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The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Campaign and the Challenge to American Democracy

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The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Campaign and the Challenge to American Democracy by John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck (2022). Princeton University Press. 400 pp. (\$29.95 Hardcover) ISBN 978-0691213453

The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Campaign and the Challenge to American Democracy begins with one of the darkest moments in recent American political history: the January 6th attack on the Capitol. John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck were perplexed about why the 2020 presidential election results were so close despite Donald Trump facing dire national crises, in which conventional wisdom would predict a landslide defeat for the incumbent. However, as the authors claim, Trump did not lose by wide margins; instead, Trump lost due to small shifts in voters moving toward Biden in crucial swing states that Trump previously carried in the 2016 presidential election. The authors claim that the 2020 presidential election seemed to upend consensus about the forecasting power of normative predictors of electoral victory because the fundamental nature of American politics changed. The authors' crucial theoretical contribution is their argument that the state of American politics has evolved away from deep ideological polarization into a new period of 'calcified politics.' This book uses an in-depth multimethod approach with extensive survey data to argue America has entered into a new era of 'calcified politics' in which the average partisans in the electorate have intractable bonds to their parties.

The strength of this book hinges on its study of the underlying changes in the voting public, which describes why polarization does not help make sense of the current state of partisan political behavior following the controversial 2020 presidential election. In the introductory chapters, the authors begin by arguing that the essence of political divisions in America has changed. While the voters are sorted neatly into parties along ideological lines, the authors posit that the electorate is also simultaneously more concerned about salient issues surrounding individuals' racial and religious identities.

The authors argue that the convergence of voters prioritizing divisive identity politics while being sorted along ideological lines led American partisans to harden their political loyalties toward their respective parties. The consequence of these systematic transformations in the American mass electorate led to America's party politics entering a period known as "calcified politics," in which the authors claim that partisans show "less willingness to defect from their party" by adhering strictly to their partisan identities at the ballot box in all elections (p.6). The authors' thesis that American politics evolved from a state of deep political polarization and has entered a nascent era of hardened partisan loyalties is not novel; however, they explain that 'calcified politics' entails more than unbreakable partisan bonds. The authors posit that normative predictors of electoral success, such as public approval ratings and the state of the economy, are currently not useful predictors of electoral success due to the partisan's strict loyalty to their party through major national crises.

The authors argue a crucial reason why ossified partisan loyalties define our political environment is that voters are less likely to switch their votes at the ballot box and continually forgive their party's leaders for failing to represent their interests due to changes in the substantive issues partisans prioritize and, subsequently, how ambitious politicians use these alterations in the electorate's issue priorities for their political gain. To emphasize their point in Chapter 1, the authors use a unique survey experiment from the 2019 Nationscape survey to portray that opposing partisans prioritize inflammatory identity issues while also finding that

Democratic and Republican respondents' preferences on these emotional issues were starkly polarized.

This survey experiment is one of the book's strongest points because it captures how dissimilar the opposing partisans are while also describing the incompatible value systems of rival partisans. Ambitious office seekers exploited these deep divisions leading up to the 2020 presidential election to remain electorally competitive despite having low approval ratings. The introductory chapters by the authors established that the simultaneous divergence of the partisan ideological priorities on combustible issues of identity and Trump's rhetoric were integral factors that explain why polarization is not an appropriate description of American politics.

Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck then clarify that the fossilized partisan connections to their respective parties were only amplified by the emergence of national crises leading up to the 2020 presidential election. The critical argument the authors conclude is that the birth of 'calcified politics' came about because of the negative changes in mass politics colliding with political elites' inflammatory responses to country-wide calamities. By combining national emergencies and attitudinal transformations within the parties in the electorates, the authors strengthen their compelling argument as to why the blanket term of polarization does not accurately reflect partisan political behavior.

The authors' most captivating and compelling chapters that bolster their thesis occur in Chapters 5 and 8, which describe how the intersection of American social and ideological divisions and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in concert with the murder of George Floyd revealed polarization did not adequately define American politics. Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck found by using county-level data to illuminate that despite COVID-19 deaths and cases rising, the Republican partisans continued to stand by their party despite Trump's chaotic response to the pandemic. Also, the authors note that even when a moment of increase in bipartisan approval occurred for Trump after he briefly took the pandemic seriously, this moment was short-lived once the former President signaled to Republicans that the lockdowns were an existential threat to his reelection bid. The authors found the same trend following the aftershocks of the murder of George Floyd. Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck argue that following the riots, even GOP partisans who were in favor of police reform adjusted their views to align with Trump's staunch opposition to the Black Lives Matter social activism.

While the authors argue that Biden did not benefit from the bumpy COVID-19 response by the Trump administration because the Republican partisan's approval of the President's job performance did not waver, this position is not held by all political scientists. Abramowitz (2021) argues that the pandemic significantly undercut Trump's overall approval among the general public, which hurt his reelection chances. Trump may have retained durable support among the strongest Republican partisans, however, as Abramowitz (2021) finds voters soured on Trump's job performance due to the rocky reaction to the pandemic by the President's administration. The incumbent-referendum model employed by Abramowitz (2021) finds that at the peak of COVID-19 during the summer of 2020 in the lead-up to the presidential election, Trump's approval rating tanked among the public due to his chaotic plan to contain the pandemic. The steep decline of Trump's job approval caused by the ramifications of COVID-19, Abramowitz (2021) argues, was the catalyst for the former President's failed reelection bid. Unlike Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck, Abramowitz (2021) finds that even in an era of

hardened partisan identities, normative predictors of reelection success, such as approval ratings, are critical for enterprising office seeker's ambition for winning elections.

This book is an excellent study of why American politics has become so volatile. Despite minor criticisms, the authors do a stellar job of marshaling significant amounts of survey data to argue that the quintessence of partisanship in American politics has changed, and the completion of this incremental transformation has dire consequences on American political discourse. The authors' book is an excellent contribution to the existing works on partisan political behavior while also making a convincing explanation that polarization does not accurately capture the state of American politics.

References

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