

Wolak, Jennifer. *Compromise in an Age of Party Polarization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 223 pages.

The majority of Americans value political compromise, and want their politicians to practice it rather than to engage in gridlock. Additionally, Americans value compromise because they were socialized to believe that compromise is a virtuous trait that is vital for settling conflicts in everyday living. These are the two basic premises in Jennifer Wolak's new book "Compromise in an Age of Party Polarization," which counters public misconceptions that Americans no longer desire politicians (or parties) to work in a bipartisan manner to effectively address social issues. Dr. Jennifer Wolak is a political science professor whose research interests include political psychology, public opinion, and the consequences of emotion in politics. She draws upon all of these fields in her new book, which delivers impressive analysis and thought-provoking discussion pertaining to how Americans would like to see politics practiced today.

Using a remarkably large cross-section of survey data responses, collected by a wide variety of sources over the last forty years, Dr. Wolak makes a compelling empirical case in support of these premises. She uses various quantitative methodologies and tests to indicate that even the most partisan and politically active members of the public want to see politicians they support compromise rather than to stand in continued opposition based on ideological principles. Upon completion of the book, she calls upon all readers to rethink their beliefs of the United States as being hopelessly polarized, while also stating the prediction that politicians who embrace bipartisan compromise in the future will reap success with voters.

While reading, I could not help but feel as if there might be a disconnect between the responses received from abstract, ideal questions found in surveys about how politics *should* be, versus the possible ideological polarity respondents held about *actual*, concrete specific issues. After all, it is one thing to *say* you value compromise, and another to actually be willing to make

concessions about important issues that may be central to one's identity. Through various hypothesis tests, the author did find that a willingness to compromise may be reduced towards values-based social issues, as well as when people perceive that their political values to be under attack. I appreciated the author's recognition that various social contexts may work against a desire to compromise. In doing so, Dr. Wolak uncovers a more nuanced social reality about what effects the public's willingness to engage in compromises, rather than to make blanket statements about holding an unwavering value towards compromise at all times.

Likewise, the author does a great job of identifying three various countervailing social forces that work against the public's childhood socialization of valuing compromising to resolve conflicts. First is an American news media which thrives on stories that centers on emotion-based conflicts and partisan gridlock, drawing public attention towards where we are divided rather than recognizing our similarities. This can foster in-group and out-group perceptions about American politics, exacerbating divisions and reducing the desire for compromise. Second is that Americans all too often live, work, and socialize in areas that lack ideological diversity. This can create a "false consensus" effect among Americans, which reduces understanding and empathy for those with different beliefs. Third, the political parties have become more polarized themselves, which has to some degree pushed more extreme policy stances and an unwillingness to compromise with political adversaries onto the public. This combination of findings helps to explain why the public believes that the public is bitterly divided, one which overstates perceptions of differences among Americans, while simultaneously underestimating public support for political compromise.

In general, I enjoyed reading this book, and believe it is a must-read for anyone who wants to gain a better insight into the minds of the American public. While the book is sophisticated and relies upon a large amount of quantitative analysis, it is also accessible to a more general audience,

and is written in a very clear and concise manner. As a reader who viewed the American public as deeply divided and hostile before reading Dr. Wolak's new book, I have found that this book has led me to question those beliefs about political polarization. Any social scientist with an interest in political psychology would be well-advised to read this book, which I am happy to strongly recommend.

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