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OCCASIONAL
P A P E R



Polarized Politics and Policy Consequences

Diana Epstein, John D. Graham

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Summary

America's two political parties have become more distinct in the past few decades, deepening a divide that has come to be known as polarization. The split has been particularly apparent in the "political elites," by which we mean members of Congress, party activists, and other influential players in the political process. Ordinary voters are also sorting themselves more tightly into the parties that align with their core values, and ideological concerns are playing a larger role in politics. As the parties have moved further apart, there has been a marked decline in legislative centrists who bridge the parties and broker crucial compromises. Within each party, the members of Congress have become more internally homogeneous in voting and in their underlying beliefs.

Polarization has numerous causes, including the partisan realignment of the South, changing institutional procedures in Congress, the growth in income inequality, balkanization of the mass media, and the rise of new interest groups. It has a variety of different consequences—some positive, some negative, some empirically supported, and some only hypothesized. The purpose of this occasional paper is to review the dimensions, causes, and consequences of political polarization in the United States; to discuss potential remedies; and then to define a future research agenda to help better understand the phenomenon.

To elucidate the impact of polarization on the day-to-day lives of U.S. citizens, the research community may need to modify its benchmarks for what constitutes a successful public policy. We also need a better understanding of how polarization affects the quantity and substance of rulemaking, judicial decisions, and legislation, including policies at the state and local levels of government. Special attention needs to be directed to how polarization is complicating long-term policy challenges (e.g., Social Security and health care reform) that can only be resolved through true bipartisan collaboration. Finally, we ask whether polarization is changing how scientific and policy-analytic information is—or isn't—generated and used by decisionmakers and stakeholders.