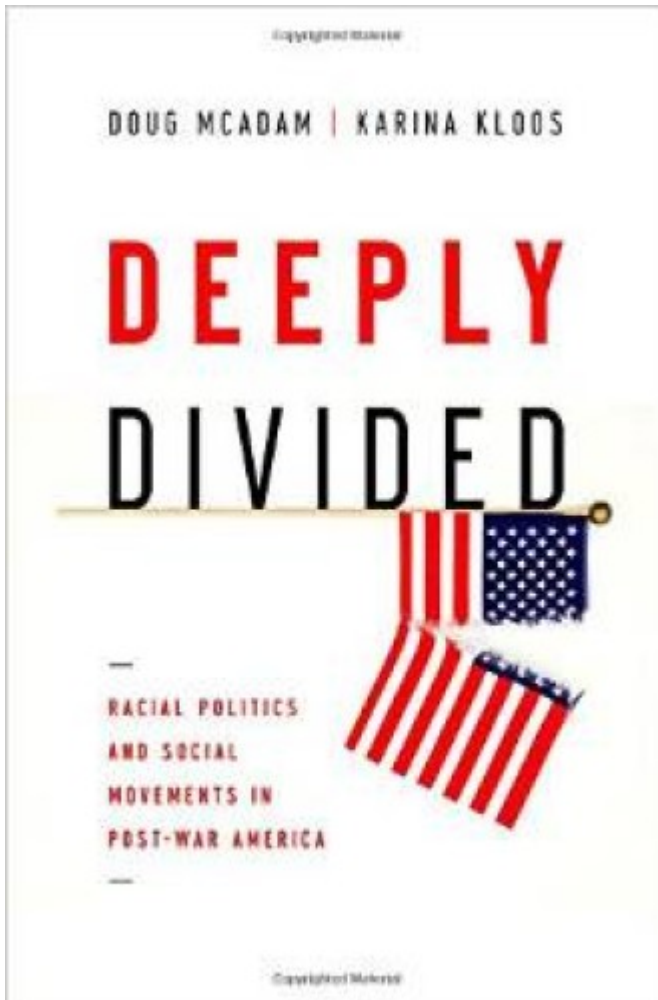


Deeply Divided, by Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos

reviewed by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Deeply Divided

By Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos
Oxford University Press

Politics have always been dirty. For every triumph of cooperation and principle, there are dozens of instances of division, mudslinging, and vitriol. All students of history understand this fact.

It seems, though, that in recent years American politics have taken a particularly dark and nasty turn. Jason Chaffetz, a freshman Republican member of Congress from Utah, publicly vowed that he and a group of colleagues would “take the government down” if congressional leaders did not acquiesce to their demands, and months later he won reelection with 76 percent of the vote. A bipartisan bill to establish a task force to develop a plan to address the nation’s deficit failed to pass the U.S. Senate because eight original Republican cosponsors of the legislation voted against their own bill upon learning that President Obama was in support of the measure. Midway through his second term in office, Obama faces a nation in which 25 percent of the population believe that his presidency is illegitimate because, they maintain, he was not born in America, 17 percent hold that he is a practicing Muslim, and according to one poll—this is not a joke—10 percent believe he is the Antichrist. Is this really politics, even dirty politics, as usual?

Doug McAdam, a professor of sociology at Stanford University, and Karina Kloos, an activist and scholar of social movements, think not. In *Deeply Divided*, the authors argue that contemporary American politics have taken an extreme turn that has ground previously functioning political processes to a halt, all but eliminated bipartisanship and compromise, and helped to create the greatest inequality in wealth that the United States has seen since the 1920s. They write, “The events of the past six years—serial budget crises, government shutdown, willful sabotage of presidential appointments, etc.—have told us all we need to know about escalating paralysis and government dysfunction.” The ten Congresses between 1948 and 1968 averaged almost 1,400 pieces of legislation enacted in each two-year period. By comparison, the most recent Congress enacted a grand total of 284 pieces of legislation in the same amount of time. Can we be surprised that one in three Americans now identify “government/Congress/politicians” as the nation’s most pressing problem?

