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INTERNATIONAL PEACE



RENEWING U.S. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Lessons From Europe and U.S. History

Rachel Kleinfeld

With Richard Youngs and Jonah Belser

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Summary

Democracy in the United States faces a dilemma. Voters feel increasingly unrepresented by both of the dominant parties. Yet these parties now control large swaths of uncompetitive seats at the state and national levels, reducing options for new voices. Obvious solutions, such as increasing party representativeness or creating a third party, may increase polarization, which would likely impede governance. Examples of party revitalization in contemporary Europe and from U.S. history suggest that locally grounded movements that reinvigorate political competitiveness may offer a path forward.

The Challenge of Unrepresentative Parties

- **Unrepresentative parties frustrate voters:** A growing plurality of Americans identify as independents (44 percent) rather than Republicans (22 percent) or Democrats (32 percent). Since 2013, a majority of Americans have believed political parties are so unrepresentative that a third party is needed.
- **Divided electorate stymied by safe seats:** Despite an extremely divided electorate, 95 percent of Americans live in safe districts where one party's national candidate won by more than 5 percent. In 2014, 43 percent of state legislative elections were not even contested by both major parties.
- **Polarization undermines easy solutions:** U.S. polarization, once confined to party activists, has spread to ordinary voters with such intensity that a third party would likely deepen partisan polarization or populism, while increasing gridlock. Such gridlock deepens Americans' dissatisfaction with their parties.

Avenues to Reinvigorating Party Representativeness

- The contemporary experiences of France, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK), and accounts of the United States during the Gilded Age, suggest that revitalizing parties and creating new parties can foster greater representativeness within two-party systems.

- However, in highly polarized countries, such as Spain and the UK, party revitalization has deepened polarization.
- To energize voters while reducing polarization, movements should follow the lead of France and the historical United States by moving voters away from traditional left/right issues toward new choices, such as open versus closed societies or pragmatic versus ideological policymaking.
- Revitalization movements succeed by signaling a radical departure from the establishment. Anti-establishment rhetoric can acknowledge populist anger, while directing voters away from left/right polarization.
- Grassroots organizing around concrete local issues lends credibility to calls for tangible change and allows movements to bring new, less partisan constituencies into politics.
- Successful organizing requires sophisticated data and technology, although such organizing often appears spontaneous and distinct from the activities of the major parties.
- Revitalizing U.S. politics requires changing electoral structures to open races to greater competition. For example, ranked-choice voting, open primaries, and fusion voting could enable greater representativeness.
- Nonpartisan elections appear to be an attractive way to reduce polarization. Yet they may depress turnout and benefit wealthier, more well-known candidates. Structural changes should retain partisan identifiers, while enabling a broader range of candidates to expand representativeness and increase competition.

Introduction

What can be done to improve democracy in the United States? After decades of giving advice to foreign lands, the city on a hill and exporter of democracy is facing multiple, interconnected challenges to its own governing system. Challenges of legitimacy and polarization familiar to more recent democracies now confront the United States and other long-consolidated democracies.

One significant problem is popular frustration with the two dominant political parties in the United States. Gridlock preventing politicians from addressing clear national needs is among the top reasons why Americans are frustrated with Congress. Meanwhile, the widespread view among voters that neither Democrats nor Republicans represent their views, combined with the monopolistic holds each party has gained over an increasing number of elected seats, has created a dangerous sense of democratic deficit. In less consolidated democracies, the sense that political elites are neither doing the job of governing nor representing the public often elides into the impression of a political class enmeshed in self-serving policies that rig the system against the everyday voter. These impressions are now dominant among the U.S. public.

Many Americans believe that creating a third party offers a solution. Indeed, a plurality of Americans has wanted a third party since 2006, and a majority has desired one since 2013, according to Gallup polling. But a closer look at voters' views suggests that a third party could increase representativeness at the cost of exacerbating polarization, and thus gridlock.

Once citizens are highly polarized in a winner-take-all system like that of the United States, parties are caught in a devilish choice between representing voter preferences (at the risk of deepening polarization) and governing effectively, the latter of which requires compromise and outreach across the party divide.

No perfect solutions exist to the wicked problem in which the United States now finds itself. Examples from contemporary Europe and lessons from U.S. history, however, suggest strategies for reviving representation and reveal the payoffs and pitfalls to each in terms of polarization. The cases illustrate the importance of building movements based on local, municipal activism that engages a less political portion of the population. These examples also highlight the need for governing reforms that would disincentivize politicians from

catering to their existing partisan bases, while enabling new types of candidates to arise from within traditional party structures.

The Failure of U.S. Political Parties to Represent

Democracies rely on political parties to do two things: represent voter preferences and aggregate those preferences into governing policies. The United States' parties are failing at both tasks. A marked rise in gridlock over some of the most salient legislative issues in the 108th, 110th, and 112th Congresses led to the extended government shutdown of 2013. That year, Americans declared “dysfunctional government” the top problem facing the United States, above any single policy issue.¹ Their frustration at Congress's inability to pass needed legislation has continued to fuel voter anger according to more recent polling.²

Meanwhile, so few Americans feel represented by a major party that the total number of voters who consider themselves to be independents now nearly equals that of voters who claim a party affiliation. Gallup's January 2018 polling shows that 44 percent of Americans now identify as independents, with just 22 percent identifying as Republicans and 32 percent as Democrats.³ The trend is slightly more positive among younger Americans, though hardly much better. Pew's 2016 polling finds that 41 percent of millennials (eighteen to thirty-five years old) identify as independents.⁴

The growth of independent voters is not just a problem of representation but also a problem of disenfranchisement. With political choice increasingly being determined in partisan primaries, voters who register as independents in the

country's nine fully closed primary states (including highly populous swing states like Florida and Pennsylvania) are effectively cut off from exercising their democratic voice.⁵ Moreover, the lack of competition in congressional and state legislative elections is now so high that it calls into question whether even voters who identify with a party have real choice. The Cook Political Report claims that 417 of 435 congressional races were uncompetitive as of 2016.⁶ The political scientist Carl Klarner claims that

When parties hold near-monopolies over so many elected seats, and voters are disenchanted with these parties, democracy itself is rendered suspect.

95 percent of U.S. voters live in safe congressional districts, defined as those where the winning candidates were elected by more than a 5 percent margin.⁷ Klarner found that one of the major parties did not even bother fielding a candidate in 43 percent of 2014 state legislative elections, a range that covers 35.7 percent of the U.S. population. When parties hold near-monopolies over so many elected seats, and voters are disenchanted with these parties, democracy itself is rendered suspect.

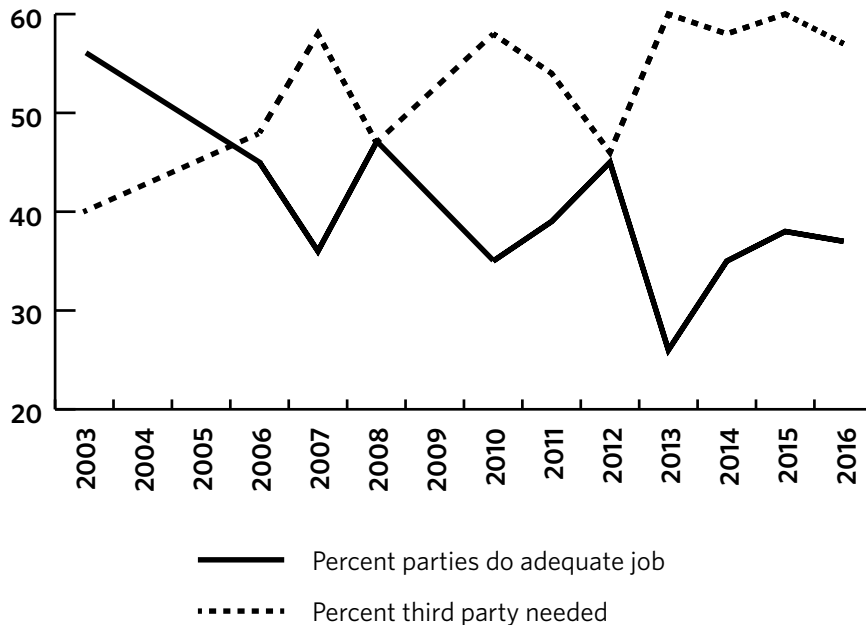
The Peril of a Third Party With a Polarized Electorate

No wonder so many Americans want a third option. Polling data (see figure 1) indicates that a substantial share of Americans view the establishment of a third major political party as a possible solution.

Yet a third party could have perverse effects. Many Americans who want a new party are not unhappy centrists but instead are voters looking for something more left, right, or populist than what currently exists. About 87 percent of independent voters tell pollsters they lean left or right, suggesting that these voters are not simply centrists.⁸ In fact, both parties today suffer from being more pragmatic than their base voters, a situation that has arisen from an overly strong Democratic Party and an overly weak Republican one; in both cases, this leaves a group of alienated, angry voters even more polarized than the parties themselves. To see how this situation has emerged, note the changes in U.S. voter affiliation over time, as shown in figure 2.

Figure 1: American Views on Third Parties

In your view, do the Republican and Democratic parties do an adequate job of representing the American people, or do they do such a poor job that a third major party is needed?

