

*From the March/April 2013 issue:*

## **America's Missing Moderates: Hiding in Plain Sight**

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In 2000 the Republicans won the electoral Triple Crown, capturing the presidency (despite losing the popular vote), the House of Representatives and the Senate (with Vice President Dick Cheney as tie-breaker) for the first time since the election of Dwight Eisenhower 48 years earlier. In 2002 they increased their congressional majorities, an unusual feat in an off-year election, and in 2004 voters re-elected President George W. Bush and added slightly to Republican congressional majorities. The six years of unified party control produced by these three elections was the longest period of unified government the United States had experienced since the Kennedy-Johnson Administrations in the 1960s.

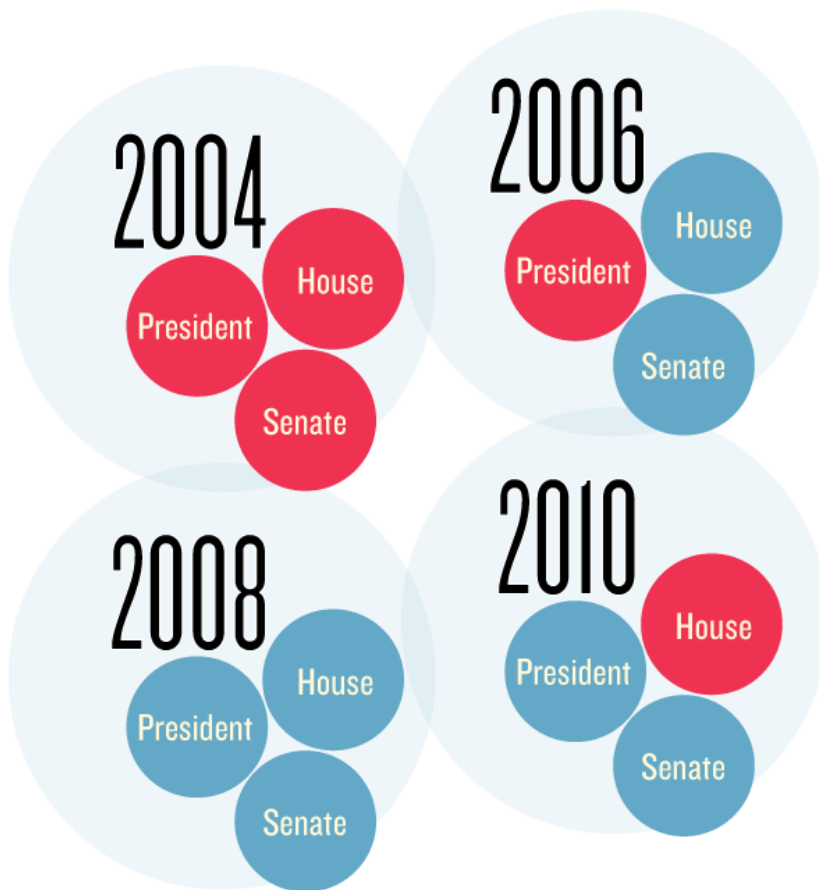
Political scientists refer to U.S. electoral history in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the “era of divided government.” Between the 1952 and 2000 elections Republicans held the presidency for 28 years, but Democrats organized the Senate for 36 years and Democratic majorities ran

the House for 42 years. The result was a long period when divided party control generally prevailed. In only eight years (1952–54, 1976–80, 1992–94) did one party control the presidency and both chambers of Congress.<sup>1</sup>

The apparent break with previous history in the early 2000s was the stuff of Republican dreams and Democratic nightmares. Had Karl Rove succeeded in his announced goal of creating a long-term Republican majority? For Rove the “real prize”, as Nicholas Lemann put it in 2003, would be “a Republican majority that would be as solid as, say, the Democratic coalition that Franklin Roosevelt created—a majority that would last for a generation.”<sup>2</sup> Such ambition soon faded, as the President’s approval ratings plunged in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the misbegotten nomination of Harriet Myers to the Supreme Court, the Dubai ports debacle, Social Security private accounts and the war in Iraq. In 2006, the new Republican majority suffered a “thumpin”, in President Bush’s words, losing thirty seats in the House and six in the Senate, ceding control of both chambers of Congress to the Democrats. Divided government returned.

