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CRASHING THE PARTY

Democrats, Republicans, and the
Crisis of U.S. Politics

By John Nichols

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Crashing the Party

Democrats, Republicans, and the Crisis of U.S. Politics

By John Nichols

The closest commentator that the contemporary United States has to Mark Twain, satirist and television host Bill Maher, surveyed the sorry state of the American politics midway through the 2016 election season and declared, “Our system sucks. The Constitution needs a page-one rewrite.”

As Twain did in the nineteenth century, when he exposed the excesses of America’s first Gilded Age and sought, without success, to avert the young nation’s lurch toward imperialism, Maher spoke a truth that even the boldest of today’s politicians dare not detail—and that most media elites refuse to discuss. The American system no longer works in any realistic sense. It is not just that it is “rigged” against the economic interests of the great mass of Americans, as liberal Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren suggests. It is rigged against functioning as anything more than an enabler of a failed status quo. The system can register disenchantment, yet it is structurally designed to disarm and defeat responses to that disenchantment.

The tensions that extend from this reality have defined the electoral landscape of the 2016, the most volatile presidential election year since the explosive campaigns of the late 1960s. Nothing about the 2016 race will resolve those tensions. But it has exposed the vulnerability of the processes that will eventually have to give way if there is to be a newer and more responsive politics in the United States.

At the heart of the crisis is a two-party system that for much of the post-World War II era

proved to be capable of containing dissent, constricting the discourse and continuing politics as usual. Even when reasonably substantial and progressive change did occur, during a ten-year period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the response of the system’s overseers (on the U.S. Supreme Court and in Congress) was not to open its doors to the new dynamic. Instead of adjusting on the side of progress, they erred on the side of reaction: with an updating of procedures and practices to make the parties and their candidates more reliant on wealthy campaign donors and less responsive to voters. Since the “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s, both parties have competed for the favor of a donor class of billionaires and corporate CEOs, developing what veteran consumer activist and presidential contender Ralph Nader describes as a “commonality” that is “demonstrated in terms of allowing big money to corrupt politics, allowing Wall Street to override and take much control of Washington, and allow our foreign policy to be so militarized.” That commonality has frequently made the give-and-take of American politics so tedious that election turnout even in presidential years has declined toward a mere fifty percent of the electorate.

It is easy to blame individual party leaders and candidates, but the real problem is structural. Though it was not formally designed as a two-party system, American electoral politics evolved into just that. The two major parties are now so protected structurally that the formation of alternative parties is always difficult—and it is especially difficult at precisely the point when they might be most likely to

develop: during volatile presidential elections when voters are dissatisfied with their choices. Most American states make it hard for new parties to get on the ballot, and many actually require alternative political groups to secure their ballot positions before the major parties nominate their candidates. Thus, dissident contenders who are denied nominations have no real opening to leave their parties and

form new coalitions—as is common in the more flexible and functional democracies.

This lack of political flexibility, while rarely discussed, actually defines modern American politics—and governance. The problem is that the definition that has been reached is not merely defective. It is antithetical to democracy.

America's Rapidly Expanding Demand for a New Politics

By taking advantage of media and governing structures that are biased against the more adventurous and ambitious politics that can develop in multi-party democracies, the Democratic and Republican Parties are now decades into the project of defining American politics narrowly. Unfortunately for them, America is no longer narrow.

The decline of traditional media and a social-media revolution, decades of deindustrialization, globalization and automation, and the rise of new movements to address wage stagnation, economic inequality, gender bias and discrimination, mass incarceration, racially-insensitive, and irresponsible policing and a climate crisis that threatens the planet have combined to create more urgent demands on both major parties and on the body politic. The United States has an expanding grassroots left (which since the rise of the Occupy movement and state-based anti-austerity protests has drawn increased support from established labor groups and members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus) and that movement is at once pulling the Democratic Party away from the center while developing alternatives to the party and to electoral politics. The United States also has a grassroots right (which is linked to and often supported

by exceptionally wealthy donors and right-wing media) and it is pulling the Republican Party toward what was once considered the extremist fringe of the political spectrum. The United States also has a rising generation of younger, so-called “millennial” voters who feel no attachment to the old parties—and are often repulsed by them. The center is barely holding in the Democratic Party. It has given way in the Republican Party. And the explosions are far from finished; both parties and the electoral process that extends from them have entered into a period of upheaval that will alter American politics—perhaps beyond recognition.

