Historical Context

An Era of Tenuous Majorities Continues

Morris P. Fiorina

A majority of the world's developed democracies are parliamentary, wherein the party or coalition of parties that has a majority of seats in the parliament chooses the chief executive, often called the prime minister. The United States is one of a minority of democracies that are presidential, in which voters elect the chief executive independently of the legislature.[1] The United States is even more unusual in having two equally powerful chambers of the legislature, which are elected separately for different terms of office. Moreover, as British analyst Anthony King notes, the two-year term served by members of the US House is the shortest among world democracies, for which four- to five-year terms are common.[2] Combining these exceptional institutional features, a US national election every two years can generate any one of eight patterns of institutional control of the presidency, House, and Senate:

1. RRR
2. RDR
3. RRD
4. RDD
5. DDD
6. DRD
7. DDR
8. DRR

The 2016 elections generated a shift from pattern 8, one of the divided government patterns, to pattern 1: unified Republican control under President Donald Trump. Two years later the Democrats moved the country to pattern 2 by capturing the House. Two years after that, the 2020 elections generated pattern 5, unified Democratic control under President Joe Biden, but two years later in 2022, the Republicans took back the House, moving the country to pattern 6.

Although a national election can produce a different pattern of party control every two years as the past five elections have, that is historically very unusual. Elections reflect underlying cleavages that tend to persist over time. Thus, elections in any historical period tend to produce only a few patterns of control. Consider the period known to political historians as the "third-party system." After the depression of the mid-1890s, the Republicans captured the presidency and both chambers of Congress in 1896, yielding pattern 1: RRR. They repeated that feat in the next six elections, so that for fourteen consecutive years the GOP maintained full control of the national government. After a split between progressive and conservative factions of the Republican Party that allowed a Democratic interregnum, the Republicans regained unified control in 1920 and maintained it for the next four elections. As Table 1 summarizes, the Republicans enjoyed full control of the federal government for twenty-four of the thirty-four years between the 1896 and 1930 elections, and the seventeen national elections held during that time produced only four patterns of institutional control.

After the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, the Republicans lost the House in the elections of 1930 and then lost all three elected institutions in 1932.[3]

TABLE 1 AN ERA OF REPUBLICAN MAJORITIES

	President	House	Senate
1896	R	R	R
1898	R	R	R
1900	R	R	R
1902	R	R	R
1904	R	R	R
1906	R	R	R
1908	R	R	R
1910	R	D	R
1912	D	D	D
1914	D	D	D
1916	D	D	D
1918	D	R	R
1920	R	R	R
1922	R	R	R
1924	R	R	R
1926	R	R	R
1928	R	R	R
1930	R	R/D	Tie

The New Deal Democrats enjoyed full control for fourteen consecutive years, until losing the Congress in the election of 1946. But they recaptured the Congress two years later when Harry Truman was elected in his own right. The Democrats controlled all three elective branches for eighteen of the twenty years between the 1932 and 1952 elections, during which nine of ten elections produced the same pattern of institutional control (Table 2).

The Republicans captured all three branches in 1952 but lost Congress to the Democrats in 1954. So began an era of divided government.[4] Although losing control of Congress in the off-year 1954 elections was nothing new, the 1956 election that followed was: for the first time in American history, the popular-vote winner in a two-way presidential race failed to carry the House, and only for the second time did such a winner fail to carry the Senate.[5] An interlude of unified Democratic control occurred from 1960–68,[6] but the 1968 elections marked a resumption of the pattern first observed in the 1950s, when split control of the presidency and Congress became the norm. As Table 3 summarizes, between 1952 and 1990 thirteen of nineteen elections split control of the presidency and of Congress between the parties, and after 1968 only four years of unified control during the Carter presidency interrupted what otherwise would have been a twenty-four-year pattern of divided party control under a Republican president. Importantly, however, even though government control was usually split during this forty-year period, institutional control was very stable. The Democrats controlled the House throughout the period and the Senate for all but six years. Meanwhile, the Republicans won the presidency seven times in ten tries, with only a narrow victory by Jimmy Carter in 1976 interrupting what might well have been a string of six consecutive Republican victories.[7] Nineteen elections produced only three different patterns of institutional control (Table 3).

