

The Politics of Listlessness:  
Polarization, Neoliberalism, and the Democratic Party Since 1980

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In September 1981, a hundred leading Democratic elected officials from across a beleaguered party convened for a Democratic National Strategy Council, aiming to formulate Democrats' response to Reaganism. Alan Cranston of California, the Senate Democratic Whip, chaired "A Conversation among Democrats." The questions prepared for that session could be repeated, nearly verbatim, after every electoral setback for Democrats for the next four decades. portending paths both followed and left untrod.

If our party is a coalition, unlike the Republicans who tend to represent a single group, what are the common denominators, transcending regional differences and local interests, which make us a National Party?...

The Republicans cannot, and will not, represent the needs and hopes of middle and lower income Americans, as we are committed to do. Yet numbers of these Americans voted Republican in 1978 and 1980. How have we failed to make clear that the Democratic Party represents the true interests of these and other Americans among our true constituencies?...

To endure, a Party must look to the future as well as stay true to its past. What problems have we as a Party failed to face up to? Where will the next two decades take us and what are the principle (*sic.*) new challenges that we must address?<sup>1</sup>

Incipient in each question was the goal of a party that would bring together its many constituencies in shared vision and common purpose—but also the recognition of forces that would militate against that goal. From cycle to cycle across the decades that followed the crack-up of the New Deal order,<sup>2</sup> the Democratic Party's project *as a party* has stubbornly eluded its grasp.

The struggles of the Democratic Party *qua party* have colored analysts' understanding of the its place in recent American history. Two master stories have dominated scholarship on post-

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<sup>1</sup> "A Conversation among Democrats—Chaired by Sen. Alan Cranston," Kirk O'Donnell files, Box 23, "Strategy Council Meeting, 1981," Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., Papers, Burns Library, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. The questions are unsigned, so it is unclear if they originated with Cranston or the Democratic National Committee.

<sup>2</sup> The term, whose analytical force we believe endures, comes from Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

1970s politics and policy, receiving largely bifurcated treatment across disciplines. Political scientists' accounts have emphasized polarization, while historians have excavated a neoliberal "neo-consensus." On the face of it, the respective themes of deepening division and increasing convergence would seem to exist in some analytical tension with one another—if not outright contradiction. But the party's very muddiness of vision and purpose have helped to sustain such unresolved tensions in scholarly interpretation.

By attending closely to parties as historically significant institutions and structuring forces in their own right, this essay begins to reconcile themes of division and consensus by delineating the impact of *both* polarization and neoliberalism on the Democrats' coalitional and ideological trajectories.<sup>3</sup> Polarization consolidated liberal forces within the Democratic fold and hardened partisan conflict. Neoliberalism constricted the space for traditional liberal politics and foreclosed new possibilities. Those effects in combination explain the recurrent dynamics of the country's center-left party since 1980, as it has bolstered its capacity for outward partisan combat while failing to draw out of its constituent parts a cohesive project for power.

In the pages below, we first place historical scholarship on recent center-left American politics in the context of disciplinary divides over competing master stories of convergence and polarization. We then track Democrats' factional and coalitional dynamics across the party, beginning with the dark days that followed Reagan's election. As the party recalibrated and

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<sup>3</sup> Neoliberalism as a concept is complex and multivalent. We lean on William Davies, who treats neoliberalism as "an attempt to replace political judgment with economic evaluation, including, but not exclusively, the evaluation of markets." See William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty, and the Logic of Competition* (London: Sage, 2015), 5-6. For helpful guides to its many dimensions, see Peter B. Evans and William H. Sewell, Jr., "Neoliberalism: Policy Regimes, International Regimes, and Social Effects," in *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*, eds. Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Angus Burgin, "The Neoliberal Turn," typescript, 2019. For a debate on the term, see Daniel Rodgers, "The Uses and Abuses of Neoliberalism," *Dissent*, Winter 2018, and responses from Julia Ott, Mike Koneczal, N. D. B. Connolly, and Timothy Shenk, plus a rejoinder from Rodgers, at [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/debating-uses-abuses-neoliberalism-forum](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/debating-uses-abuses-neoliberalism-forum).

reorganized in the 1980s, the pattern was set for contradictory trends that would persist into the next century.<sup>4</sup> Polarization and neoliberalism interacted in different ways in different settings, but across all of them, the fundamental story would hold: that of a party incapable of bringing its forces together *as a party*.

The great partisan sort that scholars of polarization emphasize was no mere window dressing. The ideological sorting of the party system removed many of the nettlesome conflicts that defined the party at midcentury, and helped to revive the Democrats' national organization and legislative discipline. As partisan identities became more salient, the courtesies that followed from the old cross-cutting alignment disappeared, legislative fights turned bruising,<sup>5</sup> and American politics grew angry.<sup>6</sup> If Republicans have moved further right than Democrats have moved left, they have been largely parallel but asymmetric processes. The organizational base of the Democratic Party has remained a liberal coalition of labor, minority constituencies, and social and cultural activists that has endured since the 1970s in the face of mighty headwinds. Both the party's congressional rank and file and its activist cadres grew more cohesively liberal over time, while African Americans and feminists bolstered their positions in the party coalition. Though beleaguered labor faced new intraparty competitors, it, too, tethered itself to the party banner.

But if polarization shored up the forces of liberalism for lean times, neoliberalism straitened Democrats' freedom of action while empowering new factional forces within the party. Democrats accommodated themselves to and attempted to shape a new order that was not,

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<sup>4</sup> Charles L. Ponce de Leon points to the thematic force of both polarization and economic transformation in "The New Historiography of the 1980s," *Reviews in American History* 36.2 (June 2008): 303-314.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Sinclair, *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policymaking* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006); Frances Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

in the main, the product of their own conscious design. As the postwar political economy of equitable growth, “easy finance,”<sup>7</sup> fixed exchange rates, commercial Keynesianism, and countervailing labor power collapsed, old commitments receded. Not without dissention, but in numbers not limited to the “Atari Democrats” of the 1980s and the “New Democrats” around Bill Clinton, Democrats preached macroeconomic orthodoxy, deregulation in the name of consumer choice, public-private partnerships, and fiscal restraint.<sup>8</sup> Questions about the political control of the economy retreated to the background in debates over what it meant to be a Democrat during these years. Neoliberalism upended not only the party’s factional balance of power but also its organizational dynamics. Transformations on the ground—seen not only in the decline of unions but in the broader disembeddedness of party politics from community-level ties that held sway during the New Deal order—attenuated the party’s reach and deepened its legitimacy problems.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, Democrats have displayed the politics of listlessness. In various factions from left to center and across institutional loci, this listlessness emerged and endured in ways that defy glib patterns either of party revitalization not yet complete, or else of ongoing decline and fall. Facing profound institutional and electoral headwinds, an increasingly polarized center-left party repeatedly failed to subordinate particular interests for common purpose, to connect policy and politics, or to build public goods that would benefit the party as a whole. Under such circumstances, Democratic politics amounts to less than the sum of its constituent parts—

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase comes from W. Elliot Brownlee, *Federal Taxation in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 149.

<sup>8</sup> Iwan Morgan, *The Age of Deficits: Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Paul Pierson, “The Deficit and the Politics of Domestic Reform,” in *The Social Divide: Political Parties and the Future of Activist Government* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 126-178.

<sup>9</sup> Josh Pacewicz, *Partisans and Partners: The Politics of the Post-Keynesian Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

including those parts bolstered and emboldened by the forces of polarized party sorting. The feckless quality in both the party's management of its own coalition and its behavior in power does more than confound analysts' ability to depict the party accurately. It also contributes its own fair share of responsibility for the political maladies of the age.<sup>10</sup>

A few key themes emerge from our account. Polarization in these decades played out for Democrats largely through impersonal processes of ideological sorting and compositional change, with the party serving as the passive receptacle for a new political alignment.<sup>11</sup> The traditional forces who cohered at the base of the party largely mustered a kind of liberalism of the litmus test, emphasizing fealty on the core issues that divided the parties rather than plumbing the limits of new possibilities. Democrats' neoliberal turn, by contrast, emerged from the conscious agency of actors seeking to negotiate harsh new realities. Those moderates, never able to consolidate control over their party, would rely on divided government to achieve their major breakthroughs. And in turn, polarization and neoliberalism would interact with new consequences during the first decades of the twenty-first century. Centrists' political dissipation, the party's increasing combativeness, and ascendant new progressive forces combined to shift the party's center of gravity decisively *leftward*, even as Democrats continue to run up against profound limits in their ability to muster a cohesive project for power.

### Bringing the Parties Back In

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, "The Hollow Parties," in *Can America Govern Itself?*, eds. Frances Lee and Nolan McCarty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 120-151.

<sup>11</sup> This contrasts with the active work by liberal Democrats to reshape the party system across the span of the New Deal order. See Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), esp. 7-54, 95-171, and 221-264.

Unsurprisingly for an era dominated by a “conservative ascendancy” and labeled by one historian “the Age of Reagan,” the story of liberalism and the country’s center-left party have received less elaborate historical scholarly treatment.<sup>12</sup> But the existing work is notable for its shared emphases. Notwithstanding a small countercurrent of scholarship on grassroots and left-liberal politics in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>13</sup> the dominant theme is of a retreat by the Democratic Party and liberalism as a political program from the redistributive and labor-oriented politics of the New Deal order to, in Lily Geismer’s words, the “individualist, meritocratic, suburban-centered priorities of liberal, knowledge-oriented professionals.”<sup>14</sup> Historians have varied in the degree to which they emphasize Democratic actors’ agency and initiative in this reorientation relative to the impact of external political and economic forces.<sup>15</sup> But they concur on the basic story of Democrats’ replacement of class politics with a post-sixties cultural liberalism and simultaneous collaboration with the ascendant right on neoliberal projects of state power.

