The 2016 Presidential Election—An Abundance of Controversies

As the polls universally predicted, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote. But contrary to universally held expectations, Donald Trump shocked the political world by breaching the Democrats "blue wall" and winning a majority of the Electoral College. This was only one of myriad controversies associated with the 2016 voting, several of which continue months after the election. Disappointed commentators pronounced that Trump's win was a victory for racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and other social pathologies. As we discuss in the next essay, preliminary analyses indicate that such charges are exaggerations at best. In this essay, we note that the voting in 2016 was little different from that in 2012. But in a majoritarian system like that in the United States, small shifts in votes can have enormous consequences for political control and public policy. The data indicate that millions of Americans faced a choice between two candidates they regarded as extremely unattractive. Far from an endorsement of Trump's more incendiary positions, Americans voted for him in spite of those positions, believing that the alternative was worse.

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Even by the colorful standards of presidential primaries, the 2016 election cycle has been filled with jaw-dropping, head-scratching moments.—Eric Bradner

While the world celebrates and commiserates a Donald Trump presidency, one thing is clear: this will go down as the most acrimonious presidential campaign of all.—Rachel Revesz

Controversial presidential elections are nothing new in American electoral history, 2016 being the latest, but certainly not the first. Despite much apocalyptic commentary, however, the implications of the 2016 election seem less dire than those of some elections held in earlier eras. The four-candidate 1860 election started the country on the path to civil war and the disputed election of 1876 threatened to reignite that conflict. In more recent times, the strong showing of a racist third party in 1968 coupled with political assassinations and civil disorders on a scale not seen since

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Quotations are from Eric Bradner, "13 jaw-dropping moments of the 2016 campaign," CNN, August 10, 2015, www.cnn.com/2015/08/09/politics/2016-campaign-surprise-moments-donald-trump/; and Rachael Revesz, "How the 2016 Presidential Election Was Won: The Timeline, Controversies and Seats that Led to the White House," *The Independent,* November 9,2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections /presidential-election-2016-results-timeline-controversies-quotes-seats-maps-polls-quotes-a7398606.html.

the labor violence of the early twentieth century led some contemporary observers to believe that the country was coming apart.[1] The 2000 Florida electoral vote contest raged for more than two months, threatening a constitutional crisis and deeply dividing partisan activists on both sides. Still, even allowing for the fact that secession and revolution are not seriously on the table, for the sheer number and breadth of the controversies that accompanied it, the 2016 election does seem out of the ordinary.

Parties have nominated flawed candidates before—Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964 and Democrat George McGovern in 1972, for example—but at least since the advent of scientific survey research, no major party has nominated a candidate so wanting in the eyes of the electorate, let alone both doing so simultaneously. Charges of ethnocentrism and racism are as American as apple pie, but in their prevalence and virulence in 2016 (with misogyny added to the toxic mix) they were reminiscent of 1928, if not the late nineteenth century.[2] "Biased media" is a complaint common to all elections, but the retreat from objectivity by the mainstream media in 2016 struck many observers as a significant break with modern journalistic practices.[3] The increasingly visible role of social media like Twitter threatened to further diminish the importance of the legacy media. Swing voters, largely missing in action in recent elections, suddenly reappeared in 2016.[4] Possible foreign intervention in the election was a new development (at least insofar as the United States was the intervenee rather than the intervener), as was FBI involvement (but possibly only because earlier instances did not become public). Meanwhile journalists scrambled to read up on "populism," which had not played such a significant role in American elections since the 1960s. "Class," long ago displaced by discussions of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation in college course syllabi, enjoyed an academic as well as political revival (so did "authoritarianism," another oldie but goodie).[5] All of this was overlaid

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1 William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973).

2 In 1928, the Democratic candidate was Catholic Al Smith of New York. Religious, ethnic, and urban-rural divisions dominated the election. As noted in essay 4, much of the politics of the late nineteenth century revolved around ethno-cultural divisions.

3 See the debate sparked by Jim Rutenberg, "Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism," *New York Times,* August 7, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/business/balance-fairness-and-a-proudly -provocative-presidential-candidate.html?_r=0.

4 Nate Silver, "The Invisible Undecided Voter," *FiveThirtyEight,* January 23, 2017, fivethirtyeight.com/ features/the-invisible-undecided-voter/.

5 Amanda Taub, "The Rise of American Authoritarianism," *Vox,* March 1, 2016, www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424 /trump-authoritarianism; cf. Wendy Rahn and Eric Oliver, "Trump's Voters Aren't Authoritarians, New Research

on a split decision where Hillary Clinton won a clear popular vote plurality and Donald Trump a clear electoral vote majority. The impact of this troubling outcome was probably exacerbated by the sheer shock of a Trump victory when the various polls and "models" assured the political universe that Clinton was a surefire winner: you could take it to the bank.

This essay and the next review some of the aforementioned developments. Such a review is necessarily modest and incomplete, given that in these immediate postelection months the ratio of opinion to research is highly skewed toward the former.

Some Perspective

In the aftermath of every election, commentators vie to explain its meaning. Winners rejoice and losers lament, both often arguing that the key to the outcome was some specific factor supporting their point of view. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, sentiments like these were common among disappointed Clinton supporters:

> "For anyone who voted for Donald Trump, **bald-faced racism** and sexism were not the deal-breakers they should have been. Hatred of women was on the ballot in November, and it won." (emphasis in original)[6]

> "Donald Trump has won the presidency, despite an unprecedented level of unfitness and in defiance of nearly every prediction and poll. And he's done this not despite but [sic] because he expressed unfiltered disdain toward racial and religious minorities in the country."[7]

As I will discuss in greater detail in the next essay, many disappointed Clinton supporters made such claims and no doubt many more agreed with them. But imagine an alternative universe in which the Clinton campaign followed Bill Clinton's advice

Says. So What Are They?" *Washington Post,* March 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/09/trumps-voters-arent-authoritarians-new-research-says-so-what-are-they/.

