

# Critical Dialogue

## What Happened to the Vital Center? Presidentialism, Populist Revolt, and the Fracturing of America. By

Nicholas F. Jacobs and Sidney M. Milkis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 362p. \$99.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.  
doi:10.1017/S1537592722003772

— Joshua N. Zingher , *Old Dominion University*  
jzingher@odu.edu

What do you get when you mix strong partisanship, weak parties, and an increasingly powerful executive branch? Nothing good, argue Nicholas Jacobs and Sidney Milkis in *What Happened to the Vital Center? Presidentialism, Populist Revolt, and the Fracturing of America*. In this book, the authors examine the increasingly fraught interactions among populist movements, party politics, and presidentialism.

In my view, the book is motivated by a question that most, if not all of us, have asked ourselves over the past several years: What happened to our political system that allowed Donald Trump to become president? Trump won the Republican nomination, despite no history of participating in Republican politics or even being a Republican. In fact, he was initially opposed by most of the party elite. Yet, he captured the nomination anyway, an event that would have been unthinkable in previous eras. The fact that the party apparatus was unable to stop this hostile takeover was compounded by the fact that Republican voters did not seem to care. Trump won the 2016 presidential election with overwhelming support from Republican partisans.

As Jacobs and Milkis note, populist movements are nothing new. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of many of the country's seemingly cyclical populist movements, including the anti-Masonry movement in the 1820s, the agrarian populism of William Jennings Bryan, and Father Coughlin and the America First movement in the 1930s. What separates our current populist movement from these earlier iterations of the phenomenon, the authors argue, is the party system's inability to contain it. Most previous populist movements fared poorly in the face of strong party organizations. For this reason, populist anger generally failed to gain traction within the parties themselves. Across history, Jacobs and Milkis argue, party organizations blunted the impact of populist movements and their ability to translate the populist zeitgeist into substantive representation in government.

Yet, as evidenced by Trump's ability to ride a populist wave into the White House, the party organizations today seem far less capable of offering effective resistance. The authors attribute this inability to a pair of linked forces: the increasing importance of the presidency post–New Deal and the concomitant weakening of the party organizations. The expansion of the administrative state, starting with the New Deal and continuing throughout the twentieth century, made the presidency more important. The growth of the federal government created a new pathway for the president to reshape policy through unilateral control of the bureaucracy.

As a result, American politics are increasingly president centric. State and local party organizations have been hollowed out as the fortunes of state and local candidates now rise and fall along with the presidential candidates. These changes, along with changes in campaign finance, media environment, and the McGovern-Fraser institutional reforms of the early 1970s, which were purported to make party nominations more democratic and transparent, have worked to make parties as organizations less powerful and less relevant (p. 173).

Strong parties have been replaced by strong, executive-centered partisanship. This allows presidential aspirants to form their own personal coalitions and raise money while not being beholden to a party apparatus and, perhaps more concerning, even to the party system itself (p. 30). The flip side of this equation is that party organizations have fewer and fewer tools at their disposal to control candidate selection. This lack of institutional control opens the door for candidates, populist or otherwise, who may have once been stopped by the party machinery, to gain access to the ballot and therefore power. For Jacobs and Milkis, party organizations—once the mechanism that kept the dangers of populism at bay—no longer provide effective guardrails.

The strength of this book lies in the authors' ability to connect deep structural changes to institutions—particularly the presidency—that unfolded over the course of decades to shape the current tumultuous and, in my estimation, scary state of American politics. Our politics has indeed become president centric, and this book explains both why this has occurred and the fundamentally problematical consequences that follow from this shift.

One of the great limitations with contemporary quantitative political science is that public opinion data do not go back very far in time. We tend to assume that American politics began when the American National Election Study (ANES) started to survey voters. The American political development approach is a welcome corrective here. Scholars of all stripes need to take the historical and political context into account. Politics look like they do today, as the authors note, because the nature of the administrative state, and therefore the presidency, began its dramatic shift in the 1930s in response to the Great Depression. Now, nearly a century later, presidents from both the Right and Left use the great power of the presidency to unilaterally bend the entire administrative state toward their preferred policy goals.