The story of a Democratic shift to the right on economic and social-welfare policy over the last four decades sits uneasily within the dominant framework of the era in both popular

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<sup>12</sup> Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Sara Evans, “Beyond Declension: Feminist Radicalism in the 1970s and 1980s,” in *The World the 60s Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*, eds. Van Gosse and Richard Moser (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 52-66; Jonathan Bell and Timothy Stanley, eds., *Making Sense of American Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Lily Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Stein places the strongest onus on Democrats’ agency in *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the 1970s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). On Democrats’ post-1970s transformation, see Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us*; Lily Geismer, “Democrats and neoliberalism,” *Vox Polyarchy*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2019/6/11/18660240/democrats-neoliberalism>; and Brent Cebul, “Supply-Side Liberalism: Fiscal Crisis, Post-Industrial Policy, and the Rise of the New Democrats,” *Modern American History* Vol. 2 (July 2019): 139-164. Journalistic accounts take a more combative and moralistic tone. See, for recent examples, Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal: Or, Whatever Happened to the Party of the People?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015); and Ryan Grim, *We’ve Got People: From Jesse Jackson to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the End of Big Money and the Rise of a Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Strong Arm Press, 2019).

discourse and political science: namely, escalating conflict driven by polarized partisanship.<sup>16</sup> Popular commentators emphasize a “big sort” of Americans into red and blue bubbles of media consumption, habits, values, and geographic residence.<sup>17</sup> Political scientists have centered the story in government and stressed the decisive role played by political elites and activists in driving polarization of the mass electorate, as ordinary voters adopt new positions via partisan cue-taking.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, such scholars have made the *asymmetry* of contemporary partisan dynamics a core part of their accounts of polarization, with a GOP hurtling rightward while Democrats hew center.<sup>19</sup> But they have also marshalled extensive quantitative evidence for both increasing cohesion and an overall (if modest) leftward shift in the voting behavior of Democratic legislators from the 1980s onward.<sup>20</sup> And they identify more recent evidence of growing liberal identification among Democrats in the mass electorate and steeper increases in animosity toward Republicans.<sup>21</sup>

Historians have not ignored the tension between the story of Democrats’ post-’70s neoliberal capture and the popular framework of polarization. Rather, in a manner reflective of a

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<sup>16</sup> For a useful typology of polarization, see Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson, “Have Americans’ Social Positions Become More Polarized?,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102.3 (Nov. 1996): 690-755.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> For a recent synthesis of a vast literature in political science, see Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). The modern study of polarization originated in work on Congress. See Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, “The Polarization of American Politics,” *Journal of Politics* 46.4 (November 1984): 1061-1079.

<sup>19</sup> Major statements on asymmetric polarization include Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off-Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); and Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Political scientists point to both the profound compositional effects from the disappearance of the party’s southern conservative wing as well as the increased use of tools by party leaders to instill discipline. David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sinclair, *Party Wars*, esp. 67-109, 256-265.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), esp. 43-71, 90-120.



longstanding historical tendency to treat formal politics as subsidiary to deeper social and cultural processes, they have increasingly challenged the latter framework's accuracy and usefulness. As political historians sound the call to look "beyond red and blue,"<sup>22</sup> Bruce Schulman finds, in a recent overview of post-1968 historiography, that "something like consensus history has made a comeback."<sup>23</sup> He identifies a shared emphasis on underlying political agreement beneath the surface "noise" of partisan conflict in historical work on spatial politics, the carceral state, and neoliberal political economy.<sup>24</sup> The mission to collapse binaries and unearth the persistence of deep structures in the polity has led some scholars to go so far as to stress continuity rather than change as a defining theme across long stretches of American history,<sup>25</sup> while others continue to see in the political-economic shifts of the 1970s a "pivotal decade" that seeded an enduring new neoliberal order.<sup>26</sup> Even as they differ in their temporal story, however, these historians agree that convergence and consensus characterize more of recent American politics than division and polarization do.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams, "Beyond Red and Blue: Crisis and Continuity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Political History," in *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 3-23; see also Matthew D. Lassiter, "Political History Beyond the Red-Blue Divide," *Journal of American History* 98 (December 2011): 760-764.

<sup>23</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, "Post-1968 History: Neo-Consensus History for the Age of Polarization," *Reviews in American History* 47 (2019): 479-499; quote on p. 479.

<sup>24</sup> Though the recent work of synthesis by Kevin M. Kruse and Julian Zelizer is ostensibly framed as an account of division and polarization, Schulman argues that they actually confirm neoconsensus arguments related to policy while highlighting how "the development of an openly derisive style of politics" lent the era the appearance of deep-seated conflict. Schulman, "Post-1968 History," 493. See Kevin Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2019).

<sup>25</sup> For a general statement, see Cebul, Geismer, and Williams, "Beyond Red and Blue."

<sup>26</sup> Stein, *Pivotal Decade*. For two efforts at delineating neoliberalism as an organizing historical concept of the last four decades, see Kim Phillips-Fein, "The History of Neoliberalism," in *Shaped by the State*, eds. Cebul, Geismer, and Williams, 347-362; and Gary Gerstle, "America's Neoliberal Order," in *Beyond the New Deal Order: U.S. Politics from the Great Depression to the Great Recession*, eds. Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Alice O'Connor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 257-278..

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Zimmer views the analytical predominance of polarization less as a logical interpretation of contemporary political phenomena than as an intellectual development in need of its own historicization, in "Reflections on the Challenges of Writing a (Pre-) History of the 'Polarized' Present," *Modern American History* 2 (2019): 403-408.

Yet reducing the conflict that abounds in American politics to so much stylistic sound and fury leaves basic questions unanswered. At a systemic level, the increasing discipline of the parties in government have placed strains on the very functioning of American political institutions and given rise to sober-minded considerations of constitutional crisis. A master story of political consensus seems inadequate to account for that level of brittleness and tension.<sup>28</sup> At the more granular level of Democratic party development over recent decades, moreover, the particular themes emphasized by historians fail to account both for the empirical evidence of the party's increasing cohesion as well as for more recent factional developments. The left-liberal resurgence evident in twenty-first century party politics, most notably, has origins left unidentified in accounts that exclusively focus on the limits imposed by Democrats' upper-middle-class transformation and neoliberal turn.

There is no alternative, we contend, to attending to “high politics”—and the autonomous influence of political elites—as a means of reconciling the seeming contradictions in the Democrats' trajectory. Indeed, our approach harkens back to older traditions in political history that plumbed the dynamics of electoral politics and told the stories of party leaders.<sup>29</sup> Formal politics encompasses terrain of its own, not simply reducible to underlying interests or upstream cultural practices. And political parties, as the central organizers of electoral competition and programmatic choice in that terrain, belong at the forefront of such historical analysis.

Parties, in this view, are complex and layered organizations with long developmental lineages, and deserve serious scrutiny as consequential structures in their own right. In turn, how, and under what conditions and constraints, parties serve to organize conflict in society and shape

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<sup>28</sup> For an account in the American Political Development framework, see Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman, *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> The essays in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political History*, eds. Paula Baker and Donald T. Critchlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), attest to the continuing vitality of this tradition.

the actions of the state are historically contingent questions of immense consequence. Parties coalesce social actors in common front, mobilize citizens electorally on behalf of a project for power, and, as the only entities conceived as “an organized attempt to get control of the government,”<sup>30</sup> serve to manifest ideological and material pressures bubbling up from society in the actions of the state. Historians lose sight of what matters about parties when they neglect their internal dynamics and interactions with other institutions, treating them instead as mere surface effect.<sup>31</sup>

The party-centered account that follows applies a capacious definition of the term, encompassing not merely formal party organizations but also the coordinated efforts of party members in Congress as well as political aspirants, activist networks, and factional groups at work in the broader paraparty orbit.<sup>32</sup> Across these disparate venues, we trace the key dynamics that have shaped the evolution of the party, as Democratic actors navigated novel challenges both external and internal in origin after the 1970s.

“In 1981 the New Deal doesn’t carry a lot of water.”

On November 4, 1980, Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter by a 10-point popular-vote margin, Democrats lost 31 seats in the House elections, and Republicans captured a Senate

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<sup>30</sup> E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Rinehart 1942), ix.

<sup>31</sup> For recent examples of scholarship on later twentieth-century political history that attend closely to formal party dynamics, see Timothy Stanley, *Kennedy Vs. Carter: The 1980 Battle for the Democratic Party’s Soul* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Michael Bowen, *The Roots of Modern Conservatism: Dewey, Taft, and the Battle for the Soul of the Republican Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Jonathan Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); and Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> V.O. Key laid out the classic tripartite typology of the “party organization,” the “party-in-the-electorate,” and the “party-in-government,” in *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1942). The contemporary definition of party that most broadly encompasses groups that operate outside the confines of the formal party organizations is Kathleen Bawn, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, “A Theory of Parties: Groups, Policy Demands, and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10.3 (September 2012): 571-597.

majority through a shocking twelve-seat gain. If anything, the election tallies undersold the severity of the Democrats' troubles. The radical legislative breakthroughs of Reagan's first two years in office came fast before halting just as abruptly—but they set in profound relief the Democrats' internal factional tensions and programmatic challenges for years to come.

The conservative coalition revived for a twilight victory in 1981. Across the decades of the New Deal order, the party's conservative contingent in Congress had been more numerous and institutionally empowered. But Reagan's election marked the first time a conservative Republican had arrived at the White House carrying the banner of a serious, movement-backed project for transformative use of state power, which meant conservative Democrats in a shrunken majority caucus could flex new clout. Following the election, Texan Charles Stenholm revived Judge Howard Smith's old term for southern dissidents—"boll weevils"—in spearheading the organization of the Conservative Democratic Forum (CDF), all but two of whose 47 members hailed from the South.<sup>33</sup>

House Speaker Tip O'Neill, the North Cambridge warhorse, channeled the accommodationist tendency of midcentury Democratic politics into the energetic management of a party in flux. His approach combined new formal leadership tools—control over committee assignments and floor management, regularized leadership meetings and caucus outreach<sup>34</sup>—with a recognition of the party's continuing diversity. As he described his caucus to a reporter, "in another country there would be five separate parties."<sup>35</sup> In the opening shots of the Reagan Revolution, those "parties" would get the better of him.

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<sup>33</sup> CDF was informally termed the Redneck Caucus. Viveka Novak, "After the Boll Weevils," *National Journal*, June 26, 1993, 1630-34.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Sinclair, *Majority Leadership in the U.S. House* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 53, 66-67.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Healey, "It's time for round 2 and things are looking up," *Boston Globe*, May 15, 1981.

