The Evolution of a Party System:
Four Stops on the Road to 2025

Political parties have long been central—pivotal—to policy-making in the United States. Not nearly all of the programmatic issues in American politics derive from these parties. Some are forced in by exogenous developments in the larger environment. Many more are a current reflection of the major social cleavages in American society. And the structure of governmental institutions, by itself, always gives shape to potential policy products, sometimes favoring given substantive domains or specific programmatic responses within them. Yet in the world of 2025, and for a couple of centuries beforehand, the parties of the day reliably performed two critical functions within all of this: they shaped policy alternatives, and they provided the crucial connection between a social base for policy divisions and the governmental institutions that had to respond.[1]

So the state of the parties in any given year comes prepackaged with a set of inherent questions, about continuity and change in their own institutional specifics and about their contributions to the politics of the moment:

- An opening section will introduce the evolution of this party system in the longest run, with particular attention to how this unfolds from one political era to another. Four major eras tell this story: an era of pure factional politics, 1776-1824; an era of two-party competition, 1828-1892; an era of hegemonic parties, 1896-1964; and the age of the activists, 1968-2024.

- A second section introduces three specific partisan politicians, who brought eras two, three, and four to life: Andrew Jackson with the birth of organized parties; William Jennings Bryan with deliberate alteration of a party program; and Donald Trump with the pattern of partisan behavior characterizing the modern world.

- That first section attempts to avoid the modern fallacy that correlation is causation, rather than just a register of historical developments. The second section looks for clues to connect the current with the successor worlds. And a short closing note asks, in effect, "Where are we in history?"

A. Four Systems Across Time

1. Pure Factional Politics, 1776-1824

The concept of a 'party system' cannot stretch far enough to include policy-making struggles—really just intermittent policy discussions—under the Articles of Confederation, 1776-1787. A confederal system of government, with a single-chamber legislature and no chief executive, where each state possessed one vote and unanimity was effectively required, was not an invitation to generate any form of intermediary organization. In these earliest days of the new nation, the result was just an absence of national public policies: revenues could not be raised, bills could not be paid, expenditures could not be encumbered, and international agreements could not be forged.[2] Within a decade, a diverse array of state political leaders had concluded that if this governmental structure could not be substantially reformed, the nation itself might come apart.

The solution would be a new Constitution of the United States, with a federal form of government, a deliberate separation of powers, an explicit chief executive, and a bicameral legislature, composed of an upper chamber, the Senate, to cement the individual states to this federal union, along with a lower chamber, the House of Representatives, to connect the general public to its new—and this time, intendedly effective—government. Seen from one side, this was a richly elaborated governmental structure, with elucidated powers for policy-making and a national scope of application. Though from the other side, the result was also far more complex than its predecessor, for a nation that had always been internally diverse and would become only more so as time passed.

Two inescapable early tasks would demand a response that was going to draw out a continuing party system for the long run. The first involved federal assumption of state debts left over from the revolution and the Articles. Without assumption, the states would perforce prioritize

their own policy needs, over, above, and often in opposition to federal activities. If that could be addressed, the larger legislative challenge was to create a federal system for managing a national budget, and hence the national economy. As envisioned by Alexander Hamilton in his *First Report on the Public Credit*, this included a national bank, a national mint, and a national tariff structure. Though what the two challenges also provided was an inescapable lesson in politics under the new constitutional system.

For what their pursuit demanded, immediately and practically, was coalition formation and then coalition maintenance in pursuit of these (and many subsequent) programs.[3] That lesson was immediate for a Washington administration tasked with these opening challenges. But it was simultaneously obvious to those who did *not* want to pay the price of debt assumption or pursue a national economic policy. The inescapable result was two informal coalitions, aligning "pro" versus "anti" administration supporters. By the second Washington Congress, these divisions extended out to counterpart political figures in the states. By the third Congress, they were well on the way to specifically partisan labels, pitting "Federalists" against "Democratic-Republicans". And by the fourth Congress, there were no successful candidates left who did not campaign under one or the other label. (Table 1)

Table 1

By then, it was also clear that these labels were more than simple coalition markers; they came packaged with (two) partisan programs. Federalists favored governmental activity on behalf of economic development. Democratic-Republicans countered with democratic values on behalf of individual opportunity. These two incipient parties likewise offered a view of each other. The Democratic-Republicans saw an opposition favoring the privileged by way of the statism that had been at the root of the revolution, while the Federalists pictured an opposition fronting the same

disruptive values that had led to a near-collapse under the Articles. For what proved to be only a political moment, this alignment appeared headed for a competitive two-party system.

Indeed, for the fourth Congress, the Democratic-Republicans succeeded in wresting partisan control away from the Federalists in the House of Representatives, creating the first instance of what would later be known as 'split partisan control' of American national government. Unified partisan control was then restored when John Adams, the Federalist candidate for President, benefited from some dramatic political blunders by the French and their American allies, to defeat Thomas Jefferson, the Democratic-Republican champion. The Adams administration capitalized on this unified control to punish domestic opponents directly, by way of the Alien and Sedition Acts, clamping down on their former opposition in a sweeping variety of ways.

Yet an adverse public reaction shifted unified control to the Democratic-Republicans in the next presidential election. In the moment, that could still be viewed as the obvious product of a true two-party system, where unified partisan control in the hands of one party was replaced by unified partisan control in the hands of the other. Yet Jefferson's success in his rematch with Adams would prove instead that it had been the beginning of an extended period of one-party Democratic-Republican dominance. (Table 2) In this, Jefferson was to secure unified Democratic-Republican control through four congresses. His successor, James Madison, would continue unified control through the next four. And his successor, James Monroe, would showcase the same four-congress effect.

Table 2

So it would take painfully little time for major political players to see that they had inherited not a two-party system but rather a single dominant party, within whose confines the real policy struggles were to play out as a kaleidoscope of shifting *factional* conflicts. The Federalists, in

desperate decline, were nevertheless to linger through a long slow trip to oblivion, functioning as an occasional gadfly opposition but never more than that. Yet rather than being a dominant party seizing its opportunity to impose a composite program, the Democratic-Republicans would become in effect the *framework* within which most such policy struggles occurred. For this, the two great struggles of the entire period, the battle over what became the Louisiana Purchase and the protracted argument about pursuing what became the War of 1812, are diagnostic, while suggesting the broad range of factional coalitions possible in a period of pure factional politics.

The Louisiana Purchase effectively doubled the geographic size of the new nation, giving it a developmental trajectory that would run well past the Jefferson/Madison/Monroe triumvirate.[4] For its congressional battle, there were three major factions:

- In the center, the regular Democratic-Republican Party saw a huge increment to the nation as a whole, as well as a hugely popular move, cumulating in an evident partisan benefit;
- On the left, the Quids, a faction of the party dedicated to 'old republican' virtues, were opposed to any territorial acquisition that was not achieved through constitutional amendment;
- And on the right, the remaining rump of the Federalist had no constitutional quibbles, but opposed expansion of the nation rather than development of its existing territory.

The result was the first great instantiation of an American legislative tradition, setting the extremes against the middle, with victory for the latter on the narrowest of margins, 59-57.

Finding a place for the United States in the international order was a recurrent original challenge, becoming only worse when Britain and France went to war. Both nations shared the view that any third nation which traded with the enemy was itself an enemy, justifying disruption of its trade, seizure of its merchandise, and impressment of its seamen. Washington attempted a (bootless) resolution by treaty. Jefferson tried a sequence of approaches to leveraging American trade, whose costs fell disproportionately on his own country. Leaving Madison with little option short of war. Though on the way there, the parade of policy twists with factional supporters

appeared nearly limitless: seeking to fight a war without an army, seeking a land war that did not require a navy, agreeing to create an army and a navy but refusing any tax increases—and on and on before Congress finally capitulated to the inevitable.[5] Even then, a kaleidoscope of domestic factions continued to shift as the war dragged on, until the abdication of Napolean finally provided a resolution that was little more than a return to the state quo ante.