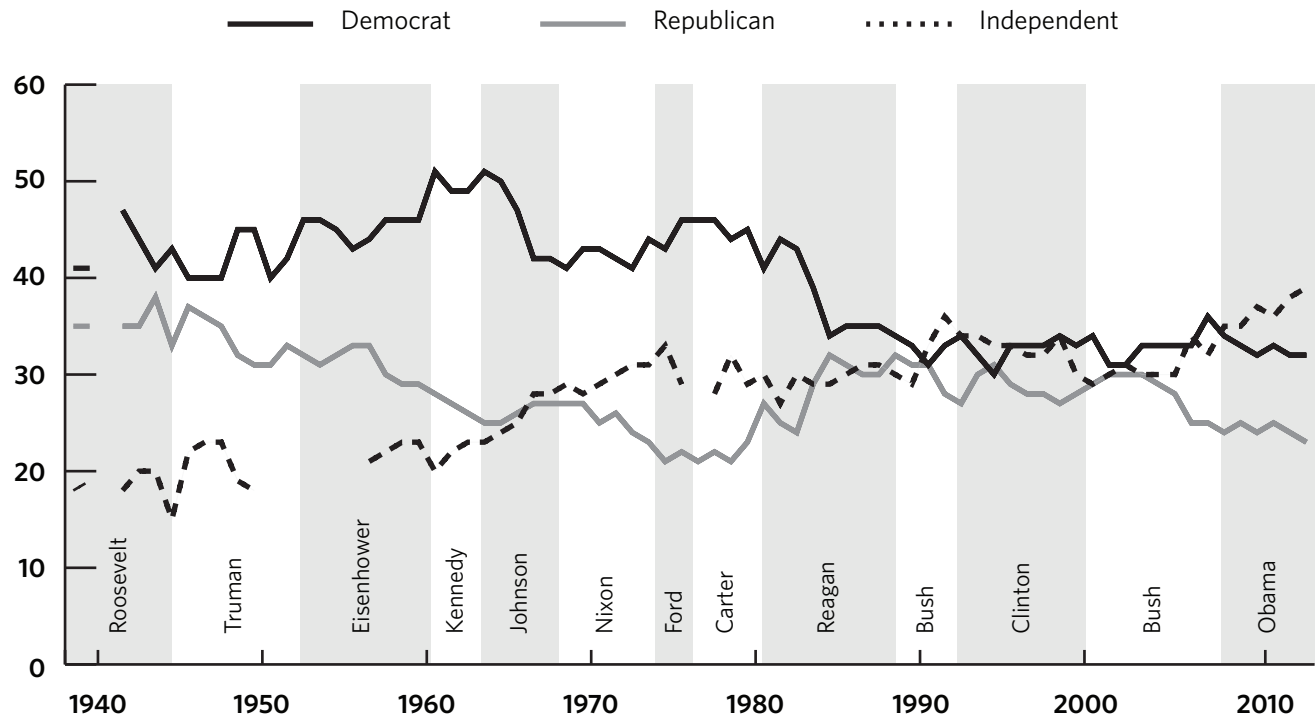


Source: Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans' Desire for Third Party Persists This Election Year," Gallup, September 30, 2016.

Note: 2007 and 2011 represent the average of two polls conducted those years.

Figure 2. U.S. Party Identification, 1940–2014

Percent of Americans who say they are ...



Source: Pew Research Center, "A Deep Dive Into Party Affiliation: Sharp Differences by Race, Gender, Generation, Education," April 7, 2015.

Note: The 1940–1989 data was drawn from Gallup polling, and the 1990–2014 data was drawn from Pew polling. No data was available for 1940. No data on independents was available from 1951 to 1956.

Democratic Party Strength Alienates a Liberal Base

As this figure demonstrates, Democrats lost nearly 10 percent of their party members in the 1960s as many voters angered by the civil rights movement left to become independents. Even more abandoned the party beginning under former Democratic president Jimmy Carter, a trend that continued into the 1980s; this time, they left to join the Republicans as so-called Reagan Democrats. Unsurprisingly, the Democratic Party concluded after the disastrous presidential elections of 1972 and 1980 that its primary system was nominating candidates too liberal for general election voters. In 1980, Democrats created a superdelegate system, ensuring that 15 percent of their delegation—which translated to about one-third of the votes needed to elect a presidential nominee—were party insiders. The goal was explicitly to tamp down popular pressure so that candidates deemed electable would emerge from the primary process.⁹

While the Democratic Party is currently debating whether to maintain such strong control over presidential elections, it continues to play a strong king-maker role in selecting candidates for congressional, state, and sometimes local downballot elections.¹⁰ Parties wield power over candidates through access to data, donors, media, and get-out-the-vote resources. The Democratic Party today controls access to the main donor database (NGP VAN), which aggregates data from nearly all races across the nation. Only candidates approved by the Democratic National Committee have access. The data are particularly meaningful because Democratic fundraising requires greater reliance on broad networks of grassroots donors, whose contact information, giving amounts, and other relevant information are easily aggregated through the database.¹¹ Meanwhile, the decline in union membership means that there are few pre-organized, get-out-the-vote groups at a scale that Democrats can rely on separate from the party, making data access and party financial support essential for identifying the voters to mobilize to the polls.

These various tools of control mean that the Democratic Party significantly shapes the spectrum of candidates that voters may choose from in presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, and often state legislative races. To cite just one recent example, in a 2016 Pennsylvania primary race, the party recruited another candidate to mount a primary challenge against former Democratic representative Joe Sestak after he refused to select a party-approved campaign manager. The Democratic Party put more than \$1 million into the challenger's campaign, drummed up major endorsements, and provided staff and get-out-the-vote support to dissuade others from helping Sestak.¹² While occasional outsiders, such as Representative Seth Moulton, can win a campaign in the face of such a juggernaut, it is rare.

Yet, as demonstrated by Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign and the attempt since the mid-2000s of liberal political action committees to mount primary challenges against conservative Democrats, many Democrats are unhappy.¹³ The share of voters who describe themselves as leaning Democratic has included a growing percentage of self-described liberals over the past fifteen years—from 27 percent in 2000 to 41 percent in 2015.¹⁴ Having lost its more conservative voters and, thus, having consolidated its membership as a more progressive voting bloc, the Democratic Party establishment now finds itself more conservative than its base.¹⁵

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Republican Party Weakness Alienates Activists

On the other side of the aisle, the Reagan revolution led to a rapid rise in the Republican voter rolls in the early 1980s. Yet gains to Republican market share in the decades following former president Carter's administration were achieved in part by outsourcing media and other key operations to activists outside the

**Popular pressure from the most activist
Republicans, rather than the party
itself, determines its candidates.**

party establishment. The success at building an echo chamber of bloggers, talk radio outlets, and Fox News contributors eventually diluted the strength of the party to control its message. While these outlets can amplify ideology and messaging, they are independent of the party. For example, it was Fox News, not the Republican Party, that controlled the criteria determining which candidates would appear in the party's 2016 primary season presidential debates and the amount of stagetime and airtime the candidates received during these debates.¹⁶ Probably interested in ratings more than ideas, Fox News and other similar outlets have pushed a more populist line that reflects tribal politics of

identity—otherwise known as affective horizontal polarization—rather than conservative ideology. Conservative politicians such as Senator Jeff Flake now speak openly about the need to retake their party from these media outlets.¹⁷

Beyond media coverage, Republican fundraising and voter outreach often evades the control of the party establishment. A small number of high-net-worth donors and activists have been able to exercise inordinate control over

conservative media outlets, organizations, and candidates. Rather than give through the Republican Party apparatus, the biggest of these donors contribute outside of party structures. Charles and David Koch, for instance, have created a 400-person donor network known as the Freedom Partners Policy Leaders Conference, to which Republican candidates come to gain support—entirely separate from the Republican National Committee (RNC).¹⁸ The Mercer family's significant role in the rise of President Donald Trump's outsider campaign has been thoroughly documented.¹⁹ Get-out-the-vote activity has also been outsourced. Evangelical churches have long formed a pre-organized, get-out-the-vote base for Republicans but are not controlled by the party. Donors such as Sheldon Adelson and the Koch brothers have also financed get-out-the-vote campaign field assistance, further weakening the gatekeeping role of the RNC.

Together, these trends mean that popular pressure from the most activist Republicans, rather than the party itself, determines its candidates. Republican activists throughout the 2000s have been far more likely to run successful primary challenges against less conservative candidates—a reality that burst into the open after 2010 with the rise of the Tea Party.²⁰ That year, Tea Party candidates won nearly one-third of their primary contests, ousting so many long-serving Republican politicians that no candidate could ignore their preferences.²¹ The Tea Party's Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives has shaped the house speaker's priorities over the last two congresses.

Even when Tea Party candidates lost subsequent general election contests, and although few of them won Senate seats, their primary victories (such as the ones that successfully toppled former senator Richard Lugar in 2012 and other long-serving Republican moderates) played a significant role in shifting the

Senate to the right in terms of voting and—equally important—partisanship and rhetoric.²² After 2010, the National Republican Senatorial Committee made a policy decision not to interfere in primary battles. At the presidential level, the party cannot and does not determine its candidates. Republican superdelegates control just 7 percent of votes and are tethered to the votes of their states, so they serve to amplify rather than moderate popular pressure.²³ Thus, three Tea Party candidates unknown before 2010 were among the Republican presidential contenders in 2016 (Texas Senator Ted Cruz, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker).

