



Political
Foundations of
State Capacity

NISKANEN C E N T E R

HOW DEMOCRACIES REVIVE

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The Niskanen Center is a 501(c)3 issue advocacy organization that works to change public policy through direct engagement in the policymaking process.

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I. Introduction

In 2022, it is no longer difficult to envision the downfall of American democracy. To a growing number of commentators and analysts, this demise almost feels inevitable. If “January 6 was practice” for an authoritarian takeover (as the headline of a December Atlantic article warned us), next time could be for real.¹

This essay makes the case for resisting the prevailing pessimism. While the threats are obviously real, the prevailing zeitgeist of a downward spiral should, counter-intuitively, be seen as a sign for optimism. Before we can rebuild our democracy, we first have to acknowledge that it is, in fact, falling apart. And we are indeed starting to realize this – hence the pervasive panic, that repeated prerequisite for reform. This is why I am ultimately optimistic. And why you should be, too.

In this essay, I will seek out some lessons from history that should inform our optimism. Though much is unique about our current impasse, much is also familiar. All democracies have ups and downs. American democracy has had ups and downs. We are in a “down.” And some “downs” last a long time. But they never last forever. Thus, the first lesson of history — “the inevitability of course change” — is perhaps the most obvious. Each generation is a reaction to the previous generation. But if the first lesson of history seems obvious, we keep forgetting it. Thus, the second lesson is “the illusion of course continuation.” That is, just as course change is inevitable, so is it almost equally inevitable that we forget this, and delude ourselves into thinking we have somehow escaped the broader patterns of history.

Time and again, we mistakenly predict that we have reached some new stage that will somehow last for centuries (e.g., we are at the “End of x” or “This time is really different” or Yale economist Irving Fisher’s September 1929 conclusion that “stock prices have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau”²). Time and again, we mistakenly make straight-line projections about markets or demographics or politics, assuming that whatever trends have led us to this moment, they will continue indefinitely. But they never do.

One way to think about this is that history never moves in straight lines, but in waves, undulating in inevitable though unpredictable ups and downs of varying magnitudes. Yet, we as humans have a difficult time understanding exponential change. In calculus terms, we think in terms of first derivatives (steady rates of change), rather than second derivatives (changing rates of changes). Thus, in periods in which change is slow, we should expect it will eventually speed up. And when change speeds up, we should expect it will eventually change direction. Or put another way, it is in periods where things seem all too quiet that we should expect trouble ahead. And it is in periods where it feels like we are rapidly careening towards trouble that we should expect a much more fundamental change ahead. But mostly we don’t, because our brains are not hard-wired to think this way.

But precisely because most of us don’t think this way, the future belongs to those who can squint ahead a few years and invest their time and energy towards productive and creative disruptions

1. Barton Gellman, “Trump’s next coup has already begun,” The Atlantic, Dec. 6, 2022.

2. “Fisher Sees Stocks Permanently High,” New York Times, Oct. 16, 1929.

– just as those with the courage to buy during wild market sell-offs can get rich.

Thus, a third lesson: “The disrupters write the future.” That is, when a political system is ossified and atrophied and ready for change, those who force the change get to define the future. Those who have the change forced on them wind up like the *ancien régime*. But to disrupt the status quo requires both a bold optimism about longer-term possibilities and a commensurate willingness to gamble on the shorter term. This, in particular, is far too rare in our contemporary politics, so focused on always winning the “next” election.

We are in a destructive cycle, what I’ve called a “doom loop” — and unless we take some forceful but thoughtful actions to break that, it will get worse.³

Any disruption of the status quo will feel risky, but whether we like it or not, it’s already being done. It’s just a question of how, by whom, and with what goals in mind. The MAGA faction is disrupting our political order. This is their stated goal.⁴ They are willing to suffer short-term losses by running radical candidates in order to heighten the contradictions for long-term gains. And they are succeeding. The events of January 6 only strengthened their hold, because it showed how far they were willing to go, and it forced fellow Republicans to choose sides. Which they clearly have. As of February 2022, the official position of the RNC is that the events that led to January 6 were “legitimate political discourse” and that the two Republicans who have participated in the House committee investigating the day’s events (Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger) should be repudiated by the party because they were engaging in “the persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse.”⁵

The MAGA faction has no vision of what it wants to build. It just wants to tear it all down. This is disruption for the sake of disruption. But it may serve one positive function – it may destroy the status quo beyond repair, thus opening up the potential for real transformation.