2. Competitive Two-Party Politics, 1828-1892

The familiar contours of an established factional politics began coming apart with the presidential election of 1828, to be terminally shattered in the successor contest in 1832. For 1828, five Democratic-Republicans went all the way to the ballot box in the general election, where four secured votes in the Electoral College. That sent the election to the House of Representatives, where a deal was struck between the outgoing Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, and the Speaker of the House, Henry Clay of Kentucky, making them President and Secretary of State respectively. Yet the lasting outcome belonged to the great disgruntled loser, General Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, who would recast both the operating structure and the programmatic focus of what became simply the Democratic Party.

Having secured the most Electoral Votes from states that put their Electors on a public ballot, Jackson believed that the old, established, social elites had conspired to deny him victory. Four years later, when he unhorsed sitting president Adams, Jackson was in the process of building nothing less than a new intermediary structure for American politics. Its central product would be a national network of mass-based, fully articulated, and organizationally hierarchical intermediaries, one that would give a specific character to American politics well into the twentieth century. This party system, a differentiated organizational structure with lasting policy programs,

would be reliably energized by party operatives who desired both to win individual policy battles and to secure the rewards—the "spoils"—of politics.

From the start, American politics had been distinguished by a broader electorate than elsewhere in the world, accompanied by a wider range of public offices that could be filled by this broader electorate. The years leading up to 1828 had multiplied both, creating a world where most adult white males could vote and where the winning party had very substantial jobs and favors—patronage—to dispense.[6] For Jackson, with the unfailing organizational support of Martin Van Buren, Senator from New York, these voters and those jobs were the target. By the time they had captured the presidency (and Congress) three straight times—two for Jackson and a third for Van Buren—a second organized party was struggling to be born. Under the tutelage of Henry Clay, policy guru of the Adams presidency, this aspiring competitor surfaced first as the National Republicans, then settled in as the Whigs, before ultimately becoming institutionalized as the Republicans.

Jackson would articulate what became the ideological core of the Democratic Party for the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth:

> It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes. Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth cannot be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally entitled to protection by law. But when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government.[7]

Thereafter, the battle between two great organized parties would revolve around some mix of four major policy differences:

- Infrastructure: the degree to which a central government should provide basic support for expansion of the national economy, and the means by which it should or should not do so;
- Land: the degree to which that same central government should provide land for division among its citizens, along with the rules that would govern its dispersion;
- Currency: the degree to which individual banks—national, state, or local—should be able to print currency, and the regulations under which such currency should be accepted as valid;
- Tariffs: the place of explicit levies on trade, targeted at some mix of revenue extraction and manufacturing encouragement.

An intensely competitive two-party politics would result. After Jackson, no president would be able to secure even a second term—a re-election—until the Civil War, resulting in a partisan rotation of the executive: Democrat in 1836, Whig in 1840, Democrat in 1844, Whig in 1848, Democrat in 1852. Though in the American context, this could in principle be accompanied —and now was accompanied in practice—by split partisan control, whereby different parties dominated different branches of (the same) national government. (Table 3) When a pure factional politics had become diagnostic of the previous political period, beginning in 1800, split control had been an irrelevance. For an era of competitive two-party politics, it would actually be the dominant pattern.

Table 3

The programmatic core of this regularized antebellum competition would remain remarkably stable, with one major addition. The Mexican War of 1846-1848, set off by an American move to annex the former Mexican province of Texas, would fuel what became stereotyped as a "Manifest Destiny", whereby the United States would/should occupy and populate the entire North American continent.[8] Both the war and the concept proved popular with the general public, so the Democrats added territorial expansion to their overall program, reaching out toward the Oregon Territory and the southwestern lands, while the Whigs asserted their preference

(inherited from the Federalists) for fostering economic development and democratic progress inside existing borders.

By the 1850s, however, there were other emergent policy domains, springing from two further, distinguishable, social cleavages. One of these was cultural, deriving from divisions between nativists and immigrants. The decade from 1845-1855 was the high-water mark of immigration in American society to that point, where the integration of new citizens was made additionally difficult by religious divisions, Catholic versus Protestant, with powerful policy implications all their own. The second challenge was sectional, involving attitudes toward—and perceived costs from—the presence or absence of substantial slave populations. The place of slavery had intermittently bedeviled American politics from the beginning, exploding in the 1850s when the drive for a transcontinental railroad required a repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the great previous effort to marginalize the issue.

Both major parties, Democratic-Republican as well as Whig, preferred a focus on the key policy disputes characterizing the 1820s through the 1850s. But by the late 1850s, there were splinter parties making a serious bid to ride one of these other priorities to national status. Which led to four proto-parties competing for the presidency by 1860, offering: union with popular sovereignty for the Democrats; union with slavery for the Constitutional Unionists; union with abolition for the Republicans; and slavery with only a silence on union for the Southern Democrats. At the ballot box, the result was mixed. Abraham Lincoln, the Republican, secured just 39% of the popular vote but a huge majority in the Electoral College, while the Democrats, albeit losing seats, retained control of the Senate.

Formally, that left it to Lincoln, like the three presidents before him, to figure out how to govern under split partisan control. Yet by the end of December, the practicalities were being

recast. Southern states were already seceding, and only days after Lincoln's inauguration, what were now the Confederate States of America opened fire on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter in South Carolina. The next day, the President of the United States declared war on the confederacy.[9] Thereafter, war policy itself would largely be shaped by the President, who had constitutional primacy, though Congress would occasionally mount organized investigations and idiosyncratically attempt to influence personnel decisions.

Yet the surprise of the Lincoln presidency was that Congress, with healthy new Republican majorities once the southern Democrats had departed, would undertake major domestic programs—in fact, the largest collective policy output until the New Deal in the 1930s.[10] Some of this was war-related, as with taxation and constitutional procedure. Much harked back to the Whigs, with bank regulation, infrastructure provision, and protective tariffs. Plus one true reversal of old Whig positions, as a newly muscular Republican Party shifted toward providing plentiful and cheap land as the route to mass opportunity—and a means of cementing their new majority. The personal beneficiary of all this was to be Ulysses S. Grant, victorious General of the Union Army and then President of the United States.

The close of the Grant presidency was then accompanied by a declining public appetite for re-fighting the war, while the wellsprings for a different policy focus were already appearing, rooted principally in industrialization and secondarily in territorial expansion. With industrialization and its major side-effects, elected officials would seek to foster (or at least take credit for) economic growth and rising standards of living, while standing against predatory pricing, grim working conditions, and illicit market control. Beyond these was a congeries of new and more specific regulations to govern price-fixing and market manipulation, the formation of organized labor unions, and the behaviors appropriate to governmental personnel itself.[11]

All of which had to be pursued in a context shaped further by the mechanics of bringing new states into the union, in two very different pieces. The first involved the secessionist states, whose restitution was eased by having most re-enter under national Republican leadership, before being replaced rapidly at the state level by rigidly Democratic one-party regimes. Yet more than a third of the ultimate geography of the nation was to be contributed by entirely new states west of the Great Plains. To the point where the 25 putative states at the end of the Civil War would become 47 by the last election of the 19th century, sharing interests common to most new states but gaining a very different impact in the Senate, where each got two seats, as opposed to the House, the much larger body where they often began with just one.

The postbellum Republican parties that inhabited this landscape would be advantaged by the vast patronage resources of a national government emerging from civil war. These resources could be turned to building organizations—"machines"—that were more than equivalent to anything the antebellum Democrats had ever produced.[12] Nationwide two-party competition returned with them, though in an institutionally peculiar fashion. The Democrats had already bounced back to control of the House by the last congress under U.S. Grant, going on to control the Speakership in 16 of the 22 congresses between 1874 and 1894. Yet these Democrats would secure the presidency only twice in those same years, as three sharply regionalized factions—northeastern, southern, and western—had great difficulty finding a candidate who could energize all three without actively repelling any.[13]

Republican dominance of the Senate was greater even than their control of the presidency, surfacing in 18 of the 22 congresses during this same period, though it pivoted on policy grounds peculiar to the internal politicking among Senate Republicans. Currency issues, long central to economic arguments, had traditionally centered on banks and their regulation. But in this

postbellum period, these issues came to focus instead on the divide between 'hard' (stable) versus 'soft' (inflationary) money, now embodied even more concretely in a preference for gold versus silver. Yet the resulting electoral math, central to many of these issues in this newer world, was cruel to both sides:

- For the Democrats, the challenge focused on the Presidency, where there was no hope of an Electoral College majority if they could not draw some serious minority from the northeast. Yet this necessitated a hard-money appeal, and when they bowed to this strategic imperative, as they usually did, the resulting program was unattractive to a large share of their partisan base.

