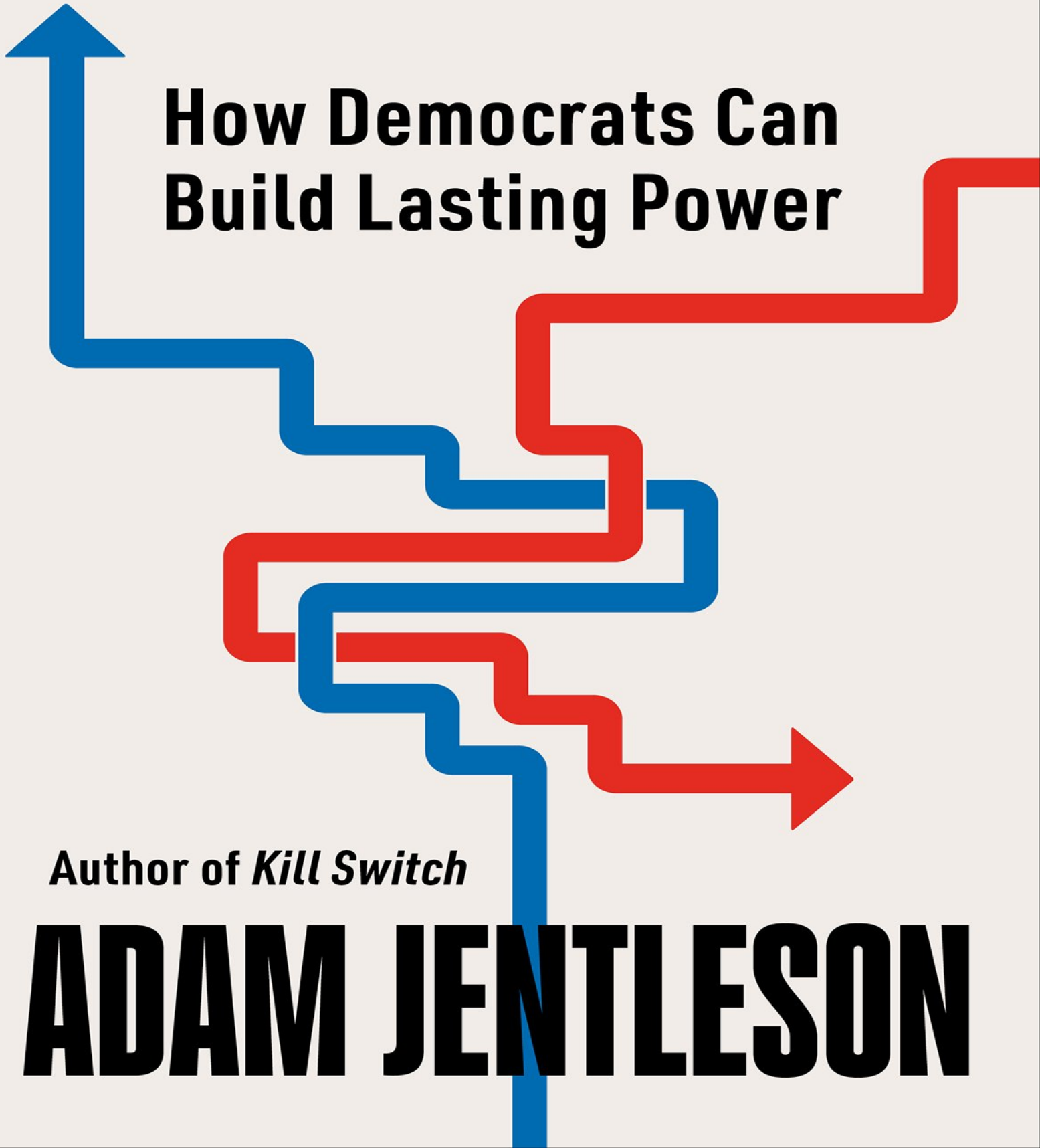


SUPERMAJORITY

**How Democrats Can
Build Lasting Power**

Author of *Kill Switch*

ADAM JENTLESON



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SUPERMAJORITY

INTRODUCTION

“SENATOR,” I WHISPERED, “IT’S TIME TO GO.”

Senator Harry Reid was sitting at the head of a long table strewn with plates of half-finished steaks, mashed potatoes, and creamed spinach, surrounded by a dozen or so members of his staff. We were at Charlie Palmer’s, a steakhouse at the foot of Capitol Hill that was a favorite gathering spot for politicians, lobbyists, and donors. It was November 8, 2016—election day.

The dinner had a valedictory feel. Reid had announced his retirement earlier that year, and he was in the midst of a months-long series of goodbyes. But I was eager to keep the night moving, as I anticipated it would be a busy one. Like most of my fellow politicians, Democrats and Republicans alike, I expected Hillary Clinton to defeat Donald Trump by a comfortable margin. On the Senate front, our internal projections gave Democrats a roughly even chance to win the six seats we needed to take back control of the upper chamber. Those two events—Clinton winning the White House and Democrats retaking the Senate—would have provided the perfect capstone to Reid’s career.

Reid had risen to become Senate majority leader after the 2006 midterm elections, riding a blue wave that he helped set in motion. Democrats proceeded to hold on to that Senate majority for a remarkable eight years, before finally losing it in 2014. When Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia passed away in February of 2016, history and tradition dictated that, pursuant to its “advise and consent” role under the Constitution, the Senate should give a fair and timely hearing to then-President Barack Obama’s pick to replace him. Under the Founding Fathers’ vision, it was not supposed to matter that the Senate was controlled by the opposing party.

Yet in an unprecedented breach, the Republican Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, announced that he would refuse to confirm Obama’s nominee, no matter who they were. McConnell was posturing for the Tea Party, the restive grassroots base that had pushed formerly staid leaders like the Kentuckian himself into a pattern of what at the time seemed like aberrant behavior—escalating from South Carolina congressman Joe Wilson yelling “[You lie!](#)” at Obama during a joint address to Congress in 2009 to pushing the nation to the brink of default in 2011 to shutting down the federal government in 2013. When that same Tea Party base rebelled against GOP party leaders to nominate Trump for president in 2016, it felt like karmic justice. Polls showed Trump losing badly to Clinton, while the more mainstream candidates preferred by GOP elders fared better. With the gift of Trump as an opponent, it seemed, Clinton would win the White House, Democrats would retake the Senate majority, and together they would fill Scalia’s seat, securing a liberal majority on the Court for a generation.

Given these prospects, I wanted to move on with the evening and prepare Reid for a victory lap of friendly press interviews. After hustling him out of the restaurant, we retreated to the headquarters of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), located in a two-hundred-year-old, three-story townhouse on the east side of the Capitol. What was built as a residence for the Senate doorkeeper had been converted into a modern office, yielding a maze of narrow hallways and uneven floors. A young aide met us at the door and led us to a small room with bare walls, a couple of couches, and a TV. The one small window faced the alley. Crammed into the space were me, Reid,

his wife Landra, and Montana senator Jon Tester—a mountain of a man who was running the DSCC that cycle—along with his wife, Sharla. There is much talk of “war rooms” in politics, conjuring images of touch screens and floor-to-ceiling monitors, but in reality, they usually look like the drab room we found ourselves in that night.

Once the election results began rolling in, they were never particularly good, but it took a while for them to really go south. While the Clinton campaign came into the night feeling optimistic about its chances to win Florida, it soon became clear that something was amiss. Around 8:45 PM, *The New York Times*’s projection model swung to make Trump the favorite to win the Sunshine state. Around 9:30 PM, exit polls out of Michigan showed an unexpected surge in rural voters, while turnout in the heavily Democratic urban areas was lagging.

Reid had gone quiet, staring down at his hands. For weeks, all of the top consultants and pollsters in the party had been telling him the same thing: Clinton was a virtual lock to win. But then he had picked up the phone and called his younger brother, Larry.

Larry Reid lived in a trailer on his brother’s property in the tiny mining town of Searchlight, Nevada—population 329—where they had grown up. Like most of Reid’s staff, I considered Larry a nuisance. The first time I visited Reid at his home, I was warned to stop at the end of the long dirt road that led up to his house and call ahead, “just to be sure Larry doesn’t shoot you.” A year earlier, Larry pleaded no contest to a DUI charge. When he was pulled over, [Larry allegedly punched the state trooper](#), although the battery charges were later dropped. Yet if Larry was a poor judge of many things in life, his older brother trusted his instincts on politics. Trump was the first politician in a long time that Larry had been excited about, and that thought nagged at Reid.

As the bad news kept trickling in, I called my contacts on the Clinton campaign, who assured me everything was going to be fine. Democratic strongholds like Miami-Dade County in Florida and Michigan’s Wayne County, which includes Detroit, were not fully reporting, they said. The numbers would turn around once they did. Around 10:30 PM, New York senator Chuck Schumer, whom Reid had anointed as his successor, showed up with his chief of staff, Mike Lynch. Schumer had been up for reelection that night, and after delivering his victory speech to a raucous crowd of supporters in New York City, he hopped on a late flight to DC to watch the returns with us.

When Schumer arrived, I slipped out of the stifling room and pulled Lynch aside. I ticked through my concerns. Lynch, fresh off the good vibes of Schumer’s victory rally, opened a bottle of Irish whiskey and poured us a couple of shots. As I downed mine, Lynch assured me that he had talked to the Clinton campaign and it was going to be fine. Miami-Dade hadn’t come in yet, he said.

Around 11:30 PM, Miami-Dade came in, and Florida was called for Trump. Amid widespread predictions that Trump’s 2016 campaign—laced as it was with racist and xenophobic rhetoric—would tank his numbers with Black and Latino voters, pundits were shocked to see Trump holding steady with both groups. A trend began to emerge that was deeply unsettling to Democrats: Working-class voters of all races were shifting toward Trump. Wisconsin fell to him soon after that, while Michigan and Pennsylvania were looking grim.

Reid had seen enough. “[Well, I guess that’s that](#),” he said, as he stood up and left. At 2:31 AM, the Associated Press called the race for Trump. I walked back to our office, on the third floor of the Capitol building, overlooking the National Mall. Our team of young staffers was still there. I thanked them for their work but did not bother attempting a pep talk. Around four in the morning, I headed home.

I knew that the consequences of that night would be disastrous for the people and causes I cared about. Yet in the moment, what was most bewildering was the possibility that everything I had learned about politics was wrong.

Clinton’s primary opponent and antithesis had been Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, who had channeled a torrent of populist energy to rise from backbench senator to a household name. Sanders’s performance exposed Clinton’s deadening approach of replacing big ideas with appeals to identity. Everything about Clinton’s candidacy exuded a lack of ambition. Her aides talked relentlessly of a

“path to 270 electoral votes,” a preemptive concession that winning bigger was not possible. She never articulated a vision that all Americans could see themselves in, somehow expecting it to emerge, genie-like, from a pile of white papers. Her loss felt like the exhausted sigh of an entire class, a party out of ideas.

In the weeks, months, and years after the election, these thoughts began to congeal into questions. How had our vision grown so small? Why was the election so close in the first place—and why has every contest since remained so? Is this how things are going to be from now on, with every race for the White House finding Democrats desperately scraping for a narrow majority, but losing as often as we win? As the forces of fascism rise, must we consign the fate of our democracy to a break-even bet against an authoritarian take-over?

THE ANSWERS I FOUND in the years since revolve around a simple proposition: While some features of our era are truly unique, others represent common threads connecting us to past generations. Mastering our time requires a clear understanding of how we got here, grounded in knowledge about what has worked in the past. What is unique about our era is how narrowly divided we are. In the broad sweep of American history, we have never experienced a run of consecutive elections as close as the last three. What is not unique is that this period of polarization will eventually give way to durable power for one side or the other. This book is about how to make sure Democrats emerge as dominant.

Narrow majorities are too fragile to shift the balance of power. Witness how, even as Democrats have traded elections back and forth with Republicans in recent years, conservatives have consolidated power in the Courts. To win dominance, we must ask what it takes to build an electoral coalition big and broad enough to reign for a generation. Anything less will fail to overcome conservatives’ entrenched advantages in antimajoritarian institutions like the Senate and the Supreme Court, and prove inadequate for sustaining Democrats in power long enough not just to enact progressive change, but to make it stick. A majority will not be enough—we are going to need a supermajority.

[Part One](#) of this book chronicles how Democrats lost the first liberal supermajority of the twenty-first century. I describe how we got here, chronicling the events from Obama’s election in 2008 to today, some of which I bore eyewitness to. I describe the evolution of my own thinking during this time, which readers may find familiar, as many Americans grappled with thorny questions about the challenges posed by Trump’s rise and processed new ways of thinking that arose from the left. What I describe as the “muddle” that descended after Trump’s election eventually yielded to clarity about how to maneuver the forces governing our politics to achieve historic progress, and how a profound misunderstanding about the nature of Trump’s appeal abetted his rise.

In [Part Two](#), I show what answers can be found by examining the periods of the twentieth century when Democrats accomplished the most—when their efforts made American society more just, raised living standards, and achieved the monumental progress we rightly celebrate today. Over the past one hundred years, Democrats have built supermajorities three times: under presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and Barack Obama. These chapters will examine how Democrats navigated the peaks and pitfalls of these periods, focusing on how they succeeded at maneuvering the American public toward our highest ideals and bringing the United States ever closer to the promise of a more perfect union.

A running theme is that supermajorities are unfailingly messy. They never represent victory for the left or the right alone, or for any faction—indeed, building them requires breaking away from a binary conception of politics altogether. We are a nation of apostates, united by a belief in our common purpose but otherwise delightfully diverse in our thinking and values. To build a supermajority, Democrats must embrace the variousness of the American people. We can do this without sacrificing our vision of a world that is more equal, more just, and more prosperous for all, so long as we give ourselves some flexibility on how to get there.

This is a book about hard choices from the past that provide lessons for the present. Writing it has provided me with hope that, when leaders engage the American people in all of their complexity, we can overcome the seemingly intractable challenges we face and accomplish more than we ever thought possible. This is not a time for fear. It is a moment that calls for ambition and the discipline to turn talk of change into lasting political power. If we keep trying to white-knuckle our way to 50 percent every election, our luck is going to run out. Staking everything on a coin flip against fascism means that one day we will lose the toss, and there won't be another one. It is time to break this era of polarization and build something bigger and better—it is time to build a supermajority.

Part One

LOST

Chapter One

SUPERMAJORITY

AMERICA TODAY IS SO POLARIZED that what unfolded [on the National Mall](#) on January 20, 2009, feels like a fantasy. But I was there, and I remember it vividly. I remember watching the skies clear as the new president prepared to take the oath of office, the throng before him stretching from the Capitol building to the Washington monument, almost two miles. I was one of nearly two million people shivering in the below-freezing temperatures, bundled up against a stiff wind coming off the Potomac River. Together, we made up the largest crowd to ever gather on the National Mall.

Five years earlier, Barack Obama had burst onto the national stage with a vision of a unified nation. In a prime-time speech to the Democratic national convention in Boston, he declared, “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America—there’s the United States of America.” Now, on that frigid January day, he seemed to have made good on that promise, uniting a broad cross section of the country in what felt like a generational shift.

The day lent itself to superlatives. With wide margins in the popular vote and electoral college, Obama had won the most sweeping victory of any Democrat since Lyndon Johnson and any president since Ronald Reagan. In addition to perennial battleground states like Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan, Obama added Ohio and Florida to his column, along with traditionally Republican states like North Carolina and Indiana. He had what political observers call “coattails,” as large majorities of Democrats swept into Congress behind him. In the Senate, Democrats gained eight seats, bringing them to fifty-nine; a few months later, Republican senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania would switch parties, staking Democrats to a sixty-seat Senate majority, something neither party had glimpsed in more than three decades. In the House of Representatives, Democrats swelled their ranks to 257 seats, their largest margin in that chamber in over a quarter-century. By any measure, the power that Obama and congressional Democrats had amassed was more than just a majority—it was a supermajority.

The party on the losing side of an election usually comforts itself by sifting through the data for glimmers of hope—a strong performance in a certain swing region or with a particular demographic group—something that might point the way toward a comeback strategy. This time, good news was hard to find for Republicans. Just eight years earlier, Republican strategist Karl Rove had held forth with bold predictions of a coming Republican realignment. Now a commentator on Fox News, Rove was left muttering, “[We are in trouble](#),” as he watched the election results roll in. Seasoned political hands were sounding the alarm. “If the party doesn’t embrace the kind of change that is out there in the way that our country’s demographics are changing,” fretted Dan Gurley, a veteran Republican operative, “they’re going to [relegate themselves to a permanent minority](#).”

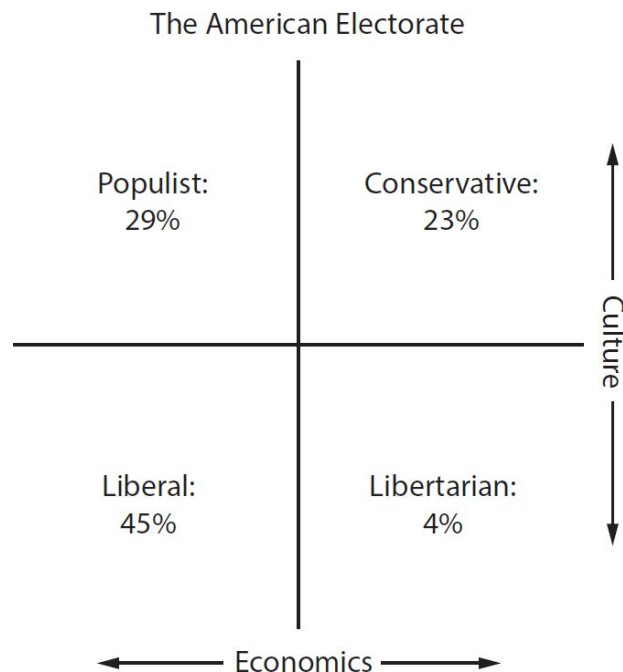
There was talk of a Democratic realignment. Larry Sabato, head of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, marveled, “[It is hard to imagine](#) that barely 20 years ago, it was fashionable to talk of a Republican ‘lock’—a GOP dominance of the electoral map so strong that it appeared to guarantee the party possession of the White House for years to come.” With Democrats winning

states that had long been reliably red, “the GOP now faces the prospect of a Republican ‘lockout’ for years to come if they do not move quickly to get their act together.” As the political reporters Alec MacGillis and John Cohen summed it up for NBC, “The Democrats appear to have built a majority across a wide, and expanding, share of the electorate,” while Republicans “[appear at the moment to be marginalized](#)”, hanging on to a coalition that may shrink with time.”

Obama had been right to wager that red and blue America could still unite behind one banner. He recognized something essential: The American electorate possesses enduring features that are consistent from generation to generation. A leader who taps into them can do more than win an election—they can reshape America’s political map. Every time liberals have achieved a supermajority, such as during the New Deal and civil rights eras, they have done so by adapting these core principles to the circumstances of their time. The way to break out of this era of polarization is to once again aspire to win big, and that starts with unearthing a few durable truths about American politics.

THE FIRST TRUTH about our politics is that the American electorate is *heterodox* in its beliefs.

To accurately describe the American electorate, we need to start by throwing out the old binary that plots politics as left versus right. The humble horizontal line, positioning extremists at the poles and moderates in the center, is a fundamentally misleading way to characterize how voters think. While no representation will perfectly capture Americans’ political beliefs, an instructive approach is to map them as a two-by-two quadrant, with economic issues represented along the x-axis and cultural issues along the y-axis.



[Follow for extended description](#)

Right away, an important point jumps out: *no box contains a majority of voters*. In the United States, no single ideology can assemble a majority, let alone a supermajority. Instead, building a supermajority requires embracing a mix of views. It is not about being left or right, liberal or conservative, moderate or progressive, but a mix of all of these. Americans are an innately heterodox people. We do not tend to order our beliefs in abstract categories, and conventional descriptors such

as left and right do a poor job capturing our complexity. In recent years, political scientists, data analysts, and pollsters have been working to break down these traditional categories. Lee Drutman, a fellow at the New America Foundation and lecturer at Johns Hopkins University, has written that traditional, overly simplistic ways of categorizing political beliefs “mask an underlying diversity of political thought that is far more complicated. Moderate, independent and undecided voters are not the same, and *none* of these groups are reliably centrist. [They are ideologically diverse](#),” and therefore, resistant to appeals based entirely in any single ideology.

This is true even for many voters who think of themselves as moderate. Analysts have found that what voters mean when they describe themselves as *moderate* tends to be more a matter of mixing together ideas from across the spectrum than adopting views that lie in the midpoint between two poles. Importantly, “moderate” voters’ mixtures of views can, and often do, include immoderate or even extreme stances. In focus groups, it is common to hear a voter stake out immoderate positions—say, wanting to throw all CEOs *and* all immigrants in jail—and in the next breath, describe themselves as moderate. As Drutman puts it, “many people who call themselves ‘moderate’ do not rate as moderate on policy issues.”

These voters frequently show up as “moderate” in polls because that is often the only category surveys offer to someone who does not consider themselves rigidly liberal or conservative. However, the descriptor is too mild to capture the roiling, iconoclastic nature of these voters. According to the pollster Kristen Soltis Anderson, moderates tend to “defy what many people may think of as America’s political center.” Anderson continues, “When analyzing my survey data deeply, [clusters of voters emerge](#) who might overall be socially conservative but lean progressive on an issue like abortion or free speech. There are plenty of voters who lean socially progressive but who have reservations around issues like transgender sports participation or gun rights. Voters are complicated,” she concludes, and “likely to be heterodox in their viewpoints, taking a few stances from Column A and a few from Column B.” In their landmark study, *Neither Liberal Nor Conservative*, the political scientists Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe examined more than half a century of polling and opinion data and concluded, rather unflatteringly, that “the moderate category seems less an ideological destination than [a refuge for the innocent and the confused](#).” A more generous characterization is that these are people who refuse to be pigeonholed.

Heterodox voters—immoderate moderates—are the true “average voters” who will make or break any supermajority. Anderson’s firm, Echelon Insights, found that only 13 percent of voters identify as “strongly liberal” while just [11 percent identify as “strongly conservative](#),” leaving more than three-quarters of Americans uncommitted or only loosely committed to any ideology. These voters also tend to be working-class, which in political analytics is defined as voters without a four-year college degree. This is important because the single biggest reason Democrats have struggled to build and sustain comfortable majorities in recent years is that working-class voters are abandoning them. Working-class voters are by far the largest voting bloc, [accounting for 59 percent of the electorate in 2024](#). In a trend that political scientists call “education polarization,” or more colloquially, the “diploma divide,” Democrats have been losing voters without a college degree while gaining college graduates, who represent a smaller proportion of the population. This was not always the case. In 1960, President John F. Kennedy lost voters with a college degree by a two-to-one margin but won decisively [with voters who did not go to college](#). Indeed, this strength with working-class voters formed the foundation of Democrats’ political power throughout the New Deal and civil rights eras. Even as recently as the 1990s, Democrats won about half of white voters without a college degree. But in recent years, we have been losing these voters in droves. In 2024, Donald Trump beat Kamala Harris among white voters without a college degree [by 56 percent to 42 percent](#).

The working class voters Democrats have been hemorrhaging tend to be ideologically omnivorous and, as we will see, turned off by Democrats’ trend toward ideological rigidity. According to the Pew Research Center, taking “a roughly equal mix of liberal and conservative positions is far more prevalent among those with less education than those with at least a college

degree.” Similarly, Echelon Insights found that [across more than fifty policy questions](#) , voters with college degrees were the only group to offer ideologically consistent answers. The finding holds true across studies: The more education a voter has, the more rigidly ideological—and less heterodox—they tend to be.

A second enduring truth about American politics is that *resentment is the most potent threat to liberal progress*. Resentment divides people and limits their sense of generosity, possibility, and solidarity. Resentment powered Trump’s rise, and overcoming it is critical to beating the threat he represents.

For the purposes of this book, I ask readers to distinguish between two types of resentment: racial and “just-world.” *Racial resentment* is based on race alone and is essentially synonymous with *racism* . *Just-world resentment* arises from beliefs about fairness and deservingness—the concern that one group is being given unearned advantages over another. In *Reaching Beyond Race* , the political scientists Paul Sniderman and Edward Carmines show that even people who do not hold racist beliefs harbor [resentment about policies like affirmative action](#) , stemming from their belief that people are gaining an unfair advantage.

Yet while distinct, these two types of resentment can easily be fused together, leading people who harbor just-world resentment to the same political place as racists. In *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind* , the political scientist Darren W. Davis and political psychologist David C. Wilson show that because just-world resentment “is rooted in beliefs about justice, fairness, and deservingness, ordinary citizens, who may not harbor racist motivations, may wind up in the same political position as racists, [but for different reasons](#) .”

Like the two halves of a nuclear warhead being pushed together at the moment of detonation, when these two strains of resentment come together, the reaction is powerful enough to lay waste to many of the causes liberals hold dear. But while just-world resentment can be melded to racism, it can also be cleaved from it. Keeping the two types of resentment from fusing requires liberals to take the concerns that inspire just-world resentment seriously. Wondering whether the government is spending your taxpayer dollars efficiently or whether people who receive government benefits deserve them, are legitimate concerns that liberal governance can address without abandoning core principles.

This is precisely how the great leaders of the past century built the New Deal and civil rights—era supermajorities: They embraced Americans’ heterodoxy and effectively neutralized just-world resentment. In our own time, the leader who achieved all of this more powerfully than anyone since the civil rights era was Barack Obama.

HETERODOXY WAS IN BARACK OBAMA’S DNA. The son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from a conservative Kansas family, Obama was raised in Hawaii, a state that is mostly nonwhite but where the Black population hovers in the low single digits. Dan Hale, a teammate on Obama’s high school basketball team, remembers that he was often the only white kid on the court while [Obama was the only Black kid](#) .

Throughout his youth and young manhood, Obama never fit easily into any category. From college onward, he often found himself as one of the only Black people in predominantly white places, such as being elected the first Black president of the *Harvard Law Review* . At the same time, he also frequently found himself accused of not being Black enough. As an Illinois state senator, his district represented Hyde Park, a neighborhood that included the University of Chicago campus. It was a deeply liberal district but much whiter than many others in the city. In 2000, Obama tried to unseat the longtime congressman Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther with deep ties to the Black community, challenging Rush for the Democratic nomination in Illinois’s majority-Black first district, representing Chicago’s South Side. While Obama criticized Rush’s undistinguished record as a legislator, Rush kept the focus of the campaign firmly on identity. “ [Barack is a person who read about the civil rights protests and thinks he knows all about it,](#)” Rush said. “I helped make that

history, by blood, sweat, and tears.” The race was not close. Rush stomped the newcomer, [winning over 60 percent to Obama’s 30 percent](#).

Yet Obama’s heterodoxy has never been just about his race or upbringing. Throughout his career, Obama gravitated toward public opinion that bleeds across ideological categories. Though generally a blue state, Illinois is ideologically diverse. The southern part of Illinois is closer to the Ozarks than Chicago, and in 1998, the state sent Republican Peter Fitzgerald to the Senate. Obama’s poor showing against Rush convinced him that he might be better suited for a statewide race. With an eye on what he’d have to answer for later, he interspersed his largely liberal record in the state senate with votes to cut government spending, and often dodged votes on hot-button cultural issues.

In October 2002, during the lead-up to the Iraq War, Obama accepted an invitation to speak at an anti-war rally. His speech was surprisingly pro-war. “Let me begin by saying that although this has been billed as an anti-war rally, I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances,” he said by way of opening. He then repeated the phrase, “[I don’t oppose all wars](#)” three times before explaining that he “would willingly take up arms myself” against terrorists. Finally, he got to what the crowd had come to hear: “What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war.” The crowd responded with polite applause.

When Fitzgerald announced that he would not run for a second term in 2004, Obama leapt at the opportunity, beating out a crowded field to win the Democratic nomination. In most races across the country, the 2004 election cycle proved a bad one for Democrats. They lost the presidential race, and Republicans increased their majorities in both chambers of Congress. Obama’s campaign stood out as a bright spot, even as he was boosted by a rather charmed series of events. His Republican opponent was Jack Ryan, an investment banker with leading-man good looks. But in June, a judge unsealed files related to his divorce from the actress Jeri Ryan. His then-wife alleged in those documents that Ryan had [brought her to sex clubs against her will](#) and pressured her to have intercourse with him in front of strangers. Ryan denied the allegations but dropped out of the race. He was replaced by Alan Keyes, a right-wing gadfly who ran as a hardline evangelical, a badly mismatched profile for a state like Illinois. As Obama coasted to victory, he got a call from the Kerry campaign letting him know that he had been picked to deliver the keynote speech at the party’s national convention. The prime-time keynote vaulted him to national prominence, and in November, Obama won his election with 70 percent of the vote. A US senator at age forty-three, his eyes were on an even bigger prize.

WHEN OBAMA RAN FOR PRESIDENT IN 2008, I was working for one of his rivals, writing speeches for Senator John Edwards of North Carolina. Edwards would soon be best remembered for cheating on his cancer-stricken wife with his videographer. But before that, he was known as the son of a millworker, a populist who focused relentlessly on the plight of the working poor and decried “the two Americas,” one for those “who have lived the American Dream and don’t have to worry, and another for most Americans who work hard and [still struggle to make ends meet](#).” Poverty was not a popular or trendy issue, and I was inspired by his focus on it.

During the primary, Edwards was one of [several candidates who ran to Obama’s left](#). On health care, Edwards proposed an ambitious plan for universal coverage. His proposal included a “public option,” or a government-run plan that would compete with private insurers. His proposal also included strict new rules governing what insurance companies must cover, and a stiff penalty on anyone who did not purchase insurance (essentially adopting the risk-pool model of the auto insurance industry). Hillary Clinton was also running for the nomination and came out with a similarly ambitious plan. When Obama released his plan, it was more conservative than either of theirs, declining to include the penalty on those who did not buy insurance. This was a key distinction: The penalty was the forcing mechanism that made the coverage universal. Without it, many young and healthy people were likely to go uninsured, making the risk-pool sicker and driving up costs for everyone else.

Health care was not the only issue where Obama ran to the right of his rivals. Obama favored free trade more than Edwards and was more vocal in his support of the death penalty than either Clinton or Edwards. He opposed gay marriage, and talked about his faith more emphatically than any Democrat had since Jimmy Carter. On climate change, Obama emphasized the need for fossil fuels to remain part of the energy mix and proposed a less ambitious plan to “cap and trade” carbon emissions than his rivals did. When the housing bubble burst in 2007, the solutions Obama proposed were more market-oriented than those advanced by Clinton and Edwards. “Obama’s [housing] proposal is tepid by comparison, short on aggressive government involvement and infused with conservative rhetoric about fiscal responsibility,” wrote Max Fraser at the left-wing magazine *The Nation*. “As he has done on domestic issues like healthcare, job creation, and energy policy, [Obama is staking out a position to the right](#)” of Edwards and Clinton.

For many Democratic primary voters, however, it all came back to Iraq. The war eclipsed all other issues, and Edwards and Clinton had both voted to authorize the invasion. Even as Obama tacked right on other topics, many progressives were willing to give him leeway. He had been further to the left, and presciently correct, about the issue most on their mind.

AS THE *FOX AND FRIENDS* SEGMENT cut to a commercial break, the Reverend Jesse Jackson turned to Dr. Reed Tuckson, seated next to him, and whispered, “[I want to cut his nuts off](#) . . . [He’s] been talking down to Black people.”

It was July of 2008. The comment was not unusual coming from Jackson, the iconoclastic civil rights leader with a decades-long history of tossing rhetorical grenades. The problem was that Jackson’s mic, clasped to the broad lapel of his navy suit, was on. Clips of Jackson’s comments soon made the rounds on political blogs and cable news, igniting a storm of controversy. Within days, Jackson was forced to walk it back.

What triggered Jackson’s remark was a speech Obama had delivered a few weeks earlier. Speaking to a Black congregation on the South Side of Chicago to mark Father’s Day, Obama had taken up the issue of Black fatherhood. “If we are honest with ourselves,” he said, “we’ll admit that what too many fathers also are is missing—missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it.” When it came to solutions, Obama leaned heavily on personal responsibility. Drawing on his own experience with an absent father, Obama advocated a collective effort to “break the cycle” of truant fathers in the Black community. He praised single mothers for doing “heroic” work, but insisted children need both parents. He chided dads who might be physically present but disengaged: “[Don’t just sit in the house](#) and watch *SportsCenter* all weekend . . . replace the video game or the remote control with a book,” he said. Despite Jackson’s assessment that this amounted to “talking down to Black people,” the almost entirely Black congregants filling the pews showered Obama with amens and applause throughout the speech.

In March 2008, clips surfaced of Obama’s longtime pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr., castigating the United States for its legacy of racism, including a 2003 sermon in which he characterized the 9/11 attacks as retribution for American neocolonialism. “[God damn America](#),” Wright thundered, in a clip that played on loop on cable television. Wright had married Barack and Michelle Obama, so there was no dodging the issue. Instead, Obama seized on the controversy to frontally address the most taboo issue in American politics.

Summoning reporters and supporters to Philadelphia’s National Constitution Center on March 18, Obama delivered a thirty-seven-minute speech, broadcast live. He used the address, which speechwriter Jon Favreau recalled him dictating verbatim, to call Americans to a higher purpose while pointedly refusing to condemn all resentment as racist. He acknowledged “the anger and frustration of people of all colors” while urging Americans to move beyond “old racial wounds” in pursuit of “a more perfect union.” He contextualized Wright’s anger within the Black experience, while also acknowledging the “similar anger” of working-class whites who harbored resentment. He

condemned Wright's most extreme statements, yet remarked that he " [can no more disown \[Wright\]](#) than I can disown my white grandmother," whom he described as "a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe." But, he continued, "These people are part of me, and they are part of America, this country that I love."

NBC's Brian Williams called it " [the most important speech](#)" of the presidential race . The address "held his campaign together," ABC's George Stephanopoulos observed. Obama had waded into the most fraught waters in politics with a speech that respected Americans' intelligence, and they applauded him for it. A CBS News poll taken soon after the speech found that [69 percent of voters approved](#) of Obama's discussion of race relations, while 71 percent felt he had effectively explained his relationship with Wright. Obama had refused to fall back on easy tropes or condemn anyone who has ever experienced resentment as racist. Instead, he invited them into his coalition.

IN THE GENERAL ELECTION, Obama faced off against Arizona senator John McCain, the erratic Vietnam veteran and war hero who had built a national reputation as a maverick for defying his party on high-profile issues. Yet some of that shine had worn off after McCain spent the primary embracing Bush's positions. While the president was deeply unpopular with most Americans, the GOP base was still loyal to him, and McCain needed their votes.

As the race unfolded, Obama came at McCain from all angles. He relentlessly hammered the Republican with a populist economic message. McCain provided fodder, [forgetting how many houses he owned](#) in an interview with *Politico* . To combat McCain's maverick image, Obama emphasized his own status as an outsider and his mission to clean up Washington by banning lobbyists from his White House. He zeroed in on kitchen-table issues like health care, while emphasizing the unifying, uplifting appeals of hope and change that had become his trademark. On September 15, the investment firm Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, triggering a series of calamitous events that would send the US economy reeling into the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. As events unfolded, McCain inadvertently underscored his longstanding reputation for hotheadedness by suspending his campaign, only to meekly restart it weeks later. Obama kept his cool and came across looking more competent, reassuring many voters who wanted change but remained skeptical of a man who had been a state legislator only four years earlier.

In the homestretch, the race shifted decisively toward Obama. One group drove the shift more than any other: white working-class voters. Throughout the primary, Obama had struggled with these voters, consistently losing them to Clinton by double digits. Yet in the fall, "growing numbers of whites who have not finished college have been expressing the view that Obama cares about people like them," according to the Associated Press. Polls found Obama slashing McCain's lead among voters like Ruth Ann Michel, a retiree and lifelong Republican, who told a reporter that Obama would be her [first vote for a Democrat](#) .

On election day, Obama scored 43 percent of the white vote, one point shy of the highwater mark set by Bill Clinton in 1996—one no Democrat has reached since. Overall, [more than eight million Americans](#) who would go on to vote for Trump in 2016 cast their ballots for Obama. His combination of populism, optimism, and heterodoxy had delivered Democrats to a supermajority. Now, they had to decide what to do with it.

Chapter Two

THE UPPER CHAMBER

ONE OF THE SENATORS who made up Democrats' Obama-era supermajority came from deep red Louisiana. Senator Mary Landrieu was born into a political family. Her father, Moon, was a broad-shouldered, wide-faced former baseball player who took on the white power structure in New Orleans and won. In a city where council members had historically been elected with either white or Black votes, *Moon was the first white person* to win a city council seat with both. As mayor through the 1970s, he oversaw the desegregation of the city and the redevelopment of its downtown, before being tapped to serve as housing secretary under President Jimmy Carter. In 2010, Mary's younger brother Mitch would follow their father and preside as the popular mayor of New Orleans for eight years. But the *big sister would rise highest*. In 1980, at just twenty-three years old and sporting her trademark blond bob, disarming smile, and wide blue eyes, Mary ran for election to the Louisiana state legislature, and won. It would be the first of many wins.

During the New Deal era, Louisiana had been a Democratic stronghold, as the party's longtime commitment to the twin forces of populism and white supremacy maintained white voters' loyalty while keeping Black residents disenfranchised. For a state with the second-highest Black population in America, this required strict and often violent enforcement. By the mid-1990s, the New Deal coalition had disintegrated, and Louisiana's white voters joined most of their southern brethren in migrating to the GOP.

Mary Landrieu was able to keep the state competitive for Democrats. After a failed run for governor in 1995, she turned her sights to an open Senate seat in 1996, positioning herself as a centrist "New Democrat" in the mold of Bill Clinton, backing welfare reform and balanced budgets while supporting the death penalty and promoting fiscal responsibility. She won a close race, prevailing by about 5,800 votes.

A more intense stress test came in Landrieu's second campaign. She came up for reelection in 2002, the first cycle after 9/11 and a time when the political environment strongly favored the GOP. Republicans saw Landrieu as a prime target, recruiting a tough opponent in Suzanne Terrell, Louisiana's well-regarded commissioner of elections. Terrell had the enthusiastic backing of President George W. Bush, who stumped for her at a time when his *approval ratings were still in the high 60s*.

Louisiana has what is known as a "jungle primary" system, where candidates of all parties run against each other and, if no one breaks 50 percent, the top two advance to a head-to-head matchup. As the only Democrat in the race, Landrieu held off Terrell in the first round, as two other Republicans combined to split the GOP vote three ways. In the runoff, Terrell was poised to consolidate the GOP vote, making Landrieu the underdog. Her path to victory was narrow: She needed to run up the score with Black voters while maintaining a strong performance with whites.

To thread this needle, Landrieu took the sting out of Republican attacks on cultural issues by emphasizing her right-leaning positions on issues like guns. Unabashedly prochoice, she framed her

position in religious terms, telling voters, “ [I have a good relationship with my God](#) and with my Savior.” She also leaned into populism, zeroing in on what she claimed was a secret deal between the Bush administration and Mexico to increase sugar imports, a move that would have [hurt Louisiana’s sugar industry](#) . Walking off the stage after a contentious debate, Landrieu snapped at Terrell, “This is your last campaign.” She was right. Landrieu won the runoff, pulling in just under 52 percent of the vote. Observers marveled at her “unexpected win,” as *The New York Times* put it. In 2008, with a boost from Obama, she won her third term by a comfortable six points.

WHAT ALLOWED THIS DEMOCRAT to represent a deep-red state for nearly two decades? Louisiana has historically been a state where politicians are not shy about showering their constituents with federal largesse, and part of Landrieu’s approach involved emphasizing, more than most politicians, what she delivered. She became known for channeling federal resources to the state, often leveraging her positions on the Appropriations and Homeland Security Committees. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in 2005, she fought tenaciously for disaster relief, at one point threatening to block every presidential nomination before the Senate until the Bush administration agreed to provide \$6 billion to fix Louisiana’s levees.

But a core part of Landrieu’s appeal was her willingness, even eagerness, to break with her own party. Landrieu voted for Bush’s 2001 tax cut, voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq (the war remained popular in Louisiana long after most Americans soured on it), and at one point joined Republicans to permanently repeal the estate tax. On education policy, Landrieu backed efforts to convert New Orleans’s failing public school system into a charter district, a stance that put her at odds with teachers’ unions, a reliable Democratic constituency.

Yet Landrieu’s most notable break from Democratic orthodoxy was her full-throated support for the oil and gas industry. She endorsed drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, siding with the fossil fuel industry and GOP colleagues and against most Democrats. She coauthored the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act of 2006 with Republican senator Pete Domenici, a bill opening more than eight million acres to offshore drilling (and ensuring Louisiana a share of the revenue). She also pushed to increase offshore fracking and to curtail regulations that she claimed would drive energy industry jobs overseas. In a 2010 hearing, she bore down on Ken Salazar, Obama’s secretary of the interior, critiquing the moratorium on offshore drilling that the administration had imposed after the Deepwater Horizon disaster. “In Louisiana alone, some 330,000 people earn a living from the oil and gas industry,” Landrieu said as she laid into Salazar. “Our federal government has a responsibility to assure them that their [paychecks will not turn into pink slips](#) .”

Nor was she bashful about these positions. In 2014, as chair of the Energy Committee, Landrieu was one of the loudest Democratic voices urging approval of the Keystone XL pipeline—a proposed extension of an existing pipeline system that would have transported crude oil from Canada’s tar sands to US refineries, including some in Louisiana. Environmental activists had made stopping the Keystone pipeline their top priority, and most Democrats rushed to side with them. But Landrieu argued, correctly, that the pipeline would create jobs for Louisiana, and ignored the activists.

Today, it is almost unthinkable for a Democrat to take such a heterodox mix of positions. Yet this was standard fare when Democrats succeeded at building a supermajority. Serving alongside Landrieu in the Senate were other pro-fossil fuel Democrats such as Byron Dorgan and Kent Conrad of North Dakota, and Joe Manchin and Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia. She served with Arkansas’s Mark Pryor, Nebraska’s Ben Nelson, and Pennsylvania’s Bob Casey, all of whom were pro-life. Missouri’s Claire McCaskill, Arkansas’s Blanche Lincoln, and Montana’s Max Baucus were all business-friendly and fiscally conservative. While every single one of these senators would occasionally prove frustrating to more left-leaning Democrats at one time or another, they also tended to be reliable votes on most issues. But it was their heterodoxy that allowed them to win and hold red states where Democrats today find themselves unable to compete.

WHEN THE FOUNDING FATHERS MET in Philadelphia's Constitution Hall, they designed a system resistant to sudden, large-scale change. Fearful of would-be despots, they built a series of checks and balances that abhor revolutionary shifts. The main bulwark the Framers created to guard against radical swings was the Senate—and the Senate is the reason that narrow majorities are not enough to enact change on a grand scale.

In the Framers' original design, the Senate's ability to pump the brakes on rapid change had nothing to do with its famous filibuster, which did not exist for many years and is nowhere in the Constitution. (This was the topic of my first book.) Nor did the Framers create the 60-vote threshold that has become the de facto standard for passing bills in today's Senate. They considered both options but rejected them, coming down firmly on the side of majority rule and extended-but-not-endless debate. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison called majority rule "the republican principle" and reasoned that requiring "more than a majority" for bills to pass the Senate would mean, "In all cases where justice or the general good might require new laws to be passed, or active measures to be pursued, the fundamental principle of free government would be reversed." Indeed, for most of the Senate's existence, it was a majority-rule institution. The modern filibuster and its attendant 60-vote threshold did not come into being until the latter half of the twentieth century.

The features that make the Senate the "saucer that cools the tea" are woven into the structure of the institution itself and will remain even if current efforts to eliminate or reform the filibuster succeed (as I hope they do). These built-in features include six-year, staggered terms, which make the Senate far less susceptible to sudden swings in power. Whereas every seat in the 435-member House is contested every two years, only a third of the one hundred seats in the Senate are contested in any given election—and of those, a smaller number, usually in the single digits, are considered competitive. Thus, even in a "wave" year, the Senate places a relatively firm limit on how much ground the party riding the wave can gain. Even without the filibuster, the Senate's institutional bias toward minority rights will provide senators with a variety of tools to slow down or obstruct legislation.

Yet perhaps the Senate's most important "cooling" feature is the one that defines the chamber: Every state elects the same number of senators, regardless of size. Wyoming, with its population of fewer than a million people, will always have the same number of senators as California, with its population of over thirty-six million. This means that rural, largely red states will always be overrepresented in the chamber. Even if the filibuster is abolished, senators representing around a quarter of the nation's population will still be able to muster a majority, and block whatever they choose.