TABLE 2 AN ERA OF DEMOCRATIC MAJORITIES

	President	House	Senate
1932	D	D	D
1934	D	D	D
1936	D	D	D
1938	D	D	D
1940	D	D	D
1942	D	D	D
1944	D	D	D
1946	D	R	R
1948	D	D	D
1950	D	D	D

TABLE 3 AN ERA OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT: DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONAL MAJORITIES

	President	House	Senate
1954	R	D	D
1956	R	D	D
1958	R	D	D
1960	D	D	D
1962	D	D	D
1964	D	D	D
1966	D	D	D
1968	R	D	D
1970	R	D	D
1972	R	D	D
1974	R	D	D
1976	D	D	D
1978	D	D	D
1980	R	D	R
1982	R	D	R
1984	R	D	R
1986	R	D	D
1988	R	D	D
1990	R	D	D

So, even during this long period of divided government a large degree of predictability still existed. With Republicans generally in control of the executive, tax increases were unlikely; with Democrats in control of the Congress, spending cuts were unlikely.[8] This was bad news for the federal budget, but the parameters within which deals would be struck generally were understood.

Bad news for the budget was good news for Ross Perot, who made budget deficits an issue in the 1992 election. Although some doubt that Perot cost George H. W. Bush the election, his independent campaign probably didn't help the Republicans.[9] The reestablishment of unified Democratic control under Bill Clinton began a three-decade-long (and counting) period of electoral outcomes that defy generalizations like those describing the three previous eras. In contrast to the relatively stable institutional majorities that characterized the three preceding eras, since 1992 the country has experienced an era of unstable institutional

majorities. The Democrats have held the presidency for twenty of the thirty-two years, but neither party has held the office longer than eight years, and popular vote margins have been close. Even the presidents reelected for a second term earned relatively narrow margins of victory. Republicans have had an advantage in the House since their 1994 takeover, but the Democrats have won majorities four times. Control of the Senate has been split almost evenly.

In addition, the most recent sixteen elections have generated seven different patterns of control, including five patterns in the most recent five elections as noted earlier. And had President Trump supported stronger candidates in Senate races like the 2022 Georgia run-offs, all eight patterns of control would likely have occurred since 2000 (Table 4), a logically complete but unprecedented development. The only period in American history that comes close to the instability of the current period is the so-called period of no decision of the late nineteenth century, but the current era is longer and seemingly still ongoing.

A few analysts suggest that this recent electoral experience is simply the inverse of the era of divided government; in a mirror image of that earlier period, Democrats now have the edge in presidential contests and Republicans in congressional contests, especially the House. There are similarities to be sure, but the differences are more noteworthy. As noted earlier, the past

TABLE 4 AN ERA OF UNSTABLE MAJORITIES

	President	House	Senate
1992	D	D	D
1994	D	R	R
1996	D	R	R
1998	D	R	R
2000	D/R	R	Tie
2002	R	R	R
2004	R	R	R
2006	R	D	D
2008	D	D	D
2010	D	R	D
2012	D	R	D
2014	D	R	R
2016	R	R	R
2018	R	D	R
2020	D	D	D
2022	D	R	D

sixteen elections produced seven different patterns of institutional control, whereas the nineteen elections in the divided government era produced only three. Recent presidential elections have been closely contested; there have been no Democratic landslides comparable to those rung up by Republicans Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan in the divided government era. Conversely, control of the Senate has been up for grabs in recent elections, unlike the pronounced Democratic advantage in the previous era. Moreover, there is nothing remotely comparable to the four-decade-long string of Democratic House majorities in the second half of the last century.[10]

Why did American politics change so dramatically? The answer comes in at least two parts. First, the parties changed character. From the Jacksonian era to the mid-twentieth century, electoral victory brought control of public sector jobs, government contracts, and inside information about government plans—various components of "honest graft."[11] Civil service reforms were the first attack on this spoils system, and beginning in the 1960s, public sector unionization shifted power from the parties to increasingly powerful interest groups. Meanwhile, the adoption of universalistic policies and entitlements weakened the role of the parties as providers of particularized benefits. Further constraining old-time party activities were the adoption of conflict-of-interest laws and changing media norms: journalists were transformed from lapdogs to junkyard dogs in Sabato's phraseology.[12] These reforms and societal changes greatly diminished the material rewards of participating in party politics.[13]

With material rewards provided by parties diminishing, more people entered politics for other reasons. Rather than donate to or work for a party to get or keep a job or in the hope of making economically valuable contacts, more people became party activists because they wished to help (or as Hersh suggests, make them feel like they were helping) to end abortion or gun violence, stop global warming, lessen economic inequality, remedy discrimination against marginalized groups, and a host of other causes.[14] The result is that many of today's most active party participants are motivated more by policies and principles than their counterparts in earlier periods. They are more likely to prioritize policy goals over winning office. The problem is that people who care a great deal about any issue typically have unrepresentative (extreme) views on that issue, a relationship first noticed a century ago.[15]

