

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

changes in social norms, mores, and hierarchies that have occurred over their lifetimes. In an age when subjects as previously unremarkable as consumers' choice of transportation, recreational activity, entertainment genre, light beer, or fast-food outlet can serve as charged forms of political expression – or be interpreted as such by others – it is hard to deny that a culture war has erupted. As political scientist Jaime Settle demonstrates about routine user posts on social media sites like Facebook, “Certain kinds of content – for example, those that make reference to Chick-Fil-A, gun racks, or hybrid cars – can be considered political [by readers], even when there is no explicit reference to any political angle of these topics . . . and once political identity is made salient, the processes of social identity theory suggest that negative judgment of the out-group follows suit.”¹⁶

General predispositions about social relations and trends do not always map easily onto the specific policy-focused survey items and institutional outputs that have often served as the basis of previous political science analysis. But the extent to which many areas of modern life have become suffused with partisan or ideological valence is confirmed by the daily news headlines and the personal experiences of most Americans – including journalists and academics themselves, whose own professional livelihoods have been drawn into intensifying political battles.

Before attributing these trends to peculiar American cultural sensibilities or specific political leaders, however, domestic transformations should be placed in international context. The United States is not the only place where popular tensions over ethnic diversity, national identity, social complexity, and expert-led governance are on the rise, producing an electoral rift separating voters along the tiers of educational achievement. The clash between Democratic progressive technocracy (a party now built on liberal cultural ascendance and expert-guided policymaking) and Republican populist nationalism (a party now driven by nostalgia and resentment of elites) turns out to be just one example of a snowballing global pattern.

A CHANGING NATION ON A CHANGING GLOBE

The political dynamics in the United States and comparable Western democracies have evolved as their populations have become more educated, diverse, and internationally connected – especially the high-achieving segment most likely to be involved in organizing and financing politics. The global left has become more assertive in adding a progressive cultural agenda to its traditional support for an expanded welfare state, while the global right has accommodated an increasingly energetic backlash against

social change and the growing power of technocratic bureaucracy in domestic and international institutions. These trends have contributed to an emerging dimension of conflict along educational lines, which reinforces the rising centrality of cultural issues.¹⁷ College attendance can produce a liberalizing effect on cultural opinions; when facing electoral choices defined by contrasting cultural values, college-educated voters in other nations have become more likely to choose left-of-center candidates and parties.¹⁸

A recent comparative study of 21 nations by the political scientists Herbert Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm found that parties on the ideological left have lost the most support over time among voters with relatively high incomes but relatively low levels of education. Left parties have gained the most among high-education and high-income voters, but only reached parity with their opponents on the right among these doubly advantaged citizens. The new primary base of the international political left is among voters whose educational attainment is comparatively high while their income level is comparatively low, whereas the strongest base of the right is the opposite voting pool of citizens with higher income but less education – a group that is proportionately shrinking worldwide.¹⁹ As university attendance has grown across rich democracies, the left and the right have thus become increasingly divided by educational levels (with the left becoming more educated) and decreasingly divided by income (with the right no longer strongly favored by wealthy voters). These cross-national trends indicate that the sources of recent party change in the United States are unlikely to be unique.

Political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have found that increasing educational attainment, especially among the young, is part of a value transition transforming politics across Western societies.²⁰ As citizens have become more educated, younger generations have prioritized the progressive “postmaterial” cultural values Inglehart first described a half-century ago, incentivizing leftward social and political change. The rising salience of cultural beliefs and associated social policy issues has coincided with a more educated society and a leftward shift in norms. Among older and less educated voters, these developments have stimulated antagonism against societal diversification and the rule of the well-educated. Norris and Inglehart provide cross-national evidence for increasingly liberal public attitudes toward social equality, morality, and traditional authority, combined with growing electoral support for parties representing antisystem protest or authoritarian views. Across multiple nations, political and cultural elites have moved in a socially liberal direction more quickly than the mass

public. The pattern of a general leftward drift in public opinion led by the young and well-educated, provoking an angry or fearful countermobilization among older and less educated subpopulations who are losing cultural power, is far from a strictly American phenomenon.

These differences do not necessarily polarize citizens further on economic policy. In Europe, university education is associated with left-of-center cultural and social attitudes but right-of-center views on economic redistribution (in part due to the increased financial security provided by a degree).²¹ Parties on the ideological left in many countries now draw less support from low-education voters and more support from high-education voters than they did in 1970. But they have not become the parties of the rich; instead, parties on the ideological right in many countries have attracted votes from both the wealthy and the less educated.²² To build a governing majority, party coalitions on the left likewise must attract disadvantaged citizens who benefit from government largesse as well as more affluent supporters of social change.