In 2008 the Republicans experienced another “thumpin”: Barack Obama won a decisive victory over John McCain, and the Democrats enlarged their congressional majorities. For a short period afterward speculation that 2008 was a “transformative election” ran rampant. In early 2009 James Carville published a book titled *40 More Years: How the Democrats Will Rule the Next Generation*. But in 2010 the Democrats suffered a “shellacking”, as President Obama put it, losing 63 seats in the House (the largest mid-term loss since 1938), six Senate seats, six state houses and nearly 700 state legislative seats. (Carville’s book, incidentally, was discounted by 60 percent on Amazon.com.)

Clearly, generations are not what they used to be. Since that brief period of unified Republican government in the early 2000s the country has entered a period of almost unprecedented electoral instability. The four elections between 2004 and 2010 produced four distinct patterns of majority control:

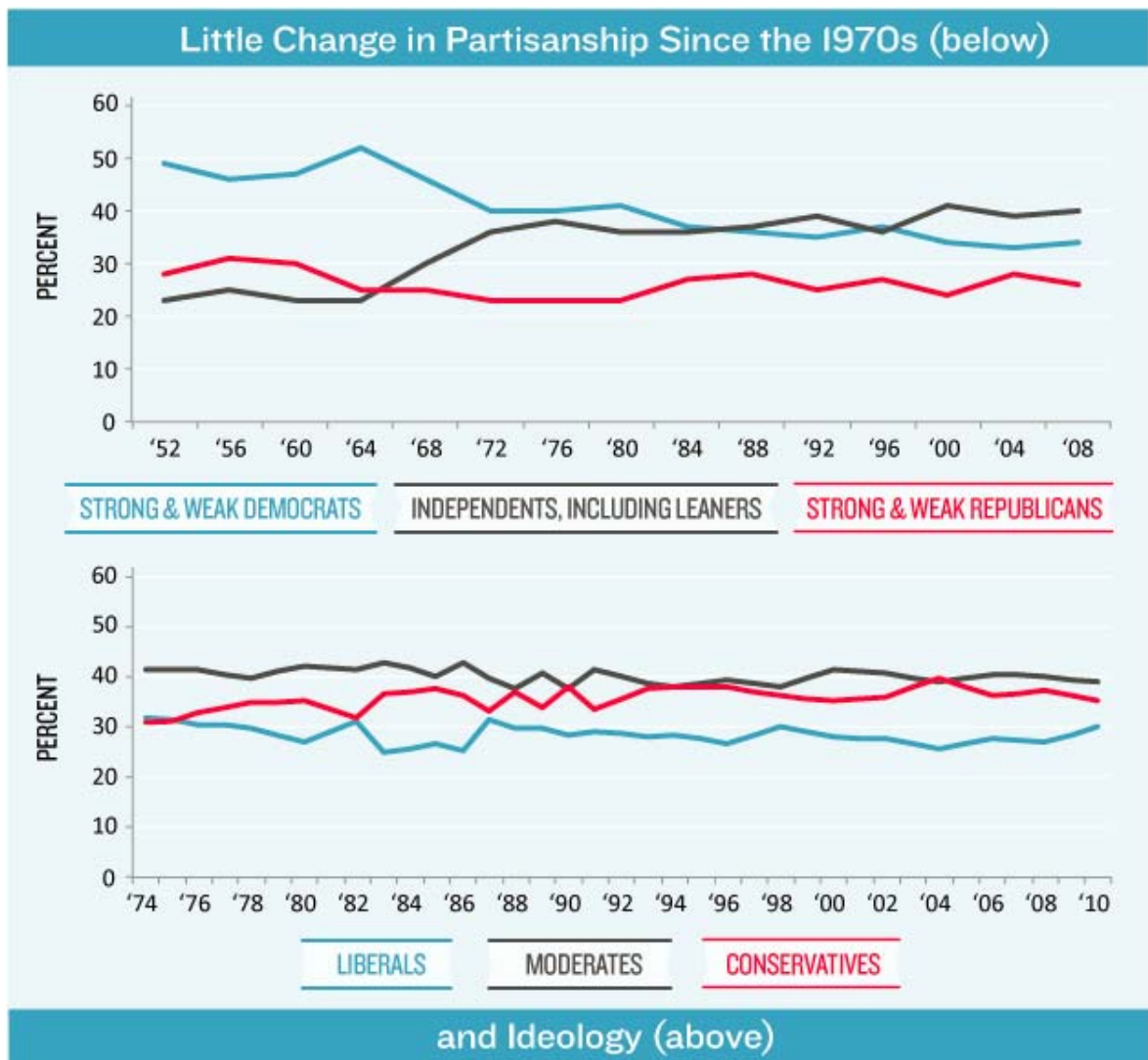


How common or unusual is this period? It turns out that the country had seen nothing like it since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the five elections of the 1886–94 period produced five distinct patterns of institutional control. Had the Republicans captured the Senate in 2012, or had control of the two chambers of Congress flipped, or had Mitt Romney been elected with Republicans in control of either chamber, the elections of 2006–12 would have tied the historical record for majority instability. As it stands, the current period holds second place in American history.

It is important to recognize that this pattern of unstable institutional control stands in contrast to the macro-stability of the American electorate. That is, control of our institutions is not vacillating between the parties because voters are manic, dramatically changing their party preferences from one election to the next. Nor are they flighty and uncommitted, voting on a whim now for Democrats then for Republicans. Despite some gradual demographic shifts, the characteristics of the American electorate have changed little in the past generation; the way the parties represent them, on the other hand, has changed a great deal.

## The American Voter, Then and Now

For some sixty years political scientists have been asking Americans, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent or what?” The figure below tracks the collective answer, illustrating American partisanship since 1952. The Democrats lost their national majority during the tumult of the 1960s, and at the same time more came to identify as independents. But since the Reagan years, partisanship has been generally stable, with 35–40 percent of the population adopting the independent label, a slightly lower proportion the Democratic label, and about a quarter of the electorate the Republican label. Three decades of data undermine pundits’ claims that the country is half Republican red and half Democratic blue.



