THE RISE OF MCPOLITICS

Democrats and Republicans belong to increasingly homogeneous parties. Can we survive the loss of local politics?

By Yascha Mounk

Shortly before the 1960 Democratic primary in West Virginia, a close ally of John F. Kennedy’s asked Raymond Chafin, the Party chairman in Logan County, how much it would cost to buy his support. “About thirty-five,” Chafin said, hoping for a windfall of thirty-five hundred dollars. Meeting Kennedy operatives at a local airstrip, he was greeted with a nice surprise: thirty-five thousand dollars in cash.

As promised, Chafin used his control over the local Party machine to help deliver the state to the junior senator from Massachusetts. “The Kennedys were well aware of our brand of politics,” he said years later. “I guess it was their brand, too.”
For much of the twentieth century, the real power in American politics rested not with U.S. representatives or senators but with the governors, mayors, and assemblymen who controlled local purse strings. In many cases, men like Chafee got people elected to Congress in order to reward them for years of loyal service or to rid themselves of ambitious rivals, but national politics was of comparatively little importance. “The politicians who were crucial to the operation of the organization normally stayed home,” one scholar of the period observed.

At the federal level, the two parties resembled loose associations of disparate interests rather than ideologically cohesive movements. They had few resources and virtually no means of insuring ideological discipline among their members. Many Democrats were more conservative than many Republicans.

All of that had real advantages: Congress was, for much of the past century, a place of remarkable comity, where politicians routinely struck compromises on public spending or judicial appointments. Even as Americans found themselves deeply divided on everything from foreign policy to rock and roll, high politics was relatively free of acrimony.

It was also, however, very difficult for ordinary voters to make their voices heard. West Virginia is sometimes touted as the place where Kennedy overcame the biggest obstacle to his candidacy by proving that religious bigotry was no match for his charm. But only fifteen states and the District of Columbia held primaries in 1960, and their outcome was merely advisory. Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s most serious rival for the Democratic nomination, did not bother entering any of them.

The parties’ lack of ideological definition also made it difficult for citizens to vote their conscience. A liberal who strongly opposed segregation may, for example, have wholeheartedly supported Kennedy. But in voting for him in the general election she would also have voted for a Vice-Presidential nominee, Johnson, who had, as late as 1947, denounced an anti-lynching bill as “a farce and a sham—an effort to set up a police state in the guise of liberty.” (Although Johnson finally backed a civil-rights act in 1957, he allowed amendments that appeased segregationists by rendering it largely unenforceable.) So long as America’s main political parties remained pragmatic associations of local interests, socially progressive Democrats in the North were yoked to segregationist Democrats in the South. Neither Democrats nor Republicans consistently fought to end Jim Crow. The relative lack of partisanship in postwar politics was purchased at the price of violent exclusion.

Assessing the twin problems of organizational weakness and ideological incoherence, a 1950 report by the American Political Science Association sought to turn the loose political federations into something that more closely resembled today’s unified parties. Democrats and Republicans, some of the nation’s most eminent scholars argued, needed to “provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action.” To that end, each party’s candidate was to be determined in a “national presidential primary,” and leaders in Washington were to be given “additional means of dealing with rebellious and disloyal state organizations.” To fix the problems of American government, the scholars believed, politics had to become more national and party platforms more clearly distinguished.

Almost seven decades later, their wish has come true. As Daniel J. Hopkins, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, chronicles in a new book, “The Increasingly United States” (Chicago), American politics has become thoroughly nationalized: voters pay vastly more attention to what is going on in Washington, D.C., than to what’s going on in their own town or state. The Democratic and the Republican Parties have become much more homogeneous, offering largely the same ideological profile in Alabama as they do in Vermont. In each election, Americans now face a choice between two clearly demarcated alternatives of action. The medicine prescribed
by the American Political Science Association all those years ago has been taken; the question is whether the patient can survive its side effects.

For the first five days after Kennedy was shot, a mourning nation wondered whether his agenda could possibly outlast him. Even key members of the Cabinet doubted whether Johnson, hastily sworn in as the thirty-sixth President of the United States aboard the airplane on which his predecessor had landed in Dallas three hours earlier, would follow through on civil-rights legislation. But when Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress on November 27, 1963, he threw down the gauntlet to Southern Democrats. “No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory,” he said, to their horror, “than the earliest possible passage of the civil-rights bill for which he fought so long.”

