



Why We're Polarized

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131 notes/highlights

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Chapter 1: How Democrats Became Liberals and Republicans Became Conservatives



In 1959, then vice president Richard Nixon—who would go on, as president, to create the Environmental Protection Agency, consider a basic minimum income, and propose a national health-care plan more ambitious than Obamacare—spoke with derision of those who sought to cleave the parties by their beliefs. “It would be a great tragedy if we had our two major political parties divide on what we would call a conservative-liberal line,” he said. The strength of the American political system

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is “we have avoided generally violent swings in Administrations from one extreme to the other. And the reason we have avoided that is that in both parties there has been room for a broad spectrum of opinion.”⁵ In this, if in little else, Nixon was joined by Robert F. Kennedy. The journalist Godfrey Hodgson recounts a conversation where Kennedy warned that “the country was already split vertically, between sections, races, and ethnic groups,” so it would be “dangerous to split it horizontally, too, between liberals and conservatives.”⁶ Politics, in this telling, was meant to calm our divisions, not represent them.

July 19, 2020

 *This is a profound enough point worth dwelling on for a moment. When a division exists inside a party, it gets addressed through suppression or compromise. Parties don't want to fight among themselves. But when a division exists between the parties, it gets addressed through conflict. Without the restraint of party unity, political disagreements escalate.*

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An example here is health care: Democrats and Republicans spend billions of dollars in election ads emphasizing their disagreements on health care, because the debate motivates their supporters and, they hope, turns the public against their opponents. The upside of this is that important issues get aired and sometimes even resolved. The downside is that the divisions around them become deeper and angrier.

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 *The muddling of the parties carried well into the modern era. Stanford University political scientist Morris Fiorina notes that when Gerald Ford ran against Jimmy Carter, only 54 percent of the electorate believed the Republican Party was more conservative than the Democratic Party.*

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Almost 30 percent said there was no ideological difference at all between the two parties.¹⁰

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 *today's independents vote more predictably for one party over the other than yesteryear's partisans.*

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In his important paper "Polarization and the Decline of the American Floating Voter," Michigan State University political scientist Corwin Smidt found that between 2000 and 2004, self-proclaimed independents were more stable in which party they supported than self-proclaimed strong partisans were from 1972 to 1976.¹³

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 *On first glance, these two trends contradict: How can the electorate become both more partisan in its voting behavior and more independent in its party membership? Shouldn't more consistent support for a party lead to a closer allegiance to that party? The key idea here is "negative partisanship": partisan behavior driven not by positive feelings toward the party you support but negative feelings toward the party you oppose.*

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A 2016 Pew poll found that self-described independents who tended to vote for one party or the other were driven more by negative motivations. Majorities of both Republican- and Democratic-leaning independents said a major reason for their lean was the other party's policies were bad for the country; by contrast, only a third of each group said they were driven by support for the policies of the party they were voting for.¹⁴

July 20, 2020

 *Washington's address prefigured much of what was to come in American politics. As the Princeton historian*

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Sean Wilentz wrote in the *New Republic*, it was a "highly partisan appeal delivered as an attack on partisanship and on the low demagogues who fomented it." Washington delivered the speech, cowritten by Alexander Hamilton, as America was splitting into a two-party system—the Federalists, led by John Adams and Hamilton, and the Democratic Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Washington was, in effect, a Federalist, and in warning against the development of factions, he was warning against those who had arisen to challenge his chosen successors. As Wilentz wrote, "Washington's address never explicitly mentioned Jefferson or his supporters, but its unvarnished attack on organized political opposition was plainly directed against them."

If Washington's intervention was partisan, his instincts were thoroughly American. This has been the balance Americans have struck ever since: a system defined by political parties whose existence we decry. We mistrust ideologues and partisans. We venerate centrists, moderates, independents.

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Health care offers an even starker example. In 1965, a Democratic president created a massive, single-payer health-care system for the nation's elderly. But as liberal as Medicare was in both conception and execution, it received seventy Republican votes in the House as well as thirteen Republican votes in the Senate. Obamacare, by contrast, was modeled off Mitt Romney's reforms in Massachusetts and built atop many Republican ideas; it relied on private insurers for the bulk of its coverage expansion and ended up sacrificing its public option. But as compromised as Obamacare was in design, and as desperate as the Obama administration was for bipartisan support—and believe

me, I covered that fight, they would've traded almost anything for Republican backing—the legislation didn't receive a single Republican vote in either the House or the Senate.

Bush also signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law and oversaw a cap-and-trade program to reduce the pollutants behind acid rain. Reagan, for his part, signed an immigration reform bill that today's Democrats venerate and today's Republicans denounce. "I believe in the idea of amnesty for those who have put down roots and who have lived here even though sometime back they may have entered illegally," 19 Reagan said. Yes, Reagan said that. President Bill Clinton, meanwhile, launched his administration with a budget designed to reduce the deficit and an all-out effort to pass the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He famously ran against the left wing of his own party, flying back to Arkansas to preside over the execution of a brain-damaged inmate and publicly denouncing the rapper Sister Souljah. He worked with congressional Republicans to slash welfare and balance the federal budget. During his second term, he proudly declared that "the era of big government is over."

July 20, 2020

Chapter 2: The Dixiecrat Dilemma

 *To understand what happened in American politics between 1950 and 2018, you need to understand what the southern Democratic Party was and what it became. As the famed political scientist V. O. Key Jr. observed, the South's Democratic Party was an institution unto itself. Within the South, "the Democratic party is no party at all but a multiplicity of factions struggling for office." 2 It had liberals and conservatives, machine politicians and reformers. In national politics, however, the South's Democratic Party was a united front, "the instrument for the conduct of the 'foreign relations' of the South with the*

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rest of the nation.”

Put simply, the southern Democratic Party was an authoritarian institution that ruled autocratically in the South and that protected its autonomy by entering into a governing coalition with the national Democratic Party. The Dixiecrats gave the national Democrats the votes they needed to control Congress, and the national Democrats let the Dixiecrats enforce segregation and one-party rule at home. The Dixiecrat-Democrat pact is a powerful reminder that there are worse things than polarization, that what's now remembered as a golden age in American politics was purchased at a terrible cost.

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 *If it is strange to read about America in the language we often use to write about, say, post-Soviet republics, well, that's partly the point. “America is aspirational,” says Carol Anderson, the author of *White Rage* and a professor of African American studies at Emory University. “That is part of what sets it apart. Marginalized people have used those aspirations to say, ‘This is what you say you are, but this is what you do.’ But what also happens is those aspirations get encoded as achievements. You get this longing for a mythical past.”* ⁴

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Demythologizing our past is necessary if we are to clearly understand our present. But an honest survey of America's past offends the story we tell ourselves—it offends our sense of America as a true democracy and the Democratic Party's sense of its own honorable history.

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 *“By 1944, in the states of the old Confederacy, only 5 percent of age-eligible African Americans were registered to vote, which left millions of blacks politically voiceless,” writes Anderson. The repression was fiercest where black political power was most*

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feared. In 1953, in the so-called Black Belt—the region of Alabama where the black population exceeded the white population—“only 1.3 percent of eligible African Americans were registered. Two counties had no black voters whatsoever.” ⁸

The South’s mixture of legal discrimination and racial terrorism worked. Within three years of the Civil War’s end, “black voter registration ranged from 85 to 94 percent in the Deep South, and almost one million freedmen were voting throughout the region,” ⁷ records Mickey. Less than a century later, that fundamental freedom had been demolished.

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 *The question is why the rest of the country—a country that was, imperfectly but undeniably, operating under a liberal democratic system—permitted the South to make such a mockery of America’s political values.*

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Part of the answer lies in the path chosen in the aftermath of the Civil War, when President Andrew Johnson, a bitter white supremacist, abandoned the work of racial equality and restored the South to white control. In a fusillade against the reconstruction acts passed by Congress, Johnson warned they would allow black people to “rule the white race, make and administer State laws, elect Presidents and members of Congress, and shape to a greater or lesser extent the future destiny of the whole country. Would such a trust and power be safe in such hands?” ¹⁰

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 *These figures, if anything, underestimate the South’s political clout. In the US Congress of that era, seniority meant power. And because of the authoritarian structure southern Democrats operated at home, they were rarely exposed to anything even approaching electoral pressure, which let them amass more seniority, in greater numbers, than elected*

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officials of any other region.

1932, southerners made up two-thirds of the Democratic House caucus; from 1933 to 1953, their share never slipped below 40 percent,” writes Mickey. 11

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 *Faced with anti-lynching legislation in the late 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said that if he supported it, southern committee chairs would “block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing.” 13 Moreover, if you weren’t acceptable to southern Democrats, you weren’t going to be the Democrats’ nominee for president in the first place: the party required a two-thirds supermajority of delegates to the national convention to approve a presidential ticket, which meant the South held an effective veto over a hostile nominee.*

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This power brought presidents to heel as surely as it did wayward congressmen.

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 *At the same time, the South’s alliance with the Democratic Party was by no means purely cynical. They really were Democrats, their party loyalty locked in place by regional identity and interest.*

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But then race became an area of disagreement. Democrats didn’t just want to redistribute from rich northern whites to poor southern whites. They also wanted to redistribute from richer whites to poorer blacks. Furthermore, beginning in 1948, with President Harry Truman’s military desegregation orders, the Democratic Party became a vehicle for civil rights, betraying its fundamental compact with the South. It’s in this era that a Republican—Barry Goldwater, running on a platform of “states’ rights”—carried much of the old Confederacy in a presidential election for

the first time.

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 *It reflects the logical endpoint of economic progressivism, as attention to the poor demanded attention to what was keeping so many nonwhite Americans poor, and it reflected strategic decisions the Republican Party made along the way, particularly the conservative movement's successful effort to turn the GOP into an ideological vehicle defined by mistrust of the federal government, opposition to redistribution, and faith in state and local rule—attractive ideas for southerners looking to block national efforts to improve both the economic and political conditions of African Americans.*

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Still, at the moment of rupture, the parties remained blurred. It is remarkable, from our current vantage point where everything cuts red from blue, to see a debate that polarizes the country without splitting the parties. But that was the case with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As Geoffrey Kabaservice shows in Rule and Ruin, his history of Republican moderation, “eighty percent of House Republicans supported the bill, as opposed to sixty percent of House Democrats.” 14

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 *The Democratic Party’s embrace of civil rights, and the Republican Party’s decision to unite behind a standard-bearer who opposed the bill, cleared the way for southern conservatives to join the Republican Party. And that set the stage for all that followed.*

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Civil Rights

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Crucially, these forms of polarization reinforce each other. Issue-based polarization leads to political identity polarization: if there's more intense disagreement about cannabis policy, people will want their political representatives to fight for their beliefs, which will push the parties to polarize around the issue as well. You can argue that that's what happened in the civil rights example above, as intense polarization around the issue of civil rights drove party polarization around civil rights. The Goldwater campaign tried to seize political opportunity by providing a home to angry racial conservatives, which eventually led those racial conservatives to cluster in the Republican Party, and vice versa.

