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THE SIXTH U.S. PARTY SYSTEM

Origins, characteristics and future prospects

CANDIDATE

Rebecca Andreucci

Student ID: 651612

SUPERVISOR

Gregory Alegi

CO-SUPERVISOR

Elena Griglio

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INTRODUCTION

Party systems theory maintains that the political history of a country can be divided into different phases, each characterized by its own salient issues, voting patterns, coalitions, and party strengths. These dynamics are periodically uprooted, typically every two or three decades, as external stimuli such as economic and international crises provoke a "realignment" of electoral politics.

Scholars of the theory identify "critical", or "realigning", elections as the specific historical junctures in which a new phase emerges. Paul Kleppner distinguishes them from the category of maintaining elections, which might temporarily upset the political system via a shift in consensus away from the majority, only for traditional party loyalties to be soon reinstated. Critical elections, on the other hand, provoke permanent changes to current electoral politics, modifying the size and composition of voter coalitions to the point of establishing a new equilibrium. Typically, such realignment junctures are also characterized by higher degrees of voter turnout, and by the polarization of partisan conflict around issues that acquire particular salience. Kleppner ultimately defines a party system as a series of maintaining, realigning and reinstating elections, i.e. as the alternation of periods of relative stability and periods of change.

With regards to what might provoke the collapse of a party system, scholars of critical realignment theory, such as Walter D. Burnham, argue that the crisis of a current equilibrium is a response to sudden and unavoidable crises that challenge the stability of voting alignments. On the other hand, according to a "secular" interpretation, partisan realignments are caused by more long-term, imperceptible dynamics that slowly shift preferences away from the majority party by eroding its support among certain key electoral groups. Secular realignment theory recognizes the importance of sudden crises in legitimizing a new majority, but it argues that abrupt socio-economic turning points can only serve as catalysts that bring to the surface changes that were already happening.

In the history of the United States, five party systems have been identified so far, from the first proto-partisan coalitions of the post-Constitutional era, to the New Deal system of the 1930s. Retracing the country's pivotal political developments through the lens of secular realignment theory, this thesis answers the following

question: has the fifth party system collapsed at some point in the second half of the 20th century, and if so, when and how has another realignment occurred?

The research method focuses on those which can be considered the most defining moments, such as the election of a specific president, or domestic and international contingencies, that explain the life cycle of a party system. Therefore, other key periods of American history are not included or just briefly mentioned in this analysis; their absence is not however motivated by lack of interest or importance, but by an evaluation of their relevance with respect to the purpose of this study.

After expanding on the definition of party system and the tenants of critical and secular realignment theory, the first chapter is dedicated to a brief history of U.S. electoral coalitions, and the evolution of inter and intra partisan dynamics from 1789 until the late 1940s. The core focus will be the New Deal system, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's groundbreaking victory in 1932 and his ambitious reform package, to the beginning of the stabilization phase around 1940. Finally, the first signs of a crisis lying ahead will be taken into account.

The second chapter begins with the analysis of Barry Goldwater's Senate race in 1952, and his subsequent nomination as the Republican presidential candidate in 1964. The success of his conservative platform in the traditionally Democratic "Solid South" is explored, together with the outbreak of the civil rights movement, as the clear signs of cracks emerging within the New Deal coalition. Subsequently, the 1968 presidential campaign will be discussed in detail, as the Vietnam war infiltrated the electoral discourse, ultimately affecting the credibility and popularity of President Johnson and the Democratic Party as a whole. Finally, the impact of Ronald Reagan's presidency is contextualized within a decade, that of the 1980s, in which the United States sought stability and peace after the social and foreign policy turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s. Reaganism as a political philosophy is credited with solidifying a new conservative coalition, in which evangelicals and the white southern working class play a central role, setting the stage for the success of anti-establishment movements and candidates in the new millennium.

Chapters three and four cover recent U.S. political history, from the DLC's role in reforming the image of the Democratic Party in the early 1990s to Donald Trump's second electoral success. Having understood that the tumults of the 1960s have caused the collapse of the New Deal order, and the subsequent emergence of another party system, the question is now whether the 21st century might lead to a seventh realignment, one in which the Democratic Party faces significant struggles. Neither Bill Clinton nor Obama's electoral coalitions have survived their two terms, and the realignment of the white working class with the GOP, combined with geographically and demographically concentrated liberal consensus in urban, college educated communities, poses a serious threat for the Democrats in a majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral system.

Conversely, the anti-establishment, conservative-populist agenda proposed by Donald Trump and his Republican Party have been extremely successful in strengthening support both among older and newer cohorts. An increasing number of non-white Americans has joined the ranks of the GOP in the past decade, together with white blue-collar workers and southern evangelicals that now constitute a bulwark of American conservatism. Motivated by a compelling agenda, and mobilized via an efficient use of social media, this interestingly diverse coalition, which some have argued recalls the New Deal era more than today's Democratic base does, is constantly changing. If ethnic voters, which will soon become the majority of the electorate, can be captured by the Republican Party, the realignment suggested by Donald Trump's victories is certainly going to materialize. However, this thesis concludes that eight years is too short of a time frame to understand the long-term implications of the Republican conservative revolution, and only future research will be able to evaluate the full-scale impact of Donald Trump on U.S. politics.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN PARTY SYSTEM

1.1 Party systems theory

The "party systems" theory was initially developed between the 1950s and 1960s by political scientists such as Valdimer O. Key, as a new methodology for analyzing political history according to changes in voting behavior. Subsequently, Burnham has further developed the concept, arguing that so-called "realigning periods" occur cyclically, and set the preconditions for the emergence and stabilization of a new equilibrium (Argersinger, 2019). As written by Argersinger in his 2019 book titled *Structure, Process and Party: Essays in American Political History,* "periodically, major social and economic crises produce elections that realign voters' partisan affiliations, shift party strength and revise the saliency of issues, thereby creating another era or party system of political and governmental stability" (p. xii).

More specifically, John Aldrich and Richard Niemi define party systems as "periods of a generation or more in which electoral politics differ distinctly from the periods before and after" (p.87). Such eras, according to Argersinger, are characterized by their own patterns of voting behavior, party identification and specific political concerns. Between two periods of relative equilibrium stands a so-called "critical era", i.e. a short period, typically encompassing one or two electoral campaigns, of significant changes to party and voting dynamics (Aldrich and Niemi, 2019). The elections that signal the shift from one party system to another are also defined as "critical", precisely because they mark the passage from one *status quo* to another.

According to Burnham, critical realignments present three key characteristics. Firstly, change throughout U.S. political history has often occurred rather abruptly, and according to Stonecash and Silina, these changes are the "primary means by which significant transformations in the general shape of public policy happen" (p.6). Social and economic tensions usually provoke a reorganization of the parties' agendas at periodic intervals of about "36-38" years (p. 6).

Secondly, as a result of the political response to new emerging issues the electorate dramatically shifts its support; "major parties become minorities…and large blocks of the active electorate – minorities, to be sure, but perhaps involving as much as a fifth to a third of the voters – shift their partisan allegiances" (Burnham, 1970, pp.6-7). More simply, the party that had retained the minority/opposition status until that point is offered the chance to become the new majority through the realignment that occurs in critical elections. As a result of this newfound status, the new majority party dominates both the administrative and ideological aspect of the emerging party system for the subsequent years; the third aspect of realignment is thus that "the winning party

sets the policy direction of the new system with little or no need to accommodate the policy preferences of the losing side, and subsequent debate is limited" (Stonecash and Silina, 2005, p. 7).

Paul Kleppner, in *The Third Electoral System 1853-1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures*, writes that "elections are recurring events reflecting underlying and ongoing sociopolitical processes" (p.17).
Within the context of party systems theory, he focuses on elections as markers of change. He identifies two macro-categories: *maintaining elections* and *realigning/critical elections*. The former are not disruptive to the electoral system, as they show the persistence of the same partisan identifications and voting behaviors; they might be "maintaining" (voting determined by party loyalty), "deviating" (temporary shift in party loyalties as a result of specific events) or "reinstating" (re-establishing traditional party loyalties). In all of these instances, the core electoral bases of the parties remain unchanged.

Realigning elections, on the other hand, produce a shift in consensus which permanently modifies the system and changes the coalition bases on all levels of partisan elections. Therefore, while according to Kleppner all party systems share common elements, each differs in characteristics of voting behavior. In agreement with White and Kerbel, he identifies higher voter turnout as a defining feature of realigning elections; in addition, however, he also highlights how such eras are typically characterized by unusually high degrees of polarization as well. Ultimately, Kleppner argues that the succession of maintaining, deviating and reinstating elections with realignment periods in between is what defines a party system.

1.2 Weaknesses of critical realignment theory

The critical realignment model has been subjected to fierce criticism. Some scholars have highlighted its conceptual, methodological or empirical shortcomings in identifying the determining factors of electoral realignments; others, as Argersingers points out, have called into question the accuracy and significance of the theory as a whole.
Chubb, for example, argues against "an ongoing cycle of periodic critical realignments", claiming that the changes that have taken place in the history of U.S. elections are to be attributed to "exogenous factors" rather than "internal, periodical and systemic ones" (p.4). Similarly, Ladd and Hadley believe that there are no realignment cycles, that electoral change cannot be categorized according to pre-determined patterns, and that realignments – if any – are the consequences of bigger changes in socio-political dynamics and political agendas (Argersinger, 2019).

An alternative to critical realignment has been offered by V.O. Key himself, who has developed an argument linking party systems to what he defines as "secular realignment", i.e. "a movement of the members

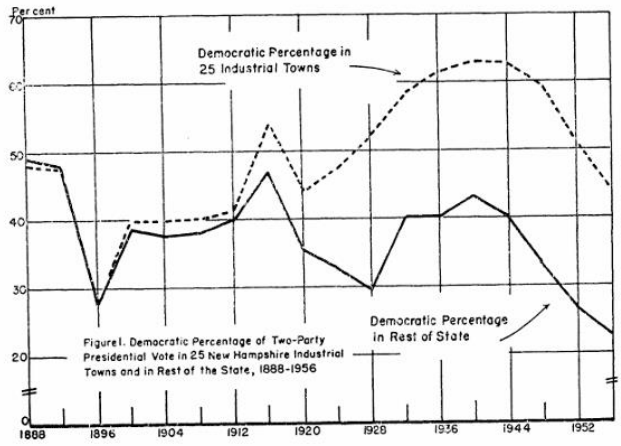
of a population category from party to party that extends over several presidential elections and appears to be independent of the peculiar factors influencing the vote at individual elections" (p. 199). One of the greatest shortcomings of Burnham's study is the assumption that massive shifts in voter behavior and the emergence of a new majority occur abruptly and in fixed, periodic cycles. Key's contribution might resolve, at least in part, such concerns. Pointing out that "conceptions of the party system characteristically do not explicitly include a time dimension" (p.198), he warned against focusing excessively on periodization at the risk of dismissing other "fundamental aspects of party behavior" (p. 198) that might explain realignments.

While elections and campaigns constitute important markers and indicators of partisan conflict, shifts in the balance of power are caused by much more than single events. According to Key, in fact, it is important to identify the long-term – what he calls "secular" – factors that play into partisan attachment. Referring to his 1955 study *A Theory of Critical Elections,* he argues in favor of certain electoral periods that are particularly significant because they "involve far wider movements and more durable shifts" than usual (p. 198); however, changes in power dynamics are normally attributable to more slow-paced and hidden phenomena that span through decades before eventually coming to the surface. While abrupt realignments can occur as a result of sudden events such as wars, economic crises and other domestic or foreign policy shocks, they are not as common and cyclical as Burnham had made them out to be.

Following the assumption that voter realignment occurs as "a variety of factors operates overtime either to solidify the group or to erode the ties that unite it politically" (p. 199), Key provides a few supporting examples from the New England region. Analyzing New Hampshire's Democratic vote between 1888 and 1956, for instance, Key found that prior to the turn of the 20th century both industrial and rural areas tended to split their votes between the two parties almost equally. Figure 1 below shows however that throughout the next fifty years, the industrial and urban electorate moved closer to the Democratic Party, and divisions across city/rural areas began to emerge. "Over the entire period a secular trend seems to have been in motion beneath the cyclical and short-term variations in the division of the vote between the parties" (p. 200).

Figure 1: percentage of Democratic vote in New Hampshire's urban and rural areas between 1888 and 1952

Source: Key, 1959

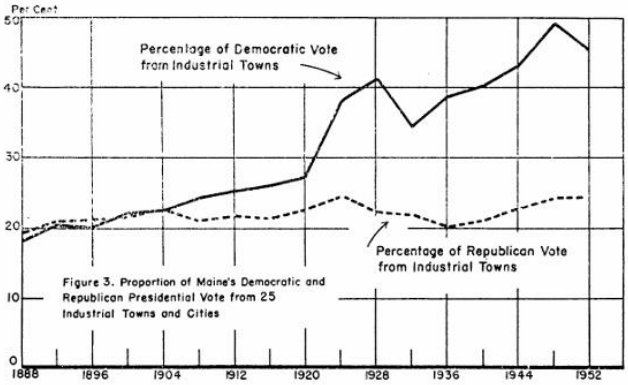


[a]The values shown in Figure 1 for 1912 are the Democratic percentage of the three-party vote; for 1924, the Democratic vote plus the Progressive vote as a percentage of the three-party vote.

In Maine, as figure 2 shows, while Democratic consensus soared in the 25 most important industrial cities, the Republican Party remained dependent more or less consistently on the same electors throughout the whole period analyzed. This data reflects the formation of homogeneous party coalitions; Key however observes that their fragmentation is an equally slow process with a variable rate, also affected by "short term fluctuations which are the product of events or issues of the moment" (p. 205).

Figure 2: percentage of Democratic and Republican consensus in Maine between 1888 and 1952

Source: Key, 1959



Taking the secular realignment model as a reference apparently negates findings by other critical realignment scholars such as Aldrich and Niemi who, as mentioned above, have theorized a model which places a short-lived "critical era" between two periods of relative equilibrium. Burnham has revisited his approach multiple times, eventually recognizing the importance of long-term readjustments but maintaining that "change occurs as explosive, semi-revolutionary episodes which have occurred at remarkably regular intervals" (Stonecash and Silina, 2005, p.8).

It is however possible to reconcile the two approaches, and make them coexist as explanatory factors for the emergence and decline of party systems. Key himself has admitted the role that sudden, groundbreaking shocks play in motivating electors to choose one or the other party. In this regard, one might argue that critical elections exist, and that they represent instances where issues that abruptly rise to the forefront of the political agenda combine with under-the-surface reorganizations of the electorate in order to produce a realignment, i.e. a new party system. Following this interpretation, the demarcation between systems would be less clear-cut, and it would become evident that the stabilization of a new equilibrium is never truly static.

In terms of party system periodization, the most widely accepted model divides the U.S. electoral history in five eras, or realignments. The first one dates back to the critical election of 1796, the first contested race in American history after the unchallenged Washington presidencies. The second emerged towards the end of the 1820s. At this point, partisan politics began stabilizing, and two-party competition was fully institutionalized (White and Kerbel, 2022). The two main coalitions, the Whigs on the one hand (emerged from the dissolution of the Federalists) and the Democrats on the other, started organizing their respective internal structures.

In the mid-1850s, deep societal and political changes produced a new realignment. The third party system was characterized by the stabilization of the two coalitions that are still at the heart of the U.S. political system today: the Republicans and the Democrats. The former built their power base in the North, while the latter in the agricultural South. At this time, the first signs of the Civil War tensions emerged, progressively polarizing the political arena and essentially splitting the country in half, as slavery became a more salient issue. In this conflictual scenario, third parties begin making an appearance, including the Know-Nothings and the Free Soilers.

The period between 1893 and 1932 is typically considered as that of the fourth party system. Characterized by unprecedented degrees of sectionalism, this era witnesses a decline in clear partisan identification and voter turnout. Both parties suffered great losses, but the Republicans fared comparatively better and, until 1932, only two presidents (Coolidge and Wilson) have been elected from the Democratic Party. The fourth party system also partially coincides with the Progressive Era and the unusual success of the homonymous party guided by former president Theodore Roosevelt and Wisconsin Representative Robert M.

La Follette. A long series of one term Republican Presidents followed a *laissez-faire* approach to the economy, and operated according to a Jeffersonian interpretation of federal power.

The fifth party system emerged around 1932, at the start of the New Deal era. It is characterized by a dominance of the Democratic party and the shift towards a more active role of the federal government. The birth of the "New Deal coalition" established a new electoral base for the Democrats, which included ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, and even working class southerners. This heterogeneous group will remain largely tightknit until the mid-1960s, when the civil rights movement alienated white southerners, precipitating the majority coalition into an identity crisis which favored the Republican Party. Although few scholars argue that there is no end in sight for the fifth party system, and others set its decline around the beginning of Ronald Reagan's presidency, it is possible to argue that the break-up of the New Deal party base constitutes the beginning of the end – and possibly poses the conditions for the emergence of a sixth system.

1.3. Hamilton, Jefferson And The First Party System

Former war hero, George Washington became the first President of the United States in 1789, immediately upon ratifying the Constitution. During the subsequent eight years, he ran for re-election once, and as for the first time, he was the only candidate on the ballot and won formally unchallenged. When he refused to run for a third time, in 1796, he set a precedent that would only be infringed by Roosevelt in 1940; eventually, term limits would be introduced by the 22nd Amendment in 1951.

The election of 1796 is considered to be the conventional starting point of the first party system; it is often referred to as the first "critical" race in U.S. political history, as the first instance where two nominees – the incumbent Federalist VP John Adams and the Democrat Thomas Jefferson – campaigned for the presidential seat (Silbey, 2010). While the decades following this election are regarded as a fundamental building bloc of American political history, due to the lack of a defined party structure and electoral norms and regulations equal across states, some would argue against defining this era as a party system *per se.*

Some states, such as Pennsylvania and New York, established proto-partisan structures quite early on, but in most of the country factions were preponderant, and pre-modern politics largely relied on notables and personal connections, which operated often unpredictably and without a common set of rules. As Chambers points out, these characteristics are more akin to factionalism, which is to be distinguished from partisanship.

Factions, in fact develop mostly by chance, as people with similar interests begin coordinating to achieve a specific goal. According to Chambers, they are unstable and they do not perform their political functions according to institutionalized procedures, since once the common objective is met they dissolve in

the vast majority of cases. On the contrary, as defined by Brinkley, the characteristics of a modern party include the presence of a stable and durable relationship between its leaders and the electorate, national and local representatives communicating and coordinating their activities, the establishment of fixed procedures in the performance of party functions, and a coherent partisan ideology, i.e. a collective of ideas, perspectives and loyalties, and a "comparatively durable combination of interests or opinion-aggregates" which constitutes a party base (Chambers, 1963, p. 110).

Additionally, White and Kerbel employ the so-called tripod model in their classification of what constitutes a political party; the three elements are the "party in the electorate" (whether voters identify with a given political party, either strongly or weakly – membership fee or more psychological attachment); the "party organization" (the internal bureaucracy, physical assets, workers and regulations) and the "party in government" (those that take office under a party label). Although these features have eventually developed and now constitute staples in the functioning and structure of American parties, their absence in the early years of the Republic suggests a factional system, more than a partisan one.

Early American politics, according to Chambers, operated in fact through the involvement of a wide range of actors, such as interest groups, individual leaders, factions and caucuses, which did not follow a common and nation-wide set of rules for nominations, elections, policymaking and propaganda. Besides the plurality of American society and political demands, another element which posed an obstacle to party development was a diffused anti-partyism. George Washington himself had expressed skepticism in this regard, wary of a partisanship that posed unnecessary constraints to the political independence of citizens, generated excessive conflicts and increased the likelihood of factionalism (Silbey, 2010). He advised against a political system based on parties, but further developments made this scenario virtually impossible.

Both national and international issues did in fact emerge, dividing public opinion on how to best address them. From the reaction to the French Revolution, to the new relations with the United Kingdom, the management of banks and tariffs, emerging conflicts between states and the central government, soon enough at least two distinct groups began forming (Chambers, 1963). The latter would soon be organized in a coherent manner across the country, with a single set of national leaders and shared social, economic political and moral views – marking the "progress from faction politics to party politics" (p. 101).

As Chambers argues, Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Party was a pioneer in this sense. It became the first political coalition to develop a national coordinating structure, to standardize political function, amass a significant electoral base and formulate a systematic ideology, where "ties of interest were supplemented by shared outlooks and symbolism" (p. 101). Hamilton's party gathered consensus among businessmen from the northeastern states (White and Kerbel, 2022); it ran in favor of the creation of a National Bank, the introduction

of high tariffs, and the promotion of a centralized government that could control the conflict between states and work to establish positive commercial relations with England (Silbey, 2010).

Soon, as White and Kerbel argue, dissent against Hamilton and his platform began to grow and subsequently organize under the leadership of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, with a stronghold on small farmers in the mid-Atlantic and Southern States. The so-called "Democratic-Republican" party had a largely different economic and foreign policy program that the Federalists'. It opposed excessive centralization (whether it would be through the establishment of National Banks, or the strengthening of the federal government), and promoted the prioritization of the power of self-determination and freedom of states. Stabilized during the Jay Treaty controversy when Jefferson assumed leadership, the Democrats followed the path of the Federalists and promoted coordination between national and local leaders, thus securing a rather stable base (Chambers, 1963). They also began developing a form of party organization (i.e. division of labor and coordination) much earlier than their counterparts, according to Chambers.

As a result of partisan development, American politics became more organized. Voters could make their choice between the two coalitions on the basis of policy proposals, concerns with the economy, security and ethno-religious elements, rather than personal relationships or support of notable candidates (Silbey, 2010). Citizens could now easily identify with their party's symbols, platforms and ideology across state lines. The government, both at the federal and state level, began establishing links with its constituents – as the former's functioning now depended on the latter's consensus. (Chambers, 1963).

Partisanship did not however come without its shortcomings; as Washington himself had warned, polarization increased both within and outside of Congress. While this constitutes an inevitable feature of partisan politics, in certain eras of American history it has been more pronounced than in others, not without negative consequences.

Besides 1796, the second "critical" electoral period in this era was arguably that of 1800. According to White and Kerbel the first party system consolidated after the first properly contested race had paved the way for the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. Hamilton's party effectively began its declining curve, becoming progressively more irrelevant until it failed to even nominate a presidential candidate in 1820, opening up for what would then become the Whig Party as the main opponent to Jeffersonians. The latter also started fracturing, with Andrew Jackson taking over a section of the Democratic-Republicans and founding the Democratic Party – establishing the scenario that would become the main feature of the second party system.

Interestingly, despite all the subsequent changes in U.S. politics during the past 200 years, and the different parties that came and went, White and Kerbel recognize that the dichotomy between Hamiltonian nationalism and Jeffersonian localism has remained the paradigm through which political actors are evaluated

and classified. Through the years, different parties have in fact shifted between positions closer to one or the other opposite ends of the spectrum, either in favor of a "big" or "small" federal government. For example, throughout the Civil War and the Progressive Era, the Republican Party remained in favor of a strong federal authority, while the Democrats – faithful to their southern power base – advocated for the prioritization of States' rights. In the New Deal era, the roles were reversed; FDR's Democratic Party promoted a strongly centralized reform package aimed at saving the country from the aftermath of the Great Depression. Conversely, the Grand Old (Republican) Party in the opposition settled on a more decentralized and pro-states agenda.

According to Chambers, the evolution of American politics ultimately depends on the fact that the United States offered a hospitable environment for the development of political parties, earlier than other western countries. Firstly, American society was more open and mobile that its European counterparts, which were characterized by a feudal system and rigid distinction between social classes. The renowned U.S. liberal tradition has set as its main pillar the protection of freedom of expression, under the First Amendment of the Constitution. A "new society" at the time of Independence also meant that there was no establishment *per se*, particularly not one that enjoyed privileges by birthright or tradition, such as monarchy or the Church in Europe, and that could influence and coordinate the administration without involving the citizenry (Chambers, 1963). The latter was also motivated, according to Chambers, by the presence of one of the earliest examples of mass suffrage; although it did not become universal until the 19th Amendment of 1920, since the early days of the Republic nearly all men met the property qualifications required to cast their ballot – which meant that a higher percentage of white men than in other countries could exercise their right to vote.

1.4 Presidentialism in the United States

American parties have developed within the context of a presidential system where, contrary to parliamentary democracies, the executive and the legislature are not tied together by a confidence relationship. The 1789 Constitution determined instead that the power to nominate and legitimize both branches of government lied in the hands of the citizenry, albeit with peculiar exceptions in terms of electoral practices.

The Electoral College seemingly resolved tensions in the Constitutional Convention, by mediating between proposals for the direct, popular election of the president and nomination by Congress. This compromise determined that each state's legislative branch chooses a number of electors corresponding to the combined total of its Representatives and Senators, who then express two preferences (National Archives, 2023). Originally, the system determined that the candidate that won the most "electors" became president, and the runner-up vice-president.

Interestingly, the presidency was initially supposed to be a rather limited role, as the recent colonial history of the United States and the tumultuous relationship with the motherland cast doubts on the compatibility of democracy with a strong executive power. The Articles of the Confederation, adopted in 1787 as a prodrome to the Constitution, established in fact that the president "was simply the delegate 'appoint[ed] … to preside' in Congress for no more than a year in any three-year stretch" (Reed Amar, 2005, p. 131). In this regard, the new constitutional document gave the head of the executive powers that the Articles did not mention, such as that of appointment, veto, pardon, or the authority to negotiate international treaties. Moreover, Akhil Reed Amar specifies in his constitutional analysis that, while under the Confederation the president was supposed to be a sitting member of the legislative assembly, Article II of the U.S. Constitution set all the conditions for the executive to operate independently.

As mentioned above, the peculiarity of the U.S. presidential system lies in the direct election of both the executive and the legislative branches, particularly since the introduction of the popular vote for the Senate via the 17th Amendment of 1913. The principle of "checks and balances" substitutes the confidence relationship typical of parliamentarism as the tool which prevents the excessive enlargement of one of the branches of government at the expense of the others. For example, while the president can veto legislation, Congress can override it with a 2/3 majority; the Supreme Court has the power, as in all common law systems, to declare unconstitutionality and set precedents that act as *de facto* legislation. The latter in particular is quite a recent development in U.S. constitutional history, rooted in a judicial precedent set by the 1803 Supreme Court decision in Marbury v. Madison, which "established the right of the courts to determine the constitutionality of the actions of the other two branches of government" (National Archives, 2022b).

Naturally, the development of political parties has been influenced accordingly, as political coalitions have set in place their own systems for the nomination, support and promotion of candidates that are otherwise nonexistent in democracies where the Head of State and the Head of Government are different figures, not directly elected and with the former being, in most instances, a representative role. In parliamentary democracy, political parties are the central actors; voters express their preferences in legislative elections, and the resulting majority, formed often following a compromise between different coalitions, expresses the configuration of the government that, given parliamentary support, can exercise the executive power.

In the United States, instead, the two branches are essentially independent, as both receive their legitimation from below. In this scenario, the brief history of the King Caucus, which will be mentioned below, as well as the introduction of primaries and conventions, are all examples of systems set in place by parties to serve as "links" between the voters, who hold the "legitimizing" power, and their representatives in both congressional and presidential elections. The fact that citizens can express distinct preferences for their congresspeople and president has resulted, throughout U.S. history, in a conflictual relationship in government, especially when "cohabitation" occurs as the legislature and the executive are the expression of two different

majorities. Conversely, the "trifecta", i.e. control of both the executive and the legislature by the same party, while quite common in the past has become an increasingly rare occurrence in the 21st century, heightening inter-partisan tensions.

1.5 The institutionalization of the (second) two-party system: Whigs and Democrats

By the 1830s, the two-party system had become one of the pillars of U.S. politics; as mentioned above, the Federalists virtually disappeared post-1820 and were replaced by the newly founded Whig Party. According to White and Kerbel, the latter built their base in New England campaigning for restrained executive powers, the promotion of westward expansion under the Manifest Destiny doctrine and more protective tariffs. This coalition became one of the defining elements of the second party system, as it collapsed shortly after the set date for the beginning of the third – splitting and then definitely fading to irrelevance after 1860.

Under the leadership of Andrew Jackson and, subsequently, Martin Van Buren, the Democratic Party on the other hand became progressively stronger. Gathering consensus among farmers, laborers and Irish-Catholic immigrants, it built a platform advocating for free trade, social reform, southward expansion and a of greater international involvement (LeMay, 2017). Democratic representatives were able to understand the power of a well-organized party machine, which they exploited to gather consensus; conventions emerged, along with the practice of running "party-led newspapers", publications whose goal was to showcase and promote the coalition's political agenda. Additionally, as President, Jackson became well-known for frequently recurring to the so-called "spoils system", the practice of promising jobs within the party or the administration for loyalists in the event of a victory. The underlying goal was that of involving citizens in the activities and programs promoted by the party, in order to ensure continuous support and build a sense of identity, rather than a one-time choice on the ballot.

The emergence of the modern party structure bore its fruits rather quickly; White and Kerbel recognize that during Jackson's presidency, between 1829 and 1837, a massive increase in turnout was registered, with a jump from 25% to 79% by the end of the 1830s. Party loyalty soon became the main source of consensus, and the electoral bases solidified around their respective leaders; in a context where belonging to a party mattered progressively more, "ideological differences were gradually supplanted by a politics of personality" (p.37). Leaders of both the Whigs and the Democrats invested in such a "us vs them" dichotomy, as they found that it guaranteed consensus, albeit not always a victory.

In terms of critical elections, the second party system is quite rich in this sense. Perhaps the first example is the highly controversial victory of John Quincy Adams in 1824, which represented the definitive

demise of the so-called “King Caucus”. The Caucus had been adopted as the method for the nomination of candidates since the end of Washington’s presidency; after he had decided to not run for a third time, in fact, both the Federalist and the Democratic-Republican parties had assumed control of the nominating process through their individual caucuses, in the absence of a seemingly better alternative (Forrest and Michael, 2024).

After the election of 1820, in which James Monroe won the Democratic nomination and then the presidency with little to no opposition – since the then-Federalist party had failed to choose its own candidate – the convention of 1824, in which only ¼ of the congressional delegation took part, decided to nominate the unpopular Secretary of the Treasury William Crawford. The subsequent contest in November presented a peculiar scenario: on one hand, the Democrat Andrew Jackson had obtained the majority of the popular vote (more than 150,000), and more electoral votes than his opponents, for a total of 99. However, because of the fact that the latter did not meet the minimum requirement, Jackson could not claim victory and the House of Representatives had to intervene in nominating the President – the final pick being John Quincy Adams, who had placed second behind Jackson with regards to both the electoral college and the popular vote (270toWin.com, 2024).

Table 1: United States presidential election of 1824

Source: 270toWin.com, 2024

1824 Election Results

	Candidate	Party	Electoral Votes	Popular Votes
	Andrew Jackson	Democratic-Republican	99	153,544
✓	John Quincy Adams	Democratic-Republican	84	108,740
	William H. Crawford	Democratic-Republican	41	40,856
	Henry Clay	Democratic-Republican	37	47,531

Four years later, Andrew Jackson effectively won the presidential election with 178 electors and over 647,000 popular votes. His victory in 1828 is typically considered as a turning point in American politics, so much so that this period is also referred to as the era of “Jacksonian democracy”. Not only was Jackson the first President from west of the Appalachian mountains, with significant party effort coming from that area; he was also the first to be elected through the direct involvement of voters rather than the support of a political organization, with the introduction of the popular election for the Electoral College in substitution of caucuses (LeMay, 2017).

According to Arthur Schlesinger, another strong feature of Jackson's impact on the second party system is his role in the transformation of the liberal movement and the Democratic Party into a strong supporter of Hamiltonian nationalism, "from a faith in laissez-faire to the acceptance of an active executive and positive government" (Shade, 1986, p. 488). With the development of the two-party system in an era of emerging class inequalities, he also highlights how economic and social factors were the most relevant determinants of voting choices, rather than ideological principles (Shade, 1986).

In his analysis of *Politics and Parties in Jacksonian America*, William G. Shade writes that the 1810s and 1820s in the United States had in fact marked a period of intense economic, social and technological development. With westward expansion at its peak, population grew exponentially; the numbers doubled every 22.5 years, not only due to high birth rates but also, and mostly, to immigration – mainly from Ireland and Germany – which at the time was largely unrestricted. As the economy developed and changed, due to technology that would boost industry production and wealth, social stratification began to emerge; nothing like the strict class divisions of the motherland, the new America nevertheless saw the birth of working, middle and higher classes.

Both of these features of the new American society led to important political changes. First of all, an increase in the number of citizens – and thus of voters – implied that it had become necessary to involve them in publicly relevant decisions, including presidential elections. As mentioned above, the collapse of the King Caucus after the controversies of 1824 led most States to introduce the direct election of Electoral College members, a role previously attributed to State legislatures – a system retained only by South Carolina as of 1832, according to Michael LeMay.

In his 2017 book on the history of the American party system, LeMay also argues that another important consequence of population growth and the subsequent expansion of the electorate, particularly among the working class, was the birth of the modern mass party, whose base and organization no longer involved a limited number of elites, but were extended to the vast majority of the population. In this regard, the Democratic Party was a pioneer; besides the anti-Masonic party (a rather short-lived alternative to the two-party system which held for the first time a "modern" nominating convention), it was the first one to introduce national conventions for the nomination of presidential candidates, when in 1827 and 1828 the party promoted the candidacy of General Jackson. The same example would be followed by the Whigs in 1839, and soon enough, this decentralized system replaced the party caucuses as what LeMay defines as the "source of political power" (p. 13).

LeMay also stresses the importance of two particular features in the growth and stabilization of the second party system. In 1828, The Democratic Party was the first coalition to introduce a convention in Washington DC, the *party-as-organization* tool that twenty years later would become the Democratic National

Convention (DNC). According to LeMay, the role of the DNC would be to raise resources, mobilize voters and coordinate efforts at both the national and local levels. Although not all States were immediately included in the Convention, early coordinating efforts produced a rapid increase in turnout; while in 1824 it corresponded to 26.5% of voters, in 1828 the percentage increased to 56.3%. The success of this organizational structure soon motivated the Whig Party to adopt it; at that point, LeMay argues that the mass party system had fully stabilized.

In addition, with the normalization of the spoils system throughout the 1820s and 1830s, party machines developed under the control of so-called "party bosses", defined by LeMay as individuals who could control organizational and political power oftentimes without even holding office, fostering in many cases instances of corruption.

They became primary figures in providing support to citizens, particularly the most faithful "rank-and-file members" (p.15) of the party, by exploiting their connections with government officials and businesses, as well as religious and secular organizations. This system responded to unsatisfied needs, *de facto* substituting the government as an essential provider of welfare, especially for the more marginalized and disadvantaged communities, particularly considering that, As LeMay writes, "compared with modern American government, the national government of the 1800s had a very slight role in matters of public welfare. For Jackson and Van Buren, democracy meant limited, local government" (p. 15).

The two decades prior to the outbreak of the Civil War were characterized by rising social, economic and political tensions. Economic disparities between the highly industrialized North and the agricultural South were growing as technological and market advancements progressed (Shade, 1986). The division alongside class and geographical lines also led to the emergence of different political interests, and the subsequent polarization of the electorate according to which of the two parties voters felt represented by. As mentioned by LeMay, the Whigs solidified their consensus in the North-East, among those that were reaping the benefits of economic progress, while the Democrats took on the role of representatives of the Southern agricultural class. It is in this geographically, socially and economically fragmented context that the issue of slavery became progressively more important, and contributed to the intensification of political and social conflict.

In 1820, the Missouri compromise had attempted to provide a solution by determining that slavery would be prohibited in all states north of the 36°30′ parallel, on which lied the border between Missouri and the then-Arkansas territory (National Archives, 2021). By essentially dividing the country in half, however, the compromise did not achieve its intended goal and contributed to further sectionalization of politics and public opinion. In the following years, slavery became a progressively more relevant point of contention, until the attempted "Compromise of 1850".

The previous year, the newly acquired territory of California had made the request of joining the Union as a free state, unlike all other areas that had been recently moved under U.S. control after the U.S. – Mexican

war (National Archives, 2021). In order to mitigate tensions and maintain a balance between free and slave territories, Congress determined for California to join as a free state, while the newly constituted New Mexico and Utah were admitted without specifically addressing the issue; eventually, both adopted pro-slavery constitutions by popular vote. In order to appease the pro-slavery groups and States, the Compromise also ruled for the establishment of a much more stringent Fugitive Slave Act (National Archives, 2021), which regulated the capture of escaped slaves.

While moderates approved the proposal, which temporarily appeared to effectively solve the issue, Southern Democrats and Northern Whigs heavily opposed it (LeMay, 2017). Moreover, the precedent set via popular sovereignty by New Mexico and Utah constituted an important point of contention for the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 – which determined the reignition of the conflict, the definitive dissolution of the Whigs and the emergence of a new political force which would stand as the main opposition to the Democrats until present day: the Republican Party.

1.6 The Civil War and the emergence of the third party system

The period between 1854 and 1896 is known as what some historians define as the first real party system, considering that the immediate post-Independence era appears closer to a sort of pre-partisan structure, where the political actors involved were not yet fully institutionalized and electoral behavior had not stabilized yet. The Jacksonian period too showed significant lower levels of party development and partisan identification, as well as political integration, with respect to the third.

According to Paul Kleppner, the third electoral system was characterized by two different phases of development; initially, the Whig party was substituted by the Republicans, also known as the Grand Old Party (GOP), around 1854. Contrary to the former, which could count on sufficient support nationwide, the GOP was particularly strong in the mid-Atlantic and East-North central areas. At the same time, the Democrats solidified their control over the South below the Mason-Dixon line, producing a political system that was highly geographically polarized (Kleppner, 2017).

Between 1856 and 1860, regional variance in support for the parties skyrocketed, only to decline in the wake of the Civil War. During the following decade, the electoral power of the Democratic Party decreased, but not even the Republicans could count on a large voting base towards the end of the 19th century. A series of one-term presidents dominated the Gilded Age until 1892, with the election of Grover Cleveland who, as Kleppner recognizes, is the first of only two Democratic presidents until 1932.

Using statistical measures for one sequence of adjacent elections and comparing them with a similar measure for the next sequence, Kleppner identifies "sectional polarities of a nature and magnitude that distinguish the third from the second party system. That succession of party systems involved the post-1852 collapse of national parties and their displacement by parties that grew disproportionate support for one or more sections of the country" (p. 25). A realigning election would thus show low levels of correspondence with pre-1853 electoral dynamics, while a reinstating election would show high levels of correspondence.

Kleppner identified low levels of defection from party loyalty across presidential contests. According to his theory of realigning and maintaining elections, Kleppner hypothesizes that the third party system was actually characterized by a phase of "secular realignment", which went on from 1853 until about 1972, and a stabilizing phase which lasted from 1874 to 1992. The second period is characterized by a growing popularity of third parties, which is usually a symptom of dissatisfaction with the two major contenders; consensus for both Democrats and Republicans decreased around that time, in a climate of high partisan competitiveness. During the stable phase, over 65% of the population in most states would vote, which indicates a situation of high electoral turnout despite all.

Post-1856 oscillation

In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act essentially annulled the provision of the Missouri Compromise, and allowed for the introduction of slavery in potentially all U.S. territories. In opposition to this initiative, the Republican Party was born out of the fragmentation of the Whigs; it drew consensus from former Whigs, Free Soilers, abolitionists and disgruntled Democrats. Initially, it originated purely as a heterogeneous anti-Democratic coalition; it was however not until the period between the elections of 1856 and 1860 that this miscellaneous opposition group began acquiring the characteristics of a party, and eventually renamed themselves Republicans.

Soon enough, the Democratic and the Republican parties established coalitions with opposing bases and platforms. The former appealed mainly to businessmen in the East (the so-called "bourbon Democrats") and small farmers in the southwest region. Following a Jeffersonian model, Democrats advocated for "small government" and a self-managing economy, fighting against excessive centralization in all forms, including the establishment on National Banks (LeMay, 2017). With regards to domestic policy, the Party largely espoused the Manifest Destiny doctrine to justify the westward expansion of the United States. It was according to this principle, for example, that acquisitions in the territories of Oregon, California, New Mexico and Texas were carried out (Library of Congress, 2000).

Republicans, on the other hand, had by the end of the 1850s settled with an electoral base located in the North and made of white protestants, professionals, industrial workers and African Americans. Following a more Hamiltonian approach, LeMay argues that their platform advocated for the protection of businesses and the domestic market through high tariffs, the establishment of banks, as well as the promotion of technological development, such as the construction of railroads. The differences between the two parties fostered factionalism and growing dissatisfaction with the system on the part of the electorate.

In this divisive climate, third parties began emerging and gaining significant popularity, although without ever reaching sufficient percentages to be a serious threat to either of the two major opponents. Among the most notable, there were the Know-Nothings and the People's Party, which catered to different demographics.

The Know-Nothing Party, much like the GOP, emerged from the collapse of the Whigs and appealed to their most conservative fringe. Many of its members came from a nativist group, the Order of United Americans (OUA), which interpreted socio-economic development as the outcome of a system which maintained social inequality and a strict class hierarchy. Politics, both in terms of holding public office and voting, was intended as an elitist prerogative; the OUA was in favor of property qualifications and restrictions on the basis of citizenship. Because of the fact that most foreigners were relegated to poorly-paying jobs and degraded slums, the fear of the "other" had a strong classist sentiment to it as well (Levine, 2001). Moreover, "once nativists consolidated a significant following in, and a rhetoric appropriate to the social stratum, antiforeignism acquired even greater plebeian credibility and appeal, attracting some native-born workers who were less privileged and less sharply demarcated in economic condition from immigrant workers" (p.475). It is worth noting that the Know-Nothings were not born as a pro-slavery coalition; however, their nativist and anti-immigrant platform facilitated their choice to side with the anti-abolitionists once the issue became a pressing matter for American politics.

On the other hand, the rather short-lived People's Party, politically active only from 1876 to around 1896, built a mass electoral base of farmers, laborers and middle-class activists campaigning against growing corporate power and wealth accumulation (Levine, 2001). Its contribution to the third party system is quite minimal in terms of electoral consequences, however their grievances would soon rise to the forefront of public debate and pave the way for meaningful reforms. As a prodrome to the Progressive Party of the 1910s, Bruce Levine recognizes the pivotal role of the People's Party advocating for initiatives such as the federal income tax, the direct election of senators and the introduction of referenda and initiatives on the ballot – which would all be passed as constitutional amendments in the following decades.

The defining moment of the 1856 – 1872 realignment was undoubtedly the Civil War, which went on from 1861 to 1865. The event which sparked the conflict was the decision, taken in 1860 by 11 slave states,

including Alabama, Georgia, Texas and Virginia (from which West Virginia would split), to secede from the Union. By that point, the divide between the North and the South of the United states had become irreconcilable, and slavery became the *casus belli*. As a result, as Kleppner highlights, anti-slavery soon turned into a political priority to preserve the Union. Violent outbreaks had occurred across the country ahead of the war, and polarization grew in the context of an already factionalized political life. What would once be disagreements, became accusations of treason from both sides; partisan sentiments strengthened, particularly among Republicans which made their opposition to the Democratic Party an issue of patriotism: "borrowing a line from the 1860 Democratic presidential nominee, Stephen A. Douglas, Republican Party builders proclaimed righteously, 'There can be no neutrals in this war—only patriots—or traitors'" (pp. 79-80).

During the war, the two parties split even more clearly along geographical lines: in the North, Republicans solidified their consensus for the war in opposition to the Southern rebellion, supported on the other hand by a large number of Democrats. The GOP came out of the war stronger, even though the cross-pressure from both coalitions within such a polarized party system had initially discouraged voting; the conflict solidified the party base, adding to it the large number of freed black men that would soon be enfranchised thanks to the 15th Amendment. The latter, together with the 14th which granted citizenship to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States" – including former slaves (United States Senate, 2024), was part of the so-called Reconstruction measures. The new Democratic POTUS, Andrew Johnson (chosen by Lincoln as VP in 1865 as a reconciliation attempt with the South), promoted his predecessor's policy of reinstatement of the secessionist States into the Union – the one condition being to ratify the new constitutional amendments.

While the issue of black suffrage had begun dividing politics well before 1860, with the Democrats adopting a more conservative stance than the Whigs, it was not until the Civil War and its aftermath that the positions of the two parties on the matter became more polarized. The Republican Party, that with Lincoln had effectively ended slavery, adopted a clear anti-Southern strategy and presented its support of the rights of the former slaves as a natural consequence of the Civil War victory, the so-called "fruits-of-the-labor", according to Kleppner. Conversely, anyone who opposed black suffrage would be associated with the Democratic Party. The Civil War essentially transformed the issue into an indicator of party loyalty and patriotism, and in doing so "the Republicans channeled mass opinion to carry into law a measure for which there was little popular support" (p. 94).

1874 – 1892: the "stabilization" phase

The clearly positive impact that the Civil War had on Republican consensus did not imply that the Democrats were completely annihilated. Already during the midterm elections of 1862, the latter had regained some of the percentages lost two years prior, and by the 1870s a period of so-called "democratic resurgence"

took place, in response to an economic crisis and the role played within the Union by the slave states that had not seceded – Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri and West Virginia (Kleppner, 2017).

The first elections after the 15th Amendment also saw an increase in voter turnout, which continued into the 1880s and interested not only black but also white men. Contemporarily, according to Kleppner, significant partisan divisions along racial lines emerged, with whites – particularly in the South – overwhelmingly aligning with the Democrats, as black men showed their support *en masse* for the Republican Party. This dynamic produced a polarized system that lacked in competitiveness and the two electoral bases remained rather static for quite some time.

The economic crisis of the post-war period, the so-called "Panic of 1873", is considered as one of the worst deflationary periods of the century. For five years, companies cut expenses and jobs, and the unemployment crisis which ensued contributed to the intensification of class divides and social tensions. Interestingly, according to Kleppner, this did not produce a realignment, but rather a "reactivation" of the disillusioned Democratic voter and an increase in the Party's strength in outstate and urban and industrial areas. Henceforth, while Republican support decreased during the recession, the Democratic Party could attribute its newfound power to the economic distress.

