



Perpetual Tumult: A Brief History of American Democracy
2021

By Alex Lovit

Kettering Foundation White Paper [2021:1]
April 2021

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Conducted against the backdrop of a global pandemic, the United States presidential election in 2020 was a particularly rancorous and bitter affair. Americans cast ballots at rates not seen in a generation, with both Joe Biden and Donald Trump receiving more votes than any previous presidential candidate in American history. However, this turnout was motivated largely by negative partisanship; in recent polls, a majority of both Republicans and Democrats see the opposing party as “a serious threat to the country.”¹ The losing contender, Trump, refused to concede and promoted baseless arguments that the election had been corrupt; this was unprecedented in American history. The dispute over the election culminated in a riot on January 6, 2021, during which a pro-Trump mob stormed the US Capitol and briefly delayed the official certification of Biden’s victory. For many observers, these scenes of chaos and violence within the highest national offices of republican governance demonstrated the fragility of American democracy.

While it would be foolhardy to ignore threats to the United States’ democratic institutions and traditions, in this paper I am making an argument for optimism about our nation’s democratic resilience. This argument is based in a reading of American history, and specifically draws from Samuel Huntington and other scholars who have discerned cyclical patterns of unrest in the nation’s past. Historically, these moments of ferment have rarely presaged the collapse of democratic norms and have more often represented attempts to reconcile the nation with its founding ideals. The centuries-long tradition of American citizens participating in political life with passion and conviction is a source of strength for our democratic culture, rather than a warning sign of impending failure. Throughout history, American democracy has always been ugly, and often been tumultuous, but our track record as a nation provides more reason for optimism than despair.

The Ugliness of Democracy

Electoral politics in the United States has always been ugly, partisan, disrespectful, and apocalyptic in tone. For example, the 19th-century political media were highly partisan, with competing newspapers in most cities interpreting events from the perspectives of the two parties (for the first quarter of the century, Federalist and Democratic-Republican; for the second quarter, Whig and Democratic; and for the last half of the century, Republican and Democratic). This was especially true in election years, when campaign-focused newspapers aimed at faithful partisan audiences provided clarification of party platforms, published sheet music for campaign songs, and, crucially,

¹ “Democracy on the Brink: Political Rivals Considered a Serious Threat to the Country and Its People,” PRNewswire, ROI Rocket, January 26, 2021, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/democracy-on-the-brink-political-rivals-considered-a-serious-threat-to-the-country-and-its-people-301215271.html>.

derided the hypocrisy, incompetence, and ill intent of the opposing party. In the Kettering Foundation's hometown of Dayton, Ohio, for example, in 1844, readers could subscribe to either the (Democratic) *Coon Dissector* or the (Whig) *That Same Old Coon*. Each of these publications used the same racial slur in its title to attempt to associate the opposing party with the reviled African American race. *That Same Old Coon* promised to send Democratic candidate James Polk "to the gallows," while the *Coon Dissector*, its border decorated with an illustration of raccoons hanging from ropes, accused Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay, among other crimes, of "profligate mirth and obscene jest" at a brothel, of "violating the Constitution," and of murder.²

A half-century later, the "Gilded Age" of the late 19th century brought the most sustained era of electoral participation by eligible voters, but many historians have also described the politics of the era as more symbolic than substantive. "Partisanship devolved into sham battles over meaningless issues designed to divert the masses from the very real problems emerging from industrialization."³ The central issue in the presidential election of 1884, for example, was a choice between public and private immorality, with evidence emerging during the campaign that (Republican) James Blaine had accepted bribes to direct government contracts and (Democrat) Grover Cleveland had fathered a child out of wedlock.

During the 20th century, politicians continued to deploy extreme rhetoric in describing their opponents. In 1948, Truman claimed that "the Communists are rooting for a GOP victory because they know it would bring on another Great Depression."⁴ In 1964, Lyndon Johnson's campaign ran an ad that implied that his opponent, Barry Goldwater, would trigger a nuclear war.

Yet memories of this rhetoric have been short. Every four years, political pundits bemoan that campaigns have reached a new low. According to journalists, 1988 was "the nastiest Presidential race in memory"; 1992 was "the nastiest presidential campaign in recent history"; 1996 was "one of the nastiest and most negative in history"; 2000 was "one of the scruffiest, nastiest, silliest, and most devoid of responsible content in recent memory"; 2004 was "among the most negative presidential campaigns in history"; and 2008 was "the most negative campaign in the modern era."⁵

² *That Same Old Coon* (Dayton, OH), June 8, 1844, <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p16007coll29/id/339>, *Coon Dissector* (Dayton, OH), July 12, 1844, <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p16007coll29/id/172>.