Sociologists have been querying Americans about ideology for almost as

long, asking people to classify themselves on a scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Again, the accompanying figure shows no dramatic shifts for more than a generation. The liberal label traditionally carries less popular support than the conservative one; only about a quarter of the electorate adopts it. “Moderate” is usually the plurality choice, with conservative trailing by a bit. There is no indication in the data that the middle is waning and the extremes waxing. The picture is one of stability.

Pundits often combine “conservatives” and “moderates” and pronounce the United States to be a center-right nation. It’s probably an accurate characterization relative to other advanced democracies, but there are two problems with this interpretation of the data.

First, there is no logical reason why moderates should always coalesce with conservatives to form a three-fourths majority. If conservatives move far enough to the right, moderates could find themselves closer to liberals and coalesce with them to form a two-thirds center-left majority.

Second, as an empirical matter, ordinary Americans do not use these abstract terms in the same way partisan intellectuals do. Self-classified liberals tend to have liberal views on specific policy issues, but self-classified conservatives are much more heterogeneous; many, even majorities, express liberal views on specific issues, such as abortion rights, gun control and drug law reform.

Perhaps, then, voters have changed on a few touchstone issues that make all the difference for today’s elections. Here the data are more fragmentary—specific-issues questions come and go on surveys. But the PEW Research Center has conducted surveys on 42 attitude, value and policy subjects since the late Reagan years. Its 2012 report concludes:

The way that the public thinks about poverty, opportunity, business, unions, religion, civic duty, foreign affairs and many other subjects is, to a large extent, the same today as in 1987. The values that unified Americans 25 years ago remain areas of consensus today, while the values that evenly divide the nation remain split. On most of the questions asked in both 1987 and 2012, the number agreeing is within

five percentage points of the number who agreed 25 years ago. And on almost none has the basic balance of opinion tipped from agree to disagree or vice versa.

In sum, an examination of popular attitudes toward particular subjects yields the same conclusion as an examination of partisanship and general ideology. In the aggregate the American electorate has changed little in the past generation.

Political independents and ideological moderates in the American electorate have not declined in numbers, let alone disappeared. Indeed, their numbers continue to exceed those of partisans and ideologues on either side. How then, do we explain the indisputable fact that politics in Washington and in many state capitols is more bitter, contentious and polarized than a generation ago?