- For the Republicans, the challenge focused more directly on the Senate, where the new western states were consistently Republican, courtesy of party support for the infrastructure essential to state development. Yet these states simultaneously arrived favoring soft money—embodied now by silver—so that the two parties each acquired powerful (internal) cross-pressures, albeit targeted differentially at different governmental institutions.

Only that framework can explain how bimetallism, in its specifics and their adjustment, could be recurrently central to national politics, or how strike-associated violence could recurrently seize the national agenda, or how the economic cycle—intruding by way of the Panic of 1893, known in its time as "the Great Depression"—could rejig all those other strategic calculations. In this world, Grover Cleveland, Governor of New York, did finally manage the necessary policy straddle between an inflationary party base and the inescapable need for some share of the hard-money northeast, bringing the presidency back to the Democrats in 1884 as he did so. Though the straddle was not easy to execute in office, where Cleveland went on to lose his battle for re-election in 1888, before returning to defeat the Republican incumbent, Benjamin Harrison, in 1892.

3. Hegemonic Parties, 1896-1964

For a painfully short period, the Cleveland re-election would serve as an argument that the Democrats were finally 'back', re-established as the other main actor in a competitive two-party system. But the policy environment for this returning president proved incredibly unkind. Its

main substantive event would be a huge economic downturn, known as "The Great Depression" until an even more severe incarnation appeared in the late 1920s. Bereft of policy levers with which to respond, Cleveland turned to the repeal of bimetallism as his only legislative hedge against economic calamity, while appealing for help to the great financial houses in New York—the easiest source of private finance but also the great symbolic enemies of rank-and-file Democrats.

That set the stage for a disastrous 1896 election, followed by an extended period of Republican dominance.[14] The Democrats would secure the presidency only once between 1896 and 1932, and even that required two Republican candidates on the presidential ballot. Said differently, no lone Republican candidate for President was to lose to the Democratic nominee between 1896 and 1932. The Panic of 1893 simultaneously reinforced the nomination of the leading Republican of his generation, Representative William McKinley of Ohio, who would bring with him the great pillar of Republican policy in this emergent era, namely the gold standard. While from the other side, Cleveland's response to the Panic finally produced a nominee, former Representative William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, who appealed to what had long been the policy preference of his rank-and-file, namely silver as specie in its own right—at a ratio to gold that further violated all contemporary market logic.

Three basic changes in the character of politics followed. On the way to the election, the McKinley-Bryan struggle shifted the operational nature of national campaigns, with McKinley contributing a focus on fund-raising and paid advertising, while Bryan made 'whistle-stop campaigning' the signature characteristic of presidential contests. In the process, their joint contest reset the established bases of party support, with Republicans now dominating the northeast and the midwest, Democrats dominating the south and the west—a new, different, and largely

uncompetitive array. (Table 4) And by the end, their campaign had set in stone the economic policy, namely sound money and economic development, that would anchor American policy-making until the true 'Great Depression' appeared.[15]

Table 4

At first, the Democrats were unperturbed. Bryan would be their nominee in three of the four presidential contests before 1912, and he would personally savage the one exception, who tried to bring the party back to its pre-Bryan strategy. On the other side, a hard currency built on gold would be the foundation of economic policy-making in the United States until the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, while a dollar tied to gold would survive until the election of Richard Nixon in 1968. Two other policy domains would emerge as substantive foci, bringing with them the remainder of the major programmatic disputes for an extended period of Republican hegemony. The first was almost accidental, growing out of multiple conflicts with Spain in the Caribbean and exploding into a Spanish-American war in 1898. The second was more deliberate, more lasting, and more comprehensive, involving what became known as "progressivism".

The Spanish-American War led not just to a transfer of Cuba to the American sphere of influence but to orthodox colonies elsewhere, largely in the Pacific. Whether and how the United States should be an imperial nation would remain a matter of political debate, with Republicans in favor and Democrats opposed. A second idiosyncratic contribution of the war was its great hero, Theodore Roosevelt, who would become not only McKinley's Vice-President but the effective engine for "progressivism" afterward. The label itself had arrived in the late Grant administration, with civil service reform as its focus. Subsequently, this morphed into structural democratization more generally, with primary elections as its touchstone. Roosevelt, courtesy of the assassination

of McKinley and then through re-election in his own right, would expand this progressive thrust still further, into corporate regulation, work rules, and welfare reform.

The American society around these programmatic developments was largely an extrapolation of previous major trends, most especially industrialization, coupled with external immigration and internal migration, plus a galloping urbanization and a reorganization of social life to accord with an industrial world. All of that was simultaneously accompanied by continuing misery on the farm and a growing urban-rural gap in overall well-being. Along the way, both parties would acquire regular and progressive wings, and it was this factional split inside the Republican Party that would give the Democrats their lone presidency in an opposition era, via (progressive) Woodrow Wilson in 1912.[16]

Wilson would bring back old Democratic positions on the tariff and protectionism while offering new progressive tools for corporate regulation. But his major policy contribution would be a modernizing hybrid, a Federal Reserve Board, the first true central banking system in American history and a classic progressive tool, seeking to extract policy desires by shaping market operations. A second term of this Wilson presidency then had to feature a focus on "the Great War", World War I, with numerous supportive policy activities. Wilson's own wish for the outcome was to see the creation of an international body to manage national conflicts and avoid future wars, but foreign allies were unresponsive to his recommendations while a Congress that was trending Republican refused even to join the resulting League of Nations.

A nation returning from war instead appeared much more responsive to Republican promises of a refocus on domestic normality, ushering in three successive Republican presidencies. Even in victory, Wilson had drawn a smaller vote than Bryan in his dramatic defeat, while the Republican recovery under Warren Harding would come with lower voting turnout still, lower than

any election since before the Civil War. The associated partisan imbalance proved to be broad, deep, and repetitive, uniting all three nationally elective institutions. Though ironically, this was buttressed by the emergence of a deep divide inside the minority (Democratic) party, pitting rural, nativist, and dry states against their urban, immigrant, and wet counterparts in fierce intra-party conflict.

Herbert Hoover, the last of three consecutive Republican presidents, entered the White House in 1928 with his usual potpourri of ideas for improving the operation of governmental machinery. What he received in return was the most catastrophic economic downturn in American history: the stock market crashed, banks failed, businesses closed, and unemployment surged everywhere. By the time Hoover had to stand for re-election, the Great Depression had only spiraled downward. The public turn to his Democratic opponent, Governor Franklin Rosevelt of New York, was then overwhelming. The Democrats had already picked up the House of Representatives at the mid-term election of 1930. Roosevelt picked up 12 Senate seats and control of that chamber too on his way to the White House.

An administration with no major coordinated plan on its way into office nevertheless began with a huge tranche of social welfare programs, on currency, banking, service provision, farm relief, home loans, employment insurance, industrial coordination, and on and on. These were the products of Roosevelt's "hundred days" and were quickly gathered under the label of a "New Deal".[17] In its programmatic substance, this was nothing less than the single-shot provision of an American welfare state, remarkable on its own terms but likewise in 1933 by comparison to the rest of the world. In its practical politics, this was close to a pure presidential product, enabled by the fact that two of Roosevelt's first three Congresses were the only ones in American history where northern Democrats by themselves had a majority in the House of Representatives. Indeed,

to the extent that there was any serious policy conflict, it came not from the parties or from Congress but from the Supreme Court.

