

# REPUBLIC OF WRATH

## Also by James A. Morone

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# REPUBLIC OF WRATH

HOW AMERICAN POLITICS TURNED TRIBAL,  
FROM GEORGE WASHINGTON TO DONALD TRUMP

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JAMES A. MORONE

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*For Rebecca*



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# INTRODUCTION

## How American Politics Turned Tribal

**A**merican politics is loud, angry, and bristling with us versus them. The hostility between Republicans and Democrats seems to swell with every election. In 2009, a Republican Congressman shouted “You lie!” at President Barack Obama on national television and raked in almost two million dollars in campaign contributions the following week. Seven years later, candidate Donald Trump screamed “Punch him in the face!” and a delirious white supporter at a campaign rally buffeted a young black man while others shouted racial epithets. Democrats responded to President Trump’s election with annual “Not My President” marches. In the House of Representatives, 229 (out of 233) Democrats voted to impeach Trump without a single Republican vote. Republican Party members call Democrats “immoral” and “lazy.” Democrats fire back with “closed minded” and “dishonest.” On dating apps, people even spurn romance with partners from the opposite party—and that’s just as well since six out of ten parents would be unhappy if their children married someone from across the political divide.<sup>1</sup>

But is there anything new in our screaming political divisions? Do they endanger the republic, as many observers fear? Or should we all take a deep breath as American politics runs through just another rowdy stretch? This book scans American history to explain

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what is different about the passionate present—and how the past might guide us to toward a better future.

Much of what we deplore today is nothing new: nastiness, violence, intolerance, fraud, twisting the election rules, bashing the government, bias in the media, fistfights in Congress, and even a violent coup in North Carolina. We have seen it all before.

But, yes, there is something different about partisanship today, and it centers on two conflicts that each burned hot throughout American history—the long, hard battles that surrounded race and immigration. In every generation, African Americans dared the nation to honor its founding statements—and then braved the violent backlashes. Clashes over slavery, segregation, racial equality, white privilege, and black lives profoundly shaped each twist and turn in the history of partisan politics. Immigrants faced a different set of challenges as they pressed for a place at the American table. Some Americans always seemed to fear the new arrivals—they came from the wrong places, represented inferior races, clung to un-American values, or professed dangerous religions. Spasms of nativism met each immigrant generation. The conflicts over race and immigration touch every aspect of the American story. They reshape the partisan debates because race and immigration create disruptive new answers to the deepest question in American politics: Who are we?

Today the partisan politics enfolding race and immigration have taken a new and unprecedented form. Historically, each of this country's two major political parties defended—and, in turn, disdained—a different group on the margins of power. Nineteenth-century Democrats welcomed European immigrants and thrust ballots into their hands almost before they'd recovered from the sea voyage. But the Democrats were also the party of thumping white supremacy and stridently defended slavery, segregation, and white privileges. On the other side, the conservative party was more enlightened about race but shouted "Fraud!" as the Irish or Sicilian

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or Jewish immigrants lined up to vote. At times, the parties broke into internal factions and the clash went on within their ranks. But, one way or another, the parties split up the nation's most explosive conflicts by picking different sides in the struggles over race and immigration. Then, beginning in the 1930s, a new alignment began to take shape.

African Americans boldly joined the Democrats—the bastion of white supremacy—and slowly, over decades, became a major force within the party. A second seismic change came from immigration. Between 1970 and 2017, more than sixty million people arrived in the United States, and the number of Americans born abroad leapt from less than one in twenty (in 1970) to almost one in seven people today. By the mid-2000s, most naturalized immigrants had also begun to identify with Democrats. For the first time, black Americans and immigrants were members of the same party.

An unprecedented coalition began to emerge. Democrats assembled African Americans, immigrants, and their liberal supporters. The modern Republican Party gathered people who consider themselves white and native. The most passionate differences ringing through American history are now organized directly into the parties. For the first time, all the so-called minorities are on one side.

The politics grew more treacherous when the US Census Bureau crunched the 2000 census results and made a controversial prediction: the United States would become majority-minority within a generation. White people (who are not Hispanic) would make up 46 percent of the population by 2050 and just 36 percent by 2060. In the past, the parties would have diffused the political impact—each party would have claimed one part of the rising majority. But thanks to the new party alignment, “majority-minority” sounds suspiciously like “majority-Democratic.”<sup>2</sup>

Today's party division threatens to turn every difference into a clash of tribes. Policy questions—what to do about health care or taxes or global warming—become caught up in the us-versus-them

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battles. Both parties are deeply enmeshed in feelings about identity because each draws people who see themselves as fundamentally different from those on the other side. To be sure, Americans argue about many different things—as they always have. But, generation after generation, nothing has ignited political passions like the intertwined issues of race and immigration. And now the parties inject those fervors directly into every political debate.<sup>3</sup>

