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After the Mid-Term Elections, More Gridlock Likely

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For thirty of the last forty-two years, America's two major parties, the Democrats and Republicans, have failed to achieve undivided control of the executive and legislative branches. When one party has controlled the White House, the other party has controlled one or both of the two legislative houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. **This has produced a great deal of gridlock.** Much of the proposals emanating from the White House have been blocked; and even when they got through, they have become garbled in the attempt to weld together tenuous majorities.

Since last year, **Joe Biden and the Democrats** have enjoyed tenuous control of the executive and legislative branches of Congress. In the Senate, Democrats and Republicans each have fifty seats, but the Vice President can break ties. Differences among the Democrats have, however, made it difficult to get even fifty votes, and for many legislative initiatives, such as a change

in voting rights or a new national abortion law, the party in opposition can use a "filibuster" in the Senate, which would require the majority party to get 60 votes to pass their legislation. Only certain kinds of budgetary measures can pass with a simple majority.

In the mid-term elections in November 2022, the **Republicans are likely to take back control of the House of Representatives**, which even if the Democrats retain the Senate, will make it difficult for the Biden administration to pass any significant measures. That can have dire consequences.

During the **last six of Obama's eight years in office**, the gridlock between the executive and legislative branches made it impossible for the government to take measures that could have halted the effects of the Great Recession, repaired the country's infrastructure, mended America's safety net, including Obama's own flawed health plan, and prepared the country better to compete internationally in an increasingly fractured global economy.

If the United States government is divided again after November, it will have similar ill effects on the country -- and on the world.

Reasons for the Gridlock in American Party Politics

There are **two kinds of reasons for this gridlock**. One kind go back to the founding and the first decades of the United States; the other go back to the shift in power and in party coalitions over the last forty to fifty years. To guard against the tyranny they thought they had experienced under the British, the

country's founders designed a political system that invited gridlock. The structure, founding father James Madison wrote in *The Federalist*, would provide an "impediment ... against improper acts of legislation."

The **American Constitution creates a separation of power** among the executive, the legislature and the judiciary allowing each to block the other's initiatives. The distribution of power among the states -- permitting small or sparsely populated states like Delaware or Wyoming equal votes within the Senate -- made it difficult for majorities to exert their will. This has been most evident recently in the ability of a small coal-producing state West Virginia to shape climate change legislation to its liking.

The second reason goes back to the **decline of the informal Democratic coalition that dominated American politics from 1932 to 1968**. This loose coalition of some of the main Democratic strands in US politics held undivided control of the government for 24 of those years and was able to adopt significant reform legislation from the Social Security Act and the National Labor Relations Act down to Medicare and the civil rights acts.

It contained some business support from extractive industries and Wall Street, and retained the support of the post-Civil War South, but **was underpinned by the labor movement**, which by the 1950s represented about a third of American non-farm wage-earners, and by big city political machines. It represented in a microcosm the democratic pluralism of the New Deal, which pitted labor as a countervailing power to business. Business still shaped the

final conclusion of legislation, but it was forced to heed labor's demands. All that began to change in the late 1960s.

Democratic support for the civil rights reforms and Democratic support for the War on Poverty, which was primarily aimed at urban blacks in the wake of the riots in numerous cities, alienated many working class white Democrats, particularly in the South. The support of the Democratic Party for school desegregation through busing black children to white schools and vice versa also alienated white ethnic voters in the cities, many of whom fled to the suburbs, contributing to the decline of the urban machines.

Democrats' identification with the '60s counter-culture and feminism, moreover, drove out rural evangelicals who had either been Democrats and or had shown no interest in politics. At the same time, as Republicans embraced the white backlash and the religious right, many college-educated voters who would become professionals, such as teachers and nurses, shifted to the Democrats.

Rapid Decline of the Labor Movement has been Crucial

But the most significant development was the **rapid decline of the labor movement that began in the 1970s**. Corporations hired anti-union consultants, busted unions by firing and replacing strikers and resisted attempts by the Carter administration to toughen labor laws. They also moved their plants away from northern cities to the South or even overseas where

they could avoid unions. A surplus of unskilled labor created by legal and illegal immigrants made it very difficult for unions to organize low-wage services and led to labor losses in construction.

By the **beginning of the new century**, labor represented about ten percent of the working class and had virtually no presence in many states. In the twenty-first century, competition from China and the lure of cheap labor in Mexico decimated even the small towns and mid-sized cities that contained manufacturing. This created resentments that were directed primarily against the Democrats who had championed the trade deals with Mexico and China and made little effort to stem illegal immigration.

By the early twenty-first century, the old party system was gone.

Democrats lost much of their white working class support. Instead, they have relied on a coalition of the upscale professionals from the big metro centers, most of whom are working in the public sector, in high-tech services and non-profit organizations, and the support of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.

The unions had helped keep working class Democrats in the fold even when they disagreed with Democrats on social issues. With the unions in decline,

Democrats lost those voters who were convinced Democrats would confiscate their guns or open the borders to illegal immigrants.

The **loss of union power also changed the thrust of the party's economic program.** The older party had stressed trade protection and

border control against illegal immigrants and guest workers who would bring down wages and putting limits on executive salaries and raising taxes on the wealthy and on corporations.

