Where are We in History? Political Orders and Political Eras in the Postwar U.S.

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Abstract

An effort to pump new life into the notions of political order and political era suggests that the United States has seen three different mixes of key structural elements, influential policy conflicts, and the dynamic following from their interaction since the Second World War. For a full generation after the end of World War II, American politics was really just an extension of what had gone before, in effect the Late New Deal Era. Yet this same effort suggests that larger social trends were undermining the stability of this era well before major anomalies began to break through in the late 1960s, ultimately producing a different mix of structure and substance, one that we now recognize as the Era of Divided Government. And it suggests, by 2000, that major anomalies were breaking through again, so that the next analytic challenge is to see which of these are harbingers of lasting shifts and which are just the ructions that inevitably accompany the death of an old order, without revealing anything about the new.

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The notions of a political order, stable enough to create a political era, were casualties of the behavioral revolution in political science in postwar America. Both notions once seemed like natural analytic tools. A political order was a small set of structural influences sufficient to dominate—and explain—national politics for an extended period. And that period, its political era, could be characterized by a small set of substantive conflicts, the policy content that helped to determine the identity of key structural influences while being simultaneously institutionalized by them. Both notions, order and era, still had teeth at the time of the second great work of the Michigan school of political science, from the name onward, in Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, *Elections and the Political Order* (Campbell et al. 1966).

The implications of that title were clear enough. Elections were part of a political order, even a key empirical route into understanding it. But they were not the order itself. Acolytes were, however, to adopt the model but ditch the organizing concept, preferring to disaggregate politics to the individual whenever possible. In truth, as with many scholarly debates, they had help from their opponents. Too often, analysts of any given political order took the concept to imply a single principle of stratification, with a single set of critical resources, producing one dominating pattern of influence, leading to one inherently static outcome for an extended period, its political era. The notion of a small set of key structural elements, channeling political conflict to some places and not others but allowing noticeably different outcomes within those parameters, was lost along the way.¹

The surface noise of American politics has never been kind to such an inherently static conception, and the current moment is an excellent reminder of why that is. Many developments in current American politics have come to seem anomalous, when viewed through postwar political history or indeed when viewed through postwar political science. Perhaps the notions of a political order and its political era can, if not foretell the future, at least sharpen the questions about what is breaking up familiar patterns from the recent past? To do so, our conception of a political order needs to include critical elements from the three structural levels of politics:

- from social cleavages at the mass base for politicking, which are themselves productive of certain political coalitions but not others;
- from the nature of the intermediary organizations that connect these cleavages to governmental institutions, while partially transforming them;

¹ For an argument over routes to a revival of this approach, see ‘Polity Forum’ 2005. For a heroic example to extend it across all of American history, see Silbey 1991.
and, most surely in the American case, from the shaping influence of the structure of government itself.

From the other side, our conception of a political era needs to focus on the substantive conflicts that give it temporal integrity. These are the policy divisions that summarize what is at the heart of the struggle in their period; they are what politics is ‘about’. Note also that this is precisely the point at which an earlier generation made its central analytic mistake. For the result cannot be static even within its associated era. The result must instead be a set of major alternatives characterizing political conflict. Structure and substance are thus linked not just ineluctably but reciprocally, and the core conflicts that play this role must themselves have three key characteristics:

- these conflicts must buttress some underlying social coalitions while hobbling others;
- they must reflect the central interests of intermediary organizations, while encouraging some and disadvantaging others;
- and they must find ways, lasting for an extended period but not forever, of putting the structure of government itself to work on their behalf.

The Late New Deal Era

In its time, the end of the Second World War caused many analysts to imagine that an entirely new political order would more or less inevitably appear—caused many, in fact, to perceive it as being born. The huge surface disruptions associated with economic and social reconversion did inevitably spill over into politics. Yet with hindsight, we know that while American politics might never again look precisely like itself in the depths of the Depression, nor in the depths of World War II, what was effectively the Late New Deal Era had grown out of both and was destined to last for another full generation:

- It had its diagnostic social divisions, in the form of social class. Blue-collar Americans leaned Democratic, white-collar Americans Republican. The very success of the New Deal program blurred this picture in some regards, since many Americans of all classes supported national recovery

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from the Great Depression. But by comparison to the geographic divisions characterizing pre-Depression politics, the new underlying cleavage was clear enough.