Re-elected overwhelmingly in 1936 with an augmented congressional margin, Roosevelt set out to rein in the Court, institutionalize his welfare state though personnel policy and executive reorganization, and purge the remaining organized opposition in his party, namely the southern Democrats in Congress. Instead, a notable economic contraction before the 1938 mid-term led to a bounce-back for the Republicans, coupled with the uniform return of those challenged Democrats. More abstractly, what resulted would essentially be the contours of American politics for the next thirty years—a second long, new, and stable partisan hegemony, this time for the Democrats and not the Republicans.

Three substantive domains would become the policy core of this extended political period. Social welfare would remain its programmatic core. Yet this would be joined in a painfully short time by international relations, inescapably through World War II, drawing an isolationist United States out of its international indifference, extended by way of a long 'cold war' between liberal democracy and international communism, where the US was the sole democracy with the resources to carry the fight.[18] Last but not domestically least, these concerns were to be joined by civil rights and racial policy, culminating in a veritable civil rights 'revolution' and adding the third of the three major policy domains that would characterize an evolving hegemonic era.[19]

The policy-making process inside three dominant issue domains would be most directly shaped throughout the balance, not so much between two unequal parties as among four continuing partisan factions, two from each party. On one side were northern versus southern Democrats. On the other side were northeastern versus outstate Republicans. The comparative size of these four factions moved back and forth, shaping and reshaping the making of public policy as it did so. Yet

the four were reliably mixed additionally, in differing alignments that depended on the substantive domain at issue. The result could be made to sound complex: mix and match among four major party factions across three great substantive domains. But in fact, the underlying relationship of factions to domains would remain stable through the remainder of the New Deal era:[20]

- When the substantive focus of policy debate was social welfare, the liberals were northern Democrats, the conservatives were outstate Republicans, and the swing groups were southern Democrats plus northeastern Republicans;

- When the substantive focus was instead foreign affairs, the internationalists were southern Democrats, the isolationists were outstate Republicans, and the swing groups were northern Democrats plus northeastern Republicans.

- And when the substantive focus was civil rights, the integrationists were northern Democrats, the segregationists were southern Democrats, and the swing groups were northeastern and outstate Republicans.

In such an environment, political negotiations shifted with the substantive focus of the issue in question, making the resulting negotiations additionally complex in that each realm also had to be pursued with attention to possible policy implications for the other two.

Remarkably, while this combination was indisputably complex, it was also to be roughly stable for more than thirty years. Which meant that established players learned to adapt their strategic behavior to this ongoing context, a behavioral template so stable that it acquired a summary concept of its own, "incrementalism", with the presumption that policy would be adjusted and readjusted within a matrix of continuing negotiations.[21] The arrival of Lyndon Johnson, more than thirty years later, would bring this to its high tide on all three diagnostic policy domains: a comprehensive welfare extension in Johnson's "Great Society", an active anti-communist war in Vietnam, and that veritable civil rights 'revolution' None of the major players could have known that this was at once the apotheosis and the end of a long Democratic hegemony.

4. The Age of the Activists, 1968-2024

The three great policy domains of the long New Deal era were well represented in the 1968 presidential campaigns. But this time, their embodiments—inflation for social welfare, Vietnam withdrawal for foreign affairs, and racial rioting for civil rights—convinced President Johnson not to stand for re-election. Vice President Humphrey, an archetypal spokesman for the traditional versions of those domains, was nominated in his place, while the Republicans turned back to former Vice President Richard Nixon to rescue them from the Goldwater debacle while offering a modern version of 'something for everyone' inside the Republican coalition.

Nixon would go on to secure an individual triumph but fail to gain Republican control of either house of Congress, providing grist for conventional interpretations in both directions. Democrats could see a temporary hiccup in their hegemonic era; Republicans could see a partisan renaissance requiring only a successor election to restore the missing pieces. And both interpretations would be seriously wrong. What followed instead was the great third option of American party politics, namely divided government, soon to be the diagnostic electoral outcome of the entire modern era. (Table 5).

Table 5

Two grand factors were to distinguish the new era and drive its evolution. One was a sweeping change at the social roots of American politics, a change in its fundamental cleavages. The other was a sweeping transformation of the structure of its key intermediaries, the two political parties. By comparison to the world of the long New Deal, the United States in the modern era was more white-collar and less blue-collar, more suburban and less urban, and more focused on college rather than high-school or the trades as a route to individual achievement.[22] All of which virtually called out for new issues and new coalitions, where an emergent panoply of 'cultural' issues would provide the major substantive addition.

Growing numbers of white-collar Democrats and blue-collar Republicans were the most obvious and immediate contributors to the resulting (new) coalitions. Though for the opening years of this modern period, the nation remained united by a public expectation of collective progress coupled with individual mobility. Yet there was a second major contribution to this new era, one driven by, capitalizing on, and extending the impacts of social change. In this era as in all eras, emergent social and programmatic changes were being filtered through the main intermediary organizations, the political parties. But now, the parties themselves were being transformed by a sweeping set of deliberate reforms, producing arguably the largest shift in the structure of American parties since the 1820s.[23]

At the core of this reform drive was an effort to escape the power of party organizations, in favor of a consciously activist structure:

> The chief consequences of these trends have been a change in the process of candidate selection and in the nature of electoral appeals. Party organizations composed of persons motivated by material rewards have a strong interest in winning an election, for only then will their rewards be secured. Provided there are competitive parties, candidates, at least at the top of the ticket, will be selected and electoral appeals fashioned so as to attract votes from the largest possible number of citizens. When the organization consists of members motivated by purposive rewards, the candidate selected must be one that can attract their enthusiasm, [the enthusiasm of issue activists], even if he cannot attract voter support, and the appeals issued must be consistent with their preferences, even if voters find them repugnant.[24]

This combination of social change and structural reform was to eventuate in a volunteer party structure producing an associated 'age of the activists'. In the long years of Democratic hegemony, the majority of Americans had lived in states with old-fashioned organized parties. But by the beginning of the modern era, an overwhelming majority lived in states with reformed volunteer parties, increasingly manned by issue activists. (Table 6)

Table 6

The conventional lament on the arrival of divided government was that it constituted a veritable recipe for institutional gridlock and policy stasis, but that view too proved remarkably inaccurate. Instead, there were still major policy domains where the general public more or less expected a policy response: support for the environment, its protection and restoration; escape from 'stagflation', the unexpected but lasting combination of inflation and recession; and budget control, in the name not just of current balances but of deficit reduction. Under divided government, the major players, brought up and skilled in the organized-party era, still saw their main responsibility as negotiating for the best deal they could get, though now in full knowledge that the next election would not provide a more palatable escape. Little else could explain:

- How Richard Nixon, with his lifelong suspicion of governmental interventions, would start the long process of making the condition of the environment a federal responsibility.

- How Jimmy Carter, the lone president in these early years from the party that had incubated the New Deal, would instead drive 'deregulation', a concentrated effort to *pull back* from involvement in the detailed workings of the marketplace;

- Or how Ronald Reagan, the voice of a new conservatism and more explicitly ideological than his predecessors, would nevertheless lob bomb after legislative bomb at stagflation.[25]

The drive toward volunteer over organized parties would grow only stronger in this new era, while the burgeoning population of independent activists, afforced by new 'cause' groups on both sides, would lead these intermediaries to operate very differently. An explosion of those activists was also sufficient to explain why each party became more explicitly ideological, a resulting combination that became ever more polarized, inside what was now a very competitive two-party framework. In the end, those joint impacts of ideologization and polarization would almost inevitably require an altered process of policy-making as well, though this was to arrive on a different time-line and by differing paths inside the institutions of American government.

Activist domination came early to the great traditional institution of American party politics, the national party convention, with repeated attacks by volunteer-party delegates on the party office-holders who had previously occupied their seats, reshaping the battles over presidential nominations as they did so. Fortunately, the first systematic attempt to survey the policy preferences of intermediary elites arrived early enough to catch the mature days of pre-reform politics. (Table 7) This picture of policy preferences among delegates to the national party conventions of 1952 featured a Democratic rank and file that was mildly left of the national average, with a Republican rank and file that was mildly right of that same standard. Democratic activists were then mildly left of their rank and file, while Republican activists were hugely right of theirs, residual testimony to the disastrous effect of the Great Depression and the long Democratic hegemony that followed.