³ Worth Robert Miller, "The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (January 2002): 49-67, 50.

⁴ Jules Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1959), 237.

⁵ Dan Amira, "Every Presidential Campaign Is the Meanest, Nastiest, Dirtiest Ever," *Intelligencer*, August 22, 2012, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2012/08/most-negative-campaign-ever.html>.

This is the paradox at the center of American political history: that a system in perpetual political crisis, in which “apocalyptic rhetoric . . . pervaded American politics from the start”⁶ and in which politicians routinely describe their opponents as threatening to overturn democracy, should be the oldest continuous democratic government in the world.

Partisanship in a Two-Party System

One key to understanding this paradox is the United States’ two-party system. The Founders who designed the Constitution regarded the formation of organized political parties with horror. Avoiding this outcome was one of James Madison’s key arguments for the Constitution’s strong federal government, with representatives chosen through indirect elections or in large districts: “The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.”⁷ Upon departing the post, George Washington, the nation’s first chief executive, similarly warned of the dangers of political parties should a less principled person than himself ever ascend to the office: “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. . . . Sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty.”⁸

But having pronounced warnings of the dangers of factionalism, Madison and Washington proved to be major players in founding the first nationally organized political parties: respectively, the Democratic-Republican and the Federalist parties. Rather than designing a system that prevented factional parties from arising, they had created an ideal environment for a two-party political system to arise. Political parties have risen and fallen and shifted over the course of American history, but since almost the beginning of the republic, two dominant parties have shaped not only electoral politics, but also citizens’ political identities and behaviors beyond the polling place. This two-party system has paradoxically both provided stability and promoted polarization. As historian Jill Lepore argues, “The two-party system turned out to be essential to the strength of the Republic. A stable party system organizes dissent. It turns discontent into a public good. And insures the peaceful transfer of power, in which the losing party willingly, and

⁶ Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 688.

⁷ James Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” November 23, 1787, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp.

⁸ George Washington, “Farewell Address,” September 19, 1792, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

without hesitation, surrenders its power to the winning party.”⁹ In the United States, the two-party system has promoted the regular transfer of power, as the losing party in any particular election remains the most viable competitor in future elections.

On the other hand, as Kettering Foundation research on deliberation has demonstrated, choosing between only two options promotes polarization and binary thinking. Political opinions are complex and multidimensional; any binary choice between two options is not only reductive but also can tend to promote demonization of “the other side.” Throughout most of American history, the two dominant political parties have each embraced diverse coalitions of supporters motivated by a broad range of identities and issues. But, as political scientists Christopher Hare and Keith Poole have written, “Polarization has proved to be greatest when conflict between the two parties becomes unidimensional—that is, either when secondary, non-economic divisions within the parties overtake economic matters to become the primary focus of conflict or when those divisions essentially disappear.”¹⁰

Hare and Poole argue that the two-party system has often been moderated by cross-cutting allegiances within the parties. But in the 19th century, partisanship became reduced first to the single issue of slavery, provoking the Civil War, and then to the regional allegiances and resentments that emerged from that war. Hare and Poole warn that, in recent years, “The Democratic and Republican parties in Congress are more polarized than at any time since the end of Reconstruction, and a single liberal-conservative dimension explains the vast majority of legislators’ vote choices.”¹¹ This is true not only among elected officials, but also among citizens. As political scientist Lillianna Mason has written, “The increasing social, demographic, and cultural divides between the parties are leading Democrats and Republicans to think of each other as enemies, rather than opponents. . . . As partisan social divisions grow deeper, it is difficult to imagine a way for American citizens to trust their fellow citizens on the other side of the aisle.”¹²

These trends are indeed troubling, but the history of the United States provides some reason for optimism. The nation has endured centuries of partisanship, ignorance, bad faith, and political violence. Yet January 20, 2021, marked the 46th time in history that the most powerful office in the country was transferred from one occupant to another—and the 24th time that the new president represented an opposing party from that of his predecessor.

⁹ Lepore, *These Truths*, 165.

¹⁰ Christopher Hare and Keith T. Poole, “Polarization of Contemporary American Politics,” *Polity* 46 (July, 2014): 411-429, 414.

¹¹ Hare, “Polarization of Contemporary American Politics,” 428.

