

NICOLE MELLOW



THE STATE OF **DISUNION**

REGIONAL SOURCES OF MODERN
AMERICAN PARTISANSHIP

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AMERICAN PARTISANSHIP

NICOLE MELLOW

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
BALTIMORE

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mellow, Nicole.
The state of disunion : regional sources of modern American partisanship / Nicole Mellow.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-8018-8812-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-8018-8816-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8018-8812-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8018-8816-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Political parties—United States. 2. Political culture—United States.
3. Political participation—United States. 4. Opposition (Political science)—
United States. 5. Divided government—United States. 6. United States—
Politics and government—2001- I. Title.
JK2261.M46 2008
324.273—dc22
2007034000

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book.
For more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales@press.jhu.edu.*

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
1 RECASTING REGION	13
2 REGIME CHANGE FROM THE NEW DEAL STATE TO THE REPUBLICAN REVOLUTION	29
3 SUN BELT RISING GLOBALIZATION AND REGIONAL CHANGES ON TRADE POLICY	46
4 CHANGE COMES TO THE COTTON BELT RACE, REGION, AND THE POLITICS OF WELFARE POLICY	82
5 THE POLITICAL RESURRECTION OF THE BIBLE BELT RELIGION, MODERNIZATION, AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF ABORTION POLITICS	131
6 A HOUSE DIVIDED THE GEOGRAPHY OF PARTIES AND CONFLICT	164
APPENDIX A. RESEARCH METHOD AND CASE SELECTION	181
APPENDIX B. CONGRESSIONAL VOTE ANALYSIS	184
NOTES	189
INDEX	223

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals contributed to the development of the ideas that are expressed in these pages, and I owe all of them a great debt for what they have taught me about politics. My deep gratitude goes to Peter Trubowitz and Walter Dean Burnham for nurturing my interest in political geography while I was a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. It was also they who taught me the value of roaming widely through the toolbox to find whatever is necessary to best answer the interesting questions. Before them, Sidney Plotkin ignited my interest in politics at Vassar College when he put a copy of E. E. Schattschneider's book in my hand and helped me understand its insights. I owe thanks, also, to Ralph Nuñez, president of New York City's Homes for the Homeless and my first boss, for opening my eyes to the marvels of real-world politics.

Individuals at several institutions have been kind enough to read parts or all of the manuscript and to offer useful critiques along the way. In particular, the following scholars provided invaluable advice and insights: Brian Balogh, Richard Bense, Catherin Boone, James K. Galbraith, Bryan Garsten, Gary Jacobsohn, Farid Kahhat, Tse-Min Lin, David Mayhew, Sidney Milkis, James Morone, Michael Nelson, Benjamin Page, Howard Reiter, Gretchen Ritter, Bartholomew Sparrow, Anand Swamy, Jeffrey K. Tulis, Tamara Waggener, and Margaret Weir. Special credit goes to Sid Milkis, who asked hard questions at critical junctures. Anand Swamy helped me think through the methodological issues. Jeff Tulis was particularly influential in the development of this project, and I am deeply grateful for his willingness to read and reread my work. Tim Sullivan's close read immeasurably improved the manuscript. Finally, the strong support and useful suggestions from the anonymous reviewers at Princeton University Press and at the Johns Hopkins University Press were simply terrific, especially for one's first book. The book is stronger as a result of the advice of all of these scholars; any shortcomings that remain are not for want of their efforts.

Colleagues at Williams College have contributed to this project through their willingness to read my work, offer suggestions, and engage in lively and thoughtful conversation about American politics. I would especially like to thank Monique Deveaux, Cathy Johnson, Michael MacDonald, Jim Mahon, George Marcus, Darel Paul, and Mark Reinhardt for their ideas and inspirations, and Sharron Macklin for her technological mastery. Fellows at the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Williams provided valuable

comments on my work and helped expand my intellectual horizon across disciplinary boundaries. Bright students at Williams regularly challenged me to refine my thinking about parties, politics, and geography. I particularly want to thank Jacob Eisler and Alex Matthews for their painstaking research assistance and their abundant curiosity about politics.