- The late New Deal Era had its diagnostic intermediaries as well, especially in the form of its key organized interests. Part of this alignment was new; part was just a remix. On the new side, union labor increasingly buttressed the Democratic coalition. In the remix, while the immediate postwar years were the heyday of the great corporations, it was really small business, not big, that buttressed the Republican coalition.

- By the same token, the parties being underpinned in this fashion were not opposite ends of the same continuum. Rather, they were organizational entities different in kind. Here, however, it was the Democrats who retained the older form, as an amalgam of organized machines in the cities, rural rings in the countryside, and growing volunteer organizations everywhere. By contrast, the Republicans, having been devastated by the Great Depression, already approximated the modern form, as an ideological, activist-based operation throughout.

- The structure of government was not as central to the pattern of politics that resulted as it would be in the successor era to the Late New Deal. Though the interaction of that structure with social cleavages and intermediary organizations still mattered. This interaction implied different coalitions contesting for control of the Presidency as opposed to Congress. Just as it implied distributions of institutional power inside these institutions, but especially inside Congress, that privileged some party factions, especially Southern Democrats, at the expense of others.

- Lastly, the central policy conflicts of the Late New Deal Era were obvious and inescapable. The dominant conflict continued to involve social welfare. The New Deal had brought the welfare state to the United States. Conflict over its provisions—over adding the ‘missing pieces’, over organizing provision differently, or over redirecting programs so that they restored autonomy to recipients—would continue to characterize the Late New Deal Era.

- Yet there was a dominant secondary conflict as well, involving foreign affairs. World War II was followed, not by a return to international disengagement, but by construction of the institutions (and disputes) of the Cold War. If conflicts over these never supplanted social welfare, they could temporarily displace it at any given point in time.
This structure then imparted a characteristic dynamic to American politics. The dominant realm of conflict remained social welfare, where the Democrats were the party of expansion, or at least protection, while the Republicans were the party of retrenchment. Considerably more Americans agreed with the Democrats, and unified partisan control of the institutions of American national government in Democratic hands was the logical concomitant. Nevertheless, when foreign affairs was the dominant realm of partisan conflict instead, as it was with the Korean War election of 1952, and when the Republicans had a personally attractive candidate for President, as they did with Dwight Eisenhower in that same year, they could not only hope to wrest away the Presidency. They could expect to sweep Congress along in its wake.

Republican tenure in national government was intermittent and reliably short-lived even then. Yet notice how the most important substantive link in this political dynamic, its partisan pivot, was in important ways a historical accident. It fell to the Democrats, being in power courtesy of the Great Depression, to pursue military victory in the Second World War, and then to construct the major institutions of the Cold War. Into the 1960s, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, Democratic Presidents, would extend precisely this ‘logical and natural’ connection, adding the greatest increment to the American welfare state since the inception of the New Deal, while undertaking the greatest American effort ever in the anti-Communist crusade. The coming of a successor era to the Late New Deal would underline how historically contingent this combination had been.

The Era of Divided Government

In a sense, social change was undermining this political order from the moment the Second World War ended. Reconversion and subsequent economic growth were altering the class structure of American society, though the political implications were not straightforward. A simple algorithm of ‘blue-collar Democratic, white-collar Republican’ would have created a permanent Republican majority by 1956 at the latest. What resulted instead was a growing white-collar Democracy, coupled with fresh blue-collar opportunities for Republicans. At the same time, the interaction of economic growth with racial desegregation was sharply altering the one-party nature of the American South. In its time, no one could know where this was going. In our time, we know that it

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3 See especially Ladd with Hadley 1975; Diggins 1989; Sundquist 1968, Chs. 10-12.
was bringing the long-established American ‘three-party system’—Northern Democrats, Southern Democrats, and National Republicans—to a close.

