

CHAPTER TWO

The Old and New Democratic Parties

*Cotton on the roadside, cotton in the ditch.
We all picked the cotton but we never got rich.
Daddy was a veteran, a southern Democrat.
They oughta get a rich man to vote like that.*

*Well somebody told us Wall Street fell
But we were so poor that we couldn't tell.
Cotton was short and the weeds were tall
But Mr. Roosevelt's gonna save us all.*

*Well mamma got sick and daddy got down.
The county got the farm and they moved to town.
Papa got a job with the TVA.
He bought a washing machine and then a Chevrolet.*

Thomas Byrne Edsall

—Bob McDill, “Song of the South,”
on Alabama, *Southern Star* (1989)

OVER THE PAST seventy-plus years, the American progressive tradition has changed radically. In its triumphant years, roughly from 1932 to 1966, a liberal Democratic agenda was developed to expand access to the middle class, to promote international trade, and to deploy government spending, all to foster full employment. The New Deal coalition was, in its essence, an economically based alliance of the ascendant.

The underlying moral premise of the Democratic Party of the Roosevelt era was that government constituted an essential force for the prevention of economic catastrophe and social inequity. Looking back over his first term, Franklin Roosevelt described the role of government:

We of the Republic sensed the truth that democratic government has innate capacity to protect its people against disasters once considered inevitable, to solve problems once considered unsolvable. We would not admit that we could not find a way to master economic epidemics just as, after centuries of fatalistic suffering, we had found a way to master epidemics of disease. We refused to leave the problems of our common welfare to be solved by the

winds of chance and the hurricanes of disaster. . . . We have begun to bring private autocratic powers into their proper subordination to the public's government. The legend that they were invincible—above and beyond the processes of a democracy—has been shattered. They have been challenged and beaten.¹

The New Deal agenda entailed a massive expansion of the federal government into the domestic sphere, an expansion configured explicitly around the goal of security, the regulation of financial institutions, the forced accountability of business, a degree of federally imposed redistribution, and government-supervised wage and employment practices.

Major New Deal initiatives created procedures and mechanisms to oversee the generation of wealth and to protect the rights of workers. Hallmark measures included the Federal Emergency Relief Program, the Emergency Banking Act of 1933, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Social Security Administration, the Rural Electrification Administration, the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, the National Labor Relations Act of 1936, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (including the first minimum wage), and so forth.

During the New Deal era, “liberalism” conveyed to most Americans a right to economic safeguards and the tempering of market forces through the power of government action. In the years since 1966, liberalism has undergone a major conceptual transformation, and its adherents have splintered into two factions. The first of these factions is made up of an alliance of the so-called subdominant, who are joined by the shared goal of seeking a haven from market pressures as well as insulation from majoritarian moral and social norms that are often experienced as discriminatory. This alliance includes within

1. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Second Inaugural Address, Wednesday, January 20, 1937, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres50.html>.

it (1) the victims of economic competition—low-wage workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable—and those without the skills to prevail in the postindustrial economy; (2) racial, ethnic, and other minorities historically barred from social and economic participation; and (3) those seeking government support in the aftermath of the cultural revolutions of the past forty years, which have led to divorce and nonmarital birth rates that often leave single women and children in need of the basic necessities of life. The focus on rights for such subordinated groups—including the disabled, the aged, the addicted, and the mentally ill rather than for the entire working class or for all the have-nots—has produced new schisms within the Democratic Party.

Adding to the volatility of the contemporary Democratic coalition has been a second major faction made up of highly educated voters, frequently in professions that require advanced degrees. Over the past four decades, the conversion of professionals (variously known as the “knowledge class,” the “new class,” “information workers,” or “symbol analysts”) to a solid base for the Democrats has helped compensate in numbers for the defection of skilled and semiskilled lower-income white workers to the GOP. From 1960 to the present, the percentage of Democratic presidential voters employed in the professions has doubled, from 18 to 35 percent, whereas the share of the Democratic vote made up of lower-income skilled and nonskilled workers has dropped from 50 percent to 35 percent.²

As the political and economic liberalism of the New Deal era has been transformed, it has lost the unambiguous majority support of middle- and lower-income white voters—voters who adhere to values oriented toward discipline rather than nurturance, or to use another formulation, discipline versus therapy.³ This cultural chasm has, over

2. Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks, *Social Cleavages and Policy Change: Voter Alignments and U.S. Party Coalitions* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 190–94, 232–38.

3. Thomas B. Edsall, “Two Areas Reflect Deep Divide,” *Washington Post*, April 13, A1.

the past four decades, pitted a progressive and highly educated elite within the Democratic Party against less-affluent Democratic cultural conservatives who oppose abortion, same-sex marriage, and busing, and who, in general, defend traditional gender roles and conventional social mores.