This stubborn, plodding institution sits squarely athwart another power center that has bedeviled Democrats: the US Supreme Court. While both the House and the Senate must pass bills for them to become law, only the Senate is responsible for confirming justices. Under the principle of judicial review, the Supreme Court can overturn or chip away at any law it finds unconstitutional. Today, conservatives hold a six to three majority on the Court and have wielded it aggressively to overturn or weaken landmark liberal legislation. In recent years, the Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade*, gutted the Voting Rights Act, rolled back rights for transgender Americans, and undermined the power of federal agencies to regulate pollution, to name a few.

For any agenda passed by a liberal supermajority to endure, Democrats will need to shift the balance of the Supreme Court to a liberal majority. There are two ways to do so: Either a Democratic president presides over enough vacancies to shift the balance and fills those seats, or both chambers of Congress pass Court reform expanding the number of seats, and then the Senate confirms enough new Supreme Court justices to shift the balance in liberals' favor. Neither of these options can happen quickly. Both options will require Democrats to maintain control of the Senate, along with the White House, for an extended period, likely spanning two or more election cycles. Winning a bare majority in the Senate will not be enough to pull this off. Health issues, retirements, a bad midterm cycle, or simple bad luck are enough to scuttle any majority that hangs by a seat or two. To

hold on to the Senate for long enough to shift the balance of the Court, Democrats will need to elect a supermajority of between 55 and 60 senators. When they did so in 2008, they were able to hold the majority for another six years.

Democrats cannot assemble a Senate majority of that size today because they are not competitive in enough states. In 2009, Democrats held at least one Senate seat in thirty-six states—including red states like Nebraska, Montana, Arkansas, West Virginia, and both Dakotas. Today, Democrats have all but given up competing for Senate seats in every one of those. At this writing, Democrats hold Senate seats in just twenty-four states and are competitive in only a handful more. To build a supermajority, winning Senate seats in red states like Louisiana is not a luxury—it is a must.

BY 2009, DEMOCRATS HAD BEEN TRYING to extend health care coverage to all Americans for over sixty years. In 1944, FDR included the right to “adequate medical care” in his Economic Bill of Rights. He was forced to drop it, and every Democratic president since has suffered the same fate. Yet on a bitterly cold December morning, with over fifteen inches of snow on the ground from the “Snowpocalypse” blizzard that had struck DC a few days before, Democrats found themselves on the verge of realizing their longtime goal.

For the first time in over twenty years, the Senate was in session on Christmas Eve, racing against the clock. At the center of it all, hunched over his desk at the front of the chamber’s four semicircular rows, was Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. Softspoken, inscrutable, and determined to seize the moment, Reid had made the high-stakes decision to convene the Senate during the holiday week, defying both Republican stalling tactics and the storm buffeting DC. Unsure if he had the votes, Reid gambled that forcing the Senate into session under duress would push the legislation over the finish line.

The journey had begun about a year earlier. After winning the nomination, health care had become a major focus of Obama’s campaign against McCain. He hammered the issue relentlessly on the stump. When it came to advertising, [his campaign spent more on ads about health care](#) than any other topic. Once in office, Obama was determined not to repeat the mistakes of the most recent Democratic attempt to enact universal health care, when Bill Clinton’s top-down approach had alienated congressional allies. Instead, Obama devised a strategy where congressional leaders would take the lead in crafting the legislation, thus securing their buy-in from the beginning. The president set the basic parameters and instilled a sense of urgency but let his allies in the House and the Senate figure out the details.

By the spring of 2009, multiple committees were at work on the provisions of a bill that would expand coverage to millions of uninsured Americans and rein in insurance company abuses. Obama strove to preempt opposition from industry groups and conservatives, convening public forums and privately courting industry players, from hospital groups to drug companies. In public, he emphasized that the legislation was modeled on a plan implemented by the moderate Republican governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney.

Bipartisan support seemed within reach. Republican senators Olympia Snowe, Mike Enzi, and Chuck Grassley had made health care a central focus of their careers; for several months, they engaged in negotiations with Democrats. But Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican Senate leader, made it his mission to whip Republicans into line. “[It was absolutely critical](#) that everybody be together because if the proponents of the [health care] bill were able to say it was bipartisan, it tended to convey to the public that this is O.K., they must have figured it out,” McConnell said to Adam Nagourney and Carl Hulse of *The New York Times*, in one particularly cynical reflection. As [Republican senator George Voinovich](#) of Ohio recalled, McConnell’s message to his colleagues was simple: Never mind the public interest. If Obama “was for it, we had to be against it.”

Any Republicans who needed a push to oppose the president got it in August. Lawmakers returning home for Congress’s usual month-long recess found themselves besieged by outraged

constituents at town hall meetings. Activists sporting tricornered hats fumed about “government take-overs,” “socialism,” and “death panels.” What would soon become known as the Tea Party had arrived on the political scene. The ferocity of the opposition scared off all the Republican senators who were considering supporting the bill, and rattled many Democrats.

In the fall, Democrats’ strategy shifted from seeking bipartisanship to passing the bill with Democratic votes alone. To secure the votes of pro-life Democrats in the House, Speaker Nancy Pelosi added an amendment imposing strict restrictions on abortion funding. She muscled the bill through her chamber on November 7 by a vote of 220 to 215.

Across the Capitol, Reid faced a more treacherous task. Unlike in the House, where the rules allowed bills to pass on a simple majority, Reid needed to overcome the Senate’s modern filibuster by securing 60 votes. Any potential for Republican support had evaporated after the Tea Party protests. That meant every Democrat had to vote yes on a bill that had started out popular but was rapidly becoming a political millstone.

Reid worked every angle to unify his caucus. Throughout the fall of 2009, he and his lieutenants cajoled, bargained, and arm-twisted to win over centrist holdouts without losing liberal stalwarts. One by one, Reid secured the support of reluctant senators via painstakingly tailored compromises. To get Landrieu’s vote, Reid tacked on \$300 million in additional Medicaid funding for Louisiana, which critics dubbed the “[Louisiana purchase](#).” Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska got tighter limits on abortion coverage and a promise that the federal government would pay Nebraska’s share of new Medicaid costs, soon labeled the “Cornhusker kickback.” There were many other, smaller giveaways—extra Medicare funding here, a hospital subsidy there. As each agreement inched the bill closer to passage, Republicans howled about “backroom buyoffs.” Reid shrugged it off. As he saw it, this was how deals got done.

Aside from the unified GOP opposition, the biggest obstacle proved to be Connecticut senator Joe Lieberman. After losing the Democratic primary to the more liberal Ned Lamont in 2006, Lieberman left the party and ran for his seat as an independent, beating Lamont in the general election. Lieberman had been the Democratic Party’s pick for vice president in 2000, and he never stopped nursing the wound of being rejected by his party. In 2008, he endorsed McCain against Obama. He hit the campaign trail with McCain and South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham, a trio the press dubbed the “three amigos.”

Now, Lieberman saw a chance to exact revenge. With Connecticut housing the densest concentration of health insurance companies in the nation, he took aim at the provision his home-state industry hated most: the public option. Although he was an independent, Lieberman still caucused with Democrats and was among the 60 votes Reid needed to pass the bill. After Lieberman made his opposition known, Reid tried every tactic, but could not move him. He had already been cast out of the party and was eyeing the exits, leaving Reid and Obama with little leverage. Dropping the public option was a bitter pill, but Reid and Obama decided they had no choice.

As the Senate plodded forward in December, Republican leaders used every available lever to stall the bill’s passage—drawing out every procedural vote, some of which necessitated thirty hours of debate, and forcing weary clerks to read amendments aloud, some of which ran to hundreds of pages. Outside, the blizzard dumped more than a foot of snow on a city where even a few inches can grind things to a halt. But Reid had set a Christmas deadline for passage, and he intended to keep it. To win a critical midnight vote on December 21, Reid had Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, frail and in the last months of his life, wheeled into the chamber. [Byrd called out “aye!”](#) a little after one o’clock in the morning. When the gavel came down on that particular procedural vote, the tally was 60–39—not a single vote to spare.

From there, the Senate’s ponderous rules required senators to trudge through another series of marathon votes drawn out over several days. Tensions flared in the chamber as the GOP continued to stretch debate at every turn, hoping to catch a break. All it would take to kill the bill was for one of

several geriatric members like Byrd to find themselves unable to vote. But Democrats pushed through.

At dawn on December 24, 2009, senators gathered at their desks for the historic vote. Vice President Joe Biden, in his role as president of the Senate, arrived on the floor to preside. Vicki Kennedy, the widow of the late Senator Ted Kennedy, sat in the gallery. Shortly before Kennedy had passed away that summer, he had called health care reform the “unfinished business” of his career. “This morning’s vote brings us one step [closer to making Ted Kennedy’s dream a reality](#),” Reid said to applause—something rarely heard on the staid Senate floor.

All the Senate’s liberal stalwarts voted for the bill—names like Barbara Boxer, Chuck Schumer, and Bernie Sanders. But there were not enough of them. To pass the bill, Reid had needed every one of the senators from red states, names like Max Baucus, Mark Pryor—and Mary Landrieu.

REID HAD BEEN RIGHT TO RUSH, as his 60-seat majority was about to prove precarious. Soon after the dramatic Christmastime vote, it became clear that Democrats’ candidate to fill the seat vacated by Kennedy’s death, Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley, was in trouble.

Few had imagined that a Senate race in Massachusetts, let alone one to replace the legendary Kennedy, would be competitive, but Coakley was proving to be a catastrophically inept candidate. Overconfident and disengaged, she disappeared from the trail for extended periods and routinely skipped even the most basic retail politicking. When WBZ radio host Dan Rea pressed her about her lackluster effort, Coakley dismissed the criticism. “As opposed to [standing outside Fenway Park](#)? In the cold? Shaking hands?” By contrast, the Republican candidate, Scott Brown, was good-looking—he had been a centerfold model—affable, and energetic. He barnstormed the Bay State in his dark green pickup truck. Obama and other high-profile Democrats rushed in to boost Coakley, but it was too late. Brown prevailed, costing Democrats their filibuster-proof 60th vote.

This was a problem. Although the Affordable Care Act (ACA) had passed both chambers, the versions were different; the Senate had dropped the public option and tacked on a litany of side deals. For a bill to become law, the House and Senate must pass versions that match exactly, down to the last comma. When Reid had 60 votes to work with, this was a matter of legislative housekeeping, since the same senators who voted to pass the bill would be highly likely to approve the same text again with minor tweaks. Now that Republicans had enough votes to sustain a filibuster, they gleefully proclaimed the ACA, or “Obamacare” as it became known, dead. Many nonpartisan observers agreed. “Scott Brown’s surprise victory in yesterday’s Massachusetts senatorial election is being seen in many quarters as evidence that [Democrats reached too far on health-care reform](#),” *The New Yorker* observed. Progressives, already livid over the nixing of the public option, wanted to scrap the whole effort and start over. “I think you can make a pretty good argument that [health care might be dead](#),” said Anthony Weiner, then a leading House progressive, on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*. Even a veteran congressman like Barney Frank of Massachusetts was ready to write the bill’s obituary: “I think that’s dead.”

Ignoring the doomsayers, Reid devised a two-step plan to force the bill through. The bill that included all the Senate’s side deals had not yet passed the House, where progressives were calling for changes such as restoring the public option. This would have killed the bill, since any changes would require Reid to pass the entire bill through the Senate again, and he lacked the votes to do so. Thus, the first step in Reid’s plan involved forcing House Democrats to swallow their pride and pass the Senate’s version exactly as written. This was a tall order, given the antipathy from progressives, but it would send the bill directly to President Obama’s desk. Backchanneling with Reid, Pelosi struck another series of side deals to ease progressive opposition, writing those new provisions into a separate piece of legislation. Since this new package of changes would also have to be passed by the Senate, and because Democrats no longer had 60 votes, all of the new changes had to comply with the Senate’s budget “reconciliation” process—a majority-rule legislative pathway that could be used for certain narrow, budgetary provisions, but whose strict rules prohibited larger changes such as

restoring the public option. Reid's use of this fast track was seen as an unprecedented violation of Senate norms, and Republicans were outraged. Once again, he shrugged off their objections.

In March, the White House and congressional leaders painstakingly rounded up votes from wavering House Democrats. The objections were not just coming from the left: Michigan's Bart Stupak led a bloc of pro-life Democrats who threatened to tank the bill unless abortion restrictions were tightened. In a tense last-minute negotiation, Obama promised to issue an executive order reinforcing a ban on using federal funds to pay for abortions, a longstanding policy known as the Hyde amendment. One by one, arms were twisted, and the holdouts surrendered.

On March 21, 2010, a sunny Sunday, the House of Representatives called the historic final vote. When the electronic board at the front of the chamber lit up with 216 "ayes," the bare majority required for passage, cheers erupted on the floor. Lawmakers hugged and danced in the aisles. An exuberant Pelosi, grasping a giant gavel, declared that health care was "[the great unfinished business of our country](#) . . . until today." At the White House, Obama watched the vote in the Roosevelt Room with his staff. When Pelosi gavelled the vote to a close, the room erupted with applause. Obama high-fived his Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel. Within days, a beaming Obama hosted a signing ceremony in the East Room of the White House. Flanked by Pelosi and Reid, the president put his pen to the Affordable Care Act, cementing it into law. Vice President Biden leaned in and whispered to Obama: "[This is a big fucking deal](#) ."

A FEW YEARS LATER, in 2014, Mary Landrieu found herself fighting for her political life. It was her first race after the passage of the ACA, and Republicans were hammering her on it.

But Landrieu was not just being attacked by Republicans. One rainy November morning, several dozen environmental activists gathered in front of her house to protest her support for the Keystone XL pipeline. "This house is high and dry, but the coastlines of Louisiana are sinking, [very much like Senator Landrieu's political career!](#)" Erich Pica, president of Friends of the Earth, shouted into a microphone.

Red state Democrats like Landrieu presented activists like Pica with a choice. They could either have a Democratic senator who occasionally deviated from the party line holding that Senate seat, or a Republican, since any Democrat who adhered to all of the activists' preferred policy positions was virtually guaranteed to lose a statewide race in Louisiana. When a reporter asked Pica whether he'd rather see a Republican win Landrieu's seat, he said, "Yeah, I think it would be a good thing."

Pica got his wish, and Landrieu lost. But she made her time in office count. Over three terms spanning eighteen years, she had assiduously built political capital by cutting a heterodox profile. Then she spent it on something that mattered. Because of Landrieu's vote on the ACA, the number of Louisianans lacking health insurance was slashed in half. [Almost five hundred thousand of the state's residents](#) gained coverage through the bill's expansion of Medicaid. Asked if she could do it all over, would she vote for Obamacare again, [Landrieu didn't hesitate](#) : "I would."

Chapter Three

THE PATCHWORK PARTY

JEWISH MYSTICISM TELLS THE TALE of the Golem, a sixteenth-century superhero molded from clay by a rabbi to protect his people, the Jews of Prague, from mob violence. As the rabbi chanted the kabbalistic verses that brought the Golem to life, he commanded the creature to always obey him. It did—to the letter. When asked to fetch water, the Golem kept drawing buckets until he flooded the house. Asked to catch fish, it pulled so many out of the river that there were none left. Since the Golem did not always respond to the rabbi's commands as intended, constant vigilance was required to keep this protector of the people on track.

Jewish law forbids work on the Sabbath, so the rabbi would deactivate the Golem from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. One Friday, he forgot. Unsupervised, the Golem went on a rampage, destroying the Jewish ghetto and hurting the very people it was created to protect. The rabbi decided he had no choice but to deactivate the Golem for good. He stuffed its lifeless body in the attic of Prague's Old Synagogue, where according to legend, it remains today.

In politics, the Golem is public opinion. When attended to closely and marshalled effectively, it can be a powerful force for progressive change. Ignored or misdirected, it has the power not just to stymie progress, but to roll it back. Throughout history, liberals have made the most progress when they have made the Golem work for them. When their vigilance falls short, the Golem turns on them, fueling the type of reactionary forces that now threaten to overtake our democracy.

Today, the question of whose job it is to manage the Golem remains unresolved. From the dawn of the party system in the early nineteenth century through the late twentieth century, gauging and managing public opinion was primarily the job of political parties, which came into existence to win elections and amass power for their sides. Despite their many downsides, from corruption and venality to plain old stale thinking, parties mediated between competing forces to steer candidates along a path where the end goal was always electoral victory. Now the two major political parties are vastly diminished. In their recent book *The Hollow Parties*, the political scientists Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld chronicled how today's parties have been reduced to "hard shells" covering "[disordered cores](#)."

Two decades ago, a loose collection of interest groups tried to fill the vacuum, at first demonstrating a hard-nosed commitment to managing the Golem before convincing Democrats to ignore it altogether—and let it run amok.

IN HIS 1969 BOOK *THE END OF LIBERALISM*, the political scientist Ted Lowi predicted that the expansive government programs of the Great Society would lead to the rise of a [new type of interest-group liberalism](#).

The groundwork for this shift, Lowi argued, was a change in the nature and structure of safety net programs. Under the programs of the New Deal, government benefits were generally extended to people who fit into non-fungible categories, such as everyone over the age of 65, or widows with

children, or military veterans. By contrast, the Great Society programs of the 1960s directed benefits toward people in more malleable categories, such as those living in poverty, and at more subjective goals, such as rectifying historic racial injustice. While laudable, these goals required the government to develop more complicated standards and policies, many of which effectively came down to judgment calls. Rather than automatically sending checks to people after their sixty-fifth birthday, for example, legislators and federal employees first had to answer questions such as, at what income level does a person live in poverty? To extend the government's role beyond ending de jure discrimination and into actively rectifying racial injustice, they had to decide questions such as, what constitutes a proper set of remedies for hundreds of years of oppression?

Worthy as they are, questions such as these created a wealth of new opportunities for lobbying and advocacy, which in turn sparked the rise of new interest groups dedicated to weighing in on them.

As these interest groups emerged in the 1960s and '70s, they tended to be lean, staffed by young people passionate about a given cause. Groups like the Public Interest Research Group flooded lawmakers and staffers at government agencies with policy briefs, research, and congressional testimony advancing their preferred issue stances. At a time when private industry had captured many of the government regulators charged with overseeing them, these groups played a critical role in raising awareness of issues that were genuinely in the public interest. They brought to light corporate malfeasance such as the dumping of toxic chemicals in waterways or the auto industry's willingness to sell cars it knew were unsafe. Building off tactics learned during the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, they played foundational roles in the rise of the consumerist, environmental, and feminist movements, among others. Over the latter decades of the twentieth century, these dynamics led to a fundamental shift in the advocacy landscape, as it became characterized by weak parties and strong interest groups.

Around the turn of the century, a group of operatives and donors looked at this balkanized landscape and decided to try and piece the groups together into a patchwork that could replicate the role parties used to play. Frustrated by President George W. Bush's victory in 2000, a Democratic operative named Rob Stein put together a PowerPoint presentation arguing that conservative donors had done a better job than liberals at marshalling their network of think tanks, media organizations, and advocacy groups toward the cause of winning elections for Republicans. To counter the right, Stein argued, progressive donors needed to do the same. When Bush won reelection in 2004, thanks in part to the efforts of those conservative groups, Stein was able to gin up interest from funders. He convened a group of liberal billionaires at the Boulders, a secluded resort just outside Scottsdale, Arizona, in the spring of 2005.

For donors, the price of entry was a minimum donation of \$200,000 per year, to be pooled into a group called the Democracy Alliance. The appeal was coordination: The Alliance would vet and approve a select set of groups and distribute the donors' money to them. Secrecy was paramount; for years the full membership roster remained under wraps, but it included the investor George Soros, the late insurance magnate Peter Lewis, tech entrepreneur Tim Gill, and director Rob Reiner.

Early on, the Democracy Alliance focused mainly on beating Republicans, its members bound more by a shared sense of "[revulsion toward the Republican majority](#)," as one observer put it, than by any desire to get Democrats to take certain policy positions. Most of the Alliance's early funding went to a handful of core organizations. First among equals was the Center for American Progress (CAP). An innovative think tank founded in 2003 by former Bill Clinton chief of staff John Podesta, CAP's role was to generate ideas that struck a balance between liberal idealism and political pragmatism. In its early years, CAP steered Democrats away from hot-button cultural issues. Among CAP staffers, it was whispered with reverence that at one early meeting, the notoriously profane Podesta had yelled, "I'm tired of losing elections over the fucking assault weapons ban."

In addition to CAP, the Alliance poured funds into Media Matters for America, where young staffers fact-checked conservative outlets like Fox News and deployed rapid response tactics to

counter right-wing media narratives. The Alliance also helped bankroll Catalist, a cutting-edge data analytics firm intended to give Democrats an edge in targeting and turning out voters. The Alliance supported the League of Conservation voters, an environmental organization that deployed television ads and mail advertisements for and against candidates. Other Alliance-supported groups were focused on conducting field work—that is, organizing events, registering voters, and deploying volunteers door-to-door during campaigns. Having re-created several key functions of a traditional political party, the patchwork party was now up and running.

THE ISSUE THAT BEDEVILED DEMOCRATS above all others during this period was the war in Iraq. They were caught between anti-war activists demanding a full withdrawal from the Middle East and a fear of appearing soft on terrorism.

Democrats' 2004 presidential nominee, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, tried to straddle the issue by explaining that while he had supported the decision to invade Iraq, he objected to Bush's handling of the war. While campaigning in Huntington, West Virginia—a state still considered in play for Democrats—Kerry tried to explain that he had voted in favor of a procedural maneuver to advance a war funding bill before voting against the bill later, when it came up for a final passage vote. “[I] actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it,” Kerry said, playing right into the Bush campaign's efforts to portray him as a “flip-flopper.”

As the 2006 midterm elections approached, Democrats in Congress found themselves in the same bind. To help them navigate the issue, CAP released a plan in the fall of 2005 called “Strategic Redeployment: A Progressive Plan for Iraq and the Struggle against Violent Extremists.” The authors were Lawrence J. Korb, a former Reagan administration defense official, and Brian Katulis, a national security staffer in the Clinton administration. Rejecting the left's calls for withdrawal, the paper provided a blueprint for opposing the Iraq War expressly on national security terms. It advocated a phased pullout from Iraq that would leave a contingent of troops in the country, while redeploying others around the region where they would be better positioned to attack terrorists. The reason to get out of Iraq was that the war was harming US national security interests, providing a powerful recruiting tool for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. This was not withdrawal, the paper argued, but a repositioning to wage the war on terror more effectively.

Having tapped a former Reagan defense department official to coauthor the plan, finding the right lawmaker to champion it was critical. Congressman John P. Murtha of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, was no left-winger. A hawkish Democrat, he had supported the Iraq War and served for years as the ranking member of the appropriations subcommittee on defense, a perch from which he liberally dispensed Pentagon funding. It stunned Washington when, on November 17, 2005, Murtha delivered an emotional speech on the House floor effectively endorsing the CAP plan—a watershed moment commentators dubbed the “Murthquake.” A few months later, in March of 2006, Democratic congressional leaders rolled out a national security platform titled “Real Security,” largely based on the CAP plan.

In November, Democrats won control of the House and Senate for the first time in twelve years. Voters had reelected Bush two years earlier because they believed he would keep them safe. But in the 2006 midterms, voters echoed the CAP plan by telling pollsters that the war in Iraq “did not improve U.S. security” by a margin of 59 percent to 35 percent. The patchwork party, it seemed, was working.

WHEREAS A TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PARTY houses all its functions within a single organization, the distributed nature of the patchwork party presented a coordination challenge. This was partially solved by holding regular conference calls to coordinate strategy, one of which I helped run while working at CAP in 2009. “The vast new left-wing conspiracy sets its tone every morning at 8:45 AM, when officials from more than 20 labor, environmental and other Democratic-leaning groups dial into

a private conference call hosted by two left-leaning Washington organizations,” *Politico* reporter Ben Smith wrote at the time. The call “marks a [new level in coordination](#) by the White House’s allies at a time when the conservative opposition is struggling for a toe-hold,” Smith wrote, in words that must have made Democracy Alliance funders proud.

Among the groups that joined our call every weekday morning, an article of faith was that we were there to support Democrats’ legislative agenda and push back on Republican attacks. The idea of criticizing Democrats was as anathema to us as if we had worked for the party itself. Part of that job involved easing disappointment among left-wing activists when compromises had to be made. When Lieberman’s intransigence forced Reid to drop the public option from the ACA, for instance, we did our best to explain what we saw as political reality to activists and allies. But what we saw as immutable laws of nature, others saw as a lack of imagination. We were seen as so hand-fed by Obama administration officials that the prominent left-wing blogger and activist Jane Hamsher nicknamed us “the veal pen.”

For progressives, the disappointments began to pile up. In the fall of 2009, Hamsher launched a campaign attacking Democrats for the pro-life provisions that Pelosi and Reid had added to secure passage of the ACA. When the public option was dropped from the bill, Howard Dean, the former Vermont governor who had since started his own grassroots advocacy group, lamented, “This is essentially the collapse of health care reform in the United States Senate.” The progressive group MoveOn sent an action alert to its members demanding that they light up Democrats’ phone lines to tell them, “This isn’t what [70 million of us voted for](#) .”

It was not just health care. Labor unions, which had mobilized their members behind Obama and spent millions on advertisements supporting him, had hoped Obama would prioritize legislation to make it easier to form a union, but the effort died quietly in Congress. On immigration, Obama angered activists by aggressively enforcing interior enforcement laws, ordering the deportations of more people than any previous president. The National Council of La Raza had claimed credit for helping elect Obama in 2008, sending out a press release touting its efforts to register Hispanic voters. But by 2014, the group’s president, Janet Murguía, had become so frustrated with Obama that she publicly blasted him as “the [deporter-in-chief](#) .”

Climate change activists had worked diligently to help elect Obama in 2008, but when a bill to “cap and trade” carbon emissions died in the Senate in 2010, they grew disillusioned. Groups advocating for progressive economic policies came to see Obama as too cozy with Wall Street. They viewed his failure to put a single executive in jail after the Great Recession as a betrayal—one punctuated by the embarrassing spectacle of his administration failing to stop the insurance giant AIG, which had received a [\\$183 billion taxpayer bailout](#) , from disbursing more than \$165 million in bonuses. When Obama turned his focus to deficit reduction in 2011, seeking to craft a “grand bargain” with Republicans that would necessitate cuts to entitlement programs, the groups dedicated to preserving and expanding those programs were furious. Justin Ruben, the executive director of MoveOn, summed up the feeling among progressives: “[We are all incredibly frustrated](#) .”

There is nothing new about liberal activists getting angry at a Democratic president for his shortcomings. But by the early 2000s, those activists had assumed many of the functions that used to be the purview of the party itself. The lines between issue-based activism and electoral politics had been thoroughly blurred. The interest groups had recruited volunteers, run ads, and registered voters to elect Obama. But unlike a political party, whose only role is to perform those functions cycle after cycle, they now expected a return on their issues. And unlike a political party, if Democrats fell short of what they wanted, these interest groups could shift strategy. As the Obama supermajority ran headlong into the realities of governing, the groups that made up the patchwork party began to pull apart.

WHEN THE DEMOCRACY ALLIANCE convened its annual gathering in the winter of 2010, George Soros had a message for his fellow billionaires. “We need to draw a line,” he said, “And [if this](#)

president can't do what we need , it is time to start looking somewhere else.”

The mood at the gathering was sour. Democrats had suffered a shellacking in the November midterms, losing sixty-three seats in the House and six in the Senate. Whereas Obama administration officials had been received warmly at past gatherings, the tone this time was “notably different,” according to a dispatch in the *Huffington Post* . A new dynamic was starting to take hold, as the donors began to look past the quotidian goal of helping Democrats win elections and toward something larger, a concept they sometimes described as “movement building.” As one attendee put it, “The general consensus is that support has to move beyond being about one person and more about a movement.”

The Democracy Alliance began to expand. Previously, the Alliance had limited its recommendations to a circle of twenty to thirty approved groups. Now, Alliance leadership decided to widen its scope, creating what they called a “Progressive Infrastructure Map” that would grow to include over 160 organizations and become a clearinghouse for all things progressive. Black Lives Matter, the racial justice movement that rose to prominence in 2014 and 2015, was among the new grantees. The Alliance also channeled funds to community organizing networks including the Center for Community Change and National People’s Action, immigrant rights coalitions, and even progressive political parties that competed directly against Democrats, such as the Working Families Party. By 2015, Democracy Alliance dollars were flowing to nearly every corner of the progressive ecosystem.

Leaders of the Alliance saw this growth as a sign of strength. The Alliance’s president at the time, Gara LaMarche, insisted that the organization could support both President Obama and the activist groups that often aimed their fire at him. “ [This is about doing ‘both, and,’](#)” echoed Kim Anderson, an Alliance vice president. As its strategy shifted, what had been a centrifugal force became centripetal—no longer drawing groups toward a central focus, instead pushing each of them toward their individual issues and causes, an ever-expanding galaxy of policy demanders.

The Democracy Alliance had always prided itself on pragmatism, and there was a political logic undergirding this shift. After the grim midterms of 2010, there was a growing sense that the political strategy favored by mainstream Democrats was not working. The path to a more effective approach, in the view of the Alliance and its allies, ran through a concept known as the “rising American electorate.” The basic idea was that long-term demographic trends, primarily the fact that minority voter groups were growing faster than whites, put Democrats on a path to dominance if they could motivate high turnout among those groups. The theory was based on a 2002 book by journalist John Judis and the pollster Ruy Teixeira, titled *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. Judis and Teixeira were careful to note that because white voters made up such a massive share of the electorate, a strong performance among nonwhite voters would still have to rest on a solid foundation of support among white voters. Yet when Obama’s 2008 victory seemed to deliver on the book’s promise, the more mundane ideas in their carefully caveated tome fell out of focus. The theory became shorthand as, “demographics are destiny.” As journalist Tim Alberta wrote in *The Atlantic* , among Alliance groups and like-minded operatives, the phrase began to be “treated as something [akin to divine prophecy](#) .”

For progressives disappointed by the Obama era, this rationale promised a way to win without compromise. If the path to victory lay in driving up turnout among young people and nonwhite voters, the theory went, Democrats should lean ever harder into progressive policies. There was no need to be heterodox—Democrats could win by staying entirely inside the liberal box.

THE BRUTAL 2010 MIDTERMS were followed by a contentious summer where Republicans nearly pushed the country into default. To right the ship, Obama turned to a tried-and-true tactic deployed by every successful Democrat of the previous century: populism.

Working closely with Democrats on the Hill, the Obama White House crafted an economic push that would put Republicans on the defensive. By this time, I had moved from CAP to Reid’s office. I

worked closely with the White House as we assembled and rolled out a bill called the American Jobs Act, composed of popular economic programs. Reid laid down strict rules: This was not going to be a grab bag of progressive priorities. Everything in the bill had to stimulate the economy or create jobs or both, and it had to be popular. Voters were cranky about the economy—just [37 percent approved](#) of how Obama was handling it, according to an NBC poll released in September. If Democrats stuffed the bill with provisions related to climate change, abortion, or civil rights, it would dilute the economic message.

The resulting package was a mix of tax cuts, infrastructure investments, and incentives to hire teachers, firefighters, and veterans. To pay for the bill, we reached for what had been dubbed the “Buffett Rule.” Based on the principle that it was unfair for Warren Buffett to pay a lower tax rate than his secretary, the Buffett Rule held that Americans making more than \$1 million should not pay a lower rate than those in the middle class paid. Accordingly, the bill raised taxes on those making \$1 million and above by 5.6 percent to pay for the bill’s \$447 billion price tag. Obama called a joint session of Congress on September 8, the first Thursday after Labor Day, to deliver an address introducing the bill. In the weeks that followed, we forced Republicans to vote on it repeatedly—first, on the entire package, then in its component parts. In December, Obama traveled to Osawatimie, Kansas, where Teddy Roosevelt had called for a “New Nationalism,” to deliver a populist broadside, slamming Republicans for only looking out for the rich.

After a brutal year, this fall push put Obama on his front foot going into his 2012 reelection campaign. He faced the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor who had gone on to run the successful Salt Lake Olympics. Handsome but awkward, Romney ran as an economic turnaround artist, while Obama set to work portraying him as a vulture capitalist. The focal point was Romney’s past work for the private equity firm, Bain Capital. One of the most effective ads of the cycle came from Priorities USA Action, a political action committee that, while technically not a part of the Obama campaign, was run by his close allies. The ad opens with shots of the abandoned Ampad paper plant in Marion, Indiana. “Out of the blue one day, we were told to build a thirty-foot stage,” says Mike Earnest, a worker at the plant, “not knowing what it was for.” A few days later, Earnest says, he was asked to “gather the guys” as a team of Bain executives mounted the stage. They proceeded to tell the Ampad employees that production was moving overseas, and they were all fired. “Mitt Romney made over a hundred million dollars by shutting down our plant, and devastated our lives,” Earnest says. “Turns out that when we built that stage, it was like [building my own coffin](#).”

Under pressure, the gaffe-prone Romney coughed up material that fed the attacks. In September, David Corn of *Mother Jones* published a video of Romney complaining to a room full of donors about the “[47 percent of the people](#) who will vote for the president no matter what,” because they are people who “are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it.”

Obama paired his populist attacks with a heavy emphasis on his heterodox positions. In ads and speeches, he highlighted his efforts to reduce the deficit, pointing to over \$1 trillion in cuts to government spending he had signed into law the previous year. In one ad, [Obama slammed Romney](#) for spending proposals that would increase the deficit, positioning himself as the more aggressive fiscal hawk. He promoted his efforts to secure the border, speaking of “putting more boots on the southern border than at any time in our history” and highlighting that “[deportation of criminals is up 80 percent](#).” He talked up an “[all of the above](#)” approach to energy production that embraced the need for fossil fuels, bragging that domestic oil production was the highest it had been in eight years. And he emphasized his national security credentials, including the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Romney used to have a heterodox record as well, but he shed it in the years prior to the election. Between his earlier unsuccessful run in 2008 and the 2012 primary, he traded the stances that cut against his own party for a litany of hardline conservative positions. To compete with opponents

running to his right, he renounced his signature health care plan, which had provided the model for the ACA. Having been elected as a prochoice governor—pledging, “I believe that abortion should be safe and legal in this country”—he flip-flopped, declaring himself “[firmly pro-life](#).” In his eagerness to please the right, Romney at one point declared himself “[severely conservative](#).” His top advisor, Eric Fehrnstrom, shrugged off Romney’s lurch to the right, reasoning he would simply erase the right-wing positions and start over once he won the nomination. “It’s almost like an [Etch A Sketch](#),” Fehrnstrom said in an interview on CNN. “You can kind of shake it up and restart all over again.” It was not that easy. The Obama campaign hung each of his far-right positions around Romney’s neck.

Once again, Obama’s combination of populism and heterodoxy carried the day. He won 332 electoral votes, carrying the blue wall states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, along with Ohio and Florida. In the Senate, Democrats clawed back some of their 2010 losses, gaining two seats to climb back to a fifty-five-seat majority.

After the election, GOP party leaders tasked the Republican National Committee with performing an autopsy assessing what had gone wrong. To a striking degree, the report’s recommendations echoed the Democracy Alliance’s evolving theory of the case. The GOP had become the party of “stuffy old men,” the report argued, and needed to appeal to the “rising” electorate of nonwhite voters. “If we do not, [our Party’s appeal will continue to shrink](#) to its core constituencies only,” the report warned. Upon its release, the report was widely hailed by party luminaries. When the GOP-controlled House killed an immigration reform bill the following summer, the conservative columnist David Brooks of *The New York Times* lamented that it was “[political suicide](#)” and begged his party not to follow “the receding roar of a white America that is never coming back.”

There was at least one voice dissenting from this conventional wisdom. “New @RNC report calls for embracing ‘comprehensive immigration reform,’” a Tweet flashed across the timeline. “[Does the @RNC have a death wish?](#)” The handle: @realdonaldtrump.

Chapter Four

HE TELLS IT LIKE IT IS

I WAS SITTING AT THE BAR in the sportsbook of the Mandalay Bay resort, located at the southernmost end of the Las Vegas strip. It was August 2015 and I was staffing a clean energy conference cohosted by Senator Harry Reid. I was finished with work and hadn't eaten all day, so I sat down to grab a chicken sandwich and a beer, catch up on the scores, and place a few bets.

The TV at the bar was tuned to cable news. A segment came on featuring Donald Trump, who had launched his campaign for president two months earlier and seemed to dominate every news cycle since. As I watched, a middle-aged white guy sporting a polo shirt and a high-and-tight haircut was sitting to my left, talking to his buddy. When he saw Trump on TV, he said, "You know what, I like that guy, he tells it like it is." His friend nodded in agreement as he sipped his beer. A few stools down to my right, a third guy overheard the first one's comments. "Yeah, I like that about him too." A fourth guy from across the bar heard the other three talking and chimed in: "He's not like those other politicians."

These are paraphrases, since I did not write down the exact quotes at the time. But as a political operative, I will never forget my feeling of awe as I watched the scene unfold. This was the kind of reaction that campaigns will spend millions of dollars in ads to elicit in voters and still fail to achieve. This early in the race, Trump had not run a single ad, nor was this the result of some sophisticated social media campaign. He was sparking this reaction for free.

As I sat there slack-jawed, I noticed that all the guys were wearing the same lanyards. As it turned out, our clean energy nonprofit was sharing the resort with a national convention of car dealership owners, and I seemed to be the only guy at the bar who was there with the green group. Campaigns routinely spend \$30,000 or more for a single focus group, but this was like watching one for free. Car dealership owners have long been a reliably GOP constituency. To gauge the views of Republican voters as their party's primary got underway, this was about as good of a sample as you could ask for.

At the time, polls showed Trump hovering in the teens amid a crowded crop of GOP luminaries. The field included the scion of Republican royalty, former Florida governor Jeb Bush. Former Wisconsin governor Scott Walker had become a darling of the right in 2011, when he [led a campaign to pass a bill](#) restricting collective bargaining rights for public sector employees. Florida senator Marco Rubio, whom *Time* magazine had recently anointed "[The Republican Savior](#)" on its cover, had jumped in, along with former New Jersey governor Chris Christie, another media darling. Yet the pull Trump exerted on those guys at the bar hinted at an appeal far stronger than anything these career politicians had to offer. As I nursed my beer, five months before Iowans would trudge to their caucus sites in the first contest of the primary, it hit me: Trump was going to win the Republican nomination.

I found this an appealing prospect. Early general election polls showed Hillary Clinton struggling against most of the other GOP candidates but trouncing Trump. A *USA Today* poll released around that time showed her beating Trump by 17 points. Ever preoccupied with the Senate, I was anxious for Democrats to retake the upper chamber, which required us to gain five seats. Trump's poll

numbers against Clinton were so bad that he seemed likely to be a drag on Republican candidates down the ballot, thus boosting our efforts to take back the Senate. The Senate stakes were especially high because a Supreme Court seat had been vacated in February 2016 with the sudden death of Justice Antonin Scalia, and Republicans were waging an unprecedented blockade, refusing to consider any nominee proposed by President Obama. If we took back the Senate and won the White House, President Hillary Clinton could fill Scalia's seat and shift the balance of the high court to liberals for a generation. With Trump as the Republican nominee, it seemed, the future was bright for Democrats.

There were several flaws in this thinking. Foremost among them was believing that the attraction those guys at the bar felt toward Trump would stop with them, or at least remain contained within the GOP base. I did not consider the possibility that the same qualities in Trump those guys found so magnetic would also attract the swing voters who would decide the election. Another flaw was assuming that Trump's extreme positions would translate into an image of him as extreme in the eyes of swing voters, most of whom identified themselves as "moderate" to pollsters. Even at that early point in the race, Trump had already called Mexicans rapists and drug dealers. These were immoderate positions, to say the least; surely voters who identified themselves to pollsters as moderate would be repelled by them.

Both assumptions would prove incorrect. By striking an image as someone willing to defy his party, Trump would attract swing voters and develop a profile as an independent-minded, heterodox figure—an aspect of his appeal that remains profoundly underappreciated. How he managed to do this is critical to understand as well. In an age of social media and billion-dollar campaigns, he did it unilaterally, on a shoestring. As liberals watched in horror, Trump demonstrated that political leaders can break down old ideological barriers, form new coalitions, and point the way to a supermajority.

"THE WAR IN IRAQ WAS A BIG, FAT MISTAKE."

Trump stood on the debate stage, unleashing a tirade. "We spent \$2 trillion, thousands of lives," he said. "We should have never been in Iraq. We have destabilized the Middle East." Referring to former President George W. Bush, whom many Republicans still held in high esteem, Trump was unsparing: "He lied." The debate moderator tried to move on but Trump was having none of it. He kept steering the conversation back to Bush's conduct of the war on terror. "The World Trade Center came down during the reign of George Bush. He kept us safe? That is not safe." Trump accused Bush of fumbling an opportunity to kill bin Laden, a charge lodged by John Kerry during the 2004 presidential campaign, along with countless other Democrats. "By the way, George Bush had the chance, also, and he didn't listen to the advice of his C.I.A.," Trump said, echoing Kerry's line of attack.

This was not Trump playing to the crowd. He was competing in a GOP primary where his task was to win over the Republican base. Yet here he was spouting positions that could have come from the mouth of an anti-war Democrat. The members of the studio audience registered their displeasure, showering Trump with boos. As Trump shrugged them off, he seemed to intuit something about the crowd. By their very presence at the debate, the men and women filling those seats were unrepresentative of the US electorate. People who participate in primaries tend to be unrepresentative of the voting population writ large. While turnout in general elections is not exactly stellar, usually coming in just above 60 percent, turnout in primaries is roughly a third of that, averaging about 20 percent for Democrats and Republicans. Research shows that primary voters tend to be **more ideologically rigid** than the much larger group of Americans who vote in general elections. The activists and interest groups who tend to dominate primaries by making policy demands of candidates tend to represent the purest of the pure. All told, the process tends to push candidates to take positions that are in step with activists but out of step with the electorate.

Trump's exchange over the Iraq War captured this dynamic. The party faithful at the debate still lionized Bush and the war, but the broader public had a very different view. Long before the debate,

Americans had turned hard against the war. By 2014, an NBC poll found that [just 22 percent](#) of Americans believed the Iraq War had been worth it. This was an 80/20 issue, but the most vocal GOP primary voters were demanding their candidates take the 20 percent side. What made Trump different was that when his party's activists pressured him to take the 20 percent side of an 80/20 issue, he defied them. Not only that, he did so dramatically, in a way that generated conflict. That conflict, in turn, broke through a cluttered media environment and showed voters that he was a different kind of Republican—one who tells it like it is.

Nor was Trump's deviation from GOP orthodoxy limited to Iraq. He spent much of the 2016 campaign making high-profile breaks with conservative dogma, goring one sacred cow after another. When Trump had launched his campaign that June, liberals understandably focused on the more incendiary parts of his speech, such as his accusation that Mexican immigrants were "[rapists](#)" who [were "bringing crime"](#) and "[bringing drugs](#)." These were the kinds of positions that made people like me assume voters would see him as an extremist. But many voters took away something different. What they heard was a candidate saying things they were not accustomed to hearing from a Republican. In a line that could have been lifted from a Bernie Sanders speech, Trump took on politicians, lobbyists, and corruption: "They're controlled fully—they're controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests, fully." He slammed corporations for outsourcing jobs to China: "We need a leader that can bring back our jobs, can bring back our manufacturing," he said. "[I'll bring back our jobs from China](#) , from Mexico, from Japan, from so many places." For decades, Republican politicians had been strongly in favor of free trade agreements, while the party's business wing cheered on globalization. Trump emphatically rejected this conservative consensus, railing against the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. He argued that deals like these had hollowed out the US manufacturing industry, and he promised to strike better ones for American workers. He floated extreme tariff rates of 45 percent tariff on Chinese imports and 35 percent on goods made by US companies offshoring jobs to Mexico, claiming such protectionism would "[bring high-paying manufacturing jobs back](#)."

That was just the beginning. Trump went after the GOP's traditional allies on Wall Street. "[The hedge-fund guys](#) are getting away with murder," he said on CBS's *Face the Nation* in August of 2015. "They're paying nothing, and it's ridiculous. . . . The hedge-fund guys didn't build this country. These are guys that shift paper around and they get lucky," he said. On health care, Trump criticized pharmaceutical companies for charging high drug prices and advocated for letting Medicare negotiate lower ones—a core Democratic priority that Republicans emphatically reject. He supported guaranteeing health insurance coverage to everyone: "[We're going to have insurance for everybody](#) ," he told *The Washington Post* , sounding almost Obama-esque. In an interview with Scott Pelley of *60 Minutes* in September 2015, Trump said that when it comes to health care, "This is an un-Republican thing for me to say . . . [I am going to take care of everybody](#) ." He even flirted with the idea of a single-payer system: "There was a philosophy in some circles that if you can't pay for [health care], you don't get it. That's not going to happen with us," he said. When Pelley asked who would pay for it, Trump replied, "The government's gonna pay for it."

On entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare, Trump broke decisively with conservative orthodoxy. He did so at a time when the GOP's rising stars were busy competing to see who could propose the broadest and deepest cuts to government programs. These were the party's *Young Guns* , the title of a 2010 book that featured the forty-something congressmen Eric Cantor, Kevin McCarthy, and Paul Ryan on its cover. Ryan in particular had carved out a national profile for himself by proposing a comprehensive series of entitlement cuts that became shorthand as "the Ryan plan." Enthusiasm for Ryan's ideas among the GOP elite had buoyed him, at just forty-two years old, to become Romney's vice-presidential pick in the 2012 election. When John Boehner, Speaker of the Republican-led House, abruptly retired in the fall of 2015, Ryan was the party's consensus choice to succeed him. As the GOP entered the 2016 presidential cycle, it is difficult to

overstate how central Ryan's vision of belt-tightening, entitlement-cutting austerity was to GOP orthodoxy.

Yet Trump rejected all of this. From the beginning of the campaign, he vowed to protect Social Security and Medicare, insisting he would “[save Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security](#) without cuts.” He leaned into contrast with his party. “[I'm not going to cut Social Security](#) like every other Republican,” he vowed.

Appalled at Trump's apostasy, the Republican Party went after him with everything they had, lambasting him as a threat to conservatism itself. In July of 2015, Texas governor Rick Perry blasted Trump as “a [cancer on conservatism](#),” one that must be “clearly diagnosed, excised, and discarded.” [Jeb Bush warned](#) that Trump “was a Democrat longer in the last decade than he was a Republican” and had donated more money to Democrats than Republicans. Conservative interest groups joined in, with the anti-tax Club for Growth running TV ads declaring “[There's nothing conservative about Donald Trump](#).” Operatives scrambled to form [political action committees to take him down](#). Ted Cruz launched a campaign excoriating Trump's “[New York values](#),” painting Trump as socially liberal, proabortion, and pro-gay marriage. Peter Wehner, a former senior aide to George W. Bush, warned that a Trump-led GOP would “[no longer be a conservative party](#).” Michael Gerson, a conservative columnist at *The Washington Post*, insisted that if “Trump were the nominee, the G.O.P. would cease to be.” Many Republican senators likely agreed with the outspoken South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham when he said, “I also [cannot in good conscience support Donald Trump](#) because I do not believe he is a reliable Republican conservative.”

Yet as the primary contests unfolded, Trump racked up one victory after another. Republican leaders began to panic. If Trump was the GOP nominee, one memo circulating among GOP leaders and donors asserted, not only would Republicans lose the race for the White House, but “we also lose the Senate.”

No one felt that fear more acutely than the GOP Senate leader, Mitch McConnell. Since April, he had been denying President Obama the chance to fill the Supreme Court seat vacated by Scalia's death. If Trump was the nominee, McConnell believed, he would lose the White House to Clinton and the fallout could drag down enough Republican senators to bounce his party back to the minority, mooting his efforts to hold Scalia's seat open until a Republican president could fill it. In closed-door luncheons with Republican senators and operatives, McConnell floated plans to break with Trump. He contemplated an “every man for himself” approach where Republican candidates would be encouraged to distance themselves from Trump while presenting themselves to voters as a check on a Clinton White House. As McConnell put it to his colleagues, if Trump won the nomination, “We'll drop him like a hot rock.”

Yet as spring turned to summer and Trump continued to win one primary contest after another, panic turned to resignation. Graham tweeted, “[If we nominate Trump, we will get destroyed . . .](#) and we will deserve it.” Yet when it came to sizing up Trump's appeal, McConnell, Graham, and just about every other top GOP luminary and strategist were wrong, and the guys at the Mandalay Bay bar were right. The GOP nominated Trump—but it did not get destroyed.

ONE OF THE MORE REMARKABLE ASPECTS of what Trump achieved is how simple it was to do. He did not implement the recommendations of any blue-ribbon commission, nor did he pore over polling and data analytics. Indeed, his campaign was known to be a notoriously shoestring, slapdash operation, “[sustained at times by little more than a Twitter account](#),” his own money and extensive news media coverage,” according to *The New York Times*. Still, Trump managed to seize control of the GOP and completely reshape its pitch to voters.

It is, of course, possible to pick a new appeal that ends up being worse. The mix of issues Trump chose worked because the positions on which he broke with conservative orthodoxy moved him closer to the mainstream of public opinion. On entitlements, Trump's pledge to protect Social Security and Medicare aligned him with the overwhelming majorities of Americans—[84 percent and](#)

79 percent , respectively—who opposed cuts to these programs. On trade, Trump’s advocacy for economic nationalism aligned him with the 66 percent of Americans who favored more restrictions on imports to protect US jobs. Extending affordable health insurance to Americans has been a perennial winner for Democrats, and Trump coopted the issue. Trump’s populist, anti-Wall Street rhetoric aligned him with the 80 percent of Americans who believed wealthy interests have too much influence in politics. These issues were also top priorities for voters , with the economy, health care, immigration, and Social Security all ranking at the top of voters’ lists of priorities in the 2016 election.

Finally, they were not just items off a laundry list. Making health care affordable, protecting Medicare and Social Security, sticking it to the “hedge fund guys” on Wall Street—these were some of Democrats’ most convincing appeals to working-class Americans; indeed, Obama beat Romney by running hard on them. Once Trump coopted them, the issues that remained in Democrats’ mix tended to be the things that were more appealing to white collar voters—such as climate change and LGBTQ rights. In short, the issue mix Trump assembled was tailor-made to draw in voters from the populist quadrant of the two-by-two graph in chapter one —those who are culturally conservative but economically progressive, who support social safety net programs and a more populist approach to economics, but are rooted in more conservative social mores.

There is one more reason Trump succeeded. When he stood on stage bashing George W. Bush or when he slammed other Republicans for wanting to cut Social Security, he created conflict. The conflict, in turn, generated media attention. Political operatives divide media into two categories: “earned,” which mostly means press coverage, and “paid,” which means ads and mailers. One of the many benefits of earned media is that it is free. Again and again, Trump used earned media to drive a clear message to voters. By openly clashing with the keepers of his party’s orthodoxy, Trump conveyed to millions of people that he was a different kind of Republican—just like he had to those car dealers at the bar. And he did it at no cost.

If heterodoxy communicated through conflict is the most poorly understood element of how Trump succeeded, Democrats were about to witness the rise of their own heterodox candidate, and he was about to create a lot of conflict.

Chapter Five

TOTAL CLARITY

EVERY YEAR, IN THE SPACE OF ABOUT A WEEK, the weather in Washington, DC, transforms from the breezy, dogwood-dappled glory of a southern spring into an almost intolerable humidity. On a late April day in 2015, just before the weather began to turn, I was walking along a plaza on the east side of the Capitol building, through a tree-shaded patch of grass that, in defiance of the public's jaundiced view of Congress, is known as the "swamp." Out of the corner of my eye, I spied a figure with a shock of wild, white hair. It was Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, holding a press conference.

While most candidates announce their presidential campaigns with slickly produced videos and rallies before thousands of supporters, Sanders was announcing his at this nearly impromptu event. Originally, he had sought to make his announcement a few blocks away in the more accommodating confines of the Democratic National Committee, which at least had a press briefing room. But when he was [rebuffed by the committee](#)'s chairwoman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, he decided to dash off an emailed announcement and squeeze in this press conference between Senate votes. The event was indistinguishable from the kind members of Congress routinely hold to introduce bills no one will ever hear of. Sanders was standing behind a podium that one of his staffers had carried over, his feet on the grass. He poked the air to punctuate his points as a few dozen staffers and reporters looked on distractedly.

As a fan of Sanders, I stopped to listen. Working in the Senate, I'd enjoyed listening to him rail against "millionaires and billionaires" over the years—on the Senate floor, in the hush of closed-door caucus meetings, and one time, to President Obama's face at what was supposed to be a friendly cocktail party for Democratic senators at the White House. In every venue, Sanders's message remained the same. It was the same here, too. After a glimpse of the likable curmudgeon America would soon get to know—" [We don't have an endless amount of time](#) ," he said, seeming irritated by his own press conference—Sanders ran through a perfunctory speech that was met mostly by the sound of birds chirping and camera shutters clicking.

As he turned to walk away, a reporter shouted, "It's more important to you to get these ideas out than to contest the Democratic nomination," more a statement than a question. Sanders returned to the podium. "Oh no, we are in this race to win," he said, running through a brief defense of his own electoral strength before finding his message. "That's not the right question. The question is, if you raise the issues that are on the hearts and minds of the American people," he said, turning to point to the Capitol dome behind him, "and say that this Capitol, this beautiful Capitol, our country, belongs to all of us, and not the billionaire class—that's not raising an issue, that's winning elections." Reflecting on the event later that week, reporters remarked on two things. "This seemed like a lunchtime break in which declaring for president was an afterthought," commented Maggie Haberman, who was covering the race for *The New York Times* . "It wasn't even 15 minutes." But there was something else about Sanders that struck her: " [Total clarity of message](#) ."

The same day, Harry Reid was meeting with his aides under the vaulted ceilings of his ornate office overlooking the National Mall, when he turned to Faiz Shakir, who was standing next to me. Reid knew Shakir was sympathetic to Sanders. Reid had always liked Sanders personally, and he asked Shakir to make the case for the Vermont senator's viability as a presidential candidate. Shakir said that Sanders had real charisma and deep convictions that spoke directly to the frustrations many Americans felt, including the lingering disappointments some Democrats harbored over Obama-era compromises. "He'll do better than most people think," Shakir said. Reid was impressed enough with Shakir's case that he invited him to make it later that day to a meeting of top Senate Democratic leaders. He wanted them to hear.

Soon, Sanders fulfilled Shakir's prediction. By the fall, the Vermont senator was on a first-name basis with America and Larry David was impersonating him on *Saturday Night Live*. The following spring, as I sat in my living room watching Sanders declare victory after upsetting Hillary Clinton in the Michigan primary, I thought to myself, "Wow, he really might win."

The appeal that catapulted Sanders from the Senate swamp to national renown in the space of a few months is powerful enough to help Democrats build a supermajority. But so far, correctly identifying the nature of that appeal is something Democrats have struggled to pull off—and their misdiagnosis has cost them dearly.

JUST A FEW MONTHS after Sanders struggled to draw several dozen attendees to his campaign launch, thousands of supporters crowded into Seattle's Westlake Park to hear him speak. It was August 2015. The senator stepped up to the microphone, but before he could begin, two young Black women climbed onstage. They grabbed the mic, identifying themselves as leaders of Black Lives Matter's Seattle chapter.

The lead activist, Marissa Johnson, and her partner, Mara Willaford, demanded silence in remembrance of Michael Brown, the Black teenager killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, one year earlier—four and a half minutes of silence, representing the four and a half hours Brown's body had lain in the street after the shooting. Chants of, "Let Bernie speak!" rained down, but Johnson gave as good as she got. "I was going to tell Bernie how racist this city is," filled with its progressives, but you did it for me," she said into the microphone. For his part, Sanders stood off to the side, hands clasped, an uneasy expression on his face. He tried to resume his speech, but the event was unsalvageable. Visibly frustrated, Sanders stepped back, waved to the crowd, and disappeared from the stage. He never gave the address. In a statement released after the event, the Seattle chapter of Black Lives Matter (BLM) was scathing. "The problem with Sanders," the statement read, is that he is "utterly and totally useless (when not outright harmful) in terms of the fight for Black lives."

It was not an isolated occurrence. Earlier that summer, BLM activists had disrupted Sanders's appearance at the progressive Netroots Nation conference in Phoenix, Arizona. Protesters led by the activist Tia Oso took the stage, read the names of Black Americans killed by police, and demanded that Sanders develop concrete plans to address systemic racism. Chants of "Black lives matter!" and "Say her name!" drowned out the Vermont senator's speech. "Black lives of course matter," Sanders shot back, exasperated. A veteran of the 1960s civil rights protests, Sanders reminded the crowd that he had been fighting for equal rights for fifty years. Then he added, "but if you don't want me to be here, that's okay. I don't want to out-scream people."

An oldline leftist, Sanders viewed most struggles through a class lens and seemed to see cultural issues as distracting from that core commitment. The way to end police violence against Black people, he believed, was to end poverty and improve the economic conditions in many Black communities. As a congressman, he had voted for the 1994 crime bill that many scholars and activists viewed as the main cause of the mass incarceration that disproportionately affected Black Americans. In more recent years, he had never shown much enthusiasm for the aggressive brand of racial justice activism that had come to suffuse left-wing political discourse. When asked about reparations, an idea revived by the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, Sanders dismissed the idea as "divisive." Instead,

Sanders said, “I think what we should be talking about is making massive investments in rebuilding our cities, in creating millions of decent paying jobs, in making public colleges and universities tuition-free.” Coates replied with a sharply worded rebuttal in *The Atlantic*, urging activists to continue confronting Sanders, and demanding to know why his “political imagination is so active against plutocracy, but [so limited against white supremacy](#).”

Remarkably, BLM activists put more pressure on Sanders than his opponent in the primary, Hillary Clinton. Her husband had signed the 1994 crime bill, and in 1996, she had referred to criminals with the racially loaded term “[super-predators](#).” Yet during the primary, Hillary largely managed to avoid or defuse the types of high-profile confrontations with Black activists that marked Sanders’s campaign. She was more responsive to the criticism, successfully courting the activist groups and [incorporating some of their policy demands](#) into her platform. As *Politico* noted at the time, throughout the primary, BLM protestors “primarily targeted Bernie Sanders.”

Yet it wasn’t just criminal justice where Sanders’s campaign took heat from left-wing activists. On issue after issue, Sanders found himself out of sync with the interest groups that made up the patchwork party. As a senator from a rural state, Sanders’s positions on gun control were to the right of most Democrats, including Clinton. A leading priority for gun control activists is repealing the liability shield that protects gun manufacturers from being sued for the injuries and deaths caused by the guns they make. On this issue, Sanders sided with the gun manufacturers and against the activists. Asked in a CBS interview [whether gun manufacturers should be held liable](#) for gun deaths, Sanders said, “Of course not, that doesn’t make any sense.” Earlier in his career, Sanders voted against the Brady Bill, the landmark 1993 law imposing federally mandated background checks and a waiting period on handgun purchases. This made sense for Sanders, who represented a rural state; as he once explained, in Vermont, “We had [virtually no gun control legislation](#) at all, and I represented that perspective.” Yet with Clinton boasting a nearly unblemished record in the eyes of the gun control groups, the issue became, as one analyst put it, a “[vulnerability on the left for Sanders](#).”

Another issue where Sanders was to Clinton’s right was immigration. Sanders’s class-first orientation left him skeptical of immigration, since he believed it pushed down wages for American workers. His thinking was influenced by the midcentury labor leader Cesar Chavez, who opposed illegal immigration because it undermined his workers’ leverage in their battles with management. “If we can get the illegals out of California, [we will win the strike overnight](#),” Chavez had said during a 1972 strike. In 2007, Sanders broke with nearly all Democrats to oppose a comprehensive immigration reform bill that included a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. In 2015, as many Democrats were embracing the idea of decriminalizing border crossings, Sanders cut off journalist Ezra Klein when he raised the idea in an interview. “Open borders?,” Sanders interjected, embracing critics’ terminology. “No, [that’s a Koch brothers proposal](#),” he said, casting it as a scheme by right-wing billionaires to bring in cheap labor. The exchange led to a critical story in *Vox* bearing the headline, “Bernie Sanders’s fear of immigrant labor is ugly—and wrongheaded.” While Sanders’s stance drew criticism from the left, it [elicited praise from right-wing](#) immigration restrictionists, including the president of the anti-immigration group NumbersUSA and the nativist Iowa congressman, Steve King.

Pundits and analysts struggled to categorize Sanders as he rose, routinely defaulting to the label “progressive.” Yet like many Americans, Sanders was hard to fit into a box. By opposing progressive orthodoxy on hot-button cultural issues such as criminal justice, guns, and immigration, he forged a strong appeal to Americans in the populist quadrant—the nearly one-third of voters who do not fit easily into the liberal or conservative boxes and can make or break a supermajority. The magnetism of Sanders’s appeal was undeniable. In the first two months of 2016, he shocked the political world by tying Clinton in the Iowa caucuses, Democrats’ first nominating contest, then beating her soundly in New Hampshire. A primary that had once seemed certain to be a Clinton coronation was now a real race. For Clinton, the pressure was on.

DURING HER FIRST RUN for president in 2008, white voters had been a source of strength for Clinton, as she consistently beat Obama among them by double digits. In 2016, she sought to build on that strength by focusing on the young and nonwhite voters who had sided with Obama over her.

In crafting her new strategy, Clinton drew heavily from the Rising American Electorate theory that had taken hold with the Democracy Alliance and likeminded groups. This was a seamless transition for her, since many of the leaders of the groups and the billionaires who funded them were her peers and counted themselves in her social circles. Page Gardner, a Clinton ally and president of the interest group Women's Voices, Women's Votes Action Fund, laid down the predicate, releasing a poll in June 2015 that, she claimed, showed that the voters Clinton was targeting would be the "game changers" of the 2016 election. "Unmarried women, people of color and millennials— [voters of the Rising American Electorate](#) (RAE)—are the new American majority of voting-eligible citizens and will make up a majority of voters for the first time in 2016," Gardner wrote. "More than a year out, they already are showing strong enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton."

As Sanders proved to be a more dogged opponent than she had expected, Clinton dispatched two senior staffers, Jake Sullivan and Josh Schwerin, to a vacation home on New Hampshire's seacoast to craft a tagline that could more effectively communicate her appeal. When Sullivan and Schwerin returned, they presented the campaign with the slogan, "Breaking Down Barriers." The phrase would leverage Clinton's gender to attract other constituencies in the Rising American Electorate universe, such as Black people and Latinos, on the assumption that they identified primarily as people facing barriers. Joel Benenson, Clinton's pollster, gamely made the case for the slogan to a reporter: "That's why Hillary is connecting with people when she talks about [breaking down all the barriers](#) holding people back, from corporate greed to racism or sexism." The phrase did not stick, however, and was later replaced by the more inclusive slogan, "Stronger Together."

Clinton's strategy translated into geography, as well. The most valuable resource a candidate has is their time, and Clinton's campaign sent her to [the urban and suburban areas](#) where voters of the Rising American Electorate were concentrated. This became a sore spot for her husband, who instinctively resisted the idea of avoiding rural areas. Bill's style of campaigning embraced meeting voters in unscripted settings and demonstrating that the candidate cares enough about their way of life to show up in far-flung areas. But from its perch in a Brooklyn Heights high-rise, the data-driven Clinton campaign dismissed that approach as outdated.

Clinton's new strategy was also, and often painfully, evident in her message. A side effect of her focus on the Rising American Electorate was that the way she talked about white voters ran the gamut from scolding to downright insulting. Some of her efforts were well intentioned. At a February speech outlining her vision for Black America, she sounded like a corporate diversity coach. " [White Americans need to do a better job](#) at listening," she said, imploring them to "Practice humility rather than assume that our experience is everyone's experiences." Other times, she simply stuck a thumb in the eye of voters she did not deem to be part of the rising electorate. At a CNN town hall in March, Clinton was enthusing about clean energy—a topic that tends to excite white collar voters while leaving blue collar voters cold—when she said, "we're going to put a lot of coal miners and [coal companies out of business](#) ." Months later, she apologized, but it was less than fulsome. "I do feel a little bit sad and sorry that I gave folks the reason, or the excuse, to be so upset with me, because that is not what I intended at all," she told a coal miner who had lost his job. In September, Clinton threw a star-studded fundraiser, headlined by Barbra Streisand, at New York's exclusive Cipriani Club. She took the stage to warm up the room. " [To just be grossly generalistic](#) ," she said, "you can put half of Trump supporters into what I call the 'basket of deplorables.' Right? Racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it," she said. To drive the point home, she described these millions of Americans as "irredeemable." The crowd of millionaires and billionaires ate it up.

CLINTON HAPPENED TO BE EMBRACING the Rising American Electorate theory around the time that its founders were backing away from it. John Judis, a coauthor of the theory's foundational text,

wrote a 2015 piece headlined “ [The Emerging Republican Advantage](#) .” He asserted that “the Democratic advantage of several years ago is gone. And the seeds of a slight Republican advantage appear to have taken root.” This was due, Judis explained, to the fact that Democrats were hemorrhaging white working-class voters. In *The Atlantic* , Ron Brownstein wrote up a report by a firm called Next America showing that America’s diversifying population was not yielding the electoral windfall Democrats had counted on. “ [Demographics Is Not Destiny](#) ,” read the headline.

As the primary unfolded, the results showed a role reversal from 2008. Clinton consistently won nonwhite and young voters, while Sanders dominated among white working-class voters. Losing whites in the primary was not necessarily fatal—after all, Obama had lost them to Clinton in 2008. The difference was that even as Obama struggled among white working-class voters during the primary, he always reached out to them, laying the groundwork for what would become a winning appeal in the general election. He emphasized themes such as personal responsibility. He neutralized resentment with his remarkable speech on race. And he ran to his opponents’ right on several high-profile issues, giving his candidacy a heterodox texture that aligned with how these voters viewed the world. For her part, Clinton was doing the opposite, crafting a message that was not just rigidly ideological, but actively alienating to white working-class voters. Indeed, instead of embracing heterodoxy herself, she attacked Sanders for his.

MICHIGAN WAS SUPPOSED TO BE where Clinton put Sanders away. Days before the March 8 contest, the *Detroit Free Press* released a poll showing [Clinton with a 25-point lead](#) . A decisive victory in a state heavy with white working-class voters would allay concerns about Clinton’s viability. Instead, Sanders pulled off a shocking upset, winning the state and making clear he was in the race to stay.

Facing a long slog, Clinton summoned the patchwork party. One by one, interest groups attacked Sanders for deviating from progressive orthodoxy on their issues. Gun groups attacked him for deviating from the party line on gun control. Immigration groups attacked him for opposing open borders. At a [Clinton-friendly gala](#) in New York City hosted by Planned Parenthood, attendees danced to Taylor Swift and Katy Perry tunes as Clinton unloaded on Sanders over guns *and* abortion. The interest group pile-on became so intense and one-sided that, in an interview, MSNBC host Rachel Maddow asked Sanders why so many progressive groups were criticizing him. Sanders embraced the dynamic, rejecting the Acela corridor, billionaire-funded [interest groups](#) as “[the establishment](#) .”

Yet the groups that made up the patchwork party housed something more valuable than the ability to attack Sanders. According to Democratic primary rules, “pledged” delegates must cast their votes for whichever candidate wins their state’s nominating contest, while “superdelegates” are free to vote for whomever they choose. While pledged delegates outnumber superdelegates by about 85 percent to 15 percent, in a close race like this one, superdelegates are the decisive swing voters. Many superdelegates were also the leaders of interest groups and close Clinton allies, staking her to near-unanimous support among this crucial bloc. To dampen Sanders’s momentum after Michigan, Clinton began to point reporters and Democratic leaders to her strength with superdelegates. She scored a win in her adoptive and delegate-rich state of New York, giving her a narrow edge in pledged delegates. When superdelegates were added to her total, her lead began to appear prohibitive. In the final stretch of the primary, Clinton sought not to beat Sanders with a clear and compelling message, but to outlast him.

When she finally clinched the nomination, Clinton delivered a speech vowing to fight for “ [civil rights, voting rights](#) , workers’ rights, women’s rights, LGBT rights, and rights for people with disabilities.” Afterward, the writer Todd Purdum noted, “Like them or loathe them, Donald Trump’s and Bernie Sanders’s messages are crystal clear and call for dramatic change, while Clinton’s remains [spread softly all over the map](#) .” As an anonymous Clinton staffer sighed to a reporter, “ [She](#)

has to check her list off, she has to talk about this policy, and that policy, thank these people. Once you get through the lists,” they conceded, “the speech can be very boring.”

WITH THE SUMMER CONVENTION APPROACHING, Clinton’s campaign did what has become standard practice for presidential campaigns and released a book outlining her vision for the country. Conceding that such campaign books are “rarely the stuff of high literature,” Carlos Lozada, book critic for *The Washington Post*, wrote that Clinton’s represented a fundamental “unwillingness to grapple with tradeoffs, an inability to set priorities and an obsession with checking boxes for every possible issue, even when they have nothing new to say about it.” The convention platform came in at more than ninety pages. In her acceptance speech, Clinton used “e pluribus unum” as a framing technique but emphasized the *pluribus* more than the *unum*. Commentating on her speech on CNN, former Obama strategist David Axelrod conceded, “She has a hard time weaving [her plans] into a coherent narrative that cuts through.”

Not only was Clinton’s message boring; it was rigidly orthodox. Over the course of the campaign, everything Clinton offered to voters fit neatly into the liberal box. There was no hint of heterodoxy—nothing for voters who prized independent thinking or wanted to see a candidate demonstrate that they would stand up to their party on occasion. Whereas Sanders and Trump could easily rattle off a list of issues where they diverged from their side’s orthodoxy, Clinton would have been stumped.

In November, Trump’s victory came as a shock. As Democrats spent the next four years focused on the awful things he said and did as president, they would often ask some version of this question: How can so many Americans support this extremist? The answer lay in numbers that received less attention than Trump’s tweets. When Americans compared Trump’s mix of extreme right-wing positions and popular liberal ones (such as protecting entitlements and opposing the Iraq War) to Clinton’s uniformly liberal positions, voters saw Trump as more aligned with their own approach of taking “a little from Column A and a little from Column B.” A Pew poll taken after the election showed that when asked which candidate represented “a mix of liberal and conservative positions,” voters chose Trump over Clinton by 12 points. A Gallup poll taken around the same time showed that voters viewed Trump as more moderate than most recent Republican nominees, ranging from Mitt Romney to George H. W. Bush. Such findings were borne out in the 2016 election results, when Trump won voters who held a mix of conservative and liberal positions by 6 points.

Clinton’s defenders have spent the years since 2016 arguing that she would have won but for unseen events. They point to FBI Director James Comey’s highly unusual decision to announce that he was reopening his investigation into Clinton’s handling of classified documents less than two weeks before the election. There is no doubt this contributed to her loss. But Clinton’s strategic choices were the reason the election was close in the first place. She placed a low ceiling on her own appeal by running on orthodoxy, locking herself firmly in the liberal box, and swiping at Sanders when he ventured outside of it. Instead of inviting voters from other, cross-cutting ideologies to be a part of her coalition, she pushed them away. Such a strategy perpetuates our state of narrow division and means that every election will, at best, give Democrats a coin flip’s chance of losing to right-wing authoritarians. Clinton lost the flip. As Democrats began to search for answers, it was unclear whether what they found would bring them closer to a supermajority or lead them farther away.

Chapter Six

THE MUDDLE

ON JANUARY 3, 2017, Harry Reid walked out of the Capitol building for the last time. Under the great marble archway of the Senate's carriage entrance, he descended the steps gingerly. As usual, he grabbed my shoulder to steady himself as he stepped into a black SUV, the "follow car" in his two-truck motorcade. At seventy-seven years old, the former boxer had long since lost his spryness. He had recently suffered a series of health scares, including a fall two years earlier that had shattered the right side of his face and left him blind in one eye. As Reid departed the institution where he had spent thirty-four years, he had things to celebrate—his storied career, for one, but also more recent victories. In the otherwise brutal election year of 2016, he had kept his own Senate seat in Democratic hands, pouring his time and energy into the campaign of Catherine Cortez Masto, a longtime protégé who made history that November as America's first Latina senator.

Yet for the first time that I had seen, Reid seemed unsure. A week after the election, he had taken to the Senate floor to denounce Trump in stark terms. "We have a [responsibility to prevent Trump's bullying](#) and aggressive behavior from becoming normalized in the eyes of America," he said, calling on his colleagues to join him. "We have a responsibility to say it is not normal for the KKK, the Ku Klux Klan, to celebrate the election of a president they view as their champion with a victory parade." Reid's Democratic colleagues, however, largely declined to take up his call. As the outgoing leader, he had little pull. About a year and a half later, he would be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I would see him a few more times before he passed away on December 28, 2021, but he would not set foot in the Capitol again. He had done what he could.

For her part, Hillary Clinton descended into recriminations and rationalizations while Bernie Sanders struggled to overcome his own bitterness, certain he would have beaten Trump. Barack Obama seemed intent on facilitating the peaceful transfer of power. Leaderless and lacking direction, horrified at Trump's victory but profoundly unsure about how to respond, Democrats sank into a muddle.

I WAS TRYING TO WORK THROUGH THE MUDDLE, MYSELF. I had spent more than a decade of my career learning to practice political pragmatism. I had grown accustomed to supporting—and often working for—politicians who took positions that I disagreed with. The first election I voted in was 2000, when Ralph Nader ran as a Green Party candidate. Nader's rationale for his candidacy was that there was no difference between the Democrat, Vice President Al Gore, and the Republican, Texas governor George W. Bush, because they were both friendly toward corporations. I voted for Gore and engaged in long debates with my sophomore year roommate who supported Nader. When the election came down to about 500 votes in the swing state of Florida, Nader played the spoiler, winning enough support to throw the election to Bush. Three years later, Bush invaded Iraq based on lies manufactured by his coterie of neoconservative advisors, while Gore vocally opposed the war. It was clear to me that the differences between the two men had, in fact, mattered.

I took to the streets in protest. My opposition to the war motivated me to leave my post-college job teaching at a school in the South Bronx to work in politics. Kerry, the candidate with whom I was able to get an entry-level job, did not oppose the Iraq War—to the contrary, he was famously indecisive about it. In 2008, I supported Obama, who was to the right of my own views on several issues, including gay marriage. When I went to work for Reid in 2010, he was running for reelection as a pro-gun, pro-life, business-friendly Democrat. In every case, I took it for granted that these politicians either held different views than my own or were taking positions that appealed to the electorate they were trying to win, or both. Yet even as they deviated from my personal preferences on some issues, I knew that on the overwhelming majority of things I cared about, they would deliver far better outcomes than the Republicans they were running against.

Republicans prevailed in the first few elections of my adult life, boosted by the rally-around-the-flag environment of the post-9/11 United States. But things soon turned around for Democrats. After Kerry's loss in 2004, Democrats dominated three of the next five election cycles, including both presidential elections, a run of success unlike any the party had experienced since the 1960s. But it ran out in 2016, when the country watched the supposedly pragmatic wing of the Democratic party fail in disastrous fashion. To me, it seemed irrefutable that Clinton's refusal to take bold stands had contributed to her defeat and perhaps been the decisive factor. And it seemed to me that Sanders would have won.

Demoralized and confused, but eager to join the growing resistance, I spent the next few years working in and around nonprofit groups. I spent a year back at the Center for American Progress Action Fund, helping build an anti-Trump war room. I helped start a nonprofit legal firm, Democracy Forward, dedicated to fighting the Trump administration's rampant corruption. I wrote my first book, *Kill Switch*, about the racist history of the Senate filibuster and the need to abolish it. And as I watched Democrats respond to Trump, I grew frustrated with what I deemed to be weak leadership, writing op-eds urging Reid's successor as Democratic Senate leader, Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, to take a more confrontational approach.

Still, I often found it hard to reconcile my visceral impulse to fight harder with the education I had received in fighting smarter. I sought out longtime friends, colleagues, and mentors—authors, academics, and strategists with decades of experience. I read everything I could get my hands on. I found few satisfying answers, and somewhere in that process, the idea for this book started to take hold. But it would take time to germinate. What muddle-bound Democrats like me needed in this confusing time was an entity capable of mediating between these competing impulses. What we had instead was the patchwork party.

ONE OF THE THINGS that made the patchwork party ill-suited for the moment was that almost all of its leaders graduated from college.

This problem is somewhat unique to politics, where a big part of the job is to understand the US voter. As we have seen, most voters do not have a college degree, and blue-collar voters think about the world differently than their white-collar compatriots; white-collar Americans tend to be more ideological, while blue-collar Americans tend to be more heterodox. Yet staffers who work in politics and public policy, an overwhelming share of whom are college-educated, tend to assume that the views of the public align with their own. As the political scientists Alexander Furnas of Northwestern University and Timothy LaPira of James Madison University found in a recent working paper, staffers' "perceptions about others' opinions systematically correspond to their own policy preferences."

Such biases are possible to overcome, but doing so requires a degree of self-awareness not often in evidence at the type of interest groups that make up the patchwork party. The writer Matt Yglesias has seen some of these groups from the inside, including a stint where we worked together at CAP. He has cheekily suggested that staffers at politically engaged nonprofits subject themselves to a form of cognitive behavioral therapy by placing Post-it notes on their laptops that say, "[the median voter](#)

is a 50-something white person who didn't go to college and lives in an unfashionable suburb." Of course, most staffers do not do this. Some of the bias is structural. The issues the groups exist to advocate for, such as climate change, LGBTQ rights, and criminal justice, are worthy causes. But they also tend to be top priorities for white-collar voters that leave blue-collar voters feeling cold or even alienated. Time and attention are finite resources, and it is not unreasonable for a voter to conclude that a candidate who spends a lot of time talking about climate change prioritizes it over issues that matter more to them. For all their flaws, the strong political parties of the past did not have this problem. The union bosses, precinct captains, Elks Club presidents, pastors, and rabbis who made up their membership tended to be much closer to the people and communities they sought to understand.

If the organizations themselves were poorly situated to understand the moment, the results of subsequent elections did not bring much clarity. Democrats did well in the 2018 midterms by focusing mainly on kitchen table issues—primarily health care, as Republicans spent much of Trump's first two years in office trying to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Democrats flipped forty-one seats in the House, but just two in the Senate, where they left at least one winnable Senate seat on the table. In Florida, the seventy-six-year-old Democratic incumbent, Bill Nelson, ran a lackluster campaign and lost by less than a percentage point to an uneven Republican opponent, the off-putting former health care executive, Rick Scott.

Around the same time, a group of young Democrats captured activists' hearts. In June of 2018, a twenty-nine-year-old former bartender named Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez upset the incumbent Democrat, Joe Crowley, in a primary for New York's 14th district, representing the Bronx and Queens. She was joined in Congress by Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley, an informal grouping that would become known as the Squad. In addition to being media magnets, the members of the Squad excited progressives in ways that moderate candidates did not. During this same stretch of time, two white male moderates with law-and-order backgrounds won competitive races in Trump-friendly seats. In December 2017, Doug Jones, a former prosecutor who talked up bipartisanship, won a ruby-red Senate seat in Alabama, a state that had voted for Trump by 28 points. In March 2018, Conor Lamb, a former prosecutor who opposed the assault weapons ban, won a special election in Pennsylvania's 18th district, the heart of Trump country in southwestern Pennsylvania. By contrast, every member of the Squad represented a deep blue district—the kind candidates win without needing to persuade swing voters, because whoever wins the Democratic primary faces only token Republican opposition in the general election. Despite the fact that Lamb and Jones had achieved something no member of the Squad had, by flipping red seats blue, they were undeniably bland, and their approach to politics seemed out of step with the furor of the times.

As Democrats gravitated toward the brand of politics practiced by the Squad, there needed to be an explanation for why strategies that succeeded in deep blue areas would translate to red and purple ones. The idea began to take hold that Democrats could win without persuading swing voters. Instead, victory lay in motivating more of their own voters to show up. A piece in *The New Republic* summed up this idea under the headline: "[Victory Does Not Depend on Swing Voters](#)." Swing voters are "a persona from a political landscape that simply no longer exists," wrote the author, John Lang, channeling a growing viewpoint. By affirming rather than challenging progressives' assumptions, this analysis proved irresistible and began to gain traction among lawmakers and candidates. Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, an influential member of Democratic leadership and chair of the House Progressive Caucus, tweeted, "The true swing voters don't swing between Republicans and Democrats. [They swing between the voting booth and back to the sidelines](#) if they're being ignored or taken for granted."

Like a copy of a reprint of a photo, this was the "demographics is destiny" theory suffering another round of generation loss. The original idea had been that Democrats could usher in an "emerging Democratic majority" by building an appeal to nonwhite and young people *on top of* a solid performance with white voters. The next version, embraced by Hillary Clinton, was that

Democrats could win by focusing *mainly* on the “Rising American Electorate” of nonwhite and young voters—which backfired when that focus inadvertently alienated white voters. This latest, post-Trump iteration rejected the very idea that Democrats should care whether persuadable voters might be turned off by left-wing appeals, since elections could be won simply by energizing young and nonwhite voters.

Implicit in this assessment was that the way to motivate young and nonwhite voters was by moving left across most issues. There was little evidence to support this assumption, and much to contradict it. As reams of polling, countless academic studies, and decades of lived experience show, Black and Latino voters tend to be culturally conservative and security-minded, while the priorities of young people tend to track closely with those of the general population. The only candidate in recent history for whom all of these groups turned out at historic rates was the decidedly heterodox Obama. Yet concerns like these remained largely unexplored as Democrats plowed ahead to a rematch with Trump.

ACTIVISTS’ DEMANDS for Democratic presidential hopefuls to embrace rigidly left-wing positions crescendoed as the 2020 primary kicked off. The positions that interest groups expected candidates to take included banning fracking (a major job-creating industry in the crucial swing state of Pennsylvania), supporting Medicare for All, and decriminalizing border crossings—a stance that Sanders once tagged as “open borders.” All of these were positions that, as journalist Andrew Prokop put it in *Vox*, “would have seemed [unthinkably radical to Democrats](#) just a few years earlier.”

These demands were pressed upon the candidates vying for the nomination by interest groups that, in the absence of strong parties, wield major influence over the primary process. Their main source of leverage is the promise to bestow or withhold their endorsements. Household names such as the Sierra Club and the ACLU act as trusted validators for voters. Endorsements also tend to come with the type of resources that can make or break a campaign, such as money, advertisements, and volunteers. Vying for the endorsements of these groups is a top priority of most Democratic campaigns, and the 2020 presidential primary was no exception.

The main tool interest groups use to decide their endorsements are questionnaires, which they distribute to every campaign. The premise is reasonable enough: Candidates seeking voters’ support should have to explain where they stand on important issues. But when combined with the emerging, tripartite theory that swing voters do not exist, that winning elections means motivating turnout among the Rising American Electorate, and that motivating such turnout means taking far-left positions, these efforts took on a more aggressive form.

No organization was more determined to wield its clout to push Democrats to the left than the ACLU. The free-speech organization pressed all Democratic candidates to answer a ten-page questionnaire that covered topics ranging from abortion access to criminal justice to climate change. Nuance was not encouraged—underneath each question were two checkboxes labeled “YES” and “NO.” Explanations were optional but not to exceed five hundred words. The questions were framed in pointed fashion. Instead of a general query about a candidate’s position on clemency for those wrongly imprisoned, for example, the questionnaire asked, “[Will you pledge a swift use](#) of the president’s clemency power to release 25,000 people from the federal prison system during your first term, and to direct federal incentives to the states aimed at releasing 250,000 more?”

For candidates, what lurked behind such questions was the knowledge that the ACLU was flush with cash and eager to spend it. Like many organizations, the ACLU had seen a surge in donations as Democrats opened their checkbooks to groups promising to fight Trump. The organization announced plans to spend up to \$30 million to support its favored 2020 candidates and was not shy about reminding them that this was just the tip of the iceberg. In a separate press release, the organization announced that its members had donated [a whopping \\$482 million](#) to candidates. While the ACLU is technically nonpartisan, the release noted that fully \$463 million of that total went to Democrats.

To press for answers, the ACLU trained hundreds of volunteers and dispatched them to confront Democratic candidates at public forums. At a town hall in Muscatine, Iowa, an ACLU activist pressed Sanders on whether he would allow the Boston Marathon bombers to vote. Whereas Sanders had rejected interest groups as “the establishment” in 2016, he had adopted a new strategy in 2020 and was now eager to win them over. When he answered “yes,” Republicans could scarcely believe their luck. Speaking to the National Rifle Association, Trump quipped: “[Let the Boston bomber vote](#)—he should be voting, right? . . . Can you believe it?”

The ACLU’s leaders dismissed concerns about their cavalier approach. Ronald Newman, the organization’s national political director, said that it wasn’t his job “to worry about the political firestorm.” The headline of a *Politico* story on the group’s strategy summed it up: “How the ACLU is setting up Trump for a field day in 2020.”

TWENTY-NINE CANDIDATES entered the 2020 Democratic Primary. The list included fresh faces like Mayor Pete Buttigieg, and grey eminences like Sanders and Joe Biden. It included rising stars like California senator Kamala Harris and thought leaders like Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren. It would go down as the most expensive primary contest in political history—former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg alone would spend over a billion dollars. The timing overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic and a summer of nationwide protests triggered after Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd. The stakes could not have been higher, yet one candidate after another seemed to miss the moment.

If the poet William Blake challenged us to “to see a world in a grain of sand,” Democratic candidates spent the 2020 primary asking Americans to itemize each grain on the beach. One after another, their speeches sounded like interest group roll-calls. At her January launch rally in Oakland, Harris treated an energetic crowd of more than twenty thousand people to a speech that covered abortion rights, climate change, equal pay, and fighting transphobia, to name a few—“[a laundry list of progressive totems](#),” though without much narrative,” as Tim Miller remarked in *The Bulwark*.

When New Jersey senator Cory Booker launched his campaign, he dutifully ran down an even longer list, pledging to “end the system of mass incarceration,” to “invest in people—their education, their mental health,” to “end the school to prison pipeline,” to legalize marijuana and expunge drug records, and to pass universal background checks, ban assault weapons, and close gun show loopholes. He promised to end the “crisis of climate change,” to deliver “real, inclusive economic justice,” to strengthen labor rights and raise wages; to improve public education, make college affordable, and pass Medicare for All; to pass comprehensive immigration reform and defend women’s reproductive rights; to ensure equal pay and paid family leave; to press for LGBTQ equality; to renew the Voting Rights Act and end dark-money in politics—all while restoring US leadership abroad and confronting white supremacy. Each of these issues, he insisted, represented the “[urgency of the work left to do in America](#),” but none was urgent enough to prioritize over the others.

For her part, Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren released her own series of proposals, with the twist that hers were exceptionally well developed. Her deep focus on policy, summed up in the quip, “I have a plan for that,” captured the interest of many college-educated voters such as myself, as I went on to support her in the primary. New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand pegged her own [theme of “brave wins](#)” to the 1969 moon landing. “If we can do that, we can definitely achieve universal health care,” she said. Whereas John F. Kennedy had dedicated an entire speech to the singular mission of going to the moon, Gillibrand proceeded to rattle off five additional goals in one sentence: “We can provide paid family leave for all, end gun violence, pass a Green New Deal, get money out of politics, and take back our democracy.”

There was one surprising convert to the laundry list caucus. In 2016, when reporters had been struck by Bernie Sanders’s “total clarity of message,” his launch speech had focused overwhelmingly on economic issues. Words such as *racism*, *sexism*, *xenophobia*, *homophobia*, *religious bigotry*, or

racial and environmental justice were absent. Yet when he launched his 2020 campaign, Sanders spoke all of those words before he uttered the word *billionaire*. While the words *guns* and *immigration* had been [absent from his 2016 speech](#), in 2020, each of these issues received its own section.

The heterodoxy that had marked Sanders's meteoric rise vanished. Where Sanders had once decried the idea of open borders as a plot by right-wing billionaires to score cheap labor, in a [June 2019 debate](#), he was one of nine candidates who raised their hand to support the policy. Where he had [once resisted calls to "abolish ICE"](#), he now came out in support of it. [On guns, Sanders reversed](#) each of his right-leaning positions. As he shifted policy stances, his campaign adopted faculty lounge language and mores. At a March 2020 event in Flint, Michigan, billed as a chance for Sanders "to make a case directly to black voters," he sat off to the side, silently, as Black surrogates spoke for him. Explaining the candidate's awkward silence, a Sanders spokesman told the press, "He didn't want to speak on behalf of people of color when there were people of color on the panel. Bernie does not have those experiences," he said. "[He's a white Jewish man](#)."

For these alterations to style and substance, Sanders was rewarded with endorsements from the interest groups that had rejected him in 2016. He landed the endorsements of prominent criminal justice activists like Shaun King and Eddy Zheng. He won the endorsement of CPD Action, a progressive organizing network that had backed Clinton in 2016. He was endorsed by the Sunrise Movement, the new youth-led climate activist organization known for pushing the Green New Deal. He won the backing of Make the Road Action, an influential immigrant justice group that had supported Clinton in 2016 and criticized Sanders for his right-leaning immigration stances. Now they struck a different tone, with co-executive director [Javier H. Valdés](#) declaring that Sanders's candidacy "reminds us every day that progressive values and issue priorities are both the right thing to do and the right way to beat Trump."

