

uniting, a situation made more difficult with perverse incentives for electoral and parliamentary coalitions.

Electoral and Party Institutions in the US: Resilience and Vulnerability

A rigid constitution, stable two-party system with robust opposition, and vibrant civil society engender confidence about US democracy's resilience in the face of growing income inequality, racial injustice, and affective polarization (e.g. Lee 2019; Weyland and Madrid 2019). The rallying cry of the original thirteen colonies for "no taxation without representation" led to the world's greatest experiment with self-government. The balancing of majority rule with minority protection led to a particular combination of majoritarian (single-member districts to elect the House of Representatives) and counter-majoritarian institutions (like the Senate and Electoral College giving greater weight to less populous states). Representation was, of course, restricted by the institution of slavery and the failure to recognize Native Americans and women as full citizens with voting rights, while the original federation was based on the notorious three-fifths compromise of 1787 which gave Southern states greater representation by counting three-fifths of the slave population.

The Founding Fathers considered various ills of democratic politics but did not anticipate the full effects of modern political parties. Thus, the same institutions that imparted resilience to American democracy have become sources of vulnerability in a context of growing political polarization, we argue. Two factors have reduced the competitiveness of US Congressional elections to an extreme degree: the sorting of voters into like-minded political parties from the 1970s to 1990s (reducing cross-cutting ties between the parties) and electoral engineering, particularly the use of gerrymandering to draw favourable electoral districts by both political parties. Meanwhile, voters also sorted themselves on the basis of geography into Red rural states of low population density and Blue urban states of high population density, giving the Republican party electoral advantages to a degree previously unseen. This is because of the particular institutional model of the US federal system, designed to constrain the "popular passions" of the *demos* through its counter-majoritarian institutions.

The United States Electoral College – the method of indirect election of the president and vice president that began as a compromise between free and slave-holding states at the time of the Republic's founding – distorts the equality of the vote both by providing smaller states an advantage, with the inclusion of two electors per state as in the Senate, and by the practice of winner-take-all electoral votes used by 48 of the 50 states.³ The practice of partisan gerrymandering upheld by the Supreme Court in 2019 reduces the competitiveness of representative elections and enhances the partisan advantage of whichever party controls a state legislature in the year following the census every decade. The abandonment of public financing by most presidential candidates beginning in 2008, combined with Supreme Court decisions giving corporations and labor unions unlimited campaign donation capacity, means that private money in politics plays an inordinate role in US elections. This increases the parties' dependence on special interest groups – including those with polarizing ideologies and interests – and decreases their incentives for responsiveness to and rootedness in the broader public.

In 2020, prior to the November elections, all of these institutional factors favoured the Republican Party: the chances of an inversion of the Electoral College, where the winner of the popular vote loses the Electoral College, favoured the Republican Party 65 percent of the time in close elections (Geruso et al. 2019). The Republican Party controlled 29 state legislatures compared to the Democratic Party's 19 and two states with split legislatures; thus the Republican Party had an advantage going into the 2021–2022 redistricting period (i.e. the

constitutionally mandated period after every decade's census where electoral districts for seats in Congress are determined by state legislatures). And while the disproportion in the Senate has historically given 30 percent of the population 70 percent of the Senate vote (Bump 2017) the increasing geographic sorting of the parties into rural and urban states tilted this advantage toward the Republican party (Bishop with Cushing 2009; Motyl 2016).

Given the difficulty of amending the US Constitution, we do not see the same resort to constitutional change in order to engineer electoral rules or extend term limits as in other polarizing cases. Nevertheless, recent Supreme Court decisions privileging corporate actors in campaign finance, gutting the Voting Rights Act, and upholding partisan gerrymandering and restrictive voter identification laws have helped to enhance Republican electoral advantages at a time when Republicans dominate the state legislatures who make many of these decisions (McCoy and Somer 2021).

Finally, party reforms beginning in the 1970s aiming to give voters more control and increase transparency over nomination processes and election campaigns had the unintended consequence of weakening the parties' intermediation and guardrail roles, while stimulating greater political polarization. For example, the shift toward binding primaries to choose candidates in both parties rewards the extremes in a polarized context because partisan activists are the ones who vote in primary elections and exhibit the most affective polarization (Huddy et al. 2015; Mason 2018). As Milkis and King (2021) note:

the pursuit of "participatory democracy" did not empower the Downsian median-voter; rather, the weakening of traditional party organizations enhanced the influence of donors, interest groups and social activists who scorned the pragmatic politics and compromises hitherto credited with forging majority coalitions.