So what does positive disruption look like? I will make proposals for changing our existing electoral and party system — I favor a more proportional, multiparty system. This may strike some as radical. But I would ask those who think of themselves as conservative to ask what they are trying to conserve at this point. If the goal is to renew liberal democracy in the United States and bolster its resilience against future threats, preserving the now-pathological status quo is the surest path to failure.

Others may ask, why not focus on economics or culture or media? These are important as well,

If the goal is to renew liberal democracy in the United States and bolster its resilience against future threats, preserving the now-pathological status quo is the surest path to failure.

3. Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (Oxford UP, 2020).

4. See, e.g., Nicholas Riccardi, “[“Slow-motion insurrection”: How GOP seizes election power.](#)” Associated Press, Dec. 30, 2021; Amy Gardner et al., “[Trump allies work to place supporters in key election posts across the country, spurring fears about future vote challenges.](#)” Washington Post, Nov. 29, 2021.

5. Jonathan Weisman and Reid J. Epstein, “[G.O.P. Declares Jan. 6 Attack ‘Legitimate Political Discourse,’](#)” New York Times, Feb. 4, 2022.

and there are plenty of valuable proposals in these areas. However, these domains are all shaped by partisan political conflict. And though electoral institutions are difficult to change, they are still easier to change than these other forces, and offer the greatest points of leverage.

II. It can't happen here

The sudden rise of Donald Trump came as a surprise to almost every political analyst. Likewise, the decline of American democracy was not conventional wisdom until recently.

After all, liberal democracy still seemed on solid ground even in 2015 — both in the United States and across similarly prosperous and educated Western democracies. The reigning theory was that once democracy became “consolidated” and the “only game in town,” it would last. Perhaps the long period of post-World War II democratic stability and the collapse of communism as an alternative even signaled a new phase in human history. Perhaps this time really was different. Perhaps the big ideological conflicts about how to structure society were now settled in favor of liberal democracy and market capitalism, and now it was just a matter of technocratic management on the margins.⁶

This is the “illusion of course continuation.” In retrospect, we should have, of course, seen the downfall coming as the GOP became more and more radical. But the illusion was that the Republican moderates could manage and constrain this disruptive populism, as they had in the past, and that the relatively placid bipartisanship of the 1970s and 1980s was still the norm to which we would eventually return.

After January 6, we are in a world in which it feels impossible to go back. Yet, it seems equally difficult to envision things getting better. Are we succumbing to the same “illusion of course continuation?” Only now, the linear trend looks like it is heading straight for disaster. But again, the rate at which the rate of change itself changes (the second derivative) is never stable. Just as downward spirals seem to happen suddenly (because we can't intuitively grasp nonlinear change), so they also can turn around quickly (again, because we can't intuitively grasp nonlinear change). If the future were predictable, Soviet-style five-year plans would have been a great success.

III. American democracy is over

There's plenty of reason to be pessimistic. After all, liberal democracy depends on a shared foundation of free and fair elections, in which parties and partisans recognize their political opponents as legitimate, and in which all competing parties and all voters are treated fairly and equally, and in which violence is not tolerated. When parties refuse to recognize their opposition as legitimate, endorse violence (even implicitly), refuse to concede elections, and rewrite the rules to make it harder for their political opponents to win, democracy collapses.⁷

6. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). See also Russell Jacoby, *The End Of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

7. Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown, 2018.

Collapse happens under conditions of intense partisan polarization, in which the stakes of elections feel high enough that political leaders feel justified in taking these actions and are confident that their supporters will come along with them because winning has become the most important thing.

And this is what is happening in U.S. politics right now.

This kind of “pernicious polarization” is hard to escape. It has a “doom loop” quality — that is, escalation begets escalation.⁸ As the fight grows, it is harder and harder to sit on the sidelines. As everyone gets into the fray and picks sides, the political middle collapses. Distrust, fear, and loathing reign. Compromise becomes impossible. And because the stakes feel so high, political hardball escalates until one side becomes fully illiberal. Once that happens, democracy falls into competitive authoritarianism, or just “dies.”