¹² Lillianna Mason, “Losing Common Ground: Social Sorting and Polarization,” *The Forum* 16 (April, 2018), 61.

Only once in this history has the transfer of power among nationally elected officials provoked a significant break in democratic traditions: in 1860, when the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln prompted 11 states to secede from the nation. Unlike today, however, the political divisions in 1860 were centered on a single issue (slavery), were defined by clear geographic divisions, and, crucially, could not be contained within the tradition of two-party politics. Lincoln represented the Republican Party, which had been founded only six years earlier. Unlike the Whig Party that it replaced, the Republicans had no constituency in the South. (Lincoln received only two percent of the vote among Southern states in 1860.) Meanwhile, at the Democratic National Convention in April, 1860, delegates from several Southern states walked out in a dispute over the party's platform position on slavery, and after 57 ballots, the remaining delegates were unable to select a nominee for president. The party split into a Northern and a Southern faction, each with its own nominee. In most Northern states, voters chose between Lincoln and Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas, while in most Southern states, voters chose between Southern Democrat John Breckinridge and John Bell of the newly formed (and very short-lived) Constitutional Union Party. In this divided field, Lincoln won a sufficient plurality of votes to win the presidency. The largest political rupture in American history was preceded less by growing polarization between the two dominant political parties of the era and more by the inability of either of those parties to represent the defining political divides of the time.

Cycles in American Politics

Many scholars of American political history have sought to understand the paradox of stability despite perennial tumult by noting cyclical patterns in national politics. As political scientists Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones have theorized, American political history demonstrates a “punctuated equilibrium model,” in which “stability is punctuated with periods of volatile change.”¹³ Baumgartner and Jones suggest that in most policy areas, the dominant pattern is public disengagement (outside of interest groups with particular interests in that area) combined with inertia by government agencies. However, at regular intervals, these policy areas rise to public attention through journalistic inquiry or political campaigning, precipitating periods of rapid policy change and often the creation of new agencies. After these brief moments of frantic activity, the pattern of stasis reasserts itself. Among the authors' conclusions from this pattern is that other political scientists have overemphasized the patterns of regulatory capture and the “iron triangle” among legislators, bureaucrats, and interest groups. Although this description might fit patterns during periods of stasis, it ignores the periods of public engagement and rapid policy implementation that create the framework

¹³ Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics, Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 [1993]), 1, 4.

within which those patterns play out. Leaving these periods of intense public engagement and policy innovation out of the story misses the most important moments during which the democratic public asserts its control over the administrative state.

The simplest version of a political cycle in American history is the alternation between periods of progressive and conservative control of the federal government. The father and son Arthur Schlesinger Sr. and Jr., each of whom was a celebrated historian in his own era, are the most famous chroniclers of this political cycle. As the son wrote, both of these ideologies contain the seeds of their own destruction, over time generating support for the alternative.

Sustained public action . . . is emotionally exhausting. A nation's capacity for high-tension political commitment is limited. Nature insists on a respite. People can no longer gird themselves for heroic effort. They yearn to immerse themselves in the privacies of life. Worn out by the constant summons to battle, weary of ceaseless national activity, disillusioned by the results, they seek a new dispensation, an interlude of rest and recuperation. . . . Epochs of private interest breed contradiction too. Such periods are characterized by undercurrents of dissatisfaction, criticism, ferment, protest. Segments of the population fall behind in the acquisitive race. Intellectuals are estranged. Problems neglected become acute, threaten to become unmanageable and demand remedy.¹⁴

Similar to the theory of “punctuated equilibrium,” in this version of American history, periods of intense reform alternate with “slack-water” eras during which existing agencies and policies continue to operate without major revision. Schlesinger's own political preferences were clear. He wrote speeches for the progressive Robert Kennedy's campaign and, even before the Watergate scandal, unsparingly criticized the conservative Richard Nixon for exceeding traditional limits on presidential power. But he recognized both the necessity for periods of political calm and policy stasis and the fact that reform and conservatism in American politics share a common ideological foundation:

The two jostling strains in American thought agree more than they disagree. Both are committed to individual liberty, the constitutional state and the rule of law. Both have their reciprocal functions in preserving the body politics. Both have their indispensable roles in the dialectic of public policy. They are indissoluble partners in the great adventure of democracy.¹⁵

Samuel Huntington and “Creedal Passion”

These insights into American political history—the alternation between tumult and stasis, and the shared commitment to common democratic values—also shaped

¹⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999 [1986]), 28-29.

political scientist Samuel Huntington's conception of the nation's political cycles. Huntington points out that throughout American history, reformers have attacked the status quo by laying claim to the nation's most fundamental values—democracy, freedom, equality, and so on—rather than by proposing an alternative ideology.