McAdam and Kloos tell the story of how we reached this distressing state. Starting with the example of the post-World War II United States, the authors draw a vivid picture of just how different American politics used to be. Over the course of Franklin Roosevelt’s four decisive presidential election victories—the last one with 98 percent of the electoral vote—most opponents of his social welfare programs retired, modified their views, or were voted out of office. By the end of the war, there was a widespread consensus in both political parties that government is the primary instrument for economic growth and justice. In addition, as the nation emerged from

the war against Nazi Germany and its ideology of a master race, “policy makers across a broad array of institutional arenas took seriously the need to broaden access to the American dream.”

By the time the 1960s rolled around, political scientists were writing about “the triumph of the center” and positing that modern American democratic structures, by their very nature, produce a consensus that converges on moderate political positions. There seemed to be little reason to question the theory. Contemporary accounts of the 1960 presidential election—with the victory of a young, first-term senator from Massachusetts over a two-term sitting vice president—often portrayed it as a political watershed, signaling the ascendance of a new generation over the old political guard. But John Kennedy and Richard Nixon were both pragmatic moderates with similar positions on the critical issues of the day. Both “advocated civil rights reform, aggressive action to counter Soviet threats wherever they appeared in the world and a continued active role for the federal government in countering disadvantage and inequities.” In 1960, the difference between Democrats and Republicans was often a matter more of style than of substance. Indeed, numerous Republicans in Congress possessed more liberal voting records than did their Democratic counterparts.

In the immediate aftermath of Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, differences between the parties seemed to shrink even further. In his first two years as president, Lyndon Johnson was able to steer a stunning array of sweeping legislation through Congress—not merely the 1964 Civil Rights Act but also bills establishing Medicaid and Medicare, protecting the environment, supporting the arts, and promoting rural development and urban renewal. To be sure, racism and poverty were far from dead, but political opponents were able to unite behind the ideals of greater equality and justice and to pass substantive legislation to advance these principles. Moreover, there was a mainstream perception that the nation was building to a better future together. In 1964, the top income tax rate for the highest-earning Americans was almost 90 percent, the income disparity between wealthy and poor Americans was among the smallest on record, and almost 80 percent of Americans said they trusted the government “just about always” or “most of the time.”

How times have changed. Today the highest income tax rate is just under 40 percent (and complaints that it is too high fill mainstream Republican and Tea Party political discourse), disparity of wealth is twice the level in 1964, and barely 20 percent of Americans say that they trust their government. Divisions are so deep

between political parties that even the simplest of proposals creates intractable divisions in Washington. What happened?

McAdam and Kloos do not believe the change is democratically based—that is, it is not due to a fundamental shift in the beliefs of the U.S. populace. As they explain, “The deep partisan divide that characterizes today’s Congress is typically *not* mirrored in the general public. Quite the opposite: the general public has remained largely centrist in their views, while the parties—especially the GOP—and their candidates have been pushed off center.”

Put simply, politicians are no longer obligated to serve the political center the way they once were. Instead, their primary allegiance is often to a vocal group mobilized around a specific cause: “Over the past half century social movements have increasingly challenged, and occasionally supplanted, parties as the dominant mobilizing logic and organizing vehicle of American politics.” Elections increasingly hinge on politicians from both parties gaining and keeping the support of a passionate fringe rather than the “median voter.” As a result, the centrist and pragmatic outlook that characterized politicians of the postwar generation has largely disappeared.

The authors argue that a major cause of the marginalization of the political center was ironically the push for greater democracy in party politics. The turning point was the tumultuous Democratic primary season of 1968. In March of that year, just weeks after almost losing the New Hampshire primary to anti-Vietnam War candidate Eugene McCarthy, President Johnson stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek reelection. Robert Kennedy then entered the race, winning primaries in several states and becoming the front-runner for the Democratic nomination before his assassination on the evening of his victory in the California primary. Meanwhile, McCarthy ran in every primary, winning Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Oregon, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Illinois. In 1968, though, primary results were not binding on the delegates to the Democratic Convention, who were mostly long-term state party officials and establishment Democrats.

In the summer of 1968, the candidate ultimately selected by the delegates at the Democratic Convention in Chicago was not McCarthy but Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who had not participated in a single primary. The “fix was in,” according to McCarthy supporters and other antiwar Democrats. The protests and violence that erupted in Chicago during the convention not only doomed Humphrey’s chances of

winning the presidency in November but also set in motion a series of reforms that would thereafter give primary voters binding power over the delegates sent to both parties' political conventions.