By the summer of 1981, House Democrats managed the nearly anomalous historical feat of allowing themselves to be “rolled” in three successive votes on bills constituting the core of the new administration’s fiscal agenda.<sup>36</sup> Though tactical miscalculations by the panicked and fragmented Democrats contributed to each of those rolls, in a more basic sense party leaders sealed their fate from the outset: they committed publicly to allowing Reagan’s spending and tax proposals to receive consideration on the House floor. “As Speaker, I could have refused to play ball with the Reagan administration by holding up the president’s legislation in the Rules committee,” O’Neill’s memoirs explained. “But in my view, this wasn’t a politically wise thing to do.”<sup>37</sup> The Boll Weevil-GOP coalition, for one, made the long-term sustainability of such obstruction doubtful.<sup>38</sup> But a deeper sense of shock and ideological disarray was at work. In a letter to constituents widely circulated in Washington, Les Aspin of Wisconsin invoked history to charge O’Neill with operating “in a fog.” “His politics have always been straight New Deal,” Aspin wrote. “In 1981 the New Deal doesn’t carry a lot of water.”<sup>39</sup>

The conservative rout proved potent but fleeting. The New Deal’s patrimony provided the basis for O’Neill’s first successful offensive push against the administration, as he pounced on proposed cuts to Social Security benefits for early retirees in the summer of 1981. O’Neill made the partisan authorship of the program explicit in a letter to the president in July: “A Democratic Administration created the social security system and as Democratic members of Congress we are committed to protecting the system and preserving the security and dignity of

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<sup>36</sup> Gary W. Cox and Matthew D. McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 117.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr., with William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O’Neill* (New York: Random House, 1987), 412.

<sup>38</sup> Steven Smith, “The Budget Battles of 1981: The Role of the Majority Party Leadership,” in *American Politics and Public Policy*, ed. A.P. Sandler (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1982), 52.

<sup>39</sup> Les Aspin letter to constituents, undated, Box 25, Folder “Kirk O’Donnell Files: 1981 Budget—Memos, Statements, Analysis, March 5-July 11,” O’Neill Papers.

those who depend on it.”<sup>40</sup> The administration ultimately abandoned its proposed cuts and agreed to a bipartisan commission to address the program’s fiscal imbalances. A year later, in the face of much more massive projected shortfalls in general revenue, Democrats pushed Reagan into a \$98 billion rollback of the previous year’s tax bill.

Reagan never recovered legislatively. The 1982 midterm elections, held amidst soaring unemployment wrought by the Volcker Shock, expanded Democrats’ House majority by 26 seats and decisively broke Reagan’s legislative coalition in the chamber. Party leaders made full use of the various procedural tools afforded them by reforms of the 1970s.<sup>41</sup> With the Boll Weevils’ leverage destroyed, leaders used committee assignments to reward loyalists and punish CDF dissidents.<sup>42</sup> Those midterm gains would also provide O’Neill and other leaders with a retrospective story of having pursued a deliberate rope-a-dope legislative strategy to hang full responsibility for the 1982 recession on Republicans.<sup>43</sup> Such rose-tinged accounts belied the panic and bungling that produced Democrats’ initial humiliations. As Majority Leader Jim Wright would recall ruefully on these first clashes with Reagan, “That sonofabitch rolled us.”<sup>44</sup>

### Reforging a Party Base: Feminists, African Americans, Labor

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<sup>40</sup> Tip O’Neill to Ronald Reagan, July 20, 1981, Box 20, Folder “Press Assistant Files—Social Security, 1981-1985,” O’Neill Papers.

<sup>41</sup> Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Post-Reform House*; Barbara Sinclair, *Legislators, Leaders, and Lawmaking: The U.S. House of Representatives in the Postreform Era* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), esp. 44-60.

<sup>42</sup> Steven V. Roberts, “The Democrats Get Even,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1983.

<sup>43</sup> This story was previewed in Margot Hornblower, “‘Horatio’ at the Bridge: O’Neill Fought Back, Feels Like a Winner,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 1982.

<sup>44</sup> John A. Farrell, *Tip O’Neill and the Democratic Century* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2001), 547. Wright himself would ascend to the Speaker’s chair and exercise its powers to the hilt, rendering the southern moderate an unlikely pioneer of the kind of partisan procedural combat that eventually came to define Congress. See John M. Barry, *The Ambition and the Power* (New York: Penguin Group, 1989); and Julian E. Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 162-240.

Democrats' challenges in the 1980s emerged not merely from Reagan Republicans and Boll Weevils, but from the cross-cutting and competing goals of various liberal and moderate forces within the party. Among the liberals, a particular, professional-class form of organized feminism found its seat at the party table. The first generations of African American office-holders elected after the civil rights revolution married liberal policy commitments to a hardnosed politics of group bargaining. And organized labor, in a rapprochement with the Democratic Party, did its best to stay afloat.

Feminists secured a commanding presence in Democratic party affairs that deepened even as political fortunes fluctuated. As elsewhere in the party, the story was about institutionalizing power—and about money. The 1970s heralded these developments, as the McGovern-Fraser reforms opened the party to movement actors,<sup>45</sup> while Carter-era activism on both sides of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and abortion rights polarized both parties' positioning.<sup>46</sup> When Walter Mondale chose Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate in 1984, the three-term House member's relative obscurity underlined the extent of women's underrepresentation—Democrats counted one female governor and zero senators that year. Female office-seekers encountered the biggest hurdle to running in the early stages of fundraising, which trapped them in a Catch-22 of nonviability. A new venture, targeted at getting donations *from women for* Democratic women, aimed to fix the problem. EMILY's List (Early

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<sup>45</sup> Denise L. Baer, "Political Parties: The Missing Variable in Women and Politics Research," *Political Research Quarterly* 46.3 (Sep. 1993): 547-576; Jo Freeman, "Whom You Know Versus Whom You Represent: Feminist Influence in the Democratic and Republican Parties," in *The Women's Movements of the United States and Western Europe: Consciousness, Political Opportunity, and Public Policy*, eds. Mary F. Katzenstein and Carol McClurg Mueller (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 215-244.

<sup>46</sup> Christina Wolbrecht, *The Politics of Women's Rights: Parties, Positions, and Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Marjorie Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized American Politics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

Money Is Like Yeast, because “it makes the dough rise”)<sup>47</sup> raised \$350,000 for two Senate candidates in the 1986 cycle; soon, it became one of the largest PACs in the country.<sup>48</sup> At decade’s end, Democrats began to outpace Republicans in the percentage of women office-holders in state legislatures and Congress. In 1992, the “Year of the Woman,” 25 percent of all nonincumbent Democratic House candidates were women compared with 9 percent for Republicans, while four new Democratic women were elected to the Senate.<sup>49</sup>

Notwithstanding both the “special interest” label ascribed to them by moderate Democrats and the accusations of racial and class blinders advanced by radical critics, the mainline multi-issue feminist organizations were, as a matter of formal program, down-the-line liberals on not only cultural but also economic issues.<sup>50</sup> The radical critics identified something real, nonetheless. For reasons both specific to the women’s movement<sup>51</sup> and common to the dynamics of organizational maintenance in American politics writ large, the feminist choir in Democratic politics sang with an upper-class accent. When civic organizations use expressive benefits to induce voluntary contributions, they depend on appeals and approaches that *deliver*. For feminist groups, whatever the litany of formal issue positions they propounded, abortion appeals delivered; campaigns aimed at working-class women did not.<sup>52</sup> EMILY’S List made

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<sup>47</sup> Harriett Woods, *Stepping Up to Power: The Political Journey of American Women* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 99; Ellen Malcolm with Craig Unger, *When Women Win: EMILY’s List and the Rise of Women in American Politics* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2016), 38-41; Amanda Spake, “Women Can Be Power Brokers, Too,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 1988.

<sup>48</sup> Wolbrecht, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 62.

<sup>49</sup> Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Democrats, Republicans, and the Politics of Women’s Place* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 45-48.

<sup>50</sup> For evidence from Congress, see Anne Costain and Heather Fraizer, “Congress and the Transformation of the Women’s Movement,” in *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), esp. 79-84.

<sup>51</sup> A classic critical analysis of class dynamics in feminist activism can be found in Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>52</sup> Abortion was in fact an exceptional issue among all major controversies related to women’s rights, in both the extent of its polarization by party and its reach into the mass electorate. See Sanbonmatsu, *Democrats, Republicans, and the Politics of Women’s Place*, 98-111, 173-215; Felicia Kornbluh, “Feminists and the welfare debate: Too little? Too late?” *Dollars & Sense*, November 1, 1996.



abortion its litmus test for candidate support; other issues were flexible, and its donor network hardly prioritized aggressively redistributive policies. And so universal child care, paid family leave, and combating the feminization of poverty remained at the back of the feminist agenda.<sup>53</sup>

African Americans' journey "from protest to politics"<sup>54</sup> took them into the citadel of Democratic Party power as its most loyal and cohesive bloc. The timing was vexed. Economically, Blacks had finally won their place in the manufacturing industries at the heart of the New Deal social compact, long reserved for white males—just as the jobs disappeared.<sup>55</sup> Politically, Black elected officials ascended to the councils and mayoralities of cities ensnared in crisis, and to institutional power in Congress during an era of Republican resurgence.<sup>56</sup> Black voters sustained intense partisan loyalty across these decades despite diversifying class and ideological positions.<sup>57</sup> In organizational and electoral politics, Black leaders moved away from radicalism toward a liberal programmatic agenda—but most of all they approached their distinctive political exigencies with a distinctively solidaristic pragmatism.

The rise of black mayors during the 1970s and 1980s acutely illustrated the problem of timing.<sup>58</sup> The narrow range of options for mayors seeking economic revival amidst deindustrialization, fiscal crisis, and federal retrenchment meant that Black leaders of widely

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<sup>53</sup> Ann Shola Orloff, "Transforming Gendered Labor Policies in Sweden and the United States, 1960s-2000s," in *Democracy and the Welfare State: The Two Wests in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and Mauricio Vaudagna (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 249-272.

<sup>54</sup> Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary* (February 1965): 25-31.

<sup>55</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>56</sup> On Republicans' fitful outreach, see Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*.