Yet, despite their largely successful insurgent takeover of the Republican Party over the last two decades, the most active Republicans do not feel well represented. In sixteen out of seventeen states where Republican voters were surveyed in primary exit polls in the fall of 2016, more than 50 percent of Republican primary voters declared that they “feel betrayed by politicians from the Republican Party”; similarly, a September 2015 CBS/YouGov poll of Republican voters found that 81 percent of Iowa Republicans, 72 percent of South Carolina Republicans, and 59 percent of New Hampshire Republicans believed that “Republicans in Congress compromised with Barack Obama too much.”²⁴

Consequently, although Republican congressional voting is the most conservative it has been in a century (according to the DW-NOMINATE dataset created by political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal), the ongoing drop in Republican voter identification probably represents many voters for whom the party is not right wing enough.²⁵ As scholars Norm Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute and Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution claim, and as Pew polling implies, while the bases of both parties are radicalizing, conservatives are moving far more to the right than liberals are moving to the left.²⁶

A Polarized, Extreme Electorate

The polarization taking hold in the United States is not simply a case of an electorate with different, strongly held viewpoints—that is a normal part of democracy. The danger is what scholars call affective polarization, which takes place when citizens hold such intense and personal negative feelings toward the other party that they regard their party as part of their identity—to the extent that a threat to one’s party becomes a direct, personal fight. Meanwhile, members of the opposition are seen not just as wrong but also morally corrupt. Affective polarization between parties is evidenced by 2014 Pew survey data that found that 27 percent of Democrats and 36 percent of Republicans view the other party as “a threat to the nation’s well-being.”²⁷ Polls suggest that these figures have been rising steadily. The share of Americans who feel the other party is “selfish” has more than doubled since 1960. A 1958 Gallup poll found that 67 percent of Democrats and 75 percent of Republicans did not

care what party their children married into. When Lynn Vavreck, a scholar at UCLA, reposed the question in 2016, 60 percent of Democrats and 63 percent of Republicans wanted their kids to marry within their respective political parties.²⁸

While many American voters continue to hold more amorphous views and are not tightly linked to either party, many of those people do not vote.²⁹ Individuals who identify as either Republican or Democratic are highly polarized; this fact suggests that what was once a phenomenon of committed party activists pushing politicians toward fringe positions has percolated to the mass of party members.³⁰

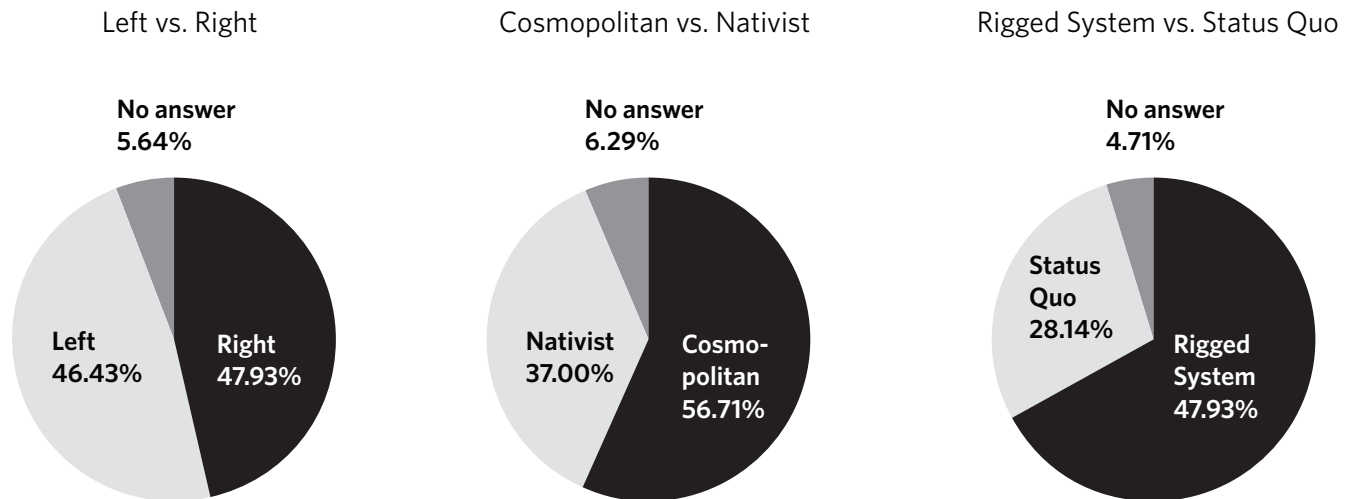
Voters are not only moving further out along the horizontal left-right political axis than their parties, fueling what could be called “horizontal polarization”; they are also alienated from party establishments along a second, vertical axis: socioeconomic polarization, or a sense that the establishment has “rigged” the country’s economic and political system for its own benefit.³¹ Trump’s success suggests that a significant portion of Republican voters feel unrepresented

by the more open economic and immigration policies of the traditional Rockefeller Republican Party. On the left, Bernie Sanders’s insurgent campaign was driven as much by strong vertical polarization on socioeconomic issues as by horizontal party polarization. Despite palpable differences on left-right issues like abortion and women’s rights, many liberals claim that “there is no difference between the parties,” because they are looking less at these cultural issues than at the fact that the legal and financial industries have been the greatest Democratic fundraising contributors in recent presidential elections.³² It is vertical

polarization that explains the fact that 12 percent of those who voted for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries switched to Trump in the general election.³³

To depict the extent of socioeconomic polarization, the author arranged responses to the 2014 Pew Research Center’s Political Typology data along the familiar left-right political axis. The same respondents were then split between citizens who prefer more open borders and believe in a globally engaged America (“cosmopolitans”) and those who espouse anti-immigrant, America First policy preferences (“nativists”). Finally, the group was broken down into those who feel that the economic and social hierarchies of the United States are generally fair (“status quo” voters) versus those who feel that the country’s social hierarchies and wealth distribution are unjust and that the government does not listen to people like them (“rigged system” voters). (See appendix 1 at the end of the paper for a full methodological explanation and a compilation of the questions used to create figure 3.)

It is unwise to assume that a third party would improve the functioning of U.S. democracy. The twin goals of increasing representation and improving governability are at loggerheads.

Figure 3. The U.S. Electorate Across Three Axes

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Pew Research Center, "Beyond Red Vs. Blue: The Political Typology," June 26, 2014.

As is clear from these pie charts, the voters who feel the system is “rigged” represent a majority more than twice as large as the citizens who believe that the social and economic hierarchy is fair. Meanwhile, while cosmopolitans represent a clear majority of the electorate, nativists whose preferences on trade, immigration, and multilateral alliances had not been reflected in either party’s major policies until the arrival of Trump represent a significant plurality of previously unheard voters, a populist silent plurality.

Given the extreme left-right polarization of the U.S. voting public, the majority of voters who feel the system is rigged, and the strong plurality of nativists, it is unwise to assume that a third party would improve the functioning of U.S. democracy. The twin goals of increasing representation and improving governability are at loggerheads. A centrist third-party base would likely leave existing parties with the most polarized voters, who would then push left/right polarization further to make the parties more representative of their views. This increased polarization would undermine the ability of parties to agree on policy solutions and thus harm the country’s capacity to govern. If, instead, a populist third party arose, it would likely attract voters from both the left and right, increasing the representativeness of the U.S. system at the cost of pulling political rhetoric and policy toward illiberal economic, cultural, and foreign policy positions, as Republicans and Democrats would vie with the new party to claim the populist mantle and retake voter market share.

Revitalizing Parties and Fighting Polarization

The United States is, of course, not alone among long-established democracies in facing high levels of public dissatisfaction with its dominant parties. For many years, European voters have expressed waning approval for their political parties. (Although the dynamics in Europe have differed from those in the United States—the former being as much about parties’ and governments’ lack of power within the European Union (EU) as about horizontal or vertical polarization.)

Yet new forms of political parties and civic activism in the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Spain offer lessons on how to revive representativeness in the United States. They also invoke caution. The UK and Spain revived citizen excitement about political parties by doubling down on polarization. The French case, like the history of U.S. democratic revival during the Gilded Age, offers more hopeful lessons on how crafting a new cross-party alignment of voters can produce more moderate policymaking without aggravating polarization.

United Kingdom

The UK’s June 2017 general election revived voter excitement, especially among young people, and garnered the country’s highest electoral turnout in twenty years. The election destroyed the country’s conservative populist party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which was left without a single seat in

parliament. Though it did not win the election, the Labor Party regained support previously lost to the UKIP and generated an unprecedented surge in party membership. The enthusiasm behind Labor’s leader, Jeremy Corbyn, also helped elevate overall voter turnout to its highest level since 1997.³⁴

While many argue that Labor’s surge owed more to the Conservative-Party-led government’s failings than to positive support for Labor, its electoral gains were built on a set of structural advances that the party has been making since Corbyn assumed party leadership. First,

Labor vastly increased its membership in partnership with a left-wing grassroots movement called Momentum. The years spent creating this organizing groundwork meant that when Prime Minister Theresa May announced the 2017 snap election, Momentum’s local networks and organizers were already in place to campaign for Corbyn on an accelerated schedule.

