

Democracy.

Unfortunately, the elections of 2018 and 2020 generally reinforce the arguments offered in the 2017 book. I begin by summarizing the earlier argument then move to a discussion of the more recent elections, concluding with some 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. As Lee Drutman recounts in his recent book, for the first two centuries of political life under the Constitution the Madisonian system of parties arose and lead to the demise of the Republic. For more than 150 years after the arrival of mass parties in the Jacksonian era the parties were loose coalitions of factions that crossed geographic divides 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. has a

19th 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 farther 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 closed to the distinct positions that they advocated in their party primaries.⁹ The link between close elections and policy moderation that once seemed axiomatic is now weak, if not nonexistent.

with a vengeance in elections in the new century.¹¹ The underlying causes of the sorting process are not well-understood.¹² Some parts of the explanation are clear enough. Social changes had an impact. 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 weakened the Democratic position in the south. 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.¹³ 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

Great Plains and the Mountain West.¹⁵ 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. Evangelicals, college degrees once were too rare to provide the basis of an electoral cleavage; they have become a significant cleavage. Each party now 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? Most observers take a somewhat earthier view, as that in *Britannica*: a political party is a group of persons organized to acquire and exercise political power.

practices

Overreach, of course, is a self-defeating strategy. Fearing they will lose the next election, parties overreach which raises the likelihood that they will lose the next election, as voters not committed to the party when Obama was elected in 2008 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).²² 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 national 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 runoffs, the 2020 elections would have given us all eight logically possible patterns in just two years of elections.

{Table 1 about here}

The 2018 elections somewhat fit the overreach account. In a number of prominent respects (trade, immigration, Russia) 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 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. *Wired*, 5/3/18

right the wrong of 2016 when the loser of the popular vote won the Presidency, as well as voter fatigue

illustration of the overreach argument. Of course, absent Covid I suspect that Trump would have won the election. The aftermath of Joe Biden 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 (which accounted for a population 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 gain of 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 kind of control of national institutions, however, the Biden administration acted as if it had an electoral mandate akin to that of Roosevelt in 1936 or Lyndon Johnson in 1964, proposing billions of dollars in new spending and 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.²³ Other poll data suggest that increasing number of voters see Biden's activist agenda as too ambitious.²⁴

From the mid-2010s, disapproval numbers are now higher than his approval numbers, with performance ratings on some issues such as immigration and foreign policy even lower.²⁵ Independents account for a large share of the

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 the present situation.

Democrats: A Multiracial, Multicultural Majority²⁹

In 2002 John Judis and Ruy Teixeira published *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, wherein they argued that ongoing sociodemographic trends worked to the long-term advantage of the Democrats.³⁰ These trends included a rising percentage of ethnic minorities, a growing percentage 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 election of the first African American president. The Republican National Committee recognized the changing country and the Republican Party needed to 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) published a report on one of the fastest growing racial and ethnic groups: Hispanic Whites. Many of these individuals were born in the United States and are citizens, but they are often overlooked in political conversations. The idea of a majority-minority country quickly entered the national political conversation.

The narrative of the majority-minority nation has become a staple of political commentary, especially on the left. Contrary to expectations, however, in the short run the 2016 elections saw some Democrats believe the party suffered from acceptance of the thesis and its apparent support for an electoral emphasis on

²⁹ This section is drawn from https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/12/08/the_myth_of_a_majority_minority_nation_144799.html

³⁰ John Judis and Ruy Teixeira. 2002. *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. New York: Scribner.

³¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/11/the-emerging-democratic-majority-turns-10/265005/>

³² https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/releases/2015/cbr1516_graphic.pdf

³³ William H. Frey. *The Browning of America Next 15 Years*. <https://www.browningamerica.org/browning-america-next-15-years>

identities.³⁴ Although the } v š Œ] μ š] } v • } (š Z v } v š Œ] • u v Œ likely been d Œ μ u % [• Å exaggerated,³⁵ social changes, particularly rapid and cumulative social changes, are unnerving to some elements of the population, with political reaction a natural result.³⁶ One need not accept far out notions o] | ^ Á Z] š Æ š] v š] } v v Æ] š Ç _ š } Œ } P v] ì š Z š Œ] •] v P u Œ] v c American electorate, and one hardly fault older, white, married non-collegeeducated voters for wondering

important new book by CUNY professor Richard Aspbould be required reading for the intellectual elites of both parties.⁴¹

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

question 9 is classified as white. With this very liberal classification, the nation is ~~three~~ ^{quarter} white in 2060.⁴³

{Census Questions here

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: thousands of those included in both the 2000 and 2010 censuses did not give identical answers; at one time chose one identity or mixture and at the other time made a different choice. Some mixed 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.

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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.⁴⁶ Again, this led to an explosion of media coverage and some outbreaks of the political spectrum.⁴⁷ Alba and his colleagues have recently shown, however, that the Census Bureau figure is extremely misleading; it is almost entirely an artifact of a rarely employed way of categorizing whites.⁴⁸

So, the case for a majority-minority electoral coalition rests on bad data. Antitarian Democratic Party is very likely to be a minority Democratic Party. 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.

What about the Republicans? It would be an exaggeration to say that there is any developed vision of a coalition that has passed from the scene. Neoliberal economic policies have been replaced by skepticism about international trade and globalization, and eighteen years of incoherence.

] v • μ o š] v P % } racial relatives. A multi-racial, multiethnic populist party such as some elements of 19th Century Southern and western Populism attempted to build has greater potential but there is little indication of such a development on the political horizon.

In sum, at the present time I cannot see any road to the Era of Unstable Majorities.



