

An Era of Unstable Majorities Continues

Morris P. Fiorina

Stanford University

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My book, *Unstable Majorities*, published shortly after the 2016 elections, addressed the enormous changes in American electoral politics that have occurred during my lifetime.¹ From a “tweedled-dee tweedle-dum” era of centrist party competition that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century our country transitioned to the polarized partisan warfare that prevails today. The result is a politics of gridlock that many observers believe threatens the very future of American Democracy.

Unfortunately, the elections of 2018 and 2020 generally are consistent with the arguments I offered in the 2017 book, suggesting that the forces underlying today’s polarized politics have not abated and may even have grown stronger. I begin by summarizing the earlier argument then move to a brief discussion of the more recent elections, concluding with some critical thoughts about what some people in the political order see as possible future paths for the parties.

Recapitulation

Unstable Majorities was the culmination of an argument I have been developing for at least two decades, in recognition that the literature on political parties that we had consumed in the 1960s and 1970s no longer explained party behavior evident since the turn of the century.² As Lee Drutman recounts in his recent book, for the first two centuries of political life under the Constitution the Madisonian system of federalism and separation of powers averted the fears of the Framers that “two great parties” would arise and lead to the demise of the Republic.³ For more than 150 years after the arrival of mass parties in the Jacksonian era the parties were loose coalitions of factions that spanned geographic divides—“big tents” in common parlance. Significant third parties were common in the 19th Century, and for much of the 20th Century Drutman argues that the U.S. had a *de facto* four-party system wherein each party had conservative and liberal wings (similar to, but slightly different from James McGregor Burns’ argument in

¹ Fiorina. 2018. *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting & Political Stalemate*. Stanford, CA. Hoover Institution Press.

² 2002. “Parties, Participation, and Representation in America: Old Theories Face New Realities. In *Political Science: State of the Discipline*. eds. Katznelson and Milner,

³ 2020. *Breaking the Two Party Doom Loop* New York: Oxford University Press.

The Deadlock of Democracy, in which both parties had presidential and congressional wings).⁴ Beginning in the 1990s however, the not-well understood process of party sorting created two ideologically distinct, cohesive parties reminiscent of the government and the loyal opposition in mid-19th Century Britain, or the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats of some continental democracies. Ironically, as the dominant parties in Europe became more like the convergent parties of mid-20th Century United States, American parties became more like the polarized parliamentary parties of mid-20th Century Europe, yet another example of American Exceptionalism.⁵

Possibly as a consequence of the parties' abandonment of the "big tent" notion a smaller proportion of the American public now claims adherence to the two parties than previously. From three-quarters of the electorate declaring Republican or Democratic affiliation in the Eisenhower era, the proportion has fallen to about 60 percent willing to claim adherence today.⁶ The decline in adherents has occurred primarily among Democrats who have lost significant ground to Independents; Republicans have about the same proportion of identifiers today as in the Eisenhower era. (Some commentators thought—briefly—that Obama's victory in the 2008 elections heralded a new Democratic alignment, but the 2010 mid-term elections put a quick end to that notion). The consequence of these trends is that the United States now has two minority parties. Neither party can win on their own as the Democrats—theoretically—could in the New Deal Era. To win, today's parties must hold their base and gain the support of a majority of independents and perhaps a few defectors from the other side. The result is the arrival of the most electorally competitive period in American history.⁷ Beginning with the Clinton victory in the three-way 1992 election, and accelerating in the 2000s, control of the presidency and both houses of Congress are in question in nearly every election.

The traditional literature holds that majoritarian electoral systems with single-member districts produce centrist politics: two "catch-all" parties compete for the middle of the electorate. In the second half of the

⁴ James McGregor Burns. 1964. *The Deadlock of Democracy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Drutman has a much more positive evaluation of the four-party system than Burns did, of course, demonstrating once again that Political Science evaluations are heavily conditioned by political context.

⁵ For a review see *Unstable Majorities*. Ch. 8.

⁶ This fact immediately brings up the question of leaning independents. Here is not the place to get into that, but suffice it to say that there is quite a bit of evidence—generally ignored—that leaning independents are not just "hidden partisans." *Unstable Majorities*. Ch. 6.

⁷ Morris Fiorina. 2013. "America's Missing Moderates: Hiding in Plain Sight." *The American Interest* 8: 58-67.

