

# Party Sorting and Democratic Politics

*This essay is more qualitative than the two previous data-heavy essays. It considers the larger consequences of party sorting for the conduct of American politics. The elites of today's parties are far apart. Larger policy differences produce greater animosity toward the opposing elites, greater difficulty in finding common ground—and, with the close party balance, less interest in doing so. The natural result is an increased likelihood of gridlock and stalemate. Sorted parties please similarly sorted minorities of the American electorate, but not the majority that remains relatively unsorted.*

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*“I believe that we have to end the divisive partisan politics that is ripping this country apart. And I think we can. It's mean-spirited, it's petty, and it's gone on for much too long. I don't believe, like some do, that it's naive to talk to Republicans. I don't think we should look at Republicans as our enemies. They are our opposition. They're not our enemies. And for the sake of the country, we have to work together.”—Vice President Joe Biden*

The previous essay described the ongoing process of party sorting that transformed the heterogeneous American parties of most of the twentieth century into organizations that resemble the more ideological parties that historically contested elections in parliamentary democracies. That essay focused on the American public: how much sorting had occurred, how much had normal Americans sorted compared to members of the political class, and which partisans and which issues showed more sorting. This essay takes a more impressionistic stance and considers in broad brush the likely consequences of party sorting for the larger political and governmental process.<sup>1</sup>

## How Party Sorting Contributes to the State of Contemporary American Politics

The first essay in the series noted the long periods of unified party control in the first half of the twentieth century. First the Republicans dominated, then the Democrats. Governing

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Quotation is from Vice President Joe Biden's announcement that he would not be a presidential candidate in 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/10/21/full-text-bidens-announcement-that-he-wont-run-for-president/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/10/21/full-text-bidens-announcement-that-he-wont-run-for-president/).

1 The first part of this essay extends the discussion that appears in Daniel M. Shea and Morris P. Fiorina, “Party Homogeneity and Contentious Politics,” in *Can We Talk?: The Rise of Rude, Nasty, Stubborn Politics*, 1st ed., eds. Shea and Fiorina (New York: Pearson, 2013), 142–153. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education Inc. For an up-to-date discussion of the consequences of party sorting for the operation of our national institutions, see Steven E. Schier and Todd E. Eberly, *Polarized: The Rise of Ideology in American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).



a large heterogeneous democracy like the United States is never an easy task but, other things being equal, it probably never is easier than in periods like those. A single party controls the executive branch and the Congress, enhancing the prospects of adopting the party program without major compromises with the opposition party. Given that they share the party label, most members of the congressional majority have an electoral incentive to make their president look good, not bad.<sup>2</sup> The president appoints and his legislative party confirms the judges and agency heads, who consequently are unlikely to hinder—let alone sabotage—implementation of the party program. The congressional majority is less likely to investigate a president of its own party.<sup>3</sup> It is very unlikely that the opposition will enjoy an electoral triumph so sweeping that it can repeal the laws already passed. And if part of the president’s agenda does not pass in one Congress, it can be carried over and finished up in the next one by a cast of characters that is largely the same. There is a high degree of predictability surrounding policymaking in stable one-party-dominated eras like the two that prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century. So long as the majority party governs competently and wins popular approval, it continues in office.

Divided government characterized the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, quite a bit still got done, although scholars continue to disagree about whether what got done was less than the American public wanted.<sup>5</sup> During the Eisenhower administration, Congress funded construction of the interstate highway system and the Saint Lawrence Seaway, passed the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction, and adopted major labor legislation. Republican Richard Nixon has been called the “last liberal president.”<sup>6</sup> His time in office saw the adoption of the alternative minimum tax and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency. Republican Ronald Reagan and the Democratic congressional leaders struck a grand bargain to save Social Security (at least temporarily) in 1983 and adopted a major tax reform in 1986. During the Divided Government era, cross-party coalitions formed to pass major legislation. But the parties then were not well-sorted.

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2 Gary C. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

3 Although Mayhew originally reported that investigations were about equally likely in periods of unified and divided government during the period 1946–1990, the more recent experience with divided government found investigative activity more likely than under unified government. David Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946–2002*, 2nd ed., chap. X (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.)

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

5 Cf. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern*; and Sarah Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003).

6 John Fund, “Nixon at 100: Was He ‘America’s Last Liberal?’” *National Review*, January 11, 2013, [www.nationalreview.com/article/337447/nixon-100-was-he-americas-last-liberal-john-fund](http://www.nationalreview.com/article/337447/nixon-100-was-he-americas-last-liberal-john-fund).

Thomas Mann charges, “To treat polarization as ‘mere sorting’ is to trivialize, if not miss entirely, the biggest development in recent decades.”<sup>7</sup> Mann’s comment reflects a misunderstanding of my position.<sup>8</sup> Nothing I have written attaches the adjective “mere” to the process of party sorting. On the contrary, I agree with Mann that it is one of the most important developments in American politics in recent decades and that it makes a major contribution to the political conditions that he denounces. The consequences of sorting have become all too apparent in the political incivility that characterizes contemporary political discussion. Even more importantly, party sorting arguably makes a major contribution to the gridlock and stalemate that so many commentators—academic and otherwise—condemn.<sup>9</sup> Finally, while recognizing that party sorting has some positive consequences—it clarifies the choices facing the electorate and makes it easier for voters to assign political responsibility—I argue that in addition to incivility and gridlock there are negative representational consequences of sorting that cumulatively outweigh the benefits.<sup>10</sup> Of course, this is a normative judgment that some may contest.