Momentum’s devolved leadership structure aims to foster a sense of ownership at the community level. It presents itself as a new form of politics that bridges traditional party structures and civic activism.³⁵ Early on, Corbyn ran what were termed organizing academies to get ordinary members into senior

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positions in the party. Momentum ran courses such as Corbynomics and People's PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics), as well as community-based public debate sessions.³⁶ Using these public education sessions, activist training programs, and more traditional voter registration drives, Momentum mobilized over 100,000 Labor supporters in just two years.³⁷

The community-level organizing fed a national movement that expanded Labor Party membership from under 200,000 when Corbyn became the leader in 2015 to 560,000 today. In the four days after the election, 35,000 new members joined.³⁸ Acknowledging that political parties will no longer have the same number of highly committed members willing to mobilize unconditionally for the party that they had in previous decades, Labor offered more flexible membership options. For instance, the party designed what it called a registered supporter option—complete with leadership voting rights—for a mere three pounds.³⁹ As of the summer of 2016, around 140,000 members were registered supporters rather than full members.⁴⁰ Many of these cheaper membership options may have helped increase the youth vote. Vast numbers of young people registered to vote for the first time in the month preceding the election, and eighteen to thirty-four year olds significantly preferred Corbyn's party at the polls.⁴¹

Second, while grassroots organizing is often viewed as a low-tech political tactic, Momentum and Labor's method of organizing relied on sophisticated strategy and integrated digital technology. Momentum hired several of Bernie Sanders's strategists to draw from the U.S. senator's grassroots strategies; the aim was to help Corbyn establish his own constituency of support that could bypass the Labor Party's senior echelons, which were still largely unsupportive of his leadership. Momentum led the development of new digital campaign and recruitment techniques, such as peer-to-peer texting and mobile-phone-banking applications; several of these were also borrowed from the Bernie Sanders campaign. The Momentum website MyNearestMarginal.com directed a new army of volunteers to areas where Labor stood the best chance of making electoral gains. Simple innovations like Momentum's carpool scheme helped get an unprecedented number of volunteers out to canvass. The Labor Party itself developed a social media tool called Promote, which allowed the campaign to send tailored messages to voters using a combination of Facebook and geographic data. Observers frequently drew parallels between Promote and the voter profiling work done by the secretive and controversial consulting firm Cambridge Analytica on behalf of Trump. Labor's use of targeted social media messaging was directed in particular at giving young people the information needed to register to vote—a tactic that was hugely successful.

Third, Labor adopted a political style that demonstrated Corbyn's break with traditional party elites, while offering an appealing aspirational message.

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Exactly how a sixty-eight-year-old man—about as far removed from youth culture as one could imagine—has become a cult figure among the young is a mystery to most political observers. Concertgoers chanted his name at the iconic Glastonbury Festival—an almost unbelievable turnaround from the norm of recent years that has seen the young malign the whole political class. While political insiders considered his speeches and media appearances an ill-managed joke, young voters saw him as authentic. Corbyn’s amateurish media persona and refusal to present a smooth, professional image won him trust among many voters.

Labor’s election manifesto was sketchy and far from fully coherent, but it projected a populist, anti-establishment tone. Mainstream media analysts ridiculed Corbyn’s ungrounded and mushy idealism. Yet the thin policy and aspirational messaging allowed Corbyn to appeal to disillusioned voters of many political creeds, while sidestepping difficult policy questions that may alienate voters should Labor ever win power. Labor’s relationship with Momentum allowed the latter to take charge of the more negative side of campaigning. Yet it did so with humor. Its satirical videos of Theresa May and the Conservatives proved a big hit. A YouTube ad—titled “Daddy, Why Do You Hate Me?”—attracted more than 7 million views and was widely thought to have been one of the most effective political videos ever deployed in the UK.⁴²

For all this success, some major caveats are in order. Labor would need to nearly double its 2017 gains to actually seize power. If it did win, it would face a collision between its muddy campaign positions and the ideological preferences of its members. The young party members who fueled Labor’s 2017 success were drawn by the organizational style and aspirational ideology that indicated a clear break from politics as usual. But the young’s policy preferences for canceling student debt and fixing the housing market have received an ambivalent response from Corbyn’s team, while the very pro-EU stance of most young voters puts them at odds with Corbyn, whose anti-EU positions have been consistent for decades.⁴³ If the party leadership does not clarify a firmer commitment to canceling student debt, fixing the housing market, and preventing a hard Brexit, many of the newly engaged young could quickly disengage again.

Most problematic, Labor achieved voter excitement by exacerbating polarization. Corbyn’s more radical, traditional left-wing platform embraced a left-wing populism that had failed to get a hearing since former prime minister Tony Blair shifted Labor toward the center in the late 1990s. The party also played heavily on socioeconomic polarization. Corbyn’s momentum is in some ways akin to what would happen if the Democratic Party were run entirely by the wing led by senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Labor offers greater representation to voters whose policy preferences are further to the left. Yet detractors argue that Labor has left the center ground dangerously empty, propelling the UK toward a deeper, unsettling polarization. Moreover, the

party's reliance on big data might lead it to target different parts of the electorate with very different messages—a strategy that could exacerbate cleavages rather than offer a unifying message.

Spain

In Spain, two new political parties have managed to break the country's political sclerosis and revitalize voter interest and representation. Previously, for over three decades, Spain's two main political parties, the Socialist Party and the conservative People's Party (PP), had rotated in and out of power. While Spain had a plethora of regional parties, the common view was that it had become a rigid *de facto* two-party system. The emergence of the left-wing, populist Podemos and the center-right Ciudadanos has revitalized popular engagement in the party system. While a third party may not be desirable in the U.S. context, the case of Spain shows that regional and national third parties are possible in a country long assumed to have one of the most ingrained two-party systems in Europe. Though neither party has taken power, both have established themselves in a remarkably short period of time as influential players in parliamentary and other public debates, while challenging the corruption that has fueled Spaniards' frustration with their political class.

As with Labor in the UK, bottom-up rather than top-down dynamics were paramount in the rise of both parties. Podemos, in particular, grew out of a broader and dramatic spike in civic engagement. It was rooted in a series of protests in 2010–2011 known as the Indignados revolt, triggered in part by anger at political corruption scandals within both existing parties and economic austerity measures that caused youth unemployment to rise above 50 percent.⁴⁴ Protesters demanded an end to closed party lists that shielded politicians from responsibility for their policy votes. Leaders of the protests initially insisted they had no political ambitions and would forswear any attempt to create a political party. But polls regularly found that over 90 percent of Spaniards distrusted the old party system, and the 2010–2011 protest leaders decided to offer an alternative through party politics.⁴⁵

The protest leaders' stated aim in creating Podemos was to develop a different kind of political party—one that retained organic links with community-level activism. Through its innovative series of local decisionmaking circles, Podemos helped get ordinary citizens engaged in politics in ways that signaled a clear break with normal Spanish politics, echoing the grassroots organizing and engagement used by Momentum in the UK. In a short span of time, Podemos has gathered nearly half a million members—Europe's third largest party membership.⁴⁶ While not in power, the party has become a powerful opposition force in parliament.

Ideologically, Podemos represents a left-wing form of populism, similar to the beliefs championed by Italy's Five Star Movement and Greece's Syriza,

which combine anti-austerity and anticorruption positions with a less idealistic and more nuanced view of the EU. Spaniards remain strongly pro-European, but a significant number are highly critical of EU policies. By calling for an “unabashed patriotism” and rejecting the long-standing idea that “Spain is the problem and cosmopolitanism is the solution,” Podemos’s form of democratic renewal includes an attempt to rediscover some degree of national autonomy.⁴⁷

At the same time, a new center-right party—Ciudadanos—has also quickly gained significant leverage in Spanish politics. Ciudadanos did not emerge through grassroots protest activism in the same spirit as Podemos. Instead, it began as a Catalan party campaigning against separatism. While functioning as a more standard party, its organizational style promises innovation too. It brought new faces into mainstream politics and trumpeted broader participation within party decisionmaking processes than has been common in Spain’s traditionally hierarchical party structures. It has a young, dynamic leadership team and has attracted a relatively younger membership.

Both Podemos and Ciudadanos have succeeded by running against the governing elite. Their anticorruption platforms have been absolutely central to their success. Compared to other consolidated Western democracies, Spain ranks a lowly forty-one in Transparency International’s 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score that has worsened over the last five years.⁴⁸ Both main parties have been involved in serious, high-level cases of political corruption. The PP has become one of the most corrupt political parties in Europe.⁴⁹ Its senior members have been embroiled in major cases of corruption during the party’s current term in office. Remarkably, the PP won reelection in 2016 even as the details of these cases were coming to light; since it has resumed office, its involvement in major corruption cases has become even more widespread.