Table 7[26]

By 1972, Democratic identifiers in the general public were slightly more liberal than their 1952 counterparts, just as Republican identifiers were slightly more conservative than theirs. Yet this time, the activists reversed a key element of the older story, with Republican delegates somewhat farther to the right of their rank and file, but Democratic delegates hugely farther to the left of theirs. 1976 then became the year that brought both parties into what would be a continuing modern alignment. The two rank and files remained only mildly distant from the national average, Democrats to the left and Republicans to the right. But both activist populations were now sharply off to the left and right respectively. Such that, by 1976, the two rank and files were closer to each other than they were to their own delegates!

A similar activist domination came later in the other elective governmental institutions, the House of Representatives and the Senate, where it had to happen one office at a time. With its

long careers and gradual progression through internal offices, Congress was more conducive to harvesting recurrent support, advancing established programs, and resisting the blandishments of short-term participants. Yet as impressive as the resulting resistance was, it could not stand indefinitely. The gradual but general creation of an activist politics, fed continually by reformed procedures and extensive social change, came eventually to populate Congress too, instantiated there as it had been at the national party conventions. So where congressional structure was once a brake on the activist rise, it too became a bulwark against activist retreat.[27]

In the immediate postwar years, a healthy leaven of Congress members still held policy positions closer to the ideological center of the other party than to the center of its own. But from the 1970s onward, these moderates became an increasingly endangered species.[28] For the House in the truly modern period, from about 1992 onward as the rise of the activists drove both parties toward polarized extremes, Republican moderates were devastated, while the Democrats were left with a small moderate cluster inside a galloping polarization of their own. (Figure 1.A) For the Senate, in the same general phase of the modern era, both parties converged on a parallel (if ideologically opposite) pattern, leaving only a rump of moderates in each party—down from 75% for the Democrats and 55% for the Republicans in the oldest postwar years.

Figure 1

What followed was a partisan politics all its own. The interparty competitiveness that had arisen during the era of divided government expanded sufficiently to underpin a reliable rotation in partisan control of the presidency: Democrat Clinton to Republican Bush to Democrat Obama to Republican Trump to Democrat Biden, and now back to Republican Trump. Unified partisan control made a flickering reappearance for each of these presidents in their initial election. Yet all but one were then characterized—and cursed—by the reappearance of split partisan control at the

first congressional election after this opening presidential vote. Only George W. Bush would escape this dynamic, courtesy of the terrorist attacks on the United States in September of 2001. Otherwise, the reappearance of split partisan control would reliably undermine unified control at its first opportunity—and eventually dominate the administrations of all these presidents.

What was also emerging along the way was a policy-making process notably different from that of its predecessors. Where the coming of an era of divided government had confounded its critics by generating fresh public policy in major substantive domains, the age of the activists would be almost the opposite. Parties that were ideologically unified and increasingly distant—with more and more members who valued *public postures*, the reason they were in office in the first place, over *public policies*, that had to be achieved by (often wide-ranging) compromise—would have great difficulty just adopting a comprehensive budget for each new year. The annual Comprehensive Appropriations Act would thus absorb a great deal of their collective time, often requiring a statutory deadline and sometimes requiring an actual governmental shutdown.

Given this environment, it was not surprising that the era produced three—but really four—distinct ways of working around recurrent partisan roadblocks:

- First came the "reconciliation process", whereby budget differences between the two congressional chambers could be adjusted without being subject to the rules of the Senate.

- Next came 'omnibus legislation', gathering up all the initiatives in a specific substantive realm and then subjecting the package to a single up-or-down vote.

- This morphed into the even-grander 'cromnibus', aggregating policies across substantive domains into one giant package, thereby magnifying the costs of opposing this dominant bill.

- And last was resuscitation of an old device, 'executive orders', whereby the president filled in the blanks on existing congressional legislation.[29]

B. Three Politicians Embodying Partisan Change

1. Elite Transformation

Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had some claim on being the 'founding fathers' for an American party system. Washington, despite an explicit abhorrence of parties as intermediaries, nevertheless generated two initial coalitions by which aspiring political leaders sought to manage public policy under the new Constitution. And Jefferson, the great rhetorical opponent of major elements of the party-politics-to-come, registered the ascendancy of an elite coalition that was to carry a partisan label and dominate a long inaugural era of pure factional politics. Yet in the long light of subsequent political history, it would be Andrew Jackson who escaped this factional politics and introduced a party system running all the way up to the political world of 2025.

The era of pure factional politics, 1790-1824, had possessed a managerial device that was crucial to sustaining a factional politics, one that might otherwise have had no recurrent structure at all. This was the metaphorical 'Virginia Dynasty', the informal arrangement by which it was possible for each successive Secretary of State under Presidents Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe—themselves all Virginians—to become the next sequential nominee, and then the next elected president, for the Democratic-Republican Party.[30] From the start, state political elites in Virginia were attuned to managing elections to their new presidency, across a period where they were consistently able to coordinate Virginia *state* politics, for a state that began as the largest of the original thirteen and remained focused on the need to include a vice-presidential nominee who could attract major northern support to its preferred presidential candidate.

So that was the arrangement that Andrew Jackson needed to destroy in pursuit of his own election to the presidency. This 'dynasty' began to falter in 1824, when four candidates secured Electoral Votes, sending the ultimate decision to the House of Representatives. Yet the vote there effectively extended this arrangement by once again promoting the Secretary of State to the

Presidency, although the winner this time, John Quincy Adams, was no longer a Virginian. Yet Andrew Jackson, victor in the battle of New Orleans and hero of the War of 1812, came out of the same election convinced that the American people had wanted him to be President but were denied the opportunity by a private cabal of social and economic elites in states that did not even allow a popular vote for their Electors.

Refusing the post of Secretary of War under incoming President Adams, Jackson set out to organize and mobilize the "Friends of Andrew Jackson" in a manner sufficient to secure the presidency in his second attempt. To that end, he recruited Martin Van Buren, sitting Senator from New York, and they set out to merge these 'friends' into what would become a fully articulated, organizationally hierarchical, nationwide network of partisan supporters.[31] Along the way, the formal product of their collective effort would be the first serious 'organized party' in American politics, the opening move in what became an era of two-party competitive politics that lasted from 1828 to 1892, apart from a short Civil War interlude. Yet the informal product of this same macro-development would transform the elite structure of this politics at all levels, from the presidency to its grass roots.

The franchise itself had always been broader in the colonies than in the mother country, and their denizens were always more prone to go on and elect indigenous public officials. But there remained room for this franchise to expand even further after independence; this drew more local officialdom into its electoral net; and the combination encouraged state and local politicians to expand the number of both elective and appointive positions.[32] It was these individuals (and their jobs), rather than an established elite leadership, that Jackson and Van Buren aimed to draw into their organized revolt. To that end, the program for their new Democratic-Republican Party explicitly condemned existing elites with their inherited privileges, attacking all requirements for

certified credentials or specialized experiences as embodying a demand for priority on the part of this already-privileged elite.

So when Jackson and Van Buren did ultimately construct a network sufficient to win a presidential election, they brought with them a transformation of local political elites much more generally. Though in truth, nothing could symbolize the shift more than the result in the presidency itself, where a larger social change was registered—indeed, personified—in a contest between the wealthy, eastern, and educated Adams and the frontiersman, westerner, and self-made Jackson.[33] Looking backward, this break between stereotypical social types underlined the fact that every president before Jackson had been directly connected to the founding fathers—even J. Q. Adams was the scion of a founder-president—while no president afterward could ever again make that claim. While looking forward, this symbolic triumph was so comprehensive that subsequent candidates reliably fronted their credentials as self-made men-of-the-people, even if that summary varied greatly in its accuracy.

