

moderate center is not well represented in contemporary national politics—and often not in state and local politics either.³⁶

The abortion issue provides a noteworthy illustration. Survey after survey finds that the majority of Americans are “pro-choice butts.” They endorse the principle of choice and oppose the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, but blithely approve of numerous restrictions such as parental consent, mandatory counseling, viability testing, and denial of public funding. As Colin Powell, among others, has discovered, however, the debate is dominated by people who condemn as pro-choice someone who would abort a fetus without a brain, and people who denounce as pro-life someone who would outlaw the abortion of a healthy eight-month fetus. Irony of ironies, it took an unelected Supreme Court to impose the kind of broadly acceptable compromise that elective politics had been unable to achieve for two decades, although it had long been evident in the public opinion polls.³⁷

In sum, another reason people are frustrated with government is that all too often they see the participants in government locked in battle over unattractive and unrealistic alternatives. The result is unnecessary conflict and animosity, delay and gridlock, and a public life that seems to be dominated by “quarrelsome blowhards,” to borrow Ehrenhalt’s apt terminology.³⁸

Other aspects of political activism exacerbate the problem. Verba and Nie, and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady report that participants care about somewhat different issues than nonparticipants.³⁹ Thus, not only do the activists debate extreme alternatives, but they also talk about issues nonactivists care less about. Moreover, purist “true believers” have a style different from that of ordinary people. They place more weight on symbols (dubbed “principles”), reject what appear to be reasonable compromises, draw bright lines where many people see only fuzzy distinctions, and label those who disagree with them as enemies.⁴⁰ Changes that empower or even

36. On the polarization of national politics see McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (1998).

37. For polling data on abortion showing majority support for various restrictions, see Ladd (1990), “The Pro-Choice Label” (1992). Those citations, along with “Abortion” (1995), also show that after the substance of the court decisions was explained, comfortable majorities approved of them, with figures for Democrats, independents, and Republicans not differing significantly. We should recognize, of course (with Justice Ginsberg), that an earlier Court probably helped to polarize the issue by institutionalizing a pro-choice position in *Roe*, rather than allowing normal politics to compromise the issue.

38. Ehrenhalt (1998).

39. Verba and Nie (1972, chap. 15); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, chap. 16).

40. As noted by the common man’s philosopher Eric Hoffer (1951) many years ago. For a more contemporary statement see Glendon (1991).