Podemos has emerged as the most effective party in criticizing Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s failure to restrain this corruption. In a June 2017 parliamentary debate, Podemos spokespeople were highly effective in presenting the economic cost of PP corruption to ordinary Spaniards. This focus remains a key pillar of Podemos’s popularity: as relative outsiders, Podemos representatives still have credibility in challenging the murky dealings of the mainstream party system. Meanwhile, with the PP lacking an overall majority, the government needs Ciudadanos’s support to get legislation through parliament, giving the new party significant leverage. Ciudadanos has been able to elicit concessions on corruption as a price for parliamentary support (although the party now struggles with the accusation that its facilitation of a PP working majority renders it more of an insider than outsider group).

Podemos and Ciudadanos broke through an entrenched, two-party system, increased citizen engagement, and offered voters new options for greater representation. The number of corruption cases now under the spotlight highlights these parties’ ability to challenge a system many Spaniards felt empowered political elites and hurt ordinary citizens. These are successes that could inspire replication in the United States.

However, both parties ended up worsening the deep, long-standing fissures between Spain's left and right. Antipathy toward the left has been strong enough that a portion of the population seemed content to vote for the PP regardless of how its politicians behaved. A staggering degree of polarization in 2016 left Spain without a government for nearly a year; differences between Spain's political parties proved too wide to allow them to form a coalition after two elections failed to deliver a decisive majority for any one party.

Podemos's founders originally talked of a new style of politics that went beyond left-right divisions and fashioned a new kind of transversal agenda for democratic reform—not so much cross-partisan as beyond or outside the metrics of normal party politics. In practice, Podemos has gravitated toward a recognizably leftist ideology. After a fierce internal battle, in early 2017, Podemos took a decisive turn back toward being a more leftist, protest-based organization, with its leader saying that the party's representatives in parliament needed to function not as members but as “institutional activists.”⁵⁰ While many of the group's members insist that this move effectively takes activism to the heart of formal, institutional politics, most observers conclude that Podemos has chosen its activist identity over the chance to exercise political power, with the compromise across partisan divides that governing requires. Meanwhile, the Socialists' attempt to mimic Podemos's success has pushed their party further to the left on some issues, deepening the country's polarization. This also has led the Socialists to give individual party activists a greater say, improving democratic participation within the party.

Ciudadanos has moved away from the center to become the firmest opponent of Catalan separatists. Its strident position and tone against pro-independence forces in Catalonia served the party well with Spain's public. It won more seats than any other party in Catalonia's December 2017 elections and has gained support in national-level polls too. Whereas the party originally called for a mollifying, liberal centrism, its identity is now far more polarizing. In contrast to Ciudadanos, Podemos advocated dialogue and mutual compromise with the Catalan separatists, only to see its support plummet.

Spain shows the promise and pitfalls created by third parties that seek to better represent voters in a country with a highly polarized public. Not only have both parties abandoned initial attempts at bridge building, but they have left the Spanish political landscape even more polarized. Meanwhile, despite their success, they have not managed to give voters the systemic change they desire. Spain still has a very traditional conservative government, following a path of neoliberal orthodoxy that does not challenge EU-imposed policies rejected by the vast majority of the Spanish population. Spain's Gini coefficient is three points higher than it was when the country's economic crisis began in 2008: inequality has increased markedly over the last decade.⁵¹

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France

The electoral triumphs of French President Emmanuel Macron and his nascent party, En Marche (On the Move), may provide the most positive model for the United States. Much as in the United States and Spain, France's two main political parties—the Socialists and the Republicans—had alternated in and out of power for decades while doing little to address France's long-standing challenges, such as youth unemployment, low economic growth, bureaucratic overreach, and the integration of immigrants. Yet unlike in these other countries—where anti-establishment politicians have helped fan the flames of disunity among citizens (and, at least in the U.S. case, may be undermining democratic structures)—En Marche has channeled citizens' disillusionment in a direction that has the potential to reinforce France's commitment to consensus-based democratic policymaking. Unusual for an anti-establishment party, En Marche aims to reduce horizontal polarization by adopting policies desired by the left and right, while (like Labor) appealing to those feeling disempowered by vertical polarization with anti-establishment rhetoric and candidates.

Within six months, Macron—former minister of the economy—went from a long-shot candidate to the president of France, all without the backing of a traditional political party. Subsequently, after almost every political commentator predicted that En Marche would have difficulty fielding candidates for the National Assembly given its lack of entrenched party networks across France, the party succeeded in replacing three-quarters of the assembly's legislators with newcomers, providing Macron with the mandate to enact his agenda.⁵² In the process, it helped France avoid the fate that liberal democrats around the world had long feared: a far-right, xenophobic, and Euroskeptic president in the form of Marine Le Pen. In both the presidential and legislative elections, En Marche benefited from a perfect storm: the deep unpopularity of the Socialist and Republican presidents that preceded Macron and the toxicity of Macron's chief opponents, Le Pen and Republican candidate François Fillon. Yet the new party deserves credit for its unique ideology, electoral tactics, and organizational structure—all of which were crafted to distinguish En Marche from France's mainstream parties and helped secure its electoral victories.

Above all, En Marche has profited from the French electorate's dissatisfaction with the parties that have dominated French politics for decades. En Marche has sought to break through rigid ideological identities by realigning voters from both sides of the political spectrum around policies of practical national renewal. By combining robust support for the social protections cherished by the French middle and working classes with business-friendly tax cuts and labor law reforms intended to jump-start France's floundering economy, the party was able to convincingly position itself as “neither left nor right.”⁵³ Despite frequently being described as centrist, En Marche's ideology is not a split-the-difference centrism but rather a pragmatic amalgamation of ideas from both the left and the right.⁵⁴ This cross-partisan outlook was crucial to

En Marche's electoral success, enabling the party to attract not only genuine centrists but voters from the left and right who had become disillusioned with the gridlock born from their usual parties of choice and were desperate for something new. By blatantly contrasting this platform with the rigid, uncompromising reputations of the establishment parties, Macron and his legislative candidates were able to persuade enough voters to give them a chance.

Voters were also attracted to the party's pool of candidates for the National Assembly, which seemed to show it was sincere about bringing new faces into politics that were closer to the people and further from France's traditional political elite. After Macron was elected president, the party augmented its support base by forming a multipartisan government and nominating more youth, women, ethnic minorities, and political novices to run for the National Assembly than is typical in French politics.⁵⁵ This approach lent credence to its image as a pragmatic, inclusive reform party fundamentally different than past political options.

Finally, activists who formed the party's backbone have been drawn to the party's novel operational approach, which some analysts have described as evoking social movements and start-ups more than mainstream political parties.⁵⁶ Unlike most French parties, En Marche has stayed afloat mostly by crowdsourcing personal donations rather than becoming dependent on state funding. In place of the hierarchical political machines that Socialists and Republicans have used to drum up votes, En Marche substituted a decentralized network of local councils where people of all ages and backgrounds were empowered to rapidly contribute to decisionmaking with minimal red tape. Encouraged by the party's national office, many councils launched initiatives to engage with undecided voters in innovative ways that helped lend a human face to the party—like hosting dinners with friends and family, starting political conversations with fellow grocery shoppers, and reaching out to youth. But En Marche was a party first, not a social movement, despite frequently adopting activist language and stylistic tropes.⁵⁷ It thus managed to avoid the perilous path of social movements such as Podemos, whose activism and ideological purity obstructs practical political compromise. Like the UK's Labor Party, En Marche has adeptly leveraged tech experts to help the party target voters and fend off Russian propaganda and cyberattacks.

So far, En Marche has been able to maintain its cross-party message and policies. Yet doing so has come at a cost in a country whose public is more polarized than Macron's party. After he was elected, his approval rating soared above 60 percent, suggesting that the majority of French were at least sympathetic to his campaign messaging.⁵⁸

But as En Marche's initial cadre of activists has moved into the Elysée and the Assembly, the party's structure has increasingly resembled a traditional

En Marche has channeled citizens' disillusionment in a direction that has the potential to reinforce France's commitment to consensus-based democratic policymaking.

political party, leaving some supporters disillusioned. The party's fragility has become clearer as it has transitioned from campaigning to governing. After Macron went from delivering riveting speeches to championing contentious legislation, his popular support declined faster than that of any French leader since 1995—falling below 40 percent by August 2017.⁵⁹ By that point, his proposed cuts to housing subsidies and the defense budget were already eliciting resentment from the left and the right, respectively. More recently, Macron's fiscal conservatism, combined with his choice to call his working-class opponents "slackers," has led the French press and some opposition politicians to deem him the "president of the rich."⁶⁰ Some have criticized Macron for overstepping his mandate and undermining his own democratic credentials by relying on presidential decrees and by not sufficiently consulting labor unions and the broader public when devising legislation that could significantly alter French life.⁶¹ In short, *En Marche* is striking a tenuous balance between social democracy and economic liberalism. Its hodgepodge coalition of urban elites, farmers, workers, businesspeople, and ethnic minorities could fall apart if the scale seems to tip too far in either direction.