Sanders was going all-in on the theory that moving left would motivate more voters to support him. But the results did not materialize, as he struggled to recapture the energy of his first campaign. In Iowa, the upstart Buttigieg beat Sanders by a hair. In New Hampshire, Sanders beat Buttigieg by less than a point, but won [fewer votes than Clinton had in 2016](#) when she lost the state to him. Sanders lost Michigan, the state that had revived his 2016 candidacy, by 16 points. In 2016, Sanders had won twenty-three nominating contests and more than 13 million votes. Over the course of the 2020 primary, he would win nine contests and approximately 9 million votes. Sanders's advisors adapted their strategy. Instead of trying to dominate primary contests, he would aim to consistently win about a third of the vote. That was the size of the hardcore base he could count on showing up for him no matter what. If he won that share of the vote in each nominating contest, they calculated, he could enter the convention with a delegate lead. It was a strategy for outlasting his opponents, similar to the one Clinton had deployed against him. As one advisor related the thinking of Sanders's brain trust to the journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes, "If it comes down to him and one other person, [we don't have a shot](#)."

JOE BIDEN'S PITCH was not about millionaires or billionaires, but electability—at least in practice.

In theory, the theme of Biden's campaign was "restoring the soul of the nation," but that message never caught on. Instead, poll after poll showed that what Democratic primary voters wanted most was a candidate who could beat Trump, and the same polls consistently showed Biden performing strongest against him. "Scranton Joe" would fix Democrats' problems with white working-class voters and send Trump packing. In the Michigan primary, which functioned as an early bellwether for white working-class voters, Biden's strength seemed clear. "[The big story in Michigan](#)," tweeted Dave Wasserman, an election analyst at the Cook Political Report, was "the shifting allegiance of working-class white Dems since '16. Pretty much the entire Upper Peninsula voted for Sanders in '16," but in 2020, they were putting up "huge Biden margins."

Earlier in the primary, concerns about Biden's age had driven Democratic voters to explore other candidates. In the fall, Warren had overtaken Biden, as a [mid-October poll from Quinnipiac](#) showed her leading the former vice president by 7 points. But at a debate that month, Warren's opponents pinned her between the ambitious goal of Medicare for All, which she had adopted under pressure from Sanders, and her promise to have a plan for everything. She struggled to explain how she would pay for the single-payer health care system and quickly faded. Buttigieg saw a spike in the polls, as did Bloomberg. [Both faded as well](#).

Meanwhile, Sanders's strategy of consistently posting solid-but-not-dominant showings seemed to be working. After hitting the political equivalent of singles and doubles in Iowa and New Hampshire, he hit a home run by winning Nevada. Fresh off his win, he sat down for an interview with *60 Minutes*'s Anderson Cooper. Pressed on the cost of his trademark Medicare for All plan, Sanders hemmed and hawed before saying, "I think it's about \$30 trillion." Asked how he would pay for it, he replied, "Well, I can't—you know, I can't rattle off to you every nickel and every dime." He also defended the communist Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, saying, "He had a massive literacy program. [Is that a bad thing?](#)" At no point in the interview did he take a position that cut against liberal dogma. Gone was any hint of heterodoxy, replaced with the profile of an almost comically doctrinaire leftist. Soon after, Biden trounced Sanders in South Carolina. Days later, on Super Tuesday, Biden dominated again. The other remaining candidates quickly dropped out and most endorsed Biden, denying Sanders the divided field his strategy relied upon. On April 6, he dropped out.

WITH THE NOMINATION SEWN UP, Biden did an unusual thing: He shifted to the left.

During the primary, Biden had been one of the few candidates to resist the leftward rush of the moment. But when the general election commenced, in an effort to generate more energy for his campaign, Biden convened a "unity task force" to give Sanders supporters a chance to recommend changes to his policy positions. After one meeting, Varshini Prakash of the Sunrise Movement approvingly told reporters, "What I've seen in the last six to eight weeks is a pretty big transition in upping his ambition and [centering environmental justice](#)." Reflecting on Biden's remarkable shift, *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank commented, "Joe Biden has become [the most progressive nominee](#) in history."

In June, protests exploded across the nation after the murder of George Floyd. Many of the most vocal criminal justice groups coalesced around the slogan "defund the police." These words quickly crowded out more pragmatic solutions to the problem of police violence. The idea was also repellent to most Americans, including most Black Americans. Even at the height of public sympathy for the Black Lives Matter movement, large majorities of Americans rejected "defund" by wide margins. Among Black Americans, only 22 percent supported defunding the police.

When conservative activists had demanded that Trump take the 20 percent side of an 80/20 issue, not only did he refuse, he defied them in dramatic fashion that broke through to voters. With activists calling on Biden to take the 20 percent side of an 80/20 issue, he took a different approach. Rather than distance himself forcefully from a toxic position and plant himself firmly on the side of the American people, Biden demurred. For two weeks after Floyd's murder, Biden declined to say whether he agreed with activists' calls to defund the police. On June 8, he finally stated, "No, I [don't support defunding the police](#)," as if it was a forced confession. After the election, many would echo strategist James Carville's assessment that "defund the police" were "the three dumbest words in the English language." But during the height of the election, Biden made no such sharp break.

The Trump campaign rushed to fill in the gray area left by Biden's refusal to break with "defund" activists in high-profile fashion. It quickly went up on air with a TV ad featuring a telephone ringing at a police station. As the phone goes unanswered, the narrator intones, "Joe Biden's supporters are fighting to defund police departments. Violent crime has exploded. [You won't be safe in Joe Biden's America](#)." Over the summer, the Biden campaign saw troubling trends in its numbers. " [This 'defund](#)

the police' thing was catching on in a more real way," confided one advisor to journalists Allen and Parnes. But the campaign was slow to act. Greg Schultz, a Biden loyalist who had been sidelined by aides more sympathetic to the "defund" activists, begged the campaign to run ads making clear that Biden opposed the idea. After several weeks—an eternity on campaigns—the campaign obliged. But much of the damage was already done. In a focus group conducted after the 2020 election, pollster Danny Barefoot reported a striking finding: "50 percent of people in our focus group said they thought Biden was [privately sympathetic to defunding the police](#)," Barefoot noted. Biden's mealy-mouthed distinctions had failed to convey where he stood to voters. As Barefoot observed, "It is clear the calls from some on the left were louder than those denials."

In November, it took seven days to call the presidential contest. In the electoral college, Biden's margin of victory came down to just 45,000 votes spread across three states. Yet again, a narrow result left Democrats with little clarity about the way forward. The muddle deepened.

Chapter Seven

EXTREMES

ON JANUARY 6, 2021, I was taping an episode of *The Circus*, the Showtime Network's newsmagazine show, in a Georgetown rowhouse. Sitting across from the host, John Heilemann, in a living room setup that looked straight out of a Pottery Barn catalogue, we chatted and watched CSPAN as the cameras filmed us. My role was to provide commentary on the procedural hoops members of Congress were jumping through as they certified the results of the November election. Typically, this postelection ritual gains little notice, but this time was different. Ever since he lost, Trump had been promoting baseless claims of election fraud and declaring himself the rightful winner. Heilemann and I both expected to see conflict, but assumed it would come in the form of Trump allies giving speeches mimicking Trump's cry of "stop the steal."

Then our phones started buzzing. Reports were rolling in of a riot outside the Capitol, with Trump egging on the perpetrators and demanding that his vice president, Mike Pence, use his largely ceremonial power to stop the certification process and overturn the election results. As crowds of MAGA-hat wearing Trump supporters gathered on the National Mall, the president delivered an inflammatory speech at the nearby Ellipse. "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore," Trump told them.

Back in Georgetown, Heilemann wrapped up our interview. He and his crew packed up and rushed east, toward the Capitol, while I headed north, to my home in the Maryland suburbs. Over the next few hours, as Trump went silent and refused his advisors' entreaties to tell the rioters to disperse, mobs breached the Capitol. They assaulted police officers, causing Officer Brian Sicknick to suffer a fatal stroke. They vandalized the Capitol building and forced members of Congress and staff to flee in fear for their lives. They did not, however, succeed in overturning the election. Joe Biden was certified as the 46th president of the United States.

Speculation swirled that this would be the last straw—that challenging the peaceful transfer of power, the very hallmark of our democracy, would finally break Trump's hold on the GOP. In 2016, Mitch McConnell had failed to follow through on his bold talk of dropping Trump like a "hot rock." Now, as the House moved to impeach Trump for his inflammatory actions on January 6, *The New York Times* reported that McConnell was seeking to round up the 16 Republican votes necessary for the Senate to convict Trump and bar him from seeking office. Yet whatever courage McConnell mustered quickly expired. After a few furtive attempts at persuading his colleagues, he gave up. Trump had only barely lost the election, and most Republicans still thought their best interests lay in sticking with him.

If the GOP was not ready to cast Trump out, perhaps it had simply tired of him. Republicans flirted with new faces over the next year, turning their attention to up and comers like South Carolina governor Nikki Haley and her fellow Palmetto stater, Senator Tim Scott. Florida governor Ron DeSantis, a bumptious culture warrior, was christened "DeFUTURE" by the *New York Post*, whose broadside tracks the preferences of its owner, the Australian billionaire Rupert Murdoch. But Trump

was undeterred. He began unloading on Haley, DeSantis, Scott, and anyone else poised to challenge his primacy. He also demanded fealty to the claim that he had won the election—what came to be known as the “Big Lie.” One by one, Republican leaders either granted obeisance or were pushed aside. [By the time the primary](#) rolled around, it was a foregone conclusion that Trump would once again be his party’s nominee. Far from breaking Trump’s hold on the GOP, the Big Lie became merely another instrument for him to bend the party to his will.

Republican leaders did not exactly cut profiles in courage in the months after the election. Yet what allowed Trump to survive was the narrowness of his loss. Margins close enough to trigger recounts in three swing states—Wisconsin, Arizona, and Georgia—provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish. The fact that the outcome came down to 45,000 votes out of more than 154 million cast meant that for politicians who inevitably prioritize their own political survival, loyalty to Trump still offered the safest path. For his part, Biden limped into office with little clout and failed to strike anything approaching fear into the hearts of his political opponents. His coattails proved nonexistent, with Democrats losing 13 seats in the House in 2020, barely holding onto their majority, and picking up just three seats in the Senate in a cycle where they were [favored to win five](#) .

The fight against the rising tide of authoritarianism in this country has multiple fronts, from culture to the courts to civic society. In the political arena, Democrats’ task is not just to win but to win big. Brittle majorities will not be enough to stem the tide. Unless Democrats can assemble a broader coalition and win more durable power, the next time the forces of fascism rush the gates of our democracy, we may not be able to hold them off.

AFTER THE 2020 ELECTION, I continued to try to resolve my competing impulses between pragmatism and idealism. I started a firm that would help progressives navigate the legislative process and cultivate the power they had won. The idea was that a small roster of paying clients would keep the organization solvent, while we offered pro bono services to nonprofit groups—a clunky and ultimately unsuccessful model.

My partner in the effort was a fellow former Reid staffer, Rebecca Katz, who also happened to be the top political advisor to John Fetterman, then serving as the lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania. Fetterman was running for the Senate seat being vacated by the retiring Republican Pat Toomey in 2022, and Katz asked me to help with the race.

A hulking, goateed mountain of a man, his arms covered in tattoos, Fetterman looked more like a bouncer at a dive bar than a typical Democrat. I had been following his career since 2016, when he first ran for the Senate and lost the primary to Pennsylvania’s secretary of environmental protection, Katie McGinty. Running as a conventional liberal, McGinty fumbled away a winnable seat to the Republican Toomey. I believed that Fetterman, like Sanders, would have won in 2016, and welcomed the 2022 race as a second chance.

Fetterman was hard to put into a box. He had supported Sanders in 2016 but not in 2020. As lieutenant governor, he infuriated Pennsylvania Republicans by hanging flags off his balcony at the statehouse in Harrisburg—one was a rainbow flag symbolizing LGBTQ rights, and another was a black flag emblazoned with a marijuana plant. He used his power as lieutenant governor to overturn the wrongful convictions of people like the [brothers Lee and Dennis Horton](#) , who spent twenty-eight years in prison for a crime they did not commit.

Fetterman ran on populist and sometimes profane themes such as “build shit in America” and “workers, wages and weed.” He and Katz ran an innovative and often downright funny campaign, trolling his opponent, the TV personality Dr. Mehmet Oz, with *Simpsons* memes. At one point, we used the website Cameo to produce a video of Snooki, the star of the reality TV show *Jersey Shore* , telling Oz, who still had a home in the Garden State, that New Jersey missed him. At a time when campaigns routinely spend millions on digital advertising, the viral video cost less than \$300. The campaign’s slogan was “Every County, Every Vote,” as Fetterman made a point of visiting rural areas. He simply showed up, as Bill had urged Hillary to do in 2016, even when the data dictated that

his time would be better spent in more populous areas. At the same time, Fetterman sparked ire on the left, angering environmentalists with his support of fracking and pro-Palestinian activists with his unapologetic support for the state of Israel. During the primary, Fetterman drew attacks from moderates and progressives alike. One of his opponents was Conor Lamb, the centrist congressman who had won a Trump-leaning district in 2018 but failed to capture the imagination of the resistance. Lamb pitched himself as [the more electable option](#), attacking Fetterman as the kind of candidate that the “[socialist label sticks on](#).” Meanwhile, Malcolm Kenyatta, a young, gay Black state representative, attacked Fetterman as insufficiently pure. “Unlike [Fetterman], [I am a progressive](#),” Kenyatta told MSNBC’s Chuck Todd.

A line of attack that united both of Fetterman’s opponents had to do with an incident in 2013, when he had been the mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, a rust belt town hugging the banks of the Monongahela River just east of Pittsburgh. On a January morning, Fetterman heard what he thought were gunshots. He called the police, grabbed his 20-gauge shotgun, and headed toward the sound. [He detained a Black man](#), Christopher Miyares, who, it would turn out, was just out for a jog. According to Miyares, Fetterman pointed the shotgun at his chest; Fetterman says he kept the gun pointed at the ground. Either way, at the first debate of the Senate primary, both [Lamb and Kenyatta seized on the incident](#) to criticize Fetterman. Kenyatta accused Fetterman of seeking “vigilante justice,” while Lamb declared that the episode was “disqualifying for any of us who have to work hard to gain the trust of the Black community.”

Black voters disagreed. [The residents of Braddock](#) are over 75 percent Black and predominantly working-class. Months after the Miyares incident, they had reelected Fetterman with over 86 percent of the vote. In the 2022 race, Black voters across Pennsylvania shrugged off the attacks. Fetterman dominated the primary, winning every one of Pennsylvania’s sixty-seven counties—including Philadelphia County, home to the commonwealth’s largest Black population.

On May 13, Fetterman suffered a severe stroke, which nearly killed him. The recovery took him off the trail for months and severely limited his ability to speak. His only debate with Oz came just two weeks before the election, and it was a disaster. I was watching it from the campaign bus, parked outside the TV station that was hosting the debate. With me on the bus was Senator Bob Casey, the senior senator from Pennsylvania. Casey, a consummate public servant and scion of a legendary Pennsylvania political family, had become a confidant and ally of Fetterman’s, and was preparing to defend him in the “spin room”—the area where reporters cluster to hear surrogates for each campaign explain why their candidate won the debate. As Fetterman stood on stage, struggling to complete his sentences, Casey watched dutifully, taking notes as if it were a normal debate, while I was sweating bullets. When it was over, Casey turned to me and asked, calmly, “Well, what points should I make?”

Collecting myself, we decided Casey should say that facing a tough situation, Fetterman had the courage to show up—just like he would always show up for the people of Pennsylvania. By this time, reporters were crowding around the bus, training the bright lights of their cameras on the door. I had stocked the bus fridge with beer for the staff to wind down after the debate. As Casey rose, I reached in and offered him a cold one. He looked at it, tempted, then glanced at his press aide, Mairead Lynn, who shook her head no. Nodding dolefully, Casey trudged out to face the cameras, while I cracked the beer. It would be the first of several that night. After doing what damage control we could, I found a roadside steakhouse, then went back to my hotel room and listened to the song “Tubthumping” by the punk band Chumbawamba on repeat: “I get knocked down / But I get up again / You’re never gonna keep me down.” It gave me an idea for a line.

With pundits almost universally predicting that the debate would sink Fetterman, something surprising happened. Between Fetterman’s unconventional mix of positions, his unique appearance, and his health struggles, voters saw something human in him. Many Pennsylvanians found his debate performance inspiring. “[I admired that he actually showed up](#) for the debate. I think it takes tremendous courage to get back on the horse,” one voter told a reporter. “I didn’t think that Fetterman

did great,” another said, “but I think it was great that he still went out there and did it.” At a rally days after the debate, Fetterman told the crowd, “ [I got knocked down](#) , but I got back up, and I’m going to fight for everyone in Pennsylvania that ever got knocked down and had to get back up.” The crowd erupted.

As election day dawned, polls favored Republicans in most races across the country. In Pennsylvania, the Real Clear Politics polling average had [Oz up by about half a point](#) . Pundits predicted that a red wave would sweep the nation, and they were partially correct: It carried Republicans to control of the House, but broke against Pennsylvania.

Republicans’ bullishness about their chances in Pennsylvania was not unfounded. In addition to the debate, they had spent months hurling the usual litany of attacks at Fetterman, running [ads claiming he “sided with socialists”](#) and was “too radical” for Pennsylvania. But Lamb’s prediction that the attacks would stick to Fetterman proved incorrect. Fetterman’s positions were not dogmatically left wing. When Republicans accused him of seeking to defund the police, [he called the idea “absurd”](#) , saying, “From my own experience I’d say, anytime you have fewer police, you’re going to have more crime”—stronger language than Biden used at any time during the 2020 campaign. Voters had also seen the left attacking Fetterman on everything from the environment to Israel to the 2013 Miyares incident, even as he ran an aggressively populist campaign that excited Democrats. Where Biden had left himself vulnerable to being portrayed as dogmatic, Fetterman’s heterodoxy provided armor. In the end, the race was not close. While Biden had shocked Democrats by underperforming expectations, Fetterman outperformed the polls, winning this race in a crucial swing state by a comfortable 5 points.

ANOTHER DEMOCRAT who turned back the red wave was Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia. He rejected the laundry list of patchwork party priorities, opposing policies such as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. A pastor, Warnock talked enthusiastically and openly about his faith.

He also deployed a proactive strategy to disarm racial resentment. His campaign ran a TV ad in which Warnock is seen walking down a suburban, picket-fenced street, wearing an open-collared, blue Oxford shirt under a navy puffer vest, walking a beagle. Ostensibly, the ad was meant to rebut his opponents’ attacks on his record. Yet even with the sound off, it conveyed a message more powerful than anything the candidate said. As Stanford political scientist Hakeem Jefferson tweeted, the ad was “meant to deracialize Warnock with this [cute ‘white people friendly’ doggy](#) .” Fordham political scientist Christina Greer concurred: “This ad will be taught in Race Politics classes for years to come . . . it is doing A LOT of silent heavy lifting.” In the year of the red wave, the race came down to less than a percentage point, but Warnock prevailed.

As Fetterman and Warnock turned in swing state victories, two other candidates tested whether it was possible to do the same without deviating from liberal orthodoxy. Oregon’s 5th congressional district is perennially competitive, stretching from the Portland suburbs down to rural Deschutes County. For a long time, the seat was held by Congressman Kurt Schrader, a business-friendly Democrat who occasionally angered his party with his friendliness to corporate interests. Yet by staking out his own unique mix of positions, Schrader had won the seat seven times. In an effort to replace Schrader with a more rigid progressive, patchwork party groups such as Justice Democrats and the Working Families Party [rallied behind Jamie McLeod-Skinner](#) , a local nonprofit leader who endorsed all of the groups’ preferred positions. McLeod-Skinner ousted Schrader in the primary, but in the general election, Republicans attacked her for her left-wing agenda. With no divergence from liberal ideology to point to, she was unable to parry Republicans’ attacks, and they stuck. McLeod-Skinner lost the winnable race to her Republican opponent, Lori Chavez-DeRemer, by 2 points.

The other test came in Wisconsin. Democrats entered the cycle with a prime opportunity to flip the senate seat held by Republican Ron Johnson, a conspiracy theorist who posted the kind of sharply negative approval ratings that make political operatives in the opposing party salivate. In the Democratic primary, the progressive lieutenant governor Mandela Barnes faced off against two more

heterodox candidates, state treasurer Sarah Godlewski, and Alex Lasry, a businessman and scion of the family that owns the Milwaukee Bucks NBA team. To secure the endorsements of patchwork party groups, Barnes embraced a litany of progressive positions, from Medicare for All to the Green New Deal to ending cash bail nationwide. The endorsements Barnes secured by taking those positions helped him win the primary, but the positions came back to bite him in the general election. Republicans had a field day with his stances; a photo of Barnes holding an “Abolish ICE” T-shirt appeared in countless GOP ads. Unable to counter the idea that he was a dogmatic leftist, on election day, Barnes lost what was a winnable Senate race by fewer than 27,000 votes.

Barnes and McLeod-Skinner were the only candidates who tested the “no swing voters” theory in races where Democrats were trying to flip red seats blue in 2022. But every other time in recent history that Democrats have tried to unseat Republicans by running on this strategy, the result has been the same. Since 2016, not a single candidate running the rigidly ideological, patchwork party strategy has beaten a Republican in a competitive House or Senate election.

AROUND 9 PM ON JUNE 27, I was lying on the floor next to my restless six-year-old’s bed, waiting for him to fall asleep, when my phone started vibrating with a torrent of text messages. Another Democrat was having a bad debate, but this time, it was the president.

Joe Biden was already on track to lose the 2024 election. His approval rating was just 38 percent in June. Going into the debate, he trailed Trump in most polls and was running 12 points behind where he had been at the same point in 2020, when he barely eked out a victory. The entire point of this debate had been to turn the race around; presidential debates typically occur in the fall, but Biden had challenged Trump to an early date in order to allay concerns about his age. Instead, he inflamed them, repeatedly losing his train of thought and coming across as both bewildered and overwhelmed by the exchange. It was difficult for anyone except the most hardcore partisans to conclude that Biden was up to the job of being president. As the fallout filtered through the electorate, it looked like the bottom was about to drop out for Democrats. Biden’s own internal polling put him on pace to lose 400 electoral votes, the political equivalent of a mass extinction event that would drag countless House and Senate Democrats down with him.

For three costly weeks, Biden clung to the idea that he could remain the nominee and defeat Trump. When he finally dropped out of the race, he denied Democrats the chance to pick their nominee, endorsing Harris and effectively slamming the door on any possibility of a deliberative process. Harris was already on record with virtually every patchwork party position imaginable, from Medicare for All to the Green New Deal. In 2019, she had been one of the candidates who raised their hand in support of open borders. Like Biden, she had failed to distance herself from “defund” when it mattered. Asked by radio host Nick Cannon what she thought about activists who “feel like we should get rid of policing altogether,” Harris said, “We have to reimagine public safety.” For much of her tenure as vice president, her approval ratings dwelled in the 30s. Americans had already clocked her as a typical liberal.

With Biden a deeply unpopular president, Harris’s path to victory hinged on making sharp breaks with him to define her own profile. Yet her attempts to do so were furtive. When Harris diverged from orthodoxy, she often tried to sound like she was not doing so. When CNN’s Dana Bash quizzed Harris on her newfound support of fracking—a position diametrically at odds with the Green New Deal—Harris was lukewarm about fracking itself, and seemed more interested in suggesting that she still supported the Green New Deal. “You mentioned the Green New Deal,” Harris said to Bash. “I have always believed—and I have worked on it—that the climate crisis is real, that it is an urgent matter to which we should apply metrics that include holding ourselves to deadlines around time.”

One area where Harris could have drawn a sharp contrast with Biden was the war in Gaza. By the time Harris announced her candidacy in July of 2024, Israel’s response to Hamas’s brutal massacre of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, had morphed from a counterassault to protect Israel’s security, into a genocide. For months, reports had been appearing in the press that Harris differed from Biden

on the conflict—that in private, she was more critical of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and [more sympathetic to the people of Gaza](#) . After the election, while promoting her book *107 Days* , Harris confirmed this impression, saying “ [we should have done more](#) ” to rein in Israel and protect innocent Gazans. Drawing this distinction in public, or perhaps an even stronger one, would have given voters a clear sense of who she was and what her values were. Breaking with a sitting Democratic president would have shown an independence of mind and a willingness to stand up to her own party. But as she traveled the country asking Americans to elect her president, she decided to keep what seemed to be her true beliefs to herself.

There are likely other reasons behind Harris’s failure to make a clean break on Gaza. Politically, by the summer, the American [public had turned against the war](#) , with support cratering to 32 percent in July. By September, 61 percent of US Jews believed Israel had [committed war crimes](#) . Yet during the campaign, the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) deployed its vast resources to prevent Democrats from criticizing the Israeli government. Just as left-wing groups impose toxic positions on Democrats, [AIPAC spent millions](#) to pressure Democrats into taking a position that was both morally wrong and at odds with the views of the American people. Breaking with interest groups does not always mean moving to the right—and interest groups do not only exist on the left.

THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN was salivating as Harris was anointed the nominee. In a memo to reporters, Trump’s top aides Chris LaCivita and Susie Wiles slammed Harris as “dangerously liberal,” writing, “It’s a once-in-a lifetime opportunity to defeat not just one Democrat nominee for president, [but two—in the same year!](#) ”

The Trump campaign began unloading its arsenal on Harris’s record. One ad in particular drew blood. Back in 2019, one of the questions on the ACLU’s questionnaire had been whether Harris would use her “executive authority to ensure that transgender and nonbinary people who rely on the state for medical care— [including those in prison and immigration detention](#) —will have access to comprehensive treatment associated with gender transition, including all necessary surgical care.” As one of more than twenty candidates vying for the endorsement of the cash-flush ACLU, Harris had checked “yes.” In the fall of 2024, the Trump campaign turned the ACLU questionnaire into a devastating TV ad. “Kamala supports taxpayer-funded sex changes for prisoners,” the narrator intoned. “ [Kamala is for they/them](#) . President Trump is for you.” The ad soon became shorthand as the “they/them” ad. “If you’ve seen a Trump campaign ad lately, there’s a good chance it’s this one,” observed Susan Davis at NPR.

Unlike Obama, Sanders, Warnock, or Fetterman, when the attacks came, Harris had no heterodoxy to point to. In the closing days of the race, with the “they/them” ad saturating TV and social media, voters broke hard for Trump. A postelection survey by Blueprint Research found that swing voters broke 52 percent for Trump, versus just 38 percent for Harris. Among those voters who broke for Trump, Democrats were seen as out of step with their priorities, with 67 percent saying they were “ [too focused on identity politics](#) .” The ad had found its mark.

IF HARRIS REPRESENTED the conflict-averse end of the spectrum, Fetterman came to represent the opposite pole.

Shortly after he won, Fetterman asked me to be his chief of staff. At the time, he was suffering from crippling mental health issues caused by his stroke, and in February of 2023 he decided to seek inpatient treatment at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. He remained there for six weeks, and I visited him nearly every day. When he was discharged, his doctors told him he could perform the job of senator as long as he stuck to his recovery plan.

For several months, it seemed to work. Fetterman complied with the doctors’ orders and enjoyed the job. He broke with his party to call out corruption within its ranks, [becoming the first senator to](#)

[demand](#) the resignation of the comically corrupt New Jersey senator Robert Menendez—a Democrat who, a federal indictment revealed, had used his influence to procure bribes that included gold bars, which he kept stuffed inside a mattress at home. [Menendez was convicted on all counts](#), including bribery and foreign influence, and is currently serving an eleven-year prison sentence at a federal penitentiary in Allenwood, Pennsylvania.

When Fetterman learned of Hamas's barbaric attack on October 7, 2023, his instinct was to have Israel's back and support its right to respond. A few weeks into the conflict, at Fetterman's direction, his staff drafted an op-ed laying out his position. Israel had a right to eliminate the threat Hamas posed, the op-ed argued, but should do so through targeted strikes, and learn the lessons of the US's ill-fated efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan by avoiding a ground invasion or occupation of the Gaza strip—a position that squared Fetterman's support of Israel with his opposition to the forever wars in the Middle East. Fetterman approved the piece, but it never ran.

Fetterman had never shied away from conflict with the left, but now, he began to relish it. A familiar gloom descended upon him as he retreated into social media, cancelling meetings with constituents who were waiting in his conference room, located mere steps away from his office, in order to lie on a couch in the dark, scrolling his phone for hours. As a US senator, he had access to the top American generals and intelligence analysts, who held regular briefings at a secure location in the basement of the Capitol building known as the "SCIF," or Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility. Fetterman reluctantly attended the first couple of briefings before deciding they were not worth his time. The few individual meetings he could be persuaded to attend were pointless. One such exchange came in late October, when his staff arranged a remote meeting with Israeli leader Yair Lapid. As I sat behind Fetterman, he referred to me as "my Jew man," then listened mutely while Lapid talked, asking no questions and declining to engage.

Fetterman's incuriosity about how US military and intelligence experts viewed the conflict was matched only by his remarkable credulousness toward any information that came to him via AIPAC. As Fetterman refused classified briefings by American officials, most of the information he consumed—that which did not come through social media—was fed to him by AIPAC and its allies. Soon, his positions became so reflexively supportive of the Netanyahu government, and so transparently devoid of serious consideration, that he made it easy for opponents to accuse him of doing AIPAC's bidding. Nor was the criticism unfounded. Fetterman nursed dreams of running for president, yet his once-powerful grassroots fundraising apparatus had dried up, and the money to finance a presidential campaign would have to come from somewhere. Buffeted between delusions of grandeur and his reflexive opposition to left-wing activists, Fetterman became a caricature, blindly obeying what was, at the end of the day, just another interest group.

IN THE 2024 ELECTION, the candidate who deployed heterodoxy successfully was, once again, Donald Trump. Making short work of his primary opponents, he castigated DeSantis for having supported cuts to Social Security and Medicare, and slammed Haley for seeking to raise the Social Security retirement age. "As I said, for many years, [I will always protect Medicare and Social Security](#)," Trump declared.

When right-wing activists tried to pull Trump out of step with public opinion, he once again broke with them, openly and forcefully. Three conservative judges he had elevated to the Supreme Court provided the votes to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, handing down the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision in June 2022. Aware of his vulnerability on this issue, Trump broke with pro-life activists, who were eager to pass a nationwide abortion ban. Trump said he would veto it. He also pledged to provide government support for in-vitro fertilization, angering right-wing activists. "With message discipline that often eluded other parts of his campaign, Trump and his allies positioned themselves as moderates on abortion," *Politico* reported. Right-wing activists were furious. "Trump's abandonment of pro-lifers is complete," lamented the conservative writer Philip Klein in the *National Review*. In the battle over abortion, it "[increasingly looks like Trump is](#)

joining the other side ,” Klein concluded. Kristan Hawkins, the president of Students for Life Action, told a reporter that her phone was “ [blowing up](#)” with [angry messages from activists](#) who vowed that after Trump’s comments, they would no longer knock on doors for the former president.

These were higher-profile breaks with orthodoxy than anything Americans saw from Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, or Kamala Harris—or any other high-profile Democrat in recent years. They were also the kind of sharp deviations that broke through with voters. In the summer of 2024, only a [bare majority of Americans saw Trump](#) as responsible for the decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* , according to a *New York Times* poll. Democrats unloaded millions of dollars in ads tying Trump to the *Dobbs* decision, but his high-profile deviation gave him a Teflon coating. On election day, a CNN exit poll found that nearly [a third of prochoice voters](#) cast their ballots for Trump. On abortion and other issues, Trump’s heterodoxy once again came off to voters as “moderation.” A *New York Times* poll found that 47 percent of voters described Kamala Harris as “too liberal or progressive” while 9 percent described her as “not liberal or progressive enough.” By contrast, just [32 percent of voters described Trump as “too conservative .”](#)

TRUMP WILL LIKELY leave the scene soon. The problem for Democrats is that he has created a durable playbook for other conservatives to adopt, rooted in trends Republican strategists have been tracking for decades. As early as 2000, Bush strategist Karl Rove was predicting that Republicans could achieve a realignment by peeling away nonwhite voters from Democrats. Many Black and Latino voters hold culturally conservative views on issues such as abortion and gay marriage, he reasoned, and were generally patriotic, business-friendly, and entrepreneurial. More recently, a Republican strategist named Patrick Ruffini updated Rove’s thesis by zeroing in on the education fault line. [The emerging Republican coalition, Ruffini argued](#) , is largely bound by “working-class roots, moderate to conservative views on policy, strong religious beliefs, and indifference to or outright rejection of the identity politics” practiced by the left.

While the trends examined in the first half of this book have shaped our present reality, they are not recent developments. In fact, they are the same forces that have been shaping US politics for centuries. They have propelled periods of monumental progressive change and the most devastating eras of conservative counterreaction. At times, liberals have made them work for them. At other times, liberals have made mistakes and let reactionary forces run wild. To master our times and build a supermajority, we must grasp how deep these forces run.

Part Two

FOUND

Chapter Eight

POLITICS ALL THE WAY THROUGH

SITTING IN THE OVAL OFFICE, Senator Bernie Sanders directed President Joe Biden's attention to a portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt hanging over the fireplace. As they debated how to respond to the Republican opposition that was blocking Biden's agenda, Sanders urged the president to embrace his legendary predecessor's approach and choose confrontation. "Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today," Sanders said, invoking a favorite FDR quote. "They are [unanimous in their hate for me](#) —and [I welcome their hatred](#)."

In his affection for this quote and its implications, Sanders is not alone. The sentiment is often invoked to urge Democratic politicians to eschew compromise, stick to progressive principles, and bowl over the opposition. The New Deal occupies a unique place in the stories we tell ourselves about how liberals gain and wield power, and rightfully so. FDR radically reshaped the relationship between the US government and its people, and the programs he created continue to deliver life-changing benefits to millions. His four electoral victories, all landslides, represent the most dominant political performance of any US president. He built a supermajority and used it to deliver change on a scale unparalleled in modern history.

Yet the durability of the New Deal is what makes it utterly unique among periods of historic progress. Both Reconstruction before it and the civil rights era after quickly yielded to extended periods of reaction that unraveled many of those periods' hard-won gains. By contrast, Roosevelt's presidency resolved into what historians call the [New Deal order](#), a term coined by the historians Gary Gerstle and Steve Fraser to describe a half-century of American history defined by a broadly shared understanding of how the public and private spheres would cooperate toward the common good, with each yielding some control to the other. Politically, this was a consensus that even Republican presidents would not challenge, and one backstopped by five decades of Democratic dominance in Congress.

While a forceful populist pitch was undoubtedly a core part of Roosevelt's success, it is far from the whole story of how he forged the accomplishments themselves or the consensus that secured them. To understand the lessons of his era and apply them to our own, we must bring two additional themes into sharper relief. The first, which this chapter will explore, is that in constructing the genuinely radical accomplishments of the era—achievements that transformed the stingy, laissez-faire domestic policy of the United States into a more social democratic model—FDR wove together different and often competing ideological strains, embracing conservative principles both in his rhetoric and policy design, even as he marshaled them toward historic liberal aims. In presenting the ambitious goals of the New Deal to the American people, he largely marketed them not as a break

with the past but as a continuation of American traditions, not as an assault on capitalism but as an effort to save it.

The second aspect, examined in [chapter 9](#), is how southern white supremacists provided the foundation for the electoral coalition that made this radical change possible. While economic populism brought new voters into the coalition and expanded the sweep of the supermajority, it rested on a series of heartbreaking concessions to southern conservatives, without which the achievements of the era would not have been possible.

It was, in short, a heterodox approach. And it took every aspect—the radical ambition to move the United States closer to a socially democratic model, the confrontational rhetoric, *and* the embrace of ideologically diverse themes and brutal compromises with southerners—to build the supermajority that made the New Deal.

As FDR rose to the presidency, he was nobody's idea of a crusading populist. A patrician by birth, he began his political career as a good-government reformer, opposed to his own party's Tammany Hall machine. He was a progressive in the early-twentieth-century sense, a somewhat paternalistic believer in regulated capitalism and social betterment.

Under President Woodrow Wilson, he won an appointment as assistant secretary of the Navy, which had been a steppingstone for his cousin Theodore's rise to the White House. During World War I, FDR enthusiastically oversaw a dramatic expansion of the Navy, which gave him an education in the mechanics of federal patronage and allowed him to cultivate relationships with labor leaders, local political bosses, and business interests.

Good-looking and amiable, with a sportsman's build, Roosevelt was an adept politician, demonstrating a remarkable instinct for self-preservation largely uninhibited by factional ideology—an inscrutability that would later acquire him the nickname “sphinx.” He aligned himself with popular initiatives like naval expansion while sidestepping responsibility for controversies or failures. He was generally well-liked among his peers and made few enemies even as he maneuvered to enhance his own profile. In 1920, Democratic party leaders picked Roosevelt to fill the vice-presidential slot on the national ticket, bringing regional balance alongside their presidential nominee, Ohioan James Cox. The ticket went down hard as the Republican Warren G. Harding swept every region except the South, which remained solidly with the Democrats, who were then still very much the party of Jim Crow and white supremacy. In typical fashion, [Roosevelt largely escaped blame for the loss](#), with the experience instead buttressing his reputation as a reliable party man.

On August 10, 1921, Roosevelt was enjoying a swim off the coast of Maine's Campobello Island when he started feeling unusually cold. He retreated to the house, thinking he had a fever. But the chill did not leave, and [soon he found himself unable to move](#) his legs. After several days and a few misdiagnoses, a doctor identified the cause as polio. For the first time in his life, Roosevelt sunk into a deep depression. He retreated to his family compound in Hyde Park, New York, where his mother, Sara, [pleaded with him to withdraw](#) from public life. But by 1928, feeling rehabilitated and able to manage his condition, the Rooseveltian urge to be in the arena drove him back to politics.

It would be a pivotal year for his career. The governor of New York, Al Smith, won the Democratic nomination for president. When Smith's first choice as successor, Lieutenant Governor Edwin Corning, suffered a debilitating heart attack, [Smith asked Roosevelt to run](#). At the time, New York was a swing state, as well as the nation's most populous and therefore [the biggest electoral prize](#). For FDR, the decision was fraught. Under a string of Republican presidents, the economy was booming and the nation continued to experience the run of good times known as the Roaring Twenties. FDR had experienced the public's general sentiment toward Democrats firsthand, in the drubbing he took in 1920. Nevertheless, he decided to take the risk.

He was not wrong about the national environment, as Democrats were crushed across the country in 1928. Herbert Hoover demolished Smith, winning 444 electoral college votes. Republicans gained thirty-two seats in the House and seven in the Senate, and dominated gubernatorial races across the

country—at least, most of them. Despite the bleak environment, and despite Smith losing New York to Hoover, Roosevelt won the governorship. In an instant, he was vaulted into consideration as the Democratic party's next presidential nominee.

Ideologically, FDR remained difficult to classify. Navigating the onset of the Great Depression, his policy prescriptions were both innovative and measured. As Roosevelt historian William H. Leuchtenberg observed, Roosevelt's record as governor was characterized by “[laudable, if initially conservative, efforts](#)” to combat the crisis. At first, Roosevelt hoped, much as Hoover did, that the economy would right itself. When conditions worsened, Roosevelt responded with pragmatic measures that drew on both conservative and progressive ideas. He cut taxes while insisting on fiscal prudence and balanced budgets. At the same time, he promoted the development of public power utilities to lower electric rates. He also prodded the state legislature to enact public works programs, and to offer direct relief for the jobless. His view that the government should play a more active role in improving people's material conditions was balanced with a fundamentally conservative fiscal approach. New York's relief program embodied the combination: It was one of the first of its kind, but it was limited in scope and required by statute to balance its budgets.

Politically, a major feature of Roosevelt's appeal was his ability to unite diverse factions. For Democrats at the time, coalition maintenance tended to come down to the question of whether a candidate could appease southern segregationists. United by their commitment to upholding Jim Crow and white supremacy, southern lawmakers wielded enormous power within the party, moving as a bloc against any candidate whom they viewed as a threat to their cherished but cruel “southern way of life.” In these intraparty struggles, the South's field general was a Georgian-by-birth named William McAdoo. A two-time presidential hopeful himself, McAdoo had carved out a national profile, serving as treasury secretary under Wilson. In 1920, Roosevelt had watched the convention devolve into a stalemate between McAdoo and his rivals, [requiring forty-four ballots](#) before the party finally settled on [James A. Cox as a compromise nominee](#). At the contentious 1924 convention, McAdoo had been the standard-bearer for the Ku Klux Klan. By the early 1930s, McAdoo had moved to California and gotten himself elected as a US senator but remained a de facto leader of the southern bloc.

Roosevelt's decades of political labor paid off when it came to securing the support of southerners like McAdoo. His constant correspondence with state Democratic officials and stumping for candidates, along with feting lawmakers and politicians at his [retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia](#), garnered favor with southern leaders, and helped him build a delegate lead by the summer of 1932. Ultimately, McAdoo's decision to back Roosevelt at the 1932 Democratic National Convention—along with his double duty as a southern heavyweight and California senator—[went a long way toward helping](#) Roosevelt attain the two-thirds threshold he needed to secure the nomination. Southerners were ever watchful, though, and made sure that Texas congressman John Nance Garner, an avowed segregationist, secured the nomination as Roosevelt's running mate.

As Roosevelt campaigned against Hoover in the 1932 election, many liberals found him uninspiring. His tone was more reassuring than revolutionary. He promised to balance the federal budget, which had ballooned under Hoover, reasoning that this would restore business confidence and reassure the markets. “Roosevelt's campaign for president [was necessarily cautious](#),” wrote Leuchtenberg. He “traveled around the country attacking Hoover and promising better days ahead, but often without referring to any specific programs or policies. Roosevelt was so genial—and his prescriptions for the country so bland,” he wrote, that many “questioned his capabilities and his grasp of the serious challenges confronting the United States.” That view was memorably articulated by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who upon meeting Roosevelt, concluded that he was “[a second-class intellect](#) and a first-class temperament.” As the historian Kim Phillips-Fein summed it up, Roosevelt was generally seen as “a wealthy dilettante of the Hudson River Valley who managed to seize an opening for political power [without a well-articulated sense of what he might do](#) with it.” Perhaps the

most comprehensive sizing-up of the time came from Walter Lippmann, the founding editor of *The New Republic* :

The art of carrying water on both shoulders is highly developed in American politics, and Mr. Roosevelt has learned it . . . It is not easy to say with certainty whether his left wing or his right wing supporters are the more deceived. The reason is that Mr. Roosevelt is a highly impressionable person without a firm grasp of public affairs and without very strong convictions. Franklin Roosevelt is an amiable man with many philanthropic influences, but he's not the dangerous enemy of anything. He is too eager to please. The notion . . . that Wall Street fears him is preposterous . . . Franklin D. Roosevelt is no crusader. He is no tribune of the people. He is no enemy of entrenched privilege. He is a pleasant man who without any important qualifications for the office would very much like to be president.

Roosevelt pitched to the nation the need for action, paired with a results-driven approach. “The country needs—and unless I mistake its temper—the country *demands bold, persistent experimentation*,” he said in a commencement address at Oglethorpe University in May. “It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.” Roosevelt’s pragmatism provided immunity against Hoover’s attempts to brand him as a radical. Hoover charged that “*so-called new deals*” would “destroy the very foundations” of democracy and set the nation on a “*march to Moscow*.” But the charges didn’t stick. In a late-October speech in Pittsburgh, Roosevelt breezily dismissed Hoover’s rhetoric as the “*gospel of fear*.”

The combination of Roosevelt’s pragmatism and firm resolve to act proved overwhelmingly appealing to the American people. In November, he crushed Hoover, winning forty-two of the forty-eight states for a total of 472 electoral votes.

TO COMBAT THE MULTIFACETED DISASTER of the Great Depression, FDR treated ideas as tools to get Americans back on their feet. The early and most productive years of the New Deal were marked by his rejection of purity, as he borrowed freely from a diverse set of intellectual traditions.

In a broad sense, FDR’s approach was fundamentally radical in its utter rejection of the laissez-faire philosophy that had governed US capitalism up to this point in time. Yet even as he extended the arm of government further into Americans’ lives than ever before, he emphasized themes such as stability, prudence, and personal responsibility, habitually wrapping ambitious liberal goals in traditional moral narratives and weaving conservative elements into his policies.

In the financial sector, rather than nationalizing banks or replacing private finance, he sought to shore up capitalism by regulating it, preserving private ownership while imposing new rules. One of his first acts was to declare a bank holiday to stabilize the system, a move welcomed by bankers. By the summer of 1933, he had passed the Glass–Steagall Act, separating commercial and investment banking and creating the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, a measure supported by both reformers and titans of industry.

