Downsizing Democracy

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Chapter 3

Elections without Voters

As long as national security, public finance, and government administration depended upon the cooperation and active support of citizens, political authority flowed from democratic elections. Triumph at the polls was not just proof of popularity. It was a test of the capacity to govern—both an endorsement of the victor’s policies and an indication that citizen administrators, citizen soldiers, citizen taxpayers, and bondholders were prepared to cooperate in carrying them out. The federal government’s early and extensive reliance on its people was a factor in its early realization of full white manhood suffrage. Reliance on the citizenry also meant that electoral competition was the principal means through which nineteenth-century political elites settled their policy differences on everything from internal improvements to tariffs.

The reliance of nineteenth-century elites on voter mobilization and countermobilization drove electoral turnout to heights never achieved since. By the 1890s, almost 80 percent of the eligible voters went to the polls in the average presidential election, and turnout approached 70 percent for midterm congressional races. In some areas outside the South, more than 90 percent of the electorate regularly exercised their voting rights.¹

In spite of twenty-first-century communications technology, today’s elections barely turn out a majority of the eligible voters even in presidential contests. Part of the explanation—perhaps the most important
part—is that political elites have found ways to achieve their policy objectives without mobilizing voters. Rather than take issues to the electorate for resolution, today’s contending elites attempt to outdo their opponents by litigating, by manipulating administrative procedures, or by the use of mechanisms like privatization, vouchers, or bureaucratic adjudication that remove policy to arenas beyond the reach of their rivals. In the process, the millions of citizens who might once have been called to the aid of their parties now remain passive bystanders. Yesterday’s actors have become today’s audience—spectators and customers rather than citizens.

Mobilization and Its Alternatives

The age of the citizen soldier was the era of “militaristic” political campaigns. Well-organized political parties mobilized their troops in virtually every constituency. Voters in each precinct were “drilled” by party “captains” who in turn received support and direction from a disciplined and well-financed party organization. A rabidly partisan press disseminated news that sometimes amounted to little more than propaganda. On election day, hundreds of thousands of party workers marched from house to house, handing out leaflets, urging voters to the polls, and occasionally offering financial inducements to help voters make up their minds. Millions of citizens attended campaign rallies, listened to speeches, and marched in parades. Playing electoral politics was the national pastime.

It was not, however, the only game in town. Even in the nineteenth century, politicians occasionally achieved their ends by means other than mobilizing voters. Slavery, for example, was too big an issue for electoral resolution. Shortly after it was settled, the country went through its first impeachment crisis, and not long after that, criminal indictments and prosecutions orchestrated by political reformers undid the Whiskey and Tweed Rings. Even in elections, extralegal violence played a role, and in the South it helped to restrict the size of the electorate. Nevertheless, all-out voter mobilization in national elections was a central strategy for forces seeking to control the government and influence national policy.

The nineteenth-century pattern of mass mobilization has little in common with the conduct of American politics today. For the last generation, voter turnout in the United States has averaged slightly more than 50 percent in presidential contests. Fewer than 49 percent of those eligible actually voted in the 1996 presidential election, the lowest electoral turnout since 1924. In midterm congressional elections, more than two-thirds of eligible voters stay home. The averages, however, conceal
sharp differences in political participation. Affluent and well-educated Americans continue to vote at nineteenth-century levels. Except among the young, presidential election turnout among college graduates remains close to 80 percent. Less affluent and less well educated Americans, in contrast, have been politically marginalized. Among eligible voters with less than a high school education, for instance, turnout has dropped from nearly 50 percent in the early 1970s to barely 30 percent today.7

Competing political elites obviously continue to appeal for votes. Parties and candidates may have spent as much as $2 billion dollars competing for popular support in the 1996 national, state, and local races.8 Much of this money, however, is typically spent on television spots during the final month of the campaign. These ads are aimed primarily at middle-class Americans who are already registered and likely to vote. Sophisticated polling techniques allow candidates to target narrow slices of this truncated and already attentive audience with political advertising tailored to their interests.9 The development of direct-mail tactics, computerized databases, the new possibilities for campaigning on the Internet—all make targeted or “customized” campaigning a political growth industry.10

In sharp contrast with the nineteenth-century pattern, today neither party makes much effort to mobilize the tens of millions of poorer and less well educated Americans who are not currently part of the electorate.11 On the contrary, many candidates deliberately depress turnout by engaging in “negative” campaigning, which disparages the opposition and is designed to discourage both nonvoters and their opponents’ established supporters from going to the polls.12 Many Americans claim that negative campaigning and smear tactics have made them too disgusted to participate in politics.13 Only the occasional political outsider like Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura makes any real effort to bring nonvoters into the electorate.14 Neither of the major parties supports electoral reforms such as the elimination of voter registration requirements or a shift from weekday to weekend voting. Both practices are standard in Western Europe, and the European experience suggests that these two changes alone would appreciably boost electoral turnout.

More than 60 million Americans entitled to vote in presidential elections neglect to do so. The parties’ apparent indifference to this enormous reservoir of potential voters is especially curious in view of the bitter conflicts that divided them in the last third of the twentieth century and the inconclusive outcomes of recent electoral contests. The vast sums spent on holding the loyalties of current voters have failed to give either party a decisive political edge. Divided government and political
stalemate seem more acceptable to party elites than an effort to shift the political balance by activating the politically inert.

Party divisions in Congress, as evinced by patterns of roll-call voting, have achieved levels of polarization unseen since the nineteenth century, and partisan struggles between Congress and the White House are pursued with a ferocity that is virtually without precedent in American history. Democratic Congresses drove Republican Richard Nixon from office and sought to do the same to Ronald Reagan. A Republican Congress impeached, but failed to convict, Democratic president Bill Clinton. Yet these titanic battles of national politics have not induced either party to engage the interest of the unmobilized voters. The battles provoke scarcely a ripple of political activity beyond the Washington Beltway, and participation continues to decline.

The conjunction of elite combat and popular disengagement defies a well-established generalization of political science. The generalization says that high levels of elite conflict will promote mass participation as contending forces engage in competitive efforts to mobilize political support. Writing during the 1950s, E. E. Schattschneider argued that popular mobilization was most likely to be initiated by the losers in elite struggles, losers who hoped to change the outcome by “expanding the scope of conflict” and enlarging the universe of participants.15 French political scientist Maurice Duverger asserted that mass mobilization was most likely to be initiated by elites representing groups in the lower reaches of the social hierarchy, where potential voters are most numerous. Politically upscale competitors resort to all-out mobilization in response. Duverger called it “contagion from the left.”16

American political practices were generally consistent with this model until the last third of the twentieth century. The Jeffersonians, Jacksonians, and Republicans all expanded the suffrage and brought new groups into the political process in an effort to overwhelm their opponents at the polls. During the 1930s, the New Dealers sought to solidify their political power by increasing participation on the part of working-class and ethnic voters. As recently as the 1960s, liberal Democrats tried to fend off the Republicans and overpower conservative forces within their own party by passing the Voting Rights Act to enfranchise millions of African Americans in the South and by securing passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which gave the vote to young people.

Recently, however, American politics seems to have departed from the democratic patterns of the past. An ongoing presidential impeachment battle failed to drive turnout above one-third of the voters in the 1998 congressional elections. In fact, the contending parties deliberately refrained from mobilizing the politically inactive. “I don’t think we
ought to play to that crowd,” said Representative John Lindner of Georgia, chairman of the House Republican campaign committee, when asked if the GOP should seek to bring new voters to the polls in 1998. Such reluctance may have been understandable for Republicans because the relatively low incomes and educational levels of nonvoters mark them as potential Democrats. But Democrats are no less reluctant. In 1984, Walter Mondale’s campaign advisers told him that the idea of mobilizing new voters was “backward thinking.” Democrats refrained from engaging in large-scale voter registration efforts even though the polls indicated that among Americans registered and likely to vote, Mondale faced nearly certain defeat at the hands of Ronald Reagan.