A second part of the answer is that the parties sorted, as the next essay discusses in detail. Students today are surprised to learn that, two generations ago, there were Republican representatives and senators who were more liberal than many Democratic representatives and senators. Abortion, gun control, environmental regulation, and other issues were much less partisan than today. In the mid-twentieth century the most racially liberal *and* the most racially conservative representatives and senators were both in the Democratic Party. No more. Party labels now provide more information about where people stand on a wide array of seemingly unrelated issues. The probability that voters take a liberal (conservative) position on abortion given that they have a liberal (conservative) position on income taxation is much higher than it was just a few decades ago.[16] Carmines and Stimson argue that this process of sorting began in the mid-twentieth century at the activist level. It became evident at the voter level in the 1980s, as shown by Abramowitz and Saunders, and has grown steadily in the new century.[17]

The underlying causes of the sorting process are not well understood but clearly involve both social change and political creativity, as discussed in later essays.[18]

As a consequence of these changes, American parties today are much different organizations from those that operated until the mid- to late twentieth century. They are more homogeneous internally and more distant from each other in policy and ideology—and a greater proportion of their most active members are motivated by ideology and policy. The electoral systems literature has long held that majoritarian electoral systems with single-member districts produce centrist politics: two "catch-all" parties compete for the middle of the electorate.[19] Reflecting both theory and electoral experience, in the second half of the twentieth century the notion that the parties would make general, overlapping appeals in an attempt to capture the center became a kind of master theory of American politics, an idea formalized in the attention bestowed on the median voter.[20] But by the 1990s it became clear that prevailing theory no longer meshed with electoral reality. On the contrary, Democratic and Republican candidates adopted positions distant from the center even in the most competitive districts, and although candidates might make attempts to move toward the center in the general election, various considerations, including the danger of being labeled a flip-flopper, kept them close to the distinct positions that they had advocated in their party primaries.[21] The link between close elections and policy moderation that once appeared axiomatic has been broken.

Rather than close electoral competition driving parties to the center, close competition today drives the parties to *overreach*. When they win control of an elective institution—and especially when they win control of all three at the same time, a so-called trifecta—they attempt to impose the position of the party on the larger electorate. This occurs even if they realize that the positions of their most fervent members are not supported by the majority, because in an era of unstable majorities they likely will soon lose power anyway. "Strike while the iron is hot" rather than occupy the political center is the mantra of today's parties. So, Bill Clinton in 1994, George W. Bush in 2004, Barack Obama in 2008, and Joe Biden in 2020 behaved similarly to Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 and Lyndon Johnson in 1964, despite winning elections nowhere near as impressively as their mid-century predecessors.

Overreach is a self-fulfilling strategy, of course. Fearing they will lose the next election, parties overreach, which raises the likelihood that they will in fact lose the next election as voters not committed to the party's platform experience a version of political "buyer's remorse." For example, according to Gallup, when Barack Obama was elected in 2008 Americans were evenly split on whether they had elected a liberal (43 percent) or a moderate (45 percent). But a year later, after the Democrats advocated cap-and-trade environmental legislation and national healthcare, a significant chunk of voters decided that they had elected a liberal after all (54 percent) rather than a moderate (34 percent).[22] The 2010 electoral bloodbath followed the next year.

Interestingly, the instability of institutional control described in the preceding pages contrasts with the stability of voting patterns in recent national elections. Research indicates that individual voters are more consistent in their partisan voting choices now than several decades ago.

However, this apparent increase in microlevel stability in the electorate contrasts sharply with the increase in macrolevel instability shown in the elections of the early twenty-first century.[23] My belief is that this observed stability of voting patterns is more contingent than generally appreciated. Political pundits and even many political scientists tend to overlook the political context in which citizens vote. At most times voters are responders, not initiators, in the political sphere. They react to what parties and candidates say and do, and importantly, they can only choose between the candidates the parties nominate.[24]

Suppose that every Saturday night you and your partner go to dinner at a restaurant that serves only two entrees: beef and chicken.[25] Every week you order beef, and your partner orders chicken. Observing these choices, many of today's political observers would infer that you are strongly committed to beef and your partner is similarly devoted to chicken. They predict that next week you will choose beef, and your partner will choose chicken as always. But suppose next week the waiter tells you that the beef entrée is liver. On reflection, you decide to have chicken. Think of George McGovern (or Hillary Clinton) as liver. Although you may have a general preference for Democrats, that general preference may not extend to every specific Democrat. Alternatively, imagine that the waiter tells you that, in addition to the beef and chicken entrees, the restaurant is serving salmon tonight. Both you and your partner order the salmon. Think of Ross Perot (or Donald Trump) as salmon. Between beef and chicken, you generally prefer beef and your partner chicken. But if salmon is on the menu, it's the preferred dish for both of you. The point of these fanciful analogies is to emphasize that voter choices depend on the alternatives that are offered. Our choices of beef or chicken reflected not only our culinary preferences but also the fact that they were the only two alternatives available to us. The same holds for choices between candidates.