Although I think this book fundamentally diagnoses the political story and the contemporary problems facing our experiment in self-government correctly, it left me with some questions about the “vital center” from which the book gets its title. The term, borrowed from a book by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. of the same name, is a broad one. It refers to the shared belief in liberal values and fundamental democratic principles that both parties endorsed in the wake of World War II. The authors argue that the vital center has broken down and that America would be well served if this consensus was reforged.

My biggest question on this score is the degree to which this “vital center” rested historically on a foundation of African American exclusion. As the authors note, the vital center has failed before, with the Civil War being the most glaring example. My read of the evidence is that periods of elite consensus coincide with efforts to keep African American civil rights off the national agenda. The vital center can reduce polarization by colluding to keep polarizing issues off the national agenda, and in American society, there is no issue more enduringly polarizing than what rights Black people should have. Politics gets tumultuous and sometimes violent when civil rights issues come to the forefront. There is a fundamental tension between stability and multiracial democracy, and often the elite consensus has come down on the side of the former at the expense of the latter.

As the authors point out, the postwar consensus broke down when civil rights activists forced the issue onto the national agenda in the early 1960s. One hundred years earlier, the Civil War ripped the country apart, and Reconstruction produced a Southern White insurgency against the federal government that lasted until 1877, when Republicans and Democrats cut a deal to settle the disputed 1876 presidential election by granting Republican Rutherford Hayes the Electoral Votes from four contested states (and therefore the presidency) in exchange for ending Southern Reconstruction. Here, the partisan elites colluded to exclude Blacks from the political process,


and this status quo lasted for nearly 100 years. This decision might have made elite politics more consensual, but it came at the expense of African Americans. When the debate over multiracial democracy reemerged in the national consciousness in the 1960s, elite consensus began to falter, and stability gave way to massive social change and the associated instability. We now have a system that is more democratic but perhaps less stable. Is a vital center possible when African American civil rights are allowed to come to the political forefront? To me, this is an open question that links the rise of a figure like Trump in the aftermath of the collapse of the racially exclusionary “vital center” very tightly to issues of racism and white identity politics.

Overall, Jacobs and Milkis’s thorough new book should serve as a warning to those of us invested in democracy. Democracy is hard to maintain, and many of the guardrails that protect it are down (Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 2018). Comparative politics scholarship warns us of the perils of presidentialism (Juan J. Linz, “The Perils of Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy* 1, 1990). As Jacobs and Milkis extensively document, our political system is moving in this direction, to our detriment. Institutional reforms are needed, but achieving them will require the vital center to reassert itself. The question is whether we can reforge some type of elite consensus that can strengthen democracy or will we continue down this road of unconstrained president-centered partisanship. *What Happened to the Vital Center?* is an important read for anyone interested in these issues.

### Response to Joshua N. Zingher’s Review of *What Happened to the Vital Center? Presidentialism, Populist Revolt, and the Fracturing of America*

doi:10.1017/S1537592722003814

— Nicholas F. Jacobs 

— Sidney M. Milkis 

We appreciate Joshua Zingher’s review of *What Happened to the Vital Center?* Just as we found value in Zingher’s attention to changes that have reconstituted political behavior in the United States, it is gratifying to read of his respect for our efforts to understand the deep historical roots of a polarized America. At the same time, we welcome the probing and troubling questions he raises about the “vital center”: Did the post–World War II consensus rest on a “foundation of African American exclusion?” Is a vital center possible when African American civil rights are allowed to come to the political forefront?

Our major objective in exploring how the vital center unraveled was to diagnose how the cultural and institutional conflicts unleashed by the 1960s contributed to the

contemporary problems plaguing self-government in the United States, a task Zingher credits us with doing well. We were careful to make clear, however, that we do not prescribe a return to postwar consensus marred by the Democratic Party's "Faustian bargain," as Ira Katznelson calls it, with Southern defenders of white supremacy. We agree with Zingher, and so state in the concluding section of the book, that "the greatest challenge faced by those who would restore the vital center is coming to terms with the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow" (p. 292).

