

# The Temptation to Overreach

*Today's parties succumb to the temptation to overreach when in control of an institution. By overreach I mean simply that they attempt to govern in a manner that alienates the marginal members of their electoral majority. Overreach has two components: (1) adopting policies and positions favored by the party base that are more extreme than those favored by marginal supporters and (2) prioritizing issues that are important to the party bases but much less so to marginal supporters. The close party balance encourages a go-for-broke mentality when a party gains control of an institution. The resulting overreach leads to a loss of support in the next election, which contributes to unstable majorities.*

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*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; . . . The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."—William Butler Yeats*

*"[I]t's hard not to think sometimes that the center won't hold and that things might get worse."  
—Barack Obama*

Essay 1 described the currently prevailing but historically unusual instability of controlling majorities in the elected branches of the national government: in recent decades, especially since 2004, party control of the presidency, Senate, and House of Representative has fluctuated to a degree not seen since the late nineteenth century. Even sweeping party victories like those that occurred in 2004 and 2008 have been followed by sharp reversals two years later. Having described party sorting and some of its consequences in the preceding chapters, this essay considers how party sorting underlies the insecure majorities that characterize national politics today.

No single factor explains the broad patterns that characterize early twenty-first-century politics, and electoral outcomes in particular states, districts, and localities have numerous specific causes. But my contention is that a significant component of the national pattern of majoritarian instability stems from today's close party divide combined with today's ideologically well-sorted parties. Briefly, neither party can win control without significant support from nonaligned citizens and even some defectors from the other party. But to attract those marginal supporters who are necessary for victory, the parties generally must soften some of their core positions and downplay some of the issues of most concern to their base supporters. After the election, however, base pressures reassert themselves, and

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Quotations are from William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*; and President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Memorial Service for Fallen Dallas Police Officers," July 12, 2016, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/12/remarks-president-memorial-service-fallen-dallas-police-officers](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/12/remarks-president-memorial-service-fallen-dallas-police-officers).



the party in office operates in a manner that alienates marginal members of its electoral coalition. In short, the interaction between the close party divide and today's well-sorted parties leads to "overreach," with predictable electoral repercussions.<sup>1</sup> The center *does* hold, frustrating the governing attempts of both parties.

### The Close Party Divide

Figure 8 of essay 2 charts the partisanship of the American electorate. To review, since the Reagan era the national pattern has been relatively stable. Today, self-identified Republicans make up a bit less than 30 percent of the eligible electorate, Democrats about 35 percent, and independents about 40 percent.<sup>2</sup> When turnout is factored in, the proportions become closer, especially in midterm elections. The smallest partisan grouping, Republicans, turns out at the highest rate, whereas the largest grouping, independents, turns out at the lowest rate, with the Democrats in between. Thus, very roughly, the party divide in the electorate over the past three decades has been close to one-third/one-third/one-third with some year-to-year fluctuation (Republicans up in 2004, Democrats up in 2008).<sup>3</sup> The implication is clear. In contrast to, say, the 1950s, when Democrats could have won the presidency—hypothetically—with only the votes of self-identified Democrats, neither party today can win with only its own adherents.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as shown in the next essay, it is almost a necessary condition for a winning party to get a majority of the vote among independents. When this condition of close party balance combines with the sorted parties of today, it produces an increasingly common tendency for parties to overreach, leading in turn to the observed pattern of flip-flopping majorities.

### Overreach

By overreach I mean simply that after it wins control of an elected institution, particularly when it wins control of all three elected institutions, a party attempts to

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1 Although used in slightly different ways, the term is common in the literature. See, for example, George C. Edwards, *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). The general idea also runs through the works of James Stimson, e.g., *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

2 Once again I note that the status of independents is somewhat controversial. The next essay addresses this subject.

3 The Pew Research Center provides an alternative picture of the electorate based on ideology rather than partisanship. According to the Pew Political Typology, the Partisan Anchors comprise 36 percent of the eligible electorate (43 percent of registered voters), divided 22 percent conservative, 10 percent liberal. A majority of the electorate—57 percent of registered voters—falls into Pew's Less Partisan, Less Predictable categories. While this ideological distribution may be slightly more tilted to the right than the partisan distribution, conservatives, the largest group, still are nowhere near a majority. Andrew Kohut, "The Political Middle Still Matters," Pew Research Center, August 1, 2014, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/01/the-political-middle-still-matters/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/01/the-political-middle-still-matters/).