### ***Incivility and Gridlock***

Both academics and journalists decry the state of American politics today. To political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, “it’s even worse than it looks.”<sup>11</sup> To journalist Jon Terbush, the contemporary Congress is “the worst ever.”<sup>12</sup> Although such assertions are hyperbolic, anecdotal evidence does support them. During the ferocious congressional battle over the debt ceiling extension in 2011, for example, tea party Republicans in the House of Representatives took the country to the brink of default. Outraged politicians and pundits charged that those who marched under the banner of the tea party were “extortionists” and worse. They were a “small group of terrorists,” “the Republican Taliban wing,” “the GOP’s Hezbollah faction,” the “tea terrorist party,” “a nihilistic caucus.” According to their critics, the tea party had “waged jihad on the American people.” Tea partiers donned political “suicide vests,” “strapped explosives to

7 Thomas Mann, “Admit It, Political Scientists: Politics Really Is More Broken Than Ever,” *The Atlantic*, May 26, 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/dysfunction/371544/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/dysfunction/371544/).

8 Mann links his criticism to a column discussing an essay of mine: Molly Ball, “5 False Assumptions Political Pundits Make All the Time,” *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2013, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/5-false-assumptions-political-pundits-make-all-the-time/273544/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/02/5-false-assumptions-political-pundits-make-all-the-time/273544/).

9 Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than it Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic, 2012).

10 There are also claims that party sorting stimulates political participation but, as noted below in this chapter, such claims are empirically wrong.

11 Mann and Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than it Looks*.

12 Jon Terbush, “Confirmed: This Is the Worst Congress Ever,” *The Week*, December 26, 2013, <http://theweek.com/articles/453744/confirmed-worst-congress-ever>.



the Capitol,” and engaged in other “terrorist tactics” which ultimately forced the entire nation to eat a “sugar-coated Satan sandwich.”<sup>13</sup>

In this particular episode, tea party Republicans were the targets of incivility, but their members had often been on the other side of the equation during the preceding years. An Iowa tea party billboard compared Obama to Hitler and Lenin.<sup>14</sup> Tea party posters depicted President Obama as the “Joker” in the popular Batman movies. A tea party heckler called Massachusetts Democratic Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren a “socialist whore” with a “foreign-born boss.”<sup>15</sup>

For those old enough to have observed politics in the mid-twentieth century, there is little question that American politics now is more contentious and far less civil than it was then. Congressional scholars of that era wrote about the norms that mandated personal courtesy and institutional patriotism:

A senator whose emotional commitment to Senate ways appears to be less than total is suspect. One who brings the Senate as an institution or senators as a class into public disrepute invites his own destruction as an effective legislator. One who seems to be using the Senate for the purposes of self-advertisement and advancement obviously does not belong.<sup>16</sup>

In that era, someone like Ted Cruz (R-TX), who called his own party leader a liar (among a series of other personal offenses), might well have been censured by a unanimous bipartisan vote.<sup>17</sup>

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13 For wrap-ups of the uncivil nature of much of the discourse, see David Harsanyi, “America Can Thank the ‘Terrorists,’” *Real Clear Politics*, August 3, 2011, [www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/08/03/when\\_we\\_balance\\_the\\_budget\\_the\\_terrorists\\_have\\_won\\_110810-comments.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/08/03/when_we_balance_the_budget_the_terrorists_have_won_110810-comments.html); and James Taranto, “‘Civility’: The Denouement,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 2, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903520204576484303256286950.html>.

14 Meenal Vamburkar, “Tea Party Billboard Shows Obama Alongside Hitler And Lenin,” *Mediaite*, July 13, 2010, [www.mediaite.com/online/tea-party-billboard-shows-obama-alongside-hitler-and-lenin/](http://www.mediaite.com/online/tea-party-billboard-shows-obama-alongside-hitler-and-lenin/).

15 Aliyah Shahid, “Elizabeth Warren, Massachusetts Senate candidate, called a ‘socialist whore’ by Tea Party heckler,” *New York Daily News*, November 4, 2011, [www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/elizabeth-warren-massachusetts-senate-candidate-called-a-socialist-whore-tea-party-heckler-video-article-1.972213?localLinksEnabled=false](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/elizabeth-warren-massachusetts-senate-candidate-called-a-socialist-whore-tea-party-heckler-video-article-1.972213?localLinksEnabled=false).

16 Donald R. Matthews, *U.S. Senators and their World*, chap. 5 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1960). For a discussion of analogous norms prevailing in at least some committees in the House of Representatives, see Richard F. Fenno, “The House Appropriations Committee as a Political System: The Problem of Integration,” *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 2 (June 1962): 310–324.

17 Further back, in 1954 the Senate censured Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) by a vote of 67–22. The censure resolution said McCarthy had “acted contrary to senatorial ethics and tended to bring the Senate into dishonor

It is ironic that congressional politics in the 1960s was more civil than today, at a time when popular passions probably were at least equal and probably greater. Younger commentators sometimes talk about unprecedented political polarization, even comparing the current situation to the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> But in the 1960s, Vietnam war protests raged, strikes and demonstrations paralyzed campuses, major American cities burned during the summers, and assassins murdered political leaders. As the second essay in this series discusses, however, today's electorate in the large is no more divided on the issues—and perhaps even less so—than the electorate of a half-century ago. In the halls of government, however, civility prevailed then to a much greater degree than it does today.

As for gridlock, its relationship with party sorting is straightforward. Refer again to figure 1 of the second essay. In the bottom panel of the figure, the average Democrat is further from the average Republican than in the top figure—the scope of partisan disagreement is wider. Moreover, the party distributions are more concentrated in contemporary congresses, to the extent that in the bottom panel there is no overlap between the two parties: the most conservative Democrat is less conservative than the least conservative Republican. If a party offers proposals that reflect the central tendency of its members, it is more likely to propose policies that are strongly opposed by the other party than it would have in the Congress depicted in the top panel, and there are many fewer moderates who can threaten to defect to the other party, thus discouraging bipartisan compromise. In addition, looking ahead to the fifth essay in this series, the contest for institutional control in each election creates an incentive for the minority to deny the majority any programmatic accomplishments and for the majority to resort to violations of traditional norms and procedures to implement its programs.

