

Bohdan Szklarski

University of Warsaw

COMPOUND EQUILIBRIUM IN A POLARIZED POLITY — LESSONS FROM AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

 <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2024-0018>

► Received: 26 September 2023 ► Accepted: 30 September 2024

Author

Bohdan Szklarski – Associate Professor of Political Science, Graduate of the English Institute, Warsaw University, and the Department of Political Science, Northeastern University, Boston. In his over 30 years of academic work, he has taught at numerous American and Polish Universities. He served as a director of the American Studies Center, Warsaw University in years 2012–2016. Now he is the Head of the Leadership Studies at ASC. Prof. Szklarski's research interests include: political leadership, political communication, American political culture and institutions, comparative politics, and political anthropology. Author of over 70 academic publications.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8508-3738> bohdan.szklarski@uw.edu.pl

Abstract

In the study of political systems, equilibrium stands as a cornerstone, underpinning stability and legitimacy. As we navigate the third decade of the 21st century, amid growing threats to democratic validity, it becomes crucial to re-examine this equilibrium principle. Even established democracies like the USA aren't immune to the pitfalls of polarization, tribalization, and radicalization. In this text, we aim to explore the resilience of equilibrium in the face of these destabilizing trends. Equilibrium, traditionally viewed as a cohesive product of political competition coming as if naturally, is a mark of consolidated democracy. Yet today, as even robust democracies face internal crises, strained by polarization and fragmentation, the concept of equilibrium evolves to become a *compound equilibrium* consisting of disjointed axes of conflict, each seeking its individual balance. Such systems necessitate greater leadership intervention or require new rules and processes to restore cohesion. In this text we pose numerous questions about the way this process of fragmentation is overcome and compound equilibrium achieved. Interestingly, some of the measures call on limiting rather than enhancing democracy. The analysis has its historical context. Post-Cold War America exemplifies the notion that more democracy doesn't necessarily equate to stronger democracy. While the focus here is primarily on the American system, as more democratic nations adopt its practices (such as debates and primaries), it's hoped that insights from the USA can shed light on how democracies globally might respond to internal and external challenges to their equilibrium.

Keywords

equilibrium, polarization, democracy, mainstream, reform

Introduction

In the study of political systems, equilibrium stands as a cornerstone, underpinning stability and effectiveness. As we navigate the third decade of the 21st century, amid growing threats to democratic legitimacy, it becomes crucial to re-examine this equilibrium prin-

ciple. Even established democracies like the USA aren't immune to the pitfalls of polarization, tribalization, and radicalization. In this text, we aim to explore the resilience of equilibrium in the face of these destabilizing trends.

Historically, equilibrium in a political system is perceived as inherently cohesive, stemming organically from the interaction of its elemental components and external dynamics (Easton, 1965). Such a concept of equilibrium "measured" at the level of the system stems from the centripetal view of the political dynamic where the forces of diversity have a tendency to eventually meet in the center. During the Cold War, like in moments of great threat, the forces which check the diversity were external to the operation of the system. They came from outside. Excessive conflict threatened not just the stability of the democratic system but its very continuity (existence). Therefore it was possible for scholars such as Easton to conceptualize the relations between diversity and equilibrium as a centripetal process.

In contexts marked by a less than critical existential threat even robust democracies face internal crises and polarization overwhelms them, we must give the concept of equilibrium a new look which recognizes its multifaceted and disjointed character. As the system endures strains from polarization and fragmentation, its core elements seem disjointed, necessitating greater leadership intervention to restore cohesion. Such a view of equilibrium grows from the centrifugal vision of the political dynamic which recognizes that forces of diversity need not have a tendency to eventually reinforce the center. The centrifugal view of democracy still needs forces which mitigate the conflict and hold the disruptive forces in check to prevent political conflicts from becoming anti-systemic. In American democracy these are: institutions, federalism, and leadership.

The centrifugal compound equilibrium, in a nutshell, is a situation when politics reveals its different spheres to be sufficiently (functionally) disjointed, each one seemingly having its own dynamics and its own equilibrium. Thus, the product of their impact on the political system is called compound equilibrium. Therefore each sphere should be treated separately. There are six principal dimensions of politics: institutions, axiology, finances, leadership, control, agency, and the international environment.

The system is in the state of equilibrium when the majority of dimensions of politics are balanced. Equilibrium of the whole system is thus a sum total of balances in key dimensions of the political system. Each dimension can be viewed separately. They need not be ideally aligned but as long as imbalance or asymmetry within any sphere of politics does not tip it outside of the mainstream of the system in any significant way, the system as a whole remains stable. This absence of ideal equilibrium or symmetry in a system adds dynamics rather than disrupts it as long as there are effective limits of tolerance of imbalance.

A food parallel may help us grasp that situation of compound centrifugal equilibrium. One can imagine a fresh out of the box multicolored layered cake where each layer consists of different material. Exposed to elements like sun, heat, light – the layers would react differently – change consistency, slide sideways or melt – each at its own pace. Nonetheless, the cake remains what it was – an edible food capable of satisfying people's craving for a piece of something sweet. While those who observe the cakes seeming disintegration may declare it dead, in reality the cake still works for those who crave sweet food. This function of fulfilling the expectation, that in spite of its asymmetrical look it still tastes like a layered cake should.

