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INTRODUCTION

Changing Parties in a Changing World

This is a book about change – both political and social change. Over the past several decades, well within the firsthand memory of many living adults, the United States has experienced a series of overlapping social revolutions. Nearly every aspect of American life has been transformed: from the quality of citizens' economic and educational opportunities to the ethos and leadership of major institutions, and from the demographic composition of the American public to the prevailing norms of culture, language, and behavior.

Government action was not the sole cause of these developments, and their consequences likewise extend far beyond the realm of politics. But ideological debate and partisan competition in America have come to separate those who have accepted or welcomed change from those who have found it costly or alienating. More than ever, the contemporary Democratic Party represents the groups who have willingly adapted to a complex world where the social value of education is rising, credentialed specialists hold increasing influence over policymaking, and the broader national culture has moved in a predominantly liberal direction. The Republican Party, along with the conservative movement with which it is aligned, now serves as the voice of populist backlash to the authority of professional experts and cultural progressives, looking back nostalgically to a simpler era when a different cast of leaders held power and a different set of values and qualities were socially rewarded. As the journalist and political analyst Ronald Brownstein describes it, party conflict in America now sets a Democratic "coalition of transformation" against a Republican "coalition of restoration."[1]

For decades, the most loyal members of each party's popular base of support have been Black voters for the Democrats and white evangelical Christians for the Republicans. The rising political salience of social, cultural, and technocratic change has mostly worked to reinforce these groups' existing partisan preferences. A white evangelical population that is habitually predisposed to favor traditional ideas, regard intellectuals with

suspicion, and resist major shifts in social relations has naturally continued to identify with conservative Republicanism, even as the public appeals of Republican leaders have evolved over the course of the twenty-first century from emphasizing "family values" moralism to invoking ethnonationalist and populist themes. And most Black Americans – as well as other racial minorities, to a lesser degree – have remained faithful to the Democratic Party, as they stand to gain from the popular acceptance of egalitarian multiculturalism and have little reason to mourn the passing of "good old days" that were not always so good for people like them.

Yet the steady march of change has inspired many other Americans to rethink their political identities. Most importantly, a new dimension of partisan conflict has emerged along the lines of formal educational attainment. Republican supporters in the electorate were once a consistently better-educated group than Democrats. But white voters with four-year college degrees have increasingly moved in a Democratic direction over the past two decades, while white voters who did not graduate from college have shifted even more dramatically toward the Republican Party. A growing "diploma divide" has rapidly reversed the traditional relationship between education and partisanship, now separating degree-holding white Democrats from degree-lacking white Republicans. These trends represent the largest and most consequential changes in the mass coalitions of the parties since the well-chronicled realignment of the formerly Democratic "solid South" during the mid-to-late twentieth century.

Historically, college graduates' elevated collective wealth and social position encouraged them to prefer the relatively laissez-faire economic views of Republican candidates, just as the incentives of less prosperous citizens with more limited education once attracted them to a Democratic Party that presented itself as defending the material interests of the working class. Yet the shifting alignment between socioeconomic status and partisan preference among American voters has neither caused nor reflected a parallel change in either party's fundamental economic philosophy. Party leaders and platforms remain strongly polarized today on matters of income redistribution, private sector regulation, and the provision of domestic social programs, with Democratic politicians continuing to stand on the left side of these issues and Republicans on the right.

But as debates over other kinds of questions have become more central to American politics, college-educated and noncollege whites have been pushed in opposite partisan directions. The segment of the electorate that shares the respect for scientific expertise and comfort with social change now prevalent among white-collar professionals has come to feel alienated

from a Republican Party where populist attacks on both educated intellectuals and liberal cultural values have become a foundational element of party doctrine, taking refuge instead among the increasingly welcoming Democrats. And noncollege whites who view contemporary social trends with suspicion have expressed their own disaffection by embracing a Republican Party that denounces the "radical transformation" of America – and by abandoning a set of Democratic leaders whom they associate with excessive cultural elitism.

In the electoral arena, the two sides of this battle have become locked in an indefinite dead heat. American politics is now distinguished by a consistent pattern of partisan parity, producing very narrow national margins of victory and frequent reversals of party control in both presidential and congressional contests. While growing Republican strength among noncollege white voters appears to have recently provided the GOP with a relative structural advantage in the Electoral College and Senate races, both parties have won national power with roughly equal frequency since the early 1990s.[2]

But the perpetually well-matched competition in American elections has not reflected a corresponding inertia in American society. Expanding our field of vision beyond the electoral realm shifts the picture from a persistent stalemate to an increasingly dominant liberal advantage. The growing population of well-educated citizens has drawn on its disproportionate social influence – within educational systems, mass communication industries, professional and charitable associations, and corporate management structures – to empower trained experts and lead a leftward shift in cultural values and institutional policies. Americans of all political persuasions are experiencing changes in their everyday lives that bear the imprint of this new technocratic bent and cultural zeitgeist, from diversity training mandated by their employers to climate change modules in their children's science lessons. Conservatives have retained the ability to achieve regular electoral victories by harnessing popular discomfort with a swiftly changing world, but the broad social transformations they oppose are mostly beyond the power of elected officials to control. Policy complexification and cultural evolution have thus continued even during periods of Republican rule, while formerly apolitical spheres have become more politicized and nearly all social disagreements have acquired the flavor of an ongoing culture war.

