I

An Introduction to Partisan Warfare

While you elect Presidents, we submit, neither breaking nor attempting to break up the Union. If we shall constitutionally elect a President, it will be our duty to see that you submit.

Old John Brown has just been executed for treason against a state. We cannot object, even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think himself right.

So, if constitutionally we elect a President, and therefore you undertake to destroy the Union, it will be our duty to deal with you as old John Brown has been dealt with. We shall try to do our duty. We hope and believe that in no section will a majority so act as to render such extreme measures necessary.

Abraham Lincoln
Leavenworth, KS
Dec. 3, 1859

On October 16, 1859, John Brown and twenty-one followers unilaterally sought to end U.S. slavery by fomenting a rebellion among enslaved people. For years, politicians in Washington and Americans beyond had argued and fought over slavery’s westward march into new U.S. territories. White Southerners and their allies had overturned a three-decade compromise limiting slavery’s expansion, which also smashed the political parties into pieces. Then the Supreme Court declared an inviolable individual constitutional right to own people that threatened to override each state’s right to keep slavery out – the specter of universal slavery in a nation where one of every seven people was enslaved.
Brown had no care for the Constitution, Congress, or the Court, however: he believed God had directed his violent mission to end the supreme injustice. The insurrection began – and ended – at the national arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and it was doomed from the start. After overwhelming the few guards, Brown and his band of black and white militants made no effort to alert local enslaved people to join them. The insurgents sat inert as alarm spread and military forces gathered over two days to confront them. Colonel Robert E. Lee commanded the U.S. troops that surrounded Brown and his party and stormed the fire engine house in which they were hunkered down. Brown survived to face charges of treason. News from the trial popularized his fervent, articulate, and unapologetic denunciations of slavery – and a nation condemned by it. Brown’s inevitable conviction transformed him into a martyr for the nation’s few abolitionists and grew his esteem among less radical anti-slavery groups. At the gallows, he passed a note to a guard: “I, John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.”

Illinois politician Abraham Lincoln was on a speaking tour in Kansas Territory at the time, and he spoke of Brown’s execution. Many Southern Democrats threatened to break up the Union if they did not get their way in the 1860 elections, as they had for years. Party nominees were not yet decided, but many slave-state Democrats considered a Republican president intolerable due to Republican opposition to slavery’s expansion and the party’s anti-slavery rhetoric. Lincoln publicly disavowed Brown’s violence to distance his party and himself from unpopular radicalism. But he also warned Democrats not to follow Brown into violent treason if they should lose the next election: “if constitutionally we elect a President, and therefore you undertake to destroy the Union, it will be our duty to deal with you as old John Brown has been dealt with.” There, in a few words, Lincoln defined the threat that parties and partisanship pose to democracy – a rash, intrinsic motive among losers to reject legitimate elections, and the will to do so if they think their gambit might work.¹

Democracy depends on peaceful transfers of power when the ruling party is defeated in fair elections, at which point the threat of violence is highest (Rapoport & Weinberg 2000). Winners legitimized by public support promise to uphold civil liberties and the equitable rule of law, which enables losers to contest future elections for power (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). That promotes peaceable acquiescence. In exchange, losers pledge to accept the result and abide by the new government’s laws (Anderson et al. 2005). Parties implicitly accept this democratic bargain

¹With Ballots and Bullets
when they compete for power in elections. Having done so, losers cannot walk away from a loss. All parties enjoy long-term governing benefits when they uphold the bargain. Democracy persists, and that stability serves public interests.²

Yet, the contentious nature of political parties militates against the immediate compromise inherent in conceding elections. People are psychologically oriented toward groups (Huddy et al. 2015; Kinder & Kam 2010), and politics is about deciding which groups get what (Lasswell 1936). That fuels conflict between groups in society. Parties organize groups into broader coalitions to win elections, and those groupings become party identities in the minds of supporters. Election campaigns and other competitive moments stoke partisan antagonisms and even hatreds, especially when social and political identities align (Huddy et al. 2015; Mason 2018; Sood & Iyengar 2016). In other words, parties play a key role in fomenting group-based conflict, especially if power is at stake.

What happens when a party loses power, but its leaders refuse to concede? The American Civil War offers a vital case study, when Southern Democrats fomented an armed rebellion, Republicans led a war to suppress it, and Northern Democrats split between national and party loyalties. That made the Civil War partisan in its origins and execution, with parties in government and opposition channeling all that followed. Those dynamic elite-level partisan divides manifested as systematic differences in the military and electoral behavior of ordinary partisans in the public.

