An Era of Tenuous Majorities

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The United States is currently experiencing an almost unprecedented period of electoral instability. This essay describes this important feature of contemporary politics and sets the stage for later essays that describe and attempt to explain current developments and trace their consequences for American government.

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Series No. 1

The United States is one of a minority of world democracies that elect their chief executives independently of the legislature. The United States is even more unusual in having two equally powerful chambers of the legislature, separately elected for different terms of office. Moreover, as British analyst Anthony King notes, the two-year term of members of the US House of Representatives is the shortest among world democracies, where terms of four to five years are common.[1] Putting all this together, a US national election every two years can generate any one of eight patterns of institutional control of the presidency, House, and Senate (D = Democratic, R = Republican):

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

This essay extends an argument first outlined in Morris P. Fiorina, "America's Missing Moderates," *The American Interest* 8, no. 4 (March/April 2013): 58–67.

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

The 2004 elections generated pattern 1, unified Republican control under President George W. Bush, but the Democrats captured both houses of Congress two years later, moving the country to pattern 4. The 2008 elections generated pattern 5, unified Democratic control under President Barack Obama, but the Republicans took back the House in 2010, moving the country to pattern 6, and the Senate in 2014, moving the country to pattern 8.

Although an election can produce any of these eight patterns of party control, elections are not independent events like coin tosses; rather, they reflect underlying cleavages that tend to persist over time. Thus, elections in any historical period tend to produce only a few patterns of control. Consider the period known to political historians as the Third Party System. After the devastating depression of the mid-1890s, the Republicans captured the presidency and both chambers of Congress in 1896: see pattern 1, RRR. They repeated that feat in the next six elections: for fourteen consecutive years the GOP maintained full control of the national government. A split between progressive and conservative factions of the Republican Party enabled the Democrats to capture the House of Representatives in the 1910 midterm elections and to elect Democrat Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and reelect him in 1916. But the Republicans regained unified control in 1920 and maintained it for the next four elections. As table 1 summarizes, the Republicans enjoyed full control of the federal government for twenty-four of the thirty-four years between the 1896 and 1930 elections; the seventeen elections held during that period produced only four patterns of institutional control.

Following the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, the Republicans lost the House in the elections of 1930 and then lost all three elective institutions in 1932.[2] Like the McKinley Republicans, the New Deal Democrats enjoyed full control for fourteen consecutive years, until they lost Congress in the election of 1946. But they recaptured Congress two years later when Harry Truman was elected in his own right and held it until 1952. As table 2 summarizes, the Democrats controlled all three elective branches for eighteen of the twenty years between the 1932 and 1952 elections; nine out of ten elections produced the same pattern of institutional control.

2. The Republicans actually came out of the November 1930 general election with a one-seat majority in the House, but by the time the new Congress convened, special elections had given a narrow majority to the Democrats.

Table 1: An Era of Republican Majorities

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

Table 2: An Era of Democratic Majorities

	President	*House*	*Senate*
1932	D	D	D
1934	D	D	D
1936	D	D	D
1938	D	D	D
1940	D	D	D
1942	D	D	D
1944	D	D	D
1946	D	R	R
1948	D	D	D
1950	D	D	D
1952	R	R	R

The Republicans under Dwight Eisenhower captured all three branches in 1952 but lost Congress to the Democrats in 1954. So began an era of divided government.[3] Although losing control of Congress in the off-year elections was nothing new historically, the 1956 election that followed was. For the first time in American history the popular vote winner in a two-way presidential race failed to carry the House; only in 1880 had such a winner failed to carry the Senate.[4] An interlude of unified Democratic control occurred from 1960 until 1968,[5] but the 1968 election

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

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

5. Some analysts argue that John Kennedy actually lost the popular vote in 1960—not because of fraud in Illinois as often charged, but because Dixiecrat candidate Harry Byrd's votes were allocated to Kennedy in some Southern states. Various methods of allocating Byrd's votes between Nixon and Kennedy take away the latter's narrow popular vote majority. See Brian Gaines, "Popular Myths about Popular