This is the reality that runs deeper than the personalities and the partisanship that have dominated the political news on the 2016 election cycle. It is simply and unquestionably the case that both major parties are now under immense pressure to change—the most immense pressure they have faced since the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the Democratic Party went through a radical transformation (moving dramatically to the left with Franklin Delano Roosevelt) and the Republican Party entered into a twenty-year period of failure and self-doubt that only ended with the emergence of Dwight Eisenhower and modern Re-

publicanism. At the same time, the elites that have long dominated these two parties are determined to resist change—or, if change must come, to shape it in their favor. Understanding the tensions, and the pressures that exacerbated them in 2016 and that will exac-

erbate them in the years to come, is necessary if there is to be any hope for a positive reform and renewal, not just of the parties but of an American political process that is insufficiently prepared to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The Politics of Preventing Catastrophe

That the process is insufficient has been confirmed by the fall competition between Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and Republican nominee Donald Trump, whom polls identify as the most spectacularly unpopular pair of major-party nominees in modern times. After a primary season that offered glimmers of recognition of the economic and social challenges facing America—and fainter glimmers of hope for an appropriate response—the fall election season settled into an agonizingly familiar pattern: an uninspired centrist with close ties to corporate interests and a penchant for caution and compromise argued that it was urgent to vote Democratic in order to avert the election of an off-the-wall extremist Republican.

For all the talk about how Donald Trump redefined the 2016 campaign in the United States as something different and more unsettling than ever before, the fall competition has actually recalled the contest America experienced in 1964, when Democratic insider Lyndon Johnson faced Republican Barry (“extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice”) Goldwater, and to only a somewhat lesser extent the presidential election of 1980, when Democratic moderate Jimmy Carter faced Republican Ronald (“government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem”) Reagan. In each of those previous election cycles, the arguments of the Democratic and Republican Parties was essentially the same:

that it was essential for the fate of the nation and the world to prevent the other party from coming to power. Issues and ideas, immediate needs and long-term initiatives, were forgotten in the mad rush to prevent catastrophe.

The problem, of course, is that when a country develops a politics based on averting catastrophe rather than debating the best way to advance, when political parties build their messages around by-any-means-necessary arguments for preventing opponents from coming to power (as opposed to making cases for themselves), nations cease to advance. By most measures, America has indeed ceased to advance on the issues that mainstream leaders of the past (Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John Kennedy on the Democratic side, and Teddy Roosevelt, Wendell Willkie, and Dwight Eisenhower on the Republican side) argued were essential to the health and safety of the republic: toward greater fairness and equality, away from concentrated domestic power and foreign policies dictated by a military-industrial complex. In today’s America, inequality is taking on epic proportions, wages have been more-or-less stagnant for decades, corporations are evolving into monopolies, and Pentagon budgets are giving new meaning to the term “bloat.” No one outside the one percent that benefits from the circumstance is pleased with it; but the circumstance does not change.

Even when the voters try to hand a mandate to a new president who promises progress, as they did with Barack Obama in 2008, promises of hope and change get bogged down in opposition-party obstruction, and the work of governing becomes so uninspired and ineffectual that frustration boils over.

So it was that, by the time the 2016 campaign got going, grassroots Democrats and Republicans were in agreement on one thing: the country was headed in the wrong direction. A fall 2015 Bloomberg poll found that 69 percent of Americans thought their country was off course. A CBS survey put the dissatisfaction measure at 68 percent, while the NBC poll put it at 70 percent. With a year to go before the 2016 election, people who approved of President Obama and disapproved of the Republican-controlled Congress thought the country

was on a flawed trajectory, and people who disapproved of the Democratic president and approved of the Republican House and Senate thought the country was on a flawed trajectory. Something was clearly wrong.

Yet the political and economic elites still saw smooth sailing ahead, predicting a “dynastic-succession” election in which the Democratic Party would nominate Hillary Clinton, the wife of a former president who had served as secretary of state for the sitting president, and the Republican Party would nominate Jeb Bush, the son of one former president and the brother of another. Even as the campaign progressed, there was lingering certainty on the part of the elites that the center would hold—or, to be more precise, that candidates who were entirely acceptable to corporate elites and billionaire campaign donors would prevail.

The Sanders Revolution Crashes Into a Democratic Wall

There was much talk of “inevitability” until the campaign actually began, after which this veneer of certainty quickly began to crumble. It turned out that the dissatisfaction was real, and far more likely to influence the electoral process than the pundits and political strategists imagined. As Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who upset and transformed the Democratic process with an insurgent campaign that promised a political revolution, told this writer after his presidential run was done:

Going through 46 states, we met so many fantastic people who are prepared to think outside of the box, who understand that the limitations that the establishment imposes on our thinking of what we can or cannot accomplish is nonsense, that we can do far, far more, and they are prepared to fight for that.