If each party nominates similar candidates from one election to the next, most voters will vote the same way, other things being equal. Democrats Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004 received virtually identical percentages of the popular vote. In contrast, the difference between the popular vote for Democrats George McGovern in 1972 and Jimmy Carter in 1976 was 12.6 percentage points. Does this significant difference between the 1970s and the 2000s mean that "swing voters" had disappeared and the country was much more set in its partisan ways in the 2000s than in the 1970s? Possibly, but it would be crazy to ignore the fact that Al Gore and John Kerry were much more similar Democrats than were George McGovern and (pre-presidency) Jimmy Carter.[26] Moreover, Gore and Kerry were running against the same Republican, George Bush, whereas McGovern and Carter faced different Republican opponents—Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, respectively. That Carter won the presidency four years after McGovern lost in a landslide may not mean that voters were less partisan in the 1970s (although they may have been), but only that they had very different alternatives to choose from than voters do today when most Democratic candidates look much the same, as do most Republicans. Now, with the Republicans nominating the same candidate, Donald Trump, in three consecutive elections, a high degree of voting stability will not be surprising. In an alternative universe where the parties nominated very different candidates, say Joe Manchin for the Democrats and Nikki Haley for the Republicans, we would expect to see more churn in the electorate.

Similarly, if voters increasingly vote a straight ticket for president, senator, US representative, and state legislator, it may mean that voters have become more partisan. But it may also mean that today's homogeneous parties increasingly offer them a choice between a liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican at every office level, so there is not as much reason for voters to split their tickets now as there was in earlier decades when the parties offered conservative and liberal Democrats and liberal and conservative Republicans.

Thus, an alternative explanation to the standard "voters are more partisan" explanation is that party sorting is the key to understanding our current political turbulence.[27] The parties have sorted especially at the higher levels of activity and commitment; each party has become more homogeneous internally on ideology and policy and more distinct from the other. Voter behavior does not change much because the alternatives that voters face do not change much. Most voters, however, are not as well sorted as party elites, and many voters are not very partisan at all; hence, they are increasingly dissatisfied with the choices the political system offers. The result is not a 50–50 nation, but something more like a 30–40–30 nation.[28]

With close electoral competition between two ideologically well-sorted parties, political overreach has become endemic, resulting in predictable electoral swings. Parties attempt to govern in a manner that reflects the preferences of their bases, but doing so alienates the marginal members of their electoral majority, who then withdraw their support in the next election. Overreach is not new, but several developments have made it a normal feature of politics today. The consequence is unstable majorities.

NEXT: ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH: IS AMERICA POLARIZED?

NOTES

1. Most of the others occur in Central and South America and other less developed countries.

2. Anthony King, *Running Scared: Why America's Politicians Campaign Too Much and Govern Too Little* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

3. Sticklers will interject that the November 1930 elections gave the Republicans a one-seat majority in the House, but by the time the new Congress convened, special elections had given a narrow majority to the Democrats.

4. For a more detailed discussion of this period, see Morris Fiorina, *Divided Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), chap. 2.

5. The year 1848 saw a three-way election in which former Democratic president Martin Van Buren ran on the Free Soil ticket, enabling Whig Zachary Taylor to narrowly win the presidency while the Democrats won both chambers of Congress. Democrats Samuel Tilden in 1876 and Grover Cleveland in 1888 won the *popular* vote but lost in the Electoral College. In both years Democrats carried the House. The election of 1880 resulted in a tied Senate.

6. However, some analysts argue that John Kennedy actually lost the popular vote in 1960—not because of fraud in Illinois, as is often charged, but because Dixiecrat candidate Harry Byrd's votes were allocated to Kennedy in some southern states. Various methods of allocating Bird's votes between Nixon and Kennedy take away the latter's narrow popular-vote majority. Brian Gaines, "Popular Myths about Electoral College Vote Splits," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (2001): 71–75; Gordon Tullock, "Nixon, Like Gore, Also Won Popular Vote, but Lost Election," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 37 (2004): 1–2.