Americans become polarized less over the substance of their beliefs than over how seriously to take these beliefs. At times, they disagree fundamentally on how to apply their ideals and principles to their political institutions and structures. Americans divide most sharply over what brings them together.¹⁶

In his 1981 book *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, Huntington developed a fairly elaborate theory of American political cycles.

Political change in the United States is distinctive in that: (1) it is episodic, tending to be concentrated in periods of creedal passion occurring roughly at sixty-year intervals; (2) it is associated not with a change in ideologies but rather with a reinvocation and reaffirmation of traditional American liberal values and beliefs; and (3) the overriding purpose of reform during periods of change is to bring American political institutions and practices into accord with these values and beliefs.¹⁷

He identifies four periods in American history in which “creedal passion” (that is, reformist dedication to fundamental democratic principles) caused significant disruption: the American Revolution of the 1770s, the Jacksonian period of the 1830s, the Progressive Era of the turn of the 20th century, and the politically tumultuous period of the 1960s and 1970s. These are not the only periods of intense conflict and rapid change in American political history, but Huntington argues that other eras, such as major political reforms of the New Deal, were caused more by external factors, while the four moments of “creedal passion” he identifies emerged from attempts to reconcile the nation's ideals and institutions. It is worth mentioning that Huntington's 60-year cycles for periods of political tumult would make the nation due for such a moment; he predicts “a major sustained creedal passion period will occur in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century.”¹⁸

Huntington argues that American politics have produced regular periods of volatility because, despite enduring and near-unanimous agreement with the American creed, that creed itself contains inherent contradictions. Most significantly, Americans have made unrealizable demands on their governmental institutions.

¹⁵ Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, 47.

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981), 111.

¹⁷ Huntington, *American Politics*, 131.

¹⁸ Huntington, *American Politics*, 231.

In terms of American beliefs, government is supposed to be egalitarian, participatory, open, noncoercive, and responsive to the demands of individuals and groups. Yet no government can be all these things and still remain a government. “Credibility gaps” develop in American politics in part because the American people believe that government ought not do things it must do in order to be a government and that it ought to do things it cannot do without undermining itself as a government.¹⁹

This results in a disconnect between ideals and institutions, or what Huntington calls the “IvI gap.” This gap can never be fully reconciled, and most of the time, the dominant responses to the failures of American government to live up to citizens’ impossible expectations are cynicism, hypocrisy, and complacency. However, during the creedal passion moments, which Huntington identifies every few generations, reformers insist on attempting to bring the nation’s institutions into alignment with its ideals.

Huntington outlines 14 elements defining creedal passion periods, many of which do seem applicable to our current moment of polarized politics. These include: “discontent was widespread; authority, hierarchy, specialization, and expertise were widely questioned or rejected”; “traditional American values of liberty, individualism, equality, popular control of government, and the openness of government were stressed in public discussion”; “politics was characterized by agitation, excitement, commotion, even upheaval”; “hostility toward power . . . was intense, with the central issue of politics often being defined as ‘liberty versus power’”; “new media forms appeared, significantly increasing the influence of the media in politics”; and “political participation expanded, often assuming new forms and often expressed through hitherto unusual channels.”²⁰ If our current political ferment resolves as have the previous periods of creedal passion that Huntington describes, we might expect a greater than normal degree of policy innovation and some political realignment among institutions and groups of citizens during the coming years, but the tumult will subside with time.

In fact, Huntington argues, these periods of agitation are necessary for the American democratic experiment to endure. After all, the United States’ identity as a nation is based not in a common ethnic identity, but in a shared commitment to the ideals of the American creed. “In the United States, as in no other society, ideology and nationality are fused and the disappearance of the former would mean the end of the latter.”²¹ Without periodic attempts to recommit to these ideals, and to the impossible task of eliminating the gap between ideals and institutions, the nation would lose its *raison d’être*. “The tension between liberal ideal and institutional reality is America’s distinguishing cleavage. It defines both the agony and the promise of American politics.

¹⁹ Huntington, *American Politics*, 41.

²⁰ Huntington, *American Politics*, 86-87.

²¹ Huntington, *American Politics*, 27.