20th Century the notion that the parties would make overlapping appeals in an attempt to capture the center became a kind of master theory of American politics, an idea formalized in the attention bestowed on the median voter.⁸ But by the 1990s it was clear that theory and reality no longer meshed. On the contrary, Democratic and Republican candidates adopted positions far from the center even in the most competitive districts and although candidates might make some tentative attempts to move toward the center in the general election, various considerations, including the danger of being labelled a flip-flopper, kept them close to the distinct positions that they advocated in their party primaries.⁹ The link between close elections and policy moderation that once seemed axiomatic now seems weak, if not nonexistent

Why has this happened? I believe the answer is two-fold. The first part of the answer is that the parties sorted. Students today find it difficult to believe that two generations ago, there were Republican representatives and senators who were more liberal than many Democratic representatives and senators. There were Democrats in Congress who opposed environmental legislation and Republicans who favored it, Democrats who strongly opposed gun control, and Republicans who favored it, Democrats who were pro-life and Republicans who were unabashedly pro-choice. The most racially liberal AND the most racially conservative representatives and senators were both in the Democratic Party. No more. Today, party labels immediately tell us with a high degree of confidence where those bearing them stand on a wide array of issues. The conditional probability that a voter takes a liberal (conservative) position on abortion given that they have a liberal (conservative) position on taxation is much higher than it was just a few decades ago.¹⁰ More colloquially, the average Democrat disagrees with the average Republican on more issues today than previously.¹¹

This process of sorting began in mid-19th Century at the elite level as shown by Carmines and Stimson, becomes evident at the mass level in the 1980s as shown by Abramowitz and Saunders, and shows up

⁸ Duncan Black. 1958. *The Theory of Committees and Elections*. London: Cambridge University Press. Anthony Downs. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Wiley.

⁹ Joseph Bafumi and Michael C. Herron. 2010. "Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 104: 519-42.

¹⁰ This increase in ideological *consistency* generates polarized ideological indices even in the absence of polarization on the individual issue dimensions. Cf. Alan Abramowitz. 2010. *The disappearing Center*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Ch. 3.

¹¹ See Abramowitz, this volume.

with a vengeance in elections in the new century.¹² The underlying causes of the sorting process are not well-understood.¹³ Some parts of the explanation seem clear enough. Social changes had an impact. As African-Americans migrated north after World War II they became a more important political force in northern cities, pushing the northern wing of the Democratic Party in a more racially liberal direction, which heightened tensions with many in the southern wing of the Party. Meanwhile, the growth of the Sunbelt increased the political importance of the region and stimulated the Republicans to move in a more conservative direction, not only to capture disaffected Democrats but to attract the new areas experiencing rapid economic development.¹⁴ Other parts of the sorting process are more difficult to understand. In 1960 if someone had foreseen that abortion would become a major issue in the decades ahead, which party would observers have predicted would become the pro-life party? More likely the Democrats, given the heavy presence of northern Catholics and southern Baptists in the party. Similarly, which party would become the environmental party? More likely the Republican Party, given its association with Theodore Roosevelt and conservation, whereas the Democratic Party included workers in heavy manufacturing and extractive industries whose jobs might be threatened by environmental regulations. Things didn't work out that way, however, and it is clear that the sorting process was strongly affected by politics, specifically political entrepreneurs who engaged in coalition building.¹⁵

Catch-all parties must engage in internal compromising to arrive at policy platforms and candidate nominations acceptable to all parts of their heterogeneous membership. In the ideological parties that operate today, that process is severely truncated. At one time Republicans were competitive in highly urbanized states such as New York and Illinois, and Democrats were competitive in rural states in the

¹² Edward Carmines and James Stimson. 1989. *Issue Evolution*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press. Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders. 1998. "Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate." *Journal of Politics*. 60: 634-52. These works disagree somewhat on the proximate causes of the sorting, however. Carmines and Stimson emphasize the primacy of race, whereas Abramowitz and Saunders conclude that race was only one of a number of issues that became ideologically connected.

¹³ Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams. 2011. *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*. Norman OK: Oklahoma University Press. Ch. 5.

¹⁴ Byron Shafer and Richard Johnston show that initial Republican gains occurred among the racially resentful but later Republican gains in the south were a result of economic development. *The End of Southern Exceptionalism*. 2006. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press.