America's "original sin" is central to our story. The party system, forged during the early days of the republic to reconcile the stability of constitutional government and populist uprisings, could not prevent a Civil War or the neutering of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in its aftermath. Still, the achievements of emancipation and the Civil War amendments would not have been possible without the emergence of a variegated Republican Party that built a broad coalition of former Whigs, disaffected Democrats, and abolitionists. Similarly, the civil rights revolution of the 1960s was the destination of a coalition of labor and civil rights activists who began a partisan realignment on race during the late 1930s and 1940s. Progress was resisted by powerful countermovements, but partisan politics animated by a mating dance between the gatekeepers of party politics and populist insurgents posed hard and ultimately successful challenges to the ramparts of white supremacy.

The civil rights revolution was so polarizing because it finally forced the United States to confront, after a century of false promises, the shameful limits of its grand experiment in self-rule. Only then did America begin to live up to its foundational principles. There is no prospect that the contemporary battle for the "soul of America" will be resolved by bargains struck between elites. Like all fundamental partisan contests in the development of American democracy, any resolution would entail a hard-fought contest over the foundational question of what it means to be an American. The tension between mediating institutions like parties and populist uprisings is a hazardous but inevitable feature of democracy.

Our core argument is that the expansion of executive power since the 1930s combined with the rise of movement politics during the turbulent sixties replaced political parties as collective party organizations with an executive-centered partisanship—an improbable joining of presidential prerogative, social activism, and high-stake struggles over domestic and foreign policy. We hope that representative constitutional government is still capable of principled party contests over the polarizing issue of American identity. But a nation under the spell of a presidentialism that fosters a winner-take-all Manichean politics cannot be the vanguard of a multiracial democracy.

### **Political Choice in a Polarized America: How Elite Polarization Shapes Mass Behavior.** Joshua N. Zingher.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 256p. \$99.00 cloth, \$27.95 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592722004054

— Nicholas F. Jacobs, *Colby College*  
nfjacobs@colby.edu

— Sidney M. Milkis, *University of Virginia*  
smm8e@virginia.edu

Much of the research in political behavior, rooted in canonical scholarship during the 1950s and 1960s, frets that the American public does not know enough and cares too little about politics to hold representatives accountable. Since the late 1970s, however, apathy has morphed into hyperpolarization. The foundational struggle over what it means to be an American, the mobilization of base supporters who scorn compromise, and rancorous tribalism with Democrats and Republicans viewing each other as an existential threat to the country have fractured the nation. Into the fray steps Joshua Zingher, whose book *Political Choice in a Polarized America* seeks to explain these developments. His core argument is unequivocal: mass polarization is a consequence of elite-level trends in partisanship.

This conclusion may be straightforward, but its rendering challenges the conceptual framework of *The American Voter* (1960), the study that has guided much of the research on political behavior since the earliest iterations of the American National Election Study (ANES). Voting decisions in the United States, Philip Converse and coauthors (1960) argued, have little connection to issues, let alone ideology; rather, political choice is determined by partisan loyalties that emerge from family ties and group identities. Zingher acknowledges that the Michigan model was a "brilliant" explanation of post-World War II politics, but he denies that partisanship and voting are "time invariant." The weakness of the Michigan model, and much of the current public opinion literature, is "its failure to take context into account" (p. 209). "Most of the canonical studies of political behavior were written at a time when elite polarization was at an all-time low," Zingher argues. Scholars of public opinion and political behavior "need to update [their] ideas" to take account of elites who divide sharply on issues and signal their stark differences to the public (p. 206).

Relying principally on time-series analysis from the ANES and the General Social Survey (GSS), the book demonstrates that since the 1970s political elites have increasingly signaled significant differences on economic and social issues. Moreover, most voters have responded to these cues: party identification and voting choices are now closely connected to worldviews and policy positions. Zingher does not argue that voters meet Converse's standard for a "belief system": "a configuration of ideas and

attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional independence” (p. 27). An important contribution of this work is that it shows that consequential issue positions need not be so structured. The public derives their positions on important policy matters from any number of potential pathways, including partisanship.