Culturally progressive technocracy, the governance of society by socially liberal and well-educated experts, is winning a long-term battle, reshaping the governmental, business, and nonprofit sectors – but not without

stimulating a major backlash that has redefined conservative politics. As formal education levels have risen, increasingly determining citizens' degree of economic success and position in the social hierarchy, they have furthered the expansion of expert-led policymaking while promoting the institutional adoption of left-of-center positions and practices on matters of race relations, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious pluralism, environmental regulation, public health promotion, and other major subjects of contemporary political disagreement. Political ideas and concerns within intellectual circles, including on college campuses, have migrated outward through political, media, corporate, and professional networks to dominate the national conversation, exerting visible influence on everything from the operation of typical Americans' workplaces to the entertainment they consume once they return home. Rather than breeding consensus, the increasing power of education – and the educated – in American life has provoked a skeptical view of meritocracy within an ideological right whose mass base of support is mostly composed of white citizens without college degrees, fueling conservative distrust of cultural trendsetters and the institutions they control. The diploma divide is thus the product of a larger set of social transformations that have realigned the constituencies of both Democratic and Republican politicians, produced an imbalance in partisan deference to educated expertise, inspired new policy debates, polarized the media and information environment, and left few areas of American life free from political conflict.

THE GROWTH OF EDUCATION AND CULTURAL LIBERALISM IN AMERICA

Our account of political change rests on the foundation of two significant long-term trends in American society. The first trend is a substantial increase in collective educational attainment. This rise has been accompanied by growth in the financial rewards and enhanced social status achieved by the earning of a four-year college degree, along with the increased coupling of partners with similar educational experience. The second trend is a pronounced leftward shift in American cultural norms since the relatively conservative 1980s – a movement reflected in public opinion, government and corporate policy, the content of popular media, and the rhetoric and behavior of elites (a term we use descriptively, not pejoratively). Influential social institutions that are led by well-educated professionals and the creative class, including universities and school systems, the mainstream news and entertainment industries, and key segments of the

nonprofit and corporate sectors, have mostly aligned with the liberal side of ongoing cultural conflicts.

But the combination of these two trends has also left whites without a college degree – who maintain relatively traditionalist predispositions, hold increasingly precarious economic positions, and perceive themselves as vulnerable to downward social mobility – open to populist appeals that promote resentment of, and mobilization against, members of the cultural elite like professional journalists, educators, scientists, and intellectuals. This counterreaction has not succeeded in reducing the advantages enjoyed by the well-educated or reversing the leftward trajectory of cultural life in America. But it represents a politically consequential rejection of dominant social currents by a large fraction of the national population, with recent manifestations ranging from the election of Donald Trump to the depressed COVID-19 vaccination rates in small towns and rural communities.

Members of the American left, especially highly educated citizens engaged in political activism, have recently become more likely to identify themselves as "progressives." This is an apt label in several respects. It reflects adherents' support for fundamental changes to traditional policies and values in pursuit of a collective social benefit – the national "progress" that their political program claims to provide. But the term also contains a historical resonance, echoing the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century. The Progressives of that period envisioned an active government led by trained experts who would be empowered to apply their skills and knowledge to solve public problems, in tandem with social reform movements intended to improve the moral character of the masses. Advocating a similar combination of professional governance and larger social change, both led by an educated upper-middle class distinguished by its disproportionate political efficacy and cultural influence, has once again become fashionable in our own time.

In the game of life, the choice of whether or not to pursue a university education determines one's career and financial prosperity. Entering a lucrative occupation, such as medicine or accountancy, requires a college degree and affects a person's entire future direction. At least, those are the rules in the board game version of *Life*. Its creator Milton Bradley did not believe that pure knowledge necessarily bestowed social respect, however: by the end of the game, players again face two possible paths – this time determining whether they "retire in style" as a successful millionaire or are relegated in their old age to being a poor philosopher. Although the crossroads in real American lives are rarely so stark, college

attendance has become an increasingly important prerequisite for economic and social success. As careers requiring degrees proliferate and rise in relative status, the earning of a college diploma affects everything from romantic relationships to likelihood of incarceration to personal health and life expectancy.