These, then, are the book’s key questions: How did ordinary Republicans and Democrats in the loyal states respond when called by party leaders to put down a rebellion by electoral opponents and erstwhile allies? How did new party loyalties hold up against the upheaval of monumental events as parties fractured before and during the war? With casualty rates orders of magnitude beyond other American wars, how did voters respond when offered the choice to sustain or extinguish the war at the ballot box — and how did those ghastly dead weigh on postwar votes cast in the decades that followed? What role did partisan leaders and the press play in fortifying partisan loyalties, mobilizing combatants, and persuading voters? Finally, what does that incomparable Civil War violence tell us about acrimonious partisanship today?

Answering these questions required collecting and analyzing massive amounts of historical data on voting and violence from a time before public opinion polling existed. Toward that end, I integrated datasets
with over one million individual Union soldier records, decades of county-level election returns, and elite rhetoric from a representative sample of partisan newspapers throughout the war. Together, these tests yield new views of mass partisanship under maximal duress along with historical insights on the most defining era of American democracy.

I find remarkable power and resilience in ordinary mass partisanship in the crucible of civil war, with behaviors motivated by individual party identities, mobilized by party leaders, and reinforced by local social contexts. The results reveal how partisanship fueled violence and what violence did to voters in turn. These findings also suggest potential paths away from violence when it would destroy democracy as well as paths toward violence when violence is necessary to save it.

**A War That Remade America**

Naturally, this book illuminates the historical contributions of mass partisanship in a pivotal era. The cliché is that “elections have consequences,” but some elections matter more than most. Civil War–era elections were arguably the most important in American history (McPherson 2015). The Civil War – fought to upend or uphold Lincoln’s 1860 presidential election and his legitimate national authority – was the most destructive and consequential U.S. conflict. The war ultimately sustained democracy, preserved the Union, achieved John Brown’s goal of eradicating U.S. slavery, and established de jure racial equality. All that collectively constituted a national re-founding. Brown’s prediction of epic bloodshed also rang true – doubtless, the most righteous and necessary work ever done by U.S. military forces, but at great cost. The changes wrought by war far exceeded even these extraordinary ends: ultimately, the war and its elections fundamentally transformed the nation, its people, and our politics in ways we still feel directly today.

The war mobilized citizen-soldiers in huge proportions. From a population of thirty-one million, roughly two million Americans volunteered to defeat the rebellion, while a million fought for its success. The per capita equivalent for that fighting force, just for the Union (U.S.) side, matched World War II and was twelve times larger than current U.S. armed forces. Immigrants contributed one in four U.S. fighters, and nearly 200,000 African Americans enlisted as soldiers or sailors, most formerly enslaved. Many more civilians – men and women, white and black, citizens, immigrants, and enslaved people – made essential contributions to the war efforts, most but not all by choice.
The war slaughtered Americans on a scale unmatched by any conflict before or since. The number of dead in national cataclysms is impossible to calculate exactly, but Civil War estimates find roughly three-quarters of a million deaths, with more U.S. dead than rebel dead, and nearly twice as many lost from disease as from combat (Hacker 2011). About half a million more suffered disabling wounds, and untold numbers suffered other physical and psychological traumas. By comparison, mortality rates among U.S. soldiers and sailors in World War II were a tenth as high; the total Civil War toll approaches eight million when adjusted for U.S. population today. Such unfathomable mass death permanently changed American society and culture (Faust 2008).

The war and its elections changed national politics in revolutionary ways, well beyond its best-known outcomes. War politics launched the U.S. welfare state, land-grant colleges, the first income tax and national paper currency, short-lived slavery reparations, birthright citizenship, and absentee voting. It expanded presidential war powers, furthered westward expansion into indigenous lands, and preserved the first federal wilderness in what became America’s National Park System. Constitutional amendments after the war established the legal foundation for two centuries of rights movements for African Americans, women, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and immigrants. It is no stretch to say the Civil War reverberates subtly and eclectically today in mixed-race households and same-sex weddings, hikes in Yosemite National Park, and student performances at LSU’s annual step show, not to mention ongoing disputes over federal power.

The Civil War’s roots also resonate odiously in current fights over racial injustices and their links to partisan politics. Backlash by Southern white supremacists in the 1870s overwhelmed political will in the North, erasing egalitarian gains for a century after Reconstruction was dismantled (Blight 2001; Foner 1988). De facto racial discrimination remains in legal force today despite de jure racial equality, and anti-black racism in modern guise retains its political potency (Acharya et al. 2018; Kinder & Sanders 1996; McRae 2018). The clash for and against racial equality still undergirds the current party system, as it has since the Civil War, with Republicans replacing Democrats as the strongest defenders of lingering white supremacy after the 1960s, causing the white South to realign with Republicans in league with racists nationwide (Tesler 2016; Valentino & Sears 2005). And public displays of Confederate monuments and flags – inextricably tied to treason, slavery, and modern opposition to racial equality – continue to spark racial-partisan violence today.
In these ways and others, politics today descend from the Civil War era. The political science classic *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) put it this way: “The conflict with the greatest consequences for our political life was fought on American soil. . . . By comparison with the impact of the Civil War, the effect of the wars of the twentieth century seems slight indeed” (p. 50). That makes deciphering nineteenth century mass politics critical to making sense of our politics today, and everything in between.