French economist Thomas Piketty and his collaborators have identified a cross-national reversal of the traditional relationship between educational attainment and political identity. In many Western democracies, well-educated citizens have become more likely over time to support parties of the left while the less educated have correspondingly moved rightward. Piketty's research suggests that this pattern of divergence is especially concentrated among younger citizens, who are also more likely to be university-educated than older generations. European women once supported parties of the right at higher rates than men but are now more likely to vote for parties of the left, matching the American case, though the size of the gender gap differs across nations.²³

Piketty argues that these changes reflect the rise of a new sociocultural dimension of political conflict that is supplanting the traditional divide over economic interests. The degree to which countries have moved in this direction reflects whether their political parties increasingly emphasize social rather than economic issues: more culture war politics leads to more educational polarization. Describing the traditional ruling parties in many Western nations as increasingly offering an electoral choice between two sets of elites – the business rich of the “Merchant Right” and the educated professionals of the “Brahmin Left” – he concludes that citizens skeptical of both groups have expressed frustration and rebellion by throwing their support to insurgent alternatives.²⁴

But other scholars view this evidence somewhat differently. Responding to Piketty, political scientists Tarik Abou-Chadi and Simon Hix argue that

“by focusing on ‘the Left’ versus ‘the Right’ as two coherent political blocs, Piketty misses another transformation of politics in most democracies across the world: the growing fragmentation of party systems. . . . [H]igher educated voters tend to support new green/left-libertarian parties while lower educated voters tend to support new populist/radical right parties. As a result, education may divide the left and right as single blocs, but is not the main dividing line between the mainstream left and mainstream right.” Collecting data from 11 democracies in Western Europe, Abou-Chadi and Hix also found that the increased strength of left-of-center parties among highly educated citizens did not mean that voters had perceived these parties as having abandoned liberal economic policies: “rather than assuming that the reason the left appeals to higher-educated voters is because center-left parties no longer support redistribution, our evidence suggests that those higher-educated voters who support the left do so *because* they support redistribution.”²⁵

Piketty has responded to this critique by acknowledging that green and populist parties diverged along educational lines long before major parties – but noting that as of 2020, traditional left and right parties have moved toward their green and populist party cousins (with socialist parties matching green parties in drawing support from high-education voters and conservative parties matching populist parties in gaining the adherence of low-education voters).²⁶ In the US, of course, well-educated citizens who might be Green Party supporters in other nations mostly work within the Democratic Party to advance cultural liberalism, while less educated citizens who might support populist parties elsewhere push the Republican Party toward cultural and nativist conservatism.

The same global trends in educational attainment and culture thus exhibit different political consequences depending on the party system of each nation. Across European countries, the most educated are the least supportive of nationalist parties and the most supportive of left or green parties.²⁷ But European politics has also experienced a backlash against the rule of the well-educated. Citizens without university degrees are more likely to believe that government does not care what they think, perceive that they lack influence over government decisions, and agree that politicians are motivated by personal profit.²⁸ This disaffected population represents the primary base for antielite and antigovernment parties in most Western democracies. Differences in political trust by education level are consistent across nations and associated with the rise of populism as a response to the power of unelected experts and elites, especially when the most educated are aligned with international institutions such as the European Union (EU).

Nationalism can be a glue fusing antielite attitudes to nativist sentiments. Well-educated Europeans are more supportive of immigration and increased diversity and more likely to identify with Europe as a whole; party activists and government officials are even more predisposed to these views. The less educated are more likely to support popular movements and referendums intended to check the influence of domestic and international elites, such as the 2016 Brexit vote that led to the United Kingdom's departure from the EU.²⁹

The United States is thus hardly alone in experiencing a rise in conflicts over culture, nationalism, and technocracy that have transformed its political landscape. And while many Americans are not reliably attentive to trends in other parts of the world, some members of both parties increasingly view themselves as acting in common cause with like-minded leaders and movements elsewhere. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's advocacy of Christian traditionalism and limited immigration, restrictions on the autonomy of journalists and academics, and centralization of government power in his own hands has won admiration on the American right. Orbán has attracted positive coverage from conservative media figures like Tucker Carlson and traveled to Dallas to give the opening address at the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) annual conference in 2022; he and Donald Trump also publicly endorsed each other's reelection campaigns. Meanwhile, well-informed Democrats with a particular interest in international affairs watched with dismay as the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016 and cheered when Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro, an insurgent populist who also received a Trump endorsement, lost his 2022 reelection campaign to socialist opponent Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Back at home, however, the US continues to maintain a uniquely strict two-party system that has remained immune to the multiparty proliferation evident in many European nations. Rather than dividing themselves among a traditional labor-allied social democratic party, an emerging urban bourgeois/environmentalist party, and one or more ethnic minority parties, the major constituencies of the Democratic Party still share the same big tent. Democratic leaders and activists therefore face the challenge of choosing candidates, policies, and campaign messages that inspire enthusiasm among an influential faction of culturally progressive professionals without fatally alienating a more traditionalist multiracial bloc of voters further down the status ladder whose support remains necessary to achieve a national majority.

The Republicans are even more distinctive when placed in comparative perspective. Big-business conservatives with substantial investment in the

institutional status quo and rebellious rightists who seek to wage a destabilizing battle against “establishment insiders” have been forced in America to confront their inevitable mutual friction within the structure of a single party, with predictably explosive results. Under the growing influence of a powerful conservative media universe that promotes aversion to social change and contempt for the values and lifestyles of intellectuals, college students, and the coastal bourgeoisie, the Republican Party has evolved from a vehicle for antigovernment sentiment to the primary outlet for broader attacks on the entire elite-led “system” – even though key elements of that system, such as many private industries, remain partially or largely aligned with the party. The relatively high level of religious affiliation and devotion in the US also reinforces Republicans’ self-identified role as defenders of traditional Christianity and ensures their party’s adherence to socially conservative positions on abortion and LGBT rights, in contrast to the more secularized climate of Western Europe where such issues are much less divisive.