Kleppner ultimately concludes that the third party system can be defined as the "era of no decision", where political struggle played out along intense and irreconcilable differences between groups, picked up and brought forward by the parties that claimed to represent them.

1.7 Turning of the century: the fourth party system

In his 2019 book titled *Structure, Process and Party: Essays in American Political History* Peter H. Argersinger identifies the origins of the fourth party system in the critical election of 1896, which marked the beginning of a 35-year long period of Republican hegemony. The 1894-1896 realigning period was characterized by an economic depression and – according to Burnham – a progressing industrial development which produced massive changes in society and voters' priorities. Following the critical election of 1896, Argersinger argues that the system stabilized until the late 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, when the Great Depression contributed to its collapse.

The realigning election of 1896

According to White and Kerbel, the two-year phase between 1894 and 1896 was characterized by extremely fast-paced technological development and industrialization, which solidified the emergence of sharp

class divides. At the same time, a contraction of the money supply and the subsequent increase in value of the "real" dollar had significant negative effects in many sectors, including agriculture (Stonecash and Silina, 2005). Such economic and social cleavages fostered further polarization of the party structure; while the South aligned *en masse* with the Democratic Party that represented rural-colonial interests, in the big metropoles of the industrial Northeast the GOP gathered massive support for its agenda as the pro-business Party (Argersinger, 2019). It is worth noting that this trend was not observable to the same degree across the United States, with some areas steering more clearly towards Republicans than others; in some instances, moreover, while for the 1894-1896 period consensus for the GOP increased in certain regions, Argersinger argues that change in voting behavior was not as long lasting as to justify a realignment.

In his 1986 publication titled *Periodization Schemes and "Party Systems": The "System of 1896" as a Case in Point,* Walter Dean Burnham collected statistical data on the gubernatorial, congressional and presidential elections between the early 1900s and the 1980s, with the purpose of indicating a significant change in voting patterns of which 1896 is supposedly the marker. What he describes as "empirical pattern recognition" (p. 36) shows that split-ticketing – the practice of voting for different parties at the presidential and congressional level – becomes prevalent in the wake of that election, asserting itself as one of the key features of the party systems of the 20th century; resulting from a number of variables, among which a general distrust in the two major political forces and a subsequent decline in party loyalty, they denote the emergence of new, "modern" dynamics which differ from those of the previous (and, to some extent, subsequent) decades. Naturally, as the author disclaims, "quantitative procedures[…], to be formally credible in the statistical sense, must rest on the law of large numbers" (p. 37). In other words, these patterns cannot be equally applied across elections, geographical areas and issues, but overall they suggest important shifts that are the symptom of new party systems emerging.

Secular realignment, on the other hand, considers 1896 as part of a much broader "sequence of change" (Stonecash and Silina, 2005, p.21). Analyzing ten presidential elections in that era, Stonecash and Silina have concluded that while until 1896 Democrats enjoyed above average strength, after the election of the Republican candidate McKinley and until 1912 their support began declining, gradually and regionally. Geographically, in fact, the decline in Democratic consensus did not occur homogeneously across the country; data from Congressional elections, the clear marker of partisan consensus on a regional basis, reveals that while Democratic support was declining nationally in the period between 1876 and 1916, in the South it was strengthening (Figure 3). An analysis exclusively limited to national data might thus "write off" this era as largely Republican-dominated, while that would not be the case everywhere in the United States. It is however worth noting that Burnham himself had recognized, as mentioned above, that his analysis could not accurately depict regional or single-election changes, as he was focusing on the broader dynamic.

Figure 3: Percentage of the Democratic vote in Congressional and Presidential elections (1876-1916)

Source: Stonecash and Silina, 2005

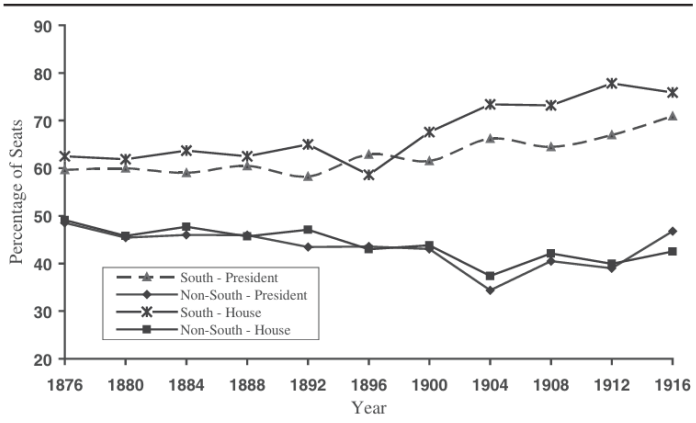


Figure 2: Democratic Percentage of Vote, Presidential and House Candidates, by Region, 1876 to 1916

NOTE: South president = presidential percentage in the South; Non–South president = presidential percentage outside the South; South House = House percentage in the South; Non–South House = House percentage outside the South.

Burnham recognizes the fact that this system was not "revolutionary"; it did not create new conditions, but rather those that had already emerged during the Civil War equilibrium, which he defines as "corporate-capitalist dominance" (p.8), only deepened. Additionally, unlike other critical elections such as those of 1828, 1860 or 1932, the realignment of 1894-1896 (which Pomper defines as "converting") did not produce "a major reversal of dominant public policy or a drastic change in the historic blocs which law at the power core of American politics in this period" (p. 8). Therefore, the "system of 1896" arguably paved the way for a new way of making politics in America for the decades to come. The dynamics that originated towards the end of the 19th century solidified, and the "cumulative effect of the issues and structural changes of subsequent years was reflected in the curious political world of the 1920s, which formed the apogee, the developmental end-point, of the system as a whole just before it perished in an unimaginable catastrophe" (p.14).

Consolidating the fourth party system

As the "new equilibrium" began to settle post-1896, key characteristics of what is now known as the fourth party system began to emerge. First of all, this period is typically classified as highly sectionalized; a strong center-periphery conflict emerged as an unequivocable sign of socio-economic and political modernization. Sharp polarization between urban and rural areas became evident across the country; this was clear in Texas, where the People's Party was particularly strong, in the Northeast where industrialized

metropoles solidified around the GOP, and in the South, where the Democratic Party maintained its stronghold. In the West, while Burnham recognizes that radical and anti-partisan sentiments began emerging, he argues that the role of the Republican coalition was never truly called into question.

The crisis of the Democratic Party is particularly relevant. In the "Solid South" (and, to a lesser extent, nationally) the latter did not object or resist the role it had relegated itself into, which according to Burnham was that of defender of the "peripheral-colonial interests" as opposed to those of the growing urban bourgeoisie. As he points out, "it was unable to find its way back to a stable relationship with "core" interests or the Metropole's votes except for a time under Woodrow Wilson. And even at that, Wilson could never have achieved power without the 1912 rupture within the Republican Party" (p. 15).

The outbreak of the so-called "Panic of 1893" right at the beginning of Grover Cleveland's second (non-consecutive) term also contributed to the dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party. The opposition acquired power in 1897 and was able to reverse the status quo to the extent that the period between 1898 and 1907 is still known as the second-most prosperous for the U.S. economy after that of the 1960s (Burnham, 1986). Therefore, while the GOP ran on a platform promoting public policies that would facilitate progress and economic development, the other party (which became known as the "party of depression"), unable to propose a viable alternative, rested on its reputation of being "backward-looking, mossback hayseeds and incompetent and disorganized when in office" (p. 16).

The success of the Republican Party was not accompanied or motivated by increasing turnout, whose rates according to Burnham steadily declined throughout the duration of the fourth party system. Despite all, in fact, masses remained largely distrusting of party politics and establishments, that at the time were run almost exclusively by coalition "bosses". At the end of the 19th century, the massive transformations that occurred due to the industrial revolution – and in turn, impacted transport (railroads) and the growth of large cities – alongside overcrowded slums – provoked social and political tensions. In response, "the democratic and republican organizations further expanded to deal with the swelling urban population and became more systematized and in command than ever" (Silbey, 2010, p. 110). As the need for more party organization, and therefore funding, grew, so did corruption – provoking a revival of anti-party sentiments.

Burnham identifies two distinct elements that set apart the fourth party system: "aggregate levels of competitiveness in congressional elections and the growth of "electoral dissociation" or disaggregation in voting coalitions as between presidential and other "high-visibility" (gubernatorial and senatorial) elections" (p. 26). With regards to the competitiveness of Congressional elections, by looking at data from the North and West between the years 1880 and 1984, it is possible to observe a rather strong trend towards a progressively larger share of seats (mostly allocated to GOP Representatives) won by over 70% of the district vote (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Congressional election results 1880-1984

Source: Burnham, 1986

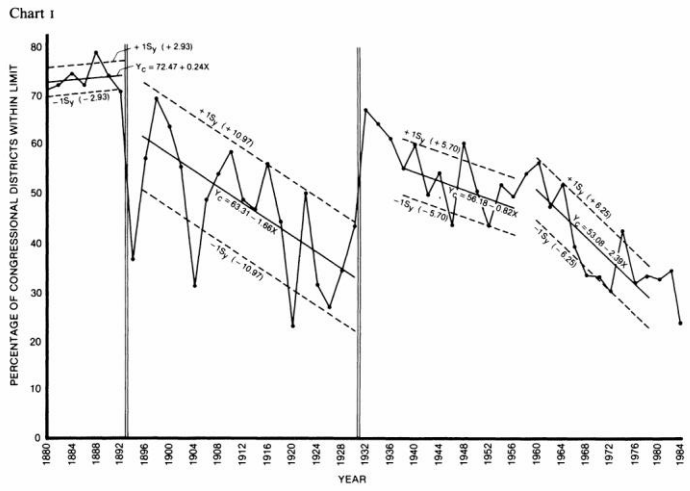


Figure 5: Congressional districts per party majority, 1834 -1984

Source: Burnham, 1986

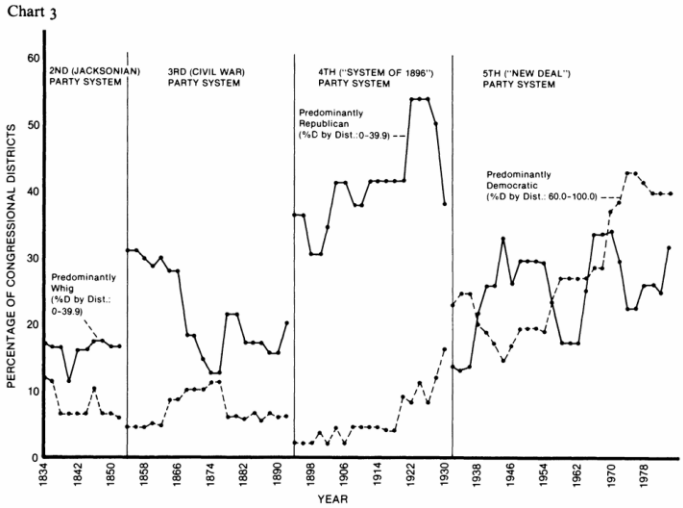


Figure 5 above shows that, contrary to the trends observable before 1894 and after 1932, the fourth party system is characterized by a higher percentage of congressional districts than usual that present a clear Republican majority, and that can thus, according to Burnham, be defined as “noncompetitive”.

Table 2: increase of split ticket voting after 1904

Source: Burnham, 1986

Table 2 Voting coalitions diverge over time: absolute deviations in presidential and gubernatorial vote, 1876–1984*

Year	N	Median	Mean	Variance	Stand. Dev.
1876	12	1.0	1.6	3.64	1.91
1880	13	0.6	1.1	1.17	1.08
1884	14	0.8	1.4	1.39	1.18
1888	16	0.7	1.1	0.74	0.86
1892	22	1.7	2.0	3.07	1.75
1896	22	1.1	2.2	6.69	2.59
1900	24	1.4	1.9	6.48	2.55
1904	26	5.7	8.2	38.74	6.22
1908	26	4.0	5.2	19.12	4.37
1912**	26	2.3	2.7	5.14	2.27
1916	29	3.7	5.6	45.09	6.71
1920	28	3.8	6.8	57.70	7.60
1924	29	5.3	5.8	21.63	4.65
1928	29	4.9	5.7	36.49	6.04
1932	29	3.9	5.1	28.12	5.30
1936	28	5.1	5.4	17.18	4.15
1940	27	4.0	4.9	16.88	4.11
1944	26	4.6	5.4	26.16	5.12
1948	26	6.3	5.3	14.43	3.80
1952	24	3.2	4.9	23.89	4.89
1956	24	9.1	8.7	36.14	6.01
1960	23	4.3	4.8	14.62	3.82
1964	21	7.4	9.9	101.88	10.09
1968	18	5.2	6.9	35.15	5.93
1972	15	11.7	13.8	88.49	9.41
1976	12	5.4	7.1	30.27	5.50
1980	11	10.9	11.4	68.81	8.30
1984	11	9.1	11.0	85.95	9.27

*Based on percentage Republican of total vote; non-southern states only.
**1912: Based on Republican and Progressive % of total vote.

Table 3 Voting coalitions diverge over time: absolute deviations in presidential and senatorial vote, 1916–1984*

Year	N	Median	Mean	Variance	Stand. Dev.
1916	27	4.0	4.4	15.08	3.88
1920	25	4.6	6.6	52.77	7.26
1924	22	3.8	6.8	59.45	7.71
1928	28	4.8	7.7	70.05	8.37
1932	26	2.2	5.9	85.42	9.24
1936	22	4.4	5.5	45.15	6.72
1940	28	3.2	4.3	18.24	4.27
1944	26	2.1	3.8	24.34	4.93
1948	21	3.9	3.8	15.22	3.90
1952	26	4.8	4.6	10.76	3.28
1956	26	7.3	8.1	30.08	5.48
1960	24	5.5	5.8	19.12	4.37
1964	29	3.4	7.1	48.47	6.96
1968	26	5.9	6.6	24.66	4.97
1972	23	11.2	11.6	54.22	7.36
1976	27	8.7	10.0	35.75	5.98
1980	27	5.5	7.6	49.79	7.06
1984	23	10.1	13.0	90.12	9.49

*Based on percentage Republican of total vote; non-southern states only.

The tables above show the second trend that distinguishes the fourth party system from all its successors and predecessors. Prior to 1904, the standard deviation between the Republican vote in gubernatorial and presidential elections (in non-Southern areas) ranged from values below 1 to 2.59 – meaning that people tended to prefer the same party in both instances. After 1904, however, the values begin to increase reaching groundbreaking deviations in election years such as 1920 (7.6), 1928 (6.04) or 1932 (5.3). The variance also increased significantly, with the same three electoral periods reaching percentages of 57.7%, 36.49% and 28.1% respectively (Burnham,1986). Comparing presidential and senatorial races in the same time frame yields similar results: in 1920, the variance settled at 52.77 and the standard deviation at 7.26; eight years later, at 70.05 and 8.37 respectively, while in 1932 the values were 85.42 and 9.24 (the highest until 1984). Although dispersion falls after 1928, it never returns to pre-1904 levels, indicating a new equilibrium where party loyalty at all levels was less consistent.

According to Burnham, this trend continues well into the fifth party system, with instances of split ticket voting becoming the norm throughout the second half of the 20th century.

The birth of mass politics: the Progressive Party

A distinctive feature of this era of U.S. politics is the popularity of progressive ideas and politicians, despite the fact that they never solidified their role within the establishment. The so-called "Progressive Era", which is set to have lasted from the 1880s to the 1910s, can be said to have produced a long lasting and "fundamental transformation in the articulation of political instances" (Burnham, 1986, p. 17).

Progressives advocated for the promotion of a well-functioning bureaucracy based on expertise independent of partisan and electoral influences. As Burnham points out, they proposed to dismantle the corrupt and anti-meritocratic party structures that strongly depended on party bosses, who ran party organizations as their own personal web of connections and would dispense favors and jobs to anyone in exchange for votes. As a result of such pressures, both establishment parties introduced the direct primary, first developed in Mississippi and Wisconsin in 1903, which provided the opportunity for the voters themselves to pick their presidential candidate and make the nomination process more democratic (although, according to Burnham, the role of parties in the process was significantly reduces as a result).

The Progressive Party, also known as *Bull Moose*, was constituted in 1912, under the leadership of politicians such as Robert M. La Follette and the former Republican President Theodore Roosevelt (White and Kerbel, 2022). It never obtained significant electoral percentages, and in terms of political relevance its main achievement has been perhaps facilitating the victory of Woodrow Wilson by breaking apart the Republican consensus. However, its existence reflects much deeper societal changes, in an era which was more welcoming to progressive reforms than many others in American history. The fast-paced development of the industrial revolution (and the consequent emergence of a numerous working class), combined with a general distrust towards corrupt political establishments, paved the way for this third party to emerge and gather significant consensus. Theodore Roosevelt ran in fact as the Bull Moose's presidential candidate in 1912, placing second behind Wilson – with 88 electoral votes and over 4 million popular votes (270toWin.com, 2024).

Interestingly, the Party's platform that year contained several proposals that would be passed as important constitutional amendments in the following years (White and Kerbel, 2022), proving that *"over a period of decades, Progressives gradually but fundamentally altered the party system by changing politics from a private affair to a public concern"* (p. 52). Notorious examples include the direct election of Senators, which was introduced through the 17th Amendment in 1913. Seven years later, after decade-long battles, women were finally enfranchised when Congress passed the 19th Amendment. Other reforms include also the introduction of ballot initiatives and referenda.

During the 1920s, despite the intervention of the Progressives, the party system went through a crisis. The number of contested elections, where all candidates have a nearly equal chance of winning, plummeted:

according to Burnham, in the Solid South the dominance of the Democrats remained largely unchallenged, while in the North the Republican Party benefitted from a rather stable electoral base.
Naturally, this context brought about a significant decline in partisanship. As Burnham recalls, it was President Warren G. Harding himself who addressed the issue in a 1923 speech. He highlighted that "party politics had increasingly been supplanted by "bloc" politics in Congress; that party loyalty, once regarded as a prime virtue, was now widely held in contempt; that as a result, it was much harder to carry out coherent programs in Congress than it used to be, and that presidential influence on legislative outcomes had markedly declined" (pp. 20-21). According to him, the introduction of direct primaries was to blame for changing the "electoral motivations" of candidates and policymakers (p.21). His words reveal quite contemporary concerns, demonstrating that with the turn of the 20th century, modern American politics emerged.

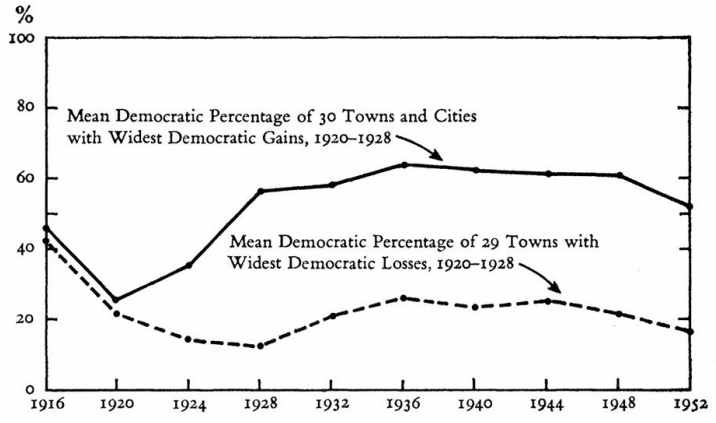
1.8 The New Deal era and the fifth party system

In his publication titled *The Emergence of the New Deal Party System: A Problem in Historical Analysis of Voter Behavior* (1975), Bernard Sternsher identifies the beginning of the fifth party system with the election of 1932. The equilibrium in voting behavior, which he describes as "stability of partisanship over extended periods as measured by relative constancy in the percentages of the vote obtained by the major parties" (p. 127), thus arguably ended with the beginning of the Great Depression.

However, Sternsher argues that by the mid to late 1920s, the first signs of an upcoming shock to the political and economic equilibrium had already appeared. At the local level, he reports that V.O. Key, in his 1955 publication *A Theory Of Critical Elections,* had presented the case of the thirty Massachusetts towns with the most democratic gains and the twenty-nine with the greatest losses, comparing analyses from 1916 to 1952. Figure 6 below shows that at the beginning of the 1920s the gap between the average gains and losses widened, and from 1928 onwards it stabilized around 30%. According to Sternsher, in his analysis Key includes data on Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire and Rhode Island which yields similar results, and that overall "the bulk of the towns with the widest Democratic gains were urban, industrial, foreign-born, Catholic areas; the towns with the widest Democratic losses tended to be rural, native-born, Protestant" (p. 133).

Figure 6: mean percentage of MA cities with the most Democratic gains and losses (1916-1952)

Source: Sternsher, 1975



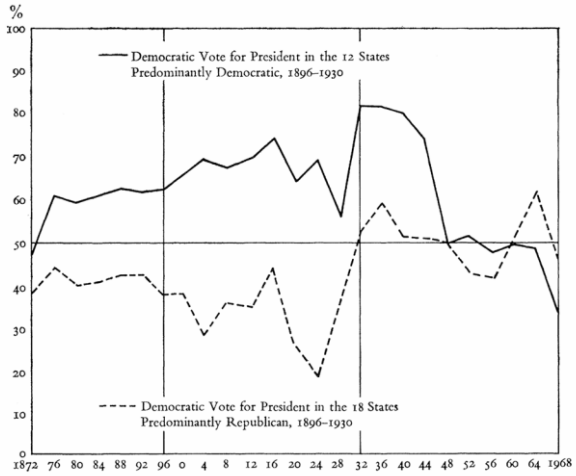
SOURCE: Key, "Theory of Critical Elections," 6 (Fig. B). Reproduced by permission of the *Journal of Politics*.

Figure 7 below applies Key's findings at the national level and reveals two important features. On the one hand, in predominantly "blue" states, the rate of votes cast for the Democratic candidate sharply increased between 1928 and 1932, after a period of decline, only to fall again after 1952 (a trend that is in line with Eisenhower's overwhelming success). On the other hand, however, GOP-leaning states also saw an increase in the vote for the Democratic candidate, but interestingly four years prior to their Dem-majority counterparts. After reaching a record low of 20% in 1924, in fact, the rate of support for the opposition in presidential elections began a steady increase which reached 50% in 1932 and nearly 60% in 1936.

The importance of these findings lies in the fact that, while support for the Democratic candidate increased nationally around the late-1920s and early-1930s, the 18 states where the electorate was predominantly Republican saw a shift in voting behavior at least four years earlier than Democratic-majority areas. Thus, according to Sternsher, the mid-1920s already showed early signs of an incoming realignment, as many of the strongly "red" states began supporting the opposition candidate.

Figure 7: Democratic vote for President in Blue and Red states

Source: Sternsher, 1975



Sternsher reports V.O. Key's definition of critical elections as

> *a category of elections in which voters are ... unusually deeply concerned, in which the extent of electoral involvement is relatively quite high, and in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the existing cleavage within the electorate. Moreover… the realignment made manifest in the voting in such elections seems to persist for several succeeding elections* (p. 129)

He then concludes that the contest of 1928 seemingly meets all the aforementioned criteria, and that ultimately "in New England at least, the Roosevelt revolution of 1932 was in large measure an Al Smith revolution of 1928" (p. 129). At first glance, the results of the contest between the Republican Herbert Hoover and the Democratic challenger Alfred Smith were in line with the previous elections, as the former won with a large margin of 58% of the popular vote and 444 electors (Olson and Wax, 2024). The strength of the Republican coalition was not called into question at this time, and the GOP's domination of U.S. politics – which had begun in the late 1890s – appeared to most as strong as it had ever been.

However, Key argues that the political significance of the 1928 presidential race is not found in the results, but rather in the unusually positive performance of the runner-up with respect to previous years. In his understanding of a critical election, victory is not necessarily a defining element. As Sternsher points out, "under Key's definition an election could be critical even if it did not result in the emergence of a new majority combination of voters" (p. 129).

Al Smith lost to Hoover with only 87 electoral votes and a little over 15 million popular votes, corresponding to about 40% of the ballots cast. According to the American Presidency Project statistics, in the

two previous contests of 1920 and 1924, the Democratic runner-up had fared much worse, mostly in terms of popular vote. In 1920, James Cox lost to Warren G. Harding with 9,134,074 Americans supporting him, around 34% of the total turnout. Four years later, in 1924, the Democrat John W. Davis won only about 28.8% of the popular vote, corresponding to nearly 8,3 million citizens.
Adjusting for population growth and the expansion of the electorate, Al Smith undoubtedly won more popular votes, despite the fact that he lost to this Republican opponent. However, another element suggests that significant coalition changes were already taking place.

As Key himself had concluded in his analysis of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine and Rhode Island's voting patterns throughout the 1920s, the Democratic Party had been gaining consensus among specific subgroups, which would later become the pillars of the New Deal coalition; the urban working class, immigrants and Catholics. Arguably, the constant growth in immigration rates during that period represented a great opportunity for the Democrats.

Notably, in fact, the 1928 election was the first in which over 13 million of the first and second generation Americans that had immigrated in the early 1910s had the chance to participate, and the majority of them – more specifically in the New England area – aligned with Smith (Sternsher, 1975). Therefore, it is possible to assume that the increase in the portion of the foreign-born electorate and of second generation Americans might have contributed to Smith's performance. Moreover, according to findings by Key, Macrae and Meldrum, a significant portion of those who voted for the 1928 Democratic candidate had cast their ballot for Robert M. La Follette four years prior, seemingly demonstrating the long lasting effects of the Progressive Era on the future new Democratic coalition (Shively, 1971). Ultimately, the analysis of 1920s voting behavior and socioeconomic changes suggests that the fifth realignment, which is set to take place in the early 1930s, was not provoked by the Great Depression. Conversely, the aforementioned findings rather lead to the conclusion that movements within the electorate from one party to another were already occurring, and the devastating crisis of 1929 might have merely accelerated the realignment.

When discussing the political significance of the 1928 election some, including Key, tend to define it as critical. As mentioned above, Key did not consider a victory to be a necessary condition of realigning elections; instead, he stressed the importance of specific changes in the voting coalitions, regardless of the result. However, others would disagree. Undoubtedly, as Hacker argues, in hindsight it becomes clear how "it was in 1928 […] that realignment of the electorate, which was to make the Democratic victory of 1932 possible, first became apparent" (Sternsher, 1975, p. 130). In a specific area of the country, a significant portion of the population shifted its preference for the candidate of the opposition.

However, it is undeniable that in 1928 the Democratic Party lost both the electoral college and the popular vote, failing to obtain a percentage of consensus that could successfully challenge the GOP. Following the concept of "normal majority status", the Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan has defined

a critical election as "one in which a realignment of the electorate results in a change in the identity of the party enjoying majority status" (p.130). This interpretation, according to Sternsher, clearly distinguishes single realigning elections from a critical period, or realigning sequence, which refers to changes that happen more gradually. In Burnham's words, Sternsher would rather identify 1928 as "part of a realigning sequence which could be identified as such only after it had been completed" (p. 142), without denying its importance as a precursor to the revolution caused by the Great Depression to the American party system.

Changes in partisan alignment in the 1920s could be inferred from other sources, adding to Key's findings in New England. In his analysis on the emerging New Deal coalition, W. Phillips Shively refers to an imperfect but quite useful poll conducted by the Literary Digest throughout four presidential elections, between 1924 and 1936. Consisting of a mailing ballot, it sampled "respondents drawn from telephone books and automobile registration lists" (p. 621), which at the time indicated mostly individuals belonging to the middle class.

This lack of diversity within the sample often produced faulty results, such as in 1936 when the poll anticipated a rather unchallenged victory for FDR's opponent Alf Landon. Nevertheless, this feature can be useful in understanding the discrepancy in voting between the middle class and other social *milieus*; the important realignment of immigrant and working class Americans in favor of the Democrats registered in 1928, for example, is not identifiable through the Literary Digest poll, as it did not affect the portion of the population that it sampled. Throughout the first and second electoral campaigns of Roosevelt too, the poll fails to register the massive shift of consensus towards the Democratic Party, mostly because the middle class remained strongly Republican at the time.

The Great Depression and the election of 1932

The Great Depression definitively put an end, albeit temporarily, to the success of the Republican Party, which had held control of all branches of government more or less continuously since the 1890s. In the wake of the financial and economic crash of October 1929, the majority of Americans responded negatively to the Hoover administration's perceived inability to prevent and then properly deal with the aftermath of the crisis. During the previous twenty years, the GOP had maintained a strong *laissez-faire* approach to the economy, promoting the model of a small government which would not intervene beyond what was strictly required. The modern interpretation of Adam Smith's "invisible hand" metaphor held that a free market, in the context of a capitalist economy, could self-regulate without the need for government intervention. Even as an economic and social crisis ensued following the collapse of the financial market, the Republican administration attempted marginal interventions that did not fundamentally change this approach.

As the socio-economic conditions worsened between 1929 and 1931, dissatisfaction with the current government grew, particularly among those groups that had been affected the most by soaring inflation and unemployment, which by 1932 had reached a rate of 24%. As mentioned in the previous section, the alignment of ethnic minorities and the working class with the Democratic Party had already begun years prior, but the dire consequences of the economic collapse of 1929 definitely accelerated the shift and contributed to the convergence of a new electoral majority.

The success of the Democratic Party in 1932 is however not only attributable to the perceived failures of the party in power; Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) platform, in fact, seemingly catered to the grievances of a massive portion of the American electorate that had suffered the consequences of an unrestrained market on one hand, and of an unresponsive government on the other. The general perception in the wake of the crisis was that Republicans had been more concerned with supporting and safeguarding the interests of financial and business elites than the working class; thus, according to Ruy Teixeira and Yuval Levin, the "common man" focus of the Democratic program attracted many voters across states, regions and class lines. Ultimately, Roosevelt won 42 out of 48 states – Alaska and Hawai'i had not been admitted yet – and 472 electoral votes out of 531, as well as 22,821,857 popular votes (57%). The incumbent, on the other hand, won only a little over 15,7 million votes, a sharp decline if compared with the 21,3 million of 1928. Conversely, in 1932, the Democratic Party went from a coalition that would hardly win more than 8 or 9 million popular votes, and whose record high had been the 15 million obtained in 1928, to the new majority party that, at least for the next twenty years, would constantly surpass 24 million ballots cast (270towin.com).

Despite the undeniable success of the Democratic coalition, scholars such as Clubb and Sanquist are reluctant to define the election of 1932 as critical. They in fact maintain that the consolidation of a realignment is quite a lengthy process.

The first step is undoubtedly an election where the opposition party wins the popular mandate, usually due to high dissatisfaction with the incumbent's performance in handling a crisis (Weatherford, 2002). However, as Clubb highlights, a system realignment occurs if only the new majority is consolidated in the subsequent elections; "the second stage of party realignment comprises the transformation of a tenuous coalition of voters united only by opposition to the incumbent into supporters who have positive and substantial reasons for investing their loyalty in the party" (p. 244). A party which can emerge as the new majority is one which can not only coordinate opposition to the incumbent, but also propose a coherent and persuasive program, taking a clear stance on issues that are relevant to the electorate and campaigning for an alternative vision for the country's future (Weatherford, 2002).

Due to the fact that a single deviating election is not sufficient to call for a realignment and the establishment of a new party system, the performance of the new majority party in subsequent elections matters

the most, as only its ability to stay in government determines the success of the realignment. With regards to 1932, surely the landslide victory of the Democratic Party in the November election subverted a decades-old political order, but without contextualizing FDR's first victory with subsequent developments, the events of that year might also suggest a temporary alignment motivated purely by widespread dissatisfaction with the incumbent's performance. It is only considering the Democratic victories of 1936, 1940 and onwards that the long-term impact that Roosevelt's emerging leadership had on U.S. politics becomes clear.

FDR successfully channeled popular frustrations with the *status quo,* fostering the emergence of a "New Deal coalition" as the product of a significant shift in the voting priorities for the American electorate; while throughout most of the U.S. recent history, most of the issues that would determine a voter's choice at the ballot box were ethno-cultural in nature, the impact of the Great Depression heightened concerns with the economy and the labor market (Shively, 1971). As the socio-economic crisis of the early 1930s affected the majority of American citizens, the electoral coalition that emerged in support of FDR's welfare program was unusually diverse; it included long-term Democratic voters in the so-called Solid South, but also "new" members such as the urban working class, immigrants (particularly Irish Catholics), recently enfranchised women and most African Americans, which shifted their support from the GOP for the first time Abraham Lincoln (Silbey, 2010).

According to Silbey, the new "common man" identity of the Democratic Party provoked a policy shift towards strong support for the working class and labor unions, in opposition to the Republican Party's focus on business elites and wealthy interests. In this regard, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the realignment of the 1930s is represented by the "revolution" that FDR's leadership provoked not only within the party, but within U.S. politics as a whole as well. In his analysis of critical realignments, Paul Kleppner recognizes the fundamental importance of ideology in the consolidation of an electoral majority; arguably, in his terms, the New Deal was not a mere reform package, but it also represented the popularization of a new understanding of the role of the government as an active agent, a safety net for the disadvantaged, which did not exist prior to 1932. Keynesian capitalism, in sharp contrast with the concept of the "invisible hand", would thus be the basis of Democrat and Republican policies alike, at least until the 1980s.

"New Deal" is the name given to the long series of reforms adopted by Roosevelt's administration, with wide Congressional support, with the purpose of addressing the negative effects of the Great Depression. During the first 100 days of his mandate, FDR managed to pass a record number of initiatives, including the creation of bodies such as the Public Works Administration – which would hire the unemployed to build public infrastructure – and reforms such as the Glass-Steagall Act (1933) that separated commercial and investment banking institutes. The overarching focus of the New Deal was to lower unemployment rates and support the working class, which had suffered the worst consequences of the economic collapse; in order to prevent similar

crashes in the future, the Democratic Party in government espoused Keynesianism, and adopted reforms with the purpose of fighting monopolies and protecting labor rights (Brinkley, 2020).

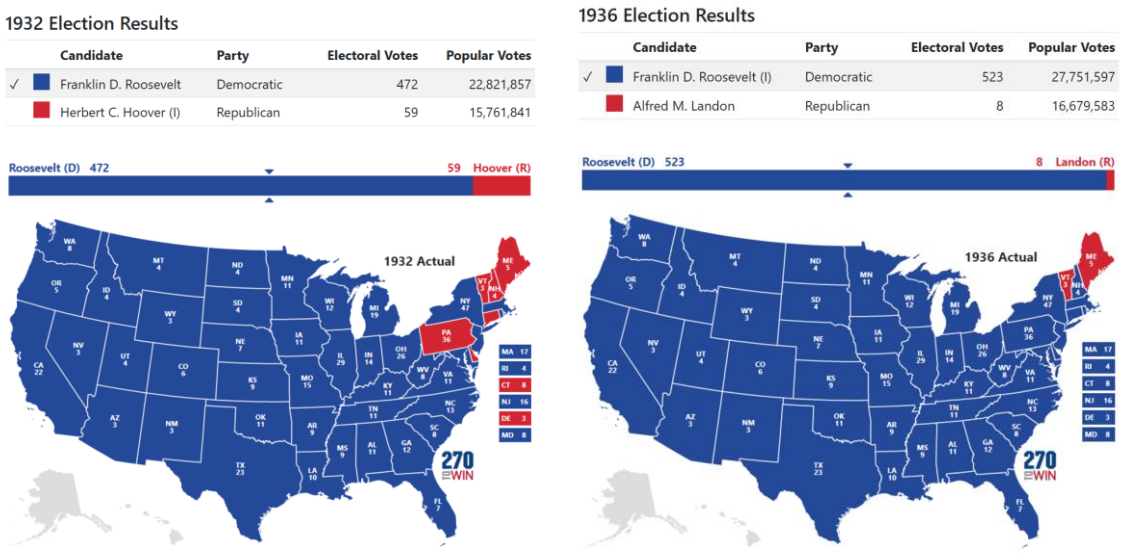
The coalition that took over the Democratic Party was perhaps partially inspired by the victories of the Progressive Era and the contributions of personalities such as Robert M. La Follette who, in 1924, had obtained enough popular votes, 4,8 million and about 1/6 of the total, to win the 13 electoral votes of the state of Wisconsin with one of the greatest performances by an Independent presidential candidate (270toWin.com). American progressives had long campaigned for more protections to labor rights and unions, as well as government funded programs and a more active role of the State. Arguably, the implementation of similar reforms during FDR's presidency created the modern welfare state in America; "combining the progressive ideas of economic regulation with State-level advances in social welfare delivery to those in need, the [Democratic] party, for the first time, pushed for a much larger role for the federal government in American society" (Silbey, 2010, p. 115). During the 1930s, liberalism was essentially re-defined as "a belief in activist national government to solve fundamental economic problems to ensure social welfare" (LeMay, 2017, p.32).

In 1936, Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran for re-election, with a presidential campaign that could be defined as an extremely successful referendum on his first term. In the race against the Republican challenger, FDR won 27,752,597 popular votes (nearly 5 million more than 1932) and 523 over 531 in the Electoral College (270toWin.com, n.d.). In Congress, the Democratic Party secured the trifecta by increasing its margin over the opposition in both Houses. In the House of Representatives, Democrats won 334 of the total of 435 seats; in the Senate, they secured a majority of 78 out of 96 (The Congress Project, 2014). Overall, the increase in the HoR amounted to 21 more seats compared to 1932, and 12 more compared to the 1934 midterms (Olson and Wax, 2024).

The maps below show the improved performance of the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate; in 1932, the Republican incumbent Herbert Hoover had obtained 59 electoral votes, and the party had retained 117 seats in the House of Representatives (losing 101). Four years later, they fared much worse, as the GOP won only eight electoral votes for the presidential candidate and 88 seats in the House (Olson and Wax, 2024).

Figure 8: presidential election results in 1932 and 1936

Source: 270toWin.com



The midterm election of 1930 had already pointed towards a crisis of the Republican majority in Congress; the Democratic Party gained the highest number of seats since 1922, reaching a total of 216, just two short of the required minimum for the majority. Conversely, the GOP lost 52 Representatives and retained control of the House by only two seats (Olson and Wax, 2024).

Table 3: results for general and midterm elections in the House of Representatives (1920 - 1930)

Source: Olson and Wax, 2024

Year	Rep. Vote share (%)	Dem. Vote share (%)	Rep. seats	Dem. seats	Trend
1920 (Harding)	58.82	35.38	303 (+63)	131 (-61)	Solid Republican
1922 (Harding)	51.86	44.64	225 (-77)	207 (+76)	Lean Republican
1924 (Coolidge)	56.06	40.22	247 (+22)	183 (-24)	Solid Republican
1926 (Coolidge)	57.11	40.09	238 (-9)	194 (+11)	Solid Republican
1928 (Hoover)	56.73	41.97	270 (+32)	164 (-30)	Solid Republican
1930 (Hoover)	53.04	44.50	218 (-52)	216 (+52)*	Lean Republican

(*) The authors highlight that "the 1930 Democratic gains were in West Virginis, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and Missouri, much like the recent populist-conservative fusion gains of the "Emerging Populist Majority" in the last decade or so" (p. 18)

Table 4: results for general and midterm elections in the House of Representatives (1932 - 1942)
Source: Olson and Wax, 2024

Year	Rep. Vote share (%)	Dem. Vote share (%)	Rep. seats	Dem. seats	Trend
1932 (FDR)	42.08	54.48	117 (-101)	313 (+97)	Solid Democratic
1934 (FDR)	41.29	53.92	103 (-14)	322 (+9)	Solid Democratic
1936 (FDR)	39.67	55.93	88 (-15)	334 (+12)	Solid Democratic
1938 (FDR)	47.5	48.7	169 (+81)	262 (-72)	Toss-up
1940 (FDR)	45.6	51.4	162 (-7)	267 (+5)	Lean Democratic
1944 (FDR)	50.8	47.0	209 (+47)	222 (-45)	Lean Republican

As table 4 shows, throughout the 1930s, the House of Representatives clearly remained under the control of a solid Democratic majority, with the exception of 1938. The contrast with respect to the previous decade is clear, as the results of both general and midterm elections were consistently in favor of the Republican coalition, which in four out of six races maintained a solid majority.

In 1936, the consensus for the Democratic Party increased in both the presidential and congressional elections. The new majority solidified its control of the executive and the legislature, supported by the success of the New Deal program.

As mentioned above, most scholars would agree that the definition of a realigning election depends on the persistence of a new electoral majority, rather than its origins. According to such criteria, the hypothesis that the contest of 1932 could be identified as “critical” was rejected; although it had undoubtedly subverted the political order, a one-time change of the party in power in and of itself did not constitute a realignment. On the other hand, four years later, the Democrats not only retained its control of all branches of government, but increased the size and strength of the electoral coalition, thus proving that the overwhelming consensus for FDR was not (only) the result of dissatisfaction with the GOP, but of a deeply rooted demand for change. In conclusion, the fifth realignment of the U.S. party system arguably took place in 1936, and the results of 1940 will signal the beginning of the stabilization phase.

The second recession of 1937 and the reorganization of the Republican Party

The nearly plebiscitarian elections of 1932 and 1936 had precipitated the Republican Party into a crisis, relegating it to minority status for the first time in forty years. Blamed for the 1929 collapse and accused of inability to repair the damages, the GOP suffered not only the loss of the presidency, but also of the majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The beginning of Roosevelt's second mandate, however, represented an opportunity for the opposition to strengthen and reorganize.

Pressured by the more conservative fringes of the Democratic Party, and relying on data which suggested that the American economy had apparently recovered from the Great Depression, FDR's administration, under the guidance of the Secretary of the Treasury Herny Morgenthau, operated cuts on government relief spending in order to avoid inflation. Similarly, according to Silbey, the Federal Reserve adopted a policy of reduction in the money supply.

Between 1937 and 1938, however, the slightly positive trend for economic growth reversed once again, albeit not with the same intensity as 1929. This second recession pushed the government to approve a new series of New Deal reforms, including landmark legislation such as the Fair Labor Standards Act, which introduced more labor protections by instituting the 40-hour work week, the minimum wage and regulations for overtime, as well as Social Security reforms (Teixeira and Levin, 2024).

Conversely, the 1937-1938 recession offered the Republican Party the opportunity to reinvigorate its opposition to the government. Exploiting the second economic downturn in less than a decade, the GOP built an counter-narrative skeptical of the success and effectiveness of Roosevelt's ambitious New Deal reforms. Embracing a more Jeffersonian approach to government powers, the Republican Party rejected welfare and labor protection due to an alleged concern with the safeguard of the Constitution and of American traditions, threatened by FDR's attempts at strengthening the power of the federal government, at the expense of Congress and the states (Weatherford, 2002).

Besides the Supreme Court, which struck down many of the early New Deal initiatives, Republicans found an unexpected ally in their reaction towards Democratic initiatives among the more conservative members of the party who, especially in the South, were increasingly dissatisfied with the Democrats' new progressivism and decided to support the GOP's counterefforts in more than one occasion (Weatherford, 2002).

The consolidation of the fifth realignment: the general elections of 1940 and 1944

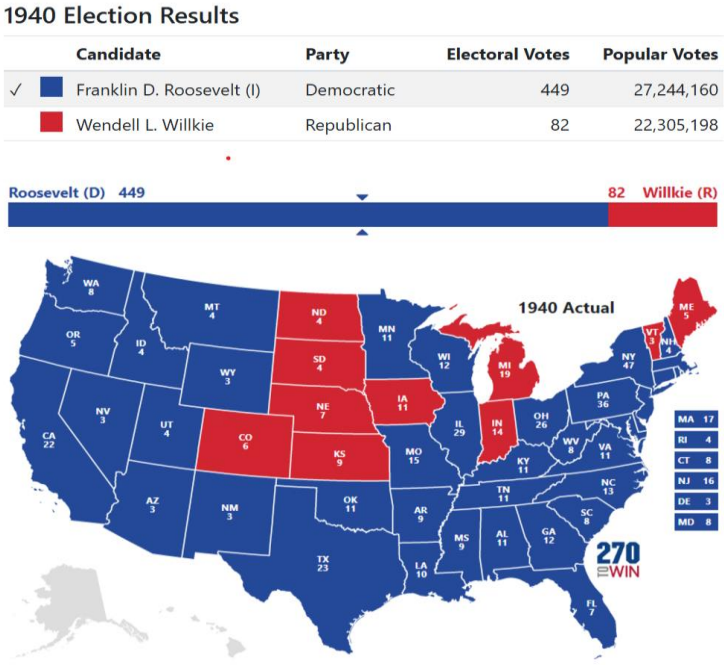
Factors such as the second recession, seemingly weak New Deal reforms, and the narrative proposed by the opposition produced important effects in the 1938 midterms. The Republican Party gained 81 seats with respect to 1936, while the Democratic Party lost 72 and the final configuration for House of Representatives resulted in a toss-up (Olson and Wax, 2024). This outcome is not however to be interpreted as a failure of the Democrats, or as the sign of another realignment approaching.

In his analysis of the consolidation of the New Deal realignment, M. Stephen Weatherford argues that, while in the first few critical elections consensus soars for the new majority, a stabilization phase eventually occurs, where the governing coalition experiences a slight decline in support, and the opposition recovers part of its losses. When a new party is elected with unprecedented success, part of its coalition is in fact inevitably constituted of voters of the former majority, motivated by a dissatisfaction with the incumbent's performance. Once the crisis is averted, however, those voters will realign with their traditional partisan affiliation, which best aligns with their values. A stabilizing election thus typically occurs after the realignment phase, and is characterized by a slight decrease in support for the new majority and a stronger opposition.

In 1940, FDR sought his third mandate, infringing a convention set by George Washinton in 1796. His margin of victory was however smaller with respect to the near-plebiscitarian outcome of 1932 and 1936; in the Electoral College, he obtained 449 electors (74 less than 1936) whereas the popular vote consensus fell by nearly half a million; conversely, the Republican candidate Wendell L. Willkie won 22,305,198 votes, over 6 million more with respect to his predecessor in 1936 (270toWin.com, 2016). The increase in support for the GOP is consistent with Weatherford's definition of a stabilizing election; as the opposition reorganized, the fifth party system entered its consolidation phase.