A number of institutions and individuals helped make possible the research and writing of this book. A fellowship from the Miller Center for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia enabled me to make substantial headway with my work and introduced me to a wonderful group of political historians. Fellowships from the University of Texas allowed me to devote uninterrupted time to the project, as did an Oakley Center Fellowship from Williams College. Both the Carl Albert Congressional Research Center and the Dirksen Congressional Center provided valuable financial support and access to their archival holdings. I am also grateful to Alan Burns at the Clemson University Libraries for his assistance in tracking down documents in the Harry S. Dent Papers in the library's special collections. The Political Science Department at Williams College provided generous support for research assistance. I am also thankful to the following individuals for generously sharing their data: Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Kenneth Meier, and Deborah McFarlane.

Many people associated with the publication process at the Johns Hopkins University Press put time and effort into this book, and it is a better product for their efforts. I am grateful to my editor, Henry Tom, whose support throughout helped make this book a reality. I also extend my appreciation to Anne Whitmore, whose copyediting abilities are simply phenomenal. And I am deeply and profoundly grateful to my good friend, Henk van Assen, a gifted book designer, who generously gave his time to this project to make my ideas come alive visually.

This book would not have been completed without the support of my family and many friends. In particular, my parents, Richard Mellow and Gail Mellow, instilled in me a desire to keep learning, and they seem never to tire of listening to my ideas. My friendship with Sunila Kale afforded the opportunity for endless spirited discussions, while Christian Novetzke provided sane advice and necessary comic relief. Jeff Tulis was tireless in his support and encouragement, and I have deep gratitude for his friendship. The arrival of Rafael Henry was all the incentive I needed to finish the book, and his presence makes the imperative of improving democratic politics ever more clear to me. And most of all, Paige Bartels offered patience, wisdom, humor, and good daily counsel, without which I would not have persevered.

THE STATE OF DISUNION

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INTRODUCTION

THE 2000 U.S. presidential campaign began as a relatively forgettable season, not nearly as exciting as the parties' respective primary seasons, but by its end it had become a drama that transfixed the nation—the world, really—for five weeks beyond election night. At its center were the major party candidates, Democrat Al Gore, the sitting vice president, and Republican George W. Bush, the governor of Texas. The voting on election night was close. By the end of the night, the race had come down to Florida. With that state's votes still undecided, neither candidate was willing to concede the election. Over the next few days, a dispute erupted over the state's vote returns, and the election saga expanded over weeks to include the full battalions of the parties, legions of lawyers, various Florida officials, and judges at both the state and the federal level. In the end, the disagreement over the vote count was resolved, in unprecedented fashion, by the intervention of the U.S. Supreme Court—a decision hardly without its own controversy. Florida's electoral votes, and with them the presidency, went to Bush.

Having won the election, President-elect Bush faced a difficult political landscape. His was a victory clouded by ambiguity and contestation, and he could claim no electoral mandate as he prepared to move into office. Congress, his partner in lawmaking, was hardly a source of reassurance. Republicans had

a remarkably slim majority in the House—just five seats—and the Senate was evenly split. Bush, who had campaigned on the promise of being “a uniter, not a divider,” now faced a country almost perfectly divided between the parties. Delivering on his campaign promise, especially after the rancor of the election, would not be easy.

For his first official appearance as president-elect, Bush chose to speak to the nation from a podium in the chamber of the Texas State House. The setting was symbolic. Democrats controlled the Texas House, and Bush’s campaign had cited his work as governor with both Democrats and Republicans as evidence of his ability to unite across divides. The Democratic Speaker of the House, Pete Laney, introduced the new president to the country. Bush, citing the “spirit of cooperation” he had seen in that very hall, insisted that the “nation must rise above a house divided.” For his part, the president promised, “Whether you voted for me or not, I will do my best to serve your interests, and I will work to earn your respect.”¹

Despite the president’s optimistic call for unity, it did not take long for the country’s deep divisions to manifest themselves. In the 2004 presidential election, as in 2000, the electorate was polarized. Election day produced higher turnout, fewer independents, and greater party unity in ballot casting than any election in recent decades, signaling the intensity of voter passions. Two years later, in the midterm elections, Democrats gained control of Congress for the first time in twelve years, yet the division of seats between the parties remained as close as it had for the prior decade. Partisan clashes on legislation still rule in Washington as well. Party-line voting in Congress has been the norm for years, and both parties have resorted to any number of rule manipulations in their efforts to defeat their opponent. Even the normally cordial Senate became embroiled in a virulent partisanship in 2005 when Republicans threatened to derail Democratic opposition to President Bush’s judicial nominees with a parliamentary maneuver nicknamed the “nuclear option.” Left and right interest groups regularly trade accusations of obduracy and malfeasance through a proliferating number of blogs, books with sensational titles, 527-sponsored advertisements, even documentaries.