¹⁵ Christopher Baylor. 2018. *First to the Party*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Great Plains and the Mountain West.¹⁶ Today the-urban rural divide is one of the defining cleavages in the party system. Another defining cleavage is race. Until 1964 Republicans got a decent percentage of the Black vote; today it is overwhelmingly Democratic. Before the 1990s both parties contained majorities of church-going worshippers; today the Democrats are the party of “nones” and Republicans the party of weekly churchgoers. College degrees once were too rare to provide the basis of an electoral cleavage; in the past two elections they have become a significant cleavage. Each party now achieves internal compromises over a much narrower range of the various policy dimensions than they did in earlier decades. The resulting compromises in the Republican Party are likely to be much farther from those in the Democratic Party than was the case in earlier decades.

The second part of the explanation for the changing nature of party competition is a change in the nature of the two parties. What is a party? According to Edmund Burke, a political party is “a body of men united for promoting the national interest upon some particular principle upon which they are agreed.”¹⁷ Most observers take a somewhat earthier view, such as that expressed by Duverger: a political party “is a group of persons organized to acquire and exercise political power.”¹⁸ In short, the principle on which party members are agreed is winning elections. I suggest that in the past generation we have seen a transition in American parties from something like those in the second definition to something more closely resembling more closely the parties in the first definition.

From the Jacksonian Era to the mid-20th Century, electoral victory for a party brought control of public sector jobs, government contracts, insider information--all the components of what Plunkett considered to be “honest graft.”¹⁹ Civil Service reforms were the first attack on this system, and beginning in the 1960s public sector unionization shifted power from the parties to increasingly powerful interest groups that have become a dominant force in today’ Democratic Party. Meanwhile the adoption of universalistic policies and entitlements weakened the role of the parties as providers of particularized benefits. Further constraining old time party activities were the adoption of conflict of interest laws and changing media

¹⁶ Which helps to explain why gun control was not a partisan issue. Remember Democratic Senators like Frank Church of Idaho, Gale McGee of Wyoming, and George McGovern of South Dakota?

¹⁷ Quoted in Henry Steele Commager. 1949. “American Political Parties.” *Parliamentary Affairs*. III: 214-225.

¹⁸ “Political Party.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2021: 1.

¹⁹ William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (1905; reprint, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963): 3–6.

practices—journalists transformed from lapdogs to junkyard dogs in Sabato’s phraseology.²⁰ Together and in combination these reforms and societal changes greatly diminished the material rewards of participating in party politics.

Peter Clark and James Q. Wilson argued that incentive fall into three categories: material, purposive, and solidary.²¹ With material rewards diminishing space opened up for party participation motivated by purposive and solidary motives. Rather than attend party functions, donate or work for a party because it was a job requirement or in the hope of making a valuable contact, people became party activists because they wished to help end (or as Hersh suggests, feel like they were helping to end) abortion, helping to end gun violence, stop global warming, achieve justice for marginalized groups, and a host of other issues.²² The result is that today’s parties look more like those envisioned by Burke than anyone would have imagined a generation or so ago.

In sum, the American parties today are much different organizations than those that operated until the late 19th Century. The parties are more homogenous and they are operated by ideologically and policy-motivated members. When Republican candidate Barry Goldwater declared in 1964 that he would rather be right than president, worldly-wise political observers smirked. Today’s parties are full of people who would rather be right than winners, or at a minimum have convinced themselves that losing today will result in victory in the future. Rather than close electoral competition driving parties to the center, close competition today drives the parties to *overreach*. When they do win control of an elective institution, especially when they win control of all three at the same time, they attempt to impose the position of the party on the larger electorate. This occurs even if they realize that their positions are not majority supported because they likely will soon lose power anyway. “Strike while the iron is hot” rather than seek victory in the center is the mantra of today’s parties. We see Bill Clinton in 1994, George W. Bush in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008 behave similarly to Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 and Lyndon Johnson in 1964 despite winning elections nowhere near as impressively as their mid-century predecessors.

²⁰ Larry Sabato. 1991. *Feeding Frenzy*. New York:Free Press.

²¹ Peter B. Clark and James Q. Wilson. 1961. “Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organizations.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 6: 129-166.

²² Eitan Hersh. 2020. *Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change*. New York: Scribner.

Overreach, of course, is a self-fulfilling strategy. Fearing they will lose the next election, parties overreach which raises the likelihood that in fact they will lose the next election, as voters not committed to the party's platform experience a version of political "buyer's remorse." For example, according to Gallup, when Obama was elected in 2008 Americans were evenly split on whether they had elected a liberal (43 percent) or a moderate (45 percent). But a year later after which the Democrats advocated cap-and-trade environmental legislation and Obamacare, a significant chunk of voters decided that Obama in fact was a liberal (54 percent) rather than a moderate (34 percent).²³ The 2010 electoral bloodbath followed the next year.