Still, Macron has pushed through economic reforms that appeared unthinkable in France and that are deeply unpopular with the working class. While his attempt to placate labor's concerns by extending unemployment benefits did not prevent hundreds of thousands of French workers from striking and protesting throughout the summer, Macron's national approval rating has crept back up to the mid-40s, which some attribute to him following through on his campaign promises.⁶²

That said, some analysts point out that support for the young president and his party was never as high as their electoral wins might suggest. Macron won in an election cycle with historically low voter turnout (though still high compared to that of the United States). As with those in the UK who cast ballots for Labor to protest against the UKIP and Brexit, around 45 percent of Macron voters described their decisions not as votes of confidence in his leadership but rather as protests against Le Pen, whom they considered an unpalatable candidate.⁶³ Meanwhile, the Socialists and Republicans were so discredited in the public eye that many citizens decided to vote for political outsiders from *En Marche* knowing full well that they were disproportionately white-collar professionals promoting a neoliberal economic agenda (their ethnic and gender diversity notwithstanding). *En Marche* failed to gain the support of many alienated French voters, who instead gravitated toward far-right or far-left candidates or, in some cases, sat out the second round of the election after their preferred candidate was eliminated. Roughly one-quarter of the votes in the first round of the presidential election went to anticapitalist candidates Benoît Hamon and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. More than a quarter abstained from voting in the second round, leading to the lowest voter turnout

rate since 1969 (74 percent).⁶⁴ Turnout for the second round of the National Assembly election was even worse (43 percent).⁶⁵

In the end, restoring French citizens' faith in moderate, compromise-driven policymaking is a task that will take many years. En Marche has been markedly more successful than the Spanish parties in paving a moderate political path and mustering a revived enthusiasm for politics. Its ability to quickly form a viable cross-partisan platform that pulled enough voters to the polls to stop opponents tainted with nativism and corruption offers hope. Yet significant portions of France's polarized electorate feel alienated by En Marche's policies, and the party's ongoing success is not assured.

The U.S. Gilded Age

Perhaps the most successful case of increasing voter representativeness and excitement while overcoming polarization stems from the history of the United States itself. In the 1890s, the country was experiencing intraparty cohesion, horizontal cross-party polarization, and vertical socioeconomic polarization similar to what it is experiencing today.⁶⁶ During the Gilded Age, wealth soared among the few, while poor Southern blacks, white farmers, and urban immigrants struggled. The effects of a polarized public were certainly more extreme then than they are now: lynchings hit their peak in 1892, while race riots, draft riots, union and industry killings, anarchist bombings, and other forms of violence grew.⁶⁷ Wealthy New Yorkers donated to the Upper East Side's Park Avenue Armory, sending their sons to train in the glorious, oak-paneled clubhouse in case class warfare broke out.⁶⁸ Yet polarization began to fall in the 1920s, giving way to an era of bipartisan lawmaking that held for much of the twentieth century. How did this happen?

The short answer is the rise of locally grounded organizers who were able to forge a national movement by offering an identity that cut across existing cleavages rather than exacerbating polarization. Like Podemos, the Progressive Movement, as this amalgamation of forces in the 1890s to 1920s was known, focused on local, concrete change to draw new voters into politics. Similar to En Marche, the movement brought new faces into the political class, while uniting divergent groups of citizens who formerly found themselves on opposing sides. Instead of altering an existing party as Labor did, or creating a new one as in Spain and France, progressive blocs emerged within both the Republican and Democratic parties, splitting both groups internally. By keeping the overarching two-party system largely intact, the Progressive Movement reduced the chances of acting as a spoiler that could have exacerbated polarization.

[During the Gilded Age] . . . locally grounded organizers were able to forge a national movement by offering an identity that cut across existing cleavages rather than exacerbating polarization.

Progressives today are often viewed as left wing, but, historically, politicians supported by the Progressive Movement backed an amalgamation of policy issues, somewhat similar to *En Marche*. They were pro-segregation as well as pro-labor. They supported regulation to fight corruption, rein in monopoly businesses, and increase consumer safety, but they had mixed views on prohibition and other regulations affecting private life. While generally seen as a middle-class or even urban phenomenon, the Progressive Movement adopted many farmers' causes from the failed Populist Party of the 1890s.

Rather than occupying a liberal spot on the left-right axis, progressives of the 1890s to 1920s are more accurately viewed as representing an anti-establishment movement that amalgamated three large blocs of voters. First, the movement attracted farmers who wanted tariffs and other policy assistance to stave off the massive economic transition under way as the United States switched from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Second, the progressives secured support from middle-class consumers, whose voting power had begun to outstrip the donation power of plutocratic businesses, meaning that demands for consumer safety began to overpower opposition to business regulation. Finally,

progressives gained a following among urban small- and medium-sized businesses and upper-crust women desiring an end to municipal corruption, a demand often tinged with nativist, anti-immigrant sentiment.

The Progressive Movement in the United States succeeded not by convincing existing politicians to change their minds but by undertaking massive voter mobilization efforts to recruit new politicians and get them elected. The movement began by focusing on concrete local issues from sanitation to playground construction. As it gained steam from the 1890s to 1920s, it put new politicians in office at the municipal and state levels; nationally speak-

ing, it predominantly affected the House of Representatives. The rhetoric of this grassroots national movement, combined with the ability of the new congressmen to get policies passed, pulled other members of their parties and the Senate along with them.⁶⁹

The new congressmen consisted of a bloc of Midwestern, generally Republican, congressmen, and Southern Democrats, who allied to help their farming communities through the economic transition. Urban progressives of both parties worked with this bloc to achieve labor reforms and reduce the power of the railroads and other industrial monopolists. These progressives achieved many of their aims and began to lose momentum around World War I, but they had opened the door to cross-party coalition building. This precedent enabled another group of Midwestern and Southern congressmen to find common cause as a conservative coalition fighting against the new labor regulation and rights movements. The bipartisanship that began with progressives laid the groundwork for what was known as the Conservative Coalition, which

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united Midwestern Republicans with Southern Dixiecrats (Jim Crow–supporting Democrats) from the 1930s through the 1960s.⁷⁰

Few would support all the policies that arose from these progressive and later conservative coalitions. While this new brand of cross-party politics played a role in ending the vast inequality of the Gilded Age, it also allowed Jim Crow segregation to deepen, unchallenged. While the adherents of these coalitions helped the United States transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, their economic protectionism, such as the Smoot-Hawley tariff, arguably helped to catalyze the global monetary fracturing that spurred World War I.

The importance of this movement to U.S. democracy, however, is clear. The emergence of this cross-party movement revitalized voter engagement and enabled U.S. democracy to emerge from immense vertical and horizontal polarization that was already yielding violence, ushering in a century-long era of great U.S. success.

Lessons for U.S. Democracy

These four cases offer a set of concrete lessons that could improve U.S. democracy today, while avoiding the pitfall of increasing voter excitement and representation at the cost of exacerbating polarization and making governance more difficult.

Engage Voters With Anti-Elitist Ideology, Style, and Tactics

Reviving citizen engagement in the face of anger with entrenched parties is the first step toward rebuilding faith in democracy. All the effective efforts chronicled here succeeded in mobilizing voters by striking three reinforcing chords:

- **Ideology:** Each party, regardless of their place on the political spectrum, developed an anti-establishment message. In the UK and France, this message was aspirational, while in Spain and during the U.S. Gilded Age, politicians ran against cronyistic political classes that had enriched themselves while ordinary people suffered. By focusing on the ills caused by vertical polarization while avoiding the language of class warfare, they were able to play a constructive role in revitalizing democratic systems and bridging the ossified policy fissures of horizontal polarization.
- **Operating Style:** Successful politicians signaled that they embodied the radical change voters wanted through rhetoric and style, such as Corbyn’s amateur media appearances and Macron’s party list of new faces. At least rhetorically, each claimed to be nonhierarchical (even if in practice some have been anything but). Politicians won by employing the symbolism of outsiders, even when—as in the cases of Macron, Corbyn, or Theodore Roosevelt (of the U.S. Progressive Movement)—party leaders emerged from the old political elite.

- **Organizing Tactics:** Most of these emergent political actors deployed a popular-movement style rooted in grassroots activism, working to convince voters and citizens who had not been engaged in politics that they can be part of real political change. Despite this old-fashioned local organizing, the modern movements embraced the use of big data and sophisticated voter targeting systems, while adherents of the Progressive Movement adopted the most sophisticated technology of their age.

Through such stylistic and organizing methods, politicians can acknowledge populist anger with the system, while realigning voters around forward-looking ideas that do not fall along old party-line fissures. Using these three tactics could allow a new U.S. movement to gain voter share while bridging the polarizing left-right divide.

Organize Locally to Strengthen Democracy From the Ground Up

The aforementioned cases all suggest that democratic renewal is best begun at the local grassroots level—not through celebrity presidential candidates alone. Organizing locally has benefits for democracy in and of itself, beyond its instrumental use as a way to build a successful national movement.

In Spain, for instance, the most significant change in politics may be at the local rather than national level. As Podemos has gained national prominence there, a series of movement-oriented political forces have won power in several key cities and municipal areas. Like the Progressive Movement in the United States, which scored its most significant anticorruption successes at the city and state levels, these Spanish efforts have often displaced highly corrupt local *notables*.