<sup>57</sup> Patricia Gurin, Shirly Hatchett, and James S. Jackson, *Hope and Independence: Blacks' Response to Electoral and Party Politics* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989); Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Ismail K. White and Chryl N. Laird, *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Political Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>58</sup> H. Paul Friesama, "Black Control of Central Cities: The Hollow Prize," *American Institution of Planners Journal* 35 (March 1969): 75-79; Neil Kraus and Todd Swanstrom, "Minority Mayors and the Hollow-Prize Problem," *PS* 34.1 (March 2001): 99-105.

varying political styles and coalitional strategies—from the pugilism of Detroit’s ex-labor radical Coleman Young to the staid coalitional politics of Los Angeles’s Tom Bradley to the fervent boosterism of Atlanta’s Andrew Young—typically defaulted to probusiness growth strategies in partnership with private developers.<sup>59</sup> The public sector, and nonprofits dependent on government contracts, built the burgeoning Black middle class from which so many newly elected officials rose.<sup>60</sup> Yet it could not serve as the basis for a revived machine, as Black mayors contended with concatenated fiscal and economic pressures and the end of traditional patronage channels.<sup>61</sup>

In national party politics, meanwhile, Black city pols fell victim to another irony of timing: they became a new fixture in the Democratic constellation only after local leaders had lost their once-mighty role in party affairs. No group fared worse from the McGovern-Fraser reforms than big-city mayors, stripped of their power to control blocs of delegates at the national convention. Take the most outsized illustration: Harold Washington’s untimely demise early in his second term as mayor cut short a powerful political project in Chicago—but for reasons far out of his control, he would never have wielded the clout in Democratic nominating politics once held by Richard J. Daley.

The 1984 and 1988 campaigns of Jesse Jackson cast the pragmatism and limits of mainstream Black politics in relief. More than particular plans or programs, Jackson offered a

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<sup>59</sup> Adolph Reed, Jr., “The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins & Constraints,” in *Power Community, and the City: Comparative Urban and Community Research Volume 1*, ed. Michael Peter Smith (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), 138-189. See also Peter Eisinger, “Black Mayors and the Politics of Racial Economic Advancement,” in *Culture, Ethnicity, and Identity: Current Issues in Research*, ed. William C. McCready (New York: Academic Press, 1983), especially 104-106.

<sup>60</sup> On the “new-style post-machine patronage politics” of municipal employment, see Eisinger, “Black Mayors and the Politics of Racial Economic Advancement,” 97-104.

<sup>61</sup> Steven P. Erie, *Rainbow’s End: Irish-Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 259-266; Charles V. Hamilton, “The Patron-Recipient Relationship and Minority Politics in New York City,” *Political Science Quarterly* 94 (1979): 211-227.

searing critique and a sweeping vision of collective liberation, calling the country away from selfishness and racism toward redemption.<sup>62</sup> “The blood at the bottom of the American pool,” he warned in 1981, “keeps coming to the surface.”<sup>63</sup> And yet his was also an intensely partisan quest, calling Democrats away from their obsession with the political center toward a moral center.

The liberal Black political establishment largely spurned Jackson in his first run, preferring instead to work with Mondale, a longstanding ally, and show their reliability as loyal Democrats.<sup>64</sup> The same story held on the white left. And so the Jackson camp built up from the grassroots, centered in the Black church.<sup>65</sup> In 1984, Jackson won about three quarters of the Black vote and only about 5 percent of the white vote. By 1988, he garnered over 90 percent of the Black vote and 12 percent of the white vote.<sup>66</sup> Though much of the Black establishment had come around by 1988, their support remained tepid, while a few white politicians, notably Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina, endorsed strategically.

Jackson took special aim at party rules. He won eighteen percent of the total primary vote in 1984 but garnered only nine percent of the delegates, having often failed to meet district-level delegate thresholds or to qualify for “winner take more” bonuses.<sup>67</sup> With his convention majority

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<sup>62</sup> On these themes, see Allen D. Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent: Jesse Jackson, Pat Robertson, and the Resurgence of Populism* (Washington: CQ Press, 1993), 58-80 and 260-265. This interpretation is largely compatible with the leading critical treatment, Adolph L. Reed, Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

<sup>63</sup> Jesse L. Jackson, *Straight from the Heart*, eds. Roger D. Hatch and Frank E. Watkins (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987), 49. This speech, “Liberation and Justice: A Call for Redefinition, Refocus, and Rededication,” is an excellent distillation of Jackson’s worldview.

<sup>64</sup> Manning Marable, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London: Verso, 1985), 254-282.

<sup>65</sup> Gerald Boyd, “Black Churches a Mainspring of Jackson’s Efforts,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1984, A24. See also Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., “Theology Under the Rainbow,” *The Witness*, May 1984, 6-9; Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent*, 120-132.

<sup>66</sup> E.J. Dionne, Jr., “Jackson’s Share of Votes by Whites Triples in ‘88,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1988, B7.

<sup>67</sup> Robert C. Smith and Joseph P. McCormick II, “The Challenge of a Black Presidential Candidacy (1984): An Assessment,” *New Directions*, April 1985, 28.

tenuous, Walter Mondale acceded to many of Jackson's platform demands but did not budge on delegate allocation. Four years later, by contrast, Dukakis had a hefty majority going into the convention and yearned for a drama-free gathering. Jackson's forces garnered a deal for strict proportional representation above a 15-percent district threshold.<sup>68</sup> That rule has remained ever since.

Ultimately, the Jackson campaigns cut in multiple directions. After he pried open the national party citadels, his supporters eagerly sought to harness the power they had struggled so hard to win. Two Jackson aides, Ron Brown and Donna Brazile, later chaired the Democratic National Committee (DNC). When, in 2018, the DNC voted to disempower superdelegates in the presidential nominating process, Brazile captured the anger that many Black Democratic elites felt at the move: "I realize that many people have felt left out. Part of the reason is that they have not participated, worked and fought to the same degree as many other people ... I earned my place at this table. Hell, I helped build the table."<sup>69</sup> In radical politics, by contrast, Jackson's disdain for mainstream Democrats' transactional politics would, with the 2016 candidacy of his 1988 supporter Bernie Sanders, harden into a call for rejection rather than transformation of the central organs of party. And finally, for many seeking to square the circle of party commitment and radical change in the twenty-first century, Jackson's campaigns now stand as a model—audacious but not utopian—to build a multiracial populism.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Taylor, "Democratic Panel Votes New Rules," *Washington Post*, June 26, 1988, A1; Larry Eichel, "Jackson Gets Rule Change on Delegates," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 26, 1988, A1. For longer context, see Elaine Kamarck, *Primary Politics: Everything You Need to Know about How America Nominates Its Presidential Candidates*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 87-124.

<sup>69</sup> Donna Brazile, "Democrats stripped my superpowers. Now I'm a notch above a coin toss," *USA Today*, August 31, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Jamelle Bouie, "Keep Hope Alive," *Slate*, November 27, 2016, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/cover\\_story/2016/11/jesse\\_jackson\\_s\\_presidential\\_campaigns\\_offering\\_a\\_road\\_map\\_for\\_democrats\\_in.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/11/jesse_jackson_s_presidential_campaigns_offering_a_road_map_for_democrats_in.html); Grim, *We've Got People*.

No account of Democratic listlessness and muted prophecy can fail to emphasize the fate of the party's venerable partners in organized labor, which were devastated in the decades since Reagan's election.<sup>71</sup> On a September afternoon in 1981, the house of labor summoned a show of force a quarter-million strong on the National Mall: Solidarity Day. Lane Kirkland, the union bureaucrat who had succeeded the crusty George Meany at the helm of the AFL-CIO two years prior, sought to mend fences with potential allies, marching arm-in-arm with Eleanor Smeal of NOW, Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP, and Coretta Scott King. But Solidarity Day was a swan song. The extent of labor's trouble came clear quickly, symbolized in Reagan's firing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization workers involved in a wildcat strike later that month.<sup>72</sup> Also in 1981, the left-liberal umbrella group Progressive Alliance, founded by United Auto Workers president Doug Fraser and largely underwritten by the union, shuttered in the wake of Chrysler's bankruptcy and an industry-wide wave of plant closings.<sup>73</sup>

Kirkland's strategy was to manage union decline more than to counter it.<sup>74</sup> The AFL-CIO worked closely with congressional Democrats, modernizing its lobbying operation and embracing the new PAC game with gusto.<sup>75</sup> The federation held the line after 1981 on hostile

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<sup>71</sup> For general histories, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *The State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2013), 141-296; and Timothy J. Minchin, *Labor Under Fire: A History of the AFL-CIO Since 1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). On the labor-Democratic partnership, see Taylor E. Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1999); and Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), esp. 172-97 and 242-56.

<sup>72</sup> Joseph A. McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Battista, *The Revival of Labor Liberalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 96-97; Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, "Liberal Alliance Falls Apart at Strange Time," *Washington Star*, March 23, 1981, 3.

<sup>74</sup> For a good statement of his worldview, see Lane Kirkland, "'It Has All Been Said Before...'" in *Unions in Transition: Entering the Second Century*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1986), 393-404.

<sup>75</sup> Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats*, 141-57; Marick F. Masters, Robert S. Atkin, and John Thomas Delaney, "Unions, Political Action, and Public Policies: A Review of the Past Decade," *Policy Studies Journal* 18 (1989): 471-80.

legislation from Congress, though its substantive agenda was defensive and frequently particularistic. For their part, progressive unions sustained their alliance with left-liberal activists—funding, for example, organizer Heather Booth’s federated network of public interest and community action groups, Citizen Action, which became a major player in Democratic get-out-the-vote operations in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>76</sup> But if organized labor and the Democrats resumed their operational partnership, the broader struggle to build an inclusive coalition advanced only fitfully.<sup>77</sup>

### Varieties of Moderation: Southerners, Ataris, New Democrats

Two tributaries, one southern and the other predominantly northern and western, fed into the faction of moderate “New Democrats” that came to prominence by decade’s end. Most of the politicians who would found the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) hailed from the Greater South, and saw modernizing the party in a battle against doctrinaire liberals as the way to preserve Democrats’ footing in the region. Largely eschewing the open dissension practiced by the Boll Weevils, white southern moderates sought to sustain the makeshift alliances in post-Jim Crow Democratic politics among ancestral party loyalists, elites in the rising Sun Belt,<sup>78</sup> and, as decidedly junior partners, African-Americans. This meant a political appeal that touted “middle-class values” to win back disaffected constituencies.<sup>79</sup> As late as 1986, David Broder could still

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<sup>76</sup> Harry C. Boyte, Heather Booth, and Steve Max, *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>77</sup> Addressing the AFL-CIO convention in November 1981, Tip O’Neill deployed a redolent phrase. “Some of you are old enough to remember the 1930s and when, together, we made America great. Together, the Democrats and labor made a middle-class America.” Warren Brown, “Democrats and AFL-CIO Leaders Hold a Love Feast,” *Washington Post*, November 18, 1981, A8.