To describe this partisan rift, the phrase “red state–blue state divide” was coined, in reference to the geographic distribution of party support in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004.² In both elections, Bush drew his support from the states of the South and the interior West, the so-called red states. His Democratic opponents, first Al Gore and then John Kerry, won in the North, including the Northeast and parts of the Midwest, and in the Pacific Coast states, dubbed the blue states.

The combination of geographic division and partisan acrimony has led pundits to marvel that politics in the new millennium appear to be taking on “the coloration of the Civil War.”³ The resurrection of this potent image—of a country torn apart geographically by its political beliefs and party attachments—raises the question What is the relationship between geography and partisanship? Why, 150 years after the Civil War, with globalization linking far-flung places and undermining local differences, do distinct subnational identities still exist, and how do they inform partisan conflict? How have Republicans come to dominate in the South and interior West, and why have Democrats prospered in the North and Pacific Coast states?

This book tackles these questions through an analysis of geography and party in the post–World War II era. Regional conflicts were common in the nineteenth century, as the different sections of the country battled over issues including slavery, tariffs, and the strength of the central government. National industrial development and widespread acceptance of the modern administrative state in the first half of the twentieth century collapsed many of the regional differences that had fed these earlier conflicts. For most scholars, though, it was the civil rights achievements of the 1960s, especially the enfranchisement of African Americans in the South, which finally put an end to the political significance of regional differences. National political consolidation was achieved once all citizens could exercise the full rights of citizenship, including selecting the national government.

My analysis shows that regional disputes continue to inform American politics. Submerged during the New Deal years, geographic divisions returned in the late 1960s and 1970s across a broad spectrum of issues. Politicians’ responses led to a regional reorganization of the two-party system and the resuscitation of party conflict. The following chapters trace the post–World War II evolution of regional economic, racial, and cultural divisions, and show the effects these have had on national party building and interparty conflict. The story encompasses the demise of the multiregional New Deal Democratic political order and the rise of a new regionally divided party system. Bipartisanship gave way to partisanship as Republicans dominated the South and West and as Democrats found themselves displaced to the North and Pacific Coast states.

In this book I make three primary claims. First, the geographic regions within the United States are potent and unique fusions of their inhabitants’ material and cultural experiences. Second, regional differences are translated into political significance in part because ambitious politicians exploit them for partisan gain. Third, ambitious politicians’ exploitation of regional differences is largely responsible for today’s partisan conflict. I found that it is the political

parties' abilities or inabilities to develop cross-regional interests which has determined their fate on the national stage. By closely examining three cases—the creation of policy surrounding trade, welfare, and abortion—I hope to both illuminate the past and shed light on the prospects for overcoming current divisions.

Ironically, President Bush's attempt to steep himself in bipartisanship that night in Austin, Texas, itself reveals the importance that regions play in national politics. Demonstrating cooperation with Texas Democrats is not the same as showing an ability to cooperate with Democrats from New York, Massachusetts, or California. While of the same party and sharing many of the same general principles, Democrats in different parts of the country are shaped by the prevailing politics of their region, as are Republicans. Georgia Democrat Zell Miller does not share all of the views of Massachusetts Democrat Ted Kennedy, just as Rhode Island Republican Lincoln Chaffee does not share the same views as Kansas Republican Sam Brownback. While it would be inaccurate to say that all Texas Democrats are conservative, the state's history of Democratic dominance points to a legacy of conservatism within the Texas Democratic Party that is different from that in other parts of the country. So, while the Texas legislature may have been the best site from which to signal an ability to work with members of both parties, the real significance of Bush's claim may have been that he had been able to work well with other Texans. How those affiliations play out in national policy debates is the point of this book.

THE WAR BETWEEN THE PARTIES: ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Geography shapes American politics. The Federalists and anti-federalists anticipated it. Politicians profit from it (and pay for it). Citizens live through its consequences. Despite this, geography has not been a significant factor in scholarly explanations for today's partisanship.