B. Program Replacement

A competitive two-party system was implicit testimony to the power of two contending organizations with contending policy programs, whose conflict would characterize much of the nineteenth century. The dominance of the old Democratic-Republicans had disappeared partly because pure factional conflict became increasingly difficult to manage, but largely because a diverse opposition came together behind an opposition party—first the Whigs, then the Republicans—with its own contrary programs. Before the Civil War, their conflict featured alternative visions of economic growth and individual opportunity, with further specific foci on infrastructure, land, currency, and tariffs. After the War, they were reshaped—tweaked—to continue into a world characterized most centrally by galloping industrialization.

Along the way, arguments over economics shifted from regulation versus laissez-faire banking to 'hard' (stable) versus 'soft' (inflationary) currency, which then morphed into a contest between gold (stable, hard) versus silver (inflationary, soft).[34] Though once again, this did not imply some automatic winner. Rather, both parties needed to mix their profiles enough to hold regular supporters while picking off a chunk of the opposition, were the fortunes of "bimetallism" were often the nub of the debate. The success of Cleveland in 1884, holding the soft-money states of the south and west but cutting into the hard-money states of the northeast, was what finally brought the Democrats back to control of the presidency. Though victory remained unstable: an inability to execute this same maneuver in 1888 gave the office back to the Republicans, only to give it back to the Democrats under a more successful Cleveland in 1992.

Yet a singularly disastrous second term for Cleveland, triggered by the Panic of 1893 and forcing the president to repeal bimetallism and go hat in hand to the great private finance houses, brought transformation to the Democratic Party—followed by a long era of Republican hegemony. The reinvigorated Republicans of 1896 had an easy inaugural champion in Ohio Congressman William McKinley, he of the McKinley Tariff at home and soon to be the champion of American imperialism abroad. So the Democrats faced not only an able opponent but the discrediting of their established strategy, namely rallying the soft-money south and west while cutting seriously into the hard-money northeast. Simultaneously challenged by an emerging Populist Party which sought to seize the soft-money position for itself, these Democrats were to be swept away by a former congressman from Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan, the 'boy orator of the Platte'.[35]

Bryan would electrify the party with his 'Cross of Gold' speech at the Democratic convention, calling for the unlimited coinage of silver at a ratio to gold of 16-to-1 and giving the party's program to the silverites, long an implicit convention majority. The McKinley/Bryan

campaign was noteworthy for innovations in political techniques as well. Yet the grand Bryan strategy, a farmer/labor coalition among all those being pillaged by the robber barons and the great faceless trusts, proved impossible to harvest.[36] The cultural difference between his original supporters, part of an evangelical Protestant resurgence, and the Catholic immigrants characterizing the northeast, proved too deep to bridge, while the reliably autonomous yeoman farmers were unconvinced that unionized labor was all that different from the robber barons and their allies.

In the end, the electoral result was disastrous.

- The Electoral Vote showed two internally contiguous but non-overlapping majorities. Oregon and California aside, McKinley carried all the states—but only the states—in a giant triangle from Maine to Kentucky to North Dakota, while Bryan carried all the states from Virginia south and Missouri west.

- The raw math was additionally crushing. While McKinley carried 23 and Bryan 22 of these states, the McKinley tally contained New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois, the four largest.

- Otherwise, the Republicans kept their control of both houses of Congress, though the Senate alignment was curious, with 44 Republicans and 5 Silver Republicans against 34 Democrats, 5 Populists, and 2 Silverites.

Four years later, McKinley could run for re-election on the combination of his economic program plus success in the Spanish-American War. The Democrats had no obvious rising national star, while Bryan, now opposing both the gold standard and imperialism, did propose to emphasize the latter this time. Yet while his party was actually prepared to moderate and de-emphasize the unlimited coinage of silver, Bryan was unwilling to run under that banner, and convention opposition melted away quickly when he underlined his view. Even more strapped than it had been in 1896, the Democratic Party of 1900 was dependent on the whistle-stopping of its nominee, for a result that was anticlimactic. The winner increased his vote margin, though turnout dropped notably. In the Electoral College, he lost only one state, while picking up four. That pinned the

Democrats back to the greater south plus the silver-mining states of Colorado, Idaho, Montana, and Nevada. While in Congress, the Republicans made modest gains in both houses, compensating for modest losses at the previous midterm.

Bryan would not be a candidate for the Democratic nomination in 1904, though he would be an active presence at the convention. Looking for a nominee and a program that might drive a wedge back into the northeastern states, party leaders settled on Judge Alton Parker of New York. Parker would indeed be nominated, though Byran, speaking on behalf of another candidate, used most of his podium time to attack the emergent nominee. While the candidate himself nearly scuttled his own nomination by sending a telegram to the convention confirming that he was a solid supporter of the gold standard. The Republican nominee this time was to be Theodore Roosevelt, hero of the Spanish-American War, then Governor of New York, then Vice-President to William McKinley, whom he succeeded when McKinley was assassinated.

The result was additionally dire, with the Democrats shedding all of their western states to become a purely southern party, and Republicans picking up seats in both the Senate and the House. That appeared to annihilate prospects for another conservative nominee, while Bryan—convinced that the previous four years should have taught everyone that Republicans were not friends of the common man—went back on the stump for 1908, to hammer home the message. Possible progressive alternatives got out of the way when the boy orator announced his candidacy, on the way to another electoral disaster. He did regain Colorado, Nebraska, and Nevada, along with the new state of Oklahoma, but that still left the Democrats on the short end of a 2-1 split in the Electoral College. A Democratic pick-up of 2 Senate seats and 3 House seats was statistically trivial. Bryan thus tied Grover Cleveland in securing three major-party presidential nominations, though Cleveland had won two of these, while Bryan still turned up empty.

C. Ideologization and Polarization

Andrew Jackson gets a personal vignette here for his contribution to the organizational character of the American party system. Just as William Jennings Bryan gets his vignette for the power of a sweeping shift in the substantive content of party programs, even if his contribution was to the losing and not the winning side. In contrast, the age of the activists—our modern era—has been characterized to date by the arrival and interaction of a set of major structural forces, driving ideologization among the active players and polarization between the two parties. These forces became visible with the successful return of Richard Nixon in 1968, but they reached their ultimate expression to date through Donald Trump, with a bit of assistance from Kamala Harris.

Richard Nixon actually believed that *he* had inaugurated a new party politics. Yet what modern political history would show is that Nixon was just the pivotal figure in *registering*—and thus demarcating—the set of structural influences that would interact to generate the party system of the current moment. After seventy-five years of a blanketing hegemonic partisan politics, the sudden but recurrent return of split partisan control, "divided government"—a president from one party frequently facing both houses of Congress in the hands of the other—signaled the change of eras. Historically, a comparable partisan outcome in a presidential contest had not appeared since the election of Zachary Taylor in 1848. But prospectively, this outcome resulted from—and gathered—a collection of political changes that would together create the new activist era.

These began with major social changes: a more middle-class majority, an increasingly suburban society, and a different educational path to individual mobility. That was followed by a recombination of social backgrounds and partisan attachments, registered most clearly in the growth of middle-class Democrats and working-class Republicans. Fresh party factions then encountered—but also encouraged—a burgeoning set of explicit political reforms, aimed at

replacing organized with volunteer parties, driven by issue activists rather than party or public office-holders, and ultimately producing a growing ideological polarization in the aggregate. There were starts and stops in the evolution of these collective forces across the postwar period, but by 2016, they were available for all to see, best embodied in the three presidential contests involving Donald Trump.

Trump arrived in 2016 as the classic incarnation of a presidential candidate almost designed for the modern, participatory, volunteer era.[37] Not obviously a member of either party—along the way to announcing that he would run as a Republican, the candidate had revealed at three previous times that he was a Democrat and one other that he was a Republican—he came down the escalator at his own Trump Tower in New York to announce his candidacy, not accompanied, much less introduced, by any major party leader or partisan public official. Rather, he announced that he had arrived to "Make America Great Again", a nationalist slogan promising economic growth and widespread opportunity, a promise that would allow him to fill in (and revise) his personal program as he went.

