

# A Historical Perspective

*In the first essay of this series I pointed out that contemporary electoral instability resembles the electorally chaotic late nineteenth century period after the return of the Confederate states to the Union. Interestingly, several social and economic trends that roiled the United States then have made a reappearance in recent decades. Rapid and cumulative social changes create new problems and create tensions in old electoral coalitions about how to address such problems. Possibly we are seeing a repeat of something long forgotten by most contemporary analysts.*

**MORRIS P. FIORINA**

Series No. 9

*These were not pleasant days . . . Men were not nice in their treatment of each other.*—Speaker of the House Thomas B. Reed

In the first essay I noted that some analysts view the current decade as a return to the divided government era of the late twentieth century—only in reverse. In their view, since the 2010 elections the country has had a Democratic presidential majority and a Republican congressional majority—the opposite of the earlier pattern. Given that we are living in the current period and do not yet have the benefit of hindsight, generalizations must be tentative. But in my view the current period more closely resembles the late nineteenth-century pre-McKinley era.<sup>1</sup> The four elections between 2004 and 2010 resulted in four different patterns of institutional control; the six elections between 2004 and 2014 resulted in five different patterns. The only historical precedent for such instability of institutional control came during the so-called Period of No Decision or Era of Stalemate in the late nineteenth century when the five elections held between 1886 and 1894 produced five different patterns of institutional majorities. Table 1 lists the election outcomes for this period when tenuous majorities were the rule for two decades.<sup>2</sup>

---

Thomas B. Reed, who served in the House from 1877–1899, quoted in David Brady, *Congressional Voting in a Partisan Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1973), 1.

1 This essay draws on several earlier writings: Morris Fiorina, *Divided Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1992) and Morris Fiorina, “America’s Missing Moderates,” *The American Interest* 8, no. 4 (March/April 2013), [www.the-american-interest.com/2013/02/12/americas-missing-moderates-hiding-in-plain-sight/](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/02/12/americas-missing-moderates-hiding-in-plain-sight/).

2 One could make a case that the Era of No Decision actually began with the election of 1860 and the onset of the Civil War. Often forgotten today is that Abraham Lincoln received a bit less than 40 percent of the popular vote in the 1860 election. Unified Republican control from 1860–1872 was due in part to Democratic states leaving the Union.



**Table 1. The Era of No Decision: 1874–1894**

	<i>President</i>	<i>House</i>	<i>Senate</i>
1874	R	D	R
1876	D/R*	D	R
1878	R	D	D
1880	R	R	T**
1882	R	D	R
1884	D	D	R
1886	D	D	R
1888	D/R*	R	R
1890	R	D	R
1892	D	D	D
1894	D	R	R

\*Popular vote winner lost the Electoral Vote

\*\*Tie

The Panic of 1873 combined with the return of Southern Democrats to the Congress resulted in Democratic control of the House for the first time since the onset of the Civil War. For the next twenty years national elections were very closely fought. The Republicans had an edge in presidential elections, but in the five presidential elections held during this period only once did a candidate receive a majority of the popular vote.<sup>3</sup> The other four winners received less than 50 percent (the remaining votes went to third parties like the Greenback, Prohibition, and Populist parties that contested elections during the period). Moreover, twice (Samuel Tilden in 1876 and Grover Cleveland in 1888), the loser of the popular vote won the presidency in the Electoral College, something that did not happen again until

the 2000 election. Democrats typically controlled the House, and Republicans generally controlled the Senate. The latter was accomplished in part by strategically admitting new Republican-leaning states to the Union.<sup>4</sup> In all, one party enjoyed control of all three elective institutions for only four years of the twenty-year period, and each episode of unified control lasted only two years.

As discussed in an earlier work, periods of divided government in American history tend to occur in times of chronic societal strain.<sup>5</sup> Historical parallels are always tempting and sometimes misleading, but one does not have to work very hard to draw parallels between the late nineteenth century and contemporary times. In the chaotic post-Civil War period the parties in Congress became more cohesive and more distinct—they sorted.<sup>6</sup> Brady calculates that in the 1896 House elections, for example, 86 percent of the victorious Republicans came from industrial districts whereas 60 percent of the

3 Ironically, it was Samuel Tilden in 1876, who lost to Rutherford B. Hayes after a negotiated political settlement gave Hayes a majority in the Electoral College.

4 These Western states had small populations so did not much affect the balance in the House, but they each had two senators. Barry Weingast and Charles Stewart III, “Stacking the Senate, Changing the Nation: Republican Rotten Boroughs, Statehood Politics, and American Political Development,” *Studies in American Political Development* 6, no. 2 (October 1992): 223–271.