4 Since Republican Dwight Eisenhower won in 1952 and 1956, the Democrats obviously did not hold all of their partisans when the latter entered the voting booths.

govern in a manner that alienates the marginal members of its electoral majority.<sup>5</sup> Most commonly, a party that wins an election with the support of independents and some of the more loosely attached adherents of the opposition party overreaches by attempting to impose more extreme policies and/or a more partisan agenda than marginal voters anticipated. In consequence the party suffers losses among these marginal supporters in the next election. Although he does not use the term, a recent study by Wlezien provides a statistical description of overreach in the post-World War II United States. Earlier research by Wlezien established that public opinion in America has a thermostatic quality.<sup>6</sup> That is, when the Democrats win control of the government, public opinion moves in a conservative direction, and when Republicans win, public opinion moves in a liberal direction, the obvious implication being that Democratic administrations are more liberal than the median voter wants, and Republican administrations more conservative. Wlezien's latest research shows that the loss in electoral support for an incumbent party is proportional to the net liberalism of laws passed by Congress during the party's hold on the presidency, relative to measures of median public opinion.<sup>7</sup> The marginal voters are located near the center in a policy or ideological space, of course, between the two parties which stake out positions to the left and right. Put simply, the more a party's record and platform depart from the median, the greater the electoral loss.

Overreach is probably a more common danger in a two-party, single-member, simple-plurality (SMSP) electoral system like that in the United States than in multiparty proportional representation (PR) systems like those that exist in a majority of world democracies.<sup>8</sup> As I noted in essay 3, as the American parties sorted, they have come to resemble the ideologically coherent parties that have long characterized European politics. In commenting on this development, most analysts have focused on the increased likelihood for stalemate such ideological parties pose in a governmental system rife with

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5 Martin Gilens concludes *ceteris paribus* that policy responsiveness is weakest when majority party control is strongest, consistent with our notion of overreach. He suggests, however, that uncertainty about future control will lead parties to be more responsive to popular preferences, whereas I argue the opposite below. Martin Gilens, *Affluence & Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*, chap. 7 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

6 Christopher Wlezien, "The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending," *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 4 (November 1995): 981–1000.

7 Christopher Wlezien, "Policy (Mis)Representation and the Cost of Ruling: The Case of US Presidential Elections," 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/files/2015/04/Wlezien-Policy-Misrepresentation-and-the-Cost-of-Ruling-for-distribution.pdf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/files/2015/04/Wlezien-Policy-Misrepresentation-and-the-Cost-of-Ruling-for-distribution.pdf).

8 Systems like that in the United States are referred to by the acronym SMSP—single-member, simple-plurality. Whichever person wins a simple plurality of the vote in each electoral district (state, congressional district, state legislative district, etc.) wins the office. A majority of world democracies use some version of proportional representation. There are many variations of the latter.



veto points like ours.<sup>9</sup> That is, in parliamentary systems which tend to be institutionally simpler than the US government, the government rules, but in our decentralized system the verb “rule” rarely is appropriate.<sup>10</sup> An independently elected executive and bicameral legislature make divided party control possible. The Senate filibuster, independent courts, federalism, and other features of American institutional structure pose further obstacles for governing majorities. These observations are widely accepted, but I believe that there is another important consequence of the development of European-style parties in the United States that is less often recognized.

In PR systems, one party rarely governs alone. Such systems generally have multiple parties, no one of which wins a majority of seats in parliament, so parties usually must enter coalitions to form a government, as shown in table 1.<sup>11</sup> Such coalitions constitute something of a natural brake on overreach. While each party in the coalition would like to implement its ideologically most preferred policies, there will be less support for those policies among other parties in the coalition; moreover, the latter may fear the electoral consequences of any coalition member overreaching. When the governing coalition does agree to act, it does so with the support of a majority of the parliament that represents a majority of the electorate (because of proportional representation).<sup>12</sup>

Two-party SMS systems, in contrast, “manufacture” majorities. Whoever wins the most votes wins the contest. In the limit, just over 25 percent of the electorate could elect a majority of the legislature or parliament.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a majority party hypothetically could implement policies that were favored by much less than a majority of the electorate. That is essentially the definition of overreach.