Knowledge workers with postsecondary degrees are not voting Democratic to advance their economic interests, as did trade unionists, European immigrants, urban Catholics, rural whites, and newly enfranchised blacks during the heyday of the twentieth-century Democratic Party. Indeed, the knowledge-worker class often espouses values and beliefs adversarial to America's business enterprises, mounting critiques of corporate greed and profiteering. Instead, the central political motivation of the new Democratic professional class has been to support a politics that reflects its beliefs in a range of recently democratized rights centered on autonomy, self-development, and individualism. Although such voters do not seek pork-barrel benefits from the government, they do seek government funding of programs consistent with their ideological commitments—for example, government affirmation and enforcement of such key rights as women's rights, the right to sexual privacy, the right to self-expression, the right to agreed-upon race and gender preferences, and the right to claim once-stigmatized identities like homosexuality. In addition, upscale Democratic activists focus on environmental issues, antiglobalization, freedom of artistic expression (films, lyrics, television or radio programming, Internet content, etc.), and ideological support for tolerance of difference and for a broadly conceived multiculturalism.

Since the 1960s, as the country's affluence has increased, this knowledge class has become a powerful force within the Democratic Party—from Hollywood to university communities to the world of cosmopolitan professionals—shaping, and shaped by, the civil rights, antiwar, feminist, and gay rights movements, as well as by the broader sexual and information revolutions. Members of this class fought for, and had their lives transformed by, decades of technological innova-

tion and have a history of success at social reform: forcing the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, abolishing the military draft, legalizing contraception and abortion, allowing no-fault divorce, toppling the Nixon administration, effectively eradicating censorship, and preserving the nation's forests, wildlife, seashores, mountain ranges, and endangered species. Activists also worked to limit the use of force by attempting to abolish the death penalty; to curb police brutality, corporal punishment, domestic abuse, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons; and to reduce the frequency and lethality of war.

The conflation of social-cultural and economic-technological-scientific upheavals over the past four decades has brought a whole new set of values, objectives, and cross pressures into the Democratic Party, creating friction with voters disoriented and angered by accelerating social change and suffering an acute sense of status-displacement—voters to whom traditional patriotic and religious beliefs serve as a bedrock. The new focus of upper-income Democrats on self-actualization, nonviolence, and aesthetic needs have conflicted, in many ways, with the needs of the less-privileged—those feeling more victimized than empowered by contemporary cultural trends. These less-privileged voters put a premium on continuity and familiarity and often couple an antimodernist bias with a central focus on economic and physical security, as well as on work and entry into the middle class rather than on less concrete postmaterialist rights or identity goals.

In contrast, the upscale cohort within the Democratic coalition is intensely hostile to agendas of imposed moral orthodoxy, particularly to the agenda of the Christian Right. Whereas knowledge workers have increasingly come to see the Republican Party as moralistic and culturally intrusive and, as such, a threat to personal freedom, sizeable numbers of middle- to lower-income white voters see moral and religious orthodoxies as reassuring, stabilizing, and politically attractive. The Democratic Party is attempting to straddle this values

gap, but it is in persistent danger of disturbing the fragile equilibrium between its donor base and some of its most crucial voting blocs.

The Demise of the New Deal Coalition

To a significant extent, the successes of the New Deal coalition have spelt its demise. In 1940, Roosevelt referred to one-third of the nation as “ill-clothed, ill-housed, ill-fed.”⁴ Today, that proportion has shrunk to 12.1 percent, while the standards by which we define poverty have risen sharply.⁵ In 1940, more than half of the U.S. population had completed no more than an eighth-grade education. In 1992, 48.9 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds reported completing some college.⁶ The more privileged among workers have become stockholders and stakeholders. Renters have become property owners. The upper strata of the have-nots have become haves, with much to conserve and with newly hungry competitors to guard against. The ethnic enmity among northern and southern, or Catholic and Protestant, European immigrants, which was characteristic of Democratic and Republican rivalries in the first half of the twentieth century, has given way to a pan-European identity in the face of a large population influx from non-European countries.

As members of the working class represented by strong unions in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s became middle class, and as suburban homeowners with high wages, extensive benefits, and secure pensions lost their sense of economic oppression, motivation to join

4. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Radio Address at the White House Conference on Children in a Democracy, January 19, 1940, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/site/docs/pppus.php?admin=032&year=1940&id=9>.

5. Bureau of the Census, “Poverty, Income See Slight Changes; Child Poverty Rate Unchanged, Census Bureau Reports,” September 26, 2003, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2003/cb03-153.html>.

6. National Center for Education Statistics, “Literacy from 1870 to 1979: Educational Attainment,” <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/historicaldata/edattain.asp>; National Center for Education Statistics, “Supplemental Note 2: The Current Population Survey,” <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2004/notes/n02.asp>.

a biracial center-left coalition diminished. The civil rights revolution and the commitment of the Democratic Party to legal equality for African Americans produced new strains—pitting blacks, Hispanics, and upscale white liberals against white working- and lower-middle-class voters and splintering core elements of the party of the Left. As less well-off whites were forced to cede status, resources, and opportunities to new entrants from once-segregated populations, many dropped out of the Democratic Party altogether.