So does the political cake – in spite of several spheres of politics having their own emotional, axiological or substantive dynamics, together they still contribute to the integrity of government/system. The layers need not be perfectly aligned as long as they do their job – allow for the representation of legitimate interests/positions of most of the actors in the political arena. The political layers, most analysts would agree, are identified as: institutions, axiology, finances, leadership, control, agency, and the international environment.

Equilibrium and system stability

Equilibrium and stability, while often used interchangeably, have distinct implications, particularly in the context of democracy. While stability implies a period of calm or consistency between disturbances, it serves as a vital condition for the continuous growth of democracy. Such stability enables the byproducts of various tensions to integrate seamlessly into a system's structure. Democracies, by their very nature, are characterized by fluidity and constant change. Equilibrium, in a similar vein, is not synonymous with a static state.

Rather than denoting a fixed point of balance, equilibrium in a democratic context refers to a state in which prevailing dynamics are harmoniously accommodated within the mainstream. This 'mainstream' is a fluid domain nestled between extreme poles, encompassing the majority of ideas and beliefs deemed legitimate at a given time, relegating more marginal or radical thoughts to the periphery. In democratic discourse, this mainstream serves as the "space of acceptance" that encapsulates the marketplace-like competition between ideas that the public views as valid (Asard 1997). Consequently, the term "dynamic equilibrium" better captures the ever-shifting balance in democratic systems (Lindbeck 1993, 199).

Polarization, however, introduces strain to this equilibrium understood as overall stability. Therefore in a two-party system like that in the USA, polarization compels politically active individuals to weigh their policy inclinations against their partisan affiliations (Lindbeck 1993, 196). Tribalization, exacerbated by media echo chambers, further strains this balance within the space of acceptance. Tracking these trends over time reveals that polarization tends to expand the sphere of acceptance, inadvertently mainstreaming ideas and behaviors that two-three decades earlier were deemed radical or fringe. This phenomenon can manifest as a growing acceptance, or even "political legitimization," for parties and ideologies once considered extreme, whether they lean right (Vrakopoulos 2022, 55) or left (Orazani 2020, 1160) on the political spectrum. A good example in US politics is Barry Goldwater's "extreme" conservative message in 1964 which became a core of Reagan's 1980s and Reagan's tax, tariff, and military buildup policies have become broadly endorsed forty years later.

In the post-Cold War America, freed from the constraints of existential fear, the 1960s ignited intense single-issue activism and a proliferation of actors in the public sphere, we learn that more democracy doesn't necessarily equate to stronger and more effective democracy. Instead it results in what Jonathan Rauch defined as "demosclerosis" – *i.e.*, a situation when the dramatic rise of single-issue interest-groups coupled with the public's increasing demands on distributive policies, have choked the government ability to produce meaningful solutions to crucial problems (1994, 12). Paradoxically, in this environment saturated with single issue-oriented actors perfect balance between actors actually

blocks any action. The 1980s culture wars added an ideological dimension to democratic politics contributing to its fragmentation and polarization (Hunter, 1991). While the focus here is primarily on American democracy, as more democratic nations adopt its practices (like debates and primaries), insights from the USA can shed light on how democracies globally might respond to internal and external challenges to their equilibrium in future.

A sobering introspection from within the system's core.

In 2021, the U. S. House of Representatives advanced a bill that encapsulated the growing unease about the trajectory of contemporary American democracy. The bill's title, the "Protecting Our Democracy Act H. R. 5314," although failing to pass the Senate, is self-explanatory. While some may interpret it as a direct response to Trump's four-year tenure, a closer look reveals legislators' profound apprehensions about the broader evolution of democratic governance.

Their areas of focus touch on longstanding tensions in the interplay of institutions, political culture, and leadership. Although the Trump era may have intensified these issues, they've been on the radar of political observers since the 1990s (the 1994 mid-terms in particular). It could be argued that the polarization, tribalization, and radicalization characterizing recent American democracy are the delayed repercussions of the Cold War's conclusion. With the diminishing of external adversaries, such as the specter of communist authoritarianism, America's internal divides have come to the fore, no longer restrained by the imperative to stand unified against a common external threat, as famously alluded to in Fukuyama's "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1989).

In essence, the "Protecting Our Democracy" bill catalogues the contentious matters brought to the fore by the 2020 elections. Collectively, these issues narrate a tale of waning social capital, eroding faith in institutions, and the escalating dysfunction of American political mechanisms:

Concerning potential abuses of presidential authority, the bill bars self-pardons by presidents and halts the statute of limitations for federal offenses perpetrated by sitting Presidents or Vice Presidents.

For reinforcing checks and balances, and ensuring accountability and transparency, the legislation augments Congressional oversight, sets boundaries on presidential emergency declarations, strengthens whistleblower protections, and mandates presidential and vice-presidential candidates to disclose tax returns for the past ten years.