With union power diminished -- and with that Democratic support for trade protection, immigration restriction, and business regulation -- the Democrats were able to **attract significant support from Silicon Valley and Wall Street, as well as Hollywood**. These donors were often fervent supporters of socially liberal causes and of environmental regulation. They made up in donations what the Democrats had lost from the decline of unions -- but at a political price.

Over time, **the very meaning of the term "liberal" has shifted** from its New Deal-era emphasis on economics to a new emphasis on support for abortion, gay marriage, gun control, affirmative action and other social issues.

Republicans, for their part, have retained the support of farmers and much of large and small business, particularly the extractive industries (coal, oil), which in response to Democratic support for environmental protection and measures to reduce climate change, had become fervent supporters of the Republican cause. And Republicans added the disenchanted workers who had abandoned the Democrats beginning in the Sixties. This latter was predominately white, but has recently begun to include some working class Hispanics.

As a result, the two coalitions have become about equal in strength.

The Democrats control the big metro areas around cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles or San Francisco. The Republicans control much of the South, which had been a bastion of racial segregation and Protestant fundamentalism, as well as the farm and natural resource communities in the West and small town and rural America.

If the Constitution dictated strict power by national majority, Democrats would outnumber Republicans, but because the Constitution gives inordinate power to smaller or less populated states like Wyoming and North Dakota, **either of the two parties are capable at a given time of winning national majorities.**

The New Deal Democrats who controlled government until 1968 rested much of their appeal on branding themselves as the party of the "common man" and Republicans as the party of business, but the decline of unions, and the rise of Silicon Valley within the Democratic Party, has meant that **on many economic issues, many voters no longer see a decisive economic difference between the parties.**

Instead, **many voters define the difference between the parties in terms of social issues** like abortion or gun control the way that during the 1920s, the parties became defined by their support or opposition to the Prohibition of sale of alcohol.

The Importance of the State of the Economy

The guiding issue in American elections is still the economy. But the two parties win popularity not so much through what they actually do regarding the economy, but through **whether they happen to be in power when the country prospered or not**. The Biden administration is probably not responsible for today's inflation, except indirectly. It comes primarily from supply chain bottlenecks and the rise in gas and oil prices from the Ukraine war. But if the Democrats lose in November, a good deal of the reason will be because voters blame the party for inflation.

Candidates will also campaign on social issues. Led by activists, both parties have developed extremes on positions that are unpalatable to most Americans. The Republicans have already benefited from Democrats being defined by a demand to defund the police and by the Democrats' seeming indifference to illegal immigration. These issues will come up in November, as will the Democrats' support for giving special preference to blacks in school admissions and employment.

The **Republicans, for their part, are going to suffer from their opposition to abortion** -- which was given new emphasis by the Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* on 24 June 2022. Most Americans do not favor an outright ban on abortion, and the court ruling, which removes an

unalterable right to abortion, has given free reign to states that want to ban it entirely.

The Outlook

The result of all this is that since 1980, the parties have alternated in power depending on how well the economy is doing (even though their policies may have had nothing to do with that) and which party's extreme views on social policy have become more salient during the year leading up to the elections.

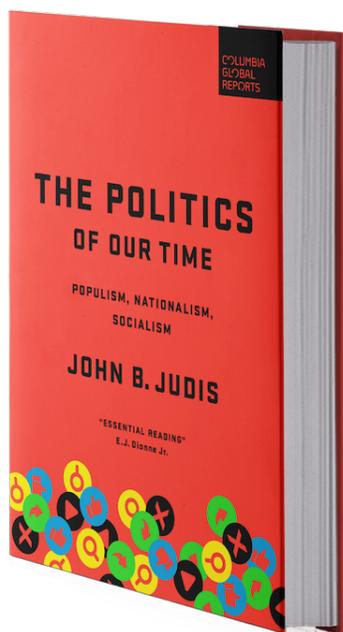
If not for the court's overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, I would have expected a decisive Republican takeover of the House and possibly the Senate, but the abortion decision, coupled with the Democrats' legislative victories, has narrowed the race. I would still expect, however, that the state of the economy – inflation, as Jimmy Carter will tell you, is a party killer – and Biden's lack of inspiring leadership **will doom the Democrats in November, at least in the House races.**

In 2016, **Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders** both tried to break out of the post-New Deal stalemate between the parties by breaking with their parties' economic orthodoxies. And Trump's rightwing populist crusade, with some help from Hillary Clinton's woeful campaign, did get him to Washington, but Trump lacked the attention span and the trained cadre to get his program across. Instead, he became captive to the business conservatives in the Republican dominated Senate.

Trump, however, may try again in 2024, with unpredictable results. He is capable of creating a democratic crisis, as he showed after his loss in November 2020, but not of putting America and his own party on a coherent new footing. Sanders is too old to run again, and his proteges are too closely identified with the extreme social policies of young college-educated metro dwellers to create viable national majorities. **American politics will remain, for several years to come, without a clear direction, mired in what political scientist Walter Dean Burnham called an “unstable equilibrium.”**

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