Even as the economic liberalism of the New Deal era has waned and as cultural liberalism has become more prominent within the Democratic Party, however, there is always the possibility of a new Democratic coalition sufficiently strong enough to challenge, and perhaps defeat, the current Republican alliance. This is particularly so if the party machinery, aspiring candidates, and primary voters can coordinate a reconfiguration that addresses the party's historical weakness on issues of culture, mainstream values, and national defense. If they are able to do so, the underpinnings and the guiding agenda of this new Democratic majority would likely radically pare the ambitious redistributive economic aims of the Democratic Party of the past.

The Rise and Fall of Organized Labor

No institution better illustrates the transformation of the political Left than organized labor. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the union movement in America was on the way up. It became a powerful force in those private-sector industries that grew massively in the wake of the Second World War: automobiles, steel, the construction trades, trucking, and shipbuilding. Union leaders and members were overwhelmingly male, and they used their muscle to shut down factories and building sites to force steady gains in wages and benefits.

The share of the private-sector workforce represented by organized labor nearly tripled between 1930 and 1960, skyrocketing from 13.3

percent to 37 percent as unions became an integral and powerful part of America's free enterprise system.⁷ Union leaders were themselves aggressive and dominant figures—Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers, John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, Jimmy Hoffa of the Teamsters, Harry Bridges of the International Longshoremen's Union, and George Meany, the plumber who rose to the presidency of the AFL-CIO.

During this period, not only were unions becoming stronger, but also the labor movement as a whole powered mobility, as millions of workers moved up the social scale. The central purpose of unions, the Democratic Party, and political liberalism in this period was to steadily improve the socioeconomic status for the entire working class. The government-backed institutions of the New Deal—in tandem with social innovations of the Second World War, such as the GI Bill—were put in place by Democratic majorities and were designed, either directly or indirectly, to help workers and farmers earn a decent return on their labor, for veterans to get a college education, for widows and a small number of abandoned women to get support for their children, and for the elderly to receive a reliable subsistence income.

Concomitant with the sociocultural movements of the early 1970s, and linked to the technological revolutions of the postwar era (computerization, mechanization, and telecommunications), the character and composition of the trade union movement began to change. Most important, organized labor began to implode in the private sector, as global competition prompted American corporations to begin a major assault against employees whose pay and benefit packages had abruptly become a competitive liability in the face of low production costs overseas.

Private sector union leaders were no longer able to face CEOs as equals across the bargaining table. Rather, unions suddenly found

7. For growth in unionized workforce, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/>.

themselves struggling simply to survive, burdened by growing obligations to provide modest benefits to the ranks of the non-dues paying, unemployed members. “We went from being the tough guys on the block to being social workers handing out food to laid off workers,” said steelworker organizer and lobbyist John J. “Jack” Sheehan.⁸

Private-sector unions were no longer ascendant, aggressive, or dominant. The percentage of the private-sector workforce represented by labor unions fell from the high of 37 percent in 1960 to just 8.2 percent by 2003, the lowest level since at least 1905.⁹ This decline in private-sector union membership has been accompanied by two additional, politically significant trends: the growth of public-sector (government) union membership and the steady decline in the number of men represented by unions.

In 1976, when private-sector unionization was starting its decline, government workers in labor unions represented only 16.7 percent of all union members. By 2003, organized government workers represented nearly half (46.2 percent) of the union movement. Male membership, in turn, declined from 82.7 percent of union members in 1960 to 58.4 percent in 2001. In sheer numbers, there were 12.4 million male union members in 1960; in 2003, there were 9.0 million, or 3.48 million fewer. During these forty-three years, the total number of men in the workforce grew by 19.9 million, from 43.4 million to 63.3 million.¹⁰ Conversely, the percentage of women in the union movement grew from 17.3 percent in 1960 to 42.7 percent in 2003; women will soon make up the majority of union members. The United Auto Workers noted in 2002 that all of the labor move-

8. Jack Sheehan, interview with author, 1988.

9. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Union Membership Annual Report 2004, available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.toc.htm>.

10. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table 1. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by selected characteristics, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t01.htm>.

ment's net membership gain in 2001 was among women: male union membership fell by 76,000, but female membership increased by 93,000.¹¹

What the data about organized labor demonstrate is how crucially this institutional base of the Democratic Party has changed over the past four decades. Organized labor has shifted from an overwhelmingly male movement with the genuine power to make demands and to shut down whole industries—a dominant and dynamic presence on the American scene—to a movement in decline, heavily dependent on tax dollars to pay the wages and benefits of its public-sector membership. “We have gone from a movement in which the primary skill was managing success to a movement fighting to stay alive,” commented Andrew L. Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, now the second largest in the AFL-CIO.¹²

The once-proud private sector unions—the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters, the Steelworkers, and the Ironworkers—were, from the 1930s through the 1960s, allied with their employers in support of competitive free trade policies and confident in their ability to produce better goods than their foreign competitors produce. Today these same unions, and many of their employers, are proponents of various forms of trade protectionism, seeking to insulate themselves from the now serious threat of foreign cars, steel, textiles, and other capital goods. The shift in the stance toward trade regulation is a direct result of the shift in the U.S. economy from net exporter of manufactured goods to net importer. At the same time, by the mid-1990s, roughly 37 percent of union members had become sufficiently alienated from the cultural imperatives of the new Democratic Party that they began voting Republican—first in presidential elections and then in congressional elections.¹³

11. *Ibid.*

12. Andrew Stern, interview with the author, March 2003.

13. In the 2000 presidential election, 37 percent of voters in union households voted for George W. Bush, according to Voters News Service (VNS) Exit Polls, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/epolls/US/P000.html>.

The Evolving Post-1965 Coalition

The redistributive liberalism of the New Deal era had resulted in a unique achievement: it forged a coalition in which most, but by no means all, constituents were located in the bottom half of American society. This alliance of the economically disadvantaged was achieved by a political strategy and a legislative agenda that endorsed, and did not violate, received social norms—including conventional family organization and religious observance. School prayer and the Ten Commandments were ubiquitous. Everyday patriotism, a reverence for the flag, obligatory military service, deference toward hierarchy, a traditional work and achievement ethic, the materialistic ambitions of working people, and the Horatio Alger dimension to the lived experience of many Americans held undisputed sway among the vast majority of Democratic Party adherents. This alliance was forged, moreover, with full acceptance of the hard rules of politics: that winners win and losers lose; that winning elections creates power; and that such victories, and the power thus achieved, create opportunity. In the case of the New Deal coalition, this provided a means for millions of once-poor Americans to set their sights on material prosperity—to buy a home, a car, and an education for their children that would assure the next generation of better lives.

As noted, this coalition's success brought about its own decline: growing numbers of citizens entered the middle class, moved to the suburbs, acquired houses, and earned the right to higher levels of schooling, and their self-identification inevitably shifted away from the have-nots. Aspirations toward higher social status and new goals of self-realization spread rapidly. At the same time, by the 1960s and 1970s, leaders of the Democratic coalition accelerated the weakening of their party by failing to manage the growing salience of emerging and divisive issues: issues of race and rights, including civil rights, reproductive rights (including the new technologies of oral contraception and surgical abortion), criminal defendants' rights (coupled with

escalating rates of crime), and welfare rights, as well as of conflicts over time posed by use of force in places as remote as Southeast Asia, Nicaragua, the Balkans, and the Middle East.

Conflicts within the party also erupted between, on the one hand, a massive youthful demographic of expressive individualists—the Doctor Spock generation—who were heavily influenced by ideals of the therapeutic and of freedom from the shackles of social subordination, and, on the other hand, the more discipline-oriented, traditionally patriotic, “silent majority,” who were committed to honoring and conserving treasured customs and forms. At the same time, the role of government in all of these volatile issues was amplified and driven home by steadily rising tax burdens, with government revenues channeled into policies and programs inevitably reflecting culturally liberal values.

In sum, leaders of, and activists within, the liberal coalition failed to foresee and to adequately manage the dangers posed by the fusion of issues configured around liberation, race, and rights—and the burden imposed by new levels of taxation—and the way in which these issues could and did turn key New Deal constituencies into adversaries of what came simply to be called liberalism—the infamous L-word against which Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush campaigned so successfully throughout the 1980s.

The shift in the liberal agenda from a focus on broad economic advancement for those in the bottom half of the income distribution to the granting of and protection of rights for specific interest groups allowed both Reagan and the first Bush to use liberalism as a wedge issue, designed to break the Democratic loyalties of more socially conservative working- and lower-middle-class white voters—the voters who became known throughout the 1980s as Reagan Democrats.

From 1962 to 1980, by failing to adjust tax rates in response to escalating inflation and in response to rising incomes due to the entry of married women into the workforce—a development that forced middle-income families into tax brackets originally designed to cap-

ture only the well-to-do—Democratic-controlled Congresses allowed the burden of the progressive marginal rates in the income tax to increasingly fall on the moderate-income voters who were essential to the maintenance of a liberal majority coalition. During this period, the marginal tax rate (the tax on the last dollar earned) for all taxpayers rose from 24.5 percent to 32.2 percent, roughly a 30 percent increase.¹⁴ Similarly, the average tax rate (the rate on all income) rose from 12.8 to 15.9 percent, a roughly 25 percent increase.¹⁵

Just as Democrats were imposing rising taxes on their own base, making it increasingly costly for taxpayers to support government spending that benefited previously disenfranchised groups, the agenda of the Democratic Party shifted from the universal programs of the New Deal and the Fair Deal to a focus on benefits for members of minority groups—first legal equality through civil rights legislation, then economic opportunity through affirmative action, then expanded services and payments to children born out of wedlock, and then subsidized jobs programs for unmarried fathers. Policies adopted by the federal government to redistribute benefits to African Americans—morally unambiguous in the eyes of many, if not most, voters as an appropriate redress for centuries of slavery—were steadily expanded to encompass other disadvantaged minorities. These other minorities were often voluntary migrants to the United States, or their descendants, who had deliberately sought entry to this country and who had not, in the view of many, been legally discriminated against.

