

GUEST ESSAY

Hillary Clinton Accepted Her Loss, but a Lot Has Changed Since 2016

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America is holding its first coast-to-coast elections since the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in 2021. That revolt, an attempt to stop the certification of the last presidential election, cost several lives. A lot is at stake.

There are the obvious things, like control of the House of Representatives and the Senate, but there are also less obvious things, like what happens to accountability, elections and democracy if the candidates who deny that Joe Biden was the legitimate winner of the 2020 presidential election win. And alternatively, what happens if they lose, refuse to concede or call on their supporters to “fight like hell” to take their country back, the way Donald Trump did on Jan. 6?

It wasn't so long ago that candidates who lost elections — even narrowly or in unusual circumstances — understood the fundamental importance of a peaceful transfer of power. In 1960, Richard Nixon told supporters that “one of the great features of America” is that hard-fought political contests end and people “unite behind the man who is elected.” Mr. Nixon, who presided in Congress over his own loss in the Electoral College, pledged his “wholehearted support” to his opponent, John F. Kennedy, and asked his supporters to do the same.

Fast-forward to the 2000 presidential election and the spectacle of hanging chads. After ballots were recounted in Florida and litigation went all the way to the Supreme Court, Al Gore, who won the popular vote by more than half a million votes, watched another man become president. Mr. Gore conceded the election for “the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy.” Like Mr. Nixon, Mr. Gore presided in Congress over his rival's certification.

Perhaps no other image sums up the sacrifices candidates have made to our nation's democracy better than Hillary Clinton stoically listening to Mr. Trump's ominous Inaugural Address in 2017 after what can charitably be described as an extremely divisive campaign. “I'm here today,” she wrote, “to honor our democracy and its enduring values.”

A lot has changed since Mr. Nixon, Mr. Gore and Mrs. Clinton put democracy ahead of their ambitions. An October 2022 New York Times/Siena College poll reported that 62 percent of Republicans still say they believe Mr. Trump was the legitimate winner of the 2020 election; by one count, there are more than 300 candidates on the ballots right now repeating the same idea. While it is tempting to think this election skepticism is the result of the disregard some candidates and voters have for democracy itself, there is more to the story.

The need to keep the other party out of government, no matter the cost, has been a long time in the making. It's about the other side being farther away than ever and elections turning on a few thousand votes. With both parties nationally viable, victory is always within reach, and this has calcified our politics — making voters less likely to try out the other side and making every election critical.

This calcification, as John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch and I describe in our recent book, “The Bitter End,” has done to our politics what it does to the human body. It makes things stiff and inflexible. Voters are more firmly in place and harder to move away from their predispositions. There is less chance for a new or dramatic event — like a pandemic, a social justice movement or an insurrection — to change people's minds. Calcification may sound like polarization, but it is worse than that; it's polarization plus, and the plus is important.

Calcification has four parts: an increasing similarity among voters within each party in terms of issue positions, ideology and characteristics; an increasing distance between the two parties on these things; the rise of issues turning on fundamental identities — race, ethnicity, gender and religion — to the top of voters' priorities; and a rough partisan balance in the electorate.

The first two factors — the sameness within parties and the differences between them — are the result of decades of changes. The passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in the mid-1960s probably started the slow ideological reshuffling of voters into parties, resulting in fewer liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats today than there were in the 1950s. Simultaneously, over the decades, there has been less common ground between the two parties, partly fueled by differing positions on issues like tax cuts, regulation and abortion. As these issues drove a wedge between politicians, voters followed.

The long-term trends are unmistakable. In the 1950s, the American National Election Studies began asking people, “Do you think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for?” The concern at the time was that parties were local institutions, lacking national identities, organization and discipline — and that because of this, they were letting voters down by not being able to speak to the national issues of the day. In 1952, 50 percent of Americans said they thought there were important differences between the parties. In 1984, the share rose to 63 percent, and in 2004, over three-quarters of the country saw important differences. In 2020, the most recent year the study asked the question, roughly 90 percent of Americans saw important differences between what the parties stood for. People get it: There are two different versions of the world on offer.

These trends are significant on their own, but they take on added importance because they coincide with how people feel about Democrats and Republicans. Substantial fractions of both parties say that members of the other party are more closed-minded, unintelligent, immoral or unpatriotic than other Americans, and the gap between how much people like their own party and dislike the other is larger now

than it had ever been. Add to this mix the importance of identity-based issues, and you have an extremely divisive politics. We are no longer fighting over tax cuts and deregulation; we're fighting over who gets to call themselves Americans.

Lurking in the background is the last component of calcification: partisan parity in the electorate. If the next election offers the real promise of controlling Congress or the White House without changing course, there is little incentive for parties to do so. Even worse, calcification creates the incentive to change the rules of elections to get those last few votes necessary to get over the top.

But calcification alone doesn't subvert democratic outcomes. That takes people.

What made the aftermath of 2020 stand out from previous elections was the interaction of calcification with political action. Specifically, Mr. Trump did the opposite of Mr. Nixon, Mr. Gore and Mrs. Clinton: He insisted that he won. Other partisan leaders echoed his claims about a stolen election, and voters, appreciating both the differences between the parties and the fact that outcomes were turning on very few votes, followed.

So yes, a decades-long drift toward calcification made it possible, but politicians and their voters made it reality. In other words, it is of great consequence who wins elections, but the candidates who lose are equally important to the future of free and fair elections in the United States.

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