With no European-style partisan fragmentation to absorb conflict from a growing political rift along educational lines, American politics has generated an especially stark diploma divide between its two governing parties. The US stands out among its international peers for the magnitude of its shift since 1970 from a party system structured by income differences in the electorate to one defined by the education gap.³⁰ Just as the need to accept the progressive cultural values of well-educated professionals has made it harder for Democratic leaders to retain their popularity among downscale social conservatives who once supported them in large numbers, the transformation of the Republican Party by populist candidates, attitudes, and media messages has undermined its appeal among the white-collar suburbanites who once represented a foundational GOP constituency.

UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATION DIVIDE AMONG AMERICAN VOTERS

Scholars of political behavior have historically viewed educational attainment as a characteristic that can help to predict a citizen’s political identity, opinions, and choice of candidates – just like the other familiar demographic categories of race, gender, religion, income, and age. Traditionally, studies found that Americans’ propensity to identify with the Republican Party or support Republican nominees grew stronger as their years spent in the classroom increased from a grade school or high school education to the earning of a bachelor’s degree. This simple

correlation between educational experience and partisanship seemed like a logical product of a party system in which Democrats claimed to be the champions of the disadvantaged while Republicans stood for those of higher social status. Voters with postgraduate degrees have traditionally represented the only exception to this pattern, as many of them are members of “helping professions” like teachers, therapists, and social workers who tend to favor the Democratic Party more than voters whose education ended upon graduation from college.

But without much advance warning, the twenty-first century brought a fundamental transformation of the relationship between education and politics – especially among white Americans. Drawing on three academic surveys, Figure 1.1 summarizes white adults’ changing collective party alignments across four major educational categories: citizens with a high school diploma or less, citizens with some college education who did not earn

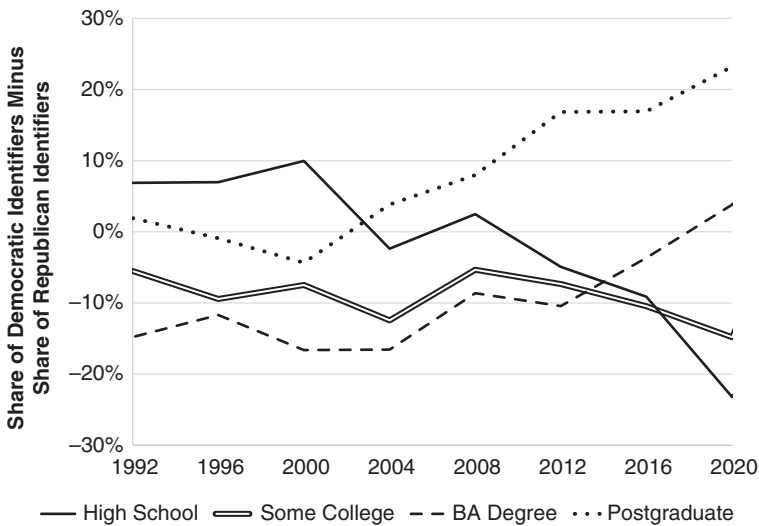


Figure 1.1 The party identification of white Americans by level of maximum educational attainment, 1992–2020

Source: American National Election Studies; General Social Survey; Cooperative Election Study.

Note: Numbers represent the average distribution of party identification (with independent leaners classified as partisans) among all adult white respondents across the three surveys for each presidential election year (the CES was conducted during 2008–2020 only; the GSS was not conducted in 1992 or 2020, so this figure substitutes the results from the 1993 and 2021 GSS surveys for those two elections).

a four-year degree, citizens with a bachelor's degree but no further education, and citizens with postgraduate experience. The numbers in the figure represent the difference between the proportion of white citizens in each category who identified with (or, for independents, leaned toward) the Democratic Party and the share of whites who identified with or leaned toward the Republicans in every presidential election year between 1992 and 2020.

The trends are clear. White citizens with no educational experience beyond high school once constituted the most strongly Democratic of the four categories but shifted away from the party after the election of George W. Bush in 2000, only temporarily reversing this exodus in the unusually Democratic-friendly year of 2008. They had already begun to collectively lean Republican by the time of Barack Obama's reelection in 2012, but this initial tilt became a lopsided pro-Republican advantage once Donald Trump became the primary face of the GOP in 2016 and thereafter. Republican identifiers have long outnumbered Democrats among whites with some college experience but no bachelor's degree, yet this group has likewise shifted further in a Republican direction since 2008.

Whites with bachelor's degrees but no postgraduate education were once a strongly Republican-leaning bloc but began to move in a Democratic direction after 2004. This change accelerated in the Trump era, and by 2020 Democratic identifiers and leaners outnumbered Republicans among whites whose educational experience ended with graduation from college. Whites with postgraduate education have consistently contained a greater proportion of Democrats than college-only whites, and the two groups have shifted away from the Republican Party at a parallel rate over the past two decades. Once evenly divided between the parties, white graduate-school alumni have become a heavily Democratic constituency.

Graduation from a four-year college has emerged as the key dividing line separating Democratic-trending from Republican-trending white Americans. Occupants of the "some college" category are a sizable and varied group that includes holders of associate's degrees, adults who have taken a college-level course or two, and dropouts from four-year undergraduate programs. "Some college" whites once bore a closer partisan resemblance to white college graduates than to "no college" whites, but since 2012 the reverse has been true.