This combination of institutional characteristics promoting disproportionate representation, internal party reforms, and campaign finance reforms that actually weakened political party control and the process of political polarization contributed to government dysfunction and the consequent rise of an outsider polarizer in the form of Donald Trump. The Republican Party's refusal to constrain the illiberal instincts of the president, including his refusal to respect the election results, threatened a major democratic crisis and the resilience of American democracy in the wake of Trump's loss in the 2020 elections.

Political Parties: Sources of Polarization – Sources of Democratic Resilience

With sufficient institutional capacity, political parties can act as a buffer between polarizing politics and society; they can inhibit the rise of pernicious polarization by filtering divisive discourses and politicians and aggregating and representing societal interests in non-polarizing ways. For example, during the inter-war era, agentic decisions of mainstream political parties to cooperate against fringe parties was key to depolarizing politics and preventing the rise of illiberal ideologies such as fascism in countries like Finland (Capoccia 2005). Similarly, "throughout much of the United States' history, and contrary to the [constitution] framers' fears, political parties have actually mitigated political and societal conflict" (Mettler and Lieberman 2020, 15). However, during the 1980s the rise of powerful and entrepreneurial politicians such as Newt Gingrich within the Republican Party, who promised to strengthen the party, were instrumental in the radicalization of this party's strategies in the US. These strategies helped the party win control of the House in 1994 after being in the minority in 58 of the prior 62 years (Mettler and Lieberman 2020), but also contributed to the growing polarization of US politics.

It may not be a coincidence that severe political polarization combined with autocratization in many parts of the world is occurring at a time marked by the weakening of traditional political parties (Mair 2013). Many political parties may no longer have the organizational and informational capacity, nor the trust of voters, to prevent or moderate polarization. As discussed above, polarization actually disincentivizes parties to pursue the centrist voter predicted in Downs' paradox of the median voter. In other words, they may not be able to play the moderating and depolarizing roles they previously played, at least in established democracies. Such roles include aggregating societal interests and mobilizing supporters without adopting "radical" policy positions, maintaining loyal constituencies, and offering voters choices based on clear programmatic differences with opponents. As such, parties did not need to vilify opponents to build party identity, mediate social conflicts, and rein in "anti-party," anti-system candidates (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Levitsky and Cameron 2003; Mainwaring 2003). Accordingly, a major factor that enabled the rise of populist and far-right parties in Europe is "the drastic decline in support for the parties that had long dominated the political scene" (Plattner 2019, 5), which can be attributed among other reasons to "the decline in ideological competition" among them and their inability to address problems such as "the upheavals wrought by global free market capitalism" (Hopkin 2017, 465).

Weakened mainstream parties may also actively choose to employ polarizing politics in order to outbid extremist or fringe competitors, regain lost constituencies, and build party identity, in the hopes of prevailing in intra-party elite power struggles (Plattner 2019; Somer 2020). Parties that fail to generate a party identity and loyal voters based on clear programmatic promises may try to create partisan constituencies based on polarizing tactics that demonize adversaries just like illiberal parties do. Hence, political struggles inside liberal-democratic parties for programmatic and organizational renewal will be crucial for the future of liberal democracy. Marc Plattner argues that:

the most interesting and consequential developments for the future of liberal democracy [in Europe] are likely to emerge from the internal struggles on the right: disputes inside center-right parties over how to counter the populist right, whether to do so by borrowing from or by denouncing their illiberalism.

Plattner 2019, 18

We would add that this is the challenge and dilemma facing the Republican party in the US in 2021.

Finally, new parties and movements such as Macron's *En marche* in France or *Podemos* in Spain, and old parties with new political orientations such as the Republican Party in the US, have emerged with polarizing agendas, at least partially in response to the failures of existing parties and party systems to address the socioeconomic and cultural tensions concerning citizens in their respective countries.

All this poses two alternative paths for established democracies and their old and new political parties. One path is to resort to illiberal measures to protect liberal democracy from illiberal elements. The militant strategy to ostracize far-right anti-systemic parties, for example, or more drastic measures such as party closures, may exemplify this approach. Such attempts to protect democracy from outside threats creates the peril of killing democracy from within. This is because they amount to adopting the values and tactics of illiberal parties and may reinforce pernicious polarization and the "Us" vs. "Them" divisions illiberal parties promote.

Alternatively, liberal-democratic parties may try to revive democracy from within by reforming themselves. In this path, parties would find new programmatic, discursive, and

organizational ways that establish bonds of trust with their voters without nurturing negative partisanship and pernicious polarization like illiberal parties do. Hence, it is crucial to find ways to reform political parties to address the problem of illiberalism arising out of polarization (Pensky 2015). However, it is not always clear what these reforms should be.