5 Fiorina, *Divided Government*, 8.

6 Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology & Congress*, chap. 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

victorious Democrats came from agricultural districts.<sup>7</sup> Thus, each party contained a strong majority of members with common interests—interests that were in conflict with the dominant interest of the other party.<sup>8</sup> A consideration of socioeconomic developments in this earlier period of majority instability shows at least five similarities with the contemporary period.

**1. Economic Transformation** In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the United States experienced the Industrial Revolution—the country transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy with all the attendant dislocations. By 1885 America surpassed Britain as the world leader in industrial output. Today, of course, the United States is undergoing another economic transformation, from an industrial economy to one variously described as post-industrial, communications, service, informational, or whatnot—but an economy clearly different from the manufacturing economy that prevailed for most of the twentieth century. Capitalism fosters creative destruction, but there is no guarantee that those who experience the destruction will be compensated by the creation. There were many winners from this earlier economic transformation but also losers and certainly significant dislocations. The same is true today.

**2. Globalization** Although not always linear, globalization is an ongoing process, not something that suddenly happened in recent decades. The late nineteenth century was a period of economic globalization. Members of Congress from the Midwest condemned the railroads in the debates about railroad regulation, complaining that their constituents could outcompete the Russians and Ukrainians in the European grain markets if only railroad abuses could be curbed. The rapidly industrializing United States was a prime opportunity for foreign investment. British finance helped build the American railroad system (probably several times over, given the financial chicanery and frequent bankruptcies). And investment opportunities abounded in steel and other industrial sectors. Globalization then was viewed in more positive terms—as an opportunity for economic growth. But in common with globalization today, it brought with it rapid and significant social and economic change.

**3. Population Movements** As the United States industrialized, Americans left the farms and moved to the cities to work in the new manufacturing enterprises. They exchanged a hard rural life for the miserable conditions of the cities and industrial workplaces.<sup>9</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century the United States witnessed several major population

---

<sup>7</sup> David Brady, *Congressional Voting in a Partisan Era: A Study of the McKinley Houses and a Comparison to the Modern House of Representatives*, chap. 3 (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Whether the electorate was similarly well-sorted (or polarized) is unknown in times preceding the development of scientific survey research.

<sup>9</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Doubleday, 1906).



movements. As late as 1950, the stereotypical African American was a sharecropper in a southern cotton field. By the 1970s the stereotype had changed to a northern tenement dweller. The movement of African Americans from South to North was the greatest internal migration in American history.<sup>10</sup> At about the same time, whites were leaving the Frostbelt and moving to the Sunbelt, altering the southern and southwestern economies and the geographic balance of political power. Population movements generate social problems, create tensions between old and new residents, and change the political balance.

**4. Immigration** Beginning in the 1880s immigration surged as millions left Europe to work in America's mines and factories. The open door closed in the 1920s and remained closed until reopened in the 1960s, after which a new surge of immigration began that has continued to the present. The debate today is characterized by a great deal of historical amnesia, but anyone who has studied the earlier period will recognize that the issues and conflicts generated by the current wave of immigration are strikingly similar to those of a century and more ago.

**5. Inequality** The Era of No Decision is more commonly known as The Gilded Age. It was a time when robber barons built great fortunes, legitimate and otherwise. Coupled with the development of a mass working class, the general socioeconomic equality described by Tocqueville gave way to great disparities in wealth between the owners and investors in the new industrial economy and those who labored in their enterprises. Today, economic inequality is back on the political agenda in a serious way for the first time since the New Deal. Related to this development is the return of crony capitalism to Gilded Age levels.<sup>11</sup>

Social and economic changes like these create numerous social and economic problems. They disrupt old electoral coalitions and suggest new possibilities to ambitious political entrepreneurs.<sup>12</sup> When changes are major, rapid, and cumulative as described above, their

---

10 Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

11 To anyone who has followed the news about fraudulent home mortgage assessments and securities ratings, obscene bonuses, Goldman-Sachs, AIG, Tim Geithner, Jack Lew, Eric Holder, "too big to fail," "too big to jail," and numerous other aspects of the 2008–2009 crash and its aftermath, the discussion of corruption in the late nineteenth century will seem familiar. For a survey of the earlier period see Jay Cost, *A Republic No More: Big Government and the Rise of American Political Corruption*, chap. 5 (New York: Encounter Books, 2015). There is a huge literature on the contemporary period, inter alia, Michael Lewis, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (New York: Norton, 2010); Matt Taibbi, "Eric Holder, Wall Street Double Agent, Comes in From the Cold," *Rolling Stone*, July 8, 2015, [www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/eric-holder-wall-street-double-agent-comes-in-from-the-cold-20150708](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/eric-holder-wall-street-double-agent-comes-in-from-the-cold-20150708).

