Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches.

My differences of interpretation aside, there is much to like and recommend in this book. In particular, Campbell’s care in parsing a wide variety of public opinion data, as well as a range of historical evidence on polarization over the past 50 years, makes the book well worth reading. Anyone working on polarization, public opinion, or political parties will want to read this book, and it will no doubt inspire important work well into the future.


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— Seth C. McKee, Texas Tech University

In The American Political Pattern, Byron E. Shafer provides a novel look at the enduring question of what accounts for alterations in the party system that are so great that they are classified as distinguishable political periods. Firmly tied to the vast realignment literature, Shafer’s account of contemporary American politics since the Democratic takeover of 1932 argues that there have been four distinct subsequent political periods: High New Deal Era (1932–1938), Late New Deal Era (1939–1968), Era of Divided Government (1969–1992), and the Era of Partisan Volatility (1993–2016). What justifies this classification of four periods is the variation in three interactive political components that comprise the intermediary structure of politics: party balance, ideological polarization, and substantive conflict (p. 9). Ultimately, the relationship between these factors produces a unique policy-making arrangement within each of the four political eras.

By delineating four electoral eras in the eight decades commencing in the 1930s, Shafer offers a rather original take on the American party system, especially when contrasted with the common organization of party eras, which places the time since the early 1930s to the present into no more than two distinguishable political periods, with their demarcation occurring around the mid to late 1960s when the New Deal Democratic Coalition finally unraveled.

According to Shafer, significant course-changing elections, or perhaps a string of such elections, are the agents that set in motion the transition from one era to the next. Starting with the remarkably brief High New Deal Era, the Democratic Party surged to its dominant position and for three consecutive contests American politics exhibited an extraordinary moment as Northern Democrats alone constituted legislative majorities in both chambers of Congress and used their clout to essentially issue their co-Northern Democratic president a blank check to muddle through the Great Depression with a raft of interventionist economic policies. Regarding the second component structuring the period, ideological polarization, it was essentially absent within the legislature, but instead manifested in the form of a fight between the status-quo protecting Supreme Court versus the reform-minded president. Finally, in the case of substantive conflict, the political battle lines were sharply focused on the matter of economic welfare, and hence to this day a class-based cleavage still splits the more economically progressive Democratic Party from its more free-market friendly Grand Old Party (GOP) opposition.

But Shafer views the High New Deal as short-lived; it saw an abrupt end with the 1938 midterm election that cost President Roosevelt his northern Democratic legislative majorities. Executive overreach in such matters as the court-packing scheme, demanding Congress bolster the administrative capacity of the White House, and an aggressive attempt to purge conservative (Southern) Democrats from Capitol Hill resulted in the most complex party system in modern times. After 1938, policy-making was contingent upon four party factions that altered their positions not just on economics, but on two additional issues: foreign affairs and civil rights.

Shafer’s articulation of this Late New Deal Era is his most important scholarly contribution. He deftly explains how, depending on the issue, the four party factions (Northern Democrats, Southern Democrats, Northeastern Republicans, and Regular Republicans [outside the Northeast]) harbored different ideological positions. For instance, on foreign affairs the Southern Democrats were the hardcore internationalists while the Regular Republicans occupied the opposite pole as isolationists, with the key pivotal players in the middle comprised of Northern Democrats and Northeastern Republicans. By contrast, on civil rights the Southern Democrats were the conservative defenders of Jim Crow and squared off against the Northern wing of their own party, while Republicans from the Northeast and elsewhere (the Regulars) were the critical dealmakers. To be sure, the Democratic Party retained its electoral upper hand throughout this era, but due to the rampant factionalism within and across the major parties, ideological polarization was modest and legislation was created based on the constant construction and reconstruction of intra-party and cross-party coalitions (e.g., this was the heyday of the so-called “Conservative Coalition” between Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans).

