Is Electoral Reform the Cure for What Ails American Politics?

The Partisan Polarization Problem

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What Ails American Politics?

• Much to choose from but the focus is on partisan polarization (PP)

• **PP accentuates** the characteristic features of US system: it makes united government stronger and divided government weaker

• How much PP is desirable is a contestable judgment/design decision

• Both the desirability and feasibility of adjusting PP depend on the frame the problem is given
Elite or Mass Frame?

- **Mass** frame locates polarization in the public and factors like rising inequality, changes in media, social sorting, immigration, lingering racism/sexism and the like.

- **Elite** frame focuses on professionalism of politics, election rules, party primaries, campaign finance, competitive conditions, and the like.
AN EXAMPLE IS RISING INEQUALITY

REASONS TO THINK THAT PP IS MASS BASED
The Polarization-Inequality Correlation (McCarty-Rosenthal)
And if PP is primarily mass based....

- Then it is possible the political system is merely *properly reflecting* the underlying preferences

- Thus, the solutions lie in *addressing the underlying problems* of inequality, racial harmony, the decline of print media, etc.
REASONS TO THINK THAT PP IS ELITE DRIVEN

AN EXAMPLE IS CAMPAIGN FINANCE
And if PP is primarily elite driven...

• Then it is possible that the system is not *properly reflecting* the underlying preferences

• And, that the solutions lie in *addressing elite incentives and the rules of the game*—the primary system, campaign, election administration flaws/barriers, etc.

• An advantage is that *elites are generally more responsive* to incentive changes—e.g. open primary versus new campaign finance rules
So how could electoral rules address the PP issue?

1. Address the intense preference/low turnout problem *by lowering the costs of voting/raising the costs of non-voting*—e.g. same day registration or compulsory voting.

2. Alter primary rules to *encourage/favor centrist candidates*—e.g. top 2 or 4.

3. **Eliminate primaries** with IRV (or combine top 4 with IRV)
But electoral reforms alone are likely to have marginal effects...

• Without *more radical campaign finance* reform, polarized money will favor polarized candidates
• Without *compulsion*, participation may still be skewed
• *District homogeneity* might undermine the demand/supply of centrist candidate
• ETC, ETC. ....
Concluding Thoughts

- To the extent that the problem is the representation gap, then electoral system engineering combined with campaign finance, election administration/participation rules, etc. might help.

- To the extent it is deep mass polarization, then there are limits to what political engineering can and should do.

- Realistic reform is a second best strategy for coping with the peculiar US political structure.