American Political Parties

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Introduction: An Election Like No Other

We have never witnessed anything like the 2020 election and its aftermath, where the centrist tendencies essential to the success of the American two-party system gave way to a politics of absolutism that manifested in an insurrection against the government. Consider the extraordinary events of late 2020 and early 2021, when expectations of a peaceful transfer of power were superseded by partisan violence.

It was a moment of outsized participation marked by great partisan energy, when 159 million Americans voted in person or by mail amidst a once-in-a-century pandemic. After days of counting ballots, Joe Biden emerged as the winner, having secured 306 electoral votes to Donald Trump’s 232. This was a devastating loss for Republicans, who in the space of just four years had surrendered the presidency, House, and Senate—the first time that had happened to the party since Herbert Hoover was defeated for reelection in 1932.

But the counting of the ballots marked only the beginning of an unprecedented moment in American history. On January 6, 2021, President Trump incited a crowd to stop the official certification of the electoral votes by a joint session of Congress. Inflamed by Trump’s rhetoric that urged his supporters to “fight like hell” because “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore,” thousands marched from the White House and stormed the Capitol. Armed with guns, bear spray, zip ties, and other weapons, the rioters constructed a makeshift gallows on the Capitol grounds intended for congressional leaders, including Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Members of Congress scrambled to get out of harm’s way and into secure locations, while congressional staffers barricaded their offices, hid under conference tables, and feared for their lives. Five people died during the insurrection, including one Capitol police officer; two officers perished by suicide shortly afterward.

One week later the House of Representatives impeached Trump for a second time. House Democrats were unanimous in their support for impeachment, and they were joined by ten Republicans, including the then-number three GOP leader, Wyoming congresswoman Liz Cheney, the daughter of a former Republican vice president. Following a Senate trial held just days after Trump left office
in February 2021, fifty-seven senators voted to convict the former president—including seven Republicans. Despite falling ten votes short of the two-thirds needed for conviction, it was the most bipartisan judgment ever leveled in an impeachment trial and marked the first time that multiple members of a president’s party supported conviction.

Inaugurated as the nation’s forty-sixth president two weeks after the attempted insurrection, Joe Biden made a plea for an American democracy that he called “precious,” yet “fragile.” He was not the first or only figure to take note of the tenuous nature of the American political system during a fraught moment in history. Former President Barack Obama saw an American system of government under siege:

America as an experiment is genuinely important to the world not because of the accidents of history that made us the most powerful nation on Earth, but because America is the first real experiment in building a large, multi-ethnic, multicultural democracy. And we don’t know yet if that can hold. There haven’t been enough of them to say for certain that it’s going to work.³

Lara Trump, the former president’s daughter-in-law, saw the zero-sum stakes of the 2020 election this way: “This is not just a choice between Republican and Democrat or left and right. This is an election that will decide if we keep America America—or if we head down an unchartered, frightening path towards socialism.”⁴

Biden struck a hopeful tone at his inauguration, but the proceedings were set against the threat of additional violence and a pandemic that by then had already killed more Americans than all of those who died during World War II. Ringed by thousands of troops, Biden took the presidential oath just hours after Donald Trump departed Washington, DC, for his Florida estate. For the first time since Andrew Johnson refused to attend the inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant in 1869, a departing chief executive was nowhere to be found on the inaugural platform. It was a symbolic statement about resistance to the peaceful transfer of power that echoed the rebellion days before.

The only other comparable precedent was 1801—the first time an American political party handed over the reins of government to its opposition—when Thomas Jefferson was sworn into office just hours after the defeated John Adams decamped for his native Massachusetts. Like 2020, the Adams-Jefferson contest of 1800 was an ugly, highly partisan affair with ramifications for the continuity of government. Federalist John Adams loathed Democrat Thomas Jefferson who, in turn, lambasted his opponent for approving the Alien and
Sedition Acts that made criticism of the president a crime and landed pro-Jefferson newspaper editorialists in jail. One Jefferson supporter captured the election’s importance: “To reign by fear and not by affection was ever bad policy. I am confident that the people of America are too fond of freedom to surrender it passively; and that whenever any body of men disclose views inimical to their interests, they will hurl them into insignificance.”