This expansion of civil rights legislation originally designed for African Americans to encompass groups including women, the elderly, Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, gays, and those embroiled in the criminal justice system—from death row inmates to recreational drug users—resulted from two parallel developments: first, the need of civil rights

14. Eugene Steurerle and Michael Hartzmark, "Individual Income Taxation: 1947–1979," Office of Tax Analysis, Department of the Treasury, undated, copy supplied to author by Eugene Steurerle.

15. *Ibid.*

leaders to gain new allies in legislative and court battles, and, second, the growing assertiveness and strength of groups representing such large populations as Hispanics, women, and the elderly. The leaders of these groups often found that the rights and preferences granted African Americans were attractive as a means of addressing the demands of their own constituents. A series of Supreme Court decisions buttressed by lower courts as well as by actions of the federal regulatory system, shaped policies determining who would get hired, who would get promoted, and who would get accepted to college and to graduate school in both the public and the private sector. These judicial, legislative, and regulatory developments were advocated by the platforms of the Democratic Party, although such policies would have had difficulty gaining either congressional approval or popular support.

The legal decisions that formed the foundation of the rights revolutions resulted, in part, from the purposeful use of the courts by minority groups, women's organizations, and others seeking to expand the rights agenda in the face of rising legislative and White House hostility, beginning in the 1970s. Such judicial and regulatory decisions, as well as new policies favoring migrants to the United States from developing countries (under the aegis of immigration reform enacted in the mid-1960s and supported by Democratic legislative majorities), had an immense impact on the lives of countless citizens, creating a vast pool of beneficiaries who developed loyalty to the party of government activism. But they also created a vast pool of those who felt unsettled and victimized by the arrival of these newcomers and who developed allegiance to the GOP as the party committed to reduced government intrusion.

For the leadership of the Democratic Party, the moral imperative of lowering barriers that had historically impeded access to opportunity for African Americans, women, and other disenfranchised groups was inescapable. At the same time, however, acceding to this imperative made holding together a biracial or multiethnic center-left

majority coalition, with an equal number of male and female adherents, increasingly difficult, imposing choices and trade-offs that inevitably produced friction, hostility, and defectors, as well as new adherents.

By allowing tax burdens on white working- and lower-middle-class voters to rise, just as those voters perceived that the government they were paying for was intervening, at their expense, to allocate benefits to groups other than their own, Democrats invited the backlash that toppled the party—and the New Deal variant of liberalism—in the elections of 1968, 1972, 1980, 1984, 1988, and 2000, as well as in the midterm elections of 1994 (the year of the “angry white male,” when Democrats finally lost both the House and the Senate).

The costs of the rights revolution fell most heavily on working-class whites, as unions, police forces, fire departments, and all levels of government and civil service employment, in addition to jobs within large private corporations subject to federal regulation, were opened to previously discriminated against and otherwise barred competitors. Schools in once all-white neighborhoods became subject to court-ordered hiring goals, as well as to court-ordered multilingual and other special-education programs, creating new groups of enraged or gratified voters. At the same time, however, more affluent white neighborhood schools in the suburbs and in rapidly growing exurbia remained relatively untouched, as did the professional lives of many doctors, lawyers, journalists, academics, and other workers at the more privileged levels of the information economy, who still enjoyed the relatively insular comforts of upper-middle-class life.

Democratic leaders were faced with what, even in retrospect, seemed an insoluble dilemma: How was the party to alleviate competition for scarce resources, both tangible and intangible, such as jobs, pay increases, classroom time, slots in universities, space in the literary canon, and other matters of cultural authority and prestige? Competition was often tinged with deeply felt convictions concerning justice—dissension between those committed to the rights of criminal

perpetrators who had suffered childhood poverty and abuse—and those committed to the rights of the victims of crime. How was the party of the common man to reconcile the interests of white South Boston and black Roxbury, or white south St. Louis and black north St. Louis? How could it offer the right to instruction in their native tongue to the more than thirty language groups registered in schools clustered around the nation's largest cities? Indeed, how could the party produce the wherewithal to feed the seemingly insatiable appetite for opportunity, benefits, and government services of a rapidly democratizing, multiethnic, multicultural citizenry endowed with certain loosely specified inalienable rights?