Finally, the simple passage of time meant that more and more Americans were products of the postwar, not the prewar, world. The Great Depression and World War II could not conceivably provide issue anchors for them, since these were, objectively, not central concerns in their world. Yet it is in the nature of change that the old order retained a remarkable, inertial, ‘sticking power’. It thus appeared not to be undermined piecemeal, a little here and a little there. Instead, it appeared to come apart at a particular time, in response to particular stimuli involving specific individuals and specific conflicts.

Only after the fact could these be seen as exemplars of the forces, the changing political structures and changing policy substance, which actually undermined the old order and brought on the new. In the case of the Late New Deal Era, this apparent breakpoint was 1968. In the foreground of its apparent specifics were the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the disastrous Democratic Convention that followed, and the independent presidential campaign of George Wallace. In the background, though barely, were anti-war protest, racial rioting, a national crime-wave, and the appearance of a self-conscious ‘counter-culture’.

In the context of the time, that is, in the context of the Late New Deal Era, these could all seem idiosyncratic, that is, dramatic and intrusive but likely to be restored to a familiar pattern by a familiar dynamic at the next major opportunity. Yet structural and substantive shifts had been proceeding apace for a long time beforehand, and it was these that were simultaneously shaping and being reflected in the apparent anomalies of 1968:

- The social coalitions at the base of politics had acquired a new complexity. The existing class cleavage did not decline. As a result, ‘the New Deal party system’ was to outlive the New Deal Era. Yet even here, there were two major changes. In one, the share of those identifying with neither party increased sharply. In the other, party identification declined precipitously as a predictor of presidential outcomes. And that does not begin to address a huge new partisan disjunction between voting for President and voting for Congress.
- Both disjunctions were, in turn, largely the product of a change in the nature of the political parties themselves. These parties had differed in the Late New Deal Era, with an old-fashioned organizational party, the Democrats, facing off against a modern activist-based party, the Republicans. By the successor era, both had acquired the modern

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5 Among many, see Ladd 1976-77, Ware 1985, Mayhew 1986, Mayer 1993.
structure, in which issue-driven activists contributed crucially to—they essentially were—the key structural elements of their political parties.

- The substantive issues that drove these activists could be seen most easily through the other key intermediary organizations of politics, the universe of organized interests from which such activists were increasingly drawn. Again, it was hardly the case that the major economic interests, business and labor, went away. Yet these established interests were joined by an expansive new body of issue organizations whose central concerns were essentially cultural rather than economic. For the Democrats, these included environmentalists, peace groups, feminists, and homosexuals. For the Republicans, they included anti-abortionists, gun owners, religious fundamentalists, and supporters of the traditional family.

- These new organizations, in turn, were both cause and effect of a major shift in the issue composition of the entire era. The old standbys, social welfare and foreign affairs, were joined—not eclipsed, just joined—by the cultural splits that the newer organized interests both reflected and impelled. A breakup of the Cold War consensus on foreign affairs was thus joined by augmented divisions on abortion and euthanasia, criminal justice and public order, private rights and collective responsibilities, education, public deportment, the public role of religion, and on and on. Said differently:

1. The old issues were essentially distributional, involving the proper share of divisible goods allocated to various sectors of society.
2. The new issues were essentially valuational, involving the proper behavioral norms within which social life should proceed.⁶

Once again, there was a characteristic political dynamic to go with this mix of structure and substance, a dynamic to characterize partisan competition in the new political era (Shafer and Claggett 1995, Shafer 2003). In this, there was not just heightened inter-party conflict, between what had become polarizing liberals and polarizing conservatives among those who did the work of the political parties. Now, there was additional intra-party conflict, an elite-mass conflict as well, between party activists and their own putative rank and file:

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⁶ Landmarks for this distinction are Scammon and Wattenberg 1970, Hunter 1991.
• Democratic activists were consistently liberal. They remained liberal on social welfare—that did not change—and they added a strident liberalism on cultural values.

• Democratic mass identifiers, on the other hand, retained a huge body of supporters who remained liberal on social welfare but had never been liberal on cultural values. They were not about to become so.

• Likewise, Republican activists were consistently conservative. They remained conservative on social welfare, perhaps becoming even more so, and they added conservatism on cultural values.

• By contrast, Republican mass identifiers retained a huge body of supporters who likewise remained conservative on social welfare but had never been conservative on cultural values. They too did not become so.

