This book on the interplay of political and economic polarization in the modern United States is fascinating, wide-ranging and on most points persuasive. It brings together a remarkable body of empirical research, covering inter alia these topics:

- The measurement of political polarization, specifically the partisan character of positions taken by Democrats and Republicans in the US Congress and its evolution over more than a century, dating back almost to the origins of the Republican Party.
- The relationship between rising income inequality and electoral choices and outcomes, and especially party-income stratification – including the well-known paradox that richer voters vote Republican while richer states tend to vote Democratic.
- The surprising role of immigration, particularly in nullifying the increased incentive to redistribute income that one might otherwise have expected to result from rising ex ante inequality in the income distribution.
- The role of political action committees (PACs) and individual contributors in mitigating or abetting the increased polarization of elected representatives.
- The effect of polarization on public policy outcomes.

The greatest strength of this work lies in its use of new and revealing data. For example, the authors plot Federal Elections Commission data on campaign contributions by PACs and individuals, measuring both the ideological position of the contributor and diversity among the candidates contributed to. They find that neither individuals nor PACs contributing
under the hard-money constraints of campaign finance law tend to exacerbate polarization, and PACs in particular tend, as a group, to make “access” rather than “influence” the central tenet of campaign strategy. In contrast, big-donor soft-money contributions to the parties, which are not limited by the campaign finance laws, are highly ideological, and it is these which “while perhaps not the cause of polarization, certainly provides its sustenance.” (161).

The authors make efficient use of mean and median incomes among all families, citizens and voters in the current population survey to explain why the decline in the median income relative to the mean – a sign of rising inequality – has not generated effective political demands for more redistributive social welfare policies. The answer is that no such decline, and therefore no such increase in inequality, has actually occurred among the voting population. They write: “Although the ratio of family income of the median individual to mean family income has indeed fallen in the United States over the past thirty years, the ratio of the family income of the median voter to mean family income has been remarkably constant.” (p. 119)

The rise in inequality, measured by the decline in median relative to mean income of all families, is driven by a tripling between 1972 and 2000 of the proportion of residents who are non-citizens. This finding has two important implications for current American political discussion. First, it shows why rising income inequality has had so little traction for the American left, which tends to assume that behind the unhappy statistics lies a damaged, angry population with latent political potential. This assumption appears to be unfounded. Second, it shows that the vitriolic right-wing opposition to immigration and to legalization of immigrants is not irrational, but rooted in well-grounded fears. If and as immigrants become citizens, the Republican Party will be in ever-deeper trouble.

Political scientists will take great interest in the work presented here on political polarization, whose rise since the early 1970s the authors take great pains to document from a comprehensive analysis of congressional roll call votes. The story is roughly that following a long period of ideological overlap between the parties, in the 1970s Democrats became more liberal, and then Republicans became sharply more conservative. By 2004, there was (astonishingly) no Democrat as conservative as the most liberal Republican in the House.

The question is why this happened. The authors examine and rule out (perhaps a bit too abruptly) the most common folk explanation, namely the switch of the Solid South from the (conservative) Democratic to the (even more conservative) Republican column. They also reject explanations based