If that tension disappears, the United States of America, as we have known it, will no longer exist.”²² That the United States continues to hotly debate at regular intervals how governmental institutions can better fulfill its national ideals is, perversely, a sign of the strength of the system.

Pessimism and Optimism about Political Tumult

Building on this framework, political scientist James Morone concurs that throughout American history, political activists have pursued the impossible goal of returning democratic control to the collective “people.” “The democratic ideals that inspire reformers are, like any myth, unattainable. Judged by the hope of restoring the people, . . . movements—from the Founding to the civil rights crusade—all failed.”²³ Furthermore, Morone argues, chasing the chimera of direct democracy has throughout American history tended to promote the construction of new administrative agencies. The “people” demand that a distrusted government take action to address urgent social problems, and the government responds by creating new institutions. Once the initial surge of public interest in the topic subsides, these same agencies are often, in practice, captured by special interests and, for the next generation of reformers, become themselves evidence of government sclerosis and targets for continued anti-statist rhetoric. “A great irony propels American political development: the search for more direct democracy builds up the bureaucracy.”²⁴ Morone tells an ultimately pessimistic story about cyclical trends in American political history in which chasing an impossible dream has contributed to a growing political nihilism. “Contemporary activists assail the government without aspiring to enhance national democracy—they are all dread and no yearning.”²⁵

Other scholars have painted a more optimistic version of the United States’ unending quest to live up to its founding ideals. Jill Lepore borrows the title of her history of the United States, *These Truths*, from Thomas Jefferson’s famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its

²² Huntington, *American Politics*, 261.

²³ James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government, Revised Edition* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1998 [1990]), 23.

²⁴ Morone, *The Democratic Wish*, 1.

²⁵ Morone, *The Democratic Wish*, 329.

foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.²⁶

The people who initiated the American Revolution by signing their names to these words were all propertied White men; in arguing for a form of government based on the “consent of the governed,” they were opposing the monarchy’s right to impose taxes, not intending to question their own position atop the American social hierarchy.

However, in founding their revolution on this revolutionary idea that government must justify its existence through consent from and benefit to the public, they provided rhetorical tools to undermine injustice of all kinds, including the injustices they themselves perpetrated. American history abounds with inequities, abuses, and prejudices but also embraces many generations of reformers (prominently including women and many minority groups—racial, religious, cultural, and so on) peacefully yet forcefully pushing back against these injustices by asking the same questions that the founding generation asked of the British monarchy:

The idea of equality came out of a resolute rejection of the idea of inequality; a dedication to liberty emerged out of bitter protest against slavery; and the right to self-government was fought for, by sword, and still more fiercely, by pen. Against conquest, slaughter, and slavery came the urgent and abiding question, “By what right?”²⁷

This question has never provided immunity from oppression, but over the course of centuries, it has provided an argument for expanding civil equality and the right of self-government to men without property, women, African Americans, immigrants, Native Americans, LGBTQ citizens, and many others.

Democratic government relies on majoritarian elections to determine what the public consents to, but in the long term, this also demands that political movements be able to justify their proposals as moral claims. America’s battles over its most fundamental values have never stopped—indeed, must never stop—if these values are to continue to be living principles.

A nation born in revolution will forever struggle against chaos. A nation founded on universal rights will wrestle against the forces of particularism. A nation that toppled a hierarchy of birth only to erect a hierarchy of wealth will never know tranquility. A nation of immigrants cannot close its borders. And a nation born in contradiction, liberty in a land of slavery, sovereignty in a land of conquest, will fight, forever, over the meaning of its history.²⁸

²⁶ “Declaration of Independence,” July 4, 1776, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp.

²⁷ Lepore, *These Truths*, 10.

²⁸ Lepore, *These Truths*, 786.

Genuine democracy cannot be passionless, and unanimous consensus is impossible. American politics has always been ugly and divisive. But the fact that as a nation we continue to stage these fights through rhetoric and elections rather than through force (and that violations of this principle, such as the storming of the United States Capitol at the beginning of the year, are nearly universally condemned) is a sign of our political system's continued strength.

About the Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an independent, nonpartisan research organization rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Everything Kettering researches relates to one central question: What does it take for democracy to work as it should? Chartered as an operating corporation, Kettering does not make grants. The foundation's small staff and extensive network of associates collaborate with community organizations, government agencies, researchers, scholars, and citizens, all of whom share their experiences with us.

Dayton Headquarters
200 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459
800.221.3657

Washington Office
444 North Capitol Street, NW
Suite 434
Washington, DC, 20001
202.393.4478