Schattschneider, Duverger, and other theorists of democratic mobilization may have failed to give sufficient weight to elite apprehensions about expanding the universe of participants. Even in an era of scientific opinion polling, the political leanings and partisan loyalties of new participants are always uncertain. Democrats in the 1960s, for example, pushed for the vote for eighteen-year-olds, only to discover that, on balance, young voters helped the Republicans in the 1970s and 1980s.

Even if new participants remain loyal to the political party that mobilized them, they are likely to bring with them new aspirants for the party’s leadership positions. Party leaders who attempt to recruit political outsiders may wind up watching their success from the sidelines. The popular forces brought into politics by the Jeffersonians, for example, ultimately displaced their patrons and transformed Jeffersonian republicanism into Jacksonian democracy. Expanding the population of participants is a risky strategy seldom undertaken lightly. Lord Derby famously called the expansion of Britain’s electorate under the Reform Bill of 1867 a “leap into the dark.”

Today, both political parties seem more afraid of the dark than ever. Republicans are concerned that an expansion of the electorate might lead to an influx of poor and minority voters, who are unlikely converts to the GOP. Some Republican conservatives, in fact, hold that ordinary Americans have succumbed to a moral and intellectual paralysis that renders them unfit to participate in governing the nation. This was the explanation advanced by some right-wing intellectuals and commentators to explain why most Americans seemed insufficiently outraged by President Clinton’s conduct to support the GOP’s campaign to impeach him. The people were no longer good enough for democracy.

An expansion of the electorate might be expected to benefit the Democrats. But the influx of tens of millions of new voters would represent a substantial risk for current Democratic officeholders. Even if these new voters remained loyal to the Democratic party as an institution, they
might not support the party’s current leadership. Some liberal interests allied with the Democrats—upper-middle-class environmentalists, public interest lawyers, and antismoking activists, for example—might lose influence in a more fully mobilized electoral environment. Liberal activists may have understandable misgivings about increased participation among working- and lower-middle-class whites, whom they see as opponents of abortion rights and affirmative action and proponents of school prayer and unrestricted handgun ownership.

Elites, of course, have always been wary of popular participation. The crucial difference between today’s elites and those of the past is not that politicians have overcome their fear of the dark but that they have found the means to avoid the dark altogether. When citizens were essential to governance, political leaders were compelled to mobilize them. It was the only way to govern. But when the cooperation of citizen soldiers, citizen administrators, and citizen taxpayers became expendable, it was easy to dispense with citizen voters as well. Contemporary leaders can pursue their goals by means that do not require them to take the risks inherent in old-fashioned democratic mobilization.

Almost all American politicians publicly deplore the nation’s low levels of voter turnout. But even modest efforts to boost voter turnout inspire little support in Washington. The so-called Motor Voter Act, for example, signed into law by President Clinton in 1993, was bitterly opposed by most Republicans. Congressional Democrats, for their part, were willing to delete those portions of the bill that were most likely to maximize registration among the poor, such as the provision for automatic registration of all eligible clients at welfare offices. Many Democrats had actually been happy to see a previous version of the act vetoed by President Bush in 1992. At any rate, the Motor Voter Act has had little effect upon the size or composition of the electorate. Thus far, few of the citizens registered under the act have actually gone to the polls to cast their ballots. In 1996, the percentage of newly registered voters who appeared at the polls actually dropped. Political mobilization requires more than the distribution of voter registration forms. Candidates and parties must make political warfare, as they did in the era of “militaristic” campaigning.

The Rise and Fall of the American Electorate
A quarter century before the American Revolution, a sizeable percentage of white males living in the colonies (and even a few black men) had the right to vote. As in Britain, the suffrage was usually limited to freeholders. The minimum value of the freehold required in order to vote
varied from one colony to the next, and in Virginia it was acreage rather than assessed value that made a man a member of the electorate.

In crowded Britain, substantial landownership was limited to a privileged few, and the freehold requirement disenfranchised most men. But it was relatively easy to become a freeholder in the colonies, where population was sparse and land was plentiful. The inflationary effects of the colonies’ reliance on paper money added to the pool of eligible voters by elevating the nominal value of their real estate. By the time of the Revolution, between 50 and 75 percent of the colonies’ white males satisfied the freehold requirement.24

Easy access to landownership was not the only contributor to the expansion of America’s pre-Revolutionary electorate. Colonial governments, as we have seen, counted on broad support from their taxpayers and militiamen and were in no position to deny the vote to the citizens who defended and financed them. After the Revolution, the new national government’s dependence upon popular acquiescence shaped the framers’ discussion of voting rights at the Constitutional Convention. Though many of the delegates expressed misgivings about the “excessive democracy” found in states with liberal voting requirements, the framers regarded popular participation as an indispensable source of authority and stability for the new government they were creating. They could not impose limits on the suffrage more restrictive than those already in place at the state level. Delegate Elbridge Gerry, noted for his mistrust of popular influence, conceded that widespread citizen participation would be necessary in order to ensure the widespread support needed for a strong and stable central government.25

In the end, most delegates were convinced that popular participation would increase the power of the national government relative to the states and would give citizens sufficient confidence in the new regime so that it could function effectively. The new Constitution provided that citizens eligible to vote for members of the lower house of their states’ legislatures would also be eligible to vote for members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Though the Constitution retained the property restrictions then in effect, the result was nevertheless fairly widespread white manhood suffrage.

Property restrictions on voting were gradually abandoned by most states, beginning with Maryland in 1802 and South Carolina in 1810. Both the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians sought an expanded suffrage to enfranchise their numerous but impecunious supporters. Jefferson himself asserted that all men who paid taxes or served in the militia should have the right to vote. The Jeffersonians were especially prone to make this argument in the North, where their Federalist opponents held
power. Under Jeffersonian pressure, property requirements were reduced or dropped altogether in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York during the second decade of the nineteenth century.

During the Revolution itself, the property and freehold requirements that restricted the right to vote had come under severe attack. Men of military age demanded the right to vote as a condition for accepting the risks and hardships of military service. The issue of suffrage reform was therefore linked to the more general question of independence. Advocates of independence supported extension of the right to vote because they recognized that soldiers with voting rights would have a personal stake in the success of the revolution. Politicians with pro-British sympathies opposed the elimination of the various property restrictions that limited voting rights. For its part, the Continental Congress sought to encourage the martial spirit and loyalty of state militiamen by recommending that all noncommissioned militia officers be elected by their men.

After the war, veterans and their political supporters demanded expansion of the suffrage as a reward for their wartime sacrifices. “The soldier is as much entitled to vote as the Captain of the company or the Colonel of the regiment,” thundered the Fredericktown, Maryland, *Hornet*. Some opponents of suffrage reform argued that military service was its own reward and that the true burden of the war actually had been borne by the civilians, who had been required to “pay heavy taxes to support you in the field, endure all that anxiety which the patriot feels for his suffering country . . . [and had not the] . . . privilege of shining in the heroic page.” Members of one Pennsylvania militia company answered this argument forcefully by appearing at the polls fully armed. They were allowed to cast ballots.

In the late 1790s, anticipation of possible American involvement in a war against the French revolutionary regime led to another wave of suffrage expansion. In Maryland, for example, prominent state legislator Michael Taney introduced a bill in 1797 establishing universal white manhood suffrage. Taney pointed out that Maryland militiamen might soon be called up for service. He urged the legislature to avert the difficulties encountered during the Revolution, when the state had been compelled to expand the suffrage because its militiamen had been reluctant to fight unless they were given the right to vote. A number of states substituted tax-paying requirements for the freehold restriction, thus achieving nearly universal white male suffrage.

The need to summon militiamen to service during the War of 1812 and, again, during Dorr’s Rebellion of 1842, led to the further lowering of property and freehold requirements in the northeastern states. In the
South, ironically, the institution of slavery helped to bring about suffrage reform for poor whites. The maintenance of citizen patrols to pursue runaway slaves and the frequent summons of the militia to confront the dreaded threat of servile insurrection compelled Southern states to expand the suffrage to whites too poor to own slaves themselves. During the 1820s, unenfranchised members of the militia in Virginia and North Carolina demanded the right to vote as a condition for serving in slave patrols. By 1829, several southern states had begun systematically to enfranchise white men of military age to bolster white unity and to enhance the security of the slave system.