Following the lead of Podemos in Madrid, these new Spanish movements introduced innovative measures to give citizens a direct say over local decisions. In Naples, Reykjavik, and other cities across Europe, municipalities have responded to a surge in local civic activism by adopting similar innovations.⁷¹ These municipal efforts to enliven local democracy take many different forms.⁷² The use of citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies, and neighborhood councils has increased dramatically at the city level.⁷³ City governments have increased the availability of informal tools of consultation, such as referendums and civic complaint mechanisms, which allow citizens to influence local decisionmaking. Many of these structural democratic reforms resemble the types of municipal improvements made by U.S. progressives at the turn of the last century. By engaging citizens in decisions on practical local issues and sweeping aside politicians closely linked to discredited national elites, these municipal efforts can strengthen local democracy while reviving citizens' belief in the integrity of the democratic system.⁷⁴

European local activism often started not with politics, per se, but with pragmatic mutual self-help and shared economic activities designed to mitigate

the harsh impact of the 2008 economic crisis.⁷⁵ Such mutual assistance activities included hosting free healthcare clinics, reclaiming abandoned buildings, and holding cultural events. Similarly, the Progressive Movement in the United States had its roots in philanthropic efforts to integrate immigrants, help struggling citizens, build playgrounds, and ensure food safety. Yet while these modern European and historical U.S. efforts began outside formal policymaking structures, both grew into platforms for citizens to engage with the formal politics of local decisionmaking, such as how local government money would be budgeted.⁷⁶ Starting with apolitical organizing at the concrete, local level has an unintended benefit to democracy. It engages citizens who may previously have been relatively apolitical and brings them into the democratic process. The new voters have the potential to bring new energy and a desire for concrete outcomes to the democratic process, opening the possibility of more pragmatic, less ideologically hidebound politics that realign voters along a new set of issues. Meanwhile, as Europe's experiments with democratic localism deepen, municipalities are framing local votes so as to foster debate on common community goals rather than narrow individual interests. Such local experiments in reframing issues could create social capital among people of different ideologies that bridge polarizing divides.⁷⁷

Finally, grassroots organizing allows digital innovations to improve democracy, while top-down efforts at e-governance can enhance fissures. When Minnesota introduced e-democracy digital platforms, for instance, they were found to skew toward higher-income, white, and male participants. The same problem dogged the original German Pirate Party.⁷⁸ Those in Germany who were not politically engaged prior to joining the party did not become more politically engaged; instead, the Pirate Party created a rather anarchic grouping with few cohesive policy stances, and the party's members had difficulty coalescing around a single agenda and eventually fell apart in scandal. As political parties strive to use technology to engage voters, grassroots organizing can ensure that the playing field is leveled.

**Democratic renewal is best begun
at the local grassroots level.**

Open Politics to New Entrants Through Concrete Electoral Changes

Movement politics can only go so far if candidates face obstacles to getting on the ballot that force them to bow to the demands of existing parties with their polarized preferences. European parliamentary systems are already more fluid and structurally open to new faces—the challenge is breaking into cultural hierarchies. In the United States, progressives in the Gilded Age altered voting structures to make politics more open to new players and more responsive to popular will than the former politics led by political machines run by unelected party bosses. Today, Democrats and Republicans have such

monopolistic holds on many districts that new changes to voting structures are necessary for new candidates to emerge with policy ideas that differ from the familiar checklist of wedge issues demanded by party activists. City- and state-level electoral reforms would allow for experimentation with different systems of voting that could improve voter engagement and representativeness while reducing polarization.

Open, but Partisan

Electoral changes can—and, ideally, should—preserve party affiliation on the ballot. That may seem counterintuitive. From the 1890s to the 1920s, progressives trumpeted nonpartisan elections for city manager and other municipal and state roles—an idea adopted by many Western states to help improve technocratic governance and reduce the role of ideology. However, studies on the

City- and state-level electoral reforms would allow for experimentation with different systems of voting that could improve voter engagement and representativeness while reducing polarization.

effects of these changes found that nonpartisan elections reduce voter participation, possibly because contests that lack a clear tribal identity require more effort from voters and the absence of a good partisan fight means the press is less engaged in these races.⁷⁹ These studies generally were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, and they were not entirely in agreement, so their applicability to the present day should not be viewed as definitive. Yet it is likely that nonpartisan elections increase the value of name recognition by eliminating party affiliation as a signal of candidates' policy preferences and identities. Thus,

nonpartisan elections tend to favor incumbents and wealthier candidates who can afford more media coverage. For these reasons, changes that preserve some party affiliation while broadening choice are preferable options.

Proportional Representation

The most direct way to open politics so that populist, far-left, and far-right preferences have more representation—while still fostering a system that can govern—would be to move from a majoritarian electoral system to the type of proportional representation employed in many European countries. Proportional representation, however, has not cured Europe's ills—indeed, Germany has struggled to form a government since its 2017 elections created an overly fractured parliament. The EU's dampening effect on democratic choice, as well as other local features, means that systems of proportional representation on the continent have not offset Europe's sense of democratic deficit. Meanwhile, coalitions can be hard to form, leaving countries without governments at all for significant periods.

Such an immense change to voting is unlikely to take place in the United States. That said, it is not impossible. Canada is currently discussing a shift to

proportional representation, and New Zealand accomplished this transformation in 1996. New Zealand was long governed by a center-right or center-left party, but its five new parties together subsequently took 25 percent of the parliamentary seats—presumably giving one-quarter of voters who previously had felt unrepresented a clearer sense that their policy preferences were being heard.⁸⁰ To give a theoretical sense of what a proportionally based, multiparty U.S. democracy might look like, the *Economist* used data from 2016 polling allocated proportionally across the country by census region.⁸¹ Their analysis suggested that in such a hypothetical 435-seat parliament, a left-wing Bernie Sanders/Hillary Clinton coalition broadly representing today's Democratic Party would have a governing majority of 237 seats. But a Sanders/Trump populist coalition would have 225 seats—also enough to govern. While a coalition of conservatives, Christians, and populists largely reflecting the current Republican Party would hold only 198 seats—not quite enough to form a government—a centrist, grand coalition of the left and right would do the worst, with a minority of just 161 seats.⁸²

More realistic than European-style proportional representation, and less problematic than a third party that could increase polarization, are a set of alternative options that broaden existing parties. These include ranked-choice voting, more open primaries, and fusion voting.

Ranked-Choice Voting

The best structural change for preserving the two-party system while potentially reducing polarization would be ranked-choice voting. This would allow voters to pick first, second, third, (and so on) choices from among a spectrum of candidates on the ballot. Ranked-choice voting could be used in place of party primaries, as it would allow for an American form of proportional representation that maintains a presidential system with its separation of powers while also allowing a broader spectrum of candidates to be represented. In this way, ranked-choice voting could help break the two major parties' current stranglehold on choosing office seekers.⁸³ Such a system could also be used in conjunction with party primaries. In the latter case, if just two parties were contesting an election (with no Green, Libertarian, or other candidates), ranked-choice voting could moderate the winner (depending on electoral rules allowing for abstention), if it were designed to elect not simply the candidate who received the most first choice votes but rather the candidate who received the most first and second choice votes.

Ranked-choice voting enables more extreme candidates to receive a hearing, but it favors candidates who campaign to reach the broadest number of voters as a second- or third-choice candidate. A study conducted for the advocacy organization FairVote found that ranked-choice voting reduces negative campaigns, which would likely help reduce polarization.⁸⁴ While some proponents

of the current system argue that ranked-choice voting results in lower turnout and more spoiled ballots among low-income and minority voters than the current system, the most recent empirical study finds no greater problems of this kind than those caused by the current system.⁸⁵ Since it threatens the establishment of whatever political system is in place, ranked-choice voting can be difficult to implement. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, for instance, voters passed a 2008 resolution for ranked-choice voting, which politicians long delayed implementing—though a court ruling forced the city to enact the changes for an upcoming March 2018 election. Voters who opted for this system in Maine have faced similar challenges.⁸⁶

Opening Primaries

Opening the United States' nine fully closed state primaries could assist in moderating politics by promoting a broader range of views within parties. So would similarly addressing the seven states where the decision to close a primary to independent voters is left to the parties (technically known as semi-closed primaries if independents can vote but registered party members cannot cross party lines). Such changes would enable greater enfranchisement of independents in those states. Both theoretical and empirical research generally finds that semi-closed primaries elect more moderate politicians (as do nonpartisan primaries, though these are often plagued by problems discussed earlier).⁸⁷ Findings for pure, open systems in which registered voters can cross party lines are more mixed, with some studies suggesting that purely open systems can actually deepen polarization.⁸⁸

More ambitious than semi-closed primaries are blanket or top-two primaries in which the top two vote-getting candidates, regardless of party affiliation, advance to the general election. A number of studies looking at California's 2012 experiment with this reform have found encouraging, but not definitive, moderating effects from this system, which would be impressive given that a 2011 study found California to be by far the most polarized state in the country.⁸⁹ Empirical research on primaries is sparse and troubled by the fact that some studies conflate different voting systems; given the potential polarizing effects of purely open or semi-open systems that allow crossover voting, studies that conflate these systems with semi-closed systems muddy results. The most recent study found that no structural changes to primaries produced effects that were robust or statistically significant.⁹⁰

Fusion Voting

Fusion voting is another system that might be worth considering, though it shares certain flaws with the problems inherent in creating a third party. Most developed in the state of New York (though permitted and generally unused in seven other states), fusion voting allows third parties to exercise a measure

of political influence. Yet rather than launching their own candidates, these parties organize strong voting blocs around clear policy positions and then cross-endorse the major party candidate who best supports their positions. The Working Families Party in New York, for instance, pulls that state's Democratic Party toward its policy positions by organizing among unions and other households and forcing primary candidates to compete for its endorsement and its captive voters. This builds representation and forces parties to compete with a broader set of viewpoints for votes, while maintaining larger tents with (hopefully) less extreme partisan views, though such third parties could conceivably pull existing parties further to the right, left, or populist margins.

