There is reason to worry that our two hundred-plus-year experiment with democracy is in danger. On January 6, 2021, insurrectionists invaded the US Capitol, interrupting the official congressional certification of the 2020 electoral vote and Joe Biden’s victory. Then-president Donald Trump successfully encouraged protestors to march from the White House to the Capitol and disrupt the solemn proceedings, and unsuccessfully urged his vice president, Mike Pence, to refuse to certify enough electoral votes to reverse the election outcome. As demonstrators neared the House and Senate chambers, members of Congress were hustled to secure locations while Capitol police, National Guard, and Washington, DC, police officers fought the rioters, often in hand-to-hand combat. For the first time in US history, a sitting president was accused of inciting an insurrection that, if successful, would have led to a constitutional crisis the likes of which Americans have never before seen.

The Republican and Democratic Parties were obvious sources of blame for this discord, especially from those who questioned the election result after their passions were inflamed by Donald Trump. Deep fissures in our politics are reflected in sharp divisions between the political parties. A metaphorical canyon divided Republicans from Democrats in 2020, with 85 percent of Trump and Biden supporters each saying the other side did not understand them. Foreign actors, especially Russia, were accused of using social media to enflame these tensions by planting false narratives designed to cause chaos and exacerbate social divisions. Consequently, partisan animosity boiled over.

This hostility may feel extreme, but it is not new. In fact, it goes back to the very beginning of the constitutional republic. George Washington understood the problems partisanship could create, and in his 1796 farewell address, Washington denounced “the spirit of party” in words that have an eerily contemporary ring:

This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. . . . The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose
in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty. . . .

[The spirit of party] serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus, the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another.²

Washington’s wish for an apolitical, unified nation did not come to pass. Instead, parties became pillars of American political and social life. Fledgling parties vigorously contested the presidential elections of 1796 and 1800, resulting in division, chaos, and contested results. As parties became more ingrained in the American psyche—and later enshrined in election law—a two-party system took root. Soon, it became impossible to imagine the political system functioning without parties. Partisan newspapers became features of public life, conveying the positions of the earliest American parties to their supporters. Later, the two major parties acted as vital agents of political socialization for a wave of Irish immigrants in the 1840s and a historic number of European migrants in the 1890s.

George Washington Plunkitt, boss of New York City’s infamous Tammany Hall machine, candidly told a reporter in 1905 how he wooed young men into his Democratic organization:

I hear of a young feller that’s proud of his voice, thinks he can sing fine. I ask him to come around to Washington Hall and join our Glee Club. He comes and sings, and he’s a follower of Plunkitt for life. Another young feller gains a reputation as a baseball player in a vacant lot. I bring him into our baseball club. That fixes him. You’ll find him workin’ for my ticket at the polls next election day. Then there’s the feller that likes rowin’ on the river, the young feller that makes a name as a waltzer on his block, the young feller that’s handy with his dukes—I rope them all in by givin’ them opportunities to show themselves off. I don’t trouble them with political arguments. I just study human nature and act accordin’.³
During the nineteenth century, presidents were often secondary in prominence to local and state party leaders, who doled out thousands of patronage jobs to their most loyal supporters—positions that often made the difference between prosperity and ruin. But party influence wasn’t always about jobs. Party leaders were vital intermediaries—assisting those in trouble with the law; providing aid to victims of fire or some other tragedy; and creating fraternal organizations or other social outlets. Former first lady Michelle Obama remembers how her father, Fraser Robinson, acquired his patronage job at the Chicago water filtration plant and, in return, served as a neighborhood precinct captain. Obama writes:

He’d held the post for years, in part because loyal service to the party machine was more or less expected of city employees. Even if he’d been half forced into it, though, my dad loved the job, which baffled my mother given the amount of time it demanded. He paid weekend visits to a nearby neighborhood to check in on his constituents, often with me reluctantly in tow. . . . When somebody had problems with garbage pickup or snow plowing or was irritated by a pothole, my dad was there to listen. His purpose was to help people feel cared for by the Democrats—and to vote accordingly when elections rolled around.4