The analyses in this book therefore follow previous academic scholars and media analysts in focusing on the "diploma divide" separating Americans who have earned a bachelor's degree from those who have not, though we also note the especially strong preference for the Democratic

Party now evident among voters with postgraduate education. These citizens are heavily outnumbered in the mass electorate, but they hold disproportionate political and social influence in many other ways. We will be discussing them often.

Trump's widely unexpected victory in 2016 inspired an avalanche of postmortem analysis and commentary by academic specialists and popular journalists alike, mostly focused on the unusually strong support among whites without college degrees that had provided him with a narrow but crucial advantage in the Electoral College. However, analysts with interests beyond a single election soon noted that the pro-Republican trend among these voters was already in motion well before Trump's entry into politics (as Figure 1.1 illustrates). The diploma divide has also reappeared in every subsequent presidential or congressional election and frequently emerges in state and local races as well, confirming that it was not the product of a factor unique to the 2016 contest (such as, for example, the messaging choices of Hillary Clinton's campaign) and does not depend upon Trump himself being on the ballot.

Systematic academic and journalistic studies tracing this wider pattern of change have begun to emerge. Political scientist Joshua Zingher has shown that earning a college degree formerly made Americans more likely to identify as a Republican, controlling for other demographic characteristics, but slowly evolved through a historical period of having no independent effect to exert a pro-Democratic influence by 2016. He found that geographic constituencies with heavy concentrations of college graduates had become more Democratic than others as early as the 2000 election, and this relationship has also slowly strengthened over time. Zingher's analysis demonstrates that living in a community with a large proportion of college graduates also increases the likelihood of identifying with the Democratic Party and voting for its candidates, with college graduates in highly educated areas moving most strongly in a Democratic direction. He also found that the effect of education on partisanship is strongest among whites but is also evident in a more muted form among other racial groups, and that college graduates now hold more liberal attitudes than nongraduates on social issues, racial attitudes, authoritarianism, and immigration policy.³¹

Using evidence from multiple surveys, political scientist William Marble concluded that college graduates have been moving toward the Democrats since the 1980s, holding other factors constant, while nongraduates have been moving toward Republicans since the 1990s. These trends have been strongest among whites, but a college degree is now associated with greater Democratic support among racial minorities as well. Marble found that

white college graduates now hold more liberal views than nongraduates across four issue areas: economics, moral and social issues, race and civil rights, and foreign policy.³²

Political scientists Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope identified race as central to the emergence of the diploma divide, emphasizing the role of racial resentment, which is higher among white voters who did not graduate from college. Their analysis confirms a reversal of the effect of education on whites' partisan preferences since the 1990s, but they did not find a corresponding shift among Black and Latino voters (at least since 2008).³³ Political scientist Zach Goldberg has argued that college-educated white liberals have transformed the issue positions and priorities of the Democratic Party. He emphasizes the role of these voters' disproportionate political engagement in changing the party's image, while also noting the ways in which they disagree with Democratic supporters of other races.³⁴

Recent scholarship thus agrees that a significant partisan gap between college graduates and nongraduates now separates white Americans, reflecting a popular shift in emphasis from traditional partisan battles over redistributive economic policy to emergent cultural, moral, and racial conflicts on which college-educated whites hold more liberal views. There is also an apparent consensus that the Trump candidacies intensified but did not inaugurate this development. Partisan differences along educational lines are much less stark among voters of other racial groups – meaning that the diploma divide is, in its current form, a mostly white phenomenon. Relevant scholarship analyzing Black politics, Latino politics, and Asian-American politics provides a set of persuasive explanations for why these groups have not yet exhibited similar educational divisions: voters of color often have a stronger sense of ethnic solidarity or common fate, they perceive social incentives from their communities to support the Democratic Party, and their partisan loyalties are reinforced by ethnic-specific institutions, interest groups, and mobilization efforts.³⁵ But as with whites, college-educated minority voters tend to hold more liberal policy views than their noncollege coethnics, and the broadening global trend of educational polarization across multiple social and national identities makes the future emergence of a significant cross-racial diploma divide thoroughly plausible.³⁶ We return to this subject more extensively in Chapter 4.

Viewing the diploma divide as a Trump-instigated phenomenon has also encouraged some observers to conclude that it simply reflects his campaigns' distinctive activation of white voters' racial attitudes. While

reliable evidence indicates that whites without college degrees indeed hold more conservative beliefs on racial issues and exhibit higher levels of racial resentment than college-educated whites, and that Trump's candidacies indeed increased both groups' propensity to vote on the basis of their racial (and gender) predispositions, racial considerations alone do not seem to account for the rise and growth of educational polarization.³⁷ Attitudes about specific racial policies and topics are closely associated with broader views about whether the country is changing too fast or undermining traditional values.³⁸ Conservative populism in the Republican Party has identified a long list of disfavored targets that includes racial minority activists and immigrants but also encompasses intellectuals, scientists, teachers, students, feminists, journalists, and LGBT advocates; as we will explore in subsequent chapters, recent battles over racial issues fit a larger pattern of a growing partisan division over the proper source of American leadership and the proper direction of American culture.