12 For a discussion of how socioeconomic change contributed to electoral change in the late twentieth century, see Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*, chaps. 5–6 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

effects are all the more pronounced. Very likely, the electoral instability of the current era reflects the new issues and problems created by the socioeconomic changes of the past half century. In fact, electoral instability probably bears a complex cause-and-effect relationship with the existence of serious socioeconomic problems.

Notice that “great presidents” do not seem to govern during periods of unstable party control. Rutherford B. Hayes, Chester Arthur, and Benjamin Harrison do not lead any historian’s ranking, nor do Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan from the pre-Civil War divided government period when the country was being torn apart by the forces of sectionalism and slavery. Lincoln’s election in 1860, however, inaugurated fourteen years of unified Republican government, as did McKinley’s in 1896. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1932 victory did the same for the Democrats. Electoral stability may increase the likelihood that successive administrations of the same party can successfully meet the challenges of their time; conversely, electoral instability may prevent them from doing so. Thus, electoral instability may be both cause and consequence of societal problems. The tensions that fracture existing electoral coalitions encourage political entrepreneurs to explore new opportunities, contributing to instability. New problems and issues create opportunities to construct new majorities.

The late nineteenth century era of electoral instability ended when the Democratic Party was captured by a populist insurgency led by William Jennings Bryan. The party adopted an anti-establishment populist platform, and its Republican opponents moved to co-opt elements of the Democratic coalition with an alternative vision of a prosperous industrial future. The result was a thoroughgoing defeat for the Democrats. Importantly, the Republican majority delivered on its promises, at least well enough to hold its coalition together for most of three decades. We suspect that if the current era is to end, it will end similarly—when one party wins a decisive victory, restrains the temptation to overreach, delivers a satisfactory performance, and holds its majority together for a decade or more. The critical question is if and when that will happen.<sup>13</sup>

The troubling difference between these two periods more than a century apart is that our times are arguably more dangerous than those in the late nineteenth century. Then Britannia still ruled the waves. The United States could free ride in international affairs as the rest of the free world free rides on America today. And while terrorism—domestic and international—was not uncommon, weapons of mass destruction were not the threat they are today.<sup>14</sup> In economics, the country was growing rapidly during the Era of Indecision—

---

13 This is probably the best case scenario. In an earlier period of electoral instability, 1840–1860, eleven elections resulted in seven different patterns of institutional control. That period ended, of course, with the collapse of the party system in the 1860 elections followed by the Civil War.

14 In my experience one of the consequences of the transformation of history teaching in American schools is that students are generally unaware of the frequency of nonracial violence in the United States. See Hugh Davis



how to dispose of the federal budget surplus was a major political issue (seriously). In contrast, economic stagnation characterizes the economy today. The United States could afford twenty years of political chaos in the late nineteenth century before a new majority emerged. It remains to be seen whether we can do so today.<sup>15</sup>

That is the somber background of the election next week.

---

Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, *The History of Violence in America* (New York: Bantam, 1969), especially chaps. 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 15, and 16, and the appendix.

15 Nearly forty years if we start the Era of No Decision in 1860. See Fiorina, *Divided Government*, and Fiorina, "Hiding in Plain Sight."

## *Essay Series*

*An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context*

*Has the American Public Polarized?*

*The Political Parties Have Sorted*

*Party Sorting and Democratic Politics*

*The Temptation to Overreach*

*Independents: The Marginal Members of an Electoral Majority*

*The (Re)Nationalization of Congressional Elections*

*Is the US Experience Exceptional?*

*A Historical Perspective*

*Post-Election*



The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs license 3.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0>.

Hoover Institution Press assumes no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Copyright © 2016 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University



## About the Author



### MORRIS P. FIORINA

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

## Series Overview

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

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

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

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

A final postelection essay will wrap up the series.

---

These essays naturally draw on the work of many people who have contributed to a very active research program. I thank colleagues John Aldrich, Douglas Ahler, Paul Beck, Bruce Cain, James Campbell, Shanto Iyengar, Matthew Levendusky, Sandy Maisel, Paul Sniderman, and Guarav Sood, whose questions forced me to sharpen various arguments; and David Brady in particular for almost daily conversations about the matters covered in the posts that follow.