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, virtually all white males in the United States had the right to vote. Women, of course, remained outside the electorate until 1920, and African Americans in the South were expelled from it after the end of Reconstruction. Immediately after the Civil War, African Americans voters ensured Republican control of the South while the disenfranchisement of ex-Confederates prevented Democrats from challenging that control. After the compromise of 1876, however, white southerners regained the right to vote and used it, along with violence and economic coercion, to drive black voters out of the electorate, thereby destroying the Republican party in the South. Black voting rights were not fully restored in the South until the enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act nearly a century later.

Despite the exclusion of women and blacks, late-nineteenth-century America was the world’s most democratic nation. In Europe, voting rights were hedged by restrictions, and even voters were not fully mobilized. In the United States, not only did white males hold the right to vote, but most of them exercised it.

Demobilization: The Legacy of Progressivism

The nineteenth-century era of electoral mobilization ended with the rise of Progressivism. Like the Constitution’s framers, the Progressives spoke for an upper class that hoped to construct a powerful and active government, one with the capacity to expand the nation’s economy, regulate social relations, and advance the national interest on the world stage. But the framers had believed that building a strong state would require them to tolerate and even encourage widespread popular participation. The Progressives regarded mass mobilization as an impediment to effective government. Rather than broadening the government’s receptivity to popular activism, the Progressives narrowed it. They weakened the party system, disfranchised millions of immigrant and working-class voters
through voter registration requirements, and contributed to the development of bureaucratic institutions whose authority was based on expertise, not popular support.

The Progressive inventory of antiparty reforms is a familiar one. The Australian ballot reform took away the parties’ traditional privilege of printing and distributing ballots and encouraged split-ticket voting. The introduction of nonpartisan local elections eroded grassroots party organization. The extension of civil service systems for administrative appointments stripped party organizations of much patronage and reduced their resources for recruiting workers and adherents. The introduction of the direct primary diminished party leaders’ control over candidate nominations. Although these reforms hardly destroyed party organizations, they did diminish the political vitality of the parties and enhance the power of the institutions controlled by the upper middle classes—newspapers, civic associations, chambers of commerce, and the municipal research bureaus that were the forerunners of today’s think tanks.36

Another major Progressive Era reform was the introduction of personal registration requirements for voting. They drove millions of potential voters from the electorate and continue to depress voter turnout in the United States today. U.S. voting turnout declined sharply between 1890 and 1910 as laws were adopted across much of the nation requiring eligible individuals to appear personally at a registrar’s office prior to election day to prove their eligibility and register to vote. The nominal purpose of registration rules was to discourage corruption and fraud in the conduct of elections. To many Progressives, however, the term “corruption” was a code for the sorts of politics practiced in America’s large cities, where political machines had organized immigrant and ethnic populations. Progressives not only objected to the corruption that was unquestionably an aspect of party politics during this era but also opposed the growing political power of the big-city parties and their working-class and immigrant supporters as a corruption of the democracy envisioned by the founders.

Personal registration rules imposed a new burden upon potential voters and altered the format of American elections. Under the registration systems adopted after 1890, it became the duty of individual voters to secure their own eligibility. This duty could prove to be a significant burden. During a personal appearance before the registrar, would-be voters were required to furnish proof of identity, residence, and citizenship. The inconvenience of registration varied from state to state, but usually voters were allowed to register only during business hours on weekdays. Many potential voters could not afford to lose a day’s pay in order to register.
Moreover, voters were usually required to register well before the next election, in some cases up to several months earlier. Finally, since most personal registration laws included a periodic purge of the election rolls, ostensibly to keep them up to date, voters often were required to re-register to maintain their eligibility. All of these hurdles represented barriers to participation in the electoral process.37

Subsequent changes in state laws, as well as the 1993 Motor Voter Act, have considerably diminished the difficulty of registering. Nevertheless, any registration rule has the effect of depressing voter turnout, especially among the poor and uneducated. Registering to vote requires a greater degree of political interest and involvement than the act of voting itself. To vote, a citizen need only be concerned with a particular election campaign. To register weeks or months prior to the election, however, a potential voter must have a more general or abstract interest in the political process rather than merely a specific interest in the campaign at hand.38

Abstract interest in politics is largely a product of education. Those with relatively little schooling may be stirred by the events and issues of a particular campaign, but by election day, it is usually too late to register. It is largely for this reason that voter participation in the United States is highly correlated with education and, thus, with income, race, and social class background. Registration rules continue to deter poorer, less educated voters. They can still be brought to the polls, but only by special efforts that contemporary parties and candidates are usually unwilling or unable to undertake. For reasons already noted, candidates prefer media campaigns aimed at actual rather than potential voters.

In addition to narrowing the electoral base of government, the Progressives also restricted the recruitment pool for public service. They aimed to eliminate the citizen administrators who had arrived at their government jobs by way of service in political party organizations. Progressives were determined to replace these short-term and decidedly amateur administrators with professional bureaucrats whose chief loyalty would be to the state itself rather than to any group outside it. They supported the “merit” system, under which an autonomous civil service commission selected administrative employees on the basis of competitive examinations rather than political connections.

The system assumed that politics could be separated from administration.39 Administrators, in other words, should be politically neutral experts or technicians, the efficient servants of a larger public interest rather than of the factional biases of the party in power.40 The bureaucratic ideology of the Progressives allowed that the party in power might have a role in defining the public interest, but the professionally staffed bureaucracy would no longer have a role in mobilizing popular support
for the government or its policies. Divorcing administration from political mobilization detached the state’s executive apparatus from the popular base upon which it had once rested.

The emergence of personnel administration during the Progressive Era helped to ensure that government employees would be insulated as much as possible from popular political currents. As noted in Chapter 2, personnel administration included a system of position classifications; efficiency evaluations; the idea of public service as a career; and rules governing salary, benefits, promotions, and pensions. These instruments of personnel administration helped to detach government workers from shifts in popular sentiment so that their labors could be directed from within the government itself. Public servants would now constitute a civil service of quasi-permanent career officials rather than short-term patronage workers whose sympathies and supporters lay outside the state itself.

Many of the basic principles of personnel administration were developed by President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1905 Keep Commission. As we saw above, Roosevelt’s successor, President Taft, created the Commission on Economy and Efficiency, which supplemented the Keep Commission’s work by elaborating principles of job classification and standards of workplace efficiency. The Progressives had begun to detach the institutions of public administration from those of public mobilization.

But they were not altogether successful. The administrative reforms advocated by the Roosevelt and Taft commissions were not fully adopted by Congress and the states. Congress, through its powers of legislative oversight and such practices as senatorial courtesy, maintained its capacity to intervene politically in administration. And at the state level, many party machines resisted civil service and other Progressive reforms well into the twentieth century.

More generally, while the Progressives were able to lay a foundation for state autonomy, they failed to create political institutions that could operate without mobilizing mass support. They engineered new institutions that foreshadowed such independence—the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Reserve Board and an increasingly powerful Interstate Commerce Commission. All of these institutions expanded the federal government’s capacity to take the initiative in regulating the economy and society. They also created new channels of access to power that bypassed the arena of popular politics—advisory commissions and legislative reference and municipal research bureaus that gave business and professional elites direct access to the executive institutions of government.

But recruiting soldiers, raising revenues, and administering programs still took substantial popular backing. Woodrow Wilson required...
a massive public relations effort and the services of an advertising agency to bolster popular support for the fiscal and personal sacrifices Americans were required to make during World War I. At the same time, the absence of widespread popular political support weakened the new administrative agencies created during the Progressive Era and helped open them to rapid colonization by the interests they nominally regulated.

The political possibilities opened by the Progressives would not be fully exploited for several decades. In the meantime, however, the advocates of active government returned to the strategy of popular mobilization. It was the principal reliance of the New Deal and the civil rights movement that emerged after World War II.

