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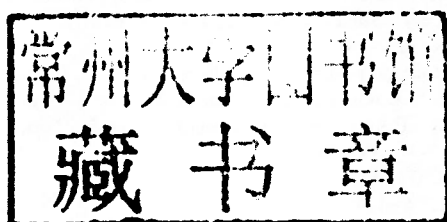
AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND POPULAR DISCONTENT

Stability without Success

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Steven E. Schier and
Todd E. Eberly



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American Government and Popular Discontent

Popular distrust and the entrenchment of government by professionals lie at the root of America's most pressing political problems. How did U.S. politics get to this point? Contemporary American politics got much of its shape from the transformations brought about from the 1950s to the 1980s. Presidential and congressional behavior, voting behavior, public opinion, public policy and federalism were all reconfigured during that time and many of those changes persist to this day and structure the political environment in the early twenty-first century.

Throughout American history, parties have been a reliable instrument for translating majority preferences into public policy. From the 1950s to the 1980s, a gradual antiparty realignment, alongside the growth of professional government, produced a new American political system of remarkable durability – and remarkable dysfunction. It is a system that is paradoxically stable despite witnessing frequent shifts in party control of the institutions of government at the state and national level. Schier and Eberly's system-level view of American politics demonstrates the disconnect between an increasingly polarized and partisan elite and an increasingly disaffected mass public.

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**For Helen Virginia Schier Drury
and
Abigail and Kathryn Eberly**

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Preface

This book is designed for use in American Government courses, from survey classes to more focused courses on the national political system, including classes on Parties and Elections, the Presidency, Congress, the Bureaucracy and Public Policy. In it, we place the operation of each of these national political institutions in broader systemic perspective.

Our book's theme will surprise some readers. Despite considerable political turbulence in national politics since the 1960s, we found much stability in the national political system over the last four decades, displayed with empirical evidence throughout our chapters. Two traits have simultaneously served to produce electoral turbulence but systemic stability during that time: widespread popular discontent with national government and the increasing dominance of occupational professionalism among the ranks of those who govern our nation. Popular discontent produces regular spasms of electoral turbulence, but professional government has remained a stable and defining characteristic of our national political system since the 1960s.

Our book originated with Todd Eberly's research revealing stable national electoral alignments since the 1960s. We further developed our book by drawing upon the path-breaking research of political scientists John Aldrich and Richard Niemi, who had previously detected the advent of a "Fifth Party System" in the 1960s. Our subsequent investigation of other national governing institutions revealed how they, like the party system, all had been transformed from 1955–1980. Key presidential, congressional, bureaucratic and judicial behaviors and traits remarkably have remained stable during the decades since then. A new American political system of paradoxical constancy had arisen from 1955–1980 and is with us still.

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1 The New American Political System

An Overview

Barack Obama had good reason to be frustrated. As he ran for re-election in the fall of 2012, one of his landmark legislative accomplishments, the Affordable Care Act providing major reform of the nation's health care, remained controversial and subject to strong partisan divisions of opinion. An August 2012 survey found that though 64 percent of Democrats had a favorable opinion of it, only 35 percent of political independents and 8 percent of Republicans shared that favorable opinion (Kaiser Family Foundation 2012). Transforming American health care had been a goal of Democrats and liberals, beginning with Harry Truman in the 1940s. Obama saw this as the major legacy his presidency could deliver. Obama had proposed the biggest change in American health care since the passage of Medicare, federal health insurance for the elderly, in 1965.

The 2009–10 battle for passage of the health care bill was bitter and divisive in Congress and among the public. The administration had begun by cutting deals with affected interest groups—hospitals, doctors, insurance companies and the pharmaceutical industry—over the parameters of the legislation. Obama then let the Democratic-majority House and the Senate work on the legislative specifics, with only a tiny handful of GOP Senators willing to cooperate with the Democratic majorities. Out in the country, a protest against “government encroachment” began—known as the Tea Party. In the summer of 2009, lawmakers encountered irate citizens’ concerns about a government “takeover” of health care. In January 2010, while Congress still worked on the legislation, Republican Scott Brown shocked the political world by winning a special Senate election to fill the seat of deceased liberal icon Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts.