Zingher thus counterposes the positions of scholars, still beholden to the Michigan model, who acknowledge angry tribalism but doubt that Democrats’ and Republicans’ dislike for each other stems from ideological conflict. Critics might rejoin that partisanship subsumes core values and policy orientations. However, drawing on methodological innovations over the past decade, Zingher shows that partisanship at one point in time does not perfectly predict partisanship or voting choices downstream: knowledge about an individual’s general policy orientation on social and economic issues adds a significant amount of predictive value. Most centrally to his argument, Zingher reveals considerable evidence that, as elite polarization increases, so too does the predictive power of issue orientation on the mass public’s political choices. These conclusions are further validated by the set of findings linking political sophistication with those patterns. Although those most knowledgeable and educated are more likely to respond to elite signals, Zingher shows that even the least sophisticated voters have become more responsive to the remade partisan context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

*Political Choice in a Polarized America* is an important achievement. As scholars of American political development, we especially value Zingher’s careful attention to changes over time that have reconstituted political behavior in the United States. He is not the first public opinion scholar to take account of how dramatic changes wrought by what historians call the “long sixties” changed the American voter. Indeed, Norman Nie, Sidney Verba and John Petrocik in *The Changing American Voter* (1976) detected the rise of a more programmatic partisanship very early in the game. Let us hope that Zingher’s systematic test of these developments encourages more scholars of mass behavior to probe the belief systems at the root of America’s discontents, further testing his argument that polarization is more than visceral contempt and personality cults.

Being development scholars, we do have some questions about the context that Zingher portrays. First, we wonder whether the claim that elite polarization begets mass polarization needs to be so one-way. We would suggest that the transformation of partisanship has been neither top-down nor bottom-up but rather a complex mixture of the two. Indeed, Zingher devotes chapter 6 to the recursive relationship between changing policy orientations and updated partisan attachments, acknowledging that politics is interactive; presumably, context works in

the same way. Moreover, the measures Zingher uses to assess elite-level polarization are unlikely to be divorced from mass politics. Consider the use of DW-Nominate scores to measure elite polarization. These scores emerge from votes taken in a legislature—votes that, given the issue orientation of contemporary voters, are probably responsive to constituent preferences, especially those who are engaged and sophisticated and thus are also likely to be the most ideologically extreme. In taking the policy positions of the average American seriously, Zingher gives us an image of an electorate that is not incapable of democratic politics. But in attributing position sorting solely to elites, he risks stripping the public—particularly those most likely to receive attention from elites—of any agency.

The reciprocal relationship between elites and the mass public also raises the question as to who the elites are in a polarized America. Zingher mentions the importance of the movement politics of the sixties and especially the civil rights and Christian Right insurgencies in changing the partisan landscape. Adding specificity to this observation, we would note how social activists deliberately changed elite behavior by weakening party organizations. On the Left, activists pushed for the McGovern Fraser reforms, which shifted power away from party bosses and elites. During the 1980s and 1990s, conservative evangelicals and other right-wing activists inspired by the Reagan Revolution began to transform the GOP into a movement party with a fervent commitment to traditional values. All in all, elections no longer turn on candidates’ abilities to reach out to the mythical median voter but on mobilizing the party’s most fervent base supporters. In the years since, both liberal and conservative movement activists have pulled the parties away from the center, energizing grassroots bases, shattering areas of postwar consensus, and fueling ideological polarization and legislative stalemate. The role of social activists in shaping contemporary partisanship—as “policy demanders” (Kathleen Bawn et al., “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, 2012)—must be considered in seeking an answer to Zingher’s million-dollar question: “What can stop [the] seeming inexorable march toward greater and greater levels of polarization” (p. 210).

