

REVIEW ESSAYS

Inequality and Polarization in America

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Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos's *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America* provides a powerful and timely analysis of the causes and consequences of growing political polarization and economic inequality. Arguing that social movements have contributed to a reconfiguration of politics, McAdam and Kloos show how the sharp right turn of the Republican Party has generated policies that greatly increase economic inequality. The study is a sweeping synthesis that weaves together scholarship by historians, economists, political scientists, and sociologists to provide a sobering, insightful, and much-needed interpretation of our current political predicament.

Deeply Divided argues that movements "have increasingly challenged, and occasionally supplanted, parties as the dominant mobilizing logic and organizing vehicle of American politics" (p. 17). In doing so, movements pull political parties toward the ideological extremes; and, in recent decades, parties have instituted reforms that reinforce and exacerbate this tendency.

The historical argument is organized around two major transitions: (1) from an era of bipartisanship that was challenged by movements of the left and right in the 1960s and early 1970s that increased the permeability of parties to social movements and (2) the rise of Reagan and the remaking of Republicanism in the 1980s and beyond. These political changes have shaped and been shaped by rising economic inequality.

The first component of McAdam and Kloos's historical account is to show how the postwar political moment in which bipartisanship prevailed was ultimately disrupted by social movements that pulled parties away from the center. The 1960s movements on the left and right set in motion

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changes within the major political parties that gave ideologically motivated activists greater sway in shaping their parties and policy-making more broadly. These changes drove increasing divergence between the positions and preferences held by elected officials and typical or "median" voters, especially on the right, a trend that political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have documented.

The 1964, 1968, and 1972 Democratic conventions became sites of major conflict propelled by civil rights, women's rights, and anti-war activists. These conflicts led to reforms including binding primaries and participatory conventions. The key consequence was to shift power away from party elites and raise the stakes of low-turnout primaries where voters differ in important respects from the broader electorate.

Republicans adopted similar reforms in their nominating process without the same internal contention. Although the Democratic Party features centrally in the "origins" story that McAdam and Kloos tell, the Republican Party and its remaking by social movements is the central focus of the book—specifically, Reagan's rise to power and enduring influence in American society. Fueled by "racial resentment," the Republican Party changed through the realignment of white southerners from solidly Democratic to Republican voters in a short time span.

Capitalizing on conservative reactions to civil rights, feminist, and leftist activism, Reagan ran a surprisingly robust challenge to Ford for the presidential nomination in 1976. His campaign challenged party insiders and relied on support from pro-life, evangelical, anti-tax, and racist movements, demonstrating the viability of a more activist Republicanism. Reagan's political fortune was aided by Gerald Ford's poor showing in the 1976 presidential election, helping to pave the way for his success in 1980.

McAdam and Kloos point to Reagan's substantial influence and describe it as a "slow release revolution" because very little of Reagan's agenda was passed during his two terms. Yet they compare Reagan to Roosevelt in terms of his broad impact but contrast the way Reagan's legacy was institutionalized. Although he did secure tax reforms, Reagan also supported policies that would be unthinkable to Republicans now, including tax increases. Thus, his major impact may be the transformation of the "ideological and demographic character of the Republican Party" by helping to strongly bind evangelicals and white southerners to Republicanism and to attract a new cohort of young conservatives that carried forward many of his key ideas (p. 207).

At the same time, redistricting has led to an increasing number of elected officials facing minimal electoral competition. This, too, exacerbates polarization, as politicians have incentives to take no compromise positions, producing political stalemates that have become all too familiar during the various budget shutdowns since the 1990s. The lasting effect was to usher in changes such that all of Reagan's successors, including Clinton and Obama, have acted in ways that are "more Reagan than Reagan" (p. 220).

McAdam and Kloos go on to show that these transformations in politics have had massive consequences for society. Drawing on the work of Thomas Piketty and others, McAdam and Kloos recount the growth of income inequality that accelerated in the years after Reagan's presidency. Illustrating the broader ramifications of these changes, they review depressing trends in health disparities and educational inequality that

have led to growing public disinvestment and greater reliance on private resources to gain quality education and health care.