Time eroded the power of these local party organizations as an expanding civil service substantially reduced the number of patronage jobs. Today, national party organizations like the Democratic National Committee, Republican National Committee, and their congressional counterparts have subsumed the once-powerful party bosses to dominate national and (frequently) state politics. This centralization of party power coincides with a partisanship that sees fewer voters split their tickets between Democrats and Republicans; more citizens contributing small dollar amounts to the national parties and candidates of their choice; and opportunities for wealthy individuals to contribute vast sums without any public attribution (a phenomenon known as “dark money”). Party identification has become the most important factor in how people vote, transforming elections into a kind of political Armageddon. After the 2020 contest, 66 percent said it was either the “single most important election” or “one of the most important” in their lifetimes.5

The partisanship we live with today can be traced back to different views of American government that divided the nation’s founders. Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, two members of George Washington’s first cabinet, were adversaries whose differences were so contentious they eventually caused both
Hamilton believed that freedom was a peculiarly American trait but needed to be paired with a strong central government led by a strong executive to prevent it from running amok. Jefferson also believed freedom to be a core American value, but he felt it could only be preserved by local civic virtue nurtured in the absence of a strong central government. In Jefferson’s view, there were substantial differences among the states, and local authorities should have the power to determine what works best in their communities.

For more than two centuries, the debate initiated by Hamilton and Jefferson about the size and role of government has imperfectly but consistently shaped partisan divisions. Although the issues separating the two sides have changed and changed again, the central tenets of their disagreement have not. Since the Democratic and Republican Parties began regularly competing after 1860, each party has at times embraced elements of the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian position. In the late nineteenth century, Democrats advanced agrarian interests by advocating Jeffersonian localism while Republicans promoted a rapidly nationalizing industrial sector. Then, during the Great Depression, Democrats became the party of Hamiltonian nationalism and oversaw an unprecedented expansion of the national social welfare state. In the late twentieth century, Republican Ronald Reagan gave voice to Jefferson’s ideal of local control even as he presided over an expansion of the federal government. Subsequently, Bill Clinton bowed to the popularity of Reagan’s appeal and modified the Democrats’ Hamiltonian stance of relying on government to solve problems, going as far as to declare that “the era of big government is over.”

In their current incarnation, Democrats align more with Hamilton and his approach to vesting major responsibilities in a federal government that can respond to the exigencies of the moment. This is particularly true in a post-COVID 19 world where Joe Biden and his fellow Democrats want to use federal power to address looming crises—be it with direct relief for those displaced by the pandemic, investing in physical and human infrastructure, or dealing with climate change. Republicans in turn have long advocated limited government with less taxation and regulation—defending Donald Trump’s tax cuts and viewing states and localities as the appropriate locus of government activity. Congressional Republicans unanimously opposed Biden’s American Families Plan to deal with COVID-19, which included direct payments to families and childcare tax credits, and also unanimously opposed his Build Back Better legislation, designed to expand the social safety net. They are backed in these efforts by rank-and-file Republicans. After the 2020 election, 62 percent of Trump
voters said congressional Republicans “should do their best to stand up to Biden on major policies, even if it means little gets passed.”

One reason why the parties have not been steadfast in their embrace of the Hamiltonian or Jeffersonian position is that Americans prefer some combination of both. Bill Clinton drew this simple analogy between Jefferson’s embrace of liberty and Hamilton’s advocacy for community:

Take a penny from your pocket. On one side next to Lincoln’s portrait is a single word: “Liberty.” On the other side is our national motto. It says, “E Pluribus Unum”—“Out of Many, One.” It does not say, ‘Every man for himself.’ That humble penny is an explicit declaration—one you can carry around in your pocket—that America is about both individual liberty and community obligation. These two commitments—to protect personal freedom and to seek common ground—are the coin of our realm, the measure of our worth.