Figure 9: presidential elections of 1940

Source: 270toWin.com, 2016



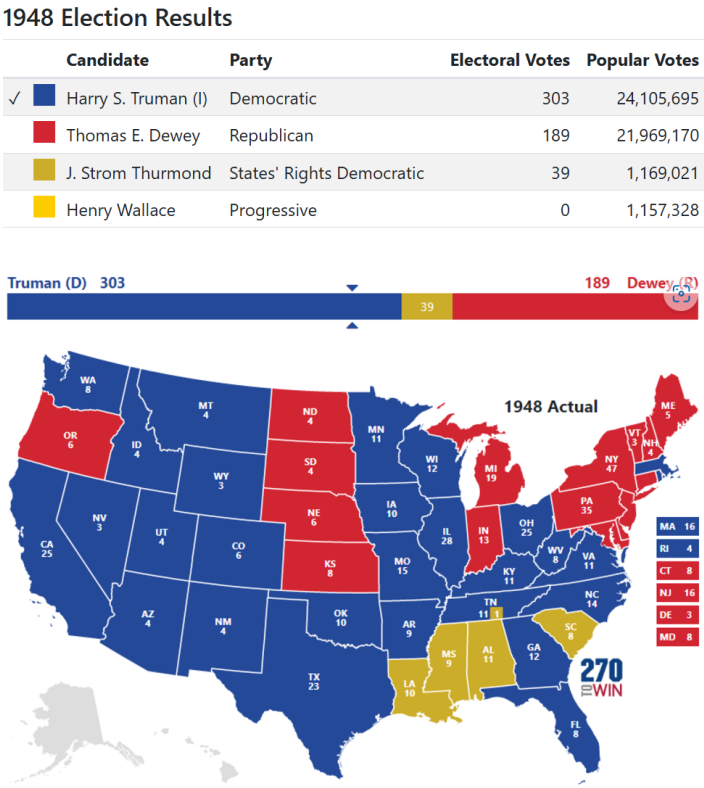
Besides the physiological increase in support for the opposition after the crisis of the realignment phase, the Republican Party may have benefitted from one other juncture in particular. When World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, the United States initially decided not to intervene, but offered support to its allies through the supply of military equipment. Converting nearly all domestic production to this goal, FDR's administration successfully put an end to unemployment and demand surplus, definitively bringing the country out of the lingering recession of 1929. In a context of economic growth, most of the emergency New Deal measures appeared outdated and some, particularly within the Republican Party, argued that an extremely active government had become redundant. The wartime "economic boom" resolved many of the issues that had led to the popularity of Roosevelt's agenda, and it almost inevitably challenged the New Deal coalition to remain strong even in times of economic prosperity.

In 1944, Roosevelt won his fourth and last mandate with an even smaller margin, confirming the strength of the Democratic Party on the one hand, and the consolidation of the fifth party system on the other. He won re-election in November with 17 electors and nearly 2 million popular votes less than in 1940 (270toWin.com, n.d.). In the Congressional race, Republicans lost twenty seats, while the Democratic Party gained twenty-two, for a total of 244 over 189 (Olson and Wax, 2024).

Interestingly, data reported by POLITICO reveals that, after the midterms of 1946 – held after FDR's passing – the GOP won back a rather short-lived Congressional majority; for the first time in 15 years, it held an advantage of 246 seats over 188 in the House of Representatives, and in the Senate they picked up 12 seats despite the fact that Democrats retained the majority (Glass, 2012). As the map below demonstrates, however, in the presidential race of 1948, where the incumbent Harry Truman won, despite losing ground in both the Electoral College and the popular vote, the Democratic Party regained the majority in the House of Representatives with 263 seats over 171 (Olson and Wax, 2024).

Figure 10: presidential election results (1948)

Source: 270toWin.com, n.d.



In the wake of WWII and amid rising tensions with the Soviet Union, the Democratic Party was compelled to made changes to its agenda. As mentioned above, the cornerstones of the New Deal reform package had been adopted in a context of extreme economic and social turmoil, and had thus been tailored to face an emergency. The war, and the increase in production that it caused, effectively led the country out of the crisis; moreover, as the leaders of the winning coalition of WWII, the United States rose to the forefront

of international politics as one of the two world superpowers. In a context of peace and prosperity, the governing coalition decided to re-adapt the governing principles of the New Deal; as Alan Brinkley writes, "theirs was a vision of essentially compensatory government, which would redress weaknesses and imbalances in the private economy without directly confronting the internal workings of capitalism. Such a State could manage the economy without managing the institutions of the economy" (p. 95). The post-war "compensatory State" was thus supposed to retain its role as watchdog of the market, without however fundamentally changing its structure.

Once the most pressing consequences of the Great Depression were resolved, the new Democratic platform incorporated more Keynesian fiscal policies and social welfare initiatives. The former had the goal of replicating in peacetime the stimuli for economic growth that the war had brought, by focusing on production incentives and welfare distribution. According to Brinkley, the postwar Democratic agenda was developed in a context of a shifting focus from domestic economic issues to international tensions and foreign policy.

As it appears evident, the Democratic Party maintained the majority position by adapting to the new needs and demands of the postwar period. The New Deal coalition survived the war, and supported the victories of three other Democratic presidents between 1948 and 1964. Between 1952 and 1960 the United States were guided by a Republican president for the first time since 1931; however, Dwight Eisenhower's two victories do not represent a crisis of the fifth realignment, since his moderatism that appealed to Republicans and Democrats alike did not disrupt the New Deal order. During his presidency, moreover, the Democratic Party held its ground in Congress, and only in 1964 the first clear signs of an imminent crisis appeared in the horizon, subsequently emerging in 1968.

CHAPTER TWO: THE REPUBLICAN REALIGNMENT AND THE SIXTH PARTY SYSTEM

2.1 Goldwater's impact on the Republican Party

The nomination of Barry Goldwater as the Republican candidate for the 1964 presidential election represented the first proper example of an ideological campaign, according to Professor Frank Annunziata. The general understanding until that point had been that both parties' programs were supposed to be pragmatic; Americans would not vote according to fleeting perceptions, but rather rational evaluations of their best interest – which, in the context of the New Deal framework, was having an active, "big" government. The reinforcement of the welfare state through New Deal, Modern Republican (with Eisenhower), New Frontier and Great Society programs had cemented the idea that social programs were a "permanent and revered institution" (p. 254). According to Walter Rostow, such acceptance was attributable to "a consensus among a substantial majority of the population that government should continue to perform a wide range of economic functions" (p. 254). Apparently, according to Annunziata, the "searing ordeal" of our Great Depression "purged the American people of their belief in the limited powers of the federal government and convinced them of the necessity of the guarantor state" (p. 254).

At that point, not even the Republican Party had rejected the New Deal strategy, at least in principle, in order to avoid the risk of antagonizing the vast majority of the American electorate. Annunziata wrote that the one and only attempt occurred in 1934, when the GOP ran a midterm congressional campaign condemning FDR's programs as "socialistic" and "un-American" (p. 254); the result was that for the first time since 1866 an opposition party failed to recover at least part of its losses from the previous general election. Since then, the GOP establishment promoted its most moderate candidates. In 1936, the party's platform "affirmed the principle of old age and unemployment payments. It pledged to protect the rights of labor to organize and bargain collectively […] It endorsed state minimum wage and hours laws for women and children, despite the Supreme Court's rulings" (p. 254). As Annunziata highlights, "the philosophy of the abortive Bull Moose (i.e. Progressive) movement of 1912 had finally captured both major parties" (p. 255).

Despite the fact that party elites on both sides had accepted the welfare state as a fixed standard, dissenting voices had always existed, and Barry Goldwater was one of them. It would take at least twenty years after his 1964 campaign for his positions to become mainstream in the Republican Party and beyond; external factors, such as the Oil Crisis and economic stagflation throughout the 1970s put heavy pressure on public spending, as many Americans began wondering whether the New Deal model could withstand such challenges. As a response to the crises, Ronald Reagan ran on a platform which fundamentally rejected the

welfare system, and the historical and economic context favored him – tuning neoliberalism into the pillar of new Republicanism. Reagan's candidacy would demonstrate the long-lasting impact of Goldwater's nomination in 1964, and how it changed the trajectory of the Republican Party for the foreseeable future, despite the fact that for years the Party would still embrace a more moderate interpretation of conservatism.

Johnson's opponent in 1964 ran on a platform that, as Annunziata writes, "constituted a direct assault upon the welfare state and an attempt to govern the United States on a pre-New Deal basis" (p. 255). He subverted the association that had by that time become an axiom of American welfare with social and economic progress, warning that it was leading the country "down the road to socialism" (p. 255).

Since his days as an Arizona senator in 1952, Goldwater had been violently opposing any federal support measures. Openly rejecting an all-too-powerful central government, he advocated for the return of control to the states; he threatened the primary role that unions had come to occupy since the days of the Wagner Act, and contrasted proposals to implement contracts that would make union membership a necessary requirement for employment. His claims for a Republican Party that would return to its Jeffersonian philosophy and reject federally sponsored welfare went unheard during the 1960 nomination process. The Party and its candidate Richard Nixon, according to Annunziata, went on to promote an extension of aids to education, double immigration rates, a medical care program and more civil rights initiatives.

When Nixon was defeated by Kennedy in 1960, Goldwater's front attributed it to the fact that "millions of conservatives […] refused to vote because no real choice existed" between the more and less liberals (the Democrats and the GOP respectively) (p. 257). As Chairman of the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, he spent the next four years advocating for his idea of conservatism; in 1960, he had published a reflection titled "The conscience of a Conservative", in which he claimed that because "the radical, or Liberal, approach has not worked and is not working" (Shermer, 2008), it was time for the Republican Party to propose an opposing strategy. He also heavily opposed federal aid to education, income tax, and any welfare measures that, according to him, went against "authentic entrepreneurial capitalism, individualism and the Constitution" (p. 258).

Goldwater believed that government intervention, regulation and supervision only damaged social and economic growth. His presidential role, if elected, would have been "not to pass laws […] but to repeal them" (p. 258). According to Annunziata, through his efforts, "Goldwater attracted a burgeoning following to his crusade against the federal government" (p. 257). Ahead of his presidential campaign, Goldwater led the more conservative Republican coalition in the Senate, heavily opposing major reforms of Kennedy's "New Frontier" coalition, such as civil rights, medical care, tax reform and education. According to Annunziata, he should however not be painted as an anti-federalist in his entirety; he was in fact favorable to centrally-controlled

institutions such as the military establishment and an expansion of the federal police; “pre-New Deal, rather than anti-New Deal, is the more apposite characterization of his principles” (p.257).

Arguably, Goldwater’s prominent role in the Republican Party contributed to the resurgence of a sort of “old” conservatism which had become quite unpopular as a result of Roosevelt’s presidency. His anti-welfare rhetoric is much older than his presidential campaign in 1964, although it is only in the mid-1960s that the party accepted, in Shermer’s words, “radical individualism” “as a way to denounce the welfare state and defend laissez-faire capitalism” (p. 680). Prior to his decision to run for office, Goldwater had built a reputation as a Phoenix businessman who – initially favorable to FDR’s emergency reforms in the early 1930s – had become increasingly distrusting of the New Deal once it appeared to become permanent. In a western context where, despite the rise of the service economy at the expense of industries in the postwar period, union membership had only been increasing, throughout the 1940s Shermer reports that Goldwater managed to become the face of the counteroffensive and build consensus with the support of a coalition of local businessmen who were wary of the increased power of labor unions.

Shermer dates the beginning of Goldwater’s political career in 1949, when he won the race for the Phoenix City Council. Three years later, in 1952, he ran for the first time for the Senate as an Arizona representative. His campaign strongly focused on an anti-New and anti-Fair Deal rhetoric, denouncing such social programs as mere tools to increase government control and threaten the people’s freedoms under the disguise of the welfare state. He attributed inflation and challenges to economic prosperity to the progressive measures proposed by the Democratic administration – both at the national and state level – which he addressed pioneering the use of rather aggressive rhetoric. Nevertheless, he promised to maintain the federal programs of the New Deal that had benefitted America and the West more specifically, such as the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, Social Security and unemployment insurance (Shermer, 2008).

Shermer argues that Goldwater’s victory is to be attributed to a strategy based on attracting the vote of the disgruntled Democrats in the state of Arizona; considering that the party had four registered members for each Republican, it would have been unthinkable for him to win by appealing exclusively to GOP voters. In this regard, the internal crisis within the state’s Democrats proved to be an advantage; “while Arizona was solidly Democratic” in fact “it was not soundly liberal” (p. 690). The more traditional, Jeffersonian wing had become increasingly unhappy with the progressivism of the New Dealers; the former had retained a significant share of the power, and although nominally no Republican was in office in the state, progressive measures and candidates struggled to make their way through.

As Shermer writes, therefore, “to win over Democrats, Goldwater fashioned himself as the heir apparent to the Jeffersonian-Democrats” (p. 691). He did not openly label his opposition to New Deal progressivism as “conservative”, and by advocating for the return of traditional Democratic Party who

"historically and traditionally has always stood as the protector of the individual's freedom and the individual's liberty" (p. 691) he attempted to discredit the claim that Republicans stood against the common man in America.

According to Shermer, by rejecting the class-based competition that had become the norm between the two parties, exploiting the disaffection of Jacksonians with the New Deal agenda, he succeeded in gathering enough consensus within the ranks of the opposition in order to win the election by only 7000 votes. That year, the Arizona GOP also succeeded in sending a member to the House of Representatives, and in increasing the number of seats in the state's lower house from eleven to thirty – as well as sending its first four representatives in the Arizona senate. These results demonstrated that Goldwater's tactic had leverage within the GOP, and the electorate more at large; despite the fact that his success was not as widely appreciated at the federal level, his victory represented nevertheless the beginning of an interesting turn for Republicans.

From Arizona to the national stage

As a Senator, Goldwater became an even more outspoken conservative, heavily opposing President Eisenhower's decisions to maintain the New Deal *status quo*. As a key representative of the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, he established himself as a notorious proponent of a more far-right conservative rhetoric which would spare no one regardless of partisan identification (Shermer, 2008).

As a pioneer of radical conservatism, Barry Goldwater used his political platform to campaign against the bulwarks of the New Deal coalition, including labor unions, which he thought had become too powerful at the expense of industries. He believed, as described by Shermer, that the influence of union leaders and their fight for higher wages were responsible for inflation and the struggles that ordinary workers and the middle-class consumer would face as a result.

During his first term in the Senate, he became a well-known proponent of anti-union legislation, so much so that the trade union movement even attempted at preventing him from running for a second time. Nevertheless, he won another mandate and managed to amass significant consensus by appealing to all those lifelong Republicans dissatisfied with the New Deal and with their party's seeming acquiescence with it during the last two decades. Disrupting the pro-union and pro-labor rights narrative that had become quite the norm under FDR, "Goldwater helped introduce into mainstream political discourse the conservative argument that many routine, heretofore legal trade union activities were, in fact, corrupt, dangerous, and un-American because they impinged on American individualism. Solidarity, then, became an abridgement of the rights of the individual" (p. 681).

In foreign policy matters, Goldwater was a strong anti-communist – in this regard, in line with the majority of both Democratic and Republican representatives, although his open support for Senator McCarthy's controversial domestic war on communism might have set him apart from the mainstream; according to Shermer, in 1954 he was one of the 22 GOP members who voted against the latter's censure. That same year, the first midterm elections during Eisenhower's presidency resulted in a defeat for the Republican Party, proving that the Democrats of the welfare state still retained strength. In that occasion, the GOP lost both Houses, the lower by 18 seats and the upper by 2; the party would not win back the former until the 1990s, and the latter until 1980 (Olson and Wax, 2024).

In the context of the late 1950s, which was becoming increasingly skeptical of labor unions' strength and practices, Goldwater found fertile grounds for his agenda. Seeking re-election in 1958, he invested in the pro-business coalition that he had been building during his first mandate; attempts by the union associations and his former Arizona opponent – Ernest McFarland – six years prior at marginalizing him only gave his campaign more leverage, and as Shermer reports Goldwater won the race with an overwhelming majority of 56%, thanks to the support of over 80,000 Democrats (Matthews, 1997). This victory only strengthened Goldwater's position within the GOP, which in other states had been badly defeated. Pushing the party to "quit copying the New Deal, seeking only for votes, and remember that a two-party system needs two philosophies and not just one" (Shermer, 2008, p. 707), in foreign policy he insisted on his anti-Communist stance, advocating for counteraction against the powerful far-left governments in Eastern Europe, China and North Korea – criticizing the Eisenhower and then Kennedy administrations for being too "tolerant", according to Matthews.

Anticipating in a sense the populist rhetoric proposed by Republicans such as Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump many years later, Goldwater delivered a speech to the Senate in January 1961, in which he defended the "diligent, dutiful, religious middle-class Americans" who were being forgotten and ignored by "paternalists in Washington who redistributed their incomes to deprived Americans and, more importantly, to citizens speaking through powerful interests" (Annunziata, 1980, p. 259). The narrative of the common, middle-class (white) men and women of America that are left out of the progressive policies of a Democratic Party that has become more fixated on "identity politics" and subsidies is perhaps the *fil-rouge* which links Goldwater's groundbreaking presidential campaign to the mainstream narrative adopted by today's GOP. Annunziata reports that the following year, in 1962, the party published its Declaration of Republican Principle and Policy, deprived of any "progressivism" – in sharp contrast with the previous years – demonstrating that perhaps also due to Goldwater's influence, the GOP's ideology was changing.

In conclusion, two have been the greatest achievements of Goldwater's politics; on the one hand, he has successfully broken apart the confidence relationship between unions and the working class, as well as the

Democratic Party, alimenting fears of corruption and inefficacy, delegitimizing one of the "key pillars of the New Deal order" (Shermer, 2008, p. 709). Then, consequentially, he has managed to build a sort of "conservative" equivalent to the diverse New Deal coalition: "his free market, small government, antilabor populist conservatism not only tapped into fears of union bureaucracy and power but also bridged differences between those in the working and managerial classes" (Shermer, 2008, p. 708). In the absence of a better alternative, he proved to his own party that the once unthinkable opposition to the New Deal and pro-union policies could become – if properly managed – what Shermer referred to as "a winning electoral strategy" (p. 709).

2.2 Goldwater's presidential nomination in 1964 and its importance for the Republican Party

On January 3rd, 1964 Barry Goldwater formally announced his candidacy for the Republican Party's presidential nomination, proposing to be the conservative that many Americans had been waiting for since the New Deal era.

In many ways, Goldwater's goal was rather ambitious. According to Annunziata, the bipartisan consensus for government-sponsored welfare in the 1950s was recognized as a sort of *status quo*; any attempt at halting America's progression towards state-sponsored programs carefully avoided reversing those that were already in place. A candidate which would openly denounce government welfare, and make it a vital point of his presidential campaign to overturn it, was more disruptive to the political order than it might be today. Moreover, there was no guarantee that – if elected – Goldwater could count on sufficient GOP support to achieve his goal.

Goldwater's rhetorical style and policy program also challenged a widely held belief among political scientists and commentators that Annunziata summarizes as trust in the fact that "the fragility and diversity of American political parties and the presumptive necessity to embrace the political center for electoral victory has traditionally precluded extreme doctrinaire behavior" (p. 260). Indeed, for most of America's party history, constrained by the first-past-the-post majoritarian system, candidates would maximize their chances of victory by embracing platforms that, whether right or left wing leaning, were overall rather moderate. Such strategy of avoiding excessively ideological campaigns would allow nominees to appeal to the largest possible pool of voters on either side of the spectrum. While in the contemporary era of highly polarized politics, certain candidates such as Clinton, Obama and, arguably, Biden have successfully secured the presidency by going back to a seemingly universal appeal for "all Americans", the sixth party system – as Goldwater's success highlights – seemingly suggests that other alternatives are viable as well.

A distinguishing characteristic of contemporary conservatism is its open support for a clear ideological stance – and in this sense, Goldwater was a precursor. He was aware of the fact that what he was building was not so much a coherent program, but rather a narrative; his goal was not to coordinate a party base, but rather a faction, compacted against "the other", the "progressive", Democratic "enemy"; as Annunziata argues, "Karl Hess, Goldwater's chief speech writer, explained that the Senator knew the nature of his movement was not organizational, but ideological. The salvific message would be brough to his 'true believers'" (p. 260). Annunziata also reports Theodore H. White's words; after studying the 1964 campaign, the author concluded that Goldwater "wanted believers more than he wanted the presidency" (p. 260).

The California primary: an example

California proved to be an essential stepping stone for Goldwater, who had fared rather badly in the earlier primaries of 1964; if he hoped to secure the nomination as that year's GOP candidate, he had to win the 86 delegates of the western state. After securing Illinois, Indiana and Nebraska without significant challenges, in California Goldwater would directly go against his only other opponent, the Governor of New York Nelson Rockefeller (Schuparra, 1992).

Rockefeller, a more moderate Republican, attempted to discredit Goldwater and secure the nomination by painting him as a right-wing extremist. However, most of the southern California GOP voters not only did not see him in that light – and rather considered him a reliable anti-Communist who strongly opposed the progressive "Eastern establishment" of the New Dealers – but they also strongly disliked Rockefeller, as a governor of one of what Kurt Schuparra called the most important Eastern "welfare states". Moreover, since the 1960 Republican National Convention, Goldwater's supporters had carried on a strenuous opposition to Rockefeller, Nixon and all the other "mainstream" GOPs who seemed excessively lenient towards welfare measures.

In California, the Arizona Senator built a campaign with populist undertones, focusing on the "two pillars of Southern California conservatism" that according to Schuparra strongly contrasted with Eisenhower and Nixon's "dynamic conservatism" (p. 279). On the one hand, GOP right-wingers stood for a nearly eradicative policy towards communism, both domestically and in foreign policy; on the other, dissatisfied with the President's adherence to New Deal principles, Goldwater mirrored their support for a market free of government control. Despite his attempts at toning down his staunch opposition to the welfare state, presenting himself as a "mainstream Republican", Goldwater's platform "still maintained that the government had to withdraw entirely from farm subsidies, public housing and urban renewal, and substantially cut back aid to

education" (pp. 283-284). Nevertheless, he apparently reversed his stance on Social Security, which had hurt him in other primaries, especially among elderly voters.

Earlier that year, during the annual meeting of the California Republican Assembly (CRA), the Rockefeller coalition and the "Goldwaterites" had clashed rather violently to gain control of the party. According to Schuparra, the CRA had been traditionally controlled by the more moderate fringe of the state's GOP, but the advance of Goldwater and his populist conservatism posed a threat to the status quo; the latter were able to take control of the Assembly at the convention in March 1964 – and their candidate received the CRA's official endorsement for the nomination. Goldwater's coalition, which included renowned ultra-conservative groups such as the United Republicans of California and the Young Republicans, alarmed the more moderate members of the GOP, and as Schuparra writes, an anti-Goldwater movement gained momentum ahead of the state's primaries.

In California, Goldwater organized a rather modern campaign; not only did he manage to gather resources from wealthy residents who wanted to support his nomination, but he could also count on a large number of volunteers who managed, for example, to gather 70,000 signatures on the petition to have him on the ballot for the primary, when only a little over 13,700 were required. The same zeal was not matched by Rockefeller supporters, something which according to Schuparra constituted another point of disadvantage for the New York governor. Despite such efforts, in May 1964 Goldwater's lead in the race abruptly halted, after Rockefeller's win in Oregon and his subsequent endorsement by Eisenhower, who described him as "the ideal Republican candidate" (p. 288).

A few days before the vote, Goldwater invested in a last-minute "campaign's ad blitz" (p. 290) on TV, radio and printed press, in order to capture the consensus of the 18% of the still undecided Republicans. Combined with his more long-term strategy, this choice proved to be victorious: Schuparra reports that Barry Goldwater defeated Nelson Rockefeller by 58,231 votes, corresponding to 51.4% vs 48.6% of the ballots cast. Despite having scored victories across the state, Schuparra also argues that his strongholds were in the southern counties – with the exception of Santa Barbara – as well as Orange and Los Angeles counties where the door-to-door campaigning bore its fruits. It was precisely the dedication of his supporters in "getting the vote out" for a candidate who had built an image of a patriot that worked in favor of Goldwater's nomination. Incapable of presenting an equally compelling narrative, Rockefeller – and, in a way, the moderate republicanism for which he stood – was thus defeated. After the victory in California on June 2nd, the Arizona Senator went on to win Washington, Colorado, Minnesota, Virginia, Texas and Alabama, *de facto* ensuring his nomination (Matthews, 1997).

2.3 The 1964 GOP presidential campaign

Despite the fact that Goldwater's image of the honest politician, as opposed to the "calculated ambiguity" (Matthews, 1997, p. 662) of his opponents, granted him two terms in the US Senate, it soon became clear that such qualities would not be sufficiently persuasive to grant him the Presidency. According to many who have analyzed his 1964 performance, including Jeffrey J. Matthews – who reflects on the Goldwater campaign in his 1997 publication *To Defeat A Maverick* – combined with his unorthodox conservatism, his rather violent and "politically incorrect" rhetoric might have been the factors determining his defeat.

Nevertheless, ahead of election night, thanks to a trend of growing popularity, predictions appeared favorable to the Senator; one month prior to his assassination, Kennedy had lost about 20% in approval ratings with respect to the average of his first three years as President. Matthews attributes this decline to disapproval of the administration's spending record and attitude towards racial integration, and ratings fell particularly among Republicans, independents, and in the eastern, mid and far western, as well as southern regions. This dynamic appeared to offer an opportunity to the GOP candidate. It was precisely in the South, which would become a solid base for Republican consent, that Goldwater significantly outpolled the current President. According to Matthews, counting on such an advantage, the party of Goldwater prepared the so-called "Southern strategy", which became the electoral scheme of the GOP for the foreseeable future: the Party could potentially win the election by relying almost exclusively on the states of the Old Confederacy, disregarding the Northeast and middle-Atlantic areas which had long been strongholds of the Democratic Party.

To Defeat A Maverick reports that – prior to his assassination – JFK was expecting a victory with a rather close margin to his opponent, demonstrating that Goldwater's Republican Party had become a sufficiently serious threat to the Democratic majority. The President's opponent did not spare attacks either, throughout the course of his campaign: making foreign policy a focal point, in response to a rising national concern with the Cold War, Goldwater heavily criticized the widely popular Nuclear Test Ban Treaty due to preoccupations with USSR non-compliance and increase in nuclear power.

After Kennedy's death in Dallas, in November 1963, it appeared as though Goldwater would retire his candidacy for the Republican Party's nomination; counting on overwhelming support from his electors, however, the Senator opted for staying (Matthews, 1997). What appeared as a close race the previous year, proved to be clearly favorable to the Democrats after the President's assassination; succeeding him, the former VP Lindon Johnson successfully implemented the rest of his predecessor's agenda, which as Matthews recalls included tax cuts and improvement to the American economy, *de facto* ensuring his re-election in November. Coming from Texas, Johnson also managed to appeal to a larger portion of the Southern population than

Goldwater had expected when Kennedy was running; his campaign "had been tailored to oppose Kennedy" (p. 665), and when the situation changed he had to rapidly attempt at reorganizing it.

In the postwar period, and subsequently during the onset of the Cold War, foreign policy became one of the main deciding factors in US elections at nearly all levels; however, "among the early post-war presidential elections, the 1964 campaign most clearly reveals the importance of voter confidence in a candidate's leadership in world affairs" (p. 665). Finding himself challenging a new opponent, Goldwater decided to focus on foreign policy in his campaign against Lindon Johnson – after this strategy had proved successful in securing the Republican nomination (Matthews, 1997). Despite the fact that, after the RNC, he had attempted at softening his stance by promising a return to Eisenhower's approach of "Peace through Strength" (p. 669) – and to consult with him and other "moderate" Republicans on matters of national and international security – his "reputation" was negatively impacted. His success in the California primary did not transpose at the national level, where the majority of Americans reportedly did not trust him to handle foreign policy matters. According to Matthews, he was typically described as a "careless extremist who if elected president could provoke nuclear war" successfully stuck (p. 669).

During his race for the GOP nomination, he had already made his anti-Communism a key pillar, both with regards to the USSR and Vietnam, where he criticized the administration's weak response and advocated for victory at all costs against Ho Chi Minh. Once chosen as the Republican candidate, he did not spare attacks against Lindon Johnson's foreign policy in South-East Asia which, in his opinion, lacked objectives and a clear sense of direction. Picking up the frustrations of the American public with a U.S.-led war that was happening on the other side of the world, he made it a key point of his presidential campaign to criticize the President's indecisiveness in resolving it by taking strong action (Matthews, 1997). Four years later, when the conflict had only progressed, Richard Nixon won the election by promising Americans to put an end to the US army's presence in Vietnam.

According to Matthews, Goldwater's candid rhetoric was both well appreciated by the press – that would "keep hitting him with questions and then wait until he slipped" to have impactful headlines (p. 666) – and by his opponents who would use it against him. During the primaries, Rockefeller's strategy had been that of painting him as a dangerous extremist; in California, the New York Governor's strategy had successfully opposed his "constructive", traditional Republicanism to Goldwater's far-right conservatism. This polarizing, "warmonger" "Goldwater image" (p. 666) attracted zealots on the one hand, and scared the rest of the electorate on the other. While his uniquely aggressive strategy had secured him two Senate terms and the GOP nomination, "a reckless candidate strictly wedded to ideology was vulnerable on a national stage" (p. 668). Nevertheless, ahead of Election Day, Goldwater's strength in the South still appeared undisputed. Besides Texas, he was favored in 13 other States – for a total of 185 electoral votes; perhaps, these numbers were

attributable to the appeal of his conservative domestic and foreign policies, to the dissatisfaction with the Civil Rights movement and to the appeal of his platform even for many (Jacksonian) Democrats (Matthews, 1997).

Polling ahead of Election Day

In 1965, author Thomas W. Benham published a study on the polls conducted ahead of the previous year's election. Focusing specifically on the Republican Party, the research included interviews of a diverse panel of potential voters as well as studies of Goldwater's campaign efforts in the South and Midwest, which included monitoring TV commercials released by both Democrats and Republicans throughout the campaign period. The study on the "national cross-section of voters" (p. 185) revealed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the GOP.

Firstly, compared to Johnson, Benham highlights that Goldwater was lesser known – and the more popular candidate typically holds an advantage over their opponent. Secondly, at the start of the campaign Johnson was perceived much better than Goldwater by most of the U.S. electorate, and although the race altered to a certain extent the overly positive image of the President, the effects were still not as great to facilitate Goldwater's rise. The report reveals that voters attributed strengths to Goldwater's character as well (e.g. "speaks his own mind" and "has strong convictions"), but at the same time his perceived negative traits, such as his apparent impulsivity, posed a significant obstacle to his success.

In addition, the poll included questions on three areas relevant to both Goldwater's and Johnson's campaigns: radicalism, the likelihood of a nuclear war, and the candidate's stance on Social Security. Regarding the first aspect, contrary to the Republican nominee's reputation of extremism which, as mentioned above, was heavily stressed by his opponents both within and outside the party, "in the public's mind, the two candidates were not polarized so neatly. Far more saw Johnson as moderate or conservative than as liberal, and about 3 people in 10 tagged Goldwater as radical" (p. 190). With regards to the more or less incumbent chance of nuclear war, the majority of respondents (including a good portion of conservatives) believed that under a hypothetical Goldwater presidency the country would be more likely to be involved in a nuclear conflict. Finally, concerning opposition to Social Security, Benham reports that the GOP candidate's skepticism towards the welfare state did not play in the party's favor – and the campaign efforts in highlighting Goldwater's support for similar improvements during his Senate mandate were not as effective as hoped.

Interestingly, Benham's analysis included a section on the civil rights movement. Throughout the campaign, some were wondering whether the Democrats' strong support for the cause would have produced a backlash at the national level, which might have favored the Republican Party. While this was not the case,

Benham observed that some negative effects were felt among the better-educated cohorts, the South and the rural areas. While this phenomenon did not have a significant impact in 1964, it could be argued that the alienation of the South as a response to the administration's fight for racial equality will constitute an issue already in 1968.

Demonstrating the role that the media had already come to occupy during electoral campaigns, Benham studied the importance of advertisement in promoting both candidates. The Democratic and Republican nominees aired a series of commercials on TV in the months and weeks prior to Election Day, and according to Benham for both of them there was an increase in visibility: 46% of respondents declared to have seen commercials for Goldwater, and 39% for Johnson. In these brief appearances, the two candidates would present the focal points of their platforms, without missing the chance of discrediting their opponent. With a rather modern approach, Goldwater's entourage also decided to implement tactics to increase the public's familiarity with the candidate; airing several "half-hour shows" – in which at some point President Eisenhower was interviewed – they partially succeeded in increasing awareness of the Republican's platform (Benham, 1965). TV was also quintessential, particularly for the GOP, in appealing for campaign funds; millions of dollars were collected thanks to the contributions of individuals who were persuaded via campaign ads. In this respect, Benham prophesized that "no doubt both parties will use nationwide network TV to appeal for funds in the future" (p. 196).

2.4 The political significance of the election of 1964

While Goldwater's ideological beliefs were convincing to some, his policy plans did not persuade enough voters to guarantee him victory. Despite late attempts at clarification and redirection, his staunch opposition to welfare measures scared many Americans with regards to the changes his presidency might entail – and the possible end in sight of what Annunziata referred to as "government-sponsored social reform" (p. 262). In 1964, he lost to the incumbent Lindon B. Johnson by 52 electoral votes against the winner's 486 (National archives, 2019), which translated in a 7.5 million votes difference between the two candidates. "The 'Goldwater undertow' cost the party innumerable congressional seats and over a five hundred seats loss in state legislatures. Limited success was achieved only in the deep South" (Annunziata, 1980, p. 261).

Johnson's landslide victory tends to overshadow, in many retellings of 1964, the political significance of Goldwater's campaign and the over 27 million votes he obtained. It became clear throughout his Senatorial and Presidential races that his polarizing rhetoric could have a strong impact on certain sectors of the population, including many Democrats – mostly in the South – who had grown wary of the takeover of their

party by progressive "New Dealers", and hoped for a return of a Jacksonian, more "conservative", approach. Had it not been for Kennedy's assassination, and for Johnson's performance in the year prior to the election, Matthews argues that perhaps Goldwater could have secured a broader consensus – although it would have been hard to imagine a Republican victory at the time. In August, the GOP "was projected to win as many as twenty-two states. And less than four weeks before the election, The New York Times noted that he led in ten states, with another eight 'neck and neck'" (pp. 672-673).

His rhetoric and his extreme opinions on US foreign policy might have scared away enough Americans to prevent him from being a significant challenger to the President. Combined with Johnson's popularity – as the successor to an assassinated POTUS and as a competent politician himself – the Republican victory in the election was definitely out of reach. However, 1964 should not be considered meaningless because the GOP lost the Presidency; Goldwater's consensus that year should not be undervalued. The Republican Party had suffered great losses since 1932, and in its attempts at rebuilding had adopted a more "moderate" and liberal stance than the pre-FDR party of Hoover and Coolidge. In this regard, Goldwater was not wrong in referring to the GOP's compliance with the New Deal order; even Republican politicians – Eisenhower and Nixon among them – had refused to reverse it or challenge it significantly, considering its widespread popularity within the American public opinion.

For over thirty years, that had been the norm. In an attempt to go back to the Republican tradition of *laissez-faire* and small government, Goldwater produced a rupture in the fifth party system's order, which had until then been characterized by an almost undisputed domination of the Democrats and their progressive agenda. When Johnson promoted the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, solidifying the government's support for racial equality, the Democratic Party alienated a significant portion of its white, Southern, working class base; although the latter did not immediately transfer their consensus to Republicans, this shift *away* from the Democratic Party paved the way for a subsequent realignment – as Reagan's victories will demonstrate.

All of these factors played in favor of Goldwater's strategy a few years later than he had intended; but it is worth remembering that subsequent developments which hurt Democratic consensus favored Republicans, bringing to fruition efforts made by certain factions (including Goldwater) to "rebrand" their conservatism in a more "right-wing" connotation. Goldwater had decided to oppose the then-mainstream faith in the welfare state, and turn the GOP into a pro-free market, free business and anti-union political force. He did so by promoting his ideas with a strong, at times violent rhetoric, which would not spare attacks on his opponents. While the America of 1964 was not yet ready for a similar candidate, his strategy proved successful in the long run. Major Republican leaders – and presidents – such as Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Donald Trump have all, to a certain extent, adopted features of Goldwater's style. In what has become the sixth (or perhaps

seventh?) party system, Republicans have gotten extremely close to where Goldwater wanted them – and they fare extremely well in elections – proving that his "rebranding" of the party has been successful.

Was 1964 a "realigning election"?

The table below contains data on the US Presidential elections between 1940 – at the height of FDR's mandate – and 1968. Results have been measured in popular vote terms, as it more representative than the Electoral College of any possible fluctuations in consensus for one party or the other.

Table 5: Popular vote results for US presidential elections between 1940 and 1968
Source: 270toWin.com

YEAR	DEMOCRATIC PARTY (in millions)	REPUBLICAN PARTY (in millions)
1940	27,2	22,3
1944	25,6	22
1948	24,1	21,9
1952	27,3	33,7
1956	25,7	35,5
1960	34,2	34,1
1964	42,8	27,1
1968	30,9	31,7

Table 6: Data on the 1964 presidential race
Source: the American Presidency Project

TURNOUT (MIL.)	VOTING AGE POPULATION (VAP)	REGISTERED VOTERS	TURNOUT RATE (OVER VAP)	RATE OF GOP VOTE	RATE OF DEM VOTE
70,097,935	110,604,000	73,715,818	63.4%	39%	61%

1952 and 1956, under Dwight Eisenhower's presidency, represent an anomaly in an otherwise Democratic-dominated electoral period. Democrats have in fact consistently collected a series of victories since the start of the fifth party system, thanks to the role of the New Deal coalition, which rallied around the party's candidates throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1960s. In this regard, 1964 reflects dynamics in line with the key characteristics of the politics of that period – without disregarding the fact that significant changes were already underway.

Since 1960, Republican consensus had been slowly but steadily increasing, and the contest between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon was definitely the closest in a long time – and extremely close even by today's standards. With a difference of only about 100,000 popular votes, and 84 electoral votes between the two candidates, the Republican Party proved it had retained most of its strength in the post-Eisenhower era (270toWin.com, 2024). 1964 however reinstated the favorable context that had accompanied the Democrats for decades; although the considerations above reveal that the New Deal and post-war consensus were beginning to show their weak spots, Goldwater's violently groundbreaking campaign did not succeed in bringing the system to an end.

Some have wondered whether 1964 can be considered a realigning election, because of its political significance. The previous chapter included the definition of "realigning elections" provided by Paul Kleppner in his studies of the party systems theory; he had characterized them as interested by major shifts in consensus within a sufficient number of societal groups as to produce permanent changes to the party system and the coalition bases. According to him, key features of realigning elections include high voter turnout and higher degrees of inter-partisan polarization.

With regards to party loyalty, in 1964 there was no major shift from the Democratic to the Republican electoral base. The traditional components of the New Deal coalition voted for Johnson, and as the data suggests Democrats have obtained 8 more million votes with respect to 1960, and considering that the Republican consensus declined by 7 million, there is at least one extra million votes that came from newly enfranchised Americans. The victory of a Democratic president is also in line with the trend that had been initiated by FDR's landslides ahead of his first and second terms. The rate of votes cast for the Democratic and Republican Parties over the total turnout provides further confirmation of the enduring popularity of

Johnson's coalition; the number of citizens who cast their ballot that year amounted to exactly 70,097,935 votes, according to the American Presidency Project. Of those, nearly 42,8 million went to the Democrats, and about 27,1 million to the Republican coalition – which translates to around 61% and 39% respectively. Clearly, the vast majority of Americans casting their votes in 1964 did so for the party that was currently in power.

Looking at data on voter turnout provides another argument against the classification of the Johnson – Goldwater race as realigning. In 1956, over 62 out of the 102.7 million enfranchised Americans showed up to the polls, for a total of 60.4% of the Voting Age Population (VAP). Four years later, the ratio increased, with 68.8 over 108 million (63.5%). 1964, however, witnessed a mere 0.1% decrease in turnout, with 70 million Americans over 110 million casting their ballot, according to the American Presidency Project. Considering the lack of a significant variation of turnout rates, one more criterion of those drawn by Kleppner would reject the classification of that year's election as realigning or critical.

An important clarification has to be made regarding the VAP. Analyses on subsequent election cycles post-1980, in this and the upcoming chapter, will calculate turnout rates as a ratio between ballots cast and the total of American citizens with the right to vote, i.e. the Voting Eligible Population (VEP). Prior to Reagan's first electoral contest, however, data on the VEP is not available, meaning that for the 1960s and 1970s, voter turnout is calculated with respect to the VAP. Contrarily to the VEP, the Voting Age Population counts all Americans who, by age, might have the right to vote and does not account for felons and expats who voted abroad. Comparing the two measures from 1980 onwards on the American Presidency Project thus reveals that the Voting Eligible Population is always lower than the VAP; this is a distinction to be taken into account in this case and in all future election analyses prior to 1980.

Finally, the aforementioned report on the polls conducted by Thomas W. Benham ahead of the election includes a section on the perceived level of "radicalism" of both candidates. Responses appear conflicting, with neither Johnson nor Goldwater being labeled as extremist by a significant portion of the interviewees; as Benham reports, some even indicated the Democratic candidate as more conservative than liberal (Benham, 1965). The data reveals that, despite Goldwater's unusually violent rhetoric, compared to the mainstream strategy adopted by his predecessors, and despite the Democratic attempts at using his transparency against him, the American public did not polarize accordingly. It is safe to conclude thus that 1964 is not a realigning election, and that in more than one way it was more favorable to the Democrats than any of the previous elections within the fifth party system.

Ultimately, however, although data on 1964 reveals enough similarities with previous election cycles to reject the hypothesis of a realignment, its significance cannot be discarded. Until the early 1960s, contrasts between Democrats and Republicans prescinded from any substantial critique of the New Deal-inspired welfare system. Even at times where the opposition occupied positions of power, such as during Eisenhower's

presidency, no reforms were proposed that would significantly alter the role of the government in allocating public spending. Attempts from the GOP at countering the mainstream narrative, such as during the midterm elections of 1934, were met with diffused backlash. However, these voices were never truly silenced, and Barry Goldwater's successes at the state and, subsequently, GOP primary level suggests that there was indeed demand for an alternative vision.

Running on the claim that "no real choice existed" between Democrats and Republicans at the time, the Arizona Senator pioneered a populist interpretation of conservatism whose main targets were bulwarks of Democratic consensus, such as trade unions. In this regard, his attempts focused on breaking the relationship of trust between the working class and unions, and posing as the representative of the true interests of Americans, he built a diverse coalition which included businesses on the one hand, and portions of the blue collar electorate on the other. Such "winning electoral strategy", in the words of Elizabeth Shermer, allowed him to win two Senate races and become the Republican presidential nominee against Lindon Johnson, defeating his more moderate opponent Nelson Rockefeller. The radicalism of his rhetoric and policy proposals were still foreign for the American electorate of the mid-1960s, but his defeat should not overshadow the long-term impacts; in 1968 already, the Democratic Party suffered a massive crisis which ultimately favored the GOP in the presidential race, and nearly sixty years later the Republican mainstream and, arguably, the party system as a whole, have become accustomed to a more extremized politics.

2.5 The electoral campaign of 1968 and the end of the Democratic era

The political scenario began to change halfway through Lindon Johnson's presidency. The strength of the Democratic Party slowly decreased due to a variety of both long-term and short-term factors. The combination of unprecedented foreign and domestic policy issues contributed to the defeat of the Democratic candidate and Vice President Hubert Humphrey in the landslide victory of the Republican Richard Nixon in 1968.

In terms of domestic policy, the civil rights movement had been active at least since the beginning of the decade, and President Kennedy had already taken a step towards meeting its demands. In this regard, Johnson proceeded down the same path, and in 1964 his commitment to racial equality was symbolized by the signature of the Civil Rights Act. While the Democratic Party's support for this cause granted it loyalty on the part of new social groups, mostly Black people who had been historically aligned with the Republican Party since Abraham Lincoln, it also alienated others; the Solid South, a typically Democratic stronghold, and particularly its white urban and rural working class, had grown unhappy with the Party's progressivism. At the

local level, many Republicans had encountered the support of disgruntled Democrats (an example is the aforementioned Senate election in Arizona, won by Goldwater). In many ways, the civil rights movement served as a catalyst for a significant portion of those electors to definitely realign with the opposition.

The main foreign policy issue at the time was the Vietnam war. Nearing the 13 year anniversary since its beginning, the conflict was far from its resolution, and the public had grown increasingly frustrated. Protests had been breaking out in college campuses and on the streets for years ahead of 1968, and both Republicans and Democrats alike criticized the Johnson administration for its perceived incapability – or lack of interest – to work towards peace. The salience of the war was heightened by the media, which in unprecedented ways brought the conflict *inside of* American households. News and images of the so-called "prime time war" were broadcasted almost constantly, contributing to the public's perception of urgency in resolving the matter. Media also played an important part in campaign efforts, perfecting the strategy of advertisement and interviews that had been tested for the first time in 1960.

The Vietnam issue split the Democratic Party ahead of the primaries, with anti-war candidates such as Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy gaining electoral consensus while at the same time being marginalized within the party. The candidate that won the nomination, Johnson's VP Hubert Humphrey, was not popular within the Democratic base, something which might have played in Nixon's favor. Running with a campaign based on ending the war, and in opposition to an ill-liked candidate, the Republican Party thus won the election with an unprecedented landslide.

The Civil Rights movement and the loss of the Solid South

A few months prior to his assassination, President Kennedy had urged Congress to adopt measures to promote racial equality, particularly in terms of voting rights, school desegregation and the punishment of discrimination in federal offices and programs. A year later, on July 2nd 1964, President Lindon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which embodied the vision of his predecessor. Despite opposition both in the House of Representatives and the Senate, the bill was finally approved with an overwhelming majority of 73 to 27 (National Archives, 2022).