In the ensuing years, Jim Crow finally came to an end—and so did the highly local party system that had prevailed, in one form or another, since the Civil War. Segregationists in the South no longer saw the Democratic Party as their natural home. In 1968, many of them supported the third-party candidacy of George Wallace, formerly the Democratic governor of Alabama. During the following decades, conservative Democrats slowly gravitated toward the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party, for the first time in its history, became liberal on both social and economic issues: across the nation, Democrats now stood for at least some modicum of wealth redistribution and racial integration.

Republicans underwent a similar transformation, adopting a militant preference for free markets and low taxes while opposing abortion and gay rights. At the same time, they set out to capitalize on the electoral opportunity presented by the schism in the Democratic Party. Starting with Richard Nixon, every Republican candidate who took the White House employed some form of what had been named, in a deceptively genteel turn of phrase, the Southern Strategy.

As the ambitious civil-rights legislation of the nineteen-sixties realigned America’s political parties, a host of deeper structural changes redirected citizens’ attention toward the capital. Thanks to the postwar boom, public jobs came to look less attractive than private ones, weakening the power wielded by local party bosses. More recent changes in the media have also played an important role. Local papers and radio stations, once the country’s dominant sources of information, brought together national, state, and municipal news; as a result, Americans who were primarily interested in what was going on in Washington still learned a lot about their home towns. Today, voters increasingly get their news from broadcast networks and cable channels, or from social-media sites and online publications, which are less likely to require them to pay attention to their city hall or state capitol.

As early as the nineteen-eighties, political scientists were noting that the nature of American politics was changing in fundamental ways. The power of the Presidency had greatly expanded. The national parties had gained vastly more control over state and local subdivisions. “In the sense that Paris is the capital of France,” the political scientist William M. Lewis observed in 1987, “Washington is becoming the capital of the United States.”

In the decades since, what Lewis dubbed the “nationalization of American politics” has only intensified. As Hopkins shows, voters recognize that state and local politics can have a big impact on their lives, determining, for example, how much property tax they have to pay or how good their children’s school is likely to be. And yet they now devote very little attention to politics below the national level.

This transformation can explain many features of contemporary politics that would otherwise be deeply puzzling. How, for instance, could governors in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere refuse to allow the expansion of Medicaid to poor adults in their states, even though the federal government would (at least at first) have footed the entire bill? Hopkins provides an answer that is both simple and convincing: voters, donors, and activists are much more likely to judge elected officials on whether they pass an ideological purity test than on whether they bring tangible benefits to their districts.

In the past few decades, Hopkins shows, Americans have grown less able to name their governor and less likely to vote in local elections. Conversely, they now have much stronger feelings about national figures, like senators or Presidential candidates. If they could choose whether their party got to occupy the White House or the governor’s mansion, most would pick the former. Even the attention of the donor class has nationalized. From 1998 to 2012, the amount of money poured into an average Senate race doubled; the cost of governors’ races barely budged.

Once upon a time, every community in America had its own store with its own local products. Today, chains like Walmart and Home Depot offer the same wares all over the country. The parties, Hopkins believes, have undergone a similar process of homogenization: “Just as an Egg McMuffin is the same in every McDonald’s, America’s two major political parties are increasingly perceived to offer the same choices throughout the country.”
Americans aren’t just less interested in local politics than they once were; their voting behavior is also much less determined by their place of residence or by the attributes of a particular candidate. It’s true that a voter’s home town or home state can help predict which party she supports. But, as Hopkins explains, party affiliation is influenced more by factors like race and religion than by local interests or political traditions. Once we know a voter’s demographic information, finding out where she lives helps little to predict her political behavior. A white, evangelical, middle-aged woman who earns fifty thousand dollars a year and has two children is scarcely more likely to vote Republican today if she lives in Springfield, Missouri, than if she lives in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Hopkins is a sure-footed guide to the twilight of local politics, and he’s aware of the risks that these developments may pose. Voters’ focus on national issues, he points out, is likely to “crowd out more local concerns.” And since most Americans pay little attention to local politics and are likely to vote for just about any candidate who shares their party affiliation, mayors and governors no longer have as much reason to place the needs of their constituents over those of special-interest groups: “Their actions in office might well reflect the wishes of the people most likely to advance their careers, whether they are activists, donors, or fellow partisans from other states.”