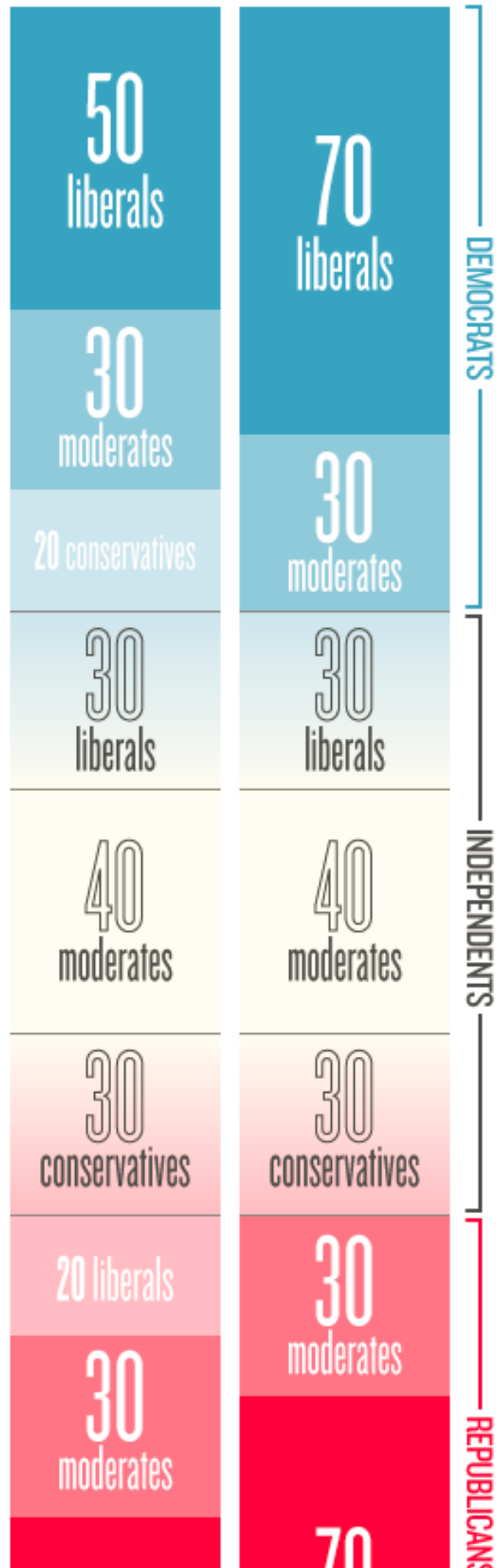
A large part of the answer is that those most active in politics—the political class, including convention delegates, donors and campaign activists—have indeed become more polarized since the 1970s. And the partisan media and many of the myriad groups devoted to a single cause did not even exist a generation ago. As a general observation, the higher up the scale of political activity one goes, the more common extreme views become and the more intensely they are held; there are few “raging moderates” or “knee-jerk independents” at the higher levels of politics. Although relatively few in number, those in the political class structure politics. Ordinary voters can only react to the alternatives they are offered, and often they must choose between two polarized alternatives even if they prefer a more moderate choice. Or, of course, they can choose simply to not vote. The much discussed decline in electoral turnout between 1960 and 1996 was concentrated among independents and moderates. Strong partisans did not drop off, suggesting they found the choices more palatable than did those in the middle.<sup>3</sup>

A second major explanation for today’s polarization lies at the root of a great deal of mistaken commentary about American politics: While the middle of the American electorate remains as large as ever, it no longer has a home in either party. As we have seen, the distributions of partisanship and ideology have not changed shape for a generation, but the relationship

between the distributions has changed since the 1980s.

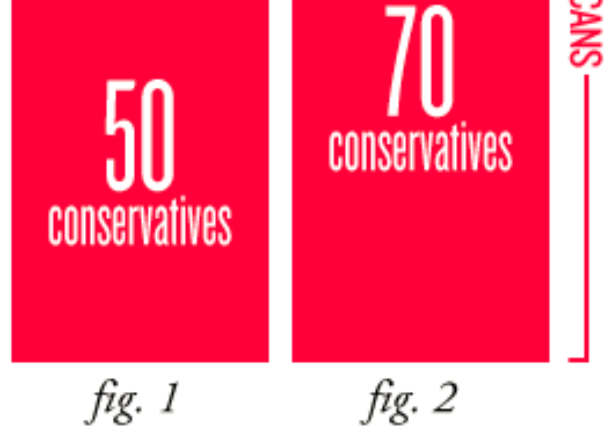
Political scientists refer to this development as a process of party sorting. To explain, consider a hypothetical electorate like Figure 1. Democrats are a left-of-center party with a right wing, while Republicans are a right-of-center party with a left wing. Assume that over time demographic changes and electoral strategies move the parties toward their respective poles, so in a later period we have something like Figure 2. Between the first and second periods, the numbers of Democrats, independents and Republicans have not changed. Nor have the numbers of liberals, moderates and conservatives. But the parties have sorted: Liberals and conservatives are increasingly aligned with the “correct” party.