On the front of election integrity and security, the bill mandates reporting of foreign contacts in federal campaigns and bans the dissemination of misleading audio or visual content, such as deepfakes, ahead of elections (H. R.5314).

The majority of the issues addressed by the bill originate from forces intensifying societal fragmentation and normalizing radicalism. These trends weaken the connectedness between systemic elements and the tacit norms of political culture. When a notable disruption occurs, such as the extremities highlighted by the 2020 elections, the system doesn't revert to its prior state; instead, a new equilibrium forms. This kind of shift, often perceived as progress, is inherent to democratic systems. This phenomenon is termed "punctuated equilibrium" by Baumgartner (Baumgartner 2009, 604).

There are several axioms upon which the concept of centrifugal compound equilibrium is founded: not all elements of the system need to be balanced simultaneously; mecha-

nisms for balancing contradictions are intra-system and, when functioning efficiently, strengthen it. This sphere of acceptance houses equilibrating mechanisms such as elections/referenda, oversight hearings, formal investigations (by Congressional committees, special prosecutors), or investigative reporting by the media which move the system back towards stability even in situations triggered by crisis or scandal.

Polarization and mainstream in democratic polity

Polarization in the political realm signifies the sharp bifurcation of political views or allegiances into two starkly opposing factions, resulting in a diminishing moderate or centrist space (Meyer 2013, 1247). When these extreme positions are expressed by recognized entities, such as formally registered political parties or influential interest groups, their outer stances effectively demarcate the boundaries of what's deemed acceptable in the political discourse. Their sizable social backing and involvement in democratic activities, such as elections or lobbying, grant legitimacy to their positions. Consequently, these entities, by their very presence, expand the scope of the political mainstream (Bagattoli 2021, 7; Donnelly 2021, 3).

Populism and polarization are intricately linked, each feeding and amplifying the other. As fringe ideas gain traction and assimilate into the mainstream, they undergo a process of normalization, an integral component of agenda-setting in democratic societies (Bibbings 2012, 9). Yet, in a deeply polarized environment, rather than recognizing this incorporation as a natural evolution of the political landscape, both ends of the spectrum – liberals and conservatives alike – tend to label these emerging perspectives as “illegitimate”. In such a climate, there's an increased readiness to curb the freedom of speech of those with opposing viewpoints. Interestingly, the contention often isn't about the content of the discourse (“what” is being said) but rather the source (“who” is saying it). Such reactive stances are symptomatic of the heightened collective anxieties that polarization fosters (Orazani 2020, 1162).

In the American political system, the expansion of the political mainstream is often catalyzed by the emergence of “third party” candidates during presidential elections. These candidates champion issues or sentiments that the two major parties might overlook, thereby resonating with an electorate seeking alternative perspectives. When the two main parties in a political system converge in their ideologies, making them increasingly indistinguishable, it paves the way for new, sometimes radical, ideas to emerge on both the left and right fringes of the political spectrum. On the other hand, if these dominant parties drift too far apart, polarizing the political landscape, it leaves a void in the center. This gap then becomes fertile ground for previously unexpressed or overlooked views and interests to find a voice and gain traction. Such entry of ideas into “unused” political space is consistent with the power vacuum theory (Brewer 2012, 17).

Rather than presenting comprehensive agendas, such new actors often focus on a select few key issues, using them as a unique selling point to carve out a niche within the larger political arena (Meyer 2013, 1250). By critiquing existing institutions and elites that may have sidelined certain segments of the population, they position themselves as voices of dissent and protest. The dynamics of voting behaviors, which chart the co-option of novel voices into the mainstream, are reminiscent of Downsian economic views on democracy grounded in rational choice theory (Downs 1957). Building on this, the spatial theory of

democracy integrates not only rational interests but also emotions as pivotal factors driving citizen behavior (Adams 2009, 826; Stokes 1963). This perspective offers an insight into the support for populists introducing fresh ideas to the mainstream, viewing them as rational reactions to mainstream parties' failure to address latent emotional needs.

Historically, the trajectory of third-party candidates in the U.S. reveals a consistent pattern: while their debut on the presidential race may not secure a win and never has, a strong performance (capturing 10–20% of the popular support in the polls) can disrupt the prevailing status quo. This last is especially true in case of very close elections as the contest in 2000 when the Florida election would have turned in favor of Democrat Gore if it were not for a little over 1.6 percent support (97,488 votes) for a Green party candidate Ralph Nader as the victory of Republican Bush hinged on 537 majority. However, their momentum typically wanes in subsequent elections, primarily because one of the major parties, or both, usually co-opt their central message or stance. Due to the U.S.'s single-member-district plurality electoral system, these third-party contenders rarely evolve into standalone political parties. This is largely because voters are reluctant to “throw away” their vote on a candidate with a slim chance of victory (Evseev 2005, 1231). As a result, the unique voices and perspectives these candidates bring are often absorbed into the mainstream, leading to a broadening of its scope.