But Hopkins fails to ponder the most important implications of his own findings. Anybody who has looked on as Donald Trump accused the opposition of “treason” and denigrated the press as “the enemy of the American people” might find the title of Hopkins’s book perplexing. Yet “The Increasingly United States” has surprisingly little to say about the way in which the growing focus on national politics and the deepening partisan divide could undermine the stability of our political system.

When the Founding Fathers set out to design the institutions that still structure our national life, they had every reason to fear that their enterprise would end in failure. By the late eighteenth century, monarchy had conquered most of the Western world. The last republics to survive the early modern era, like the Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia, were engulfed in strife at home and imperilled by powerful competition from abroad. Institutions that aimed at collective self-government had all but vanished. So the drafters of the Constitution, as they set out to defy the odds, naturally asked themselves what went wrong for the many republics that had come—and gone—before them.

The diagnosis they arrived at was simple: those predecessors—Athens and Rome, Florence and Siena—had been undone by “the violence of faction.” As James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers:

> The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much
> alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates
> their propensity to this dangerous vice... The instability,
> injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have,
> in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular
> governments have everywhere perished.

Madison’s solution to the problem of what we might call partisanship fundamentally shaped America. Many politicians, he pointed out, had simply tried to remove its cause—either through the destruction of liberty, a remedy he termed “worse than the disease,” or through an attempt to give every man the same opinions, an undertaking he thought futile “as long as the reason of man continues fallible.” In a piece of madcap logic that has come to set the tone for the country’s freewheeling cultural and political life, Madison instead insisted that America should resolve the problem of factions by multiplying their number: the more factions there are, he argued, the less likely that any one of them can attain dominance.

Although Madison failed to anticipate the rise of modern parties, the country’s politics followed something like the model he had envisaged until late into the twentieth century. At the time of Kennedy’s election, Southern Democrats intent on perpetuating segregation clashed with Northern Democrats focused on the economic conditions of the working class, Northern Democrats clashed with country-club Republicans focussed on the interests of business, country-club Republicans clashed with socially conservative Republicans opposed to the evils of modern life, and so on. Even the things that politicians from different parts of the country did have in common—self-interest and a taste for patronage—reliably turned them into competitors on the national scene. (As Lunch put it, “Mayor Daley did not care very much what the president did in foreign policy, but he wanted assurances that when federal funds were divided, Chicago would receive its share.”)

Today, this messy process of brokering flawed compromises among a large number of factions and interest groups has mostly given way to a stark conflict between two opposing camps. According to a recent study by the political scientists Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood, Americans may now be more likely to discriminate on the basis of party than on the basis of race: asked to choose between equally qualified scholarship applicants, Democratic and Republican participants alike heavily favored applicants who were identified as belonging to the same political party they did. White participants in the study were much less likely to penalize an applicant for being
black than participants of one party were to penalize applicants of the other.

As Lilliana Mason argues in a sobering new book, "Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity" (Chicago), factors such as class, race, religion, gender, and sexuality used to cut across one another to a significant extent. In an earlier age, a voter might have identified herself as both a conservative and a Presbyterian. Each of these identities predisposed her to have a negative opinion of people who did not belong to the same group. But since there were plenty of non-Presbyterian conservatives, as well as plenty of non-conservative Presbyterians, each of these "cleavages" held the other one in check.

In the past decades, though, “partisan, ideological, religious, and racial identities have . . . moved into strong alignment,” Mason writes. Religious communities, for example, are far less politically diverse than they once were: “A single vote can now indicate a person’s partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood and favorite grocery store.” As a result, Mason argues, all those factions have fused into two new mega-identities: Democrat and Republican.

A few months after the American Political Science Association called on Democrats and Republicans to transform themselves into truly national, ideologically cohesive parties, Arthur Schlesinger published an impassioned retort:

> Is not the fact that each party has a liberal and conservative wing a genuine source of national strength and cohesion? . . . The result is, of course, that no group can have the desperate feeling that all options are foreclosed, all access to power barred, by the victory of the opposition: there will always be somebody in a Democratic administration on whose shoulders business can weep, and even a Republican administration will have somewhere a refuge for labor. If the party division were strictly ideological, each presidential election would subject national unity to a fearful test. We must remember that the one election when our parties stood irrevocably on questions of principle was the election of 1860.