Sanders was right about the fact that Americans are ready to think outside the box; polling data and at least some voting patterns confirm this. He was also right that it would take a sweeping political revolution to upset and alter a system that is controlled and guided by an establishment that does not permit such thinking. But even Sanders underestimated the determination of that establishment to maintain its grip on the party. If the 2016 campaign proved anything, it is that Democratic Party elites take very seriously the maintenance of their political advantages—and the economic advantages that extend from them.

Sanders learned this the hard way: by taking on the establishment with a campaign that challenged the boundaries imposed on the process by political and media elites. He ac-

cepted some political boundaries; an independent who had never before run as a Democrat, he entered the Democratic primaries because he said it was simply too hard to build an independent candidacy or create a new party in the time that was available. But even as he joined the Democratic race, Sanders refused to except traditional limits and constraints. The senator campaigned as a proud democratic socialist—something no serious contender had ever before done in a race for the nomination of the Democratic Party. And he outlined an agenda that blended ideas borrowed from European social democrats (national health care, free higher education, economic planning and infrastructure investment) with the ideals of the anti-austerity movements that developed in the U.S. and Europe following the global economic meltdown of 2008.

More domestically focused and less explicitly internationalist in his approach than British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, Sanders said,

I believed from my heart of hearts that the ideas I was talking about were not courageous, radical, bold ideas. The ideas that I was talking about are what most Americans would support if they had the chance to hear these views, which they do not under normal circumstances. You could watch CNN for the next 14 years, and you're not going to hear a discussion about the need for a single-payer health-care system. You're not going to see a critique of the drug companies, and you're not going to hear much discussion about income and wealth inequality.

But of course it was radical to argue that popular ideas are not given a fair hearing, and that popular proposals are not implemented, because of a media system that prioritizes commercial and entertainment values over civic and democratic values. So, too, was arguing that the Democratic nominating process is rigged to limit the influence of new voters (particularly young people) and independents, and to enhance the influence of party elites

(so-called “super-delegates,” who play a pivotal role in choosing Democratic nominees but who are not accountable to Democratic voters). So, too, was calling for constitutional reforms to declare that corporations are not people, wealthy individuals should not use their economic advantage to shout down the majority in elections, and citizens and their elected representatives have a right to organize elections where votes speak louder than the dollars that corporations and billionaires donate to their favored contenders.

Sanders made all of these arguments. And, to the surprise even of the candidate’s most ardent supporters, his campaign took off.

The radical critique that Sanders brought to the 2016 campaign trail, and the determination with which he advanced it, proved to be enormously popular. He won 23 Democratic primaries and caucuses, secured 13.2 million votes, and went to the Democratic National Convention in July with 1,865 delegates (out of 4,763)—the largest delegate total secured by an insurgent challenger in modern times. Sanders proved to be so popular as a contender that Clinton had to rip up her own program and adopt much of his: formally, in a Democratic Party platform hailed by Sanders as “the most progressive in history,” and informally in a series of announcements and agreements that saw the eventual nominee move toward Sanders’ positions on a host of trade policy, higher education and health care issues.

Clinton’s moves helped her to beat Sanders in enough Democratic caucuses and primaries to secure the party nomination. But she was also helped by the structural advantage that media and political systems accord candidates favored by the elites when there is a threat that democracy might erupt.

America’s media is diverse, and it includes newspapers, magazines, websites, and radio

programs that speak truth to power. But the media system as a whole errs on the side of the centrist social policies and conservative fiscal standards favored by the economic elites that invest not just in multinational corporations but in media properties—and on the side of veteran political figures, such as Clinton, who have historically been aligned with the elites. The only deviations come when politicians are sufficiently entertaining and/or frightening (as Donald Trump proved to be in 2016) that they can generate internet clicks and broadcast ratings more commonly associated with sports figures and pop stars. Sanders did not fit into the calculus, and the media let him know this.

At the end of 2015, at a point when all the candidates on the Democratic and Republican sides had been campaigning for months, Trump and Sanders had attracted roughly similar levels of support. The “Real Clear Politics” website’s poll averages had Trump attracting 30.4 percent support nationally among voters who might reasonably be expected to participate in Republican primaries and caucuses. On the Democratic side, the RCP poll averages had Sanders attracting 31 percent support. Though they were dramatically different contenders offering polar opposite proposals for the United States, both men were attracting mass support for their challenges to politics as usual. So they should have been attracting relatively similar levels of media coverage, right? Wrong.