Reforms aimed at democratizing parties can have unintended consequences of weakening parties' intermediation and guardrails capacities. The concomitant empowering of voters or movements can actually facilitate the rise of polarizing outsiders. For example, "democratizing and transparency" reforms in the US since the 1970s, including open primaries to choose candidates, campaign finance reform empowering third-party donors over party fund-raising capacity, and Congressional reforms weakening committees and seniority, actually weakened political party intermediation capacity and facilitated the ascendance of polarizing, outsider candidates such as Donald Trump to party leadership. In this case, the party as an organization, and in particular party procedures and elites, failed to serve as guardrails against the rise of a divisive candidate. With less inclusive processes the party elites could have blocked Trump's triumph as they did with other populist-authoritarian candidates in the past (Rauch 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Hence, general dictums such as the need to "democratize parties" in the sense of enhancing intra-party pluralism and competition are too simplistic and can backfire. The relationship between party organizations and polarization is complex. In Britain, for example, both Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, who presided over the extremely polarized Conservative and Labour Party policy positions on the brink of the Brexit vote, were arguably products of bottom-up democratic movements within their respective parties: "both are 'insurgents' in the sense that party activists elevated them to leadership in a form of decision 'from below' that has not been the norm in British politics" (Whitehead 2020, 89). Hence, enhancing intra-party competition may not be the answer to addressing party-led polarizations.

Party and campaign finance reforms may offer more promise. Public financing to ensure some level of equity and transparency among candidates and parties and avoiding dependence on private donors would overcome some of the problems. Another proposal is a voucher system allowing voters to fund parties and candidates as they choose, which may reduce parties' reliance on special interest groups with polarizing agendas (Cain 2015).

Electoral system reforms can also counter the effects of majoritarian elements that distort representation, exclude minority voices, and raise the stakes of elections, hence exacerbating polarization and enabling illiberalism. Ranked choice voting⁴ is one reform to encourage coalition-building, discourage negative campaigning and the move to extremes incentivized by primaries, and give fairer representation to a wider range of voices. If it is coupled with multi-member districts and proportional representation, it is even more likely to represent a diversity of views and groups compared with the winner-take-all system of single-member districts. Such reforms can help overcome the barriers to entry for new parties in extremely stable – to the point of rigid – party systems such as those in the Hungarian and US examples. To the extent such reforms increase the responsiveness of parties to voters they will also contribute to restoring trust and enhancing accountability.

Additional reforms to reduce disproportionate representation, such as correcting malapportionment, eliminating bonus seats, and non-partisan redistricting could also help to reduce the high stakes of winner-take-all elections. A consequence of all of these types of reform may be a reduction in the mutual distrust and perceptions of existential threat characterizing pernicious polarization, which would also diminish the incentives for voters to support illiberal measures for the purpose of keeping their own party in power.

Notes

- 1 We think that the concept of democracy cannot be reduced to the question of "who rules" alone and should entail limitations on "how the rulers rule" including effective government protections of citizen rights such as freedom of expression and association. Without such limitations, the democratic election of rulers would be meaningless as elected rulers – and, as we will discuss, the ostensible majorities they mobilize – can use their powers to undermine future free and fair elections, and, thus, the election of rulers based on unfettered popular will. For a somewhat different treatise, see Plattner (2019).
- 2 The majoritarian systems (SMD or mixed) are Bangladesh, Hungary, Philippines, Thailand, the US, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. Turkey has a proportional representation system but also a high threshold for parties to win seats (10 percent of the votes), along with a disproportionate distribution of seats favouring rural areas. The Greek electoral system, after 2012, awarded a "bonus" of 50 seats to the largest party, which helped Syriza gain a majority.
- 3 A single electoral vote in California represents nearly four times the number of voters as an electoral vote in Wyoming (Collin 2016). In the House of Representatives, a 2018 model by *The Economist* predicted that the Democrats needed to win 53.5 percent of all votes cast for the two major parties just to have a 50/50 chance of winning a majority in the House. They found a similar Republican advantage in the Senate: "adding together all the votes from the most recent election of each senator, Republicans got only 46 percent of them, and they hold 51 of the seats" (*The Economist* 2018).
- 4 Ranked choice voting (RCV) describes voting systems that allow voters to rank candidates in order of preference and then uses those rankings to elect candidates who best represent their constituents. Ranked choice voting is currently used in national elections in Australia, Ireland, and Malta and in local or regional elections in Scotland, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, and increasingly in the US. See www.fairvote.org.

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