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The reverse, of course, is also true: When people sort their disagreements by party, that can lead those disagreements to deepen. If people sort into two parties along the axis of their ideal marijuana policy, those two parties will offer increasingly clear positions on marijuana, and the undecided will be pushed to make a choice

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Polarization begets polarization. But it doesn't beget extremism.

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Congress made to preserve the peace included voting down anti-lynching laws and agreeing to lock most African Americans out of Social Security. I would call that political system far more ideologically extreme than the one we have today, even as it was less polarized. Political scientists agree that the mid-twentieth century was the low ebb of political polarization, particularly in Congress. But the mid-twentieth century was not an era in which the world outside Washington was either serene or moderate. This was the age of Joseph McCarthy, the Vietnam War, and the draft dodger. It was a time of political assassinations, of civil rights activists being beaten on bridges, of authoritarian rule in the South, of feminists marching in the streets and Native Americans occupying Alcatraz. The irony is that the American political system was most calm

and least polarized when America itself seemed to be on the verge of cracking apart.

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 You'll often hear pundits talk about the "moderate majority." But as the political scientist David Broockman has shown, these so-called moderates tend to hold more "extreme" opinions than liberals or conservatives. The way it works is that a pollster will ask people for their position on a wide range of issues: marijuana legalization, the war in Iraq, universal health care, gay marriage, taxes, climate change, and so on. The answers will then be coded as to whether they're left or right. People who have a mix of answers on the left and the right average out to the middle—and they're labeled as moderate.

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But they're not moderate. They're just internally unsorted. When you drill down into those individual answers you find a lot of opinions that are well out of the political mainstream. "A lot of people say we should have a universal health-care system run by the state like the British," Broockman told me. "A lot of people say we should deport all undocumented immigrants immediately with no due process. You'll often see really draconian measures towards gays and lesbians get 16 to 20 percent support. These people look like moderates but they're actually quite extreme."¹⁷ When polarization is driven by allegiance to political parties, it can be moderating. People who aren't attached to one party or the other are free to hold much more unpopular opinions.

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 The passage of the Civil Rights Act heralded the death of the Dixiecrats. The death of the Dixiecrats cleared the way for southern conservatives to join the Republican Party and northern liberals to join the Democratic Party. That let the parties sort themselves ideologically

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6% of Democrats and 2% of Republicans in 1952. In 2012, the same survey found 43 percent of self-identified Democrats, but only 9 percent of self-identified Republicans, were nonwhite. So not only was the 2012 electorate far, far more racially diverse than the 1952 electorate, but that diversity was concentrated in the Democratic Party. 2014, Pew reported that the single largest religious group in the Republican coalition was evangelical Protestants. And the Democrats? Their single largest religious group was the religiously unaffiliated, the “nones.” 20 From 1972 to 1984, the average difference between how a state voted in one presidential election and how it voted in the next was 7.7 percentage points. From 2000 to 2012, it was only 1.9 percentage points. We are fixed in political place. Wassermann looked at “landslide counties”—counties where the winning presidential candidate got at least 60 percent of the vote. In 1992, 39 percent of voters lived in landslide counties. By 2016, that had shot to 61 percent of voters. Candidate won by more than 50 points: the share of voters living in those “extreme landslide” counties more than quintupled, from 4 percent in 1992 to 21 percent in 2016. In less than twenty-five years, the percentage of voters who lived in a district where almost everyone thought like them politically went from 1 in 20 to 1 in 5.

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 *“Democrats and Republicans are now sharply distinguished by a set of basic psychological dispositions related to experiential openness—a general dimension of personality tapping tolerance for threat and uncertainty in one’s environment.”* 31

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Open versus Closed: Personality, Identity, and the Politics of Redistribution, political psychologists Christopher Johnston, Christopher Federico, and Howard Lavine

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 *Of the many factors that make up your worldview, one is more fundamental than any other in determining which side of the divide you gravitate*

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toward: your perception of how dangerous the world is. Fear is perhaps our most primal instinct, after all, so it's only logical that people's level of fearfulness informs their outlook on life. 32

political scientists Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler's Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide:

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 *People who score high on openness, for example, tend to like envelope-pushing music and abstract art.* 60
People who score high on conscientiousness are more likely to be organized, faithful, and loyal. One review of this large research literature finds these sorts of differences consistently cropping up across nearly 70 years of studies on personality research. The punch line, of course, is that this same literature also reports a consistent relationship between these dimensions of personality and political temperament. Those open to new experiences are not just hanging Jackson Pollock prints in disorganized bedrooms while listening to techno-pop reinterpretations of Bach by experimental jazz bands. They are also more likely to identify themselves as liberals. 33

Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences, John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford write. This is why Whole Foods and Cracker Barrel locations track deep partisan divisions. Whole Foods is a grocer catering to those high in openness to experience. The aisles are thick with ethnic foods, unusual produce, and magazines touting Eastern spirituality. Cracker Barrel, by contrast, is aimed at those preferring tradition: it offers comforting, Southern favorites that are delicious without being surprising.

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 Every dimension of our lives—ideology, religiosity, geography, and so on—carries a psychological signal. And those psychological signals strengthen as they align. What's been happening to American life is we're taking the magnets and stacking them all on top of one another, so the pull-push force of that stack is multiplied—particularly for the people most engaged in politics.

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In the mid-twentieth century, this psychological dimension doesn't seem to have split American politics. It's notable, for instance, that opposition to the Vietnam War was evenly distributed across the two parties during the 1960s

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 These findings led the researchers to an interesting conclusion: "In forming an opinion, the question for the unengaged citizen is: what will this policy do for me? Among the engaged, however, reactions to economic issues are better understood as expressively motivated signals of identity. The question for the engaged citizen is: what does support for this policy position say about me?" 37

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Psychological sorting, in other words, is a powerful driver of identity politics. If you care enough about politics to connect it to your core psychological outlook, then politics becomes part of your psychological self-expression. And as the political coalitions split by psychology, membership in one or the other becomes a clearer signal, both to ourselves and to the world, about who we are and what we value. When we participate in politics to solve a problem, we're participating transactionally. But when we participate in politics to express who we are, that's a signal that politics has become an identity. And that's when our relationship to politics, and to each other, changes.

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Chapter 3: Your Brain on Groups

Tajfel theorized that the instinct to view our own with favor and outsiders with hostility is so deeply learned that it operates independent of any reason to treat social relations as a competition. We do not need to hate or fear members of an out-group to turn on them. We do not need to have anything material to gain by turning on them. Once we have classified them as, well, "them," that is enough

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As a theory, it was elegant, if a bit grim. But it raised two predictions Tajfel realized he could test experimentally. The first was that we were so tuned to sort the world into "us" and "them" that we would do so based on the lightest of cues. The second was that once we had sorted the world into "us" and "them," we would act with favor toward our group and discriminate against the out-group—even in the absence of any reason to do so.

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In a 1971 paper reflecting on these results, Tajfel and his coauthors wrote that it was time to put to rest the idea that group conflict was primarily motivated by zero-sum collisions over resources or power. "Discriminatory intergroup behaviour cannot be fully understood if it is considered solely in terms of 'objective' conflict of interests," they concluded. 7 The boys in his studies often had nothing to gain—and sometimes even had something to lose—by punishing those they believed, based on flimsy and false categorizations, to be different from them. Far from their behavior showing a pure desire to maximize their group's gains, they often gave their group less to increase the difference between them and the

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out-group. Far from the money being the prime motivator, "it is the winning that seems more important to them," wrote Tajfel.

This time, the boys were shown paintings by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky and asked to choose their favorite. The paintings were shown without signatures so that the boys could then be sorted, at random, into the Klee group or the Kandinsky group

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 *Over thousands of years, the value of social connection has become baked into our nervous system such that the absence of such a protective force creates a stress state in the body. Loneliness causes stress, and long-term or chronic stress leads to more frequent elevations of a key stress hormone, cortisol.*

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It is also linked to higher levels of inflammation in the body. This in turn damages blood vessels and other tissues, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, joint disease, depression, obesity, and premature death. Chronic stress can also hijack your brain's prefrontal cortex, which governs decision making, planning, emotional regulation, analysis, and abstract thinking. 10

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 *In 2015, Patrick R. Miller and Pamela Johnston Conover published a paper entitled "Red and Blue States of Mind." The paper looks at how Republicans and Democrats—as well as independents who lean toward one party or the other—act during elections. What motivates them? What do they feel? What drives them to participate? "The behavior of partisans resembles that of sports team members acting to preserve the status of their teams rather than*

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thoughtful citizens participating in the political process for the broader good," the paper concludes. 13

Here, again, partisan identity dominated when compared to abstractions like issue positions or ideology. But then Miller and Conover did something interesting: they asked people to reflect on how much anger, rivalry, and incivility they felt toward the other side. Once they added those answers into their data, the effect of every other political factor plummeted.

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 *All of this points toward an important principle: the most-engaged experience politics differently than everyone else. In the previous chapter I mentioned the book Open versus Closed, which finds that the least-engaged voters tend to look at politics through the lens of material self-interest ("what will this policy do for me?") while the most-engaged look at politics through the lens of identity ("what does support for this policy position say about me?"). This helps illuminate a long-running debate, particularly on the left, about whether working class voters who pull the lever for Republicans are betraying their self-interest in voting for a party that will cut taxes on the rich and break the unions that protect the poor.*

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What Johnston, Lavine, and Federico find is that as people become more involved and invested in politics, the “self-interest” they’re looking to satisfy changes. It’s a mistake to imagine our bank accounts are the only reasonable drivers of political action. As we become more political, we become more interested in politics as a means of self-expression and group identity. “It is not that citizens are unable to recognize their interests,” they write, “rather, it is that material concerns are often irrelevant to the individual’s goals when forming a policy opinion.” 15

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 In her book *Uncivil Agreement*, Lilliana Mason sums up the state of American politics—and perhaps American life—in a single, searing paragraph. The American political parties are growing socially polarized. Religion and race, as well as class, geography, and culture, are dividing the parties in such a way that the effect of party identity is magnified. The competition is no longer between only Democrats and Republicans. A single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store. This is no longer a single social identity. Partisanship can now be thought of as a mega-identity, with all the psychological and behavioral magnifications that implies. 19

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right that our political identities are more polarized than our other identities. But he was too optimistic in believing that our nonpolitical identities could become our political identities, that they were somehow a truer reflection of our essential selves, and thus strong enough to overwhelm our partisan divisions. In practice, our political identities are polarizing our other identities, too.

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 Our political identities have become political mega-identities. The merging of the identities means when you activate one you often activate all, and each time they're activated, they strengthen.

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This is what has changed.