The 2018 and 2020 Elections

Table 1 is an update of party control of the three national elective institutions. The two most recent elections have put an exclamation point on the fact that we are living in the most unstable electoral period in American history. There are eight possible patterns of control of the three elective institutions. The elections between 2000 and 2016 inclusive saw six of these patterns realized. The 2018 elections gave us a seventh, and had Donald Trump not inexplicably helped the Democrats win both Georgia run-offs, the 2020 elections would have given us all eight logically possible patterns in twenty years of elections.

{Table 1 about here}

The 2018 elections somewhat fit the overreach account. Originally, I thought that Trump might evade the overreach fate that recent presidents have suffered. In a number of major respects the positions he took in the campaign (eg. trade, immigration, Russia) were not those of the traditional Republican base, but once in office he largely ceded the policy agenda to Congressional Republicans. Their attempt to repeal Obamacare proved futile--succeeding probably would have made the 2018 election outcome even worse. Many observers thought that a large infrastructure proposal would be a political winner, with the potential to split congressional Democrats, but Congressional Republicans opted instead for tax cuts weighted toward business and the wealthy, reflecting Republican base orthodoxy—at least the old establishment base. Trump nominated prominent conservatives to the Supreme Court and in other ways

²³ Lydia Saad. 2009. "In U.S., Majority Now Say Obama's Policies 'Mostly liberal.'" <https://news.gallup.com/poll/124094/majority-say-obama-policies-mostly-liberal.aspx>.

supported the social conservative agenda, despite being a “Donny come lately on such issues. In such examples the Republicans followed the recent pattern of overreach. More likely, however, specific policies and appointments mattered less for the off-year elections than did the determined activism of Democrats to right the wrong of 2016 when the loser of the popular vote won the Presidency, as well as voter fatigue with Trump’s personal behavior.

Given the absence of any policy accomplishments between 2018 and 2020, Trump’s defeat is not the best illustration of the overreach argument. Of course, absent Covid I suspect that Trump would have won the election. The aftermath of Joe Biden’s election on the other hand, fits the overreach account pretty well. Biden did not run as a transformational president. Rather, he promised a return to normalcy—responsible adult behavior by an experienced, knowledgeable Washington leader. While he won a clear plurality of the popular vote, the heavy Democratic majorities turned in by a few states like California (which accounted for 5 million of Biden’s 7 million popular vote majority) give something of a misleading picture. Even more than in 2016 the election turned on some very close margins in a few swing states—about 43,000 votes in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Arizona. The Congressional results were disappointing—a Democratic gain of only three-seats resulted in a tied Senate, and the loss of some 20 House seats resulted in a single-digit majority in that chamber. Despite this knife-edged control of national institutions, however, the Biden administration acted as if it had won an electoral mandate akin to that of Roosevelt in 1936 or Lyndon Johnson in 1964, proposing trillions of dollars in new spending and a massive expansion of the welfare state. While Democrats point out that many of the proposed programs poll well individually, the evidence suggests that support is tepid—majorities do not believe that the programs will do much for them personally--and likely not strong enough to outweigh rising concerns about inflation, jobs and the economy.²⁴ Other poll data suggest that increasing number of voters see the Democrats’ activist agenda as too ambitious.²⁵

²⁴ Not to mention that Americans support many spending programs until the question of paying for them enters the picture. For current data showing rising concern with inflation, jobs and the economy see “Ipsos Poll: Core Political Data.” <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-10/2021%20Ipsos%20Tracking%20-%20Core%20Political%20Presidential%20Approval%20Tracker%2010%2014%202021.pdf>

²⁵ Jeffrey Jones. 2021. “Americans Revert to Favoring Reduced Government Role.” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355838/americans-revert-favoring-reduced-government-role.aspx>

From the mid-point of 2021 Biden's approval ratings have fallen about ten percentage points so that his disapproval numbers are now higher than his approval numbers, with performance ratings on some issues such as immigration and foreign policy even lower.²⁶ Independents account for a large share of the drop on Biden approval, consistent with the argument in *Unstable Majorities*, that marginal supporters of the electoral majority get a more liberal or conservative policy agenda than they had hoped for.²⁷ Democratic prospects of holding the House in 2022, already low given the historical mid-term loss and a Republican advantage in decennial redistricting, now look even bleaker. The Democrats' hopes to retain control now rest on Republican primary voters' demonstrated capacity to shoot themselves in the feet as they did in Senate races in 2010 and 2014, reinforced by Donald Trump's demonstrated willingness to damage his own party's candidates should he be in the mood.²⁸