Historical examples abound. In the wake of the Great Depression, a notable shift to the left occurred with more leftist representatives being elected to Congress in the 1930s and early 1940s as Democrats than there were as Socialists in previous eras (Domhoff 2005). Fast forward to more recent times, Donald Trump's rise as a right-wing populist mirrors this pattern. He can be seen as an offshoot of the Tea Party's ascendancy – a libertarian-conservative movement that made its mark during the 2010 midterm elections. Initially securing a modest representation in Congress, the Tea Party's influence grew considerably, culminating in 2016 when its ideologies found a home within the wider Republican Party, championed by Trump. He thus became emblematic of already simmering divisive tendencies in American politics (Roberts 2022, 685).

Polarization breeding in the mainstream

In societies deeply affected by tribalism, polarization alters the public's perception of participation. The focus transitions from pursuing effective solutions to emphasizing representation, especially when it concerns voters' identities. With measures steeped in identity politics, achieving majorities becomes elusive, leading to legislative gridlocks in Congress. Consequently, the public perceives Congress as inept and detached, with recent polls suggesting a staggering 75% disapproval rate, and only 21% endorsing their performance, and a significant 61% exhibiting minimal trust (Gallup 2023).

Crucially, in such a polarized climate, foundational issues such as education, electoral regulations, taxes, healthcare, and welfare become entangled with “identity politics”, overshadowing their intrinsic value with debates on minority rights and values. Party leaders, recognizing this dynamic, lean into these sentiments. The political landscape further discourages moderation, with 7 out of 10 electoral districts being “safe districts” where one party regularly has a dominant edge (over 15% advantage). Moreover, a whopping 96% of the populace consistently recently votes along “straight” party lines across all levels of governance for judicial, legislative, and executive offices (Conrad 2020).

Against this backdrop, politicians often are incentivized to hyper-focus on specific issues rather than advocating broad perspectives on political problems. They cater more to the base than to the general electorate (Roberts 2022, 683). Such tunnel vision disrupts the equilibrium, calling for interventions that can recalibrate the system's balance. It then becomes an opportunity for leadership to play a consolidating role in the system, although their effectiveness and willingness to do so remains a subject of debate.

Leadership endeavors are further complicated by the persistent undertones of populism, accentuated, or even spurred, by certain unique structural facets of American politics. Unlike European democracies, the US possesses inherent institutional characteristics such as a presidential system, plurality elections, a two-party system, weakly structured parties, independently funded electoral contests, and open primary nominations. Such features lower the entry barriers for new ideas and outsiders, allowing them to challenge entrenched party elites for presidential nominations (Lee 2020, 373).

Polarization in American democracy today

The manifestations of polarization within American democracy are undeniable and multifaceted. Since the mid-1990s, following a trend that arguably began with the Goldwater-Johnson presidential contest in 1964, the divide between liberals and conservatives has only widened. By the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, the gulf became even more pronounced. It got significantly more intense when Republicans captured the control of the House in 1994, first time since 1948. The razor thin Bush victory over Gore in 2000 as a result of re-count in Florida only added to the mounting tensions in the American polity. Public opinion polling regularly shows the several tendencies which weigh significantly on the nature of equilibrium in American democracy.

In Congressional practice bipartisan cooperation has seen a dramatic decline. Legislative activity is often characterized by party line votes, with little to no crossover. It means that on seminal issues such as gun control, immigration, and climate change, the polarized divide between Republican and Democratic voters has become impenetrable. In the media, there is a rise of ideologically driven media outlets which means that Americans often exist in echo chambers, only hearing views that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs. Polarized individuals are more susceptible to, and likely to propagate, information that aligns with their beliefs, irrespective of its factual accuracy (Newport 2022). In voting patterns we are witnessing two processes: geographical polarization where political beliefs increasingly align with residency – urban areas predominantly lean Democratic, while rural zones are Republican bastions (Kleinfeld, 2023). The other tendency is the decline of the center especially in the ruling elite. While the number of ideologically self-identified moderates has dwindled to 10% down from almost 30 percent three decades ago (Binder, 1996). Research shows that when it comes to positions on specific issues ordinary Americans tend to follow these divisive opinions based on the rhetoric coming from the extremes in the elites. This affective polarization erodes the support for moderate candidates running for Congress, with some of them losing in primaries or declining to run in this adverse political culture. Such electoral tendencies and noticeable issue, and elite polarization contributes to the deficit trust. Faith in major political and social institutions is eroding (Public trust, 2024).

The storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, underscores the gravity of the situation. This unprecedented act showcased how deep-seated beliefs, fueled by misinformation and polarized narratives, can manifest in violent challenges to democratic institutions. Notably, multiple investigations into the 2020 elections did not unearth any substantial evidence to support claims of “vote theft” as propagated by Donald Trump. Yet, the narrative persists. As recently as August 2023, during the first Republican debate for the 2024 elections, 75% of the candidates on stage echoed Trump’s sentiments. A similar proportion of Republican voters share this view, pointing to an entrenched belief system, further underscoring the depth of polarization (Feuer 2023).

The system response to the challenges to stability coming from radicalism and polarization

At the core of many democratic crises is the very essence of what democracy promises: a voice for the people, accountability of leaders, and transparent institutions and processes. When these promises seem unfulfilled or undermined, the public demands greater democratization and increased direct influence on the policy-making process.