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 In 2002, psychologists Marilynn Brewer and Sonia Roccas showed that people with a lot of crosscutting identities tended to be more tolerant of outsiders than

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people with highly aligned identities. 22

The insight here makes sense: the more your identities converge on a single point, the more your identities can be threatened simultaneously, and that makes conflict much more threatening.

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 *A 2012 study by Joshua Gubler and Joel Sawat Selway surveyed data from more than one hundred countries and found that civil war is "an average of nearly twelve times less probable in societies where ethnicity is cross-cut by socio-economic class, geographic region and religion."* 24

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the founder of American sociology Edward Alsworth Ross, writing in *The Principles of Sociology* A society, therefore, which is riven by a dozen oppositions along lines running in every direction, may actually be in less danger of being torn with violence or falling to pieces than one split along just one line. 23

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 *Interestingly, it turns out that there's only a weak relationship between how much a person identifies as a conservative or liberal and how conservative or liberal their views actually are—to be exact, in both cases it's about a .25 correlation.*

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One reason policy is not the driver of political disagreement is most people don't have very strong views about policy.

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Chapter 4: The Press Secretary in Your Mind



The main Democratic holdout was Senator Barack Obama. But by July 2009, President Obama had changed his mind. "I was opposed to this idea because my general attitude was the reason people don't have health insurance is not because they don't want it. It's because they can't afford it," he told CBS News. "I am now in favor of some sort of individual mandate." 8 This process led, eventually, to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—better known as Obamacare—which also included an individual mandate.

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The mandate made its first legislative appearance in 1993, in the Health Equity and Access Reform Today Act—the Senate Republicans' alternative to President Clinton's health reform bill—which was sponsored by John Chafee of Rhode Island and cosponsored by eighteen Republicans, including Bob Dole, who was then the Senate minority leader. "I was the one who came up with the idea to put it in the bill," Christine Ferguson, who directed Chafee's health policy team in the 1990s and would go on to lead Mitt Romney's Department of Public Health in Massachusetts Ten years later, Senator Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, began picking his way back through the history—he read *The System* four times—and he, too, came to focus on the Chafee bill. He began building a proposal around the individual mandate and tested it out on both Democrats and Republicans. "Between 2004 and 2008, I saw over eighty members of the Senate, and there were very few who objected," Wyden told me. 6 In December 2006, he unveiled the Healthy Americans Act. In May 2007, Bob Bennett, a Utah Republican who had been a sponsor of the Chafee bill, joined him. Wyden-Bennett was eventually cosponsored by eleven Republicans and nine Democrats, receiving more bipartisan support than any universal health-care proposal in the history of the Senate. In a June 2009 interview on *Meet the Press*, Romney, who, as governor of Massachusetts, had signed a universal health-care bill with an individual mandate, said that Wyden-Bennett was a plan "that a number of Republicans think is a very good health-care plan—one that we support." 7 Wyden's bill was part of a broader trend of Democrats endorsing the individual mandate in their own proposals. John Edwards and Hillary Clinton both built a mandate into their campaign health-care proposals.

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 *But there had been a political change: Democrats had gone from opposing the mandate to supporting it. This shift—Democrats lining up behind the Republican-crafted mandate, and Republicans declaring it not just inappropriate policy but contrary to the wishes of the Founders—shocked Wyden. "I would characterize the Washington, D.C., relationship with the individual mandate as truly schizophrenic," he said.* ¹⁰

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In June 2009, Senator Chuck Grassley, then the top Republican on the powerful Senate Finance Committee, told Fox News, “I believe that there is a bipartisan consensus to have individual mandates.” ⁹ And then something went wrong. In December 2009, every single Senate Republican voted for a point of order calling the individual mandate “unconstitutional.” Among them were Senators Bob Bennett, Lamar Alexander, Bob Corker, Mike Crapo, Lindsey Graham, Chuck Grassley, and Judd Gregg—all of whom were cosponsors of the Healthy Americans Act, which, again, included an individual mandate.

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 *In 2008, the Bush administration proposed, pushed, and signed the Economic Stimulus Act, a deficit-financed tax cut designed to boost the flagging economy. Under Obama, Republicans became staunch opponents of the idea that deficit-financed stimulus could help an economy, before re-embracing the idea under Trump.*

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When Romney ran for president in 2012, he was mocked by Democrats for saying that Russia was America’s foremost geopolitical threat; after Russia helped Trump win the 2016 presidential election, Democrats turned sharply against Russia, while Republicans came to view Vladimir Putin more favorably than they viewed Obama. ¹¹

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 *We understand reasoning to be an individual act. This is, in many cases, wrong. "The central flaw in the concept of reason that animated the eighteenth-century Enlightenment is that it is entirely individualistic," writes philosopher Joseph Heath.* ¹² *But decades of research has proven that "reason is both decentralized and dispersed across multiple individuals. It is not possible to be rational all by yourself; rationality is inherently a collective project."* ^I

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reasoning is something we often do in groups, in order to serve group ends. This is not a wrinkle of human irrationality, but rather a rational response to the complexity and danger of the world around us. Collectively, a group can know more and reason better than an individual, and thus human beings with the social and intellectual skills to pool knowledge had a survival advantage over those who didn't. We are their descendants. Once you understand that, the ease with which individuals, even informed individuals, flip their positions to fit the group's needs makes a lot more sense.

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 *on critical trials, the participants gave the wrong answer 37 percent of the time. Given the choice between what their eyes were telling them and what the group was telling them, they went with the group. "I felt conspicuous, going out on a limb, and subjecting myself to criticism that my perceptions, faculties were not as acute as they might be," said one of the subjects in a post-experiment interview. Asch's work, which showed the way a group can influence the opinions of an individual*

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In 1951, Solomon Asch, a professor at Swarthmore College, set out to

study exactly how much of our reasoning we were willing to outsource to others. He showed subjects a card with a line and then asked them to match it to the line of corresponding length on another card. The test was easy. Under control conditions, fewer than 1 percent of the answers were wrong. 13

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 In 2016, Georgetown University political theorist Jason Brennan released a book entitled *Against Democracy*, in which he argued for an “epistocracy,” a system where the votes of the politically informed counted more than the votes of the politically naive. 15 “I call this the ‘competence principle,’ ” he said in an interview with Vox.

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“The idea is that anyone or any deliberative body that exercises power over anyone else has an obligation to use that power in good faith, and has the obligation to use that power competently. If they’re not going to use it in good faith, and they’re not going to use it competently, that’s a claim against them having any kind of authority or any kind of legitimacy.” 16

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 In April and May 2013, Yale Law professor Dan Kahan—working with coauthors Ellen Peters, Erica Cantrell Dawson, and Paul Slovic—set out to test a question that consistently puzzles scientists: Why isn’t good data more effective in resolving political debates?

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If this hypothesis proved true, then a smarter, better-educated citizenry wouldn’t put an end to these disagreements. It would just mean the participants are better equipped to argue for their own side. Kahan and his coauthors also drafted a politicized version of the problem, which used the same numbers as the skin-cream question, but instead of being about skin creams, the narrative setup focused on a proposal to ban

people from carrying concealed handguns in public. Being better at math didn't just fail to help partisans converge on the right answer. It actually drove them further apart. Among those with weak math skills, subjects were 25 percentage points likelier to get the answer right when it bolstered their ideology. But partisans with strong math skills were 45 percentage points likelier to get the answer right when it fit their ideology. In another study, he tested people's scientific literacy alongside their ideology and then asked about the risks posed by climate change. If the problem was truly that people needed to know more about science to fully appreciate the dangers of a warming climate, then their concern should've risen alongside their knowledge. But here, too, the opposite was true: among people who were already skeptical of climate change, scientific literacy made them more skeptical of climate change.¹⁹ In another experiment, Kahan and his coauthors gave out sample biographies of highly accomplished scientists alongside a summary of the results of their research. Then they asked whether the scientist was indeed an expert on the issue. It turned out that on highly politicized issues, people's actual definition of "expert" is "a credentialed person who agrees with me."

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if our search is motivated by aims other than accuracy, more information can mislead us—or, more precisely, help us mislead ourselves. There's a difference between searching for the best evidence and searching for the best evidence that proves us right. And in the age of the internet, such evidence, and such experts, are never very far away.

What's striking here is that the effects are strongest among the voters who pay the closest attention to the issues. In a 2006 paper, "It Feels Like We're Thinking," the political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels. 1996 - Budget deficits under Clinton. The correct answer is that it decreased dramatically. Among the least-informed respondents, Democrats and Republicans picked the wrong answer in roughly equal numbers. But among better-informed voters the story was different. Republicans who were in the fiftieth percentile gave the right answer more often than those in the ninety-fifth percentile.²¹ 1988 - "a majority of respondents who described themselves as strong Democrats said that inflation had 'gotten worse' over the eight years of the Reagan administration; in fact, it had fallen from 13.5 percent in 1980 to 4.1 percent in 1988."²² Achen and Bartels in their book Democracy for

Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government. "In fact, the more information the voter has, often the better able she is to bolster her identities with rational-sounding reasons." 23

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Kahan calls this theory "identity-protective cognition": "As a way of avoiding dissonance and estrangement from valued groups, individuals subconsciously resist factual information that threatens their defining values." Elsewhere, he puts it even more pithily: "What we believe about the facts," he writes, "tells us who we are." And the most important psychological imperative most of us have in a given day is protecting our idea of who we are and our relationships with the people we trust and love.

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The reality, he concludes, is that "the cost to her of making a mistake on the science is zero," but "the cost of being out of synch with her peers potentially catastrophic," making it "individually rational" to put group dynamics first when thinking about issues like climate change. 24

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Kahan's work suggests that cognition exists on a spectrum, ranging from issues where the truth matters and our identities don't to issues where our identities dominate and the truth fades in importance. One implication of an era where our political identities are becoming more sorted and more powerful is that it will bring with it a rise in identity-protective cognition, and that's particularly true if the relevant identity groups are able to construct sophisticated architectures of information that we can use to power our reasoning.

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But it's also worth focusing on the word "protective." As Kahan's term

suggests, our reasoning is most vulnerable when our identities are most threatened. And for many, this is an era of profound threat.

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Chapter 5: Demographic Threat

 *The government predicts that in 2030, immigration will overtake new births as the dominant driver of population growth. About fifteen years after that, America will phase into majority-minority status—for the first time in the nation’s history, non-Hispanic whites will no longer make up a majority of the population. 2*

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According to the Census Bureau, 2013 marked the first year that a majority of US infants under the age of one were nonwhite. 1

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 *Americans is fifty-eight, for Asians it’s twenty-nine, for African Americans it’s twenty-seven, and for Hispanics it’s eleven. 4*

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Meanwhile, America’s foreign-born population is projected to rise from 14 percent of the population today to 17 percent in 2060, more than 2 percentage points above the record set in 1890.