6 Christina Cauterucci, "In 2016 American Was Forced to Face the Reality of Sexual Assault," *Slate,* December 28, 2016, www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/12/28/_2016_was_the_year_america_learned_what_sexual_assault_looks_like.html.

7 Jenee Desmond-Harris, "Trump's Win Is a Reminder of the Incredible, Unbeatable Power of Racism," *Vox,* November 9, 2016, www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/9/13571676/trump-win-racism-power.

to devote more attention and resources to the Rust Belt states, with the result that Hillary Clinton gained 39,000 more votes distributed in such a way that she carried Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin (which Trump won by a bit less than 78,000). This would have given her a comfortable Electoral College majority along with a clear popular vote plurality. Then, in all likelihood, the day-after story line in the media would have been, "Americans reject racism and sexism!"

The larger meaning of a presidential election should not hinge on the distribution of .0006 of the vote in three states. Failing to appreciate that fact led to a widespread loss of perspective among election commentators in the aftermath of the 2016 elections. In a majoritarian electoral system like ours, small changes in the vote can have enormous consequences for party control of our governing institutions and the policies they produce.[8] Turning the sentence around, consequential changes in control of our institutions produced by an election do not imply that the electorate underwent any kind of sea change, which seems to be the assumption made by many of those disappointed by the 2016 outcome. If the US electoral system was a variation of a proportional representation system as in most parliamentary democracies, then ceteris paribus, the verdict among the commentaries would have been that 2016 was a status quo election that produced no significant change from 2012.[9]

So, although there is no discounting the potential consequences of Trump's victory, in itself it provides little basis for concluding that the election reflected some sort of massive shift in the values and beliefs of the American public. As in all elections, the vote reflected a combination of long-term conditions in the country and short-term factors associated with the candidates and the campaigns. In the case of 2016, a substantial portion of the electorate had become increasingly dissatisfied with long-term developments. One candidate (Trump) was positioned to capitalize on this dissatisfaction and the other one (Clinton) was not. Overlaid on these long-term considerations were short-term factors, most important, the two candidates.

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8 Conversely, large changes in the vote can have minimal consequences for institutional control and policy change. Ronald Reagan gained 8 percentage points in the popular vote between 1980 and 1984, but the large Democratic majority in the House diminished by only sixteen seats and the narrow Republican majority in the Senate fell by one.

9 Parliamentary systems have no equivalent to our midterm elections.

The Flight 93 Election[10]

As emphasized in essays 1 and 7, voters can choose only between the alternatives the political parties offer them. If both parties nominate unacceptable candidates, voters will elect an unacceptable candidate.[11]

The media tend to emphasize candidate personality characteristics. Is the candidate authentic, warm, modest, sincere, trustworthy, and moral or their opposites? In general, research indicates that candidate personality characteristics are overrated as influences on the vote. In 1980, for example, voters thought that Jimmy Carter was a peach of a guy personally and Ronald Reagan a somewhat scary prospect, but that did not stop them from replacing what many viewed as a failed president with a risky alternative.[12] To a greater degree than usual, campaign coverage in 2016 revolved around the personas of the two candidates, especially Trump's. Indeed, some Democratic critics of the Clinton campaign complained that it had too little substance and focused too much on driving home the notion that Trump was a horrible human being.[13] Although I recognize the deep admiration for Clinton among her ardent supporters, the data clearly indicate that a substantial portion of the American electorate viewed the election as something akin to *Alien vs. Predator.*[14] Rightfully or wrongfully, the simple fact is that the American public saw both candidates as deeply flawed. According to Gallup, "Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton head into the final hours of the 2016 presidential campaign with the worst election-eve images of any major-party presidential candidates Gallup has measured back to 1956."[15] Figure 10.1

10 Publius Decius Mus, "The Flight 93 Election," *CRB,* September 5, 2016, hwww.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/the-flight-93-election/.

11 Political scientists of a certain vintage will recognize the allusion to V. O. Key Jr., the great mid-twentieth-century political scientist who wrote, "If the people can choose only from among rascals, they are certain to choose a rascal." *The Responsible Electorate* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 3.

12 Morris Fiorina, "You're Likeable Enough, Mitt," *New York Times,* June 7, 2012, campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/07/youre-likable-enough-mitt/. More generally, research finds that voters prioritize candidate qualities that are relevant to governing rather than characteristics that determine whom they'd rather have a beer with. See David B. Holian and Charles L. Prysby, *Candidate Character Traits in Presidential Elections* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

13 A Wesleyan University study of campaign ads reported that the Clinton campaign was imbalanced in just this way. Kyle Olson, "STUDY: Hillary Campaign Most Negative, Least Substantive," *The American Mirror,* March 9, 2017, www.theamericanmirror.com/study-hillary-campaign-negative-least-substantive/

14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xh1TwRilcLo.

15 Lydia Saad, "Trump and Clinton Finish with Historically Poor Images," Gallup, November 8, 2016, www.gallup.com/poll/197231/trump-clinton-finish-historically-poor-images.aspx.

