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Three Theories That Explain This Strange Moment

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I'm not much for postelection narratives. They're like the flashy jacket that looks just right when you try it on at the store, only to prove all wrong once you wear it out on the town.

After losing in 2012, Republicans knew they needed a kinder, gentler approach to a diversifying America. Then Donald Trump offered exactly the opposite and won. After losing in 2004, Democrats believed they needed a drawling good old boy who could reconnect them with "the heartland." Then Barack Hussein Obama ran for president and bent the arc of American history.

The stories we tell, in politics as in life, leave us stuck in the past even as we're forced, pitilessly, into the future. What I'm more interested in is patterns that explain more than one election, in more than one place. Three of them are on my mind right now: calcification, parity and cultural backlash.

In September, John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck released "The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Campaign and the Challenge to American Democracy." The authors, who are all political scientists, spent the last two years gathering, crosschecking, collating and analyzing the data on the 2020 election. What they found clarifies not just 2020, but 2016 and 2022: Because politics is so calcified, virtually nothing matters, but because elections are so close, virtually everything matters.

Consider everything that happened between November of 2016 and November of 2020: Donald Trump became president and ran one of the most chaotic and unusual White Houses in American history. He failed to repeal Obamacare but succeeded in slashing taxes. Unemployment fell to 3.5 percent. A pandemic killed hundreds of thousands of Americans. The murder of George Floyd led to protests, then riots, then a national reckoning on race. Trump was impeached for abusing power and misleading Congress. I could go on.

These were years when it felt like whole decades happened. Yet the 2020 election fit almost exactly into the grooves of the 2016 election. On average, there was only a two-point difference in how states voted in 2016 and in 2020 — a slighter shift than between 2008 and 2012, or 2012 and 2016. Some battleground states were closer in 2020 than they were in 2016.

Sides, Tausanovitch and Vavreck ran the numbers on Covid, on the economy, on impeachment, on the George Floyd protests. Convulsions that reshaped the country — that filled morgues and burned buildings — were barely visible in the vote. Counties with higher rates of Covid deaths didn't turn on Trump. Counties where Black Lives Matter protests turned violent went, if anything, slightly toward Joe Biden. So much happened, and so few minds changed. They call this calcification, writing, "As it does in the body, calcification produces hardening and rigidity: people are more firmly in place and harder to move away from their predispositions."

The cause of this calcification is no mystery. As the national parties diverge, voters cease switching between them. That the Republican and Democratic Parties have kept the same names for so long obscures how much they've changed. I find this statistic shocking, and perhaps you will, too: In 1952, only 50 percent of voters said they saw a big difference between the Democratic and Republican Parties. By 1984, it was 62 percent. In 2004, it was 76 percent. By 2020, it was 90 percent.

The yawning differences between the parties have made swing voters not just an endangered species, but a bizarre one. How muddled must your beliefs about politics be to shift regularly between Republican and Democratic Parties that agree on so little?

You could see it in this election. Herschel Walker is a terrible candidate. He's dogged by a history of infidelity, abuse and abortion — a problem, you would think, for a candidate running as a social conservative. One of his own advisers said he lies "like he's breathing." Voters aren't stupid: They know Walker is a flawed man. But there's a reason he netted enough support to force a runoff with Raphael Warnock.

The most consequential vote Walker would make, if elected, is for Mitch McConnell to be Senate majority leader. The same is true for Warnock, in reverse: For all his theological depth and moral authority, the most consequential vote he cast in the U.S. Senate was the one that made Chuck Schumer majority leader. On the vote that matters most, Walker is not Walker; he's a Republican. Warnock is not Warnock; he's a Democrat.

Or take it the other way: I am not John Fetterman's doctor and I don't know the extent of the damage his stroke inflicted. Still, the impairments it left are visible, and in another era, might have stalled his political career. But if you were supporting Fetterman before, switching your vote to Dr. Mehmet Oz because Fetterman had a stroke is a kind of lunacy. Fetterman, at any level of impairment, will be part of a coalition that protects women's reproductive autonomy and tries to decarbonize the economy and fights to expand health care. Oz would have been part of a coalition that seeks to do the opposite on every count.

Calcification, on its own, would produce a truly frozen politics. In some states, it does, with effective one-party rule leading to a politics devoid of true accountability or competition. But nationally, political control teeters, election after election, on a knife's edge. That's another strange dynamic of our era: Persistent parity between the parties.