Table 3: An Era of Different Institutional Majorities

	President	*House*	*Senate*
1954	R	D	D
1956	R	D	D
1958	R	D	D
1960	D	D	D
1962	D	D	D
1964	D	D	D
1966	D	D	D
1968	R	D	D
1970	R	D	D
1972	R	D	D
1974	R	D	D
1976	D	D	D
1978	D	D	D
1980	R	D	R
1982	R	D	R
1984	R	D	R
1986	R	D	D
1988	R	D	D
1990	R	D	D
1992	D	D	D

marked a resumption of the pattern first observed in the 1950s, when split control of the presidency and Congress became the norm. As table 3 summarizes, between 1954 and 1992 thirteen of twenty elections split control of the presidency and Congress between the parties; after 1968, only four years of unified control during the Carter presidency interrupted what otherwise would have been a twenty-four-year pattern of divided party control under a Republican president. Significantly, however, while government control usually was split during this forty-year period, institutional control remained relatively stable. The Democrats controlled the House throughout the period and the Senate for all but six years. Meanwhile, the Republicans won the presidency seven times in ten tries, including three by landslides, with only a narrow victory by Jimmy Carter in 1976 interrupting what might well have been a string of six consecutive Republican victories.[6] Nineteen elections produced only three different patterns of institutional control.

As a consequence, even during this long period of divided government there still was a large degree of predictability. With Republicans generally in control of the

Vote–Electoral College Splits," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34, no. 1 (March 2001): 71–75; Gordon Tullock, "Nixon, Like Gore, also Won Popular Vote, but Lost Election," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 37, no. 1 (January 2004): 1–2.

6. In retrospect, Carter's narrow victory looks like something of a fluke. He barely defeated the Republican incumbent, Gerald Ford, who had been appointed to the vice presidency upon the resignation in disgrace of Vice President Spiro Agnew and who then ascended to the presidency upon the resignation in disgrace of President Richard Nixon. Ford then committed the electorally harmful action of pardoning Nixon.

executive branch tax increases were unlikely; with Democrats in control of Congress, spending cuts were unlikely.[7] This was bad news for the budget, but the parameters within which deals would be struck were generally understood.

Table 4: An Era of Unstable Majorities

	President	*House*	*Senate*
1992	D	D	D
1994	D	R	R
1996	D	R	R
1998	D	R	R
2000	D/R	R	Tie
2002	R	R	R
2004	R	R	R
2006	R	D	D
2008	D	D	D
2010	D	R	D
2012	D	R	D
2014	D	R	R

Bad news for the budget was good news for Ross Perot, who made budget deficits an issue in the 1992 election. Although it is doubtful that Perot cost George H. W. Bush the election, he probably didn't help.[8] The reestablishment of unified Democratic control under Bill Clinton began a two-decade long (and counting) period of electoral outcomes that defy generalizations like those describing the three previous eras. Juxtaposed against the relatively stable institutional majorities that characterized the three previous eras, since 1992 the country has experienced an era of unstable institutional majorities. The Democrats have held the presidency for sixteen of the twenty-four years; but neither party has held the office longer than eight years, and the popular vote margins have been narrow. Even the reelected presidents (Bush in 2004 and Obama in 2012) have won by relatively narrow margins. Republicans have had an advantage in the House since their 1994 takeover, but the Democrats won majorities twice. Control of the Senate has been almost evenly split. In contrast to the relative stability of institutional control in the three previous eras, the most recent twelve elections have generated six different patterns of control (see table 4).

Let us take a closer look at this recent electoral history. Table 5 lists the unusual developments that have occurred since 1992. The current era began with the 1992 election itself, of course, when Perot won almost 19 percent of the popular vote,

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

8. Tim Hibbitts, "The Man Who Supposedly Cost George H. W. Bush the Presidency," *The Polling Report,* January 30, 2012, www.pollingreport.com/hibbitts1202.htm.