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 *In 2018, for the first time, Americans claiming “no*

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religion” edged out Catholics and evangelicals to be the most popular response to the General Social Survey’s question on religion. 8

Viewed through that lens, however, the tipping point has already happened. When Obama took office, 54 percent of the country was white and Christian. By the 2016 election, that had fallen to 43 percent. To put it even more starkly, about seven out of every ten seniors are white and Christian, compared with fewer than three in ten young adults

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 *Demographers can and do disagree over whether these projections will hold in the future. Perhaps Hispanic whites will begin identifying simply as whites in the coming years, much as the Irish became white in the twentieth century.*

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Race is construct, and we reconstruct its categories continuously. But that's only to say that it's often our perception of race and power that matters. And our perception of demographic change outpaces even the reality: in 2013, the Center for American Progress, PolicyLink, Latino Decisions, and the Rockefeller Foundation surveyed Americans and found that the median participant believed the country was 49 percent nonwhite; the correct answer was 37 percent.

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 *Before and after sending these Spanish speakers to the train platforms, I surveyed passengers on the platforms about their attitudes about immigration. After being exposed to the Spanish speakers on their metro lines for just three days, attitudes on these questions moved sharply rightward: The mostly liberal Democratic passengers had come to endorse immigration policies—including deportation of children of undocumented immigrants—similar to those*

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endorsed by Trump in his campaign. 14

Perhaps the most striking experiment in this space was conducted by Harvard social scientist Ryan Enos. He attempted something rare in social science: an actual test of what seeing more diversity in our everyday surroundings does to our political opinions.

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Obama's presidency didn't force race to the front of American politics through rhetoric or action. Rather, Obama himself was a symbol of a browning America, of white America's loss of control, of the fact that the country was changing and new groups were gaining power. That perception carried the force of fact.

"According to content analyses conducted by political and communication scientists, Barack Obama actually discussed race less in his first term than any other Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt," writes Tesler. 15

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more enlightened, more inclusive, like the WASP elites of the 1960s who opened up the Ivy League colleges to more Jews, blacks, and other minorities—in part because it seemed like the right thing to do. Today, no group in America feels comfortably dominant. Every group feels attacked, pitted against other groups not just for jobs and spoils but for the right to define the nation's identity. In these conditions, democracy devolves into zero-sum group competition—pure political tribalism. 17

As Yale Law professor Amy Chua writes in Political Tribes: When a political tribe is so overwhelmingly dominant, it can persecute with impunity, but it can also be more generous. It can afford to be more

universalist,

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 *The best evidence we have suggests the synthesis is right, but we're getting the causality backward. In their book *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, political scientists John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck analyze reams of data and show that racial resentment activated economic anxiety, rather than the other way around:*

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Before Obama's presidency, how Americans felt about black people did not much affect their perceptions of the economy. After Obama, this changed. In December 2007, racial resentment—which captures whether Americans think deficiencies in black culture are the main reason for racial inequality—was not related to whites' perceptions of whether the economy was getting better or worse, after accounting for partisanship and ideology. But when these exact same people were re-interviewed in July 2012, racial resentment was a powerful predictor of economic perceptions: the greater someone's level of racial resentment, the worse they believed the economy was doing.²⁷

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 *In 1996, white voters were more closely split between the two parties, the Hispanic vote was smaller, and both parties were more skeptical of immigration. In 2016, white voters were concentrated in the Republican Party, Hispanic voters were far more powerful, and this cut a political schism in which Democrats became friendlier to immigrants and Republicans nominated Trump. This is a dynamic Tesler describes well. "In the post-civil rights era, Democrats needed to maintain their nonwhite base without alienating white voters," he told me. "So their*

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incentive was silence. And Republicans needed to win over white voters without appearing racist. So their incentive was to speak about race in code. The shifts now have made it so Democrats' incentive is to make explicitly pro-racial equality appeals and Republicans now have an incentive to make more explicit anti-minority appeals." 39

Democratic platform during the reelection of Bill Clinton: We cannot tolerate illegal immigration and we must stop it. For years before Bill Clinton became President, Washington talked tough but failed to act. In 1992, our borders might as well not have existed. The border was under-patrolled, and what patrols there were, were under-equipped. Drugs flowed freely. Illegal immigration was rampant. Criminal immigrants, deported after committing crimes in America, returned the very next day to commit crimes again. President Clinton is making our border a place where the law is respected and drugs and illegal immigrants are turned away.

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 Strikingly, "white liberals are now less likely than African Americans to say that black people should be able to get ahead without any special help." Part of being a Democrat today—and particularly a white Democrat—is a commitment to racial equality, built on an understanding of systemic racism as a central scourge. As political demography changes, so do political identities. Take that idea and extend it out into the coming decades of American politics. The Democratic Party will not be able to win elections without an excited, diverse coalition. The Republican Party will not be able to win elections without an enthused white base. Democrats will need to build a platform that's even more explicit in its pursuit of racial and gender equality, while Republicans will need to design a politics even more responsive to a coalition that feels itself losing power.

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This dynamic is behind much of the panic about "identity politics." When

a single group dominates the political agenda, its grievances and demands are just coded as politics, and the vast majority of policy is designed in response to its concerns. But that changes when no one group can control the agenda but many groups can push items onto it; then the competition among identity-based groups becomes visible. It wasn't called identity politics when every cabinet member of every administration was a white male. It's only identity politics when there's pressure to diversify appointments. And yet that process doesn't reflect a strengthening of a particular identity group's hold on politics but a weakening of it.

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Sanders's evolution on these issues reflects both the broader trajectory of white American liberals and the strategic incentives facing any candidate trying to win the Democratic primary.

He opposed a 2007 bill that included a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants In 2015: "Open borders? No. That's a right-wing proposal, which says essentially there is no United States. It would make everybody in America poorer." 46 2020 primary: Sanders endorsed decriminalizing unauthorized border entry providing public health insurance

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"In a high-choice environment, people's content preferences become better predictors of political learning than even their level of education," Prior wrote.

The internet made information abundant. The rise of online news gave

Chapter 6: The Media Divide beyond Left-Right

Americans access to more information—vastly more information, orders of magnitude more information—than they had ever had before. And yet surveys showed we weren't, on average, any more politically informed. Nor were we any more involved: voter participation didn't show a boost from the democratization of political information. Why? In the early aughts, Princeton political scientist Markus Prior set out to unravel this apparent paradox.

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 *The rise of a more opinionated press is a return to an older media equilibrium. For much of American history, most newspapers were explicitly partisan*

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In 1870, 54 percent of metropolitan dailies were affiliated with the Republican Party, 33 percent were Democratic, and 13 percent claimed independence from party. 3 Hamilton argues that the transition to a news industry that prized independence from party and ideology was driven by technological advances that changed the business model of newspapers. "The development of presses with runs of 25,000 sheets or more per hour meant a single newspaper could supply a significant portion of a city's readers," he writes. Alongside a drop in the price of paper, newspapers became cheaper, which meant their potential audience became larger, which meant the prices advertisers would pay to reach that audience multiplied. Thus, newspapers, and other forms of news media, began building an ethic of nonpartisanship, one that both protected their businesses and served important editorial goals. The explosion of choice and competition carried by digital news upended this calculation again. the strategy of the digital business model is to be the most appealing thing to some people.

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 *The simplest measure for assessing political journalism is whether it's giving those who follow it a more accurate understanding of American politics. As one disturbing window into this question, consider "The Parties in Our Head: Misperceptions About Party Composition and Their Consequences," a fascinating*

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study published by Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood in 2018.

In it, Ahler and Sood observe that the intensity of partisan feeling is increasing as the parties become more demographically different from each other, but the level of animosity seems to far outpace the level of difference. After all, they write, “majorities of both parties’ supporters are white, middle class, and heterosexual, and both parties’ modal supporters are middle aged, nonevangelical Christians.” 4 Misperceptions were high among everyone, but they were particularly exaggerated when people were asked to describe the other party. E.g. Democrats believed 44 percent of Republicans earned over \$250,000 a year; it’s actually 2 percent. Republicans believed that 38 percent of Democrats were gay, lesbian, or bisexual; the correct answer is about 6 percent. Democrats believed that more than four out of every ten Republicans are seniors; in truth, seniors make up about 20 percent. Republicans believed that 46 percent of Democrats are black and 44 percent belong to a union; in reality, about 24 percent of Democrats are African American and less than 11 percent belong to a union.

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The old line on local reporting was: “If it bleeds, it leads.” For political reporting, the principle is: “If it outrages, it leads.” And outrage is deeply connected to identity—we are outraged when members of other groups threaten our group and violate our values. As such, polarized media doesn’t emphasize commonalities, it weaponizes differences; it doesn’t focus on the best of the other side, it threatens you with the worst.

It's more like the reason the food and restaurant industries pack products with salt and fat and sugar: that's what the market demands. And market demand in media has become a more powerful and more precise force.

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That algorithm isn't just an engine of radicalization; it's an engine of identity. As Peretti observed, interests become identities as they socialize you into a community. YouTube's algorithm is constantly trying to lure you into new communities, populated by charismatic YouTube stars who cultivate tight-knit audiences. W

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The digital scholar Zeynep Tufekci has tracked the way YouTube's recommendation algorithm serves as an engine of radicalization. She noticed that videos of Trump rallies led to recommendations for videos of alt-right content. Videos of Hillary Clinton speeches eventually served up leftist conspiracies. As she widened her analysis, she found it wasn't just politics. "Videos about vegetarianism led to videos about veganism. Videos about jogging led to videos about running ultramarathons. It seems as if you are never 'hard core' enough for YouTube's recommendation algorithm. It promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes." 7

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The result of the monthlong exposure to popular, authoritative voices from the other side of the aisle was an increase in issue-based polarization. "We find that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became substantially more conservative posttreatment," write the authors. "Democrats exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes after following a conservative Twitter bot, although these effects are not statistically significant."

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Christopher Bail, one of the study's authors and the head of Duke University's Polarization Lab. "For a long time, people have been assuming that exposing people to opposing views creates the opportunity for moderation," he told me. "If I could humbly claim to figure out one thing, it's that that's not a simple process. If Twitter tweaks its algorithms to put one Republican for every nine Democrats in your Twitter feed, that won't increase moderation." 11

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In theory, newsworthiness means something roughly like "important." The most newsworthy story is the most important story. But if that were true, front pages and cable news shows would look very different from how they do now: more malaria, fewer celebrities (including political celebrities). In practice, newsworthiness is some combination of important, new, outrageous, conflict-oriented, secret, or interesting.

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"Journalism academics have always known that newsworthiness, as the American press defines it, isn't a system with any coherence to it," Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, told me "It doesn't make any sense. It's just a list of factors that occasionally come together to produce news. There's no real logic to it, other than it's a list of things that can make something news. The advantage of it is that it leaves maximum leeway for editors to say, 'This is news,' and, 'That's not news,' and so it's news if a journalist decides it's news." 18

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Chapter 7: Post-Persuasion Elections



You still needed to win over swing voters, but the top priority was mobilizing the base. This strategy, Dowd said, "influenced everything that we did."