Figure 10.1. Unfavorable Ratings of Major Party Presidential Nominees: 1956–2016
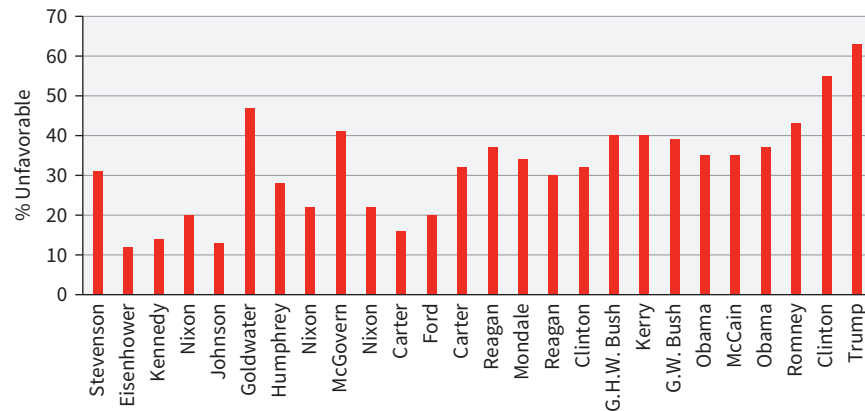
graphs Gallup's candidate "Scalometer," which asks voters to rate the candidates positively or negatively on a 1 to 5 scale.

Before Trump, the most negatively rated Republican candidate was Goldwater in 1964 with a 47-point unfavorable rating. Trump obliterated this long-standing record by 16 points. Before Clinton, the most negatively rated Democratic candidate was McGovern in 1972, with a 41-point unfavorable rating. Not to be outdone, Clinton nearly matched Trump's record-shattering performance by topping McGovern's negatives by 14 points.[16]

Of course, voters can harbor positive or negative feelings about a candidate for reasons other than their personas—namely, the candidate's records, the positions they advocate, the groups who endorse them, and other considerations. Various polls provide more specific measures of candidates' personal characteristics, although they do not provide the longtime series of Gallup and ANES measures. Table 10.1 compares personal ratings of the 2016 candidates. The top panel reports ratings for all adults from the Economist/YouGov survey and the bottom panel only for voters from the exit polls, but the figures are very similar. For many Clinton supporters, her long record of public service was a major reason to support her, but only half the electorate believed that she was qualified to serve as president and had the right temperament to serve. A possible reason for discounting her record is that nearly two-thirds of those who voted considered her dishonest and untrustworthy. Not even one-third of voters believed she was sincere in what she said: Trump's strongest point. Whether the reason was a

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16 On average candidates appear to be evaluated more negatively beginning in the 1980s. A possible explanation is that because the Gallup measure captures policy and performance evaluations as well as personal qualities, it would trend downward after the process of party sorting begins, as partisans expressed increasingly negative evaluations of the other party. See essays 2 and 3.

quarter-century-long Republican campaign of character assassination and trumped-up scandals (as Democrats claimed) or the just desserts from a quarter century of skating on the boundary between the ethical and unethical (as Republicans claimed) are not the issue. Whatever the causes, the negative numbers were the issue.

The figures for Trump are striking in their implications. Only about a third of the electorate considered him qualified to serve, to have the right temperament to serve, and to be honest and trustworthy. Only 16 percent of the voters liked him a lot and nearly half disliked him (Clinton's figures were slightly worse). Yet Trump received 46 percent of the popular vote. Rather than an enthusiastic endorsement of Trump's controversial comments and positions, the conclusion must be that a significant number of Americans cast their vote for him *in spite of* their negative views of him. As noted repeatedly in previous essays, a vote for a candidate does not imply enthusiastic support, only that the voter thinks that candidate is preferable to the alternative. Why was Trump preferable for voters who considered him unqualified to serve? A strong hint from the exit polls comes from the reasons voters gave for their decisions. By a significant margin they chose change over empathy, experience, and judgment, and on that dimension Trump led Clinton—the candidate of continuity—by a margin of 6 to 1. Numerous liberal commentators embraced this interpretation, often expressing it in vivid prose. For Thomas Frank, "She was exactly the wrong candidate for this angry, populist moment. An insider when the country was screaming for an outsider. A technocrat who offered fine-tuning when the country wanted to take a sledge-hammer to the machine."[17] Former MSNBC commentator Krystal Ball wrote, "Voters were offered a choice between a possibility of catastrophe in Trump and a guarantee of mediocrity in Clinton. Clearly, they picked the high-risk bet that they felt at least gave them some chance to escape the certain economic doom that they feel in their current lives."[18]

Table 10.1. Americans Voted for Trump In Spite Of …

	Trump	Clinton
Economist/YouGov		
Qualified	34	49
Honest and Trustworthy	31	24
Says what s/he believes	53	29
Like a lot	16	17
Dislike	47	53
Exit polls (voters only)		
Qualified	38	52
Honest and Trustworthy	33	36
Right Temperament	35	55
Bring Needed Change	83	14

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17 Thomas Frank, "Donald Trump Is Moving to the White House, and Liberals Put Him There," *The Guardian,* November 9, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/09/donald-trump-white-house -hillary-clinton-liberals.

18 Krystal Ball, "The Democratic Party Deserved to Die," *Huffington Post,* November 10, 2016, www.huffing tonpost.com/entry/the-democratic-party-deserves-to-die_us_58236ad5e4b0aac62488cde5.

The implication that many if not most votes for Trump did not reflect enthusiasm for him as much as negative judgments about Clinton received clear support in various polls. Throughout the campaign, only about 40 percent of Trump supporters said that they were voting for Trump rather than against Clinton.[19] According to Harry Enten, "No candidate since 1980 has had a lower percentage of voters say they plan to cast a vote *for* their candidate. That includes candidates whose campaigns were viewed as disastrous, including Jimmy Carter in 1980, Michael Dukakis in 1988, and Bob Dole in 1996."[20] Clinton did not fare much better. In the exit polls, 57 percent of Americans said they would have negative feelings if Trump won, but 53 percent said the same about Clinton.