To the millions of Americans without a job, FDR declared that he refused “to accept as a necessary condition of our future *a permanent army of unemployed*,” laying such a desire at the feet of conservatives who wanted the government to remain passive. Yet in explaining his reasoning, he painted unemployment as destabilizing to society as a whole: “Demoralization caused by vast unemployment is our greatest extravagance,” he said. “Morally, it is the greatest menace to our social order.” In jobs programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Public Works Administration, men worked for wages, and their contributions were tangible. Both the workers themselves and the public at large could see what was being produced by these government initiatives, as young men in quasi-military camps planted trees and built parks. The programs were also a boon to industry, funding large-scale infrastructure projects that contracted with private companies.

The most controversial initiative of the early New Deal was the National Recovery Administration (NRA). Rather than either relying on markets alone, as Hoover had, or imposing central planning, as many on the left demanded, the NRA attempted a form of state-managed

corporatism, encouraging industries to write “codes of fair competition” to govern wages, prices, and output. The intellectual underpinnings of the NRA drew from FDR’s experience with World War I-era mobilization, as well as European corporatist experiments and progressive faith in expert coordination. The famous Blue Eagle captured the synthesis. Businesses who complied with NRA standards placed the symbol in their windows, while the administration deployed a public relations campaign telling Americans it was their patriotic duty to patronize Blue Eagle establishments.

With farms in crisis, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration defied neat classification, paying farmers to reduce production in order to raise prices—an unprecedented federal intrusion into private markets that nonetheless aimed to save small property owners, not replace them. The Tennessee Valley Authority went farthest toward state ownership, combining public power generation, flood control, and agricultural planning. Yet even it was presented as a regional demonstration program, not a national ambition.

Throughout this seminal period, FDR’s genius lay in his dogged refusal to let theory stand in the way of action. As he summed up the accomplishments of the New Deal’s early years in a 1935 fireside chat, he emphasized its hybrid nature. “In our efforts for recovery we have avoided on the one hand the theory that business should and must be taken over into an all-embracing Government,” he said. “We have avoided on the other hand the equally untenable theory that it is an interference with liberty to offer reasonable help when private enterprise is in need of help.” He aligned his approach with the spirit of the American experiment itself. “The course we have followed fits the American practice of Government—a practice of taking action step by step, of regulating only to meet concrete needs—a practice of [courageous recognition of change](#).” As the historian David Kennedy summed it up in his totemic account of the era, *Freedom from Fear*, FDR’s approach was “[nothing if not heterodox](#).”

AMONG THOSE SUFFERING during the Depression, many of the most desperate were the elderly. Roosevelt’s mailbag brimmed with pleas from older Americans who had worked hard all their lives but now found themselves destitute and robbed of dignity. “[Dear Mr. President](#),” read one letter from South Carolina, “I’m 72 years old and have no one to take care of me.” A woman from Virginia pleaded, “I’m a 60 year-old widow greatly in need of medical aid, food and fuel. I pray that you would have pity on me.” At the time, the relief available to the elderly was scant. State-run old-age pension programs existed in thirty states by 1934, but most were woefully inadequate, with strict eligibility rules and meager benefits, leaving only about 3 percent of the nation’s elderly receiving any assistance.

In a letter to Congress in June 1934, Roosevelt announced his intent to pursue what would become Social Security. “[Next winter we may well undertake](#) the great task of furthering the security of the citizen and his family through social insurance,” he wrote. Once again, he framed the effort as a logical continuation of traditional principles. “Our task of reconstruction does not require the creation of new and strange values,” he wrote. “It is rather the finding of the way once more to known, but to some degree forgotten, ideals and values. If the means and details are in some instances new, the objectives are as permanent as human nature.” He emphasized that the “three great objectives” he was pursuing—“the security of the home, the security of livelihood, and the security of social insurance”—were all to be earned, framing each one as “a right which belongs to every individual and every family willing to work.” His social insurance program, he noted, would be contributory: “I believe that the funds necessary to provide this insurance should be raised by contribution rather than by an increase in general taxation.” He connected the overall effort to the Framers’ vision: “If, as our Constitution tells us, our Federal Government was established among other things, ‘to promote the general welfare,’ it is our plain duty to provide for that security upon which welfare depends.” Outlining the principles that would guide his effort, he extended a hand to southerners and their focus on states’ rights, explaining, “I believe there should be a maximum of cooperation between States and the Federal Government.”

To implement these principles, FDR convened a Committee on Economic Security, chaired by Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, to study the problem and propose legislation. The president charged them with developing a program that would provide relief to the vulnerable without veering into radicalism, one in which all benefits would be earned. As Perkins recounted, Roosevelt “was greatly opposed to the dole.” She recalled that in meetings, he would burst out, “[Oh, we don’t want the dole; not the dole!](#)” He also rejected the idea of financing the program out of general tax revenue or deficit spending. He wanted the system to be structured as money in, money out—to give recipients a sense that they had earned what they were getting, and the knowledge that everyone else receiving benefits had earned them as well. The mechanism aides landed on to meet this demand was a payroll tax. Each worker (and their employer) would pay into the system with each paycheck. At age sixty-five, workers would have a right to draw benefits from the pool to which they had contributed. Socialism, this was not.

BY THIS TIME, opponents were mobilizing. In 1934, a cadre of industrialists and disaffected Democrats formed the American Liberty League. Funded by wealthy executives—[the du Pont family alone](#) supplied nearly a third of its funds—the Liberty League reprised Hoover’s charge that Roosevelt was leading the United States down the road to collectivism. The League recruited Al Smith, who was embittered by his 1928 loss and angry at Roosevelt for boxing him out of a second run at the White House in 1932. A 1935 League bulletin declared that Roosevelt’s proposed Social Security law would “[mark the end of democracy](#)” in the United States. Conservative media amplified these dire forecasts, with William Randolph Hearst’s newspapers depicting Social Security as [a step toward a tyrannical centralized state](#).

Yet the pressure on FDR did not just come from the right. Powerful voices on the left were decrying his efforts as insufficiently bold. In 1933, Dr. Francis E. Townsend, a sixty-six-year-old unemployed physician from California, [wrote a letter to a Long Beach newspaper](#) proposing that every American over the age of sixty receive \$200 per month—about \$5,000 in 2025 dollars—on the condition that they retire from work and spend the entire stipend within thirty days, which would boost consumption. To finance the payments, Townsend suggested a 2 percent national sales tax on all business transactions. What would soon become known as the “Townsend plan” caught fire nationwide, as Townsend Clubs sprang up across the country. [By 1935, over two million Americans](#) had joined one.

Senator Huey P. Long of Louisiana, meanwhile, rallied Americans behind his own populist pledge to make “Every Man a King.” The Kingfish, as he was known, had been an early supporter of Roosevelt, but soon turned into one of his fiercest critics, pillorying him from the left and accusing him of being too cozy with corporations. Long’s own plan, dubbed “Share Our Wealth,” promised redistribution on a more massive scale than anything Roosevelt was proposing. “[He’s scared of me](#),” Long said of Roosevelt. “I can outpromise him, and he knows it.” Long vowed to cap personal incomes at \$1 million in annual earnings and \$5 million in assets, confiscating every dollar above those levels. With this revenue, he said, the federal government could guarantee every family a basic income of between \$2,000 and \$5,000, along with an old-age pension for the elderly. By 1935, Long’s Share Our Wealth Society boasted [twenty-seven thousand local clubs](#) and nearly eight million members nationwide. Father Charles Coughlin, a fiery Catholic priest whose radio show reached between thirty and forty million Americans in the 1930s, was an early supporter of FDR’s, but soon [turned against the president](#) as well, throwing his support behind Long and using his show to attack FDR.

Facing pressure from the right and left, Roosevelt introduced a steeply progressive tax bill called the Revenue Act—dubbed the “Soak the Rich” act by critics—which proposed a top marginal tax rate of 79 percent on incomes over \$5 million. [FDR declined to aggressively lobby](#) Congress to pass it, seeming content to let it languish. Politically, the bill did the trick. Roosevelt could point to it to placate his critics on the left, while blaming Republicans for blocking it.

With his left flank protected, FDR poured his energy into passing Social Security. As he sold the program to the public, he made no revolutionary appeals, instead continuing to emphasize shared benefits and fiscal responsibility. In a fireside chat delivered in April, as Congress debated the bill, he said, “We cannot continue to create [governmental deficits year after year](#).” He emphasized that his plan was financially sound, and that benefits would be paid out of workers’ contributions, not new debt. He presented the program as a prudent response to the crisis. While “we can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life,” he emphasized, Social Security would “give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family.” For the broader economy, he pointed out, the program would have the salutary effect of “[sustaining purchasing power](#).”

Even with Roosevelt’s measured framing, getting the legislation through Congress required deft maneuvering. Following their surprisingly strong performance in the 1934 midterms, Democrats held commanding majorities in both houses. But those majorities were made up of both progressive and conservative Democrats, and crosscut by regional factions whose picayune interests traversed party lines. [Roosevelt’s allies in Congress](#), including Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Congressman David Lewis of Maryland, worked to rebuff entreaties from the left to scrap the program and replace it with the Townsend plan. They cut side deals to appease constituencies, while still adhering to Roosevelt’s demand to keep the legislation focused. They negotiated adjustments, tweaking the benefit formulas and tax rates to address concerns about costs. Some provisions eked through committee by a single vote. Yet their dogged efforts succeeded in building a broad base of support for the program in Congress. When the final package came up for a House vote in April 1935, it passed by an overwhelming margin of 372 to 33. In June, after prolonged debate, the Social Security Act passed the Senate by a vote of 77 to 6.

AFTER SOCIAL SECURITY PASSED, a progressive economist named Luther Gulick was interviewing Roosevelt. Gulick pressed the president on why he had chosen the payroll tax as the funding mechanism. It was clearly a regressive tax, Gulick pointed out, since everyone had to pay it. “I suggested that it had been a mistake to levy these taxes in the 1930’s [sic] when the social security program was originally [sic] adopted,” Gulick wrote, in a memo of their conversation. Roosevelt’s reply was revealing. “I guess you’re right on the economics,” the president said. “We put those payroll contributions there so as to give the contributors a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions and their unemployment benefits. With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program.” Roosevelt continued, “Those taxes aren’t a matter of economics, they’re straight politics.” It was, the president said, “[politics all the way through](#).”

Chapter Nine

DEVIL'S BARGAIN

EARLY IN ROOSEVELT'S PATH TO THE PRESIDENCY, the price southerners demanded for their support came in the form of largely symbolic gestures, from solicitous meetings with southern leaders in Warm Springs, Georgia, to selecting the segregationist John Nance Garner as his vice president. Now that Roosevelt was president, southerners sought to exact a human toll, demanding policy changes that would harm millions of Black Americans.

This proved to be a price Roosevelt was willing to pay. Roosevelt's boldness, rightfully celebrated by Bernie Sanders and many others, was undoubtedly a cornerstone of the New Deal. But a full picture of the era must include the heart-wrenching compromises Roosevelt was willing to make with the white supremacist senators who formed a key faction in Democrats' coalition. In debates about strategy today, FDR is often invoked to claim that trade-offs are not necessary, that opposition can simply be bowled over. Yet FDR made brutal trade-offs—compromises with people's lives and livelihoods that shock the conscience and go far beyond anything Democrats would contemplate today. Nor was this a peripheral matter. As much as any single factor, it was this ruthless political calculation that enabled the achievements of the New Deal.

FOR THE FIRST THREE DECADES of the twentieth century, Republicans had been the preeminent political party in the United States, controlling both chambers of Congress for twenty-four years. The only Democrat to reach the White House during that time, Woodrow Wilson, came to power in 1912 with just 42 percent of the popular vote, his victory enabled by a split field in which Teddy Roosevelt, running on the independent Bull Moose ticket, siphoned votes from his former protégé, the Republican William Howard Taft. In his 1916 reelection, Wilson again received less than 50 percent of the popular vote.

Roosevelt's 1932 landslide changed all that, ushering in a half century of Democratic dominance, with Congress the enduring bastion of their power. In 1932, Democrats picked up ninety-seven seats in the House and twelve in the Senate. By 1937, Democrats would control the House by a margin of 333 seats to 89, and the Senate by 76 seats to 16. Their margins would fluctuate over the decades, but Democrats would control both houses of Congress for all but a handful of years over the next half-century.

Majorities of this magnitude would seem to give any president votes to spare, but the numbers masked southerners' power. In any given year, there were a few dozen southern members in the House and around twenty in the Senate. What made them more powerful than other blocs was their unified and unshakeable commitment to upholding Jim Crow. They moved with a discipline honed during countless filibuster fights. Southerners also held the chairmanships of most key committees, positioning them as sentinels at legislative chokepoints. They wielded this power with a single-minded focus. When Jim Crow was in danger, southerners would put aside any other disagreements and rally behind the one cause that united them all. If a bill even remotely menaced the lattice of laws

and norms that upheld white supremacy, southerners killed it in committee or filibustered it to death on the floor. As they assessed potential threats, their scope was expansive. For instance, in 1912, southern legislators [killed a migratory bird bill](#) because they saw it as a stealth attack on states' rights.

Yet in addition to being racist, southern members of Congress also tended to be economically populist—an extreme version of the top-left quadrant in [chapter 1](#), where voters lean right on culture and left on economics. Much of Roosevelt's domestic agenda was appealing to them, so long as they could prevent the benefits from accruing to Black Americans.

At the time Congress was considering Roosevelt's Social Security bill, around [65 percent of Black American workers](#) were employed in the domestic or agricultural sectors. Before the bill could get to the floor, it had to pass through committees chaired by Congressman Robert Doughton of North Carolina and Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi. Arch segregationists, the two men used their leverage to demand that domestic and [agricultural professions be excluded](#) from the program. To keep his bill from disappearing into the black hole of their committees, Roosevelt assented. In one fell swoop, millions of Black Americans were entirely cut out of Social Security.

Southerners took bites like this out of every major New Deal initiative. At southerners' behest, the Civilian Conservation Corps built segregated work camps for Black workers. The Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a federal minimum wage and overtime rules, exempted agricultural, domestic, and service workers from the minimum wage because there were high concentrations of Black workers in those industries. At the Tennessee Valley Authority, Black workers were housed in segregated camps. Works Progress Administration jobs were steered to white applicants first, with Blacks typically relegated to the least-skilled, poorest-paid positions. The National Recovery Administration allowed lower pay scales for Black workers and let employers give white workers the first crack at the best jobs. By 1947, of more than three thousand GI Bill-backed loans disbursed in Mississippi, [only two went to Black veterans](#). The Federal Housing Administration refused to insure mortgages for Black buyers in white neighborhoods, entrenching neighborhood segregation and exacerbating the racial wealth gap for generations to come. To accommodate southerners, New Deal programs routinely adopted regional pay scales. This meant that Black workers in southern states were paid less, if they were paid at all.

In addition to specific carve-outs, southerners routinely demanded to devolve power to local officials, giving them the power to reject qualified Black applicants or simply refuse to pay their benefits. When the Agricultural Adjustment Administration sent millions of federal dollars flowing into the cotton fields, tobacco farms, and rice paddies of the South, it was left to white landowners to disburse the money. They routinely pocketed the government's checks while stiffing the Black sharecroppers who worked their land. As the New Deal historian Ira Katznelson has chronicled, southerners relentlessly insisted on changes that “either [excluded the vast majority of African Americans](#) or treated them differently from others,” creating a “southern cage” around the flagship programs of the era.

THE BRUTAL TRADE-OFFS FDR MADE extended beyond the New Deal programs themselves. To keep his supermajority intact, FDR aligned himself with southerners to kill every major civil rights bill that advanced under his presidency.

By the 1930s, lynch mobs had killed, raped, and maimed thousands of Black Americans. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been pressing for a federal antilynching law since its inception in 1909. In 1920, the organization started hanging a banner outside its headquarters on Fifth Avenue every time a lynching occurred, reading “[A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY](#).” After Roosevelt's election, hopes ran high that he—influenced by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's outspoken advocacy—might be the champion they'd been waiting for.

The most promising antilynching measure was a bill sponsored by Senators Robert Wagner, a Roosevelt ally, and Edward Costigan, which would have made lynching a federal crime. The bill

appeared to have the support of majorities in both chambers of Congress, but as with all civil rights bills, it would have to overcome a southern filibuster in the Senate. Supporters of the antilynching bill believed it could pass if Roosevelt was willing to engage in the fight, and their case was convincing. At a meeting with the president, Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, personally appealed to Roosevelt to throw his weight behind the bill. But Roosevelt shut him down. "Somebody's been priming you," Roosevelt snapped, as White pressed his argument. "Was it my wife?" Roosevelt bluntly explained his political calculus to White. "If I come out for the antilynching bill now, [southern Democrats] will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. **I just can't take the risk**," he said. The antilynching bill died.

As punishment for her outspoken advocacy, Eleanor Roosevelt had received hate mail and death threats, culminating in a **\$25,000 bounty placed on her head** by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1950s. Yet even she could not persuade the president to back the effort. With her husband remaining on the sidelines, Eleanor watched helplessly from the Senate gallery as southerners filibustered the bill to death. Later, she wrote to White, "**I'm sorry about the bill**."

DESPITE THE WRENCHING COMPROMISES Roosevelt made at the expense of Black Americans, it was under his presidency that they began to shift their political loyalties to the Democratic party.

The Republican Party was the party of Lincoln, and Black Americans had been a reliable constituency for the GOP since the Civil War. For decades, the Democratic Party had shown no interest in changing this dynamic, content to remain the political home of white supremacists. Yet the Depression hit Black communities especially hard, and as anger grew at President Hoover's lackluster response, some Black leaders began to argue for a reconsideration. "The Republican Party . . . has been **the saddest failure known to political history**," thundered Robert L. Vann, publisher of the influential *Pittsburgh Courier*, a Black newspaper, in 1932. Vann, a longtime Republican himself, urged his readers to "turn Lincoln's picture to the wall," and join what he called a "new army" of Black Democrats. Yet even in the face of such appeals, Black voters' loyalty to the GOP remained strong. In Chicago's predominantly Black Second Ward, for example, Hoover won nearly 75 percent of the vote in 1932.

Once Black Americans started to experience the recovery sparked by the New Deal, however, their loyalties shifted. Despite southerners' best efforts, significant amounts of aid still managed to find many Black Americans. It was far less than would have flowed without southerners' compromises and exclusions, but it was still enough to improve the material conditions of millions of Black families. By the late 1930s, one study found that one-third of the Black population in northern cities was receiving some form of federal relief. This was substantially lower than the share of the general population receiving aid, but still accounted for millions of families. In 1936, as FDR cruised to reelection, decades of Black loyalty to the party of Lincoln came to a sudden end. One of the nation's leading Black newspapers captured the moment with a banner headline: "**BIG NEGRO VOTE BACKS F. D. R. AS NEW DEAL SWEEPS NATION.**"

ROOSEVELT'S 1936 REELECTION was one of the most lopsided results in history, as he carried all but two states and won 523 electoral college votes. Flush with victory, he was ready to take the fight to his enemies.

He started with the courts. The Supreme Court had proven the most formidable opponent to the New Deal, with a series of rulings striking down key programs such as the National Recovery Administration. Early in 1937, FDR summoned reporters to his office. Gatherings like these were common, as Roosevelt frequently met with reporters for informal press conferences, most of which were off the record. But this one had a different feel to it. An aide blocked the door, and the usually jovial president seemed serious. He picked up a sheet of paper off a stack on his desk and began to read. Though the proposal was shrouded in a fog of facts about the Court being overworked, and

judges being too old, the reporters quickly realized that the president was [proposing to pack the Court](#)

For months, Roosevelt had worked in secret with a tight-knit group of advisors to develop this counterattack. If the existing majority on the Court was going to strike down his agenda, he would change the composition of the Court by imposing new qualifications and expanding its size, allowing him to dilute the opposition by appointing new, friendlier justices. Key to the program was a “one for every one over 70” rule, whereby the president could appoint one new justice for every existing justice over the age of seventy, of which there were five on the Court at the time.

The reaction was swift and brutal. Newspaper editorials weighed in with almost uniformly negative and frequently scathing reviews. Correspondence poured into the White House, with opponents far outnumbering supporters. Even some Roosevelt supporters came out in opposition. Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, who had been a staunch ally of the president’s, decried the Court-packing plan as an attempt to “[cut down . . . guarantees of liberty](#)” and “extinguish your right of liberty, of speech, of thought, of action, and religion.” Hatton W. Sumners, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, which had jurisdiction over the plan, told a group of Roosevelt allies, “[Boys, here’s where I cash in](#).”

Roosevelt tried to sway public opinion back in his direction with a fireside chat, but it didn’t help. For once, the American people appeared impervious to Roosevelt’s persuasive powers. A Gallup poll taken after the plan became public found that [51 percent of the public disapproved](#) of it, and opposition soon grew to 59 percent. The Court-packing plan was dragging down Roosevelt’s personal popularity as well. For the first time, polls showed Roosevelt’s approval rating sinking below 50 percent. He backed down, and the Court-packing plan died in Congress.

Roosevelt’s relationship with the business community had also reached a breaking point. In his first term, he strove to maintain productive relationships with industry leaders. As late as 1936, his ally Joe Kennedy, whom Roosevelt had appointed to oversee the Securities and Exchange Commission, was telling his peers in the business community, “This man, Franklin Roosevelt, is not a communist, is not a socialist, is not a radical; [he is saving capitalism](#).”

But many business leaders proved to be implacable opponents, funding efforts like the Liberty League, and Roosevelt turned against them. In a 1936 speech, he declared that US “economic royalty” was seeking to transform the nation [into an “industrial dictatorship”](#) aimed at stifling opportunity and corrupting free enterprise. At Madison Square Garden, he delivered the famous line that Sanders later invoked: “They are [unanimous in their hate for me](#)—and I welcome their hatred.”

In 1937, a recession hit, with real [GDP dropping 10 percent](#) and unemployment surging to 20 percent by 1938. Roosevelt blamed the business community, suspecting them of [coordinating a capital strike](#). He ordered the FBI to investigate whether business leaders were engaged in a criminal conspiracy against his administration. Other observers attributed the recession to Roosevelt’s drastic pivot to austerity; after the surge of spending in the first two years of the New Deal, he had spent much of the rest of his first term paring back spending. Historians and economists continue to debate whether spending cuts or reductions in private investment were primarily to blame for the recession, but [the most likely explanation](#) is that both contributed. Either way, 1937 was turning into an annus horribilis for a president who, only a year earlier, had seemed invincible.

UNDAUNTED, ROOSEVELT CONTINUED to wage war against his political enemies. In the summer of 1938, he launched an effort to unseat Democrats who had opposed him, imploring more liberal Democrats to run against his targets in primaries—to “primary them,” in today’s parlance. In Georgia, [Roosevelt urged Democratic voters](#) to reject longtime senator Walter George, who had strongly opposed his court packing plan. FDR posed two questions to voters: Was George a fighter? And did he believe in the goals of the New Deal? “[I regret that in the case of my friend](#),” Senator George,” Roosevelt said, “I cannot honestly answer either of these questions in the affirmative.”

Roosevelt's top political advisor, Jim Farley, eyed this strategy with trepidation. An August 1938 Gallup poll showed that 66 percent of Americans wanted Roosevelt to pursue more conservative policies, an inauspicious environment for a campaign to unseat conservative Democrats. "Boss, I think you're foolish," Farley said. Roosevelt dismissed Farley's concerns. The senators he was targeting "have no idea what's going to happen," the president assured his advisor. "They'll be sorry yet." As it turned out, Farley was right. In Georgia and across the country, Roosevelt's "purge," as newspapers had begun to call it, proved an abject failure. Roosevelt lost coming and going: His Democratic targets weathered the president's attacks and won their primaries, but in the general election, voters rejected Democrats from coast to coast, handing Republicans six seats in the Senate and seventy-one in the House.

Democrats' congressional majorities were so massive that even with losses on that scale, they were able to maintain control of both chambers. Yet the Court-packing backlash, the 1937 recession, the failed purge, and the calamitous 1938 midterms all combined to make Roosevelt appear beatable for the first time. Assessing the political damage, *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock concluded, "the New Deal has been halted."

AS THE 1940 ELECTION APPROACHED, Republicans were feeling resurgent. They nominated Wendell Willkie, a charismatic utility executive who emerged as a dark horse candidate during the GOP convention and proceeded to run away with the nomination, giving him an outsider's aura. But Willkie had a major political liability. He was a committed internationalist, and as war broke out in Europe, the nation was in an isolationist mood. A Gallup poll in February 1940 found that 77 percent of Americans opposed declaring war on Germany even if "it appears that Germany is defeating England and France."

Roosevelt's sympathies lay with the Allies. But he was coming off a midterm cycle where, for the first time in his presidency, he had found himself on the wrong side of the Golem of public opinion. As the question of whether the United States should enter the conflict in Europe began to preoccupy Americans, he walked a fine line, promising to keep the United States out of the war while subtly trying to prepare the ground for intervention. Over the summer, he stepped on Willkie's convention speech by announcing an aid deal with Britain, deepening US commitment to its ally. But at a campaign stop in Boston that fall, he affirmed his intent to stay out of the war. "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars," he pledged. As much as he wanted to aid US allies, renewed vigilance over public opinion was in order. "It's a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead," Roosevelt told his speechwriter, Sam Rosenman, "and find no one there."

IN THE 1940 ELECTION, Roosevelt won a third term, and the attack on Pearl Harbor would soon push the United States into the war. I leave him here, as the unique circumstances of the war make it impossible to draw lessons that can be applied to our time.

Among liberal supermajorities, what makes the New Deal remarkable is that it resolved not into reactionary backlash, but into a political economy that dominated much of the rest of the twentieth century. That lasting consensus translated into durable policy. From Social Security to unemployment insurance, to federal home loans, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the GI Bill, many New Deal programs remain with us today. By contrast, nothing that Democrats have passed in our era of narrow majorities has proven nearly as robust. During Trump's second term, Republicans dismantled most of what President Biden managed to pass in his single term.

Roosevelt did not come to define an entire political order by bowling over his opponents with the force of progressive purity. Indeed, when he tried to do so, the public turned against him and he was forced to recalibrate. Rather, he did it by embracing heterodoxy in a spirit of relentless, pragmatic experimentation, an approach that never fit easily into any ideological box.

His approach also never lacked for ambition. To FDR, making Social Security contributory, for example, was not a concession to conservatives, but rather the synergy necessary to move a heterodox nation toward a more compassionate vision; it was what made possible the most powerful antipoverty program in our history. As Frances Perkins recalled, “There was undoubted conflict within him. . . . He was all these things—the rich man’s friend, the poor man’s brother, the stern puritan conscience, the easygoing, indulgent, and forgiving friend of the irregulars.” But as Perkins saw at the time, this variousness was not a shortcoming but an attribute. “These conflicts, however, did not result in neurotic stagnation, but in life and movement in many directions; and [shrewd planning kept them from ruining](#) one another.”

The consensus Roosevelt built came at an enormous cost to Black Americans. This was not something that was unknowable in its time, as many of FDR’s contemporaries—including his wife—were repelled by the moral compromises he was willing to make. Soon, Democrats of that time would call on their party to move toward a more just vision. But this necessary evolution would unravel the New Deal coalition. As FDR’s supermajority dissolved, it would be up to the next generation to build another.

Chapter Ten

WALKING INTO THE LIGHT

WHEN PHILADELPHIA HOSTED the Democratic convention in the summer of 1948, the city was suffering through the most severe heat wave it had experienced in well over a century. On the night of July 14, inside Convention Hall, the lack of air conditioning and the bright lights that came with the new medium of television helped drive the temperature to 100 degrees .

As sweaty delegates fanned themselves with programs, the young mayor of Minneapolis took the stage. Tall and earnest, his receding hairline sharpening a widow's peak, Hubert Humphrey was largely unknown to his fellow Democrats, let alone the nation. "I realize," he said as he gripped the podium, his midwestern accent giving an angularity to his words, "that I am dealing with a charged issue." That was an understatement. The issue was civil rights, and it was tearing the Democratic Party apart.

From the start of the convention, a fierce battle had raged over how strong the civil rights plank in the party's platform should be. Accustomed to deference on the topic, southerners demanded that the party stick with its traditionally weak plank, while a faction of reformers led by Humphrey and Eleanor Roosevelt demanded a more forceful one. Caught in the middle was Harry Truman, who had inherited the presidency on April 12, 1945, when Franklin Roosevelt suffered a fatal stroke at his retreat in Warm Springs. Now, with the 1948 presidential race in full swing, Truman was badly trailing his Republican opponent, New York governor Thomas Dewey, and could ill afford to depart the convention with a divided party.

As Humphrey recalled in his autobiography, during the days of FDR, " the traditional thing to do was to make a gesture toward what was right in terms of civil rights, but not so tough a gesture that the South would leave the Democratic coalition." Now, leaving was exactly what the southerners were threatening to do. For a party that had relied on the "solid South" as the foundation of its coalition since the Civil War, this prospect spelled disaster. Party leaders begged Humphrey to drop his challenge, threatening him with reprisals if he refused. "This will be the end of you," warned J. Howard McGrath, the chair of the party. The weak planks of the Roosevelt era "should be good enough for all Democrats," Humphrey remembers being told. " Who is this pipsqueak who knows more than Franklin Roosevelt knew about Negro rights?," demanded Scott Lucas, the powerful Illinois senator.

Defying the pressure, Humphrey made his stand. "My friends," he bellowed, "to those who say that we are rushing this issue of civil rights, I say to them we are 172 years late. To those who say that this civil-rights program is an infringement on states' rights, I say this: The time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights." The crowd erupted, a cacophony of hearty cheers mixed with equally lusty boos. In the parliamentary maneuvering that followed, Humphrey and his allies carried the day, and the party voted to adopt the stronger civil rights plank. Southerners bolted, with the entire Mississippi delegation and half of Alabama's walking out of the convention. A few weeks

later, [they banded together](#) with other southerners to start the States' Rights Democratic Party—nicknamed the Dixiecrats—and picked South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond, heretofore a Democrat, as their nominee.

Humphrey's historic speech was a necessary rejection of the devil's bargain struck by FDR. Under the old terms, the Democratic Party had played host to the forces of racism and resentment as the price of enacting the New Deal agenda. Over the coming years, Democrats would seek to expel those insidious forces, but like a virus, the forces would seek another host. Democrats—and for a while, Republicans—remained unsure of how to operate under these new conditions. At various points, both parties found themselves torn between the aspiration to walk into the light of civil rights, and the temptation to embrace the forces of reaction.

AFTER FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT'S DEATH IN 1945, a group of Democrats led by Eleanor Roosevelt and Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, formed a group called Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). It was meant to represent, in the coinage of the Harvard historian and ADA member Arthur Schlesinger, “[the Vital Center](#)” that existed between conservative reactionaries and the progressive faction led by the former vice president Henry Wallace, whom they deemed too sympathetic to the Soviet Union. The ADA sought to carry forward Roosevelt's New Deal legacy, with one major modification: a forceful commitment to civil rights.

This commitment led the ADA to oppose Truman as the Democratic party's 1948 nominee. Even by the standards of the day, Truman was distinctly racist. As a senator, he wrote home telling of “[n****r picnic day](#)” and described the White House waitstaff as “an army of coons.” Yet as he gained greater exposure to the struggle of Black Americans, Truman's views evolved. In particular, he was appalled at the violent treatment of Black soldiers returning from World War II. In 1946, Truman learned of the assault on Isaac Woodard, a Black Army sergeant who was traveling home to South Carolina when he suffered a savage [beating that left him blind](#). “My God!,” Truman reportedly exclaimed, “I had no idea it was as terrible as that. [We've got to do something!](#)”

Truman began to take more aggressive steps on civil rights than Roosevelt ever had. He ordered the desegregation of the armed forces and moved to make permanent a temporary council charged with eliminating discrimination in federal employment. He also issued an executive order creating a presidential committee to study civil rights abuses. That panel's historic report, “[To Secure These Rights](#),” included policy recommendations, which called for the passage of federal antilynching and anti-poll-tax laws. Unlike Roosevelt, Truman endorsed both measures. These moves earned Truman the enmity of southerners. Democrats controlled the Senate, and when Truman sent antilynching and anti-poll-tax legislation to Congress in accordance with his commission's recommendations, [southern Democrats blocked his bills](#).

When William McAdoo died in 1941, the generalship of the southerners had passed to the senior senator from Georgia, Richard Russell. Widely respected for his command of Senate procedure, the driving force behind Russell's public service was his commitment to white supremacy. In a 1936 speech, he had declared, “[this is a white man's country](#),” yes, and we are going to keep it that way.” Unlike fire-breathing demagogues such as Mississippi's Theodore Bilbo or South Carolina's Ellison “Cotton Ed” Smith, Russell plied his white supremacy in genteel fashion. Yet few doubted the steel that lay beneath.

As the 1948 campaign unfolded, Russell wrote a letter to Strom Thurmond confiding that Truman's embrace of civil rights had left him “sick at heart.” Truman, Russell feared, “intends to press the matter until every power of the Federal Government is brought to bear to destroy segregation.” The Democratic Party, Russell lamented, had always “represented states' rights and white supremacy,” but now “Johnny-come-lately pink-tainted radicals” threatened to take over their ancestral political home. “It will be a great tragedy,” Russell wrote, “if we are [driven from the house of our fathers](#) by a bunch of . . . radicals who . . . now have control of our party.” In March, southern

senators representing every state in the Confederacy gathered in Russell's Senate office and anointed him their "general" for the fights to come.

While the battle at the Philadelphia convention had ended with the Dixiecrats in retreat, the war for the party was far from over. Despite all the drama over the platform, Democrats' "stronger" civil rights plank had merely brought them to parity with Republicans. The GOP nominee was New York governor Thomas Dewey, who had enacted an antidiscrimination law that was broader in scope than anything Truman had achieved. At Republicans' own convention earlier that summer, the party had adopted a civil rights plank that was at least as strong as the one backed by Humphrey. Assessing both parties' platforms, *The New York Times* concluded, "There is no sharp cleavage between President Truman and Governor Dewey on the issue of civil rights and racial discrimination."

Heading into the fall, Republican strategists calculated that Dewey could play it safe and sit on what polls showed to be a double-digit lead. This strategy was also somewhat born of necessity. Derided by the sharp-tongued Alice Roosevelt Longworth as the "little man on the wedding cake," Dewey was devoid of charisma. At one campaign stop, a photographer urged him to smile. "I thought I was," Dewey replied. Regardless of its provenance, the strategy seemed sound. The pollster George Gallup was so confident of a Dewey victory that he advised the New Yorker's campaign to stop wasting money on polls.

Everything about Dewey was perfectly calibrated to trigger Truman's underdog instincts. A son of the US burgeoning middle class, the former haberdasher ran an energetic, populist campaign. Embarking on a whistlestop tour, he railed against Dewey as captive to "the most reactionary elements . . . silent and cunning men," who would "skim the cream from our natural resources to satisfy their own greed." He decried "bloodsuckers with offices in Wall Street," "princes of privilege" and "plunderers." He accused Republicans of having "stuck a pitchfork in the farmer's back." Two years earlier, riding a wave of discontent over postwar economic hardships, Republicans had snatched control of the House and Senate in the 1946 midterms. When they produced little with their majorities, Truman accused Republicans of running a "do nothing Congress."

In a historic upset, Truman came back to defeat Dewey, winning 50 percent of the popular vote to Dewey's 45 percent. Of the southern states, four went to the Dixiecrats—South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The rest stayed in the Democratic column, accounting for Truman's margin of victory as he pulled in 303 electoral votes. Two days after the election, as Truman's train pulled into his hometown of Independence, Missouri, a sharp-eyed staffer spotted a day-old copy of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* under a seat and handed it to Truman. Grinning from ear to ear, the newly elected president brandished it aloft so everyone could see the errant headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman."

AT FIRST, it seemed as if Truman had written a new playbook for Democrats, showing that populism combined with an embrace of civil rights could win a presidential election. It wasn't anything close to FDR's supermajority—indeed, Truman's popular vote margin was the narrowest since 1916 and second narrowest since the turn of the century. But it was enough to win.

Within a few months, though, Truman's standing cratered. Early in 1949, he unveiled an ambitious "Fair Deal" agenda that included a single-payer health insurance program, federally subsidized housing, income supports for farmers, a new wave of civil rights measures, and more. Democrats had taken back control of both chambers of Congress in 1948, but Russell maneuvered his cadre of southerners to block much of Truman's agenda.

Truman's civil rights bills were filibustered or bottled up in committee, his ambitious health care plan was blocked, and his housing and farm policies came to little. Inflation, the Korean War stalemate, and a series of corruption scandals all piled on, sending Truman spiraling. From a peak of 69 percent early in 1949, his approval rating plummeted to 37 percent within a year, and 22 percent by 1951—still the lowest mark ever recorded by a president in the polling era. In the 1952 primary,

Truman was upset by Senator Estes Kefauver in New Hampshire and withdrew from the race. For models on how to win amid the post–New Deal dynamics, Democrats would have to look elsewhere.

HEADING INTO 1952, Democrats sought to heal the rift with the southern wing of their party. They settled on a man with the potential to please everyone—or no one.

Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson was a liberal with a relatively strong record on civil rights. He had worked to desegregate the Navy as an assistant secretary. As governor, he had deployed the National Guard against white mobs who sparked race riots in the town of Cicero. Yet as he sought to lead the party, Stevenson moved to accommodate southerners on the issue they valued above all else. As his vice president, Stevenson chose Alabama senator John Sparkman, a segregationist in good standing who boasted of voting against more than one hundred civil rights bills. Sparkman was close with Russell, who was sufficiently appeased that, at the convention, he personally put Stevenson over the top for the nomination—a sharp turnaround from the Dixiecrat rebellion of 1948. The move prompted Congressman Adam Clayton Powell and several other Black delegates to walk out. But southerners were satisfied, with delegates from the former Confederate states predicting to an Associated Press reporter that the [South would unite for Stevenson](#).

If Democrats believed they had veered too far toward sympathy for civil rights, Republicans headed in the opposite direction. Attributing Dewey's 1948 loss in part to low Black turnout, GOP leaders sought to reclaim their status as the party of Lincoln. In October 1952, Dewey, serving as a party surrogate, delivered a televised speech lambasting Stevenson for picking Sparkman and running on "white supremacy." Stevenson "pretends to be a modern, liberal gentleman who reads well-written, glittering speeches," Dewey said. "Meanwhile, with his full knowledge, Senator Sparkman continues to beat the bloody trail of suppression of the rights of good Americans." Dewey went on. "White supremacy is [the battle cry of the old Ku Klux Klan](#). It is the battle cry of the hate mongers and the fascists. It is the battle cry of those who would suppress the rights of all minorities," he said, in what *Time* magazine judged to be a "[highly effective](#)" speech.

On the trail, Stevenson failed to channel the populist fire of Roosevelt or Truman, while his aloof manner led the columnist Stewart [Alsop to label him an "egghead"](#). The insult stuck. Facing off against the former supreme Allied commander, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Stevenson was crushed, losing the popular vote by 11 points and notching just 89 electoral votes to Eisenhower's 442.

EISENHOWER MAY HAVE BEEN A REPUBLICAN, but he ratified the New Deal order. While some conservatives were agitating to attack FDR's flagship accomplishments, Eisenhower believed that doing so was political suicide. "To attain any success it is quite clear that the Federal government cannot avoid or escape responsibilities which the mass of the people firmly believe should be undertaken by it," he wrote to his brother Edgar in 1954. "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, [you would not hear of that party again](#) in our political history."

Eisenhower was not as enthusiastic about civil rights, however, and he handed much of the portfolio off to his eager vice president, Richard Nixon. A decade before forging his infamous "southern strategy," Nixon was one of several Republican leaders spearheading the GOP's efforts to reclaim Black voters. As a young man, he'd had an egalitarian streak. Attending Whittier College, he had cofounded a fraternity called the Orthogonians as an alternative to the campus elite club, the Franklins. In their yearbook photo, the Franklins donned tuxedos; in theirs, the Orthogonians wore white, open-collared Oxfords with the sleeves rolled up. The differences were more than sartorial. The Orthogonians distinguished themselves from the Franklins—and many other social clubs of the time, for that matter—by welcoming Black members, something Nixon personally pushed for. Dean Triggs, a fellow Orthogonian, recalled that Nixon "was one of the guys that was a believer" in

opening the club to Black members. It was “unheard of” at the time, Triggs said, but Nixon “felt very strongly” that no one should be denied acceptance “because of the color of a man’s skin.”

Nixon’s desire to move forward on civil rights created tension with Eisenhower. While Eisenhower had appointed Chief Justice Earl Warren to the Supreme Court, he did not embrace Warren’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring segregation unconstitutional. At a press conference two days after the ruling, a reporter teed up Eisenhower to take credit for the decision by noting that it had come down under a Republican administration. Eisenhower pushed back, saying, “the Supreme Court, as I understand it, is not under any administration.” Later, he would insist on having the words “Eisenhower administration” stricken from the GOP platform in the section endorsing the *Brown* decision.

In 1956, Democrats renominated Stevenson and backslid further on civil rights. They weakened their platform by adding a plank affirming the importance of states’ rights—precisely what Humphrey had implored them to “walk away” from. If the two parties had been at parity on civil rights in 1948, Republicans were now noticeably stronger. Reluctant or not, Eisenhower had appointed the justices who decided *Brown*; he had also desegregated the armed forces and the District of Columbia. Thus, the 1956 GOP platform could accurately claim that “more progress has been made in this field [of civil rights] under the present Republican Administration than in any similar period in the last 80 years” (even if, to modern eyes, this doubles as a commentary on the painfully slow pace of progress). The 1956 election was another landslide, with Stevenson losing the popular vote by 15 points and winning just 73 electoral votes to Eisenhower’s 457.

The GOP’s reinvigorated pursuit of Black voters appeared to be paying off. Eisenhower won the votes of more Black Americans than any Republican since the Black electorate shifted toward Democrats under FDR. Cities like Chicago, Baltimore, and Memphis, which had been firmly in Democrats’ column, went for Eisenhower. Shortly after the election, *Jet* magazine ran a cover with the headline, “Why Negroes Switched to Ike.” Analyzing the shift for *The Washington Post*, reporter Richard Lyons provided an answer: “The vote pattern indicated that the overriding issue was civil rights.”

BUOYED BY THE RESULTS, Nixon worked with an administration ally, Attorney General Herbert Brownell, to send a strong civil rights bill to Congress. To overcome Eisenhower’s reluctance, Brownell maneuvered over and around the president, shocking many contemporaries with the brazenness of his tactics, which some thought bordered on insubordination. Yet getting the bill to the Hill was the easy part. Many civil rights bills had come before Congress, but all had perished at the hands of Richard Russell and his faithful weapon, the filibuster.

As 1957 dawned, Russell had a promising new lieutenant in his crusade. Lyndon Baines Johnson had been elected to the Senate in 1948, in a close race he was set to lose until 200 votes were discovered in the small town of Alice, deep in the brush country of south Texas. Curiously, all the votes in this batch had gone for Johnson; what’s more, based on the order in which the local clerk recorded the votes, the two hundred Texans casting these ballots somehow managed to do so in alphabetical order. These late-breaking “votes” put Johnson over the top by 87 ballots out of nearly one million cast—a margin that earned him the nickname “landslide Lyndon.”

Once in the Senate, Johnson lost no time in ingratiating himself with Russell. He spent evenings and weekends with the lonely older man, a confirmed bachelor, in his art deco apartment building overlooking Rock Creek Park. Johnson also made clear that he was committed to Russell’s cause, using his maiden speech to celebrate the filibuster and its primary purpose of blocking civil rights bills. “When we strip away the trappings of rhetoric and theory and legend which surround the arguments here against the filibuster,” Johnson said on the Senate floor, “we have left the simple fact that we are debating the so-called civil-rights legislation.” Russell adored the speech and became Johnson’s faithful patron. With the Georgian’s backing, Johnson became Senate Democratic Leader in 1953, a mere five years after arriving in an institution notoriously resistant to strivers.

To advance the civil rights bill, Nixon forged an alliance with a group of Senate liberals led by Humphrey, who had been elected to the Senate in 1948. Their plan to overcome the filibuster was simple: abolish it. For their plan to work, the liberals needed a friendly ruling from the presiding officer of the Senate, a role typically played by the vice president. When the Senate convened in January 1957, Nixon sat in the presider's chair, on the dais overlooking the Senate floor, and [issued the ruling liberals were seeking](#), effectively declaring the filibuster unconstitutional. To take effect, however, the ruling had to be ratified by a majority of the Senate—a move that today, we would refer to as the “nuclear option.” Johnson and Russell went to work against Nixon and the liberals, deploying all the means of persuasion at their disposal, including threats of committee appointments withheld and pet projects blocked. In the end, Johnson and Russell prevailed. However, in June, the House passed the administration's civil rights bill, sending it over to the Senate and giving the Humphrey-led faction another shot. They were able to maneuver the House bill to the Senate floor, but there, it was blocked by Russell and the filibuster.