Despite this political reversal, the Obama administration played “small ball” by making specific deals on particular aspects of the vast (2,000-plus pages) legislation (Johnson 2011, 157). Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska got his state a higher Medicare reimbursement rate. Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana received more money for hurricane recovery. After months of negotiations among Democrats, Congress passed the law on March 25, 2010. The bill included many big changes in health care, including the expansion of Medicaid (medical insurance for the poor) eligibility, the establishment

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of government-run health insurance exchanges to facilitate the purchase of private insurance, and prohibitions on health insurers denying coverage due to pre-existing conditions. Public opposition to the legislation, however, did not recede. The Tea Party movement spawned several activist organizations that contributed to the GOP takeover of the House and gains in the Senate in the 2010 elections. Though Obama won a narrow re-election victory in 2012, his health care law remained unpopular with voters. National exit polls revealed that 49 percent of voters wanted the health care reform law fully or partially repealed but only 44 percent wanted the law to remain or be expanded (Schultheis 2012).

Obama's predecessor George W. Bush in 2005 had suffered an even worse fate with Social Security reform. After his 2004 re-election, Bush promised to spend his "political capital" on a major transformation of the nation's public retirement pension program. Though broad agreement existed that the program faced long-term financing problems, no consensus existed about how to alter its financing. Bush proposed that Social Security recipients receive "personal accounts," an approach strongly opposed by the Democrats. Bush embarked on a public persuasion tour, involving "60 stops in 60 days." Administration officials backed that up with hundreds of traveling stops and radio interviews as well.

Bush's proposal got nowhere. Though both Houses of Congress had GOP majorities, no committee took a vote on Social Security reform in 2005 or 2006. Public opinion polls showed no movement toward Bush's position (Edwards 2007, 262–263). Democrats and the American Association of Retired Persons, the nation's largest senior lobby, remained firmly opposed. With his grand initiative shelved, Bush then encountered great difficulties responding to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. In the Fall of 2006, Democrats swept to majority control of Congress.

Both Obama and Bush pursued ambitious items dear to the hearts of the partisan and ideological followers, but that left many in the public realm cold. A strong protest against the presidents' partisan initiatives arose and produced a substantial electoral rebuke in mid-term elections. Our argument here is that such trends arise from the systemic environment in which Bush and Obama governed. Successful leadership is rare in this environment. As America's presidents attempt to command a government of career professionals in Congress and the bureaucracy, they frequently find themselves subject to tides of popular discontent.

The two presidents' frustrations are grounded in the core circumstances of America's contemporary political system. We define a *political system* as a social organization in which power is allocated among a small group of citizens who govern the greater community. Our present political system has several traits that serve to frustrate effective leadership, as Bush and Obama discovered. At present, America has no stable majority party that routinely wins elections and rules. Instead, power has fluctuated with increasing frequency between Democrats and Republicans in recent years. The public

dislikes political parties and has low trust in government. America's fragmented media environment encourages acquisition of political knowledge by partisan and ideological activists who voice unceasing demands and agendas, while making it easier for far more citizens to tune out. Career professionals whose occupational welfare may not involve following presidential leadership populate the nation's bureaucracy. Federal courts increasingly engage in policymaking regarding issues that were previously the province of Congress and the president.

Seven Big Changes

When did these traits arise? Contemporary American politics got much of its shape from transformations from the 1960s to the 1980s. Presidential and congressional behavior, voting behavior, major media, public opinion, public policy and federalism altered during that time and many of those changes persist to this day. Several political scientists have noted aspects of this in scholarly articles.¹ In this book, we bring together these changes to form a composite view. We focus on the national political system as a whole and how many of the changes it underwent during the 20-year period endure to the present day.

Seven changes in America's politics and government originating from 1960 to 1980 are now central traits of our national political system.