The history of partisanship reveals four additional twists to the politics of us versus them. The first springs from a curious silence at the very heart of the republic: How should we run elections? The men who wrote the Constitution shrugged off the question and left it to the states. And there, from the start, the majorities ruthlessly changed the rules to their own advantage. During the very first presidential campaign—when two parties each fielded a single candidate (in 1800)—seven out of the sixteen states changed or debated changing the election rules. As parties developed, they grew more brazen about rigging the process. To this day, there is often no neutral arbiter to oversee elections, carve the districts, decide who qualifies to vote, determine registration procedures, specify how votes are cast, count the ballots, or adjudicate disputed returns. There are few rules and almost no guidelines—just political muscle down in the states and towns.

Second, rigging the rules is simplified because, astonishingly, there is no right to vote in the United States. Again, it's up to the states. Take, for example, the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution which allegedly gave citizens the right to vote directly for their US senators. Well, not exactly. The amendment extends the ballot to those entitled to vote for the “most numerous branch of the state legislatures”—in 1913, when the amendment was ratified, that meant black voters in New York but not North Carolina, and women in Nevada but not New Jersey. The Seventeenth Amendment is just one example of the long tradition: when it comes to elections, we defer to the states, and the states are not bound by a

basic right to vote. The Supreme Court invoked two centuries of jurisprudence after the disputed 2000 election in its *Bush v. Gore* decision: “The individual citizen has no constitutional right to vote for electors of the president of the United States.” The fight over who votes and how has kindled ferocious conflicts throughout American history. And the most intense battles have always blazed around African Americans and immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

A third twist emerges from the familiar American resistance to a strong national government. A painful racial history lurks deep in the antigovernment tradition. There was always a white supremacy party ready to fight the feds. Each new national program faced the same anxious filter: Might it give the federal government the authority to someday, somehow, threaten slavery? Or segregation? Or white privilege? To be sure, many Americans opposed federal power in the name of personal freedom and local democracy. But throughout American history, the honorable tradition of resisting the central government in the name of liberty has drawn much of its potency from an alliance with raw racial animosity. We’ll see that link in every chapter. To the discomfort of many conservatives, the connection remains robust. An American majority (including 46 percent of whites) considered President Trump a racist three years after he’d been elected. Future Republicans will face the hard job of severing the long historical connection between resisting the national government in the name of freedom and attacking it out of racial hostility.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, sexuality escalates the intensity of each fray. Racially divided societies always construct powerful taboos against interracial sex. If black men marry white women, the carefully fabricated racial differences will collapse. In the United States, the violently enforced sexual taboos came with strict gender controls. Nineteenth-century observers, like Alexis de Tocqueville, commented on the unusually rigid limits imposed on women in America—they were barred from both politics and markets. By the late 1830s, however, women had

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begun to challenge the restrictions. The gender rights campaign emerged directly from the fight against slavery. Supporters of both racial rights and gender equality traditionally found a home in the same political party. Today, gender coalesces with race and immigration to differentiate the parties. It's an unprecedented configuration: African Americans, immigrants, and women lean to one party, white, native males toward the other.

MY FOCUS ON AMERICAN IDENTITY—ON RACE, IMMIGRATION, and gender—is different from most accounts of our partisan history. The usual emphasis is rooted in economics. Most political historians emphasize tariffs and banks, labor and capital, booms and busts, and, most important of all, the rise and fall of inequality. All these issues appear in the pages that follow—the battle between rich and poor, for example, powered the rise of active government and forms the great lost tradition for contemporary Democrats. But as I pored over 220 years of newspapers, speeches, and party platforms, I was constantly struck by the tribal passions that intensified all those other conflicts, mutating from one generation to the next and roaring into our own time.

We begin with the hesitant rise of partisan politics. Americans founded their republic with little thought about how the people (meaning affluent white men) might air their political differences. In fact, we can find the origins of this deep silence in one of the most romantic tales about the young republic—the military coup that did not happen.

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THE RAGTAG AMERICAN ARMY HAD DEFEATED THE MOST powerful empire in the world. Now, in March 1783, they camped in Newburgh, New York, waiting for the peace treaty that would end

the American Revolution. But there was no cheer among the troops because Congress, which did not have the power to raise taxes, had not paid them in months. The soldiers were cold, hungry, and impoverished. The officers had turned their blankets into coats, their troops didn't even have blankets. What some of them did have were wives and children begging in the streets. When they mustered out of the military, the officers were facing hardship, poverty, and possibly even debtors' prison.