Other things being equal, one would have expected an average Democrat to crush a historically flawed candidate like Trump. Instead, Clinton's margin over Trump was lower than Obama's margin over Romney in thirty-seven states. In my view, explanations of why the Democrats lost the presidency in 2016 focus too much on Trump and not enough on Clinton. Earlier in the summer of 2016, when Republican acquaintances expressed the hope that the FBI would recommend an indictment of Hillary Clinton, I cautioned them to be careful what they wished for, suggesting that this would be the worst possible outcome for Republicans. The likely last-minute replacement on the ticket would be Joe Biden, and in all likelihood he would win the election and with it the Senate. Biden is largely scandal-free, a pauper by senatorial standards, and his background and record appeal to precisely the segment of the electorate that defected from Obama to Trump. Some believe the same is true for Bernie Sanders as well, although that is a harder case to make given some of his economic views.

The Split between the Electoral College and the Popular Vote

For the second time in sixteen years, the popular vote leader did not win an Electoral College majority. When this happened in 2000, many political analysts expected much more of a negative popular reaction than the limited one that ensued. Most Americans who were not locked into the two partisan camps seemed to accept the sports analogies that were offered: in the World Series and the NBA playoffs the winner is determined by games won, not the most runs or points. In the 1960 World Series, for example, the New York Yankees outscored the Pittsburgh Pirates 55 to 27; but

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19 "Diminished Enthusiasm Dogs Trump: Clinton Gains in Affirmative Support," ABC News, October 24, 2016, www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1184a22016ElectionTrackingNo.2.pdf.

20 "Clinton Voters Aren't Just Voting against Trump," *FiveThirtyEight*, October 25, 2016, fivethirtyeight.com /features/clinton-voters-arent-just-voting-against-trump/.

the Pirates won the series four games to three, and no one questioned the outcome. The same analogies were offered in 2016 after Clinton supporters railed that she had legitimately won the election but lost in an undemocratic vestige of an eighteenth-century political compromise.

I am of two minds about such analogies. When the topic is the legitimacy of elections and the governments they determine, such analogies are inapt. Elections are the way democracies determine a legitimate government. The political equality embodied in majority rule is the most fundamental component of a democratic form of government. So if the rules of the electoral game crown a candidate who gets fewer votes than an opponent, it violates political equality and undercuts the legitimacy of the winner. I see no way around that conclusion.

As a description of the way to play the electoral game, however, sports analogies are apt. Many Clinton supporters claim that she would now be president had the election been based on the popular vote. Probably they are correct, but we can never know for sure because one cannot assume the popular vote would have been the same absent the Electoral College: the candidates would have conducted different campaigns. From the standpoint of the Trump campaign it mattered not at all whether he lost California by 270 votes or by the 4,270,000 that he actually did. The 4-million-plus vote margin that Clinton racked up in California was irrelevant under the Electoral College rules. Reports indicate that the Trump campaign set aside the states certain to go either Republican or Democratic and concentrated on the sub-election occurring in the thirteen battleground states.[21] Trump won that sub-election by about 800,000 votes.[22] Had the outcome been determined by popular vote, however, Trump would have made more of an effort in friendly areas of states like California and New York, and Clinton in friendly areas of deep red states. How it all would have netted out is the kind of counterfactual that sparks interesting discussions but is probably beyond resolution with data.

The Polls and Models

In the immediate aftermath of the election, a number of columnists concluded that "the polls blew it."[23] But as Clinton's popular vote plurality mounted, analysts realized

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21 John Judis, "On the Eve of Disruption: Final Thoughts on the 2016 Election," *TPM,* December 18, 2016, talkingpointsmemo.com/edblog/—100887.

22 2016 National Popular Voter Tracker, undated, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/133Eb4qQmOxN vtesw2hdVns073R68EZx4SfCnP4IGQf8/edit#gid=19.

23 Michelle Jamrisko and Terrence Dopp, "Failed Polls in 2016 Call into Question a Profession's Precepts," Bloomberg, November 8, 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-11-09/failed-polls-in

that the polls had performed pretty well. Most of the major national polls pegged Clinton's lead at 2–4 percentage points, and she ultimately won the popular vote by about 2 points. So, the polls slightly overestimated Clinton's lead, but that overestimate is actually a bit smaller than the underestimate of Obama's 2012 vote.[24] A bigger problem was the exaggerated certainty that various polls and models gave to a Clinton win. Although criticized earlier for giving Trump as *high* a probability of winning as 30 percent, Nate Silver at 538 turned out to be closer to the mark than *Huff Post*'s 98 percent and Sam Wang's 99 percent predicted probabilities of a Clinton victory.[25]

The state polls, on the other hand, revealed some problems. On average they tended to underestimate Trump's support, particularly in the states he ultimately carried—including, critically, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, where 4–6 point poll advantages for Clinton the week before the election evaporated on Election Day.[26] The polling disparities were correlated with the state's proportion of voters without college degrees.[27] The polls may have under-sampled white noncollege voters, underestimated their likelihood of voting, or both.

A great deal of ink and airtime were devoted to predictive models during the campaign. There are two kinds of election models, although they overlap a bit.[28]

-2016-call-into-question-a-profession-s-precepts; Andrew Mercer, Claude Deane, and Kyley McGenney, "Why 2016 Election Polls Missed Their Mark," Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/why-2016-election-polls-missed-their-mark/.

24 Sean Trende, "It Wasn't the Polls that Missed, It Was the Pundits," *Real Clear Politics,* November 12, 2016, www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/11/12/it_wasnt_the_polls_that_missed_it_was_the_pundits_132333.html.