<sup>78</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt : Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>79</sup> Al From, “Democrats in the Center,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 3, 1996.

report from “rural Democratic courthouses where ‘Daddy is sheriff and Bubba is his deputy.’”<sup>80</sup>

But in fits and starts, then accelerating from 1994 onward, the tides of demographic party sorting would overwhelm southern Democratic coalitions and party power.<sup>81</sup>

The second moderate tributary emerged from what Samuel Huntington termed a “New Affluent” stratum in Democratic politics.<sup>82</sup> Hailing from high-tech, upscale suburbs of the North and West and championing a new growth politics that foreswore the pork barrel, these Democrats wielded out-with-the-old generational rhetoric to attack long-sacrosanct New Deal shibboleths. At once evoking and drawing a contrast with neoconservatism, their journalistic guru Charlie Peters propounded the moniker “neoliberals” for them,<sup>83</sup> while Tip O’Neill’s quippy aide Chris Matthews coined an alternative label at a DC brunch in 1982 that spread fast: “Atari Democrats.”<sup>84</sup> Matthews’s term tweaked the obsession with technology and post-industrial economic development that colored the proposals and intraparty critiques of office-holders like Gary Hart and Tim Wirth of Colorado, Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts, and Bill Bradley of New Jersey.

Though geographically diverse, their politics reflected a broadly similar suburban and educated voter base, part of the slow shuffling of white partisan alignments underway across the country. “Wirth or Les Aspin [of Wisconsin] could come from a hundred different districts

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<sup>80</sup> David S. Broder, “Republicans Gain Strength in Region’s Political Cauldron,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 1986, A1.

<sup>81</sup> Compare Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); and James M. Glaser, *The Hand of the Past in Contemporary Southern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>82</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Visions of the Democratic Party,” *Public Interest* 79 (Spring 1985), 64.

<sup>83</sup> See Charles Peters, “A Neo-Liberal’s Manifesto,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 1982. Though the substantive overlap is clear, Peters’s parochial and time-bound meaning of the term should be distinguished from the broader transnational concept.

<sup>84</sup> Randall Rothenberg, *The Neoliberals: Creating the New American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 79. See also John B. Judis, “Neoliberals: High-Tech Politics for the ’80s?,” *The Progressive*, October 1982; and Patrick Andelic, *Donkey Work: Congressional Democrats in Conservative America, 1974-1994* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 150-180.

around the country,” Matthews remarked. “The new-breed guys went away to college. They became unrooted.”<sup>85</sup> On cultural and “postmaterialist” issues like ecology and consumer protection, neoliberals generally took outspoken liberal positions. Hart’s political genesis as manager of George McGovern’s 1972 presidential campaign was no aberration—a strong dose of the New Politics suffused the neoliberals’ approach. “I had a base among environmentalists and anti-war activists, because I was up front on those issues, as I was on gay rights and women’s rights,” Tsongas explained. “I had those groups in place, and then I moved on to the business community.”<sup>86</sup>

That “business community” was key: it was political economy, not culture, that the neoliberals stressed. They reveled in a rhetoric of sober realism, hard choices, and rejection of “class warfare.”<sup>87</sup> Failure to adapt to new economic realities with “tough, fresh policies,” Tsongas insisted in 1980, threatened to “reduce liberalism to an interesting dissertation topic for historians.”<sup>88</sup> Globalization and the supplanting of manufacturing by services—“an economic transformation as significant as the Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,” Hart declared in 1982<sup>89</sup>—had together rendered the New Deal-Keynesian synthesis obsolete. In its stead, neoliberals sought to foster innovation and nurture growth sectors like high-tech.<sup>90</sup>

The Ataris saw in contemporary Democratic practice the perverse tendency to prop up declining industries while ignoring emerging ones. The debate over the federal bailout of Chrysler in 1979 proved a crucible for them; Hart opposed it, while Tsongas and others made

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<sup>85</sup> Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (New York: Random House, 1988), 135.

<sup>86</sup> William Schneider, “JFK’s Children: The Class of ’74,” *The Atlantic*, March 1989, 46.

<sup>87</sup> Les AuCoin, quoted in Schneider, “JFK’s Children,” 42.

<sup>88</sup> Paul E. Tsongas, “Update Liberalism, Or It’s a 60’s Relic,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1980.

<sup>89</sup> Gary Hart, “An Economic Strategy for the 1980s,” February 6, 1982, Box 75, Folder 17, Gary Hart Papers, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colo. Hart presented this at the annual Issues Conference of the House Democratic Caucus.

<sup>90</sup> Brent Cebul, “Supply-Side Liberalism: Fiscal Crisis, Post-Industrial Policy, and the Rise of the New Democrats,” *Modern American History* 2.2 (July 2019): 139-164.



their support conditional on labor concessions. The bailout crystallized neoliberals' political critique of the Democratic Party—less that it supported government interference in the market than that it kowtowed to entrenched interests.<sup>91</sup> It was no coincidence that the very auto-industry bankruptcy that helped neoliberals fortify their factional critique simultaneously prompted the shuttering of labor-liberalism's leading effort at coalitional revival in the Progressive Alliance. Yet notwithstanding their professed opposition to the politics of special interests, neoliberals' close ties to favored corporate sectors only encouraged the deeper incorporation of business into the inner circle of the party-as-broker—what Robert Kuttner in 1985 termed “interest-group neoliberalism.”<sup>92</sup>

In 1985, southern moderates joined with northern Ataris to form the Democratic Leadership Council. For the next two decades, the DLC would serve as the nerve center for a party faction of self-described New Democrats calling on the party of the people to move “beyond the sterile left-right debate.”<sup>93</sup> The DLC's initial leaders were mostly from the South: in the Senate, Lawton Chiles of Florida and Sam Nunn of Georgia and, less centrally, the border-state Joe Biden of Delaware; Governor Chuck Robb of Virginia; Representative Jim Jones of Oklahoma.<sup>94</sup> But the Southerners shared with the Ataris the same essential critique: that the party

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<sup>91</sup> Robert Reich and John D. Donahue, *New Deals: The Chrysler Revival and the American System* (New York: Random House, 1985), 268-297.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Kuttner, “Ass Backwards,” *The New Republic*, April 22, 1985.

<sup>93</sup> Quote from “The New Progressive Declaration: A Political Philosophy for the Information Age,” Progressive Policy Institute, July 10, 1996, <http://web.archive.org/web/20020116151449/http://www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=839>. With the DLC's closure, the group's archives are no longer online, but may be found by using caches of ndol.org from the Wayback Machine at web.archive.org. On the New Democrats, see Jon F. Hale, “The Making of the New Democrats,” *Political Science Quarterly* 110 (1995): 207-232; Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2000); Daniel DiSalvo, “The Death and Life of the New Democrats,” *The Forum* 6:2 (Summer 2008), Article 4: 1-18; Curtis Atkins, “Forging a New Democratic Party: The Politics of the Third Way from Clinton to Obama,” PhD dissertation, York University, 2015; Stephanie Mudge, *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 260-303.

<sup>94</sup> Though he soon moved toward a more protectionist stance on trade and left the DLC's central orbit, Representative Dick Gephardt of Missouri served as the group's first chair. Paul Taylor, “Democrats' New Centrists

had become a passive broker for the organized demands of labor, identity groups, and big-government constituencies—“the party of caucuses,” bemoaned Chiles. “A caucus for every group but Middle America.”<sup>95</sup>

The New Democrats maintained two consistent targets of factional criticism. First came organized labor, both as actor in the political economy and linchpin of the old liberal coalition. The DLC, largely led by politicians from right-to-work states, sought labor-management cooperation rather than what it deemed a conflictual model from another age.<sup>96</sup> The second antagonist, more intense but also more amorphous, was the New Politics. New Dems saw coarsened permissiveness and the liberal tendency to explain away antisocial behavior as political legacies of the 1960s that repelled the mainstream. As the DLC put it in its 1990 New Orleans Declaration, “We believe in preventing crime and punishing criminals, not in explaining away their behavior. We believe the purpose of social welfare is to bring the poor into the nation’s economic mainstream, not to maintain them in dependence.”<sup>97</sup> One figure in particular epitomized the worst in those tendencies: Jesse Jackson, whom the DLC pointedly refused to invite to its conventions leading up to the 1992 presidential race.<sup>98</sup>

After Michael Dukakis’s defeat, the DLC established a new think tank, the Progressive Policy Institute, which published in September 1989 the New Democrats’ most important document: “The Politics of Evasion: Democrats and the Presidency,” by William Galston and Elaine Ciulla Kamarck. The authors were political scientists who had met on Mondale’s

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Preen for '88,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 1985, A1; Phil Gailey, “Frankly, Democrats Want the South,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1986, B8.

<sup>95</sup> Janet Hook, “Officials Seek Moderation in Party’s Image,” *CQ Weekly Report*, March 9, 1985, 457.

<sup>96</sup> For the factional debate, see Jeff Faux, “The Myth of the New Democrats,” *American Prospect*, Fall 1993; and Will Marshall, “Friend or Faux,” *American Prospect*, Winter 1994.

<sup>97</sup> “The New Orleans Declaration: Statement Endorsed at the Fourth Annual DLC Conference,” Democratic Leadership Council, March 1990,

<http://web.archive.org/web/20030526020448/http://www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=878>.

<sup>98</sup> Robert A. Jordan, “DLC Gets Jesse Jackson’s Dander Up,” *Boston Globe*, May 5, 1991.

campaign, but hardly embraced a repeat of his politics. Three successive presidential defeats made the crisis plain, they argued. Mobilization was no answer. “The real problem is not insufficient liberalism on the part of the Democratic nominees; it is rather the fact that during the last two decades, most Democratic nominees have come to be seen as unacceptably liberal.” There was a call to factional arms more than a substantive vision. “Eventually,” they warned their fellow moderates in elective office, “the massive political realignment at the top of the ticket will affect races at the bottom of the ticket.”<sup>99</sup>

Growing polarization helped ensure that New Democrats’ party legacy would be mixed. On the one hand, they favored expanding the scope of market, rather than governmental, authority, and rarely defended politics as the way to allocate resources. They consistently urged Democratic candidates to go after political independents.<sup>100</sup> But they never went so far as to disavow partisan commitment itself. Whether or not they were Republicans Lite in substance, New Democrats always framed their core project as rescuing the Democratic Party from itself. When DLC chief Al From trumpeted the New Democrats’ achievements, he gave a backhanded homage to his political party. Were it not for the New Democrats, he claimed, the party might “have gone the way of the Whigs.”<sup>101</sup>

### Party-Building as a Double-Edged Sword

As factional actors in the 1980s battled fitfully over the party’s vision, Democrats attempted across several fronts to meet their organizational challenges. “Needless to say,”

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<sup>99</sup> William Galston and Elaine Ciulla Kamarek, “The Politics of Evasion: Democrats and the Presidency,” Progressive Policy Institute, 1989, 3, 14. [https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Politics\\_of\\_Evasion.pdf](https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Politics_of_Evasion.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> Al From and Will Marshall, “The Road to Realignment: Democrats and Perot Voters,” Democratic Leadership Council, July 1993, <https://web.archive.org/web/20010729020122/http://www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=2446>.