Once again, Shafer argues that a changing electoral pattern closes the Late New Deal Era and replaces it with the Era of Divided Government. The cardinal feature of this third period is Republican dominance in presidential elections while Democrats continue to control Congress (with the exception of a Republican Senate from 1980–1986). Shafer shows that instead of resulting in legislative gridlock, policy compromise within divided government became the order of the day. With no
foreseeable alteration to the partisan balance of power, Democrats and Republicans repeatedly struck deals and the substantive conflict centered on economic policy and the crosscutting issue of cultural values, which would eventually sort themselves along a single liberal/conservative dimension in the most recent Era of Partisan Volatility. Below the surface, Shafer places considerable weight on the emerging influence of party activists who are drawn to politics because of strong ideological views that set in motion the polarization of the political parties. Indeed, in Shafer’s telling, it is the party activists who steer the political system away from divided government and finally into the current period of electoral volatility. 

Characterized by a historically even balance in the electoral strength of the major parties (i.e., highly competitive national elections), in our present Era of Partisan Volatility, Shafer argues that no party majority in the White House or either congressional chamber is safe—the next election can lead to a switch in party control. Two very evenly matched major parties are now highly polarized along a single ideological liberal-to-conservative dimension in which all of the salient issues neatly align (economics, social/moral values, civil rights, foreign affairs). In this latest version of American party politics, the precarious hold on party majority status leads to legislative gridlock that is invariably broken by episodes of crisis that compel the parties to broker compromises in the face of critical events like 9/11 or the Great Recession or, on a lesser scale, horse-trading in the form of omnibus bills hatched out under the duress of threatened government shutdowns over looming fiscal cliffs and debt ceilings. And in those instances of ephemeral united party control, Democrats and Republicans run their legislation through with nary a vote of support from the partisan opposition (e.g., President Clinton’s first budget, President Bush’s first major tax cut, President Obama’s signature healthcare reform popularly bearing his name—and one could now add President Trump’s tax bill to this list).

Shafer’s assessment of the factors driving macro-level American political change is in many ways compelling, particularly in describing the interaction of the intermediary factors that he contends shape the distinctive portrait of each of his four political eras and the style of policymaking that results from them. He is persuasive in constructing his argument and adept in his elucidation of various strains of scholarship that bolster his theory. Shafer also deserves a handsome degree of credit for highlighting the time-bound nature of past scholarship that may accurately interpret the party system of its own time along with its attendant policy-making, but fails to anticipate that a change in the political period would permanently alter this temporal dynamic. Nonetheless, as is true of any major scholarly revision, there are holes and questionable interpretations of the mechanisms driving change. For example, the dynamics underlying the critically important southern realignment are essentially elided, but perhaps this is best since the scholarly controversy over this development persists. Further, Shafer’s final chapter is long and cumbersome to the point that the reader gets the sense that it is his attempt to engage in a thorough patching of the gaps that remain after laying out his exposition of the four major political eras in the previous chapters. Finally, although Shafer’s approach does at times provide for an understanding of how mass political behavior interacts with elite activity, one is left with a murky picture of how elites and the mass public conspire to form Shafer’s four political eras and the changing dynamics that play out within each. Indeed, at one point in his concluding section, Shafer avers that “parties cannot bring fresh political eras into existence by deciding—wishing, even strategizing—to do so” (p. 216). This is a curious statement, and perhaps not entirely accurate, since a theory like “Issue Evolution” (see Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics, 1989) provides compelling evidence that the GOP’s Southern Strategy was just the kind of partisan maneuver that did alter the American party system along a racial axis that continues to separate Democrats from Republicans. This criticism aside, students and scholars of American politics would be remiss if they did not examine this work. Shafer’s enterprise is truly grand and will undoubtedly raise numerous debates in the years to come.


— Helena Silverstein, Lafayette College

Two First Amendment cases are among the notable cases that occupy the United States Supreme Court’s 2017–2018 docket. On December 5, 2017, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission, a high-profile case that centers on a baker’s refusal to design a cake for a gay couple’s wedding. Especially salient in the wake of Obergefell v. Hodges—the Court’s 2015 holding that the Constitution protects the right of same-sex couples to marry—Masterpiece Cakeshop pits the baker’s assertion of free speech and free exercise rights against Colorado’s prohibition of sexual-orientation-based discrimination in public accommodations. On February 26, 2018, the Supreme Court heard arguments in Janus v. American Federation of State, County,