In his classic study of the late nineteenth-century Congress, David Brady describes the venomous politics of the era. Their opponents likened Populist leaders like William Jennings Bryan to Robespierre, Danton, and other leaders of the French Revolution who sent their political opponents to the guillotine. According to some commentators, the 1896 Democratic platform was “made in Hell” and the Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, was a “mouthing, slobbering demagogue whose patriotism is all in his jaw bone.”<sup>19</sup> Brady argues that a major contributor to the historic levels of roll call polarization

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and disrepute, to obstruct the constitutional processes of the Senate, and to impair its dignity; and such conduct is hereby condemned.” The Senate was narrowly controlled by the Republicans at the time. All Democrats and half the Republicans voted for censure. One can hardly imagine a Senate resolution containing such terminology today.

18 George Stephanopoulos, “A Country Divided: Examining the State of Our Union,” *ABC News*, June 30, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/print?id=2140483>.

19 These quotations are all taken from David Brady, *Congressional Voting in a Partisan Era: A Study of the McKinley Houses and a Comparison to the Modern House of Representatives* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1973), 1–3.



in the McKinley congresses—levels not matched until very recently—was the distinct nature of the parties' electoral coalitions. An overwhelming majority of House Republicans represented industrial districts, and a solid majority of House Democrats represented agricultural districts.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the parties were well-sorted: each party contained a heavy majority of members who represented a common interest that was opposed to the dominant interest of the other party.

The same situation characterizes the current era. Party coalitions have again become more homogeneous. Take regional strengths and weaknesses, for example. From the Civil War to the 1990s, Democratic representatives dominated the South; from the New Deal onward, they were elected from all regions of the country. The Republican congressional delegation in the twentieth century also came from all regions—except from the South (with a few minor exceptions). Today, the character of the Democratic congressional caucus is very different. What remains of the southern contingent consists primarily of liberal African-American representatives from southern cities, and the party now enjoys its greatest strength in the liberal northeastern and western coastal regions. In a complete historical reversal, today's Republican Party now dominates the South and has almost disappeared from its historic stronghold in New England. The preponderance of its membership represents districts in the heartland—what coastal elites call the fly-over states.

Urban-suburban differences reinforce such regional differences in electoral support. Today's Democratic Party is an urban party, whereas the Republican Party is predominantly suburban and rural. Moreover, as Bruce Oppenheimer points out, many of the remaining southern Democratic districts are in the large cities of the Sunbelt, so that they are more similar to northern districts than southern Democratic districts were at mid-century.<sup>21</sup> The consequences of such differences in party support show up clearly in issues involving energy, the environment, and guns.

As parties become more homogeneous, political issues become more partisan and divisive. If both parties include representatives from urban and rural districts, both feel pressure to moderate their issue stances. The pressure comes from members associated with points of view that diverge from the party majority. Such members will defect on party proposals that are highly unpopular in their districts, and party leaders who wish to become or remain *majority* party leaders will hesitate to endanger such members by advocating proposals that harm those members' electoral chances. But when Democrats are largely an urban party and Republicans a suburban and rural party, why should anyone expect Republican representatives to worry about the problems of the cities? Urban districts only

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Oppenheimer, "Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, and the Democratic Congressional Majority," *Extensions* (University of Oklahoma), Spring 2009.

elect Democrats. And why should Democrats worry about the economic consequences of the Endangered Species Act for farmers and ranchers? Rural and farm districts consistently vote for Republicans. Party homogeneity encourages both parties to reject trade-offs and advocate one-sided programs that reflect the parties' preponderant interests.

The natural consequence of party sorting is that each party gradually comes to have less contact with, knowledge of, and sympathy for the constituencies of the other (recall the discussion of partisan misperception in the second essay). If one party is rooted in the predominantly white middle class, one should not expect its representatives to support policies that redistribute income or other resources from its voters to minorities who vote heavily for the opposing party. Conversely, if one party's adherents are heavily employed in the public sector or dependent on government benefits, one should not expect its representatives to favor policies that cut taxes and public spending.

Students today are surprised to learn that until the feminist movement Republicans had traditionally been somewhat more supportive of an equal rights amendment. And until the mid-1970s, the environmental issue was up for grabs, leading Republican president Richard Nixon to support the Clean Air Act. As pointed out in the third essay of the series, until the early 1990s Republicans and Democrats felt about the same on the issue of abortion. And until the 1992 election, the presidential vote division between regular church-goers and seculars was small.<sup>22</sup> The natural result of such party heterogeneity was much less of a partisan divide on related issues. But once the advocates for a particular issue became exclusively associated with one party or the other, balance and moderation were the casualties. For several decades, Republican pro-life groups have advocated a constitutional amendment to prohibit abortion altogether while Democratic pro-choice groups defend third trimester abortions for elective reasons. The fact that almost 90 percent of the electorate falls somewhere between these polar positions gets overlooked in the partisan battle. Most recently, uncertain voters are offered a stark choice in regard to climate change: one party tells them that global warming is an imminent planetary threat, and the other party asserts that it is a gigantic liberal hoax.

In recent decades, many commentators have identified another factor that contributes to contentious politics—the introduction of issues variously called moral, social, or cultural into the political agenda. This is the culture war argument that I have dealt with extensively in other writings.<sup>23</sup> Issues that can easily be framed in terms of moral and/or religious beliefs—racial equality, women's rights, traditional family values—are harder to

<sup>22</sup> Morris P. Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War: The Myth of a Polarized America*, chap. 7 (New York: Pearson, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* See also Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).





compromise than economic issues, the argument goes, especially when framed in terms of fundamental rights protected by the US Constitution. One side asserts that affirmative action is a violation of racial equality while the other asserts to the contrary that it is an important means toward racial equality. One side contends that free access to abortion is a fundamental component of equal rights for women, while the other contends that abortion violates the right to life of the fetus. One side claims that same-sex marriage is a violation of traditional morality and religious principles while the other claims that it is a necessary component of personal dignity and equality.