<sup>101</sup> Atkins, “Forging a New Democratic Party,” 116. See also From, *The New Democrats*, 249-250.

O’Neill aide Kirk O’Donnell wrote in a strategy memo to the DNC in early 1981, “the Democrats are in trouble.”<sup>102</sup> On this, all party factions agreed, and endorsed O’Donnell’s push to professionalize the national committee as a service party for office-seekers. By decade’s end the party would prove better armored, funded, and organized at the top—but ever more sapped of prophetic purpose.

O’Donnell also sought to “promote greater participation of Members of Congress, Governors, Mayors and State Legislatures” in party affairs. The debacle of the Carter presidency helped account for the breadth and diversity of support for this unambiguous reversal of a key McGovern-Fraser tenet. Taking office-holders out of the nominating process, so the argument went, had served to destroy the connective tissue between the presidency, Congress, and subnational actors that party institutions historically provided. The surprisingly uncontested dismantling of the party’s midterm issues conventions represented one such reassertion of officials’ intraparty clout, which also represented a victory for their more cautious political outlook relative to that of the liberal activists that McGovern-Fraser reforms had advantaged.<sup>103</sup> The same impulse could be seen in the work of the Commission on Presidential Nomination, which created 550 new unpledged ex officio convention delegates, eventually known as superdelegates.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Enclosed in Kirk O’Donnell memo to Al Barkan, Dick Moe, and Paul Kirk, undated, Box 22, Fodler KOD: DNC Information, 1980-1981, O’Neill Papers.

<sup>103</sup> Ann Lewis memo to Eugene Eidenberg, Ron Brown, Bill Sweeney, Mike Steed, Bob Neuman, April 11, 1981, and undated “Recommendations from Mid-Term Task Force to Chairman Manatt,” both in Box 1043, Democratic National Committee (DNC) Papers, National Archives, Washington, D.C.. (This collection is unprocessed; many folders are unlabeled.)

<sup>104</sup> “Report of the Commission on Presidential Nomination,” adopted Feb 5, 1982, p. 16, Box 1073, Folder “Hunt Commission,” DNC Papers.

Nowhere was the sense of crisis wrought by Reagan's election more acutely felt, or met with efforts of such portentous consequence, than in the realm of party finance.<sup>105</sup> In the 1980 cycle, the RNC had raised five times as much money as the DNC.<sup>106</sup> (A year later the DNC would still be paying off the debt accrued *during the 1968 campaign*.)<sup>107</sup> In Congress the disparities approached the comical: the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) raised just over \$2.8 million and its Senate counterpart \$1.6 million in 1980, compared to \$20.3 million and \$22.3 million, respectively, on the GOP side.<sup>108</sup> Democrats of all stripes grew newly open to crash-financing efforts to close the gap.

The quickest route was big money, and Democrats, Willie Sutton-like, went there. The DNC under chairman Charles Manatt institutionalized major donors' participation in party affairs through a Democratic Labor Council and a Democratic Business Council—membership in the latter costing \$10,000 in individual contributions or \$15,000 from PACs. Manatt's successor, Paul Kirk, offered in 1985 what a conference program dubbed a “stockholders' report” to Business Council members, extolling the council as the “backbone of the Democratic Party's finances, and its intellectual resources.”<sup>109</sup>

The major locus of transformative change in party financing was found in the rejuvenated congressional campaign arms, particularly the DCCC during the chairmanship of the party's “Dr. Faustus,” Tony Coelho.<sup>110</sup> The central Californian ascended to his position after a single term in Congress, touting turbocharged fundraising as the answer to Democrats' existential fears after

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<sup>105</sup> Timothy Clark, “The RNC Prospers, the DNC Struggles As They Face the 1980 Election,” *National Journal*, September 27, 1980, 1617-21.

<sup>106</sup> Paul S. Herrnson, *Party Campaigning in the 1980s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 33.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Kelly remarks, Executive Committee meeting, May 8, 1981, Box 1043, DNC Papers.

<sup>108</sup> Herrnson, *Party Campaigning in the 1980s*, 33.

<sup>109</sup> Brooks Jackson, “Democrats Court Small Band of Business Donors Who Contribute Advice Along with Needed Cash,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 1985.

<sup>110</sup> Kuttner, “Ass Backwards.”

the 1980 election. Prior to Coelho's tenure, the committee raised most of its funds at a single annual gala, then divvied up the proceeds equally among members. Coelho centralized the allocation of the growing largesse, concentrating on vulnerable incumbents.<sup>111</sup> Key to his strategy was Democrats' retention of House control, however nominal, and the party's 1982 gains bolstered the force of his pitch: Ante up to an incumbent governing party that wasn't going anywhere soon.<sup>112</sup> "Business has to deal with us whether they want to or not," he explained with characteristic bluntness. "I tell them, 'You're going to need to work with us.'"<sup>113</sup>

Coelho's overtures both depended on and in turn exacerbated the party's characteristic tendency to take all comers—to prize inclusion of interests over programmatic coherence or conviction. "I cannot buy the argument by any special interest groups," Coelho wrote to Jim Jones, "that Members of our party are not supportive of some of their concerns—after all is not our umbrella rather large?"<sup>114</sup> Even the Congressional Black Caucus, the "Conscience of the Congress" on the party's left, played along, as the CBC's foundation wing took in large corporate donations to underwrite its internship program and lavish annual legislative conferences.<sup>115</sup> By the 1986 election cycle, House Democrats had come to receive 63 percent of all PAC money, including 48 percent of corporate PAC contributions and 52 percent of those from trade association PACs.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>Gary C. Jacobson, "Party Organization and Distribution of Campaign Resources: Republicans and Democrats in 1982," *Political Science Quarterly* 100.4 (Winter 1985-1986): 603-605.

<sup>112</sup> Brooks Jackson, *Honest Graft: Big Money and the American Political Process* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 77.

<sup>113</sup> Kuttner, "Ass Backwards."

<sup>114</sup> Coelho to Jones, March 27, 1981, Box 24, "Kirk O'Donnell Files: DCCC—Correspondence, Mailings & Memos, Jan.-July 1981," O'Neill Papers.

<sup>115</sup> The tobacco industry proved a particularly active partner in these decades, giving \$175,000 to the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation in 1987 alone. Myron Levin, "Women, Blacks Courted: Big Tobacco Buying New Friendships," *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1988.

<sup>116</sup> Jackson, *Honest Graft*, 93.

Though the degree to which the money chase compromised governance and party practice can be exaggerated,<sup>117</sup> the blatancy of the new arrangements contributed to a pervasive sense of decadence. Coelho set the tone. With O’Neill’s permission, he organized a “Speaker’s Club,” for which membership, priced at \$5,000 per individual or \$15,000 per PAC, “would entitle the participants to regular meetings and social activities with the Speaker and Members of the Leadership including committee chairmen.”<sup>118</sup> (“I look upon my Club members as friends and advisors,” O’Neill wrote a long-distance telephone company executive. “When you come to Washington, I want you to visit me and my congressional colleagues and keep us informed of your concerns.”)<sup>119</sup> The open talk about how policymaking would affect fundraising prompted disquiet among the squeamish. “People aren’t embarrassed about saying this anymore,” one House Democrat told Elizabeth Drew. “I’m no Common Causer, but this stuff has really been bothering me.”<sup>120</sup>

Ron Brown’s tenure as the DNC’s first African American chairman, from 1989 to 1993, brought all the pieces together. A former Urban League official turned lobbyist at Patton Boggs and Blow, Brown joined Jesse Jackson’s 1988 campaign before launching a race to succeed Kirk at the DNC. Once in command, Brown took the Democratic institutionalist’s ethic of inclusivity to a new level, dodging programmatic questions and process reforms alike and showering state

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<sup>117</sup> Compare Philip A. Klinkner, *The Losing Parties: Out-Party National Committees, 1956-1993* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 168-171; and Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 141-145.

<sup>118</sup> Tony Coelho to Fred Richmond, March 27, 1981, Box 24, “Kirk O’Donnell Files: DCCC—Correspondence, Mailings & Memos, Jan.-July 1981,” O’Neill Papers.

<sup>119</sup> Tip O’Neill to John R. Barnes, November 6, 1981, Box 24, “Kirk O’Donnell Files: DCCC—Correspondence, Mailings & Memos, Aug.-Dec. 1981,” O’Neill Papers.

<sup>120</sup> Elizabeth Drew, “Politics and Money – I,” *The New Yorker*, December 6, 1982.

parties and candidates with resources.<sup>121</sup> Lavish “finance council weekends” buttered up the party’s donors.<sup>122</sup>

The financial improvements, along with the retreat from programmatic work and factional brokerage, had rendered the national Democratic organization a full-fledged service party.<sup>123</sup> A new political class grew up around it. “Money mechanics”<sup>124</sup> skilled in the task of bundling large donations and connecting them to relevant office-holders kept the dollars flowing. The party organizations linked office-seekers with for-profit suppliers of electoral services, preeminently television advertising, midwifing the rise of a consultant class and a new preoccupation with messaging.<sup>125</sup>

### Neoliberalism and Polarization in the Clinton Years

As Galston and Kamarck had emphasized in “The Politics of Evasion,” the presidential-level realignment threatened to shake up partisan affiliations down-ballot, and “southern politicians know this better than anyone.” Their analysis converged on a core prescription: the party should nominate a moderate for the presidency, aiming straight at disillusioned white voters turned off by “racial reductionism” and “the white liberal elites who increasingly dominate national party and presidential politics.”<sup>126</sup> Their charge would form the basis for Bill

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<sup>121</sup> Menefee-Libey, *Triumph of Campaign-Centered Politics*, 108-110; Anthony Corrado, “The Politics of Cohesion: The Role of the National Party Committees in the 1992 Election,” in *The State of the Parties*, eds. John C. Green and Daniel Shea (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), esp. 66-71.

