



Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility

Mark D. Brewer, Jeffrey M. Stonecash

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Contemporary American politics is highly polarized, and it is increasingly clear that this polarization exists at both the elite and mass levels. What is less clear is the source of this polarization. Social issues are routinely presented by some as the driver of polarization, while others point to economic inequality and class divisions. Still others single out divisions surrounding race and ethnicity, or gender, or religion as the underlying source of the deep political divide that currently exists in the United States. All of these phenomena are undoubtedly highly relevant in American politics, and it is also beyond question that they represent significant cleavages within the American polity. We argue, however, that disagreement over a much more fundamental matter lies at the foundation of the polarization that marks American politics in the early 21st century. That matter is personal responsibility. Some Americans fervently believe that an individual's lot in life is primarily if not exclusively his or her own responsibility. Opportunity is widespread in American society, and individuals succeed or fail based on their own talents and efforts. Society greatly benefits from such an arrangement, and as such government policies should support and reward individual initiative and responsibility. Other Americans see personal responsibility-while fine in theory-as an unjust organizing principle for contemporary American society. For these Americans, success or failure in life is far too often not the result of personal effort but of large forces well beyond the control of the individual. Opportunity is not widespread, and is by no means equally available to all Americans. In light of these basic facts of American life, it is the responsibility of the state to step in and implement policies that alleviate inequality and assist those who fail by no fault of their own. These basic differences surrounding the idea of personal responsibility are what separate Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, in contemporary American politics.

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