Book Reviews

Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party by Julian E. Zelizer. New York, Penguin, 2020. 368 pp. $30.00.

Persistent, seemingly intractable polarization across American politics continues to prompt new scholarship examining how we got to this point. Among congressional scholars, the 1970s reform era and its aftermath in the House of Representatives bears renewed attention: did reform cause polarization, or was it a product of polarization?

Burning Down the House sheds important light on these debates and the development of contemporary legislative politics. Julian E. Zelizer argues that the contemporary era of divisive politics can be traced back to the strategy adopted by a young Newt Gingrich (R-GA) to exploit Democratic-passed ethics reforms as a weapon for Republicans to take down House Speaker Jim Wright (D-TX) and regain the majority. The book's extensive use of archival material, and revealing interviews with the key figures involved—including the late Speaker Wright—illuminate both Democratic ignorance about the post-Watergate, postreform political environment, as well as Gingrich's exploitation of these new vulnerabilities.

The approach reveals a simple but complex answer to the causes of the contemporary partisan era—everyone has a role to play. Zelizer deftly weaves together countless developments inside and outside Congress, including concrete procedural reforms, ideological changes, the advent of C-SPAN and talk radio, the prerogative of good government groups such as Common Cause, and partisan incentives, including then–vice president George H.W. Bush's presidential ambitions and the House Republican leadership's pursuit of majority power. Indeed, if the statistical and game-theoretic models prized by political scientists illuminate how member behavior is so often driven by broader institutional-level dynamics, the historian's approach here spotlights member agency—that is, the decisions made by individual members and leaders still matter. Members make mistakes (for example, Wright's failure to forge personal bonds with the Democratic rank and file); they fail to see the consequences of their actions (the latitude given to

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Gingrich by Republican leaders); and they take decisive action in the face of strong prevailing forces (Gingrich's decision to target Wright in the first place).

Zelizer makes a strong case for the Wright episode as a turning point for Republicans, though it remains to be seen how much Gingrich and his allies can take credit for the transformation of the Congress and the polarization of the constituencies they represent. Zelizer rightly highlights the cold relationship between Wright and the Democratic rank and file, but the liberal Democrats who led the charge to transform the House (alongside their ideological allies across the aisle) are notably absent from much of this story. Gingrich's strategy of exploiting the DC pressure system emulated the very strategy pursued by liberals to pass 1960s- and 1970s-era reforms. Liberals decried the problem of "secrecy" in the House and implored good government groups and the media everywhere to examine how Congress hid behind closed-door committee meetings and unrecorded teller votes. The goals differed, of course: Gingrich sought personal and partisan aims, while liberals sought rule and policy reforms. But if liberals failed to see not only the new political environment, but their own political strategy—albeit an aggressive incarnation—in Gingrich's efforts, then this is arguably a more damning condemnation of the reform era and its leaders than is offered here.

Ultimately, if the current era of divisive politics was not inevitable, but a product of the decisions made by members—as Zelizer persuasively argues—then potential solutions will likely require the same set of uneasy alliances pursued by liberals and conservatives throughout the twentieth century.

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America's Inequality Trap by Nathan J. Kelly. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020. 232 pp. Paper, $32.50.

In a democratic system, it is reasonable to expect that government will address economic inequality by enacting redistributive policies. Average citizens, the theory goes, will use their political voice to collectively push back on an increasing concentration of economic resources in the hands of an elite few. Policymakers, sensitive to these organized efforts, will respond by taking actions that rebalance society's economic scales. But this pluralist vision of politics has not been realized in the United States, which for the past half-century has witnessed a steady increase in economic inequality—the income

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