

**Arthur Paulson.** *Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy: An Unprecedented President in an Age of Polarization.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018. 166 pp. (\$90.00 cloth).

Based on the title and blurbs on the back of the book, one might expect the focus of Arthur Paulson's new book to be President Donald Trump and what his election means for the future of American democracy. Indeed, it seems as if the author is set to ponder the implications of electing a leader with authoritarian inclinations or perhaps grapple with the question of what it means when the popular vote is no longer predictive of electoral outcomes. Early in the course of reading *Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy: An Unprecedented President in an Age of Polarization*, however, readers may develop a sneaking suspicion that they are the victims of a bait-and-switch. The book's title makes clear that while the author's scope is wide (our "Age of Polarization" and the fate of "American Democracy" itself), President Donald Trump will appear front and center, as he himself would no doubt see fit. The volume appears to be offering one of the first book-length scholarly forays into the nature of this peculiar presidency and its broader implications for the nation and its governance. After the first few pages recap Trump's "unconventional candidacy" and offer a fleeting glimpse at what the author – along with the rest of us – foresees as an "unprecedented presiden[cy]," we are led headlong into a history of the Democratic and Republican parties in the twentieth century and a process of ideological polarization that begins to take place in the 1960s, eventually culminating in recent events. We are treated to a grand tour of presidential primaries, general presidential elections, and even congressional polarization along the way.

While one may at first have the impression that Paulson is simply laying the historical groundwork for his theory about the emergence of Donald Trump and a meditation on his presidency's implications for the future of American democracy, it becomes increasingly clear with each subsequent chapter that we may not actually be heading where the title led us to believe we would wind up. Indeed, the reader would be forgiven for feeling distracted by the disconnect between setup and delivery. This is a shame, because the meat of the book – while not what was promised – offers a solid and illuminating, if not especially original, reflection on party polarization suitable for a wide audience. In fact, my hunch is that the author may have proposed just such an account of the historical roots of polarized partisanship, aimed at placement on U.S. parties and elections course syllabi, but that after November 2016, editors everywhere were anxious to seize the opportunity they saw in our seemingly insatiable appetite for media offering to make sense of the Trumpian moment. The result, whether due to author or editorial inspiration, is, in this case, a book that reads as an American Political Development take on the institutional roots of party polarization, intermittently interrupted with attempts to connect the narrative to the events of 2015–2017.

The first chapter provides a quick look back at the 2016 presidential campaign and election from the vantage point of the Trump presidency's first year. Paulson argues that what is

“unconventional” about Trump is more style than substance and reminds us of various historical precedents for questions of personal character, electoral illegitimacy, and populism in presidential elections. This is the first of several passages in the book in which the author seems to undercut the titular lack of precedent for what occurred in 2016. For instance, he describes the Republican nomination process as having been “unusual, but not necessarily system changing or unprecedented” (p. 57), and reminds us that the phenomenon of a nominee winning the presidency despite losing the popular vote is “unusual, although certainly not unprecedented” (p. 75).

In chapter two, Paulson traces the evolution of what were once “umbrella parties” covering diverse ideologies, identities, and interests, into homogeneous “polarized parties” aimed overwhelmingly at particular types of constituents (e.g., southern vs. northern, rural vs. urban, civil rights voters, wall street vs main street). Chapters three through five focus primarily on electoral history, with 2016 as a special case of interest. In the third chapter, “Trumping the Republicans and Berning the Democrats: Post-Reform Presidential Primaries and the Case of 2016,” it is the subtitle that truly captures the chapter’s scope. By this point in the book, it will have become evident that the author’s main question is, in fact, the backward-looking “How did we get here?” rather than the forward-oriented question of the “prospect for American democracy.” Paulson identifies institutional reforms and ideological sorting by party – with increasing polarization across parties and homogeneity within them – as weakening party leadership and leading to unpredictable electoral results. Chapter four turns from primaries to general elections, again with 2016 feeling like more of an afterthought than the focus. Chapter five looks at party polarization within Congress and, peripherally, the implications for congressional relationships with the executive branch.

The final chapter, “The Trump Era and Beyond: Postindustrial Democracy in America,” claims to evaluate the prospects for democracy under Trump (and the aftermath of his presidency), but quickly makes clear that the true threats to democracy have little to do with Donald Trump or the recent election, which the author sees (uncontroversially) as a symptom of broader historical processes in play. While the author promises that at last, this sixth and final chapter of the book will reveal “the prospects for American democracy in the twenty-first century,” it is not until page 136 (of 150) that we get to the section entitled “The Trump Era and Beyond: Prospects for American Democracy.” Indeed, it is Alexis de Tocqueville rather than Trump who emerges to take center stage in this final chapter, for it is in his *Democracy in America* that Paulson grounds his expectations for what lies ahead for our modern democratic institutions. The first half of the chapter reads as if it could be a stand-alone essay on equality, class, and popular decision-making in Tocqueville and the implications of changing economic growth rates for democracy as seen through a Tocquevillian lens. Needless to say, this feels like one final instance of misdirection given the expectations built at that start of the book. When, in the final few pages, we finally arrive at what was to have been the main theme of the book – “Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy” – we are rewarded for our

persistence with a brief argument about post-industrial modernization and a decline in “equality of conditions” leading to Trump’s election. The punchline (spoiler alert!) is that American democracy is not that democratic after all, and recent changing economic conditions have just exacerbated this. So, what are “the prospects” going forward? In the final paragraph, Paulson makes his prediction: “Democracy in America in the twenty-first century will either become much more democratic or much less so. Either way, in the twenty-first century, how Americans experience their economic lives and their relationship with their government is changing fundamentally – for better or for worse.” It is telling that even this giant hedge feels only weakly supported by what precedes it, with little evidence against the alternative that the state of democracy will remain pretty much where it is today for the foreseeable future.

For the reader seeking a book that grapples with the threats to American democracy posed by a norm-breaking, race-baiting president with authoritarian inclinations, this is not your book. If, however, one is looking for a book to assign an undergraduate class on parties, elections, and/or polarization, and has no qualms – in this age of click-bait – about offering up attention-grabbing Trump as a way to entice students to read it, this book would be worth considering.

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