It doesn’t take much imagination to see how it really could happen here. Republicans running on stop-the-steal platforms win key statewide offices in the 2022 midterms and the GOP cements partisan control over elections. Then, it won’t matter how many votes Trump (or DeSantis, or another Republican nominee) gets in 2024. As long as it’s close (and it almost certainly will be), Republican officials can declare a share of Democratic votes fraudulent and declare Trump the winner. And if there’s a dispute, a Republican-controlled House can settle it in the Republicans’ favor.

The scenario is plausible enough. But then what? Presumably there would be massive protests. Presumably a second Trump administration (or similar figure) would attempt to crush the protests. The darkest scenarios would envision the Republicans going full authoritarian, cracking down on civil liberties, using the coercive powers of the state to take over media and intimidate business. But who knows? Other scenarios envision the regime falling apart amid corrupt infighting, policy overreach, governance failures, and the kind of self-immolation that brings on realignment-level backlash.

Though many scenarios seem possible, it takes particular imagination to envision things getting better before they get worse. Given the rise of violent rhetoric, particularly on the political right, and the extent to which Republicans have embraced both the Big Lie and fascist gestalt that goes with it, it’s hard to see to the other side of this.

But envisioning such a future is precisely what we must do. After all, nothing goes on forever.

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8. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, “Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (January 2019): 234–71.

In the study of revolutions⁹ it is not the widespread immiseration of the poor that casts the die. That is a near-constant in many societies. It is instead, the decision by a group of outsider political elites to mobilize discontent and thus transform dissatisfaction into change. Generally, a society on the verge of a major change is a society in which economic inequality is high, and a large group of aspiring elites fear being pushed out of political power. It is precisely in these moments — in which the dysfunction of the current political system becomes clear to dissatisfied elites — that the impetus for political change takes over. And what had been a problem for many years — economic inequality, political alienation — suddenly becomes a problem with a *solution*.

Is this where we are? Certainly the moment feels ripe for change. It's clear our democracy is falling apart, and it's clear that this downfall will push many aspiring elites out of power. Authoritarianism does not leave much room for coalition politics. But who will come forward with a solution?

IV. History tells us the future will be different — but how?

Let now us stipulate that the crisis of American democracy is likely to get worse in the next few years. Two questions follow: How much worse, and for how long?

Periods of crisis are periods of contingency; the range of potential outcomes expands. This is why, for example, the question of what might have happened if Abraham Lincoln hadn't been assassinated is far more interesting than the question of what might have happened if James Garfield hadn't been assassinated. 1865 was a hinge moment, in which American political development could have gone in many potential directions. By 1881, the basic contours of American politics were largely settled for the time, and specific leaders mattered less.

This idea of long periods of stasis interspersed with short bursts of change is captured in the theory of “punctuated equilibrium” as applied to politics, developed by Frank Baumgartner, Bryan Jones, and a large and ever-expanding list of collaborators.¹⁰ The idea comes from biology, and the observation that evolution is not a gradual process, but marked by “explosions” in which environmental stresses impose intense natural selection pressures and leave behind major changes in the fossil record. But in more stable periods, the fossil record is relatively unchanged.

In complex systems, the concept of “criticality” captures this idea of sharp changes. Many systems operate on the edge of a “critical” change. A classic metaphor is a sandpile. As one adds grains of sand to a sandpile, the chances of an avalanche increase, even as the pile remains stable. Individual avalanches are unpredictable in any moment. But in a system in which one is steadily adding sand, avalanches will happen with some regularity.¹¹

The old adage about war sums up this idea of sudden change following long stasis well: “long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.” Or, perhaps even better, Ernest

9. John Foran, “Theories of Revolution Revisited: Toward a Fourth Generation?” *Sociological Theory* 11, no. 1 (March 1993): 1–20; Jack A. Goldstone, “Theories of Revolution: The Third Generation,” *World Politics* 32 (3): 425–53; Peter Turchin, “Dynamics of Political Instability in the United States, 1780–2010,” *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 4 (July 1, 2012): 577–91.

10. Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

11. Per Bak, *How Nature Works: The Science of Self-Organized Criticality*, (Copernicus, 1999).

Hemingway's classic line (from *The Sun Also Rises*): "How did you go bankrupt? Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly."