<sup>122</sup> Bob Farmer remarks, Executive Committee meeting, May 1, 1989, Box 187, DNC Papers.

<sup>123</sup> Xandra Kayden and Eddie Mahe, Jr., *The Party Goes On* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Herrnson, *Party Campaigning in the 1980s*; David Menefee-Libey, *The Triumph of Campaign-Centered Politics* (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000).

<sup>124</sup> Kuttner, “Ass Backwards.”

<sup>125</sup> Larry Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Robin Kolodny, “Electoral Partnerships: Political Consultants and Political Parties,” in *Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections*, eds. James A. Thurber and Candice J. Nelson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 110-133.

<sup>126</sup> Galston and Kamarck, “The Politics of Evasion,” 14, 17.



Clinton's candidacy. Clinton served as chair of the DLC in 1990 and 1991, taking up the chance to make new contacts, and to hone the core New Democratic themes of opportunity, responsibility, and community to which he would return time and again through the next decade.<sup>127</sup>

Presidentialism more than party-building defined both the New Democrats' factional activity and the formal party's approach during the Clinton years. "We don't care about the party apparatus," Al From said in 1992. "What we care about is what this party says, and what its candidates stand for." As his ally Rob Shapiro, a Clinton economic adviser, put it, "What we've done in the Democratic Party is an intellectual leveraged buyout."<sup>128</sup> Though New Democrats had their Tocquevillean streak, they never included parties among the little platoons they wished to empower or treated them as civic institutions rather than factional battlegrounds.<sup>129</sup> The DNC, for its part, operated as an adjunct to the Clinton White House and its immediate priorities.<sup>130</sup> Its unlimited "soft money" went largely to television, under the fig leaf of "issue advocacy"—not bricks-and-mortar party-building.<sup>131</sup> In the blur of prosperity and Clintonian charm, Democratic cohesion, such as it was, emerged as a byproduct of Republicans' sustained assaults.

The New Democrats' major policy victories, most notably the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1993 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities

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<sup>127</sup> Bill Clinton, "Keynote Address of Gov. Bill Clinton to the DLC's Cleveland Convention," May 6, 1991, <http://web.archive.org/web/20010513055339/http://www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=3166>. See also the "New American Choice Resolution" adopted at the convention, [https://web.archive.org/web/20040313082824/http://www.ndol.org/documents/cleveland\\_proclamation.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20040313082824/http://www.ndol.org/documents/cleveland_proclamation.pdf); Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*, 163-92; and From, *The New Democrats*, 131-59.

<sup>128</sup> Lloyd Grove, "Al From, the Life of the Party," *Washington Post*, July 24, 1992, D1.

<sup>129</sup> Among the DLC's various manifestoes, The New Democrat Credo well captures this communitarian impulse. "The New Democrat Credo," Democratic Leadership Council, May 1998, <http://web.archive.org/web/20010528150505/http://ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=533>.

<sup>130</sup> Daniel Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 225-46.

<sup>131</sup> Anthony Corrado, "Party Soft Money," in *Campaign Finance Reform: A Sourcebook*, ed. Anthony Corrado (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1996), 169.

Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, would come about not by persuading internal adversaries but by making common cause with Republicans.<sup>132</sup> In every case but NAFTA,<sup>133</sup> those successes took place under divided government, when Democratic congressional leaders had lost their power to stop votes on legislation that would divide the party. Indeed, the paradox for New Democrats was that their greatest policy triumphs took place after their ranks began to deplete. The GOP rout of 1994—gaining 54 House seats, six Senate seats, and control of both chambers—hit old-line conservative and moderate Democrats who had survived thanks to split-ticket voting. If bipartisan deals and Clinton’s “triangulation” dominated the short term, the old moderates’ departure would push the party leftwards in the long run.

The boom years of the 1990s saw the type of finance politics that supercharged top-end inequality become a serious force inside the Democratic Party, and Wall Street donors underwrote the party’s new fizzy prosperity politics. The super-rich of the New Gilded Age, while mainly Republican, counted plenty of Democrats among their ranks. They had decidedly more liberal preferences on abortion, gay rights, and the environment than on the role of government to help the needy and to stimulate employment.<sup>134</sup> The macroeconomic orthodoxy touted by economic advisor-turned-Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin set the fiscal and ideological parameters of such electoral appeals.<sup>135</sup> Supporting business confidence came first. That meant not only reducing the deficit to avoid crowding out private borrowing but also eschewing any saber-rattling against rising inequality. For swing voters, Rubin counseled, “class

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<sup>132</sup> In 1996 alone, this story described not only the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, but also the Prison Litigation Reform Act; the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act; the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act; and the Defense of Marriage Act.

<sup>133</sup> NAFTA was negotiated under George H.W. Bush, with a requirement for an up-or-down vote in Congress.

<sup>134</sup> Benjamin I. Page, Jason Seawright, and Matthew J. Lacombe, *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Benjamin I. Page, Larry M. Bartels, and Jason Seawright, “Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2013): 51-73.

<sup>135</sup> For a good profile, see John B. Judis, “Old Master,” *The New Republic*, December 13, 1993, 21-28.

conflict is not an effective approach.”<sup>136</sup> The DLC had built bridges to Wall Street,<sup>137</sup> but the role of finance was not simply a factional one. Rubin, for one, had cut his political teeth chairing the 1982 annual dinner for the DCCC under Tony Coelho, and advised Walter Mondale on strategy to announce a tax increase in order to attack the deficit.<sup>138</sup>

As southern ranks diminished after 1994, New Democrats looked increasingly to upscale suburbs regardless of geography. In a 1997 poll, Mark Penn, the New Democrats’ favored pollster, divided moderates into two camps. For downscale “Suburban Values Voters,” the trick was cutting into Republicans’ advantages on issues like welfare and crime. The real growth area, however, came from the professional “New Economy Dems.”<sup>139</sup> The DLC embraced these voters in heralding the party’s move out of the “Industrial Age,” its preferred term for the New Deal era,<sup>140</sup> into the “Information Age.”<sup>141</sup> It was a suburban politics that picked up on some of the Ataris’ softer postmaterial concerns without their gloom-and-doom about economic decline or priggish opposition to pandering.

Yet the plutocrats and “Patio Man”<sup>142</sup> should not be conflated. Both sets of actors benefited from free markets and free trade and shared a distaste for unions and taxes, it is true. And affluent suburbanites were certainly not budging on the exclusionary local politics of

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<sup>136</sup> Robert E. Rubin and Jacob Weisberg, *In an Uncertain World: Tough Choices from Wall Street to Washington* (New York: Random House, 2003), 353. See also Laura Tyson, “A Squandered Legacy,” *Prospect*, April 20, 2004.

<sup>137</sup> Paul Starobin, “An Affair to Remember?,” *National Journal*, January 16, 1993, 121; see also “Bill Clinton’s Policy Network,” *National Journal*, May 9, 1992; “The Money Men,” *New York*, July 13, 1992, 48; Michael Steinhardt, *No Bull: My Life In and Out of Markets* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), 209-18.

<sup>138</sup> Susan Dentzer, “Walter Mondale Learns a Lesson,” *Newsweek*, October 22, 1984, 77.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Grier, “Democrats’ Values Moving to Suburbs,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 27, 1997, 1.

<sup>140</sup> The DLC’s “Hyde Park Declaration,” adopted at a meeting on FDR’s estate in 2000, praised “Roosevelt’s thirst for innovation” rather than the substance of his policies, and mentioned the New Deal only in the context of the New Deal generation’s passing. Democratic Leadership Council, “The Hyde Park Declaration: A Statement of Principles and a Policy Agenda for the 21st Century,” August 2000,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20071028010903/http://www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=1926>.

<sup>141</sup> See, e.g., Al From, “The New Democratic Platform,” *The New Democrat*, September/October 1996, 12-14. For a critical take, see Robert Dreyfuss, “How the DLC Does It,” *American Prospect*, April 23, 2001, 20-25.

<sup>142</sup> Reference is to David Brooks, “Patio Man and the Sprawl People,” *Weekly Standard*, August 12, 2002.

housing and education.<sup>143</sup> But, fundamentally, the financialization and deregulation that powered the fractal inequality of the New Gilded Age offered less to the “Rising Learning Class”<sup>144</sup> than to the super-rich. Those divisions remained in the background during the long boom of the 1990s. After the Great Recession, as college-educated white Democrats moved sharply leftwards, the hedge funders and the knowledge workers would espouse very different visions for the Democratic Party.

Bill Clinton’s impeachment put an end to the New Democrats’ moment in the sun and laid bare the accumulated impact of party polarization. It was the long-scorned liberals who came earliest and loudest to Clinton’s defense, as they watched the right-wing attack machine in action. “Now that you’ve been screwed by your friends,” one liberal senator reportedly told Clinton in a phone conversation during the Lewinsky imbroglio, “you may want to talk to some of those you took for granted.”<sup>145</sup> The fight had an important policy byproduct, as the New Democrats’ last great goal for the Clinton years—adding individual private accounts to Social Security—remained unfulfilled.<sup>146</sup> The coalition that had passed welfare reform could not make another go. When privatization again rose to the top of the agenda in 2005, a new House Democratic leader would, as in 1982, rally to the program’s defense.<sup>147</sup>

### Conclusion: Partisanship without Party-Building in the New Century

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<sup>143</sup> Lily Geismer and Matthew D. Lassiter, “Turning Affluent Suburbs Blue Isn’t Worth the Cost,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2018, SR7.

<sup>144</sup> William A. Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck, “5 Realities That Will Shape 21st Century Politics,” *Blueprint*, Fall 1998, 8.

<sup>145</sup> Jackie Calmes, “Fast Friends: Clinton’s Best Allies Now Are the Liberals He Spurned in the Past,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 1998, A1.

<sup>146</sup> Robert J. Shapiro, “A New Deal on Social Security,” in *Building the Bridge: 10 Big Ideas to Transform America*, ed. Will Marshall (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 39-56.

<sup>147</sup> Steven M. Teles and Martha Derthick, “Social Security from 1980 to the Present: From Third Rail to Presidential Commitment—and Back?” in *Conservatism and American Political Development*, eds. Brian J. Glenn and Steven M. Teles (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 261-290.