Certainly this argument has some validity, although the contending sides often underestimate the willingness of Americans to compromise moral issues—they have little problem in the case of abortion, for example, as shown in earlier essays.<sup>24</sup> The important caveat, however, is that—contrary to the assumptions of many commentators—such issues are not new to the modern era. The New Deal period was historically unusual in that economic and, later, foreign policy issues crowded out moral issues. The latter have been staples of American political conflict through most of our history. From at least the time that large numbers of Catholic immigrants began arriving on American shores to the Great Depression, Protestant Americans worried about the moral “failures” of Catholic immigrants who drank and danced and in other ways violated the Sabbath. Regulating the use of foreign languages also is an old issue. Bilingual education—French and German long before Spanish—was controversial in the nineteenth century. But the parties of earlier periods were patronage-based and generally kept such issues off the public agenda because of their (now and then demonstrated) potential to fracture party coalitions and jeopardize control of what was considered the real value of institutional control—jobs, contracts, and various forms of “honest graft.”<sup>25</sup>

As I have discussed elsewhere, however, civil service, public sector unionization, conflict-of-interest laws, and investigative media have restricted the use of material incentives to generate political activity and support.<sup>26</sup> Partially in consequence, the parties have enlisted issue activists to serve as party foot soldiers, thus rendering it impossible to keep their issues off the agenda. Substantive disagreement between the parties is greater now than half a century ago not only because of greater party differences but also because of a greater number of issues to disagree about.

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24 For a more detailed discussion, see Fiorina with Abrams, *Disconnect*, chap. 2.

25 For a discussion, see Joel H. Silbey and Samuel T. McSeveney, *Voters, Parties and Elections: Quantitative Essays in the History of American Popular Voting Behavior*, part 3 (Lexington, MA: Xerox College Publishing, 1972).

26 E.g., Morris Fiorina, “Parties, Participation, and Representation in America: Old Theories Face New Realities,” in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner (New York: Norton, 2002), 511–541.



In sum, in the mid-twentieth-century period when politics seemed less contentious than today, the American parties were considerably more heterogeneous. The result was party platforms that were less divergent and more balanced among various interests, allowing greater room for compromise. In the ensuing decades, the parties sorted along various regional, demographic, and issue lines.<sup>27</sup> The result is parties that are more homogeneous internally and more distinct from each other. Extreme partisans regard the members of the opposing party as “the other.”

### *Politics for Higher Stakes*

For the reasons just outlined, party sorting has raised the stakes of politics.<sup>28</sup> In an era of heterogeneous parties and low party cohesion, party control of Congress makes relatively less difference in what kinds of policies emerge than in an era with the opposite characteristics. Party control always matters, to be sure. It matters for who gets various perquisites of office: committee and subcommittee chairmanships, control of staff, budgets, and other institutional benefits. But party control matters relatively less for substantive policy outcomes when the parties are heterogeneous and fragmented.

Without a Democratic majority in Congress, the health care plan fails to pass in 2010. Without a Republican majority in the House, the debt ceiling extension passes easily in 2011. Without a Senate of his own party, President Obama’s Supreme Court nomination is stymied rather than confirmed. The stakes of politics generally rise with substantive disagreement and, by whatever psychological mechanism(s), so does emotional involvement.<sup>29</sup> If I am forced to accept a compromise far from my preferred position, I will feel disappointed and frustrated. The more important the issue is to me, the greater the emotional reaction.

Party sorting heightens the frequency and intensity of such feelings. If activists and public officials associate only with people who agree with them politically—colleagues, other activists, campaign donors and workers—they will slowly lose understanding of, sympathy for, and eventually even tolerance of those who do not (if they ever had much of those qualities to begin with). They gradually will come to believe that their positions are so self-evidently correct that they will cease to critically evaluate their own positions and to recognize any validity in opposing positions. The arguments made by political opponents will be dismissed or ignored entirely, not rebutted with logic or facts. Contrary to Senator

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27 Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Polarized Public? Why American Government is so Dysfunctional* (New York: Pearson, 2013).

28 Fiorina with Abrams, *Disconnect*, chap. 7.

29 Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, “The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Puerto Rico, 2016.



Moynihan's dictum, partisans ultimately feel entitled to their own facts.<sup>30</sup> And it becomes all too automatic to question the motives of opponents. Your political opponents advocate particular policies not because they honestly believe such policies address important public problems but because they are racists, or they are bought and paid for by Wall Street or the Koch brothers. Or they hate America and consciously plan to undermine it and establish a socialist state. And as for the hoi polloi who are taken in by the propaganda of the other side, they deserve no respect, only contempt. They are "bitter and cling to their gods and guns" and they are "deplorables." Or they are economic illiterates and "taxeaters."

In sum, far from a "mere" sorting, the evolution of American political parties from loose coalitions of disparate interests to groups of like-minded people is a major factor contributing to the contentious and unproductive politics of today. Substantive differences between the parties are on average greater today, and as the political agenda expanded ("the personal is the political") they have found more things to disagree about. And for familiar psychological reasons, substantive conflict generates emotional affect and personal animosity. Many political scientists of the 1950s looked at their parties and found them wanting. They wanted the parties to look more like they do today. But many of today's political scientists look at our parties and wonder whether it would be better for the country if they looked more like they did in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>31</sup>

### **Is Party Sorting All Bad?**

As stated in the introduction to this essay, I believe that party sorting is one of the principal underpinnings of our current political stalemate. I suspect that the great majority of observers would agree that the sorting described in the preceding essay has had serious negative consequences. When ideology and issues crosscut party cleavages, party cohesion is difficult to maintain and cross-party coalition possibilities expand. This was the case in mid-twentieth-century America. Today ideology and issues reinforce the partisan cleavage rather than cut across it. This restricts the possibilities for constructing cross-party compromises.