The basic principle at work here is that most systems have some amount of friction that prevents continuous change and maintains a status quo despite ongoing pressure. In governing, for example, it would make little sense to rewrite all public policy each year in response to the whims of public opinion, or the vagaries of consumer sentiment, just as it would make little sense for any of us to wake up every single morning and reevaluate all of our life choices. We can't, and shouldn't, hold elections every single day.

But even as policies and leaders and party platforms stay more or less the same, over time, major socioeconomic and cultural forces shift. And the more they drift from the existing frameworks of public policy and party platforms, the more pressure builds up for change. But because the U.S. is a two-party system, it is far more resistant to gradual adjustments, compared to systems in which parties can come and go more easily. It is this top-level stability that frequently lulls analysts into thinking politics has reached some kind of permanent stage, even as pressure builds below the surface.

In the study of American political development, certain years have long been considered as "critical" election years: 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, 1932. In such elections, the fundamental party structure "realigned" and a new "party system" formed, holding together until the next critical election, in which a new issue split one or both of the major parties and a new governing regime came to dominate. Though these elections reflect pressures that have been building up for a while, the historical moments of change stand in as the hinge-points of history — a key moment that stands in for a broader historical turning.

Perhaps the civil rights revolution of the 1960s ended the fifth party system, and after a strange interregnum of scrambled identities in the 1970s that looked like depolarization, the Reagan "revolution" really did usher in the sixth party system. If so, its 30-40-year lifespan should be ending, and a new, realigning party system is ready to emerge, capitalizing on the tensions within the existing parties.¹²

Typically, these moments of partisan realignment have revolved around intra- rather than inter-party fights, since they depend on new dominant issue dimensions to reshape partisan conflict.

Perhaps the rise of economic populism cutting across both parties suggests the possibility of a future significant rift. Perhaps the collapse of "neoliberalism" and the failure of both left and right to offer anything in its place other than an incoherent hodgepodge of legacy ideas signals a shift. Like party systems, the basic rules of democracy in the U.S. also go through seismic moments of change after long periods of relative stasis, and for similar reasons. Again, the U.S. political system is uniquely resistant to change, with just two parties and more veto points than any other system. Lots of checks and balances mean pressures build up over time and so when changes come, they come in waves.

12. Chris Vance, "[The Seventh Party System](#)," Niskanen Center, Jan. 12, 2021..

Broadly, the basic rules of American democracy have evolved through four waves of ever-expanding participatory inclusion: The War for Independence, the expansion of the franchise in the Jacksonian Era, the Progressive Era (direct primary, direct elections of senators, initiative and referendum, women's suffrage), and then the voting rights and good government era (1965-1974, from the Voting Rights Act to the Federal Election Campaign Act).

In each era, deep dissatisfaction with the unfairness and corruption of the existing rules gave way to a period of reinvention, in which the fundamental bargain of American democracy adapted to changing social values and expectations about how a modern democracy should live up to its core values of “liberty, individualism, equality, popular control of government.” I’m borrowing this framework from Sam Huntington, who chronicled this cycle in his 1981 book, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. In these reform eras, what Huntington calls “creedal passion” dominates. (“Creedal passion” is his term for a mood of moralizing reform that draws on America’s founding creed.)

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In such eras, Huntington wrote, “Discontent was widespread; authority, hierarchy, specialization, and expertise were widely questioned or rejected.” ; “Political ideas were taken seriously and played an important role in the controversies of the time.” ; “Politics was characterized by agitation, excitement, commotion, even upheaval — far beyond the usual routine of interest-group conflict.” ; “New media forms appeared, significantly increasing the influence of the media in politics.”

In most respects, these descriptions very much fit today’s politics, and given that we’re on schedule with the rough cyclical timeline, we are likely in for another transition moment of democracy reform.

And in each era, the results followed a consistent pattern. “Political participation expanded, often assuming new forms and often expressed through hitherto unusual channels.” ; “Major reforms were attempted in political institutions in order to limit power and reshape institutions in terms of American ideals (some of which were successful and some of which were lasting).” ; “A basic realignment occurred in the relations between social forces and political institutions, often including but not limited to the political party system.”¹³

Like the party system cycle, the democracy reform cycle has an internal logic. A reform fervor only lasts so long. Some reforms get passed. Things improve enough, though perhaps not as much as reformers might have hoped. An era of stability and complacency sets in. But complacency breeds corruption and hypocrisy. And corruption and hypocrisy stimulate a new era of reform.