First, the 1964 election marked the end of the Democratic dominance of the New Deal era—established with the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932—and the start of our present electoral era.² Political scientist Gerald Pomper first hinted at this in 1967 when his review of state-by-state election data revealed a tremendous electoral upheaval had occurred in 1964 (Pomper 1967). The upheaval hinted at by Pomper was significant and continued through the election of 1968. The electoral change witnessed during the 1960s was unlike any prior period in America and its impact has persisted into the twenty-first century. Chapter 2 features our update of Pomper's analysis.

Second, the end of the New Deal electoral coalition was not marked by the rise of a new electoral alignment in the traditional sense (Burnham 1970). Political scientists have identified certain elections, like those of 1860 and 1932, as realigning, creating lasting changes in party allegiances among the electorate. In the past, political realignments had resulted in the clear dominance of one party—that did not happen post 1964. Many scholars look to the 1968 election and the victory of Richard Nixon as the start of a “southern realignment” that brought Republicans to dominance in presidential elections and slowly moved them to parity in congressional elections—a trend that culminated in the mid-term elections of 1994 (Lawrence 1997). This, however, only tells part of the story. Because of Watergate, American politics was adrift until 1980 when Ronald Reagan sought to complete a Republican realignment, but it would be incomplete,

and because of changes underway since the late 1960s, neither party would achieve dominance (Ladd 1997). So an *anti-majority party realignment* replaced the New Deal—not a shift in mass-party allegiance, but a decline in such allegiances among a significant portion of the public (Paulson 2007). This decline in allegiance continues to the present even as clear evidence demonstrates increased polarization among political elites. *Polarization* is increased partisan and ideological distance between the two major parties as they become extreme in their issue positions. Evidence of elite polarization, Morris Fiorina notes, is often mistaken as demonstrating increased mass polarization (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008, 2009). Still, Alan Abramowitz clearly demonstrates evidence of polarization among the most informed and politically active citizens (Abramowitz 2010). The seeming paradox of growing partisanship in voting at a time when the mass public shows little indication of polarization, may be explained by changes in the media and is explored in Chapter 4.

Third, American media has transformed in the present era. At the dawn of the New Deal Era in the 1930s, radio was the only source of broadcast media known to most people, and newspapers were the dominant source of information. Variety of programming was limited. The advent of television introduced a dramatic and new broadcast medium, but variety of programming remained minimal. As recently as 1970, most Americans had few television viewing options; the three major networks claimed 8 out of 10 viewers. Most homes had one TV and network or local news was an evening staple (Prior 2007). This began to change rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s as cable television and then satellite television became commonplace. Today, the major networks compete with hundreds of cable and satellite channels available in nearly 90 percent of homes. The internet has become a major new source for news and all manner of media exist for accessing information and entertainment. The media explosion of the current political era has been transformative. Those who are politically active have gained immeasurable access to news and information and the advent of partisan media has allowed for selective viewing. Individuals with less interest in politics enjoy an array of entertainment choices as an alternative to news. The result is an electorate that is more polarized than before. In this new media environment, partisans have their views and motivation to vote reinforced by the information explosion as more moderate voters tune out the world of politics (Prior 2007).

Fourth, since 1968, there has been a decline of party affiliation among Americans³ even as partisanship among voters increased. In 1960, the authors of *The American Voter* wrote of the lasting attachment that most Americans had to one of the nation's political parties. Their loyalties helped to establish the stability of the party system. For many Americans, that stability is now more tenuous. Though partisan voters compose a growing share of the electorate, dissatisfaction with the two major parties, closely matched partisan allegiances, and occasional upticks in participation by less partisan voters have

spawned in recent decades: (1) an increasing prevalence of divided party control of government (especially evident at the state level); (2) the Wallace, Anderson, Perot and Nader third party presidential candidacies; and (3) rapidly shifting alteration of the parties' control of government in the twenty-first century. Partisanship has increased among politically active elites but there has not been a corresponding increase among the mass public. Increased polarization and partisanship among politically active citizens, however, have resulted in significant party sorting. *Party sorting* refers to the increased fit between party affiliation and ideology and issue positions.⁴ We explore the phenomenon of party sorting further in Chapter 4.