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If Bush's 2000 message was that he was a Republican Democrats could feel good about, his 2004 message was he was a Republican Republicans could feel great about. It worked. Bush went from losing the popular vote in 2000 to winning it in 2004. Republicans expanded their majorities in the House and Senate.

July 30, 2020



"The defining characteristic of our moment is that parties are weak while partisanship is strong," wrote Marquette University political scientist Julia Azari. ⁴

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She's right, and it's one of the most important insights for understanding the rise of Trump, the success of more ideologically extreme candidates, and the American political system's deepening vulnerability to charismatic demagogues.

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His primary opponents spoke of him in apocalyptic terms. Ted Cruz called Trump a "pathological liar," "utterly amoral," and "a narcissist at a level I don't think this country's ever seen." Rick Perry said Trump's candidacy was "a cancer on conservatism, and it must be clearly diagnosed, excised, and discarded." Rand Paul said Trump is "a delusional narcissist and an orange-faced windbag. A speck of dirt is way more qualified to be president." Marco Rubio called him "dangerous" and warned that we should not hand "the nuclear codes of the United States to an erratic individual."

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And then every single one of those Republicans endorsed Trump. Cruz told Americans to vote for the pathological liar. Perry urged people to elect the cancer on conservatism and then later served as its secretary of energy. Paul backed the delusional narcissist. Rubio campaigned to hand the nuclear codes of the United States to an erratic individual. The list goes on. Paul Ryan, the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, endorsed Trump, as did Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, and Reince Priebus, the head of the Republican National Committee. Mike Pence, the governor of Indiana, commiserated with Dan Senor, a former Bush adviser, over the fact that Trump was "unacceptable"—and then signed on as Trump's vice president. ⁵

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We've flipped from a system that selected candidates who were broadly appealing to party officials to a system that selects candidates

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who are adored by base voters. Put differently, neither Donald Trump nor Bernie Sanders would've had a prayer in the 1956 presidential primaries, but one of them won and the other nearly won the 2016 presidential primaries.

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Ideological primary challenges have become more common in recent decades, particularly in the Republican Party.

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Clark University political scientist Robert Boatright found that the share of Republican primary challenges that are based around the incumbent not being conservative enough has shot from less than 25 percent in the 1970s to more than 40 percent in the 2010s; among Democrats, ideological primary challenges have gone from a bit under 10 percent to a bit over 10 percent (Democratic primary challenges are likelier to focus on social identity than ideology). 8

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La Raja and Schaffner cut this divide into "pragmatists" and "purists." Politics, they argue, is a war between pragmatists "concerned primarily with staying in power" and "policy-demanding" purists, who care above all about getting their agenda passed. Defunding parties empowers the purists over the pragmatists.

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University political scientist Hans Hassell showed that party networks

supported more moderate candidates even in safe seats.¹² Whatever the motivation, if you're a candidate who wants to fund your campaign in a state where the party controls the money, your incentive is to convince your party that you can win, and that often means convincing it of your ideological and temperamental moderation. But if you have to raise the money yourself, your incentives change. Most people, and most groups, don't give money to politicians. Those who do give are, predictably, more polarized, more partisan, or they want something. You motivate them through inspiration, outrage, or transaction. Put differently, you appeal to them through ideology, identity, or corruption. I think this typology misses the powerful role of political identity and negative partisanship. Here, as elsewhere, political conflict isn't just about policy, and it's not just about power. It's about group conflict.

July 30, 2020

 *Sebold and Dowdle found that "the total number of small contributions rose from 55,000 in 2000 to more than 566,000 in 2016," a more than tenfold increase.*

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As it's become easier to fund campaigns through individual contributions, more candidates have done it. But that's also changed the kinds of candidates who prosper in primaries. E.g. Sanders and Trump

July 31, 2020

 *The nationalization of politics is both a cause and consequence of these trends. As Daniel Hopkins shows in his book *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized**

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Under materialist theories of political engagement, where people participate because they're trying to maximize their share of the resources politicians control, this engagement pattern doesn't make sense. But under an identity model of political engagement, where people participate to express who they are, who they support, and who they loathe, it makes perfect sense.

July 31, 2020



Michael Barber exploits another difference in state campaign finance laws and compares states that limit individual contributions to candidates with states that limit PAC contributions to candidates. 16

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Where the rules push toward individual donations, he finds candidates are more polarized. Where the rules open the floodgates to PAC money, the candidates are more moderate. Individual donors want to fall in love or express their hate. They're comfortable supporting candidates who offer less chance of victory but more affirmation of identity. Institutional donors are more pragmatic. They want candidates who will win, and they want candidates who, after they win, will get things done.

July 31, 2020



This is less benign than it sounds.

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Institutional donors want government to work, it's true—but they want it to work in their favor. If individual donors give money as a form of identity expression, institutional donors give money as a form of investment. Individual donors are polarizing. Institutional donors are corrupting. American politics, thus, is responsive to two types of people: the polarized and the rich.

August 1, 2020



Once an issue becomes a red-blue collision, corporate cash often loses out to the zero-sum logic of partisanship or the fury of the base.

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But that isn't to dismiss the power of access-based money: we don't hear about most of what politicians do, leaving a truly vast space for the corruptions of transactional fund-raising to warp policy.

August 1, 2020



moments when the transactionalists and the polarizers settle into alliance with each other

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that's often been the story of the Trump administration, which tweets about kneeling NFL players in the morning and passes corporate tax cuts in the evening.

August 1, 2020



The Supreme Court, in a series of rulings dating back to the '70s, has decided that political spending is constitutionally protected speech, so you can't regulate it out of politics.

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But that means that the workable reforms tend to toss us between plans that amplify the powers of small donors, which worsen the problems of polarization, or plans that permit institutional money to flood the system, with all the attendant corruption. So long as politics runs on private donations, you're left with the inescapable problem that the people who donate want something different from the people who don't.

July 31, 2020



Today, Utych found, "moderates and ideologically extreme candidates are equally likely to be elected." As party affiliation becomes more important, individual candidate traits lose their power. You might prefer a moderate Republican to a fire-breathing conservative, but given what the Left looks like to you these days, you'll take either over a Democrat.

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In his 2019 paper "Man Bites Blue Dog," Stephen Utych looked at congressional races and concluded that "while moderates have

historically enjoyed an advantage over ideologically extreme candidates," that "gap has disappeared in recent years." 18

August 2, 2020

 In January of 2016, the National Review , long the closest thing conservatism has had to a gatekeeper, published an issue entitled "Against Trump." In it, the editors asked, "If Trump were to become the president, the Republican nominee, or even a failed candidate with strong conservative support, what would that say about conservatives? The movement that ground down the Soviet Union and took the shine, at least temporarily, off socialism would have fallen in behind a huckster. The movement concerned with such 'permanent things' as constitutional government, marriage, and the right to life would have become a claque for a Twitter feed." 19

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November 2019 Sean Illing views had evolved. Trump, he said, been steadfast "on pro-life stuff, on conscience rights, on judges." The downside, Lowry admitted, is "he doesn't respect the separation of powers in our government, he doesn't think constitutionally, and says and does things no president should do or say."

August 2, 2020

Chapter 8: When Bipartisanship Becomes Irrational

 Scalia was appointed to the Supreme Court by President Reagan in 1986 and unanimously confirmed by the Senate. Like many conservative theorists of the era, his jurisprudence was formed in the shadow of the Warren Court, which saw the Constitution as a

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living document that evolved alongside the country it founded.

The Warren Court, and its successors, looked inside the Constitution and found protections that previous generations had missed: for African Americans, for women seeking abortions, for men who loved other men. Scalia thought this preposterous. The Constitution, he said, is “not a living document. It’s dead, dead, dead.”¹ He believed, or said he believed, in originalism: ² the Constitution meant only what he understood it to have meant to the men who wrote it

August 5, 2020

 *law professors Robin Bradley Kar and Jason Mazzone.* [204](#)
“In all 103 cases, the President was able to both nominate and appoint a replacement Justice, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate. This is true even of all eight such cases where the nomination process began during an election year.”⁵

Senate Republicans refused to take a vote on or even hold a hearing for Garland’s nomination. McConnell: “it would be absurd to fill a Supreme Court seat in an election year. No, the choice properly belonged to whoever succeeded Obama,... This wasn’t about Garland; it was about democracy.” McConnell’s bet paid off. Trump won the 2016 election—indeed, there’s a reasonable argument that conservative mobilization around the vacancy was what pushed Trump over the finish line—and conservative jurist Neil Gorsuch was named to the open seat, preserving the GOP’s 5–4 majority. “One of my proudest moments was when I looked Barack Obama in the eye and I said, ‘Mr. President, you will not fill the Supreme Court vacancy,’ ” McConnell, for his part, gave up the game in 2019. Speaking at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon in Kentucky, he was asked what he’d do if a Supreme Court vacancy opened in 2020, the year of the next presidential election. CNN’s Ted Barrett reported what happened next: “The leader took a long sip of what appeared to be iced tea before announcing with a smile, ‘Oh, we’d fill it,’ triggering loud laughter from the audience.”⁸

August 5, 2020

 In 1990, in a paper entitled "The Perils of Presidentialism," Linz explained why. The "vast majority of the stable democracies" in the world were parliamentary regimes, where whoever wins legislative power also wins executive power.⁹ America, however, was a presidential democracy: the president is elected separately from the Congress and can often be at odds with it. This system had been tried before. America, worryingly, was the only place where it had survived.

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Spanish political sociologist named Juan Linz. presidents tend to be elected by voters but legislatures tend to reflect geography, with small towns and rural areas given outsized power.

August 5, 2020

 Linz admitted that he couldn't fully answer the question of why America was different. He suspected that "the uniquely diffuse character of American political parties—which, ironically, exasperates many American political scientists and leads them to call for responsible, ideologically disciplined parties—has something to do with it." Whatever the explanation, Linz continued, "the American case seems to be an exception; the development of modern political parties, particularly in socially and ideologically polarized countries, generally exacerbates, rather than moderates, conflicts between the legislative and the executive."¹²

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Linz was writing in 1990, when America's political parties were far more exceptional, far more mixed and moderated, than they are today. But what read in 1990 like an explanation of what made America's political system different now reads like an analysis of why America's system is in crisis. The Garland affair is a perfect example.

August 5, 2020

 *But why is that McConnell's problem? Why should he have been the one to fold? Perhaps Obama should have bowed to the winners of the most recent election and nominated a Scalia-esque conservative to fill Scalia's seat. It may sound ridiculous, but both McConnell and Obama represented legitimate electoral majorities, and there was no obvious way to resolve their differences.*

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In the 2014 election, Republicans took control of the Senate with a decisive fifty-four-vote majority. True, the 2014 election had the lowest turnout in seventy years, and sure, only a third of Senate seats are up for election in any given year the Senate is a noxiously undemocratic institution that gives a voter in Wyoming 66 times as much power as a voter in California, but the rules are what they are. McConnell was leader of a Republican majority in the US Senate. He had the votes to block any nominations Obama might make—why shouldn't he have used them? Did the voters who gave him that majority really want him to let Obama replace Scalia with a Democratic justice, no matter how moderate? Wouldn't it have been more of a betrayal of his voters if he'd led a new Republican majority in the Senate to help Obama flip the Supreme Court to a 5–4 liberal split?