25 "Who Will Win the Presidency?" *FiveThirtyEight,* November 8, 2016, https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/#plus; "Forecast," *Huffington Post,* November 8, 2016, elections.huffingtonpost.com/2016/forecast/president; "Is 99% a Reasonable Probability?" Princeton Election Consortium, November 6, 2016, election.princeton.edu/2016/11/06/is-99-a-reasonable-probability/. I have not delved into the guts of these models, but any methodology that generates an election prediction with confidence levels in the range of 98–99 percent strikes me as prima facie problematic.

26 Dhrumil Metta, "How Much the Polls Missed by in Every State," *FiveThirtyEight,* December 2, 2016, fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-much-the-polls-missed-by-in-every-state/; David Weigel, "State Pollsters, Pummeled by 2016, Analyze What Went Wrong," *Washington Post,* December 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/12/30/state-pollsters-pummeled-by-2016-analyze-what-went-wrong/?utm_term=.e4e8d652d728.

27 Nate Silver, "Pollsters Probably Didn't Talk to Enough White Voters without College Degrees," *FiveThirtyEight,* December 1, 2016, fivethirtyeight.com/features/pollsters-probably-didnt-talk-to-enough-white-voters-without-college-degrees/.

28 Actually, three, but models of the third type—formal or mathematical—are too abstract to make empirical predictions about an election.

Table 10.2. 2016 Election Forecasting Models

	Predicted Two-Party Popular Vote for Clinton	Certainty of Popular Vote Majority
Erikson & Wlezien (economic indicators/polls)	52	82%
Lockerbie (economic expectations/1st term)	50.4	62%
Lewis-Beck & Tien (approval/growth)	51.1	83%
Campbell (convention/growth)	51.2	75%
Abramowitz (approval/growth/1st term)	48.6	66%
Norpoth (primaries)	47.5	87%

Source:
James Campbell. "Forecasting the 2016 American National Elections." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (2016): 652.

The first type, discussed above, is poll-based, although it aggregates, evaluates, simulates, standardizes, and in other ways tries to extract more accurate information from the universe of polls. The second type consists of political science forecasting models that get less media attention, probably in part because they omit the subjects most dear to the hearts of journalists: the candidates and campaigns. The political science models are generally based on the so-called fundamentals: chiefly peace and war and the state of the economy, which are viewed as factors that set the election context and determine the kinds of campaigns that can be conducted.[29] For the most part these models do not include the candidates; the latter are implicitly assumed to account for only a little variation on the margins.[30] A few of these models incorporate some poll data, just as the 538 polls plus model includes some aspects of the fundamentals. But for the most part these models implicitly assume that the election is often determined before the campaign formally begins or in some cases even before the candidates are nominated. Table 10.2 summarizes the principal forecast models for 2016.

Most of the models predicted a narrow Democratic edge in the two-party vote, although two models went the other way.[31] None of them calculated the same degree

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29 Lynn Vavreck, *The Message Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

30 It's not that the campaigns and candidates are irrelevant, but the assumption is that both candidates fall within a range of acceptability and that both campaigns will have access to roughly equal resources and expertise. Thus, the candidates and campaigns generally offset, leaving the election to reflect mostly the underlying fundamentals.

31 Abramowitz predicted a lower Clinton vote because his "time for a change" model includes a variable for an incumbent party that has held office for two terms. Despite the prediction of his model, Abramowitz expressed doubt about the forecast because he viewed Trump as outside the bounds of acceptability. Alan I. Abramowitz, "Will Time for Change Mean Time for Trump?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 49 (October 2016): 659–660.

of confidence (figures in parentheses) as the polling models did. In this situation, the most reasonable interpretation is that the fundamentals indicated a fifty-fifty election that would be determined by the marginal effects of the candidates and campaigns. Thus, the verdict is that they performed decently, although Brady and Parker report that the accuracy of some of the best known economic models has been declining since 1992.[32]

Swing Voters

Analysts define swing voters in various ways.[33] At its broadest the concept excludes only those who are sure to turn out and sure to vote for one of the parties and not the other, leaving as swing voters everyone who is uncertain about whom they will vote for and/or whether they will vote at all. The conventional wisdom is that the proportion of swing voters in the American electorate has greatly declined, but in essay 1 and various earlier writings I have argued that swing voters are made, not born.[34] To reiterate, today's sorted parties nominate candidates who look similar to the ones they nominated in previous elections, so most voters will probably vote the same as they did in previous elections. Rather than being less willing to move between parties than voters in earlier decades, contemporary voters may simply have less reason to do so. The three members of the Democratic sequence of Gore, Kerry, and Obama from 2000–2008 looked a lot more similar to each other than did the members of the Humphrey, McGovern, and Carter sequence of 1968–72. On the Republican side, Bush, McCain, and Romney in 2004–12 looked considerably more similar to each other than the sequence of Eisenhower, Nixon, and Goldwater in 1956–64. Other things being equal, party sorting at the candidate level should produce less voter swinging in contemporary elections than in the late twentieth century, even if voters were just as willing to swing now as they were then.

As argued in essay 4, however, to the dismay of the Republican thought establishment, Trump broke the mold of recent Republican nominees. He demonstrated the appeal of a de-sorter in the primaries. By the time the general election campaign was under way he was a full-scale disrupter, in Silicon Valley jargon.[35] This qualitative impression

32 David Brady and Brett Parker, *Now Is the Winter of Our Discontent: The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

33 William G. Mayer, ed., *The Swing Voter in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2008).

34 Morris P. Fiorina, "If I Could Hold a Seminar for Political Journalists . . ." The Forum 10 (no 4): 2–10, https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/for.2012.10.issue-4/forum-2013-0011/forum-2013-0011.xml.