But many people also maintain the skepticism toward a knowledge- and credential-based society expressed by Milton Bradley's implied derision of intellectuals as lacking practical usefulness. The growing dominance of organizations and industries led by college and graduate degree-holders – and the accompanying promotion of socially liberal and cosmopolitan attitudes – has bred dissatisfaction among those who believe that American greatness was built by common sense, physical and emotional toughness, a strong work ethic, and respect for traditional ways. The quickening changes of contemporary life have not given equal deference to the wishes of all citizens or uniformly benefited every segment of the public. Americans are increasingly playing the game of life by a new set of imposed rules, but only some of them are pleased with where their path now leads.

PARTY CHANGE AND POLARIZATION IN AN AGE OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

In this book, we show that Democrats and Republicans have responded to the evolution of American society by undergoing important changes within their own constituencies, governing and communication styles, and policy positions and development. This argument represents both a synthesis and a critique of existing scholarly literature and prevailing media consensus. The analysis that we offer has been informed by the research and insights of fellow political observers both within and outside academia. But the nature and magnitude of contemporary party change in America has not been fully acknowledged by previous accounts.

The political mobilization of white evangelical Christians within the Republican Party after the 1970s received substantial attention from scholars and journalists alike, as did the defection of white conservative voters from the Democrats over the party's support for civil rights. These developments hastened the partisan conversion of the American South from a traditionally Democratic bastion to the primary Republican regional base. They also fueled a growing partisan divide over subjects of particular concern to social conservatives, such as abortion, gay rights, and the role of organized Christianity in public institutions and public life. By the 1990s, political scientists had begun to demonstrate that voters' positions on these

issues, as well as their broader views about moral traditionalism and the threat of cultural decline, were becoming more strongly predictive of which party they joined and which candidates they supported.[3]

Yet journalists' frequent declarations at the turn of the millennium that the American public had descended into a culture war were not universally accepted among leading academic scholars. Because statistical analyses of public opinion data continued to show that a substantial fraction of Americans held ambivalent or inconsistent beliefs on specific policy questions, some skeptics argued that political polarization was a trend evident only among politicians and party activists, not average citizens.[4] Others pointed out that a disproportionate focus on novel cultural topics obscured how much voters' partisan and candidate preferences continued to reflect their distinct beliefs and interests in the realm of domestic and economic policy, which still served as the primary dimension of mass party conflict in the early 2000s.[5]

Time would prove these assessments premature. Although citizens were never as politically divided as politicians, they were increasingly choosing ideologically consistent positions across multiple social issues and supporting candidates of the party that matched those beliefs. As these alignments grew stronger, social science research became more likely to emphasize the role played by cultural attitudes and predispositions in affecting the behavior of the American public. The history-making elections of Barack Obama and Donald Trump to the presidency, along with the emergence of new social movements like the Tea Party, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter, stimulated a rise in scholarly attention to the politics of race, gender, and immigration. Academics even found their own profession newly engaged in political controversies over the ways they addressed these subjects in their classrooms and research.

The question of *whether* the mass public had become polarized began to evolve into the question of *how* the public was polarized. Although the policy views of many citizens continued to depart from strict partisan or ideological dogma, scholars found that Americans had become more socially and psychologically distant from those with opposing political affiliations. Democrats and Republicans increasingly viewed each other unfavorably, a phenomenon dubbed "affective polarization."[6] Partisan divisions more frequently fell along the lines of other social boundaries such as race, religion, generation, and place of residence; as fewer citizens held identities that cut across these categories (e.g., a born-again Christian Democrat; a big-city Republican), they became more likely to perceive their own partisan side as representing "us" and the other party as "them."[7]

By the 2010s and 2020s, it had become clear that partisan affiliation and ideological labels were a central component of many Americans' sense of themselves, reinforcing both their emotional affinity for fellow party members and their growing aversion to the opposition. As political scientist Patrick Egan explains, "Republican and Democrat, as well as liberal and conservative, have become more than just bundles of policy preferences. They are also increasingly taking on the quality of … strong social identities. … Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans prefer to be friends with, date, marry, work and do business with, and be neighbors with their own group."[8]

Stronger partisan ties, however, do not mean that no one has changed sides. The importance of cultural considerations in the minds of voters has grown enough over the past two decades to unmoor the degree-holding segment of the public from its traditional home in the Republican Party while dramatically extinguishing the Democrats' former advantage among white citizens of lower educational status. Because Americans are likely to work with, socialize with, partner with, and live near people of similar educational attainment to themselves, the diploma divide will likely reinforce existing trends toward greater social and affective polarization.