Wild plans filtered through the camp. An anonymous letter circulated among the officers and called on them to "assume a bolder Tone." Some wanted to head for the western forests and turn their guns against this "country that tramples on your rights, disdains your cries—& insults your distresses." Others thought the army should march on Congress, demand their pay, and perhaps thrust one of their own into power.<sup>6</sup>

The idea that the American Revolution might have ended in a coup sounds fantastic to us today. But that is exactly how revolutions normally end—strong men seize power. Some of General George Washington's officers were ready and willing. The plotters called a secret meeting. "The passions were all inflamed," fretted an anxious Washington when he got wind of the cabal. He issued an order, asserting his authority by changing the date of the meeting. Maybe waiting a few more days would cool things off, he wrote to a member of Congress.

On March 15, hundreds of officers gathered on a windy bluff overlooking the camp in a large building known as the Temple of Virtue. A nervous Washington strode through his mutinous troops to the front of the room and read a meticulously crafted speech. He implored them to back down, cheered them for their valor, and promised to always champion their interests. It was a beautiful speech—so eloquent that it is still read by every cadet at the US Military Academy—but it didn't work. The men remained sullen and unmoved.

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Washington then unfolded a letter from a member of Congress promising to win the soldiers their pay. Washington read, haltingly, and then stopped. Reaching into his tunic, he pulled out a new pair of spectacles. The officers had never seen their general wearing glasses. The tall, powerful soldier who had taken command eight years ago was getting old—he was now past fifty. “Gentlemen, you must pardon me,” muttered Washington, “I have grown gray in your service and now I find myself growing blind.” Stagecraft? Perhaps. But seeing their general’s infirmity worked like no words could. We know from their letters home that some of these tough, battle-hardened warriors began to weep. That was the end of their rebellion.

The usual moral of the famous story is simple. Good leaders like Washington or his officers do not seek power; they do their job and go home. Washington drew a different lesson: the new nation must have a strong central government—it was the government’s weakness that almost led to the coup.<sup>7</sup> Washington squared the circle between abjuring personal power on the one hand and calling for a strong government on the other by denouncing politics. Public officials, he thought, should do the right thing. Nothing excited his wrath more than political parties or democratic societies (as the interest groups were called) trying to bend government toward their own interests. Washington’s *Farewell Address*, traditionally read out loud across the country to mark his birthday, is an extended blast against parties and factions. The party spirit, he practically shouted, was a “horrible,” “baneful,” “frightful despotism” that would wreck our empire of liberty.<sup>8</sup>

The men who wrote the Constitution disagreed on a lot of issues, but they all agreed with Washington about this—political parties were poison. Benjamin Franklin was so fearful of them that he made a strange proposal at the Constitutional Convention. Do not pay people who serve in the executive department because, if we do, political parties will rise up and grasp for the spoils of office. James Madison, the most sophisticated political thinker of them



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all, identified political faction as “the mortal disease under which popular governments have everywhere perished.” John Quincy Adams called parties “a baneful weed” that malicious Europeans had planted in the land of liberty. And as usual, Thomas Jefferson spun the best aphorism: The party spirit, he wrote, was “the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not get to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all.”<sup>9</sup>

There was just one problem with all that high-minded talk. It immediately proved impossible to run a republic without political parties. Americans disagreed about all kinds of things. Should the national government be strong or weak? Should we despise England or France? Where should we put the capital? What should we do about slavery? Or the Irish, French, and Haitian refugees that entered the country with pamphlets full of incendiary ideas? Whether the founders liked them or not, political parties gave the people (which, at the time, meant mainly wealthy white men) their say. Parties lined up popular support behind the politicians who were wrestling over these issues.

Jefferson may indeed have ended up in hell because he and Madison quickly rallied opponents of strong national government into something that looked a lot like a party—complete with a newspaper digging up dirt about the other side (conveniently funded by Jefferson’s State Department). Their rivals, led by Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, organized too. And in no time those infernal parties were part of the political scene. Everyone acknowledged that what they were doing was wrong—but, what else could they do? Each side organized a faction because they were convinced their rivals would ruin the republic. Each side believed its passage to the dark side would be temporary. They all expected to return to their nonpartisan ways as soon as they had saved the nation from their irresponsible competitors.

As a result of their nonpartisan illusion, the founding generation left behind no wisdom about partisan politics—and not many rules.