In their 2020 book *The Upswing*, Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett offer another take on these oscillations. They posit the “I-we-I” cycle, in which America shifts between periods of

13. Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1981).

individualism and periods of communitarianism, between periods in which personal liberty is the most important pursuit and periods in which a search for common purpose binds the nation together. From the height of individualism in the Gilded Age, America turned towards collective purpose, first in the Progressive Era, and then in the New Deal. But by the 1960s, the excessive “we” of consensus grew stifling, and the new generation sought to liberate itself. Thus, the turn towards personal freedom and individualism was a natural response to too much community. But if each period is a reaction to the previous period, perhaps our current era, with its hyperindividualism and loss of collective purpose, is awaiting a turn back towards the communitarian — just as the Progressive Era was a reaction to the “Social Darwinism” and social inequalities and injustices that defined the late 19th century “Gilded Age.”¹⁴

Like today, the end of the 19th century was a dizzying period of corporate consolidation, growing inequality, partisan polarization, social dislocations, an influx of immigrants, and new technologies that changed how people lived and connected to each other (first railroads, then the telephone), and how people learned about the world around them (the rise of national mass-circulation magazines). Individuals reacted to the dislocations and injustices by organizing for social, economic, and political change, both at the local and national level.

These cyclical theories are variations on the same underlying observation: societies are complex systems, and oscillate between sustained periods of order punctuated by shorter periods of disorder. All equilibria are temporary; all institutional and ideological arrangements solve one set of problems only to create a new set of problems a generation later; all movements go too far. Thus each period is a reaction to the excesses of previous periods. The more any complex system postpones change, the more dramatic the eventual transformation — and the more that change catches us by surprise. That’s because the longer the run, the more easily we are lulled into thinking this time really is different.

V. The Progressive Era’s lessons

What made political reform possible in the Progressive Era but not in the Civil War era? The simple answer is that the conflicts of the Progressive Era were multidimensional, cutting across parties and existing identities. There was no one all-encompassing conflict, but instead a scramble, in which coalitions were ever-changing. The reformers took on many targets at once, and their crusades didn’t fit neatly into national partisan politics. It was precisely this uncertainty that shook up the party coalitions, paving the way for a wide variety of structural reforms.

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14. Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).

The Civil War, by contrast, was one great, national, all-encompassing fight. The conflict had been suppressed for many decades prior through a series of “compromises” that proved unsustainable, setting off crises and radicalizing the two sides. It was a kind of doom loop that took four bloody years to eventually resolve.

To be sure, the relative success of the Progressive Era did not come about because the Progressives planned it this way. It had far more to do with the extent to which many of the causes they engaged were more local than national, and the way their focus on economic reforms cut across sectional divides.

Two additional key lessons of the Progressive Era are that it adopted 1) a bottom-up approach to political organizing (which kept politics much more multidimensional); and 2) a utopian vision for the future (an alternative to the pessimism that might have otherwise dominated a period of “a fierce discontent,” to borrow the title of Michael McGerr’s history of the era.¹⁵

Then, as now, many citizens had lost faith in the major institutions of society, above all the major political parties. By taking a more bottom-up approach, often focusing on solving local problems, citizens learned to work together, to feel powerful, and to develop an ethos of democracy as collective problem-solving. They formed new organizations devoted to new problems, and organized new political parties to raise new issues.

There was, as historians have observed, no single Progressive “movement” — rather, Progressivism was more of an ethos — a faith that society should and could be better, and that it was incumbent on citizens to work together to build towards a more just country. It was, as the historian Daniel Rodgers described, “an era of shifting, ideologically fluid, issue-focused coalitions, all competing for the reshaping of American society.”¹⁶

This faith in a more just society was crucial. Progressives believed a better, fairer world was possible. Despite the many disparate and sometimes competing reform projects that made up the era, “optimism” was a common thread.

As a recent review of the psychological literature confirms, this forward-looking view is central.

Utopian thinking – imagining better societies – is one of the keys to unlocking the potential for collective action ... Utopian thinking activates, catalyzes, and reshapes the social imagination, defined as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”¹⁷

In short, in order to act, we need to feel that change is possible. The alternative, a kind of learned

15. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

16. Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 113–32.