However, the practical response from political elites, particularly in the U.S., often diverges from these calls. To stabilize the system, leaders often lean on technocratic or bureaucratic fixes that, in some instances, might feel antithetical to grassroots democratic demands. These fixes, although framed as necessary to stabilize or streamline the system, can inadvertently sideline the very public that a democracy serves. A few mechanisms highlighting this phenomenon include:

Automatic Regulation: Measures like the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act were meant to enforce budget discipline by imposing decreasing annual deficit targets. If the targets were not met, the act required spending cuts via a sequestration process, which automatically cuts funding from programs. This limits the influence of active, current democratic choices in budgetary matters.

Budgetary and Spending Limitations: The imposition of restrictions on discretionary spending can also be seen as a way to insulate budgetary decisions from the volatility of political whims. On the one hand, such measures aim for fiscal responsibility; on the other, they can curtail active policymaking.

Ruling by Adjudication: Increasingly, courts have been asked to intervene in political disputes or to interpret social norms, effectively placing significant policy decisions in the hands of the judiciary. While this approach can provide neutral, rule-of-law-based decisions, it’s also criticized for sidelining legislative bodies and reducing political debates to legal battles.

The counterargument to these mechanisms is that they provide stability and predictability, qualities that are essential for a functioning democracy and economy. Yet, there’s undeniable tension between these stabilizing mechanisms and the more volatile, grassroots democratic demands. It’s a dance between wanting democratic systems to be responsive to every gust of public sentiment and needing them to maintain a steady trajectory in the face of constant winds.

Moreover, such technocratic measures which LIMIT the choices and propagate mechanisms which depersonalize the policy making process by removing decisions from the control or discretion of people and elites might be seen as short-term fixes for deeper,

systemic issues. While they might bring about stability in the short run, they might not address the underlying frustrations and disparities that fuel public demands for greater democratization. Over time, ignoring these root causes could erode trust and lead to even greater demands for systemic change.

The condition of equilibrium in American system

The U.S. political landscape is ever evolving. With deeply polarized elites and the electorate, there's a clear fragmentation not just in the political discourse but also in the media and social spheres, which are now divided into echo chambers and tribal affiliations. Yet, despite these seemingly insurmountable divisions and proclamations of its demise by analysts like Murray (2012) and Hunter (2016), the concept of a mainstream still persists in American democracy. This isn't the first time the American system has encountered such pronounced fragmentation. It's especially evident during times of heightened political unrest. For instance, during the turbulent 1960s, Richard Hofstadter described the American mainstream as "overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive" (Hofstadter 1967, 4), a description that feels even more apt for the 2020s.

The fragmentation of a system inevitably leads to the disruption of its equilibrium. Instead of viewing this balance as a singular entity, we suggest envisioning it as a multi-faceted construct, with each facet corresponding to major policy areas. In such a segmented political landscape, it's crucial to evaluate the stability within each sector independently. The unifying force that holds these disparate parts together is the potent vertical influence of leadership. This leadership acts as a counterbalance, preventing the inherent divergent forces from dismantling the mainstream. It aims to integrate these segmented actions, lending coherence to the policy-making process.

The notion of a *compound equilibrium* suggests that we assess a system's stability by individually examining the stress distribution in its pivotal sectors. Even if these sectors aren't perfectly balanced, as long as their deviations don't dramatically breach the system's stability thresholds, the overarching balance remains intact. In this intricate framework, the system's overall equilibrium emerges from the combined (im)balances of its distinct components.

The complexity of a political system isn't easily distilled into a singular list of defining dimensions. However, a consensus among scholars suggests key facets like the institutional, axiological, financial, electoral, governance, and international sectors. Each dimension embodies a vibrant policy realm, encapsulating a wide range of beliefs, ideals, and interests. Within a fragmented political landscape, each of these sectors can operate with a certain degree of autonomy, with potential distinct actors championing solutions. These spheres might not always converge cohesively, given the varied issues that animate them.

The institutional sector navigates the contentious terrain of foundational rules and institutional privileges. The axiological facet grapples with the tension between rights and core values. The financial dimension concerns itself with the distribution and generation of tangible resources. The electoral realm focuses on the competition for filling and controlling elite decision-making roles. Governance delves into the exercise of power and the intricacies of decision-making. Lastly, the international facet of politics revolves around the molding of, and reactions to, external dynamics.

In this segmented landscape, stakeholders championing particular outcomes in one domain might often sideline other areas. Such politics, in a divided public realm, leans more towards emphasizing issues rather than seeking comprehensive solutions. Many players prioritize voicing their concerns over sculpting consensus-driven outcomes. This isn't necessarily indicative of restraint but might stem from the challenges of forging productive outcomes in a paralyzed political environment. The harder it becomes to broker compromises, the more likely competitors will retreat to their foundational stances. Instead of courting moderates or those in the middle ground, they cater to their most ardent supporters. Issue-centered advocacy overshadows problem-solving. This approach, in turn, leads to a political environment where actors are more inclined towards extremes rather than seeking some middle ground.