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Political parties were not seriously discussed at the Constitutional Convention, were not mentioned in the Constitution, and scarcely appear in *The Federalist Papers* (editorials which explained the Constitution and pushed for ratification in New York). The Constitution shuffled most of the details off to the state governments. There, the majorities schemed up all kinds of ways to keep people away from the ballot box if they were not deserving or not ready or not on our side.<sup>10</sup>

Efforts to bar political rivals from the ballot run through the years: eligibility rules, registration requirements, violence, literacy tests, poll taxes, gerrymanders, barriers for felons, barriers for former felons, shifting ID laws—on and on it rolls through US history, the politics of who votes and how easily. The rigmarole that surrounds voting would rise through the years, especially when it mixed with the creedal politics of race and immigration.<sup>11</sup>

THE VERY FIRST CONTESTED ELECTION, IN 1800, ESTABLISHED the traditional party attitudes toward race and immigration. President John Adams, who had succeeded George Washington, was running for reelection with the Federalist Party against Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans.\*

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\*A word about party names: The Jeffersonians generally referred to themselves as Republicans. Later, they came to be called Democrats, the same name by which the party is known today. Historians have tidied things up by calling the Jeffersonians “Democratic-Republicans,” though the party members did not use the term themselves. On the other side, the Federalist Party soon vanished, and most members (and their attitudes) drifted into the Whig Party, in the 1830s, and, from there, to the Republicans, in the mid-1850s. Of course, the nineteenth-century parties look very different than their twenty-first-century counterparts, but by the election of 1856, the two major parties were the Democrats and the Republicans.

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President Adams and the Federalists aspired to a classical, orderly republic where people deferred to their leaders. Instead, they faced a brawling, partisan uproar intensified by refugees who were fired up by the egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution and loudly scorned the president for acting like a king. The Federalists tried to impose order with the Alien Acts, which authorized government officials to deport foreigners without testimony or trial. They also passed a sedition law that established prison sentences for newspaper editors who dared to impugn the government. The blundering legislation, meant to hush political debate, had exactly the opposite effect. The laws became major issues in the boisterous election of 1800. For the next sixty years, the Democrats continued to stand up for immigrants and mocked their rivals for clinging to the “spirit” of the Alien and Sedition Acts (as the Democratic Party platform of 1852 put it), even long after the laws—and the Federalists—had vanished into history.<sup>12</sup>

The clash over the Alien Acts remains infamous to this day. However, the 1800 election also focused on slavery, and on this issue, the parties took very different positions. Now, it was the Federalists who were more tolerant. Throughout the 1790s, Americans had anxiously followed the slave rebellion shaking Saint-Domingue, the French colony in the Caribbean that would later become Haiti. In 1791, the slaves rose up and overthrew their French masters. When the English tried to take advantage of the chaos and seize control of the island, the rebel slaves fought and defeated them (the British forces suffered almost as many casualties in the conflict on Haiti as they had during the American Revolution). After defeating the British, the rebel leader, Toussaint Louverture, proposed a trade alliance to the Adams administration. The administration agreed in 1799, and the fledgling US Navy even went so far as to shell one of Toussaint’s rivals. The Democrats, who had been so welcoming to the European refugees, were horrified by an alliance with former slaves. What would happen, asked Jefferson, when Haitian vessels

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landed in southern ports with black crews who had won their freedom with guns and knives? American slaves might be inspired to launch a revolt of their own.

Sure enough, even as voters in some states were casting ballots in 1800, a large and well-organized slave insurrection was discovered in Virginia. The Democratic-Republican newspapers blamed this terrifying conspiracy on the Federalists' rash alliance with a nation of slaves who, as the party members constantly reminded everyone, had won their liberty by murdering their masters.

A pattern had already emerged. The conservative party (the Federalists, followed by the Whigs and the Republicans) was more tolerant toward African Americans. Over time, they offered a political home to most black voters, abolitionists, and civil rights activists. But aliens vexed them. The conservatives continually invented new ways to keep the newcomers away from politics and power. On the other side, the Democrats championed European immigrants (Asians would be a different matter), but they bitterly denounced efforts to meddle with slavery, states' rights, segregation, or white supremacy.

THE UNITED STATES FINALLY CAST ASIDE WASHINGTON'S warnings and built unabashed, all-in mass parties for the white male masses in the 1820s and 1830s. They hit the political scene with an arresting claim—parties could calm the rising storm over slavery. Martin Van Buren—a short, smooth-talking, self-educated, gaudily dressed, flamboyantly whiskered, political genius from New York—sold the idea to southern leaders. A proper party, purred Van Buren, would break the northern “clamor against Southern Influence and African slavery” by channeling political competition into a focus on the plums (or jobs) that would be distributed after election victories.<sup>13</sup>

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The very fear that Benjamin Franklin had voiced at the Constitutional Convention, when he suggested not paying federal officials, now mutated into a way to protect the republic from the slavery debate. The party faithful would follow their party chieftains and fight for the spoils of office instead of relying on such mischievous motives as regional feeling or personal judgment. Americans built their first mass party partially to blunt the great tribal issue of the day. It worked for, roughly, three decades until the slavery question simply got too powerful and broke the parties.