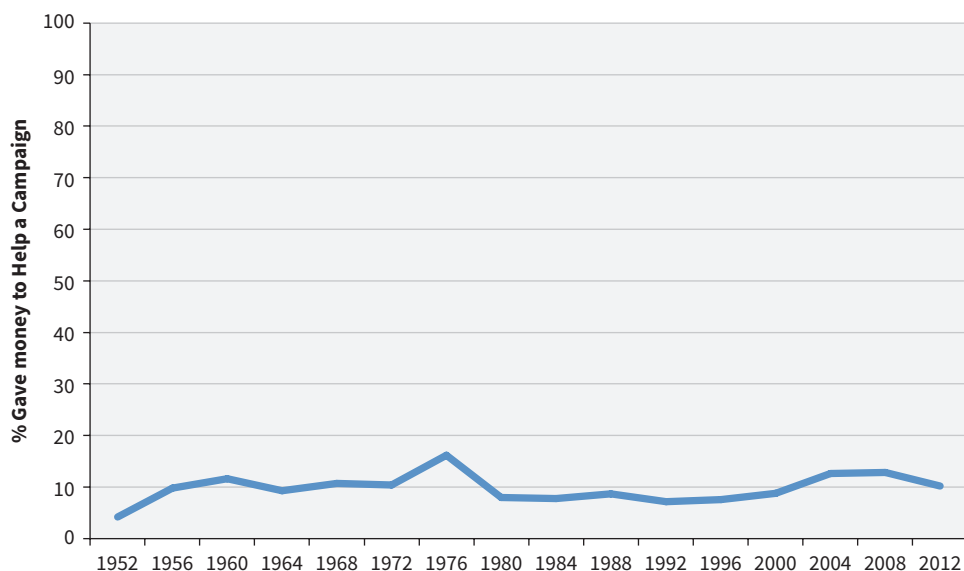
While I believe that the party sorting that has occurred during the past two decades has heightened the conflictual nature of American politics, making compromise more difficult and stalemate more likely, other scholars have noted some potentially positive aspects of sorting. Alan Abramowitz argues that today's sorted parties have produced a more engaged public and heightened political participation: "Some Americans may be turned off by the sharp ideological divisions between the parties, but more Americans appear to be excited and energized by the choice between a consistently liberal Democratic Party and

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan is credited with the comment that "we are all entitled to our own opinions but not to our own facts."

<sup>31</sup> Fiorina, "Old Theories Face New Realities."

Figure 1. The Proportion of Americans Who Are Campaign Donors Has Not Increased



Source: ANES

a consistently conservative Republican Party.”<sup>32</sup> As Levendusky and I pointed out when Abramowitz first made this argument, the data fail to support it.<sup>33</sup> True, interest in the campaign rose slightly in 2004 and 2008 before receding in 2012, and more people reported attempting to persuade others how to vote in 2004 and 2008 before receding in 2012. But contrary to Abramowitz’s claim that “every available indicator of public interest and involvement indicates that the level of engagement in the 2008 election was even greater than it was in 2004,”<sup>34</sup> American National Election Studies (ANES) measures show levels of activity and involvement that are well within the range established in past decades.

For example, despite the ease of donating to campaigns over the Internet and frequent claims by candidates about record-setting numbers of small donors, figure 1 shows that the proportion of Americans who report donating to a campaign has stayed roughly constant at about 10 percent. Similarly, despite myriad claims about Obamamania in 2008, figure 2 shows that the proportion of Americans who report attending a political meeting or rally has shown almost no movement over a sixty-year period. And the proportion of Americans

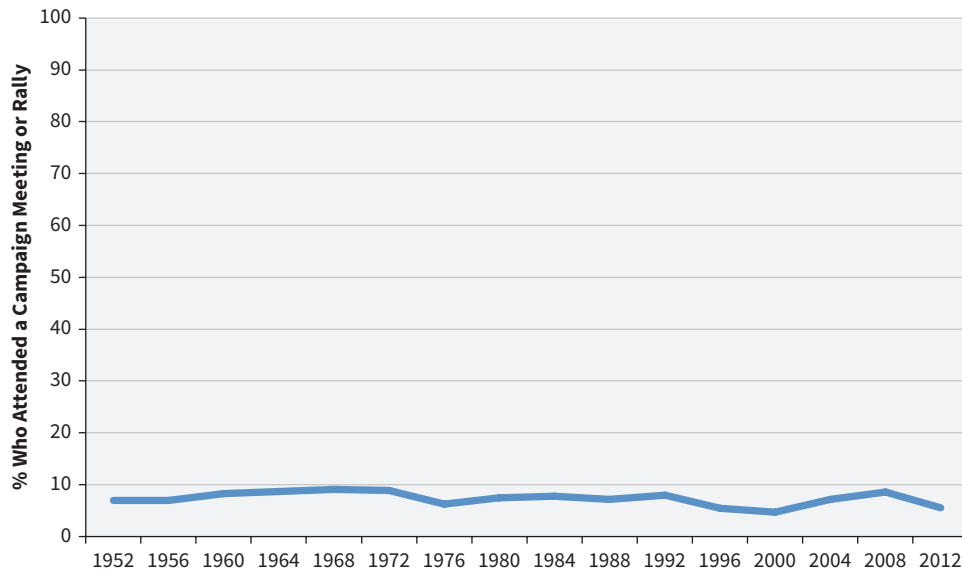
32 Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 33.

33 Alan I. Abramowitz, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” in *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, vol. 1, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 72–75; and Morris P. Fiorina and Matthew S. Levendusky, “Response to Abramowitz’s Comments,” in *Red and Blue Nation*, vol. 1, 95–108.