Table 5: An Era of Instability and Pattern-Breaking

1992: Ross Perot—19% / Clinton—43%
1994: Democrats lose House—first time in 40 years
1996: Democratic President / Republican Congress
1998: President's party gains seats in the House!
2000: Chaos
2002: President's party gains seats again!
2004: Consolidation of the Reagan Revolution?
2006: No—Republican thumpin'
2008: The New Deal returns?
2010: No—Democratic shellacking I
2012: Status quo (but historically unprecedented)
2014: Democratic shellacking II

the largest vote for a third place finisher since Theodore Roosevelt split the Republican Party in 1912. Similarly, Bill Clinton became president with 43 percent of the vote, the smallest popular vote percentage for a winner since Wilson's election in 1912. Then in 1994 the Republicans captured Congress for the first time in forty years, beginning a six-year period of divided government with a Democratic president and a Republican Congress—a reversal of the previous pattern of divided government that blew up a number of political science theories that attempted to explain why Americans supposedly liked Republican presidents and Democratic Congresses.[9] After a failed Republican attempt to impeach President Clinton, the Democrats gained House seats in 1998, violating perhaps the hoariest of all generalizations about American politics: that the party of the president loses seats in midterm elections.[10] The bitterly contested 2000 elections followed, with a tie in the Senate and the loser of the popular vote elevated to the presidency via the Supreme Court. In 2002 the party of the president again gained seats in a midterm election.

For a brief period, the 2004 elections appeared to put an end to this electorally turbulent decade. After the elections, Republicans of our acquaintance were dancing in the streets (figuratively, at least). Although George W. Bush did not win by a landslide, in capturing the Senate and the House as well as retaining the presidency the Republicans won full control of the national government for the first time since

9. As pointed out above, the 1956 election was the first time in American history that a victorious president of *any* party failed to carry the House in a two-way race. The 1996 election was the first time in American history that a *Democratic* president failed to carry the House, although Perot received 8 percent of the popular vote, meaning it was not quite a two-way race.

10. This was the second time in thirty-five midterm elections since the Civil War that the midterm loss did not occur (1934 was the other case). A technical quibble: in 1902 the House was expanded and both parties gained seats, but the president's (Republican) party gained only nine seats whereas the opposition Democrats gained twenty-five, so the Republican percentage of the House declined.

the election of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, a half-century earlier.[11] Even in the landslide reelections of Richard Nixon in 1972 and Ronald Reagan in 1984, Republicans had not been able to capture both chambers of Congress.[12] In the afterglow of the elections many Republicans hoped (and some Democrats feared) that Karl Rove had achieved his professed goal of building a generation-long Republican majority, much as Mark Hanna had done for the McKinley Republicans in the 1890s.[13]

Such hopes and fears proved unfounded, however, as a natural disaster (Hurricane Katrina), a series of political missteps,[14] and the weight of an unpopular war in Iraq took their toll on the president's public standing. In the 2006 elections, which President Bush characterized as a "thumpin'" for his party, the Democrats took back the House and the Senate and netted more than three hundred state legislative seats. Republican fortunes continued to deteriorate in the remaining two years of President Bush's term. Following an economic collapse in 2008, the Democrats won the presidency to restore the unified control they had lost in 2000. In the short span of four years, party fortunes had completely reversed.

Now it was the Democrats' turn. Six months after the 2008 elections, Democratic politico James Carville published *40 More Years: How the Democrats Will Rule the Next Generation*.[15] By no means was Carville alone in his triumphalism. After the elections, pundits and even some political scientists speculated that the 2008 presidential outcome was "transformative" in the sense that it represented an electoral realignment similar to that of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s.[16] Again,

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11. Yes, strictly speaking, the Republicans won full control in 2000, but the Democrats won the popular vote that year and the Senate was tied, with Vice President Dick Cheney in the position of tiebreaker. Unlike this messy 2000 outcome, the 2004 elections rendered an unambiguous verdict.

12. Republicans won the Senate in the 1980, 1982, and 1984 elections.

13. Nicholas Lemann, "The Controller," *The New Yorker,* May 12, 2003, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/05/12/the-controller.

14. Political junkies will remember (among other things) the ill-fated proposal of Social Security private accounts, the ill-fated nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court, and the ill-fated proposal to sell US ports to Dubai.

15. James Carville, *40 More Years: How the Democrats Will Rule the Next Generation,* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009. After the 2010 elections, Amazon offered a 60 percent discount on the book.