35 Peggy Noonan, "Trump Tries to Build a 'Different Party,'" *Wall Street Journal,* January 26, 2017, www.wsj.com /articles/trump-tries-to-build-a-different-party-1485478386; Edward G. Carmines, Michael J. Ensley, and Michael W. Wagner, "Ideological Heterogeneity and the Rise of Donald Trump," The Forum 14 (no. 4), https:// www.degruyter.com/view/j/for.2016.14.issue-4/for-2016-0036/for-2016-0036.xml?format=INT.

is consistent with the quantitative data about swing voters in 2016. Numerous commentators noted the large increases in the number of voters who indicated they were undecided, intended to vote for third-party candidates, or claimed that they would vote but not for president. An Economist/YouGov survey in July and August 2016 found 31 percent of voters distributed roughly evenly across those three categories. In contrast, most commentators put the numbers of such voters in the lower single digits in 2012.[36] Some analysts correctly cautioned that the large number of voters potentially in play meant that the 2016 election had more underlying volatility than other recent elections. Preliminary analyses suggest that late deciders were slightly more likely to go to Trump than to Clinton and that those who changed their minds late in the campaign also did so.[37] The numbers were not large, but they may have eroded Clinton's margin in key areas. Polls also found Republicans registering gains in the generic congressional vote in the last week of the campaign, suggesting a general movement in the Republican direction.[38]

The Media

On several subjects, the weight of social science research conflicts with what is widely believed in popular, journalistic, and political circles. Two prominent—and related— examples are the ability of the mass media to shape public opinion and the impact of campaign events. Surveys show that Americans believe the media are very powerful— hence the concern about bias in the media—and that people less sophisticated than they are (that is, most of those on the other side) are easily manipulated by slanted news and sophisticated ads. Naturally, people who work for the media or make their livings producing political ads believe that the media are very important. But as communications scholar Diana Mutz observed, scholarly research does not support such claims of major media influence; there is an "enormous chasm" between the beliefs held by journalists (and the typical voter) about the effects of campaign media and the findings of political communications scholars. "Public perceptions of the power of media in elections, and the academic evidence of its influence, could not be further apart."[39]

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36 2016 figures cited in Brady and Parker, *The Winter of our Discontent* 29. On 2012 see Reid J. Epstein, "The Disappearing Undecided Voter," *Politico,* undated, www.politico.com/news/stories/0812/79504_Page3.html.

37 Dan Hopkins, "Voters Really Did Switch to Trump at the Last Minute," *FiveThirtyEight,* December 20, 2016, fivethirtyeight.com/features/voters-really-did-switch-to-trump-at-the-last-minute/.

38 The generic vote item reads, "This November, do you plan to vote for a Democratic or a Republican candidate in your congressional district?" Harry Enten, "Senate Update: The Generic Ballot Is Hurting Democrats' Chances," *FiveThirtyEight,* November 7, 2016, fivethirtyeight.com/features/senate-update-the-generic-ballot-is-hurting-democrats-chances/.

39 Diana Mutz, "The Great Divide: Campaign Media in the American Mind," *Daedalus* 141 (no. 4): 83–87.

If ever there were an election designed to pit the popular belief of major media influence against the scholarly consensus of minor influence, 2016 was it. The legacy media were almost unanimous in opposing Trump. For many of them, their editorial positions spilled over onto the news pages, with the apparent approval of their editors.[40] The tone of their op-ed and other editorial efforts seemed to grow more frantic as Clinton failed to pull away from Trump in the polls. Some newspapers endorsed a Democrat for the first time in memory or history.[41] After every embarrassing revelation or outrageous comment, the media chorus would pronounce the end of the Trump campaign, and still he marched on to win. Thomas Frank asked, "How did the journalists' crusade fail? The fourth estate came together in an unprecedented professional consensus."[42]

As the next essay will discuss, a plausible hypothesis is that a strong current of antielitism was running in the 2016 election and that those associated with the national media are viewed as card-carrying members of the elite. Along with other institutions, trust in the media has declined precipitously in recent decades (figure 10.2). Why should voters be influenced by people they distrust? Did the media's recent record merit trust? Columnist Matt Bai expressed this sentiment in an acerbic passage:

> But Trump had figured out that no one really believed the elite media anymore—the same media that said Iraq was an existential threat, that the banks had to be saved, that Obama would transform our dysfunctional politics. The same media that nightly featured a cavalcade of smug morons whose only qualification to opine on TV was an almost pathological shamelessness.

Bai added,

> Because this is what he [Trump] learned from his first-ever campaign experience—that if you pit yourself against powerful agencies or politicians or a corrupt media, people now will believe almost anything. Or maybe they won't really care what you're saying, as long as it's infuriating to the so-called experts.[43]

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40 Rutenberg, "Trump Is Testing the Norms."

41 Hannah Levintova, "This Newspaper Just Endorsed Its First Democrat for President in Almost a Century," *Mother Jones,* September 23, 2016, www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/09/donald-trump-just-forced-yet-another-newspaper-endorse-democrat-first-time-almost-c; Rebecca Shapiro, "For the First Time In its 126-Year History, This Newspaper Endorsed a Democrat," *Huffington Post,* September 28, 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/arizona-republic-hillary-clinton-endorsement_us_57eb284fe4b024a52d2b7437.

42 Frank, "Donald Trump Is Moving to the White House."

43 Matt Bai, "The Moment That Made Trump Possible," Yahoo! News, December 15, 2016, https://www.yahoo.com/news/the-moment-that-made-trump-possible-100008601.html.