34 Abramowitz, *Disappearing Center*, 112.

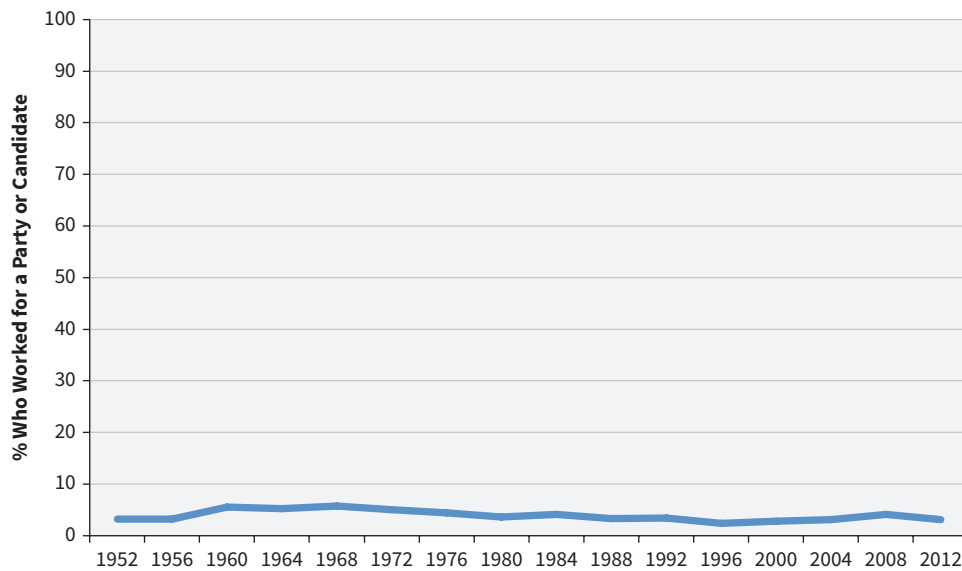


**Figure 2. The Proportion of Americans Who Attend a Political Meeting or Rally Has Not Increased**



Source: ANES

**Figure 3. The Proportion of Americans Who Work for a Party or Candidate Has Not Increased**

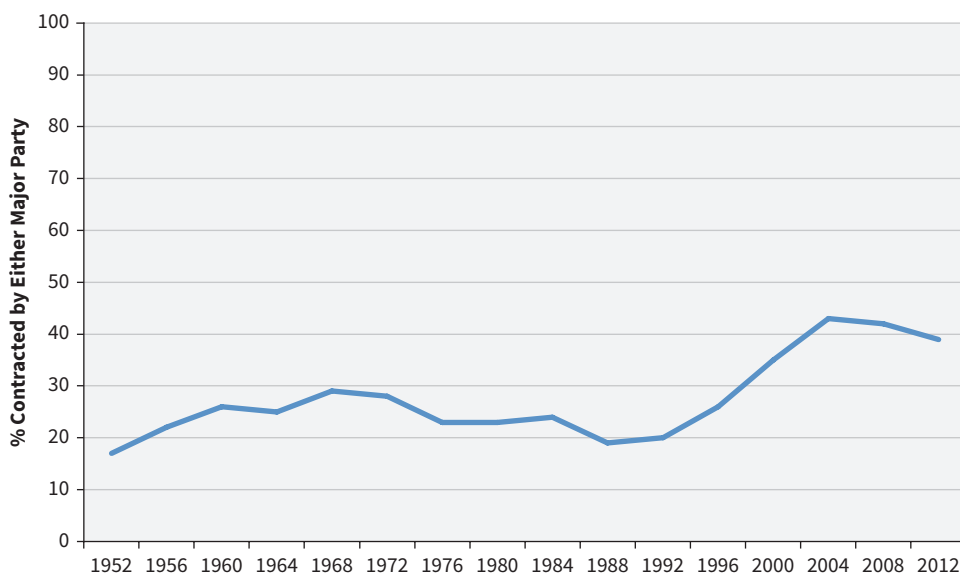


Source: ANES

who actually work for a party or candidate is no higher now than in the mid-twentieth century—less than 5 percent, as graphed in figure 3.

The serene stability of these figures is all the more surprising given that the political parties have conducted much more intensive “ground games” in the elections since the turn of the century, as reflected in figure 4. Even though today’s sorted parties are more likely to cajole voters to participate, aside from displaying more yard signs and campaign stickers,

Figure 4. Americans Increasingly Report Party or Campaign Contacts



Source: ANES

voters have only just maintained their previous levels of activity. Moreover, other data are even less consistent with the heightened engagement thesis. After noting the 2012 plunge in presidential primary turnout and the decline in turnout in the 2012 general election, Rhodes Cook asks, “Are Voters Drifting Away?” and notes that “in recent years it seems as though voters have become more attuned to what they do not like in American politics than what they do. Stark differences between the parties remain, but voters appear to be tiring of the shrill partisanship, ‘my way or the highway’ rhetoric, and the frequent examples of government dysfunction that follow.”<sup>35</sup> Continuing that trend, turnout in the 2014 midterm elections was the lowest since 1942. In 2016, Republican primary turnout surged, a development that most observers attributed to the Trump candidacy. This may be the exception that proves the rule: as Republican elites complain, Trump does not represent the sorted Republican establishment very well—they fear and hate him in part because he is a party de-sorter.

Ironically, a number of analysts, notably Russell Dalton, are in partial agreement with Abramowitz that today’s sorted parties have contributed to a change in political involvement, but the change is the opposite of the one Abramowitz imagined.<sup>36</sup> Dalton argues that traditional conceptions of citizenship are “duty-based” at their core. The good

35 Rhodes Cook, “Are Voters Drifting Away?” *Sabato’s Crystal Ball*, April 2, 2015, [www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/are-voters-drifting-away/](http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/are-voters-drifting-away/).