The delineation of political spheres leads to a fractured equilibrium, with each realm governed by its unique dynamics. At any given time, a particular sphere might lean heavily towards an extreme, sometimes even venturing beyond the conventional mainstream. Picture each political domain as an individual balance scale, where one end occasionally extends outside the accepted boundaries of mainstream thought.

Electoral sphere imbalance as illustration of fragmentation of equilibrium

Claims of a "Stolen Election" and the balance of the system: an example that illustrates how imbalances can be contained within a single realm is evident in the electoral challenges historically seen in American politics. It's not uncommon for the legitimacy of elections to be questioned. Common grievances include alleged miscounts, voter intimidation, faulty voter rolls, excessive wait times, and other purported discrepancies. In 2004, the Conyers Report highlighted 41 such irregularities in the presidential elections. Though these irregularities were largely verified, they didn't impact the official electoral outcomes (Conyers 2005).

The Democrats' response to their 2004 loss showcases a disturbance in the electoral domain that didn't ripple across other political areas. While some fringe voices called for George Bush's disqualification, the Democratic nominee, John Kerry, remained notably distant from post-election controversies, preventing personalization of the movement. The Democratic party mostly accepted the electoral bodies' decisions. Those who were disgruntled, predominantly from the party's left wing, channeled their frustrations into advocating for system reforms, emphasizing election integrity and tackling voter disenfranchisement. However, those who subscribed to deeper conspiracy theories found themselves marginalized, at least temporarily (Weiss 2020).

The 2004 electoral imbalance might have amplified polarization in party rhetoric, but it remained within mainstream boundaries. The grievances, when processed through mainstream democratic mechanisms, didn't destabilize the broader system. This episode possibly reinforced the notion that valid challenges require substantial evidence and must navigate through democratic channels, advocating for reforms, laws, and enhanced transparency.

Contrast this with 2020, when the Republicans, under Donald Trump's banner, echoed similar grievances but pursued them beyond traditional confines. Instead of entrusting mainstream institutions (such as electoral and certifying bodies, or courts) to probe these

allegations, there was significant external pressure on these entities to sway their findings in favor of the challengers. The Capitol riot on January 6 became a poignant symbol of this refusal to recognize the system's foundational principles.

Three years post the 2020 election and the subsequent unrest, court decisions underscored that Trump and his supporters exceeded mainstream boundaries by relentlessly contesting the election results without substantive evidence. Those who audaciously defied the system faced severe legal repercussions, with the most outspoken culprits receiving extended prison sentences (Feuer 2023). Even Trump is under legal scrutiny, not for expressing his beliefs (protected by free speech) but for allegedly attempting to manipulate vote counts and certification, thereby compromising the integrity of the rule of law and the institutions that uphold it. The ongoing legal battles and official inquiries even three years post the election spotlight the deep fractures in America's political landscape.

Fractured Public Sphere and Equilibrium: The System's Counteraction

A fractured public sphere requires a cohesive force to maintain stability, ensuring that diverse entities don't destabilize the overarching system. In such a fragmented political environment, equilibrium takes on a multifaceted nature. It's essential to note that most entities within this sphere—ranging from parties, interest groups, NGOs, unions, to politically active celebrities—operate within the mainstream political paradigm and possess intrinsic legitimacy.

Historically, institutions and the overarching political culture have acted as unifying forces. However, in a climate polarized by populism, where even institutions and values are contested territories, the search for cohesive forces turns elsewhere. While weaker political systems might rely on external entities—such as multinational corporations or powerful nation-states—for coherence, a robust entity like the United States seeks internal forces. Leadership and inherent systemic mechanisms play pivotal roles in this context.

Balance in a political system isn't just spatial but also temporal. It isn't imperative for all components to be in equilibrium simultaneously. A system that's balanced across every dimension risks stagnation, becoming unresponsive to requisite changes. Such inertia can hinder the system's ability to innovate and adapt. However, with certain stabilizing forces, this multifaceted equilibrium can extend over time, ensuring not all elements need alignment concurrently. Otherwise, the system might stagnate. Unexpected phenomena, be it scandals or crises, can recalibrate this balance. By unveiling latent issues, they compel the system to address and rectify them, acting as crucial feedback loops. While these jolts might be distressing, they're essential for enduring stability, fostering a renewed equilibrium in the affected political spheres.

Guardians of the Mainstream: Safeguarding Political Equilibrium

Open political systems inherently possess mechanisms to address and reconcile disparities. Inherent corrective measures, for example electoral processes and elite turnovers, serve this purpose. Democratic principles, such as checks and balances or the separation of powers, act as intrinsic regulatory mechanisms. When functional, they fortify the system, ensuring no single entity becomes disproportionately influential. Conversely, in closed or authoritarian systems, corrective mechanisms often lie outside recognized power

channels, manifesting as anti-systemic forces. While protests, underground movements, or international pressures can act as balancers, their extrinsic nature to the system might introduce instability or even system breakdowns. The collapse of the Soviet bloc serves as a poignant reminder of this dynamic.