An old saying goes that something that can't go on forever, won't. Electoral chaos and government gridlock in the face of mounting national and international problems eventually will provoke some kind of crisis or other reaction that changes our politics-- for better one would hope, but for worse is always a possibility. It is extremely difficult to foresee when such hinge points occur and what will follow them, but historically they seem associated with national elections that produce a major victory for one party or the other, which then governs in a manner that solidifies its position.²⁹

²⁶ A.B. Stoddard. 2021. "If Polls are Right, Democrats are Doomed. If They're Wrong, It's Worse." https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/10/11/if_polls_are_right_dems_are_doomed_if_theyre_wrong_its_worse_146544.html.

²⁷ Geoffrey Skelley. 2021. "Biden has Lost Support Among All Groups of Americans—But Especially Independents and Hispanics." <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/biden-has-lost-support-across-all-groups-of-americans-but-especially-independents-and-hispanics/>.

²⁸ In 2010 a Republican Senate candidate had to deny being a witch. David Gura. "'I'm Not a Witch,' Republican Candidate Christine O'Donnell Tells Delaware Voters." <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2010/10/05/130353168/i-m-not-a-witch-republican-senate-candidate-christine-o-donnell-says-in-new-ad>. In 2014 a Republican candidate in a very winnable seat said that in the case of "legitimate rape" a woman's body had the capacity to shut down the pregnancy. Another (losing) candidate charged that the theory of evolution and climate change were lies from "the pit of hell." Elise Viebeck. 2012. "Republican Says Evolution, Big Bang Theory 'Lies Straight from the Pit of Hell'." <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/260641-house-republican-says-evolution-big-bang-theory-lies-straight-from-the-pit-of-hell->. Most recently Trump has suggested that his supporters should boycott the upcoming elections. Ewan Palmer. 2021. "MAGA Supporters Left Confused by Donald Trump's Call Not to Vote in Midterms, 2024." <https://www.newsweek.com/maga-supporters-confused-donald-trump-vote-2024-election-qanon-midterms-1639286>.

²⁹ Mayhew has shown that the classical realignment account is inaccurate in nearly all its particulars. Still, it is difficult to deny that elections like 1896, 1936 and 1980 settled some older issues and set a new direction for the country. David Mayhew. 2004. *Electoral Realignments*. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press.

New Party Coalitions?

Social change causes political change; hence, it is natural to imagine a changed politics down the road from observing social changes occurring today. Components of each party have identified social changes they believe can be exploited to construct enduring electoral majorities. In fact, both of their visions are at odds with available facts and both reduce the prospects of moving beyond our present situation.

*Democrats: A Multi-Racial, Multi-Cultural Majority*³⁰

In 2002 John Judis and Ruy Teixeira published *The Emerging Democratic Majority* wherein they argued that ongoing socio-demographic trends worked to the long-run advantage of the Democrats.³¹ These trends included a rising percentage of ethnic minorities, and growing percentages of younger voters, unmarried working women, and the college-educated. Individually and cumulatively these developments suggested a bright electoral future for the Democratic Party

The 2008 Obama coalition appeared to confirm the arrival of this “new American electorate” or “coalition of the ascendant.”³² In the aftermath of Obama’s re-election the Republican National Committee recognized the need to adjust the party’s positions to the changing country when it issued an “autopsy” of Mitt Romney’s loss, concluding that the Party should become more inclusive and increase its appeal to ethnic and racial minorities, women, and young voters. A few years later the United States Census Bureau (CB) put an official stamp on one of the important demographic trends when it issued a report titled “Non-Hispanic Whites May No Longer Comprise Over 50 Percent of the U.S. Population by 2044.”³³ Many official government reports go unnoticed; not this one. The idea of a majority-minority country quickly entered the national political conversation.

³⁰ This section is based on Morris Fiorina. 2021. “The Myth of a Majority Minority Nation.” https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/12/08/the_myth_of_a_majority-minority_nation_144799.html

³¹ John Judis and Ruy Teixeira. 2002. *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. New York. Scribner.

