

**UC Berkeley**  
**California Journal of Politics and Policy**

**Title**

Explaining the Ideological Divide in California: A Review of No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures by Seth E. Masket

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/88s6z7fq>

**Journal**

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 3(1)

**Author**

La Raja, Raymond J.

**Publication Date**

2011-03-05

**DOI**

10.5070/P27K5Z

Peer reviewed

Explaining the Ideological Divide in California:  
A Review of *No Middle Ground: How Informal  
Party Organizations Control Nominations and  
Polarize Legislatures* by Seth E. Masket

Raymond J. La Raja  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

In *No Middle Ground*, Seth Masket puts a twist on Speaker Tip O'Neill's adage that all politics is local. According to Masket, American politics is not just shaped by local politics; it is arguably controlled by local political parties. To be sure, these are not the kind of parties Boss Tweed would recognize, and Californians could be forgiven for saying they've never actually *seen* any of these political parties.

[www.bepress.com/cjpp](http://www.bepress.com/cjpp)

Masket's response is that local parties in California are more informal than old-fashioned machines with hierarchies of ward bosses and benefit seekers. Instead, the contemporary local party relies on a dense network of activists, political brokers, and benefit seekers who coordinate resources to nominate favored candidates for public office. Masket argues convincingly that these informal party organizations (IPOs) are largely responsible for sending ideological politicians to Sacramento and why the state legislature has become so polarized in recent decades. It is a provocative and well-researched argument that places *No Middle Ground* at the center of current research on American political parties.

*No Middle Ground* also helps shed longstanding assumptions about California politics. Masket, for example, throws water on the myth that the state is the epitome of

---

Review of *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* by Seth E. Masket. 2009. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

candidate-centered politics in America. In fact, politics in California is more party-centered than the classic movie, “The Candidate,” would have us believe. Rather than winning by contracting with savvy media consultants—the so-called “hired guns”—candidates must actually earn the broad support of local partisan activists and benefit seekers.

If, hypothetically, the Robert Redford character were running for state legislature, his sloughing off of former activist friends would ensure a short career indeed. These ideological activists, and others in the IPO, would make sure that someone challenged him in the next primary. For this reason, candidates are typically not free to “move to the middle” once they get to the legislature. Instead, they need to satisfy the preferences of a relatively small ideological faction in the district, namely the IPO that has the resources to put people in office and keep them there.

The key to IPO power is the primary system. Primaries, of course, are low turnout, low information elections. For this reason, a small but organized cadre of partisans can have as much influence in choosing candidates for office as the traditional party organizations run by bosses. And by controlling nominations, the IPO can groom and select their preferred candidates for the legislature.

The fact that the IPO consists of partisans who are much more ideological than rank-and-file party identifiers means that the eventual winner of the Democratic or

Republican primary is going to tilt heavily to the left or right, respectively. Since most districts are not competitive in the general election, the winner of the primary gets the legislative seat. This dynamic explains why the parties in California are so far apart.

But how did the parties get this way in a state that was long-noted for bipartisanship? In addressing this question, the book is a gem for its ambitious scope and theory. Masker tracks California political history going back to the first legislature of 1851, and puts his argument in the context of legendary figures, including lobbyist Artie Samish and Speaker Jesse Unruh. He shows how state politics transformed from a closed fraternity among lobbyists and politicians in Sacramento into one of the most ideologically divided legislatures in the nation.

Of course, much else has happened along way: urbanization, civil rights, and a changing economy. But Masker points to a single reform that did more than anything to change politics in Sacramento. Californians can thank the elimination of cross-filing in the early 1950s for the increasing power of IPOs and subsequent rise of ideological partisans in the statehouse.

From 1914 to 1952, politicians in California could “cross-file” when they ran in the primary. This essentially meant they could put their name on the primary ballot for multiple parties, without having to specify what party they

belonged to. Voters only saw their name, occupation, and whether the candidate was an incumbent.

This reform was inaugurated, along with primary nominations, as part of the Progressives' effort to destroy the corrupt parties controlled by the Southern Pacific Railroad and party bosses in San Francisco. Without the power to choose nominees, party bosses could not influence who would seek and win office. Untethered from major parties, politicians became free agents who could bargain and broker with any interest they desired without having to kowtow to party leaders.