Something like this has also happened in the American electorate. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, demographic changes, such as the migration of African-Americans to the north, the rise of the Sunbelt and immigration, coupled with electoral strategies described in books with titles like *The Emerging Republican (Democratic) Majority*, have produced political parties that are more homogeneous than they were a generation ago. And the



most active and involved members come from the most extreme reaches of each party.

In consequence, the dynamics of American politics are increasingly driven by small and highly unrepresentative slices of the population. Consider the Republican presidential primary contest in 2012. Here are the turnout figures (of eligible voters) in the early contests:<sup>4</sup>



Iowa Caucus	6.5%
New Hampshire Primary	31.1
South Carolina Primary	17.6
Florida Primary	12.8
Nevada Caucus	1.9
Minnesota Caucus	1.2
Colorado Caucus	1.8
Missouri Primary	7.4
Maine Caucus	0.5

On February 7 the media declared Rick Santorum a legitimate contender for the nomination on the basis of three victories: the Minnesota caucuses, in which one of every 100 eligible voters participated, the Colorado caucus, in which two of every 100 eligible participated, and the Missouri “beauty contest” primary in which seven of every 100 eligible participated.

Of course, primary electorates have always been small and unrepresentative, but primaries were not as common a generation ago, and the participants were unrepresentative in different ways—the Democratic primary electorate in Massachusetts was very different from that in Mississippi. Today primary electorates are more homogeneous across the country. Democrats appeal to public employees, environmentalists and liberal cause groups, while Republicans rely on business and taxpayer



groups along with conservative cause groups.

Thus, while the electorate at large has changed little during the course of the past generation, there is a closer connection between partisanship on the one hand and issues and ideology on the other, resulting in the kind of partisan warfare common today. Still, it is important to recognize that the process of party sorting weakens rapidly as one moves beyond the political class to the larger electorate. There is still considerable common ground in the electorate—but it is difficult in today’s political configuration for anyone in either major party to appeal to it. To take a striking example, consider abortion.

The activists who attended the Republican presidential nominating convention in 2012 adopted an abortion plank in the party platform that essentially said “no abortions, no exceptions.” Their counterparts at the Democratic convention adopted a platform that essentially said “abortion at any time, no restrictions, regardless of ability to pay.” Now compare those extreme positions with those held not just by partisans in the electorate, but by those who characterize their partisanship as “strong” (strong Democrats are about a fifth of the population, strong Republicans about a seventh).

For thirty years the American National Election Studies project has included an item that offers citizens multiple positions on abortion, not just the simplistic pro-choice/pro-life choices offered by some polls. The 2012 data are not yet available, but there has been little variation over time in the response patterns. In 2008, 11 percent of the strong Democrats queried said that abortion should never be permitted, and 26 percent that it should only be permitted in case of rape, incest or a threat to the woman’s life. So, more than a third of strong Democrats were closer to Mitt Romney’s position on abortion than to that of their own party. Perhaps even more surprisingly, 22 percent of strong Republicans said that abortion should always be available as a matter of personal choice, and another 16 percent in case of a clear need. So, more than a third of strong Republicans were closer to the Democratic position than to that of their own party. Turning to those partisans who label themselves “not so strong”, we find that more than 40 percent of Democrats and more than half of Republicans are at odds with their party’s platform. Similar results hold for other so-called “hot button” issues, like gun control. Setting aside independents, even

partisans in the electorate are out-of-step with many of the positions held by their purported leaders.

## ***To the 2012 Elections***

**B**arack Obama won a handsome victory in 2008. Historically speaking, Americans do not replace presidential parties in landslides—FDR in 1932 is the exception, not the rule. Obama’s 7.2 percentage point margin in the popular vote was the fifth largest in 14 elections in American history in which one party turned out the other—just after Ronald Reagan’s 9.7 point margin in 1980. In addition, the Democrats scrambled the red-blue map, flipping nine states, three each in the Southwest, Midwest and South Atlantic. In the aftermath of the election many Democrats believed they had a mandate to move the country sharply in what they term a “progressive” direction.