Media analyst Andrew Tyndall, who tracks news coverage of candidates, determined that, though Sanders and Trump were gaining equal levels of support, 234 minutes of network news attention had been devoted to Trump in 2015 versus just ten minutes for Sanders. “The network newscasts are wildly overplaying Trump, who regularly attracts between 20-30 percent of primary voter support, while at the same time wildly underplaying Sanders, who regularly attracts between

20-30 percent of primary voter support,” observed Eric Boehlert of Media Matters in late December.

Obviously, Trump is the GOP front runner and it’s reasonable that he would get more attention than Sanders, who’s running second for the Democrats. But 234 total network minutes for Trump compared to just 10 network minutes for Sanders, as the Tyndall Report found?

Imagine if Sanders, the democratic socialist who argued that working people should unite and take on the elites, had gotten media coverage that was comparable to that accorded the billionaire Republican whose faux populism sought to divide Americans along lines of race, ethnicity, and religion. Might Sanders have upset expectations and won the Democratic nomination, as Trump did the Republican nod? Sanders thinks that he was able to communicate effectively with younger voters who “do not watch the evening news” but rely on social media. At the same time, he admits that the media’s failure to cover his campaign at critical stages, and its focus on political gossip rather than substantive issues harmed his prospects. “I think it hurt us a whole lot with older people, who really did not hear from us directly through ABC or CBS,” said the senator, referencing major television networks that remain prime sources of political news for voters over age fifty.

When Sanders was able to make a direct connection with voters, turning the focus away from personalities and toward the issues, as he did in states such as New Hampshire, Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana and Oregon, the democratic socialist won overwhelming victories. That rattled party leaders, as was revealed by WikiLeaks shortly before the Democratic National Convention. The publication of thousands of DNC e-mails confirmed the suspicion of Sanders supporters that the committee sought to tip the balance of the nominating process toward Clinton. In the e-mails, top

DNC staffers speculated about attacking Sanders based on his religious faith; an attorney offered the committee advice on defending Clinton against complaints about fundraising schemes that favored her candidacy; and Wasserman Schultz called Sanders' campaign manager Jeff Weaver "particularly scummy" and "an ass." The e-mails from supposedly unbiased party officials were frequently dismissive of the candidacy of the progressive senator, even as he won key primaries. When Sanders suggested during the campaign that he would like to replace her as chairman, Wasserman Schultz replied to an aide with a sharp e-mail that declared, "He isn't going to be president." Asked about the bias displayed in the e-mails from Wasserman Schultz and other DNC insiders—

who were supposed to treat both campaigns fairly—Weaver observed that "much of what we felt was happening was in fact happening."

Wasserman Schultz was forced to resign. But the party chair and her allies got the nominee they so obviously preferred. At the same time, they earned the distrust, and in some cases open antipathy, of Sanders backers. That distrust and antipathy created divisions, and challenges, for the party as the fall race began. While Sanders himself endorsed Clinton, the nominee struggled to hold her own against Trump, a candidate who even Republicans like Ohio Governor John Kasich (a former GOP presidential contender) described as unfit for office.

The Republican Roots of Trumpism

While the Democrats saw off the Sanders insurgency, perhaps to their own detriment, the Republicans got Trumped. What's the difference between the two parties? Why was the Sanders insurgency blocked at the same time that the Trump insurgency was prevailing? The answer, of course, is that Donald Trump was far less of an insurgent than Bernie Sanders. Trump was portrayed as a "billionaire populist," but he was always more billionaire than populist, and some Republican elites recognized that right away. Others resisted him, but they were doomed from the start.

Trump was destined to win the Republican nomination because he had figured out the Republican Party. He knew that, since the time of Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" and "moral majority" campaigning in the early 1970s, party leaders had made the most cynical of political bargains. They would seek power promising to advance the right-wing social agenda

of conservative southern and rural voters, and then they would govern as representatives of wealthy campaign donors and Wall Street. As long as they ginned up fears about integration and immigration and affirmative action and abortion rights and marriage equality for lesbians and gays at election time, the GOP insiders calculated that they could keep winning elections with a carefully-orchestrated politics of division and foreboding. The problem was that Republican presidents and congresses rarely used the power that came with their victories to deliver any kind of economic progress for those who provided the party's essential votes; indeed, by embracing race-to-the-bottom trade deals, bailouts for banks and every other agenda item advanced by Wall Street, party leaders in Congress made their base voters more economically vulnerable. Trump figured out that he could insert himself into the Republican primaries, describe the other candidates for the party's nomination as cam-

paign-finance crooks and double-dealing political grifters, and win.