³² Ruy Teixeira. 2012. “The Emerging Democratic Majority Turns Ten.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/11/the-emerging-democratic-majority-turns-10/265005/>

³³ U.S. Census Bureau. “2014. Projecting Majority-Minority.” https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/releases/2015/cb15-tps16_graphic.pdf

There is no downplaying the political impact of what has been called “the browning of America.”³⁴ The narrative of the majority-minority nation has become a staple of political commentary, especially on the left side of the political spectrum. Contrary to expectations, however, in the short run—the 2016 elections—some Democrats believe the party suffered from acceptance of the thesis and its apparent support for an electoral emphasis on identities.³⁵ Although the contributions of ethnocentrism and racism to Trump’s vote have likely been exaggerated,³⁶ social changes, particularly rapid and cumulative social changes, are unnerving to some elements of the population, with political reaction a natural result.³⁷ One need not accept far out notions like “white extinction anxiety” to recognize that a rising American electorate logically entails a declining American electorate, and one hardly can fault older, white, married non-college-educated voters for wondering where or if they fit in the new Democrat majority.³⁸ As Judis himself noted in 2015, the presumption of *The Emerging Democratic Majority* not only was that rising groups would continue to favor the Democrats in their voting, but also that increased Democratic support from rising groups would not be offset by falling support among declining groups, contra to the movement of white working class Democrats to Trump in 2016.³⁹ As Teixeira pointed out earlier, there are still too many whites in the electorate for the Democrats to win without attracting a goodly share of them.⁴⁰ Ironically, an emphasis on racial and ethnic identities may have boomeranged by creating a “white consciousness” where little or none existed before.⁴¹ Moreover the increase in Trump support

³⁴ William H. Frey. The Browning of America: The Next 15 Years.” <https://frey-demographer.org/browning-america-next-15-years>.

³⁵ Mark Lilla. 2016. ‘The End of Identity Liberalism.’ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>

³⁶ Morris Fiorina. 2020. “Economic Anxiety or Cultural Backlash: Which Was Key to Trump’s Election?”

³⁷ Sabrina Tavernese. 2018. “Why the Announcement of a Looming White Minority Makes Demographers Nervous.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/22/us/white-americans-minority-population.html>

³⁸ Charles M. Blow.2018. “White Extinction Anxiety.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/24/opinion/america-white-extinction.html>

³⁹ John B. Judis.2021. “The Emerging Republican Advantage.” <https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/32748/emerging-republican-advantage>

⁴⁰ Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers. 2001. *America’s Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*. York: Basic.

⁴¹ Ashley Jardina. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. New York: Cambridge.

among Latinos and even African Americans in 2020 suggests that the first assumption of continuing or increasing minority support for Democrats is fragile as well.⁴²

Politics aside, however, the simple fact is that the notion of a majority-minority American is empirically false, as shown by academic demographers who have been criticizing the Census Bureau projections for nearly a decade. An important new book by CUNY professor Richard Alba should be required reading for the intellectual elites of both parties.⁴³

The accompanying snapshot of Senator Ted (Rafael Eduard) Cruz and his family provides the best short explanation of the critique. Senator Cruz is the son of a Cuban father and Irish mother. The CB classifies him as Hispanic, a minority. Cruz' wife, Heidi, is of northern European ancestry. The two daughters also are classified as minority (so long as the parents report their children's Cuban heritage on the Hispanic origin question--see below). Should these girls grow up, marry say, ethnic Norwegians, and have one or two children each, Cruz's grandchildren will be classified as minority, again, as long as whoever fills out the census form acknowledges their Hispanic ancestry. So, if he lives until 2044, Senator Cruz could contribute as many as seven people to the projected nonwhite majority: himself, two children who are one-quarter Cuban, and two to four grandchildren who are one-eighth Cuban.