But academic analyses and media descriptions of the current political environment also often portray today's voters as having sealed themselves in social and informational bubbles that constantly reinforce their existing political preferences – an instinct that is especially easy to satisfy in the era of highly segmented cable news and social media. Political scientists write of "calcified" partisanship while reporters and pundits speak of partisan "tribalism" – terms that suggest an inevitable permanence to individuals' political identities.[9] Political psychologists and communications scholars have joined with journalists to express worry that Americans are more likely than before to reject documented facts that challenge their partisan beliefs and to accept misinformation that flatters their predetermined biases, undermining their ability to act as the well-informed citizens that a healthy democracy requires.[10]

Many citizens indeed remain consistently allied with a single party over their adult lifespan, view the partisan opposition with deepening distrust, and display a remarkable ability to dismiss or discount arguments and evidence – no matter how objectively strong – that might contradict these predispositions. But we should not conceptualize American politics as a battle between the eternally loyal and mutually antagonistic members of Team Red and Team Blue. Even in our current polarized age, a significant fraction of voters has been busily switching sides. These citizens have

responded to the ongoing progression of political developments and cultural trends by eventually concluding that the party they once thought was their proper political home no longer represents people like them.

Students of American parties once accommodated large-scale changes in mass partisanship by applying the predictions of critical realignment theory. This theory claimed that periodic "critical elections" over the course of the nation's history abruptly rearranged the popular coalitions of the parties; these shifts then remained mostly intact until the next critical election a generation or two later.[11] Realignment theory fell out of favor among many academic experts because its fundamental model of long-term stability punctuated by occasional episodes of dramatic short-term change seemed inconsistent with a much more complex and contingent historical record.[12] But it served a useful purpose in reminding scholars that voters can react to the rise of new political issues and concerns by reconsidering their partisan preferences, and that these individual responses can leave a significant imprint on the collective composition and policy priorities of both Democrats and Republicans if a newly emerging axis of division cuts sideways across the parties' existing constituencies.

No recent national election fits the archetype of a critical realignment. Rather than jumping across the boundary separating the parties in a single act of sudden collective mass conversion, the movement of noncollege whites abandoning the Democrats and college graduates deserting the GOP has occurred in a gradual fashion without a single common precipitating event. And while the Republican Party has experienced several dramatic developments that have understandably attracted substantial scholarly and media attention to its evolving internal dynamics – especially the ascendance of Donald Trump and his style of conservative populism – the Democrats have more quietly undergone their own consequential transformation into a more educated, more technocratic, more multiracial, and more culturally progressive party.

Our perspective is usefully informed by two important intellectual reformulations by our academic colleagues. Many scholars have come to view American political parties as institutions that not only contain politicians, voters, and formal organizations (such as the national party committees) but also encompass "extended party networks" that include allied interest groups, media platforms, financial donors, think tanks, and other centers of political activity. The theory of political parties developed by a collaboration of scholars associated with the UCLA political science department argues that much of the internal power within the Democratic and Republican parties resides within these extended networks,

where "policy demanders" use their leverage over candidates to encourage the adoption of their favored issue positions and priorities.[13] Broad definitions of parties that account for the substantial influence of unelected activists, experts, and media figures over the behavior of officeholders can indeed best capture how these institutions operate, and our analysis treats interest groups, media sources, and policy specialists as key members of both the Democratic and Republican coalitions.

Another welcome development is the founding of the Consortium on the American Political Economy.[14] The scholars associated with this initiative seek to examine the interconnections among government authorities, civic institutions, markets, economic sectors, and larger social structures in the United States, borrowing an intellectual approach that has been much more prevalent among specialists in comparative and international politics. Like them, we aim to adopt a broad perspective in the tradition of classic political sociology, stepping back from an ultraspecialized focus on specific institutions and elections in favor of an integrative view that places party politics and government policymaking in a wider social context.

But we wish to inflect these approaches with a more complete recognition of the importance and implications of the contemporary culture war. Because cultural politics rests so heavily on invocations of identity and the mobilization of symbolic preferences, it does not always translate into a specific government policy agenda; for example, pollster Patrick Ruffini reported that the most prevalent concerns of Republican voters in 2023 included subjects beyond the normal responsibilities of elected officials like "liberal mainstream media bias" and "woke ideology in corporations."[15] The UCLA theory of parties places great emphasis on the policy demands of activists and interest groups while viewing the larger electorate as a much less powerful source of influence on the position-taking of politicians. But we conclude that the new cultural concerns of mobilized party constituencies are fueled by the mass public as well, whether or not these issues correspond to specific policy responses from the government. American Political Economy scholars sometimes characterize cultural conflicts as the artificial product of strategic manipulation by capitalist forces perceiving a profitable avenue to advance their material interests, not as reflecting sincere popular passions. But we view the institutions of the political and economic system as responding to real, deepening divisions in American society.

Though they may sometimes be stoked by calculating politicians and outrage-baiting media personalities, today's cultural battles reflect the genuine emotional engagement of many citizens with the revolutionary