As slavery moved to the center of American politics, each party groped for ways to keep its northern and southern members together. The Democrats managed, for a time, by simply leaving the issue to the states. No one, they insisted, had any right to meddle with the states' control over their "domestic institutions." But the Democrats soon undermined their tidy solution. In the 1840s, they began to proclaim that it was the nation's providential destiny to spread across the entire continent. But each new acre brought with it an inescapable question—would this territory be slave land or free soil? States' rights offered no simple solution, and the party began to strain over the question that it had pushed before the country.<sup>14</sup>

The Whigs never found any answer to the slavery question and when it became the dominant issue, the party cracked into northern and southern factions. Most northern Whigs migrated to the Republican Party—it opposed the spread of slavery but also included a cadre of nativists fearful of immigrants. The new party's attitudes about race and immigration kept getting entangled with one another. For example, after the Civil War, in 1869 a Republican Congress overrode furious Democratic objections and passed the Fifteenth Amendment extending suffrage to black men—at the time, it was a bold and radical move. But Republican efforts to empower black voters in the South clashed with Republican efforts to control immigrants. A forceful version of the Fifteenth Amendment would have

directly protected the right of all citizens to vote, but it won only five votes in the Senate. The proposal failed to attract more Republican support because it would have ruled out the literacy tests and poll taxes that Republicans deployed to limit Irish voters in the Northeast. Other senators, from both parties, feared that a powerful voting rights amendment might empower Chinese immigrants in the west. The actual Fifteenth Amendment was more constricted and only forbade states from denying any citizen the right to vote “on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.” The amendment did extend suffrage to black men for decades—an extraordinary achievement. Eventually, however, Democrats won control in Washington and enabled the southern states to use the loopholes in the amendment—literacy tests, poll taxes—to deny black Americans voting rights. Voters in the 1890s were barred not because they were black (forbidden by the Fifteenth Amendment) but because they were not able to pass a literacy test or pay a poll tax or jump the many hurdles that were carefully engineered to keep them from the ballot box (perfectly legal, ruled the Supreme Court at the time).

The decades following the Civil War brings a jolting theme to the surface. While the former slaves struggled to build new lives—gathering churches, uniting families, engaging in politics, seeking to get ahead in the new South—they faced the longest, most sustained terrorism campaign in American history, especially in states and regions that had majority black populations. Over forty violent years, white elites slowly stripped the vote from African Americans and, in some states, vastly limited the democracy altogether. In one typical midterm election, for example, the 2.2 million people in Mississippi (49 percent African American) cast just 35,000 votes—a turnout of just over 1 percent.<sup>15</sup>

By the start of the twentieth century, both parties had turned away from racial rights. The Democrats, based in the South, remained committed to white supremacy. Republicans still claimed to be the party of civil rights and commanded the allegiance of most

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black Americans but abandoned any real effort at reform. President William Howard Taft, a Republican from Ohio, began his inaugural address (in 1909) by sadly confessing that the black man's friends once thought to give him the vote but that had proved a mistake. Neither party would push civil rights or racial justice.

At the same time, the turn of the twentieth century, the traditional party pattern regarding immigration also broke down. Democrats (long the party of immigrants) and Republicans (the party with a nativist streak) reacted to the largest immigration in American history by each splitting into factions supporting and opposing immigration. After a long debate, the critics won the debate and pushed the golden gates almost shut starting in 1921. In 1907, 1.2 million people had arrived on American shores. A quarter century later, Franklin Roosevelt launched the New Deal as just 23,000 immigrants landed. One of the great conflicts in American history went quiet. Identity issues lost their partisan intensity.

On the national level, both parties abandoned civil rights and, a little more than a decade later, shut down immigration. Social scientists have recently reconstructed metrics of partisanship. With the great identity issues put aside, the partisan brawling steadily declined. To be sure, we will see stinging battles and fundamental changes. But the angriest disagreements were now within the parties rather than between them. Each party had conservative and liberal wings that clashed with one another on a wide range of topics, including the issues of identity, race, and immigration. As a result, the first half of the twentieth century registers on most scales as cheerfully bipartisan.<sup>16</sup>

AT EVERY TURN IN THE AMERICAN STORY, WE'LL SEE HOW African Americans themselves drove national changes. At the start of the twentieth century, blacks altered the political calculus by moving north. They faced discrimination and hard times, but up

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north they had a powerful weapon—the vote that they had been denied in the South. Some local Democratic bosses did what they had always done with newcomers: they started signing them into the party. As early as the election of 1932, black voters began to drift from Republican to Democrat in significant numbers, and in 1936, during Franklin Roosevelt's first reelection campaign, a majority of black voters ticked the Democratic box.