Equilibrium in political systems is protected by mechanisms that broadly categorize into political and institutional. Political mechanisms are primarily driven by the masses or elites and usually empower a particular actor to rectify imbalances and establish a renewed power distribution. Foremost among these are elections, transparency and accountability, and civil society activism. Institutional mechanisms, conversely, prevent an undue concentration of power, ensuring a fair playfield. Key mechanisms here include checks and balances, an independent judiciary, and the bureaucratic stability offered by a non-partisan civil service.

The challenges of polarization and threats to the efficacy of American democratic institutions have catalyzed the emergence of novel protective measures. These mechanisms are automatic, activated by predefined conditions rather than political intervention. Their seemingly objective nature lends them a “non-political” sheen.

Illustratively, the foreign policy domain boasts the War Powers Act of 1973, designed to check executive power during international conflicts. Fiscal policy showcases mechanisms like the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act of 1985, providing a blueprint for spending cuts when a budgetary compromise proves elusive. When the budget deficit exceeds predefined thresholds (currently set at 120%), automatic fiscal measures kick in. The Budget and Impoundment Act of 1974 introduced limits on discretionary spending shifts, compelling a more methodical fiscal approach. The creation of the Congressional Budget Office furthered this rationale, tasked with impartial data collection and budgetary impact assessments.

The overarching aim of these mechanisms is ensuring stable, predictable governance, capable of weathering political or economic storms. Their existence acknowledges a fundamental democratic tenet: while democracy must remain nimble and adaptable, it also requires buffers against excessive volatility or recklessness. Implementing these mechanisms can be seen as a move towards “less democracy” to counteract the perils of populism and radicalization destabilizing the system. In moments of crisis, democracies lean on rational, sometimes seemingly “undemocratic,” solutions to prevent descending into chaos or authoritarian rule. This paradox underlines a significant theme: in crises, democracies may look to de-politicize or rationalize processes to ensure their survival.

Looking ahead, as the integration of technology and governance deepens, could artificial intelligence offer potential solutions? AI algorithms, designed with fairness, transparency, and without bias, might indeed be the next frontier in safeguarding democratic equilibrium.

American Equilibrium: A Lesson in Democracy's Resilience

The United States, with its dynamic socio-political landscape, offers invaluable lessons in the functioning, maintenance, and restoration of systemic equilibrium. The following insights can be gleaned from America's ongoing battles against polarization, populism, and the challenges they pose:

Adaptive Evolution: The American democratic system has consistently demonstrated an ability to evolve and adapt. Its mechanisms, such as checks and balances, have frequently been tested, but they also have undergone transformations to address emergent challenges.

Institutional Integrity Matters: Despite pressures from populism and extreme polarization, core institutions – including the judiciary, the press, and civil society organizations – have proven instrumental in defending democratic norms.

The Value of Civic Engagement: The emphasis on civic engagement in the U.S., from community involvement to national voting, underscores the idea that active participation is both a right and a responsibility. It's a reminder that a vibrant democracy requires its citizens' involvement.

Importance of Checks and Balances: The American system's built-in checks and balances act as a safety net, ensuring that no single branch of government can gain unchecked power. This design has been a bulwark against potential authoritarian drifts.

Global Influence: America's political experiments, from primaries to televised debates, have gained global attention. As they are assimilated into other democratic systems, it's crucial to consider their contexts and impacts comprehensively.

The Need for Constant Vigilance: Democracy is not a self-sustaining mechanism. The American experience teaches that constant vigilance, active participation, and a commitment to democratic values are essential to maintaining equilibrium.

In conclusion, as the world watches America grapple with its internal challenges, the key takeaway is that democracies are inherently messy, but also resilient. The compound equilibrium seen in the U.S. is likely a preview of what other democracies might expect as they evolve. While each nation must tailor its approach to its unique circumstances, the American experience offers both cautionary tales and templates for success.

References

- Adams, James, Zeynep Somer-Topcu, (2009). "Policy Adjustment by Parties in Response to Rival Parties' Policy Shifts: Spatial Theory and the Dynamics of Party Competition in Twenty-Five Post-War Democracies", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, 825–846.
- Agiesta, Jennifer, Ariel Edwards-Levy, (2023). "CNN Poll: GOP voters' broad support for Trump holds, with less than half seriously worried criminal charges will harm his 2024 chances", CNN, September 5, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/05/politics/cnn-poll-trump-primary-criminal-charges/index.html>.
- Asard, Eric, Lance Bennett, (1997). *Democracy and the Marketplace of Ideas. Communication and Government in Sweden and the United States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bagattolli, Carolina, Tiago Brandão, (2021). "Contesting the Mainstream Narrative? A Conceptual Discussion on the Politics of Science, Technology, and Innovation from the Periphery", *Journal of Scientometric Research*, vol. 10, issue 1, pp.5–20.
- Baumgartner, Frank, Christian Breunig, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Bryan D. Jones, Peter B. Mortensen, Michiel Nuytemans and Stefaan Walgrave, (2009). "Punctuated Equilibrium in Comparative Perspective", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Jul. 2009), pp. 603–620.