Partial Remobilization: The New Deal

In the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt and his liberal allies sought to reverse the course that had been charted by the Progressives and to mobilize new constituencies that would support his domestic policy initiatives, some of which originated in the unfinished business on the Progressive agenda. In the aftermath of the 1932 national elections, Franklin Roosevelt and his party found themselves in control of the White House and both houses of Congress for the first time in two decades. Democratic victory, however, was a result of the economic crisis brought about by the Great Depression. The bulk of the nation’s wealth as well as some of its most powerful institutions—private and public—remained in the hands of the New Deal’s conservative opponents. Democratic electoral success in 1932 might not survive the crisis that caused it or bring any lasting change in the distribution of political power.

The New Dealers saw a strategy of popular mobilization as a way to add durability to their momentary triumph over an opposition that had privileged access to the courts, the federal bureaucracy, most major corporations, universities, major law firms, and the national news media. Accordingly, the Roosevelt administration sought to establish or strengthen party organizations and to build ties to labor unions capable of bringing blue-collar workers and their families to the polls. This effort brought a substantial number of new voters into the electorate and helped to make the Democrats the nation’s majority party for the next thirty-five years.

As it responded to the nation’s economic emergency, Roosevelt’s administration established a number of major domestic spending programs that would energize the Democratic party’s electoral machinery and attach millions of new voters to the New Deal coalition. In states and
cities where established Democratic party organizations were willing to give their allegiance to the new president, the administration used them as the conduits for the millions of dollars distributed to citizens under the aegis of such new federal initiatives as the Civil Works Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the National Youth Administration. Over the course of the thirties, nearly half of all American families would draw assistance from one or another of these programs, and by controlling the distribution of that assistance, Democratic machines in cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh were able to enroll millions of new voters. Most of the party’s new adherents were drawn from the ranks of the unemployed and willingly gave their political support to the party organizations that provided them with crucial jobs or emergency relief funds.

In states and localities where established Democratic organizations were controlled by the president’s enemies, Roosevelt channeled relief funds to insurgent Democratic factions and encouraged attempts to seize control of the party machinery. In Michigan and Minnesota, for example, insurgents loyal to the president were able to take control of state party organizations and, with the help of federal relief funds, mobilize large numbers of new Democratic voters. In other states, such as New York, factional struggles between Democratic supporters and opponents of the Roosevelt administration weakened the Democratic party and reduced its effectiveness as an instrument for popular mobilization. The chief beneficiary of New Deal patronage here was Republican-Fusion mayor Fiorello La Guardia.

Not only party organizations but also labor unions were enlisted in the New Deal campaign to mobilize new blocs of voters, especially unions affiliated with the newly created Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Roosevelt supported the Wagner Act, through which the government guaranteed labor’s right to organize—a guarantee badly needed by the CIO’s industrial unions, which had been locked in mortal combat with America’s manufacturers. In response, the CIO gave all-out support to the Democratic party. The CIO and its constituent unions contributed nearly $2 million to Roosevelt’s 1936 campaign for reelection. Where local Democratic party organizations were weak or non-existent, the CIO in effect became the Democratic party, organizing meetings and rallies, mounting registration drives, and delivering voters to the polls.

By 1944, the CIO Political Action Committee, which organized tens of thousands of union members to work on behalf of Democratic candidates, had become a central part of the national Democratic party’s cam-
campaign apparatus. Thanks to local party machines and labor unions, the Roosevelt administration was able to expand voter turnout in the North and to begin the process of permanently attaching millions of new voters to the Democratic party. Presidential election turnout outside the South rose from less than 57 percent of eligible voters in 1928 to more than 73 percent by 1940. A large percentage of new voters were unemployed and had received some form of relief under the auspices of New Deal programs. The overwhelming majority of these supported the Democrats. According to an August 1936 Gallup poll, an astonishing 82 percent of Americans receiving some form of federal relief planned to vote for Roosevelt. Millions of the voters mobilized by the Roosevelt administration during this period became permanently attached to the Democratic party coalition and provided the Democrats with a stable base of support that, for a generation, would contribute to Democratic control of America’s political institutions.51

Democratic efforts to organize and mobilize new voters during the 1930s were confined to the North. Roosevelt believed that retaining the support of the southern wing of the Democratic party was essential to the success of his legislative agenda and his continued tenure in the White House. He did not challenge either the political establishment of the former Confederacy or the region’s segregationist order. Since the administration of most New Deal programs was decentralized, southern state governments shaped them to suit their racial customs. Benefits under the new Aid for Families with Dependent Children Program, for example, rarely went to black recipients in the southern states.52 To appease southern landowners, agricultural labor was exempted from federal minimum wage and labor legislation.

Though they were potentially Democratic voters, most blacks and a large number of poor whites living in the South were disenfranchised by electoral systems that included poll taxes, literacy tests, and, in the case of blacks, the threat of violence against those who sought to vote. The South had the lowest voter turnout in the nation—only 18 percent, for example, in the 1924 presidential election. Unlike their northern counterparts, who faced Republican competition, the Democratic leaders of the one-party South had no interest in boosting voter turnout. Most viewed voter mobilization as a threat to their power and resisted all efforts to expand the southern electorate. Roosevelt refrained from interfering with these regional arrangements, and after World War II, the Truman administration followed pretty much same course. Truman, for example, helped to thwart the CIO’s “Operation Dixie,” an ambitious effort to use veteran union organizers to expand both union membership and voting rights among southern black workers and sharecroppers. The
administration feared that the reaction of the Democratic party’s southern, “Dixiecrat” wing would destroy the Democratic coalition and ruin the president’s chances for reelection in 1948.\textsuperscript{53}

In the North, Roosevelt’s political efforts produced a Democratic coalition similar in its general outlines to that of a European social democratic party. It included members of the middle-class intellectual, professional, and quasi-professional strata; unionized workers; and the poor. Some segments of the business community supported particular Democratic programs or saw the New Deal as an acceptable alternative to more radical economic and social changes. The Democratic coalition also included immigrant-stock voters and virtually the entire African American population. As this coalition developed, it provided the mass base of support for the agenda of social reform and economic regulation associated with the latter part of Roosevelt’s first term.

New Deal mobilization efforts in the 1934 midterm congressional elections increased the size of the Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. With the backing provided by this reinforced mandate, Roosevelt embarked on the so-called Second New Deal. It included the enactment of the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act, the Banking Act of 1935, the Public Utility Holding Company Act (Wheeler-Rayburn Act), and the Revenue Act of 1935. The last of these measures, dubbed the “Soak the Rich” tax act, increased federal income tax rates and began the modern-day expansion of the national government’s revenue base. The Democratic congressional landslide of 1934, powered by a flood of new voters in such states as New York and Pennsylvania, swept aside or at least temporarily disheartened Roosevelt’s foes in both political parties and opened the way for his new legislative program.\textsuperscript{54}

Though the New Deal mobilization effort was impressive, it was incomplete and temporary. The two forces upon which Roosevelt had relied, organized labor and urban political machines, both lost political potency after World War II. Labor was internally divided by struggles between radical and moderate unionists.\textsuperscript{55} New technologies challenged the machine’s domination of the electoral process. The use of the new broadcast media permitted political candidates to run successfully for office without organization support.\textsuperscript{56} By the 1950s, voter turnout in the North had returned to pre–New Deal levels.

The possibilities for political change—much less social democracy—during the New Deal era were even more sharply constrained by the place of the South in the Democratic party. The South as a region benefited from New Deal social and agricultural programs. Southern conservatives, however, opposed a number of the administration’s tax and regulatory initiatives, were deeply suspicious of the influence of liberal and labor
forces in the Democratic coalition, and were determined to protect the southern apartheid system. The congressional seniority system placed many southerners in the key leadership posts of both House and Senate, posts from which they could hinder New Deal initiatives and prevent any social or racial reforms from penetrating their region.

In 1939, southern Democrats and conservative Republicans joined forces in a conservative coalition that slashed relief expenditures, cut business taxes, launched an investigation of the National Labor Relations Board, and eliminated the Federal Theatre Project. Over the next thirty years, this coalition worked to prevent liberal social and economic measures from being enacted. Conservative Republicans supported southern autonomy on matters of race. The southerners worked with the Republicans to prevent labor and liberals from bringing about the economic and social reforms they sought. During the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s this conservative coalition was quite successful, for example, in blocking national health insurance proposals initiated by Presidents Truman and Kennedy while simultaneously preventing the enactment of the significant civil rights bills proposed in 1944, 1946, 1950, 1960, and 1963. Roosevelt’s determination to conciliate white southern Democrats by overlooking the denial of voting rights to black southerners meant that the New Deal and its ideological successors would be unable to overcome the local and parochial elites who opposed their political goals. During the 1960s, however, black civil rights leaders and their various white allies sought to rectify this mistake.