At first the white newspaper columnists chuckled over the preposterous alliance. The Democratic Party, dominated by southern segregationists, could never be a real political home to African Americans. But black activists proved the pundits wrong as they crowded into that hostile party and slowly became a political force to be reckoned with. By the election of 1948, the last vote of the New Deal era, a roaring Democratic convention beat the white supremacists and narrowly endorsed a bold civil rights plank. The segregationists, who had dominated the party for more than a century, walked out in protest and ran their own candidate, Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond, the governor of South Carolina.

The migration of northern black voters from the Republicans to the Democrats rewrote American politics. The Dixiecrats did not get far in 1948, but the changes in the Democratic Party that precipitated their bolt had seismic consequences. It broke the Democrats' hold on the South. In the election before the rupture, the Democrats had won a whopping 83 percent of the vote in the Deep South, but in the election afterward, they got just 54.7 percent. Southern Democrats responded by looking for new allies. Eventually, the conservative wings of each party—led by southern Democrats and midwestern Republicans—united under the Republican banner. The liberals in both parties drifted to the Democrats.<sup>17</sup>

In popular memory, the political alignment changed in a flash. "There goes the South," President Lyndon Johnson supposedly sighed when he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In reality, the tectonic plates had been rumbling for decades and the changes were



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slowly taking hold, developing gradually from the first stirrings in 1928 to the visible changes by the 1960s. There is a reason, however, that we remember that election of 1964.

For starters, it fully exposed racial tumult across the country. The pugnacious segregationist George Wallace challenged President Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination with a truculent, resentful, impolite (today we'd say incorrect) campaign. Wallace attacked civil rights as an international plot designed to rob white people of their jobs, their neighborhoods, and their way of life. He repeated his commitment to law and order like a mantra and boasted that if he came across protesters, he'd put a pistol to their heads or run them over in his car. The most often quoted defiance, from his inaugural address as governor of Alabama, hovered over his campaign: "Segregation today . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever."<sup>18</sup> In his first foray north, in the Wisconsin primary, the segregationist stunned everyone by taking 33 percent of the Democratic primary vote. He followed that shocker by repeating the results in Indiana and almost winning in Maryland. At the time, however, nominations were still controlled by party bosses, and Democratic leaders had no intention of permitting Wallace to get a place on the ticket. But his campaign revealed a disquieting truth: civil rights kindled white anxiety in the North as well as the South. George Wallace always seemed a sideshow in the American political pageant—until Donald Trump rode the same attitudes all the way to the White House.<sup>19</sup>

The election of 1964 marked the emergence of the political parties as we recognize them today. Republican senators had saved the Civil Rights Act—thirty-three (out of thirty-nine) members voted to break the southern filibuster that had gone on and on for some sixty working days. But a single nay cast by Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) eclipsed all those resolute ayes. Less than a month later, conservatives seized control of the Republican convention and nominated Goldwater.<sup>20</sup>

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Goldwater preached the antigovernment gospel like no presidential candidate had done in modern times. He had always actively opposed segregation, but during the campaign he stayed mum as segregationists swarmed into his campaign. The handful of black delegates at the Republican convention, including Jacky Robinson, who had broken the color line in baseball, published harrowing stories in the black newspapers about what they had encountered—screams, racial epithets, flying bottles, and threats of violence. “I had a better understanding of how it must have felt to be a Jew in Hitler’s Germany,” summed up Robinson. In the end, roughly 90 percent of black voters went Democratic. It was the end of the black Republican vote.<sup>21</sup>

Liberal George Romney (R-MI), who had run against Goldwater for the Republican nomination, wrote a long, bitter, private letter to Goldwater, upbraiding the nominee for turning a blind eye to the racial hostility that surrounded his campaign. “Your strategists proposed to make an all-out attempt for the Southern White segregationist vote and to . . . exploit the so-called ‘white backlash’ in the North,” Romney wrote to Goldwater. Convention delegates, continued Romney, received racial “hate literature.” And you never said a word. But Republican liberals like George Romney were now vulnerable. They had always counted on northern black voters and, as the black voters turned to the Democrats, the Republican liberals would slowly vanish.<sup>22</sup>

Less than a year after the Democrats won the 1964 election with the party’s largest landslide of the twentieth century (61.8 percent of the popular vote), liberal Democrats won a different kind of civil rights reform. The tiny immigration quotas set in the 1920s, they argued, were just another form of discrimination. It was time, said Vice President Hubert Humphrey, to align immigration law with “the spirit of . . . civil rights law.” Democrats had supported immigration back to the early nineteenth century. Now they were also

the party of civil rights—and, for the first time, placed immigration reform in the same political framework as civil rights.