17. Vivienne Badaa et al., “Imagining Better Societies: A Social Psychological Framework for the Study of Utopian Thinking and Collective Action,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14, no. 4 (April 2020).

helplessness driven by pessimism, is deeply demobilizing. By focusing on a better future, Progressive thinkers helped make it possible.

An obvious limit of utopian thinking is that it is easy to take things too far. There is, of course, a delicate balance. A vision must be compelling enough to motivate people, but also make realistic assumptions about human behavior.

In this respect, Progressives made one important mistake. They overestimated the ability of citizens to engage in independent, reasoned debate, and stay engaged, and they overestimated the ability of citizens to govern themselves without strong intermediary institutions.

In wresting power from existing institutional structures, most of all political parties, they failed to build new institutional structures to organize and structure politics, and put excessive faith in the values of “nonpartisanship” and “expertise.” Unfortunately, some reformers are once again making the mistake of focusing on nonpartisanship, and counting on “independent” citizens to somehow bring reason and rationality to politics. One can see this approach, for example, in the movement for nonpartisan open primaries, which makes many of the same category errors about politics as the Progressives did 120 years ago.

Democrats also make this mistake when they think they can win elections on good policy alone. This assumes that there is some set of hyper-rational, informed voters who evaluate policy and then vote accordingly. But this is not and has never been the case. Politics is always a game of coalition-building among identity groups, and in modern mass democracy, political parties are the central organizing forces doing this work.

That takes us to more specific reforms.

VI. Writing the future

If the key to Progressive reform was many overlapping issue-based conflicts, the leading cause of violent breakdown is a flattening of conflict and a collapse of dimensionality. It is the same process that drives breakdowns in all kinds of complex systems.¹⁸

A recent series of articles applying complexity science to the challenge of partisan polarization all reached a similar conclusion. Once binary partisan polarization takes hold, it can become irreversible without a major, major external shock to realign the system. The basic dynamics of partisan polarization that sort people into two competing camps take on a very strong self-reinforcing dynamic, with amplifying “attraction-repulsion” dynamics, thus making depolarization impossible. As Jenna Bednar explains, “Neither individual commitment to democratic norms nor elite

18. As Samuel S.-H. Wang and co-authors write, “Critical transitions in a variety of phenomena may have early warning indicators that include slowing down, increased variance, and skewness, and may be seen in phenomena as diverse as market crashes and avalanches. Of particular note as a forerunner to critical transitions is a collapse of dimension, calling to mind the current low dimensionality of U.S. politics.” Samuel S.-H. Wang et al., “A Systems Framework for Remedying Dysfunction in U.S. Democracy,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 50 (December 14, 2021).

moderation can restore bipartisanship.”¹⁹

Instead, the only way out is to realign the conflict by increasing the number of sides. As Bednar writes,

Almost by definition, multipolarity supports a more complex information space and greater diversity. It is possible that multipolarity would reduce some of the extreme outcomes; even better, from the viewpoint of democracy, is that multipolarity would encourage the cross-cutting cleavages and other forms of complex alliance formation and information exchange that support compromise.²⁰

If flattening of conflict to a single, binary, us-versus-them dimension is toxic for democracy, there is only one remedy: To add more conflict, hoping to increase the dimensionality and scramble the sides. Incrementalism is unlikely to succeed. Instead, as Scott Page writes, summarizing the articles in the special issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on “Complexity and Polarization,” “So what is to be done? How do we escape our current situation? First, we must be aware of why we cannot chip away at this problem. We must take substantial action.”²¹

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A traditional think tank approach would be to come up with a clever policy synthesis that is neither left nor right, but borrows from both, or to put together an “odd bedfellows” coalition, like the one that came together around prison reform.²² But these coalitions are hard to sustain, and few issues can escape the maw of partisan polarization.²³

That’s because the core problem is not disagreement on issues, or even ideology. The core problem is that politics has become about winning and losing, because partisan politics is a fight between two “mega-identities” — Democrats and Republicans.²⁴

The challenge is to find new identities that can scramble these categories. Therefore we need new political parties — or at least new intermediary organizations that can elevate new identities that might shake up political coalitions. These could be more local identities. In particular, there would be tremendous value in organizing new factions in states or cities with solid one-party rule.