For decades, at least since the New Deal days, the Democratic Party had slowly but steadily embraced a new conception of liberalism, which was not only limited to the economy but encompassed democratic partisanship and civil rights as well (Schickler, 2016). Thanks to the efforts of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his successors, a new base gathered under the Democratic banner, and the same social groups (urban populations, union members, Jewish and African Americans) that stood for the New Deal also began to show

their support for a progressive civil rights policy. This "political lineup" (p.101) that Eric Schickler defines as the result of a "racial realignment" within the Democratic Party produced a convergence of economic and social progressivism that was unprecedented in American history; as the fight for racial equality continued, and liberals eventually took over the party machine, Republicans responded in their own way, provoking a system realignment.

At the national level, for most of postwar history, Democrats had avoided the topic of racial equality, since both the Presidency and Congress strongly depended on the support of the "Solid South" to win elections. According to Schickler, inaction was thus motivated by an attempt at keeping the party power intact. At the state level, specifically in the North, as the party was naturally more responsive to grassroots demands, the new liberals had started to make their way within the establishment already during the 1930s. As beneficiaries of New Deal welfare spending, Schickler highlights that around that time African Americans began realigning with the Democrats, solidifying the association between economically and socially liberal voter. This alliance between the Party and racial minorities provided the necessary consensus that put civil rights advocates in positions of power at the state level, and "rather than having to capture the National Democratic Party as a whole, pro-civil rights forces capitalized on the decentralized, fragmented party system in which state parties and candidates were able to adopt their own positions on issues" (p. 152).

At the national level, progress was happening more slowly. The first examples of civil rights measures were adopted in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the desegregation of the military by President Truman's executive order in 1948, the *Brown v. Board of Education* SCOTUS decision in 1954 which affected schools, and the first proposals to remove the poll tax – eventually achieved with the 24th amendment in 1964 (Schickler, 2016). The Party, however, was still dominated by more traditionally liberal leaders, who did not want to show overt support for racial equality at the risk of alienating southern whites. It was not until "the African American led civil rights movement mobilized sufficiently to force civil rights to the top of the agenda" that the national party was forced to adapt (p. 102).

After 1956, Schickler reports that in all general elections the Democratic platform included mentioning of racial justice, and grassroots mobilization in instances such as the Montgomery bus boycott – which initiated a Southern-wide campaign – brought civil rights at the forefront of domestic policy concerns for an unprecedented number of Americans. The Democratic Party had already been more receptive than the GOP towards such instances, "but it was the protest, litigation and legislative strategies adopted by movement activists that turned this baseline receptivity into a program that took center stage in political battles" (p.212). The author also writes that as the liberal and progressive House Democrats cooperating with civil rights organizations gained popularity within the party structure, "taking over" groups such as the Democratic Advisory Council, they also gained the political authority to push their agenda on presidential candidates.

Although presidents such as Kennedy and then Johnson were initially skeptical of a full schism with the Southern plank of the party, popular support for civil rights and the threat posed by the left wing (such as Robert Kennedy) ahead of the 1964 nomination motivated a shift towards progressivism, which according to Schickler eventually isolated the South and provided an ulterior motive for a realignment of the latter with the Republican Party. Following the interpretation of public policy as "the result of the rational calculation of political decision-makers" (p.2), Johnson and the Party's leadership understood the importance of the civil rights question for electoral outcomes in order to avoid instability (Stern, 1990). It was thus a political strategy which placed civil rights at the top of the Democratic Party – and administration's – agenda.

The Republican response to the Civil Rights movement

As African Americans were realigning with the Democratic Party in the post-New Deal era, a "conservative coalition" emerged; northern Republicans and southern Democrats agreed on opposition to the New Deal on the one hand, and racial equality on the other. According to Schickler, the fundamental difference between the Republican and Democratic Party's response to the civil rights issue is to be attributed to the respective voter coalitions; contrary to the increasingly diverse Democratic base, Republicans were not as concerned with the racial equality, thus GOP leaders did not have particular incentives in promoting civil rights legislation.

While the national Republican leadership was controlled by the more moderate wing of the Party – with personalities such as Nelson Rockefeller and Dwight Eisenhower, it was at the state level that the first signs of a potential voter realignment appeared; as mentioned above with regards to Goldwater's victory in Arizona, southern white Democrats had become disappointed with the party's takeover by the more progressive wing, and they found in Goldwater's republicanism the answer to their grievances. The push for reorganization did not however come until much later; according to Schickler in fact, similarly to the Democratic Party, the GOP – particularly at the national level – was reluctant to renounce part of its historic electorate, i.e. the African American community.

The strength and the increasing power of the civil rights movement, however, provoked an opposite but equally strong reaction on the part of southern whites, initiating a decades-long process of pushing the Republican Party to the right, mirroring the Democratic shift to the left.

Schickler argues that the realignment process was facilitated by President Eisenhower's efforts to strengthen party organizations in the South. Initially planned to appeal to the emerging middle class of the growing cities in the region, they were "taken over" by southern whites frustrated with the civil rights movement, offering

them the opportunity to climb the ladder of the party's structure. As within the Democratic ranks the more progressive candidates made their way through starting from the lower levels, the more conservative Republicans did the same within their own ranks, "tipping the balance in the national GOP away from the Northeast" (p. 239).

The new right-wing leaders also provided the necessary nexus between economic and social conservatism that united their support base. Stressing the importance of "states' rights", they criticized the New Deal administrative state and civil rights legislation alike for violating the freedom of the single states to organize how they best saw fit. Essentially, the big question which in a way both the new Democratic and Republican leaderships asked their electorate was: should the federal government "have the power to reorder economic and social relations against the will of the states?" (p.240). The answers both reached were opposites, and that is perhaps where the polarization of the new American party system emerged.

While such changes had been underway for decades before 1968, the divisive nature of the civil rights movement and the Civil Rights Act as its most emblematic culmination contribute to explaining how the GOP benefitted from the crisis of the Democratic Party and its base. The loss of the Solid South alone might have not been fatal to Humphrey that year, but the combination of such frustrations agitating under the surface with the more urgent matter of the Vietnam war might have favored Nixon by ample margins.

The Vietnam war, the Chicago convention and the Democratic split

On March 31st 1968, President Lindon Johnson delivered a now renowned speech, in which he made two groundbreaking announcements: the end of military escalation in Vietnam, with the intention of working towards a peace treaty, and his decision to not seek re-election the following November (Sieg, 1996). This event marked the beginning of a rather unique presidential campaign, in which foreign policy had a fundamental role, ultimately to the Democrats' disadvantage. In his analysis of the 1968 presidential race, Kent G. Sieg recognizes that, contrary to the praise that the Johnson administration had received on its domestic policy with the "Great Society" programs, dissatisfaction with its management of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war ultimately contributed to the success of the Republican Party.

After the defeat against John F. Kennedy in 1960, Richard Nixon came back to the forefront of American politics to run as the Republican candidate who promised that "a new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific" (Small, 2004, p. 523). The strength of the Republican Party that year came from the exploitation of growing anti-communist and anti-war sentiments, as well as the difficulties that the Democrats were facing in maintaining a middle ground and maximizing consensus; as Small recognizes, ahead

of the November election, the GOP campaign leveraged the failed attempts of the President at balancing progress in the negotiations with the North Vietnamese, with the need to appease both the conservative and liberal public opinion.

Johnson's decision to resolve the Vietnam question in the nearest future thus came at a time of heightened frustrations with a conflict that had, at that point, stretched through over 12 years and three different administrations. Melvin Small reports that by 1967, the sum of casualties and deaths had reached a total of 170,000, and as a result of the three-year long "Operation Rolling Thunder" launched in 1965, U.S. troop presence in Vietnam had reached 500,000 units (Nelson, 2018). In this regard, the draft became the most efficient tool for the administration to increase the number of soldiers in the army, transforming the U.S. involvement in South-East Asia from a purely foreign but to a domestic policy matter.

Small reports that in a poll conducted at the beginning of 1968, more than 40% of respondents declared that the Vietnam campaign was a mistake, and the approval ratings for the President stationed in the "low thirties", despite the landslide that had had him elected four years prior. The nature of the "prime time war", according to the author, implied that Americans would receive daily news updates directly from the battlefield, increasing awareness and the perception of urgency with regards to the conflict. Protests against the U.S. involvement had been breaking out across the country, and the increase of anti-war sentiments threatened the stability of the Democratic administration.

After Johnson's announcement on March 31st, a little over one month passed before peace talks began in Paris, between the US and the North Vietnamese. The United States posed three conditions to grant a halt of all military offenses, namely that the North Vietnamese army would stop all attacks on the South, which would be allowed to participate in the negotiation, and that they would respect the demilitarized zone (Small, 2004). Since North Vietnam wanted a full halt of U.S. bombings before making any concessions, talks stalled for a significant amount of time. This stalemate, combined with the administration's hard stance in Paris, hurt the Democrats. Missed opportunities for compromise increased the perception of inactivity, and decreased consensus for the President while at the same time galvanizing the opposition.

By early 1968, Small argues that the Democratic Party had essentially split in half. On the one hand, the establishment rallied around the President and his intransigent approach to the negotiation; on the other, an increasingly frustrated base moved to the left, calling for the end of the war and growing frustrated with representatives who did not appear to be listening to their grievances. The popularity of such anti-war sentiments seemingly motivated likeminded members of the party to join the presidential race; Eugene McCarthy had done so in February, despite his "relative obscurity and less than energetic campaign style", as well as the fact that "there were not enough binding primary elections to gather enough delegates to cobble together a majority at the convention" (p. 517).

In terms of support within the establishment, Robert Kennedy faced a similar problem when he decided to run as well in March. After months of uncertainty, he sought the nomination when President Johnson refused his proposal to institute an independent commission to support the administration in drafting a new policy for Vietnam (Small, 2004). Soon, JFK's brother became a favorite among voters, and in June he secured the primary in California. His assassination only two days after his victory, however, abruptly ended his campaign.

Considering the popularity of anti-war candidates within the party base, the outcome of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago proved to be a failing strategy. Due to the support he enjoyed from the party's "southern, labor and organizational wings, which dominated delegate selection and, ultimately, controlled the nomination" (Nelson, 2018), despite the overwhelming support for both Kennedy and McCarthy, Vice President Hubert Humphrey was chosen as the presidential candidate. "The Chicago convention disillusioned most Democrats because states with presidential primaries (as opposed to caucuses) cast 63 percent of their delegate votes for the minority plank" (Sieg, 1996, p.1065), represented by the President's entourage. In response to Humphrey's nomination, protesters gathered in front of the Hilton Hotel on August 28th, the night when he accepted the candidacy; the subsequent violent clash with the police was filmed by TV reporters and aired – signaling the beginning of a political era in which television would be increasingly employed "as a visual medium to persuade through violent imagery" (Culbert, 1998).

Once nominated, Hubert Humphrey found himself in a rather difficult position. While backed by most of the party's elite, he did not possess the requirements to win the support of the electoral base and, arguably, the popular vote. According to Sieg, his closeness with Johnson and his support throughout the entirety of the latter's term for his Vietnam policy had turned him into an extremely unpopular candidate. Therefore, he understood that the only possibility to increase his appeal as a nominee would be to distance himself from the President and express a more conciliatory position. However, as Vice President, he could not fully reject the administration's strategy; finding a balance between the two alternatives proved to be rather difficult, especially as Johnson would consistently oppose his requests of moving towards a more "open" approach (Sieg, 1996). Even when the North Vietnamese had slowed down their attacks on South Vietnam throughout the summer of 1968, the President refused to make any concessions.

Throughout the campaign, the Democrats suffered from Johnson's hard stance, which negatively contributed to an already high degree of intra-party polarization, and which alienated the establishment from the demands of its base. On the other hand, Richard Nixon benefitted from such crisis of consensus, and a third party candidate emerged as well. George Wallace decided to run with the Independent party and, at the height of his campaign, attracted nearly 20% of the electorate; like Nixon, he "capitalized on Americans' growing distaste for unruly mass demonstrations" (Small, 2004, p.524), and ultimately won 46 electoral votes as well as nearly 10 million of the ballots cast (270toWin.com, 2024).

In late October, however, progress in the negotiations seemed to favor Humphrey's campaign. Thanks to cooperation on the part of the Soviet Union, North Vietnam agreed that the South would join the peace talks in exchange for a bombing halt on the part of the United States; contemporarily, as Sieg reports, the South Vietnamese President agreed to possibly participating in the Paris negotiations. This unexpected development was renamed the "October surprise", an expression "which has come to mean any late-breaking event with the potential to change the course of the race" (Greenfield, 2024). As a result of the apparent end of the negotiating stalemate, in fact, the Johnson administration might have been able to reach an agreement to end the war, or to the very least take a substantial step towards that goal and, according to Sieg, ultimately win the election. Nixon's entourage was aware of the fact that the Republican's victory would be jeopardized by a negotiating success achieved by the Democrats, and began pressuring the South Vietnamese to withhold their participation – promising a better deal if Nixon were elected in November (Sieg, 1996).

The government was aware of the plan, as the FBI had wired the phones of Nixon's aides, but Johnson opted for not revealing it to the general public, in fear of a potential increase in tensions and repercussions against the administration; instead, he "tried to work around [the scheme] by re-including the South Vietnamese in the peace process" (p.1071) but was unsuccessful. On November 5th, Richard Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey with 31.7 million votes over the opponent's 30.9 million (270toWin.com, 2024).

The role of television in influencing public opinion

In his 1998 publication titled *Television's Visual Impact on Decision-making in the USA, 1968: The Tet Offensive and Chicago's Democratic National Convention*, David Culbert reflects on how the news coverage of the Tet Offensive in February, and of the police using violence against protestors during the DNC in Chicago in August, represent the first prominent examples of television being used as a tool to potentially influence public opinion.

With the popularization of color TV towards the end of the 1960s, visual imagery had substituted newspapers and radio as the main source of information for the vast majority of Americans. Several news programs on networks such as NBS, ABC and CBS were created, which contrary to the printed press had the unusual power of reaching a much larger audience in real time. In this regard, according to Culbert, the Tet Offensive of January 31st 1968 represents a perfect example of what the future of TV news would look like. That day, the North Vietnamese army attacked Southern Vietnam cities for the first time since the start of the conflict, during the celebrations for the Tet lunar holiday; members of the U.S. army stationed in the demilitarized zone were surrounded by Vietcong soldiers, and the United States Embassy in Saigon was attacked. For what could be the first time in history, the events were filmed and brought directly inside

American households; “violent fighting captured by all three American television networks constituted the most dramatic television coverage of the war” (p. 421).

Until then, the “living-room war” had been retold to Americans mostly by non-violent imagery and narrated voiceovers of more or less groundbreaking developments. Despite the fact that it is still an unprecedented strategy in the history of U.S. conflicts, the most symbolic instance is the picture taken by Eddie Adams of the execution of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan in the streets of Saigon. The image was shown on all major TV networks and newspapers, producing such a significant impact that according to Alan Brinkley “no single event did more to undermine support in the United States for the war” (p. 422).

Despite the fact that neither Nixon’s victory, nor the plummeting approval rates for the Vietnam policy of Johnson’s administration are to be attributed entirely to news coverage, according to Culbert it is undeniable that in a time of public opinion crisis, violent imagery of the losses and defeats suffered by Americans overseas played its part in solidifying and legitimizing preexisting anti-war sentiments. The Loan execution, for example, had an impact that “is related to a changing climate of opinion which found policy-makers as well as average citizens worried as to whether the USA’s Vietnam policy merited continued support” (p. 437).

The Chicago riots on August 28th were also captured by television cameras, but they have allegedly not moved people as much, at least not towards protesters. Despite the fact that images of that day were “amongst the most violent ever recorded” (p. 438), and that highlights were reproposed in the following days and weeks, according to David Culbert “television coverage of violence in Chicago […] played a lesser role than it did in making possible the Voting Rights Act of 1965”, where a correlation exists between images of police violence and an increased demand for reform (p. 438). Nevertheless, the 90 million Americans who were watching at home – about half of the population – alongside delegates within the Convention, felt the effects of the broadcast; footage of the police hitting and arresting people protesting then nomination of a candidate they felt did not represent them, visually demonstrated the definitive fragmentation of the party that had remained in power, with little to no opposition, since the days of FDR. It was “a defining moment for the power of television images in American politics” (p. 441).

Ultimately, although news coverage did not pertain to Richard Nixon’s electoral strategy, it undoubtedly worked in his favor. By highlighting the war and domestic instances of social unrest in response, the media contributed to a tense climate which damaged the credibility of the Johson administration and favored the opposition. The social and political context in the late 1960s was already quite unstable, with a governing party suffering a crisis of unity, particularly in the wake of Humphrey’s nomination, and a Republican coalition which was growing stronger as more southern whites and sections of the electorate unhappy with Johnson’s Vietnam policy were aligning with it. Arguably, foreign policy issues only exacerbated existing divisions, deriving from an ongoing process of realignment of racial minorities with the “party of civil

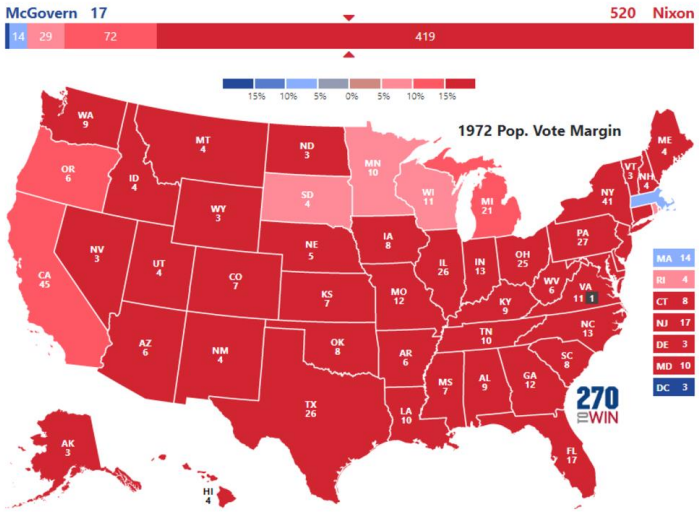
rights" and an equal but opposite realignment of significant portions of the white population with the GOP. While the social and political significance of this process will become clear years later, in hindsight it is undeniable that the peculiar context in which the 1968 election took place favored a crisis of the American party system.

2.6 The political significance of the 1972 election

In 1972, President Richard Nixon was re-elected with nearly 47 million popular votes, securing all states besides Washington DC, Massachusetts, and one elector from Virginia (the only Independent Electoral College victory). Considering the results map on accounts of the margins of victory (figure 11), in the majority of states which gave their electoral votes to the incumbent, the latter enjoyed an advantage of over 15 percentage points against his opponent (*270 to Win*, 2016).

Figure 11: Nixon-McGovern margins of victory per state

Source: 270toWin.com



This landslide was particularly significant with respect to previous elections for a variety of reasons. First of all, it was the first race since 1948 in which voter turnout, measured according to the Voting Age Population, fell below 60% - more precisely at 57% - a trend that would persist until 2020 (The American Presidency Project, 2021). These percentages appear rather counterintuitive, considering that a year prior, following the new Voting Rights Act of 1970, Congress had passed the 26th Amendment which guaranteed the right to vote to all citizens of at least 18 years of age. This reform recognized at the federal level a right which, until then, had been granted by only a few states to citizens below the age of 21: Hawai'i, Alaska, Georgia and Kentucky (Nicholas, 1973).

Despite the enlargement of the voting population, however, turnout remained low. In his analysis of the 1972 race, Herbert G. Nicholas argues that the youth, which had been extremely active four years prior when campaigning for McCarthy, and for McGovern in the primaries in early 1972, did not maintain the

momentum. Of the newly enfranchised citizens between 18 and 24 years of age, only 47% went to the polls, registering a record low among first-time voters.

This lack of turnout for young citizens took many pollsters by surprise, in the days after November 7th; according to Nicholas, however, this is due to the "confusion of the activism of the collegiate few with the indifference of the non-collegiate majority" (p.2). The record low turnout and low levels of political participation registered in 1972 are particularly significant, as they reflect new, emerging dynamics within the U.S. political system.

Essentially, such scarce voter turnout was the almost natural consequence of already record-low levels of popular engagement registered during the electoral campaign. As Nicholas argues, polling conducted in October 1972 revealed that the percentage of Americans interested in the outcome of the race had fallen from 48%, at the start of the year, to 39%, and among those who declared their intention to vote, the majority expressed their preference for the Republican incumbent. Aware of the benefits of a "discreet" electoral campaign, Richard Nixon had adopted a peculiar strategy, which involved the lowest possible number of public appearances. Not only refraining from participating to a significant amount of events, he also intervened only once on television, and a few times on the radio for nationwide addresses. As Nicholas notes, he refused to debate McGovern, who on the other hand did not benefit from the attention he was receiving. This approach definitely favored the President, who maintained the image of a poised statesman, as opposed to McGovern's perceived lack of charisma, which emerged the more the media would focus on his campaign performance.

Nixon successfully insisted on his achievements, including the establishment of positive relations with both China and the USSR, the impact of his economic policies on unemployment and inflation, and his widely appreciated "law and order" approach to social unrest (Nicholas, 1973). His campaign focused also on discrediting the opponent; on the one hand, he exploited the skepticism of the general American public towards McGovern's abilities in domestic and foreign policy, and on the other he capitalized on the Democratic Party's failures of the most recent past.

The Democrats still retained major support, particularly in the North and in local and state elections. With the midterms of 1970, the party's presence in Congress had increased by 12 seats at the expense of the GOP, regaining the control of the Houses lost two years prior (Olson and Wax, 2024). In 1972, the "Solid South" still rallied behind the democratic candidates for Congress and Governor, with the exception of Mississippi and Louisiana which elected, respectively, two Republican congressmen and the first GOP representative since the Reconstruction era (Nicholas, 1973).

At the presidential election level, however, the Democratic Party was showing signs of struggle. On the one hand, McGovern proved unable to present a convincing image of leadership which could challenge

the GOP and the incumbent on their shortcomings. One interesting example is the Vietnam issue. In 1968, Richard Nixon had won the race mostly exploiting the Democrats' failure to reach a peace settlement, promising that he would pull the U.S. out of Vietnam if elected President. Four years later, the war was far from over; Nixon's strategy had enlarged the conflict to Vietnam's neutral neighbors – Cambodia and Laos – and American casualties in combat had increased, according to Nicholas, by 20.000. McGovern ran in the primaries as the progressive candidate that would finally bring peace in Vietnam, and this strategy carried him all the way to the nomination. However, his inability to focus on Nixon's failures, and to enlarge his supporting base in the final stretch of the campaign, posed significant obstacles to his presidential victory.

Beyond McGovern's arguably uncharismatic persona, however, the struggle of the Democratic Party ran much deeper. After Humphrey's defeat, the Democratic National Convention (DNC) had attempted a series of reforms of the delegate selection process, in order to prevent a new unpopular nomination. These interventions yielded the expected results, and the composition of the 1972 delegations was much more representative of the wider electorate. Women, young voters and racial minorities were present in much larger numbers than before; moreover, as these categories were generally more likely to lean liberal, the party overall shifted to the left, explaining the initial success of McGovern as a progressive leader.

The increased presence of minorities in the delegate ranks might relate to another factor, i.e. the increase in amateur participation. Contrary to professionals, whose careers are directly tied to the party's electoral success, so-called "amateurs" partake in political activity following their personal interests. Women and the youth usually fall within this category, therefore their larger presence among delegates might explain the increase in amateurism. Typically more tied to their ideals and "intense commitment to policies and programs" (Soule and McGrath, 1975, p. 509), amateurs are less likely to accept compromise on their positions. In this tense climate, moderate Democratic leaders in 1972 struggled to hold the party together and factions formed around more or less liberal candidates.

Thus, amateurism can damage unity, as "increasingly programmatic" inter and intra-party coalitions engage with highly controversial positions on issues and policies that can rarely be reconciled. This interpretation could also relate to the argument, made in the following chapters, that one of the explanatory factors for the "conservative revolution" of the Republican Party in the post-Obama era comes from right-wing grassroots activism.

The sectionalization of the electorate along ideological lines is one of the most distinctive factors of the campaign. An analysis conducted on policy polarization in the 1972 election reveals that as party loyalties weakened, people began choosing their candidate according to concerns with specific issues, changing the quality of the electoral response and the way in which campaigns would be conducted from then on (Miller et al., 1976). Preference for certain policy programs over others also led many Americans in 1972 to "defect"

their preferred party in favor of the opponent. The decline in party loyalty produced a weakening of traditional affiliations; the aforementioned study suggests that in 1972, most voted for the candidate that they perceived more capable of dealing with the issues they considered of primary importance. Concerning the Democratic Party, for example, data reported by Miller and his collaborators shows that only 58% of registered electors voted for McGovern. Part of the remaining 42%, arguably the more conservative plank, opted for Nixon's "hard line" in areas such as Vietnam and security, which converged more with the Republican than with the Democratic Party. The shift was essentially from long-term party identification, often built over years and generations, to the consideration of more short-term factors that had gained relevance throughout the campaign (Miller et al., 1976).

The looming crisis of the fifth party system

The peculiar re-election landslide achieved by the GOP raises the question of whether 1972 can be considered a realigning election or not. Referring once again to Paul Kleppner's features, this section is dedicated to establishing the significance of 1972 in these terms. As mentioned above in relation to the 1964 race, Kleppner identifies critical electoral periods with major shifts in preferences within relevant sections of the electorate, which produce significant changes to party bases, higher-than-normal degrees of voter turnout, increased inter-party polarization and changing degrees of party loyalty.

Firstly, as highlighted in the previous section, 1972 was characterized by lower turnout rates than the previous years. Only 57% of the Voting Age Population went to the polls, as opposed to the percentages well above 60% registered in the previous 20 years, according to the American Presidency Project's 2021 report. Therefore, it might appear as if the Nixon-McGovern contest fails to meet at least one of Kleppner's criteria, that of mobilizing a higher-than-normal portion of the electorate. However, looking at data on the *next* few elections, it is possible to observe how a higher number of Americans cast their vote in 1972 than in the subsequent years.

According to the VAP measurement of the turnout ratio, the first election cycle where more than 57% of Americans went to the polls would be in 2008, where the ratio amounted to 58%, as reported by the American Presidency Project. Data similar to pre-Nixon rates, above 60%, was observed again in 2020 (62.8%). Undoubtedly, 1972 was characterized by lower-than-usual voter turnout, if compared with previous contests where levels of electoral engagement were high. However, the aforementioned data is significant as it marks the beginning of a long series of election years with lower turnout than the rates registered in the early

phases of the fifth party system. Notably, looking at the Voting Age Population as a constant criteria for measurement throughout the second half of the 20th century, the size of the potential electorate increased each year. Therefore, the constant trend in terms of voter turnout reflects a significant lack of engagement: despite the fact that more Americans each year acquired the right to vote, the pool of potential electors did not turn into more citizens effectively casting their ballot. Essentially, although 1972 turnout rates are lower than the past, they are also higher than in future elections.

Another feature of Kleppner's classification is the observable shift of significant sections of the electorate from one party to another, which results in major changes to party bases and the system as a whole. As mentioned above, 1972 registered a record-low in terms of party loyalty, with an unusually high number of Americans voting against their typical affiliations. Because this "shift" did not happen at the same rates for the presidential and the state-level races, Nicholas reports that 1972 has also registered a record-high for ticket-splitting, with 55% of US electors choosing different parties' candidates for each contest.

Among those who decided to "defect" the Democratic coalition, the conservatives in the South are particularly worth mentioning. The first examples in this sense date back to Goldwater's candidacy in 1964, as the early sign of growing dissatisfaction with the perceived "takeover" of the Democrats by the more progressive coalition. Eight years later, Nicholas notes that southern Democrats who believed McGovern to be too "radical" once again opted for the Republican candidate – at least in the presidential election. In this regard, however, authors Troy M. Olson and Gavin M. Wax define what occurred in 1972 with the southern vote as only a "partial realignment", "where split-ticket voting was common (as it was throughout the country), and party registration advantages did not change much" (p. 58). They argue that a permanent realignment with the Republican Party, which includes party loyalty up to voter registration, will not occur in the South until the 1990s (Olson and Wax, 2024).

Moreover, McGovern fared worse than Humphrey among the working class (only 41% voted for him), the Catholics and the college educated (40%) and unions (43%) (Miller et al., 1976). Nixon, on the other hand, obtained important support from these historical components of the New Deal coalition – with respect to 1968, only 60% of voters in these categories supported the Democratic candidate. With regards to the "non-white" vote, Democrats retained comfortable majorities, registering however interesting declines.

For example, McGovern's support within the African American electorate varied according to social status; while black voters in disadvantaged neighborhoods predominantly supported the party with a 93% of consensus, the percentages decreased in more "mixed" (86%) and suburban areas (66%). The Republican campaign for ethic voters proved to be rather successful in gathering consensus also among Jewish-Americans, where the percentage of votes for Richard Nixon jumped from 16% in 1968 to around 33% in 1972 (Nicholas,

1973). Some scholars thought that, save a second major economic crisis, the realignment of the "integrated ethnic voter" with the Republican Party would continue – and considering the most recent election result they might not have been entirely wrong.

Although the rise of GOP consensus within these categories is not as significant as to establish a new Republican majority at the expense of the Democrats – which succeeded in local and state contests – this dynamic is nevertheless particularly significant. At the height of the Democrats' dominance of American politics, particularly during the New Deal era, support for the party among racial or ethnic minorities and workers was unquestioned. The coalition which elected Roosevelt four times depended heavily on unions, blue-collar labor and religious minorities, as well as immigrants. 1972 marked the beginning of the consolidating decline in consensus within these groups, and in particular the shift of the Southern working class towards the GOP – which had begun during the Civil Rights movement. The crisis of the Democratic Party among its once historical voting blocs would only be partially outweighed by the liberal shift of other parts of the American electorate, such as the college educated and the urban middle-class; the Republican coalition has won a greater number of contests since the 1970s, slowly eroding the Democratic coalition also at the local and state levels.

Finally, Kleppner stresses the importance of party polarization in phases of heightened political conflict. As mentioned by Miller with respect to McGovern's scarce support among the more moderate plank of the Democratic coalition, the election of 1972 was characterized by an unusually heightened importance of ideology over party loyalty in terms of decisive policy issues. In this tense climate, the two candidates became representative of the two ends of the ideological "liberal-conservative" spectrum, as the intensity of such dichotomy had grown since the last election. Thus, the alignment of the liberals with the Democratic Party and the conservatives with the GOP began; "those who preferred liberal policy alternatives were typically self-identified Democrats, but they actually voted more heavily for McGovern than expected", while those more favorable to conservative approaches voted more heavily for Richard Nixon (p. 763).

The division along strict ideological lines may have become evident for the first time in 1972, but it slowly progressed over time, signaling the importance of this contest in setting an electoral precedent. 41% of GOPs at the time self-identified as conservative, as opposed to a 28% who considered themselves more liberal. According to a Gallup poll, the percentage of right-wing Republicans increased to 58% in 1994 and 74% in 2021; on the other hand, liberals within the party's electorate have decreased, reaching a record low of 4% in 2021 (Saad, 2023). Similarly, the number of conservative and moderate democrats has been rapidly decreasing, from 25% and 48% respectively in 1994, to 12% and 37% in 2021. Comparatively to the GOP's

compact conservative coalition, the number of Democrats identifying as liberal is however lower (50%), indicating a higher degree of fragmentation (Saad, 2023).

This polarization, attributable to an increasingly primary role of ideology and issues over party affiliation and policymaking, has slowly alienated a significant part of the electorate which does not identify with either of the two "sides". The number of voters self-identifying as "independent" increased from around 6 million in the late 1950s to 25 million by 1973 (Nicholas, 1973); immediately following Reagan's two terms, in 1988, the percentage had reached 33% and by 2023 the data now indicates that 43% of Americans are not directly affiliated with either of the two major alternatives (Jones, 2024).

In conclusion, the 1972 election clearly meets three out of four of Kleppner's criteria; concerning the voter turnout question, although the data reported by the American Presidency Project on the 1972 contest reveals a record low number of Americans casting their ballot than in the past, the downward trend in VAP-based turnout rates for the subsequent decades suggests that 1972 might have had a bigger impact on U.S. politics than many might have thought at the time.

The realignment represented by Nixon's landslide shortly preceded an apparent crisis of the newfound Republican success, which occurred with the Watergate scandal, an economic recession and the rise of inflation rates (the so-called *stagflation* of the late 1970s) that a frustrated American electorate blamed on the incumbent administration (LeMay, 2017). These grievances, however, did not impact the party for longer than the duration of Carter's one and only term. Post 1980, Democratic leaders only briefly managed to "reconstruct" an electoral coalition, largely due to their personalities rather than a persuasive agenda. Aldrich and Niemi agree in identifying 1972 as the beginning of a new equilibrium, where politics fundamentally changed and the two major parties further solidified their respective progressive and conservative positions, growing more and more distant.

The alienation of significant portions of the Democratic base favored the Republicans, at least at the Presidential level, amid growing dissatisfaction with the system as a whole, which drove many Americans away from the polls altogether. The election of Ronald Reagan eight years later was motivated by the same dynamics, as the changes that have been described solidified; decreased party loyalty, the GOP's electoral success among sections of the once-compact New Deal coalition, increasing popularity of conservative talking points at the expense of progressivism, all determined the beginning of a new era of American politics where the Republican Party has the upper hand.

2.7 Ronald Reagan's presidency and the success of the "new conservative coalition"

In 1980, the incumbent Jimmy Carter dramatically lost against Ronald Reagan, former Governor of the state of California, who obtained a groundbreaking number of popular votes – nearly 44 million – and 489 electoral votes, corresponding to 90% of the total (Howison, 2014). With respect to 1976, the Democratic incumbent lost nearly 5 million preferences. In the context of the Congressional race, the Republican Party gained control of the Senate for the first time in 28 years (270towin.com, 2016). In the House of Representatives, the number of Republican seats increased by 34, "narrowing the gap between the parties to 243 – 192" (Rossinow, 2015, p. 29); the Democratic Party lost one seat and many of its representatives succumbed to Republican challengers. As Democratic leaders – including former presidential candidate George McGovern – lost their seats in Congress, the party's majority was reduced "to its lowest margin in the twentieth century" (Howison, 2014, p. 111), at least at the time.

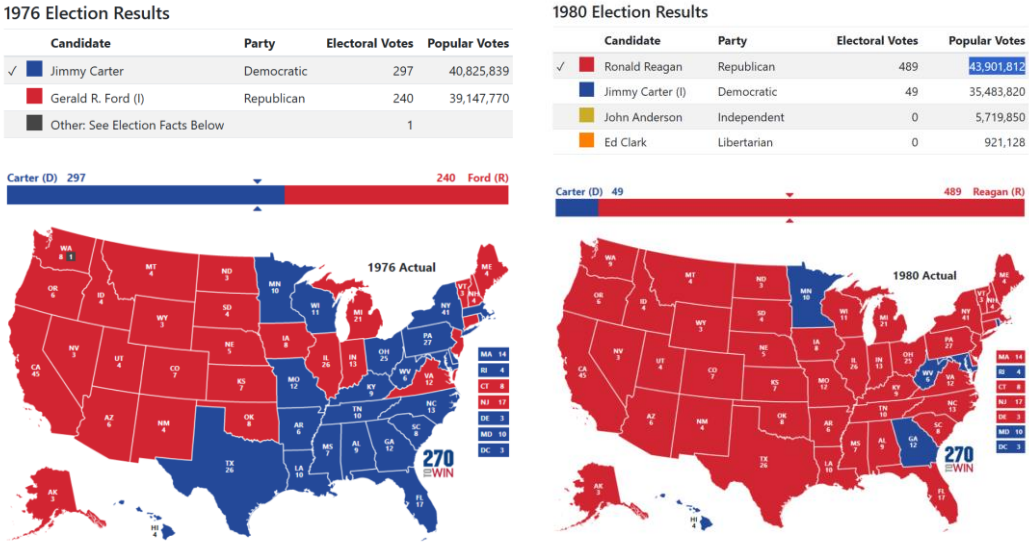


Figure 12: presidential election results in 1976 and 1980

Source: 270toWin.com

Despite a whole decade of presidential successes, throughout the two Reagan terms, and the subsequent Bush Sr. Presidency, the Republican Party never gained the majority in the House of Representatives. In the midterm election of 1982, for example, Democrats increased their number of seats by 26, bringing their advantage over the GOP to 269 over 165. 1984 was a toss-up, but in the 1986, 1988 and 1990 races the Democratic Party retained comfortable majorities in the House (Olson and Wax, 2024).

While the focus of this analysis is on the presidential elections as indicators of success for the parties, data on Congressional contests helps in painting a more accurate picture of partisanship in the United States.

The near-constant Democratic majorities in both Houses, for example, suggest that the party had not lost *all* of its base, despite the increase in GOP votes at the presidential level. At the same time, the aforementioned data begs the question of whether Democratic votes for Congress reflect genuine popular support of the party's candidates, or if such evident split-ticketing is more a symptom of the crisis of the postwar party system.

As Ladd reports, Lipset attributes the Democrats' success in congressional elections to the party's links with "mass groups popularly-based interest organizations" (p. 5); on the other hand, the GOP triumphs more often in Presidential elections as the executive is a role with a more nationalist perspective, which the Democrats lack. Such "cohabitation" has become increasingly normalized, and some Americans might even perceive it positively; in his 1973 publication on the 1972 general elections, Nicholas cited a Washington Post poll administered ahead of the vote, in which a majority of respondents argued in favor of the legislative and executive branches being controlled by two different parties. These responses reflect what Ladd refers to as "cognitive Madisonianism", a term which describes an increasingly positive attitude of the American electorate towards a sustained divided party control of Congress and the Presidency, under the perception that it assures a greater balance of powers.

The new conservatives

Goldwater's success in the 1964 electoral campaign suggest that the preconditions for the realignment which occurred in 1980 already existed. Reagan himself had first appeared as a promising Republican spokesman when he campaigned for the GOP ahead of that year's vote, despite the fact that for most of his early adult life he had been "a liberal and a partisan Democrat", according to Doug Rossinow (p.11). In the beginning of his 2015 book titled *The Reagan Era: a History of the 1980s,* Rossinow includes mentions of the future President's early political career. After his governorship, Reagan ran for the Republican primaries for the first time in 1976, but lost against President Gerald Ford, whose moderatism, reputation and targeted attacks on Reagan's extremist rhetoric proved to be successful. Nevertheless, Rossinow argues that, in those primaries, Ronald Reagan registered interesting victories already, particularly among working-class voters and portions of the non-white electorate.

The success of 1980 arguably derived from Reagan's ability to exploit underlying changes in American politics and society, thus crafting a campaign that could appeal to a wide range of voters and grievances. Firstly, as it had been the case for Goldwater – and Nixon, to an extent – the ranks of the "new conservative coalition" included a significant number of former Democrats, who had been driven away from their party as the latter had aligned more clearly with liberal and progressive positions. In this regard, 1980 represents the

culmination of a decade-long process of disengagement, which brought the so-called "Reagan Democrats" to vote *en masse* for the GOP and its clearly conservative platform on key issues such as abortion and anti-communism (LeMay, 2017).

A relevant role in this ascending coalition was played more generally by the white population of the South, whose alignment with the Republican Party had begun decades earlier; in this regard, Howison writes that "the efforts of these white southerners would be a key development for the political organization of the conservative movement, as they broke ranks with the Democrats and realigned with the new conservative faction within the Republican Party" (p.17). According to Howison, the election of 1980 was the first, but not the last, in modern American history where the Republican Party carried the entire South – with the exception of Georgia, Jimmy Carter's home state. Reagan won 51% of the regional vote, with percentages reportedly increasing to 60% considering only the white population, as the local African American community overwhelmingly voted for the Democratic Party.

In addition, the transformation from an industrial to a service and financial economy had plunged entire regions into despair. Manufacturing communities in areas such as the Rust Belt suffered the consequences of massive deindustrialization and unemployment (in 1982, national unemployment rates skyrocketed to 10% for the first time since the Great Depression) – difficulties that only exacerbated the distrust toward the Democrats, in particular, and the federal government, more generally (Rossinow, 2015). The growing support for the Republican Party among working class men also impacted unions, that were experiencing a massive decline in membership; Howison writes that, while in 1976 about 60% of labor unionists had voted for Carter, four years later the percentages had fallen to 47%, while 44% of union households cast their votes for Reagan.

At the same time, the Republican Party capitalized on the eroding support of ethnic voters for the Democrats, a realignment to which Howison argues Richard Nixon owed part of his success; greater percentages of Hispanics were expressing increased interest towards the GOP than in the past. Another shift happened in the notoriously liberal younger cohorts; as opposed to the trends registered in the 1950s and 1960s, by 1985 the impact of Carter and Reagan's presidencies had arguably produced a realignment. While the Democratic Party could still count on the support of the ageing New Deal generation, the GOP amassed 44% of consensus among prospective voters who declared that, upon turning 18, they would be more likely to vote Republican (Ladd, 1989).

The apparent threat posed to American values by the progressive movement worried another group which proved to be quintessential to Reagan's victory: the evangelical right. While workers, the white Southern population and unions had already shown increasing support for the Republican Party, the religious component of the conservative coalition is a new and defining element for all elections from 1980 onwards. The

evangelical right emerged in the public eye during the 1970s and quickly organized politically. Howison writes that in 1976, a large number had supported Carter – who had made his renewed Christian faith a central point of his persona – but his supposed "betrayal" in failing to cater to their grievances drove the evangelicals *en masse* to the Republican Party, and Reagan more specifically, four years later.

In his personal life and during his days as California governor, Ronald Reagan had never taken clear stances in favor of religious ideals and proposals – conducting a rather moderate policy program. However, Howison argues that by the end of the 1970s he had understood the role that evangelical conservatives could play in the new Republican coalition, and he began to include their concerns within his addresses, calling for less government interference with religious matters. His first presidential campaign's platform included issues such as tax exemption for southern religious schools, which also related to tax cuts, another one of his main concerns. His ability to cater to the religious right won him the support of this category, something which, according to Howison, *de facto* signaled its alignment with the Republican Party, even though the President's support for their agenda remained for the most part symbolic. From 1980 onwards, Evangelicals thus became what Paul Frymer refers to as a "captured group" of the Republican Party, meaning "any politically relevant group that votes overwhelmingly for one of the major political parties and subsequently finds the primary opposition party making little or no effort to appeal to its interests or attract its votes" (p.131).

According to Ladd, these changes unequivocally describe a realignment, where "a transformed parties and election system is firmly in place in the United States" (p.18). In many ways Reagan's coalition included groups that had already shown their support for the Republican Party, albeit perhaps not to the same proportions. Although party leaders before him had capitalized on this realignment, Reagan's unprecedented success is due to one factor in particular: the consolidation of the association between conservatism and Republicanism. The interchangeable use of these two terms is thus part of a fairly recent development of the American party system, which stabilized during the 1980s; "in the past, both the Democratic and Republican parties contained a stunning array of ideological variety among their respective politicians and the constituencies that supported them […] historically, conservative Republicans were but one faction within the party; they were hardly the driving force they would become in later decades" (Howison, 2013, p.19).

2.8 The consolidation of the conservative realignment

The impact of the election of 1980 should thus be contextualized within the rising popularity of neoconservatism in the American political climate.

Although Reagan was the first Republican president to be directly associated with the movement, American conservatism was not a recent phenomenon. In his study of Reagan's ascendance, Doug Howison mentions

that the history of the movement in the United States was quite rich; he argues that there were at least three "currents" of conservatism, namely libertarianism, typically applied to the economy, anticommunism and traditionalism. Because of the tension between these streams, which never truly eased even in times of apparent cohesion, Howison argues it might be more accurate to speak of american *conservatisms.*

Their fusion in one single movement occurred in the second post-war era, and significantly strengthened the coalition, giving it the power to become a more prominent voice within the Republican Party. Conservatives seized the opportunity given by the ideological vacuum in the wake of Eisenhower's presidency, the same lamented by Barry Goldwater when he denounced the absence of a popular counter-vision to New Deal Democratism. Exploiting the popularity of anti-communist sentiments, as Howison argues, Republican conservatives built their following on the then-widespread fear of Communism, once limited to foreign policy, then "expanded" to a critique of all those domestic issues perceived by certain sectors of the population as un-American and potentially subversive, such as welfare, civil rights, or the anti-war and feminist movements.

Additionally, the rise of neoconservatism also depended on the intellectual support of a coalition of political and social scientists as well as public officials, which had by the 1970s "developed an ideological position whose hallmark was a strongly negative assessment of social, cultural and political developments in America during the previous decade" (Joseph, 1982, pp. 956-957). Skeptics of participatory democracy, egalitarianism and the welfare state set themselves apart from a supposedly leftist "class of intellectuals" (p. 957) that had promoted the reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, threatening the stability of U.S. politics, society and history.

Essentially, the success of the conservative revolution within the Republican Party throughout the 1980s depended on the rise of cultural justifications against societal developments. Opposing welfare or the fight for equality was no longer a matter of practicality or budget balance, but more so a rejection of grievances that threatened the very core of American identity. Progressives did not seek a different society, but more so represented a danger for national culture and history. As further analyses will prove, the normalization of similar talking points both from the right and left wing perspectives would only increase the degree of political polarization in the U.S. party system of the late 20th and early 21st century.

Stressing the importance of *culture* subverted the traditional political order, by which American political parties had developed non-ideological, moderate platforms, that could easily appeal to the "middle-of-the-road vote", "aggregating diverse interests rather than articulating abstract principles" (Joseph, 1982, p. 959). The clear dominance of moderate positions in the electoral bases and leadership of both parties throughout the New Deal realignment does not, however, imply the absence of more right of left wing leaning currents. Relegated to minority status since the 1930s, in the mid to late 1960s conservatives rose to the forefront of Republicanism by successfully exploiting the crisis of the *fifth* party system, "evidenced by the

erosion of party loyalty in the electorate, the diminished role of party organization in political campaigns, and the weakening of party cohesion in government" (p. 960).

