

“Necessary and Damaging: Presidential Base Electoral Strategies and Partisan Polarization”

Abstract: Even though campaigns are fundamentally about dividing an electorate so as to produce a majority for one candidate, in periods where the electorate is already fairly equally split between the parties, forging a majority coalition becomes an especially difficult task. In these instances, candidates must choose between two campaign strategies: persuasion (running towards the middle to win swing voters) and mobilization (running towards their base to turn out more partisan voters). However, this choice is not neutral. Mobilization not only makes post-election governing in political systems with separated powers more challenging, but also reinforces and magnifies the partisan polarization already existing in the public sphere. In sum, mobilization is often a short-sighted (and in this sense, irrational) electoral strategy. This chapter examines four presidential reelection campaigns from two historically different, yet similarly competitive partisan eras (1888 and 1892; 2004 and 2012). It investigates the strategic rationales and the political circumstances that led Cleveland and Harrison to choose persuasion and Bush and Obama to choose mobilization. Thus, while it is expected that a presidential campaign would divide the American electorate, the particulars associated with today’s partisan polarization made mobilization the necessary strategy for Bush and Obama, but these strategic choices are doing damage to the nation.

Academic Biography:

Lara M. Brown is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Villanova University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of *Jockeying for the American Presidency: The Political Opportunism of Aspirants* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press) and a co-editor of a forthcoming volume, *The Presidential Leadership Dilemma: Between the Constitution and a Political Party* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press). Prior to completing her doctorate, she served in President William J. Clinton’s administration at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C.