Nevertheless, the political parties have often forced Americans to choose one side or the other—sometimes resulting in their hatred for both. Herbert Croly argued that Hamilton “perverted [the] national idea as much as Jefferson perverted the American democratic idea, and the proper relation of these two fundamental conceptions one to another cannot be completely understood until this double perversion is corrected.” Thus, there have been historic oscillations as both parties adjusted their perspectives as to whether Hamilton’s emphasis on authority and a strong federal government, or Jefferson’s preference for a devolution of power to state and local officials meets the moment. Often, Americans want both even if they can’t have both.

The Hamilton-Jefferson debate has even extended to what parties should look like and how they should act. Hamilton’s preference for a strong, centralized approach to politics has seen both parties become much stronger at the national level in terms of organization and money—sometimes using these resources to shape elections at the state level. Yet when it comes to selecting their presidential candidates, the party establishments have weakened. Democrats have long been unable to dictate their party’s nominee, allowing primary voters to make that decision since 1972. Historically, Republicans deferred to their party’s leaders to select their presidential candidates until Donald Trump smashed whatever power a weakened national Republican establishment retained. Indeed, Trump’s go-it-alone, one-man control over the GOP—even in his post-presidency—is unlike anything we have ever witnessed. Even past
strong presidents (Franklin D. Roosevelt comes to mind) had to defer to party bosses whenever the situation required.

Thus, even when they have been sympathetic to Jefferson’s preference for a weak national government, organizationally the parties have transformed themselves into national behemoths that Hamilton might have welcomed. Still, the groups that identify with the two parties are very different. Democrats have a multicultural appeal and a broad, at times unwieldy coalition that includes progressive, liberal, and moderate elements. This diversity of supporters can complicate governance when the party holds power, especially when it has exceptionally narrow congressional majorities like it did following the 2020 election. Republicans are more monolithic, especially since Donald Trump took control of the party rank-and-file, although there are differing opinions as to whether Trump’s position as a modern-day party boss will last. Outright near-unanimous Republican opposition to Joe Biden in the early days of his presidency put tremendous pressure on the Democratic party’s coalition to hold together despite internal differences.

This book tells the story of American political parties—why they formed, how they function, and where they are headed. It is a saga filled with many twists and turns, surprises, and uncertain outcomes along the lines sketched out between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Chapter 1 describes in greater detail the emergence of the arguments developed by Hamilton and Jefferson about the appropriate scope and nature of the federal government that have reverberated through the long history of political parties in America and provide the backdrop for the framework of this book. Chapter 2 details the first century of American political party development and explores how parties forged a uniquely American character while adapting to new times and technologies. Chapter 3 takes this history into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, focusing on forces that molded party organizations into powerful institutions at the turn of the twentieth and on forces that eroded and then helped rebuild them at the turn of the twenty-first.

Chapter 4 describes the ongoing evolution in how parties choose their presidential nominees, with emphasis on how the rise of personality politics and the emergence of social media have shaped nomination politics and undermined formerly powerful party organizations. Chapter 5 notes how party loyalties can strengthen during periods of realignment (when new coalitions of voters upend previous political coalitions) and erode during periods of dealignment (when independent voters become decisive in elections). Chapter 6 looks closely at the challenges posed to parties by social media. Chapter 7 explores the importance
of money in politics, examines the current state of campaign finance laws (or lack thereof), and considers how the Internet and super-rich individuals have revolutionized fundraising. Chapter 8 examines the role of the party in government, including the importance of the national party organizations. Chapter 9 looks at the role of third parties in the American two-party system and notes that at key junctures they have helped the major parties adjust to changing public demands. We conclude by considering what lies ahead for a party system that appears to be buckling under the weight of a rapidly changing America.

In its complexity and entirety, the saga of the US party system is fascinating because of the continued evolution of its actors. With each election, we learn more about how the two major parties address the eternal and emerging questions of our politics. We will begin most naturally with an election like no other in our lifetimes: the extraordinary story of 2020 and how partisan combat and its aftermath upset centuries-old norms of party behavior while bringing the republic itself to the brink. While the 2020 election and its aftermath add an important chapter to our story, as we note in the conclusion, the final ending has yet to be written.