**RECOGNIZING THE POWER OF ORDINARY MASS PARTISANSHIP**

Victory over the rebellion required the combined force of the loyal public’s ballots and bullets in a war of wills. Their political resolve determined the outcome as much as the strength of their arms and leaders. Thus, we cannot explain Civil War-era politics without understanding the collective contributions made by millions of ordinary people. This book’s biggest contribution toward that end is this recognition: mass partisanship, guided by local and national leaders, was key to mobilizing and sustaining mass warfare and determining the war’s political outcomes in elections.

Politics is about power, and parties seek to impose their group’s will on society by winning control of government through elections. Competition for that power can lead to violence, especially when opponents fear they may not have another chance to win. The book’s first task is to adopt a more expansive view of what American parties and their followers can do.

*Partisan* comes from middle-French, with early applications to spears, bodyguards, and irregular military forces. In other words, partisanship has had violent connotations from the start. Enlightenment philosophers and American founders recognized latent dangers in partisanship and hoped to avoid parties altogether. Concerns about violence and illiberalism have been mostly absent in modern American views of parties. Political science here matured in relative partisan calm in the mid-twentieth century, with undue focus on that era, particularly in mass politics. Broadening the partisan concept requires looking beyond modern U.S. politics. I begin by reviewing conventional party views and then recall older political thought and contemporary cross-national research on parties fomenting violence. Those works bring surprising and disquieting party traits into view, alongside the mundane but vital functions parties perform in making democracy work.
The Conventional View

For all the popular complaints about partisanship in the United States, political scientists view parties as essential players in a healthy democracy (e.g. Aldrich 1995; Cohen et al. 2008; Duverger 1963; Schattschneider 1942). Parties contribute to efficient governance by organizing groups into coalitions that pursue interests within and between branches and levels of government. That work builds party reputations, which inform policy- and performance-based choices for voters in the public. Parties coordinate internally to select a candidate to represent the party for each elected office. Elections legitimize party governance with evidence of broad public support, especially when parties mobilize high participation rates. Parties can also reduce resistance and violence among their members in competition and defeat. Toward that last end, historians Michael Holt (1978) and David Potter (1977) argue that the party system helped delay the onset of the Civil War by managing violent centripetal forces. In short, parties do crucial democratic work.

Critics note that American parties produce policy gridlock under divided government, and they reduce the range of choices available to the public. Parties also grab fleeting public attention to persuade audiences unfamiliar with political details by simplifying messages in ways that misinform, that inflame conflict between social groups, and that cast opponents as villains. These dissonant notes should be red flags. Each positive partisan byproduct is probably conditional on parties choosing to make those goods, rather than finding other means to gain power without them. Those goods seem automatic only in the modern U.S. context in which scholars found them.

At the level of ordinary partisans, we know their individual attachments to party are the most powerful and enduring force in mass political behavior. Party identity practically determines vote choice, issue attitudes, political perceptions and information, and participation motives without changing much over the lifespan (e.g. Achen & Bartels 2016; Berinsky 2009; Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002). The quiescent era in which American scholars conceptualized partisan identity probably contributed to these potent but largely benign parameters: At best, it informs and guides public views; at worst, it distorts political views and causes some small rancor. In the last half century, U.S. party elites have sorted into consistent ideological camps, prominent social groups have aligned more exclusively within each party, and partisan animosity has grown fierce (e.g. Mason 2018; Poole 2015). Accordingly, public opinion...
scholars have begun to recognize darker aspects of mass partisanship and inched toward a warier view of its capacities – first partisan dislike, then social avoidance, and now material discrimination, all reinforced by partisan homophily (e.g. Iyengar et al. 2019). But that still falls far short of the mass-partisan extremes that become visible in the Civil War era.

### Historical & Cross-National Context

What have we missed about partisanship? Parties are supposed to mitigate violent conflict by channeling it into democratic elections, but group identities like party are inherently contentious and insular, fueling in-group bias, out-group hostility, and even violence when party aligns with other social divides (Mason 2018; Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel & Turner 1979; Wilson 2004). Basic democratic moments like campaigns and elections tend to be times of greatest rancor and risk.

Philosophers Machiavelli and Hume wrote with concern about the violence and disorder caused by political factions and proposed ways to defang them (North et al. 2009). American founders James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and George Washington shared worries about party threats to democracy. That contention is manageable, Madison optimistically wrote in Federalist #10 and #43, but its roots are not eradicable: “The latent causes of faction are thus sown into the nature of man,” with violent factions as “the natural offspring of free government.” He argued that small democracies fail because governing majorities that share a “common passion or interest . . . sacrifice the weaker party. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention . . . short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.”