Additionally, the domestic and international developments of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to a loss of trust in the system on the part of the American electorate. In 1973, the decision of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to cut its supply of oil to the U.S. produced shortages and, in turn, a massive increase in prices (Rossinow, 2015) – the so-called "Oil Shock". The economic and unemployment crisis, also known as "stagflation", which ensued in the subsequent months severely impacted America's productivity. President Ford's management of inflation did not yield the expected results; as Rossinow argues, his successor, Jimmy Carter, unsuccessfully attempted his own anti-inflationary reforms, while worrying about unemployment to appease his Democratic base. Similarly, Howison recalls how between 1976 and 1980, other shocks severely impacted the popularity of the President; while the economic crisis worsened, revolts were happening in Central America, the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis challenged the Democratic administration's foreign policy, and in 1979 the USSR invaded Afghanistan.

Therefore, Howison argues that such domestic and foreign developments contributed to a climate that was more receptive to a new kind of conservatism, which campaigned for tax cuts and the restoration of lost American *grandeur*. In many ways, Goldwater's and Reagan's rhetoric and proposals showed close similarities; however, the former campaigned in a climate that was still permeated by moderates, who perceived his anti-New Deal and reactionary approach as extremist. However, Reagan was favored by a much different context; throughout the 1970s, "the various developments that had emerged in American society over issues such as crime, rioting, patriotism and the Vietnam War, abortion and feminism, had both popularized and legitimized the rhetoric of the ideological conservatives" (p.87). In this respect, Howison recognizes that "this series of political and ideological realignments that developed during the late 1970s was a unique moment in American social and economic history. Writing in 1980, Walter Dean Burnham argued, "It has never before happened in modern times that the Republicans have been able to take the offensive on bread-and-butter economic issues." (Howison, 2013, p.98).

While appealing to the more "extremist" fringes of the conservative coalition, which represented great untapped potential for the long-term success of the Republican Party, Reagan curated an image that was still "toned-down" enough to reassure the centrists. The new GOP appropriated conservative rhetoric shedding it – at least apparently – from the more overt forms of discriminatory discourse. For example, pushbacks against the criminalization of discriminatory attitudes and the end of segregation in the South were not framed as racist, but rather as a legitimate concern with the protection of state autonomy and history. Additionally, the nominee's choice to select the more moderate George H.W. Bush as his running mate proved to be politically

savvy, as according to Howison it "united the party behind Reagan's candidacy while adding to his appeal in the Northeastern states, the historic stronghold of moderate, not conservative, Republicanism" (p.109).

The newfound strength of the conservative movement is interpreted by some scholars as a passive reaction, and by others as active mobilization (Gross, Medvetz and Russell, 2011). The former argue that the new Republican base (southern whites, evangelicals, the working class) aligned with the party as a negative reaction to the Democrats' response to the racial question, and the failures of the New Deal promises, the liberal governments' foreign policy (e.g. Vietnam) and the economy, with Carter's response to the oil crisis of 1973 being the most recent. Pierson and Skocpol in fact cite the disappointing performance of the expanded "activist American State" of the 1960s as a factor that played in favor of the Republican Party (Gross, Medvetz and Russell, 2011, p. 340). This interpretation suggests that the electoral success of the Republicans was more due to a vote *against* than *for* a party, candidate or political project.

On the other hand, some would argue that the success of new conservatism is not a passive reaction to a changing reality and broken promises, but it is rather due to the efforts of activists, thinkers and politicians to gather consensus. The work of conservative political organizations, growing in strength and numbers throughout the 1970s, contributed to what Gross, Medvetz and Russell called "a clearly delineated American conservative movement, organized around a more or less coherent set of ideas" (pp. 327 – 328). Following this argument, Howison argues that in support of Reagan's policy plan, "new organizations and ideas began to unify around efforts to reduce taxes and economic regulations, and these efforts would begin to find increasing resonance with the general public, who were also being squeezed between conditions of high unemployment and inflation" (p.96). Reagan's doctrine can be summarized with the term "supply-side economics", i.e. the belief that a decrease in marginal tax rates would have a net positive impact on investments and "higher rates of economic growth in the long term" (Rossinow, 2015, p. 33). Together with programs to decrease government control and funding, this term became the most recognizable pillar of GOP politics as a response to the failings of Keynesianism.

Realignment theory holds that the shift between party systems occurs in two distinct phases; in "deviating" elections, voters initially respond to pivotal domestic or international crises by revoking their mandate to the administration in office and giving it to the opposition. This process explains the shift from one majority to another, but it does not call for a realignment. The emergence of a new party system is consolidated when, in subsequent electoral cycles, the new majority is confirmed in office and a new dominant ideology permeates politics. Therefore, both interpretations of the conservative uprising can be true; initially, American voters might have given their preferences to Reagan and the Republican Party due to discontent with the Democratic administration's handling of the economic crisis and international turmoil. Then, as their

perception of the new majority became progressively more positive, they confirmed their choice in the next electoral cycles and espoused, more or less thoroughly, conservative ideals.

The previous section justified the definition of 1972 as a realigning election; that interpretation holds true if, like Howison, one defines the Carter presidency as "a political anomaly, an outlier that does not conform to the larger conservative trends" (p. 12). However, 1980 is also realigning in its own right, as underlying changes in voting choices, party alignments and ideologies finally came to the surface. Following Howison's argument, Reagan's success in 1980 did not create the conservative coalition, it simply solidified a trend which had been occurring for at least a decade at that point, and that several concurring causes which impacted the credibility of the GOP – among them the Watergate scandal – had merely delayed. Reagan had essentially "succeeded in bringing together the three forms of conservatism under the banner of the Republican Party, and he also benefitted from the timing of the crises of the 1970s" (p. 112).

2.9 The long-term impacts of Reaganism

In the introduction to his 2015 book titled *The Reagan Era: a history of the 1980s*, Doug Rossinow provides an interesting testimony as a young American whose first vote, cast in 1984, was for Ronald Reagan. In recalling the reasons for his choice, he reports that "Reagan affirmed values that attracted me: unqualified patriotism, national strength, and individual empowerment. I was not very interested in Reagan's specific policy stands" (p.1). The point of view of a young, 18-year old voter, as one of the many six out of ten 18 to 24 year olds who cast their vote for the incumbent President that year, confirms the power that Reagan's approach to campaigning and the presidency had had – and would continue to have – on the American public. His eight years in office were immersed within a context – and to a certain extent, contributed to shaping it – of massive social, economic and political changes in the United States. "Reaganism", as Rossinow writes, soon came to be known as its own form of conservatism, with its own political identity and distinctive features: neoliberal capitalism, unconditional patriotism and individualism.

The "Reagan Revolution" (270towin.com, 2016), produced immense changes to welfare and policymaking for the following decades. In terms of economic policies, the new Republican administration espoused the "neoliberal" philosophy, a decision which resulted in a definitive break with New Deal Keynesianism. Reagan, following a popular trend in the whole Western world, promoted a regime of continued deregulation – a path that Carter had explored, to a certain extent; marginal income taxes were cut, as well as government spending, and the money supply was placed under strict control. In terms of foreign policy, the

United States government adopted a strategy of military and financial support to anti-Communist forces in particular areas of interest (LeMay, 2017).

As mentioned above, the relevance and public support for New Deal-style policies had been decreasing throughout the 1970s. First, in the post-war era, the economic growth that had increased the quality of life for an unprecedented number of Americans had called into question the urgency of such massive government spending. Then, the oil shock of the 1970s had affected the credibility of Keynesian economics by questioning its effectiveness. These concerns faded into the background as determinants of voting choices, and conservatism benefitted from this shift. The impressive electoral success registered in 1984 denotes a growing support for the GOP, the President and the new approach to economic, social and foreign policy. With respect to 1980, Reagan's second term began with an increase in nearly 1 million votes for the President and a grand total of 525 electors – the Democratic Party won only Minnesota and DC (270toWin.com, n.d.).

The impact, whether positive or negative, of policymaking over the economy is more easily observable than the consequences of social policies; therefore, according to Kelley, a party's or government's ability to achieve success in the former category almost always guarantees positive electoral results in the short run. These dynamics relate to the importance attributed by Key to perception; not only does a policy program actually have to yield positive results, but the people need to *perceive* its efficiency as well in order for this success to turn into electoral support (Kelley, 2020). During the first two years of his mandate, a brief but intense recession seemingly had a negative impact on the credibility of Reagan's anti-welfare agenda (Rossinow, 2015). As the economy recovered by the mid-1980s, however, positive sentiments towards the Republican administration solidified, with most Americans considering Reaganism responsible for that "period of peace and relative prosperity" (Ladd, 1989, p.7), and for the improvements to the standard of living for many – although more disadvantaged groups suffered deeply from the dismantlement and defunding of the welfare programs.

Regan's style of delivery, as well as his approach to economic, social and foreign policy survived his presidency by many years. He skillfully understood the role that the legacy of Barry Goldwater could play in rebuilding the Republican Party, to turn it into a strong challenger for the Democratic post-New Deal order. Reagan's understanding of conservatism as a moral code, more than a political agenda, builds on Goldwater's understanding of the importance of "symbolic weapons usable in concrete political battles with the left" for a successful conservative counter establishment (Gross, Medvetz and Russell, 2011, p. 333). For the first time in contemporary American history, the Republican Party managed to construct an identity that could appeal to the masses; the once party of the elites now catered to the "common man" on a platform which opposed the "liberal leftist elites" with which the Democratic Party was allegedly associated; essentially, "conservatism was rebranded as a form of populism" (p. 334).

Reagan's platform achieved the unification of conservatives under a single banner, a banner of economic and foreign policy priorities, despite the fact that the various coalitions, e.g. the more and less traditionalists, were deeply divided on social and cultural issues. The efforts of the Republican Party's strategists, thinkers and leaders had, by the end of the 1980s, achieved the reframing of "conservative dogma" as "common sense" (Rossinow, 2015, p.2). Reaganites "shifted American political debate onto Reagan's chosen terrain, and Reagan's liberal enemies found themselves permanently on the defense" (p.2), in a sort of reversal of the New Deal era dynamics. Despite massive reliance on government assistance among the more or less poor, 1980s conservative elites managed to "restore popular faith in capitalism and individualism" (p. 3), perhaps to pre-Great Depression standards. One ideology was dominant, and the party that embodied it enjoyed great electoral and public consensus, while the other, defeated, struggled to carve its new space within the opposition.

As mentioned above, during the 1980s American conservatism went through an intense cultural revolution, evolving from the more "traditional" style embodied by old-school Republicans. Even Barry Goldwater, who has been described as a pioneering right-wing politician, focused his remarks on the economy and foreign policy. Anti-New Dealers would argue against the welfare state as unnecessary, but their conservatism rarely focused on cultural or ideological issues. As the base of the Republican Party changed, and more "ideologically-charged" groups such as the evangelicals began driving the GOP further to the right, previously unmentioned issues made their way into the party's platform; opposition to abortion, minority rights or feminism as threats to American history and culture became tools for conservative coalition building. Granted that this ideological-conservative revolution did not occur overnight, and that Ronald Reagan was not the only individual responsible for it, its effects are clearly visible in the Democrat-Republican divide of 21st century politics. The primacy of cultural issues in campaigns and debates is undeniable, and as they have entered the discourse on both the left and right, the "two ends" of the political spectrum have become more and more polarized.

Despite the undeniable success of Reaganism in shifting the political debate to the right, political scientists such as Larry M. Bartel do caution against theorizing a conservative rebranding of America's public opinion as a whole (Rossinow, 2015). Nevertheless, the popularity of conservatism was undeniable, and the perception of Reagan's as a successful presidency might have contributed to a stable trend of Americans self-identifying with similar policies throughout the next thirty years (Jones, 2024).

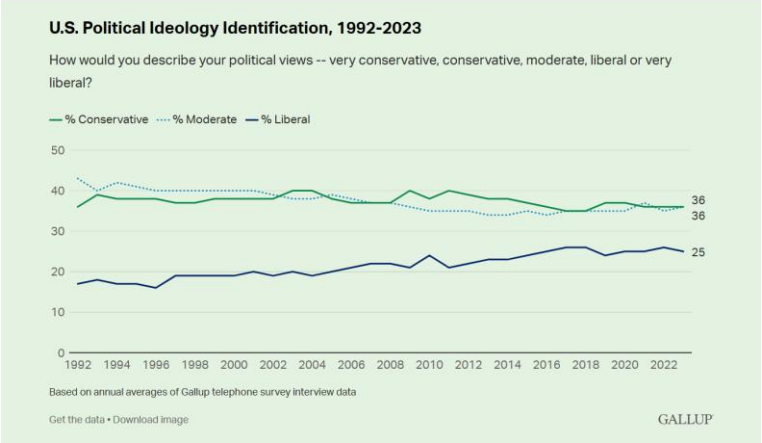


Figure 13: Self-identification of US voters according to political ideology (1992-2022)
Source: Jones (2024) on Gallup.com

Regardless of concerns with the more or less ambiguous rightward shift of American public opinion as an effect of Reaganism, Rossinow argues in 2015 that "there can be little doubt that the U.S. political system […] moved dramatically rightward in this decade" (p.4). Similarly to the way in which FDR's impact had persuaded the general public, political elites and commentators that Keynesian liberalism had become an inevitable component of American political life, forty years later Reaganites successfully implanted within the public perception the "new consensus that America was naturally a conservative country" (p. 5).

Exploiting this newfound consensus and the already failing popularity of the liberal welfare State, Reagan and the Republicans in power successfully dismantled government-funded programs and aids, upholding the neoliberal-conservative belief in a small federal authority that would not intervene in social and market dynamics. His restrictive approach to taxes and regulations in the name of economic development has become one of the pillars of candidate platforms for both parties; even the Democrats have accepted the end of New Deal welfare, and subsequent "liberal" Presidents, namely Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, have promoted their share of deregulatory reforms. In a way, Reagan's greatest achievement has been that of not only taking over the Republican Party with his conservatism, but also turning neoliberalism into a bipartisan ideology.

Clinton, who as Howison reports, would openly declare in his 1992 campaign that "the era of big government is over" (p.140), espoused the neoliberal philosophy of economic deregulation, privatization, and general reduction in the role of the state in favor of free market policies" (p.141). In 1993, he signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, the "largest free trade zone in the world, by eliminating tariffs between Mexico, Canada and the United States" (p.140) – according to a project crafted by his two Republican predecessors. In 1999, the Financial Services Modernization Act, followed in 2000 by the Commodity Future Modernization Act, repealed the 1933 Glass-Steagall bill which had separated investment from commercial

banks. Many agree that this decision will pave the way for the 2008 collapse, by facilitating the emergence of "new banking conglomerates and the explosion of the unregulated 'over the counter' derivatives market" (p.141).

It was thus perhaps also due to the compliance of the Democrats since the 1990s with the deregulatory agenda that Reaganism survived the 1980s and grew stronger. As Gregory Albo wrote, "The New Deal and Keynesianism were dead in American politics, sent to the graveyard by Clinton's Democrats" (p.143). In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the election of Barack Obama represented for most the end of the Democratic complacency with Reaganism. However, while the economic collapse compelled the new President to adopt more welfare-like measures, overall he has remained in line with neoliberal principles. Clearly, neoliberal capitalism has come to be one of the key pillars of the sixth party system, as the latter arguably evolves towards the seventh.

CHAPTER THREE: THE AMERICAN PARTY SYSTEM IN THE 21ST CENTURY – TOWARDS A 7TH REALIGNMENT?

3.1 The Democratic Leadership Council

According to Walter Dean Burnham, partisan realignments are defined by a reorganization of the major voter coalitions, in response to a crisis of traditional politics and phases of socioeconomic stress. Additionally, during these periods of intense political turmoil, the parties active within the system tend to grow increasingly polarized (White and Kerbel, 2022). Looking at American politics in the 21st century, and in particular at the groundbreaking elections – for different reasons – of Barack Obama in 2008 and Donald Trump in 2016, the question of whether any further realignment has occurred begs an answer. Obama's victory, for example, undoubtedly revealed increased electoral divides based on demographic factors such as age, gender, race and religious preferences (White and Kerbel, 2022). Although both him, Clinton before and Biden after, would promise to run the campaign and then the government to the benefit of all Americans, rising above polarizing partisanship, has this actually happened?

In 1984, the disastrous outcome for the Democrats which was the landslide re-election of Ronald Reagan revealed the weaknesses of the Party in what appeared to be the beginning of an era of Republican realignment. As mentioned in the previous chapter, after the 1968 electoral fiasco the DNC had introduced reforms in the nominating process of delegates, achieving an overall composition that was more representative of the diverse American society, and had abolished the unit rule which until then had allowed state delegations to vote "as a bloc" (Hale, 1995, p. 212). The downside of such changes, according to Jon Hale, was that the unity of the party had been put at risk by the emergence of sectionalized groups, such as women, black people, Hispanics, or liberals, each with its particular agenda that they expected the party and its candidate to cater to. The nominee in 1984, Walter Mondale, thus attempted the failing strategy of building support within each group, and "as a result, he was a nominee widely preferred within the party, but one without an overarching vision" (p. 212).

In the immediate aftermath of 1984, it became clear that the party needed serious platform reforms in order to strive for future electoral success. The following year, a political entrepreneur created an unofficial organization, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), which included elected members of the Party. The Council's goal was to "move the national Democratic Party, in both perception and substance, toward the center of the political spectrum in order to break the Republican hold on the White House" (Hale, 1995, p. 207). After Michael Dukakis' defeat against George H.W. Bush in 1988, mostly due to the lack of a persuasive

and coherent counterstrategy against the former Reagan VP, the Democratic establishment had to "reinvent" itself ahead of the next election (Hale, 1995). In the next few years, the DLC caught the attention of more prominent members of the party, and gave great contributions to the development of a viable moderate alternative.

The "New Democrats" in the DLC, including future President and Vice President Bill Clinton and Al Gore, believed in the primary interest of the party to reinvent itself to escape irrelevance, promoting a new, centrist image that "everyone could support" (Hale, 1995, p. 219). Cooperating with the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), a think tank created in 1989, between the end of the 1980s and the election of 1992 the DLC thus worked towards this goal. In a PPI publication titled *The Politics of Evasion* political scientists Elaine Kamarck and William Galston argued that the alignment of the Democratic Party with "liberal fundamentalism" "appeared to have driven away enough white middle class voters to give the Republicans dominance in presidential politics between 1968 and 1988, near parity in the Senate, and in partisan identification" (Hale, 1995, p. 222). In this respect, Hale agrees that "unless the Democrats could moderate their liberal identity […] a Republican realignment, averted since Watergate, would be completed" (p. 222).

Hale argues that the agenda set at the 1992 conference of the DLC would go on to become the baseline for that year's party platform, eventually contributing to the success of Bill Clinton. In an attempt to gain back the support of the white middle class voter – quintessential in determining the outcome of an election – the new party's agenda – prompted by the DLC – was presented as a third "progressive but moderate" alternative to the conservative-liberal dichotomy. The New Democrats wanted to convey an image of moderatism, all while presenting themselves as an alternative *outside* of the liberal (i.e. progressive) and conservative spectrum that, they argued, by the 1990s belonged to "now irrelevant old politics" (p. 223). "Just as Reagan was able to draw on well-developed ideas that had been percolating in the growing conservative establishment of think tanks, journals, and leadership groups throughout the 1970s, the DLC, in setting up an infrastructure for a new "progressive" establishment, hoped to provide the same for the next Democratic nominee and administration" (p.224). In this regard, the outcome of the 1992 nomination and, subsequently, Presidential election, was a success for the Council.

3.2 The "centrist revolution" of the Democratic Party: President Bill Clinton

In 1992, the Democratic Party chose Bill Clinton as the presidential nominee to run against the incumbent George H.W. Bush in the upcoming fall election. Former governor of Arkansas, in 1990 he had become the chair of the DLC, gaining notoriety as a "third way" Democrat, receiving early endorsements –

which supported his victories in the primaries of Maryland and Georgia – and campaign funding through the Council (Hale, 1995). The Governor's presidential campaign relied on many of the pillars of the DLC's platform; as Hale reports, he promised a "new kind of government" (p. 226) that would heal America from the damage done by the "trickle-down economics" model promoted by Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. The New Democratic Party did not want to retract from free trade and globalization, but proposed a government-controlled capitalism.

According to Hale, Bill Clinton's candidacy had to represent the success of the New Democrats, without however alienating the rest of the base. In this respect, the decision to pick the more moderate Al Gore as running mate was supposedly made to ensure a wider support for the ticket, both within the DNC and the Party's electorate as a whole. Nevertheless, the contribution of the DLC to the reform of the Democrats was a substantial aspect of the 1992 campaign. The platform presented by Clinton to the American public, called *A New Covenant with the American People*, in fact, clearly "echoed the main themes and policy proposals as the DLC's 'New Choice' […] The text of the platform was organized around the main themes of the New Democrats […] A comparison of the platform with the DLC's New Choice Platform revealed striking similarities between the two. Of fifty-one specific agenda item subheadings in the platform, thirty-seven were in agreement with agenda items in the DLC's New Choice Draft" (p. 227).

In November 1992, Bill Clinton won the presidency with nearly 45 million popular votes and 370 electors, carrying even southern states such as his home state of Arkansas, as well as Louisiana and Georgia (270toWin.com, n.d.). The Democrats also retained the majority in the House of Representatives which was now attested at 258 seats over the Republicans' 176 (Olson and Wax, 2024).

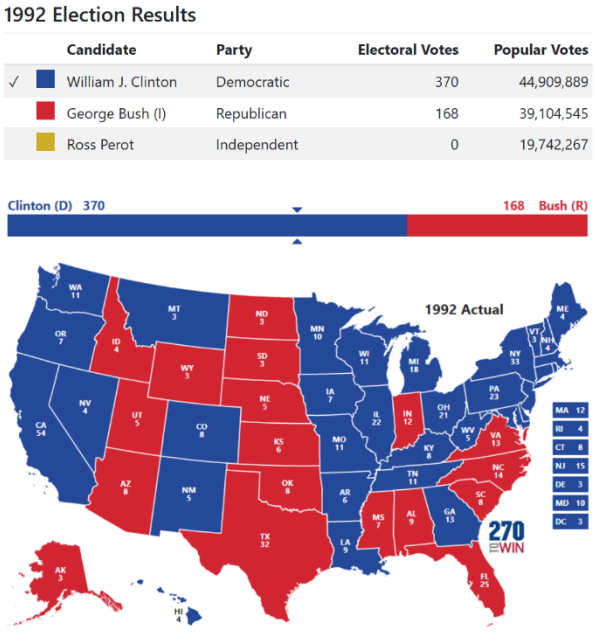


Figure 14: results for the 1992 presidential race – source: 270toWin.com, n.d.

According to the pre-election polls, this victory was rather unexpected. Bush Sr had successfully led America through the first Gulf war, achieving the liberation of Kuwait from Hussein's invasion, and going into the election cycle a Gallup poll attested the incumbent's approval ratings at 89%. However, "eighteen months later, Bush had an approval at 29 percent in August" (Olson and Wax, 2024, p. 71). Hale attributes only partly Clinton's success to the state of the economy, which led many Americans to seek change in the White House; although the U.S. were going through a slight

recession, the downturn itself was not enough to explain the success of the Democratic Party.

On the contrary, "the new identity of the party" "can be credited with putting [Clinton] in the position to win" (p. 228). The new generation of moderate Democrats in 1992 successfully appealed to white, middle-class liberals – all while the working class was drifting away from the party and realigning ever more clearly with the GOP. The institutionalization of the DLC as a sort of think tank for the Democrats facilitated the development of "a message, agenda, and set of policy alternatives that had the potential to serve as the basis for a centrist presidential candidacy" (p. 228). Bill Clinton successfully exploited his role as chair to "position himself as a prominent party moderate and using the DLC message as the basis of his campaign message" (p. 228).

Once elected, Clinton presented himself as a sort of link between the "old" and the "new" Democrats. During the first two years of his mandate, for example, according to Hale he promoted initiatives that were more in line with the traditional liberal approach – which did not enjoy significant support from the New Democrats, such as "the 1993 economic stimulus program, the FY 1994 budget, and health care reform" (p. 229). On the other hand, the administration's position on matters such as taxation, the welfare system and trade (NAFTA being the most notorious initiative in this sense) were met with overwhelming consensus in the new, liberal fringe of the coalition. Perhaps due to an attempt at bridging the gap between the liberals and the new centrists in Congress, or to the fact that the DLC did not have enough personnel to "fill all the seats", the initial period of Clinton's control of the White House passed in this sort of ideological ambiguity (Hale, 1995).

Olson and Wax define the election of 1992 as "the window into the politics of today" (p. 79), which set the stage for the emergence of what they call "the new populist majority" – a sort of rebuttal to the "emerging democratic majority" professed by John B. Judis as Ruy Teixeira in their 2004 homonymous book. Firstly, 1992 signaled the beginning of a reversal in the partisan power dynamics and the beginning of a "fifty-fifty gridlocked America" (p. 76); for the previous thirty years, the GOP had retained control of the White House with a couple of interruptions, while the Democratic Party had invested on its strength in local and state elections to maintain its hold over Congress. In 1992 and more or less constantly since, while the New Democrats have successfully carried the party to victory in at least three noteworthy instances (Clinton, Obama and Biden), they "tended to either win the presidency or lose it while winning the popular vote", while the GOP "starting in 1994 have held Congress most of the time and have continued to grow in local and state strength" (p. 77).

Secondly, they recognize that the end of the Cold War provoked a crisis of the world order which reflected in the American political system. While the Republican Party was dealing with the legacy of Reagan, the Democrats had embraced neoliberalism, "hyper-globalization and technological change" (p. 74). The authors argue that the platform of the New Democrats was built on the passive acceptance that the party was

losing the support of the working class of the Midwest and those areas, such as the infamous Rust Belt, once strongholds of American industrialism that had been decaying since globalization had plunged the manufacturing sector into the worst crisis in recent history. On the contrary, the program that would be embraced by Clinton and most of his successors catered clearly to the white, middle-class professionals of the great urban centers. Arguably, the realignment of the working class and entire regions of the country was initially signaled by the success of the independent candidate Ross Perot, who did not registered any success in the Electoral College, but "received a higher percentage of the vote of anyone going back to Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose run in 1912" (p. 74).

In many ways, Perot's success represents an opening to a third alternative with respect to the Democratic and Republican establishments. The "bipartisan free trade consensus" (p. 75) and its more or less negative consequences had frustrated an increasing number of Americans, as mentioned above. Thus, a "populist revolt" emerged in the 1990s and it would continue to grow stronger in the following decades; together with Pat Buchanan's challenge to the incumbent ahead of the 1992 and 1996 Republican primaries, the non-traditional alternatives embodied increasing popular dissatisfaction with elites that had "lost touch" with a significant portion of America. According to Olson and Wax, it was precisely the wide support – at least in Washington – for hyper-globalization that paved the way for Trump's success in 2016 and for the rebranding of the GOP as the party of the common man. On the one hand they argue that the Trump coalition combines part of Pat Buchanan's challenge to the GOP establishment and part of Perot's platform; on the other, they categorize Trump's opponents as "those most committed to the globalization consensus that became established after the 1992 election […] defended by the party establishments of both the Democrats and the Republicans" (p. 79).

In the decades after 1992, as the emergence of a new base of "younger, college educated and diverse voters" (p. 84) failed to materialize, the Democratic Party has lost progressively more consensus particularly outside of the bigger urban centers. Contrary to the 20th century trends, even when a Democrat sat in the White House the party has failed to gain a significant majority in Congress – besides in 2006 and 2008. Essentially, the authors argue that while Clinton won exploiting the disappointment with the Iraq war and the failed reforms on social security and immigration, the New Democrats' efforts at presenting a centrist image did not yield the expected results. Similarly to Obama's victory, Clinton's diverse coalition did not hold after his two mandates were over, in the absence of a clear and stable partisan ideology on which voters could mobilize.

3.3 The new Democratic coalition: temporary shift or stable realignment?

Obama's triumph came at a time of economic collapse in the wake of the Great Recession, of a declining trust in George H.W. Bush's administration and its foreign policy strategy, and in the "dominant ideology of the preceding electoral realignment" (Master, 2009, p. 19); most of his success is to be attributed, however, to the emergence of a new "progressive" electoral coalition which carried him to victory with considerable margins for two mandates.

Promising a break from the past via "major changes in both domestic and foreign policy" (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 594), with 365 electoral votes and nearly 69.5 million popular votes (270towin.com, 2016), Barack Obama became the first African American president – his identity being one of the main points of contention for his opponents throughout the campaign and beyond – and the first non-southern Democrat to be elected to the White House since JFK (Abramowitz, 2010). The success of the Obama-Biden ticket appeared overwhelming, as the Democrats won not only all the 19 states carried by the party four years prior, but also 9 that had overwhelmingly voted for Bush, and 7 of the most populous states including California and Florida – many by "landslide or near-landslide margins" (p.10), according to author Alan I. Abramowitz.

At the county level, Democratic consensus increased in 2437 of all 3141, particularly in the big metropolitan areas with a significant concentration of highly-educated and ethnic (particularly Hispanic and African American) voters. Abramowitz confirms what Olson and Wax would write fourteen years later, namely that the less prominent – but significant – increase in Republican consensus occurred in small, rural towns, mostly in the Appalachian region, whose residents typically had lower levels of education and high concentration of religious communities with small minority populations.

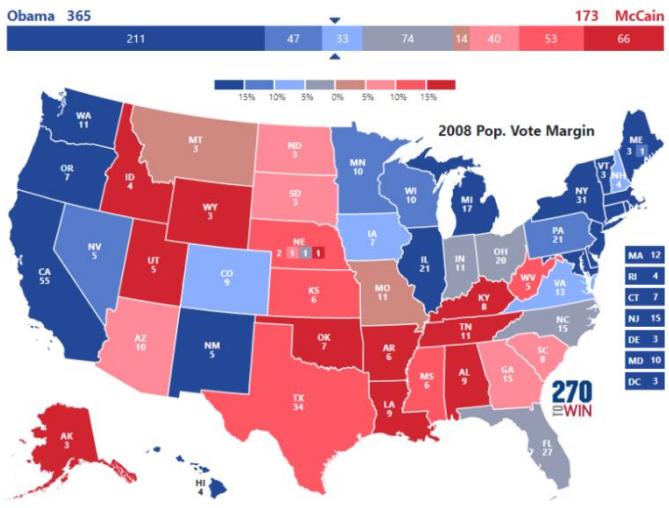


Figure 15: margin of victory map in 2008 - source: 270toWin.com, 2016

Therefore, despite the evident Democratic shift, in 2008 America appeared to be more polarized than ever before. As Abramowitz observed two years later, "over the past three decades the coalitions supporting the two major parties have become much more distinctive geographically, racially and ideologically" (p. 594). In this respect, the divide between the "blue" and the "red" states became even more prominent than in 2004, with the margins of victory for both Obama and McCain well over 10 points and the number of "contested" regions in rapid decline.

Geographically, according to Abramowitz, McCain carried the new strongholds of the Republican Party, i.e. the Old Confederacy, except for Virginia, North Carolina and Florida, with little resistance – winning "54 percent of the vote in the South while Obama won 57 percent of the vote in the rest of the country" (p. 595).

While this level of geographical polarization appears in line with the developments of the most recent elections, it reveals a sharp change with respect to the 1960s and 1970s, when the number of contested states was much higher, and the number of landslides much lower. Comparing 2008 to two other elections with a Democratic winner, i.e. 1960 and 1976, Abramowitz observes that "in 1960, 20 states were decided by less than 5 points and only 9 by more than 15 points; in 1976, 20 states were decided by less than 5 points and only 10 by more than 15 points. And in both of those elections all of the most populous states were closely contested" (p. 595).

Besides geography, the 2008 American electorate was also divided along "generational, racial and religious lines" (p. 596), providing a perfect example of what the near future of partisanship in the United States would look like. As mentioned above, some scholars in the wake of Bush's defeat had signaled the emergence of a progressive Democratic majority of a new generation of young, college-educated "millennial" Americans, women, and racial minorities which would carry the party to victory for the foreseeable future, similarly to FDR's New Deal coalition. In 2008, and to an extent until 2012, this hypothesis seemingly found support in the configuration of electoral victories; the new generation of Americans was already more liberal, on average, than baby boomers – 32% of them self-identified as such, contrary to their parents' 17%; at the same time, millennial conservatives amounted to around 26% while boomers at about 40% (Master, 2009).

The younger cohort expressed their support for Obama in the exit polls with a 34% margin overall, higher within non-white groups – the increase with respect to John Kerry's 9% in 2004 was of 25 points – and the highest ever recorded for any president within any age cohort (Abramowitz, 2010). Considering that the 2004 nominee had fared better among voters over 65, Abramowitz observed that "the difference between the youngest and oldest age groups [in 2008] was by far the largest in the history of national exit polls going back to 1972" (p. 596).

Essentially, "voters under the age of 30 provided Obama with a plurality of almost 8 million votes which was more than 80 percent of his overall vote margin" (p. 598). This success, which translated into important victories in Congressional races as well, is only partly explained by the diverse racial composition of the younger generation of Americans. Both white and non-white millennials were in fact more likely to align with liberal views, and thus vote Democratic, than the older generations (table 7). For example, Abramowitz mentioned a 2008 national exit poll revealing that "54 percent of whites under the age of 30 voted for Obama compared with only 41 percent of whites over the age of 30 and 76 percent of Hispanics under the age of 30 voted for Obama compared with only 63 percent of Hispanics over the age of 30" (p. 598).

Table 7: "political attitudes by race and age in 2008"

Source: Abramowitz, 2010

Political attitudes by race and age in 2008.

	Whites		Nonwhites	
	18–29	30-over	18–29	30-over
Liberal Id	40%	24%	49%	36%
Pro-Choice	49%	39%	53%	45%
Pro-Gay Marriage	60%	31%	66%	34%
Pro-Government Health Insurance	55%	41%	80%	60%

Source: 2008 American National Election Study.

Obama's success among young Americans was largely determined by the latter's policy preferences. Typically more favorable to issues such as gay marriage, a federally-protected access to abortion and universal healthcare, they supported a candidate that promised to meet their expectations. In addition to his concrete policy plan, younger voters were attracted by Obama's identity which, at the time, embodied a multicultural diversity that promised a different society than that of their parents or grandparents (Master, 2009). The victory of the first African American President was arguably supported also by its symbolic significance, and the revolution it had the potential to bring to American society and politics in the 21st century.

In his 2010 study of the election, Alan I. Abramowitz refers to a Time Magazine poll conducted in October 2008, where circa 1000 voters were asked to provide their opinions on ten of the most relevant policy issues in the campaign, e.g. abortion, healthcare and the war in Iraq. Their answers were classified along a 0-10 scale, where 0 meant "strong opposition" and 10 "strong support". The results in table 8 show that the majority of respondents identified with positions closer to either end of the scale, corresponding to strongly conservative or strongly liberal viewpoints. The Iraq war was one of the most polarizing issues; as Abramowitz reports, "only 12 percent of Obama supporters favored keeping U.S. troops in Iraq without a withdrawal timetable versus 77 percent of McCain supporters" (p. 600). Similar polarizations of the electorate could be observed with respect to all the most important issues in the 2008 campaign.

Table 8: distribution of public opinion on major policy issues (2008)

Source: Abramowitz, 2010

Distribution of public opinion on nine policy issue in 2008.

Issue	Strongly Liberal (0–1)	Liberal (2–3)	Centrist (4–6)	Conservative (7–8)	Strongly Conservative (9–10)
Gay Marriage	31%	7	14	6	41
Abortion	43%	9	16	4	27
Iraq war	30%	14	19	15	22
Offshore drilling	10%	7	19	17	47
Health care	30%	18	22	10	20
Financial regulation	36%	21	25	6	11
Climate change	30%	23	28	7	12
Business tax cuts	12%	9	37	20	22
Mortgage Assistance	18%	18	38	10	16
Average of 9 issues	27%	14	24	11	24

Source: Time Magazine Poll, Oct. 3–6, 2008.

In 2010, Abramowitz recognized that Obama's victory depended not only on the favorable conditions to a Democratic success laid out by Bush's low approval ratings and the economic crisis, but also on two pivotal "realignments" of the American electorate: younger voters and the non-white population, which at the turn of the millennium constituted a significant proportion of the electorate. While until the early 1990s the change in the number of ethnic voters had been minimal, "in the 16 years between 1992 and 2008 the nonwhite share of the electorate doubled, going from 13 percent to 26 percent" (p. 597), a trend supported not only by increasing birth rates and immigration, but also by an aggressive registration campaign promoted by the Democrats.

Using 2008 data, Abramowitz observes that Obama was the preferred candidate for 86% of 18-29 year olds favorable to the recognition of gay marriage; for 84% of those who considered themselves pro-choice; for 90% of those advocating for a government-sponsored healthcare program and, finally, for 95% of the youth that identified as liberal. On the contrary, McCain was the candidate of 72% of the youth opposing gay marriage; for 80% of those against the federal protection to abortion rights; for 73% of those against any form of public healthcare and for 84% of the conservative 18-29 year olds. Considering this data, the reasons for the realignment of liberals with the Democratic Party and of conservatives with the GOP become clear.

With regards to racial minorities, as mentioned above Obama was particularly successful in the African American and Hispanic communities; 95% of the former voted for him, with respect to Kerry's 88%. The latter represented on the other hand "the most dramatic improvement in Democratic performance between 2004 and 2008" (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 596). Exit poll data reported by Abramowitz revealed in fact that the increase amounted to 12 percentage points, from 54% to 66%. The only group within which the Democratic consensus did not improve much with respect to 2004 were white Americans, but considering that the Party had registered consistent losses in that cohort since 1964, it did not come as a surprise. The noteworthy aspect is however the clear realignment of whites with the Republican Party, as they preferred McCain by "a double digit margin"

than they had Bush in 2004 – despite the latter's unpopularity by the end of his mandate – signaling that the racial question had a significant impact on voting choices. In many ways, this trend relates to the poor performance of the Democratic Party in the South that was mentioned above. Even among whites, in fact, Abramowitz observed that Obama's consensus oscillated from around 10% in the "Deep South" to 60% in the Northeast and West regions.

Because non-white voters largely identify with the Party, their rapid increase in numbers with respect to the entirety of the U.S. electorate has reshaped the bases of both of the major political parties. In 2008, while the GOP coalition had remained white for the most part, the exit polls revealed that "African Americans made up 24 percent of Obama voters while Hispanics and other nonwhites made up 16 percent" (p. 597). The great margins of success within the non-white population had contributed to the 9.5 million votes difference between Obama and McCain in 2008; eight years prior, the close election of 2000 had declared Al Gore the loser with only about 500,000 popular votes less than George W. Bush. Ethnic voters had also been responsible for Obama's nomination, as especially in the South they have provided him with sufficient consensus where he could not count on a strong white support (p. 597).

Considering race, the number of moderate or conservative whites identifying as Democrats has decreased since the 1990s, corresponding to an increase of liberal whites and ethnic voters within the ranks of the party – "moderate-to-conservative whites" had made up the majority of Jimmy Carter's votes in 1976, but only a quarter of Obama's in 2008. The 1976 election had also seen barely 1/5 of ethnic votes within Carter's coalition, a number which increased to more than 1/3 in 2008. On the contrary, the white electorate of the Republican Party has increased from 58% in 1976 to 70% in 2008, as the number of moderate and liberal GOP voters has decreased (Abramowitz, 2010). Therefore, as of 2010, the base of the Democratic Party was largely made up of white liberals and non-white Americans; the Republican Party, on the other hand, retained a high degree of support mainly among white conservatives.

American society has become increasingly diverse in the past decade, and this has inevitably reflected in a greater share of the electorate being not white; perhaps, what some scholars in the wake of Obama's victory have underscored is the realignment of an important portion of the ethnic vote with the Republican Party in the Trump era, and with the fact that the Democrats lost more consensus than they could gain – among and regardless of ethnic voters.

In conclusion, Abramowitz argued that "ideological realignment and the growth of the nonwhite electorate have dramatically altered the composition of the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions over the past three decades" (p. 599). Although the changes in the GOP base have been less evident than those among Democrats, the American electorate of the 21st century is clearly more polarized along ideological, racial, generational and educational lines than thirty or forty years ago. Perhaps aware of the public frustrations

which such divided politics, both Barack Obama and John McCain had promised to campaign in blue and red states alike, seeking to be the President of all Americans and not just of Democrats and Republicans respectively.

However, voting patterns in 2008 suggest the opposite; besides the aforementioned distinctions across races and age groups, overall the vast majority of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (91%) voted for Obama, while McCain received overwhelming support (90%) from Republicans and Republican-leaning independent voters (Abramowitz, 2010). The data mentioned by Abramowitz with regards to policy preferences (on issues such as gay marriage, abortion and healthcare) and its relation to voting patterns suggests that it was not only the polarized political climate leading groups of voters to side with one party or the other, but the latter were themselves deeply divided on policy issues.

Obama's "non-ideological liberalism"

In many ways, Barack Obama won the White House in 2008 thanks to the support of the first successful presidential campaign in contemporary American politics that could be defined as a movement (Master, 2009). How did the Democratic Party achieve and coordinate such degree of mobilization? Arguably, there are two factors to take into consideration: the party's platform and the channels for grassroots activism that were successfully exploited by Obama's campaign in 2008.

As mentioned above, Obama has first and foremost successfully exploited the crisis of consensus for the Republican Party. The GOP had by that time established itself as the coalition of strong foreign policy approaches and small, efficient government. In this regard, the two "wars on terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan were wearing out America's support for George W. Bush, who by the end of his second mandate could no longer count on the overwhelming consensus of the weeks post-9/11. Moreover, the administration's approach to the economy could not prevent the Great Recession of 2008.

Authors Fabbrini and La Raja noted that the decline of Republican consensus had become clear already between the midterm elections of 2006 and 2008; in this two-year interval, the Democrats had increased their number of seats in the House of Representatives from 203 to 257, and in the Senate from 45 to 60, mostly thanks to the support of self-identifying independents concerned with the economy and foreign policy. Thus, part of Obama's success – especially in the states that the Democrats won despite them being traditionally "red" – is definitely attributable to dissatisfaction with Bush and the GOP. These factors alone would not have, however, explained the outcome of the election.

In 1992, Clinton's "third way" liberalism had successfully granted him the presidency by tapping into the moderate voters that had felt alienated on the one hand by the Democrats' espousal of progressivism and the increasing reliance on interest groups for consensus, and by the takeover of the Republican Party by neoconservatives on the other. Obama's strategy has also focused on finding a "middle ground", but contrary to Clinton's coalition – whose goal was that of simply reinventing liberalism in an attempt at seizing the "Reagan democrats" – the Democratic Party of 2008 chose a "non-ideological", more pragmatic approach – according to Fabbrini and La Raja. The campaign's strategy was that of mobilizing the centrist and moderate electorate, regardless of partisan affiliation, in response to a political climate that was becoming progressively more polarized.

Despite a rather divisive nominating process, which contraposed the "new generation" Democrat Barack Obama to the more traditional Democrat Hillary Clinton, the Party displayed an image of unity throughout the campaign. Under Obama's leadership, the Democrats have attempted at tracing their steps back to the New Deal to recreate a sort of continuity with FDR, interrupted by the Great Society reforms which had dismembered the coalition in the 1970s. Without abandoning the goal of greater social justice through the support of the so-called "activist government", underlining the distance from the neoconservative GOP which "considers social inequalities a condition of a dynamic economy" (Fabbrini and La Raja, p.11, translated by author), Obama ran on a platform that promised support to all Americans, regardless of their identity – via major reforms such as increased funds to education and the extension of healthcare coverage. As Fabbrini and La Raja argue, "Obama's politics were thus known to be in tune with middle class values and culture" (p. 13, translated by author).

This kind of "hard-headed liberalism" espouses on the one hand the New Deal principle of government assistance through redistribution (such as Obama's proposal to increase taxation on the 5% of the population that earned more than 230,000$ a year); on the other, it draws inspiration from Clinton's pragmatism without however relying on the economic and financial market; the crisis of 2008 had in fact clearly demonstrated the dangers of deregulation and how "market solutions were not always able to solve issues affecting a developed society, especially all those inequalities and vulnerabilities caused by advanced and 'dynamic' capitalism" (p. 14, translated by author). Contrary to FDR's response to the Great Depression, Obama ran on a platform that promised to reform the current system without however questioning the foundations of the free market economy.

Soon enough, however, the Democratic Party found itself facing the struggle of maintaining such a diverse coalition, which did not share the same moral or ideological preferences. The more progressive voters were dissatisfied particularly with Obama's foreign policy approach – considering for example the "delayed" withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Middle East. Obama will achieve only the end of hostilities in Iraq, while

the presence of American soldiers in Afghanistan will end only in 2021. The more "moderate" or conservative leaning voters, as well as members of the party, on the other hand forced adjustments to his agenda. In an attempt to overcome the obstacles posed by a Republican-controlled Congress, many of the proposals of the Obama administration were redefined. The Affordable Care Act, or "Obamacare", did not deliver on the hopes of a universal healthcare system that had motivated many progressives to vote in 2008; it simply extended protections to the uninsured, without dismantling the private insurance market (American Medical Association, 2024), as that would have required a degree of bipartisan support that Obama did not have.