The proposed reform sailed through Congress, and the United States opened to large-scale immigration for the first time in fifty years. At first, the change seemed insignificant in comparison to the massive expansion of African American rights in the mid-1960s. But it led to the second largest immigration (in proportion to the population) in US history. The parties unwittingly broke a pattern that stretched back to the first campaign. Although it took decades for the partisan lines to clarify, by the 2000s, the Democrats stood for both black rights *and* immigration. Republicans attracted the skeptics.<sup>23</sup>

There were more turns on the road to today's political parties. The most significant came during the 1970s, when two different women's movements helped to redefine both the Republicans and the Democrats. A moral crusade, dominated by churchwomen, rose up to fight against the Equal Rights Amendment (the ERA, which was debated between 1972 and 1979 and would have inserted gender equality into the Constitution) and the Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade* (the 1973 decision that struck down laws restricting abortion). The women championed traditional gender roles, denounced homosexuality, and warned the nation about an immoral culture that threatened the old-fashioned family. They injected their quest to restore traditional morals into the heart of the modern Republican Party.

At the same time, a new generation of feminists mobilized on the other side of the same issues. They pressed for ratification of the ERA, promoted gender equality, and emphasized women's freedom to control procreation (from birth control to abortion rights). By the end of the decade, the movement began to fight for rights in the gay and lesbian communities. Their views would become central to the modern Democratic Party.

## REPUBLIC OF WRATH

In short, the contemporary parties emerged with an unprecedented division that reflected the fiercest culture conflicts running through American history. On the one side, African Americans, immigrants, and liberal women. On the other, people who see themselves as white, native, and supporters of what they call the traditional family. One consequence can be seen in the membership of the House of Representatives fifty years later: the Democratic Caucus in 2020 was just 39 percent white men and included eighty-nine women. Across the aisle, the Republicans remained 89 percent white men and counted just 13 women. For the first time, the parties reflected all the us-versus-them intensity of the American culture wars.

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TODAY, POLARIZATION HAS SPREAD INTO EVERY NOOK AND cranny of American governance. A brief scan of our national institutions suggests the sweeping reach of partisan attitudes—it's us versus them in every direction.

Partisanship swept into Congress in the early 1990s. Republican Congressman Ron Machtley first encountered it over basketball. His family and his friends were back home in Rhode Island, and playing hoops gave Ron a welcome connection to other members. One day, in 1993, a couple of stony-faced colleagues came up to him with a blunt message from a rising new Republican leader, Newt Gingrich of Georgia. "No more basketball. You're playing with Democrats. They are the enemy." The Republicans had languished in the minority for sixty years. The path back to power, believed Gingrich, required discipline and fire. The message to voters would be that Democrats were lax, corrupt, immoral, and wrong for America.<sup>24</sup>

For most of the twentieth century, the members had battled by day and then retired for bourbon and bull sessions at The Hole in The Wall, tucked between the House and Senate chambers. Not

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anymore. Now, they spend very little time together. Members fly into the capital on Tuesday and leave on Thursday night. Over 110 Republicans, eager to avoid any tincture of Washington, sleep on cots in their offices. It is a government of strangers with little loyalty for or understanding of the institution—much less the other party.

Congress does not work very well because it had evolved, over the generations, into a body that required cooperation between the parties. When members see the strangers from the other party as their mortal enemy, the machinery grinds to a halt. Each party spies the same path to success: block the other, win big, get your way, and finally reap the benefits from a grateful public. Cooperation doesn't figure into the plan.<sup>25</sup>

AS CONGRESS BOGGED DOWN, POWER FILTERED TO THE White House, which began to face new levels of hostility from the rival party. The animosity did not begin with Donald Trump. The previous three previous incumbents all heard chants of "Not my president!" Republicans met Bill Clinton's election, in 1992, with cries of "illegitimate" (he won with just 39 percent of the popular vote in a three-way race). Congressional Republicans took a position that was, at the time, unusually confrontational: they pledged to block his agenda, whatever it turned out to be. Republican President George W. Bush followed Clinton and also faced charges of illegitimacy when he lost the popular vote but grasped the office thanks to the Electoral College—the first president to lose the popular vote since Benjamin Harrison back in 1888.<sup>26</sup>

Barack Obama won two elections by a larger margin than any Democrat in more than sixty years but faced the most unfiltered umbrage in generations. False rumors about him proliferated. He was said to have been born in Kenya (like his father) or in Indonesia (where he had lived as a youngster). Donald Trump raced around the television shows, gathering publicity as he broadcast the lie.