The American people do not give mandates. They hire parties provisionally and grant them a probationary period to prove their worth. A major electoral victory by the out party generally says no more than “for heaven’s sake, do something different!” Such was the case in 2008. From their post-9/11 heights President Bush’s approval ratings steadily declined to dismal Truman and Nixon levels. Americans first registered their displeasure with the Administration in 2006 and emphatically made the point in 2008. Obamamania was icing on the Democratic cake.

In the aftermath of the election the Democrats overreached: the Obama Administration governed in a way that caused the defection of marginal members of its majority. Loosely speaking, Democrats build their coalitions from the left, Republicans from the right. Each must add to their base enough of the center to win. After winning, however, activists pressure their leaders to govern from the Left or Right, possibly reinforcing what the leaders would like to do anyway, which risks alienating those at the center. After a narrow victory in 2004 George Bush proclaimed that he had earned political capital and intended to spend it. Many voters, however, were unaware that they had voted for a “Freedom Agenda” or for Social Security private accounts. In his 2010 memoir President Bush expressed sober second thoughts: “On Social Security, I may have misread the electoral mandate.” Such misreading contributed to the 2006 “thumpin.”

Similarly, according to Gallup data, when Obama was elected about 45 percent of the country thought they had elected a moderate and similar numbers a liberal (nearly 10 percent thought they had elected a conservative). Nine months later, 55 percent felt they had elected a liberal and only 35 percent a moderate, and voter's remorse began to set in. Obama's approval ratings among independents were underwater by late summer 2009, presaging the massive swing against the Democrats more than a year later.

The subject of independents engenders much confusion among political commentators. Some advocates of a more centrist politics treat independents as an undifferentiated mass of centrist voters. They are not. Independents are a heterogeneous lot. While some are moderates, others are largely uninformed about the issues. Many independents are cross-pressured, attracted to one party on some issue or set of issues and to the other on different issues. Still others dislike both parties. The label subsumes many different types of voters.

At the same time some political scientists have asserted that the lion's share of "independents" are nothing of the sort; they are rather "closet partisans" who like the independent label but are actually no different from the "not so strong" partisans. There is remarkably little evidence for this contention. The entire subject cries out for more detailed examination in an era when as many as 40 percent of Americans take the independent option when queried in national surveys. Whatever they are, independents have provided much of the volatility present in recent elections, swinging 18 points against the Republicans in 2006 (compared to 2002) and 17 points against the Democrats in 2010 (compared to 2006).

Health care reform was a large part of the explanation for the Democratic slide between 2008 and 2010. To this day the law has never achieved majority support in the polls, and Democrats' singular focus on passing it at a time when voters considered the economy and jobs much more important priorities contributed to the perception that the Administration was driven by its own ideological commitments rather than the problems facing the citizenry. The result was the great shellacking of 2010. While the recession played a major role, Democratic losses were much larger than predicted by economic forecasting models. Several colleagues and I calculated that the Democrats might have barely held their House majority

were it not for the vote on the healthcare bill.<sup>5</sup> In particular, it was the difference between victory and defeat for Democratic representatives whose districts voted for McCain or only narrowly for Obama in 2008.

After the 2010 elections Republican expectations for 2012 skyrocketed. The House majority looked safe, Democrats were defending two-thirds of the Senate seats to be filled in 2012, and by all indications President Obama was highly vulnerable. But the comedic Republican nominating process noted earlier illustrated the problem with a political process driven by party fringes. The Massachusetts moderate Mitt Romney was never comfortable playing the role of a “severe conservative”, poor nominees threw away almost certain Senate pick-ups in Missouri and Indiana (after arguably doing the same in Colorado, Delaware and Nevada in 2010), and the election results basically reaffirmed the status quo, a great relief for the Democrats and a bitter disappointment for the Republicans.

### ***Misreading the Results***

**N**ow that the elections are over, various interpretations of what it all meant are piling up. The immediate post-election narrative held that an old, white Republican Party had been overwhelmed by an electorate newly dominated by minorities, young people, single women and well-educated professionals of a decidedly more liberal bent. There is an element of truth to this interpretation, but it lets the Republicans off too easily. The facts paint a more complicated picture.