Fabbrini and La Raja argue that, in the context of a highly polarized political climate, this non-ideological approach was extensively challenged and, at times, unsuccessful. The Democratic Party's inability to overcome conservative opposition and deliver on its most progressive campaign promises frustrated the more liberal electors, while the more left leaning reforms alienated the moderates. Since the 2008 crisis had not caused massive transformations in the priorities of the American voters, similarly to the effects of the Great Depression for instance, the realignment in favor of the Democrats that some scholars expected (the "progressive majority") did not occur. Obama's rejection of a traditional Democratic "ideology" was rooted in the desire to rebuild the strength of the Party after the disappointing electoral outcomes – with the exception of Bill Clinton – of the past few decades. Learning the lesson taught by the dismemberment of the New Deal coalition as the reforms of the Great Society in the 1960s alienated the moderate base, Obama's 21st century Democratic Party was supposed to gain back their support by presenting a program that did not have a clearly leftist-progressive, nor openly moderate, stance. However, the Republican Party on the other hand had increasingly embraced its right-wing and conservative shift, which attracted many of the undecided and independent voters in once key sectors of the Democratic coalition – proving its ability to exploit the "tools of ideological struggle" (p. 40, translated by author).

3.4 Preparing for the 2010s: coalition building through social media

Ahead of the 2008 campaign, the Democratic Party had also engaged in a comprehensive rebuilding process which went beyond its electoral base. At the dawn of the digital era, it had already become clear that any successful candidate could not rely solely on a convincing platform, but they were obliged to also focus on grassroots mobilization, online and offline, to reach as many potential voters as possible.

Obama's campaign took place in a historical context where the role of political parties had been evolving; since the 1990s, both the Democratic and Republican establishments had sought to transform their role, after the more recent reforms – particularly with regards to the nominating process – had taken power

away from the party committees and given it to the voters. According to Fabbrini and La Raja, in 21st century America, political parties have come to occupy the different – but no less important – role of gathering financial and material resources, as well as mobilize the electorate. In the early 2000s, with the passing of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (2002), which forbade parties from accessing unlimited funds, independent organizations and individual citizens (initially gravitating around the Democratic Party) who wanted to show their support began donating to the cause (Fabbrini and La Raja, 2010). While this Act was essentially repealed by the Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court in 2010, it might have nonetheless contributed to the success of Obama's presidential bid two years prior.

The achievements of Obama's campaign can essentially be motivated by two distinct but interdependent factors: his rhetoric, with the image of the campaign that he painted for the American public, and his clever use of old and new media to spread the message.

The collective narrative

As a community organizer in Chicago, Illinois, Obama had learned about the importance of a collective narrative in producing grassroots change. His presidential campaign reflected this principle, as he often referred to his electorate as a group of individuals with "different stories" but "common hopes" (Emejulu, 2011). According to author Akwugo Emejulu, the Democratic Party was able to support its candidate in constructing a campaign discourse that created "specific identities of both Obama and the public which (re)produce a collective mood for change" (p. i118). After the financial crisis of 2008, the unsuccessful campaigns in the Middle East and the worst recession since the 1930s, the American electorate clearly wished for something new, and Obama understood this need.

The interesting aspect of his rhetoric, and perhaps the one which carried him to victory, thus related not much to the promises he made – which included traditional Democratic talking points, such as accessible healthcare, education reforms, the environment, as well as "new" issues such as the end of the Iraq war (BarackObamadotcom, 2008a) – but to the narrative it created on how he planned to achieve his goals. On January 8th 2008, Barack Obama spoke before a Nashua, New Hampshire, crowd after the results of the state primary had crowned Hillary Clinton as the winner with a margin of about 7500 votes.

The speech, entirely reported on YouTube, shows the presidential candidate addressing the crowd after his loss, reiterating his belief in mass mobilization to produce deep change; thanking his supporters for coming out and speaking up, the presented himself as the mere spokesperson (always speaking in "we" terms) of a

coalition – which he referred to as a "new American majority" – which could "take this country in a fundamentally new direction", leading it "out of a long political darkness" of divisiveness.

The rhetoric of his whole campaign, before and after the nomination, was collective in its focus; in that occasion, he spoke about a "different campaign" which was about "not just what I will do as President. It is also about what you, the people who love this country […] can do to change it". Patriotism was an important component of his narrative of change; the new American majority, as he frequently reiterates in his public addresses, is composed of all ethnicities, age groups and political affiliations; the common thread is a desire for a better future that should be achieved through collective effort.

In his victory speech in Chicago on election night, the President elect goes back to the patriotic narrative, stressing that the coalition who elected him is made up not of "a collection of individuals" – implying isolation – or of "red states and blue states" – referring to political divisiveness – but it *is* the United States of America. This tone resurfaces when, later in the address, he refers to Abraham Lincoln, another man from Illinois, who led a "nation far more divided", and when speaking of a 106-year-old voter he recalled all the trying and glorious times the United States have gone through in the past century. Calling for unity and bipartisanship, he congratulated John McCain on his strenuous campaign efforts and, speaking to anyone who did not vote for him, he said: "I need your help, and I will be your President too".

Regardless of what might have happened in hindsight, Obama's campaign was undoubtedly successful because it conveyed a message of hope, and instilled in the President's supporters the idea that through collective action, deep change could be achieved. His well-known motto, "Yes We Can", referred not only to a campaign platform, but to a vision of the country that he – with his identity – symbolized. The son of a black father from Kenya and a white mother from the United States who had rose to the presidential candidacy represented for many the personification of the "American dream", described by Emejulu as the "belief in equality of opportunity for the pursuit of happiness" (p. i120). Hope was used as a rhetorical tool for mass mobilization as the "construction of collective identity and agency" (p. i120). The framing of the campaign as a collective effort, and not just as an attempt by the candidate at persuading a distant electorate to vote for them, created a hopeful *movement* which rallied for a common cause, and saw itself – and was reflected in the words of Obama – as an active agent of change.

The "new majority" was undoubtedly a majoritarian and intersectional coalition, with a broad a diverse base; Obama was able to attract such massive consensus but framing issues "in such a way as to have broad-based appeal among the public" (p. i122) – referring to the concept of "non-ideological liberalism". He addressed commonly felt problems, such as poverty, unemployment, the desire for education reforms and the end of the wars in which the United States were involved, while recognizing the specific struggles of minorities, women and other disadvantaged communities that were part of his electoral coalition. He framed

his concerns and his platform as to move away from the negative connotation of "identity politics"; the issues he referred to were framed as "fundamentally American problems" (p. i123) that the whole nation ought to be concerned with in order to achieve a better future where no one was left behind.

New and old media

"This victory belongs to you" said Barack Obama addressing the crowd in Grant Park in Chicago, on the night of his presidential victory in 2008. He was referring to a large group, which comprised the nearly 69,5 million popular votes he received, as well as the many volunteers, staff members and campaign organizers which had made everything possible. Undoubtedly, his charisma and his rhetoric had contributed to the results, but the way in which the campaign was set up and his message spread made the difference.

Similarly to his predecessors, Obama's campaign organizers invested in television, which allowed for the integration of stories on and about the candidates with visual imagery that could be transmitted to the American public (Gupta-Carlson, 2016). Since the technological development which had turned the TV into a mass consumption good, campaigns had implemented it into their strategies; the first presidential debates were held, and televised (notorious was the one between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, which allegedly favored the former due to his better "stage presence"). In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan had incorporated TV addresses and appearances as a means to spread his message; in her reflections on social media and the Obama campaign, Himanee Gupta-Carlson highlighted the power of media in establishing a "special relationship" between candidates and the general public; "through the use of television commercials, candidates can connect with voters by looking into cameras and creating an appearance of addressing their 'fellow Americans' directly" (p. 71). Gupta-Carlson reports that Obama invested in TV commercials as well; during his 2012 re-election efforts, his campaign spent around 404 billion dollars in televised advertisement, second only to his opponent Mitt Romney. Four years prior, in 2008, he had purchased thirty minutes of airtime on different networks a week before the election, similarly to Reagan in 1980, and some argue that this decision sealed his victory.

For most of the second half of the 20th century, creating and diffusing visual imagery required high costs – as exemplified by the amount of money spent for TV ads – and expertise. In the mid-2000s, however, the fast-paced development of the Internet, which eased access to technologies such as cell phones and personal computers, produced social media. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and, a few years later, Instagram, would not only change the dynamics of social interaction, but also of political campaigns. Due to both historical contingencies – candidates before him did not have such technology available – and to his ability to seize the opportunity, Obama provided the first example of a presidential campaign which

successfully exploited the Internet to gather consensus. The unprecedented mobilization which characterized the Democratic Party in 2008 involved analogic methods such as door-to-door campaigning, phone calls and donations, but it also incorporated digital features such as e-mails, blogs and social media posts (Gupta-Carlson, 2016).

Digital storytelling, i.e. the construction of narratives via digital means, is defined by Gupta-Carlson as a "democratizing art that challenges the one-way authority of traditional narrative" (p. 72). As mentioned above, creating and sharing content had been – before the mainstream spread of the Internet – a prerogative of journalists, video-makers, directors and similar "experts"; such content would then be passively consumed by the public, which had no agency in how and when it was created. The Internet democratized this process, and technological developments such as the incorporation of cameras and internet connection into cell-phones dramatically decreased the costs – in terms of time, money and skill – of making videos, writing blogs or social media posts, and in overall terms spreading a message (as Gupta-Carlson reports).

Obama's Internet campaign took place in an extremely favorable context; Facebook (created in 2005) had by 2007 amassed 50 million active users, a number which had doubled ahead of the 2008 election (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Outside of the United States, the late 2000s and early 2010s offer plenty of examples of mass movements coordinated with the support of the Internet and social networks, such as the 2009 protests in Iran and the well-known Arab Uprisings. Soon, the Web made its debut in the world of politics; ahead of the 2008 election, defined as the "first Facebook election" by authors Carlisle and Patton (p. 883) the January presidential debate was broadcasted by ABC News in partnership with the famous social network. Users could log into a "U.S. politics" application to give live feedback, discuss the debate with fellow voters and even register to vote.

The collective tone of Obama's campaign combined perfectly with the mass-access to the Internet. Political blogs, both on the left and the right, already existed, but social media enhanced "public" virtual discussions. As Pamela Rutledge wrote in 2013 "social media creates a new political dialogue. It takes the power of political messaging away from the mass media model and places it firmly into peer-to-peer, public discourse" (Gupta-Carlson, 2016, p. 73).

Obama supporters wanted to use the Internet to spread their message, and in doing so they took advantage of already existing platforms, such as Facebook, and of new ones provided *ad-hoc* by the campaign. In 2007, contemporarily to the announcement of his candidacy to the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama made known that his "coalition" had created a specialized network, myBarackObama.com, where users, i.e. voters, could create profiles to interact with others, build discussion groups, raise donations and find or plan campaign-related events (Gupta-Carlson, 2016). People would attend rallies and then post videos or comments on social media, which would garner the attention of fellow prospective voters and spark discussions.

Comparing the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama rallies she attended, author Himanee Gupta-Carlson observes that the availability of the Internet had changed the way in which people *paid attention*. Bill Clinton's supporters would stand and listen, cheering, to the words of their candidate; sixteen years later, Obama's crowd would also be busy recording videos and typing posts or comments on Facebook, spreading almost in real time news on what was happening.

The *ante-litteram* "virality" of Obama's campaign became part of a "new media effort designed to build momentum from below", according to Gupta-Carlson (p. 73). Anyone at that point could share their story and their opinions, "at a very low cost and with little specialized expertise" (p. 73). The democratized access to the internet turned ordinary people into *de facto* campaign organizers, which would connect with other Obama voters and even interact with those who had not considered expressing their support for him. Gupta-Carlson also reports that, by November 2008, Obama had gathered around 5 million followers spread among fifteen different platforms, and had raised almost 640 million dollars, 80% of which had come in sums of less than twenty dollars – suggesting that ordinary people had chosen to show their support.

The benefits of internet-based campaigning would however soon show their costs as well. Transposing the once unilateral dialogue between the voters and the candidate online "changed the relationship between candidates and constituents. In doing so, the campaign story became a story marked less by the quality of its narrative and more by its ability to provoke a response" (Gupta-Carlson, 2016, pp. 74-75). Traditional media such as television and newspapers typically works as a mediator between the politicians and the electorate, filtering information in a way which might produce a biased narrative, but in the presence of free press it *should* guarantee authenticity. The removal of this "buffer" through the Internet has indeed brought the candidates and their coalitions closer, but it has also resulted in greater uncertainty in terms of what is factual and what is not. As Bryan Alexaner observed, "where the story begins and ends, what the container is that holds a narrative" is now harder to identify (p. 72).

The proliferation of unverified information and the ease with which people could spread it and communicate their opinions has, in the Obama era, advantaged other movements. Arguably "nationalist" groups such as the Tea Party in 2010 and extremists have resorted to the Internet to spread their negative views of the President and coordinate to "further reactionary political agendas that run counter to the narrative that Obama sought to convey" (p. 72). After Obama, Internet use for political ends has become a mainstream practice, with its perks and its risks. Candidates from both the Democratic and Republican sides have implemented social media strategies into their campaigns, in a more or less calculated manner. As will be discussed later, Donald Trump's arguably spontaneous use of his digital platforms has achieved similar results in amassing consensus from a wide variety of voters, and has definitely contributed to his two electoral successes and his long-lasting impact on the GOP and beyond.

3.5 The Tea Party and the ultra-conservative shift of the GOP

In 2012, Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williams published a book titled *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, in which they provided an in-depth analysis of the rise to prominence and impact of this controversial movement. They recount that it initially emerged as a series of locally organized groups, which appeared on the national political arena in early 2009, weeks after Obama's historic victory. They organized in opposition to the new Democratic administration's policy, particularly concerning the Affordable Care Act, and promoted legislation to lower taxation and business regulations. Despite the progressive turn that Obama's victory seemed to represent, American conservatives managed to stay, and even rise, to the forefront of national politics, via a systemic and well-thought out strategy. In the wake of the defeat, the Republican Party had remained without a clear leader, and the party's structure was divided; "who could be the face of the GOP after Bush?" (p.6). Following this interpretation, Skocpol and Williams argue that the success of Tea Partiers derived from the need of the GOP to find new leadership and a new ideological direction.

Within the context of the Internet era, social media served as a powerful coordinating tool; protests began in February 2009, and conservative bloggers, users and commentators shared the news on Twitter and Facebook. However, once Fox News began broadcasting on such rallies and events, the size of the movement grew bigger and bigger, with many people gathering to express their dissatisfaction with Obama's transformative project for America. As Skocpol and Williams write, "conservative news outlets amplified the public attention grassroots Tea Partiers were receiving, and mainstream media outlets became transfixed by the spectacle" (p.8). In the following months, Tea Party activists began organizing local and regional coordinating meetings, which according to Skocpol and Williams at some point in 2010 amounted to about 1000 nationally. As they argue, "their emergence was important, taking grassroots activism from the realm of occasional outbursts connected by Internet communications into sustained, face-to-face community organizing" (p.8).

The fundamental goal of Tea Party activists was to support the most conservative personalities within the Republican Party; ahead of the 2010 midterm elections, the movement organized to push radical right-wing GOP candidates in all Senate and House seats up for re-election. That November, Republicans fared well: they re-gained the majority in the lower chamber by winning 63 seats, and they reduced the margin for the Democratic Party in the Senate by six. Skocpol and Williams also write that at the local level the party's success was even more striking, as it won around 700 seats in state legislatures and six governorships. In the

aftermath of the election, many wondered whether the Tea Party movement might have played a role in the overwhelming success of the GOP; while some concluded that such a locally-based, fragmented group might not have had the necessary resources and leverage to fundamentally tip the balance of an election, Skocpol and Williams argued against such quick judgments.

First and foremost, the authors disprove the thesis that the Tea Party was a purely grassroots movement, which drew strength only from the efforts and finances of common individuals. They argue that the impact of the coalition derived from its multifaceted nature, which did include grassroots activism, but also financing groups interested in leveraging efforts from below "to further their long-term goal of remaking the Republican Party, pushing it towards the hard right on matters of taxation, public spending, and government regulation" (p.12). Finally, as mentioned above with regards to the role of Fox News in building momentum around the movement, conservative media undoubtedly mobilized voters by providing "a steady diet of information and misinformation – including highly emotional claims – that keep Tea Party people in a constant state of anger and fear about the direction of the country and the doings of government officials" (p.13). Their narrative, according to the authors, successfully contributed to the creation of a sense of community, to help "otherwise scattered Tea Parties get together and feel part of something big and powerful" (p.13). As they argue:

> *"the "mass movement" portrayal overlooks the fact that the Tea Party, understood in its entirety, includes media hosts and wealthy political action committees, plus national advocacy groups and self-proclaimed spokespersons—elites that wield many millions of dollars in political contributions and appear all over the media claiming to speak for grassroots activists who certainly have not elected them, and to whom they are not accountable. What kind of mass rebellion is funded by corporate billionaires, like the Koch brothers, led by over-the-hill former GOP kingpins like Dick Armey, and ceaselessly promoted by millionaire media celebrities like Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity?"* (p.11)

In order to achieve their goals, Tea Partiers used such leverage to pressure Republican representatives in siding with their positions, promoting the slashing of public spending and taxation, limitations on the public sector unions and the elimination of regulations on businesses. Their plan was to oust all non-compliant GOPs in favor of more conservative candidates at the next election round.

The clear objective of the movement has been, since the beginning, to remake the GOP "into a much more uncompromising and ideologically principled force […] even further to the right" (p. 155). While Skocpol and Williams argue that most anti-establishment Tea Partiers did not actually identify with the "Republican" label, but would rather consider themselves Independents or simply conservatives, they still would "orbit" around the party, and according to Gallup 62% of Tea Partiers called themselves "conservative Republicans". Virtually all had voted for McCain in 2008, yet they "are more strongly and more angrily opposed to President Obama than other conservatives or Republican-identifiers" (pp. 27-28).

The polarization of the American electorate and, in response, Congress, had been ongoing for decades when the Tea Party emerged. However, Skocpol and Williams argue that up to Obama's first victory, there was still a good degree of willingness to "reach" to the other side of the aisle and compromise. They observe that overall, non-Tea Party Republicans were closer to independents or even democrats on issues such as public spending and the role of government. However, Tea Party activists had the clear goal of challenging Obama's allegedly "socialist" reform program by packing Congress with right-wing conservatives who were unwilling to compromise on almost anything. The authors argue that, in a way, they succeeded.

They began by taking over Republican Party committees, appointing themselves or nominees to shift the GOP from the bottom-up, pushing "Republican candidates and officials to be more staunchly ultra-conservative" (p. 156). Their efforts, according to Skocpol and Williams, led to "an electoral turnaround for Republicans", which proved that America was indeed not "on the verge of a second New Deal and permanent Democratic majorities" (p. 158), as the "coalition of the ascendant" would have led to believe just two years prior. The quick resurgence of the Republican Party is clearly attributed by the authors to overwhelming support for its candidates on the party of Tea Partiers, who showed up to the polls to stop what they saw as America's dangerous turn towards socialism.

Essentially, "grassroots Tea Party protests and local network-building helped the Republican Party escape the defeatism that pervaded party ranks after the massive defeats Republicans suffered in 2008" (p. 160). The movement simply channeled the pre-existing and largely unexpressed energies of American conservatism into the Republican Party. Contextually with the Supreme Court "Citizens United" decision in 2010, which essentially removed campaign funding limitations for groups and corporations, "the various Tea Party funder groups also served the purpose of directing money to conservative candidates without it having to be filtered through the bumbling Republican Party machine – an approach taken by other Republican advocacy groups as well" (p. 160).

Midterm elections usually favor the Republican Party (Skocpol and Williams, 2012). Despite the fact that 2008 had been a highly mobilizing year, with around 63% of the Voting Eligible Population showing up to the polls, two years later the rate fell to 40.3% as "Republicans and older people were revved up to go to the polls, while younger voters and those who might have voted Democratic were unenthusiastic and stayed home in droves" (p.161). The success of the Republican coalition in 2010 was arguably attributable to an overlapping of Tea Party activism with old, white Americans who were on average more disappointed with Obama being in the White House than young, diverse voters. The 2008 election definitely contributed to an enlargement of the age gap; Skocpol and Williams recognize that in the 2006 midterms voters over 65 "essentially split their party support, giving 52% to Democratic House candidates". However, "in 2008, the GOP, led by John McCain, won the 65-and over vote by an 8% margin (53% to 45%)" (p. 162).

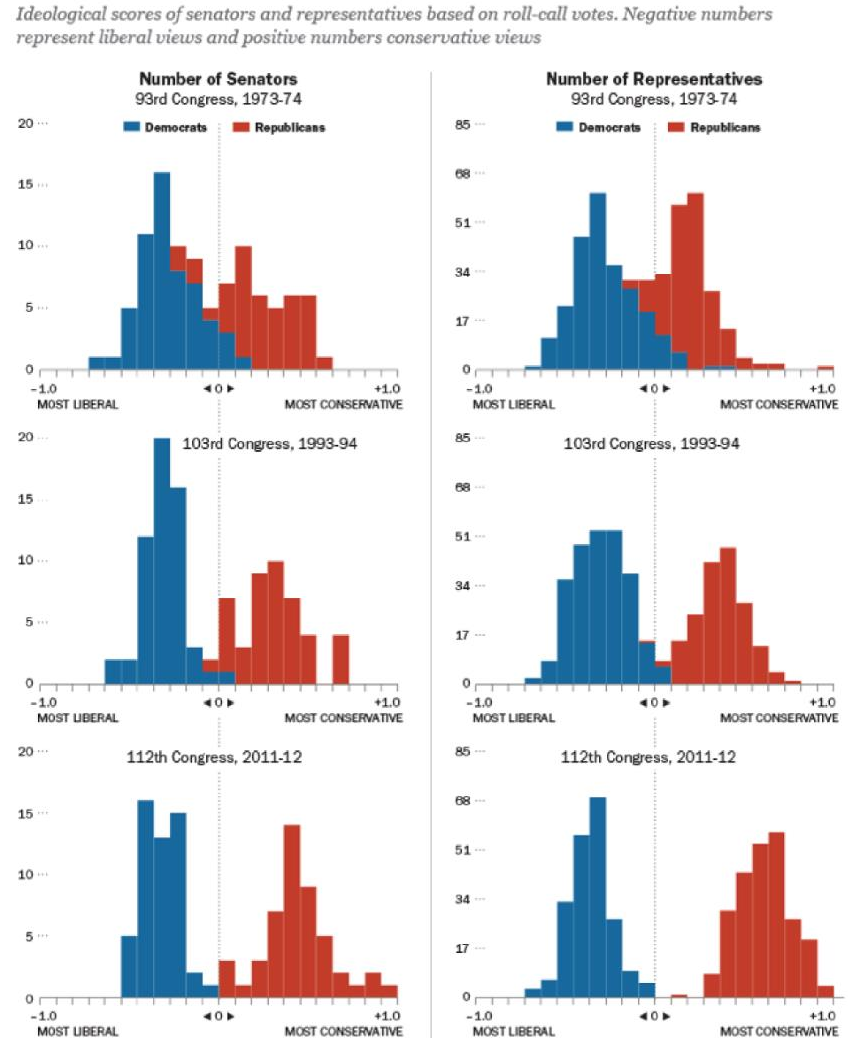
Tea Party activists, on the other hand, were well-organized; they would gather periodically and discuss the necessary steps to take to advance their agenda, and this arguably helped their success. “The bottom line, then, is that Tea Party forces—especially grassroots participants and the favorable media attention they got—may not have made the difference in November 2010 between GOP victory and defeat. But the Tea Partiers and their adoring media surely helped re-inspire grass roots conservatives, set a national agenda for the election, and claim a Republican-wave election as vindication for a particular, extreme conservative ideology” (p. 163). The authors argue that “local Tea Party takeovers of GOP committees are likely to matter – along with local Tea Party efforts to exert watchdog pressures on elected representatives […] Ongoing organization matters; turning out for meetings matters; repeatedly contacting legislators matters. And so does taking direct control of GOP organs” (p. 182).

Skocpol and Williams cite the shift in the ideological composition of the 112th Congress (2011-2012) as the ultimate proof of the transformative impact of the Tea Party movement. They argue that the efforts of activists to back and elect ultra-conservative Republicans led to “a new phase in the extreme ideological polarization of U.S. politics” (p.169). On the one hand, even formerly moderate Republicans who kept their seats, fearing backlash from the more conservative fringes, often rejected opportunities for compromise with the Democrats; on the other, most of the newly elected Representatives, as the authors argue, “are even further to the right than their GOP predecessors” on most policy issues, for a total of about 77% of new GOP Congressmen. Such claims of a large ideological shift are seemingly confirmed by Pew Research data on the ideological scores of Senators and Representatives. The figure below shows the evolution of Congressional roll-call voting during the last forty years, up to 2011.

As shown, in the 1970s both in the Senate and the House of Representatives, overlapping between Republicans and Democrats would be quite common. This implies that the former would vote according to more moderate or even liberal positions, while the latter would occasionally align with more conservative proposals. This dynamic aligns with the evidence of greater ideological variability within the parties, as the existence of more conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans was a normal occurrence. Twenty years later, similar compromises had become more rare, and the two coalitions had already moved towards more liberal positions (for the Democrats) and more conservative ones (for Republicans). The 112th Congress represents a more extremized version of that dynamic; in figure 14, the “zero” line in the middle, ideally representing moderatism, now clearly separates the two voting blocs. There is no more overlapping between Democrats and Republicans, implying a lack of compromise, and the latter have moved more clearly towards the “most conservative” positions, particularly in the House.

Figure 14: Progression of ideological polarization in Congress (1973-2011)

Source: Pew Research Center data (the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)



Such a polarized Congress contrasts even with other highly contentious eras of U.S. politics, such as the 1980s. On one hand, President Ronald Reagan proposed an anti-tax and deregulatory policy that was still foreign to the Democratic platform at the time, and his contribution to the conservative turn of the GOP undoubtedly polarized a partisan dynamic where overlapping and compromise had been quite common until the 1970s. On the other, however, in Congress he still "dealt with federal budget deficits much as fiscally cautious Republicans before him had done, by arriving at compromises with Democrats that included tax increases as well as spending cuts" (p. 171). After the 2010 midterms, however, ideological sorting has become more extreme, mostly as a result of what Skocpol and William attribute to "Republicans moving ever further rightward while the Democrats mostly stay put" (p. 170).

CHAPTER FOUR: DONALD TRUMP AND THE SIXTH PARTY SYSTEM

Tea Partiers have seemingly succeeded, through their systematic grassroots efforts, in pushing the alignment of the GOP with ultra-conservatism, supporting candidacies of radical right-wingers at the local, state and national level. The gridlock that has resulted from this shift, together with a generalized polarization of politics, has undoubtedly posed obstacles to more progressive reforms, often preventing *any* reform at all. Ultimately, the post-2010 conservative turn of the Republican Party paved the way for the changes that have occurred in U.S. party and electoral politics since 2016.

4.1 The realignment of 2016

In November 2016, Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States, defying the expectations of many expert commentators. His rough rhetoric and personality had led many to doubt even the remote possibility of his election. In some ways, they were correct, particularly with respect to his *popularity*; although the Republican Party obtained 304 votes in the Electoral College, "only" 63 million Americans voted for him with respect to Clinton's 65.8 million (270toWin.com, n.d.). As one of the few examples of mismatch between the popular vote and the Electoral College, the election of 2016 reflects the picture of a clearly divided America.

Writing from the perspective of Trump voters, one of whom supported Obama back in 2008, Troy Olson and Gavin Wax reflect on what might have been the causes for the missed Democratic realignment of the 2000s – and in turn, of Trump's success. The "demographics coalition" that, according to Judis and Teixeira, would have carried the Democrats to victory for the foreseeable future proved to be only a temporary alignment, determined in large part by dissatisfaction with the incumbent administration in the wake of the financial collapse. While the GOP was building its support in "a counter-pivot somewhere else in the country and somewhere else in the coalition" (p. 86), the Democrats were becoming increasingly popular in few concentrated areas: the urban centers populated by young, well-educated professionals (what the authors call *ideopolises*).

The focus on major metropolitan areas has, according to Olson and Wax, produced two major consequences for the Democratic Party. Firstly, the growing focus on a middle-ground liberalism that could cater to professionals and college educated Americans has alienated the working class of the Heartland, which in the past few years has clearly been aligning with the Republican Party. Moreover, the concentration of Democratic consensus in specific parts of the country has weakened the party's strength in the Electoral College, contraposed to the success of the GOP in that aspect; "in a sense, even if the Democratic coalition of

everybody is demographically diverse and rich, it is not wide enough geographically nor is it deep enough in difficult years" (Olson and Wax, 2024, p. 94). With regards to the urban-rural divide, the Democrats have been winning progressively less counties outside of major urban centers in the past few election cycles – limiting their chances of success. The authors argue that the once-Democratic identity as the "party of the common man" has been delegitimized, and that the Republican Party has capitalized on this failure in order to favor the realignment of the working class.

The authors refer to data, extrapolated from studies conducted by the Pew Research Center, which suggests that the Democratic consensus has been eroding in middle-class communities. At the national level, and in major counties populated by Americans with a "shared middle income" of around 50-60 points, Democrats have consistently lost votes between the election of 2008 and that of 2016. Table 9 below includes a summarized list containing some of the 18 counties in the authors' analysis.

Table 9: support for the Democratic Party in middle class communities in the Heartland and Midwest (2008-2016)

Source: Olson and Wax, 2024

	Obama 2008 (in %)	**Clinton 2016 (in %)**	**Dem difference**	**Share middle income**
National	53	48	-5%	51
Johnstown, PA	50	30	-20%	56
Scranton, PA	57	43	-14%	56
Reading, PA	54	43	-11%	57
Monroe, MI	51	36	-15%	58
Eau Claire, WI	58	46	-12%	61
Jackson, MI	50	37	-13%	56

On the contrary, table 10 contains data showing a dramatic increase in Democratic support in the wealthiest Congressional districts between 2008 and the 2018 midterm elections.

Table 10: Democratic support in the wealthiest districts by Real GDP (2008-2018)
Source: Olson and Wax, 2024

	Wealthiest 10	**Wealthiest 25**	**Wealthiest 50**
2008	8/10 Democratic	18/25 Democratic	31/50 Democratic
2018	10/10 Democratic	25/25 Democratic	45/50 Democratic

In October of 2024, Stanford Professor David W. Brady intervened in a conference promoted by the Italian Center on Electoral Studies (CISE) at LUISS University, titled *Neck and Neck in the Last Mile: The 2024 US Presidential Election,* in which he analyzed the recent changes within both the Democratic and Republican voting coalitions.

Referring to data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) database, he concluded that while Democratic support fell among the poorest whites, it did rise among the wealthiest. Figure 15 shows that, until the 2000 election, more poor white Americans identified as Democrats, and voted accordingly, than as Republicans. In 1996, the year of Bill Clinton's re-election, around 65% of the white working class seemingly voted for him, contrary to nearly 35% aligning with the opposition. Four years later, an interesting dynamic becomes clear; from the beginning to the end of George W. Bush's first term, there is almost an exact fifty-fifty split among poor whites, between those voting for the Republican Party and those voting for the Democrats. Finally, after a brief return to 20th century dynamics around 2008, where more would align with the left than the right (although not to the same extent as before 2000), in the post-Obama era support for the Democratic Party has decreased dramatically among working class whites, from around 55% in 2008 to 40% in 2016.

On the other hand, figure 16 arguably confirms the claim, made by many commentators on both sides, that the Democratic Party is realigning as the coalition of the elites, while the GOP is building an image that caters successfully to blue-collar men and women. Until 2008, the wealthiest whites would overwhelmingly identify as Republicans, with an interesting spike up to 80% precisely in 2008, which corresponded to a record low of support for the Democratic candidate (20%). In the following years, the rate of pro-GOP wealthy whites has sharply declined, reaching a record low of about 50% in 2016, seemingly remaining constant since. At the beginning of the Trump era, more wealthy white Americans thus identify as Democrat than Republican, and although the margin is not particularly large, these dynamics indicate important changes in the income and wealth composition of the voting coalitions for both parties – and a subversion of the traditional 20th century order, according to which the poorest sections of the population would typically be more liberal, and the wealthiest more conservative.

The Democratic coalition has thus been weakening, while the GOP has gained consensus particularly in those areas and among those groups that had been strongholds of Democratic consensus in the New Deal and immediate postwar era. Olson and Wax's interpretation of the failures of the Obama coalition is seemingly confirmed by the events of 2016, where an anti-establishment and populist candidate won the election, running against those elites that the Democrats were being accused of cooperating with. Trump won in 206 counties that had once been Republican, and 181 of those still voted for him in 2020. In a way, according to Olson and Wax, the Republican Party might have come closer than its counterpart in building a New Deal-like coalition which is diverse in terms of the ethnicity, degree of education, age and geographical composition of its electors.

Figure 15: two-party presidential vote among poor whites (1990-2020), source: Brady, D.W. (ANES data)

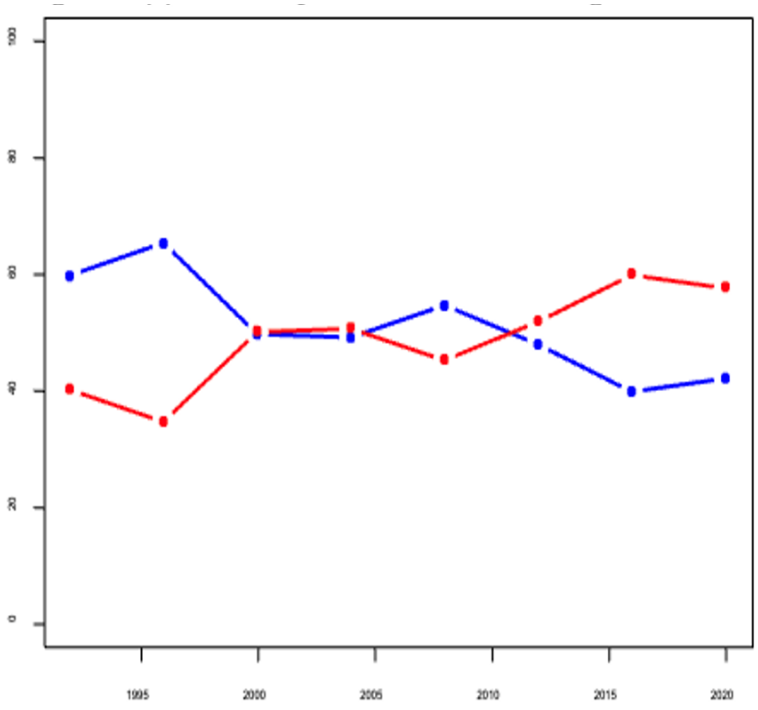
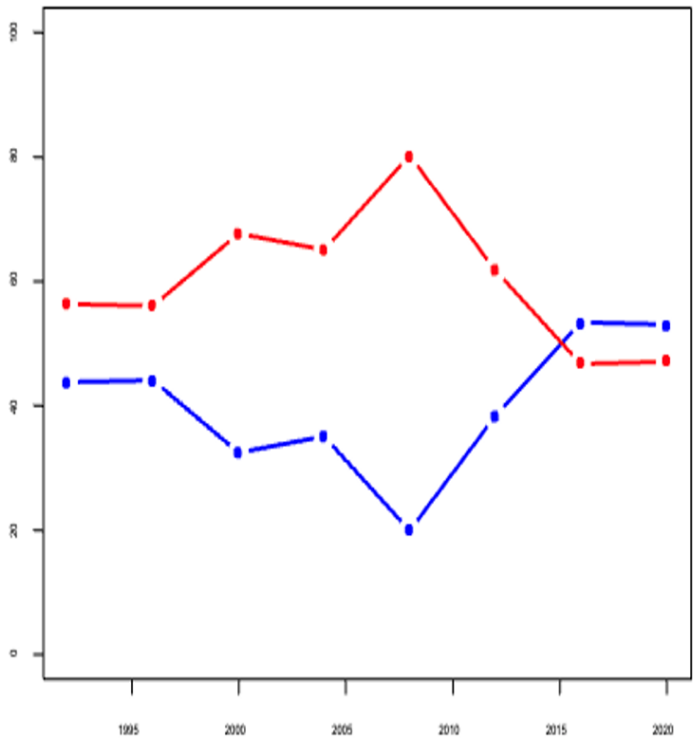


Figure 16: two-party presidential vote among wealthiest whites (1990 - 2020), source: Brady, D.W. (ANES data)



In their interpretation of the 2016 results, Zito and Todd reflect on the changes that have occurred in the voting coalition of both parties. They too argue that the Democrats have been gaining momentum among the college-educated, racially diverse and young communities of the big metropolitan centers on the East and West coasts. The weakness of the coalition is that it is highly geographically concentrated; on the other hand, the GOP can now count on a widely distributed base which sweeps across the whole country, with important bastions in the South and post-industrial Midwest. Thus, because the Electoral College, as the ultimate determinant of elections results, does not favor the party that has high *concentration* of votes, but the one which has high *distribution* of votes, Republicans hold an advantage in this realignment period.

"The Great Revolt": the realignment of the blue collar whites

As mentioned above, the first signs of the weaknesses of Obama's "new American majority" were already present before 2016; one of the most obvious is the detachment of America's rural and post-industrial Heartland from the Democratic coalition, which either did not support the Party's candidate in 2008 and 2012, or was deeply disappointed by the results of his policies.

In 2018, reporter Salena Zito and political strategist Brad Todd first published a book, titled *The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition reshaping American politics*, which contained surveys and interviews on the supposed realignment of the Midwest with the Republican Party in 2016. They spoke to people living in the most rural and isolated counties of the Rust Belt, in Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Iowa. Their interviewees had all supported Trump in his contest against Hillary Rodham Clinton, and many of them had been lifelong Democrats who had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012. The authors focus on the realignment of the working class, but the protagonists of their book also include college-educated professionals in the Heartland, suburban populations and evangelicals, as to show that the Trump coalition was actually much more diverse than initially thought.

Among the former Democratic voters who turned to Donald Trump in 2016, the testimony of Ed Harry is particularly poignant. The authors would ascribe him to the "unforeseen realignment that happened across the Great Lakes region in hundreds of communities […] flipping Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Iowa into the Republican side of the Electoral College after serving as what journalist Ron Brownstein dubbed the reliable industrial Democratic "Blue Wall" for decades" (p. 2). Ed Harry is a Democrat. He has been as long as he can remember, and even as a Trump voter in 2016, he remained registered with his party. Involved in the public sector unions since the 1970s upon his return from Vietnam, and a union arbitrator, he represented the stereotypical die-hard Democrat of the industrial heartland of America. Until, as he declares, "when the establishment Democrats stopped caring about his people, he stopped caring about them" (p. 27).

In an area whose wealth had essentially been made by the industrial revolution, Harry argues that the free trade agreements that both Republican and Democratic administrations alike promoted destroyed businesses by incentivizing "corporations to base themselves overseas" (p. 28). He explains his shift to Trump in a rather straightforward manner: "my party, the party that was supposed to be the party of the working guy, the guy I stood up for and worked for all of my career was no longer part of this new ascending Democratic coalition. Blue collar America essentially had the door shut in its face" (p. 28).

Ed Harry lives in Luzerne County, in Northeastern Pennsylvania. In the 2008 election, Obama won 9% more than McCain there, and in 2012 he beat Romney by 5%. In 2016, Trump won over 20 percentage points more than Clinton in the county, which according to Zito and Todd "accounted for nearly 60 percent of his margin statewide" (p. 31). Harry refers to the fact that according to him the shift "did not happen overnight" (p. 32) and that the dissatisfaction of the people with Washington elites, especially from the Democratic Party which had administered their states for decades, had been a slow but steady process. It is precisely this frustration with how party politics had been conducted until then the fil rouge which connects Trump voters; Harry himself refers: "what I liked about Trump was that it was more than about Trump, it was about people,

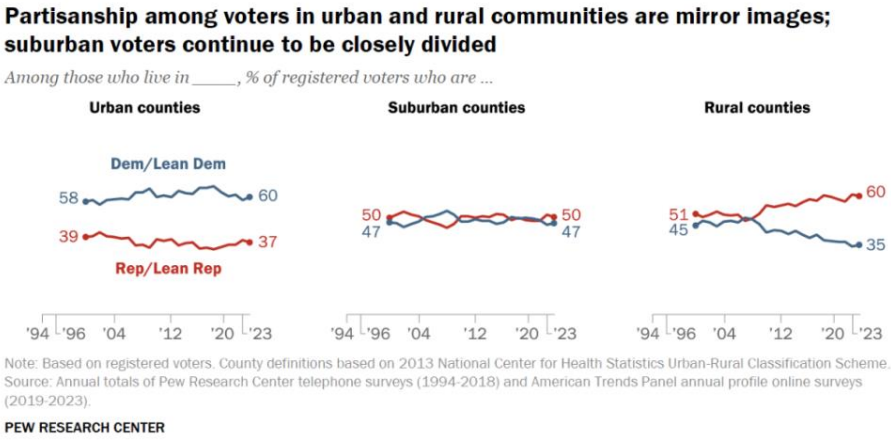
it was about being part of something bigger than just me" (p.34). It is precisely Trump's lack of political history which has attracted many of his supporters who appreciated him seemingly being an outsider to Washington.

Trump won in these communities, and if – as many would argue it has – "their political behavior in 2016 becomes an affiliation and not a dalliance, they have the potential to realign the American political construct and perhaps the country's commercial and cultural presumptions as well" (p.3). Many of the Democratic "deserters" had long been dissatisfied with the direction the party had taken, increasingly focused on cultural issues and much less on what they perceived as the most urgent matters for the ordinary American. Most areas of rural and post-industrial U.S. had not yet recovered from the Great Recession, despite the fact that "nationally, the number of employed Americans had bounced back to pre-recession levels by 2014" (p.4). Reflecting the motivations of most of the former die-hard Democrats, one of the respondents in Zito and Todd's book declares: "I am that kind of voter that was hiding in plain sight and no one saw coming. I was right here all along […] something just gave in within me" (p.5).

These people were the "last, and most overlooked, clause […] of the coalition of the ascendant" (p.11). When speaking of the broad base that had rallied behind Obama, Brownstein had referred to: "a combination of the young, minorities, and women joined with *just enough blue-collar Midwestern whites* to put the president over the top" (p.11). In many ways, "Trump gained a foothold with the same rural and industrial voters in economically challenged Rust Belt states who had either stuck with Obama in 2012 or stayed at home" (p.11). Some observers had already rejected the inevitability of the Democratic realignment as a result of an increasingly diversified electorate. In the 2012 election, in fact, around 91 million white voters had showed up to the polls with respect to the 98 million of the Obama-McCain contest – suggesting an untapped potential.

Figure 17: growing support for the GOP in rural communities since the mid-1990s

Source: Pew Research Center, 2024a



In the past few years, the disaffection of the working class for the Democratic Party has been the object of an interesting range of studies. In 2023, sociologists Theda Skocpol and Lainey Newman published a book titled *Rust Belt Union Blues: Why Working-Class Voters are Turning Away from the Democratic Party*. Focusing on western Pennsylvania, the authors investigate the relationship between declining union membership and de-alignment from the Democrats – attempting to answer the question "why are industrial workers in America today less likely to think that the Democratic Party is on their side?".

The loss of Democratic consensus is attributed both to changes in the "group identity" provided by unions and dissatisfaction with the free trade policies promoted by Democratic administrations. Skocpol and Newman too conducted their research by talking directly to blue collar Americans, declaring that the vast majority of steel workers, for example, as well as unionists, have by now switched party affiliation. Retirees have observed that party loyalties for most of the 20th century were mostly motivated by a core belief in the fact that one – the Democratic Party – was the party of the working man, and the other – the GOP – protected other interests that openly went against their own. The popularity of unions, and their overwhelming support for the Democrats, contributed to fostering a community that was committed to supporting the party of the "common man". Essentially, "voting Democrat was not just about particular issues for unionized workers, instead it was in large part about socially embedded identities and mutuality, about *who they were*".

From the mid-20th century and up until 20 years ago, union membership was a strong predictor of support for the Democratic Party; as of 1980, for example, the correlation between the percentage of union members and support for the Democratic presidential candidate in Pennsylvania was 0.7. In 2016, the correlation had decreased to less than 0.1. The decline of unions' appeal and power, attributable to a variety of factors including decreased funding, technological changes, globalization or union-busting practices, have produced important political effects by weakening the social ties among workers, and in turn their sense of

belonging to the Democratic base (Newman and Skocpol, 2023). In contemporary American politics, Skocpol and Newman argue that the rural/urban divide is a much more accurate predictor of voting behavior, with residents living outside of the major cities much more likely to vote Republican. Recent data seemingly confirms this assumption; in the exit polls conducted by CNN in both the 2020 and 2024 elections, Donald Trump was much more successful in rural and suburban rather than urban areas.

Providing a sociological explanation, which expanded beyond "the political and economic implications of membership" (DeSmith, 2023), Skocpol and Newman argue that the realignment of the rural working class with the Republican Party may have been encouraged by organizations – such as the National Rifle Association and "gun clubs" – which came to occupy the "spaces" that unions once had in those communities. In her article on the book's publication, DeSmith writes that "as the union's social role eroded […] workers filled the void with other, often more conservative groups". Essentially, the authors respond to those who wonder why "blue-collar workers keep voting against their own economic self-interest" by arguing that the success of the Republican Party in those counties has been favored more by changes in the local communities than "pragmatic" evaluation of the relationship between class and the economy.

Considering that the Democratic Party's economic policies in the past decades have also espoused free trade capitalism – which has undoubtedly caused additional issues to the average American worker – it should come to no surprise why similar studies, including Zito and Todd's book, consider Trump's victory as the end result of such process of de-alignment from the Democrats. Workers nurture deep-rooted resentments, which Skocpol and Newman observed to be "grounded in a sense that they had been left behind […] For many remaining Rust Belt workers, unionized or not, the Democratic Party seems increasingly wedded to metropolitan constituents and no longer locally present or tuned to the concerns of other groups once loyal to the party".

Whether or not 2016 represents a realignment, according to Zito and Todd, depends largely on the durability of the Trump coalition. Considering that many of them were attracted by an unconventional candidate who attacked the Washington elites regardless of their party affiliation, the question stands of whether, in absence of a Trump-like personality, the not-die-hard Republicans will remain aligned with the GOP. The diversity of the coalition, while a reason for the overwhelming Republican success in 2016, might also constitute a weak point if not taken care of. As Zito and Todd predicted in 2019, "the challenge for Republicans is to keep the Trump coalition intact in rural and small-town geography, while preserving the pre-Trump partisan breakdown of suburbia – a feat that will require keeping longtime Republicans voting their party and newer Trump voters voting their cause" (p. 236).