36 Russell Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How A Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2008).



citizen is someone who performs the duties of citizenship—in particular, she pays attention to public affairs and votes. But Obamamania in 2008 notwithstanding, young people today—millennials—are less likely to follow public affairs and to participate in election activities. Disputing those who conclude that the young are unengaged, however, Dalton argues that they are differently engaged. They adhere to a conception of citizenship that focuses on the community more than the polity. They are skeptical of government. They favor participation in community life rather than in campaigns and elections. They sign online petitions, boycott corporations, and volunteer to help those less fortunate or those affected by natural disasters.<sup>37</sup> They are more tolerant and more compassionate.

Dalton suggests that part of the explanation of “young people’s alienation from electoral politics” lies in the party sorting that Abramowitz celebrates: “Youth are drawn to political figures who appear to be forthright and not acting with ideological or partisan blinders . . .”<sup>38</sup> I do not need to take a side in this debate. Suffice it to say that not only has party sorting not produced any increase in political participation but, if Dalton is correct, as millennials become a steadily larger proportion of the electorate, citizen participation in campaigns and elections may actually decline.

A second argument in favor of party sorting does have the great benefit of being empirically correct. As Levendusky notes, sorting simplifies the task facing the voter by making the alternatives very clear.<sup>39</sup> No longer are voters as confused about which party stands for what as they often must have been in the past. According to the ANES, in 1976, when moderate Republican Gerald Ford ran against moderate Democrat Jimmy Carter, only 54 percent of the public thought the Republican Party was the more conservative of the two parties, and 29 percent said they didn’t know or there was no difference between them. By 2012, 73 percent of the public said the Republicans were more conservative, and only 18 percent said they did not know or there was no difference.<sup>40</sup> The recognition of party differences on many individual issues has increased as well.

Not only does party sorting simplify the task facing the voter by making the alternatives very clear, but I would add that sorting may enhance electoral accountability as well since

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37 Research finds that this is true in Britain, Canada, and Australia, as well as in the United States. Aaron J. Martin, *Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo-American Democracies*, chap. 5 (New York: Routledge, 2012).

38 Russell Dalton, “The Good News is the Bad News is Wrong: Another View of the Millennial Generation,” *Extensions*, 2015: 10–13.

39 Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 138–41.

40 A minority of 10 percent stubbornly continues to believe that the Democrats are the more conservative party.

parties are less able to hide their positions in a “fog of ambiguity.”<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, on many issues today there are very clear party differences that are widely appreciated by voters. Moreover, as a later essay will discuss, the electoral fates of individual candidates now rise and fall with the fortunes of their parties. Compared to the mid-twentieth century, candidates are less able to carve out a personal vote and insulate themselves from collective party responsibility.

But while recognizing that party sorting has a positive aspect, I believe that in a large heterogeneous democracy like the United States, where people have different interests and values, the level of sorting that exists in the party system today on balance is a negative. Mann and Ornstein among others have pointed out that—given the American constitutional system with its separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism—a party would have to win and retain an overwhelming majority to implement its platform given all the veto points that can be utilized by the opposition.<sup>42</sup> Failure to win and hold such overwhelming majorities produces the stalemate and gridlock that characterize contemporary politics.

To this, I would add that there is a significant cost on the representational side as well. As Ross Douthat wrote before the 2016 campaign formally began,

But it [the two-party system] does mean certain ideologies and world views get marginalized in national political debate. The libertarian who wants to cut defense spending, the anti-abortion voter who favors a bigger welfare state, the immigration skeptic who wants to keep Social Security exactly as it is . . . all these voters and many others choose the lesser of two evils every November, because neither party’s leadership has any interest in representing their entire world view.<sup>43</sup>

Quite right. It is not too much of a simplification to posit that there are three clusters of issues in the contemporary United States: foreign and defense issues, economic and social welfare issues, and cultural and moral issues.<sup>44</sup> For purposes of illustration, imagine that

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41 Downs argues that in two-party majoritarian systems like that in the United States, the parties have incentives to broaden their appeal by taking ambiguous positions. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 135–137.

42 Mann and Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*.

43 Ross Douthat, “Donald Trump, Traitor to His Class,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-donald-trump-traitor-to-his-class.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/opinion/sunday/ross-douthat-donald-trump-traitor-to-his-class.html).

44 A number of studies find that the views of ordinary Americans about domestic issues generally fall on two dimensions—economic and cultural—in contrast to the single ideological dimension that emerges in congressional voting. Foreign policy issues on which the public has less well-formed views normally are not even included in such analyses. Byron E. Shafer and William J. M. Claggett, *The Two Majorities: The Issue Context of Modern American Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Edward G. Carmines, Michael J. Ensley,





there are only two stances on each cluster: an assertive (A) or cautious (C) stance on defense and foreign policy issues, a preference for government control (G) or a free market (M) stance on economic issues, and a progressive (P) or traditional (T) stance on cultural issues. Then there are eight ( $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ) possible platforms a party could espouse:<sup>45</sup>

	Platform							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Foreign/Defense	C	C	C	C	A	A	A	A
Economic	G	G	M	M	G	G	M	M
Cultural	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T

Contemporary Democratic candidates generally offer voters the first platform and contemporary Republican candidates the eighth platform. If you are a voter whose views fit any of the six platforms in between, you usually will have to choose between candidates who are wrong on at least one position you hold. With less well-sorted parties, however, New Deal Democrats could vote for a local congressional candidate who adopted platform 6, libertarian Republicans could vote for a local candidate who offered platform 3, and so on. No more.

The success of Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican nomination contests may be partially a reaction to this “two sizes fit all and you’d better like it” choice offered by the current sorted parties. To the surprise of many politicians, journalists, and academics, Donald Trump won the Republican presidential nomination. Reflecting on that development, Douthat writes,

Trump proved that movement conservative ideas and litmus tests don’t really have any purchase on millions of Republican voters. Again and again, Cruz and the other G.O.P. candidates stressed that Trump wasn’t really a conservative; they listed his heresies, cataloged his deviations, dug up his barely buried liberal past. No doubt this case resonated with many Republicans. But not with nearly enough of them to make Cruz the nominee. . . .