Schlesinger's words have proved prophetic. The conviction that a victory by Hillary Clinton would permanently bar conservatives from power was a core theme among some of the loudest advocates of the movement's accommodation with Trumpism. Michael Anton, in his Claremont Review essay "The Flight 93 Election," saw "the ceaseless importation of Third World foreigners with no tradition of, taste for, or experience in liberty" as an imminent threat to the survival of the American republic. With his team's total and permanent defeat supposedly on the horizon, Anton advocated the kind of high-stakes gamble taken by passengers on the airliner that crashed into a field in Stonycreek Township, Pennsylvania, on 9/11:

> Charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway. You—or the leader of your party—may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees. Except one: if you don't try, death is certain.

Liberals, though appalled by Anton's race-tinged rhetoric, often share his assessment of the situation: they, too, believe that democracy's fate now hinges on the next election. This is worrying: you can reject the idea that Democrats and Republicans are equally to blame for the breakdown of civility in American politics—or that Hillary Clinton posed as much of a threat to the rules and norms of liberal democracy as Donald Trump does—and still recognize that a situation in which partisans on both sides think that they face existential stakes every four years is not sustainable for very long.

As Robert A. Dahl argued, developing democracies in their early years often avoid ferocious factionalism by restricting participation in their political institutions to a comparatively small set of people. But, over time, one excluded group after another can win inclusion in those same institutions—like poor white men, former slaves, and women, in the United States. Not for the first time, that greater inclusion, personified by President Barack Obama, has now bred a potent backlash.

It is tempting to take this as evidence in support of a deeply pessimistic interpretation of the country's past and its likely future: any robust attempt to remedy social injustice will inevitably lead those who have immense privileges to reverse the tide of progress or even to jettison their commitment to shared political institutions. But past periods of majoritarian backlash haven't fully turned back the clock. The resistance to Reconstruction gave this country the intolerable reality of segregation—but it did not reintroduce chattel slavery. The resistance to the civil-rights agenda of the nineteen-sixties perpetuated forms of both economic and political discrimination—but it did
not reëstablish segregation. In the same way, resistance to the full participation of women, immigrants, sexual minorities, and African-Americans in the nation's public life may have helped give rise to Trump—but it is very unlikely to undo the vast changes of the past fifty years.

As politics has become more national, it has overcome many of the problems that political scientists bemoaned in the early nineteen-fifties. People now cast their votes to advance their political ideology, not to get a public job. They can rest assured that their support for a liberal Presidential candidate will not elect a conservative Vice-President (or vice versa). But so long as all politics was local, as Tip O'Neill famously insisted, it also performed an important service to the republic. Fights over property taxes and subway lines gave rise to competing interests and idiosyncratic alliances, helping to turn Madison's logic of defeating factionalism through the proliferation of factions into daily political reality. The true danger of Americans' fading interest in local politics is not, as Hopkins would have it, that weighty matters like roads or schools will go ignored. It is that a politics in which all Americans fancy themselves bit actors in the same great drama of state, cheering or jeering an identical cast of heroes and villains, is much more likely to split the country into two mutually hostile tribes.

The nationalization of American politics has led to the rise of two political mega-identities. But it does not foreordain that they will be incapable of finding common ground, or that the current period of intense partisanship will go on forever. In the past, times of heightened animosity have often been followed by periods of unexpected calm. Ordinary citizens are less polarized in their opinions than the political parties in Washington; many long for moderation. And, despite the central role that attacks on minorities played in Trump's campaign, most Americans have grown more, not less, tolerant of compatriots who do not share their ethnicity, their religion, or their sexual orientation.

In ways that Schlesinger anticipated, the deep divide between supporters and opponents of President Trump is subjecting national unity to a fearful test. The danger that a highly nationalized and deeply partisan politics poses to American institutions is undoubtedly real. But, just as it would be naïve to pretend that a happy ending is assured because our political institutions have managed to incorporate new groups in the past, so, too, would it be cynical to conclude that America is too riven with conflict—or too rotten with injustice—to be redeemed.

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