The end of the "Blue Wall"?

The realignment of the Midwestern working class in 2016 is the result of a complex and long-term process. In their 2024 publication *The Emerging Republican Majority*, Judis and Teixeira illustrate how traditional components of the Democratic coalition had been slowly detaching from the Party since Nixon's presidency. With a Democratic Party that was increasingly perceived as too "ideologically progressive", groups such as the white working class were attracted by the opposition – in 1972, 70% of them voted to re-elect Nixon and by the 1970s the average of white working men and women voting for Democratic candidates had fallen to 35%, compared to the 55% of the 1960-1964 period. Then, despite Carter's 1976 success, the weakening of the New Deal coalition continued, and Reagan notably won on a platform of deregulation, lower income tax and pro-business policies which had become popular by then. In 1980 and 1984, he "won support from an average 61 percent of the white working class, while his Democratic opponents, Carter and Walter Mondale, won an average of 35 percent" (p. 16).

Judis and Teixeira mention the case of Pennsylvania and many of its counties – including Luzerne, where Ed Harry lives – that had not voted for a Republican in decades and then swung for Reagan in 1980, aligning with the GOP until the 1990s. Similarly to Trump's achievements four decades later, Ronald Reagan won two elections by combining more "traditional" Republicans, however uncomfortable with his "social conservatism", and "new" supporters – namely the white working class, the South and those "social conservatives" such as Evangelicals and Catholics who appreciated his stance on issues like abortion.

As for 2016, the loss of Democratic support among traditional components of the coalition continued, contributing to Trump's victory in battleground states such as the "Blue Wall" of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. In an article written for USA Today in the wake of the defeat, Craig Gilbert, Todd Spangler and Bill Laitner attribute Trump's success to the inability – or unwillingness – of the Clinton campaign to cater to that region and in particular to its rural and blue-collar white population, which had notoriously supported the Democratic Party. The youth and African American residents did not show up for Clinton either; in Pennsylvania Black support for the Democrats in the exit polls had fallen by 3%, and her decision to not make stops in Wisconsin during the campaign is said by the authors to have contributed to the low margin of victory among voters under 30 (4%), a sharp decline compared to Obama's 23% in 2012. In Milwaukee her margin fell by 27,000 votes with respect to the previous election, which corresponded to "roughly the size of her statewide defeat".

The data becomes even more significant if compared to the performance of the (winning) Republican Party; with respect to Mitt Romney in 2012, Donald Trump obtained nearly the same number of votes (1.4 million) in Wisconsin (WI), but was able to secure the state due to the Democrats' poor performance. In terms

of the key groups which sided with him, the hypothesis forwarded by Zito and Todd that the support of the working class helped boost the performance of the GOP is seemingly confirmed by data which attests Trump's popularity among "non-college" whites in WI at around 28%, a jump of 20% with respect to 2012. In rural areas, whose populations "constitute a major swing vote", Trump won by 29 points. In this respect, the authors highlight how, besides him, "no GOP nominee had won the rural vote in Wisconsin by more than 10 points in recent decades".

In Detroit, Michigan, the Democratic Party lost 50,000 votes in the span of four years, as many – particularly in the Black community – did not show up to vote, while Trump secured the most "Blue-collar" counties. POLITICO reports that the calculations made by the Clinton campaign projected a 5-point margin for the Democratic Party in the state, despite communications from on-the-ground activists and organizers of growing dissatisfaction with Clinton among unionists, women, young and African American voters. The lack of a proper campaign strategy in the formerly Blue Wall industrial state allegedly favored Trump's victory, despite the fact that he earned less votes than George W.H. Bush in 2004 – who had not secured Michigan's electors (Dovere, 2016). Essentially, although Trump's coalition included already in 2016 a wide variety of voters, e.g. Evangelicals, right-wing extremists and more "traditional" Republicans, the wide support of blue-collar workers and rural communities solidified an alignment that had begun in the 1970s and put Trump in the White House.

Of course, the margin of victory within these traditionally Democratic cohorts was not so overwhelming as to explain the GOP's success alone; however, data on the performance of both candidates in the key battleground states reveals that it was not much Trump's success, more so Hillary Clinton's failures, which determined the "Blue Wall" shift and eventually gave the GOP enough electoral votes to win the election. This assumption can be confirmed looking at state-by-state results; in now-solidly Republican states in the South and Heartland, Trump won by typically wide margins. In Mississippi, for example, he won with 58.3%, compared to Clinton's 39.7%; in Louisiana, the percentages were 58.1% and 38.4% respectively. In both cases, differences in popular vote terms hovered around 200,000 – 400,000 votes cast. Typically "central" and scarcely populated states such as Montana and Wyoming also went to Trump with percentage differences of 40 - 50% with respect to Clinton (Politico, 2016).

Numbers on the industrial Midwest tell a different story. All of the three components of the Blue Wall went to Donald Trump with an extremely tight margin; in Wisconsin, the GOP candidate obtained 1,409,467 popular votes (i.e. 47.9% of those cast), while Clinton settled at 1,382,210 (46.9%); Michigan's sixteen electoral votes went to the Republican Party by a difference of precisely 11,612 popular votes (a percentage difference of 47.6% vs 47.3%); finally, in Pennsylvania, Clinton lost to Trump by a little over 68,200 votes and 1.2 percentage points (Politico, 2016). In a scenario where these three states would have voted for the

Democrats, Hillary Clinton would have won the election with 278 Electoral Votes, and Trump would have lost it with 260. The extremely tight margins by which he won the Midwest thus suggest that a small number of voters might have made the difference (including the working class), and that without their contribution the results would have been different.

4.2 Republicans and Democrats (2016 – 2024)

In the analysis of the last eight years, an important premise has to be made: 2020 was a rather peculiar year, and the presidential election which took place in November had an equally peculiar outcome. Joseph R. Biden, former Vice President with the Obama administration, won with nearly 81.2 million popular votes, the highest number since FDR's reelection in 1936. He won key states, such as Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin in the Midwest, which secured an Electoral College majority of 306 over Trump's 232 (270toWin.com, n.d.). In Congress, the House of Representatives' race resulted in a toss-up, with the Republican v. Democrat seats being respectively 213 and 222 in number (Olson and Wax, 2024). In the Senate, the Democratic Party flipped four seats – the Republicans one – and established a 50-50 majority (New York Times, 2021) that Vice President Kamala Harris could break in case of a tie when voting.

Table 11: analysis of presidential elections data (2016-2024)
Sources: The American Presidency Project, the US Elections Project and the Federal Election Commission

Election year	Turnout	VEP*	GOP votes	DEM votes	% of turnout (VEP)	% of Dem vote (turnout)	% of Rep vote (turnout)
2016	136,787,187	230,931,921	62,984,828	65,853,514	59.2%	48%	46%
2020	158,427,986	242,690,810	74,223,975	81,283,501	65.3%	51%	47%
2024	156,302,318	244,666,890	77,303,573	75,019,257	63.9%	48%	49%

(*) Pew Research defines the Voting Eligible Population as an estimate which "subtracts noncitizens and ineligible felons and adds overseas eligible citizens"

At first glance, the 2020 results seemingly disprove the thesis, presented by Olson and Wax as well as by Zito and Todd in their books, that the Trump coalition had produced a realignment. However, the election of 2020 was clearly influenced by international crises, the most impactful being the COVID-19 pandemic, and domestic issues, such as the Trump administration's response to the health emergency and the economic crisis that inevitably ensued, as well as the Black Lives Matter protests. Without a doubt, Biden's victory was not motivated *only* by short-term issues – with respect to 2016, Democrats gained nearly 16 million votes and the campaign was highly mobilizing – but they have reasonably played a part in swaying consensus or motivating inactive (and newly enfranchised) voters.

Table 11 shows electoral data from the last three contests. Between 2016 and 2020, a few elements have changed; firstly, turnout rates have increased as the Voting Eligible Population (VEP) has expanded by almost 12 million units – and turnout has jumped from 136,7 million (59.2%) to 158,4 million (65.3%) Americans showing up to the polls (implying that the elections after 2016 have mobilized a big portion of formally inactive voters, besides the newly enfranchised ones). The measure of turnout according to the VEP is quite a recent methodology; prior to 1980, most polls would measure it as a proportion of the Voting Age Population, but since then – as Pew reports – the votes cast/VEP ratio observed in 2020 has been the highest (with an increase of over 13 percentage points since 1980) (DeSilver, 2021). This expansion of the active electorate clearly favored the Democrats in 2020, who increased the proportion of votes from 48% to 51%, but Republicans too have reaped the benefits – despite losing, Donald Trump obtained 12 million votes more in 2020 than 2016. As the world "returned to normal" in 2024, less Americans – compared to four years prior – showed up to the polls, but as the size of the electorate seemingly shrunk, the turnout rates remained the same. As the losing party, Democrats saw a decrease of consensus, returning to the 2016 levels, while the GOP's rose of two percentage points.

The spike in turnout in 2020 is consistent with data from a Gallup poll conducted in September, in which 74% of respondents declared to be highly concerned with the results of the election. Since 2004, Gallup has observed that whenever similar rates were registered in the "attention to the election" category, that would translate to high turnout rates (Saad, 2020). At the same time, 67% of Americans reported "high enthusiasm" about voting, with 80% for Democrats – a jump of 12% from the previous high, in 2008 – and 75% for Republicans. These numbers seemingly confirm the assumption that, because of the context in which the 2020 elections took place, many more Americans were concerned with the results and were highly preoccupied with who would become the next president.

The tables below provide a summary of electoral data from the 2016, 2020 and 2024 presidential races in the three key states of the Blue Wall, with the addition of Georgia from 2020 to 2024, as the state that "flipped" blue and determined Biden's victory against Trump.

Table 12: presidential election of 2016 - data for Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania
Source: POLITICO, 2016

	2016		
STATE	**WI (1O E.V.)**	**MI (16 E.V.)**	**PA (20 E.V.)**
TRUMP	1,409,467	2,279,805	2,912,941
CLINTON	1,382,210	2,268,193	2,844,705
MARGIN	27,257	11,612	68,236

Table 13: presidential election of 2020 - data for Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Georgia
Source: POLITICO, 2020

	2020			
STATE	**WI (1O E.V.)**	**MI (16 E.V.)**	**PA (2O E.V.)**	**GA (16 E.V.)**
TRUMP	1,610,184	2,649,852	3,377,674	2,461,854
BIDEN	1,630,866	2,804,040	3,458,229	2,473,633
MARGIN	20,682	154,188	80,555	11,779

Table 14: presidential election of 2024 - data for Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Georgia
Source: POLITICO, 2024

	2024			
STATE	**WI (1O E.V.)**	**MI (16 E.V.)**	**PA (2O E.V.)**	**GA (16 E.V.)**
TRUMP	1,697,626	2,816,636	3,543,308	2,663,117
HARRIS	1,668,229	2,736,533	3,423,042	2,548,017
MARGIN	29,397	80,103	120,266	115,100

Compared to 2016, the Democratic Party has fared better in 2020 in the Blue Wall states that had so strongly determined Trump's victory ahead of his first term. Joseph Biden won all 46 Electoral Votes, plus 16 coming from Georgia, securing the presidency with an Electoral College majority of 306 over 232 – the exact "mirror" of the 2016 election. Notably, the margins of victory were greater than four years prior, with the exception of Wisconsin – which Biden won by a little over 20,000 votes – second only to Georgia's 11,779. At first glance, it might thus appear that the Democratic Party recovered from the previous defeat, perhaps even "winning back" those groups that had defected to the GOP. In context, however, one detail must be kept in mind; similarly to nation-wide results, while the consensus for the Democrats increased, so did that for the Republican Party. The difference between data from 2016 and from 2020 hovers around 250 – 600 thousand popular votes more for the Democratic Party, and 200 – 460 thousand more for the GOP.

At the national level, while the Democratic consensus has heavily oscillated – 65.8 million votes in 2016, 81.2 million in 2020 and 75 million in 2024 – the GOP has registered a constant increase – respectively, 62.9, 74.2 and 77.3 – even when it lost the Presidential election (270towin.com). These results might suggest that Trump too enlarged his electoral base by a considerable amount, and that despite his defeat, the durability of the new Republican coalition could not yet be called into question.

The success of the Democratic Party in 2020 is also overshadowed by the results of the most recent presidential race, in November 2024. Donald Trump won securing all the states that had "flipped" for Biden, and maintained a strong advantage in those areas that have now become bulwarks of Republican consensus. With respect to 2020, moreover, the Democrats *lost* around 35,100 and 67,500 votes in Pennsylvania and Michigan respectively – and their gains in Wisconsin and Georgia were contained well within the 75,000 threshold. The margins of victory for Trump dramatically increased in Pennsylvania and Georgia, the two states were the GOP made the biggest improvements from 2020. In particular, POLITICO reports that, in Georgia, the GOP won with a margin of over 100,000 votes more against Harris than it had against Biden.

Clearly, the election of 2016 paved the way for an era of American politics characterized by Republican successes, but without the landslides of the Nixon or Reagan era. Nowadays, both parties count on quite "stable" coalitions that are increasingly divided along ideological lines – making bipartisan consensus in Congress and in public opinion more difficult. Elections have become closer, with the winning party securing the victory by margins of 2-3% of the popular vote and numbers in the Electoral College which hardly surpass the 300s.

Comparing the results of 2016 or 2024 with other election years in which Republicans won the White House highlights the peculiarity of the contemporary party system. In 1972, Richard Nixon won re-election against his opponent George McGovern; the President was confirmed for another four (then turned two because of Watergate) years by more than 46,7 million Americans over 28,9 million (270 to Win, 2016). This

difference of nearly 18 million votes between the winning and the losing candidate is in contrast with more recent elections, such as 2016, in which not only did the President-elect lose the popular vote, but the difference between the two coalitions amounted to a little more than 3 million. The normalization of such close elections is a clear symptom of a highly polarized, split party system and voter coalitions.

The trend which is taking American politics towards increasing polarization has erased one key component of strong electoral victories: the ability of one party to appeal to the more "moderate" or "dissident" streams within the electoral bases of its opponent, thus securing a significant majority of the vote. As a result of an electorate essentially split in half, therefore, the winning party, whether the GOP or the Democrats, does not enjoy the strong majority required to pass more meaningful and systematic reforms – also considering the frequent "cohabitation" with an opposite-majority House of Representatives and a Senate controlled by extremely tight margins.

Ultimately, while it is clear that the GOP is enjoying a political phase as the "new majority" party, analyzing how and if its electoral coalition has changed since Donald Trump's first victory might be useful in shining a light on its future.

In this evaluation, Paul Kleppner's "checklist" for realigning elections proves once again to be a useful tool, and the impact of 2016 will be analyzed in terms of shifts in consensus, party loyalty, party polarization, and the popularization of a new ideology.

However, there is an important distinction to make between this period and all realigning eras since the first party system emerged. Firstly, secular realignment theory poses that such large-scale changes do not occur in a short period of time, therefore the causes and consequences of the 2016 election will be truly visible a few years from now, and the one contained in the following sections is an incomplete and imperfect analysis. Secondly, a "realigning election" can only be called once enough time has passed, and the new majority has consolidated in the next few cycles. Since 2016, the United States has voted in only two other presidential contests, and although a pattern of "mini-realignments" is already visible, it is too early to evaluate their impact and durability. Thus, 2016 is here considered as the start of a new period for U.S. politics, which may produce a seventh party system, but that might become clear in the next decades.

Evolution of the Trump coalition

Between 2020 and 2024, Donald Trump has further consolidated the support of groups who had already secured his victory in 2016, but he also gained among other sections of the electorate that have long been part of the Democratic coalition.

In 2023, author Patrick Ruffini published a piece on POLITICO analyzing the evolution of working class support for the Republican Party in the recent past. As mentioned, this trend has been ongoing for quite a while, and a significant portion of the working men and women of Midwestern America had already shifted their alliances to the GOP before 2016. He observes how, ahead of the 2024 elections, the race appeared to be incredibly close, and not only did Trump seemingly maintain the consensus among the white working class, but he also gained popularity among non-white working men and women – a traditionally Democratic bulwark. Similarly, a Pew Research summary of the main features of the Republican electorate ahead of the election shows an increase in the rate of non-white voters (of which the majority, 14.7%, would be Hispanic) – as opposed to the "white" population whose numbers have decreased from 93% about two decades ago to 79% in 2024.

Such evidence seems to suggest that the axiom for which Republicans would only ever win among white, non-college educated Americans, while the rest of the country would be overwhelmingly Democratic, might be inaccurate. And if this trend continues, the increasing diversity among American citizens will not automatically imply a guaranteed Democratic majority in the elections to come. Judis and Teixeira, the authors of "The Emerging Democratic Majority" have notably retracted their thesis, conceding "in the run-up to the election that their promised Democratic majority would never emerge" (Ruffini, 2023).

Ruffini also reports how the results of the 2022 midterms were particularly favorable to the new Republican coalition; as the Democratic Party maintained a narrow 51 to 49 majority in the Senate, the GOP had a net gain of ten seats in the House of Representatives, which resulted in a majority of 222 over 213 (New York Times Archive, 2022). The maps below provide a visual representation of the results: figure 18 shows the district map, which highlights that most of the "blue" states that Biden had won in 2020 have also elected at least one Republican Representative. Figure 19 below highlights the shift towards the GOP observed at the national level. Many of the districts which renewed their representation in 2022 have done so choosing a Republican candidate. While the GOP has won all of the most competitive districts required to maintain control of the House, the Democratic Party would have had to win a total of 46 and fell short at 41. 2022 also represented, as Ruffini reports, the year which registered the highest support for the GOP in midterm elections among Black and Hispanic voters (Ruffini, 2023).

Figure 18: District map of the 2022 HoR midterms – source: New York Times Archive, 2022

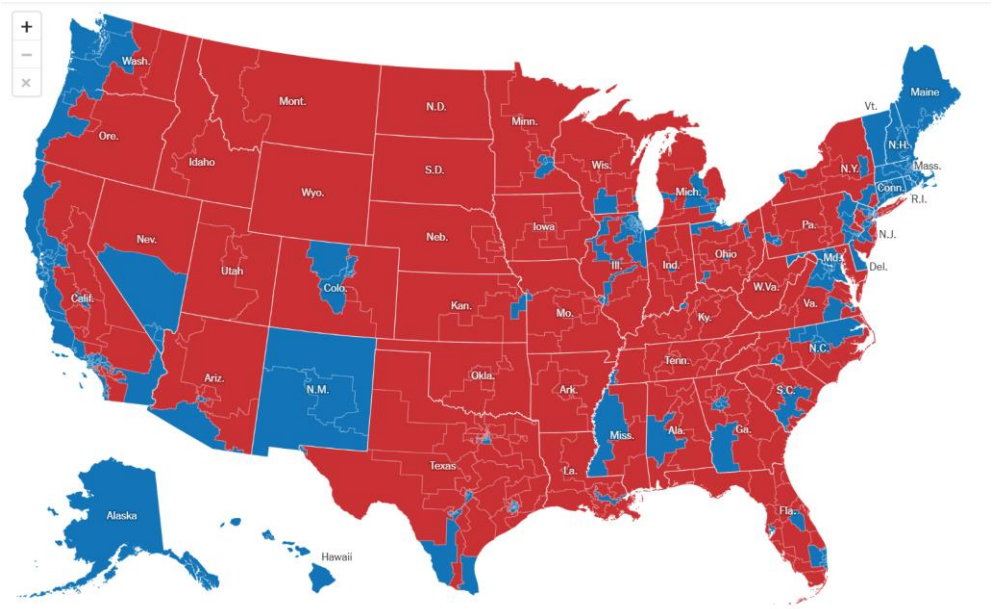
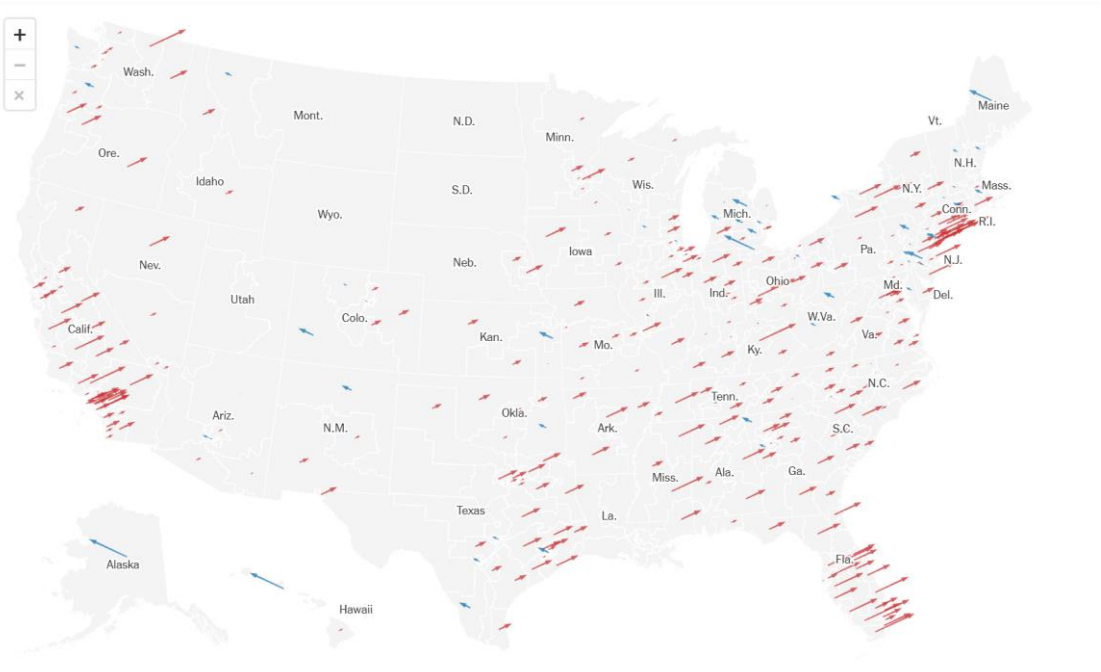


Figure 19: leftward or rightward shift of districts from 2020 to 2022 – source: New York Times Archive, 2022



In 2019, Zito and Todd had asked the question of whether this Republican realignment – which they had observed to be overwhelmingly white, contrary to recent evidence – could outlive the Trump presidency. In 2023, Patrick Ruffini answers; arguing that the outcome of 2016 had not been determined by a "one-off" coalition attracted exclusively by Trump's personality, he highlights how not only it has been expanding in presidential races, but other Republican candidates up and down the ballot have been benefitting from greater consensus. In 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis won re-election with 59.4% of the vote and all but five counties (New York Times Archive, 2022) thanks to the support of important immigrant communities, including the Cuban population in Miami and Puerto Rican residents of the Orlando area, which had traditionally sided with the Democrats. Thus, because of the growing support for GOP politicians at all levels, Ruffini supposes that while the right-wing populist coalition might have been drawn together by Trump it might not be wholly dependent on him. This assumption could lay the foundations for a long lasting Republican realignment, especially if the Party can attract more ethnic voters as society becomes increasingly diverse.

Ahead of the 2020 election, a Gallup poll argued that the fate of the Democratic Party would be largely decided by the turnout rates of African Americans. In agreement with most post-2016 analyses, Pew Research had reported a decrease of 7 points, from 67% in 2012 to 60%, which has proved to be fatal to Clinton in the Blue Wall states. Typically, as of 2020, Gallup attested Black support for the Democratic Party at about 90%, while Republicans fared much worse; in September, approval for Trump had settled at 11% (on average, about 8% of Black Americans would vote for the GOP). On the other hand, Biden visibly enjoyed less support among African Americans with respect to Obama (75% vs 90%+ favorable ratings), despite having chosen Kamala Harris as his running mate (Newport, 2020). Interestingly, Gallup hypothesized that, because of the higher chance for Black (non-college educated) men to be Republican than Black women, the former would "provide a greater challenge for Biden's campaign blandishments than other Black Americans". Of course, because of the higher propensity of African Americans to vote for the party that they deem more capable to deal with issues of "race and racism", the response of the Trump administration to the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer might have hurt Trump's chances to win a more considerable portion of the Black electorate.

Four years later, however, an analysis conducted in May by the Pew Research Center reported a decrease in the margins of support for Joe Biden among Black Americans – a cohort that would "play a key role in determining the outcome of the 2024 presidential election"; 18% of respondents declared they would vote for Trump at that point, and 12% overall identified as Republicans. Contrary to the general trend, among African Americans the younger generations are more likely to lean Republican than those aged fifty or more, with a margin of at least ten percentage points – more specifically, 17% and 7% (Cox, 2024).

Perhaps, a more realistic investment for the GOP would be the Hispanic community. As Pew Research reports, in the face of an increase in voting eligibility between 2016 and 2024 (from 27 to 26 million), Latinos have leaned Republican to a greater extent than African Americans. Additionally, the number of Hispanic eligible voters has increased in the past few years, from 13.6% of the total VEP in 2020 to 14.7% in 2024 (in 2000, by comparison, the percentage was 7.4%), and now constitute the majority of the non-white vote (Krogstad et al., 2024). If upward trend in the portion of Latino voters within the U.S. electorate continues in the next few years, both the Democratic and the Republican Party will have to either keep them in the coalition or encourage their realignment.

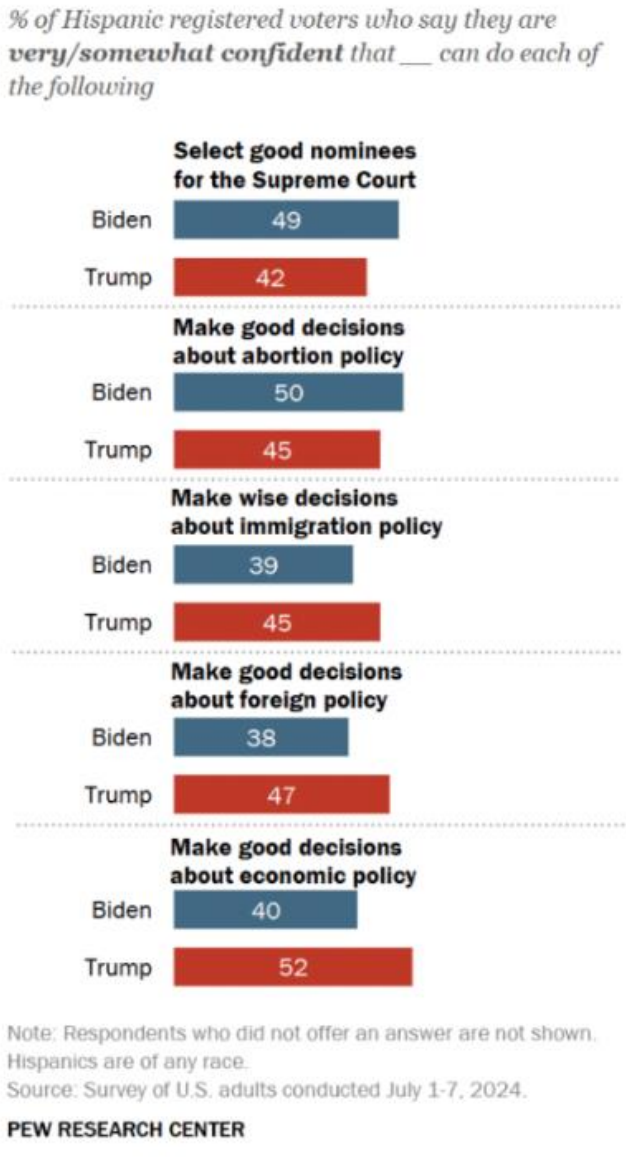
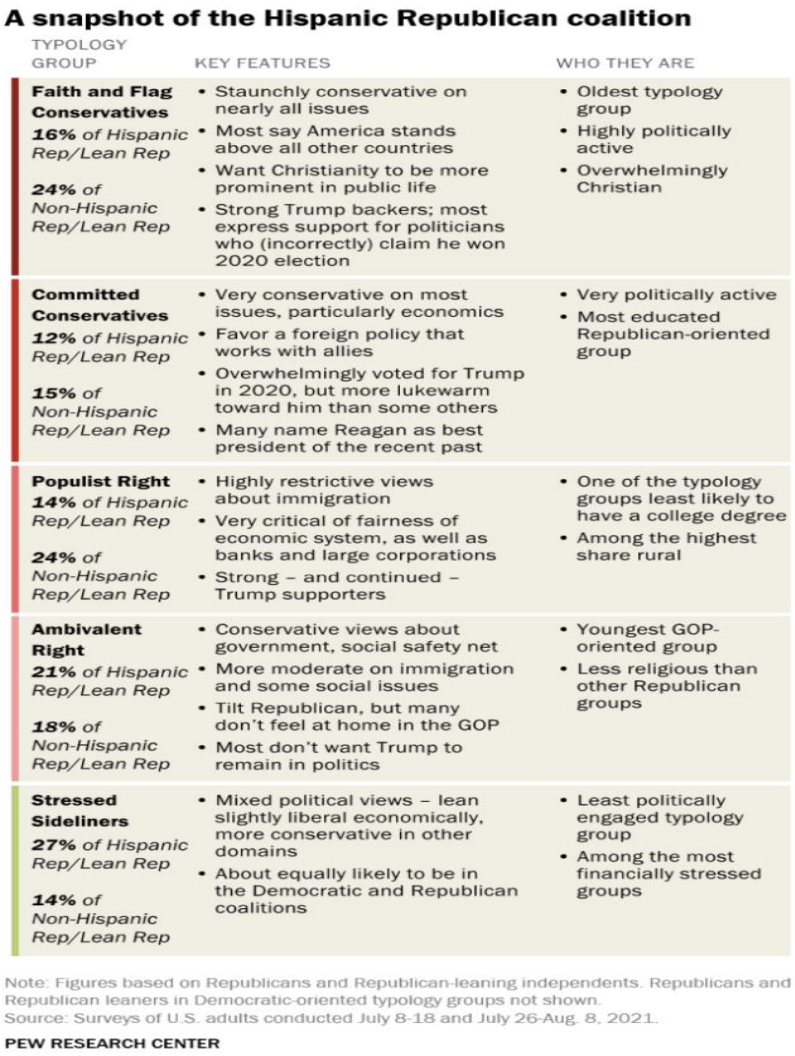


Figure 20: percentage of Hispanic voters confident in Trump and Biden
Source: Noe-Bustamante, Krogs and Lopez, 2024

While 59% cast their preference for Joe Biden in 2020, 38% did so for Donald Trump, narrowing the 2016 margin between the two parties. With regards to the trust for either of the two candidates to deal with the most pressing issues, figure 20 shows that, with respect to other minorities, the support for the Democratic Party among Latinos appears less overwhelming.

On abortion and Supreme Court nominations, the majority of respondents trusted Joe Biden more, but on the other hand a significant 42% and 45% of them preferred Trump. Interestingly, in areas such as immigration and foreign policy, as well as the economy, those describing Trump as the best-equipped candidate are more than those supporting Biden. “Edison Research” and CNN exit polls in November 2024 attested the share of Latinos for Trump at around 45-46%, an increase of about 13 percentage points since the last election cycle (Buchholz, 2024 and CNN, 2024).



A snapshot of the Hispanic Republican coalition

TYPOLOGY GROUP	KEY FEATURES	WHO THEY ARE
Faith and Flag Conservatives **16%** *of Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep* **24%** *of Non-Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep*	• Staunchly conservative on nearly all issues • Most say America stands above all other countries • Want Christianity to be more prominent in public life • Strong Trump backers; most express support for politicians who (incorrectly) claim he won 2020 election	• Oldest typology group • Highly politically active • Overwhelmingly Christian
Committed Conservatives **12%** *of Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep* **15%** *of Non-Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep*	• Very conservative on most issues, particularly economics • Favor a foreign policy that works with allies • Overwhelmingly voted for Trump in 2020, but more lukewarm toward him than some others • Many name Reagan as best president of the recent past	• Very politically active • Most educated Republican-oriented group
Populist Right **14%** *of Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep* **24%** *of Non-Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep*	• Highly restrictive views about immigration • Very critical of fairness of economic system, as well as banks and large corporations • Strong – and continued – Trump supporters	• One of the typology groups least likely to have a college degree • Among the highest share rural
Ambivalent Right **21%** *of Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep* **18%** *of Non-Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep*	• Conservative views about government, social safety net • More moderate on immigration and some social issues • Tilt Republican, but many don't feel at home in the GOP • Most don't want Trump to remain in politics	• Youngest GOP-oriented group • Less religious than other Republican groups
Stressed Sideliners **27%** *of Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep* **14%** *of Non-Hispanic Rep/Lean Rep*	• Mixed political views – lean slightly liberal economically, more conservative in other domains • About equally likely to be in the Democratic and Republican coalitions	• Least politically engaged typology group • Among the most financially stressed groups

Note: Figures based on Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. Republicans and Republican leaners in Democratic-oriented typology groups not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted July 8-18 and July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.

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Figure 21: typologies of Hispanic Republicans

Source: Krogstad, 2022

Ordered from the most to the least conservative, Hispanics within the GOP appear as a diverse coalition of voters (figure 21). 16% of them are identifiable as "faith and flag conservatives", embracing conservatism nearly across the board. The vast majority of this subgroup is Christian, and strongly supports Trump – alongside claims of a "stolen victory" in 2020 (Krogstad, 2022).

Other relevant groups are the "populist right" (14% among Latinos), generally supportive of more restrictive immigration laws and skeptical of "the establishment" (banks, corporations, and party elites). A greater percentage of Hispanic Republicans (57%) self-identifies more with ambivalent or "moderate" positions, particularly in the younger generation, as those most open to realigning with the opposition.

The CNN exit poll mentioned above seemingly confirms another one of the main assumptions about Trump's coalition; support for the GOP was apparently strongly correlated to one's perceived financial situation – and to the opinion on the general state of the country's economy: out of nearly 23,000 respondents, almost half argued that their personal finances were in a worse position than four years prior, and 82% of them said to have voted for Donald Trump. On the other hand, 83% of those who claimed to be better off than in 2020 voted for Kamala Harris. Similarly, the share of respondents who thought the state of the U.S. economy

to have declined under Biden's presidency overwhelmingly sided with the GOP (70%), while Democrats benefitted from the 92% of those who had an overall positive opinion of the nation's economic status (CNN, 2024). Additionally, the Midwest and South were confirmed to be Donald Trump's major source of support, with 52% and 56% of the total votes cast.

In conclusion, the "Trump coalition" underwent serious changes in the past eight years, in terms of its racial, ethnic and age composition, size, and ideological "streams". By combining under the same party banner both social and economic conservatives, as well as moderates and right-wing populists, Donald Trump has secured the White House twice – and came close to winning in 2020. His victory seemingly took by surprise many within the establishment and the news media, as well as academia (Judis and Teixeira are a great example in this sense); essentially two factors explain the success of the GOP in the recent past. First and foremost, albeit not in considerable quantities, the coalition has become more diverse; it is still overwhelmingly white, but more Black and Hispanic Americans, as well as young people and women, have turned out for Trump in the three times he has run for president. Now, while the percentages do not yet lead to the conclusion of a massive realignment of non-white voters, many have already begun paying attention to this phenomenon as it might imply a further weakening of the Democratic base.

In a system based on the popular vote alone, perhaps the increase of one or two percentage points among Latinos or African Americans voting right-wing would matter much less. However, because of the Electoral College, if enough "ethnic voters" realign in key states where their contribution fundamentally provokes a "swing", a few thousand people might determine the outcome of the election. As mentioned above, for example, in 2016 Clinton lost Michigan (also) due to the decline in turnout among Black voters outside of Detroit, which combined with an increase in the blue collar white support for the GOP, and several Republican candidates have secured important victories (such as DeSantis in Florida) thanks to the support of local Hispanic communities.

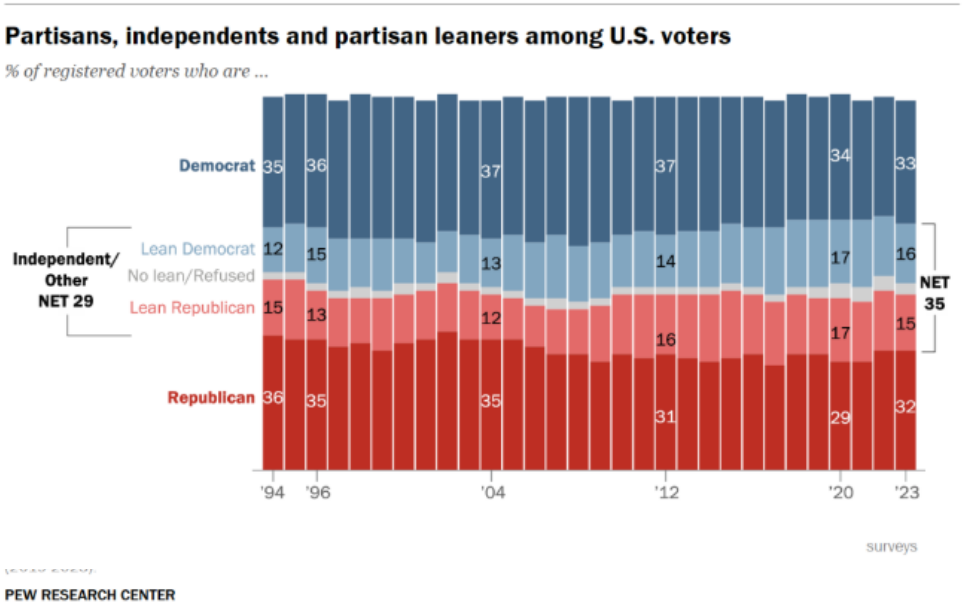
Another key pillar of this "Republican alignment" related closely to the Electoral College question. When scholars like Judis and Teixeira, or Brownstein, referred to young voters and ethnic minorities as the "coalition of the ascendant", and the future of the Democratic Party, they were not wrong. Still amid the growing popularity of Trump's right-wing populism, Generation Z and millennials, as well as women, and minorities in general, overwhelmingly lean Democratic and have contributed to the success of more left-wing personalities such as Bernie Sanders. However, in a system which values distribution over concentration, the expansion of the Democratic coalition has come with one key flaw: big metropolitan centers have become the bulwark of the party, with their diverse, young and (mostly) highly-educated population attracted by a now clearly liberal platform. On the other hand, the Party has lost ground in rural areas and small towns outside of the big cities, "leaving behind" blue collar whites that were highly critical of free trade and the neoliberal

model that since Bill Clinton establishment Democrats have openly embraced. Thus, Democratic gains have not made up for the losses, and in many of the so-called "swing states" the party has failed to retain a comfortable enough majority to "easily" win elections.

Changing degrees of party loyalty

The "party sorting" trends that have slowly split the electorate in near-perfect halves have been in the works for quite some time, and the majoritarian, winner-takes-all electoral system certainly encourages voters to align with either of the two parties. After the gap between self-identifying Democrats and Republicans widened in 2008, with the Democratic coalition reaching a 55% share – while Republicans witnessed a decline, hovering around 45-46% – pre-Obama levels returned around 2010, when the share of Democrats decreased and that of Republicans increased. In 2023, however, Pew registered the smallest gap in the past thirty years; ahead of the 2024 election, 49% of American voters identified as part of the Democratic coalition, while 48% sorted themselves within the Republican one (in 2020, the rates were 51% and 46% respectively).

Figure 22: Independents, leaners and partisans (1993 - 2023) - source: Pew Research Center, 2024a



Considering a more nuanced picture, the number of voters who identify as fully Democrat or Republican has decreased since the mid-1990s, contrary to an increase in those who use the "independent" or

"Democrat/Republican leaning" labels, although "partisan leaners often share the same political views and behaviors as those who directly identify with the party they favor" (Pew Research Center, 2024a). Notably, the oscillation in partisan identification between 1994 and 2023 was contained within 2 – 4 percentage points, which indicates a rather low correlation between identification on the Democratic/Republican spectrum and election results. However, the respective coalitions growing more and more alike in terms of size in the last few years is clearly in line with intra-party polarization, as the current political climate has essentially split the country in half – making compromise and bipartisanship much more rare than in the past.

Comparing the data in figure 22 with information on partisan identification prior to 1990 (figure 23) provides an even clearer picture of the evolution of the Democratic/Republican coalitions. The two graphs below include data collected from Gallup by Professor David W. Brady for the aforementioned conference; figure 23 covers the 1960-1975 time frame, showing that "Republican ID" decreased in the early 1970s, from around 30% to a little over 20%, and conversely Independents increased up to about 35%. The most interesting aspect of the data contained in this graph is however the line describing the trend of Democratic ID; after stationing at a record high of more than 50% (which indicated that the majority of U.S. voters effectively identified as Democrat), it suddenly dropped by around ten percentage points throughout the mid to late-1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement. Thus, the data below seemingly supports the assumption made in the previous chapter that the fight for racial equality embraced by the Johnson administration started the process which would sever the ties of the New Deal coalition.

Figure 23: Party ID 1960 – 1975

Source: Brady, D.W. (Gallup.com)

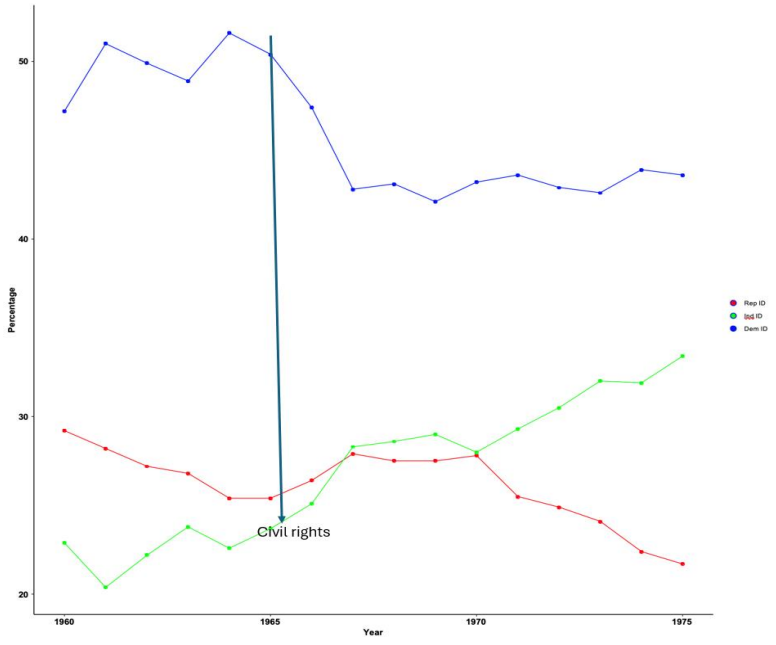


Figure 24: Party ID (1940s-2010s)

Source: Brady, D.W. (Gallup.com)

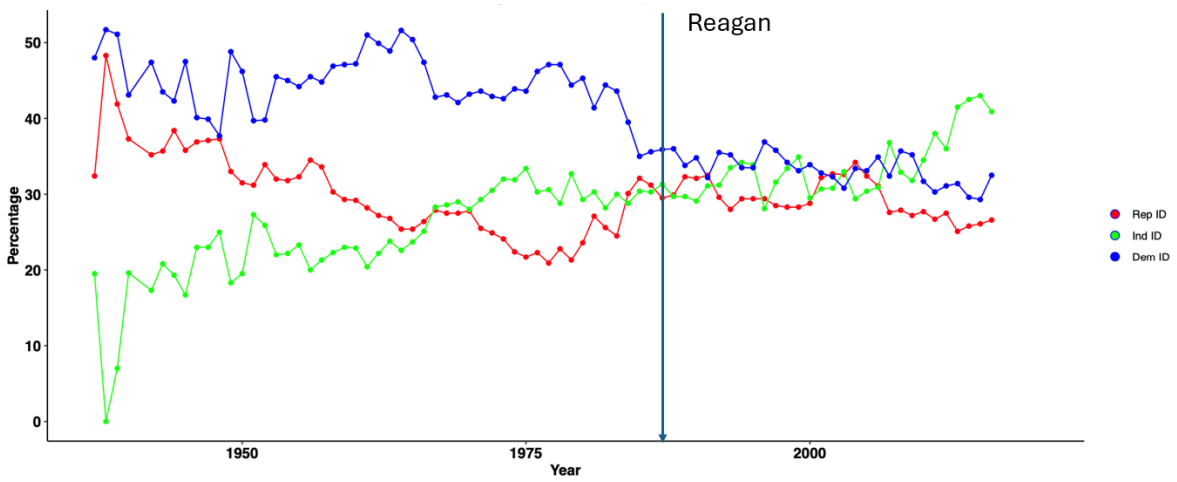


Figure 24 supplements the previous graph by showcasing party identification trends post-1975. The interesting aspect is the sharp decline in Democrat ID and increase in Republican ID contextually to the beginning of the Regan era, which coincides with the President's widespread popularity and the crisis of Democratic leadership. From the early 1980s onwards, moreover, the "gap" between Americans across partisan identifications has reduced greatly; at the start of the new millennium, a similar number of voters self-identified as either Democrat or Republican, and only "Independents" were seemingly increasing.

The lack of change in party loyalty is thus in and of itself a sign of a new political era, one in which the two coalitions have grown so different and so far apart from each other that any "shift" one way or the other is rare and much harder for the party elites to provoke. So long as the Republican Party continues embracing its mix of populism and conservatism, building a coalition that includes right-wingers and disappointed Democrats and until the Democratic Party responds by catering to minorities with an increasingly socially liberal platform, winning election will be a matter of a few thousand votes in two or three "key" states. While no significant political change occurs in this scenario, the emergence of this dynamic – which disrupted the political equilibrium of the late 20th century – is a realignment on its own.