Two social science interpretations dominate explanations for the intensity of current party conflict. The first focuses on the interests of key actors—elected officials, party activists, and core interest groups—and the actions they take to achieve their desired goals. The second concerns the ideas that have animated politics in recent decades. These two explanations, while drawing from different intellectual traditions, establish important parts of the story of rising conflict. Yet, lacking systematic analysis of the country's regions and their very different developmental paths, neither provides a fully satisfactory account of rising partisanship.⁴ Not only is the role of contemporary regions in party politics a crucial explanatory factor in the wholesale shift from mid-century bi-

partisan cooperation to today's partisanship, it is one that accommodates both interests and ideas.

The explanation that focuses on the effects of rational actors pursuing their interests points to two developments as contributing to the growth in party conflict. The first is the proliferation of single-issue interest groups, which began in the 1960s. Typically more ideologically extreme than the average voter on the issues around which they organize, these groups are significant electoral actors because they bundle funds, votes, and other resources to lawmakers' campaigns in exchange for legislative support. Lawmakers have responded to the proliferation of groups by using the party less as a vehicle for mass mobilization and more to convey their credibility and to organize themselves to achieve the legislative outputs desired by their interest group constituents.⁵ Second, to facilitate collective action, lawmakers changed the internal operation of Congress, and participated in the "nationalizing" of their party organizations.⁶ For scholars like David Rohde, this institutional reorganization had a profound influence on party conflict. Rohde argues that by the 1970s parties were more ideologically homogeneous; because of the increasingly similar interests of their constituents, party members in Congress instituted reforms that strengthened party leadership, thinking this the best way to achieve the members' now collective goals. Under the directorship of discipline-enforcing leaders, the parties have come into increasing conflict with each other.⁷ This account has been elaborated and generalized by Rohde and John Aldrich in their theory of "conditional party government."⁸

This explanation is useful for its description of the decisions made by key political actors that facilitated the increase of conflict, yet the fundamental, substantive reasons for debate are still unclear. Why was voters' electoral behavior creating increasingly homogeneous parties in the first place? To what conditions, or changes in conditions, were voters responding? For Rohde, it was a growth in the number of liberal Democrats in Congress that led to the push for House reforms. But what caused these numbers to grow across successive elections? Rohde argues that the reforms then contributed to an increasingly liberal national party as southern Democrats became more like northern liberals in their party. But, if reforms helped drive internal homogeneity, they did so among Democrats in large part because many southerners left the party. Rohde leaves the significance of this shift unexplored. What effect did the departure of southerners have on the nature of the party's ideological homogeneity (on what it meant to be "liberal") or on the nature of the subsequent conflict with Republicans?

These questions cannot be fully answered unless the larger historical environment within which the parties were operating is understood. Explanations that focus narrowly on interest pursuit and institutional structure leave us with too cursory a treatment of what drives conflict. More attention is needed to the larger social context that shapes how actors articulate and prioritize their interests and that, ultimately, leads them to choose one set of actions over another in any given moment. Because changing the context can change the logic of actors' choices, which then leads to different outcomes, a close examination of the historical setting with which political actors contend is needed.

Examining this setting is the terrain of political historians, and their accounts, especially those that focus on changing political ideas, provide the second common explanation for today's partisanship. Scholars have long pointed to a tradition of ideological division between American parties that extends back to founding era debates between Hamilton, Jefferson, and their compatriots over core political values, economic organization, and the proper conception of governmental authority.⁹ As one analysis puts it, "American party history, and by extension American political history at large, has been irreducibly ideological."¹⁰ From this perspective, the key to understanding today's conflict is to understand how older disputes have been refashioned by new conditions.