Johnson was stuck. He wanted to be president and to win his party's nomination, he would need at least some support from northern liberals. While southerners were the dominant faction, northerners had enough clout to wield a veto, and Johnson's opposition to civil rights was anathema to them. At the same time, Johnson's power in the Senate flowed from Russell's patronage. Based on the countless hours Johnson had spent with Russell, he knew that fighting communism ranked just behind upholding white supremacy in the hierarchy of his mentor's passions. At the time, as the great powers vied for the loyalties of satellite states and post-colonial nations, there was a growing awareness that Jim Crow undermined America's moral authority abroad. With some canny [persuasion from Johnson](#), Russell came to accept that a toothless civil rights bill could buttress America's geopolitical posture without fundamentally threatening Jim Crow.

Since the administration's bill was strong—resembling, in key respects, what would become the landmark 1964 bill—Johnson had to engineer the passage of several amendments gutting it. Once he did, Russell was satisfied that the bill posed no material threat to Jim Crow and signaled his troops to stand down. Thurmond waged [a theatrical twenty-four-hour filibuster](#), but the tool's real power came from the ability of senators to coordinate and extend debate indefinitely. With the rest of the southerners following Russell's orders to let the bill proceed, they simply waited Thurmond out. When he finished, no one rose to take the proverbial baton, and the bill passed.

Through his work on the bill, Nixon had formed a working relationship with Martin Luther King Jr., whom he had met on a trip to Ghana in March. The journalist Earl Mazo, who was interviewing King for a biography, asked the civil rights leader for his thoughts on the vice president. “I am coming to believe that Nixon is absolutely sincere about his views on this issue” of civil rights, King said. “His travels have revealed to him how the race problem is hurting America in international relations, and it is altogether possible that he has no basic racial prejudice.” But, King added, “If Richard Nixon is not sincere, he is [the most dangerous man in America](#).”

“I'M WAY BEHIND ON THIS because [I've hardly known any blacks in my life](#),” John F. Kennedy confided to an advisor. “It isn't an issue that I've thought about a lot.”

The aide was Harris Wofford, one of the first white graduates of Howard Law School, a future architect of the Peace Corps and senator from Pennsylvania, and the person Kennedy turned to for tutelage on civil rights as the 1960 campaign approached. The matter “was [alien to most of his experience](#),” Wofford recalled, and the aspiring president “was not committed to any positions at all.” Kennedy's starting point was evident in his book *Profiles in Courage*, in which he described Reconstruction as “[a black nightmare the South never could forget](#).” As a senator from Massachusetts, Kennedy had voted with Russell to gut the 1957 civil rights bill.

For most of the 1960 campaign, Kennedy prioritized keeping the South in the tent over pushing his party toward an embrace of civil rights. At the convention that summer, he promised southerners that he would not deploy federal troops to enforce integration, as Eisenhower had three years earlier

to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Such assurances won over Georgia governor Ernest Vandiver, who also happened to be Russell's brother-in-law. Russell, for his part, was confident enough in Kennedy's commitment to Jim Crow that he put his political machine to work for the New Englander. In September, Kennedy campaigned with Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, the arch segregationist who had forced the confrontation in Little Rock. An ad in the *Arkansas Democrat* blared, "Lest We Forget—The Republicans promised us States Rights. Instead, [they invaded us with Bayoneted Troops!](#) "

Then came a test. On October 19, King was arrested at a sit-in at Rich's department store, where he was protesting the segregated lunch counter. Yet instead of holding King in a municipal jail, the Dekalb County judge sent him to Reidsville State Penitentiary. His friends and family feared he would never make it out alive. Coretta King, pregnant with the couple's third child, was frantic. King wrote to her: "They had me [chained all the way down](#) to my legs, and they tied my legs to something in the floor . . . I didn't know where they were taking me . . . That kind of mental anguish is worse than dying, riding for mile after mile, hungry and thirsty, bound and helpless."

Wofford had an idea. Working with Sargent Shriver—Kennedy's brother-in-law and one of the few family insiders sympathetic to civil rights—he urged the candidate to call Coretta to reassure her, then to call Governor Vandiver to ask for King's release. Shriver convinced Kennedy to make the calls. "I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King," Kennedy told Coretta. "If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call on me." Kennedy then placed a call to Vandiver. "Governor," Kennedy said, "is there any way that [you think you could get Martin Luther King](#) out of jail? It would be of tremendous benefit to me." Vandiver agreed to release King on the promise that Kennedy would not show him up with a public statement. Kennedy agreed.

When King was released, his family and supporters celebrated with a rally at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, the King family parsonage. The pews were packed as Martin Luther King, senior—known as Daddy King—took the pulpit. He told the crowd that he had planned to vote against Kennedy because he was Catholic, but that was before he called Coretta. Because of that call, the elder King announced, he was switching his vote to Kennedy—and not just his. " [I have a suitcase full of votes for the Senator](#) ," Daddy King declared. Days later, the younger King announced that, while he would not formally endorse a candidate, he wanted to "make it palpably clear that I am deeply grateful to Senator Kennedy for the genuine concern he expressed in my arrest . . . [Senator Kennedy exhibited moral courage](#) of a high order." The Kennedy campaign quickly worked up a pamphlet featuring the quotes from King, along with similar sentiments from other Black leaders, and [contrasted them with "no-comment Nixon](#) ," as the Republican had remained silent on the matter. The campaign [printed two million copies](#) on blue paper and distributed them at Black churches.

Weeks later, in one of the closest elections of the twentieth century, Kennedy received 70 percent of the Black vote, which helped him win several swing states, including Illinois, Michigan, and South Carolina. If the Black vote had gone the way it was trending earlier—when Daddy King was planning to deliver his suitcase full of votes to Nixon—Kennedy likely would have lost. As Nixon aide William Safire later reflected, "John F. Kennedy picked up the telephone, [spoke to Dr. King in jail and became President](#) ." Nursing a grudge, Nixon retreated into recriminations and second-guessing. "I needed only five per cent more votes in the Negro areas," he grumbled. He blamed his press secretary, Herb Klein, for allowing him to be labeled as "no-comment Nixon," explaining, "I had meant Herb to say that I had no comment *at this time* ."

Like the 1960 election itself, the fight to build a post-New Deal supermajority was close, with neither party able to claim a decisive advantage. For the time being, Democrats had the upper hand—but Richard Nixon would be back.

Chapter Eleven

LANDSLIDE LYNDON

AS PRESIDENT, John F. Kennedy was proving to be a disappointment when it came to civil rights. He declined to mention the cause in his inaugural address. His famous declaration that the United States was prepared to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty,” doubled as a reminder that he was more focused on fighting for freedom abroad than at home. Worse than any rhetorical omission was the lack of action that followed. As his administration stretched into its second year, he failed to introduce a single piece of civil rights legislation. Kennedy could have acted without Congress but chose not to. During the 1960 campaign, one of his few concrete promises on civil rights had been to combat housing discrimination via an executive order—as he described it, with the “stroke of a pen.” When no such action was forthcoming, activists launched an “Ink for Jack” campaign, sending fountain pens to the White House to remind the president of his broken promise.

For his part, Kennedy expressed frustration that activists did not grasp the political realities he faced. Indeed, in 1961 the American public remained deeply divided on civil rights, even as they witnessed many of the seminal events of the movement. As the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the integration of Little Rock Central High School, the wave of sit-ins that began at a Greensboro lunch counter, and the summer of Freedom Rides unfolded, most Americans remained unconvinced. A Gallup poll taken in June 1961 showed that 61 percent of Americans disapproved of the Freedom Riders, while 57 percent believed the sit-ins were hurting the civil rights cause.

Activists could be forgiven for doubting the Democratic Party’s commitment to the cause. In 1948, Humphrey had called on his party to walk forthrightly into the “bright sunshine of civil rights,” but his fellow Democrats had responded with a decade’s worth of backsliding. The major civil rights bill to pass during that period had come under a Republican president. As Humphrey fought for that 1957 bill in the Senate, his chief ally had been the Republican Richard Nixon, while two of the most powerful Democrats in Washington, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Russell, weakened the bill to within an inch of its life.

King had put his reputation on the line by all but endorsing Kennedy in 1960. Now that Kennedy was in office, King wrote, “the chilling prospect emerged of a general administration retreat” on civil rights. Activists were not seeing their profound sense of urgency reflected in their political leaders, while those leaders felt that activists were being unrealistic in their demands. If a more productive synergy between activists and politicians was possible, so far, it was proving elusive.

DESPERATE FOR A WIN, civil rights leaders turned to a Georgia town of about fifty thousand people on the banks of the muddy Flint River.

In December 1961, Karl Fleming’s beat covering the civil rights movement for *Newsweek* brought him to Albany (pronounced “All-BENNY”). Civil rights leaders had selected the town for

their next campaign and were planning sit-ins and marches to protest the city's rigidly segregated accommodations and services. The local police chief, Laurie Pritchett, had invited Fleming for a drink at a hole-in-the-wall bar next to the police station. Sitting across from the barrel-chested Pritchett, who left his blond hair just long enough to hint at a pompadour, Fleming ordered a beer, while Pritchett asked for a glass of buttermilk. When Fleming commented on the odd choice, the chief replied, "There are three things I like to do. [Drink buttermilk, put n****rs in jail](#) , and kick reporters' asses."

Less well known than Birmingham's infamous Eugene "Bull" Connor, Pritchett was every bit as racist but far shrewder. He knew what civil rights leaders were seeking by coming to Albany and was determined to deny it to them. Pritchett had watched as authorities in neighboring Alabama had stoked violence against protestors. In Anniston, about sixty miles outside of Birmingham, a white mob had been waiting when a bus of Freedom Riders pulled in. The bus was firebombed. When the passengers stumbled out, the mob beat them mercilessly. Images of the burnt-out bus and bleeding victims appeared on front pages across the country. Pritchett [concluded that the violence had been a mistake](#) —not because of the human toll, but because of the attention it drew.

To avoid this, Pritchett instructed his officers to enforce segregation strictly but peacefully. As Black demonstrators trained by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee began pouring into Albany's whites-only libraries, parks, and bus terminals, Pritchett's officers hauled them off to jail by the hundreds. Albany's jails were soon overflowing, yet it was not front page news. A *New York Times* story bearing the headline "[202 More Negroes Seized in Georgia](#) " was buried on page forty-seven.

Movement leaders begged Martin Luther King Jr. to get involved. He arrived in December, was arrested for parading without a permit, and set for trial in July 1962. When he returned for the trial, he was sentenced to the maximum forty-five-day sentence and was prepared to serve it out. But after just two days behind bars, King was summoned by Pritchett, who informed him that he'd been bonded out by an anonymous Samaritan, likely arranged by Pritchett himself. King tried to refuse the bond. "God knows, Reverend, I [don't want you in my jail](#) ," Pritchett scoffed, and sent him on his way. King was at a loss. "We had witnessed persons being kicked off lunch counter stools during the sit-ins, ejected from churches during the kneel-ins, and thrown into jail during the Freedom Rides," he reflected. "But for the first time, we witnessed being kicked out of jail." King and the movement left Albany empty handed.

As King left town, Pritchett [treated members of the press to a steak dinner](#) "in appreciation for the accurate coverage of Albany's difficulties" at the Radium Springs club, where President Kennedy had recently golfed with the publisher of the local paper. Kennedy had been apprised of the developments in Albany while vacationing in Hyannisport. He called Burke Marshall, the head of the Justice Department's civil rights division, who was himself fishing in the Poconos. The two men decided not to act.

SEEKING A SHERIFF WHO COULD BE PROVOKED, movement activists found their man in Birmingham.

The leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) labeled the Birmingham campaign "Project C," for *confrontation* . Starting the first week of April 1963, protestors held marches, mass meetings, and sit-ins at lunch counters, and boycotted businesses. King was jailed on Good Friday, and wrote a call to the nation's conscience in the margins of a newspaper. "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it [must be demanded by the oppressed](#) ," he wrote, in what would become known as his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." He wrote that the movement aimed "to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue . . . to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored." Yet as April turned to May, Project C stalled

for lack of confrontation. Protesters were growing weary or afraid for their jobs, and bail funds were running low.

SCLC organizer James Bevel proposed that activists hold a march made up entirely of schoolchildren. On May 2, the Children's Crusade began. That morning, [more than a thousand Black youths](#), some as young as eight, gathered at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church. They marched downtown in waves, singing hymns. By day's end, about eight hundred children had been locked up. The next day, as another thousand young people rallied at the church and prepared to march, Bull Connor did what movement leaders expected him to, and resorted to violence. He ordered firefighters to train their hoses on the children. The jets shredded clothing and sent small bodies tumbling down streets. He set police dogs—snarling German Shepherds—on them. "Let those people come," Connor shouted to a sergeant, as marchers approached. "[I want 'em to see the dogs work](#)."

The images out of Birmingham seized the nation's attention in a way Albany had not. "[DOGS AND HOSES REPULSE NEGROES AT BIRMINGHAM](#)," *The New York Times* blared. This time, the headline was on the front page, with photos. "[Violence Explodes at Racial Protests in Alabama](#)," proclaimed an adjacent headline, and beneath that, another: "10 on Freedom Walk Seized at Alabama Line." This time, Kennedy was spurred to action. Burke Marshall flew to Birmingham to mediate. Business leaders, alarmed by the damage to the city's reputation and the economic impact of boycotts, agreed to come to the table. A tenuous truce was struck on May 10, whereby local leaders pledged to remove Jim Crow signs and desegregate downtown stores and lunch counters within ninety days.

A month later, in Tuscaloosa, Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway of Foster Auditorium to prevent federal forces from integrating the University of Alabama. Kennedy responded by doing what he had promised Vandiver he would not, and federalized the Alabama National Guard to force integration. That night, June 11, Kennedy addressed the nation. "[We are confronted primarily with a moral issue](#)," he said. "It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution," he said as he called on Congress to end segregation in public facilities, schools, and federally assisted programs. He announced that he would send Congress a bill and did so within a week.

But Kennedy's commitment soon wavered. Southerners promptly bottled up his civil rights bill in committee and made clear they would sabotage the rest of his agenda if he pressured them to move on it. The March on Washington that August did little to change the president's political calculus. "Do you think we did the right thing by sending the legislation up?," Kennedy asked his brother Robert, the attorney general. "[Look at the trouble it's got us in](#)."

Meanwhile, in Texas, a feud between Senator Ralph Yarborough, a liberal, and Governor John Connally was threatening to explode over civil rights. In an attempt to keep the party's factions together, the president headed off for a November swing through the Lone Star State, a trip that would end in Dallas.

FIVE DAYS AFTER KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION, America's accidental president addressed the nation from the House chamber. Not long ago, Lyndon Johnson had ardently defended the filibuster and gutted the 1957 civil rights bill. Now, ignoring the advice of his aides, he decided to seize on Kennedy's memory to force the issue. "No memorial oration or eulogy," Lyndon Johnson declared, "could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory" than swiftly passing the civil rights bill—a rather generous formulation given Kennedy's lukewarm commitment to the cause. "We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights," Johnson declared. "[We have talked for 100 years or more](#) . It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law." The chamber erupted in a standing ovation.

No one knew better than Johnson that lofty talk would not be enough. Russell loomed, and Johnson was going to need a large store of political capital to defeat his mentor. He set about accumulating it by doing things that annoyed and often angered liberals, spending the early months

of 1964 focusing his legendary legislative energies on slashing government spending, appeasing business leaders, and cutting taxes.

As he introduced his agenda, Johnson consistently hit conservative themes. In his January 1964 State of the Union address, he pledged to run “a progressive administration which is [efficient and honest and frugal](#).” He promised to cut the deficit in half and shrink federal spending to its lowest level since 1951, calling for “a substantial reduction in Federal employment” and ordering federal agencies to cut their budgets. When he declared, “Let this session of Congress be known as the session which did more for civil rights than the last hundred sessions combined,” he added in the next breath, and “as the session which enacted the most far-reaching tax cut of our time.” As *The New York Times* reported, “[Johnson took office crying frugality](#) and followed up virtually every day with a new directive or a new announcement aimed at getting reductions in federal employment and spending.”

In a May speech at the University of Michigan, Johnson mixed in conservative themes as he outlined ambitious liberal goals. Proposing what would become landmark antipoverty programs, he echoed FDR’s distaste for “the dole,” declaring, “We are not content to accept the endless growth of relief rolls or welfare rolls. We want to offer the forgotten fifth of our people opportunity and not doles.” To drive the point home, he reiterated, “[The days of the dole in our country](#) are numbered.” He emphasized the same themes in private, explaining to Humphrey—whom he had picked as his vice president—that when it came to the poor, his goal was to “make taxpayers out of them [instead of tax-eaters](#).”

Johnson courted the business community aggressively, catering to corporate leaders at White House luncheons and laying on the flattery, telling them that they were “what makes the mare run.” The approach worked. Reports rolled in of conservative business leaders, even supporters of the arch-conservative Barry Goldwater, coming around to Johnson as a “[man who talks our language](#).” As liberals grumbled about Johnson’s misplaced priorities, his tax-cut bill—the largest income-tax reduction in US history at that point—sailed through Congress, and Johnson signed it into law in February. With the tax cut and a slashed federal budget under his belt, Johnson could turn to civil rights.

WHEN JOHNSON INFORMED RUSSELL that he intended to press ahead with civil rights, his mentor responded, “You will not only lose the election, [you will lose the South forever](#).” Johnson replied, “Well, Dick, if that’s the price I have to pay, so be it.”

In March, the Georgian took to the floor to declare his intent to filibuster. He would “[resist to the bitter end](#) any measure or any movement which would have a tendency to bring about social equality and intermingling and amalgamation of the races in our Southern states.” The filibuster was on. The House had passed its version of the civil rights bill in February, sending it to the Senate. With his declaration, Russell made clear that when Senate leaders tried to move forward on the bill, they would be met by a wall of opposition from southerners. Passing the baton of obstruction between them, they could block the bill and bring all other action to a halt indefinitely.

To break the filibuster, Johnson and his allies had to invoke what is known as “cloture,” a procedural move that at the time required 67 votes. Democrats had 68 senators but as usual, the raw numbers masked southern opposition. Around 20 southern Democrats could be counted on not just to defect, but to oppose the bill passionately. Factoring in other defections, Johnson figured that “[a minimum of 25 Republicans](#) will be required for cloture,” according to the notes of a January meeting between the president and his top aides, Clarence Mitchell and Joe Rauh. Since there were only 33 Republicans in the Senate, Johnson was never going to get that level of support from them without the cooperation of their leader, Illinois senator Everett Dirksen.

For Johnson, passing the tax cut in February had built political capital with Republicans and taken away the leverage southerners had used to hold Kennedy hostage, since they could no longer threaten to kill his other domestic priorities if he pressed forward on civil rights. Equally important,

the negotiation over the tax-cut bill allowed Johnson to deepen his relationship with Dirksen, who had acted as the lead negotiator for Republicans on it, and for whom the bill had been a top priority.

When it came to civil rights, Dirksen was not an easy sell. He strongly objected to parts of the bill—particularly Title II, which desegregated public accommodations. As they readied for the floor fight, Johnson gave Dirksen permission to redraft entire sections of the bill to make it more palatable to himself and other Republicans. Dirksen's changes included carve-outs that gave greater leeway to small businesses for complying with antidiscrimination statutes. He hemmed in the power of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which the bill created, requiring it to defer to state and local agencies first. He also limited the attorney general's ability to sue for discrimination. The changes were so extensive that Johnson allowed Dirksen to write his own version of the law, the "[Dirksen-Mansfield-Kuchel-Humphrey substitute](#)," which Johnson then swapped out for the entire bill.

Having fortified his alliances, Johnson was ready to join the battle. The Dirksen bill went to the floor in May, nearly two months after Russell had declared southerners' intent to filibuster. Over the next month, Johnson applied the pressure he was known for. He told aides he was willing for the Senate to put aside all other business until they broke the filibuster. [He jawboned recalcitrant senators](#), leaned hard on Kennedy's memory, and called aides and colleagues at all hours of the night. Yet while much is made of the "Johnson treatment," no amount of strong-arming would have been enough if not for Johnson's partnership with Dirksen. On June 19, Johnson finally decided he had the votes. The honor of the final speech went to Dirksen. Rising on the Senate floor, he invoked Victor Hugo: "[Stronger than all the armies is an idea](#) whose time has come." As a leading southern senator later sighed, "You know, [we could have beaten John Kennedy on civil rights](#), but not Lyndon Johnson."

Johnson signed the bill on July 2, at a [packed ceremony in the gilded East Room](#) of the White House. He handed a pen to Martin Luther King Jr. It was almost exactly two years since King had retreated from Albany in defeat. Since then, activists and political leaders had finally found the elusive synergy. At the cost of much suffering, activists had exercised superhuman levels of discipline to seize the attention of a skeptical public and demonstrate the righteousness of their cause. They had compelled political leaders to act—yet even that might not have been enough without a leader willing to take a risk. Whereas Kennedy seemed eager for any excuse to backslide, Johnson seized an opportunity, macabre as it was, to break through barriers that had previously proved impassable. Even then, he did not win solely by barreling ahead with liberal demands. He paired his grand ambition for a more just nation with a heterodox strategy, invoking conservative themes and throwing his weight behind measures like tax cuts and budget-cutting that proved critical to building the relationships and political capital he would need to win the fight for civil rights. Working together, activists and political leaders broke the forces of white supremacy that had remained virtually unchallenged since the Civil War. There was—and would remain—profound tension. But for the time being, it was the productive kind.

THE PROCESS OF BUILDING AND SPENDING political capital is constant. Now that Johnson had spent a large share, he needed to build it up again.

Almost immediately after passing the civil rights act, Johnson sought to distance himself from it. He and his advisors saw the bill as a major political liability in the upcoming 1964 election. Three weeks after the signing ceremony, he confided to an aide, "[If we have to get elected on civil rights](#), then we're already defeated." He urgently needed to "get the campaign on some other basis." Polls showed Johnson holding a large lead over the Republican nominee, Arizona senator Barry Goldwater. But civil rights was such a charged issue, Johnson worried it could change the dynamic. As Johnson's pollster Sam Lubell concluded, "[The racial issue is the only one that can elect Goldwater](#)."

Over the summer, Johnson talked to fretful Democrats warning of a brewing backlash against the civil rights bill. Governor Buford Ellington of Tennessee summed up what he was hearing in a missive to the president. “[The so-called backlash](#) . . . does actually exist. . . . People holding jobs with industry and government are afraid they are going to be forced out of jobs to make room for people who are not qualified either by training or experience . . . that white people will be discriminated against in future employment. . . . I find this exists in every state.”

Johnson’s response would take the form of a cold political calculation. During the Freedom Summer of 1964, volunteers had risked their lives to register thousands of Black voters in Mississippi. On June 21, in Neshoba County, [members of the Ku Klux Klan murdered three](#) young volunteers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, and buried their mutilated bodies in a makeshift dam. Black Mississippians were not just denied the franchise, they were locked out of political representation within the Democratic party itself. The white supremacists who controlled Mississippi’s power structure ensured that a state whose population was about half Black would send an all-white delegation to represent it at that summer’s Democratic convention in Atlantic City. Unable to crack the party power structure itself, civil rights activists formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and sent their own, integrated delegation to Atlantic City. The delegation was led by Fannie Lou Hamer, a magnetic sharecropper-turned-activist, and their demand was to be seated in place of the all-white delegation.

The confrontation between the two Mississippi delegations quickly captured national attention. Johnson was furious that his convention was turning into a showdown over civil rights. He saw signs of white backlash that, as Buford warned, were not confined to the South. “[Hell, the Northerners are more upset](#),” Johnson lamented. “They wire me to tell me the Negroes are taking over the country, they’re running the White House, they’re running the Democratic Party . . . it’s not Mississippi and Alabama anymore . . . [I’m] catching hell from Michigan, Ohio, Philadelphia, New York, that nearly every white man in this country would be frightened if he thought the Negroes were going to take him over.” Johnson ordered the FBI to bug the phones in the hotel rooms of Hamer, King, and other MFDP members. He refused to meet with Hamer or King—calculating, as one advisor put it, that doing so would be “an unnecessary affront to a large number of people at this particular time.”

Johnson offered the MFDP a deal they were likely to reject: Mississippi’s white delegation would keep the state’s sixty-eight seats, but the MFDP would be given two at-large seats and promises of future reform. “[We didn’t come here for no two seats](#),” Hamer said. The MFDP walked out. But Johnson got what he needed—a high-profile rejection of civil rights activists, with the nation watching.

Weeks later, Walter Reuther, the union leader, placed a call to Johnson. “It was a great convention, despite the little problem,” he said, referring to the MFDP protest. Johnson agreed. “It could have been the greatest debacle the Democratic Party ever had,” the president mused. “If they’d have had the Freedom Party seated and running all those white folks out—” Reuther finished his sentence: “Nothing would have been more tragic.”

COMING OUT OF THE CONVENTION, Johnson commanded his campaign to do everything it could to direct attention away from civil rights. He turned to the new medium of TV ads, and promptly killed any civil rights-themed ads the campaign had been planning. “[We had prepared a lot of material on civil rights](#),” said James Graham, the account lead at Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB), Johnson’s Madison Avenue ad firm (and the one that would inspire the TV show *Mad Men*). But “it looks now as if we’ll never use it.” Instead, Johnson wanted to direct attention to anything other than civil rights. “We’ve got five million budgeted but we can’t undo what they’ve done these past few days,” he said to an aide, referring to the MFDP activists.

The Civil Rights Act was the biggest achievement of Johnson’s administration to that point, yet it went unmentioned in his campaign ads. He hammered Goldwater on his intent to cut Social Security. In one ad, a pair of hands stacks copies of Goldwater’s controversial statements on Social Security on

top of each other as a narrator intones, “ [On at least seven different occasions](#) , Barry Goldwater has said he would drastically change the Social Security system,” as the hands rip up a Social Security card. Johnson hit Goldwater for being unstable. One ad shows a map of the United States with the eastern seaboard being sawed off over a soundbite of Goldwater saying, “Sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the Eastern Seaboard and let it float out to sea,” mingled with maniacal laughter. The Johnson campaign ran two separate ads courting Republicans, including a four-minute-long spot titled “Confessions of a Republican,” in which a dapper actor in horn-rimmed glasses pauses to light a cigarette as he explains that, while he voted for Eisenhower and Nixon, Goldwater “scares me.” By far the most famous of the ads features a little girl picking petals off a daisy, counting them as she does. Halfway through, her child’s voice morphs into that of a man counting down to a launch as the camera zooms in on her face, which dissolves into a mushroom cloud. The “Daisy” ad ran just once, but it dominated the national discussion for weeks. There were ads hitting Goldwater for owning a yacht and for shirking his senatorial duties, even one touting Johnson’s position on hospital insurance. Yet among all of these historic, innovative ads, there was not a single one focused on civil rights.

On election day, “Landslide Lyndon” finally proved worthy of the name. He won the largest popular vote share of any presidential candidate in modern history—61 percent—and forty-four of fifty states. [Republicans had gone into November with hopes](#) “of evening things up a bit” in the Senate, according to *The New York Times*. Yet instead of losing seats in the Senate, Democrats gained two. All told, Johnson gave Democrats control of two-thirds of the House and Senate, a supermajority unseen since the days of Franklin Roosevelt. Soon, he would put those votes to work.

“WE SHALL OVERCOME.”

With those words, Johnson brought the joint session of Congress to its feet. In breaking a southern filibuster for the first time and passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act the previous year, Johnson had already been bolder on civil rights than any president since Abraham Lincoln. In March 1965, backed by the enormous momentum of his landslide the previous November and the supermajorities it swept in, he made clear he was far from done.

While the 1964 Civil Rights Act had attacked segregation, Black Americans were still systematically denied their voting rights—the cause that had brought the MFDP to Atlantic City. Early in 1965, civil rights activists had begun a peaceful march in Selma, Alabama, headed for Montgomery. But as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were met by a sea of Alabama State Troopers equipped with blue riot helmets and gas masks. After giving a perfunctory order to turn around, Connor ordered his troopers to attack. Tear gas canisters rained down on the unarmed marchers as the troopers beat them mercilessly— [one dealt John Lewis a concussion](#) . As with Birmingham, the images out of Selma sparked public outrage. As he had after the series of events in 1963, Johnson seized the moment, pushing through the Voting Rights Act, which provided the enforcement mechanisms necessary to make the rights enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment a reality for millions of Black Americans. It banned discriminatory practices like literacy tests and provided for federal oversight of voter registration in states and districts with histories of racial discrimination. Sending the MFDP away from Atlantic City had been heartless, but it had helped build the landslide that made passage of the Voting Rights Act possible.

That landslide knocked down barriers and cleared the path to the other monumental liberal advances that, collectively, would come to be known as the Great Society. Back in 1964, Johnson had tried to pass Medicare, attaching it to a Social Security bill, which squeaked through the Senate, passing on a vote of 49 to 44. But the main choke point lay in the House. Wilbur Mills was a short, rotund, wire-spectacled Arkansas Democrat, who prided himself on fiscal conservatism and was known to while away evenings reading the tax code. Mills foresaw that Medicare would grow rapidly and, as part of the Social Security system, would require increasing payroll taxes to keep up with growth. Johnson had deployed every tactic that comprised the famous Johnson treatment to persuade

Mills. He tried loyalty: “Wilbur,” he said, “I’ve just been looking through the polls here, and I’ve only got a few weaknesses, and the worst of them is that [I’m not doin’ anything for the old folks](#) . I need some help. How about Medicare?” He tried flattery, insisting that Mills would get all the credit and “[it will be the biggest thing you have ever done](#) for your country.” It was to no avail, as the Johnson treatment wilted under Mills’s green eyeshades. After Johnson’s landslide win in 1964, however, Mills relented, and Medicare became law.

Johnson spent the next few years building the kind of legislative record not seen since the New Deal. In addition to Medicare, he created Medicaid. He passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, providing federal funding to improve schools, especially in low-income areas. He passed the Higher Education Act, expanding federal scholarships, student loans, and support for colleges and universities. He created Head Start and the Job Corps, and passed the Food Stamp Act to expand access to nutrition assistance for low-income families. He passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, abolishing the national origins quota system and opening the United States to increased immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He passed the Fair Housing Act, making housing discrimination illegal. He passed the Water Quality Act, and created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The trade-offs Johnson made to win a landslide had been excruciating for many activists, but the supermajority he built improved the lives of millions and secured monumental wins for the causes they believed in.

“[IT’S A MESS, AND IT’S GOING TO GET WORSE](#),” Richard Russell told Johnson. The topic was not civil rights, but the creeping involvement of the United States in Vietnam. To date, the United States had committed “advisors,” not troops—at least, not officially. Johnson was considering whether to escalate, and he wanted his mentor’s advice.

On domestic issues, Johnson was confident and in command. Yet on foreign policy, he was uncertain and insecure. He had little foreign policy experience in Congress. As vice president, Kennedy had kept him out of major decisions such as the Bay of Pigs. When he traveled abroad, Johnson’s trips were largely ceremonial.

In 1964, there was an out if he wanted it. Neighboring Laos had been gripped by a civil war between communist and anticommunist forces, just as Vietnam was now. Yet in 1962 the United States and Soviet Union, along with twelve other nations, had signed a treaty to establish Laos as a neutral and independent nation, allowing the United States to pull out without admitting defeat. In 1964, as the fortunes of the US-aligned government in Saigon waned, influential voices lobbied for a similar formula to extricate the United States from Vietnam. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield nudged Johnson in that direction, as did the influential [columnist Walter Lippmann, who met with Johnson](#) to press such a solution on him in May.

Johnson was gripped by the fear that he would be seen as soft on communism. But as of 1964, most Americans did not have strong feelings about the conflict. The public was aware of the issue, but it did not rank among their top concerns.

Russell echoed all of these themes in his call with Johnson. “I don’t think the people of the country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less,” Russell told the president. But, he warned, “you go to sending a whole lot of our boys out there, they’ll find out something.”

“How important is it to us?,” Johnson asked him.

“It isn’t important a damn bit,” Russell responded.

Johnson switched to politics. “Well, they’d impeach a President, though, that’d run out, wouldn’t they?,” he asked.

“No, sir, I don’t think they would,” came Russell’s answer.

What about the international standing of the United States? “Wouldn’t that pretty well fix us in the eyes of the world, though, and it’d make us look mighty bad?,” the president asked.

“Well, I don’t know,” Russell replied with a mirthful chuckle. “ [We don’t look too good right now](#) .”

In the end, Johnson declined to take his mentor’s advice. Two months after his call with Russell, an exchange between US and Viet Cong forces in the Gulf of Tonkin ended with a US destroyer firing on North Vietnamese forces. Americans suffered no casualties. But as he had with Kennedy’s death, Johnson seized the moment. He demanded that Congress pass what became the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave the president unprecedented power to wage war. He used that power to escalate US involvement, officially committing US troops for the first time early in 1965.

WITHIN A FEW YEARS, every aspect of Russell’s advice would prove correct, as the Vietnam War turned into an unmitigated humanitarian and geostrategic disaster for the United States. At 9 PM Eastern on March 31, 1968, Johnson delivered an address to the nation to announce a pause in the bombing of North Vietnam. At the end of the speech, he uttered words no one saw coming. “With American sons in the field far away, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office.” He continued, “Accordingly, I shall not seek, and [I will not accept, the nomination](#) of my party for another term as your president.”

Johnson’s instincts, so sharp on civil rights and virtually every other domestic issue, abandoned him on Vietnam. Working in tandem, if not always in concert, with a movement that remained relentlessly focused on winning American hearts and minds, the public was brought around and historic progress was achieved on civil rights and a raft of other domestic issues. Yet on Vietnam, Johnson’s insecurity got the better of him. Among the many casualties of the war was Johnson’s vision for a Great Society—and the promise of a lasting liberal realignment. “That bitch of a war,” Johnson lamented, “ [killed the lady I really loved](#) .”

Chapter Twelve

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

FOR LYNDON JOHNSON, “the lady I loved” was the Great Society, his sweeping domestic agenda aimed at eradicating poverty and racial injustice while dramatically expanding the federal government’s role in social welfare. In addition to creating Medicare and Medicaid, it created food stamps, attacked housing discrimination, and massively expanded federal support for education while also building new consumer, environmental, and urban development programs.

Yet it also pushed to the fore new questions of deservingness. The New Deal’s expansion of the social safety net had, by and large, woven answers to questions about deservingness into the programs themselves. Social Security was pay in, pay out. The GI Bill was based on the proposition that if you spent your college-aged years putting your life on the line for your country, the nation would help you pay for college. People who got jobs through the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps worked for their wages. Home buyers were entitled to federally backed loans because they were just that, loans. The Tennessee Valley Authority built infrastructure and public goods—electric power, flood control, soil improvement, and navigation—that facilitated self-sufficiency; government would build the dam, but it was up to you to work the land.

In each case, the answer to why those who received benefits deserved them was self-evident and built into the design of the policy itself. Understanding the answers to just-world questions required no broader political awareness. A person could have no idea who the president was, but they would know why they deserved Social Security benefits because they watched that deduction come out of every paycheck for their entire working lives. Equally important, they knew why *everyone else* who received benefits deserved them: because they had paid in, too.

The Great Society ventured beyond these boundaries. In distributing benefits, it focused mainly on expanding the type of assistance that does not require recipients to earn it, prompting the question of whether Americans deserve government benefits simply because they are poor. Cash payments to poor families had started under the New Deal, with the Aid to Dependent Children program created by the Social Security Act, but the main focus of that era had been earned-benefit programs. The major initiatives of the 1960s inverted that dynamic: The flagship programs were no longer earned benefits, but direct-cash payments, funneled through programs like food stamps. Taken together, food stamps and Aid to Dependent Children comprise what most people mean when they refer to “welfare.”

There is a reason for this: The Great Society sought to expand the safety net into corners unreached by the New Deal. Monumental though it was, the New Deal still fell short of aiding millions of Americans struggling in dire straits through no fault of their own. Someone who cannot get a job because they have to care for a sick relative cannot pay payroll taxes. Yet this presented policymakers with vexing questions about how to establish deservingness. In lieu of self-evident measures like payroll taxes, policymakers positioned the government as the arbiter of fairness.

This might all seem reasonable enough to liberals, who inherently place more trust in government bureaucrats to be fair and professional. But what about conservatives or independents—or people with heterodox viewpoints, who worry that the government will distribute benefits unfairly, whether through favoritism to certain groups of people, or sheer incompetence, or both? And since these funds come largely out of taxpayer dollars, isn't it reasonable to care about how they are spent?

These are the kinds of tough but fair questions that arise out of just-world resentment. Whereas liberals had addressed such questions frontally and in a satisfying manner during the New Deal, their answers got less satisfying in the 1960s. As the 1968 elections approached, a flood of resentment surged forth. Which side proved more adept at directing it would determine the course of US politics.

AS JOHNSON SKULKED OFF THE SCENE, Nixon reappeared. He had compounded his 1960 loss to Kennedy with a failed bid for California governor in 1962, a bitter race in which he had viciously attacked the incumbent governor, Pat Brown, for being soft on communism. The morning after his defeat, Nixon held a press conference. Following a perfunctory statement by his press secretary, the henpecked Herb Klein, Nixon took the podium. "Now that Mr. Klein has made his statement," Nixon said, "and now that all the members of the press are so delighted that I have lost, I'd like to make a statement of my own."

For about fifteen minutes—the transcript runs more than two thousand words—Nixon ranted extemporaneously about various topics, including what he deemed to be the unfair press coverage he had received, before closing with words that seemed to come to him in the moment but would shape his image forever. "As I leave you," he said, "just think how much you're going to be missing. You don't have Nixon to kick around anymore." As if that wasn't petulant enough, he tacked on, "Because, gentlemen, [this is my last press conference](#)."

Nixon's enemies, who were legion, could scarcely contain their glee. When President Kennedy called Brown to congratulate him, he could not help bringing up the bizarre press conference. "I'll tell you this, you reduced him to the nut house. God, that last farewell speech of his," Kennedy said. "Wasn't that terrible?" Brown replied. "I don't see how he can recover. . . . [I really think he's psychotic](#) . He's an able man, but he's nuts." For *The New York Times* , Nixon's press conference merited front page news. "[NIXON DENOUNCES PRESS AS BIASED](#)," ran the headline. "Richard M. Nixon conceded defeat today," the lede read. "He later devoted what many observers regard as the possible valedictory of his national political career to a bitter denunciation of the press." The entire transcript of Nixon's rant appeared inside the fold.

Perhaps, though, these Franklins were having a little too much fun kicking the Orthogonian. Five days after the press conference, the liberal journalist Howard K. Smith hosted a half-hour special on ABC, calling the episode, "[The Political Obituary of Richard Nixon](#) ." For the panel, in addition to welcoming Nixon aide Murray Chotiner and then-Congressman Gerald Ford, Smith invited Alger Hiss. Hiss was an accused communist spy whose prosecution Nixon had spearheaded as a freshman congressman on the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee, bird-dogging the case relentlessly until he found compelling evidence—including secret State Department microfilms and notes in Hiss's handwriting, stuffed in a pumpkin on his Maryland farm—that [Hiss had been spying for the Soviets](#) . The Hiss case had divided the nation. To liberals, Hiss had become a cause célèbre, a member in good standing of the intelligentsia being persecuted by the uncouth Nixon. Conservatives, meanwhile, pointed out that the evidence against Hiss was in fact, rather damning. The case had first brought Nixon to national recognition. Now, Hiss was being offered a chance to dance on Nixon's political grave, live on network television.

Viewers recoiled. The ABC switchboards lit up with angry callers, as the network received tens of thousands of complaints. James Hagerty, the head of ABC News, was compelled to publicly defend the show. "I cannot accept the charge that we used him [Hiss] deliberately to blacken or smear the patriotism of Richard Nixon," Hagerty said. "[To me it is unthinkable that Hiss](#) . . . could possibly

damage Richard Nixon, whose credentials for public service and patriotism have national recognition.”

Just like that, Nixon was back. Freshly in demand as a campaign surrogate, he spent the 1966 midterm elections stumping for GOP candidates. When Republicans gained seats in both chambers of Congress that year, he reaped a windfall of goodwill. As journalist Joe McGinniss chronicled in *The Selling of the President*, Nixon learned from his humiliation at Kennedy’s hands and assembled a team of consultants—including a young TV producer named Roger Ailes—to construct the image of a “New Nixon.” As the 1968 presidential primary geared up, Nixon was widely seen as the front-runner. Throughout the Republican primary, Nixon ran a professional, workmanlike campaign as one by one his GOP opponents suffered self-inflicted wounds. Michigan governor George Romney, widely seen as a leading contender, returned from a trip to Vietnam to declare that he had been “brainwashed” into supporting the war; the negative reaction to his comments brought a premature end to his campaign. Meanwhile, rumors swirled about the messy personal life of Nelson Rockefeller, the moderate and popular New York governor. In the New Hampshire primary, Rockefeller stumbled badly, winning just 11 percent of the vote to Nixon’s 78 percent. “Quite frankly . . . I find it clear at this time that a considerable majority of the party’s leaders want [Nixon],” Rockefeller conceded, and soon dropped out. “For the first time in years,” *Time* magazine observed, Nixon “felt like a winner again .”

Nixon’s final hurdle was thrown up by the GOP’s conservative wing, who saw Nixon as too moderate. Their champion was California governor Ronald Reagan. A former Democrat who turned hard against his former party over taxes, the size of the federal government, and the Cold War, Reagan set conservative activists dreaming of drafting him for a late challenge to Nixon at the party’s convention that summer. But when the convention arrived, Nixon was able to neutralize Reagan’s appeal, calling upon influential conservatives such as Goldwater and Senator Strom Thurmond to vouch for him. Indeed, Thurmond played such a prominent role that the nationally syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak called the weeklong gathering “truly Strom Thurmond’s convention .”

Conservatives’ concerns that Nixon was too moderate proved well-founded at the convention. On Vietnam, he called for “a negotiated settlement .” His dovish position caused *The New York Times* to comment, “With nary a whimper from the conservatives,” the GOP “adopted a platform liberal enough for Vice President Humphrey to stand on and sufficiently peace-oriented for [anti-war Democrat] Senator Eugene McCarthy to tiptoe around on.” Nor was Vietnam the only issue on which Nixon’s platform seemed to compromise conservative principles. “Even on the law and order issue, the platform struck a moderate tone,” the *Times* reported, pairing calls for decisive action to quell the race riots that had erupted across the country in recent years with distinctly liberal-sounding demands for measures to “alleviate and remove the frustrations that contribute to riots. Republicans left the convention feeling ideologically unsettled. An ardent anticommunist, Nixon had shifted to the center on Vietnam. A moderate reformer on civil rights, he had enlisted Strom Thurmond to keep conservatives in line. In a restive nation, Republicans wondered, which Nixon had they just nominated?

WHAT WOULD SOON GAIN INFAMY as Nixon’s “southern strategy” started not south of the Mason-Dixon line but east of the Harlem River.

Born in the Bronx, Kevin Phillips was the son of an official at the New York State Liquor Authority. A “long faced prodigy with a pedantic manner and a visage that looked half scholar and half black-Irishman ,” as one profiler described him, Phillips became obsessed with politics at an early age. For fun, he collected falling-apart copies of almanacs wherever he could find them, paged through their country-by-county results of presidential elections, and drew electoral maps. As a kid, Phillips spent his afternoons and weekends at political rallies, where he sometimes climbed on top of

the sound truck to warm up the crowds. “ [My father didn’t think anything would come of that](#) ,” Phillips said.

After graduating from Colgate and then Harvard Law School, Phillips got a job as an administrative assistant to Congressman Paul Fino, a Bronx Republican. The son of a subway mechanic, the cigar-chomping Fino once staged a parade through his district featuring forty-five horses ridden by cowboys and accompanied by a truck blasting Beatles songs. Fino’s policy commitments traced the fault line between New Deal–era programs and those of the Great Society. He opposed programs such as food stamps and federal housing subsidies, but supported Medicare and Social Security, even calling for an increase in those benefits.

Phillips closely observed the interplay of the ethnic communities in Fino’s polyglot district, a mix of Italians, Irish, Jews, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans. Phillips, himself a hybrid of Scotch-Irish, English, and Welsh heritage, whose parents were Catholic and Protestant but mostly nonobservant, was something of a neutral observer. “It just struck me as an automatic thing that ethnic tensions were a normal part of politics,” Phillips said. “ [The whole secret of politics](#) ,” Phillips told the journalist Garry Wills, “is knowing who hates who.”