The result was a politics of insider back-scratching, masquerading as virtuous bipartisanship. During this era, the fault lines in politics were not necessarily between the major parties, but between the Speaker's coalition (often bipartisan) and ideological activists in either party who wanted the party-in-government to stand for something. Activists pushed to end cross-filing, which they succeeded in doing in 1952. This change in electoral laws set the stage for the development of IPOs. Efforts to organize and promote favored candidates promised rich rewards now that primaries had partisan coherence and candidates could not gain office by running on a different party ballot.

The analysis is based, in part, on close observation of five distinctive California IPOs. These include Orange County Republicans, South Los Angeles Democrats, East-side Los Angeles County Democrats, West Los Ange-

les Democrats, and Fresno Democrats and Republicans. While these IPOs vary in terms of wealth, racial composition, ideology, and other characteristics, they have all mastered the process of recruiting candidates and controlling electoral resources to win primary elections. The Democratic IPOs tend to be led by politicians in office, such as Maxine Waters (South Los Angeles), while leadership in Republican IPOs appears to include wealthy conservative activists, land developers and business leaders. The Lincoln Club of an Orange County is paradigmatic.

Since IPOs can give or withhold support, politicians are naturally inclined to respond favorably to their demands. Keeping politicians in line requires the occasional demonstration of power against those who stray too far. Masket cites the removal of Congressman Marty Martinez (D-El Monte) for drifting away from the liberal politics of the West L.A. Waxman-Berman organization (that backed Hilda Solis instead), and the recall election organized by the Lincoln Club against Orange County Republican, Doris Allen, for her treasonous decision to run as the Democratic candidate for Speaker in 1995, in which she won with support of all Democrats and her lone Republican vote.

One of the most impressive aspects of *No Middle Ground* is that it challenges theoretical arguments that hold considerable weight in political science scholarship. Most research emphasizes that political parties are shaped by ambitious politicians who use party institutions to advance

career goals (e.g., Aldrich 1995). Hold on, says Masket. He observes that California legislators seemed perfectly happy in mid-century avoiding partisanship and party organizations, either in their districts or in the legislature.

Instead, he draws attention to elites *outside* the legislature who influence the shape of parties in the legislature. In demonstrating the power of these nonelected elites, working through IPOs, Masket returns party scholarship to the study of organizations. His “nomination-centered” approach helps us see the link that has been obscured by a dominant scholarly focus on candidate-centered campaigns and the role of officeholders in shaping the party-in-government.

Critically, the theoretical underpinnings of *No Middle Ground* provide a compelling explanation for polarization in Congress, as well as the California Legislature. While other scholars have pointed to the important role of activists in driving polarization, Masket puts flesh on the bones by explaining how they do it, and illustrating where they have an impact. His scholarship is a model for political science research. He draws on multiple methods to make his case, including an impressive array of interviews and historical tracing of careers, as well as deft quantitative analysis of electoral outcomes and ideological voting in the legislature over time. Much of the argument is by inference, but the sheer weight of the evidence is compelling.

One challenge that this book must grapple with is that research using large quantities of data casts doubt on the impact of primaries on polarization. For example, recent work on congressional primary elections finds little evidence that primary elections, primary turnout, and the threat of primary competition affect roll call voting in Congress (Hirano, Snyder et al. 2010). If IPOs really exert power through primaries, as Masket argues, we should observe differences in roll call voting in Congress before and after the introduction of primaries, particularly where formal party organizations have been weak.

At the conceptual level, his taxonomy of members of the IPO is not always easy to differentiate. According to Masket, IPOs include *officeholders*, *benefit seekers*, *brokers*, and *activists*. It is clear that activists want policy, and that they differ from the other categories of IPO members. But it not easy to see why brokers (those who help coordinate activities, such as fundraising) are not also benefit seekers motivated by material incentives. What’s in it for the “brokers” in this dynamic of helping people win office? Masket is a bit vague when he says they “desire to achieve some goal in politics.” (42)

Similarly, the book does not illuminate some apparent tensions among different sets of IPO actors. For example, why are benefit seekers not more willing to challenge hardcore activists in the selection of candidates? In James Q. Wilson’s classic formulation, the benefit seekers are will-

ing to go with anyone who will win office, since they care less about policy and more about getting the goods. Ideological candidates can be dangerous for gaining benefits, either because they are more likely to lose, or because they are too principled (or don't care) about providing selective goods to benefit seekers.