This intensifying dimension of political and social conflict was not only fueled by the ethnonationalist bent of the Trump-era Republican Party, but also reflected a visible counterreaction on the left. Democratic leaders and major social institutions such as the mainstream media and entertainment industries, schools and universities, and even much of the business world responded to Trump's rise by strengthening their advocacy of progressive racial values, policies, and movements. Debates over the teaching of critical race theory, the establishment or abolition of organizational diversity programs, and corporate support for Black Lives Matter protests were prominent developments during the 2010s and 2020s, illustrating the growing alignment of major American social institutions with cultural liberalism and the Democratic Party – and conservatives' increasing frustration with their own declining cultural power. Even if racial predispositions are not always the dominant factor influencing the electoral choices of voters, the rise of the diploma divide has been accompanied by a newly prominent focus on racial issues that is increasingly evident not only within government but across much of the private sector as well. We explore this topic in much greater depth in the pages that follow.

Besides pertinent academic scholarship, the account of educational and cultural polarization that we present in this book has also been informed by thoughtful and sophisticated contributions from the world of journalism. Eric Levitz of *New York Magazine* and Vox has compiled evidence exploring the diploma divide and its potential causes.³⁹ Thomas Edsall of the *New York Times* has repeatedly highlighted data on growing educational divisions and the rise of the culture war.⁴⁰ Nate Cohn, also of the *Times*, has

illustrated how the diploma divide is changing both parties' internal composition.⁴¹ Will Bunch of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* has evaluated the role of higher education in creating the diploma divide and its consequences in turn for colleges and universities.⁴² Adam Harris of *The Atlantic* has explored the presence of existing social divisions and Trump's role in exacerbating them.⁴³ Each is attentive not only to recent voting trends, but also to wider cultural evolution.

Prominent journalists and media commentators sometimes suffer dismissive treatment from academics who jealously labor in relative anonymity. But they deserve substantial credit for identifying new political developments in their early stages and considering their implications for political outcomes. Descriptive analysis of trends in motion, which contemporary journalism often provides as well as or better than academic scholarship, is critical for stimulating research and advancing collective understanding – even if follow-up studies from social scientists uncover more nuance or complexity than media treatments initially recognize.

At the same time, the pundit world is often predisposed to interpret every change in the parties' constituencies, policy commitments, or relationship with other institutions through the lens of its potential effect on the next election. Second-guessing the strategic decisions of party leaders, especially on the Democratic side, is an evergreen pastime if not an outright cottage industry. Levitz argues that Democrats could have retained more support from white voters without college degrees by pursuing a more economically focused message, while Edsall believes they could have done so by moderating on cultural issues. John Judis and Ruy Teixeira echo both critiques, having evolved over two decades from forecasting an *Emerging Democratic Majority* to wondering *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*⁴⁴ Judis and Teixeira argue that Democrats mistakenly embraced left-wing social and cultural concerns rather than a populist economic agenda, achieving their expected gains among well-educated voters but losing crucial ground with the working class.

Others offer similar advice. Journalist Matthew Yglesias and consultant David Shor have become associated with the concept of “populism,” claiming that Democrats could improve their electoral fortunes by talking more about issues on which the public shares their policy preferences (and less about positions that provoke popular distrust). From the other side of the aisle, Republican pollster and consultant Patrick Ruffini likewise argues that Republicans are on firmer ground attacking the extremes of Democrats' social agenda than trying to resuscitate a conservative economic message.⁴⁵ These authors also uniformly note the potential decline of

Democratic loyalties among racial minority groups in the age of educational polarization, with Republicans sensing opportunities to build a more multi-racial base of popular support.

Perpetually anxious Democrats are reliably well-represented in the political media, but concerns that the diploma divide presents a new electoral challenge are not limited to a single party. Republican campaign strategists have repeatedly expressed frustration that the ascendance of Trumpism has damaged the GOP's popularity in well-educated suburban constituencies, and that Republican primary voters have repeatedly chosen flawed populist nominees who have proven to be weak general-election candidates in potentially competitive races.⁴⁶ After the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, visible tensions emerged between some Republicans who endorsed enacting strict state or national bans on abortion and others who worried that the issue would further erode their declining electoral support among college-educated voters – especially women – unless the GOP successfully cultivated a more moderate reputation.⁴⁷ Some consultants reportedly suggested that the party should overhaul its messaging approach on abortion policy to reassure voters that it did not favor extreme positions, even perhaps by abandoning its traditional “pro-life” label.⁴⁸

While we follow these debates with interest, we do not intend to enter them here. This book seeks to provide readers with a synthetic, wide-ranging, and empirically grounded analysis, not to direct judgments or prescriptions at either party. Rather than a venue for permanent triumphs or win-win propositions, the political world that we describe is dominated by tradeoffs, constraints, and backlashes. For Republicans, the benefits realized by gaining electoral support among white voters without college degrees must be weighed against the costs of declining institutional and cultural power; for Democrats, the price of achieving liberal social change has been the rise of a populist nationalism that they view with alarm. As our view expands beyond any specific political figure or outcome, we perceive a party system that is embedded in a larger society buffeted by historical and global trends, where the evolution of American culture proceeds independently of the results of American elections. In such a circumstance, even smart and capable strategic actors have a limited ability to command the forces shaping their fate.