It was not hard for Trump to beat the 16 other Republican contenders and “the smartest people in the room” cadres of consultants and strategists they had assembled to elect one of the insiders. Trump faced tepid resistance from conservative elites and disbelieving conservative pundits, who did not want to see the old calculus that empowered them politically and paid their bills upset by an upstart billionaire. These elites, who generally grouped around the family of former Presidents George Herbert Walker Bush and George Walker Bush, had seen off past challenges to their authority from religious-right extremists such as Pat Robertson (in 1988) and right-wing populists such as Pat Buchanan (in 1992 and 1996). And they imagined that they could do so again by rallying around another member of the first family of insider Republicanism: former Florida Governor Jeb Bush—or, failing that, a generic insider Republican such as former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney (the party’s hapless 2012 nominee who deferred early in the process to a Jeb Bush juggernaut that relied on the old combination of massive fundraising from donors with corporate ties, big-name endorsements and the same crew of strategists who had put a Bush on six of the past nine Republican tickets).

Trump knew something the Bushes and Romneys refused to admit: that the party base hated not just Democrats such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton but also Republican leaders who treated Obama or Clinton with anything less than overt and unyielding disdain. Trump’s embrace of conspiracy theories that imagined Obama to be a Kenyan-born Muslim radical, or that portrayed Clinton as a criminal mastermind who belonged in jail rather than in the State Department or the White House, did not disqualify him with a Republican base

that had for two decades been fed a steady diet of lies and hatemongering by right-wing media and cynical political strategists. It made him the trusted and favored choice of the Republicans who were most likely to vote in party primaries, and of more extreme voters (including followers of former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke and the wild-eyed anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant zealots who formed what came to be referred to as the “alt-right”). It should not have surprised anyone that Trump would win Republican caucus after Republican caucus, Republican primary after Republican primary with the support of voters who got most of their information from the right-wing Fox television network, the right-wing Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity radio programs, and the right-wing websites that peddled precisely the sort of conspiracy theories and hatred toward immigrants, refugees, and minorities that Trump proposed to mainstream. Trump did not create a new movement; he simply told voters who had been taught to hate Democrat elites that they could also feel free to hate Republican elites.

Trump’s task was made dramatically easier than it might have been by wall-to-wall media coverage from outlets that craved the ratings he could generate; CBS chief Les Moonves actually admitted at an industry gathering that the ratings and revenue bonanza associated with the Trump moment “may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.” The coverage of the billionaire was lavish, and constant. “Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump, and Trump” is how veteran political observer Larry Sabato summed up mainstream-media’s approach to the primary season. By late February of 2016, the billionaire had, according to figures cited by *The Economist* magazine, enjoyed ten times as much attention on network evening newscasts as Florida Senator Marco Rubio, a candidate seen by many in the party establishment

as their last best hope to upset Trump. This overwhelming over-coverage of Trump's candidacy made "The Donald" the defining figure in the GOP competition. As Amy Goodman of Democracy Now! put it: "Trump doesn't even have to go out on the road—he's piped into everyone's home." That was invaluable for Trump.

Equally invaluable for Trump was the determination of the nation's most prominent and powerful Republicans, House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, to maintain their prominence and power. During the primary season, Ryan and McConnell occasionally grumbled about Trump's racism, sexism, xenophobia, and attacks on the judiciary and the rule of law; but they always attached to their mild rebukes a promise that they support the party's eventual nominee. That empowered Trump, as the message that Republican primary voters got was that his excesses were never so great that they would cause key Republicans to reject him. Once the nomination fight was

done, McConnell and Ryan were on board the Trump train—and eventually, so too were bitter Trump rivals such as Texas Senator Ted Cruz.

The lesson from Ryan and McConnell and Cruz was blunt and unequivocal: partisanship would always trump principle; nothing mattered more than maintaining the party's grip on power, and its ability to grasp for more power in the future. With their choices, Ryan and McConnell and Cruz made what was still sometimes referred to as the "Party of Lincoln" or the "Party of Reagan" into the "Party of Trump." They lied to themselves, imagining that they could after the Trump interregnum restore some semblance of dignity; that they could renew the once-successful strategy of presenting themselves and their party as respectable while winking and nodding as conspiracy theories and racist appeals were used to stir the base into an anti-Democratic frenzy every four years. But Trump had opened a political Pandora's Box that was not about to close for the Republicans.