I emphasize that the term overreach is used here in a value-neutral sense. By definition an overreach is electorally costly, but not necessarily bad from the standpoint of some moral or ethical standard. For example, after the landslide Democratic victory in 1964, the 89th

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9 Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than It Looks; How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

10 In retrospect, the responsible two-party system of the United Kingdom for most of the twentieth century now seems to be something of an anomaly among world democracies, despite being taken as an ideal type by some political scientists of an earlier generation.

11 Michael Laver and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Making and Breaking Governments: Cabinets and Legislatures in Parliamentary Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

12 To cite an extreme case, at the time of this writing Germany is governed by a coalition of the two biggest parties, the Christian Democratic bloc and the Social Democrats. One can hardly imagine how the US Congress might operate if it were organized by a coalition of Republicans and Democrats.

13 Just over 50 percent of the voters in just over 50 percent of the districts. Extreme distortions happen in practice, not just in theory. In the 2015 British general election, the Tories under David Cameron won an absolute majority of seats in Parliament despite winning only 36 percent of the popular vote.

**Table 1. Most Advanced Democracies  
Have Coalition Governments**

	<i># of Parties in Governing Coalition</i>	<i># of Parties with Seats but Not in the Governing Coalition</i>
Australia	4	5
Austria	2	8
Belgium	4	8
Czech Republic	3	4
Denmark	2 (6)	5
Finland	4	6
France	4	13
Germany	3	2
Ireland	2	8
Italy	6	6
Japan	5	7
Luxembourg	3	3
Netherlands	2	10
Poland	2	5
Spain	1	5
Sweden	2	6
United Kingdom	2	14

*Note: Denmark has two parties in the governing coalition (Social Democrats and Social Liberal Party) with six ancillary parties supporting it but they are in neither the actual governing or opposition coalitions.*

**Source:**

UN, CIA World Factbook, and representative parliament sites. Current as of April 2015.

importance of hard work and individual responsibility and promised an administration that would reform welfare and be tough on crime—issues that had put the Democrats on the defensive for two decades. Although the Democrats won full control of the national government, Clinton received only 43 percent of the popular vote in a three-way election. Despite his centrist campaign appeals and winning only a minority of the vote, however, the new Clinton administration adopted a traditional Democratic agenda, including

Congress produced a series of landmark legislative enactments. But for their efforts, the Democrats lost forty-seven seats in the House of Representatives and four in the Senate in the 1966 elections. Then (with the Vietnam War and urban disorder added to the mix), they lost more seats in both chambers as well as the presidency in 1968. This was political overreach in the sense that I am using the term, but I doubt that many Americans today would say that passage of the Voting Rights Act and Medicare was a bad thing to do.<sup>14</sup> History can judge the moral merits of political overreaches; we are focusing here on the electoral costs when overreaches occur.

As the example of the Johnson administration suggests, overreaches are nothing new, but they were once something that generally happened in the aftermath of an electoral landslide. Now they have become standard operating procedure for today's parties. What follows are some recent examples.

In 1992 Bill Clinton led the Democrats out of the electoral wilderness where they had wandered since 1968. During the campaign Clinton emphasized the

<sup>14</sup> Of course, other Great Society initiatives were and remain matters of continuing partisan controversy. Consistent with this discussion of overreach, Gilens concludes that policy responsiveness to the public was quite low in the Johnson years. *Affluence & Influence*, 221–229.



an attempt to overhaul the health care system, an effort that failed completely. The result of this overreach was Democratic calamity in the 1994 elections. The Republicans under Newt Gingrich gained fifty-four seats in the House of Representatives to win control of that body for the first time in forty years and with a net gain of ten seats in the Senate won control of that body as well. In the year after the election, many in the commentariat viewed President Clinton as a mere placeholder.<sup>15</sup> The consensus held that Republican Senate Leader Robert Dole was the “grown-up” in Washington and only the formality of the next election remained before President Dole took office.