After the 1964 election, that instinct prompted Phillips to spy opportunity in the midst of failure. While Republicans reeled from Johnson’s landslide, Phillips noticed that [Fino had won Italian assembly districts](#) by wider margins than ever. Even more significantly, he cleaned up in Irish districts as well, a striking result given deep-seated loyalties to Democrats as the party of Al Smith. To Phillips, these findings heralded a coming shift in the tides of resentment. For decades, ethnic, often Catholic, whites had directed their resentment toward Protestant Yankee Republicans and had remained staunch Democrats. Now, they were redirecting that resentment toward nonwhites who, after increases in Black immigration from the South and Latino and Asian immigration from abroad, now lived in their communities. To their eyes, these newcomers were being showered with handouts by Democrats—without earning them.

If the floodwaters of resentment were building, Phillips knew exactly how he wanted to direct them. He envisioned a clean break with the old-school GOP of Brownell and, in his previous political life, of Nixon, a gentleman’s party that saw reclaiming ground with Black voters as a strategic imperative. “All [the talk about Republicans making inroads](#) into the Negro vote is persiflage,” Phillips said, in characteristically blunt terms. “From now on, the Republicans are never going to get more than 10 to 20 per cent of the Negro vote and they don’t need any more than that.” By letting Democrats claim the Black vote and the mantle of civil rights, Phillips calculated, Republicans could gain the South—a no-brainer of a trade, in his mind. “Who needs Manhattan when we can get the electoral votes of 11 Southern states?” Phillips told Wills. “Put those together with the Farm Belt and the Rocky Mountain states and we don’t even need the big cities. We don’t even want them.”

As the 1966 midterms approached, Phillips felt confident in his vision. “You’ll see it working in the 1966 elections,” he promised. “ [It’s all in the charts](#) ” that he had drawn up, he assured a reporter. He was right. The trends he identified powered Republicans to gain three seats in the Senate and forty-seven in the House. Having gotten wind of Phillips’s talents as they readied for 1968, the Nixon campaign snatched him up.

A THOUSAND MILES AWAY, in Birmingham, another man was realizing that racial resentment was not just for the South anymore.

George Wallace had begun his political career as a New Deal populist and a moderate on civil rights, at least by the standards of the time in his beloved Alabama. But in 1958, he lost his first race for governor to John Patterson, who relentlessly hammered him for his liberal stances on race issues. Afterward, Wallace vowed to an aide, “ [I was out-n*****ed, and I will never be out-n*****ed again.](#)” Wallace ran again in 1962, promising to “stand in the schoolhouse door” to prevent integration. This time, he won. In his inaugural address, Wallace declared “ [segregation now, segregation tomorrow](#) , segregation forever!” A few months later, in June, he made good on his

promise, standing in the doorway as federal forces sought to enforce integration at the University of Alabama.

While the campus was integrated, Wallace got what he wanted: The image of him facing off against Deputy US Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach was broadcast on TV screens and plastered on front pages across the country. What happened next surprised even Wallace. By that point, Wallace was certain that running on racial prejudice was a winning strategy in Alabama. Now he discovered that people all over the United States were cheering him on, as letters and telegrams poured in from every corner of the country. “They all hate Black people, all of them. They’re all afraid, all of them,” he exclaimed. “Great God, that’s it! They’re all Southern! [The whole United States is Southern!](#) ”

Buoyed by this national reaction, Wallace decided to make a longshot bid for the presidency in 1964. While he never posed a real threat to win the nomination, he got Johnson’s attention by running stronger than expected in several northern and midwestern states, taking a shocking 34 percent of the vote in Wisconsin. His 1964 performance set him up for a more professional campaign in 1968, which he launched under the banner of the newly created American Independent Party.

Though they came from different backgrounds and parts of the country, Phillips and Wallace arrived at the same idea. It wasn’t just about race, although that was the foundation of their thinking. The more politically potent form of the idea—the kind that can build right-wing supermajorities—arose when old-fashioned racism was yoked to the just-world resentment harbored by those who think the government is directing benefits to people who, in their view, do not deserve them.

Much more so than Nixon, it was Wallace who tested the political potential of these ideas in the 1968 election. As he stepped onto the national stage, Wallace forged his appeal by fusing just-world resentment to the explicit racism he had demonstrated with his stand in the schoolhouse door. When it came to the safety net, Wallace distinguished himself from conservatives like Goldwater, who wanted to cut or abolish Social Security, by unabashedly supporting the earned-benefit programs of the New Deal. At the same time, he vociferously opposed the newer welfare programs of the Great Society on the basis that the benefits were unearned—drawing the distinction just as the Bronx congressman Fino had when Phillips worked for him. In a TV interview in 1968, the journalist Paul Niven pressed Wallace on this unusual mix. Based on Wallace’s populist economic policies, Niven pointed out, “In the state legislature, many of [your contemporaries regard you as a liberal](#) , if not a left winger.” Wallace responded, “When you say I’m a liberal because I’m for old age pensions for the elderly, yes, I’m very much for that. I’m very much for elderly citizens of our country being taken care of. And if we’d stop some of this foolish foreign aid and some of this so-called poverty program, we might even be able to increase the Social Security payments of the elderly citizens today in our country,” he said. Wallace continued, “And I’m not against that at all. I’m against paying people who are able-bodied not to work. And we have a vast welfare program today in our country that pays able-bodied people not to work. And I’m against that.”

In November, Wallace posted one of the strongest performances ever by a third-party candidate, winning nearly 14 percent of the popular vote and carrying five southern states. While [Nixon entered the fall with a large lead](#) in the polls, lingering distaste for him closed the polling gap, as his lead shrunk to just 2 points in the final Gallup poll before the election. In the end, Nixon edged the Democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey, by under one percent in the popular vote, yet his margin in the electoral college remained comfortable, winning 301 votes to Humphrey’s 191. It was Wallace’s presence that made the race close. According to a postelection study, [more than 80 percent of Wallace voters](#) were registered Democrats, yet most would likely have voted for Nixon if the Alabama governor had not run. Millions of working-class whites were defecting from Democrats, but still had reservations about Nixon. Next time, Nixon came to believe, he would have to make a more aggressive bid for their support.

EVEN AS NIXON BEGAN to hone the political weapon that would break up the New Deal coalition, he ratified its policy agenda as president.

Nixon created the modern environmental regulatory state, establishing the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and signing into law the Clean Air Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Safe Drinking Water Act. He expanded Social Security, increasing benefits to keep up with inflation and implementing automatic cost-of-living increases. He created the Supplemental Security Income program to provide a guaranteed income for elderly and disabled Americans who fell below the poverty line. He expanded federal funding for Medicare and Medicaid. He also proposed a form of universal basic income for US families: His Family Assistance Plan would have replaced the existing welfare system with a negative income tax.

Perhaps the most surprising area of accomplishment for Nixon came on civil rights. He presided over the nationalization of the Voting Rights Act, extending its purview beyond the South to cover all states. He also intervened to desegregate schools. Fifteen years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, nearly 80 percent of Black students in America still attended segregated schools. At least seven southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina—operated their schools in open defiance of the Court’s decision. In 1970, Nixon worked with Secretary of Labor George Shultz to form committees in each state composed of prominent Black and white community leaders. Nixon would summon the committees to Washington, where he and Shultz would cajole, flatter, and browbeat them into implementing desegregation. It worked: The percentage of Black children attending all-Black schools in the South plummeted to just 8 percent by 1974. As the civil rights historian Hugh Davis Graham wrote, as president, “Nixon’s policies were too variable, unpredictable, and even contradictory to sustain a characterization as racial reactionary.”

AFTER NIXON’S 1968 VICTORY, Kevin Phillips channeled his theories into a book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*. It was an immediate hit, with *Newsweek* christening it “the political Bible of the Nixon Era.” Phillips got a job in the administration working in the Justice Department, but the pull of electoral politics was too strong. He conducted long interviews with reporters about his political theories from his Justice Department office. Soon, he left government to start a syndicated newspaper column and newsletter, and became a regular commentator on radio and television.

Despite Phillips’s departure, there remained a coterie of Nixon aides eager to take up his ideas. In 1970, a speechwriter named Pat Buchanan wrote Nixon a memo urging the president to conduct “heated political warfare,” and pursue a strategy “of not cooling off our supporters but of stirring the fires.” “It will be their kind of society or ours; we will prevail or they shall prevail,” Buchanan urged, the fury of his call to action going well beyond Phillips’s comparatively sterile comparisons of electoral coalitions. Michael Balzano, a staff assistant, pushed the president in the same direction. “Today, racial minorities are saying that you can’t make it in America,” Balzano wrote in a memo. “What they really mean is that they refuse to start at the bottom of the ladder the way you did. They want to surpass you . . . [and] they want it handed to them. . . . You worked the menial jobs to get where you are—let them do it too.” Balzano did not want his remarks circulating. “CAUTION—DANGER,” he wrote. “With respect to the calculated polarization described in this paper, ABSOLUTE SECRECY CANNOT BE OVERSTATED” or “there would be no way of calculating the damage to the Administration.” These aides were urging Nixon to take just-world resentment and weaponize it by fusing it to raw racism. Whereas Phillips had framed his case in charts and numbers, Buchanan and Balzano gave it an Arthurian sheen. The political force before Nixon was Excalibur, his aides seemed to say, if only he was bold enough to draw it from the stone.

He was. In 1972, Nixon joined racial and just-world resentment together into the political weapon that slayed the New Deal coalition. Channeling the advice of Phillips, Buchanan, and Balzano, he honed Wallace’s appeal into a form that could be marketed to the whole nation. One of the issues

Nixon used to achieve this transformation was busing. In 1971, the liberal majority on the Supreme Court had ruled the practice of forced busing—transporting students from predominantly Black school districts into white ones and vice versa, to promote integration—constitutional.

Busing was an issue that could fuse the two types of resentment. Parents who might not be racist themselves could, understandably, be upset at having their children bussed out of their neighborhood school and across the city to a new school where they knew no one. Yet parents who objected on this basis might find themselves standing next to others shouting racial slurs at the anti-busing rallies that sprung up in cities across the country. A poll at the time showed that [73 percent of Americans opposed busing](#), including a significant proportion of Democrats.

Nixon seized on this potential. In March 1972, he delivered a nationally televised address dedicated to his opposition to busing, and put the Democratic-controlled Congress on the spot by sending it legislation to outlaw the practice. Nixon had Democrats right where he wanted them. They failed to develop an effective response and simply sat on his antibusing legislation as the campaign unfolded. In November, Nixon's "Southern Strategy," as it was dubbed, won not just the South but swept the nation, winning every state except Massachusetts.

Yet Nixon's triumph was short-lived. The roiling bitterness that led him from civil rights champion to tribune of white backlash also drove him to authorize the Watergate burglaries and other underhanded tactics that would soon explode into public view and bring down his administration. He resigned on August 9, 1974, boarding Army One, the helicopter waiting on the White House lawn, and flashing a double *V*. Now, truly, the United States would not have Nixon to kick around anymore.

In the 1974 midterms, Democrats reversed Republicans' 1972 gains, with a generation of "Watergate babies" picking up forty-nine seats in the House and four seats in the Senate. Nixon's penchant for self-destruction had sabotaged his supermajority. But he had drawn a blueprint for forging just-world resentment to racism, and demonstrated its power. The question for Democrats was whether they could forge a counterstrategy before it was too late.

Chapter Thirteen

OUR NETTLESOME TASK

IF JUST-WORLD RESENTMENT can be fused to racism to create a politically powerful mix, the reverse is also true: The two types of resentment can be kept apart. In the 1960s, while Kevin Phillips and George Wallace were scheming to graft just-world resentment to racism, others were working to sunder them.

By 1968, Americans had exhausted their political will when it came to civil rights. Public support for the achievements of the era was strong. In April 1965, Gallup found 76 percent of Americans supporting the Voting Rights Act. Yet when it came to the pace of change, Americans were ready to pump the brakes. A 1965 National Opinion Research Corporation poll showed 68 percent of Americans wanted to see moderation in civil rights enforcement, with only [19 percent wanting vigorous enforcement](#).

Over the same period of time, riots became a feature of the national landscape. Triggered by a volatile mixture of police violence and deep frustrations over economic conditions and racial discrimination that persisted even after the passage of major civil rights laws, between 1964 and 1968, the United States [witnessed riots in over 150 cities](#). In the 1965 Watts riots and the 1967 riots in Detroit and Newark, dozens were killed and the National Guard was deployed. All told, roughly two hundred people were killed and thousands injured, making the riots one of the deadliest and most politically consequential episodes of domestic unrest in modern US history.

For leaders of the civil rights movement, this posed a vexing challenge. As the failure of the Albany movement had demonstrated in 1962, rousing the American people's conscience was not easy. Hundreds of children being thrown in jail by Albany's racist police chief, Laurie Pritchett, had not been enough—it had taken Bull Connor turning dogs and firehoses on children to sway the public. The question was how to refocus the attention of a nation that was losing its patience on their cause—or whether they should even try.

These were the questions Martin Luther King Jr. took up in his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here?* “[Our nettlesome task](#),” King wrote, “is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands.” He mused:

We must frankly acknowledge that in past years our creativity and imagination were not employed in learning how to develop power. We found a method in nonviolent protest that worked, and we employed it enthusiastically. We did not have leisure to probe for a deeper understanding of its laws and lines of development. Although our actions were bold and crowned with success, they were substantially improvised and spontaneous. They attained the goals set for them but carried the blemishes of our inexperience.

“When a new dawn reveals a landscape dotted with obstacles, the time has come for sober reflection, for assessment of our methods and for anticipating pitfalls,” King continued. “For the moment, therefore, we must subordinate programs to studying the levers of power Negroes must grasp to influence the course of events.” Building that political power, King explained, required others to see themselves in Black Americans' cause—not just morally, but materially. “[A true alliance is based](#)

upon some self-interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge,” he wrote.

The activist and thinker Bayard Rustin, who had helped King and other leaders organize the March on Washington, was thinking along the same lines. “The civil rights movement is evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged social movement— an evolution calling its very name into question ,” he wrote in an essay titled “From Protest to Politics,” published in the February 1965 issue of *Commentary* magazine. Protests had raised the salience of their cause, and won over hearts and minds on a historic scale. But to leaders like Rustin and King, the movement was now running up against the limits of what protest could achieve. The movement “is now concerned not merely with removing the barriers to full opportunity but with achieving the fact of equality. From sit-ins and freedom rides we have gone into rent strikes, boycotts, community organization, and political action,” Rustin wrote. The challenges before them were at least as daunting as those they previously faced, if not more so. “As a consequence of this natural evolution, the Negro today finds himself stymied by obstacles of far greater magnitude than the legal barriers he was attacking before: automation, urban decay, de facto school segregation. These are problems which, while conditioned by Jim Crow, do not vanish upon its demise. They are more deeply rooted in our socioeconomic order; they are the result of the total society’s failure to meet not only the Negro’s needs, but human needs generally.”

King and Rustin sought to channel their insights into a universal plan for action that would benefit workers of all races. In a 1965 *Playboy* interview with Alex Haley, Rustin said, “We must develop a Federal program of public works, retraining and jobs for all—so that none, white or black, will have cause to feel threatened. . . . Together, they could form a grand alliance. Together, they could merge all people for the good of all .” This meant expanding the pie. “We need to protest the notion that our integration into American life, so long delayed, must now proceed in an atmosphere of competitive scarcity instead of in the security of abundance which technology makes possible.”

Rustin and King came together with A. Philip Randolph to develop a set of concrete policy proposals they christened the “Freedom Budget.” The budget outlined sweeping federal policies that would guarantee jobs and decent living standards for all. It called for the government to serve as “ the employer of last resort ,” ensuring full employment at fair wages. It proposed massive investments in housing to “wipe out slums,” as well as expanded welfare and health care programs, improved access to education, and new environmental protections. The authors estimated that the plan would cost \$185 billion over ten years, which they proposed to pay for with the economic growth the plan would spur.

The leaders emphasized the universal nature of the program as they rolled it out. “This proposal is not a ‘civil rights’ program, in the sense that term is currently used,” King wrote. “ The program would benefit all the poor , including the two-thirds of them who are white . . . their combined strength will be necessary to overcome the fierce opposition we must realistically anticipate.” In his foreword to the Freedom Budget, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* , Rustin emphasized that the benefits of the program would be widely shared. “ It will mean more money in your pocket . It will mean better schools for your children. It will mean better homes for you and your neighbors. It will mean clean air to breathe and comfortable cities to live in. It will mean adequate medical care when you are sick.”

This shift to a vision of economic fairness for all is what brought King to Memphis in the spring of 1968. The city’s sanitation workers were on strike, their rallying cry of “I Am a Man,” emblazoned on placards and signs, capturing the inextricable link between economic well-being and basic human dignity. On April 4, as dusk fell, King was preparing for a rally with the striking sanitation workers. Around 6 PM , he stepped out onto the second-floor balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel. His friend Ben Branch, a musician, was in the parking lot below. “Ben, be sure and have them sing ‘Precious Lord, Take My Hand’ at the meeting tonight,” King called down. Harold Wesley Varner, a drummer for the church band, was in the parking lot with Branch. “I recalled the words in the hymn

about being weak and tired, and I thought that Dr. King looked especially tired that day,” Varner recalled. At 6:05 PM , a shot rang out. “I heard what sounded like a clap of thunder,” said Varner. “[I looked up to see Dr. King fall over backwards](#) from the railing.” King’s companions rushed to his body. Ralph Abernathy cradled his head. But it was too late. King was rushed to the hospital, where, at just thirty-nine years old, he was pronounced dead.

WHEN ROBERT F. KENNEDY HEARD the news about King, [he “seemed to shrink back](#) , as though struck physically,” according to John J. Lindsay of *Newsweek* , who was with him at the time. Yet Kennedy also knew what to do, because he had been through this before. He arranged for a plane to transport King’s wife, Coretta, and had three more telephone lines installed at the Kings’ home.

That night, Kennedy was in Indianapolis. He had recently announced his candidacy for president, and the next primary was being held in the Hoosier State. A crowd was gathering to hear Kennedy speak in the heart of Indianapolis’s Black community. The mayor, Richard Lugar, pleaded with Kennedy’s staff to cancel the event out of fear for the candidate’s safety. Reports from the neighborhood hinted at danger, as residents had spotted young men carrying gasoline cans and firearms. “[I was upset, to put it mildly](#) ,” said Abie Washington, a thirty-six-year-old Black resident who had just returned from serving in the Navy. “I was pissed. Something needed to be done and I wanted to do it.” These were not idle threats. That night, in response to the news of King’s death, riots were erupting in cities across the country, and Indianapolis looked likely to join them.

Kennedy ignored the warnings and pressed on. With a large crowd assembled, he climbed on top of a flatbed truck, wearing a black overcoat against the chill of the wind that cut through the early spring night—a coat that had belonged to his brother. The crowd was abuzz with pleasant chatter, as many remained unaware of the news. “I have some very sad news for all of you, and, I think, sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world,” he began, “and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee.” Gasps rippled through the crowd. Kennedy continued:

[In this difficult day, in this difficult time](#) for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black—considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible—you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

Then, he addressed the tension that hung in the air. “For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and mistrust at the injustice of such an act . . . I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling,” he said. Then he added, “I had a member of my family killed.” It was the first time he had ever spoken publicly of his brother’s assassination.

As he went on, he cited a verse from the ancient Greek poet Aeschylus, one that had comforted him after his brother’s death, describing pain that “falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair . . . comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.” Bringing his remarks to a close, he said, “What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need . . . is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country.” He asked the crowd to honor King not with anger, but with prayer: “Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of the world. . . . Say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love.”

The speech was about six minutes long. When it was over, people began to disperse into the night. “My level of emotion went from one extreme to another,” Washington recalled. Kennedy “had

empathy,” Washington reflected. “He knew what it felt like.” So, he thought, “ [Why create more violence?](#) ”

Riots erupted in more than one hundred cities across the nation that night, but not in Indianapolis. William Crawford, a member of the Black Radical Action Project, had been standing about twenty feet from Kennedy. “Look at all those other cities,” he reflected later. “I believe it would have gone that way had not Bobby Kennedy given those remarks. . . . [The sincerity of Bobby Kennedy’s words](#) just resonate,” Crawford said, “especially when he talked about his brother.”

THE BOBBY KENNEDY who wielded enough credibility to talk a crowd out of rioting had come a long way since a May morning in 1963, when a meeting about civil rights went off the rails.

Bobby had invited the essayist James Baldwin to assemble a group of Black leaders for a conversation at the Kennedy family pied a terre in New York City, a penthouse overlooking Central Park. Baldwin brought the singer Harry Belafonte, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, psychologist Kenneth Clark, actress Lena Horne, NAACP organizer June Shagaloff, and a twenty-four-year-old Freedom Rider named Jerome Smith, who bore scars from a brutal beating he had suffered in Mississippi.

As guests snacked on a light buffet in the parlor, Kennedy tossed his jacket over a chair and rolled up his shirtsleeves, trying to set a collegial tone. He spoke of his family’s immigrant roots, noting that as Irish Catholics, the Kennedys had faced discrimination themselves. “He said something about his family and the kinds of discrimination it had had to fight,” Horne recalled. “He seemed to feel that this would establish some sort of identification, some [sort of rapport, between us](#) . It did not.”

At one point, trying to establish a connection, Kennedy asked Smith whether he would be willing to fight for his country in a foreign war, as Kennedy’s two older brothers had. “Never!,” Smith shot back. “If the United States declares war on anybody,” Smith said, “I would never pick up a gun.” Bobby was taken aback. “You will not fight for your country?,” he asked, incredulous. “How can you say that?” Smith said, “What you’re asking us young black people to do is pick up guns against people in Asia while you have continued to deny us our rights here.” Smith had the scars to show for his commitment to nonviolence, but he warned the attorney general that, absent meaningful progress, Black militancy would only rise. The next time police came at him with clubs and dogs and firehoses, Smith said, he would be armed. “ [When I pull a trigger](#) ,” the young man said, “kiss it goodbye.”

Kennedy turned red-faced and made clear to the guests that they had worn out their welcome. “We left convinced that we had made no dent or impact on Bobby,” Kenneth Clark said. “It may very well have been [that Bobby Kennedy was more antagonistic](#) to our aspirations and goals than he was before.” Characteristically, Kennedy fumed and plotted revenge. “They seemed possessed,” he vented to his aide, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. “They reacted as a unit. It was impossible to make contact with any of them. . . . You can’t talk to them the way you can talk to Martin Luther King or Roy Wilkins,” he complained. The FBI, which Kennedy oversaw as attorney general, began to track Baldwin shortly thereafter.

The next morning, King called Belafonte to ask how it had gone. “Disaster,” Belafonte sighed. To the singer’s surprise, King seemed bemused. “ [Maybe it’s just what Bobby needed to hear](#) ,” he said.

FOR MOST OF BOBBY KENNEDY’S ADULT LIFE, his brother’s career had been his cause. With him gone, he had none. He plunged into darkness. A man who had questioned little about the world and his place in it suddenly found himself beset by doubts and regret. He was wracked with guilt—as attorney general, he had led a crackdown on organized crime, and he confided to friends that he thought his brother’s death was retribution. “ [It should’ve been me](#) ,” he said. He withdrew from the

spotlight and, for perhaps the first time in his life, took time to read and reflect. One of the books he read was a compilation of ancient Greek tragedies, given to him by his brother's widow, Jackie.

When Kennedy reentered public life, it was as a changed man. At the August 1964 Democratic convention, his first major appearance after his brother's assassination, he was greeted with a thunderous ovation. He appeared unsure of himself, even scared. Yet by 1966, he had found his voice, traveling to South Africa, where he spoke eloquently against apartheid, declaring, "each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and . . . those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Kennedy had a home in New York, and in 1964 he won one of the state's Senate seats. In 1967 after hearing witnesses at a hearing testify about people starving in Mississippi, Kennedy decided to tour the Delta. He was shocked by the inhumane conditions he found. In February 1968, he traveled to Appalachia, a thirty-six-car motorcade of reporters in tow, bumping along dirt roads and stopping in "hidden hollows at weather-bleached wood and tarpaper shanties sagging with neglect," according to a dispatch from *Time* magazine. "In spavined one-horse communities named Neon, Grassy Creek, Mousie, Fisty, Jackhorn and Cody, ragged, slack-eyed men and women and listless children with bellies taut from hunger spoke of their need." In Wolfe County, Kentucky, Kennedy learned that 5,000 of the 6,500 residents survived on about ten cents per meal. A father of fifteen told Kennedy how he coped with hunger: "Whenever you get another kid to feed, just add a little more water to the gravy." At one stop, a little girl thrust a note into his hand: "Bobby, please run for President."

Even the jaded reporters trailing Kennedy were struck by what they saw in the man. At a stop in Nebraska, journalist Helen Dudar followed Kennedy into a home for disabled children. She watched as Bobby gently stroked the arm of a hydrocephalic baby and let a little girl chew on his fingers without flinching. "He can be tough, demanding, rude, icy," Dudar later reflected. "But to see him with children is always to wonder how exactly he came to be known as ruthless." As his biographer Larry Tye wrote, Kennedy showed that he could "make rhinoceros-hided scribes fall in love with him to an extent not seen since Franklin Roosevelt or perhaps his distant cousin Teddy." Having covered his older brother's administration, Harrison Salisbury of *The New York Times* nursed a jaundiced opinion of Bobby. Yet by 1968, he found his view changing. "The new Bobby was a proud man but a humble one. He was no longer a capo. He was a member of the human race, a man of doubts and uncertainties," Salisbury recalled. "Gone was the smart aleck. Gone was the political trickster. Gone was the shallow sureness. Robert F. Kennedy had come of age. . . . I could hardly wait until November. I had not the slightest doubt that Robert F. Kennedy would win."

EVEN AS KENNEDY FOCUSED ON THE PLIGHT OF POVERTY, he zeroed in on the questions of deservingness raised by the Great Society.

Often in the same breath as he spoke eloquent words decrying economic inequality, Kennedy emphasized his opposition to a version of welfare that asks nothing of recipients. "Welfare's not the answer. It's jobs. It is a basic responsibility of our society to give every man an opportunity to work," he told a crowd of poor white Kentuckians, to enthusiastic applause. Instead of expanding welfare, Kennedy advocated providing jobs—a "hand up" rather than a "hand out." In an April 1968 speech in Nebraska, he argued that people wanted "a decent job and decent wages and not just [to] rely on welfare and the dole." In Indiana, his campaign advertisements asked voters, "Won't you help Robert Kennedy give people a hand up rather than a hand out?" A TV ad featured Kennedy saying, "I think welfare is demeaning and destructive of the human being and of his family."

In May, he gave a speech in Los Angeles devoted to the topic of welfare reform. "Perhaps the area of our greatest domestic failure is in the system of welfare," Kennedy said. "Welfare itself has done much to divide our people, to alienate us one from the other," he said. He engaged just-world concerns directly, citing the "understandable resentment of the taxpayer, helplessly watching your welfare rolls and your property tax rise."

Crucially, Kennedy offered welfare recipients the same respect, pointing out that they would much prefer the dignity that comes with work. “There is greater resentment among the poor, the recipient of our charity,” he said. “Some of it comes from the brutality of the welfare system itself; from the prying bureaucrat, an all-powerful administrator deciding at his desk who is deserving and who is not, who shall live another month and who may starve next week. But the root of the problem is in the fact of dependency and uselessness itself.” Kennedy spelled out his solution: “The answer to the welfare crisis is work, jobs, self-sufficiency, and family integrity; not a massive new extension of welfare.” Just as Franklin Roosevelt had railed against the “dole,” Kennedy argued, “We need jobs, dignified employment at decent pay; the kind of employment that lets a man say to his community, to his family, to his country, and most important to himself, ‘I helped to build this country. I am a participant in its great public ventures. I am a man.’”

Kennedy was frontally addressing the same resentment identified by Wallace, Phillips, and Nixon, but with a positive vision rooted in timeless liberal principles. The way Kennedy bridged the chasm that conservatives sought to deepen was perhaps best captured by a white voter who told the journalist Theodore White, “He may be for them [African Americans] [but he’s for us too](#) .”

WELFARE WAS NOT THE ONLY AREA where Kennedy diverged from liberal orthodoxy. At a time when it was already becoming fashionable to consider the phrase “law and order” racist, Kennedy leaned into it. “[I was the chief law-enforcement officer of the United States](#) ,” he said, invoking his tenure as attorney general. “I promise if elected I will do all in my power to bring an end to this violence.” As someone who could credibly claim to have personally prevented a riot in Indianapolis, he had unique credibility when he promised voters, “We needn’t have to expect this violence summer after summer.” The day after King’s assassination, Kennedy addressed the City Club of Cleveland. After denouncing King’s murder, he also denounced the riots that unfolded in response. “[An uncontrolled or uncontrollable mob](#) is only the voice of madness, not the voice of the people.”

These points were major themes of his campaign. In Indiana, his campaign released an ad titled “Law and Order.” In it, Kennedy decried “the violence and the lawlessness and the disorder. I don’t think that we have to accept the idea that somewhere out there, somewhere, we’re going to have violence. I don’t think that we have to accept the idea that somewhere out there, somewhere, [we’re going to have looting](#) .” Kennedy’s emphasis on law and order was so forceful, it prompted Nixon to complain to the journalist White, “Do you know a lot of these [people think Bobby is more a law-and-order man](#) than I am!”

Kennedy’s heterodoxy distinguished him from the orthodox liberalism of his chief rival for the Democratic nomination, Senator Eugene McCarthy. Throughout the campaign, the Minnesota senator stayed squarely in the liberal box. While McCarthy performed well with college students and urban, white liberals, he struggled to expand his coalition. Kennedy gave no quarter on economic populism—he had done more than any white leader of his era, and certainly more than McCarthy, to highlight the plight of the poor. Yet he also refused to consign to bigotry those with questions about fairness and deservingness, or to dismiss their desire to be safe in their communities.

AS KENNEDY FORGED A HETERODOX PATH on issues of work and welfare, he sided with the left on the issue that, by 1968, was coming to eclipse civil rights as the transcendent cause of the time: the Vietnam War.

Kennedy’s early career had been defined by anticommunism. At the height of the “red scare” in the 1950s, he had worked as an aide to the demagogic Senator Joseph McCarthy on his investigations subcommittee, reporting to the infamous hatchet man and fixer, Roy Cohn. Yet by 1968, the hawkish Kennedy had come to believe the war in Vietnam was a disaster. His opposition hardened after returning from an inspection tour of Vietnam in January 1968, where he saw firsthand the scale of

corruption inside the South Vietnamese government, and came away convinced that US policy toward the country rested on rotting pillars.

As Kennedy moved toward opposing the war, his genuine belief in US power and resolve prevented him from becoming an outright dove. Rather, he focused on how the war was undermining US Cold War aims. Announcing his candidacy on March 16, Kennedy described how the Vietnam War “[saps our spirit and our manpower](#)”, further raises the risks of wider war, and further destroys the country and the people it was meant to save.” Two days later, at a speech at Kansas State University, he explained that what he saw as an unnecessary war was undermining the ability of the United States to fight future, necessary ones. “[We set out to prove our willingness](#) to keep our commitments everywhere in the world,” he said. “What we are ensuring instead is that it is most unlikely that the American people would ever again be willing to engage in this kind of struggle.” He framed his opposition in military terms, arguing that “the war has already stripped us of the graduated-response capability that we have labored so hard to build for the last seven years.” And he argued that the war was emboldening US enemies. In January, Communist North Korea had captured the USS *Pueblo*, an electronic surveillance ship, and held the crew of more than eighty sailors for months, torturing them until they taped forced confessions. Kennedy pointed to this humiliating episode as a direct result of the Vietnam War: “Surely the North Koreans were emboldened to seize the *Pueblo* because they knew that the United States simply cannot afford to fight another Asian war while we are so tied down in Vietnam,” he said. Kennedy was no dove, but on the issue activists cared about most, his beliefs aligned with theirs.

AS VOTING BEGAN in the 1968 primary, Kennedy’s heterodoxy attracted a multiracial working-class coalition that looked a lot like the one that undergirded the New Deal.

In Indiana, the journalist Jules Witcover marveled at the seamlessness with which a Kennedy campaign motorcade traversed Black and ethnic white neighborhoods. “[What set the motorcade apart](#)”, and what made it significant for Kennedy the candidate, was the unbroken display of adulation and support as he moved from Negro neighborhood to blue collar ethnic back to Negro again, over and over and over.” When voting began, Kennedy racked up wins in Black and white precincts alike. “What was surprising,” the columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote, “was [his record among the backlash ethnic voters](#) that gave George Wallace his remarkable vote in Indiana four years ago.” Even as he rolled up large margins in Black communities, [Kennedy prevailed with working-class whites](#) as well, winning the seven largest Indiana counties where George Wallace had run strongest in his longshot 1964 bid. In the only precinct in St. Joseph’s County where Wallace had prevailed in 1964, Kennedy garnered 190 votes to 95 for McCarthy and 55 for the favorite son candidate, Indiana governor Roger Branigin. In Vigo County, which would go for Wallace in the Democratic primary four years later, [Kennedy won 9,600 votes](#) to 7,300 for Branigin and 5,300 for McCarthy. The journalist David Halberstam noticed that he encountered many white voters “who thought the choice in American politics [narrowed to George Wallace or Bobby Kennedy](#).”

This working-class coalition powered Kennedy to a string of primary wins. He pulled off a dominant victory in Indiana, securing 42 percent of the vote to McCarthy’s 27 percent. He went on to win the next two primaries, in Nebraska and South Dakota. In late May, he suffered a setback by losing Oregon to McCarthy. California was next, and Kennedy staked his campaign on the Bear State —“[the one we have to win](#),” as he put it. On June 4, he got the bounce-back victory he was seeking there, beating McCarthy 46 to 42 percent.

That night, a fatigued Kennedy roused himself to address the jubilant throng waiting for him in the ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. The crowd chanted “[We want Bobby!](#)” as he took the stage shortly after midnight. Kennedy flashed a weary smile and thanked both his supporters and his dog, Freckles, before ending with a shout of, “on to Chicago,” where the Democratic convention would be held.

Kennedy usually exited through the crowd, since to him, leaving out the back felt like shirking. But this time, he had to get to a press conference and the crowd was simply too raucous. Hotel staff directed him to a service hallway that led through a pantry. As Kennedy paused to shake hands with kitchen workers, a slight young man in a blue busboy uniform stepped out from behind an ice machine. Twenty-four-year-old Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, a Palestinian immigrant simmering with political grievances, gripped a .22-caliber revolver. Kennedy, who was a strong supporter of the state of Israel, “[must be assassinated before June 5, 1968](#),” the one-year anniversary of the start of the Six-Day War between Israel and its neighbors, Sirhan had written in a notebook. Minutes earlier, the clock had struck midnight, as the calendar turned to June 5.

As Kennedy passed through the hallway, Sirhan opened fire at point-blank range, emptying all eight bullets. Two bullets slammed into Kennedy’s back and a third ripped into the base of his skull. He staggered and fell as hotel workers and campaign staff dove for cover. Amid the bedlam, former pro-football star Rosey Grier, who had been serving as an unofficial bodyguard, pinned Sirhan against a table. A seventeen-year-old busboy, Juan Romero, crawled to the fallen Kennedy. Someone placed a rosary in the senator’s hand. Ethel Kennedy, pregnant with the couple’s eleventh child, knelt by his side, pressing ice cubes to his forehead. Bobby’s eyes were open. As he lay bleeding on the kitchen floor, he smiled and asked, “[Is everybody OK?](#)”

THERE WERE, TO BE SURE, significant differences between Kennedy’s approach and those of Rustin and King, from substantial gaps on policy to points of rhetorical emphasis. Yet at a fundamental level, they were aligned, and it is easy to envision a productive tension developing in their quasi-alliance—the same kind of synergy between activists and politicians that had delivered historic progress under Johnson.

For King, whatever distance remained between him and Bobby seemed unlikely to have prevented him from supporting the man who once had been so deaf to the civil rights cause. According to Stanley Levison, a King confidant, King planned to support Kennedy. “After Bobby Kennedy entered the primaries, I asked Martin how he felt about McCarthy or Kennedy,” Levison recalled. “And he said that while he hadn’t publicly decided to take any stand yet, his mind was made up. He had decided that [he would support Bobby Kennedy](#).” The pragmatist in King “was impressed by Bobby Kennedy’s ability to pull behind him a sufficient section of the electorate to win it.” But he was also struck by how much the man had changed since Jerome Smith had confronted him. More than anything, Levinson said, King “was impressed by Bobby Kennedy’s ability to grow. And he felt that if he’d come that far, with the greater responsibility he could become one of the outstanding presidents and really be the kind of man the country needed.”

The vision of a multiracial, working-class coalition that Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were forging died with them. Robbed of generational leaders, Democrats devolved into internecine conflict, while conservatives cast their eyes on a supermajority.

Chapter Fourteen

THE PARTY HOLLOWS

TWENTY YEARS AFTER Hubert Humphrey triggered a civil war at one Democratic convention, he found himself at the center of another. In 1948, Humphrey had torn the party asunder with a bold show of courage. In 1968, he was throwing Democrats into chaos with a case study in cowardice. Where once Humphrey had braved threats from party leaders and called on his fellow Democrats to unshackle themselves from the reactionary forces among them, now he let party leaders browbeat him into submission on the Vietnam War. A prophet of progress had come to embody a party adrift.

This was an inauspicious time for Democrats to lack visionary leaders, as Republicans were on their way to forging their own supermajority. Those five days in Chicago, and the cascade of decisions that flowed from them, crippled the Democratic party's ability to respond to the threat conservatives posed then—and now.

IN FEBRUARY 1968, Walter Cronkite, the legendary host of *CBS Evening News*, returned from a fact-finding trip to Vietnam with a jarring report: "It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of [Vietnam is to end in a stalemate](#)," he said, calling for the United States "to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could." That same month, the conservative editorial board of *The Wall Street Journal* declared, "[the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed](#)." By August, Gallup found that [53 percent of Americans believed it was a mistake](#) to have sent troops to the country, the first time a majority of Americans held that view.

In the Democratic primary, voters were giving most of their votes to the anti-war candidates, Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy. Yet after Kennedy was assassinated, McCarthy failed to take control of the race. Humphrey had not run in a single primary, instead having a series of favorite son candidates—such as Branigin in Indiana—stand in for him as proxies, amassing delegates that would transfer to him at the convention. Between those delegates and Johnson's backing, along with the residual shock of Kennedy's assassination, Humphrey was able to consolidate support among party bosses and delegates. By the time the convention arrived, he seemed to have the nomination locked up, if in desultory fashion.

At the convention, the party divided over the Vietnam plank in the platform. Anti-war forces advocated for a "peace plank" that called for an immediate halt to the bombing, followed by a negotiated end to the war. But the lame-duck Johnson was dead set against it, determined not to be embarrassed by his own party repudiating his war policy. If Humphrey embraced the peace plank, Johnson threatened to yank the support of the southern bloc, with whom he still held sway, and throw the nomination to a floor fight.

By most accounts, Humphrey privately opposed the war, even as he played the loyal soldier in public. After the 1964 election—when the conflict was at an inflection point, with Johnson consulting Russell on whether to commit combat troops—Humphrey had urged the president to find

a face-saving way out of the conflict. “[Politically, it is always hard to cut losses](#),” Humphrey wrote in a memo to Johnson. But due to the enormous political capital amassed by his landslide victory, “the Johnson administration is in a stronger position to do so than any administration in this century.” In response, Johnson promptly cut Humphrey out of deliberations on the war, refusing to relent [until he got “back on the team.”](#)

Humphrey did as he was told, then and at the convention. Humphrey had not shrunk from a floor fight in 1948, when he was just a mayor and wielded far less power. Now, he had more power but less courage. Once feted by reporters as the “happy warrior,” Humphrey now found himself cast as an “[ingratiating schoolboy](#),” in the words of *The Atlantic*’s Michael Janeway, who filed a dispatch from the convention. When the vote came up, Johnson won the test of wills, and the peace plank was defeated.

Outside the hall, the vote “put the match to the Chicago powder keg,” according to the Associated Press. Protestors squealed “oink, oink” at police officers, who started clubbing them. “[The whole world is watching!](#),” protesters chanted, while inside the hall, Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut condemned the Chicago police’s “[Gestapo tactics](#),” on live television. Taking it all in, Theodore White concluded, “The Democrats are finished.”

In September, Humphrey finally came out against the Vietnam War. But it was too little, too late, as he went down to Nixon. When the results were in, it was hard not to notice that the Democrats who abandoned Humphrey for Wallace and Nixon looked a lot like the white farmers Bobby Kennedy had won in Indiana, or the coal miners he had connected with in Kentucky.

TO COPE WITH THE TRAUMA OF 1968, Democrats enacted a series of reforms to the rules governing their party structure and primary process. These changes were designed to disempower the forces that had imposed Humphrey as the nominee, and empower the grassroots, which had favored Kennedy. Ironically, even as Democrats mourned Kennedy, they created a party structure designed to shear candidates of the heterodoxy that defined him.

After the ruinous Chicago convention, party reformers were eager to take power away from the bosses who had imposed Humphrey as the nominee. They secured a promise from the party to create a commission to consider reforms to the nominating process. In 1969, the Democratic National Committee picked Senator George McGovern and Representative Donald Fraser to chair it. The commission recommended a slew of reforms whose most meaningful result was to elevate the role of primaries.

Until then, primaries had been nonbinding, serving mainly as an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their appeal. The delegates candidates secured when they won a primary were not obligated to vote for that candidate at the convention; instead, they ultimately followed the dictates of their local or regional bosses. The theory behind the McGovern-Fraser reforms was that it would be more small- *d* democratic to let voters pick the nominee by making primary contests binding. Humphrey had declined to contest a single primary, while Kennedy and McCarthy—both anti-war candidates—had run vigorous campaigns, won the most contests and accumulated the most delegates. But because the primaries were nonbinding, many of the delegates won by anti-war candidates went to Humphrey at the convention. The McGovern-Fraser reforms created the system we know today, where the delegates a candidate wins in a primary stick with them to the convention.

The flaw in casting this approach as more democratic is that the voters who dominate primaries are unrepresentative both of Democrats themselves, and of the voters who decide general elections. Overall, only a fraction of voters participate in primaries. Since the enactment of the McGovern-Fraser reforms, somewhere between 15 and 20 percent of Democratic voters participate in presidential primaries in any given cycle. These voters are much more likely to be college-educated than Democrats in general, and the electorate overall. Among Democratic primary voters, [62 percent hold a college degree](#), while fewer than half of Democrats who vote in general elections do. When it comes to the entire American electorate, [only 40 percent of voters hold a college degree](#).

As we have seen, the priorities of college-educated voters tend to be out of step with those of most general election voters, especially the swing voters who decide elections. Specifically, the views of college-educated voters tend to be more ideologically rigid, while general election voters—especially the working class voters who will make or break a supermajority—tend to be more heterodox. A system where college-educated voters make up 60 percent of the population that picks the Democratic nominee but only 40 percent of those who pick the president is tailor-made to select for candidates who are out of step with the broader electorate.

This dynamic played out in 1972, when the party nominated the candidate favored by grassroots activists, George McGovern. McGovern ran as an orthodox liberal. There was no talk of law and order. On welfare, he proposed supplementing existing programs with a \$1,000 payment to every American, with no work requirements, and was vague to the point of obfuscation about how he would fund it. Asked by a TV interviewer whether he was asking the American people to accept his plan without any idea of how to pay for it, McGovern replied, “That is exactly right.” Peter Edelman, a former Kennedy advisor, tried to talk McGovern out of the universal income idea: “[Proposing this is a political disaster](#),” he told McGovern aides. But he was ignored. McGovern stayed firmly inside the liberal box and got crushed by Nixon, losing forty-nine states in one of the worst electoral performances in US history.

IN THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL RACE, an outsider candidate defied the McGovern-Fraser reforms.

In the wake of McGovern’s self-inflicted wounds on welfare, Jimmy Carter called for a top to bottom reform of the program, [calling it “wasteful” and “unjust.”](#) Carter also sought to neutralize busing, the issue Nixon had wielded with such force in 1972. Amid the rising furor, Carter said that he would never use the federal government [to try to challenge the “ethnic purity”](#) of neighborhoods.

Such racially coded appeals did not stop Black voters from supporting Carter. As governor of Georgia, Carter had appointed prominent Black officials to positions of leadership. But his appeal seemed to run deeper than his record. Carter campaigned in Black neighborhoods more than his rivals, and did so with a relaxed affinity. “He grew up with poor blacks in the South,” John Lewis explained to a reporter. “He is used to being around blacks.” A man of faith, Carter was comfortable in church. “[The parishioners said ‘amen’ and ‘preach, brother’](#) to Mr. Carter as easily as they would have to a black minister,” wrote *The New York Times*, about one campaign stop.