In practice, by the mid-1960s, Democrats had embarked on large-scale programs of social reform, including health care for the poor, welfare for an exploding population of single mothers, special education for the legions of learning disabled, nutritional programs for inner-city infants and children, Spanish-language signage in public buildings, and so forth. These programs committed tax revenues that were widely viewed by lower- and middle-income whites as being weighted toward “another” America. Ronald Reagan captured the sentiments of many of these voters when he declared, as he did so often, “I didn’t leave the Democratic Party, the party left me.”

By the 1970s, Democratic Party platforms began to endorse non-traditional family structures. The sexual revolution, the women’s movement, antiwar protestors, and the student counterculture all served to radicalize previously quiescent sectors of the American populace, to increase competitive pressures for limited resources, and to compound the difficulties of those seeking to maintain the remnants of the majority Left coalition, even while providing substantial new populations of beneficiaries and adherents for the Left. Many of the insurgents within the Democratic Party during this period, especially those traveling the route from the student Left to the upper councils of the Democratic Party, conveyed contempt for the materialistic values of union members and traditional middle-American constituen-

cies—the goal of a quarter-acre lot, a tract house, a two-car garage, a ride-on mower, a power boat, and a cabin by the shore. At the same time, the new “elitism” at the upper levels of the Democratic Party attracted substantial numbers of upper-income voters who felt more at home in the left coalition as its culture became more intellectually sophisticated and compatible with their own views.

In effect, an elite cultural progressivism in many ways supplanted the Democratic Party’s economic progressivism of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. The two-parent family with a male head of household lost its privileged position within the social order; indeed, it was often demonized by the new Left as an institution of patriarchal oppression. Even as this attitudinal shift alienated those with “bourgeois” family values, it attracted new antitraditionalists, such as sexual libertarians, vast numbers of unmarried women, and so on.

In addition, the historic economic class divisions of the New Deal period were augmented by a range of movements, often jostling uncomfortably under the standard of the Democratic Party. New configurations of support and opposition emerged regarding the introduction of laws regulating novel reproductive technologies, sexual harassment, child support and custody disputes, violence against women, and sexual harassment. Such shifts from a center-left political alliance based on economic status to one based not only on economic concerns but also on broadly conceived human rights, as well as on cultural identity and affinity, resulted in growing divisions within Democratic ranks. A socially liberal, well-educated, secular Left leadership cohort joined forces with racial minorities, unwed mothers, gay rights activists, and other previously marginalized groups. They opposed a Republican Party funded and led by the very wealthy and by a corporate ownership and managerial class, which sought a reduction in the regulatory and tax burdens of big government and which allied with a culturally conservative, religiously observant, materialistic white working and lower middle class seeking to stem the tax-fueled and government-sponsored tides of change.

The congressional elections of 1966 first demonstrated the vulnerability of the splintering New Deal coalition, when Democrats lost 44 House seats in the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 1965 riot in the African American Watts section of Los Angeles, the 1966 race riots in Chicago, and reports of sharply rising crime rates in virtually every region of the nation. The 1968 independent presidential bids of both Eugene McCarthy on the left and Alabama governor George C. Wallace on the right magnified this vulnerability. The Wallace bid proved particularly prophetic. Wallace won 13 percent of the popular vote and forty-six electoral college votes from the states of the Deep South in a campaign that both defended segregation and portrayed the Democratic Party as an elitist institution imposing on America not only forced integration but also the values of pointy-headed intellectuals.

Wallace's 1968 message was based on race, but its appeal extended far beyond to a larger "populism of the right." Wallace gave voice to the growing conviction of working- and middle-class white voters that their values, their neighborhoods, their ambitions, and their traditions were under assault by a powerful liberal elite that had extended its domination to Congress, to the courts, and to the leadership cadre of the Democratic Party. In his last presidential campaign in 1976, Wallace told voters, "We haven't been against people. We've been against big government trying to take over and write a guideline for you and tell you how to cross the street, what to do with your union and your business when you know how to do it yourself."¹⁶

In 1968, running as an independent candidate in the general election against Democratic nominee Hubert H. Humphrey and against Republican nominee Richard M. Nixon, Wallace declared: "It is a sad day in our country that you cannot walk even in your neighborhoods at night or even in the daytime because both national par-

16. Wallace quotes available on the Public Broadcasting Service website, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wallace/sfeature/quotes.html>.

ties, in the last number of years, have kowtowed to every group of anarchists that have roamed the streets of San Francisco and Los Angeles and throughout the country. And now they have created themselves a Frankenstein monster, and the chickens are coming home to roost all over this country. . . . Yes, they've looked down their nose at you and me a long time. They've called us rednecks—the Republicans and the Democrats. Well, we're going to show, there sure are a lot of rednecks in this country.”¹⁷

