

BOOK REVIEWS

# Political Volatility in the United States: How Racial and Religious Groups Win and Lose

By Baodong Liu. Lexington Books, 2023. 244 pp., \$39.99 paperback

Stefanie Chambers 

Trinity College, Hartford, CT, USA  
Email: [stefanie.chambers@trincoll.edu](mailto:stefanie.chambers@trincoll.edu)

For the last decade, news about record levels of political polarization in the United States has inundated the American public. Media reports often reference the violent events of January 6, 2021, interference with the certification of the electoral vote, partisan divisions, racial unrest, and religious chasms as a symptom of this new partisan divisiveness. For many Americans, reflecting on the last two presidential elections when Donald Trump was the Republican nominee (2016 and 2020) highlights how political polarization intensified after the Obama presidential era (2009–2016). In this comprehensive new book, political scientist Baodong Liu offers readers a new understanding of the cycles of political polarization and volatility that regularly emerge in the United States. Far from representing an exception, these periods are recurrent events in our political system and have increased as White Anglo-Saxon Protestant or WASP control of the nation has been threatened. Using a unique theoretical lens Liu labels the Atomic Structure Theory, he articulates his argument in a manner that non-experts can understand. His book helps readers contextualize current events, cyclical trends of political violence and instability, and the way religious and racial minorities at the grassroots and elite levels participate in the process. Far from providing a discouraging outlook on American politics, Liu leaves the reader with a deeper understanding of volatility cycles and the potential for political equality in the future, something the media rarely provides.

Liu poses two central questions. First, he asks whether we should expect politically cohesive social groups to experience status change in our democratic system. Relatedly, he attempts to understand the types of status changes racial minority groups face, concluding that beneficial or consequential changes can be expected when we consider the long-term trajectory. In this respect, Liu offers a more optimistic outlook than the media or some other scholars on the future of our democratic system. Liu explains:

“Throughout history, we see that racial and religious minorities occasionally become political winners in spite of their peripheral positions in the atomic structure, which does not stop white voters, still comprising the super majority of the electorate in the United States today, from occupying the center stage of power structure” (p. 202).

Therefore, Liu's analysis allows us to understand how marginalized groups exist within the political system—sometimes gaining ground, and other times remaining at the margins.

Using the 2012 re-election of Barack Obama and the 2020 election of Donald Trump, Liu highlights how fear existed as an important undercurrent in each contest. During the 2012 election, President Obama's Republican challenger Mitt Romney, a practicing Mormon, faced a significant uphill battle to secure the Republican nomination due to his non-WASP credentials. However, in the general election, he managed to regain some of the support he'd struggled to capture in the primary. As the first-ever religious minority to run as the Republican presidential nominee, Romney's candidacy exposed a fault line in electoral politics. However, White protestant support for Romney in the general election outpaced the support Obama received. Was this due to the perceived racial threat of another term with a Black president? Was it related to false claims that Obama was secretly a Muslim presenting himself as a protestant? These are the issues Liu examines in this volume. Central to Liu's analysis is the role fear plays as an underlying issue among the American electorate. And this fear is evident at several critical historical junctures in the past from the Civil Rights Movement through contemporary times.

At the heart of Liu's book is his powerful Atomic Structure Theory. The theory is based on the premise that social tensions between and among groups based on race and religion play a pivotal role in electoral politics. Liu uses case studies across the decades to illustrate the power dynamics between and within the dominant group (WASPs) and minorities (racial/ethnic or religious). His analysis of the political volatility during times of strife helps the reader see the pattern of polarization and tension in the American electorate. However, the Atomic Structure Theory goes further by using five axioms to expand upon analysis of intergroup relations. These axioms allow the reader to evaluate the threat response of the dominant group more thoroughly. Liu explains that the atomic group structure helps us understand:

“...the historical experiences of minority groups—including German Americans, white Catholics, Latterday Saints, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans—but also the experiences of the nation's originally dominant group, namely WASPs.” (p. 13)

Beyond the case studies presented in the book, the generalizability of Liu's Atomic Structure Theory is particularly valuable for observers of American electoral politics. The theory can be applied to other underrepresented groups such as female candidates, women of color who run for office, and LGBTQ candidates. Through Liu's extensive incorporation of the literature on American political development, political theory, and political psychology, he creates an easy-to-digest understanding of American history and contemporary events for less advanced readers and experts. The book is ideal for courses on racial and ethnic politics, religion and politics, American Studies, and Ethnic Studies.

doi:10.1017/rep.2023.41