16. Thomas B. Edsall, "Permanent Democratic Majority: New Study Says Yes," *Huffington Post,* May 14, 2009, www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/13/pemanent-democratic-major_n_186257.html. The November 24, 2008, cover of *Time* magazine pictured a cigarette-smoking Obama as FDR riding in a 1930s car.

such hopes and fears proved unfounded, as the (politically) misplaced priorities of the new administration led to a massive repudiation in the 2010 midterm elections, which President Obama characterized as a "shellacking" for his party.[17] The Democrats lost the House of Representatives and more than seven hundred state legislative seats.[18] The loss of sixty-three seats in the House was the largest midterm seat loss since 1938, three-quarters of a century earlier—a far cry from the return to the 1930s that the Democrats had anticipated after the 2008 victories.

Republicans had high hopes of winning back the presidency and the Senate in 2012. But although President Obama managed the nearly unprecedented feat of winning reelection by a smaller popular vote margin than in his initial election, he beat back the challenge.[19] In other respects, the 2012 elections continued the status quo of a divided national government with a divided Congress, as the Democratic majority hung on in the Senate.[20] Still, looking ahead to 2014, Republican Senate prospects looked bright because the Democrats were defending two-thirds of the seats in the states where elections would be held, with seven of these elections in states carried by Republican Mitt Romney in 2012. In other respects, not a great deal of change was anticipated.

Election Day 2014 came as something of a shock, then, when an unexpected Republican wave rolled across the electoral landscape. Suffering their second consecutive midterm shellacking, the Democrats lost the Senate by a larger margin—nine seats—than most forecasters and prognosticators had predicted. Although the

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17. Namely, cap and trade and health care rather than jobs and the economy. The argument that the administration's priorities were (electorally) misplaced will be advanced in the fifth essay of this series, "The Temptation to Overreach." For an analysis of the electoral costs of these votes, see David Brady, Morris Fiorina, and Arjun Wilkins, "The 2010 Elections: Why Did Political Science Forecasts Go Awry?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 2 (April 2011): 247–250.

18. Not counting New Hampshire. That state's legislature is so large that including it skews the numbers.

19. Obama in 2012 was the first president since Andrew Jackson in 1832 who was reelected by a smaller margin than in his initial election. Two more technical quibbles: first, this factoid does not count Franklin Roosevelt's second and third reelections in 1940 and 1944, only his first in 1936; and second, Grover Cleveland won the popular vote in 1888 by a smaller margin (0.3 of a percentage point) than in his initial election in 1884, but he was not reelected; he lost in the Electoral College.

20. For the second election in a row, Republican primary voters chose several candidates whose out-of-the-mainstream remarks during the campaign very likely cost the party several eminently winnable Senate seats.

Republicans gained only thirteen seats in the House, they now hold more House seats than after any election since 1928. The Democratic House delegation has been reduced to the party's strongholds in the big cities, university towns, and majority-minority districts. Along the same lines, with the gain of another three hundred state legislative seats, the Republicans now control sixty-eight of the ninety-eight partisan state legislatures—again, their strongest showing in the state legislatures since the 1920s.[21]

Table 6: The Era of No Decision: 1874–1894

	President	*House*	*Senate*
1874	R	D	R
1876	D/R*	D	R
1878	R	D	D
1880	R	R	Tie
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*

In sum, beginning in 1992, twelve elections have produced six different patterns of majority control of our three national elective arenas. In particular, the four consecutive elections of 2004–10 produced four different patterns of institutional control; extending that recent series through 2014 yields five distinct patterns in six elections. The United States did not experience any comparable period of majoritarian instability in the entire twentieth century.[22] We need to look back to the so-called period of no decision of the late nineteenth century that preceded the McKinley presidency to find a series of elections that showed this level of electoral instability: the elections of 1886–94 produced five different patterns of institutional control as shown in table 6. This precedent shows several interesting similarities to the present period; I will return to this historical comparison in the ninth essay of this series, "A Historical Perspective."