Partisanship is Beginning to Derail the Partisans

The Republicans were not the only ones lying to themselves.

Democratic insiders imagined at the start of the fall 2016 campaign that it would be possible to run an old-fashioned "we're better than them" campaign against Trump and the Republicans. But Clinton's poll numbers suggested that she was struggling to attract the independent progressives, the working-class men and women, and especially the millennials who had been excited by Bernie Sanders and his democratic socialist candidacy. The polls did not suggest that substantial numbers

of Sanders backers were attracted by Trump; in fact, they were disgusted with him. But they were also angry with Democratic leaders who had schemed to derail the Sanders insurgency. Recognizing the depth of the anger, Clinton backers joined Sanders backers not just in moving to displace DNC chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz from her position, but also to establish a commission to reform the nominating process. That represented progress. But not enough progress.

Democratic leaders have yet to fully recognize that the Sanders campaign was not just a chal-

lenge to Hillary Clinton but to the Democratic Party as it currently operates—and, indeed, to the political process as it currently operates. The senator from Vermont is right when he notes:

We went into state after state where we took on the entire Democratic leadership. We took on the Governor. We took on two United States Senators, we took on all the Mayors, and we won big. What does that tell you about the relationship of the Democratic leadership to their own constituents? The Democrats have got to, I think, open the door to the young people. Welcome them in and understand that that will be messy, that many of these young people are not professional politicians who have spent 30 years making contributions to the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party is going to have to adjust itself to their reality rather than forcing these young people, these working-class people, to be adjusted to the Democratic leadership reality.

It is optimistic to suggest that even a “messy” process can succeed in opening up a party that is not inclined toward openness. The more likely scenario, for the Democrats and the Republicans, is that party leaders—and most pundits—will continue to misread the moment and imagine that the upheavals of 2016 will be contained on the calendar of this particular year. That’s not going to happen. The realities of globalization, deindustrialization, automation, failed austerity schemes, bloated military budgets, and warped national priorities are not going to be altered by this election. In fact, they are likely to metastasize as the United States and other western democracies wrestle with a new world order that they ushered in but can no longer manage. And the inability of a narrowly-defined two-party system to give voice to an ever-expanding spectrum of American ideals and demands will become ever more evident.

Americans are dramatically dissatisfied with politics as usual—and the gridlock, inequality, and injustice that extends from it. One-third of Americans now see the inability of their

federal government to address major issues facing the United States as a “crisis” according to a Gallup Poll conducted early in 2016, while 51 percent say the dysfunction is a “major problem.” Roughly the same percentage of Americans see the tendency of political party leaders to place partisan concerns ahead of the common good as a “crisis” (30 percent) or a “major problem” (55 percent). These disgruntled citizens do not place the full blame for their country’s problems on the two major parties—polling suggests that many voters recognize, correctly, that a consolidated and dumbed-down media is also a major factor. But Americans are starting to recognize that they need more choices if they are going to get government that reflects their values and that responds to their demands.

A September Gallup poll found that only 38 percent of Americans felt that the two major parties did an adequate job of representing the will and the desires of the American people. Sixty percent of those surveyed said the country needed another party. That’s a dramatic shift from just four years ago, when 45 percent said the existing parties were sufficient and 46 percent wanted another option.

Perhaps more significant than the polling data is the practical evidence of interest in and support for multi-party democracy. Despite the many barriers to third parties in the United States—they have historically been neglected by the media, denied a place in presidential debates, and forced to engage in a costly process of petitioning their way onto state ballots—the socially-liberal and economically-conservative Libertarian Party succeeded in getting on all 50 state ballots and that of the federal District of Columbia in 2016, while the left-leaning Green Party approached the election with 44 state ballot lines and that of the District of Columbia. As the fall campaign got going, the Libertarians were polling in double digits in many states and in some national surveys, and were

actually earning endorsements from major newspapers. Meanwhile, at one point during the campaign the Greens were polling as high as five percent nationally, and doing even better in major states such as California, suggesting that they could earn a record vote in 2016.

Additionally, the New York-based Working Families Party, which frequently endorses left-leaning Democrats but sometimes runs and wins on its own, has been rapidly expanding to states across the country—and securing additional ballot lines in the process. And the victories of Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant, as a Socialist Alternative party contender, have inspired other candidates by municipal socialists in cities across the country.