The 1960s: Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, and the Great Society

Popular electoral mobilization sparked by the civil rights movement undermined the power of the conservative coalition. In Alabama, the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 focused national attention on a wave of African American protest that would rock the South for a decade. At first, national leaders of the Democratic party remained faithful to Roosevelt’s strategy of preserving party unity by avoiding confrontation with the white South on the issue of race. In his 1956 presidential campaign, for example, Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson asserted that the resolution of racial conflicts should be left to the individual states.

But the civil rights struggle won the support of northern liberals as the campaign of protest escalated. Televised images of southern law enforcement officers savagely beating peaceful demonstrators convinced large numbers of northerners that support for the cause of black civil rights was a moral imperative. For their part, a number of northern
Democratic politicians began to calculate that their own political interests might be served by supporting at least some of the demands of civil rights protestors. Because of the great postwar migration of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities, blacks now constituted a significant voting bloc in a number of key northern states. John F. Kennedy campaigned for black support in 1960 at the risk of antagonizing white southerners, and black urban voters helped to produce his narrow presidential victory, giving him 82 percent of their votes—an increase of more than 20 percentage points over Stevenson’s showing in 1956. Without this strong African American support, Kennedy would have lost the electoral votes of New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Michigan, and the presidential election itself. Once in office, Kennedy acknowledged the loyalty of black voters by issuing a series of executive orders attacking discrimination in transportation, housing, employment, and education.

Northern Democrats had little to lose and much to gain by supporting the civil rights cause. On the one hand, they might win favor with their increasingly numerous black constituents. On the other hand, by aligning themselves with southern blacks, northern Democrats could shift the balance of power within their party by undermining the white southerners, who had long enjoyed disproportionate influence in the Democratic coalition.

Initially, the goals of the civil rights movement matched its label. It concentrated on civil rather than political rights—chiefly public accommodations and employment. In 1961, however, the Kennedy administration pressed civil rights leaders to shift their focus to voting rights. The administration believed that an emphasis on voting rights would be less confrontational than the full-scale ground assault against the South’s system of racial separation in restaurants, swimming pools, and transportation. Kennedy also calculated that moving the battle to the polling place would increase black Democratic votes in the South and offset defections among whites, improving the president’s prospects in the 1964 presidential election. Kennedy therefore supported the initiative that became the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, outlawing the poll taxes used in the South to disenfranchise blacks as well as many poor whites. Some civil rights leaders viewed the Kennedy administration’s focus on voting rights as an effort “to cool the militancy” of the protest movement. Most, however, were willing to accept the federal protection and subsidies offered by Kennedy for voter registration drives.

Other politicians and interest groups had reasons of their own for supporting the expansion of voting rights in the South. Upper-middle-
class liberal activists with ties to universities, foundations, philanthropic institutions, and the media had played a significant role in the Democratic party since the Roosevelt administration; and, with the increasing political and economic importance of the institutions to which they were linked, they played even larger roles in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

These liberal activists had consistently exercised greater influence at the national level and in the White House than on Capitol Hill or in state and local governments. The postwar liberals strongly favored expanding the power of the federal government and of the presidency at the expense of Congress and state and local governments. Liberal activists had been the brain trust behind Roosevelt’s New Deal and the intellectual force behind Truman’s Fair Deal. In the 1960s, liberals continued to support the idea of a powerful national government, led by a vigorous chief executive, that would initiate national programs to regulate the economy, protect the environment, and provide a variety of social services.\(^6\)

The alliance of Dixiecrats and conservative Republicans had posed the major obstacle to realization of the liberal agenda. During the 1940s and 1950s, this coalition went on the offensive, initiating a series of investigations whose chief political aim was to discredit liberals and liberal institutions by linking them to the threat of international Communism.\(^6\) To this end, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) probed supposed Communist influence in such liberal bastions as labor unions, the film and broadcast industries, the news media, philanthropic institutions, and the universities. HUAC investigations led to criminal sentences for a number of witnesses who refused to testify before the panel. Others saw their careers ruined by unsubstantiated allegations linking them to Communist organizations.

In general, HUAC was used by successive chairmen, including southern Democrats like Martin Dies of Texas and John Rankin of Mississippi, as well as arch conservatives like J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, to attack liberal Democrats. Meanwhile, in the Senate, Joseph McCarthy (R.-Wisconsin) conducted probes of Communist infiltration of such institutions as the State Department, in which liberal Republicans played significant roles. McCarthy was backed by the midwestern, conservative Taft wing of the Republican party. Taft and his allies saw McCarthy’s probes as a useful means of discrediting the more liberal Eastern Establishment wing of the GOP, which had aligned itself with the New Deal and often supported liberal Democratic programs.\(^6\)

The emergence of the civil rights movement provided liberal forces with an unexpected opportunity to turn the tables on their conservative
foes. Extension of voting rights to African Americans in the South could produce several million black voters to undermine the Dixiecrat politicians aligned with the conservative coalition. This strategy promised liberals a measure of revenge against the forces that had only recently sought to portray them as Communist sympathizers. More important, enfeebling the Dixiecrats would open the way for implementation of the liberal agenda that the conservative coalition had blocked for more than two decades.

Liberals were joined in their support for the expansion of black voting rights by important segments of the American business community. Many national corporations were anxious to stop the turmoil of civil rights demonstrations and boycotts and were happy to join the Kennedy administration in encouraging black protestors to “work within the system”—seeking to achieve their ends by voting rather than demonstrating. Firms with international markets were anxious to end the embarrassment abroad caused by worldwide exposure to scenes of southern police officers enforcing racial subordination by brutalizing peaceful civil rights protestors.

The national news media also had a stake in supporting the campaign for black voting rights. The morality plays enacted on the streets by civil rights organizations were irresistible to television networks in search of dramatic, “visual” news. Electronic journalists just learning the uses of their medium discovered new possibilities for shaping as well as reporting the news. In Little Rock and elsewhere, a few of them helped to stage the set-pieces that became national emblems of a renewed determination to resolve the peculiar American dilemma.

At the same time, civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King learned to use television to gain the sympathy of northern audiences for their cause. His movement’s struggle to win voting rights for black southerners captivated the networks and electrified their viewers. Segregationists unwittingly played the role scripted for them by the civil rights movement, though occasionally they overacted. The murder of three voter registration workers in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964 appalled the nation and turned the networks’ klieg lights on county courthouses and black churches in the Deep South. They finally converged on Selma, the seat of Dallas County, Alabama.

Martin Luther King targeted Selma for a concerted campaign of protest activity partly because the disenfranchisement of African Americans in Dallas County was so starkly obvious. Though they made up 58 percent of the county’s population, only 2 percent of the county’s registered voters were black. A sustained voter registration drive between 1962
and 1964 had produced only 795 new black registrants. The county government responded to even these meager gains by instituting new registration standards—devices transparently designed to keep black residents off the voting rolls—requiring new registrants to be able to read and interpret passages from the state and federal constitutions and to provide a certificate of “good character” from an already registered voter.

Selma had been chosen, however, not only because it had an outrageous record of discrimination against would-be black voters but also because Dr. King was confident that state and county political leaders would respond to peaceful protests with violence, and in the process imprint themselves on the collective consciousness of a national television audience as the irrationally brutal oppressors of defenseless crusaders ready to sacrifice themselves for freedom and democracy. Whatever the voting rights campaign may have been on the streets of Selma, on television it was a clear-cut struggle of good against evil. Alabama and Dallas County authorities played their assigned roles convincingly. Before a full array of network cameras, Alabama state troopers launched a vicious attack against protestors on the Raymond Pettus Bridge, leaving forty demonstrators seriously injured in what the national news media dubbed “bloody Sunday.”