19. Jenna Bednar, “Polarization, Diversity, and Democratic Robustness,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 50 (December 14, 2021).

20. Bednar, “Polarization.”

21. Delia Baldassarri and Scott E. Page, “The Emergence and Perils of Polarization,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 50 (December 14, 2021).

22. David Dagan and Steven Teles, *Prison Break: Why Conservatives Turned Against Mass Incarceration*, (Oxford UP, 2016).

23. Heather Hurlburt and Chayenne Polimedio, “[Can Transpartisan Coalitions Overcome Polarization?](#)” (Washington, D.C.: New America, 2016).

24. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

More intra-party conflicts at the national level could also open up some unexpected creativity.²⁵

VII. A game plan

Since the most urgent problem in our democracy right now is the collapse of the center-right and the takeover of the Republican Party by an extremist illiberal MAGA faction, the first focus must be building a new center-right. Building it within the framework of our single-winner plurality elections presents an enormous challenge.

However, there are ways.

For the 2022 federal elections, the most effective plan would be to choose what I'll call the "Evan McMullin option." McMullin is challenging incumbent Utah Sen. Mike Lee this year D as an Independent. He has been endorsed by the Democratic candidates who would otherwise be most likely to run. After all, the chance of a Democrat winning a Senate seat in one of the most Republican states in the country is zero. If Democrats indeed stand down, and don't run a candidate, McMullin might win by appealing to enough moderate Republicans. If so, he could play a key role as a moderate swing senator in a divided Congress – especially if he can form a caucus with a few like-minded centrists.

Now, imagine if a coalition of moderate Republicans and Democrats worked together to run Independent candidates in open-seat Senate elections in Missouri and Alabama in 2022 D two states where a very Trump-y Republican is likely to win the primary, where Democrats are unlikely to win the general election, but where an Independent not encumbered by the Democratic Party brand could win by appealing to some moderate Republican voters and the overwhelming majority of Democratic voters, who would understand that a moderate Republican running as an Independent would be far better than a Trump-y Republican. It's a strategy that might work in some other states as well. In particular, it would be worth trying in Louisiana, where John Kennedy, who voted to overturn the Arizona results, is up for reelection. Perhaps Democrats would say that they shouldn't give up on states like Louisiana and Missouri, that they could still win them. But they are definitive long shots.

There are also 139 House Republicans who voted to support the challenges to the Arizona or Pennsylvania results. Almost all of them are in Republican districts where the Democratic candidate has zero chance of winning. If a moderate Republican ran as an Independent in some of these districts, and Democrats stood down, it's possible that these Independent candidates could win enough seats to hold the balance of power in the House. Simultaneously, running as Independents in districts without a Democratic challenger offers moderate Republican candidates a more likely path forward than attempting to win Republican primary elections.

Assume this is a modest success. Say we elect three senators and 15 new House members under this strategy. Then what? Then they have to use their power to leverage bigger changes. They will have a moment to do this right at the start of the Congress, when the House and Senate decide on

25. Steven M. Teles and Robert P. Saldin, "[The Future Is Faction](#)," *National Affairs*, Winter 2022.

their rules and their leaders. They should declare that they will only support a leader who guarantees a vote on a major election-reform bill.

Another intermediary step would be to reestablish fusion balloting. Fusion balloting means a candidate can appear on the ballot as the nominee of more than one party. The Populists of the late 1800s used fusion voting to advance their views — fusing with the Democrats in the North against the robber-baron Republicans, and occasionally fusing with the Republicans in the South against Jim Crow Democrats.²⁶ But the rise of the Australian ballot — a standardized form printed by the state — gave Republicans in many states an excuse to end fusions, forcing Populists and Democrats into separate parties. Fusion today remains legal in only a few states.

If fusion were widely legal, we'd likely see a new minor party made up of non-Trumpist Republicans and independents. This Moderate Party could cross-nominate, or “fuse,” with Democrats. It would also give voters a chance to see themselves as part of a Moderate Party, which over time might support some of its own candidates and build more of an identity.

But this would have to be a temporary strategy. The longer-term goal must be to create space for a genuine multiparty system in the U.S., a system that will be more robust because it will be more able to adjust to changing demands than a two-party system, which is far more likely to get stuck in a doom loop.

This would require a reform bill that would open a more permanent place for more than just two parties, allowing a distinct center-right party to emerge — along with a few other parties.