OUR ARGUMENT

This book provides a comprehensive portrait of the transformative impact of increased educational attainment and cultural evolution on recent and current American politics. We argue that these changes have polarized the

national climate, fueling a culture war that not only dominates partisan competition but extends beyond elections to incorporate the discussions and institutions that define contemporary social life. They have precipitated a realignment of America's unique two-party system and the parties' extended networks of activists, interest groups, and media sources, creating a "diploma divide" that now plays a critical role in determining electoral outcomes, shaping internal party dynamics, and influencing the trust and operation of government, media, schools and universities, the nonprofit world, and the corporate sector.

Drawing from comparative research on global value change over the past several decades, we label the current age of American politics "two-party postmaterialism." Like other rich nations, the United States has been transformed by an increasingly educated sector of influential elites who endorse culturally progressive values and prioritize social causes over economic interests. And as in other world democracies, the growing power of white-collar professionals has provoked a backlash among less educated and older voters. But in the US, these international trends have been channeled through a distinctively rigid two-party system with no viable outlets beyond the hegemonic Democratic and Republican parties, forcing citizens and institutions seeking to navigate today's climate of social change to align – or be seen to align – with one side or the other in a perpetually bifurcated political conflict. The US is hardly the only nation that has experienced the emergence of leftward social shifts led by well-educated thought leaders or the rise of a populist counter-response on the right, but the distinctive nature of American partisanship has ensured that these developments have had especially polarizing consequences.

Both major parties have undergone a considerable, and underappreciated, evolution over the past two decades – a set of transformations that we characterize as the "Educultural Realignment." The pace of social change has inspired some voters and institutions to switch their partisan affiliations or sympathies while provoking others to cling even more devotedly to their existing loyalties, leaving few in the unattached middle ground. As both educational attainment and cultural liberalism have advanced across American society, these trends have encouraged the Democratic Party to embrace a combination of technocratic, expert-led governance and progressive social sensibilities that has simultaneously attracted college-educated metropolitan professionals and repelled degree-lacking whites, especially the residents of small towns or rural areas. The Republican Party has adapted by defining itself as the nation's most important and dedicated

opponent of globalization, cultural liberalization, and the rule of experts, scientists, and intellectuals.

Unlike archetypal “critical” realignments, this reordering of partisan constituencies occurred steadily but gradually over multiple elections. It has also been complicated by the continued presence of racial minorities, even those with modest educational experience, within the Democratic coalition. But in an era of consistently narrow national elections for both the presidency and Congress, the impact of these changes on electoral results can be decisive when filtered through America’s geographically defined electoral system.

Several conservative critics have recently referred to the current prevalence of cultural progressivism within the educational, media, nonprofit, and corporate realms as the ripening payoff of a planned 50-year “long march through the institutions” led by a cadre of neo-Marxist activists.⁴⁹ According to this argument, the New Left of the 1960s organized an ultimately successful effort to implant its adherents and ideas within the traditional organs of the American establishment. We agree with these observers that liberal values increasingly predominate within universities, mainstream media outlets, nonprofits, and large private companies. In fact, we view these developments as an important component of the Educultural Realignment that extends beyond voting patterns and electoral outcomes. A complete account of the two parties’ contemporary constituencies and sources of influence requires acknowledging that Republicans and Democrats now maintain sharply contrasting relationships with major social institutions that exist outside the apparatus of government itself.

But we argue that the prevalence of progressive values within these organizations is not the product of a leftist infiltration or capture from outside. Instead, it reflects the changing political alignments evident among the kinds of people – well-educated white-collar professionals and managers – who are especially likely to gain positions of social leadership and influence. These figures’ promotion of left-of-center political values – often moderated or communicated via symbolic expressions designed to placate peers, employees, or patrons – must normally remain compatible with capitalist practices and other institutional priorities; indeed, modern liberalism has been transformed by its current institutional alignments just as these institutions have been influenced by liberal ideology. Such trends are also not unique to the United States, reflecting larger forces of global social change. Rather than a triumphant conquering invasion of formerly hostile territory by a battalion of leftist activists, we characterize this trend as a “long slog of the institutions” through a political minefield where these

organizations' internal and external incentives to adopt progressive cultural policies have also reduced trust among, and provoked attacks from, suspicious populists on the right.

Although the magnitude of American society's leftward ideological shift since the 1980s has not always been sufficiently acknowledged – especially by progressive beneficiaries who remain preoccupied with the battles they have yet to win – liberals correctly note that the conservative movement retains substantial political power that is often wielded at their expense. Conservatives have often declined to respond to the liberal dominance of professional, academic, and creative communities by attempting to contest progressive ideas with equally intellectual counterarguments or by amassing rival scientific evidence intended to persuade neutral observers of the objective superiority of conservative beliefs. Instead, they prefer to use their control of government offices in red states and during Republican presidential administrations to attack the institutional bases of their perceived political enemies.

We summarize this trend on the American right as “power without credibility.” With the notable exception of the conservative legal movement, which requires sympathetic academic scholarship to generate the logical and evidentiary justifications for the doctrines and judicial opinions necessary to advance its goals within the norms of jurisprudential reasoning, the contemporary right has largely declined to contest liberal elites on their own terms.⁵⁰ Instead, conservative activists seek to discredit or defund expert communities, and the larger structures in which they reside, from their perches within alternative platforms with openly ideological sympathies while declining to pursue the achievement of objective intellectual or scientific authority.