Like 2020, the contentious election of 1800 was followed by an even more contentious aftermath. Owing to an Electoral College mechanism that didn’t account for the emergence of political parties, Thomas Jefferson’s running mate, Aaron Burr, won an equal number of votes to Jefferson in the Electoral College. Under the Constitution, the House of Representatives had to resolve the matter. Controlled by the Federalist Party, whose most well-known public spokesperson was Alexander Hamilton, members of the congressional majority were confronted with an unappetizing choice: which of their rivals would they select to be the next president? After a weeks-long deadlock and with Hamilton’s endorsement, the Federalist House chose Jefferson as the lesser of two evils. Adams left office, but a period of political vitriol followed. Four years later, Burr assassinated Hamilton in a duel. Within a decade, the Federalist Party itself devolved into political insignificance.

The election of 1800, and John Adams’s acceptance of defeat, created what James MacGregor Burns described as a vital extra-constitutional right: the peaceful transition from a party-in-power to its opposition. Burns noted that this customary transfer of power from one political party to another—one that still eludes many other nations—showcased America at its best:

A crucial liberty, one that had not been tested during the twelve-year hegemony of Federalist government, was established in the election of 1800—the freedom of the opposition not only to oppose, but to prevail peacefully. Not only did this constitute evidence to the world that the American polity was far more stable than it may have appeared, it was a notice to future American political leaders that they need not contemplate coups or venture violence in order to succeed. Much to the contrary, the path to political power in the United States was shown to lead directly to and through the ballot box, ensuring for generations to come the freedom of meaningful political opposition and the regular, orderly peaceful transfer of political power.

This peaceful transfer of power and acceptance of constitutional norms shaped how American political parties developed around a set of democratic values. Louis Hartz, a political theorist best known for his commentary on American political culture, maintained that the United States had achieved a
national consensus centered on the importance of individual freedoms: “It is a remarkable force this fixed, dogmatic liberalism of a liberal way of life. It is the secret root from which have sprung many of the most puzzling aspects of American cultural phenomena.” Englishman G. K. Chesterton wrote in 1920 that the United States was founded on a “creed,” saying: “That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence; perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and also great literature.” This creed allowed for little tolerance of extremes and was decidedly centrist in nature. Lewis Cass, the 1848 Democratic nominee for president, once told a Tammany Hall audience of party bosses in New York City that he was “opposed to all the isms of the day” like “communism and socialism.” Abraham Lincoln warned that if the Declaration of Independence were amended to read that “all men are created equal, except Negroes, foreigners, and Catholics,” then “I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.”

The American penchant for middle-of-the-road politics formed a foundation for our two-party system. President Dwight Eisenhower once noted, “There is in our affairs at home, a middle way between untrammeled freedom of the individual and the demands for the welfare of the whole nation. This way must avoid government by bureaucracy as carefully as it avoids neglect of the helpless.” The search for the middle led to the development of two broad parties, a phenomenon that happened almost simultaneously with the adoption of the US Constitution. Although the names and allegiances of the parties have changed many times, a two-party system with its origins in the formative years of American political parties has endured for more than two centuries. As political scientist V. O. Key observed: “Human institutions have an impressive capacity to perpetuate themselves or at least to preserve their form. The circumstances that happened to mold the American party system into a dual form at its inception must bear a degree of responsibility for its present existence.”

As the two-party system began to form, a public consensus about the boundaries of political debate formed with it, the product of the disagreements between Hamilton and Jefferson and their influence as party leaders. They established the parameters of conflict that would take place between two dominant parties by posing and answering several key questions:

1. How do we limit our freedoms and still possess them?
2. How much government should we have, and when is it too excessive?
3. When do we need a national government to act in the interests of all our citizens?
4. When is it appropriate to leave matters to local customs and practices?

Hamilton believed that Americans were inextricably linked by a common bond of citizenship that required action by the federal government, and especially the president, when times demanded it. Writing in *The Federalist*, Hamilton observed, “Energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government.” Hamilton added that energetic executives were “essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks” as well as the “steady administration of the laws; to the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy.” For Hamilton, the best presidents were proactive executives who protected individual rights and acted on behalf of the nation.

Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, preferred a more limited federal role, believing local communities should take the lead and act in the citizen’s best interests and that the nation’s diversity meant that different states and locales would choose different alternatives. In 1825, Jefferson warned about the expanding power of government and believed that “the salvation of the republic” rested on the regeneration and spread of the New England town hall meeting.

As two-party competition developed between Democrats and Republicans, vigorous debates emerged between them revolving around these poles. From time to time, the leading parties shifted positions. Democrats began their storied history as devotees of Jeffersonian Localism, espousing the doctrine of “states’ rights.” Republicans initially staked their political fortunes on a Hamiltonian Nationalism that would keep the Union together amidst a Civil War. Later Republicans espoused building railroads, creating land-grant colleges and universities, and giving the federal government a powerful voice in protecting industrial workers as the nation’s economy shifted from an agricultural to an industrial base. The Great Depression altered the parties’ accustomed roles. Democrats, led by Franklin D. Roosevelt, wanted the federal government to bring relief to the nation’s unemployed and provide greater economic security, including passage of Social Security. Republicans took Jefferson’s side, believing that Roosevelt’s New Deal programs infringed individual freedoms and threatened the sanctity of local rule.

The parties never quite played their assigned roles perfectly. During the Eisenhower years, Republicans presided over a massive expansion of the federal
government, including creating the nation’s interstate highways. In the Clinton years, Democrats scaled back their expectations about what the federal government can and should do. Complicating matters is the tendency for the public to want some combination of Hamiltonian nationalism and Jeffersonian localism. Journalist Walter Lippmann once observed that Americans did not like to choose between these two schools of thought: “To be partisan as between Jefferson and Hamilton is like arguing whether men or women are more necessary to the procreation of the race. Neither can live alone. Alone—that is, without the other—each is excessive and soon intolerable.” Throughout history, voters have reversed course when they perceive that one party offers too much government and the other too little. But if either Hamilton or Jefferson had come back to life at any point in the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries, they would have recognized themselves in the tone of Democratic and Republican Party leaders.

Now, however, after four years of the Donald Trump presidency, two impeachment trials, and political polarization that echoes the fracturing of the party system of the 1850s, there arises a question as to whether the public consensus recognized by political theorists and historians has come apart. Put another way, is the continuance of our two-party system assured, or will the Democrats and Republicans splinter into three or four parties? The question is a serious one. As previously noted, Lewis Cass, the 1848 Democratic presidential nominee, embraced moderation by rejecting all the extreme “isms” of his day. But the Trump presidency was built on an important “ism”—populism—which sees “the people,” whom it purports to represent, as producers who personify the American Dream, while its enemies are takers—that is, elites, immigrants, and those who reject conventional social mores. In its essence, populism is all about us versus them: the makers vs. the takers. In 1995, political scientist Wilson Carey McWilliams noted that the populism of the Right [favors] “old hatred and [creates] new resentments, threatening what remains of civic community.” It specifically threatens to undermine the moderation that makes the two-party system possible.

Donald Trump was defeated in 2020, but the populist movement he leads is poised to define the Republican Party for the foreseeable future. Political commentator Michael Lind writes:

In the Republican party, the inherited program shared by much of the conservative movement and the party’s donors, with its emphasis on free trade and large-scale immigration, and cuts in entitlements like Social Security and Medicare, is a relic of the late 20th century, when the country-club
wing of the party was much more important than the country and western wing. The anger and sense of betrayal of the newly dominant white working class in the Republican party makes perfect sense. . . Mr. Trump exposed the gap between what orthodox conservative Republicans offer and what today’s dominant Republican voters actually want—middle-class entitlements plus crackdowns on illegal immigrants, Muslims, foreign trade rivals, and free-riding allies.17

Whenever populism ascends, rhetorical excess inevitably follows. Michael Kazin writes: “By calling the enemy an ‘octopus,’ ‘leech,’ ‘pig,’ or ‘fat cat,’ a populist speaker suggested that ‘the people’ were opposing a form of savagery as much as a structure inimical to their interests. Character assassination was always essential to the rhetorical game.”18 For four years, Donald Trump engaged in a form of character assassination on Twitter, replete with dismissive name-calling (e.g., “Crooked Hillary” Clinton, “Sleepy Joe” Biden, and “Crazy Nancy” Pelosi). In 2016, Hillary Clinton charged that Trump “built his campaign on prejudice and paranoia. He is taking hate groups mainstream, and helping a radical fringe take over the Republican Party.”19 Clinton was prophetic, as white supremacists and armed militias staged the violent Capitol insurrection that resulted in mayhem and murder.