Elites certainly tap into this activism in signaling partisan battles to the mass public. Our work, for instance, calls attention to the growth of executive-centered partisanship, which has shifted policy making from the parties to the presidency on both sides of the aisle. Note that there is some observational equivalence between changing partisanship and the rise of presidential partisanship. As Zingher observes, over time, more and more Americans correctly place the Democrat Party to the ideological “left” of the Republican party (figure 3.7, p. 82). We see



the exact same trend when participants surveyed in the ANES are asked to position Democratic and Republican candidates running for the presidency. In fact, Americans were slightly more able to do this earlier in the time series, when images of the “Democratic Party” and “Republican Party” were perhaps more influenced by local context. Like other political elites, presidents since the 1980s have become much clearer in the signals they send to the electorate. However, establishing the president as the repository of partisan responsibility aggravates Manichean party conflict. As Juan Linz (“The Perils of Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy* 1, 1990) pointed out more than three decades ago, “presidentialism” weakens collective responsibility and forges a polarizing winner-take-all politics.

These observations are not meant as a criticism of Zingher’s important study; rather they are offered in the spirit of continuing a critical dialogue. We owe a debt of gratitude to his demonstration that citizens’ political choices are informed by core values. Our hope is that this exchange sheds new light on the causes and consequences of a polarized America, as well as potential remedies for the darker side of harsh party conflict. Throughout *Political Choice in a Polarized America*, elite polarization is lamented for its failure to govern responsibly. Nevertheless, if we take account of how the “gatekeepers” of party politics have been marginalized by executive aggrandizement and activists, we might discover where the work of political reform and reimagination of institutions may begin.

**Response to Nicholas F. Jacobs and Sidney M. Milkis’s Review of *Political Choice in a Polarized America: How Elite Polarization Shapes Mass Behavior***

doi:10.1017/S1537592722004066

— Joshua N. Zingher

The rise of partisan polarization is the most important development in American politics over the past 50 years. Both Jacobs and Milkis’s book and my own document how polarization has reshaped our politics in important and troubling ways. As Jacobs and Milkis correctly note, in my book I view the rise in mass polarization as an elite-led phenomenon. The elites became polarized, and the electorate sorted into the correct partisan camp as a result. This

left us with two partisan camps that are divided on policy, identity, and just about everything else.

My theory argues that the elites—elected officials, partisan media, and activists—began to send clear signals about where the parties stood, and voters became better able to tell which party best matched their views. All theories are simplifications of reality, and mine is no exception. There certainly must be a reciprocal relationship between elite and mass polarization: adopting extreme positions would be an electoral loser if there was no appetite for extremity among voters.

From an empirical perspective, accounting for this recursive relationship between elite and mass polarization gets complicated very quickly. Yet, the fact that this relationship is difficult to untangle does not mean it is unimportant—quite the contrary. One of the great flaws with much of the political science literature is that it gives elites too much credit and the masses too little. I tried to avoid this trap by arguing that people have real attitudes about what the government should do. Yet, if this is the case, it has numerous ramifications for elite politics.

During the 2016 primary, I had a conversation with a reporter who was surprised when I told him I thought Trump had a real chance to capture the nomination. “Why?!” he exclaimed. My answer was simple: “Look at the polling. Trump is closer to Republican primary voters on every single issue.” In my view, the rise of Trumpism was about bringing the positions of GOP elites in line with those their voters had long held. Clearly, the electorate has the power to influence the nature and direction of the parties, even if it is difficult to capture this influence in a theoretically or empirically parsimonious way.

As Jacobs and Milkis note in their book and in this critical dialogue, institutional changes have weakened the parties’ abilities to control candidate selection, among other things. The electorate has more power to steer the ship than ever before, and it certainly appears unwilling or unable to rein in polarization. Perhaps, as *What Happened to the Vital Center?* implies, weakening political parties in an effort to democratize the system helps neither democracy nor the parties.

Both *What Happened to the Vital Center?* and *Political Choice in a Polarized America* warn us that extreme polarization hurts democracy. Perhaps it is time we empower political parties once again and give them the tools to check populism and its associated ills.