But Newt Gingrich did not draw the obvious lesson from the Clinton administration’s overreach. He resurrected Clinton’s political fortunes and sank Dole’s by using his House majority in an overreach of his own. A battle over cutting the federal budget led the federal government to shut down twice in the winter of 1995–96, with negative consequences for the Republican Party in the court of public opinion. Despite the monumental Republican victory in the 1994 elections, that result had by no means indicated that a majority of voters wanted cuts in popular programs like Medicare. The consequence of the Republican overreach was an easy Clinton reelection in 1996.

In 2004 the Republicans won full control of the national government for the first time in a half-century. Given his narrow popular vote margin, many observers were surprised by the assertive tone adopted by President Bush. In his post-election news conference, he stated, “I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it.”<sup>16</sup> The president announced that the United States would follow a freedom agenda in the international arena—the use of American power to actively promote democracy around the world. And in the domestic arena the president proposed the introduction of Social Security private accounts. Historically, presidents who win by large margins are likely to claim mandates, those who win by smaller margins not so much.<sup>17</sup> Today, as the Bush example illustrates, the simple fact of winning may be taken as a mandate.

More attuned to the next election than the lame-duck president, the Republican congressional majorities let the president’s proposal to adopt Social Security personal accounts die a quiet death, and the Republican “thumpin’” in 2006 put an end to any

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15 In one widely noted post-election press conference, President Clinton argued that he was still “relevant.” *Time* magazine, “Clinton ‘The President is Relevant,’” April 18, 1995, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,3632,00.html>.

16 Marc Sandalow, “Bush claims mandate, sets 2nd-term goals/‘I earned capital in this campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 5, 2004, [www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Bush-claims-mandate-sets-2nd-term-goals-1-2637116.php](http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Bush-claims-mandate-sets-2nd-term-goals-1-2637116.php).

17 Patricia H. Conley, *Presidential Mandates: How Elections Shape the National Agenda* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

lingering talk of a Bush mandate. In his memoirs, President Bush acknowledged the likelihood that he had overreached: “On social security, I may have misread the electoral mandate.”<sup>18</sup> The American people rarely give mandates; generally they hire you on probation and renew your contract if you perform satisfactorily.<sup>19</sup>

As James Carville and numerous others noted, the 2008 election results were superficially consistent with the idea of a Democratic mandate, especially when considered together with the 2006 “thumpin’” of the Republicans. But most political scientists took a more cautious position, pointing to the ongoing war in Iraq, President Bush’s approval ratings (which were flirting with historical lows in 2008), and the September stock market crash more than any desire on the part of the American public to embark on a new liberal era as principal factors underlying the Democratic victories.

The warning signs of Democratic overreach were apparent early on. The night that he claimed the nomination Barack Obama stated,

[G]enerations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children . . . that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs for the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal.”<sup>20</sup>

Had I been advising Obama I would have suggested replacing the semicolon in the preceding passage with a period and striking everything about the oceans and the planet that followed. The remarks suggest an administration itching to overreach, which in fact it did.<sup>21</sup>

At a time when many Americans felt that their economic condition was desperate, the new administration focused on issues of more concern to the Democratic base than the larger public. In an effort to address global warming, the House passed “cap and trade” energy legislation that was unpopular in coal- and oil-producing states. (The Senate, where carbon

18 George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Random House, 2010), 300.

19 And the mandate after landslide elections often is no more than “for God’s sake, do something different.”

20 Huffington Post, “Obama’s Nomination Victory Speech in St. Paul,” June 3, 2008, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/03/obamas-nomination-victory\\_n\\_105028.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/03/obamas-nomination-victory_n_105028.html).