American politics has typically had "sun" and "moon" parties. After the Civil War, Republicans controlled American politics for decades. After the New Deal, Democrats dominated. Between 1931 and 1995, Democrats held the House for all but four years. Since 1995, control of the House has flipped four times, and if Republicans win the gavel in 2023, that'll be five.

We live in an era of unusual political competitiveness. Presidential elections are decided by a few points, in a few states. The House and Senate are up for grabs in nearly every contest. In both 2016 and 2020, fewer than 100,000 votes could've flipped the presidential election. So even as calcification means fewer minds change in any given election, parity means those small, marginal changes can completely alter American politics.

Take 2016. If 40,000 people in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania had voted for Hillary Clinton rather than Trump, American politics travels a radically different path. Democrats probably replace Antonin Scalia on the Supreme Court. The Republican Party probably blames Trump and his acolytes for blowing a winnable election and turns sharply against them and everything they represent. So much in 2016 turned on so little.

Similarly, the dominant trend of 2022 was stability. What's most surprising about the election is how few seats changed hands despite high inflation and Joe Biden's saggy approval ratings. But with a 50-50 Senate and Democrats' modest eight-seat margin in the House, even an election in which so few seats flipped may mean that we awake in January to find much is different.

Calcification and parity describe the structure of American politics. But another idea, cultural backlash, describes the substance of not just American politics, but that of many other countries as well.

The cultural backlash theory comes from the political scientists Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart. Inglehart, who died last year, is famous for tracking the post-materialist turn in global politics. Starting around the 1970s, generations raised in relative affluence began to care less about traditional economic issues and more about questions of personal autonomy and social values. The core fights of politics turned away from the distribution of money to the preservation of the environment and women's bodily autonomy and marriage equality.

These changes were generational, and they've moved steadily from the margins of politics to the center. That's led to a backlash among those opposed to, or simply disoriented by, the speed at which social mores are shifting, and the rise, in countries all over the world, of a post-materialist right. That's led to a slew of right-wing parties that care more about culture and identity than tax cuts and deregulation.

"You can call them the radical right, that's a very common way of labeling them," Norris told me in a podcast conversation, "but they're not always right-wing in economics. Sometimes they're fairly positive toward public spending — for example, in Scandinavian countries. What distinguishes them is that they really want to restore and push back against social liberalism, or as we call it in the contemporary parlance in the media, the 'woke' agenda."

Compare the Republican Party of 2010 to the Republican Party of 2022. In 2010, Republicans ran on an economic theory I thought was wrong, but was at least clear. The Obama administration was spending too much. The rise in debt was scaring businesses and burdening households. What Washington needed was adults who'd tighten the proverbial belt and bring back fiscal discipline. Republicans made their obsession with repealing Obamacare the central fight in American politics for a solid decade. In 2010, voters angry about the economy could vote for a party that was also angry about the economy, and that seemed to have a plan for what to do about it.

Fast forward to 2022. I suspect one reason Republicans weren't better able to weaponize inflation is that the post-materialist right is too muddled in its thinking on economic policy to have converged on a clear message. Are Republicans the party of spending more or of spending less? Yes, they are. Do Republicans believe the prices Americans are paying are too high or, as their vows to repeal Medicare drug negotiation and Obamacare subsidies suggest, too low? Yes. Is the economy running too hot because the government has pumped in too much money or does it need yet more support in the form of full extension of the Trump tax cuts? Absolutely.

Voters are pretty good at sensing what parties and politicians actually care about. Inflation may be a problem, but Republicans never credibly presented themselves as a solution. Today's Republican Party is obsessed with critical race theory and whether Dr. Seuss is being canceled. It is not obsessed with economic growth and health care policy.

If you were looking for a three-sentence summary of American politics in recent years, I think you could do worse than this: The parties are so different that even seismic events don't change many Americans' minds. The parties are so closely matched that even minuscule shifts in the electoral winds can blow the country onto a wildly different course. And even in a time of profound economic dislocation, American politics has become less about which party is good for your wallet and more about whether the cultural changes of the past 50 years delight or dismay you.

(On my podcast, "The Ezra Klein Show," I recently interviewed John Sides and Lynn Vavreck about their work on calcification and parity and Pippa Norris about her work on cultural backlash. They explain their theories in far more depth than I can offer here. And for more of my own thoughts on the midterms — including my skepticism of the emerging DeSantis-is-a-juggernaut narrative — this postelection conversation with my editor, Aaron Retica, was a fun one.)

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