Some analysts suggest that our recent electoral experience is simply the reverse of the era of divided government; in a mirror image of that period, Democrats now have the edge in presidential contests and Republicans in congressional contests, especially the House. There are similarities, to be sure, but the differences are more noteworthy. As noted above, the past twelve elections have produced six different patterns of

21. Only ninety-eight because Nebraska is unicameral and ostensibly nonpartisan.

22. Fiorina, "America's Missing Moderates."

institutional control, whereas the nineteen elections in the Divided Government Era produced only three patterns. Recent presidential elections have been closely contested; there have been no Democratic landslides comparable to those rung up by Republicans Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan in the Divided Government Era. Conversely, control of the Senate has been up for grabs in recent elections, unlike the pronounced Democratic advantage in the previous era. Some analysts talk about a Republican lock on the House, but only a few years ago—2007–8—the Democrats held a seventy-eight-seat majority.[23] As yet, there is nothing remotely comparable to the four-decade-long string of Democratic House majorities in the second half of the last century.[24]

Looking ahead to November 2016, the electoral uncertainty of the past quarter-century shows no sign of abating. Strong insurgent presidential candidacies have rocked the parties, defeating the establishment in the case of the Republicans and disrupting Hillary Clinton's glide path to the nomination on the Democratic side. With the Republicans defending twenty-four of the thirty-four Senate seats contested in 2016, control likely will flip back to the Democrats should Hillary Clinton win the presidency. Some analysts have sketched out admittedly long-shot paths for the Democrats to win the House in 2016.[25] Thus, the recent outcomes more closely resemble the electorally chaotic late nineteenth century (table 6) when presidential elections were virtual coin tosses: the Republicans had an edge

23. Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "Explaining the Republican 'Lock' on the House," *Sabato's Crystal Ball,* April 23, 2015, www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/explaining-the-republican-lock-on-the-u-s-house-of-representatives/.

24. Many commentators believe that Republican control of redistricting following their 2010 electoral triumph has created an insuperable obstacle for the Democrats. Political scientists generally find redistricting to be a much less important factor than pundits think. The relatively greater geographic concentration of Democratic voters is the primary factor in the current Republican advantage in House elections. For a discussion, see John Sides and Eric McGhee, "Redistricting didn't win Republicans the House," *Washington Post,* February 17, 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/02/17/redistricting-didnt-win-republicans-the-house/.

25. Kyle Kondik, "House 2016: Is it Possible for Republicans to Kick Away Their Majority?" *Sabato's Crystal Ball,* October 8, 2015, www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/house-2016-is-it-possible-for-republicans-to-kick-away-their-majority/; Lisa Hagen and Cristina Marcos, "Ten House Seats Dems Hope Trump Will Tilt," *The Hill,* April 3, 2016, http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/274952-ten-house-seats-dems-hope-trump-will-tilt?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=1087.

in the Senate and the Democrats in the House, so the patterns of institutional control regularly changed.[26]

Interestingly, the instability of institutional control described in the preceding pages contrasts with the stability of voting patterns in recent national elections. Research indicates that individual voters are more consistent in their partisan voting choices now than several decades ago, but this apparent increase in micro-level stability in the electorate contrasts sharply with the increase in macro-level instability shown in the elections of the early twenty-first century.[27] Some analysts suggest that in a deeply divided country, a few centrist (or clueless) voters can swing control of government institutions from one party to the other, but (as shown in the next essay) research does not support the assumption of a deeply divided country.[28] Still others attribute the macro-instability to variations in turnout.[29] Obviously, it is true that in a period of evenly matched parties, shifts in partisan preference or turnout by a relatively small number of voters can change the outcomes of elections; after every close election there are print and online commentaries pointing out how a shift of a few votes in a few states could have changed the Electoral College majority or party control of the Senate.

But my belief is that the observed stability of voting patterns is more contingent than generally appreciated. Political pundits and even many political scientists tend to overlook the political context in which citizens vote. In general, voters are responders, not initiators, in the political process. They react to what parties and candidates

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26. In the five presidential elections between 1876 and 1892, no candidate reached 51 percent of the popular vote and four winners received less than 50 percent. Two plurality losers won Electoral College majorities, something that did not happen again until 2000.

27. E.g., Larry Bartels, "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1 (January 2000): 35–50. It is unclear whether the impact of partisanship itself has strengthened or whether factors associated with partisanship have become stronger and more consistent (see essay no. 3, upcoming), but there is little doubt that partisan consistency in voting has increased, at least for Democrats. With the sole exception of the 1964 elections Republicans have always been very consistent. See Samuel Abrams and Morris Fiorina, "Party Sorting: The Foundations of Polarized Politics," in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization,* ed. James Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 113–129.