For those working in this tradition, the current conflict arose out of efforts by public intellectuals and party leaders on the right to develop and impose a "public philosophy" alternative to the reigning, though increasingly unpopular, New Deal philosophy. While the country had largely endorsed the New Deal's agenda of government activism in pursuit of public welfare, the social tumult and economic woes of the late 1960s and 1970s caused a growing number of voters to question Democratic commitments and solutions. Fueled by the country's problems at home and abroad and by a negative reaction to the activism of the left, strands of conservatism that had been percolating separately converged with the growing neoconservative movement, which began to articulate its rejection of the path taken by New Deal liberalism. Newly energized, the conservative movement's preference for private sphere, individual, and market solutions to the nation's ills clashed with liberals' continued belief in government activism to tame inequalities.¹¹

But, more than the parties' renewed debate over economic policy, the "culture wars" have become the real focus of most analysts' attention. John Kenneth White, for example, has described post-1960s politics as centered around a "values divide" in which the very definition of "good" and "bad" is debated—a result of the upending of traditional norms of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture by growing recognition of the country's racial and ethnic diversity and

the acceptance of new family patterns.¹² Samuel Huntington has similarly described the effect of those years as invoking the country's "creedal passions" and pulling a new generation of citizens into debate about core values.¹³ James Ceaser writes that more fundamental even than a conflict over values, left and right disagree on the foundational ideas, deriving from "nature, History, and faith," that underlie values; the two sides even disagree over whether foundational ideas should play a role in politics.¹⁴ For these and other authors, today's political conflict reflects differences in deeply held moral and ontological beliefs that are often manifested in battles centering on race, gender, religion, and various "post-material" concerns. Representing these conflicting ideas in government, the political parties are inevitably drawn into battle.¹⁵

These historical accounts help explain the substance of today's conflict. They identify the principles that have unified each of the parties as well as the source of the divisions between them in ways that the accounts of interest-seeking actors do not. But they have their own limitations. Changes in values occur neither spontaneously nor randomly; there are patterns to the support and development of ideas. These patterns need careful explication if we are to make sense of why ideological consensus fell apart as it did and why the challenges that arose took the precise form they did. For example, when stagflation fostered skepticism of Keynesianism, why did conservative solutions become the more viable competitor than radically left solutions? How did Republican Party ideology come to fuse libertarian, moralistic, and laissez-faire capitalist ideas, given that they appear to contain clear tensions? How did feminist ideals come to be more associated with Democrats than Republicans, given that the Democratic Party was long dominated by conservative southerners and was closely tied to labor, which was initially resistant to many feminist demands? But perhaps most importantly, why does the appeal of individual ideas appear to be geographically based, at least sufficiently so to generate solidly red states and solidly blue states? These sorts of questions cannot be answered by reference to the intrinsic nature of the ideas themselves. Needed is attention to the way national trends have affected various regions, along with examination of how these effects shifted the electoral motivations of the political actors who suffused those ideas with particular meanings and fashioned them into broad party ideologies.

REGIONS, PARTIES, AND CONFLICT: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT

V. O. Key, the eminent scholar of both regions and parties, wrote in the early 1940s that "[s]ectional interests have constituted important building blocks for the American parties. Each party has had its roots deep in sectional interest and

each has sought to build intersectional combinations powerful enough to govern.”¹⁶ My study begins with the New Deal Democratic Party of the early 1960s, a party whose electoral strength derived from the accord brokered between its two regional halves, in the North and South. The premise of this accord was that national policy was tailored to accommodate the interests dominant in each region: organized labor and manufacturers in the North and agriculturalists and labor-intensive industry in the South. Issues that defied tailoring, such as civil rights for African Americans, were suppressed. Making sustained allies of North and South had been one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s chief accomplishments, and so attractive were the regional benefits of New Deal policies that they tended to induce the cooperation of northern Republicans as well.¹⁷ The result was the classic bipartisanship of the late New Deal decades, often described as the consensus era in American politics.¹⁸

Yet, the very social and economic developments that the governing Democratic regime put in motion brought regional distinctions to the fore and frayed the North-South accord. In his analysis of presidents and partisan regimes, Stephen Skowronek has argued that presidents who are “regime articulators” inherit the regime’s governing commitments yet must manage its increasingly contentious coalition partners.¹⁹ As New Deal regime articulators, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were confronted with the dilemma of holding together a fractious coalition, and they made political decisions that further weakened the longstanding regional accord of the Democratic Party. Republican leaders of the late 1960s and early 1970s were quick to exploit the emerging fissures in the New Deal coalition—perhaps most obviously in the area of civil rights.²⁰ But, as later chapters of this book show, Republicans fractured the Democratic Party regionally with a host of other policy ideas as well.²¹ Because of the history of antagonisms between North and South, the dissonance between the two regions at the time, and the increasingly similar socioeconomic experiences of the South and West, Republican efforts to splinter Democrats on a regional axis were powerfully effective.