Trump proved that many of the party’s moderates and establishmentarians hate the thought of a True Conservative nominee even more than they fear handing the nomination to a proto-fascist grotesque with zero political experience and poor impulse control. That goes for the prominent politicians who refused to endorse Cruz,

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and Michael W. Wagner, “Who Fits the Left-Right Divide? Partisan Polarization in the American Electorate,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 56, no. 12 (December 2012): 1631–1653.

45 If we add a middle-of-the-road position on each cluster, there are 27 possible platforms. No need to go there; eight is enough to make the point.

**Table 1. Only Strong Partisans Feel Well-Represented by the Contemporary Parties***“Do Any of the Parties Represent Your Views Reasonably Well?”*

	2004	2008	2015
Strong Republicans	93%	85	92
Weak Republicans	83	60	63
Independent Republicans	66	49	50
Independents	47	36	11
Independent Democrats	58	53	40
Weak Democrats	72	69	46
Strong Democrats	80	81	87

**Source:**

2004 and 2008 data from Comparative Study of Electoral Systems; 2015 data from Polimetrix.

the prominent donors who sat on their hands once the field narrowed and all the moderate-Republican voters in blue states who turned out to be #NeverCruz first and #NeverTrump less so or even not at all.<sup>46</sup>

Trump offered something different to voters who don't fit happily in issue profiles 1 and 8 above. On foreign affairs he is cautious about American involvement but assertive where critical American interests are at stake. On abortion he has sounded traditional, but on gay rights progressive. On economic issues he attacks Wall Street but opposes a large increase in the minimum wage. And he further muddies the choice by complicating the economic dimension—adding trade agreements to the more traditional issues of government regulation and income redistribution. Whatever his many negatives, Trump has a potentially positive role as a de-sorting force in contemporary American politics.<sup>47</sup>

The simple fact is that the present condition of sorted parties primarily pleases a minority of Americans, mostly active partisans who are similarly well-sorted. Table 1 contains the responses to a survey question included on the 2004 and 2008 Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) surveys and updated by Polimetrix in 2015. Strong partisans (about one-third of the eligible electorate) are quite happy with the contemporary parties (and no doubt some of those who are not may think their party is too moderate). Not-so-strong partisans (about one-quarter of the electorate) are significantly less enthusiastic about their parties. Only half of the leaning independents (about 30 percent of the electorate) feel reasonably well-represented by either party, and a majority of pure independents (10 percent

46 Ross Douthat, “The Defeat of True Conservatism,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/opinion/campaign-stops/the-defeat-of-true-conservatism.html?ref=opinion&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/opinion/campaign-stops/the-defeat-of-true-conservatism.html?ref=opinion&_r=0).

47 He is not the first to try, of course, but previous attempts by candidates like Rudy Giuliani and Jon Huntsman met with little success.



of the electorate) feel they were left out of the party system altogether, particularly in 2015. The sorted parties today represent the political class well, the larger country not so well. In a recent survey of Americans' attitudes toward the political parties, Howard J. Gold concludes: "There is no question that public disdain for both the Democratic and Republican parties has grown considerably since the mid-1990s, and that the public understands well the polarization that has gripped political elites. Increasing numbers of Americans have come to see the parties as ideologically far apart, with large percentages stating that the Republicans are too conservative and that the Democrats are too liberal."

Rather than being enthusiastic supporters of one or the other of the two parties, we suspect that many Americans wish they could divide their votes, say 65 percent for the Republican candidate, 35 percent for the Democrat or vice-versa, rather than give an all-or-nothing endorsement to either side.<sup>48</sup>

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48 Howard J. Gold, "Americans' Attitudes Toward the Political Parties and the Party System," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2015): 815.

## *Essay Series*

*An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context*

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## About the Author



### MORRIS P. FIORINA

Morris Fiorina is the Wendt Family Professor of Political Science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. For more than four decades he has written on American politics with particular emphasis on elections and public opinion. Fiorina has written or edited twelve books and more than 100 articles, served as chairman of the Board of the American National Election Studies, and received the Warren E. Miller Career Achievement Award from the American Political Science Association Section on Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior. His widely noted book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope) is thought to have influenced then Illinois state senator Barack Obama's keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention ("We coach Little League in the blue states, and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states").

## Series Overview

In contrast to most of modern American political history, partisan control of our national elective institutions has been unusually tenuous during the past several decades. This essay series argues that the ideologically sorted parties that contest elections today face strong internal pressures to overreach, by which I mean emphasizing issues and advocating positions strongly supported by the party base but which cause the marginal members of their electoral coalitions to defect. Thus, electoral losses predictably follow electoral victories. Institutional control is fleeting.

The first group of essays describes the contemporary American electorate. Despite myriad claims to the contrary, the data show that the electorate is no more polarized now than it was in the later decades of the twentieth century. What has happened is that the parties have sorted so that each party is more homogeneous than in the twentieth century; liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have largely passed from the political scene. The muddled middle is as large as ever but has no home in either party. The growth in the proportion of self-identified independents may be a reflection of the limited appeal of today's sorted parties.

The second group of essays develops the overreach argument, discusses the role of independents as the marginal members of an electoral majority, and explains how party sorting produces less split-ticket voting. Rather than most voters being more set in their partisan allegiances than a generation ago, they may simply have less reason to split their tickets when almost all Democratic candidates are liberals and all Republican candidates are conservatives.

The third group of essays embeds contemporary American politics in two other contexts. First, in a comparative context, developments in the European democracies are the mirror image of those in the United States: the major European parties have depolarized or de-sorted or both, whereas their national electorates show little change. The rise of anti-immigrant parties may have some as yet not well-understood role in these developments. Second, in a historical context, the instability of American majorities today resembles that of the late nineteenth century, when similar significant social and economic changes were occurring.

A final postelection essay will wrap up the series.

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