28. E.g., Michael Kazin, "The Trouble with Independents," *New Republic,* April 25, 2011, www.newrepublic.com/article/not-even-past/87379/republican-democrats-independents-dewey-lippmann.

29. Samuel Best, "Why Democrats Lost the House to Republicans," CBS, November 3, 2010, www.cbsnews.com/news/why-democrats-lost-the-house-to-republicans/.

say and do. More important, they can only choose between the candidates the parties nominate.

Suppose that every Saturday night you and your partner go to dinner at a restaurant that serves only two entrées: beef and chicken.[30] Every week you order beef and your partner orders chicken. Many of today's political pundits would infer that you are strongly committed to beef and your partner is similarly committed to chicken. They predict that next week you will choose beef and your partner will choose chicken as you always do. But suppose next week the waiter tells you that the beef entrée is liver. On reflection you decide to have chicken. Think of George McGovern as liver. Although you may have a general preference for beef (Democrats), that general preference may not extend to every specific instance of it like, say, liver (McGovern). Alternatively, imagine that the waiter tells you that in addition to the beef and chicken entrées, salmon is being served tonight. Both of you happily order the salmon. Think of Ross Perot (or Donald Trump) as salmon. Between beef and chicken, you generally prefer beef and your partner chicken. But if salmon is on the menu, it's the preferred dish for both of you. The point of these fanciful analogies is to emphasize that our choices depend on the alternatives that are offered. Our choices between beef and chicken did not reflect only our culinary preferences but also that they were the only two alternatives available to us. The same holds for choices between candidates.

If each party nominates a nearly identical candidate from one election to the next, there is little reason to expect voters to change their votes every four years (other things being equal). Democrats Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004 received virtually identical percentages of the popular vote. In contrast, the difference between the popular vote for Democrats George McGovern in 1972 and Jimmy Carter in 1976 was 12.6 percentage points. Does this significant difference between the 1970s and the 2000s mean that swing voters had disappeared and the country was much more set in its partisan ways in the 2000s than in the 1970s? Possibly, but it would be crazy to ignore the fact that Al Gore and John Kerry were much more similar Democrats than were George McGovern and (post-presidency) Jimmy Carter.[31] Moreover, Gore

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

31. The current image of Jimmy Carter is that of a liberal Democrat, but in 1976 he was viewed as a respectable alternative to George Wallace. "Carter would not have been the establishment's first choice as a nominee, but as a less toxic conservative he had the best chance to defeat Wallace in major

and Kerry were running against the same Republican, George W. Bush, whereas McGovern and Carter faced different Republican opponents—Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. That Carter won the presidency four years after McGovern lost in a landslide may not mean that voters were less partisan in the 1970s (although they may have been) but only that they had very different alternatives to choose from than voters do today, when most Democratic candidates look pretty much the same, as do most Republicans.

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

My argument, to be developed in later essays, is that party sorting is the key to understanding our current political turbulence. At the higher levels the parties have sorted; each party has become more homogeneous internally and more distinct from the other. Voter behavior does not change much because the alternatives voters face do not change much. Most voters, however, are not as well-sorted as party elites and many voters are not partisan at all; hence, they are increasingly dissatisfied with the choices the political system offers.

With close electoral competition between two ideologically well sorted parties, political overreach has become endemic, resulting in predictable electoral swings. By overreach I mean simply that a party governs (or attempts to) in a manner that reflects the preferences of its base but alienates the marginal members of its electoral majority, who then withdraw their support in the next election. Overreach is not new, but a number of developments have made it a normal feature of politics today. The consequence is unstable majorities.

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contests on their shared home turf in the South. Some of the more moderate and liberal candidates stayed away from the Florida primary to benefit Carter, who won there." PrimaryCaucus (a map-based history of the presidential nominating process), https://sites.google.com/site/primarycaucus/home/democrats1976.

Before developing that argument, I will first post two essays that describe the contemporary American electorate, correct some common misconceptions about that electorate, and describe some of the ways in which it has changed (or not) since the mid-twentieth century.

Next: Has the American Public Polarized?

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, 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.

Essay Series

An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context

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Series Overview

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

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

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

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

A final postelection essay will wrap up the series.

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