“Growing up, no one knew him,” he announced on *Good Morning America* in March 2011. “He doesn’t have a birth certificate, or if he does, there’s something on that certificate that is very bad for him.” The White House released Obama’s birth certificates—short form, long form—but that did not quiet the skeptics. As his second term came to an end, only one in four Republicans were ready to agree that the president had been born in the United States. The conspiracy gathered intensity from another falsehood. Barack Obama, a practicing Christian, was said to be a Muslim—presumably the “bad thing” he was hiding on that birth certificate. The charges reflected the same deep angst over national identity that has sprung up, again and again, throughout US history. To some Americans, President Obama was the wrong race, the wrong religion, and even the wrong nationality. Many white Americans felt that he just did not seem like one of “us.”<sup>27</sup>

Still, when Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama took office, they all repeated the ritual pledges to reach out to the other side. The rhetorical gestures took on new weight when President Donald Trump, who lost the popular tally by almost three million votes, cast aside the conventional gestures of reconciliation with tweets, rallies, provocations, and executive orders all blazing with hard knuckle us versus them. His followers ardently approved, precisely because everyone else was so offended.

THE COURTS, TOO, HAVE SLID INTO THE PARTISAN VORTEX. One of Trump’s first actions as president was to issue an executive order blocking people from six majority Muslim nations from entering the United States. Democrats sued in Hawaii and six weeks later, Justice Derrick Kahala Watson blocked the order from going into effect. But why Hawaii? In December 2018, US District Court Justice Reed O’Connor struck down the Affordable Care Act (or Obamacare) lock, stock, and barrel. He gave Republicans a policy

victory that they had failed to win in Congress (though he stayed his own decision). But why a Texas court?<sup>28</sup>

Political scientists call it venue shopping—find a court that leans your way. Partisanship has become an essential feature of the American judicial system, exploding one of the most important myths in American governance. Chief Justice John Roberts neatly summed up the fading ideal at his confirmation hearing: “Judges are like umpires. Umpires don’t make the rules; they apply them.” Judges, appointed for life, apply the laws and protect individual rights. For a long time, that fiction held. Most Supreme Court justices were appointed with near unanimous votes. But social scientists have shown, in study after study, that since the 1950s, ideology is the most powerful predictor of judicial votes, especially on major cases. Today, the general public has caught on—a full 75 percent agree that “justices sometimes let their ideological views influence their decisions.”<sup>29</sup>

The courts were designed to be above the partisan fray. But the partisan wave that engulfs American politics now endangers the courts’ role as arbiters of the American rules. We have been here before. Past generations packed the courts (in the 1860s) or threatened to pack them (in the 1930s) when the judiciary and the elected branches grew far out of synch. Now, once again, left-leaning policy wonks buzz with ideas about reorganizing the courts to break the tightening conservative grip on them.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE APPEARS TO LIE IN THE STATES. ONCE they were viewed as “laboratories of democracy,” testing all kinds of experimental policies before they went national—social security, women’s suffrage, alcohol prohibition, and same-sex marriage to name a few. In many places, the parties worked together once the elections were over. But partisanship has risen in the states too. Today, the state experiments increasingly focus on keeping the other party down.<sup>30</sup>

## REPUBLIC OF WRATH

After Democrats narrowly won statewide office in Wisconsin in 2018, for example, the lame duck Republican legislature stripped the incoming Democratic governor of the authority to interfere with the new work requirements that their party had affixed to food stamps and Medicaid; he could not withdraw the state from a law suit against Obamacare or loosen the voting requirements that they had tightened. Most of these moves were imported from Republican efforts in North Carolina. In Texas, Democrats fled the state in 2003 in an unsuccessful effort to deny Republicans a quorum for their bare-knuckle redistricting plan. In Oregon in 2019, Republicans tried the same trick and went into hiding to deny the Democrats a quorum for their cap-and-trade environmental legislation to curb greenhouse gases. State militia groups pledged to defend the Republicans with arms, if necessary. Threats of violence grew louder and led the police to shut down the legislature as a public safety measure.

Those laboratories of democracy in the states, sum up political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, “are in danger of becoming laboratories of authoritarianism.” In truth, the efforts to suppress the other side and even the threats of militia violence are nothing new. We see them throughout American history—especially as immigrants or black voters cast ballots in large numbers. When the ruling powers feared a rising majority-minority, repression often followed. The laboratories of democracy have never been good places to test truculent attitudes about us versus them.<sup>31</sup>

FOR A LONG TIME—BY BOTH DESIGN AND CHANCE—THE parties deflected identity conflicts. In the nineteenth century, each recruited very different kinds of groups. In the early twentieth century, each party divided within itself on matters of race, immigration, and gender. By contrast, today’s parties are internally united on all those dimensions and, as a result, zoom them straight into



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politics. Raise a policy issue, any policy issue, and watch it flow into the clash of identity and culture. Politics has grown so hot because it now boomerangs right back to the primal question: Who are we? To answer “Republican” (much less to shout “Trump”) is practically a slur in some neighborhoods. A white male Democrat is practically an oxymoron in others.

How did we get here? What warnings lie buried in the past? Where should we go next? Those were the questions on my mind as I wrote the chapters that follow.