

The Gingrich Senators: The Roots of Partisan Warfare in Congress. Sean M. Theriault. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 240p. \$99.00/\$27.95.

Virtually every observer of congressional politics over the last decade has noted with disappointment the increased ideological and partisan polarization present in both the House and the Senate. The public has become increasingly partisan, state legislatures have polarized, and both Houses of Congress are as divided as they have been in U.S. history. In some ways for the House, this is not particularly surprising as the House responds to the whims of the public quite strongly. Thus, if the public polarizes, the House should follow. Much of the existing procedural foundations of the House are also highly partisan, meaning the members of the House have significant reasons to maintain high levels of party loyalty. The Senate, however, was intended to be the more collegial, levelheaded, august chamber. George Washington famously noted that the Senate was to be the saucer onto which the overheated legislation of the U.S. House rested. With infrequent, staggered elections, a heavy emphasis on unanimous consent in its agenda setting, and its small, interpersonal setting, the Senate ought to maintain a reasonably high level of collegiality and moderation even if the public and the House polarize. Yet despite all these forces that ought to work to keep the Senate even-keeled, most estimates of polarization in the Senate suggest that it is nearly equally as divided as the House.

In *The Gingrich Senators: The Roots of Partisan Warfare in Congress*, Sean M. Theriault offers a novel and thoughtful explanation of why the Senate has polarized despite its apparent institutional design to resist such a move. Theriault suggests that much of the polarization in the U.S. Senate is attributable to a specific group of Senators who served in the U.S. House with former Speaker Newt Gingrich. This group of Senators arrived at the House at the beginning of their congressional careers facing an entrenched Democratic Party that had maintained control of the House for decades. In order to make policy head way in the House and to combat the formidable policy advantages the House rules granted such a long-serving majority party, the Gingrich Senators learned to enforce lockstep discipline among their membership, and to obstruct the activity of the majority party at every turn, rather than “going along to get along” and hoping for policy concessions from the majority. This highly adversarial style was relatively new to the House, but was ultimately successful and saw Gingrich and his fellow Republicans gain control of the House in 1994 for the first time since 1955. Seeing the success of such obstructionism, many of these House members would subsequently be elected to the Senate and bring these tactics along with them. Theriault notes frequently that it is not Gingrich himself that polarizes these Senators, but rather the shared environment of the House they served in. Gingrich reaped many of the rewards of these tactics, but it is the circumstances the group faced that taught them the value of partisan warfare to achieve their group’s goals.

In Part I of the manuscript, Theriault introduces readers to the Gingrich Senators. In particular, he notes in Figure 2.3 the dramatic increase in the polarization of the House following Gingrich’s election to the House and the foundation of the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS). The COS served as a mouthpiece for the more conservative

wing of the Republican Party, and it was here that the future Gingrich Senators began to learn the partisan tactics that would ultimately create so much stalemate in the modern Senate. Theriault also points out the ways the COS used Special Orders and one-minute speeches to ridicule the Democratic majority. This tactic of speech giving as a way to call attention to issues or shortcomings in governance is often ignored by legislative scholars, since it plays little role in the policy outcomes of the chamber. Theriault notes, however, that members of the COS gave more than three times the number of one-minute speeches as other Republicans who had served before Gingrich's arrival, indicating its frequent use by a group of House members with few other recourses to have their voices heard.

In Part II of the book, Theriault develops the argument that the Gingrich Senators themselves were the polarizing agents of Congress. This portion of the book does a nice job of comparing the Gingrich Senators to other Republicans, along with Gephardt Senators (a similar set of Senators who served with Democratic Speaker Richard Gephardt), and demonstrates that the differences between the Gingrich Senators and other Republicans are actually larger than the long-noted divisions between Northern and Southern Democrats during the 70's and 80's. Theriault also uses Gingrich Senators' predecessors as a tool for evaluating whether Gingrich Senators just happen to come from partisan constituencies and finds clear evidence that the polarization brought to the Senate by the Gingrich Senators was *not* just a function of their constituencies, but was something endemic to their service in the House. Part III of Theriault's work pushes past simple ideological differences between Gingrich Senators and their counterparts, and shows that Gingrich Senators are an extremely cohesive group with a strong "pack mentality," that has served to frustrate Democratic presidents and majorities in a variety of ways. Democratic presidents judicial and executive nominees are virtually guaranteed to face opposition from the Gingrich Senators, even if the remainder of the Republicans are on board with the nominees. The Gingrich Senators are also much less likely to support cloture and override filibusters than nearly any other group of senators.