21 Given that most professors spend their days in liberal university environments, I realize that many Democrats think of Obama as a moderate pragmatist rather than a liberal overreacher. But the opinions that matter are the voters’. According to the Gallup organization, when Obama was elected about 45 percent of the members of the electorate thought they had elected a moderate and similar numbers a liberal (nearly 10 percent thought they had elected a conservative). Nine months later 55 percent thought they had elected a liberal and only 35 percent a moderate—and voter’s remorse began to set in.





interests were stronger, refused to even consider the bill, meaning that some House Democrats had been forced to cast an unnecessary, politically damaging vote.) But the Affordable Care Act obviously was the central element of the Democratic overreach. The legislation never enjoyed majority support in the population (although specific parts of it did), and the Democrats secured passage only via a series of side deals and parliamentary maneuvers that reflected poorly on the legitimacy of the process. An intensive statistical analysis indicated that the Democrats might have saved their House majority—just barely—in 2010 had marginal members of the party not been forced to cast a vote for the Affordable Care Act.<sup>22</sup>

After the 2014 elections Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer of New York created a stir in Democratic circles by stating publicly that his party had embraced the wrong priorities after the 2008 elections.<sup>23</sup> Health care had not been a major concern of the American public, although it was more important to the Democratic base.<sup>24</sup> Instead of putting all their efforts on the financial crisis and the resulting recession, “Democrats blew the opportunity the American people gave them. We took their mandate and put all of our focus on the wrong problem: health care reform.”<sup>25</sup> Schumer’s remarks were criticized by many Democrats, but I believe his analysis was correct.

The health care example makes an important point about overreach that is often overlooked. On reflection there are two components of overreach, although they often occur together. The first, more widely noticed one is the tendency to take more extreme positions on issues than a majority of the public at large favors. Abortion is our running example. As noted earlier, the 2012 Democratic platform plank amounted to “anytime, for any reason,” while the Republican plank amounted to “never, no exceptions.” While majorities of convention delegates supported these positions, 80 percent or more of the American public falls between these extremes. Much of the discussion of polarization in the United States focuses on this first component of overreach.

But Schumer’s comments identify a second, perhaps equally important component. It is not just how parties position themselves on issues, but also which issues they place on the agenda. This second aspect of overreach entails the adoption of priorities that are important to the party base but of secondary importance to the public. The data

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22 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).

23 Schumer also noted that the botched rollout of Healthcare.gov, the Veterans Affairs scandals, and the child migrant border crisis had contributed to a general sense that the administration was incompetent.

24 Ryan D. Enos and Eitan D. Hersh, “Party Activists as Campaign Advertisers: The Ground Campaign as a Principal-Agent Problem,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (May 2015): 263–264.

25 Russell Berman, “Chuck Schumer’s Cure for Democrats,” *The Atlantic*, November 25, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/11/chuck-schumers-cure-for-democrats/383175/>.



**Table 2. The Public's Policy Priorities: January 2013**

	<i>% Saying each is a "Top Priority" for the President and Congress this year</i>
1. Strengthening the economy	86
2. Improving the job situation	79
3. Reducing the budget deficit	72
4. Defending against terrorism	71
5. Making Social Security financially sound	70
6. Improving education	70
7. Making Medicare financially sound	65
8. Reducing health costs	63
9. Helping the poor and needy	57
10. Reducing crime	55
11. Reforming the tax system	52
12. Protecting the environment	52
13. Dealing with the energy problem	45
14. Reducing the influence of lobbyists	44
15. Strengthening the military	41
16. Dealing with the moral breakdown	40
17. Dealing with illegal immigration	39
18. Strengthening gun laws	37
19. Dealing with global trade	31
20. Improving infrastructure	30
21. Dealing with global warming	28

**Source:**

Pew Research Center, "Deficit Reduction Rises on Public's Agenda for Obama's Second Term," January 24, 2013, [www.people-press.org/2013/01/24/deficit-reduction-rises-on-publics-agenda-for-obamas-second-term/](http://www.people-press.org/2013/01/24/deficit-reduction-rises-on-publics-agenda-for-obamas-second-term/).

job? Are my kids getting a decent education? Will Social Security and Medicare be there for me? Are we safe here in our country? As for Obama's priorities, immigration came in at seventeenth on the public's list, guns (only a month after the school massacre at Sandy Hook) at eighteenth, and global warming dead last at twenty-first.