To be sure, activists and benefit seekers are often the *same* people. I am thinking of the members of the Lincoln Club in Orange County who are very conservative and also work in lucrative businesses, such as real estate, which is highly dependent on government regulations. It would have been helpful for Masket to clarify these distinctions or provide insights about how the IPO balances internal tensions among members. Surely, the dynamics differ between the two parties, since members of the Republican IPOs do not rely as much on government patronage as Democrats. The different social bases of the parties are likely to create different sets of incentives when organizing the IPO. Indeed, those social bases have been shifting during the decades we have observed polarization, and there is scant attention to key events such as the civil rights movement that made racial issues more salient between the parties, or court decisions such as *Reynolds v. Sims* (requiring equal-sized legislative districts) that amplified the urban-rural divide.

At the end of the book, Masket addresses the all-important question of whether Californians were better served

when the major parties in Sacramento were less divided by ideology. The answer is a conditional, no. Under the weak party system, Californians, he says, were “starved” of information.” They could not vote based on true preferences because they did not really know what the candidates stood for.

The Progressive reform of cross-filing made politicians less accountable for their policy positions. To be sure, they voted on symbolic issues that reflected constituency opinion, but on much legislation they tended to vote in the most expedient way and appeared vulnerable to the influence of lobbyists who could make political contributions.

With the removal of cross-filing and the formation of IPOs, the ideological coherence of parties increased. Today, voters are more likely to know what they are getting. And politicians choose policies that tilt more in the direction of ideological activists rather than business lobbyists. Of course, by this logic, California's legislature—and Congress—should now be as free of lobbying influence as any point in history. The public, however, is not convinced, and increasing partisan bickering does little to elevate the public's opinion of the legislature.

The policy implications emerging from *No Middle Ground* are clearly important. First, reforms can strengthen political parties, and enhance the power of certain elements *within* the parties. Other scholars, like Nelson W. Polsby, have shown how the introduction of primaries in

presidential elections affected the power of different party factions and influenced the kind of candidates who succeed.

In legislative elections, Masket illustrates the rules and norms that enhance the power of the party at the grassroots. Then he shows how this power affects governing and policy. Legislators in California vote ideologically because local IPOs choose them *because* of they are ideological partisans. And members remain partisan because they fear the wrath of IPOs if they do not tow the line.

If what Masket says is true—and I think it is—then some remedies to attenuate polarization come to mind (for those who think increasing polarization is a problem). First, term limits should be eliminated. Masket argues that term limits made nominations even more important in California politics. Career politicians lose the advantages of incumbency when they run for new seat, so they need the resources of an organization to advance their careers for future offices.

Second, reformers should worry less about increasing turnout in general elections and focus more on boosting it in the primary election. If low turnout is a source of power for party factions, then broader voter mobilization for the primary may increase the “representativeness” of the electorate. This might have the effect of pulling candidates closer to the center, away from the most ideologically ex-

treme activists and voters who typically mobilize for primaries.

Third and related, California might consider offering public financing in primaries. I offer this less as a corruption-prevention measure than as a way to attenuate the reliance of candidates on the resources of the IPO. To be sure, the IPO will remain an important player—particularly if the subsidies are too meager to run a major campaign. At the very least, efforts to increase the amount of campaign information through subsidies might moderate politics by giving voters a better sense of what the candidates stand for. This could more closely align officeholders with the preferences of the district. Masket suggests that better media coverage would help moderate politics (via the same information rationale); although it is unlikely the news media will pick up the slack without any incentives to do so.

In the end, *No Middle Ground* is a superb piece of scholarship that merits top rank in contemporary studies of political parties. Masket’s research clearly demonstrates “the local roots of national politics.” Rather than blame Washington or Sacramento for the ideological fervor that appears to make politics a zero-sum game, we might look literally in our own backyards for the sources of our discontent.

And yet, the book also reveals that the happy days of bipartisanship in mid-century were not exactly a hallmark

of representative democracy. It is exactly this appreciation of the tension between being a “responsible” party and the challenge of broad representation in a diverse state like California that makes this book so vital for others to read and understand. It merits considerable attention by students, scholars and policymakers.

### References

- Aldrich, John Herbert. 1995. *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Hirano, Shigeo, James M. Snyder, Jr., Stephen Ansolabehere and John Mark Hansen. 2010. “Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress”, *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 5(2): 169-191.