This move toward populism brought many new voices into mainstream politics. The antiwar faction behind George McGovern would win the Democratic nomination for their candidate in 1972 but badly lose the general election. The religious right first became a significant factor in American presidential politics in 1976, and the candidate who mobilized its passion was the born-again governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter. Though the highly public support for Carter by televangelists such as Pat Robertson was short-lived—by 1980 they were throwing their support behind Carter's far more socially conservative Republican opponent, Ronald Reagan, swinging the South to Reagan in the process—a new model for securing a party's nomination was becoming evident. The presidential candidates who were able to survive their parties' grueling gauntlet of primaries, where candidates are many and voters are often few, were those who tapped into the passions of ideological factions within their parties.

An unforeseen consequence of the new nominating rules was thus their impact on the pragmatic, moderate center of the American political spectrum. McAdam and Kloos explain that because the "nominating process . . . favors small numbers of committed activists, the real action is taking part at the ideological edges of the system, effectively marginalizing the great majority of Americans who occupy the moderate center of the political continuum." This so-called tyranny of the primary not only shapes presidential politics; it dominates congressional and state legislative elections, where voter turnout is much smaller and the voices of the passionate few can hold even greater sway.

Other factors have accelerated the shift of American politics away from the center. Once ideologically driven politicians reach their statehouses, they must hold on to the support of the issue-driven voters who were responsible for their election. This has spurred an epidemic of radical gerrymandering at the state level—a legally questionable practice that has gone largely unchecked by the courts. In Georgia, the 11th Congressional District now extends from Atlanta to Savannah 248 miles away. In North Carolina, the 12th Congressional District, only a few miles wide in most places, reaches 140 miles from Charlotte in the south to Durham in the north. By concentrating all of the opposition party's supporters into a few districts and conceding defeat in these districts, the ruling party can significantly increase the

number of statewide districts in which it holds the majority.

According to McAdam and Kloos, gerrymandering has had a profound but underappreciated role in undermining the competitiveness of our political system. As recently as 1992, 103 of 435 congressional districts were competitive—meaning that the number of Democratic and Republican voters in the district were within five percentage points of each other. Today, that number is down to 35. As the authors put it, “The great majority of Americans now exercise little electoral voice when it comes to those who represent them in the House.” Moreover, with the vast majority of districts dominated by voters from a single party, there is little incentive for and much risk in bipartisan compromise. For ideologues there is no honor in the middle ground.

McAdam and Kloos maintain that the electoral college exacerbates these problems. In the 2012 presidential election, there were only six battleground states—that is, states in which the margin of victory for either candidate was 5 percent or less: Colorado, Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The mean margin of victory in the other 44 states was a whopping 19 percent. This means that if you are a Republican voter in New York or a Democrat voter in Louisiana, you might as well sit out the presidential election. Your voice will make no difference in the results. How do we get more Americans to engage with politics when we have created so many ways to prevent their voices from having any meaning?

In their compelling and detailed account of the circumstances that have fostered the vitriolic, dysfunctional system that now defines American politics, McAdam and Kloos have less to say about what can be done to get us out of this predicament. In the volume’s closing chapter, they argue that “the key . . . to gaining any kind of meaningful traction on the substantive economic and political issues that divide us must come from efforts to restore and revitalize our democratic ideals and practices.” They suggest such steps as eliminating the electoral college and electing the president by popular vote; creating open primaries in which candidates from all parties compete against one another, with the top two finishers facing off in the general election; removing the responsibility for redistricting from legislative and other political bodies; and even making voting mandatory for all eligible Americans in order to increase turnout and dampen the power of political extremes. Because special-interest campaign dollars often trump majority opinion—as with the National Rifle Association’s ability to counter overwhelming popular support for greater gun control—the authors also advocate comprehensive campaign finance reform.

Of course, the path to enacting such measures and the impacts that these steps would have remain unclear. What is clear is that the simplest way to ensure the perpetuation of the current dysfunctional state of American politics is for mainstream Americans to continue to approach politics with apathy and resignation.