

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 2: Sources of American Discontent

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1. [Week 2 Readings](#)

[Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: “How Do We Change America?”](#)

[Will Howell and Terry Moe, “Why the President Needs More Power”](#)

[Michael Barber and Nolan McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization”](#)

[Paul Starr, “The Battle for the Suburbs”](#)

Week 2 Readings

1. Identifying a current crisis
2. Stating that this crisis is not new; part of a larger crisis
3. Explaining the roots of the larger crisis
4. Proposing solutions

Four Views on America in Crisis

Author	Immediate crisis	Deeper issue
Taylor	Protests in the streets	Economic inequality + racism
Howell & Moe	Populist authoritarianism	Ineffective government
Barber & McCarty	Congressional dysfunction	Polarization
Starr [Rodden]	Electoral bias	Urban/rural divide + winner-take-all elections

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: “How Do We Change America?”

- Protests in the streets: we have seen it before
 - Rodney King riots (1992)
 - Civil Rights marches (1960s)
 - Back to Chicago riots in 1919
- Yet *“struggles build upon one another and are not just recycled events from the past.”*
- History of protest intertwined with history of government response

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: “How Do We Change America?”

What are the real demands?

In 1968, King, in the weeks before he was assassinated, said, ‘In a sense, I guess you could say, we are engaged in the class struggle.’ He was speaking to the costs of the programs that would be necessary to lift black people out of poverty and inequality, which were, in and of themselves, emblems of racist subjugation. Ending segregation in the South, then, was cheap compared with the huge costs necessary to end the kinds of discrimination that kept blacks locked out of the advantages of U.S. society, from well-paying jobs to well-resourced schools, good housing, and a comfortable retirement. The price of the ticket is quite steep, but, if we are to have a real conversation about how we change America, it must begin with an honest assessment of the scope of the deprivation involved. Racist and corrupt policing is the tip of the iceberg.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. “How Do We Change America?” *New Yorker*, June 8, 2020. © Condé Nast. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: “How Do We Change America?”

History of government response:

- Reagan: Reaganomics & reduction of the welfare state
 - *Ronald Reagan mastered the art of color-blind racism in the post-civil-rights era with his invocations of “welfare queens.” Not only did these distortions pave the way for undermining the welfare state, they reinforced racist delusions about the state of black America that legitimized deprivation and marginalization.*
- Bush: same
 - *The period after the L.A. rebellion didn’t usher in new initiatives to improve the quality of the lives of people who had revolted. To the contrary, the Bush White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater blamed the uprising on the social-welfare programs of previous administrations, saying, “We believe that many of the root problems that have resulted in inner-city difficulties were started in the sixties and seventies and that they have failed.’*

History of government response:

- Biden: 1994 crime bill
- Clinton: “ending welfare as we know it”
- Obama: inability to curb police abuses

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: “How Do We Change America?”

Solution: dramatic expansion of social services

Will the federal government intervene to stop the looming crisis of evictions that will disproportionately impact black women? Will it use its power and authority to punish police, and to empty prisons and jails, which not only bring about social death but are now also sites of rampant covid-19 infection? Will it end the war on food stamps and allow African-Americans and other residents of this country to eat in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression? Will it finance the health-care needs of tens of millions of African-Americans who have become susceptible to the worse effects of the coronavirus, and are dying as a result? Will it provide the resources to depleted public schools, allowing black children the opportunity to learn in peace? Will it redistribute the hundreds of billions of dollars necessary to rebuild devastated working-class communities? Will there be free day care and transportation?

Answer: probably not.

- **Immediate crisis:** Framed around Trump's presidency
But today's crisis did not come about because of Trump himself. He is the proximate cause of serious trouble for U.S. democracy, but he is better thought of as a symptom of deeper, more basic causes that propagate the dangers we currently face."
- **Structural crisis:** Social change and disruption
..a sharp decline in manufacturing jobs, a hollowing out of the middle class, a stagnation in family income, a steep rise in inequality, and a surge in the number of undocumented immigrants—all of which, taken together, have generated pain, frustration, and a sense of hopelessness, anger, and cultural displacement within segments of the population.

Ineffective government is built into the very structure of the American system.

- System of checks and balances/veto points make change difficult to achieve
- Congress at the center of U.S. lawmaking, with parochial concerns and special interest politics

Populist leaders thrive on ineffective government.

Solution: Expand the powers of the president

- Put president at the center of lawmaking process; place initiative with the president
- Congress just votes up/down
- Only expand presidential powers insofar as they *make government effective* (no pardons)

Same starting point as Howell and Moe: ineffective government

But focused on Congressional dysfunction:

- Inability to legislate, they argue, is not inherent to Congress; it is a new phenomenon
- and it is driven by **polarization** and **partisan sorting** → inability to form bipartisan coalitions

Solution: *Given this dreary outlook, it is entirely appropriate that we turn our intellectual energies to exploring ways to negotiate and govern despite growing partisan differences. A new political science of negotiation that can suggest new mechanisms and protocols that help to 'get the deal done,' even in polarized times, would accomplish a great deal of good.*

Barber, Michael, and Nolan McCarty. "Causes and Consequences of Polarization." Chapter 2 in *Negotiating Agreement in Politics*. Edited by Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin. American Political Science Association, 2013. © American Political Science Association. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Problem: Underrepresentation of urban dwellers (Democrats)

- Republicans have won the presidency in the Electoral College twice in the past two decades despite losing the popular vote
- Democrats have won more votes than Republicans in elections for 11/15 Senates since 1990, but they have only held a majority on six occasions

Cause: An increased urban-rural political divide in voting and the use of single-member districts in US legislative elections

Solutions:

- Proportional representation
- A center-left Democratic party to appeal to the suburbs?

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