- Bibbings, Sharleene, (2012). *The Politics of Mainstreaming in Critical Perspective*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Binder, Sarah, (1996). *The Disappearing Political Center: Congress and the Incredible Shrinking Middle*, The Brookings Institution Paper, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-disappearing-political-center-congress-and-the-incredible-shrinking-middle>.
- Brewer, Mark, Sandy Meisel, (2012). *The Parties Respond: Changes in American Parties and Campaigns*, New York, Routledge.
- "Congress and the Public", *Gallup Historical Trends* (2023), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx>.
- Conrad, Daniel, (2020). "Most Americans Registered Will Vote Straight Ticket, Poll Shows", *Courthouse News Service*, <https://www.courthousenews.com/most-registered-voters-to-vote-straight-ticket-poll-shows>.
- Conyers, John, Anita Miller, (2005). *What went wrong in Ohio : the Conyers report on the 2004 presidential election*, Library of Congress Online Catalog (1,474,246), Chicago, Academy Chicago Publishers.
- Domhoff, William, (2005). "Third Parties Don't Work: Why and How Egalitarians Should Transform the Democratic Party", *Who Rules America*, Santa Cruz, University of California (online material) https://whorulesamerica.ucsc.edu/change/science_egalitarians.html.
- Donnelly, Jack (2021). "Levels, centers, and peripheries: the spatio-political structure of political systems", *International Theory*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, March 2021, pp. 1–35.
- Downs, Anthony (1957). *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York. Harper and Brothers.
- Downes, James, (2020). "How the far right took over the mainstream, Centre for the Analysis of the Far Right", openDemocracy Limited, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/how-far-right-took-over-mainstream>.
- Easton, David, (1965). *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley.
- Evseev, Dmitri (2005). A second look at third parties: correcting. The supreme court's understanding of elections, *Boston University Law Review*, Vol. 85, pp. 1277–1330.
- Feuer, Alan, (2023). "Ex-Leader of Proud Boys Sentenced to 22 Years in Jan. 6 Sedition Case", *New York Times*, September 4, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/us/politics/enrique-tarrio-proud-boys-sentenced.html>.
- Fukuyama, Francis, (1989). "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18.
- Hofstadter, Richard, (1967). *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, New York, Vintage.
- Hunter, James, (1991). *Culture Wars. The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America*, Basic Books.
- Hunter, James, Carl Bowman, (2016). "The Vanishing Center of American Democracy. The 2016 Survey of American Political Culture. Initial Report of Findings", Raleigh, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.
- Kleinfeld, Rachel, (2023). *Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Working Paper, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/09/polarization-democracy-and-political-violence-in-the-united-states-what-the-research-says?lang=en>.

- Lee, F., (2020). "Populism and the American Party System: Opportunities and Constraints", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 18, issue 2, pp. 370–388.
- Lindbeck, Assar, Jörgen W. Weibull, (1993), "A model of political equilibrium in a representative democracy", *Journal of Public Economics*, Volume 51, Issue 2, June 1993, pp. 195–209.
- Mason, L (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McDonald, Nicola, Garry W. McDonald, (2020). "Towards a Dynamic Equilibrium-Seeking Model of a Closed Economy", *Systems*, vol.8(4).
- Meyer, Thomas, Markus Wagner, (2013). "Mainstream or Niche? Vote-Seeking Incentives and the Programmatic Strategies of Political Parties", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 46, issue 10, pp. 1246–1272
- Murray, Charles (2012). *Coming apart: the state of white America, 1960–2010*, New York: Crown Forum.
- Newport, Frank, (2022). *Polling in an Era of Political Polarization*, Polling matters, Gallup, (29.04.2022) <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/392237/polling-era-political-polarization.aspx>.
- Orazani, Seyed Nima, Michael Wohl, Bernhard Leidner, (2020). "Perceived normalization of radical ideologies and its effect on political tolerance and support for freedom of speech", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, vol. 23, issue 8, pp. 1150–1170.
- Protecting Our Democracy Act H.R.5314 – 117th Congress (2021–2022), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5314>.
- Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024*, PEW Research Center, June 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>
- Rauch, Jonathan, (1994). *Demosclerosis. The Silent Killer of American Government*, Times Books.
- Roberts, Kenneth, (2022). "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions", *Government and Opposition*, Volume 57, Special Issue (October) 4: The Three Faces of Populism in Power: Polity, Policies and Politics; October 2022, pp. 680–702.
- Scarf, H.; Hansen, T. (1973). *The Computation of Economic Equilibria*; Yale University Press: New Haven.
- Stokes, Donald (1963). "Spatial Models of Party Competition", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Jun. 1963), pp. 368–377.
- Vrakopoulos, Christos, (2022). "Political and ideological normalization: quality of government, mainstream-right ideological positions and extreme-right support", *European Political Science Review*, Vol.14, Issue 1, February 2022, pp. 56–73.
- Weiss, Joanna, (2020). "What Happened to the Democrats Who Never Accepted Bush's Election", *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/12/19/2004-kerry-election-fraud-2020-448604>.