During his presidency, Richard Nixon consistently promoted policies that split the New Deal interregional alliance, even forgoing Republican unity at times to do so. With the country awash in political turmoil, regional strife in the 1970s was especially intense. Congressional Democrats turned repeatedly to economic policy—an area in which the two halves of the party had long been most in agreement—for a salve. But, as the United States’ position in the global economy changed, so too did regional relationships to that economy, and southern and northern Democrats found themselves in disagreement. Repub-

lican advantage at this time lay in appealing to southern Democrats, not just on racial issues but on other social issues and economic and foreign policy matters as well. The result was the peak of the “conservative coalition” of Republicans and southern Democrats of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While different in form from the bipartisanship of the early postwar years, the conservative coalition’s legislative activity nonetheless represented a new high-water mark of bipartisanship.

The regional discord of the late New Deal years led to a wrenching reorganization of the geographic bases of the party system. The most transparent outcome of Republican efforts to destabilize Democratic geography was an acceleration of the Republicans’ capture of the South, but Republican Party leaders concentrated on the West as well, a region with fewer House seats than the North and South (though disproportionately large in the Senate and electoral college) but, like the South, containing states with fast-growing economies and populations. Also as in the South, the farming states of the interior West had a political history of antagonism toward a perceived domination by northern financial and political elites. These economic, social, and symbolic similarities were fodder for a growing Republican Party.

With the regional cracking of the Democratic Party, the New Deal regime, long assumed to be a solid fixture of twentieth-century politics, was revealed as a unique and ultimately unstable sectional fusion in American party history. Two new parties replaced the New Deal party system in the 1970s: the “emerging Republican majority,” centered in the fast-growing suburbs and small towns of the South and West, and a refashioned Democratic Party, developing its electoral muscle in the historically urbanized, more densely populated, and commercially developed states of the North and the Pacific Coast.²² As the demands made by the South and West on the national government began to clash with those of the North and Pacific Coast, the parties responded. The early postwar electoral geography of both parties disintegrated, and partisan conflict intensified as their geographic bases shifted.

Not only has regional conflict driven oppositional party politics, but the logic of regional incentives points to the eventual return to bipartisanship. The first party to effectively crack the other’s regional stronghold with geographically targeted policy inducements will not only begin to redefine the geographic bases of the parties but will also help introduce the next era of consensus politics.

My argument that conflict between today’s national parties is built on regional differences is made by examining three fundamental axes of conflict—

foreign economic, social welfare, and cultural political. Using representative cases of trade, welfare, and abortion policy making in the U.S. House of Representatives, respectively, the following chapters trace the impact of economic and social change in the South, interior West (hereafter “West”), North, and Pacific Coast on the parties’ issue stances and coalition building efforts.²³ The influence of these developments on the level of interparty conflict becomes clear, and charting them reveals a narrative of party system evolutions, regime change, and the rise of geographically based party conflict that spans nearly half a century and the major dimensions of contemporary political debate. Appendix A describes the logic of my case selection in more detail, while Appendix B describes my method for analyzing House vote data.

Chapter 1 defines the regions. The insights of multiple theoretical traditions, including political economy and political culture perspectives, provide a useful starting point for developing a new interpretation of region and its political significance. This recasting not only provides the most leverage for understanding contemporary politics but also clarifies why regions are enduring political phenomena despite continual social and economic change.

With regions firmly defined, Chapter 2 describes the breakdown of the New Deal regime and the bipartisan consensus that it generated as well as the emergence of a new era of national party competition and conflict. This chapter presents an overview of key national party developments since World War II, highlighting their regional dimensions. Party support shifted in, and among, each of the regions as Democrats and Republicans worked to define the key issues and strategies that helped establish their regional bases in the new, post-New Deal era.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide in-depth analyses of the relationship between regions and party since the 1960s in the policy arenas of trade, welfare, and abortion, respectively.²⁴ The resurgence in trade policy partisanship reflects the conflicting imperatives of an economically declining industrial belt in the North and a growing, export-oriented Sun Belt in the South and West. Chapter 3 illustrates clearly the role that continuing differences in the material conditions of the regions have played in party politics, though it also highlights northern disillusionment with Cold War security solutions, which fed regional ambivalence about the modern defense state.