Back in 1964, political scientist Richard Hofstadter anticipated contemporary populism by noting the emergence of a “paranoid style” that was beginning to creep into our political discourse:

As a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet unaroused public, the paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated—if not from the world, at least from the theater of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention. This demand for unqualified victories leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid’s frustration. Even partial success leaves him with the same sense of powerlessness with which he began, and this in turn only strengthens his awareness of the vast and terrifying quality of the enemy he opposes.20
Hofstadter’s description of the “paranoid style” captures the qualities that underlay Trump’s appeal and his ability to remake the Republican Party in his image. As Donald Trump Jr. told the crowd gathered to hear his father prior to their storming of the Capitol, their presence should be a warning to those Republicans who wanted to certify the Electoral College votes: “This isn’t their party anymore,” he said. “This is Donald Trump’s Republican party.” Trump Jr. was right. A poll taken immediately following Trump’s second impeachment trial found 75 percent of Republicans wanted Trump to continue playing a prominent role in the Republican Party. Seventy-one percent of Republicans believed impeaching and convicting the former President was an act of disloyalty.

The result has been to strip the Republican Party of its conservative principles and stymie the development of conservative policies and programs. This became apparent in 2020 when the GOP followed Trump’s instructions and re-adopted its 2016 platform without changing a word. It was an unprecedented action that left voters adrift as to what Trump and the Republican Party would do if he had won a second term. Democrats, as is customary, adopted a full-length party platform that defined their approach to the major issues of the day—including the COVID-19 pandemic, race relations and policing, immigration, climate change, and foreign policy. Republicans essentially expressed their loyalty to one man.

Sixty years ago, a committee of the American Political Science Association issued this prescient warning:

When the President’s program actually is the sole program . . . , either his party becomes a flock of sheep or the party falls apart. In effect, this concept of the presidency disperses the party system by making the President reach directly for the support of a majority of the voters. It favors a President who exploits skillfully the arts of demagoguery, who sees the whole country as his political backyard, and who does not mind turning into the embodiment of personal government.

History has shown that whenever populist grievances become dominant, populism itself descends into its own paranoid style and eventually recedes into the background. Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party has created its own unique politics of grievance and has brought many former white working-class Democrats who resent globalism and the country’s changing political demography into their ranks. But the transformation of the Republican Party into a Trumpian populist entity threatens to eliminate the political consensus that has shaped American discourse for nearly three centuries and potentially the existence of the two-party system itself. The anger Republicans exhibit has spilled
over into our civic life. Today, 55 percent of Republicans believe “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.” Twenty-five percent say that “if elected leaders will not protect America, the people must do it themselves, even if it requires taking violent action.”

Even if Republicans remain out of power, the threat posed by right-wing populism to the survival of the party system is real. Party scholars often focus on the majority party—why it succeeds in gaining power and what ideas it has to offer. But the minority party also plays a vital role in stable governance. It defines its disagreements with the majority, even as it selects those issues upon which they agree. Those disagreements, often filled with echoes of Hamilton and Jefferson, are presented to voters who determine which side they prefer. The minority party can also co-opt the development of third parties and simplify the choice voters must make.

Back in 2014, Republican South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham, said, “The country needs a vibrant Republican party.” He was right. In politics, ideas matter and move nations, and a vibrant Republican Party would choose areas of disagreement with Democrats and offer policy alternatives. Today, ideas are in short supply as the Republican Party has abandoned its conservative principles to indulge in personality politics. Time will determine whether that lasts, but it calls into question if the long-standing consensus derived from the Hamilton-Jefferson debates will continue, or whether the two-party system is past its zenith.

This is where the party system stands in the aftermath of the 2020 election. To understand how we got here, it is best to return to the beginning and look at the history of political party development in America, at how once-weak political parties grew into the dominant institutions we know today. We will tell that story in the next two chapters, starting in chapter 1 with an account of how nascent parties took root in what Burns once described as the “vineyard of liberty” that characterized the early United States.