Some conservative leaders have lamented their lack of success in turning the cultural tides in their direction, and expressed concern that this failure ultimately limits the long-term potential of the right's political project. For example, the late writer and publisher Andrew Breitbart famously argued that “politics is downstream from culture.”⁵¹ This view might seem to identify gaining influence within mainstream cultural institutions as a necessary first step to winning political battles. But Breitbart, like many of his colleagues in the conservative movement, devoted his energies to stoking outrage among existing supporters via red-meat, tabloid-style content rather than attempting to build a high-achieving alternative journalistic enterprise that could compete with the news-gathering capacity of NBC or the *New York Times* – just as no true conservative counterpart exists for major liberal-dominated social institutions like prestigious universities or the

entertainment industry. Conservative critics correctly observe that many important sources of cultural status and influence are unsympathetic to their beliefs and aligned with their political opponents, but their responses to this disadvantage – including the election of Trump to the presidency as an outspoken critic of the liberal establishment – do not promise to solve it.

Our account provides an alternative to traditional theories of America's partisan landscape that predict sudden but occasional political realignments or describe the current era as marked by a self-reinforcing polarized stasis built on impenetrable and immovable partisan loyalties. As we will show, the constituencies, rhetoric, and priorities of both major parties have changed gradually but significantly over the past several decades. Americans are sorting themselves along the lines of their differing cultural views, but they are not simply exhibiting deference to the pronouncements of their party leaders. Instead, international educational and cultural trends have taken a unique form in the United States, causing some citizens to rethink their partisan attachments while transforming the images of the parties and the perceived stakes of the competition between them – and turning nearly every political, social, and institutional controversy into a new front in an ongoing culture war.

This reframing provides a fresh perspective that reconciles the seeming contradiction between the social change we see around us and the supposed entrenchment of today's partisan and ideological divisions. Americans are not merely stuck in a steady state of ossified partisanship, nor have they undergone a single climactic reordering of their political preferences in any single recent election – even those, like 2008 or 2016, that were often viewed at the time as revolutionary, “game-changing” events. Instead, the nation has experienced a complex and dynamic interplay of societal transformations and established political structures. Increasing educational attainment and leftward cultural shifts have brought critical changes to American politics, while the nation's two-party system serves as a filter that shapes how these changes are expressed and their consequences for the governing choices of political leaders.

In the chapters that follow, we explain how the increasing global importance of education has taken a unique path toward influencing politics and society via the distinctive American two-party system. We provide a new analysis of the unique coalitions and objectives on each side of America's foundational political conflicts, but we reject the assumption that contemporary polarization has eliminated voters' openness to changing partisan sides. Instead, we show how the increased salience of educational attainment and cultural concerns has helped polarize the political

climate alongside liberalizing trends, transforming the economy and broader society in the process.

The growing diploma divide has left its influence on electoral outcomes, internal party disputes, the operation of government, and the behavior of universities, media companies, scientific communities, nonprofit associations, major corporations, and other social institutions. The consequences of a nation that is increasingly “polarized by degrees” extend to public policy, affecting how the United States will handle current political subjects such as the environment, education, and public health – all major issues on which credentialed experts and populist voices sharply disagree. Rather than providing one side with an enduring advantage in both winning elections and governing successfully, the educational divide has reinforced each party’s unique qualities but redefined their political styles.

This book is primarily an analysis of trends in progress. It accounts for changing social and political dynamics by identifying larger patterns within, and connections among, both mass and elite politics and both the public and private sectors – but it does not aspire to provide a comprehensive test of a new abstract theory. Our evidence is drawn from journalism, history, and popular culture as well as traditional social science data, and our analysis takes a broad perspective, sacrificing some of the specificity that comes with a narrower focus. We also seek to take advantage of the increasing cross-pollination between popular commentary and academic scholarship, benefiting from the arguments and evidence gathered by the new breed of data-conscious but practical journalists who have embraced our discipline.

But our preference for the big picture also provides a contrast with the common tendency of media coverage – and, sometimes, academic research as well – to become preoccupied with the results of the most recent election, interpreting American politics through the lens of individual personalities and temporary fluctuations in the parties’ relative popularity with voters. The Democrats and Republicans have traded electoral victories and tenures in power frequently over our period of study, and while many of these contests have had important consequences, the central elements of our story have progressed during the arrival and departure of multiple candidates, presidential administrations, and congressional majorities. We aim to provide a view of contemporary politics that includes critical social and historical context, placing the charged partisan battles and sharply distinct approaches to governing that dominate today’s political world in a wide panoramic landscape of social, cultural, and institutional transformation.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Over the course of the following chapters, *Polarized by Degrees* moves from documenting the impact of rising educational attainment and cultural liberalism on national parties and electoral coalitions to exploring their broader consequences for institutions, policymaking, and the social climate of the United States. Chapter 2 dives deeper into the two major social trends that motivate our analysis. It examines the steady growth and benefits of educational experience in the US, as well as the liberalization of American society since the relatively conservative 1980s – a movement led by the increasingly progressive values of the highly educated and culturally influential. These trends are largely global and only partially reflect the religious differences that some analysts previously foresaw as fueling cultural conflicts. The American culture war has taken a long leftward turn, but that does not mean either side has given up the fight.