The Framers hoped in vain that large democracies with well-designed constitutions might avoid that fate – to “break and control the violence of faction,” as Madison wrote, and “form a barrier against domestic faction and insurrection,” in Hamilton’s description (Federalist #9). Of course, both men founded America’s first parties with help from others who decried factions. The Civil War would show that violent minorities could pose as great a threat as majorities (Dahl 1956). In short, theorists and leaders centuries ago recognized far more danger in parties than we do today.

Likewise, many studies of modern violence around the world indict political parties as key culprits. Many parties mobilize strategic violence
by supporters for electoral and political advantage – to gain victories, or to protest and challenge defeats (e.g. Blattman 2009; Bratton 2008; Dunning 2011; Hafner-Burton et al. 2014; Harish & Little 2017; Höglund 2009; LeBas 2006; Powell 1981; Snyder 2000; Wilkinson 2006). Surveys of ordinary voters in some of these places show no perceived conflict between democratic values and violence (Fair et al. 2014). Other scholars find political parties escalating conflicts into civil wars, with partisanship motivating individual participation in that violence (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008). However, with a few key exceptions, most comparative politics work neglects individual motives in partisan violence. In short, both cross-national and cross-temporal views of contentious politics challenge contemporary American observers to rethink assumptions of a bright line dividing electoral politics and violence. Political parties can drive both simultaneously (e.g. Kalyvas 2006; Tilly 2003).

My Argument

Given the increasing rancor in modern U.S. partisanship, and with what we know about the power of ordinary party identities, it might be hard to imagine that Americans could be more polarized than we are now, nor to conceive a more potent role for ordinary partisanship in mass politics. That only reflects the limits of our imagination – a blind spot for a time in America’s past when partisan conflicts were indeed greater, and when ordinary partisanship was, in some ways, even more potent.

Beyond what we know, I will argue and show that leaders made ordinary mass partisanship more enduring through political turmoil and more resistant to tumultuous political events and national conditions, and that ordinary partisanship was extraordinarily lethal when party leaders explicitly called their voters to arms. I propose partisan opinion leadership as the main force behind these effects, with party leaders guiding the views and acts of loyal followers who looked for cues from trusted sources (Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992). Partisan social influence and individual reasoning supported those effects – but party leaders also shaped these social networks and individual considerations. Democratic partisanship guided the rebellion and reduced willingness to defend the nation, even as Republican partisanship fueled democratic resolve to fight in battlefields and at the ballot box. Considering mass partisanship in the Civil War context enables us to recognize these extremes.
The foundation of this book rests on seeing the Civil War as a fundamentally partisan war – in long-term predicates, proximate electoral cause, wartime political and military developments, and aftermath. Most historians recognize the war’s partisan-sectional roots, though the strongest party claims are not canonical (e.g. Alexander 1981; Holt 1978; Potter 1977; Silbey 1985). For example, Thomas Alexander (1981) writes, “secession was a step so drastic and so contrary to the fervor of American nationalism that it could never have been made persuasive to a majority of voters [based on self-interest]. Only through the vehicle of the Democratic party was secession possible” (p. 29).

In contrast, historians sharply disagree whether partisanship defined Northern politics during the war. Adam I. P. Smith (2006), in No Party Now, explicitly denies a major role for partisanship in the war’s northern upheaval, crediting war-inspired patriotism and self-serving Republican arguments that civil war proscribed partisan opposition. On the other side, Jennifer Weber’s (2006) Copperheads and Mark Neely’s (2002) The Union Divided reveal extraordinary conflict – even low-level violence – among Northern partisans over the war. And Joel Silbey’s (1977) A Respectable Minority presents some evidence of partisan continuity between wartime elections and prewar voting, indicating plenty of enduring party loyalty. Resolving these historical disputes requires broader and more systematic evidence on voting, rhetoric, and violence.

To say partisanship was fundamental is not to say party motives and mobilization were the only force behind the war, nor that other social, political, and economic factors were unimportant. I mean only – but importantly – that partisanship tangled inextricably with other causal elements for elites and the public alike. To take a central example, differences over slavery and its expansion defined the party coalitions competing for the presidency in 1860, and nineteenth century parties were the main organizing force in politics, as they are today. Efforts by other groups, like anti-slavery societies, were orders of magnitude smaller than party-led efforts. As Republican Senator Henry Wilson (MA) said bluntly in 1863: “this abhorred and accursed rebellion, born of the fell spirit of slavery, was plotted by Democrats, organized by Democrats, and inaugurated by Democrats.” All this makes parties the logical place to look for the most impactful collective action in war politics.