Which brings the analysis back to its last, key, structural piece, in which the structure of American government itself came to play the keystone role in assembling all these developments into a new political order. And this time, the influence of governmental structure was much easier to see. Not only were there cross-cutting majorities on economic versus cultural issues at the social base for American politics. They were cross-cutting largely because the intermediary organizations for that politics, its political parties and associated interest groups, put policy programs together in fashions very different from the preferences of large segments of the general public. Yet the structure of American government facilitated a simple solution in the face of this increased complexity: colonize one branch of elective national government with one majority, and one branch with the other. When that came inevitably to imply one branch for the Republicans and one branch for the Democrats, there was finally a name for the new political era as well. Split partisan control was its diagnostic characteristic. ‘Divided government’ was its monicker. And the Era of Divided Government had been born.

An Order in Action

To repeat: new, or at least newly consequential, policy issues were at the heart of this reconstitution. In 1968, these appeared most centrally to involve issues of public order. With hindsight, however, we would come to see these as only part of a much larger complex of what should rightfully be called ‘cultural’ issues, involving the behavioral norms by which society should conduct its affairs. Which helps explain a further tension within the underlying social coalitions. The class divide, built around issues of social welfare, hardly disappeared. It was just that it was joined by an essentially religious divide, built around issues of cultural values. Attacks on the public role of religion and then on specifically religious
policy areas like abortion, initially coming by way of the U.S. Supreme Court, shook the partisan loyalties first of Catholics and then of Evangelical Protestants. Initially, both constituted simple opportunities for Republican gains. In short order, however, they introduced counterpart stresses within the Republican coalition as well.

Before examining the concrete operation of this political order, much less its apparent breakdown in our time, it is worth returning to two other implicit points. The first involves, once again, the huge role of historical accident. Because the Democratic Party was in the majority and in power when the anomalous events of 1968 exploded, the great cultural conflicts of the succeeding era would be fought out principally within its borders, with Republicans attempting to adapt and pick up the pieces. Recall that in the last great round of cultural conflict in American politics, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the Republican Party that had been in the majority and in power so that those conflicts had been fought out principally within its borders instead, with the Democrats doing the adapting.

The second implicit point is entirely new, at least to the twentieth century, and should not be lost. The general public did not choose an extended Era of Divided Government. Indeed, it was not evident that this public wanted one. Rather, individual voters looked at a policy menu provided by ideological activists, found it recurrently unattractive, and simply picked and chose within it, so as to maximize their own preferences. In a parliamentary system, this exercise would have been hugely problematic. A party elected by one majority could have turned and governed on the other. In a separated system like that of the United States, a democratic resolution was actually easier: locate one policy majority in the presidency, the other in Congress. If that meant split partisan control of the main institutions of national government, then so be it.

Accordingly, as long as the policy menu retained this form and the general public retained its preferences, split partisan control was entitled to continue, even if literally no one at either the elite or the rank-and-file level desired it. Split partisan control—divided government—was, after all, merely a diagnostic outcome. The important considerations were the structural and substantive factors that repeatedly produced it. As long as these remained in place, they, not the wishes or choices of individual participants, would determine the result. This is just another way of repeating the fundamental points that follow from a focus on political orders and political eras:

- Both Democrats and Republicans could be victorious with the presidency or with Congress. This was not an order that dictated the triumph of one side or the other, in one place or the other.
Both economics and culture could prove decisive in any given election. What distinguished this era was its greater substantive complexity, in the simultaneous presence of two great and cross-cutting majorities.

On the other hand, it is crucial not to forget that there was a whole range of other outcomes, sought by many of the most active players and most powerful interests, which the structural underpinnings of an extended era simply did not permit.

Foremost among these prohibited outcomes was unified partisan control, around one or the other of those two dominant issue clusters. As a result, there were to be two great challenges to the power of this order, and thus to the longevity of its era. The first arrived in 1976, when Jimmy Carter restored unified partisan control, and many analysts announced that divided government had been only an anomalous interim. The second arrived in 1992, when Bill Clinton restored unified partisan control, and many analysts announced that the extended hegemony of divided government—twenty of the previous twenty-four years—was over. Students of political orders, by contrast, expected the underlying structures of the Era of Divided Government to reassert themselves at their first opportunity in both cases. Which in fact they did.