August 5, 2020

 *In an analysis published after Justice Anthony Kennedy retired, law professors Lee Epstein and Eric Posner wrote in the New York Times that in the '50s and '60s, "the ideological biases of Republican appointees and Democratic appointees were relatively modest." 13 Even as late as the '90s, justices regularly voted in "ideologically unpredictable ways." In the 1991 term, for instance, Byron White, a Democratic appointee, "voted more conservatively than all but two of the Republican appointees, Antonin Scalia and William Rehnquist." But that's changed. Over the past decade, "justices have hardly ever*

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voted against the ideology of the president who appointed them," Epstein and Posner find. "Only Justice Kennedy, named to the court by Ronald Reagan, did so with any regularity." Their chart is striking

It's easy to read an analysis like this and think the authors are describing a golden age. But it's all a matter of perspective. The eras of relative moderation are considered eras of failure and betrayal by the political parties responsible for them. Republicans lament the heterodoxies of justices like Earl Warren, John Paul Stevens, David Souter, and Anthony Kennedy—indeed, it's precisely in response to these unpredictable appointments that the parties began to develop more ideological and reliable methods of sourcing judges. NYTimes: If the Supreme Court Is Nakedly Political, Can It Be Just? <https://nyti.ms/2J8cakV>

August 5, 2020

 *The American political system is built on a deep sense of place. The House isn't meant to host the meeting of two parties but of 435 districts; the Senate is not meant to represent red and blue but to balance the interests of fifty states. This reflects the Founders' belief—true in their time—that our political identities were rooted in our cities and states, not the more abstract bonds of nationhood. "Many considerations ... seem to place it beyond doubt that the first and most natural attachment of the people will be to the governments of their respective States," wrote James Madison in Federalist 46. The centrality of state and local political concerns in national politics has been one of the American political system's brakes on polarization. The zero-sum forces of two-party competition were moderated by the regional interests of politicians rooted, first and foremost, in a particular place.*

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Typically, Medicaid is funded by a roughly 60:40 split between the federal government and the states. The Affordable Care Act, however, promised that the federal government would pay 100 percent of the law's new

Medicaid costs for three years, before phasing down to a 90:10 split by 2020. But some conservatives said that even the 10 percent states were being asked to pay was too much. This was, in particular, a charge levied by Nebraska's popular Republican governor, Dave Heineman. So Nelson negotiated a special deal on the state's behalf: for Nebraska, the federal government would carry 100 percent of the Medicaid expansion's bill, a subsidy worth more than \$100 million.

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 In his book *The Increasingly United States*, Daniel Hopkins tracks the troubling nationalization of American politics. At the core of that nationalization is an inversion of the Founders' most self-evident assumption: that we will identify more deeply with our home state than with our country. [214](#)

He ran a text analysis of digitized books going back to 1800, comparing use of the phrase "I am American" with "I am a [Californian/Virginian/New Yorker/etc.]." Prior to the Civil War, expressions of state identity were far more common than expressions of national identity. National identity took the lead in the run-up to World War I, the two traded places for a while in the early twentieth century, and then, around 1968, expressions of national identity raced ahead and never looked back. He shows that when you ask Americans to rank their most important identities in surveys, almost everyone lists nationality in their top three, while the number listing their state, city, or neighborhood lags far behind.

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 As goes identity, so goes politics. In an analysis of more than 1,600 state party platforms dating back to 1918, Hopkins finds while "the platforms in earlier eras focused more on state-specific topics," modern platforms "now emphasize whatever topics dominate the national agenda." Similarly, he shows that in 1972, "knowing which way a state leaned in

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presidential politics told one nothing about the likely outcome in the gubernatorial race.” 15 Today, it tells you most of what you need to know.

The culprit here is obvious. In recent decades, the media and political environments have both nationalized. Voters following politics today get constant cues to think about national politics, but coverage of state and local politics is declining.

August 5, 2020

 *In 2011, Congress got rid of earmarks entirely. They were considered a corrupt, and a corrupting, form of politics. Much better to have Congress run on pure principle and partisanship than the grimy work of negotiating something tangible for your constituents. To ideologues, transactional politics always looks dirty. To the transactional, ideologues look self-destructive.*

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That is, in the end, what happened to Nelson. Rather than being celebrated back home for cutting Nebraska such a sweet deal, conservative media pounced on him. That same year, Heineman cautioned his constituents against accepting the Medicaid expansion they could've had for free. “If this unfunded Medicaid expansion is implemented, state aid to education and funding for the University of Nebraska will be cut or taxes will be increased,” he warned. 18

August 5, 2020

 *There was, perhaps, another secret to the system’s success, one that I didn’t appreciate until I read Princeton University political scientist Frances Lee’s book *Insecure Majorities*. American politics, for most of its history, simply wasn’t very competitive. And contrary to what the conventional wisdom holds, perhaps that was a good thing, or at least, given the*

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idiosyncrasies of our system, a necessary one.

But here's the thing, Lee says. For most of American history, including the eras of cooperative, farsighted governance our civics textbooks remember most fondly, American politics wasn't competitive. 19 Writing in 1965, Samuel Lubell said, "Our political solar system ... has been characterized not by two equally competing suns, but by a sun and a moon." 20 The Republican Party ran American politics for most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Democrats held the reins in the decades following the Great Depression and World War II. And majorities, both in terms of presidential vote totals and congressional control, were often lopsided.

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The durability of party control in America's past is easy to miss because our political histories tend to be presidential histories, and the presidency has tended to be more competitive than control of Congress. But when you view political power through a broader lens, our era is an aberration.

In this 150-year time frame, there's no period where political control has been as tenuous as in the last four decades. And that's true whether you're looking at how often control of the government switches or how much power the majority party wields when it's on top.

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This is key to Lee's point. When one party is perpetually dominant, the subordinate party has reason to cooperate, as that's its only realistic shot at wielding influence. Either you work well with the majority party or you have no say over policy, nothing to bring home to your constituents.

Lee's argument is that close competition, where "neither party perceives itself as a permanent majority or permanent minority," breeds all-out

partisan combat. When winning the majority becomes possible, the logic of cooperation dissolves. If you're signing on to the majority's bills and boasting about the provisions you added to their legislation, then you're part of their reelection strategy. If you're keeping the majority from passing anything and making sure people are fed up with the state of politics, then the voters are likelier to make a change. This is the paradox of bipartisanship: what Bob Michel, the leader of the House Republicans in the 1980s, called the "subservient, timid mentality of the permanent minority"²¹ makes it easier to work with the majority but harder to win back the majority. Governing and campaigning conflict. Once a political party has decided the path to governing is retaking the majority, not working with the existing majority, the incentives transform.

August 5, 2020

 *Originally, both the House and the Senate had what's called a "previous question motion," which allows a member of the body to move off whatever point is being debated—the previous question, in parliamentary parlance—and demand an actual vote. That's the provision the House uses to end discussion even today. The Senate used to have that rule, too. And then it got rid of it, and created the filibuster as an unintended consequence.*

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Here's the thing about the Senate filibuster: it wasn't supposed to exist. Sarah Binder, author, alongside Steven Smith, of Politics or Principle: Filibustering in the United States Senate

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 *Filibusters were rare in past Senates (with one gruesome exception: they were used routinely to block anti-lynching and civil rights legislation). According to official records, from 1917 to 1970, the Senate took forty-nine votes to break filibusters. That's an average of slightly less than one each year. From 2013 to 2014, it had to take 218. That might've*

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been a high mark of Senate obstruction, but there was no subsequent retreat to the rare filibusters of yesteryear: the 2015–2016 Senate session saw 123 cloture votes, and the 2017–2018 session hosted 168.

There are examples of judicial nominees being filibustered only to subsequently pass unanimously. In 2009, then senator Tom Harkin, a Democrat from Iowa, told me about a particularly egregious example, coming as it did deep in the throes of the financial crisis. “We had an extension on unemployment insurance,” Harkin said. “We had a filibuster that lasted over three weeks. They held up everything. And in the end, the vote was 97 to one.”²⁶ Filibustering isn’t a way lone senators make an unpopular argument heard, but a way the minority party in the US Senate sabotages the majority’s ability to govern, in the hopes that voters will punish the party that seems to be in charge.

August 5, 2020

 *If the US government failed to pass a debt ceiling increase and thus stopped paying its debts, the markets would have to reevaluate the most core piece of financial information of them all. The result would be a global financial crisis, sparked by congressional infighting.*

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Debt ceiling bills have always been used to embarrass the other side, but they’ve never been used as actual leverage because the consequences were simply too dire. That changed in 2011, when the newly elected Tea Party class of Republicans refused to increase the debt ceiling in order to increase their leverage to force spending cuts (a bit of anti-deficit dogmatism that tellingly evaporated the moment a Republican won the White House). The resulting crisis shook financial markets and led the Standard & Poor’s credit agency to downgrade US government debt.

August 5, 2020

Chapter 9: The Difference between Democrats and

Republicans



*In 2012, the two scholars published *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, and in it, they minced no words:*

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Thomas Mann and Norm Ornstein Today's Republican Party ... is an insurgent outlier. It has become ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition, all but declaring war on the government. The Democratic Party, while no paragon of civic virtue, is more ideologically centered and diverse, protective of the government's role as it developed over the course of the last century, open to incremental changes in policy fashioned through bargaining with the Republicans, and less disposed to or adept at take-no-prisoners conflict between the parties. This asymmetry between the parties, which journalists and scholars often brush aside or whitewash in a quest for "balance," constitutes a huge obstacle to effective governance. 1

August 6, 2020



Most observers saw Trump as a radical break from the Republican Party's traditions and narratives. Ornstein saw him as the logical next step for a party that was transforming itself, its institutions, and its leadership into vessels of revanchist rage. Conservatives were choosing, again and again, the path of maximum confrontation and disruption, rallying behind the voices that promised to go where their predecessors hadn't, to speak the words that had previously been whispered, to embrace the tactics that had once been shunned. Trump wasn't a break with this Republican Party. He was the most authentic expression of its modern psychology. The primary would prove Ornstein right.

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I have seen a GOP Congress in which the establishment, itself very

conservative, has lost the battle to co-opt the Tea Party radicals, and itself has been largely co-opted or, at minimum, cowed by them. As the congressional party has transformed, so has the activist component of the party outside Washington. In state legislatures, state party apparatuses, and state party platforms, there are regular statements or positions that make the most extreme lawmakers in Washington seem mild.