My reform proposal would be as follows:

- Conduct House elections using proportional multimember districts of ideally five members;
- Increase the size of the House to 700 members;
- Eliminate primary elections. Let parties choose how to nominate candidates;
- Hold all Senate elections using ranked-choice voting with fusion balloting, so smaller parties can choose to either endorse major party candidates or run their own candidates, either way without acting as spoilers.

These reforms are all constitutional.

Recognizing that such a package of reforms would be a big step, here are two more modest proposals for Congress. First, Congress could repeal the 1967 Uniform Congressional District Act, which requires states to use single-member districts, and instead allow states to experiment with proportional multimember districts. Though the 1967 Act may have made sense at the time in the context of the one-person, one-vote reapportionment revolution and civil rights, it has outlived its usefulness.

Second, Congress could establish a bipartisan commission to investigate and recommend struc-

26. Peter H. Argersinger, “A Place on the Ballot”: Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws,” *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (1980): 287–306.

tural solutions to our democracy crisis. Though such a commission is likely to be messy, it at least would provide a focusing forum for education.

I leave it to others to explore new economic, environmental, and social policies. I would note that a new party system will open up new opportunities for policy innovation. And since many of our existing models of how to do economic, environmental, and social policy are locked in the old binary partisan fights about the size of government, it will be difficult to have policy innovation without electoral and party-system changes.

Some might worry about the “unintended consequences” of any major reform. But all reforms have unintended consequences. Politics is a complex system, and all complex systems are unpredictable. If we learn from the past, however, we can at least make different mistakes in the future, and then learn from those mistakes. If the lesson of history is that change is constant, then it’s obvious that there are no “permanent solutions.” Politics is not a puzzle to be “solved.” It is a forum for managing and resolving the inevitable and necessary conflicts of democracy. A democracy without conflict is a democracy without elections. We should thus aim to build political institutions are “robust” rather than “stable”²⁷ — institutions that manage and adjust to changing circumstances, rather than entrenching the status quo; institutions that expand conflicts into multiple dimensions so that coalitions can be fluid, rather than flattening conflicts into a single dimension so that politics collapses into one great, Civil War style conflict.

Understandably, the upcoming elections feel urgent, and so record dollar sums will be spent on them, even as the number of competitive districts and states continue to shrink. Much of this money will surely be wasted, given both that so few swing voters still exist, and the fundraiser-consultant industrial complex will take a hefty cut.

More importantly, the only way we can solve our democracy crisis is to enact dramatic change, instead of digging ourselves in deeper. If American democracy depends on one party (the Democrats) keeping the other (the Republicans) out of power, we have already lost. As dire as the moment seems, focusing solely on the short term only makes the problems worse. The only way to win for the long term is to take some bigger gambles that make the bigger changes we need possible.

VIII. Conclusion

The good news is that we can learn from history. The bad news is that we rarely do. But we can learn from the fact that we rarely learn from history, and plan accordingly.

Undeniably, it feels as though American democracy is spiraling out of control. Anxiety and uncertainty are the dominant moods. A two-year pandemic has reoriented the basic structures of work and family. An assault on the U.S. Capitol and the Big Lie have hit at the heart of our democracy. A new social justice movement has begun a racial reckoning. Increasingly extreme fires and floods and the promise of more to come add stress and foretell hard choices ahead. Neither party now

27..Bednar, “Polarization, Diversity, and Democratic Robustness.”

has a coherent governing ideology capable of responding to these challenges, but Republicans have dispensed with even the pretense of a platform as of 2020 and have instead become an illiberal grievance cult. Still both parties soldier on, propped up by being the only viable alternative to each other in our two-party system.

But we are not sleepwalkers, fated for disaster. The recent epidemic of political pessimism has done something important: It has awakened us to where we might be headed, if we don't make dramatic changes. The good news is that we are now waking up. We know the status quo is unacceptable. And this is cause for optimism, and for leadership to take us up and out of the ravine. Enough with the pessimism. Let's turn this mess around.

About the author

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About the series

This paper is the first in a series from the Niskanen Center's State Capacity Project that examines how political conditions shape the possibilities for effective governmental decision-making and execution. For more from the series, visit <https://www.niskanencenter.org/the-political-foundations-of-state-capacity>.