The Wallace constituency—enlarged over the subsequent quarter-century to encompass Richard M. Nixon's silent majority, the Reagan Democrats of 1980 and 1984, the disaffected males so influential in Newt Gingrich's Republican revolution of 1994, and the voters backing both presidents Bush—began as a renegade protest against the emerging shape of Democratic sociocultural and racial liberalism and has by now become a crucial Republican constituency. This constituency, more than any other, has been the single most important factor in American politics, from the congressional elections of 1966 to the midterm elections of 2002. This is not to minimize the significance of other constituencies in election outcomes—women, Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, gay rights activists, and many others have, and continue to, cast decisive votes. Women overall, for example, voted for Gore 54–43, while men voted for Bush 53–42. But, while working women voted for Gore by a 58–39 margin, nonworking women voted for Bush by a 52–44 margin, according to the Voter News Service 2000 exit polls.¹⁸

The complex center-left alliance may indeed, again, form an election-day majority, as it did in 2000 when Al Gore won the popular vote, but its margin has become so slender as to be in constant peril.

In an era dominated by the victories of the Republican Party—not only at the presidential but also at the congressional, gubernato-

17. *Ibid.*

18. 2000 Voter News Service (VNS) exit poll data, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/results/index.president.html>.

rial, and state-legislative levels—it is the group of white, moderate-income, disproportionately male voters behind the GOP that has most consistently exerted the leverage to propel American politics to the right. Successful Republican candidates—most notably Reagan and George W. Bush—have often adopted right-populist cadences and rhetoric—the “common touch” designed to reach and emotionally tap into the concerns of key voters on the middle and lower rungs of the social ladder. The party of commerce, industry, and wealth generation, the party of resistance to progressive taxes, government regulation, and government-funded social benefits, has found a crucial ally among overwhelmingly white working- and middle-class voters whose experience has led them to see much of what government visibly provides as adverse to their own most cherished interests.

Maintaining the Contemporary Coalition

The Democratic coalition, on the other hand, continues in many ways as a union of the have-nots. Economic divisions remain a significant factor in elections. Al Gore beat George Bush by 13 percentage points among voters making \$15,000 to \$30,000, according to exit polls by Voter News Service (VNS), while voters making more than \$100,000 backed Bush over Gore by 11 points.¹⁹

There is now, however, a host of other factors that are significantly more predictive of voting behavior than income or education. The intensity of voters’ religious convictions, measured by church attendance, is currently a much stronger indicator of partisan preference than is economic status. The 14 percent of voters who attend religious services more than once a week supported Bush over Gore by a decisive 27-point margin (63 to 36 percent). The 14 percent of voters who never go to church backed Gore over Bush by an even

19. Exit poll data available at the CNN website, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/epolls/US/P000.html>.

larger 29 points (61 to 32 percent).²⁰ In fact, the answers to public opinion surveys to questions on abortion, gun ownership, and even Hillary Clinton (as a proxy, arguably, for nontraditional roles for women) correlate much more strongly with voting behavior than a respondent's identification as a member of the working class or the upper middle class.²¹

Al Gore's 2000 campaign became a testing ground for advocates attempting to integrate the cultural liberalism of the modern Democratic Party with a renewed economic populism and a revitalized conception of a top versus bottom political contest. Democrats in 2000 painted the Bush campaign as financed by a new generation of special-interest power brokers who sought a pliant president who would bend public policy to suit their purposes and profits. The official theme of the Gore campaign became, "Standing up for the people, not the powerful." At the Democratic convention, Gore declared: "Whether you're in a suburb or an inner city, whether you raise crops or drive hogs and cattle on a farm, drive a big rig on the interstate or drive e-commerce on the Internet, whether you're starting out to raise your own family or getting ready to retire after a lifetime of hard work, so often powerful forces and powerful interests stand in your way, and the odds seem stacked against you, even as you do what's right for you and your family. . . . I want you to know this: I've taken on the powerful forces, and as president, I'll stand up to them and I'll stand up for you. . . . That's the difference in this election. They're for the powerful. We're for the people."²²

Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg, one of the principal architects of Gore's populist strategy, conducted a postelection survey to determine the effectiveness of Left-populist themes. His findings showed that Gore's campaign had done little or nothing to restore

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Gore's acceptance speech is available at the CNN website, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/conventions/democratic/transcripts/gore.html>.

Democratic support among the key target constituencies of white men and women without college degrees. The survey, conducted for the Institute for America's Future (IAF), revealed that these constituencies had significantly more positive feelings toward the Republican Party than toward the Democratic Party. Asked whether their views were warm or cool toward the two parties, white women without college degrees were decisively favorable to the GOP (49 percent warm and 27 percent cool), while their assessment of the Democratic Party was somewhat less positive (46 percent warm to 34 percent cool). For noncollege white men, the differences were more dramatic: their positive view of the Republican Party was 54 percent to 27 percent, and their assessment of the Democratic Party was negative, 38 percent to 41 percent.