Trump did bring with him an extended career as a real estate entrepreneur, where the key skill was not brokering coalitions but spotting individual opportunities and either passing on them or plunging with an investment of major resources. This was accompanied by a leadership style that centralized authority in the hands of the chief executive, stereotyped by the frequently climactic phrase in his reality-television show, "You're fired". The conventional response by political analysts was that this approach would run into catastrophic difficulties with a separation of powers inside a federalist framework which collected hugely diverse interests from the larger society. From his end, the new President brought with him a fondness for internet communication

and personal commentary via social media, the first presidential nominee (and then president) who was central to that particular aspect of the modern world.

What he would inherit in Washington as the winning presidential candidate in 2016 was unified partisan control, still a frequent (though no longer reliable) asset for an incoming president. This particular incarnation was sufficient to allow him to secure his first major programmatic goal, comprehensive tax reform, but not his second goal, elimination of the Obama healthcare program, where Republicans with potentially injured constituencies did not stand with their president. This was to be followed at the mid-term elections by the usual recurrence of split control, as the Democratic Party regained a majority in the House of Representatives. Deprived of unified control, Trump turned increasingly to latent assets that remained part of the executive office.

The most evident was an ability to take rhetorical initiatives in foreign affairs. where Kim Jung Un of North Korea and Vladimir Putin of Russia received direct attention. Less obvious but pursued more consistently was an effort to recruit and appoint strong programmatic conservatives to national government. None other than Richard Nixon had begun this effort with the Supreme Court in the opening years of the activist age; Trump would pursue it much more broadly, while acquiring three nominations to the Court itself And the third such initiative was the resurrection of an old presidential power, to issue executive orders to the federal bureaucracy. Used historically for executive reorganization and military direction, it had been rescued by Barack Obama when he lost unified control after his first Congress. Donald Trump would attempt to impose it more broadly still, for a record-breaking total.[38]

All of which would be followed two years later by defeat in his campaign for re-election. In running for president the first time, Trump had assembled a presidential 'ticket' including Mike Pence, Senator from Indiana, who implicitly connected him to the regular party and to social

conservatives within it. In this second effort, however, they were to be defeated by a Democratic ticket headed by Joseph Biden, with a long career in both party and public office—including Vice-President under Trump's predecessor, Barrack Obama—plus Kamala Harris, Senator from California and an important part of the Biden outreach to the Progressive opposition inside his own party.

Trump himself never accepted the outcome, always treating it as an obvious 'steal', but neither did he withdraw from national politics, continuing to communicate copiously through "Twitter" and then "X", its internet replacement, as well as through his own social media site, "Truth Social". There, he reliably excoriated actions by the Biden administration, while complaining that the latter had 'weaponized' the judicial system in order to injure him. What he otherwise did, with potentially more concrete consequences, was not just to make endorsements and personal appearances but to intervene actively in state and local nominating contests inside the Republican Party, so as to shape candidacies and acquire allies. All of which was bent toward a rematch with Joe Biden in 2024.

The 2024 contest became stunningly idiosyncratic when medical revelations forced President Biden to withdraw, well after the final convention delegates had been selected. In 1920, Woodrow Wilson, crippled by a serious stroke, had delayed his nominating effort for well into the year of the Democratic Convention, but no one had ever withdrawn even later in the process. Yet the party convention retained the formal right to make a nomination, and administration supporters fell into line quickly behind Vice-President Harris, delivering the Democratic nomination to her. In so doing, they completed an archetypal result of internal party politics for the age of the activists, with nominees who were the preference of the two extreme internal party factions, the Progressives for the Democrats and the Freedom Caucus for the Republicans:

- Biden, as the voice of the official party, had taken Harris in 2020 to placate the Progressive wing of his party, even though she had attacked him during pre-convention debates for being insufficiently liberal today and responsive to racists in an earlier day.

- Versus Trump, the voice of the Freedom Caucus inside his own party, who added specific attacks on economic inflation and illegal immigration to his ongoing MAGA program, plus a promise to end foreign wars quickly, especially the war in Ukraine.

Where are We in History?

A careful historical tour can lead to the current moment. Just as it can isolate landmark changes along the way. And the evolution of the American party system is a nearly ideal example. What such a tour cannot be is a projection to subsequent history, even in the near term. For most points along the way, the near past and the near future could be easily connected in retrospect. Yet a historical tour simultaneously confirms that there are times when the critical contents a party system do change. In that sense, yesterday is no guarantee of tomorrow. Rather, what analysis can still provide is a small set of change-points, allowing current interpreters to ask whether events of the moment are on a scale with—or even analogous to—previous change agents, rather than just extensions of last year's story. That is the point of adding candidate vignettes to party systems.

For this, what Andrew Jackson brings to the analysis is not just a critical role in the shift from an era of pure factional politics to an era of organized two-party competition. Rather, it is also the question of whether any such change was accompanied by a sweeping *elite transformation,* like the one that did accompany the rise of Jackson and his Democratic-Republican Party. Very different was what William Jennngs Bryan brought to analysis of the shift from an era of two-party competition to one of hegemonic partisan dominance. Here, the question was whether any such shift is accompanied by far-reaching *programmatic change,* where the additional virtue of a focus on Bryan is that he brings a stern reminder that the losing party can be equally influential in securing a continued public *rejection* of a continuing party program.

Within that framework, the contours of the age of the activists, the one characterizing the party system of 2024, were easy enough to recognize: major social change, sweeping institutional reform, and the growth of ideologization among the active players and polarization between the two parties. For this, their instantiation in the most recent presidential election was almost stereotypical: the lock-step support for returning President Trump by his fellow partisans in Congress; the sharp redirection of major dimensions of policy conflict, at home and abroad; plus the scale of polarization represented by the two presidential candidates of 2024. Though in the end, these could still sum to three major options: a) the apotheosis of the modern era, b) a sufficiently pure version of the great change elections to suggest the onset of a whole new era, or c) the latest twist in an established order, whose implications could not be interpreted until the analyst could see the next—the successor—party contest.

Table 1

Political Parties Arrive:
Partisan Attachment among Members of Congress

	A. The Senate			B. The House		
	Fed.	D-R.	None	Fed.	D-R.	None
1st Congress	3	2	21	16	11	38
2nd Congress	6	3	18	17	12	37
3rd Congress	12	6	10	27	33	55
4th Congress	21	11	0	47	59	0

Table 2

The Emergence of a Single Dominant Party

		A. Senate D-R / Fed	B. House D-R / Fed	C. Elec Col D-R / Fed	President	
5th	1796	10 -- 22	49 – 57	68 - 71	J. Adams	(Fed)
6th	1798	10 – 22	46 – 60	----		
7th	1800	17 – 15	68 – 38	73 - 65	T. Jefferson	(D-R)
8th	1802	25 -- 9	103 – 39	----		
9th	1804	27 -- 7	114 – 28	162 - 14		
10th	1806	28 -- 6	116 – 26	----		
1th	1808	27 -- 7	92 -- 50	122 - 47	J. Madison	(D-R)
12th	1810	30 -- 6	107 – 36	----		
13th	1812	28 -- 8	114 - 68	128 - 89		
14th	1814	26 – 12	119 – 64	----		
15th	1816	30 – 12	146 – 39	183 - 34	J. Monroe	(D-R)
16th	1818	37 -- 9	160 – 26	----		
17th	1820	44 -- 4	155 – 32	231 - 1		
18th	1822	34 -- 5	189 - 24	----		

Table 3

Split Partisan Control Arrives

	Unified Control	Split Control		
		Pres v H	Pres v S	Pres v Both
A. Pure Factional Politics, 1800-1824	12	0	0	0
B. Two-Party Politics, 1828-1860/1874- 1896	10	8	4	0
D. Civil War Interim, 1862-1894	6	0	0	0
C. Antebellum Politics, 1828-1860	7	4	1	0
D. Postbellum Politics, 1874-1896	3	4	3	