In a pattern that would become familiar, interest group leaders opposed Carter—he was “[a bit too conservative for my taste](#),” said the civil rights leader Julian Bond—while rank-and-file Black voters supported him. Carter dominated with Black voters in the primary. In the general election, he won 92 percent of the Black vote on his way to defeating Gerald Ford, a high-water mark exceeded only by Barack Obama. [He also won 48 percent of the white vote](#), higher than any Democrat since. This combination powered him to victory in every southern state save Virginia, proving that the voters who fled the Democratic party of Humphrey and McGovern remained winnable for a candidate with the right appeal.

As president, though, Carter foundered. A micromanager, he seemed overmatched by the demands of the office. He ran an insular administration, surrounding himself with a tight-knit group of advisors that observers came to refer to as the “Georgia Mafia.” As crises piled up, from the Iran hostage situation to the energy crisis triggered by the OPEC oil embargo, the isolated Carter sank.

CARTER ALSO HAD THE MISFORTUNE to face a Republican opponent with visions of a supermajority.

Ronald Reagan believed he could win anywhere. Planning the swing that would launch Reagan’s 1980 campaign, his advisors presented him with two venues to choose from: the annual fair in Neshoba County, Mississippi, or the Urban League conference in New York City. The choices reflected a major divide. Mississippi looked likely to flip from Carter, who had won it by just 14,000

votes in 1976. In addition to being a popular gathering spot, the Neshoba County Fair was located near where the civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman had been murdered in 1964. Campaigning at the fair would be seen as “ [winking at the folks here](#) ,” according to one advisor. The argument for speaking to the Urban League, on the other hand, was that Reagan could chip away at Democrats’ strength with Black voters. The country was in a recession, and Reagan could attack Carter’s strengths by highlighting the rise in Black unemployment under his watch. In sum, Reagan’s advisors presented him with the question: Should he double down on Nixon’s southern strategy or seek to peel off Democrats? Reagan chose both. He went to Neshoba, where his appearance had the intended effect. The next day he traveled to New York City, and delivered a pitch focused squarely on “ [jobs, jobs, jobs](#) .”

During his campaign, Reagan played on his audiences’ resentment even more than Nixon had. He regaled listeners with racialized stories of a “welfare queen” in Chicago who, Reagan said, “ [used 80 names, 30 addresses](#) , 15 telephone numbers” to collect \$150,000 per year in government benefits. He conjured scenes of a hardworking man, presumably white, in the checkout line at the supermarket, waiting behind “some young fellow ahead of you to buy a T-bone steak” while “you were waiting in line to buy hamburger.” When Reagan spoke to audiences in the South, the young fellow would often become a “young buck.” Reagan was fusing just-world resentment to racism—it wasn’t just that *he* was using food stamps to buy steak, it was that *you* were stuck behind him, watching him spend your taxpayer dollars while [all you could afford was hamburger](#) .

As Reagan pushed these caricatures, the media obliged. The poor population in the United States has always been mostly white, and in earlier eras the media had largely captured that fact. During the Great Depression, photographer Walker Evans focused the nation’s attention on the plight of white dustbowl farmers. Depictions of the urban poor, such as photos of men standing in breadlines, were overwhelmingly of white people. Yet after the 1960s, the media portrayal shifted. While Blacks made up about less than a third of the poor population in the United States as of the late 1980s, fully 65 percent of the images of poor Americans broadcast on network television were Black, while 62 percent of the images of poor Americans in news magazines were Black. Public perceptions aligned with these portrayals, as over half of the public reported thinking that most poor people were Black, while only one in four [thought most poor people were white](#) .

In November, Reagan trounced Carter, winning forty-four states and 489 electoral votes. Working-class Democrats flooded to his banner in such numbers that they became known as Reagan Democrats. Yet if Reagan channeled Nixon’s “Southern strategy” to win the White House, he took a different approach as president. Whereas Nixon had largely validated the New Deal consensus on policy—embracing an active role for government in domestic affairs and a forceful regulatory state—Reagan enacted a deeply conservative agenda. He sharply reduced the federal government’s role in domestic life by slashing taxes, cutting funding for social programs, shifting responsibilities to states, and appointing industry-friendly regulators to aggressively roll back consumer protections. Reagan took the weapon Nixon had honed and used it to end the last vestiges of the New Deal coalition, fusing just-world resentment to racism not just to win elections, but to undo the consensus on the role of government that had held sway for nearly half a century. As historian Nicole Hemmer wrote in *Messengers of the Right* , Reagan’s rhetoric about welfare queens and young bucks was “ [an appeal to white grievance](#) that also helped blend anti-Black politics into antigovernment politics.”

IF THE NEW DEAL COALITION WAS DEAD, a Democratic pollster named Stan Greenberg wrote its epitaph. In 1985 he traveled to Macomb County, Michigan, a Detroit suburb that lay along the banks of Lake St. Clair. In 1964, Macomb had gone 74 percent for Lyndon Johnson, but by 1984 Reagan carried about two-thirds of the county.

Racism alone did not explain the shift—if it had, Macomb would not have given three-quarters of its votes to Johnson after he passed the Civil Rights Act. Rather, what Greenberg found was a wellspring of just-world resentment that was well on its way to being fused to racism.

The voters Greenberg talked to were not completely closed off to Democratic appeals. They still harbored resentment toward Republicans for their favoritism for the rich. But now, they also resented what they saw as Democrats' favoritism for nonwhites. The "upper class—they got all the tax breaks," one participant said. Democrats "try and give everybody this giveaway money. . . . They are not interested in us," another said. "We really don't have much representation because Republicans are for big business, and the Democrats are for the giveaways, and we are the ones that pay all the taxes." This perceived neglect "crystallized in a sense of betrayal," Greenberg wrote—and into racism. Many of the participants in his focus group expressed "[a profound distaste for blacks](#)," a sentiment that pervades almost everything they think about government and politics," Greenberg wrote.

The Democratic Party was not interested in dealing with the implications of Greenberg's results. The McGovern-Fraser reforms had empowered the interest groups who dominated primaries, and the party kept sliding in their direction.

In 1984, Democrats nominated Minnesota senator Walter Mondale, a longtime liberal stalwart who served as Carter's vice president. Rather than challenge the dominance of interest groups, Mondale embraced them, adopting the positions they urged on him and racking up their endorsements. To compensate for his down-the-line liberalism on cultural issues, Mondale tried leaning into economic populism, surrounding himself with advisors who urged him to attack concentrated corporate power. "Stung by Reagan's successes, the Democrats have turned to academia for a campaign theme for '84," *The New York Times* reported. "[Its name is industrial policy](#)." In addition to restrictionist trade policies, Mondale pledged to stop corporate mergers and shift power to small businesses. Yet this version of economic populism did not address just-world concerns about fairness, and remained squarely in the liberal box. It did not work. In 1984, Reagan nearly succeeded in his goal of winning everywhere, carrying every state in the union except Mondale's home state.

DEMOCRATS WERE SQUARELY IN THE MIDST of a long electoral drought that commenced after the McGovern-Fraser reforms. Of the six presidential contests from 1968 to 1988, Democrats lost five, and averaged just 43 percent of the popular vote. The only Democrat to win the White House during this period was Carter, who had done so by defying the influence of left-wing activists. The move toward an interest-group-dominated party—one stuffed squarely in the liberal box—was proving to be a disaster.

In February 1985, a group of moderate and centrist Democrats founded the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). The driving force behind the group was a combative former Capitol Hill aide named Al From. The DLC's mission was to break the grip of interest groups and steer the party toward its preferred agenda of fiscal restraint, welfare reform, and tougher stances on crime and national defense. Interest groups were immediately suspicious, eyeing the DLC as a Trojan horse for yet another interest: corporations. Jesse Jackson, whose Rainbow Coalition occupied the opposite end of the political spectrum, dubbed the DLC "[Democratic Leisure Class](#)."

The DLC's early results were mixed. To tilt the nomination process toward its preferred candidates, the DLC succeeded in stacking a series of predominantly southern primaries on a single day midway through the primary calendar, which soon became known as Super Tuesday. The goal was to give the more moderate voices of southern voters a greater say in the nomination process. Yet in 1988, the tactic backfired, after the left-leaning Jackson won several southern Super Tuesday states on the strength of his appeal with Black voters. Jackson soon faded, but with the DLC's preferred candidates denied their springboard, the path was clear for Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis to win the nomination.

Republicans had nominated an eminently beatable candidate in the chronically awkward and effete George H. W. Bush—who, as Texas governor Ann Richards would say, "was born with a silver foot in his mouth." In July 1988, Gallup found Dukakis leading Bush, [54 percent to 37 percent](#). That was when Lee Atwater, a Republican operative, unleashed a wave of attacks against Dukakis over a

prisoner named Willie Horton, who raped a white woman while released on a furlough program that Dukakis had supported. With Dukakis pegged as yet another soft-on-crime liberal, his lead collapsed. Bush won the 1988 election with a 8-point margin in the popular vote and 426 electoral votes—the third consecutive Republican landslide, and the fourth in the previous five elections.

After losing a winnable race for the White House and fed up with what seemed like an endless string of losses, the DLC commissioned two political scientists, William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, to diagnose the party's troubles. The resulting paper, "The Politics of Evasion," accused the party of ignoring the causes of its decline. Democrats "have [manufactured excuses for their presidential disasters](#)," they wrote, "built on faulty data and false assumptions, excuses designed to avoid tough questions." They attacked the delusion that the path back to power lay in purity—or "liberal fundamentalism," as they put it—or that tripling down on liberal ideas could win elections by spurring higher turnout. Rather, Democrats' woes lay in the simple fact that "[t]oo many Americans have come to see the party as inattentive to their economic interests, indifferent if not hostile to their moral sentiments and ineffective in defense of their national security," Kamarck and Galston wrote. The solution was not to be found in checking boxes but in picking fights. "Only conflict and controversy," they wrote, "are likely to attract the attention needed to convince the public that the party still has something to offer."

STILL, THE DLC NEEDED A LEADER.

In April 1989, Clinton walked into the Arkansas statehouse and pitched Bill Clinton, the governor of the state, on taking over as head of the DLC. Clinton agreed, and spent the next few years traveling on the DLC's dime and developing a policy agenda he dubbed the New Covenant.

A central theme was the need for welfare reform. "[We should require work and responsibility](#) , but we shouldn't cut people off just because they're poor or young or unmarried. We should promote responsibility by requiring young mothers to live at home or in proper supervised settings and to finish school. But we shouldn't put them or their children out on the street," Clinton said, in one of a series of speeches laying out his vision. "Welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life," he said, promising to "[put an end to welfare](#) as we have come to know it"—a clunky formulation that was later shortened to, "end welfare as we know it."

Clinton also infused his ideas with a populist spirit. "The 1980s ushered in a gilded age of greed and selfishness, of irresponsibility and excess, and of neglect," he said. "Many big corporate executives raised their own salaries even when their companies were losing money and their workers were being put into the unemployment lines." Such broadsides brought a new, populist element to the DLC's appeal. "Clinton sanded down some of the sharpest edges of these ideas and [adapted them into the folksy, populist style](#) he had developed while repeatedly winning office in Arkansas," recalled the journalist Ronald Brownstein, who covered the 1992 race for *The Washington Post* .

As the primary got underway, Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas jumped out to an early lead. Tsongas labeled himself a "hybrid," liberal on cultural issues but conservative on economic ones—a lonely worldview, as evidenced by the sparsely populated lower-right quadrant in the chart of Americans' political inclinations from [chapter one](#) . On economics, Clinton ran to Tsongas's left, positioning himself as a populist while hammering Tsongas for his support of "trickledown economics." Clinton's campaign ran ads featuring a quote from Tsongas pledging to be "[the best friend Wall Street ever had](#) ."

Clinton coupled his populist economic pitch with rightward appeals on crime. In January 1992, he left the campaign trail to personally oversee the execution of Ricky Ray Rector, a Black man who shot five people and killed two, including a police officer, before shooting himself in the head; the resulting operation saved his life but lobotomized him. "I can be nicked a lot," Clinton said after Rector's execution, "[but no one can say I'm soft on crime](#) ." In March, Clinton held a press conference at a correctional facility near Stone Mountain, Georgia. Clinton stood in front of several dozen Black inmates, dressed in white jumpsuits and arranged in neat rows—a photo that graced the

cover of newspapers days before Super Tuesday. California governor Jerry Brown, also running in the primary, accused Clinton of race-baiting. “He’s saying, [we got ’em under control folks, don’t worry](#) .”

Yet on Super Tuesday, Clinton romped, winning eight of the eleven states and propelling himself to the nomination. He dominated with Black voters, winning 75 percent in Florida. The result, *The New York Times* editorialized, “gives healthy evidence, probably for the first time since Robert Kennedy’s Indiana primary campaign in 1968, that it is [politically possible to bring poor blacks](#) and blue-collar white voters together.”

Clinton entered the general election in third place, trailing both Bush and the third-party candidate, Ross Perot. When Dukakis had been the nominee in 1988, Jesse Jackson had used his leverage to extract concessions, securing major roles for himself and his campaign team. Thinking Clinton was in a weak position, Jackson intended to do the same to him.

CLINTON HAD OTHER IDEAS.

He strode to the podium on June 13, 1992, at a convention organized by Jackson. Sitting on the dais to Clinton’s left, Jackson had just finished praising the community engagement work of a rap artist named Sister Souljah.

Clinton opened his speech with standard fare, affirming shared Democratic goals and assailing the Republican president, George H. W. Bush. But as he neared the end, Clinton’s tone shifted. He brought up the recent riots in Los Angeles, sparked a few weeks earlier after police officers brutally beat a Black man named Rodney King. A bystander caught the beating on video tape, and the footage played endlessly on news broadcasts. The ensuing riots engulfed the city, [killing sixty-three people](#) and injuring more than two thousand. Clinton quoted what Sister Souljah, the activist whom Jackson had praised moments earlier, had said about the riots to *The Washington Post* : “If black people kill black people every day, [why not have a week and kill white people](#) ?” The room went silent as Clinton drove his point home. “If you took the words ‘white’ and ‘black’ and reversed them,” he said, “you might think David Duke was giving that speech.”

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Reporters jolted to attention. A stunned Jackson stared straight ahead. In the days that followed, coverage of the moment rocketed across newspapers, TV, and radio. The message encoded in Clinton’s remarks was not lost on many—certainly not on one white electrician in north Philadelphia, who told the reporters Jack Germond and Jules Witcover of the Associated Press, “The day he [told off that fucking Jackson](#) is the day he got my vote.”

Clinton’s surprise attack at Jackson’s forum introduced a new term into the political lexicon: a “Sister Souljah” moment, short for telling an audience something it doesn’t want to hear. In the weeks after, Clinton shot into the lead. As *Chicago Tribune* columnist Clarence Page observed, Sister Souljah was “the most important moment in the 1992 presidential race. . . . She comes up repeatedly in the surveys and focus groups the campaigns conduct to [measure the attitudes of white suburban](#) and blue-collar swing voters.”

At the 1992 Democratic convention, the party felt like it had finally broken out of the box. “For 23 years,” said John Droney, a Clinton supporter from Connecticut, Democrats “have been prisoners of every weird special interest that could exist on the face of the Earth, and the party was dictated to by these people. . . . We did not look like the party of everyday working people, people trying to [get ahead and send their kids to college](#) .” As his running mate, Clinton chose another white southerner, Tennessee senator Al Gore Jr. Jesse Jackson felt so thoroughly pushed out, he issued his own platform.

Having shored up his right flank on crime and welfare, Clinton spent the general election running on the economy. “[The economy, stupid](#) ,” blared a sign on the wall at his campaign headquarters. In November, Clinton posted strong gains with white voters without losing ground among nonwhites. Perot’s presence makes the 1992 contest challenging to parse—Clinton won 370 electoral votes with just 43 percent of the popular vote, while Bush’s 38 percent of the popular vote was good for 168

electoral votes, and Perot's 19 percent for zero. But Clinton came within 2 points of tying Bush for the white vote—a result that likely would have held if Perot had not run, since polls showed Perot voters splitting roughly evenly between Clinton and Bush as their second choices. “These findings suggested that Clinton’s well-publicized conflicts with Jesse L. Jackson—which helped Clinton among whites, according to Bush campaign polls— [did not damage his prospects among black voters](#) ,” wrote Thomas Edsall and E. J. Dionne in *The Washington Post* .

It seemed as if Clinton had sprung Democrats from the box they had been trapped in since 1968—but whether he could build a supermajority was another question altogether.

SINCE ROOSEVELT, the social safety net had gone from being a major asset to Democrats, sustaining them as the dominant party for most of the postwar period, to a liability, feeding the resentment that conservatives weaponized to end the New Deal consensus. Now, after Democrats spent two decades on the defensive over the welfare state, Clinton tried a new approach: submerging it.

For the most part, Clinton’s first two years were marked by a series of miscues, including a failed attempt to enact a universal health care plan, which led in 1994 to Republicans winning control of the House for the first time since 1952. The Democratic bastion that had endured through the conservative realignment of the era of Nixon and Reagan finally fell.

The biggest victory of Clinton’s early years was a 1993 budget bill, which he used to advance his stealthy approach for delivering help to poor Americans. The earned income tax credit (EITC) is a refundable federal tax credit created in 1975 to offer a modest wage subsidy to low- and moderate-income working families with children. As part of the 1993 deal, Clinton doubled it.

Clinton’s biggest domestic fight came on welfare. In the early 1990s, welfare rolls surged by nearly a third, and the perverse dynamics of the system were becoming impossible for even the most ardent liberals to deny. In particular, the program put unmarried mothers in an impossible position, not paying them enough to get ahead but rescinding even those meager benefits if they got married. Welfare “ [paid women too little to survive](#) . And it made you feel like scum,” said Johns Hopkins sociologist Kathryn Edin, who studies welfare programs. Public support for reform was overwhelming: In 1994 a CNN poll found [81 percent of Americans saying they wanted](#) “fundamental reform” to welfare.

Initially, Clinton’s welfare reform proposal looked like something Bobby Kennedy might have proposed. It introduced new restrictions on benefits and strict limits on how long recipients could stay on welfare rolls, with the guarantee of a job if and when benefits ran out. “We propose to offer people on welfare a simple contract,” Clinton said in June 1994. “We will help you get the skills you need. But after two years, [anyone who can go to work must go to work](#) , in the private sector, if possible, in a subsidized job, if necessary.” One of Clinton’s top advisors on welfare reform, Peter Edelman, had been a close aide to Kennedy and helped plan the late senator’s Appalachian tours. On those travels, Edelman had met a young civil rights lawyer named Marian Wright, and the two married. Marian Wright Edelman went on to found the Children’s Defense Fund, and helped shape the welfare debate as it unfolded.

Flush with the victory of retaking the House in 1994, Republicans promptly overplayed their hand. They issued punitive proposals, including one that would have cut support to families so drastically that it directed additional funding to orphanages in anticipation of their rolls swelling. This ignited a firestorm of bad press, and tagged Republicans as cruel. Clinton saw a chance to regain his footing after the red wave of the midterms, and held an Oval Office ceremony to veto the 1995 welfare bill sent to him by the GOP Congress. In 1996, Republicans sent Clinton a slimmed-down version. He vetoed that one as well.

Over the summer, though, Republicans turned the screws, stripping out many of the most objectionable provisions and sending Clinton a third bill. The core of the legislation still contained profound changes: It turned the program from one administered by the federal government into a series of block grants to states, giving governors broad leeway to determine who qualified for aid.

Most significantly, the bill did not include a jobs guarantee. If welfare recipients could not find work in two years, they were out of luck.

In August, Clinton called a meeting of his top advisors in the White House Cabinet Room, ostensibly to decide whether to sign the bill. Some in attendance thought his mind was already made up. It was later discovered that Clinton aide Bruce Reed had only prepared one version of the speech Clinton was to deliver hours after the meeting. Clinton signed the bill. Within weeks, Edelman handed in his resignation. “I have devoted the last 30-plus years to doing whatever I could to help reduce poverty in America,” he wrote. “I believe the recently enacted welfare bill goes in the opposite direction.” Marian Wright Edelman issued a scathing public rebuke, calling the new law “an outrage . . . that will hurt and impoverish millions of American children.”

The debate over the law’s impact rages to this day. Over the next few years, welfare caseloads plummeted by more than 50 percent, and the poverty rate, especially child poverty, fell as well. By 2000, the United States saw its lowest child poverty rates on record for Black children and children of single mothers. Defenders of the bill also credit welfare reform for spurring increases in employment among single mothers in the late 1990s, which coincided with record low poverty rates for those families. Yet disentangling which of these results can be attributed to the bill and which to the late-1990s economic boom is difficult. Critics claim that the bill made the most vulnerable even more so, and contributed to the rise of extreme poverty—families living on less than \$2 per person per day. The transfer of power to the states created an uneven system, with results varying dramatically from one state to the next. Arizona, for example, has some of the highest poverty rates in the nation. But as of 2019, for every one hundred Arizona families living in poverty, only six received welfare.

One thing, at least, is certain. Signing the bill did not help the Democrats build a supermajority. Clinton was reelected comfortably, winning 49 percent of the popular vote to Dole’s 41 percent—despite the presence again of Perot—and carrying 379 electoral college votes. Yet Clinton had no coattails. In the House, Democrats picked up a mere two seats, leaving Republicans in control. In the Senate, Democrats lost two seats. Clinton’s second term was beset by scandal, further dashing any hopes of building toward something bigger.

In the end, Clinton’s administration was more about political damage control and pragmatic progress than about building a new supermajority. When Clinton won, Democrats had been in the wilderness for twenty years. Returning to power was an achievement in itself. But rather than rally Americans behind an inspiring new vision of a social compact, Clinton protected the safety net by submerging it, delivering benefits to Americans stealthily through programs like the EITC and, later, the child tax credit. Clinton used heterodoxy to build political capital, but unlike FDR or Johnson, he was less ambitious in his vision of how to spend it. Where Roosevelt and Johnson wove together conservative themes to secure monumental liberal goals, Clinton channeled a similar approach into a series of meaningful but medium-bore achievements. He won two elections in reasonably decisive fashion, and Democrats did better than expected in the 1998 midterms, largely due to Republicans overplaying their hand and impeaching Clinton over his affair with Monica Lewinsky, a former White House intern. But by enduring scandals that might have brought down another president, Clinton spent much of the political capital he built on himself, rather than on constructing an enduring realignment for Democrats.

In the 2000 election, Gore was unsure of how to handle Clinton’s legacy, trying to distance himself from Clinton’s personal brand while also taking credit for his administration’s accomplishments. With an assist from the spoiler Ralph Nader, Gore closed the door on the Clinton era by losing a winnable race to George W. Bush.

OBSERVING CLINTON’S “RUDDERLESS PRAGMATISM” with disdain, a Harvard law student began drafting a new vision of politics. He aspired to do more, to forge “long-term, structural change, change that might break the zero-sum equation that pits powerless blacks [against] only slightly less

powerless whites.” He called his vision “transformative politics,” and the manuscript he typed ran to dozens of pages. But it would go unpublished because the author had more important things to do. Within a shockingly short period of time, Barack Obama would be standing before a crowd of nearly two million people, having put his ideas into practice, and built a supermajority.

Now it is our turn. Our urgent task, nettlesome as it may be, is to craft a new supermajority, make it stick, and dominate the twenty-first century. This must be our gift to the next generation.

Conclusion

SUPERMAJORITY THINKING

WHEN THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY MET in Chicago to nominate Kamala Harris for president in August 2024, it was a slapdash affair. Usually, a party has months to plan a convention. But Harris had become the presumptive nominee only about a month earlier, when Joe Biden dropped out and endorsed her. The themes of the weeklong gala were unclear, in part because there had been no primary season for Harris to develop and refine her rationale for seeking the presidency. Perhaps more importantly, in her eight years on the national stage, Harris had never seemed to develop that clarity in her own mind—at least, not in a way she ever articulated. She rose without making clear what she stood for, apart from the usual litany of positions: Medicare for All, Green New Deal, open borders, and the like. To succeed within the modern Democratic party, a politician did not have to stake out a unique identity—in fact, it was better not to. All they needed to do was check the right boxes, take the right positions, and please the right groups. Harris’s convention reflected this. Throughout the week the speeches were unmemorable, repeating the same biographical details and handful of career highlights, as speakers fumbled to find purchase on a candidate with little texture.

A moment that seemed to offer the rare promise of unscripted excitement came during the final hours of the convention’s last day, when rumors swirled that a “special guest” would appear shortly before Harris delivered her speech accepting the nomination. As my friends and I sat in the convention hall, waiting for the moment to arrive, we exchanged guesses about who the special guest would be—Taylor Swift? Beyoncé, whose song “Freedom” had become the campaign’s unofficial anthem?

Nope. It was former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta.

As Panetta walked onstage I thought, “This can’t be it.” When it became clear it was, I thought, “Who is this for?” Panetta was not exactly a household name. Since the 1990s, he had served in various roles, including as a congressman, White House chief of staff, and head of the Central Intelligence Agency. Insofar as he was a figure associated with the Democratic Party before its rush to the left, his appearance seemed to be an attempt to reach out to wavering moderates. But Panetta was also the ultimate swamp creature at a time when anti-establishment feelings were running deep.

As an attempt at heterodoxy, it was representative of Harris’s half-baked and ineffective efforts. With a nearly decade-long career and voting record in the Senate as an unreconstructed progressive, she would have to draw some bright lines of independence, fast, if she was going to build up any armor to beat back the inevitable Republican attacks. She campaigned with former Congresswoman Liz Cheney, a former Republican and heir to an iconic conservative last name—but also someone who had been cast out of her party over her opposition to Trump. Harris’s embrace of Cheney angered many progressives without seeming to dislodge a meaningful number of Trump voters. Harris also made a passing mention of owning a handgun, and studiously reversed her opposition to fracking. Still, if you were a voter looking for signs of independence from her party, you had to squint to see them. In August, I wrote an op-ed labeling these moves “vice-signaling,” since signals

were all they were, and encouraged her to do more. Yet that ended up being the extent of it. By the time the election rolled around, Harris had not done anything remotely close to the scale of Trump calling the Iraq War a “big fat mistake,” or Obama taking on Black fatherhood, or Sanders calling open borders a “Koch brothers proposal.”

Meanwhile, Harris’s attempts to inspire progressives fell flat. She offered them more laundry lists while stiffing them on the thing they cared about most: the transcendent moral question of the Gaza war. As we exited the convention hall after Harris’s underwhelming speech, my friends and I traversed narrow corridors marked off with police barricades. On either side of the barricades, hundreds of pro-Palestinian activists chanted and yelled at us as we and the other exiting convention-goers passed by. The leaders of some of the groups that were protesting had asked the Harris campaign for a speaking slot. They had offered to have their remarks vetted by the campaign, and made a point of being inside the convention hall to watch in respectful silence as the parents of an Israeli hostage took the stage. But [Harris had rebuffed the activists’ reasonable entreaties](#) .

To win his supermajority in 1964, Johnson had denied voting rights activists their demands at his convention, as he fielded reports of a brewing white backlash. But the reason the backlash was brewing in the first place was that Johnson had passed the monumental Civil Rights Act less than two months earlier. While Johnson’s treatment of Fannie Lou Hamer and the MFDP activists was heartbreaking, he would use the supermajority he gained from his landslide victory the following November to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965, declaring “we shall overcome” before a joint session of Congress. To the extent there was a backlash brewing during Harris’s convention in August 2024, it was in the opposite direction—one that would sweep the American public *toward* the activists’ position. Misreading the moment, Harris’s decision was much more akin to Humphrey’s in 1968, when the candidate who accepted the nomination in Chicago as anti-war protestors demonstrated outside was privately sympathetic to the activists’ views, but could not muster the moral courage to say so.

This was the exact wrong combination. In the 2008 election, activists had given Obama leeway to make high-profile, heterodox breaks with his party, responding to his candidacy with passion despite his deviations from liberal orthodoxy because he was with them on the thing they cared about most, the Iraq War. Harris did the inverse. Her heterodox breaks were low-profile and furtive, while she put herself on the wrong side of activists, and history, by boxing them out and holding a strictly pro-Israel convention at a time when that nation was conducting a genocide.

This was not a strategy designed to win a supermajority. As I left the convention, I had a sinking feeling that 2024 was going to be more like 2016 than 2008.

The rise of fascism can make Democrats risk averse, but this leads to poor strategic choices. The scope of the challenge we face should drive us to think big. Striking the right mix is difficult—the right decisions will feel risky at the time. But playing it safe will leave Democrats stuck in a permanent defensive crouch, practically begging the forces of fascism to continue rising. The only way to beat back right-wing authoritarianism is to lead with boldness, and build a popular front—a supermajority.

Here is how to do it.

TIPPING POINT 370

Supermajority thinking starts with thinking big. In campaign terms, this means changing what we target as the “tipping point state.” Traditionally, the tipping point state is the one that delivers 270 electoral votes. In supermajority thinking, the tipping point state is the one that delivers 370 electoral votes.

In the 2024 election, that state would have been Florida—clearly a winnable state, since Democrats won it as recently as 2012. Florida is the perfect supermajority tipping point state because the reasons it has moved away from Democrats in more recent years are the same ones that have driven other states away—first and foremost, the shift of working-class voters of all races toward Republicans; the same would be true if the supermajority tipping point state was Ohio or North Carolina, the next two in line. Whatever it is, the state will be challenging, and the strategy necessary for Democrats to win it will yield a windfall of other states as well. If Harris had won Florida in 2024, she would have also won Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Georgia, Arizona, Nevada, North Carolina, and Ohio, all of which she lost by less than she did in Florida.

The 100 electoral votes that separate a simple majority of 270 from a supermajority of 370 are not just for bragging rights—that is where the power lies. That delta is the difference between a Democratic president’s ability to enact major change or merely be a seat-warmer at the Resolute Desk until turning power back to Republicans. A win of that magnitude carries clout. It will usher in majorities in both houses of Congress, giving the president the ability to enact the agenda they ran on. It gives them the muscle to roll over previously impassable barriers, as Johnson’s landslide enabled him to finally overcome Wilbur Mills’s opposition and pass Medicare. And it helps them withstand the vicissitudes and downturns that inevitably arrive, as Franklin Roosevelt was able to absorb the setback of the 1938 midterms. The pendulum always swings back—the question is whether we can absorb the hit when it comes.

This is particularly important when it comes to the Senate. To pass an ambitious agenda, a president must hold control of both houses of Congress for an extended period of time, preferably longer than the two years that elapse before the first midterm election. Even if a president had a wildly productive first two years, the six-to-three conservative majority on the Supreme Court stands ready and eager to assault any agenda passed under a Democratic president. To flip the balance of the Court back to liberals, Democrats will need to maintain control of the Senate for long enough to replace at least two conservative justices with liberal ones. Since these are lifetime appointments, this likely means biding our time until older conservative justices like Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito decide it’s not worth holding on until Republicans are back in power, and they retire. A Senate majority big enough to hold power for this long needs to be in the neighborhood of 60 seats. Just as Democrats must set the tipping point at 370 for presidential elections, they should also set a complementary goal of aiming at 60 seats in the Senate. That means crafting a strategy to win a state like Louisiana and working backward from there.

Settling for smaller but ideologically purer majorities is a path to purgatory at best, and losing to fascism at worst. A narrow majority can evaporate at any moment due to a health event or a scandal or some other unforeseen circumstance. A majority that hangs by a seat or two will probably be lost within two years—not long enough to replace at least two conservative Supreme Court justices with liberals. The cost-benefit proposal is practically a no-brainer. It does not ask any of us to compromise our own principles to welcome into our coalition a Democratic senator from a state like Arkansas whom we disagree with on a few issues. I would certainly rather have a Democrat I disagree with on three or four issues in that seat than a Republican I disagree with on pretty much everything.

HETERODOXY

A friend of mine was on a flight to Nashville recently when their seatmate struck up a conversation. A middle-aged Black man who ran a debt collection business, he explained to her that he hates Trump—but also *The New York Times*, having cancelled his subscription five years earlier. He identifies with the libertarian podcast host Joe Rogan whom, he said, “asks what I’d want to ask” when he interviews guests who range from Elon Musk to Democratic Texas Senate candidate James

Talarico. This man liked Biden at first, but thought he needed to be replaced because he was too old, and then was appalled when Democrats anointed Harris with no process. He wants to see Robert Kennedy Jr. and Michelle Obama run in 2028 and would be happy with either of them as president. He was also devastated by the recent death of the legendary actress Catherine O'Hara.

If this set of views strikes you as unusual, know that it is closer to the worldview of most American voters than your own. Most Americans' views are *heterodox*. College-educated Americans are outliers in their tendency to hold ideologically consistent views. When it comes to the electorate, they are vastly outnumbered by Americans without a college degree, who make up around 60 percent of all voters and assemble their worldview by taking a little from Column A, and a little from Column B.

Take [Brice, a twenty-four-year-old white Baptist](#) who lives in Nashville, attended some college, and works as a self-employed writer. Brice cannot afford health insurance, gets his news primarily from YouTube, and thinks the economy is getting worse. He hates the fascist influencer Nick Fuentes, wants Michelle Obama to be the next president because she embodies "humanitarian values," does not think the United States should be allied with Israel at all, and has no issue with illegal immigrants. In the 2024 election, Brice voted for Trump.

[Dylan is a thirty-one-year-old Black program manager](#) in Arizona. He believes that Harris and Trump didn't focus enough on health care, wrote his senior thesis on reparations, and believes Biden did more for Black Americans than any recent president. Dylan's ideal candidate is Cornell West, the socialist Harvard professor, whom he likes because West "isn't a politician." Dylan voted for Trump.

Or take [Cheryl, a sixty-six-year-old white ride-share driver](#) from Missouri who feels "hopeless" about the state of the United States. Cheryl believes that tariffs are "killing" the working class and doubts if Trump is going to do anything to help them. She thinks Bernie Sanders is "intelligent," even though he supports tariffs. Cheryl thought Kamala Harris "was a joke," and voted for Trump.

Such views may be maddeningly inconsistent, but voters are under no obligation to align their worldview with any ideology. As the work of Drutman, Anderson, and others show, Americans are impossibly complex people. As we try to build a supermajority, we can either pull our hair out in frustration—or embrace the messy pluralism that makes us who we are as a country.

Trying to capture the exact mix of views held by voters like Brice, Dylan, and Cheryl is a fool's errand. Even among this small sample, each has their own unique mix, and Democrats cannot start taking positions at random. What Americans like them are looking for is something bigger. They are looking for candidates who reject ideology and do not fit easily into any box—something that each of them saw in Trump, even though he did not align with many of their specific viewpoints.

Democrats have plenty of room to show an independent streak while remaining firmly rooted in liberal principles. Consider these moves from Democrats who have won red states. In his 2012 race, Democrat [John Barrow pulled a pistol](#) out of his belt in a TV ad to demonstrate his commitment to gun rights, and went on to win a district that gave 59 percent of its votes to the Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, in the previous election. Laura Kelly won the governorship of Kansas by bringing a hatchet to press conferences to demonstrate her commitment to cutting government waste. John Bel Edwards won the governorship of Louisiana by embracing fossil fuels and emphasizing his business-friendly credentials. Joe Manchin won a Senate seat in West Virginia, a state Trump won by 39 percentage points, by shooting a climate change bill with a rifle in a TV ad. Yet all of these Democrats have delivered on core liberal priorities. Barrow and Manchin were reliable votes for Democrats on most issues during their time in Congress. In Louisiana, Edwards expanded Medicaid to get [health insurance to 638,000 Louisianans](#), while Kelly is working to do the same to [cover 150,000 low-income Kansans](#).

Being heterodox does not mean taking stances you don't believe in—in fact, it means the opposite. Most Democrats do not agree with liberal orthodoxy on all issues; I'd wager that most readers of this book can think of a handful of issues where they diverge from their own side's orthodoxy. The way to be heterodox is to simply say what you believe and be unafraid of the conflict

that arises when activists and interest groups get mad at you for it. Indeed, Democrats should embrace that constructive conflict—just as Trump leaned into fights with his own base on Iraq, Social Security, health care, and other issues. As Trump showed, that conflict breaks through with voters and conveys that you are an independent thinker, someone who “tells it like it is,” more powerfully than any ad.

EMBRACE CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

A related point is that it is easier than you might expect to communicate the heterodox voters are seeking. Despite the overwhelming complexity of today’s new media environment, social media platforms are merely mediums. What matters is the ideas we communicate through them—and critically, whether they represent a heterodox mix or a rigidly ideological point of view.

As the midcentury political scientist E. E. Schattschneider wrote in his seminal 1960 work, *The Semisovereign People*, “[The definition of the alternatives](#) is the supreme instrument of power.” That aphorism is as true today as it was in his time. When Trump was still running his campaign on a shoestring in the summer and fall of 2015, he managed to redefine the entire ideology of the GOP. The reason it worked is that where he shifted positions, he moved toward voters rather than farther away—whether it was Iraq, entitlements, health care, or economic populism. Moreover, all of those issues struck voters as unexpected coming from a Republican, because they cut against type. He did this simply by saying what he thought in public. Because it conflicted with his party’s stances, it generated coverage, which in turn generated further conflict. At no point did he back off. There is nothing stopping Democrats from doing the same, starting now.

MANAGING THE GOLEM OF PUBLIC OPINION

The great achievements of the last century were secured by leaders who were not captive to public opinion, but kept a close eye on it. Franklin Roosevelt had only very limited tools to guide him, as polling was just emerging in his era. But his instincts told him that as he proposed radical changes, it was critical to continue engaging with ideological traditions that came from other directions. When Johnson decided that he was going to wield Kennedy’s memory to pass civil rights, there was not a single poll he could point to showing that this was what the public wanted. To the contrary, he knew that to overcome Americans’ stubborn skepticism of civil rights, he was going to have to build political capital through other means, spend it, and then build it up again to win the landslide of 1964—after which he spent it again on the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, and the other achievements of the Great Society.

Leaders must lead—they should not be bound by public opinion. But leading cuts both ways—people need to follow you. As Roosevelt said, “[It’s a terrible thing to look over your shoulder](#) when you are trying to lead and find no one there.” Or as Congresswoman Sarah McBride put it more recently, “We [should be ahead of public opinion](#), but we have to be within arm’s reach. If we get too far out ahead, we lose our grip on public opinion, and we can no longer bring it with us.” When Democrats shifted dramatically to the left after 2016, voters did not follow them. Leaders can direct the Golem, but they also must maintain vigilance over it. This is the delicate balance of building and spending political capital. Build it, spend it on things that matter, then build it again.

ADDRESS JUST-WORLD RESENTMENT

To prevent reactionary forces from building their own supermajority, the most important thing we can do is to prevent just-world resentment from fusing to racism.

Franklin Roosevelt and Bobby Kennedy understood that people would be more open to, and less resentful of, government aid if it was clear that everyone receiving it earned it, either by paying in or working for it, or both. In the late 1960s, King and Rustin were explaining that the fortunes of Black Americans were tied up with those of their white countrymen, moving away from the idea of “preferential treatment,” as King put it, and toward the embrace of universal economic benefits embodied in the Freedom Budget.

The most effective way to keep the two types of resentment from fusing is to embrace universalism over preferential treatment, and build the answers to just-world questions into the policy itself. The best example is Social Security. Everyone knows why they deserve it, and why everyone else deserves it—because they all paid in. Today, Social Security remains far and away the most popular government program. In a political context, Democrats do not ever have to explain to voters why Social Security is good—they do not “message it” in any meaningful sense, they simply pledge to defend it. Voters already know why they like it, because the policy answers voters’ tough questions by itself.

THE AMERICAN SECURITY GUARANTEE

The way forward is to wrap all of these concepts up in one big idea—one that will give Democrats from Louisiana to Massachusetts something to unite behind. In past eras, Democrats rallied behind ambitious goals such as the New Deal, the Great Society, ending the Iraq War, and enacting universal health care. Today, that cause should be ending the economic insecurity that suffuses Americans’ lives.

Across income, race, age, and geography, Americans feel that the floor has dropped out. Work feels less secure. Big expenses such as housing, health care, child care, and education feel out of reach. Upward mobility feels slower, less predictable, and often out of reach. One bad break—an illness, a layoff, a rent hike—could be catastrophic. Consider that as of April 2025, only [10 percent of US adults rated their personal finances](#) as “excellent,” with just 34 percent saying “good”—far below historical norms. According to the Federal Reserve Board’s 2025 report on economic well-being, [only 63 percent of Americans](#) could cover a \$400 emergency expense. A February 2026 study by the National Institute on Retirement Security found that the typical US worker has [less than \\$1,000 saved for retirement](#). It is not surprising that a recent *Wall Street Journal* poll shows that nearly [70 percent of US adults say](#) the American Dream no longer holds true.

We can restore that dream with a sense of shared purpose—one that will unite a broad swath of the country into a new supermajority. During his time, Franklin Roosevelt sought to create a cradle-to-the-grave system of social insurance. He was addressing the historic crisis of the Great Depression. Today, our job is to finish that work. The American Security Guarantee is a pact of economic security that we enter into together, as a nation. In return for hard work and financial contributions, all Americans would receive:

1. Social insurance that is there when you need it—enough to ensure that you and your family do not go hungry.
2. Access to your choice of public or private health care, with expenses capped on a sliding scale according to income.

3. Guaranteed job training and transition services to secure employment in industries that best match your skills with local demand.

The American Security Guarantee is a promise we will make to each other as Americans: If you work hard and play by the rules, we will not let you fall through the cracks. It is heterodox, embracing conservative values of personal responsibility, fiscal responsibility, and freedom of choice, while marshaling them toward the liberal end of ending poverty in the United States once and for all. It would slash government bureaucracy and dramatically reduce the size of government by consolidating federal aid programs, and the sprawling bureaucracies that administer them, into a simplified design. It would be financed by money in, money out, and not increase the deficit. It would combat resentment by answering just-world questions about deservingness in the policy design itself—everyone will know that everyone earning benefits deserves them, because they paid in or worked for them, or both.

WE HAVE BEEN THROUGH A LOT AS A COUNTRY over the past decade, and it is always tempting to think that this time is different. While there are certainly unique features to our age, many things remain the same across eras. Indeed, the changes we've seen since the last time Democrats built a supermajority under Obama are dwarfed by the scale of changes from Roosevelt's time to Obama's. During that span, the entire relationship between the federal government and the American people was fundamentally altered. Millions of Black Americans were enfranchised. The demographic makeup of the country fundamentally shifted as we welcomed immigrants from around the world. New states were added. A world war was fought and won; a cold war, too. We landed on the moon, and technology went from radio to the iPhone.

But what remained true across epochs is that leaders who built an appeal to the American people based on heterodoxy were able to build supermajorities, while those who did not, failed. Resentment reigned as the most powerful force threatening liberal dreams. When liberals succeeded at managing resentment, they won. When they did not, reactionary forces took over. We know how it was done in the past, and we know how to do it now. It is time to get to work.

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Finally, this book is for the leaders who I hope will take its lessons to heart. If *Supermajority* succeeds, it will be because it persuades some of you to aim higher than our professional political culture thinks possible. The most consequential achievements in our history were built by those who had the vision and boldness of mind to think bigger. Given the challenges we face today, we cannot afford any less from you.

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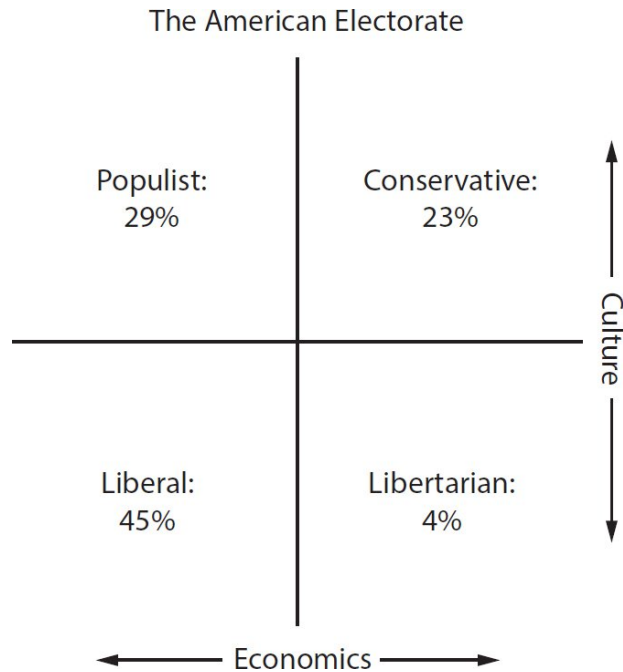
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