Chapter 3 explores the effects of these developments on the American party system. Both Democrats and Republicans have responded to a changing society by adapting their issue agenda and public image. Democratic politicians have gradually abandoned their instinctive reluctance to alienate socially traditionalist voting blocs in the face of growing pressure from internal constituencies to adopt a reputation for cultural progressivism, intellectual erudition, and demographic diversity. Republicans have been compelled to defer to a popular conservative media universe that promotes aversion to social transformation and hostility to claims of expertise by non-conservative authorities. Both Barack Obama (the wonky advocate of social change) and Donald Trump (the plain-spoken, nostalgic nemesis of experts) serve as symbolic contemporary personifications of their respective parties, attracting some new voters into their partisan tents while repelling some previous supporters toward the opposition.

Chapter 4 explores the diploma divide's consequences for electoral competition and outcomes. The movement of college-educated citizens into the Democratic Party and the defection of less educated whites to the Republicans represent the most important changes in the parties' popular constituencies in a generation. Drawing on evidence from opinion surveys, election returns, and demographic data, Chapter 4 documents the parties' changing electoral and geographic bases of support. These trends continued in the 2020 election despite Democratic efforts to reverse the party's declining popularity among white voters without college degrees, and some signs have emerged that the diploma divide may be starting to spread to other racial and ethnic groups as well. Democrats may suffer a structural

disadvantage because the Electoral College and apportionment of the Senate grants noncollege whites disproportionate voting power, but they may benefit in lower turnout elections in which well-educated voters are overrepresented. The growing numbers of college-educated citizens and racial minorities will also limit Republican victories unless the party can cut into Democratic support among these constituencies.

Chapter 5 investigates the influence of these increasing party differences beyond electoral politics, focusing on the divergence of partisan attitudes toward educators, journalists, and scientists – as well as the social institutions in which these professions are situated. Republicans direct increasing hostility at schools and universities, teachers, professors, and students, with conservative media increasingly portraying the educational system as a bastion of radical leftism. Intellectual opinion journalism has become more influential among liberals over time, exemplified by new online ventures and increased permeability between media and academia, while traditional venues for conservative discourse have lost influence to more populist and anti-intellectual platforms. Republican voters no longer trust mainstream journalists and scientists to deliver unbiased information, preferring to accept and promote the claims of overtly ideological alternative sources. The advancing strength of cultural liberalism is also apparent in the world of nonprofit associations and advocacy organizations, which increasingly align with the Democratic Party and promote the progressive political values popular among white-collar professionals.

Chapter 6 demonstrates how the changing social and cultural trends of recent years have significantly complicated one of the most venerable institutional alliances in American politics: the traditional partnership between corporate interests and Republican politicians. While many business leaders continue to favor conservative economic policies, the technocratic and culturally progressive ethos of the contemporary Democratic Party has increasingly permeated the internal governance and external engagement of major corporations as politicized professions such as compliance, lobbying, and public relations have expanded. Rising educational standards in the workforce have increased the presence of experts throughout the economy, leading to corporate processes that more closely resemble bureaucracies and stakeholder policymaking, with a growing emphasis on culturally liberal values such as diversity, representation, and social responsibility. But populist skepticism among conservative voters has encouraged Republican politicians to attack “wokeness” in the corporate sector

and even threaten the government-provided benefits enjoyed by corporations that impose progressive internal policies or publicly endorse liberal cultural causes, straining the long-standing alignment between big business and the GOP.

In Chapter 7, our analysis turns to the formulation and execution of public policy. Democrats prize substantive experts when staffing the executive branch while Republicans prefer political operatives and professional communicators. But across the issue spectrum, policies are increasingly complicated and technical, requiring knowledge of many previous rounds of institution-building and policymaking. New social problems require complex policy tools, often led by intellectuals and the research they produce. We present three case studies of policymaking domains – public health (COVID-19 response), environmental regulation (climate change amelioration), and education policy (public university governance) – in which credentialed specialists and technical analysts play a growing role in policy creation and implementation. In all three areas, Republicans are increasingly suspicious of expert communities, seeing them as dominated by liberals seeking to advance their ideological values under the guise of technocratic governance.

Chapter 8 concludes our analysis with a broader survey of the state of American politics and culture. The prevailing direction of social change has produced an increasingly complicated, diverse, and progressive national climate that has mostly worked to benefit the well-educated professionals who are best equipped to navigate its evolving incentives, norms, and structures. Citizens who feel alienated or threatened by these trends have responded by launching a resentful barrage of political attacks at a disfavored liberal establishment via an increasingly antisystem Republican Party. This reaction has further reduced conservatism's intellectual credibility among well-educated elites, but academic experts' urgent warnings about the populist right's discomfort with multicultural democracy may only further intensify the distrust they provoke among American conservatives. At the same time, a political movement that has adopted Trump and Trump-style figures as its leaders will find little success in winning back support within the ranks of credentialed professionals and the institutions they populate. Like other manifestations of polarization, this dynamic is self-perpetuating and difficult to reverse once in motion.

As the main axis of partisan and ideological competition in America shifts from economic to cultural differences, the scope of popular politics grows ever larger. After all, culture is everywhere. Aspects of daily life

that once contained little political resonance, such as consumers' choice of entertainment, refreshment, or recreation, now routinely hold considerable symbolic or identity-based importance and serve as fodder for political expression and conflict. As a result, it has seldom been more difficult to understand American politics without acknowledging its interconnections with the wider vista of an evolving and complexifying American society.