indicate that the priorities of President Obama have been out of step with those of the public for his entire administration, not just the first as Senator Schumer charged. At his 2012 inauguration, Obama focused on issues vital to specific constituencies within his coalition.<sup>26</sup> The president emphasized issues like climate change, gay rights, immigration, gun control, and equal pay for women. Such issues are very important to the Democratic base. Two weeks before the president's inauguration, however, the Pew Research Center asked a representative sample of the American public what they believed should be the most important issues the Congress and the president should work on during the coming year. As table 2 shows, it is striking how little overlap there was between the priorities of the broader public and those enunciated by President Obama.

The priorities of the public were heavily focused on what are generally called "bread and butter" issues—the things that are important in the day-to-day lives of most Americans. Will I keep my

26 Tom Curry, "In second inaugural, Obama appeals to his progressive base," NBC News, January 21, 2013, [http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2013/01/21/16627455-in-second-inaugural-obama-appeals-to-his-progressive-base?lite](http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/01/21/16627455-in-second-inaugural-obama-appeals-to-his-progressive-base?lite).



**Table 3. The 2004 Presidential Election: This Issue Is Extremely or Very Important**

<i>Issue</i>	
Economy	91
Jobs	91
Education	88
Terrorism	87
Health Care	85
Iraq	82
Social Security	79
Taxes	77
Medicare	76
Budget Deficit	74
Foreign Affairs	71
Energy	71
Environment	70
Gay/Lesbian Policy	28

**Source:**

Joseph Carroll, "Economy, Terrorism Top Issues in 2004 Election Vote," Gallup, September 25, 2003, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/9337/economy-terrorism-top-issues-2004-election-vote.aspx>.

I emphasize that I am not arguing that the public's priorities are always the ones that a governing party should follow. That is a normative position that political philosophers have argued about for centuries. Surely there is a place for—indeed, a need for—leadership in a democracy. Farsighted leaders should work to counteract the biases toward short-term thinking and the preference for tangible versus abstract outcomes that seem to be part of human nature. Rather than a normative argument, I am simply observing that leaders who stray too far from the priorities of the public in democratic societies run the risk of becoming former leaders.

As the experience of the Bush administration showed, contemporary Republicans are just as prone to prioritizing issues differently from the way the broader public does. With one war already underway, there was no evidence in the polls that Americans were keen on investing more blood and treasure in pursuit of a freedom agenda, but it was a policy favored by the neoconservative faction of the party. And certainly, there was no widespread public demand for Social Security personal accounts. Further back, a central part of the 2004 Republican campaign was an emphasis on anti-gay-marriage initiatives, an issue

designed to maximize turnout within the evangelical community, although all reputable polls showed that it was of minor import to the public at large (table 3).<sup>27</sup>

The current election season provides numerous examples of a misalignment of party and popular priorities, especially on the Democratic side where Hillary Clinton was pulled to the left by the Sanders challenge. Watching Clinton at a December 2015 town meeting in New Hampshire, journalist Joe Klein notes:

And then she went straight to questions. Dozens were asked. And you might wonder how many concerned the topic of the moment, the need to rethink national security in an era when the terrorists have switched tactics and are attacking low security targets—theaters and restaurants in Paris, Christmas parties in San Bernardino.

<sup>27</sup> And post-election analyses found little evidence that it had any significant effect on the vote. Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 2nd ed., chap. 8 (New York: Pearson, 2006).

**Table 4. The Public's Policy Priorities: January 2016**

	<i>% Saying each is a "Top Priority" for the President and Congress this year</i>
1. Strengthening the economy	75
2. Terrorism	75
3. Education	66
4. Jobs	64
5. Social Security	62
6. Health Care Costs	61
7. Medicare	58
8. Reducing crime	58
9. Budget deficit	56
10. Poor and Needy	54
11. Immigration	51
12. Strengthening the Military	49
13. Environment	47
14. Tax Reform	45
15. Criminal justice reform	44
16. Climate change	38
17. Gun policy	37
18. Dealing with global trade	31

**Source:**

PEW Research Center. "Budget Deficit slips as Public Priority," January 22, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/01/22/budget-deficit-slips-as-public-priority/>.