Yet, for all the evidence that Americans want more choices, prospects for opening up the country's political process face structural barriers that are daunting even for the most optimistic reformers. And there are no guarantees that multi-party politics would suddenly make the United States a green and pleasant land. After all, countries with a more open and functional politics have economic and political problems that go unresolved.

When the dust settles from the 2016 election, the elites will speak among themselves about how to address the political vulnerabilities that were exposed by the campaign. There will certainly be discussion about whether a two party system that developed in the 1850s is the right fit for twenty-first century America. But, at the elite level, these discussions will invariably err toward tinkering with existing structures rather than overturning them. At the grassroots level, where social media and independent journalism are creating new webs of connection and engagement, there will be a richer and more enthusiastic conversation about structural change. That discussion (primarily on the left, but also on the right) will be

energized and expanded by the experience of the 2016 primaries, and of a fall election season that saw the hands of the Libertarians and the Greens strengthened in many states.

Already, there are movements for ambitious reforms, some of which have the potential to be as transformational as the Progressive Era reforms of a century ago (which during the period from 1910 to 1920 saw the Constitution amended to create an elected U.S. Senate, to provide women with the right to vote and to dramatically expand federal taxation and regulatory powers in ways that would eventually empower Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal). Today, there are new movements for constitutional reform. By mid-2016, 17 state legislatures had asked the Congress to take steps to amend the Constitution in order to reform campaign finance laws in a way that could level the playing field for all candidates and parties.

At the same time, a new voting rights movement has developed and seeks to remove barriers to electoral participation. The gerrymandering schemes that the major parties use to create districts that favor their candidates are being challenged in the courts with renewed vigor. And a national group, FairVote, has helped community activists across the country to implement local "Instant-Runoff" and "Ranked-Choice" voting systems that allow the votes of losing candidates to transfer to more viable contenders. This reform eliminates the prospect that support for an "ideal" third-party candidate might spoil the election prospects of an acceptable major-party candidate—or vice versa. By removing the fear that votes for third-party candidates might be wasted, ranked-choice voting in cities such as San Francisco has already resulted in the election of candidates backed by third parties. And there is now a push to implement the system for statewide elections in the state of Maine.

A New Politics for a New America

It is dangerous, however, to underestimate the strength and determination of the partisans who will resist even the most modest reforms. The two major parties have maintained their duopoly for 160 years—adapting just sufficiently to stifle the independent and alternative parties (Populist and Progressive and Socialist) that have at times threatened their ability to define politics in their favor. Despite their genuine differences, the Democrats and Republicans frequently join together to draw electoral district lines, set voting rules, and thwart opposition. They are likely to do so again.

For this reason, much of the agitation for change will take place within the major parties. The highest-profile struggle is likely to take place within the Republican Party, where the traditional leadership split between a small #NeverTrump contingent that refused to support the nominee and a larger group (including House Speaker Paul Ryan, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and most Republican governors) that imagined it could accept Trump for the election season and then get their party back. It won't work that way. Trump's fall campaign, while chaotic and often dysfunctional, succeeded in winning over many grassroots Republicans and also in drawing independent Trump enthusiasts into the party fold. They are not going away. So the likelihood of many years of bitter internal division, struggles for control of the party apparatus at the state and national levels, and primary fights is real. The party experienced similar disarray after Barry Goldwater's loss in 1964 and reconstituted itself only sufficiently to attract 43 percent of the vote in 1968. Luckily for the Republicans of the late 1960s, the Democrats were even more divided. Democratic President Lyndon Johnson dropped his bid for reelection in the spring of 1968 and the party atomized into competing camps, with the establishment backing Vice

President Hubert Humphrey, many liberals and progressives sitting out the fall election, and southern segregationists and northern reactionaries backing the renegade independent candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace. As a result, Nixon's 43 percent was sufficient to claim the presidency and, from the White House, the master political strategist built a new Republican Party that attracted not just the Nixon voters of 1968 but a great many of the Wallace voters.

Republicans are not likely to be so lucky this time. There is no space for it to grow on the right, and Trump's candidacy has "branded" the GOP as a racist, xenophobic, and sexist party that will have an exceptionally hard time appealing to the country's rapidly-expanding Latino community or to young voters of all races and backgrounds. Nor is there a Nixon on the horizon: a senior party figure with national name recognition, clear political skills, and connections to the various factions within the party. And whoever tries to be that figure—Speaker Paul Ryan perhaps, or Ohio Governor John Kasich—is all but certain to face sniping from Trump. Unlike Goldwater, who stepped back from the national limelight after losing, Trump will not fade away. And media outlets that are always searching for the lowest common denominator will continue to use the billionaire to attract clicks and ratings.