7. In retrospect, Carter's narrow victory looks like something of a fluke. He barely defeated the Republican incumbent, Gerald Ford, who had been appointed to the vice presidency on the resignation in disgrace of Vice President Spiro Agnew and who then ascended to the presidency on the resignation in disgrace of President Richard Nixon. Ford then committed the electorally harmful action of pardoning Nixon. Morris Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 121–27.

8. Mathew McCubbins, "Party Governance and U.S. Budget Deficits: Divided Government and Fiscal Stalemate," in *Politics and Economics in the 1980s*, ed. Alberto Alesina and Geoffery Carliner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 83–111.

9. Tim Hibbitts, "The Man Who Supposedly Cost George H.W. Bush the Presidency," Polling Report, 2012, http://www.pollingreport.com/hibbitts1202.htm.

10. Many popular commentators suggest that greater Republican control of redistricting explains their relatively greater success in the House. Political scientists, however, generally find redistricting to be a much less important factor than pundits think. The relatively greater geographic concentration of Democratic voters is the primary factor in the current Republican advantage in House elections. For a discussion, see John Sides and Eric McGhee, "Redistricting Didn't Win Republicans the House," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/02/17/redistricting-didnt-win-republicans-the-house/.

11. William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (1963 repr., New York: E. P. Dutton, 1905), 3–6.

12. Larry Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

13. For a more extensive discussion, see Morris Fiorina, "Parties, Participation, and Representation in the United States: Old Theories Face New Realities," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner, (New York: Norton, 2002), 511–41.

14. Eitan Hersh, *Politics Is for Power: How to Move beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

15. Floyd Allport and D. A. Hartman, "The Measurement and Motivation of Atypical Opinion in a Certain Group," *American Political Science Review* 19 (1925): 735–60; Hadley Cantril, "The Intensity of an Attitude," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 41 (1946): 129–35. The association between intensity of viewpoints and extremity of viewpoints has long been recognized in ordinary language usage. We speak of knee-jerk liberals and rabid conservatives but not raging moderates.

16. This increase in ideological *consistency* generates polarized ideological indices, even in the absence of polarization on the individual issue dimensions. Contrast Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), chap. 3.

17. Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, "Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate," *Journal of Politics* 60 (1998): 634–52. These works disagree on the proximate causes of sorting. Carmines and Stimson emphasize the primacy of race, whereas Abramowitz and Saunders conclude that race is only one of several issues that became ideologically connected.

18. Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2011), chap. 5.

19. See, e.g., Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (New York: Wiley, 1963).

20. Duncan Black, *The Theory of Committees and Elections* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958); Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Wiley, 1957).

21. Joseph Bafumi and Michael C. Herron, "Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress," *American Political Science Review* 104 (2010): 519–42.

22. Lydia Saad, "In U.S., Majority Now Say Obama's Policies 'Mostly Liberal,'" Gallup, 2009, https://news.gallup.com/poll/124094/majority-say-obama-policies-mostly-liberal.aspx.

23. For example, see Larry Bartels, "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1 (2000): 35–50. It is unclear whether the impact of partisanship itself has increased or whether factors associated with partisanship have become stronger and more consistent (see chap. 2

of *American Gridlock*). However, there is little doubt that partisan consistency in voting has increased, at least for Democrats—and with the sole exception of the 1964 elections, Republicans have always been very consistent. See Samuel Abrams and Morris Fiorina, "Party Sorting: The Foundation of Polarized Politics," in *American Gridlock*, ed. James Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 113–29.

24. As the great twentieth-century political scientist V.O. Key Jr. wrote, "If the people can choose only from among rascals, they are certain to choose a rascal." V.O. Key Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 3.

25. Why would you patronize such a restaurant? It is the only restaurant in town, and if you want to dine out, you must go to this restaurant.

26. The current image of Jimmy Carter is that of a liberal Democrat, but in 1976 he was viewed as a respectable alternative to George Wallace.

27. The *locus classicus* is Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

28. See "Party Affiliation," Gallup, https://news.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx.

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An Era of Unstable Majorities Continues

A continuation of the Hoover Institution's *Unstable Majorities* series from the 2016 election season, the first half of this essay series leads up to the November 2024 elections with general discussions of the past and present political situation, of particular interest to students and professionals in the fields of political science and political journalism. The second half continues post-election with analyses focused specifically on the 2024 elections, addressed to a wider audience. The series begins by looking back at the issues raised in 2016 that continue today.

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