From the perspective of protest leaders and the national media, Dallas County sheriff Jim Clark might have been sent by central casting to play his part in the drama. Clark displayed a violent temper on camera and off, wore a “Never!” button in his lapel, and armed his deputies with electric cattle prods. Clark’s extravagant cruelty unwittingly contributed so much to the cause of African American voting rights that the protestors made him an honorary member of Dr. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) as well as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The previous year, Birmingham, Alabama, police commissioner, Eugene T. “Bull” Connor had been similarly helpful to Dr. King’s efforts when, in full view of network television cameras, he arrested King and unleashed his deputies against peaceful demonstrators.

The drama and passion generated by television coverage of the Selma protests helped to create the setting for passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The 1964 Democratic landslide had added significantly to the strength of northern Democrats in both houses of Congress. This allowed President Johnson to secure congressional passage of sweeping voting rights legislation that substantially increased African American voter registration in the South. Under the terms of the 1965 Voting Rights Act,
federal officials took control of voter registration in those states and localities that had previously acted to deny voting rights to blacks. Millions of black southerners became voters as a result.

The overwhelming majority of these new voters, of course, gave their support to the Democratic party. At the same time, large numbers of white southerners expressed their opposition to the national Democratic party’s civil rights policies by shifting their support to the GOP—first in national presidential contests and later in state and local races as well. As a result, Democratic party organizations in the southern states, institutions that had been controlled by conservative whites since Reconstruction, became increasingly dependent upon the support of African Americans. In such states as Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina, blacks quickly came to make up more than a third of the electorate and to account for at least half the votes received by Democratic candidates in statewide races. No southern Democrat could hope to be elected to statewide office without overwhelming black support.

Forced to confront this new electoral reality, some Democratic politicians, like Senators Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, joined their white constituents by moving into the Republican camp. One—George Wallace of Alabama—led a third-party revolt. Other southerners adjusted their rhetoric and behavior to court black support. This strategy required southern Democrats to abandon their alliance with Republican conservatives and to support the national party on social welfare and civil rights issues. As a result, the political potency of the conservative coalition, which for so long had thwarted American liberals, began to wane.

Its passing briefly created the climate for an efflorescence of liberal politics. During his first full term in office, President Johnson led congressional Democrats toward his vision of a “Great Society,” whose key components were embodied in a sweeping legislative program that included the enactment of a comprehensive War on Poverty, Medicare, Medicaid, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the 1966 Civil Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Liberals hoped that in alliance with newly mobilized African Americans, they would be able to sustain the political momentum for further domestic social reform. But even as Democrats enacted President Johnson’s ambitious legislative agenda, the Democratic coalition was confronting serious internal divisions created, in part, by the party’s own efforts to attract and mobilize an African American constituency.

Though proposed as an assault on poverty in general, the Great Society’s economic opportunity initiatives served as vehicles for racial protest in northern cities. The targets of protest frequently included urban political party organizations and labor organizations—mainstays of the New

—68—
Deal coalition and the political bedrock beneath Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory of 1964. The community action agencies that served as local outposts of the War on Poverty represented potential competition for the patronage-consuming parties of big-city politics. The parties could distribute government-sponsored jobs, and they often did so in the form of jobs with nonprofit corporations beyond the limits of local government and outside the orbits of established political organizations. Even if local political leaders managed to take control of the antipoverty agency, as Mayor Daley did in Chicago, the effort was likely to ignite or intensify the underlying struggle between Democratic stalwarts and black insurgents.79 Political allies that had helped to return Democrats to the White House in 1960 now turned against one another in combat.

Organized labor was soon engaged as well. Job training and employment programs undertaken under the aegis of the War on Poverty created new competitors in the labor market, and affirmative action policies threatened to displace union members from slots in city government and the building trades, slots that they had long regarded as theirs to occupy and bequeath to family members. The “street-level bureaucrats” of municipal government struggled to maintain authority over a restive and resentful clientele that consisted, increasingly, of culturally alien Latinos and African Americans.80

Until disrupted by the combined forces of the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty, unions, urban party organizations, and local real estate interests had found common ground in “executive centered coalitions” centered on entrepreneurial mayors and cemented together by federally subsidized urban redevelopment programs that assured profits to developers, work for construction unions, lower taxes for homeowners, and secure jobs in the municipal civil service for the lower-middle-class and upwardly mobile members of the working class.81 For black city residents, these local urban renewal initiatives seemed little more than campaigns of “Negro removal” designed to banish them from the fringes of central business districts, where their presence posed a threat to commercial property values. Now they struck back.

They had allies. White liberals—academics, foundation officials, social welfare professionals—had participated in the design of the War on Poverty, but in local politics, their social reform objectives confronted many of the same obstacles that confronted black activists. They denounced municipal bureaucracies and party machines as “insensitive” to the needs of the black community; construction trade unions, as racist; and neighborhood resistance to racial balance in the schools, as segregationist. Its southern base overturned by the civil rights struggle, the Democratic party’s foundations in the North were now shaken as the
underlying racial schism within its ranks rumbled to the surface. The emerging pattern of alliances and animosities in the Democratic party was characterized at the time as a coalition of the top and bottom against the middle—upper-middle-class white professionals allied with blacks in opposition to lower-middle- and working-class whites. 82

These divisions were hardened by the Vietnam War. During the early years of American military involvement in Southeast Asia, President Johnson sought to minimize tensions within his party by restricting increases in military expenditures in order to avoid draining resources from the domestic programs supported by white liberals and black activists. America, he argued, could afford guns and the Great Society at the same time. His effort to sustain consensus among Democrats was one consideration in his choice of gradual escalation in Vietnam rather than a massive military effort from the beginning. 83

As escalation followed escalation, however, federal funds flowed away from the War on Poverty to the war in Vietnam. The antipoverty initiatives were also undermined by resurgent conservative forces in Congress. The price of their support for White House policy in Vietnam was a federal retreat from social engineering at home. Liberals—including members of Johnson’s own cabinet, such as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner and Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz—saw the Vietnam War as an immediate threat to the programs and institutions to which they were committed. It was both an assault on liberal conscience and on the policies that reflected liberal power. 84

Thousands of liberal Democrats turned away from the Democratic president to join the student radicals who had been campaigning against the war since its early stages. They sought not only to end the war but also to reverse the massive diversion of funds and political energy from the movement for social reform that had seemed so promising at the dawn of Johnson’s Great Society. 85 Among their student allies on college campuses, resistance to military conscription had already reached epidemic levels. The war was a more immediate threat to them than to their elders. But their educational status made it possible for many of them to avoid Vietnam. Higher education, in fact, was one common attribute among the antiwar forces, both old and young. Blue-collar “Middle America,” in contrast, provided disproportionate support for the American war effort in Vietnam—and many of the soldiers who fought there.

The conflict over the war exacerbated social class divisions within the Democratic party, divisions that had been exposed by the struggle over civil rights. Blue-collar Democrats resented what they saw as an effort by a small but well-educated and relatively affluent stratum to impose its own social and cultural values on the remainder of society. Alabama gov-
ernor George Wallace expressed the anger of working-class Americans when he exhorted them to resist the efforts of “pointy-headed intellectuals,” “pot smokers,” and “Harvard professors on bicycles” to come into their communities and tell them how to live. Working-class Americans, for the most part, were also angered by the lack of patriotism exhibited by the sons of privilege who found ways to avoid the draft while their own sons were sent to fight. The echoes of these conflicts of the 1960s can be heard clearly today in arguments about “family values” and even in continuing recriminations about the past drug use and military records of some prominent politicians.

For their part, many middle-class Democrats viewed members of the white working class as racists and jingoists. After a mob of New York City construction workers wearing yellow safety helmets attacked and beat student antiwar protestors, the term “hard hat” became synonymous with working-class thuggery in the lexicon of liberal Democrats. “Archie Bunker,” the white, working-class lead character of a television situation comedy enormously popular among viewers of the period, was depicted as a bigoted, neo-Fascist dolt. 86

The collapse of the conservative coalition initially seemed to offer liberal Democrats an opportunity to extend the New Deal agenda of social reform beyond the 1960s. By the end of the decade, however, the opportunity had been forfeited. Widening class and racial divisions within the Democratic party destroyed the prospects for a grand alliance of races and classes that would have united college-educated liberals with their would-be working-class allies both black and white. Millions of working-class whites in the North and South abandoned the Democratic party to support George Wallace’s independent presidential bid in 1968 and at least briefly joined the Republican camp to vote for Richard Nixon in 1972. Nixon’s hard hat supporters were the forerunners of the “Reagan Democrats,” who would help to elect a Republican president in 1980 and 1984.