Part IV concludes the manuscript and offers up some predictions for the future of the Senate overall, and the Gingrich Senators in particular. The rise of the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party has provided the Gingrich Senators with natural anti-establishment allies, and as Theriault points out, Gingrich Senator Jim DeMint was a pivotal player in getting many Tea Party senators elected. Given this particular alliance, it's unlikely that the Senate will find a way to return to its more collegial roots in the near future. The continued partisan warfare in the Senate also works to rob the Senate of its moderate voices. Many moderates on both the Republican (Lamar Alexander) and Democratic (Ben Nelson, Jim Webb) side have elected to resign leadership positions rather than deal with the difficulties of the constant partisan battle the Senate has become. For those who oppose the more partisan Senate, Theriault notes the outlook is rather bleak.

There are many things to like about Theriault's work. The analysis is extremely comprehensive and Theriault works hard to counter any potential competing hypotheses. At different points, his analysis demonstrates that Gingrich Senators come from different

constituencies that other Republicans, but that this fails to account for all the polarization they bring to the Senate; that their individual characteristics like age, occupation, or military service fail to account for the increased level of polarization they represent, and that many of the Gingrich Senators managed to arrive in the Senate and maintain lengthy careers despite their relative extremity. After careful analysis, Theriault's original argument that service in the House during Gingrich's tenure led to the partisan warfare of the Senate maintains much of its explanatory power. Said more simply, we can be quite confident that serving together in the House under their particular circumstances causes much of the obstructionist behavior of the Gingrich Senators we see in the Senate. Despite the careful statistical analysis, the book also manages to remain a story largely about politics. The analyses are carefully connected to actual political developments and votes in the House and Senate, and the focus on graphical presentation works to keep much of the math in the background of what is ultimately a very political story. The author should also be commended for taking some time to be forward looking himself. Political science research rarely makes predictions about future political developments, but Theriault rightly thinks through the implications of his work for the future of the Gingrich Senators themselves and the Senate overall. While this of course exposes the book to potentially being incorrect in its predictions, it is refreshing to see an author with sufficient belief in his argument to make out-of-sample hypotheses plain.

Overall, this book is an important contribution, which should be read by scholars interested in polarization, legislative politics generally, and the U.S. Senate specifically. It is a nice complement to two recent books on the U.S. Senator: Nathan Monroe, Jason Roberts, and David Rohde's (eds) *Why Not Parties: Party Effects in the U.S. Senate* (2008) and Steven Smith's *The Senate Syndrome: The Evolution of Procedural Warfare in the Modern U.S. Senate*. Monroe, et al.'s collection of essays help point out that while scholars have tended to think of the House as the primarily partisan institution in Congress, there are good reasons to think that much of the activity in the U.S. Senate is also highly partisan. Smith's work takes a historical approach to tracing the emergence of the procedural conflicts that seem to hamper virtually all modern Senate activity. Paired with Theriault's careful investigation into the effects of the Gingrich Senators, the three works would make an excellent introduction to the modern U.S. Senate for either undergraduate or graduate students. The book also pairs nicely with Theriault's own prior work *Party Polarization in Congress* (2008) and Frances M. Lee's *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and, Partisanship in the U.S. Senate* (2009), both of which point out that much of the polarization in the U.S. Congress can be attributed to seed authority in Congress to partisan leaders, who use their [procedural control to polarize the congressional legislative agenda](#). Theriault's work on the Gingrich Senators suggests that this legislative strategy was brought to the Senate by Senators serving in a particularly hostile House environment, and adopted extreme strategies as a way to overcome significant legislative disadvantages.

Justin H. Kirkland
University of Houston

References

- Lee, Frances E. 2009. *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate*. University of Chicago Press.
- Monroe, Nathan W., Jason M. Roberts, and David W. Rohde, eds. 2009. *Why Not Parties?: Party Effects in the United States Senate*. University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Steven S. 2014. *The Senate Syndrome: The Evolution of Procedural Warfare in the Modern U.S. Senate*. The University of Oklahoma Press.
- Theriault, Sean M. 2008. *Party Polarization in Congress*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.