The Clinton and Bush years get relatively short attention, but *Deeply Divided* provides a more detailed treatment of the Obama administration and the rise of the Tea Party. This is particularly important in making a convincing case for the deeper historical origins of the political polarization that prevails today. Equally significant, the authors underscore the central importance of race and racism in driving the ratcheting up of polarization during this period.

McAdam and Kloos make several important contributions to our understanding of U.S. politics. While many scholars have worked on pieces of the story, this book's synthetic narrative shows the historical processes that have given rise to our highly unequal and polarized society. Sociologists need to be writing this kind of publicly engaged work that reaches across disciplines and toward a much broader audience. *Deeply Divided* is especially strong in analyzing the key political moments and the institutional mechanisms that have had transformative effects on politics and society. Two stand out: the reorganization of party nominating rules in the early 1970s and the indirect effects of Reagan on conservative politics in the 1980s and beyond.

Written before the 2016 election, McAdam and Kloos are striking in anticipating Trump's success. This is not because the candidate with strong ties to social movements prevailed. As we know, there were other contenders with much stronger and credible links to the Tea Party and other right-wing movements than Trump. Rather, *Deeply Divided* draws our attention to the institutional and cultural mechanisms that undercut the ability of party elites to control nominating processes. By taking a historical view, we gain perspective on how primaries came to be central, how ideological identities became more important than parties, how distrust in politics increased (such that prior office-holding is a deficit), and how movements disrupt party politics.

Interestingly, I saw McAdam give a talk related to the book early in the Republican presidential primary season in which he

predicted a “party decides” kind of consolidation around someone like Marco Rubio by major donors that would determine the Republican nominee. Of course, “establishment” Republicans did try to secure exactly that kind of outcome, and most observers expected the same thing. Nevertheless, *Deeply Divided*'s historical and sociological analysis shows that the ability of party elites to coordinate the nominating process has eroded despite the dependence of candidates on major fundraising.

Given the historical sweep of the argument, there are also key parts of the story that are missing or less developed. *Deeply Divided* says very little about what has happened within the Democratic Party or among leftist social movements since the 1970s. Such an analysis would need to take stock of the professionalization of social movements and advocacy, the labor movement's struggles, the decline of mainstream religious organizations, and changes within the Democratic Party. This is important for assessing the programmatic agenda that McAdam and Kloos propose for countering the trends in polarization and inequality.

Deeply Divided concludes with a chapter titled “Restoring American Democracy” that lays out a normative argument for the kinds of policies that would address the substantial increases in polarization and inequality in the United States. The chapter recaps the ways that polarization and inequality have contributed to inequalities in political representation (voice). As a result, policy is increasingly at odds with public opinion and political legitimacy, and distrust in government grows. McAdam and Kloos go on

to summarize a long list of liberal policy goals that would undo damage to democratic institutions and voting, such as reversing the *Citizens United* decision, reforming felon disenfranchisement laws, creating more competitive electoral districts, and abolishing the electoral college. Ultimately, they acknowledge that these changes are not likely to be enacted, given the state of politics documented so extensively in the prior chapters.

Surprisingly, McAdam and Kloos say little about social movements, civic associations, or political parties as possible tools for contesting or reversing these trends. Perhaps they are reluctant to make a stronger case for movements given their argument that social movements helped “get us into this mess.” However, they do conclude their book by stating, “What is needed now is a *centripetal* movement to reclaim and reinvigorate the political middle and repair our badly frayed democracy” (p. 352). What they mean by this is unclear. When polarization and inequality prevail, what is the “political middle”? And do all principles and policies become polarized? Are there historical analogies that shed light on the dilemmas faced by groups trying to reassert democratic norms and practices and promote social equality? What kinds of organizational forms or strategies would be effective for challenging rising inequality and political polarization? How might movements and parties effectively build on the main constituencies and identities that may cooperate or compete with one another for attention and resources? These are among the pressing questions that McAdam and Kloos's provocative and ambitious book raises.