Reducing Gerrymandering

Fixing gerrymandering is a far more common and popularly understood reform to solve the problem of closed, monopolistic parties than the solutions offered above. It is discussed last because political scientists who research gerrymandering claim that it does not affect polarization. Their findings rest largely on the fact that senators who run across non-gerrymandered state boundaries have polarization scores (in academic measures) similar to those of their gerrymandered House colleagues. Such scores show that the seven states with a single representative, which ipso facto cannot be gerrymandered, nonetheless have quite partisan representatives.⁹¹

Yet this is a myopic view of how polarization works. Senators use congressional races to determine their understanding of voter desires—as evidenced by the previously discussed Republican senators' reaction to the rise of the Tea Party in the House. House politics can affect senatorial positions even without an election. In 2009, when contentious climate change legislation was under debate in both houses, vulnerable congressmen who voted in favor of stronger climate regulation returned to their districts over the Fourth of July to a barrage of opposition advertising. Seeing their colleagues' vulnerability, multiple senators rolled back their legislative language to protect themselves from similar negative advertising in their own upcoming elections.⁹² Increasingly partisan House races are likely to garner increasingly partisan senatorial votes and rhetoric. Meanwhile, national politics spill across state boundaries. Since single representatives in partisan-leaning states must still compete in primaries, polarizing waves such as the Tea Party threaten even safe districts and national-level party pressure can force more partisan voting.

Academics such as Nolan McCarty also claim that geographic sorting in the United States is so strong that even heterogeneous districts are unlikely to reduce polarization, which is true. McCarty also makes the moral case that representing the differing views of divided Americans should take precedence over crafting districts to elect less representative centrist candidates.⁹³

Despite these valid concerns, the technocratic dismissal of gerrymandering ignores the importance of perception within a democracy: if voters feel a

system is rigged, then it hurts perceptions of democratic legitimacy regardless of whether the gerrymandering actually affects partisan voting.⁹⁴ For that reason alone, crafting contiguous districts along rational lines should be a priority, even if doing so does not enhance competition.

Conclusion

Today, the two major parties in the United States have gained monopolistic holds over an increasing number of elected seats, while voters are increasingly polarized and, at the same time, alienated from both parties. This is a recipe for democratic disillusionment and decay. Indeed, the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the United States from a “full” to a “flawed” democracy in 2016 due to the erosion of public trust in elected officials.⁹⁵

Yet in the face of a polarized electorate, the two tasks of political parties—representing voter preferences and turning those preferences into laws that enable effective governance—may be on a collision course. The seemingly straightforward solutions to revive voter excitement in existing parties or start a new party could exacerbate polarization in the United States. The UK Labor Party has

successfully renewed itself and Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain have revived citizen excitement and become meaningful political players—but these parties did so by playing to citizens’ polarized ideological preferences. That is not an acceptable strategy for those seeking to reduce polarization in the United States. Conversely, in France, En Marche’s mix of left- and right-wing policies has alienated more ideological voters, hampering its popularity.

U.S. political parties might be wise to adopt some of the successful political tools employed by Labor, Podemos, Ciudadanos, and En Marche—namely their anti-establishment ideologies, operating styles, and organizing tactics. But the most promising avenues for democratic renewal in the United States do not begin at the national level.

Instead, reformers should look to the local level and champion long-needed structural reforms within municipalities and states to improve the quality of U.S. democracy. As examples from U.S. history and contemporary Europe demonstrate, locally based efforts to engage people in concrete change have real potential to restore citizens’ faith in their political systems and may ultimately serve as a conduit for national political reforms. And though getting politicians on board with reforming the U.S. electoral system will not be easy, structural changes such as open primaries and ranked-choice voting would enable a broader spectrum of candidates to have a voice and help restore competitiveness and representativeness to U.S. elections. Unlike creating a third party, a path that carries the risk of aggravating polarization, these reforms constitute realistic steps toward generating more moderate, representative national, state, and local governments that can also govern effectively.

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Appendix

The Methodology of the Survey Questions for Figure 3

To depict socioeconomic polarization in the United States along multiple dimensions, the authors created a multi-axis framework based on a 2014 Pew survey titled “Beyond Red Vs. Blue: The Political Typology.” The survey (available online) polled 10,013 adults of voting age of whom 79 percent were registered voters.⁹⁶ The survey was conducted by cell phone or landline in three phases from January to March 2014.

Carnegie James C. Gaither Junior Fellow Gustavo Berrizbeitia sorted the Pew survey questions among the three thematic axes that appear in figure 3: “left versus right,” “cosmopolitan versus nativist,” and “rigged system versus pro–status quo.” Questions were omitted if they were clearly partisan, irrelevant to the aforementioned categories, or asked only to a subset of the total polled sample. The percentage breakdown of responses to individual questions in the three tables below were taken directly from the survey’s published results, while the percentages in figure 3 were derived from an average of the aggregated answers sorted along the aforementioned three axes. Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to responses such as “don’t know” or refusal to answer.

Left Versus Right Axis			
Leftwing Positions	Percent of Total Respondents	Rightwing Positions	Percent of Total Respondents
Government does a better job than it gets credit for.	40	Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient.	56
Poor people have hard lives because government benefits do not go far enough to help them live decently.	47	Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return.	44
The government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt.	43	The government today cannot afford to do much more to help the needy.	51
Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people cannot get ahead these days.	27	Blacks who cannot get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition.	63

Left Versus Right Axis			
Leftwing Positions	Percent of Total Respondents	Rightwing Positions	Percent of Total Respondents
Society is just as well off if people have priorities other than marriage and children.	50	Society is better off if people make marriage and having children a priority.	46
Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.	32	Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard.	65
Homosexuality should be accepted by society.	62	Homosexuality should be discouraged by society.	31
It is NOT necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values.	53	It IS necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values.	45
I worry that the government is getting too involved in the issue of morality.	62	The government should do more to protect morality in society.	33
Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites.	46	Our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites.	49
Children are just as well off when their parents work outside the home.	35	Children are better off when a parent stays home to focus on the family.	60
Government aid to the poor does more good than harm, because people cannot get out of poverty until their basic needs are met.	47	Government aid to the poor does more harm than good, by making people too dependent on government assistance.	48
In your opinion, which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor?*	50	In your opinion, which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor?	39
<i>Circumstances beyond control</i>		<i>Lack of effort</i>	
The police should not be able to stop and search people just because they think a person looks suspicious.	56	The police should be allowed to stop and search anyone who fits a general description.	41

*Note: For this question, 8 percent of respondents said “both.”

Cosmopolitans Versus Nativists Axis			
Cosmopolitan Positions	Percent of Total Respondents	Nativist Positions	Percent of Total Respondents
Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents.	57	Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and healthcare.	35
Good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace.	62	The best way to ensure peace is through military strength.	30

Cosmopolitans Versus Nativists Axis			
Cosmopolitan Positions	Percent of Total Respondents	Nativist Positions	Percent of Total Respondents
Problems in the world would be even worse without U.S. involvement.	53	U.S. efforts to solve problems around the world usually end up making things worse.	40
Relying too much on military force to defeat terrorism creates hatred that leads to more terrorism.	57	Using overwhelming military force is the best way to defeat terrorism around the world.	37
The growing number of newcomers from other countries strengthens American society.	59	The growing number of newcomers from other countries threatens traditional American customs and values.	35
It is best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs.	35	We should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home.	60
Which is closer to your view about how to handle immigrants who are now living in the U.S. illegally? Should they be eligible for citizenship if they meet certain requirements? [binary question; those responding this way assume no deportation should take place]	20 - Right away 54 - Only after a period of time	Which comes closer to your view about how to handle immigrants who are now living in the U.S. illegally? [Those who state they should not be eligible for citizenship] Do you think there should be a national law enforcement effort to deport all immigrants who are now living in the U.S. illegally, or should that not be done?	5 - Should not be national law enforcement effort to deport 17 - Should be national law enforcement effort to deport

Rigged System Versus Pro-Status Quo Axis			
Rigged System Positions	Percent of Total Respondents	Pro-Status Quo Positions	Percent of Total Respondents
Too much power is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies.	78	The largest companies do not have too much power.	18
Business corporations make too much profit.	56	Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit.	39
Elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly.	79	Elected officials try hard to stay in touch with voters back home.	17
Most elected officials do not care what people like me think.	78	Most elected officials care what people like me think.	20

Rigged System Versus Pro-Status Quo Axis			
Rigged System Positions	Percent of Total Respondents	Pro-Status Quo Positions	Percent of Total Respondents
How much time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?	7 - Never 68 - Only some of the time	How much time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?	3 - Just about always 21 - Most of the time
The economic system in this country unfairly favors powerful interests.	62	The economic system in this country is generally fair to most Americans.	34
Wall Street HURTS the American economy more than it helps.	42	Wall Street HELPS the American economy more than it hurts.	45