Figure 10.2. Trust in Media Hits New Lows
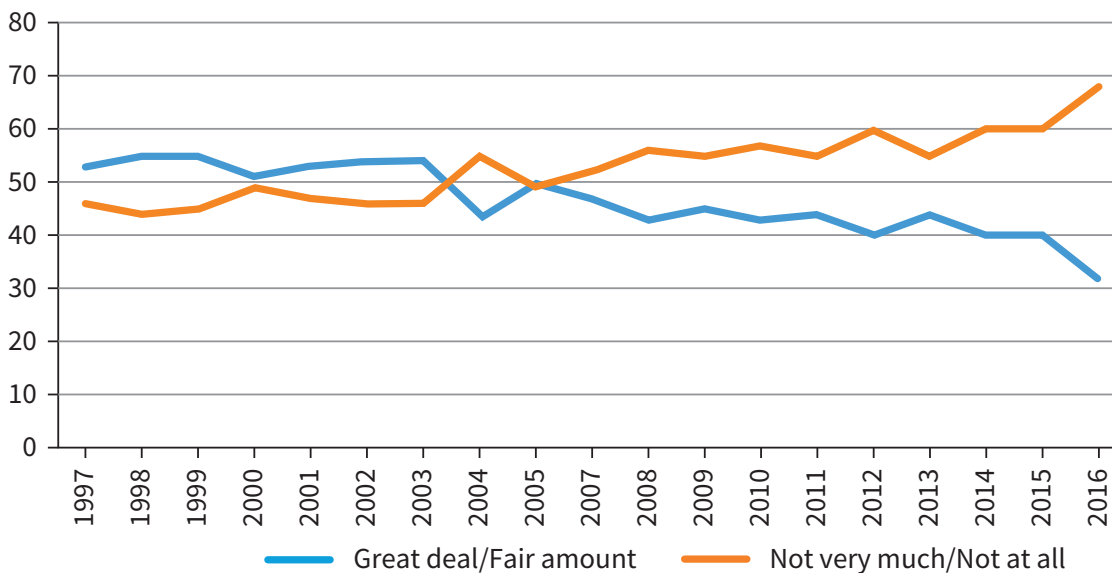
Source:
Jeff Jones and Lydia Saad. Gallup Poll Social Series: Governance File.

Thomas Frank's answer to why the "journalists' crusade" failed is similar: "They [the media] chose insulting the other side over trying to understand what motivated them. They transformed opinion writing into a vehicle for high moral boasting. What could possibly have gone wrong with such an approach?"[44]

I suspect future research will find that there is considerable support for such arguments. Media opposition to Trump may have backfired. The more unbalanced the opposition to Trump became, the more some voters were tempted to strike back at people and institutions they resented.[45] The point here is not whether Trump deserved unbalanced treatment but whether in the eyes of some voters the media had overdone it. The next essay will return to this subject.

The obvious objection to the preceding line of argument is that the media *were* more important than ever in 2016, but they were different media. The era of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post,* the broadcast TV channels, and even the cable channels has passed; the information world belongs now to Twitter, Facebook, and their ilk. With his background in popular entertainment, Trump exploited the rapidly evolving

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44 Frank, "Donald Trump Is Moving to the White House."

45 After the election, I talked to an editor from a major national newspaper who related that his paper had invited Trump voters to e-mail their reasons for supporting Trump. One of the most common responses was some version of "I wanted to see your heads explode."

media environment while the Clinton campaign was spending millions of dollars on ads—"so twentieth-century," as our grandchildren might say. Numerous analyses document that Trump received billions of dollars in free media during the primary and general election campaigns, considerably offsetting the huge funding advantage enjoyed by the Clinton campaign.[46] Trump was an inveterate Twitterer, and many of his tweets were amplified by media coverage (even if much of the latter was largely negative in tone).[47] There are claims that Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, ran a highly sophisticated analytics and social media operation that flew under the radar of the mainstream media and the Clinton campaign, an operation that helped to explain the better-than-expected showing for Trump in critical areas.[48] Journalists and politicos focused on traditional metrics—the money spent, the field offices opened, and the workers deployed by the Clinton campaign—but they had no way of evaluating the impact of Trump's tweets, Facebook presence, Reddit groups, and so on, if they were even aware of most of these activities.

Communications scholars are diligently examining these questions as I write. But until data prove otherwise, I remain skeptical of the Twitter effect at least. Political journalists need to realize that nearly everyone they talk to is abnormal: abnormally interested, abnormally well informed, and abnormally opinionated. Relatively few normal people live in the Twitterverse that political journalists and other members of the chattering class inhabit. According to a Pew Research Center study conducted just as the 2016 primary season got under way, 16 percent of US adults claimed to be on Twitter, but only 9 percent reported getting news from Twitter.[49] In another study, Allcott and Gentzkow reported that in 2016 only 14 percent of the public relied on social media as the most important source of

46 Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, "$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump," *New York Times,* March 15, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html?_r=0; Jason Le Miere, "Did the Media Help Donald Trump Win? $5 Billion in Free Advertising Given to President-Elect," *International Business Times,* November 9, 2016, www.ibtimes.com/did-media-help-donald-trump-win-5-billion-free-advertising-given-president-elect-2444115.

47 Why aren't such posts called "twits" rather than "tweets"? The former term seems more accurate.

48 Stephen Bertoni, "Exclusive Interview: How Jared Kushner Won Trump the White House," *Forbes,* December 20, 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/stevenbertoni/2016/11/22/exclusive-interview-how-jared-kushner-won-trump-the-white-house/#23e54fea2f50.

49 Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016," Pew Research Center, May 26, 2016, www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/201, noting that 67 percent of adults use Facebook, but only 44 percent said it was a source of news. A study one year earlier found that 55 percent of adults said they get news from neither Facebook nor Twitter. Amy Mitchell and Dana Page, "The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook," Pew Research Center, July 14, 2015, www.journalism.org/files/2015/07/Twitter-and-News-Survey-Report-FINAL2.pdf.

news. Moreover, as discussed in essay 2, most Americans have an expansive concept of what is "news."[50] In the Pew study noted above, the "news" included sports, science and technology, local weather and traffic, entertainment, crime, people and events in your community, and health and medicine. In sum, only a small fraction of the small minority of Americans with Twitter accounts follow what we call "hard news."