If, in the later twentieth century, polarization shored up left-liberal forces at the base of the Democratic Party while neoliberalism constricted the party's movement and vision, the relative valence of both effects shifted during the turbulence of the early twenty-first. A radicalizing GOP gradually compelled Democrats to get serious about partisan battle, while an era of economic crisis begat a resurgent Democratic left and a newly quiescent center. Yet the questions from the Democratic Strategy Council in 1981 remained potent ones. Campaign costs and changing demographic coalitions together challenged the party's commitment to, in the Council's words, "the needs and hopes of middle and lower-income Americans." And the party's pledge to inclusiveness remained its own sort of pathology, more often a thin claim to take all comers than a thick vision of universalism. As they searched for what the Council had called "common denominators," Democrats still found themselves groping in the dark.

The rediscovery of partisanship—as a fact of contemporary politics, a tool to utilize, and even a normative good<sup>148</sup>—served as the key theme for Democratic actors during George W. Bush's presidency. This ethic, and its attendant skepticism of interparty compromise, came to be adopted by an array of actors in the years to come, spurring a flurry of institution-building, much of it funded by newly energized megadonors,<sup>149</sup> innovations in activism and fundraising, and reenergized congressional opposition under Nancy Pelosi and, starting in 2005, Harry Reid. Congressional Democrats found their sea legs in 2005 offering a stand-pat defense of their New Deal birthright, beating Bush's privatization plan for Social Security. The fight highlighted both the efficacy of legislative party discipline as well as the limitations of congressional leadership as a locus of positive, as opposed to defensive, party leadership.

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<sup>148</sup> Nick Penniman, "Goodbye to All That," *The American Prospect*, November 6, 2002.

<sup>149</sup> Matt Bai, *The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers, and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

Likewise outside of Congress, Democrats' revival of partisanship hit hard limits. The newfound zeal did not entail new programmatic or ideological commitments. "Netroots" activists, reveling in keyboard combat while showcasing the internet's extraordinary potential for political organizing and small-donor fundraising, offered a case in point.<sup>150</sup> For all their gate-crashing rhetoric, they touted their own ideological flexibility and political realism, happy to support moderate candidates in red districts and states.<sup>151</sup> The netroots converged on the same diagnoses as the megadonors, emphasizing communications more than ideological revamping or formal party-building.

The party's most important organizational partner grew closer to it, if not stronger at its base. When John Sweeney of the fast-growing Service Employees International Union replaced Lane Kirkland as AFL-CIO president in 1995, hopes abounded.<sup>152</sup> Labor's political operation ramped up,<sup>153</sup> and the federation leadership, many of whom got their start in the upheavals of the 1960s, worked to heal the breach between the labor movement and the intelligentsia.<sup>154</sup> The effort to push left-liberals to envision a movement embracing the diverse panoply of American workers bore fruit in the new century, as a robust programmatic "laborism" began to flourish in the Democratic Party by the 2010s. Yet labor's membership only further dwindled.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> David Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>151</sup> Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, *Crashing the Gate: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics* (White River, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006).

<sup>152</sup> Harold Meyerson, "Mother Jones Returns," *LA Weekly*, November 3, 1995, 18-23.

<sup>153</sup> James A. Barnes and Richard E. Cohen, "Divided Democrats," *National Journal*, November 15, 1997; Steven Greenhouse, "Despite Defeat On China Bill, Labor Is on Rise," *New York Times*, May 30, 2000.

<sup>154</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, "Revitalizing America's Labor Movement," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 31, 1996, B1; Steven Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman, eds., *Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals, and the Social Reconstruction of America*, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

<sup>155</sup> Jake Rosenfeld, "US Labor Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Understanding Laborism Without Labor," *Annual Review of Sociology* 45 (2019): 449-65; Daniel J. Galvin, "From Labor Law to Employment Law: The Changing Politics of Workers' Rights," *Studies in American Political Development* 33 (2019): 50-86; Rich Yeselson, "How Labor Advocates Pushed the Democratic Party Left," *Dissent*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/how-labor-advocates-pushed-democratic-party-left-democratic-socialism-bernie-sanders-hillary-clinton>.

Barack Obama entered office as the head of a party energized by oppositional activism and, by historical standards, relatively ideologically cohesive—but also unresolved in its sense of a project for power. In short order, Obama’s own post-partisan dream came down to earth given the realities of polarized politics. (Already by December 2008, the ever-caustic Massachusetts Representative Barney Frank complained of suffering from “post-partisan depression.”)<sup>156</sup> Intransigent Republican opposition defined both the two climactic years of unified Democratic control and the six long years of trench warfare amid divided government. The Obama operation disliked carping from what the president’s press secretary in 2010 termed “the professional left,” and in a marked difference with Franklin Roosevelt and even Lyndon Johnson, it discouraged mass movements that would exert grassroots pressure.<sup>157</sup> The multiple transmogrifications of Obama’s 2-million strong 2008 volunteer organization Obama for America exemplified the difficulties of channeling presidentialist activism into partisan action.<sup>158</sup>

Still, Obama’s irritation with the grassroots hardly rose to the heights of Tsongas’s or Hart’s scolding or Clinton’s triangulation. His domestic agenda, moreover, while reflecting deep continuities with Rubinomics, not least in the personnel who fought the Great Recession, outstripped Clinton’s record in ambition and scope on economic stimulus, financial regulation, and healthcare. At the same time, Democratic moderates’ factional influence declined. The DLC shuttered in 2009, having been supplanted as a centrist player by the organization Third Way. In

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<sup>156</sup> Ryan Grim, “Barney Frank has post-partisan depression,” *Politico*, December 22, 2008,

<https://www.politico.com/blogs/politico-now/2008/12/barney-frank-has-post-partisan-depression-014959>

<sup>157</sup> Sam Stein, “Robert Gibbs Clarifies ‘Professional Left’ Criticism, Calls Initial Comments Inartful,” *Huffington Post*, August 10, 2010, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/robert-gibbs-clarifies-pr\\_n\\_676934](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/robert-gibbs-clarifies-pr_n_676934). This is a theme of Grim, *We’ve Got People*; see a revealing anecdote at p. 130.

<sup>158</sup> Sidney M. Milkis and John Warren York, “Barack Obama, Organizing for Action, and Executive-Centered Partisanship,” *Studies in American Political Development* 31 (April 2017): 1-23. See also Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect*, 96-99; Charles Homans, “The Party of Obama,” *Washington Monthly*, January 1, 2010. On the 2008 campaign, see Elizabeth McKenna and Hahrie Han, *Groundbreakers: How Obama’s 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

aiming to counter what it termed “neopopulists”<sup>159</sup> in the party, Third Way made protecting finance a central cause, and the instrumental nature of the organization’s financier-dominated funding was as blatant as its intellectual influence on the party proved lacking.<sup>160</sup>

Even more than Obama, the party politics of Hillary Clinton emerged from the travails of the prior decades—and in few politicians did the twinned, contradictory stories of polarization and neoliberalism run so tightly together. The candidate of the Goldman Sachs speeches also offered, in 2016, the most robustly liberal policy agenda in decades.<sup>161</sup> Her skills combined the technocrat’s attention to policy, incrementalist’s acceptance of half a loaf, and pragmatist’s realism about partisan conflict.<sup>162</sup> The result, not for the first time in this story, was a politics smaller than the sum of its parts.

The other important development in 2016 came as mostly young activists rallied to an old leftwing warhorse, Bernie Sanders, and worked with shocking success to revive a long-dormant radicalism in electoral politics. But neither he nor they showed any greater sense for how a political party might be forged to realize their vision. Most pointedly, the Sanders movement’s approach to party reform and nomination politics, from 2016 through 2020, bespoke the enduring influence of anti-party and New Politics traditions of thought that viewed organizational power itself with deep suspicion.

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<sup>159</sup> Anne Kim, Adam Solomon, Bernard L. Schwartz, Jim Kessler, and Stephen Rose, “The New Rules Economy: A Policy Framework for the 21st Century,” Third Way, February 2007, [http://content.thirdway.org/publications/57/Third\\_Way\\_Report\\_-\\_The\\_New\\_Rules\\_Economy\\_-\\_A\\_Policy\\_Framework\\_for\\_the\\_21st\\_Century.pdf](http://content.thirdway.org/publications/57/Third_Way_Report_-_The_New_Rules_Economy_-_A_Policy_Framework_for_the_21st_Century.pdf). See also Jon Cowan and Jim Kessler, “Economic Populism Is a Dead End for Democrats,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 3, 2013.

<sup>160</sup> Lee Fang, “GOP Donors and K Street Fuel Third Way’s Advice for the Democratic Party,” *The Nation*, December 3, 2013, <https://www.thenation.com/article/gop-donors-and-k-street-fuel-third-ways-advice-democratic-party/#>; Atkins, “Forging a New Democratic Party,” 257-76.

<sup>161</sup> Paul Starr, “What Is Hillary Clinton’s Agenda,” *American Prospect*, Summer 2016, 18-23.

<sup>162</sup> See Ezra Klein, “Hillary Clinton and the Audacity of Political Realism,” *Vox*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/28/10858464/hillary-clinton-bernie-sanders-political-realism>.



Out of the trauma of the 2016 election, green shoots of party revival finally appeared. Grassroots groups across the country began to work with and take over local parties, bringing new life to long-moribund operations.<sup>163</sup> The suburbs, long seen as the burying ground for progressive activism, now nurtured it. Complementary to but largely separate from the mostly white, college-educated women of the Resistance, the youth-led left settled in for the long haul. In contrast to anti-globalization activism, the Nader campaign of 2000, and the Occupy protests of 2011 where so many of the rising leaders had gotten their starts,<sup>164</sup> the newest left accepted the realities of two-party politics.

Perhaps no one more purely embodied the post-New Deal Democratic Party in all its vicissitudes than Joe Biden. For Biden to capture the party's nomination in 2020, at a moment of such open-ended programmatic possibilities and internal fractiousness, proved at once paradoxical and appropriate. In the shambolic means by which he won the nomination, in his notable mix of commitment and visionlessness, and in the sense of permeability that his campaign all but touted to actors with clearer goals for power, Biden offered a supremely fitting stand-in for his party. The horizon had rarely seemed wider, nor the road ahead less clear.

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<sup>163</sup> Lara Putnam and Theda Skocpol, "Middle America Reboots Democracy," *Democracy*, February 20, 2018, <https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/middle-america-reboots-democracy/>; Dana R. Fisher, *American Resistance: From the Women's March to the Blue Wave* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>164</sup> Emily Stewart, "We are (still) the 99 Percent," *Vox*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/23/18284303/occupy-wall-street-bernie-sanders-dsa-socialism>.