{Cruz Family Picture About Here}

Most people would find such a classification procedure surprising, if not dubious. The projections in the 2015 report are based on questions dealing with race and ethnicity that were first included on the 2010 census. Consider Question 8 on the census form which asks about Hispanic ancestry. Those who report any Hispanic ancestry on this question move into the minority category, regardless of their responses to question 9. Non-Hispanics who check the "white" box on question 9 go into the white category, of course—*unless they write in anything else*. Should they wish to claim say, an American Indian ancestor (fairly common), or recognize a Vietnamese grandmother, they again fall into the minority category despite their white self-categorization. In both cases, descendants stay in the same category as the parent—minority--if they acknowledge the parent's ancestry. In sum, the CB projection reflects a one-

⁴² Ruy Teixeira. 2021. "The Dems' Hispanic Problem is Way Worse Than You Think." https://www.realclearpolitics.com/2021/12/10/the_dems_hispanic_problem_is_way_worse_than_you_think_558484.html

⁴³ Richard Alba. 2020. *The Great Demographic Illusion*. Princeton NJ. Princeton University Press.

drop rule akin to that used in the Jim Crow South. The white category consists only of people who are 100 percent white.⁴⁴ If one adopts a more expansive definition of white, the projection of a majority-minority nation disappears. Myer and Levy, for example, calculate what future American populations would look like if anyone who checks the white box on question 9 is classified as white. With this very liberal classification, the nation is three-quarters white in 2060.⁴⁵

{Census Questions here

What is actually occurring is that the United States is experiencing a rapid rise in multiethnic, and multi-racial people. On first hearing about the projected nonwhite majority, many people probably form a mental image that looks roughly like this: 4 whites, 2 Hispanics, 2 Blacks, 1 Asian, and perhaps one “other.” As the preceding discussion explains, however, the picture is much more complex. The majority of minorities will not consist of people who are 100 percent Latino, 100 percent Asian, 100 percent Black, 100 percent Native American or 100 percent Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (the official Census categories). Rather, the majority of minorities will include people of numerous shadings of color. The United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, not only because of the changing relative sizes of the five large groups, but also because of the growing internal diversity within each group as the sizes of their mixed portions swell. Diversity is increasing *within* individuals as well as among groups.

Alba reports numerous analyses using census data, birth certificates and surveys to describe the increasing occurrence of mixed marriages and the children who are products of such interracial and interethnic unions. Mixed marriage rates have steadily increased and the 2020 census will likely report that nearly one in five new marriages now are mixed. Fully 80 percent of these marriages are between a white and a minority. Forty percent of these involve a white and a Hispanic, with Asian-white unions at 15 percent. Forty percent of Americans report having a close relative who is married to someone of another racial group.

⁴⁴ The official category is non-Hispanic white: “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.” <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>

⁴⁵ Dowell Myers and Morris Levy. 2018. “Racial Population Projections and Reactions to Alternative News Accounts of Growing Diversity.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 677: 215-228.

Objective measures of life chances and well-being show that mixed race children fall between non-Hispanic white and all minority children (with the exception that Asian-white children do *better* than all white children on some measures). Parental education levels are lower for white-minority children than for white children, but higher than for minority children—except for Asian-white children where education levels are higher than in all white families. The proportion of multiracial children who live in two-parent families is lower than that of all-white children, but higher than that of all minority children. Family income levels of multiracial children are lower than that of all white children (except for Asian-whites, whose families have higher levels), but higher than that of all minority children.

On more subjective measures mixed race children report more fluid identities than those of single ethnicities, sometimes reporting one part of their parentage and at other times another. Asian-white multiracials provide a striking example: two-thirds of those included in both the 2000 and 2010 censuses did not give identical answers; at one time they chose one identity or mixture and at the other time made a different choice. Some mixed-race individuals choose to identify as white, some as mixed, some as their minority heritage, and their choices differ at different times and in different contexts.

For the most part Alba's findings are positive: they replace a white versus minority binary that encourages an us versus them orientation among some Americans with a more variegated picture where racial and ethnic boundaries are far less clear and constantly shifting—even within individuals—from day to day. The findings about black-white multiracial children (about 20 percent of mixed white-minority children) provide the one glaring exception to this positive picture. "Multiracials with black and white parentage are the huge exception to this pattern, and their experience is quite distinct. They grow up in less affluent circumstances and are exposed to much more severe discrimination, as evidenced by their frequent complaints of mistreatment at the hands of the police. They are more comfortable with blacks than with whites and usually identify with the black side of their family heritage."⁴⁶ But Alba goes on to note "Yet they too

⁴⁶ p. 136.

exhibit a level of integration with whites that exceeds that of other African Americans, as reflected in the relative frequency with which they marry whites.”⁴⁷

After the 2020 census the Census Bureau made a major announcement reporting that the white population of the United States had declined by 19 million people.⁴⁸ Again, this led to an explosion of media coverage and some outbreaks of “white extinction anxiety” on the far edges of the political spectrum.⁴⁹ Alba and his colleagues have recently shown again, however, that the Census Bureau figure is extremely misleading; it is almost entirely an artifact of a rarely-employed way of categorizing whites.⁵⁰

So, the case for a majority-minority electoral coalition rests on bad data. An identitarian Democratic Party almost certainly will be a *minority* Democratic Party—a party that consistently loses elections. Political appeals to various ethnic and racial groupings will be less effective as those groupings become less distinct and their identities become more diffuse, as indications of increased Republican voting by Hispanic and Black voters suggest.