The answer, as Bill Clinton used to say, was zee-ro. None. Not a single question about national security. Several times Clinton tried to steer her answers toward the topic, but the crowd resisted and it occurred to me that Clinton was actually taking a *risk* with the Democratic base . . .

What were the questions about? Genetically modified food. Climate change. Gun control. Whether Exxon Mobil suppressed information about carbon pollution. Voting rights. Mental health. Student loans. Immigration (pro-family preservation, not border control). Preserving Social Security and Medicare. Taking care of veterans.<sup>28</sup>

As Klein notes, some of these are important issues, but table 4 shows that most ranked far down the list of public priorities measured at about the same time that he was covering the Clinton campaign.

### Why Do Today's Parties Overreach?

Given the availability of the kind of data presented above, as well as a wealth of internal polling data, not to mention the electoral experiences of some two decades, why did Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi (Speaker of the House), and Harry Reid (Senate majority leader) not behave differently in 2009–2010? Why did they overreach in both senses of the term? Today's sorted parties are an important part of the answer. Generally speaking, Democrats build their governing coalitions starting from the left, while Republicans build

28 Joe Klein, "Hillary Clinton and the Democrats' National Security Problem," *Time* magazine, December 11, 2015, <http://time.com/4145735/hillary-clinton-democrats-national-security/>.



their coalitions starting from the right. Since neither party has a majority of the electorate, each must capture enough votes among nonpartisans and otherwise nonaligned citizens—usually a majority of them—to win. Thus, one sees the well-known tendency for nominees to edge toward the political center following primary contests that take place largely on the left and right. (In today’s wired world, where everything said finds its way to the Internet, that time-honored strategy has become increasingly difficult to implement.)

After the elections the vast majority of Americans return to their focus on their nonpolitical lives, leaving the political arena to the political class. But the victors face pressure from their base to enact the core policies and priorities of the party. In today’s sorted parties, this means that Democratic officials face pressures coming almost entirely from the left, while Republican officials face pressures coming almost entirely from the right.<sup>29</sup> Given that activists typically have more extreme views than the public at large (essay 2), the result is more extreme policy positions than favored by the broader public, as in the example of abortion. And given that political activists are often motivated by issues that are not the issues most important to the broader public, the result is a mismatch of priorities, as in the health care example. The result is overreach, followed by backlash at the next election.

Contrast the situation today with that of the unsorted parties of the mid-twentieth century. A Democratic president then could play off disparate elements in the party, telling Southern conservatives that the Northern liberals wouldn’t stand for this, and telling the liberals that the Southerners wouldn’t stand for that. Similarly, a Republican president could steer a course between the Northeastern liberals and the Midwestern conservatives in the party. But after several decades of party sorting, the party bases are now so homogeneous that all the pressures within each party come from the same side, pulling elected officials away from the electorally safer center ground.

Here is where the close party balance comes in again. The close balance between today’s sorted parties reinforces the pressures coming from the left or the right in each party.<sup>30</sup> If a party is secure in its status as a majority party, it can afford to proceed deliberately, to gradually build support for a legislative initiative until adopting it no longer is an

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29 For many elected officials in today’s well-sorted parties, such pressures simply reinforce what they would personally like to do anyway.

30 Frances Lee provides an excellent analysis of the consequences of the close party divide for congressional operations today. In addition to the general consequences we discuss, she emphasizes that the goal of winning the next election leads the congressional parties to posture rather than legislate and to eschew bipartisan compromises. Frances Lee, “Toward a Less Responsible Two-Party System? Problems of Governance in a Time of Uncertain Majorities,” paper presented at the Congress and History Conference, Columbia University, June 21–22, 2013; Frances Lee, “Legislative Parties in an Era of Alternating Majorities,” in *Governing in a Polarized Age: Elections, Parties, and Political Representation in America*, ed. Alan Gerber and Eric Schickler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

overreach. But if you cannot count on long-term majority control, better strike while the iron is hot—you may not have another opportunity for a long time. Given the close party balance, the party could lose the next election even if it does not overreach. A scandal, a foreign policy crisis, an economic downturn not of the administration's making—any unfavorable development might result in loss of control. Given this uncertainty about the electoral future, you might as well go for broke even if you suffer the consequences in the next election. I would love to know whether Speaker Nancy Pelosi would have driven health care through Congress had she known that the price would be a Republican House majority for six years and possibly longer. It would not be surprising if her answer were yes.<sup>31</sup>