Fifth, since the 1960s, trust in government has declined and has remained at low levels. Along with declining party identification, low trust is an indicator of greater public disaffection with the political system. Why the decline in trust? Scholars have looked to Watergate and Vietnam as inducing "widespread popular mistrust of government" that has undermined the government's ability to enact policy (McQuaid 1989; Hetherington 2006). Social scientists have found widespread consequences issuing from the declining in trust since the 1960s. These include declining confidence in Congress and the presidency, more anti-incumbent voting, higher support for third-party candidates and less support for expanded federal domestic policies (Hetherington 2006; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Levi and Stoker 2000). The decline in trust is a major force in American politics and we address its impact later in Chapter 3.

Sixth, the rise of more "professionalism" among governing elites has contributed to this mass volatility. Those in various professional occupations now dominate American government due the rise in education levels since the 1950s and the need for informed policy experts to carry out the ever-growing responsibilities of government. These governing professionals are an elite built on merit through occupational accomplishment. They now populate interest groups, the bureaucracy, the courts, the institutional presidency, and Congress. Even at the state level, there has been an increase in the number of professional legislatures since the 1960s. Many government professionals perceive little need to mobilize the public broadly the way parties did in previous eras. Three examples can illustrate this. First, candidates now narrowly target their appeals to likely voters. Second, unelected judges increasingly engage in policymaking behavior, previously the province of elected legislatures. Third, the great growth in professional interest group activity since 1970 has produced a proliferation of elite advocacy strategies. In an era of professional advocacy, policymaking need not involve the successful channeling of mass preferences, but instead what E. E. Schattschneider described as getting "results by procedures that simply ignore the sovereign majority" (1977, 189). Such elite behaviors have furthered the public's sense of disconnect from government and created a self-reinforcing chain. Elite "shortcuts" facilitate episodes of populist anger. The tax revolt of the late 1970s culminated in the "Reagan revolution." The anti-incumbent

waves in the 1992 and 1994 elections resulted in the defeat of a sitting president and the first GOP Congress in 40 years. The turbulent elections of 2006, 2008, and 2010 saw party control of Congress switch twice as shifting partisan waves created an oscillating direction in national government.

Seventh, changing behavior in national institutions transformed governance. Congressional incumbents' electoral security contributed to legislative professionalism. Partisan polarization produced party voting in both chambers, strong majority party rule in the House and filibusters in the Senate. Presidents, for their part, were more subject to tides of popular disapproval than were more electorally secure legislators. In addition, bureaucratic activity grew in scale and federal courts asserted more expansive policymaking powers. Specific indicators tell the tale. Presidents suffered from lower levels of job approval. House and Senate incumbents gained more electoral security in the 1960s and 1970s. Party unity voting increased in both chambers. The support gap for presidents between rival congressional partisans grew. The majority party in the House increased its use of restrictive rules on consideration of bills and the Senate became far more prone to filibusters by dissenting partisan minorities. The number of federal regulations issued by the bureaucracy annually mushroomed. Federal court appointments became fronts of partisan battle because of the courts' increased involvement in policymaking.

America's national political system evolved during the 1960s and 1970s into a government of professionals with unstable mass allegiances. The public does not seem to like our regime of government by professionals. Satisfaction with government is at record lows, and, for decades, the majority of the public has harbored distrust that they can rely upon the government to "do the right thing" most of the time. Squire determined that the public holds a less favorable opinion of professional legislatures as compared to amateur, or citizen legislatures, but legislators in professional legislatures are more satisfied with their work than their weak legislature counterparts (Squire 1993).

The present system, however, has persisted despite sporadic populist eruptions for about 50 years. Its stability rests upon a paradoxical entrenchment of professionals in government and interest groups and a persistent popular disaffection with government and parties that prevents a reorientation of the system through party realignment. Previously in American history, parties have been a reliable instrument for translating majority preferences into public policy, as evident in the partisan realignments of 1860 and 1932. From the 1950s to the 1980s, a gradual anti-majority party realignment, alongside the growth of professional government, produced a new American political system of remarkable durability—one not defined by mass-based party allegiance. It has persisted despite witnessing frequent shifts in party control of the institutions of government at the state and national level.