The Democratic party faced a choice at the start of the 1970s—whether to attempt a revival of the New Deal electoral coalition that included organized labor and the white working class or whether to work out their political destiny without the party’s traditional blue-collar base. In the national political arena, the first strategy was most closely associated with the presidential campaign of Robert Kennedy and the second with what came to be called the “New Politics.” Kennedy’s electoral strategy included efforts to continue the remobilization of the electorate begun by the New Deal and the civil rights movement, taking advantage of the possibilities opened by the enfranchisement of millions of African Americans in the South. His strategy envisioned a significant expansion
of the electorate. The postmaterial forces of the New Politics, however, had little affinity for the working-class wing of the Democratic party and no inclination to mobilize them in elections.

Electoral Mobilization or New Politics?

Before John Kennedy’s assassination, his younger brother Robert had not been a popular political figure. Liberal Democrats remembered Robert as an aide to Senator Joseph McCarthy during the anti-Communist witch hunts of the early 1950s. Organized labor recollected his aggressive investigation of links between organized crime and the labor movement as staff attorney for the McClellan Committee. The business community recalled his pugnacious tactics toward prominent steel industry executives during the 1962 conflict between the Kennedy administration and the steel industry over steel price increases. Finally, many African American leaders resented his apparent lack of enthusiasm for the civil rights cause when he was attorney general during the early 1960s. Kennedy had authorized the FBI to place wiretaps on the phones of Dr. Martin Luther King and his close aide, Stanley Levison—an action that infuriated the entire civil rights leadership when it became known.

After John Kennedy’s death, however, Robert Kennedy benefited from the nationwide torrent of grief and emotional support for the Kennedy family. Popular sympathy for the brother of the martyred president helped Robert Kennedy defeat Republican incumbent Kenneth Keating to win election to the U.S. Senate from the state of New York in 1964. But Robert Kennedy had to work for his victory, and, sympathy notwithstanding, he still had political handicaps to overcome. Though he won the election by a comfortable 719,000-vote margin, President Lyndon Johnson, who led the ticket, carried New York by a 2.7 million vote margin. Thus, nearly 2 million New Yorkers who cast their ballots for the Democratic presidential candidate in 1964 made the decision not to support Robert Kennedy.

After his election to the Senate, Kennedy undertook a major effort to expand his political base in preparation for a future presidential run. He moved first to build a secure bastion of support on the Democratic party’s liberal left. Kennedy proved to be a gifted politician, able to stake out positions in support of previously neglected causes that would subsequently prove to be extremely popular among Democratic liberals. He was among the early supporters of Cesar Chavez in his efforts to organize migrant farmworkers in California. Kennedy’s presence on the picket lines alongside Mexican American farmworkers did much to enhance the senator’s image among liberals while at least partially erasing the mem-
ory of Kennedy’s service for McCarthy and his approval of the King wire-
taps. Kennedy was also among the first national politicians to take a posi-
tion on Native American rights. He toured reservations, spoke out on
behalf of Native Americans and Eskimos, and became the Senate’s cham-
pion of expanding funding for the education of Native Americans.

To enhance his standing among African Americans, Kennedy courted
the support of both mainstream civil right leaders and more radical
activists. He promoted expansion of funding for social programs includ-
ing the community action programs that were popular among local black
and white political activists because they provided a channel of federal
funding for community organizations. Kennedy proposed a variety of
programs designed to create private-sector jobs in the ghetto. He traveled
to South Africa in 1966, where he met with Albert Luthuli a Nobel
Prize–winning writer who had been banned by the government.

Kennedy received a great deal of media coverage in the United States for
speaking out against South Africa’s apartheid system. Gradually, civil
rights leaders like Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Willie Brown, and Roy
Wilkins began to believe that Kennedy’s commitment to their cause was
sincere. At the same time, even more-radical blacks like Floyd McKissick
were drawn into the Kennedy circle through regular meetings and, at
least in McKissick’s case, financial support from the Kennedy family.91

During the 1968 Democratic primaries, Kennedy campaigned vigor-
ously in black areas and won the overwhelming support of black voters.
According to news accounts, Kennedy’s campaign swings through
African American neighborhoods often radiated the ecstatic aura of reli-
gious revivals, his candidacy borne upward by wildly enthusiastic crowds.
In Indiana, Kennedy captured nearly 90 percent of the African American
vote. In Nebraska, nearly 85 percent of the black voters in the Omaha
area backed Kennedy. In the District of Columbia, Kennedy carried two-
thirds of the black vote. In California, blacks and Mexican Americans
were Kennedy’s core constituency. Rival politicians generally ceded the
black vote to Kennedy, believing there was little point to competing
against him for African American support. Eugene McCarthy, for exam-
ple, refrained from campaigning in Harlem because, he said, there was
“No need to stir up the blacks and minorities. They were Bobby’s people
and I saw no point in wasting time campaigning there.”92

Kennedy also saw disaffected young people as a potential supporters.
He gave scores of speeches on college campuses and solicited the advice
of such leaders of youth protest as Tom Hayden, president of Students for
a Democratic Society, and New Left spokesman, Staughton Lynd. Hayden
wrote, “the only politician who expressed an interest in what I was doing
was Robert Kennedy”;93 and he subsequently worked for Kennedy in the
1968 California Democratic primary. Kennedy’s most important appeal for the support of radical young people was, of course, opposition to the Vietnam War. Kennedy broke with the Johnson administration in 1965, calling for the creation of a coalition government in Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1967, Kennedy avoided taking strong positions on the issue of the war. In the aftermath of the 1968 Tet offensive, however, he began to make a series of strong speeches to enthusiastic student audiences, condemning the war on moral grounds and calling for an end to the fighting. Kennedy was sufficiently successful in attracting the support of young people to cause some radical youth leaders like Abbie Hoffman to worry that he threatened their positions of prominence. Until Kennedy’s assassination, the ranks of Hoffman’s Youth International Party thinned as members rushed off to work for the Kennedy campaign.94

While Kennedy worked to build a solid political base on the left, he was also eager to retain the backing of traditional Democratic supporters, including labor, farmers, ethnic groups, and machine politicians. As he began his campaign, Kennedy’s relations with all these groups were unsettled or just uncertain. Elements of organized labor were troubled by Kennedy’s prosecution of Jimmy Hoffa and other officials of the Teamsters Union. But Kennedy developed close ties with leaders of other unions—Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers and Cesar Chavez and his farmworkers, as well as the leaders of newly unionized workers like the Indiana steel haulers. The link with Chavez helped Kennedy to win nearly 95 percent of the Mexican American vote on the way to his victory in the California primary. Where Kennedy was unable to win over the top national union leadership, he courted local union leaders, lower-ranking national staff, and the rank and file. Young Kennedy staffers attended union conventions, where they made a point of meeting rank and file. Kennedy himself joined striking workers on the picket lines. Circumventing labor’s leaders paid off. By April 1968, polls showed Kennedy leading both McCarthy and Humphrey among union members, notwithstanding their leaders’ endorsements of Humphrey and the vigorous efforts of the AFL-CIO’s Committee on Public Education to mobilize union support for the vice president.95

Kennedy also cultivated the support of a second traditional Democratic constituency—members of white urban ethnic groups whose ardor for the party had cooled because of its stand on civil rights. Many white, working-class voters believed that the Democrats favored black aspirations at their expense. Kennedy was convinced that he could forge a coalition between blacks and urban ethnics based on their common economic concerns, much as Franklin Roosevelt had done. He cam-
paigned energetically in ethnic areas of primary states like Indiana and focused his messages on the importance of New Deal and Great Society social programs that were popular among working-class whites, as well as blacks.