Intra-party polarization

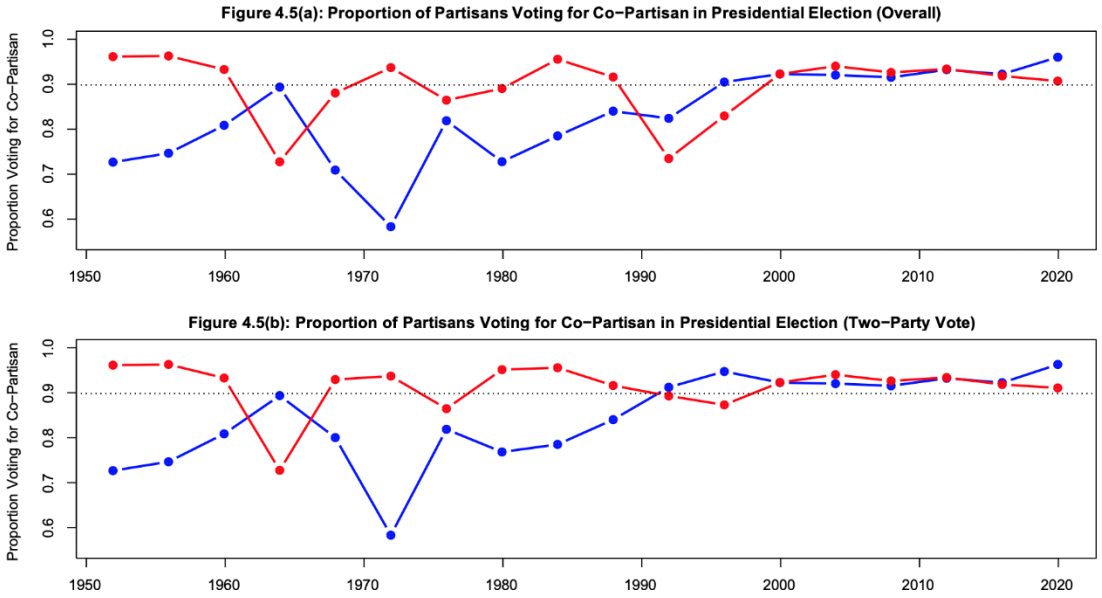
The aforementioned 2024 CNN exit poll also confirms another claim about the post-2016 realignment relating to growing similarity in the size of the electoral bases, namely that the two major political parties have

become increasingly polarized. The association between “Conservative” and “Republican”, or “Liberal” and “Democrat” has strengthened, making ‘defections’ on Election Day quite unlikely. Out of the 22,9 thousand respondents, in fact, 95% of Democrats voted for Harris, and 94% of Republicans voted for Trump. Among independents, support for the two candidates was split nearly equally, with a 49% vs 46% difference. The data is in close relation to ideology; 91% of self-proclaimed liberals cast their vote for Harris, similarly to 90% of conservatives who did so for Trump (CNN, 2024).

Comparing data with the same exit poll conducted in 2020 reveals a further (albeit slight) polarization of the electorate between these two election cycles – considering however a smaller sample (7,376 less than in 2024) which naturally meant less answers being provided. With regards to party ID, for example, CNN reports than in 2020 Joe Biden received the support of 94% of Democrats, 6% of Republicans and 54% of Independents. Four years later, his VP had only a slight gain in the first category (1%), and in the second (also 1%), but lost 5% of Independents – votes which allegedly went to Donald Trump, who increased his share in the category from 41% to 46%. In terms of ideology, Harris was more popular than Biden among liberals (+ 2%), while more unpopular among conservatives (+ 5%) and moderates (+ 6%). Considering that her opponent obtained the same increase in those categories, it is likely that there was a “migration” of those voters from one party to the other. Clearly, the increased popularity of Kamala Harris among liberals and Democrats, and of Trump among conservatives (and moderates) and Republicans indicates that the trend of party sorting along ideological lines continues. Harris as a candidate, as well as her campaign, were perhaps more “progressive” than Biden’s, and thus she failed to maintain her predecessor’s popularity in the less liberal section of the electorate.

The consequences of intra-party polarization with respect to party loyalty are clearly visible in the following graphs (figure 25), which according to Brady reflect the trend by which voters now nearly always prefer the candidate of their own party. Considering mainly the two-party vote, it is evident that for the most part, throughout the second half of the 20th century, Americans would vote in line with their partisan identification, but frequent exceptions would occur. In 1964, for example, the amount of Republican voting for Lindon Johnson increased, more “deserted” their party, assumingly voting for the incumbent Democrat instead of “their” candidate. Similarly, the “dip” in Democratic support for the Democratic candidate in 1972 is in line with Nixon’s re-election landslide, resolved in 1976 with Jimmy Carter. After a short-lived decline in 1980, Democrats have since quite constantly supported their party’s nominee. The same dynamic characterized the Republican coalition now, as more than 90% of voters on either side decide to support their party.

Figure 25: partisan voting for the co-partisan candidate (1950 - 2020), source: Brady, D.W.



The data above thus confirms the assumption made above that the U.S. electorate is rather immobile at the moment, and that it has become progressively harder for each party to appeal to the opposition's base. As a result, elections have become much closer, and the margins of victory particularly for Presidents are quite small with respect to the past.

Developing this argument, Brady compares electoral data from the 1950-1992 period to the post-1993 era. In the forty years between the immediate postwar period and Clinton, candidates would secure the Presidency by at least ten points, and five out of the eleven winners obtained more than 55% of the popular vote. In the House of Representatives, the majority party would have, on average, an advantage of 85 or more seats over the opposition. On the other hand, after 1993, the margin of victory for presidential elections has fallen below 3%, and none of the winners has obtained more than 55% of the ballots cast – in two occasions, they even lost the popular vote. In the HoR, the majority party now has a much smaller advantage of around 35 seats, and the "trifecta" (the same party controlling the two chambers of Congress and the White House) has become a rare occurrence. The most recent instance occurred in November 2024, when the GOP won the majority in both the HoR and the Senate, as well as the presidency. However, considering that the party holds only 220 seats over the minimum requirement of 218 in the House, and 53 over 50 in the Senate, the 2026 midterms might change the *status quo* (CNN, 2024b).

An interesting consequence of ideological polarization is that party sorting is not only normalized at the intra-party level, but also within the coalitions themselves. In 2022, a Gallup poll reported an increase in the number of Democrats identifying as liberal (54%), with the lowest number to date describing themselves

as conservative (10%) – a drop in 15 percentage points with respect to 1994, when the number of "right-wingers" within the party was 25%. The amount of self-identified moderates has also decreased, although not dramatically, nevertheless indicating a growing trend of party sorting along ideological lines. Within the GOP ranks, conservatives have solidified their position, now amounting to about 72% (a growth of 14 percentage points in the past thirty years) – as opposed to 5% of liberals and 22% of moderates. As Gallup highlights, while changes in self-identification with regards to political ideology do not occur suddenly, the "stability seen in 2022 […] masks the continuation of an important long-term trend, which is increased liberalism among Democrats" (Saad, 2023).

The tables below contain ANES data quoted by Professor Brady for the CISE, on the identification across the liberal-conservative spectrum within the Democratic and Republican coalitions. Party sorting had already begun decades prior, but the following data reveals that between 2012 and 2020 the number of Democrats identifying as liberal continued increasing, while conversely fewer aligned with conservative positions. The opposite trends have affected the Republican coalition, where the rate of liberals or "extreme liberals" has sharply declined in the context of an increase in self-identifying conservatives.

Table 15: Democratic Party Ideology (2012-2020), source: Brady, D.W. (ANES data)

Year	Extremely Lib	Lib	Slightly Lib	Mod/Con
2012	6%	26%	19%	49%
2016	7%	31%	21%	40%
2020	10%	36%	21%	33%

Lib = Liberal, Mod=Moderate, Con = Conservative

Interestingly, even though ideological conformity within partisan coalitions had been a clear tendency since the 1980s, in 2012 still 49% of Democrats identified with more moderate or conservative positions. That percentage has dropped to 33% in 2020, in the context of an increase in liberals or even extremely liberals (respectively 10% and 4% more in the last eight years).

Table 16: Republican Party Ideology (2012-2020), source: Brady, D.W. (ANES data)

Year	Extremely Con	Con	Slightly Con	Mod/Lib
2012	10%	45%	21%	23%
2016	11%	49%	20%	20%
2020	16%	50%	16%	18%

Lib = Liberal, Mod=Moderate, Con = Conservative

Within the GOP, from 2012 to 2020 the amount of moderate/liberals, as well as conservative-leaning, dropped by 5 percentage points each; on the other hand, the proportion of conservatives and extreme conservatives has increased and by 2020 comprised nearly 70% of the party's base. Considering that the number of self-identifying conservatives in the Republican Party has remained quite steady, the increase in liberal Democrats in the near future might result in a scenario where the two parties are even more polarized.

The growing distance between the two coalitions is also reflected in a Pew Research analysis of the electorate conducted in August 2024 (figure 26). The poll had been administered for the first time in June, but was repeated two months later as Biden dropped out of the race and VP Kamala Harris replaced him. Confirming the analysis of the 2020 and 2024 CNN polls, the study reveals that the gap between the two party bases widened as Harris took on the role of Democratic candidate, even though Democrats and Republican were already positioned on opposite ends of the spectrum on most "hot-button" cultural issues. Figure 26 includes a series of proposals that respondents had to indicate their agreement with; with regards to gun ownership, for example, 89% of "Trump supporters" positively argued that it increases safety (in self-protection terms), as opposed to only 18% of Harris voters. Other issues on which Trump and Harris supporters stand on opposite ends of the spectrum include the legacy of slavery (24% of GOP voters agree vs 80% of Democrats), multiculturalism, LGBTQ+ identities, "traditional" values and the separation of Church and State.

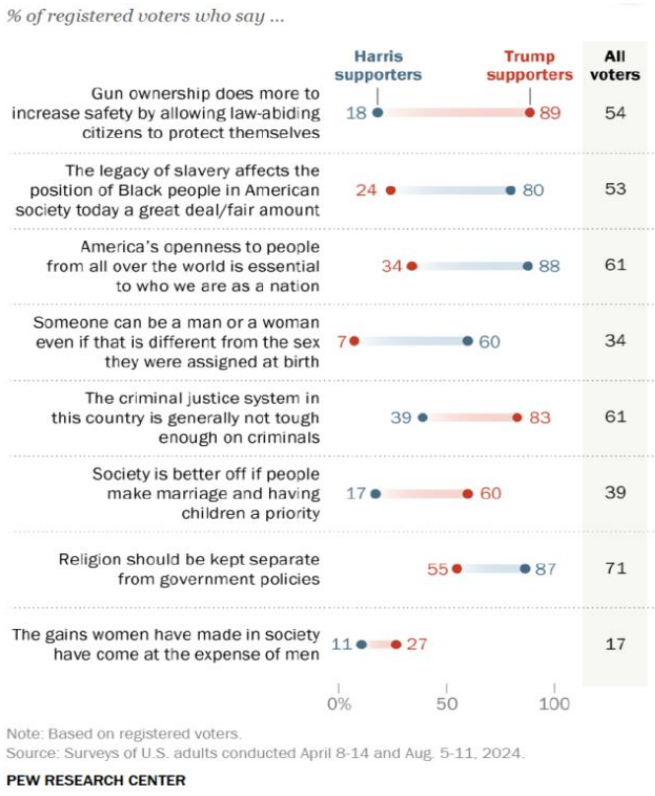


Figure 26: How Harris, Trump supporters view key cultural issues

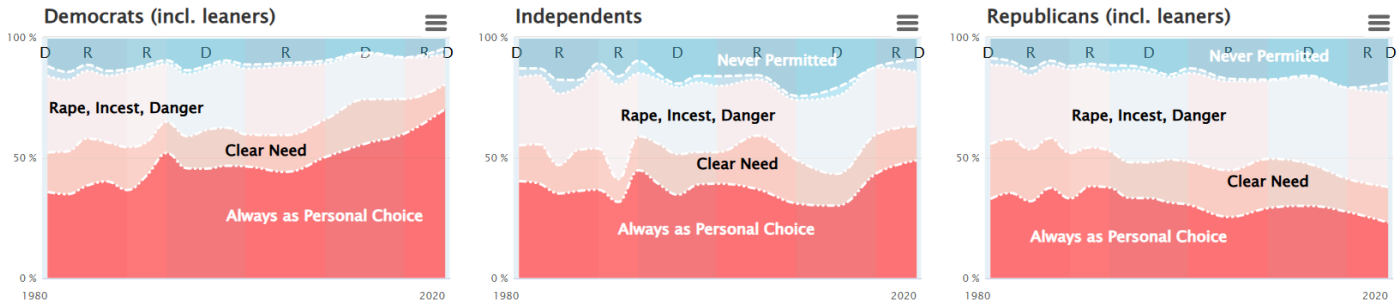
Source: Pew Research Center, 2024

Abortion, one of the most discussed issues during the campaign, was also included in the poll; while 43% of Harris voters argued that it should be legal in all cases, only 7% of Trump voters agreed; 52% of them on the other hand supported the statement that it should be "illegal in *most* cases", contrary to 9% of Harris supporters who said the same, and 11% that it should be "illegal in *all* cases". On a similar note, public opinion was highly divided on issues relating to gender identity and sexual orientation, such as same-sex marriages and the recognition of transgender identities.

Concerning abortion, data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) center (figure 27) confirms the polarizing nature of the issue in the contemporary political debate. In answering the question "by law, when should abortion be allowed?", the vast majority of Democrats in 2020 argued that it should always be a personal choice (70.3%), in clear contrast with the first answers registered in 1980 (35.8%). Conversely, only 23.1% of Republicans agree, as opposed to 32.9% forty years ago; 19% agree that it should never be permitted, contrary to 4.5% of the Democrats. Overall, independents tend to have more "mixed" opinions, but they are more likely to support pro-abortion legislation than Republicans.

Figure 27: partisan opinions on abortion - when should it be allowed?

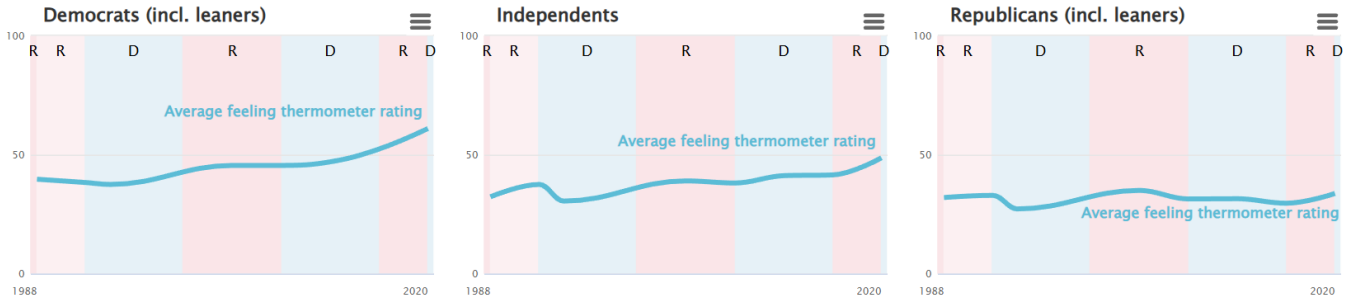
Source: ANES



As a defining element of Trump's campaign, immigration also split the electorate; in a question relating to the status of undocumented immigrants, Pew Research reported that 70% of Trump voters argued they "should not be allowed to stay in the country legally", while 85% of Harris supporters were favorable to pathways being set in place for them to stay under given conditions. These responses seemed to be slightly related to negative or positive opinions about "America's openness to people from all over the world", with the majority of Harris voters in favor, and most Trump supporters fearing the loss of national identity. These responses coincide with data from the ANES Guide To Public Opinion And Electoral Behavior (figure 28), which highlights that while on average the sentiment towards illegal immigrants has not oscillated much since the 1980s, it has actually improved by more than 20 points among Democrats (from 39.7 in 1988 to 61 in 2020) and Independents, while remaining consistently low among GOP voters.

Figure 28: "average feeling" towards illegal immigrants (1988 - 2020)

Source: ANES

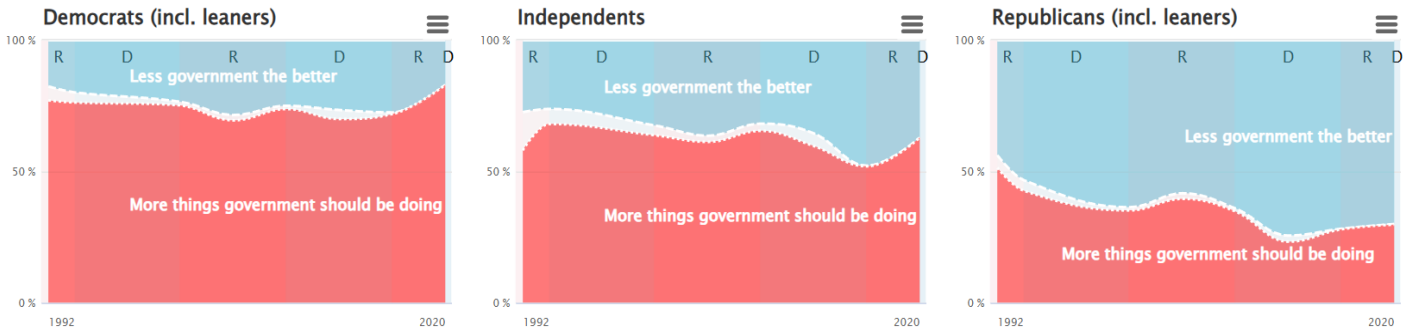


An interesting factor in this sense is the response to the current decline in the share of white people in the U.S. population; the majority of interviewees – 55% for the right-wing and 74% for the left-wing coalitions – would actually argue that it does neither represent a concern nor an advantage overall (while Trump supporters are generally more likely to sit on the "it's an issue for society" end of the spectrum than Harris') (Pew Research Center, 2024).

The analysis of Donald Trump's campaign conducted above highlighted how his platform included talking points that have by now become pillars of Republicanism; similarly to Ronald Reagan, Trump too advocated for a smaller government and to the enhancement of states' powers through decentralization. ANES data (figure 29) reveals that, in 2020, the Republican electorate was more likely than Democrats to support a reduction of government powers. With respect to the early 1990s, the percentage of GOP voters in favor of "less government, the better" has increased from 43.8% to 70%, as the graphs below demonstrate. The amount of Democrats supporting a more involved federal authority has not oscillated much, and on average they are now more likely than Republicans to have a favorable view of expanded government powers.

Figure 29: expanded or reduced government powers, according to partisanship

Source: ANES



The Pew survey mentioned above also reveals a few inconsistencies within the Trump electorate, highlighting the complexities of American party politics. On questions relating to the government potentially providing fewer services (including healthcare coverage and poverty relief) Trump voters were more likely than Harris supporters to respond positively. This tendency towards individualism clashes however with an area on which both parties are unusually in agreement; a particular statement read "Social Security should NOT be reduced in any way", and 77% of Trump voters vs 83% of Harris voters seemingly agreed. Because Social Security is generally intended as a safety net provided by the government to the most disadvantaged groups, and because it typically includes healthcare and unemployment benefits, the support of Trump voters for it is in contrast with their opposition to an active government concerned with aid to the poor and public health. A "big government" is in fact typically required in order to carry out Social Security reforms – it is enough to recall the enlargement of bureaucracy and government agencies during the New Deal period.

The gap between Democrats and Republicans also seemingly closes when it comes to foreign policy and security, areas where Americans on "both sides" have more similar opinions – mostly relating to the protection of the country's military strength and self-interests, although they might come at the expense of its allies (on average, however, Trump supporters are more likely to have isolationist tendencies than Democrats).

A new conservatism?

In his analysis of critical elections, Paul Kleppner stressed that during realignment periods the political system would also undergo an "ideological revolution", where a new set of ideas (embodied by the emerging coalition) would become the underlying principle of government.

The sections above have already introduced reflections on the growing polarization of the electorate and of the political parties, highlighting that a contributing factor to the ideological distance between the Democratic and Republican coalitions is the result of changes that the two have undergone in the past. Prior to the 1960s, party elites and party bases included a variety of perspectives, from the more progressive to the more conservative, with the end result being a system where the two coalitions were much more similar than they are now. The transformations produced by the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam war have encouraged a "sorting" of the more liberal and progressive *milieu* with the Democrats, and those more skeptical of change (perhaps simplistically defined as conservatives) with the GOP. The previous chapter has already mentioned the role of Ronald Reagan's candidacy in fostering the realignment of more ideologically conservative groups with the GOP, and the acceptance of cultural issues into the part's agenda. This trend has

thus not been introduced by Donald Trump, nor by the Democratic establishment which opposed him, but rather Trump's candidacy is only the end result of such changes.

It is however undeniable that the two political parties have grown more and more distant in the past few years, as even the Pew and Gallup polls mentioned above suggest. Today, "largely in response to the more sharply differentiated alternatives presented by the national parties and their candidates, voters have sorted themselves into increasingly distinct and discordant political camps. Their partisan identities, ideological leanings, and policy opinions have become more consistent internally and more divergent from those of rival partisans" (Jacobson, 2016, p. 228).

The new era of the Republican Party depends on the birth of a new coalition of blue-collar workers, old-style Republicans and minorities which might strengthen in the near future; every coalition, particularly the most diverse, can only function if it is tied together by a common ideology, common grievances and plans to address them. It has already been mentioned how Donald Trump's success derived from the ability to craft a platform that combined traditional elements of conservatism, such as taxation and protectionism, with populist pillars, such as the anti-establishment rhetoric. Thus, a more in-depth analysis of the ideological transformation that Trump's leadership encouraged within the Republican Party might be a contributing factor to the understanding of the post-2016 party system.

Merriam-Webster defines populism as a "a political philosophy or movement that represents or is claimed to represent the interests of ordinary people especially against the Establishment".

Populism *per se* is thus not a clearly left-wing nor right-wing feature, and in fact combines elements of both – as its "targets" can be a mixed variety of big business and liberal or far-left coalitions. The term is usually employed in a pejorative sense, "to criticize a politician for pandering to a people's fear and enthusiasm […] without regard to the consequences for the country such as inflation or debt". Regardless of whether populism is interpreted more conservatively or progressively, however, the "us vs them" binary opposition is perhaps its most notorious component.

In this sense, Donald Trump's platform perfectly embodies a more populist understanding of conservatism – presented in a way that could appeal to the average American rather than mostly business elites. As mentioned above, part of the credit for Trump's new conservatism should be given to the Tea Party. The latter emerged as a libertarian, conservative-populist political *movement* ahead of the 2010 midterms, and served as a catalyst for those sections of American public opinion which lamented widespread dissatisfaction with Obama's presidency and the Democrats in Congress.

Although the Tea Party never claimed a relationship with the Republican coalition, and operated mostly outside of the establishment, it did draw the attention of many GOP members unhappy with their party's leadership. Sarah Palin, former Governor of Alaska and John McCain's running mate in 2008, became a

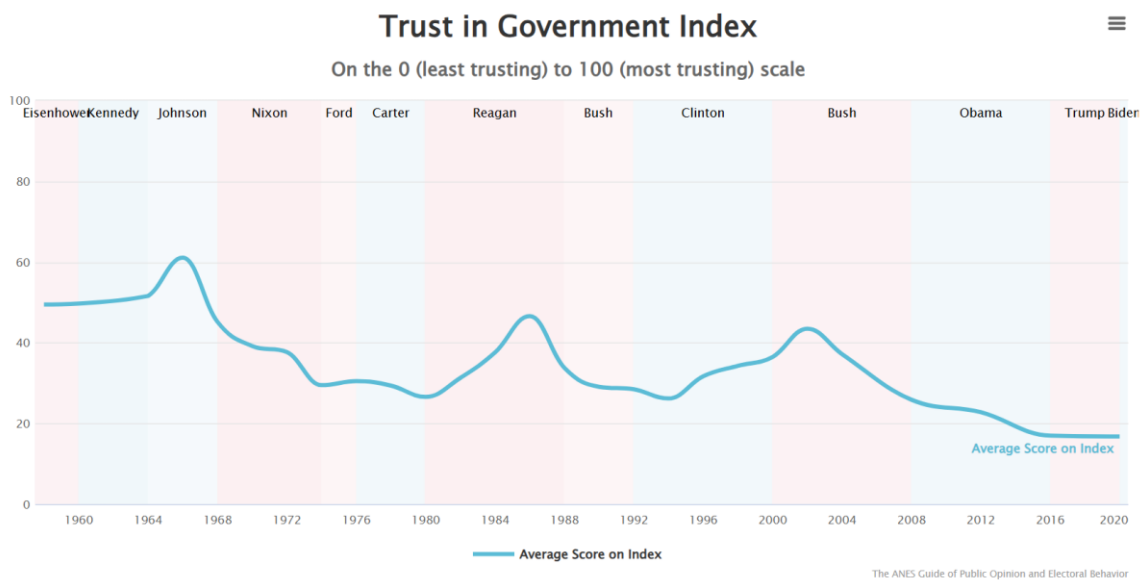
prominent spokesperson for the movement; in a series of district and Congressional elections between 2009 and 2010, Tea Party activists endorsed the candidacies of Conservative politicians, even at the expense of more moderate members of the GOP, facilitating their victories in the Republican nominations ahead of the midterms.

As Zito and Todd argue in their book, the new populism of which Trump has become a spokesperson "is a movement against bigness. It distrusts big government, big corporations, big media conglomerates, and […] big multinational agreements and organizations" (p. 247). The target of Trump's attacks is the same establishment, both Republican and Democratic, that throughout the 1980s and 1990s had promoted the deregulation of trade, favoring relocation of production abroad, worsening the crisis of American manufacturing under the weight of globalization. As a considerable portion of the electorate – particularly in rural areas – felt "abandoned" by mainstream politics, the appeal of a candidate which ran with the promise of bringing long-awaited change was strong. In this sense, not only did Trump run as a counter to the Democratic platform, but also to the more pro-business Republicanism of his predecessors, such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush (in his candidacy, as Zito and Todd report, the latter openly referred to how free trade would "benefit America").

Indeed, in emerging on the political scene, he exploited growing anti-establishment sentiments in an era of record-low trust in the government. ANES data (figure 30) reveals that, since 2002, on average a consistently lower number of Americans reports faith in federal institutions. Not coincidentally, the average score is much lower among partisan Republicans and leaners; from 47.6 in 2002, it plummeted to 8.8 in 2016, only to increase slightly by 2020. On the other hand, while Democrats have on average been more optimistic towards the government's abilities, they seemingly have lost some trust between 2016 and 2020 (from 23.3 to 16.3).

Figure 30: average trust in the government (1958 - 2020)

Source: ANES



Trump's platform still includes pillars of conservatism, such as tax cuts and reduction of government welfare, but his "populist spin" has introduced new issues – immigration, unemployment, free trade, military interventionism – that more old-style Republicans have initially resisted. Additionally, Trump's Republicanism builds upon a more recent conservative tradition – of which Reagan might have been the trailblazer – of "mixing" cultural issues within the party's platform (namely abortion, women's rights, and the LGBTQ+ community, for example). Upon announcing his candidacy, his "extremism" shocked many conservatives, who would however later conform to the new direction the party was taking, persuaded by the electoral results made possible by the (successful) populist appeal to the working class of America. Despite the fact that the combination was "in process long before Trump" (Zito and Todd, 2019, p. 258) Trump's contribution has turned the new conservative populism into the defining element of the post-2016 realigning period. It has now become the new mainstream ideology – embodied by the party in power – and it has forced the opposition to adapt to a new style of politics.

Zito and Todd report the considerations of Richard Edelman, CEO of the homonymous global public relations company. According to Edelman, the rise of populism has been facilitated – particularly in the past twenty years – by the same technological development that has produced social media and a more accessible Internet. The invention of smartphones allowed people to access information anywhere anytime, without depending on "the filter of brand-name news organizations" (p. 261). Voters can now live in a sort of information bubble (a "world of self-reference", as he calls it), where they interact with users and creators who hold the same views as they do, without being challenged to approach different points of view. In this regard,

the birth and growing popularity of cable news, not bound by the same rules and obligations as traditional public networks, has contributed to the sectionalization of news commentary according to partisan an ideological affiliations. The empowerment of the individual who now has the world at their fingertips has devalued and discredited expertise, paving the way for populism; "it coincides exactly with the idea of peer-to-peer horizontal communication being more credible than vertical" (p.261).

Trump understood and exploited the power of the Internet, and used the proximity with his audience provided by social media platforms such as Twitter (now "X") to shape the political debate to his advantage – as a nominee and, subsequently, as President. Referring to the relationship between political parties and social media, John White and Mathew Kerbel stressed how campaign communication strategies are today largely a discretionary choice of the candidate, who uses their personal accounts to express their opinions and spread their message.

While this is an approach that has now been normalized, and politicians on both sides of the aisle have adapted to it, Trump's 2016 campaign was a pioneer in removing the "distance" between the candidate's normally well-crafted persona and his voters. By speaking directly to the audience via spontaneous and non-curated social media posts, the Republican candidate solidified his "anti-establishment" image; his strong-worded appearances on the Internet would soon be followed by remarks from Clinton herself or her campaign team, and soon enough all major TV and online news channels would react to his words. As White and Kerbel argue, it was his large online following which essentially gave him the support and the power to take over the Republican Party, and with his direct and aggressive language he enlarged his following, building a seemingly close connection with them.

In conclusion, the polarization of the debate that characterizes the contemporary party system is not the result of Trump's doing, but his personality and political approach may have contributed to the exacerbation of inter-partisan conflict. On the one hand, the Democratic Party has fully embraced a liberal agenda, which focuses primarily on cultural and social issues, such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights and racial equality. The Party now seemingly appeals more to the diverse coalition of young, urban and college-educated voters, at the expense of a significant portion of blue-collar white America, which has realigned with the GOP. Clearly, as previous analyses have demonstrated, rural and working-class voters had already begun the process of abandoning the Democratic base long before Donald Trump ran for office for the first time. His conservative populism, which in emphasizing localism over globalism focused on the core concerns of those Americans (the collapse of domestic manufacturing, the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash and the consequences of a globalized trade, as well as fears for the decline of American traditions in the face of progressive social initiatives) that had largely been ignored by the establishment, however solidified this new alliance. His anti-elitist rhetoric, combined with a campaign strategy based on successful use of social media, allowed him to

build a strong enough coalition to win the White House twice, and fundamentally transform American politics for the years to come.

4.3 In defense of the 2016 realignment

In 2018, Aldrich and Niemi published a study on the history and features of what they defined as "the sixth party system", from the early fissures in the New Deal order during the 1950s to the Clinton era in the 1990s, which effectively put an end to the postwar system by embracing globalization and neoliberalism. They mentioned how a defining characteristic of this new political order was the emergence of "candidate-centered" elections during the 1960s. For most of U.S. history, voters had sorted themselves out and voted on the basis of party loyalty, and parties would put in efforts to mobilize their base.

The more widespread consumption of TV and modern media throughout the 1960s reduced the distance between candidates and the electorate, rendering the mediating function of political parties superfluous. Now that politicians could appeal directly to the public, *they* became the focus of political campaigning, and in the following decades parties had to reinvent themselves. Today, as the authors argued, "the organization no longer dominates campaigns; candidates do. The party stands in service to its candidates, and it is the candidates whom the voters see and evaluate" (p. 104). At the end of their publication, Aldrich and Niemi wondered whether the democratization of the Internet would contribute to the emergence of a seventh party system, as both a product and a response to the new needs of the 21st century. The analysis provided in this chapter seemingly concludes for a positive answer.

Ideally, this loosening of party ties would facilitate more frequent realignments, as voters are attracted more by the single candidate than by the coalition they run with. However, the increasing polarization of platforms and discourse have ironically solidified voters' alliances with one or the other party base, and the more "extreme" rhetoric popularized in the past few years has contributed to the normalization of even more irreconcilable factions. The political changes affecting contemporary voter coalitions and party agendas are long term processes, whose roots lie perhaps in Goldwater's 1964 candidacy, or the effects of the civil rights movement on the New Deal coalition. The events which disrupted American society in the 1960s and 1970s have produced the realignment of the white working class with the Republican Party, and of young, educated, urban coalitions with the Democrats.

Later developments, such as the normalization of deregulation though international market agreements, have on the one hand brought undeniable economic and financial growth, but their negative effects have on the other contributed to working class dissatisfaction with the government.

Writing in regards to the relationship between trade agreements and unions, David Bacon reflects on the consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the blue collar trust in the Democratic Party. He mentions that while NAFTA did deliver on its promises of "increased investments and freer markets", it did not lead to the expected increases in "jobs and benefits for working people"; instead, "NAFTA did lead to increasing unemployment, displacement and poverty" (p. 7). The reduced costs of relocating production to increase profit – and the elimination of tariffs – certainly benefitted companies, but resulted in job losses domestically, particularly in the Midwest, an area which by the early 1990s was already suffering the consequences of deindustrialization. Cities like Detroit (MI) have lost their role in the American economy, as production has moved to cheaper markets such as Mexico, and the apparent ease with which a production site could potentially shut its doors and reopen elsewhere seemingly gave employers more leverage against unions. As Bacon writes, "NAFTA strengthened the ability of US employers to force workers to accept lower wages and benefits" (p. 7).

Similarly, Paul Kennedy wrote in his 1993 book titled *Preparing for the Twenty-First century* that

> *"the relocation of industries abroad, the increasing redundancy of various occupations, and the inadequate educational levels of many workers for high-tech employment suggest that the lower four-fifths (or more) of Americans may not enjoy the oft-proclaimed benefits of globalization. If demographic trends lead to a relative decline in the number of Americans with high scientific skills, if U.S. multinationals find themselves increasingly pitted against foreign rivals with larger capital resources and better trained labor and conclude that they can only compete by moving production to (say) Mexico, and if American banks, media conglomerates, software companies, and R&D establishments continue to sell out to overseas firms, those benefits may appear ever less obvious"* (p. 322).

At the end of the 20th century, Kennedy argued that ongoing globalization would not come without its challenges, and that such shortcomings would weigh disproportionately on the most disadvantaged groups. He understood that the prospects of non-college-educated individuals and unskilled professional workers would be quite poor in an economy that was changing and moving from manufacturing to services. As a result, Kennedy hypothesized that a widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the growing distance between the urban elites and the rural working class, would produce social tensions and distrust as the world – and the United States more specifically – moved towards the new century.

Kennedy also understood how an America that was becoming more and more ethnically diverse would pose threats to social and political stability. As the white portion of the population would continue to shrink, mostly due to immigration and higher birth rates among ethnic groups, Kennedy referred to how "demographic change can also exacerbate ethnic tensions, as between African Americans and Hispanic-Americans (over jobs), or Asian-Americans and African Americans (over educational access), as well as stimulate the racial worries of poor whites" (p. 313). This sort of population change in the U.S. would soon tilt the "regional electoral balance" in favor of more ethnically diverse areas, such as the South and the West. As institutions would become more representative of such diversity, and multiculturalism would become more "mainstream", pushbacks – such as heightened racial tensions translating into politics – were to be expected.

Writing in 1993, Kennedy understood that the America of the 21st century might be a different reality than that of the 1900s. This chapter has been dedicated to demonstrating that – from a political perspective – such changes have taken place that it is no longer possible to speak of the U.S. party system with the same parameters employed for the 1960s, 1970s or even 1980s. A variety of factors, such as the progressive de-alignment of the working class from the Democratic Party after almost 100 years, the rise in ideological polarization across the political spectrum, and an era of newfound Republican strength with Donald Trump, have modified the political scenario to the point where a seventh realignment – granted that the sixth one had begun in the 1960s – might be reasonably hypothesized.

CONCLUSION

The majority of scholarly research agrees that the most recent partisan realignment occurred during the so-called "New Deal era", when the crisis of 1929 ushered in a Democratic government for the first time in twenty years.

The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt proved to be transformative for the American political system for a variety of reasons. It not only marked the beginning of quite a long series of successes for the Democratic Party, which would win the presidency and congressional majority seemingly with no effort throughout the 1930s and 1940s; the New Deal reform package, and the widespread support it encountered, also normalized the Democrats' Keynesian interpretation of liberal capitalism, which transformed the general understanding of the role and responsibility of the federal administration. The electorate rewarded the Democratic Party for the success of the welfare state, and of all the government-sponsored programs which, with the exception of a small recession in the late 1930s, successfully led the country out of the Great Depression and onto the international arena as a global superpower.

While the electoral performance of runner-up Barry Goldwater in 1964 arguably foreshadowed the imminent crisis of the New Deal order, the dissolution of the Democratic coalition is attributed to a series of domestic and international developments throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Firstly, the outbreak of the civil rights movement in America drew a line between the white – mostly southern – and African American electorate, weakening a voting base that was already fragile in its diversity. Secondly, controversies around the Johnson administration's handling of the Vietnam war in 1968 caused intra-partisan conflicts between the progressive and the more moderate or conservative Democrats, ultimately hindering Humphrey's chances in his race against Richard Nixon. Finally, the Oil Shock and the economic stagflation which ensued in the mid-1970s precipitated the United States into what was perhaps the worst crisis since 1929. The seemingly weak and inadequate response of the Carter administration to the emergency popularized anti-welfare and anti-public spending sentiments, ultimately favoring Reagan's overwhelming success in 1980 and 1984.

Following Key's "secular realignment" theory, this thesis has attempted to identify whether the sweeping and small socio-economic changes that have affected U.S. politics during the past fifty years might have provoked new, substantial changes to electoral coalitions and voting behavior. When has the fifth party system collapsed? Has a sixth realignment occurred, and if so, has it ended already?

The inevitable conclusion that this has indeed happened derives from two main arguments, namely that the changes in the partisan dynamics of the 1970s and 2010s clearly set those eras apart from whatever preceded them.

First and foremost, the sixth party system is set to originate around the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a realigning election potentially identifiable in the Nixon-McGovern contest of 1972. In that occasion, the Republican Party retained control of the White House with an even larger majority than four years prior, despite the fact that President Nixon had failed to deliver on the very promise that had him elected in 1968, namely ending the war in Vietnam (a goal achieved only by his successor and pre-Watergate VP Gerald Ford). Additionally, while voter turnout that year was lower than in any of the preceding elections, conversely it is also the highest – considering the Voting Age Population – for at least the upcoming thirty-six years. As per Kleppner's critical election criteria, this data is particularly important.

The decade of successes for the Republican Party, from 1980 to 1991, would thus be the consolidation phase of the 1972 realignment, if one considers the Carter presidency as an "accident" attributable to the crisis of credibility for the GOP, following the uncovering of questionable management of re-election campaign funds by a Washington Post investigation.

Undoubtedly, Ronald Reagan's belief in "big government" as an obstacle to progress radically transformed the Republican Party. Espousing the tenants of the Chicago school of economics, under his guidance the GOP effectively ended the New Deal era, guiding the nation according to a neoliberal policy plan of softer regulations on businesses and reduced government intervention via cuts on public spending and welfare programs. Concurrently, Republicans began incorporating in their agendas cultural and ideological concerns, progressively shifting the Party to the conservative right. From Reagan onwards, campaign promises of Republican nominees have touched on hot-button issues such as abortion, immigration and religion, which have on the one hand attracted groups of evangelicals and ultra-conservative activists, but on the other have alienated centrist voters.

The erasure of ideological diversity within partisan coalitions is a recurring issue in all analyses of U.S. politics from the 1980s to the present day. As the focus of public debate has shifted from economic to cultural matters, the Democratic Party has taken a clearly liberal stance, while Republicans have aligned with conservative values. As a result, compared to the 1950s or 1960s, the number of moderates within both bases has reached a record low, and achieving bipartisan consensus either in or outside of Congress has become nearly impossible.

Following the disastrous outcomes of the 1980, 1984 and 1988 presidential elections (combined with all in-between midterms), the Democratic Party attempted a rebranding. Under the guidance of the Democratic Leadership Council, Bill Clinton ran in 1992 as the presidential candidate who would defy the tense, polarized political debate, and become a leader for all Americans. As a generational link between the "old" and the "new" Democrats, throughout his presidency Clinton tried to find a balance between intervening in the economy and on social rights.

As a “new Democrat”, he espoused the neoliberal creed and promoted deregulation initiatives both at the domestic and international level. In 1993, for example, the Financial Services Modernization Act repealed the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, removing the distinction between commercial and investment banks; in 1994, the United States entered the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico, under the promise of future economic prosperity.

Deregulation, however, bears a hidden price. A decrease in the opportunity cost of relocating typically encourages industries to seek other markets where an absence of stringent labor laws and manufacturing standards makes production cheaper. While this undoubtedly brings profitable growth for firms, it typically weighs on workers who lose their jobs as production plants close. Despite the fact that neither Bill Clinton nor the Democratic Party are responsible for the crisis of American manufacturing, which had been going on for decades, rural and post-industrial communities became particularly resentful towards a self-identified “party of the common man” which had so openly embraced neoliberal principles.

Despite the evident crisis of consensus among blue-collar workers, many in the wake of Obama’s groundbreaking 2008 success prophesized the resurgence of the left, made possible by all those young, multi-ethnic and urban voters who had mobilized for the first African American President in the country’s history. This “coalition of the ascendant” was presented as a historical inevitability by many political commentators; undoubtedly, the electorate of the 21st century was onset to become progressively younger and more diverse, and millennial as well as ethnic voters are overwhelmingly Democrat. However, the smooth rise to power of the new progressive coalition encountered two major obstacles: the Tea Party and Donald Trump.

Obama’s appeals to unity and collective agency in the name of progress failed to capture a considerable number of Americans, and in the months following his victory a counter-movement began to organize. What would be known as the “Tea Party”, a reference to Boston’s rebellion against British colonial rule, originated as a series of scattered protests and meetings which would be pushed to the forefront of public debate and empowered by corporation funds and conservative media outlets. Through systemic grassroots organizing, the movement steered the GOP to the right by supporting complacent nominees in the 2010 midterms campaign and pressuring moderate Republicans to avoid compromise with the Democratic Party by threatening to oust them in the next election. While Tea Partiers are not the sole reason for an ultra-conservative realignment with much older roots, an analysis of the ideological scores in congressional voting before and after 2010 clearly reveals the result of their efforts.

The most recent upheaval in American politics happened in 2016. That November, Donald J. Trump became the 45th President of the United States despite losing the popular vote by almost 2 million to Hillary Clinton. While it took many by surprise at the time, this thesis argues that, in hindsight, his electoral success is merely the natural end result of the political developments of the past decades.

The platform adopted by the Republican Party ahead of the 2016 presidential race included an interesting mix of conservative values, such as anti-immigrant, anti-abortion and anti-LGBT+ rhetoric, and seemingly "left-wing" economic policies, focused on protectionism and the safeguard of the domestic manufacturing industry via restrictions on international trade and relocation of production. Successfully embracing right-wing populism, Trump presented himself as Washington's outsider who could fix all those issues created by both Democratic and Republican elites alike.

From 2016 onwards, support for the GOP has been growing, contrary to all the predictions of an inevitable progressive turn made at the start of Obama's first term. Surely, Donald Trump is not fully responsible for a process by which formerly strong pillars of the New Deal coalition have slowly backed away from the Democratic Party, but his personality and unusual rhetoric which defies traditional (i.e. *establishment*) norms of conduct have contributed greatly to the most recent developments. Conversely, Democrats now enjoy significant support in the big metropolitan areas of the East and West coasts, particularly among young, college educated professionals. However, since the Electoral College system favors candidates who can win a considerable number of states across generational, racial and educational categories, a coalition that is highly socially and geographically concentrated will inevitably fail – if not for unforeseen crises which can temporarily hurt the majority party (such as the COVID pandemic).

In conclusion, Trump's success depends on two major components of the U.S. electorate; one, blue-collar workers, has been growing fond of the GOP for decades already, but the other, ethnic voters (and in particular Hispanics), represents a great potential for an even stronger Republican coalition.

The de-alignment of the working class, particularly in the Midwest, from the Democratic Party is the result of a conglomerate of reasons – of which NAFTA and support for free trade are but a small portion. The urban coalition and the civil and social rights platform adopted by the left have contributed to discouraging those parts of blue collar America who feel like they share different concerns – concerns to which the Republicans have promptly catered to. In 2016, some political commentators had attributed Clinton's poor performance in the so-called "Blue Wall" to a lack of time and resources invested to campaign in those states, which the Democratic Party was projected to win with a decent margin. However, as bulwarks of the Democratic base, such as the African American community in Detroit, did not mobilize, Donald Trump won the 46 electoral votes of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

The recent rise in ethnic minority voting for the GOP, in a society that is becoming progressively more diverse, might also suggest that Trump's appeal goes beyond white working-class America. While the vast majority of African Americans still self-identifies as Democrat, a small change – particularly among young men – seems to have favored Republicans in 2024. Latinos, on the other hand, express more mixed preferences; in 2020, while 59% cast their vote for Joe Biden, a 2024 CNN exit poll attested support for the

GOP at around 45% in the Trump-Harris race – an prospective increase of about 7 percentage points in four years. Considering that Hispanics now constitute the majority of the ethnic electorate, such growth in consensus could be rather advantageous for the Republican coalition.

The initial goal of this thesis was to identify the collapse of the fifth party system, whose origins could be traced back to FDR's presidency. Did something fundamental change at some point that deeply transformed American politics? The answer lied in the tumultuous decade which began with a presidential assassination, and ended with the contentious policy issue of the Vietnam war. Following secular realignment theory, the birth of the sixth party system is thus set to have materialized at the beginning of the 1970s, only to stabilize in the 1980s. However, the analysis of 21st century U.S. politics seemingly leads to the conclusion that new and different partisan and voting coalition dynamics are emerging.

While the peculiar circumstances around Trump's success possibly point towards a seventh party system, realignment theory maintains that only the endurance of a voting coalition determines whether or not a new majority has emerged. In this regard, two issues should be addressed; firstly,, the three general elections and two midterms held in the past eight years are too close in time for an objective and accurate analysis. Secondly, the question is now if the new Republican coalition can outlive Trump's presidency, or if his leadership is the main coordinating factor which, if removed, will precipitate the GOP into another crisis of popularity. The answer to these concerns is perhaps to be found in the future, when additional research on party systems theory, with other elections as supporting evidence, will determine the full-scale impact of Trump's coalition on the endurance, or death, of the sixth realignment.

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