

## An Intellectual History of Polarization

Ethan Winter, 2019

This summer I began work on an intellectual history of polarization. Polarization, the idea that our political parties have both ideologically sorted and are moving further apart is the analytic lens through which our politics is interpreted. Indeed, for many pundits and academics this growing polarization is where our current “crises of democracy” is located. To map out how polarization has become the dominant framing of our politics, I have devoted this summer to researching its “prehistory.” To do this I have focused on the works of several political scientists including Elmer Eric (E.E.) Schattschneider, Vladimir Orlando (V.O.) Key, and Robert Dahl. Their writing constitutes my “primary source” research to-date.

Stepping back, I began this summer reading Lisa Disch’s *Tyranny of the Two-Party System*. Disch uses the practice of fusion-ticketing, or allowing a candidate’s name to be listed on the ballot more than once on different party lines, to drive her inquiry. In telling the history of fusion-ticketing which helped fuel the People’s and Populist party in the 1890s she shows the American two-party system is a “legislative contrivance” and not, as it is often portrayed “original, immutable, and indispensable to democratic progresses.”<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, Disch shows that the two-party system is at once a tangible array of rules that thwarts minor party participation, biasing it towards two and only two parties while also detailing how it serves as a catchphrase through which American politics is organized and understood. I then read Ira Katznelson book *Desolation and Enlightenment*, which tells the story of how political scientists such as Hannah Arendt and Dahl attempted to, using a renewed political science, fashion new theories of democracy in the wake of World War II, the Holocaust, and the rise of totalitarianism. Finally, I read Stephen Libitsky and Ziblatt recently published book, *How Democracy Dies*. This book is interesting for my research in that it situates political parties as playing a “gatekeeper” in restraining authoritarianism and won plaudits from center-left and center-right. This three books helped frame and subsequently deepen my own research.

Turning to primary sources, I began with Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. The theory of democracy Schumpeter advances, that the role of “the people” should be restricted to selecting leaders at regular intervals, was to provide a starting point for many pluralists, such as Dahl, in their study of America. Following this, I read a several of Dahl’s early articles as well as his first book, *Preface to Democratic Theory*. This work is a classic pluralist text and provided influential readings of Madison as well as theorizing about “populistic democracy.” Then I read Schattschneider *Politics, Pressures, and the Tariff, Party Government, Semisovereign People, and Two-Hundred Million People in Search of Government*. I am currently reading V.O. Key’s books *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* and *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. These authors were engaged in a rethinking of what a party is and how it comports with the broader party system. For example, all offered differing interpretations of how parties form and what kind of parties form.

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Jane Disch, 2002, *The Tyranny of the Two-Party System*. Columbia University Press: 4-5.

Animating all of this is renewed interest in the relation between parties and the American regime. This energy culminated, to name one prominent example, in the American Political Science Association report *Toward A More Responsible Two-Party System*. The committee of this report, of which Schattschneider was a member that sought to theorize a party system that would continue to make democracy and participation meaningful in industrial society. To do this they argued that parties structures must be bolstered and that the parties should seek to articulate slightly different policy platforms. They warned that a failure to do so would lead to the development of “unhealthy cleavages” in the electorate and the disintegration of the two-party system.

Through my continued research, I hope to historicize the theories of parties and democracy within the context of the Cold War era. Faced with fractious multiparty systems that developed into fascism in Germany and Italy, on the one hand, and the one-party system of the Soviet Union and Communist China on the other, these political scientists hoped to develop a party-system that offered choice while still producing stability and that could be exported to a decolonizing third-world. To accomplish this, they all side-stepped certain issues in their study, namely civil rights and the broader geopolitical context in which they wrote. Such choices represents a consensus impulse among political science that appears in the writing on polarization today which seeks set a bound on the political sphere and produce moderation regardless of precise policy outcome.

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