News accounts of the period indicated that Kennedy had been enormously successful in winning white ethnic support. In reporting the results of the Indiana primary, the New York Times asserted that Kennedy had managed to win over working-class ethnic whites in Gary as well as rural whites, thus commanding the support of whites who had previously backed Alabama governor George Wallace. One commentator called Kennedy “the last liberal politician who could communicate with white, working class America.” Another said, “Kennedy could do the miraculous: attract the support of desperate blacks and white working class people.”

A close analysis of Kennedy’s vote in the 1968 primaries suggests that initial observers overestimated the extent of white ethnic support for the New York senator. In the Indiana primary, Kennedy actually lost six out of seven white precincts in Gary and was able to capture urban areas only because of his overwhelming support from black voters. Nevertheless, Kennedy did well among Indiana’s Polish voters and Nebraska’s German voters, and he scored significantly ahead of all candidates among Catholic voters in national polls. After his death, many of these working-class voters would become “Nixon Democrats” and then “Reagan Democrats.”

The precise extent of Kennedy’s success among white ethnics may be less significant than his vigorous effort to get their support. He was convinced that he could win their backing and was ecstatic over news accounts suggesting that he had succeeded. After the Indiana primary, Kennedy told his aides, “I’ve proved I can really be a leader of a broad spectrum. I can be a bridge between blacks and whites without stepping back from my positions.” In a similar spirit, Kennedy courted the nation’s farmers without much hope of making significant inroads in the farm belt. But Kennedy scored significant victories in both the Nebraska and South Dakota Democratic primaries, capturing absolute majorities in both of these farm states. Kennedy was a liberal politician who sought to build a broad electoral coalition of younger, middle-class whites, working-class whites, and poor blacks. When accused by journalists of demagoguery for his often emotional appeals to voters, Kennedy replied that such appeals were needed to build a broad base of popular support. “I have to win through the people. Otherwise I’m not going to win,” he said.
The New Politics Matures

Robert Kennedy’s assassination in 1968 also meant the death of his electoral strategy. Many liberal activists were no longer willing to make common cause with the labor leaders and machine politicians who had dominated Democratic party politics for decades. They were estranged from these traditional Democrats by attitudes on race or the Vietnam War or both. Liberals cemented alliances with African Americans by their support of affirmative action policies, and constructed their own version of affirmative action within the Democratic party, in order to assure the representation of women and minority groups at national conventions. The McGovern-Fraser rules, adopted at the 1972 convention, effectively imposed race, gender, and age quotas on state delegations and outlawed winner-take-all presidential primaries, which were often controlled by party leaders. States were required to select convention delegates through open caucus procedures or primaries based on proportional representation. The reforms strengthened liberal activists and racial minorities within the party while weakening party politicians and labor leaders.98

The ability to mobilize an electoral constituency was now only one way to earn admission to party councils. It was also possible to gain entry by “symbolizing” a constituency through one’s racial identity or gender. A similar practice was later embraced at Republican conventions, where the televised image of cultural diversity served as surrogate for the experience of diversity itself.

In the New Politics of the 1970s, such imaginary political constituencies achieved an institutional embodiment in the formation of public interest groups. Public participation in public interest groups was actually quite limited. These groups relied on access to administrative agencies and litigation to achieve their ends rather than on popular mobilization in elections. Liberal and (later) conservative activists established hundreds of interest groups, public interest law firms, and think tanks to further such goals as environmental quality, the elimination of nuclear weapons, consumer protection, auto safety, and individual liberty.99 Common Cause, the Sierra Club, the various organizations formed by consumer activist Ralph Nader—all sought to distinguish themselves from traditional interest groups by claiming to serve broad public interests rather than the narrower demands advanced by more traditional pressure groups on behalf of business corporations, organized labor, or other producer groups.100 Financial support for public interest groups came from the Ford Foundation, which provided tens of millions of dollars through its Fund for the Republic; and moral support came from the
mass media, which rarely questioned the claims of public interest groups to speak for the public interest.

By speaking for the interest of everyone in general, public interest groups distanced themselves from anyone in particular. It followed that they had to exercise political influence by means other than the mobilization of a definable public constituency. To this end, the practitioners of the New Politics pursued an agenda of regulatory and bureaucratic reform, including an expansion of the role of the courts in the administrative process, an agenda that enabled them to advance the public interest without having to rouse the public itself.

One expedient was to urge the delegation of governmental tasks and public funds to nongovernmental institutions likely to be staffed by fellow practitioners of the New Politics—nonprofit social service agencies, legal services clinics, public interest law firms, and the like.101 At the same time, public interest groups and their allies sought to enhance their access to the regulatory activities of the federal government. Consumer advocates and environmentalists, in particular, were able to increase their influence in the regulatory process through sunshine laws, by subjecting federal agencies to close judicial supervision, by providing for the representation of public interest groups in the administrative process, and by using their access to the media to launch exposés attacking administrative practices to which they objected.102

Once created, new federal regulatory agencies like the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration extended the domain of the New Politics. Indeed, the executives of the new regulatory programs created between 1966 and 1976 were often recruited from the public interest lobby, just as the executives of traditional regulatory agencies were often drawn from the industries that they were supposed to regulate.103

The courts presented the partisans of the New Politics with access to another kind of influence that did not depend upon the mobilization of popular constituencies, and these partisans generally sought to subject federal programs and agencies to tighter supervision by the judiciary. During the long struggle for civil rights, liberals had learned that judges could be critically important allies when popularly elected legislatures were controlled by hostile forces. Public interest groups and their friends in Congress now supported a lowering of the requirements for standing, a virtual elimination of the political questions doctrine, the expansion of class action suits, and an enriched range of judicial remedies. Moreover, many consumer and environmental statutes, such as the Endangered Species Act, contained “citizen-suit” provisions that enabled public inter-
est groups to use the courts to enforce the statutes’ provisions without having to seek administrative remedies. Groups could finance such litigation by means of fee-shifting provisions that allowed them to collect attorneys’ fees and court costs when they prevailed.104

Party reform, public interest groups, new regulatory programs and procedures, and the use of litigation all created a political platform for the New Politics that did not rest to a significant degree on the mobilization of the electorate. Ideological justification for their nondemocratic approach to reform was provided by liberal scholars who argued for essential democratic values that could not be left to the vagaries of majority rule.105

Having established their political influence in the absence of comprehensive electoral mobilization, the liberal heirs of the New Politics were understandably reluctant to place it at risk by issuing appeals for mass activism. They were likely to flourish politically in a low-turnout environment. Today, tens of thousands of political activists affiliated with public interest groups, nonprofit organizations, and the quasi-public institutions of the domestic state form the backbone of the Democratic party’s electoral effort. For these groups, expanded participation would now represent a threat to their influence over the party rather than an opportunity for increased political power.

Political conservatives were not at all inclined to seize the initiative in popular mobilization. They rarely are.106 In some respects, they imitated the public-interest-group model pioneered by liberals. Litigation was a specialty. Through Judicial Watch, the Washington Legal Foundation, and the Federalist Society, they employed the courts to torment elected officeholders. Republicans did welcome new constituencies to their party—southern whites, the Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association, and the National Federation of Independent Business.107 These groups, however, including the Christian Coalition and its predecessor, the Moral Majority, generally appealed to middle-class Americans who already participated in politics. Republicans did little or nothing in the 1980s and 1990s to bring new voters into the electorate.

Historically conservative parties have tried to protect their own congeries of interest groups, courts, and media that have helped corporate interests to exercise political power. When liberal forces opted to follow the path of the New Politics, they eliminated the possibility of electoral expansion resulting from what Duverger called contagion from the left and virtually guaranteed that popular political participation would be marginalized.

The combination of New Politics and conservatism’s resurgence has created a highly stratified political process. Those citizens whose resources
and education enable them to take advantage of the new opportunities for personal access to politics benefit from the ability to communicate their views to policymakers. But tens of millions of Americans are barely involved in the political process, which has produced what political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady call “representational distortion.” These are the citizens who have become mere “customers” for the programs and services designed by their political betters.