August 6, 2020

 *This is not a story you can tell about the Democratic Party, which, though it has moved ideologically left, has remained tethered to traditional institutions and behaviors*

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Make no mistake: plenty of liberals will read this capsule history as a recounting of Democratic weakness. The difference here is not that liberal activists haven't wanted the Democratic Party to escalate its tactics in opposition; it's that elected Democrats have largely been able to resist their demands. The polarizing forces I have described throughout this book are acting on both coalitions. So why has the Democratic Party weathered them in a way the Republican Party hasn't? Why are the two parties so different? The answer is twofold: Democrats have an immune system of diversity and democracy. The Republican Party doesn't. This has not left the Democrats unaffected by the forces of polarization, to be sure. But if polarization has given the Democratic Party the flu, the Republican Party has caught pneumonia.

August 6, 2020

 *Nor was the presidency a one-off.*

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Between 2012 and 2018, House Republicans drove John Boehner from the speakership for being insufficiently radical and then made Paul Ryan's life so miserable he resigned the post after only three years. By contrast, as of 2019, House Democrats were led by the same leadership team they elected in 2006. During Bill Clinton's administration, Republicans pursued an unpopular and bizarre impeachment campaign. During Barack Obama's presidency, Republicans nearly breached the debt ceiling, almost causing another global financial crisis, in an attempt to

bring the Democrat to heel. During both presidencies, Republicans repeatedly shut down the federal government. In all these cases, top Republicans expressed unease with the path they had chosen but seemed helpless to do anything but channel the fury of their base. For all the rage Democrats felt toward George W. Bush in 2006 and Donald Trump in 2018, they have not attempted to gain leverage by endangering the global financial system. When Democrats took the House in 2006, Pelosi resisted calls to defund the Iraq War. Weirdly and tellingly, the longest government shutdown of the Trump era began when Republicans held Congress and Trump himself forced a shutdown over a Republican spending compromise that didn't fund his wall.

August 6, 2020

 *Back in chapter 2, we discussed the ways the two coalitions have sorted by ideology, race, religion, geography, and psychology. But not all sorting is the same. Sorting has made Democrats more diverse and Republicans more homogenous. This is often seen as a weakness for Democrats. They're a collection of interest groups, a party of list makers, an endless roll call.*

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But it's played a crucial role in moderating the party's response to polarization. Republicans are overwhelmingly dependent on white voters. Democrats are a coalition of liberal whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. Republicans are overwhelmingly dependent on Christians. Democrats are a coalition of liberal and nonwhite Christians, Jews, Muslims, New Agers, atheists, Buddhists, and so on. On the fixed versus fluid psychological dimensions discussed earlier, Republicans are overwhelmingly the party of fixed voters. But as Hetherington and Weiler note in their book *Prius or Pickup?*, Democrats are psychologically sorted only among white voters. "Communities of color include lots of people who value traditional family hierarchies and top-down authority," they write. "In fact, African Americans are the group most likely to have members with fixed worldviews." 4 But the Republican Party has so repelled nonwhite voters that they tend to be Democrats no matter their psychological makeup.

August 6, 2020

 Republicans have been able to appeal to their party through ideology. Democrats haven't. They've had to appease a coalition of whites and nonwhites, liberals and moderates, the fixed and the fluid. They've done that by promising different policies to different groups—offering a transactionalist, more than ideological, approach to party building.

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The percentage of Americans calling themselves conservative has long dwarfed the percentage who identify as liberal. In 1994, conservatives outnumbered liberals 38–17. That gap has closed in recent years, but as of January 2019, conservatives still lead, 35–26. Three-quarters of Republicans identify as conservative, while only half of Democrats call themselves liberals—and for Democrats, that's a historic high point. Self-identified moderates outnumbered liberals in the Democratic Party until 2008. E.g. liberal whites in New Hampshire and traditionalist blacks in South Carolina. It means talking to Irish Catholics in Boston and the karmically curious in California. Democrats need to go broad to win over their party and, as we'll see, they need to reach into right-leaning territory to win power. Republicans can afford to go deep.

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 In their book *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*, Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins

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What they find is that the Democratic Party is a diverse collection of interest groups held together by policy goals, while the Republican Party is built atop a more united base that finds commonality in more abstract, ideological commitments. More than twice as many interest groups make endorsements in Democratic primaries as Republican primaries. In an analysis of presidential debates from 1996 to 2012, "Republican presidential candidates were more than twice as likely as Democrats to mention ideology or principles," while Democrats "cited social, demographic, and interest groups at markedly higher rates than Republicans" and talked more about new policy proposals. In poll after poll, and under both Democratic and Republican presidents, Democrats say they prefer politicians who compromise to get things done, while Republicans say they prefer politicians who stick to their positions.

August 6, 2020

 *I differ with Grossmann and Hopkins on a key point. I think they mistake an identitarian movement for an ideological movement.*

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If conservatives believed what they claim to believe about executive power, limited government, and congressional primacy, they would have seen Trump's presidency as a crisis. And for some, it was. George Will, the longtime columnist at the Washington Post, left the Republican Party.

August 6, 2020

 *But for most conservatives, whether they were prominent pundits or everyday voters, there proved to be no contradiction between conservatism and Trumpism.*

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According to a September 2019 Gallup poll, 75 percent of self-identified conservatives and 91 percent of self-identified conservative Republicans approved of the job Trump was doing.⁷ This is because conservatism isn't, for most people, an ideology. It's a group identity.

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 *A clever 2018 paper by political scientists Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope tested this experimentally.*

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Barber and Pope asked voters if they agreed or disagreed with different policies. Because of the, erm, flexibility of Trump's rhetoric, they were able to pick policies where Trump had, at some point, articulated both a liberal policy position and a conservative policy position. They then split their sample into four groups: a control group, a group that got asked about their policy views without any Trump-related information, and then

groups that were asked about policy and given either Trump's liberal views or his conservative ones. If conservatism was an ideology first and foremost, then a stronger attachment to that ideology should provide a stronger mooring against the winds of Trump. Instead, the precise opposite was true. The people who identified as most strongly conservative were the likeliest to move in response to Trump. And the effect was about the same size whether Trump was taking the conservative or liberal position. It was the direction of Trump, not the direction of the policy, that mattered. Interestingly, there wasn't an equal and opposite reaction among strong liberals: they didn't change position much to oppose Trump. I (This doesn't prove liberals wouldn't exhibit the same behaviour toward Obama or Sanders)

August 6, 2020

 *Crucially, the Democratic Party isn't just more diverse in terms of its members; it's also more diverse in its trusted information sources. In 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey measuring trust in different media sources*

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Respondents who counted as "consistent liberals" trusted a wide variety of media outlets ranging from center-right to left. Consistent conservatives did not. Of the thirty-six outlets named, only a handful of deeply ideological sources commanded more trust than distrust among respondents who counted as consistently conservative. Pew also asked consistent liberals and conservatives which outlet served as their "main" news source. Here, too, the difference was stark. For the liberals, there was no dominant news source. CNN was the top choice with 15 percent, followed by NPR with 13 percent, MSNBC with 12 percent, and the New York Times with 10 percent. Among consistent conservatives, 47 percent chose Fox News, with the next most popular answer being "local news," at 11 percent.

August 6, 2020

 *The leading media on the right and left are rooted in different traditions and journalistic practices. On the conservative side, more attention was paid to*

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pro-Trump, highly partisan media outlets. On the liberal side, by contrast, the center of gravity was made up largely of long-standing media organizations steeped in the traditions and practices of objective journalism. 11

In “Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” a study of media dynamics in the 2016 election, six Harvard researchers concluded

August 6, 2020

 *The conservative movement has spent years battling liberal bias in the media and the academia. Some of their complaints had merit. But rather than reform those institutions or build similarly credible competitors, the right has untethered itself from them and built an informational ecosystem premised on purity rather than process. In their essay “How Information Became Ideological,” Grossmann and Hopkins describe the result:*

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Only the Republican Party has actively opposed society’s central information-gathering-and-disseminating institutions—universities and the news media—while Democrats have remained reliant on those institutions to justify policy choices and engage in political debate, considering them both independent arbiters and allies. Although each party’s elites, activists and voters now depend on different sources of knowledge and selectively interpret the messages they receive, the source of this information polarization is the American conservative movement’s decades-long battle against institutions that it has deemed irredeemably liberal. 13

August 6, 2020

 *There are examples of strong institutions with conservative cultures in direct competition with the New York Times—the Murdoch-owned Wall Street*

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Journal, for instance—but they exist as exceptions, not as oft-followed models.

I don't have a firm answer as to why, but I suspect it reflects the market available to carve off: because the mainstream media and academia actually aren't that liberal, because they mostly do put truth-seeking ahead of partisanship, there isn't that much demand for alternatives. The audience that is sufficiently alienated by mainstream outlets to present a business opportunity is uniformly conservative, and creating a differentiated enough product to appeal to them means creating a product that chooses to cater to conservative identity, rather than a product that routinely confronts it. But the result is that Democrats rely on a diversity of information sources that discipline their flights of fancy, while Republicans rely on a narrower set of media institutions that propel their polarization.

August 6, 2020

 *To win, Democrats don't just need to appeal to the voter in the middle. They need to appeal to voters well to the right of the middle. In the Senate, FiveThirtyEight's Nate Silver estimates the average state is six points more Republican than the average voter. So when Democrats compete for the Senate, they are forced to appeal to an electorate that is far more conservative than the country as a whole.* 242

Their weakness is the result of geography, not popularity. The voters who hold the balance of power in American politics are whiter, older, and more Christian than the country as a whole.

August 6, 2020

 *There is absolutely a GOP message that can command true majorities. But freed from the need to appeal to the median voter, Republicans have hewed to a more conservative and confrontational path than the country would prefer. They have learned to win power* 244

by winning land, rather than by winning hearts and minds.

Republicans know that their coalition is endangered, buffeted by demographic headwinds and an aging base. And that has injected an almost manic urgency into their strategy. Behind the GOP's tactical extremism lurks an apocalyptic sense of political stakes. It feels to many that if they lose, they may never win again—and perhaps, with their current coalition, there's a kernel of truth in that. Still, there is nothing more dangerous than a group accustomed to wielding power that feels its control slipping. In their book *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson report that it was this sense of desperation that powered the Tea Party's Obama-era rise:

August 6, 2020

 *Democrats are often derided for playing identity politics, but that is not, in truth, a difference between the parties. Republicans have built their coalition on identity politics as well. The difference between the parties is that Democratic candidates are forced to appeal to many more identities, and more skeptical voters, than Republicans do. Successful national Democrats construct broad coalitions, and that's a practice that cuts against the incentives of pure polarization.*

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What national Republicans have learned to do is construct deep coalitions relying on more demographically and ideologically homogenous voters. Instead of winning power by winning the votes of most voters, they win power by winning the votes of most places. That's let them appeal to an electorate considerably to the right of the median voter, to get away with decisions and candidates that would've torched another party.