These developments are further reinforced by two additional considerations. First, for most of American history the primary goal of parties was to win office and retain it. Policy implementation was sometimes important, but generally secondary to winning elections. Contemporary parties are different. Partly as a consequence of participatory reforms that changed the kind of people who constitute the parties, many of those active in today's parties consider material goals—winning office and all the perquisites that go with it—to be of relatively less importance than achieving desired policy ends.<sup>32</sup> Scholars of political parties have recently characterized contemporary parties as coalitions of “policy demanders.”<sup>33</sup> Given the relatively greater importance of policy goals, the members of today's party bases are willing to run larger electoral risks—to overreach—than was the case when the party bases were less well-sorted.<sup>34</sup> And they meet little

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31 According to the *New York Times*, Pelosi told President Obama, “We’ll never have a better majority in your presidency in numbers than we’ve got right now,” suggesting that she was well aware of the possible ephemeral nature of her majority. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, Jeff Zeleny, and Carl Hulse, “The Long Road Back,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2010, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C05EFDC1039F932A15750C0A9669D8B63&pagewanted=all>. Thanks to Eileen Burgin for pointing out this passage.

32 This is an argument developed in two earlier essays. Morris Fiorina, “Extreme Voices: A Dark Side of Civic Engagement,” in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, ed. Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 395–425; Morris Fiorina, “Parties, Participation, and Representation in America: Old theories face new realities,” in *Political Science: State of the Discipline*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 511–541. For a recent argument that a little participatory reform is a good thing, but too much can be harmful, see Bruce E. Cain, *Democracy More or Less: America’s Political Reform Quandary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

33 Kathleen Bawn, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (September 2012): 571–597; Hans Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

34 In fact, they may be perfectly content to lose. This is not a phenomenon unique to the United States. In 2015 British Labour Party activists elected as their leader a far-left MP universally viewed as a certain loser in the next general election. One poll reported that only 10 percent of his supporters believed that electability was an important consideration in deciding to support him. Alex Massie, “The Labour Party’s Two Word Suicide Note,”



intra-party opposition because the parties are even more well-sorted at the higher levels of involvement.

A final consideration that increases the likelihood that today's sorted parties overreach is more impressionistic on our part—anecdotal, really. But in talking to activists and reading their blogs and other statements, it seems clear that many of them sincerely believe that if their party only nominated a true conservative (liberal), a large majority of the country would turn out and elect him or her. To such claims, most political scientists have a one-word answer: Goldwater (McGovern). But as discussed in essay 2, although normal Americans inhabit heterogeneous information environments (to the extent that they are aware of the media at all), the highly involved members of the political class do inhabit homogeneous communications networks—*everyone* they talk to thinks as they do.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, their partisan and ideological blinders make them consider the other side so far out of the mainstream that people could not possibly support them if only they were given a true liberal (conservative) to vote for.

For all of the above reasons, today's sorted parties competing for the votes of a closely divided electorate find the temptations and pressures to overreach nearly irresistible. Consequently, they do not hold their majorities for very long.

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*The Daily Beast*, September 12, 2015, [www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/12/labour-s-two-word-suicide-note.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/12/labour-s-two-word-suicide-note.html).

35 A study of delegates to the 2008 presidential nominating conventions—extremely high-level political activists—reports extreme partisan segregation of the delegates' organizational networks. Michael T. Heaney, Seth E. Masket, Joanne M. Miller, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, "Polarized Networks: The Organizational Affiliations of National Party Convention Delegates," *American Behavioral Scientist* 56 (October 19, 2012): 1654–1676.

## *Essay Series*

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## About the Author



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

## Series Overview

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

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

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

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

A final postelection essay will wrap up the series.

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