The Trump campaign claimed 20 million Twitter followers, a claim difficult to fact-check because Twitter audiences are difficult to measure with any degree of accuracy. One analyst calculates that after adjusting for accounts that are inactive, zombies, or held by foreigners, the number of (American) Trump followers is probably closer to 4 million.[51] Moreover, most Twitter followers do not see

Table 10.3

Millions of Twitter Followers

Katy Perry	95.4
Justin Bieber	91.3
Barack Obama	80.7
Britney Spears	50
Kim Kardashian	49.6
CNN Breaking News	45.4
LeBron James	34.1
New York Times	33
ESPN	30.5
Bruno Mars	27.7
NBA	24.1
Pitbull	23.3
Kourtney Kardashian	21.7
NASA	21.2
Salman Kahn	20.5
Zayn	20.7
Donald Trump	16.9

what is tweeted.[52] But even taking highly inflated numbers as given, one early 2017 report put Trump's followers (17 million) as a small fraction of those who follow Katie Perry (95 million) or Kim Kardashian (49 million), LeBron James (34 million), Pitbull (who?) (23 million), and even Zayn (who?) (21 million).[53]

Comey, Russians, Hollywood Access, Fake News, Etc.

Scholarly research and popular beliefs also conflict on a second subject: the importance of campaign events that receive so much coverage in the traditional media. Journalists tend to view campaigns like an athletic contest where a single excellent or disastrous play is a game changer that will shift momentum and ultimately be the turning point

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50 Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," working paper, January 18, 2017, https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf.

51 Rob Salkowitz, "Trump's 20 Million Twitter Followers Get Smaller under the Microscope," *Forbes,* January 17, 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2017/01/17/trumps-20-million-twitter-followers-get-smaller-under-the -microscope/#6084f458675b.

52 Danny Sullivan, "Just Like Facebook, Twitters New Impression Stats Suggest Few Followers See What's Tweeted," Marketing Land, July 1, 2014, marketingland.com/facebook-twitter-impressions-90878.

53 "Twitter: Most Followed," *Friend or Follow,* undated, friendorfollow.com/twitter/most-followers/.

in determining the winner.[54] Once again, political scientists tend to be skeptical. Careful empirical research finds little evidence for such game changers.[55] Campaign effects tend to be small and transitory, in part because few people are paying much attention to them.

In 2016, this difference in popular and scholarly perspective emerged immediately after it became apparent that Trump would be president. Clinton supporters blamed the Comey letter, Wikileaks, Russian interference, and fake news, among other things. In a very close election, almost everything matters, of course, but one cannot pick and choose the events that went against your side and ignore those events and developments that went against the other side.[56] Determining whether campaign events mattered is particularly difficult in this case. The real question is whether they swung Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania into Trump's camp. Moreover, there is a tendency for partisans to "come home" during the course of the campaign. Thus, Trump's numbers were expected to improve simply because his support among Republicans had more room to grow than did Clinton's among Democrats. Preliminary evidence is conflicting. Some see evidence of a "Comey effect" in state and national polls and early voting numbers.[57] Others see no close correspondence between poll trends and major campaign developments: Clinton's numbers were rising when the Wikileaks releases were at their peak, and Trump's numbers had begun to rise before the Comey letter was released.[58] Yglesias argued that the problem faced by the Clinton campaign was real news, not fake news.[59]

Scholars are marshalling every bit of data they can get their hands on to study the questions arising from the 2016 campaign. Whether they can provide definitive answers remains to be seen. Consistent with past research, the first comprehensive study reported minimal campaign effects. After an intensive analysis of three different

54 John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

55 John Sides and Lynn Vavreck, *The Gamble* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

56 After the election, journalist Carl Cannon identified thirty-one reasons why Trump won. "How Donald Trump Won," *Real Clear Politics,* November 10, 2016, www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/11/10/how _donald_trump_won_132321.html

57 Sean McElwee, Matt McDermott, and Will Jordan, "4 Pieces of Evidence Showing FBI Director James Comey Cost Clinton the Election," *Vox,* January 11, 2017, www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/1/11/14215930 /comey-email-election-clinton-campaign; Nate Silver, "How Much Did Comey Hurt Clinton's Chances?" *FiveThirtyEight,* https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-much-did-comey-hurt-clintons-chances/.

58 Harry Enten, "How Much Did Wikileaks Hurt Hillary Clinton?" *FiveThirtyEight,* November 6, 2016, fivethirtyeight .com/features/wikileaks-hillary-clinton/.

59 Matthew Yglesias, "Fake News Is a Convenient Scapegoat, but the Big 2016 Problem Was the Real News," *Vox,* December 5, 2015, www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/12/15/13955108/fake-news-2016.

databases, Allcott and Gentzkow concluded that "even the most widely circulated fake news stories were seen by only a small fraction of Americans." Considering the counterfactual that fake news caused Hillary Clinton to lose Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, they calculated that "For fake news to have changed the election outcome, one fake news article would need to be 36 times as persuasive as one political ad."[60] Based on previous scholarly research, my expectation would be that campaign events in 2016 had little or no net effect on the outcome, subject to the aforementioned caveat that in such a close election everything mattered if everything else but that one thing is held constant. That is not to say that events like the Russian connection may not have important consequences—investigations are ongoing as I write—but only that the record of past research suggests that such campaign events had little effect on the election itself.

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60 Allcott and Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Elections."

Essay Series

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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.

Two final postelection essays will wrap up the series.

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