August 6, 2020

 *This is the way in which the parties are not structurally symmetrical and thus why they have not responded to a polarizing era in the same ways*

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They can move to the left—and they are—but they can't abandon the center or, given the geography of American politics, the center-right, and still hold power. And they know it. In December 2018, well into the Trump era, Gallup asked Democrats and Republicans whether they wanted to see their party become more liberal, more conservative, or more moderate. By a margin of 57–37, Republicans wanted their party to become more conservative; by a margin of 54–41, Democrats wanted their party to become more moderate.²⁴

August 6, 2020

Chapter 10: Managing Polarization—and Ourselves

 *America's modern run of polarization has its roots in the civil rights era, in the Democratic Party choosing to embrace racial equality and the Republican Party providing a home to white backlash.*

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In a multiparty system, polarization is sometimes required for our political disagreements to express themselves. The alternative to polarization often isn't consensus but suppression.

August 6, 2020

 *But, as I've tried to show in this book, the polarization we see around us is the logical outcome of a complex system of incentives, technologies, identities, and political institutions. It implicates capitalism and geography, politicians and political institutions, human psychology and America's changing demography.*

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Because a less polarized country lies within living memory, the tendency is to imagine a return to an idealized past. This must be the aberration, and that the state of nature.

August 6, 2020

 *There are three categories of reform I think particularly worth exploring: bombproofing, democratizing, and balancing.*

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Proposed reforms

August 6, 2020

 *But the governing principle is simple: where congressional inaction can do great damage, we should ask ourselves whether the upside of congressional deliberation truly outweighs the risk of unnecessary disaster.*

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Bombproofing

August 6, 2020

 *At the presidential level, it would simply mean doing away with the archaic electoral college. This is difficult to do through constitutional amendment but easy to do through legislative action: the National Interstate Popular Vote Compact is an agreement by states to throw their electoral votes to whichever presidential candidate wins the popular vote. It would take legal force for the moment states representing a 270-vote majority in the electoral college sign it—and so far,*

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the states that have joined represent 196 electoral votes, which is more than 70 percent of the way there.

Electoral college

August 6, 2020

 *This has a few advantages. One is that voters can choose the candidate they like most, knowing their vote can still matter even if their favorite politician loses. Another is that voters would no longer have to live in the small fraction of swing districts for their votes to matter. Parties would have to compete for all voters, everywhere. But the third and most important advantage of a system like this is that it makes third parties viable, as unlike under our winner-take-all election rules*

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A quick survey of Europe, where multiparty democracy is common and plenty of countries are undergoing their own political crises, is enough to curb expectations. Still, one way of thinking about the midcentury American party system that I've described is that it was actually a four-party system: the Democrats, the Dixiecrats, the conservative Republicans, and the liberal Republicans, and it seems to have functioned more smoothly. Perhaps some form of proportional representation could nudge us back in that direction, albeit with less racism.

August 6, 2020

 *First, get rid of the filibuster, which takes an already undemocratic institution and adds an absurd supermajority requirement on top of it. The old hope that the filibuster would encourage compromise has failed.*

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This is not a controversial point: we have more filibusters than ever and

less compromise than ever. But the filibuster's worst sin is that it drains the system of accountability. In theory, the way American politics works is that a party gets put in charge, that party governs, and then voters decide whether they like the results. In practice, the filibuster allows the Senate minority to hamstring the majority. This would be fine if voters were all congressional reporters, paid to watch the procedural maneuvering that drives the chamber. But they're not. What they know is that their roads aren't getting fixed, their jobs aren't coming back, and Washington doesn't seem to be doing anything to help them. So, reasonably, they blame the majority, even if it's not actually the majority's fault. A system where it's this hard to figure out why something didn't happen isn't a system where voters can act as an effective check on legislators. In an age where bipartisanship is irrational, making it impossible for partisan majorities to govern well simply ensures we'll be governed poorly.

August 6, 2020

 *Defenders of the filibuster—and they are rife in both parties—will cite all the horrible legislation that the other side might've passed if not for the rule. And true enough. But fundamentally, the question this raises is: Do you prefer the problems of governance or paralysis?*

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Democrats who worry that Obamacare would've been repealed in the absence of the filibuster give too little credit to a country that would've noticed health care being canceled for tens of millions of people. Either health care matters to people or it doesn't, but it can't both be central to their lives and irrelevant to their politics. Similarly, Republicans who believe the American people would rise up against unchecked liberalism should ask themselves why they're so afraid of permitting the country to see Democrats' true colors.

August 6, 2020

 *Second, it's long past time for Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico to have congressional representation. It's one thing for the Senate to represent states rather*

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than people

It's one thing for the Senate to represent states rather than people. It's another thing for so many Americans to be deprived of representation because the places they live have been denied statehood for political reasons. We live in a country built on the principle of representation. The fact that we deny it to so many of our citizens is indefensible. The fact that we particularly deny it to places with large African American and Hispanic populations compounds historical injustice and tilts the system toward white voters. If DC and Puerto Rico have representation, that would be another push for the Republican Party to veer away from deepening racial polarization as an electoral strategy.

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By 2040, 70 percent of Americans will live in the fifteen largest states. That means 70 percent of America will be represented by only thirty senators, while the other 30 percent of America will be represented by seventy senators. ¹

It is not difficult to imagine an America where Republicans consistently win the presidency despite rarely winning the popular vote, where they typically control both the House and the Senate despite rarely winning more votes than the Democrats, where their dominance of the Supreme Court is unquestioned, and where all this power is used to buttress a system of partisan gerrymandering, pro-corporate campaign finance laws, strict voter ID requirements, and anti-union legislation that further weakens Democrats' electoral performance. That would not, in the long term, prove a stable system.

August 7, 2020

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Too much of American politics is decided by efforts to restrict who votes or, as in gerrymandering, to manipulate the weight those votes hold. A more democratic system won't end polarization, but it will create a healthier form of competition.

If this seems outlandish, well, it simply describes the world we live in now and assumes it continues forward. Look at Wisconsin, where state Republicans gerrymandered the seats to make Democratic control a near impossibility.² Look at Citizens United, which gave Republicans a 5 percentage point boost in elections for state legislators.³ Look at the Trump administration's effort to add a citizenship question to the census that was designed to scare Latinos away from answering the form; its architect wrote that it would "be advantageous to Republicans and Non-Hispanic Whites."⁴

August 7, 2020

 *We balanced big and small states in the Senate. We balanced democratic and elite rule by handing the House to the voters, the Senate to state legislatures (popular elections came to the US Senate only with the 1913 ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment), and the White House, through the peculiar institution of the electoral college, to both.*

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At the time of its founding, the strongest and most politically important identities were state identities, and the central tension was between those who feared the (white, male) voting public and those who trusted it

August 7, 2020

 *The problem in our system is that what we balanced for is no longer what's competing. Today, the strongest and most politically important identities are partisan identities. We don't talk about big states and small states but about red states and blue states.*

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If there is a threat to American unity, it rests not in the specific concerns of Virginians or Alaskans but in the growing enmity between Democrats and Republicans. And here's the thing: the Founders did not think about how to balance parties, because they didn't think parties would exist.

August 7, 2020

 *It should be easier, for instance, for the minority party to bring full bills to the floor. In the House, the so-called Hastert Rule—wherein Republicans, and often Democrats, won't bring a bill to the floor unless it commands a majority among their own members—denies a vote to legislation that may pass atop unusual coalitions. You could also imagine a right to actual, ongoing debate that is not paired with a supermajority requirement.* [260](#)

In Congress, rules could be rewritten to ensure participation and voice that don't rest on the veto power of filibuster

August 7, 2020

 *All politics is influenced by identity. That's not because all politics is literally identity politics. It's because all of human cognition is influenced by identity, and politics is part of human cognition.* [261](#)

The primary way the system gets its hooks into us is by threatening or otherwise activating our political identities and using the catalytic energy to get us to contribute, vote, read, share, or just generally be pissed off.

August 7, 2020

 *The practice of mindfulness is separable from the practice of meditation.* [262](#)

In other words: a mindful person is an acutely aware person, a person who proceeds with careful attention to all relevant factors.” 6

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 "There are over five hundred thousand elected officials in the United States, only 537 of whom serve at the federal level," writes Daniel Hopkins in *The Increasingly United States*.⁹ The 537 federal officials are the ones we have the least power to influence, if only because they have, on average, the most constituents. But we often don't know the names of the officials nearest to us, even though they'd be glad to meet for coffee.

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This isn't because we're lazy, bad people. It's because media has nationalized, and there's been a particular reaping at the state and local level.

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 *But there's a real reward from rooting more of our political identities in the places we live.*

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First, we tend to live among people more like us, so the politics is less polarized. Second, the questions are often more tangible and less symbolic, so the discussion is often more constructive and less hostile. Third, we can have a lot more impact on state and local politics than on national politics, and it feels empowering to make a difference. And fourth, even if your heart lies in national politics—I'm a journalist who covers national politics, I get it—being involved in state and local politics will make you much more effective, both because it's valuable experience and because local officials eventually become federal officials, and they keep in touch with the people they've known along the way.

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 *This is not a counterintuitive take on American*

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history, by the way. Among experts, it is closer to the consensus. The Varieties of Democracy Project, which has been surveying experts on the state of global democracies since 1900, gave the US political system a 48 on a 1 to 100 scale in 1945 and a 59 in 1965. It was only after the civil rights movement that America began scoring in the '70s and '80s, marking it as a largely successful democracy. 10 The era that we often hold up as the golden age of American democracy was far less democratic, far less liberal, far less decent, than today. Trump's most intemperate outbursts, his most offensive musings, pale before opinions that were mainstream in recent history. And the institutions of American politics today are a vast improvement on the regimes that ruled well within living memory. If we can do a bit better tomorrow, we will be doing much, much better than we have ever done before.

You do not need to go back to the country's early years—when new arrivals from Europe drove out and murdered indigenous peoples, brought over millions of enslaved Africans, and wrote laws making women second-class citizens—to see it. Just a few decades ago, political assassinations were routine. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy was murdered on the streets of Dallas. In 1965, Malcolm X was shot to death in a crowded New York City ballroom. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, as was Robert F. Kennedy. In 1975, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, standing about arm's length from President Gerald Ford, aimed her gun and fired; the bullet failed to discharge. Harvey Milk, the pioneering gay San Francisco city supervisor, was killed in 1978. President Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981; the bullet shattered a rib and punctured a lung. For much of the twentieth century, the right to vote was, for African Americans, no right at all. Lynchings were common. Freedom Riders were brutally beaten across the American South. Police had to escort young African American children into schools as jeering crowds shouted racial epithets and threatened to attack. Violence broke out at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Urban riots ripped across the country. Crime was rising. The United States launched an illegal, secret bombing campaign in Cambodia. National Guard members fired on and killed student protesters at Kent State. Richard Nixon rode a backlash to the civil rights movement into the White House, launched an espionage campaign against his political opponents, provoked a constitutional crisis, and became the first American president driven to resign from office by impeachment proceedings.

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