Within the contours of this era, Jimmy Carter would not have been hurt by being an economic liberal. Yet Carter proved to be the most conservative Democratic nominee in matters of social welfare since before Franklin Roosevelt. Within the contours of this era, Jimmy Carter would not have been hurt by being a cultural conservative: that was what the voters who brought him to power thought he was. Yet this was the realm in which he chose to accommodate his national party. In return, voters should have turfed him out at their first opportunity, and when stagflation plus the Iran hostages came along to underline both misalignments, they did so.

Nevertheless, the challenge of the Clinton presidency to the new order was the more striking. Bill Clinton arrived with an actual theory for escaping the confines of the Era of Divided Government, in which he was a putative “New Democrat”, more moderate on economics and much more traditional on culture. Yet he quickly adjusted to the preferences of his active party in Congress, dumping the middle-class tax cut and seeking economic stimulus, while dumping welfare reform and prioritizing health care. As long as the underlying structure and substance of his era had not changed autonomously, then he too should have been turfed out at his earliest opportunity. But this time, the voters did not even wait for that eventuality: they ended unified partisan control of national government at their first opportunity, in 1994.
Note that this was a much more striking affirmation of the contours of an era. Previously, split partisan control had always produced Republican presidencies stapled onto Democratic Congresses. By attempting to defy the structural prerequisites of his time, what Clinton did was to confirm that this particular mix was itself just a historical accident. Given entrenched Democratic majorities in Congress, it was easier for the structural and substantive prerequisites of split partisan control to be expressed by way of partisan change in the presidency. Yet given the relevant stimuli in the opposite direction, it was perfectly plausible to have split partisan control with Democratic presidencies stapled onto Republican Congresses. And for the three congressional contests after the initial election of Bill Clinton, that was precisely what occurred.

**Where are We in History?**

It is possible to interpret everything that followed as a simple extension of the Era of Divided Government. For this analyst, such a reading requires the wishing away of too many obvious anomalies, that is, political events that qualify as anomalous within the political order of divided government. Yet it is possible to write recent American history this way, and any conclusion should certainly give it a try. Moreover, even those who find the result to be intellectually unsatisfying are stuck in the same situation that such an analyst would have encountered in, say, 1972. We can see anomalies everywhere, the apparent fraying of an old order. What we cannot distinguish is the ones that are harbingers—even the opening embodiments—of structural shifts, from the ones that should be expected to surface at the end of an old order but do not otherwise foreshadow the new.\(^7\)

It was one of the lesser maddening aspects of the presidential election of 2000 that it permitted almost any imaginable interpretation. For those determined to see 2000 as an extension of the Era of Divided Government, the task was easy. If the Republicans were indeed to sustain their control of Congress, as they always appeared likely to do, then the Presidency should have remained in Democratic hands. And in the crucial regard predicted by this model, it did. Al Gore won the nationwide popular vote, after all, while Republicans won the nationwide congressional vote. Even the fine points of these votes accorded with hypotheses from the old order. The Republican presidential vote was up by comparison to the previous election, while the Democratic *congressional* vote was up too—further outcomes diagnostic of an Era of Divided Government.

Beyond that, no model could have been expected to posit a once-in-a-century twist, the ultimate idiosyncrasy, in which formal rules, rarely relevant, delivered

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an institution of national government to the ‘non-winner’. Yet despite this incredible anomaly, split partisan control was reintroduced even faster than it had been under Bill Clinton in 1994. Without even the need for a subsequent election, Republican Senator James Jeffords of Vermont left his party and announced that he was an independent. In the process, he converted a 50-50 Senate balance in which the (Republican) Vice President retained the casting vote into the narrowest possible Democratic majority. So it took only five months to restore divided government this time.