Obama won about 51.9 percent of the two-party vote in 2012, a bit better than George W. Bush’s 51.2 percent in 2004, but down more than 3 percent from his 2008 margin. Republicans assumed that the excitement surrounding the Obama candidacy in 2008 had produced an electorate unusually young, non-white and liberal, and that with Obamamania only a distant memory the 2012 electorate would look more like the 2004 electorate. But the Obama campaign’s efficient turnout operation made the 2012 electorate look like the 2008 electorate; indeed, even more so. Young people participated at about the same rate in 2012 as in 2008, and minorities increased their participation. Although Romney won a higher proportion of the white vote than any Republican since 1988, rather than the 75 percent white electorate of 2004, the electorate in 2012 was only 72

percent white. But the conclusion that Republicans were only victims of a changing electorate weakens when we look at the 2012 electorate in terms of numbers of voters rather than their percentages.

According to the exit polls, African-Americans marginally increased their participation in 2012—by about 300,000, as did Asians and other small groups by about 400,000, and Latinos registered a big increase, about 1.7 million. These increases clearly contributed to the Obama victory. But preliminary analyses suggest that Obama would have won comfortably even without any increase in the Hispanic vote or the large majorities Democrats ran up in this demographic.<sup>6</sup> Despite an increase of about 6 million in the eligible voter population, almost 2.5 million fewer votes were cast in 2012 compared to 2008. Given that minorities cast nearly 2.5 million more votes, the implication is that almost 5 million fewer whites voted in 2012.<sup>7</sup> We do not yet know in detail where and why white turnout declined. Some of it is no doubt due to non-political factors, such as the disruptions caused by Hurricane Sandy on the East Coast, but it seems likely that the Republicans underperformed even among their targeted demographic. So while a re-examination of the party's position on immigration (or at least the rhetoric that accompanies it) is certainly advisable, it should not distract from the larger problem suggested by the party's weaker performance in the larger white electorate.

Again, definitive studies remain to be conducted, but a number of possibilities merit investigation. My impression is that the Republican embrace of social conservatism has become counterproductive at the national level. It enabled the party to win control of Congress in the 1990s after forty years in the minority, but the views espoused by Republican candidates chosen in unrepresentative primaries dominated by social conservatives are toxic to many in the younger generation, as well as to moderate middle-class Americans who reside in cities and suburbs outside the South. Even if they believe that entitlements must be restructured, regulatory hurdles lowered and the tax system reformed, they are reluctant to vote for a party whose candidates make statements about rape and evolution that strike them as outrageous. I live among thousands of affluent, educated professionals who regularly vote for Democrats who will raise their taxes. I doubt that altruism is the explanation. Rather, their alternative is to vote for candidates of a party they see as more interested in outlawing abortion, stigmatizing homosexuals and logging the redwoods.

Whether the Republicans can or will reposition themselves on issues like immigration, abortion and gay rights remains to be seen. But whether they do or not, the status quo affirmed by the 2012 elections seems likely to persist for four more years. Given a Democratic President, the Republican House majority looks safe in the 2014 midterm elections (barring some incredible new manifestation of political malpractice). And once again, the Democrats will be defending the large majority of Senate seats up in 2014, giving Republicans still another chance to make Senate gains. Events in the real world may force changes that will surprise us, but there is little in the internal dynamics of the current political situation to make the next four years much different from the past four.

### ***A Second Era of Indecision***

■ wrote above that the elections of 2004–10 had produced a period of “almost unprecedented electoral instability.” The reason for the modifier “almost” was the even more unstable period of 1886–94, a period embedded in what political historians refer to as the era of indecision, which extended from the 1874 election that ended the Civil War Republican majority, to the 1896 election, when the McKinley Republicans ended the long standoff and began an extended period of Republican control that lasted until 1912.

Year	President	House	Senate
1874	R	D	R
1876	R	D	R
1878	R	D	D
1880	R	R	R
1882	R	D	R
1884	D	D	R
1886	D	D	R
1888	R	R	R
1890	R	D	R
1892	D	D	D
1894	D	R	R
1896	R	R	R

## ERA OF INDECISION

During this period only one elected President won a majority of the popular vote (third parties were common), and two lost the popular vote. With the aid of the solid South, Democrats generally controlled the House, but Republicans usually held the Senate, partly by admitting low-population, Republican-leaning Western states into the Union.<sup>8</sup> For two decades electoral instability reigned.