In perhaps his most revealing finding, Greenberg told a gathering of progressive activists sponsored by the IAF, "We lost it downscale and gained it upscale. Progressives need to ask: What is the character of a progressive movement without the aspiration to represent working-class voters?"²³

Gore won a slim plurality of the vote with strong backing of upscale white professional voters while failing to put together a sufficient popular majority to ensure an electoral college victory. This failure was, in part, due to the defection to Bush of white working-class voters, the original mainstay of the New Deal Democratic coalition. There is now, in fact, a contemporary progressive coalition, but it has been transformed into a much more complex, difficult to unite, and less reliable coalition.

The Republican coalition, of course, has its own major vulnerabilities. As the Christian Right and the antiabortion wing have gained sway within the Republican Party, leading to the adoption of a strong antiabortion plank, many secular voters, whose economic interests lie with the GOP, have switched their allegiance to the party of the Left.

23. Poll data provided to the author by Stanley Greenberg.

In fact, secular voters are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States, and such voters have a deep antipathy to the GOP's religious and moral conservatism. This shift has offered significant opportunities to the Left. The intensity and depth of the views of more secular voters has been demonstrated in repeated public poll findings showing majorities opposed to the impeachment of President Clinton and supporting Clinton, even in the aftermath of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

The importance of the shift of these voters toward the Democratic coalition should not be underestimated. They are the driving force in the conversion of major suburban counties outside such coastal cities as New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco from Republican bastions to increasingly reliable Democratic constituencies. Together with Hispanic voters, these contemporary voters have converted California from a leaning Republican state to a reliable source of electoral college votes for Democratic presidential candidates. Support for the right to an abortion has become a bedrock of support of the Democratic Party, and the abortion issue shows how the party has developed an issue strategy that does not comport with traditional economic populism. Among whites with high school diplomas or less, VNS exit polls taken in 2000 showed that a slight majority, 52 percent to 48 percent, believes that most abortions should be illegal. In contrast, whites with college and postgraduate degrees believe most abortions should be legal, by a resounding 63 percent to 37 percent.²⁴

Issues revolving around violence constitute another noneconomic key to contemporary voter allegiance to the Democratic Party. Less well-educated whites are divided down the middle on this issue, whereas well-educated whites strongly support gun control, 66 percent to 34 percent.²⁵

The emergence of dissonance as a key element within the center-

24. CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/epolls/US/P000.html>.

25. *Ibid.*

left coalition is one of the primary reasons that the contemporary Democratic Party is so difficult to manage. A Democratic candidate, especially one seeking to win the presidency, must be able to develop a message—and, just as important, a tone—that joins the NAACP, NOW, La Raza, the Human Rights Campaign, Hollywood, the ACLU, AFSCME, and the AFL-CIO—bricklayers, government employees, laid-off steelworkers, and teachers. These groups must be united, just as an effective Republican candidate must pull together the support of key GOP constituencies—from Southern Baptists fearful of their now-porous communities to military personnel, ranchers, hedge-fund executives, hunters, and international currency traders—behind a banner of opposition to taxes, government regulation, and social spending; support for gun ownership; toleration of abridged civil liberties in the name of homeland defense; commitment to a military doctrine of preemptive war; belief in capital punishment; and devotion to traditional family values.

The Democratic coalition has been much harder to corral. Jimmy Carter won the 1976 election primarily in response to voter backlash against Watergate, but he proved unable to either master or manage Democratic congressional majorities on Capitol Hill or the competing wings of the party at large. Subsequently, he failed to win a second term. Clinton conducted a successful 1992 campaign but did not win a majority of the popular vote, as 19 percent of the electorate cast ballots for independent (and fiercely protectionist) candidate Ross Perot. Although Clinton laid the groundwork during his 1992 campaign for a more moderate Democratic coalition, promising to reverse what voters perceived as the cultural excesses of the Left—for example, by calling for a New Covenant on welfare—he crashed upon the shoals of the culture wars shortly after taking office.

Clinton's failure to lead his party back to the political center, as he had promised prior to his election, was evident on numerous fronts: his willingness to define his opening agenda in terms of abortion rights—the first executive order he signed upon assuming office

was to permit, once again, abortion counseling in federally funded family planning programs; his “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise regarding the service of gays in the military; and his delegation to his wife of the authority to reform national health policy. His actions angered the moderate voters who had backed him in 1992. They shifted in droves to the GOP for the 1994 congressional elections, leading the Republican takeover of the House and Senate in 1994.

Conclusion

The Republican and Democratic coalitions are now both in a state of flux, driven by the recognition that the United States is subject to terrorist assault and by the ongoing violence in the Middle East. Both the terrorist threat and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq worked initially to the advantage of the Republican Party and played to the GOP edge on matters of national defense and the use of force, but it is not at all clear what the long-term partisan consequences will be, much less where the war on terror and the U.S. involvement overseas will lead. These factors are virtually certain to radically affect what has been the modest, but consistent, conservative national tilt of American politics during the past four decades and to reformulate the issues of domestic social and cultural upheaval, which have recently played such a decisive role in American politics.