If 2004, in the aftermath of 9/11, could have been expected to re-elect any sitting President, then President Gore would surely have extended the Era of Divided Government, keeping the presidency in Democratic hands while Congress remained Republican. Indeed, even without that supposition, the argument for ‘no change’ is easy. From one side, terrorism ought logically to have benefited the party (and candidate) of cultural conservatism. The assertion of traditional values, and their embodiment in a forceful military response, seem part of the very notion. From the other side, the party of the President lost seats in Congress and came within a whisker of losing the Presidency, as the Electoral College once again brought the outcome down to one major state. This was hardly evidence of some major new drift to American politics.

In that reading, the structural and substantive contours of the Era of Divided Government remained in place, available to shape the contest of 2008. Yet such an analysis reads all its evidence in one determined way, while it disregards all the other events that this same reading would highlight as anomalies. These anomalies began early, with the deviant election of 1998. For all the years since the arrival of the New Deal, and all the years of the American National Election Study including the incipient pre-test of 1948, mid-term elections had been characterized by what came to be recognized as ‘surge and decline’ (Campbell 1960). Turnout went up in a presidential year, when the winning candidate drew congressional voters in his direction. Turnout then fell in the off-year election, when existing voters returned to their partisan moorings in the absence of presidential suasion.

As a result, the party of the president always lost votes, and with them congressional seats, at the mid-term. Until 1998, when the law was broken. Yet no serious analyst was prepared to argue that 1998 was like the last time the party of a sitting president picked up seats at the mid-term, namely 1934. To do so would have required the analyst to argue that the presidential election of 1996 had been analogous to the presidential election of 1932, a patently ludicrous proposition. Unless the analyst were searching for an indication that an electoral order was cracking, without presuppositions about what would come next. At the time, instead, what the precedent-breaking Democrats argued was that they were on course to hold the Presidency in 2000, reverse Republican control of Congress,
and bring back unified partisan control of national government in Democratic hands.

When the easier part of this prediction, the election of Al Gore, failed to occur, this particular narrowly partisan argument collapsed. The question is whether the more generic hypothesis from an Era of Divided Government, involving the various structural factors underpinning an era of split partisan control, had suffered a second anomaly. At a minimum, Republicans had indeed added control of the Presidency to their control of Congress, at the ballot box. If Senator Jeffords insisted on terminating unified partisan control with remarkable rapidity, the election of 2002 nevertheless offered another (a second straight) exception to surge-and-decline and thus to the rule that the party of a sitting President should lose seats at the mid-term. As in 1998, so again in 2002: the party of the President—and the Republicans rather than the Democrats this time—picked up seats in both the House and the Senate.

Moreover, unlike the last previous instance of unified partisan control before Bill Clinton, the one under Jimmy Carter after the 1976 election, the next presidential election also did not restore split partisan control. The presidential (though not the congressional) ballot of 2004 was again extremely close. But it was farther than the result in 2000 from reversing an existing partisan outcome and restoring divided government. The mid-term election of 2006 did finally hand Congress back to the Democrats. Yet this time, neither they nor most analysts celebrated restoration of the Era of Divided Government. Instead, they began to talk of 2006 as the obvious precursor to Democratic resumption of control of the White House in 2008.

All that should be said in that regard is that this is a projected relationship between voting outcomes that characterized the late nineteenth century, not the Era of Divided Government. If it came to pass, we would surely be in a new political era, one registered first by the breakdown of the established order in 1998. And at that point, theorizing guided by notions of a political order and its associated political era should probably just stop:

- It may well be that the issue base of an established era in American politics has shifted once again. Both generic terrorism and the Iraq War certainly loomed large in recent elections. But are they an extension of World War II and Korea, of the Cold War and Vietnam, or what?
- It may well be that the structural supports from an established order have likewise shifted. The social cleavages associated with cross-cutting majorities certainly did not work as previously. Or at least, the number of split-ticket voters declined in the elections of both 2000 and 2004.
- It may even be that the pattern of cross-pressures underpinning divided government had run its course, having finally forced voters to make
choices between their economic and their cultural preferences, rather than sustaining this tension.

What is needed for further interpretation, in terms of data, is the simple passage of time, to separate apparent anomalies from ongoing structure. What is needed, in terms of analysis, is new research, aimed at putting some behavioral regularity back into either these anomalies or this structure. In the meantime, one political order may well be eroding and giving rise to another, while one political era is ending and another being born. Or not.

References