Table 4

Hegemonic Parties Arrive, 1892-1896

A. State Votes

Cleveland & Bryan	Cleveland & McKinley	Harrison & Bryan	Harrison & McKinley
Alabama	California	Colorado*	Connecticut
Arkansas	Delaware	Idaho*	Iowa
Florida	Illinois	Kansas*	Maine
Georgia	Indiana	Montana	Massachusetts
Louisiana	Kentucky	Nevada*	Michigan
Mississippi	Maryland	S. Dakota	Minnesota
Missouri	New Jersey	Washington	New Hampshire
N. Dakota	New York	Wyoming	Oregon
S. Carolina	Ohio		Pennsylvania
Tennessee	Wisconsin		Rhode Island
Texas			Vermont
Virginia			W. Virginia

B. State Shifts

Both Dem	Rep to Dem	Dem to Rep	Both Rep
12	10	9	12

C. Electoral Votes

Both Dem	Rep to Dem	Dem to Rep	Both Rep
113	32	153	102

*Populist to Democratic

Table 5

Partisan Control by Political Era

A. All Elections

	Unified Partisan Control	Split Partisan Control
Hegemonic Period	**29**	**7**
Modern Era	**9**	**19**

B. Electoral Cycle, Modern Era

	Unified Partisan Control	Split Partisan Control
On-Year Election	**7**	**7**
Mid-Term Election	**2**	**12**

Table 6

Organized versus Volunteer State Parties

	A. By State		B. By Population	
	1952	1972	1952	1972
Organized	**20**	**11**	**53%**	**23%**
Volunteer	**28**	**39**	**47%**	**77%**

Table 7

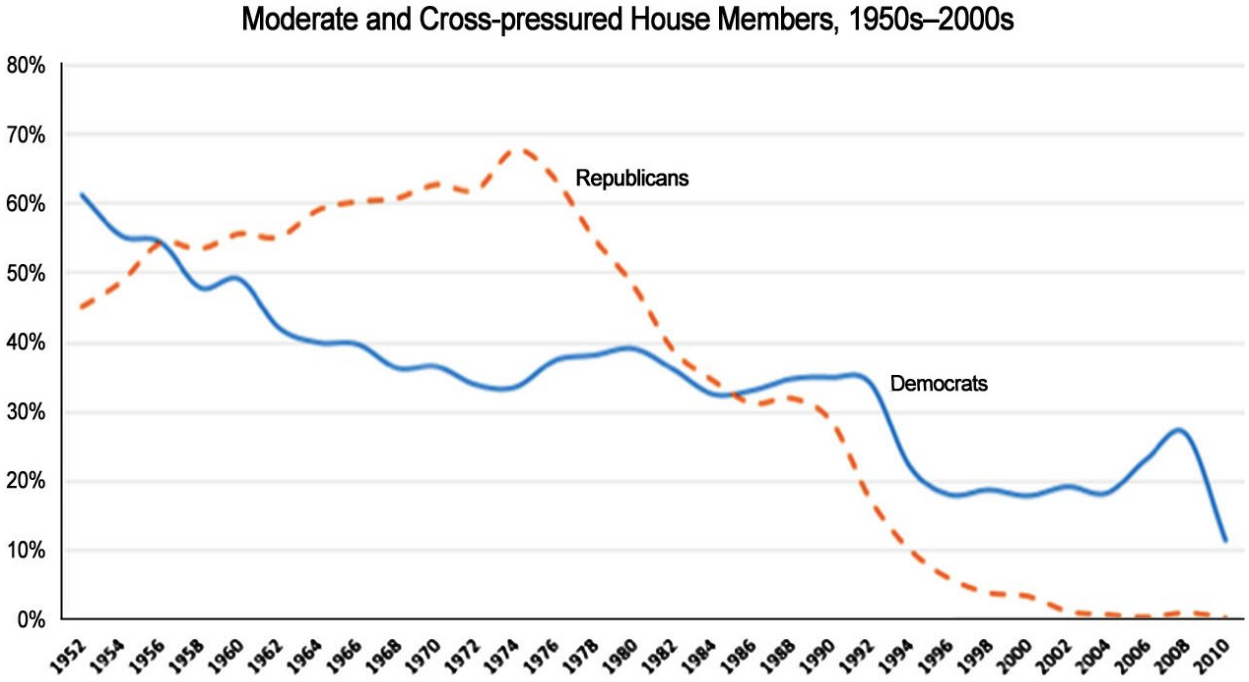
Representation at National Party Conventions: Ideologization and Polarization*

	Republican Delegates	Republican Identifiers	All Voters	Democratic Identifiers	Democratic Delegates
1980	**+49**	**+15**	**0**	**-11**	**-54**
1976	**+49**	**+14**	**0**	**- 8**	**-42**
1972	**+24**	**+12**	**0**	**- 9**	**-55**
1952	**+45**	**+ 6**	**0**	**- 6**	**- 9**

* Positive scores are conservative and negative scores are liberal; the national median is the 0 point; cell entries are then the balance of conservative over liberal or vice versa, as a distance from the median.

Figure 1

A. The House



B. The Senate

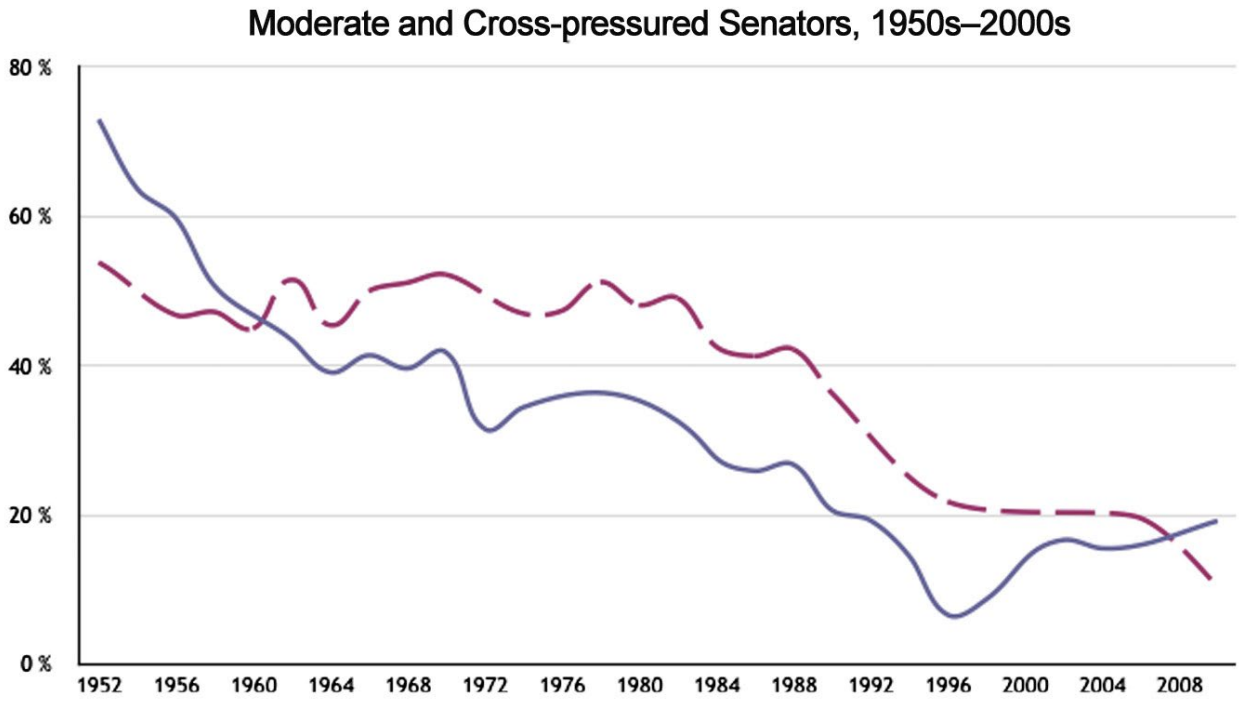


Table 8

Partisan Control in the Age of the Activists, 1968-2024

	Unified	Divided
All National Elections	**9**	**19**
On-Year Elections	**7**	**7**
Off-Year Elections	**2**	**12**

[1]Byron E. Shafer and Regina L. Wagner, *American Politics, 1763-2024: The Analytic History* (forthcoming, Palgrave Macmillan)..

[2] George William Van Cleve, *We have Not a Government: The Articles of Confederation and the Route to the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

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