Like today, this earlier period of American history was characterized by extreme party conflict. Then, as now, the parties were well-sorted. According to David Brady, in the 1896 House elections, for example, 86 percent of the victorious Republicans came from industrial districts, whereas 60 percent of the victorious Democrats came from agricultural districts.<sup>9</sup> Thus, each party contained a heavy majority of members with common interests—interests that were in conflict with the dominant interest of the other party.

Five socio-economic developments during this earlier period of majority instability were similar to those America is experiencing today. First, it was a period of economic globalization. British finance helped build the American railroad system (several times over, given frequent bankruptcies). Midwestern members of Congress railed against the railroads in the debates over the Interstate Commerce Act, complaining that their constituents could out-compete the Russians and Ukrainians for the European grain markets if only railroad abuses could be curbed. An export surplus developed as American agriculture and industry expanded their markets beyond the oceans.

At the same time, the country was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution as it transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy with all the attendant dislocations. Today, of course, the United States is undergoing another economic transformation, from an industrial economy to one variously described as post-industrial, communications, service, informational or what-not, but an economy clearly different from that which prevailed for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Great population movements characterized the period of indecision as Americans left the farms and moved to the cities to work in the new manufacturing enterprises. They exchanged a hard rural life for the miserable conditions of the cities and industrial workplaces. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the country also witnessed several major population movements. As late as 1950, the stereotypical African-American was a sharecropper in a southern cotton field. By the 1970s, the stereotype had changed to a northern tenement dweller. The movement of African-Americans from South to North was the largest internal migration in American history. At about the same time, whites were leaving the Frostbelt for the Sunbelt, altering the economy and the geographic balance of political power.

Beginning in the 1880s immigration surged as millions left Europe to work in America's factories. The open door closed in the mid-1920s and remained closed until the mid-1960s, after which a new surge of immigration began and has continued to the present day. The issues and conflicts provoked by the current wave are strikingly similar to those of a century and more ago.



Finally, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century era of indecision has also been called the Gilded Age. It was a time when robber barons built great fortunes, legitimate and otherwise. Great disparities in wealth opened up between the owners and investors in the new industrial economy and those who labored in their enterprises. Today, economic inequality is back atop the political agenda for the first time since the New Deal.

Social and economic changes like these create new social and economic problems. They disrupt old coalitions and suggest new possibilities to ambitious political entrepreneurs. When changes are major, rapid and cumulative, as they were before and now are again, their effects are all the more pronounced. Very likely, the electoral instability of the current era reflects the new issues and problems created by the socio-economic changes of the past generation. When it will end cannot be foreseen.

The concern is that these are arguably more dangerous times. Then Britannia still ruled the waves, so that the United States could to some considerable extent free-ride in international affairs. And while terrorism was not uncommon, weapons of mass destruction did not exist. In economics, deflation characterized the era of indecision, and how to dispose of the Federal budget surplus was a major political issue. Today, debt threatens our future and the specter of rampant inflation looms. The United States could afford twenty years of political chaos in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century before a new majority emerged. It remains to be seen whether we can do the same today.

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<sup>1</sup>Divided control also characterized elections in the American states during this period. See my book *Divided Government* (Allyn and Bacon, 2nd ed., 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Lemann, "The Controller", *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003.

<sup>3</sup>See my essay "Parties, Participation, and Representation in the United States: Old Theories Face New Realities", in Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner, eds., *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Norton, 2002).

<sup>4</sup>Figures cited in Matthew Dickinson, "Santorum Surges, But Can He Win the Big One?" Presidential Power blog, February 12, 2012.

<sup>5</sup>See my essay with David W. Brady and Arjun Wilkins, "The 2010 Elections: Why Did Political Science Forecasts Go Awry?" *Political Science & Politics* (April 2011).

<sup>6</sup>See Allison Kopecki and Will Irving, "Assessing How Pivotal the Hispanic Vote Was to Obama's Victory", The Caucus blog, *New York Times*, November 20, 2012.

<sup>7</sup>Turnout figures are from compilations by Michael McDonald, *The United States Elections*

Project, George Mason University.

<sup>8</sup>See Charles Stewart III and Barry Weingast, “Stacking the Senate, Changing the Nation: Republican Rotten Borough and American Political Development in the Late 19th Century”, *Studies in American Political Development* (Fall 1992).

<sup>9</sup>Brady, *Congressional Voting in a Partisan Era* (University of Kansas Press, 1973).