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Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal.  
*Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches.*  
Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006. \$35.00  
hardcover, \$18.00 papercover.

*Polarized America* is a political science book that joins the burgeoning list of academic and popular writing about the growth of economic inequality in the United States. This volume, however, has a slightly different twist. Instead of merely describing income inequality, the authors seek to correlate it with the evidence of political polarization in Congress. Using a sophisticated quantitative procedure that enables them to track congressional voting records over time, they contend that rising income inequality and a Congress of ideological extremes has replaced the declining inequality and political consensus of post-World War II America. Although the correlation they note is indisputable, much of their broader argument is misguided. At this point in U.S. politics, a return to the 'moderates' they yearn for—Sam Rayburn, John Heinz, Dan Rostenkowski, and Sam Nunn—would further exacerbate the trend toward the greater income inequality they so decry.

By now, however, virtually everyone except the far right has come to accept the evidence of growing income inequality. In 1967, the ninety-fifth percentile of the income distribution earned six times what the twenty-fifth percentile did; by 2003, this differential had expanded to 8.6. Meanwhile, median family income increased from \$31,400 in 1967 to \$42,200 in 2000. This latter statistic actually understates the trend to income inequality, because the authors chose 1967, and not 1973, the high point of American equalitarianism, as the baseline year. Moreover, even if median income did increase, it is the widespread entry of women into the workforce as well as the spurt at the top that drove the median upward. Indeed, other studies have noted that in 2004, the bottom 60 percent of all Americans received 95 percent of what they earned in 1979. Statistics like these cast doubt on one of the authors' core assumptions that even while income disparity soared, workers rejected redistributive policies because many benefited from "a period of increasing prosperity."

No comparable soft spots mar the authors' analysis of polarization in the U.S. Congress. For them, the quintessential political vignette is what happened to a single Pennsylvania Senate seat. In 1991, after a plane crash killed three-term Republican moderate John Heinz, the seat was occupied first by Harris Wofford, a liberal who ran on platform of national health insurance, and then in 1994, by Rick Santorum, one of the most conservative members of the House of Representatives. Even if the 2006 election of moderate Democrat Bob Casey, Jr. partly

spoils the tidiness of this vignette, their evidence of political polarization is compelling. In their detailed analysis of voting patterns, for example, the authors find some overlap between the members of the Republican and Democratic parties during the 1960s. But over the next forty years, the parties diverge, so that by the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress (2003-2004), no Democrat voted to the right of any Republican, and no Republican voted to the left of any Democrat.

It is the loss of this center in American politics that most concerns the authors. Their concern is revealing, but if their purpose is actually to redistribute income, the reestablishment of a bipartisan center is not the way to do it. After all, with the shift of both parties to the right, this center would merely perpetuate the same neoliberal, market-driven policies that have already spurred the growth of income inequality. The authors may desire to go back to the future, but the American political economy has changed, and a return to the relatively stable post World War II capitalism that raised everyone's income is not likely.

This point highlights the fundamental problem with the authors' perspective. In essence, their entire book consists of two mutually interrelated variables—income inequality and political polarization. The big mistake they make is thinking that these two variables cause one another, when, in fact, each flows from a prior cause—broadly speaking, changes in the American political economy that have given rise to them both. In passing, the authors do acknowledge the existence of alternative explanations about income inequality: factors such as trade liberalization, immigration and the establishment of a global labor market, declining rates of unionization, and losses in the value of minimum wage. Nevertheless, they quickly discard these “exogenous” explanations in order to focus on “the public policies produced in the American political system.” Even if it is not completely wrong to say that politics produces more politics, something is clearly missing.

Until the rise of “political science” departments in the 1920s, political economy was an established university course. Political science courses separated politics from economics and turned politics into a subject with observable laws. Although *Polarized America* does contain some valuable insights, it is still most memorable for its illustration of the intellectual damage that this separation continues to inflict.

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