It will be somewhat easier for the Democrats. But only somewhat. The divide between the Clinton and Sanders camps never ran so deep on the Democratic side as did the divide between the Trump and #NeverTrump camps on the Republican side. But many Sanders supporters were angered by the revelations about how Democratic National Committee insiders abandoned neutrality and ran interference on behalf of Clinton during the primaries. Despite

Sanders' endorsement of the eventual nominee, bitterness lingers.

Sanders backers are organizing on many fronts to take over the apparatus of the party. They have already succeeded in a number of states, and they will be highly active in the upcoming review of nominating procedures, which could weaken the influence of party elders who serve as so-called "super-delegates." But the divide between the corporate-tied centrist Democrats, who have run the party (and produced its presidential nominees) for decades, and the younger, more working-class and radical Sanders supporters, will not be easily resolved. The senator from Vermont is right when he says the process of opening up the party will be "messy." But it could also become urgent. The Sanders insurgency was not primarily powered by the candidate's personality—although polls suggest he is one of the few politicians who Americans of varying ideologies and partisanship trust and, in fact, currently the most popular American politician—but it was powered by the candidate's issues. Sanders did not deliver traditional stump speeches during his run for the nomination; he delivered tutorials that often lasted for more than an hour on the need for a single-payer health-care system, free higher education, massive investments in infrastructure, jobs programs for inner-city youth, and a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. He decried austerity and talked up social democracy. And he argued that both major parties were too deferential to Wall Street, campaign donors, and corporate lobbyists. More than 13 million people voted for Sanders and for the "political revolution" he proposed. And millions more would have voted for him if the Democratic Party had removed the structural barriers to mass participation caucuses and primaries.

Sanders and his supporters say they will keep fighting to remove those barriers. Their success or failure will define the Democratic Party

to a far greater extent than anything Clinton and his allies do—since the Sanders camp represents a dynamic force that has the potential to renew and build the party in a period where the economic and social concerns raised by the senator will become ever more pressing. Savvy party leaders, such as interim chair Donna Brazile, recognize the need to bring the Sanders backers to the table. So, too, do the more progressive members of Clinton's team. But there will be clashes, and they are likely to get intense when it comes to questions of how the party will finance its campaigns, how it will frame its agenda, and how it will organize a genuine "50-state strategy." The core question will be this: Does the Democratic Party remain a part of the status quo, or does it become a movement that seeks to change not just the politics of the United States but the economic and social infrastructure of a country where too many dreams have been deferred for too long?

Sanders is serious when he says that the Democratic Party must undergo "revolutionary" change. The party must overcome what the senator describes as its "same old weakness. That is, much too much dependency on consultants and TV ads—rather than mobilizing people."

"People are hurt," argues Sanders.

The truth is that we have had for forty years a declining middle class. People are hungry, and they're hurting, and they're very, very worried about their children. People are worried about themselves, yeah, but they're worried about their kids, and the future of their kids: Will their kids ever pay off their student debt? Will their kids ever get a decent paying job?

In order to speak to that hurt, both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party must evolve. Neither will do so willingly, or easily. The partisans of the past remain; they may even retain the upper hand, for now. But it is

a weaker hand after the turbulent 2016 nominating fights for Democrats and Republicans.

If we presume that an election season so chaotic as the one America has experienced in 2016 is unlikely to settle much, and that the chaos is likely to continue, then we must also presume that internal and external pressure on the parties to change will increase. Ultimately, it is hard to imagine how the center can hold. That may be an unsettling notion for some. But it is hopeful for those who seek a better politics in America—since changes in how parties see themselves and the process in which they are engaged create an opening for broader changes to the political infrastructure of the United States.

Those broader changes are necessary. For American politics to become even reason-

ably functional, there are going to have to be structural changes to update an archaic political system that maintains an unpopular status quo. America is a long way from the “one-page rewrite” of the Constitution that Bill Maher entertains, and which the most ardent reformers imagine could usher in an American version of European-style parliamentary democracy. But if and when the parties change—or if and when their failure to change invites the development of new parties—the underpinnings of an old and dysfunctional politics could give way to a new politics.

That new politics, with its roots in the upheavals of 2016, might not “suck” quite so horribly, or quite so completely, as a status quo that just about everyone agrees is insufficiently democratic for a new America.

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