The Republicans: A Populist Nationalist Party?

What about the Republicans? To say that there is any developed vision of a party future on the Republican side would be an exaggeration. As the party’s base of support has shifted the three-stooled Reagan coalition has fractured. A consensus on neoliberal economic policies has crumbled as major elements of today’s party express skepticism about international trade, immigration and globalization. Eighteen years of inconclusive war in the mid-East has dampened support for an activist role in

⁴⁷ P. 136. On Black-White multiracials see also Lauren Davenport. 2018. *Politics Beyond Black and White*. New York: Cambridge.

⁴⁸ Tara Bahrapour and Ted Mellnik, 2021. “Census data shows widening diversity; number of White people falls for first time.” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/08/12/census-data-race-ethnicity-neighborhoods/>

⁴⁹ Alex Noble. “Tucker Carlson Insists There Are ‘Non-White People Cheering the Extinction of White People.’” <https://www.yahoo.com/now/tucker-carlson-insists-non-white-181108285.html>

⁵⁰ Richard Alba, Morris Levy, and Dowell Myers. 2021. “the Myth of a Majority-Minority America.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/myth-majority-minority-america/619190/>

international affairs contrary to the views of the neoconservatives. Meanwhile the country grows more liberal on social issues other than abortion.

Some activists suggest that the party should embrace the changes evident in the Trump elections and transform into something akin to a populist party with white nationalist overtones, one that would at least delay its inevitable descent into minority status. The same data that impeach the Democratic idea of a majority-minority electorate show the fallacy of such thinking on the Republican side. If 40 percent—and increasing—of Americans report having a relative of another racial/ethnic group, it seems unlikely that a party will achieve majority status by insulting people's multi-racial relatives. One could embrace populism, of course, without adopting its less savory aspects. A multi-racial, multi-ethnic populist party such as some elements of 19th Century Southern and western Populism attempted to build has greater potential and some embryonic arguments in that vein have begun to appear.⁵¹ Whether they will become widely adopted by Republicans only time will tell.

Even if the Republicans were to become a more inclusive party in racial and ethnic terms, however, there are contradictions that continued movement in a populist direction would find it difficult to escape. The McKinley Republicans managed to construct a broad coalition uniting enough elements of labor with corporate America to dominate politics for a generation. Whether that earlier success can be duplicated is an open question. An "America First" stance on trade, immigration and globalization pits new working class Republicans against the older corporate base, especially the donor base. And the educated neo-conservatives who temporarily left the Republican Party because of Trump may leave it permanently, although it is not clear where they could go.⁵² Recognizing the importance of Social Security, Medicare and other components of the social safety net to working class Republicans will make it difficult or impossible to reform those programs, a goal of the Republican establishment for decades. Meanwhile, a continued heavy emphasis on culture war issues creates tensions between social conservative warriors and more moderate suburban Republicans whose partisan loyalties have been wobbling in recent elections. Republican candidates and strategists will attempt to finesse these contradictions, but they cannot make them go away.

⁵¹ Josh Hammer. 2021. "The Republican Party's Multiethnic, Working Class Coalition is Taking Shape." <https://amgreatness.com/2021/12/09/the-republican-partys-multiethnic-working-class-coalition-is-taking-shape/>

⁵² Robert Saldin and Steven Teles. 2020. *Never Trump: The Revolt of the Conservative Elites*. New York: Oxford University Press.

For these reasons, I do not see any end to the Era of Unstable Majorities. This raises the question of how long can the world's premier democracy stand nearly paralyzed in the face of major national and international challenges? The one thing that is clear is that the state of our parties must change. This is a desperate hope, but perhaps the contradictions and intra-party tensions noted above are a feature not a bug. If woke progressives and moderate Democrats can not resolve their differences, and establishment Republicans and populists can not resolve theirs, both parties might become engulfed in civil wars. In the short term this could produce conditions even worse than today's, but it might also plow up the packed electoral soil and allow the seeds of significant party transformation to take hold and grow.