Chapter 4 examines the increasing partisanship surrounding welfare policy through the lens of the now-defunct program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Like trade, AFDC is embedded in regional political economies, revealing the political and party consequences of material change.

But more importantly, welfare has served as a venue for the parties to engage racial politics, which became particularly pertinent in the context of the South's resistance to civil rights. New Deal Democrats first used welfare policy to build a northern urban constituency while simultaneously placating the labor and racial management demands of the white South's Cotton Belt. In the aftermath of civil rights, Republicans used welfare to break that cross-regional coalition of the New Deal regime. By the end of the 1960s, the infrastructure of the welfare state was concentrated in the urban North and Pacific Coast, where support for continuing and expanding the entitlement program was greatest. Opposition to welfare centered in the South and West, where racial politics and the rhetoric of "traditional family values" converged with the "devolution revolution" to foster support for the state level and private solutions to poverty backed by the Republican Party. Bearing significant political stakes for the parties' abilities to build and break regional coalitions, efforts at welfare reform through the 1990s generated increasing partisanship.

Chapter 5 focuses on growing party conflict over abortion. The 1960s and 1970s saw widespread social change, but in the South and West, rapid economic modernization and population mobility generated additional social dislocations, and the combination stimulated social conservatism: the traditional mores of religious conservatives became the ballast for rapid economic change and the focus of new demands on government. In response, the Republican Party forged an alliance with religious conservatives, criticizing Democrats' support for abortion rights and other policies favoring social change as a product of the cultural imperialism of states in the Northeast and, especially, the Pacific Coast. This facilitated Republican success in attracting new voters in the Bible Belt and elsewhere. Changing material conditions and social identities have been forged, in sometimes paradoxical ways, within the crucible of regions.

Chapters 3 (trade) and 4 (welfare) each examines three episodes of policy-making: First, the early 1960s, during the Kennedy administration, the classic period of postwar consensus and decline in party conflict; second, Nixon-era legislation, which occurred during the lowest period of partisan conflict; and, third, the height of partisanship in the mid-1990s during the Clinton administration. Settlements on trade and welfare policy during both the Kennedy and Nixon administrations were bipartisan, but the coalitional differences between the two periods illustrate why the Nixon administration inaugurated the rise in conflict that characterizes today's politics. Chapter 5, on abortion, examines only two periods, since Congress did not begin legislating on the issue until the

1970s: bipartisan legislation on abortion funding from the 1970s and partisan legislation from the late 1990s on the “partial birth” abortion ban.

Both parties have used policy to alternately build new cross-regional coalitions, fortify the geographic footprint of existing regimes, and divide the opposition along geographic lines, and these strategic activities are the subject of the concluding chapter. The result is a party system made dynamic by politicians’ exploitation of regional changes. Geographic incentives explain New Deal bipartisanship, the Republican-sponsored bipartisanship of the early 1970s, and the current era of partisan conflict. If past patterns hold true, this contentious phase will give way to bipartisanship when one party successfully penetrates the other’s regional stronghold and both parties compete for the same geographic audience.

RECASTING REGION

GEOGRAPHY HAS been both the promise and the challenge of American union since the founding. While advocates of the Constitution saw the size and diversity of the territory they proposed to incorporate as the best way to secure liberty, many were critical of the effort to create a strong centralized government that would displace the power of the individual states. Prominent among the skeptics was the anti-federalist Cato, who voiced his concerns in a series of letters in the *New-York Journal*. One of his chief worries was that the citizens of the different states and the different regions were simply too dissimilar for harmonious collective self-governance.

The strongest principle of union resides within our domestic walls. The ties of the parent exceed that of any other; as we depart from home, the next general principle of union is among citizens of the same state, where acquaintance, habits, and fortunes, nourish affection, and attachment; enlarge the circle still further, and, as citizens of different states, though we acknowledge the same national denomination, we lose the ties of acquaintance, habits, and fortunes, and thus, by degrees, we lessen in our attachments, till, at length, we no more than acknowledge a sameness of species.¹

While Cato lost the argument against ratification, his fundamental insight was prescient. Geography does produce politically significant differences.

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