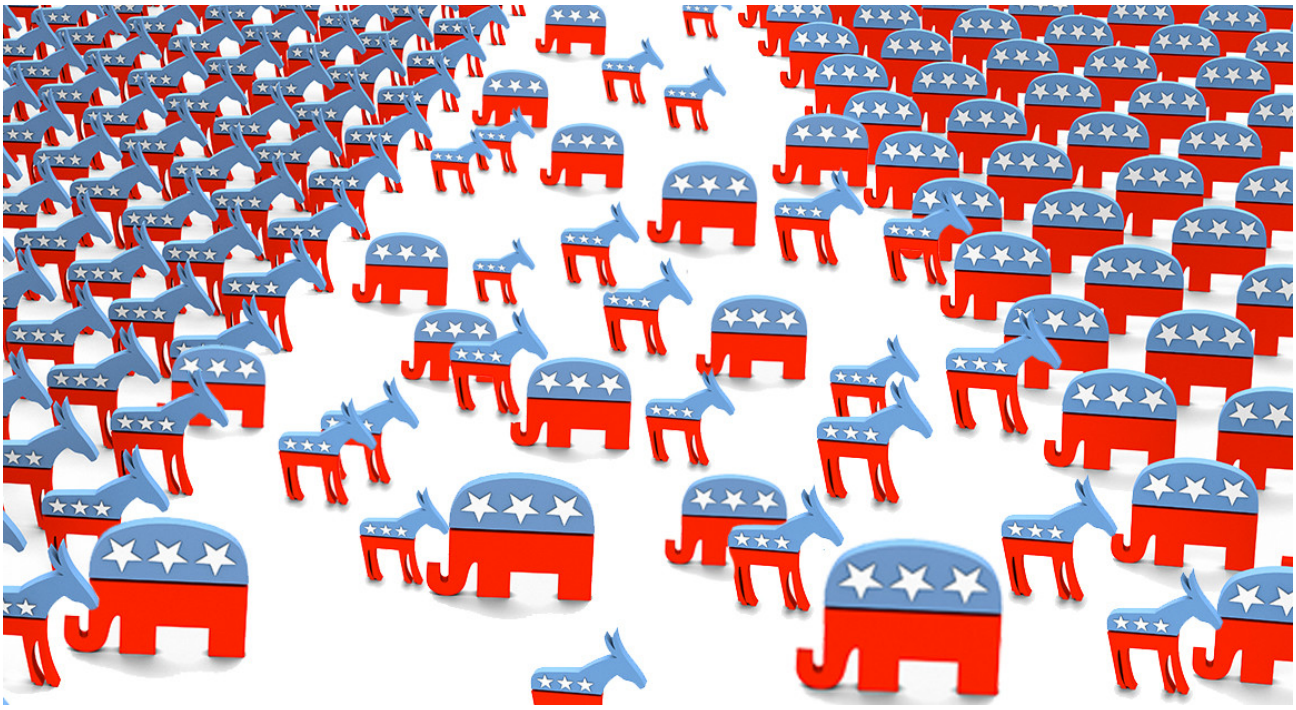
POLITICO

THE BIG IDEA

This Is What the Future of American Politics Looks Like

This year, we're seeing the end of a partisan realignment, and the beginning of a policy one — and U.S. politics is about to change big-time.

By MICHAEL LIND | May 22, 2016



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For political observers, 2016 feels like an earthquake — a once-in-a-generation event that will remake American politics. The Republican party is fracturing around support for Donald Trump. An avowed socialist has made an insurgent challenge for the Democratic Party's nomination. On left and right, it feels as though a new era is beginning.

And a new era *is* beginning, but not in the way most people think. Though this election feels like the beginning of a partisan realignment, it's actually the end of one. The partisan coalitions that defined the Democratic and Republican parties for decades in the middle of

the twentieth century broke apart long ago; over the past half century, their component voting blocs — ideological, demographic, economic, geographic, cultural — have reshuffled. The reassembling of new Democratic and Republican coalitions is nearly finished.

What we're seeing this year is the beginning of a policy realignment, when those new partisan coalitions decide which ideas and beliefs they stand for — when, in essence, the party platforms catch up to the shift in party voters that has already happened. The type of conservatism long championed by the Republican Party was destined to fall as soon as a candidate came along who could rally its voters without being beholden to its donors, experts and pundits. The future is being built before our eyes, with far-reaching consequences for every facet of American politics.

The 2016 race is a sign that American politics is changing in profound and lasting ways; by the 2020s and 2030s, partisan platforms will have changed drastically. You may find yourself voting for a party you could never imagine supporting right now. What will that political future look like?

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Today's Republican Party is predominantly a Midwestern, white, working-class party with its geographic epicenter in the South and interior West. Today's Democratic Party is a coalition of relatively upscale whites with racial and ethnic minorities, concentrated in an archipelago of densely populated blue cities.

In both parties, there's a gap between the inherited orthodoxy of a decade or two ago and the real interests of today's electoral coalition. And in both parties, that gap between voters and policies is being closed in favor of the voters — a slight transition in the case of Hillary Clinton, but a dramatic one in the case of Donald Trump.

During the Democratic primary, pundits who focused on the clash between Clinton and Sanders missed a story that illuminated this shift: The failure of Jim Webb's brief campaign for the presidential nomination. Webb was the only candidate who represented the old-style Democratic Party of the mid-20th century — the party whose central appeal was among white Southerners and Northern white "ethnics." Even during the "New Democrat" era of Bill Clinton, white working-class remnants of that coalition were still important in the party. But by 2016, Webb lacked a constituency, and he was out of place among the politicians seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, which included one lifelong socialist (Bernie Sanders) and two candidates who had been raised as Republicans (Hillary Clinton and, briefly, Lincoln Chafee).

On the Republican side, the exemplary living fossil was Jeb Bush. Like his brother, Jeb pushed a neo-Reaganite synthesis of support for a hawkish foreign policy, social conservatism, and cuts in middle-class entitlements to finance further tax cuts for the rich. From the Reagan era until recently, the GOP's economic policies have been formulated by libertarians, whose views are at odds with those of most Republican voters. In March of this year, a Pew Research Center poll showed that 68 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning voters opposed future reductions in Social Security benefits — almost the same amount of support found among Democrats and Dem-leaning voters (73 percent). Republicans who supported Trump were even more opposed to Social Security benefit cuts, at 73 percent. And even among those who supported Kasich, 62 percent opposed cuts in Social Security benefits — even though Kasich, himself, is in favor of cutting entitlements.

As country-and-western Republicans have gradually replaced country-club Republicans, the gap between the party's economic orthodoxy and the economic interests of white working-class voters in the GOP base has increased. House Republicans repeatedly have passed versions of Paul Ryan's budget plan, which is based on cutting Social Security and replacing Medicare with vouchers.

Except for Trump, all of the leading Republican candidates—Cruz, Bush, Rubio, Kasich —favored some version of the Ryan agenda. By contrast, Trump was the only leading GOP candidate who expressed the actual preference of most Republican voters, declaring his "absolute intention to leave Social Security the way it is. Not increase the age and leave it as is." Trump is now the presumptive Republican presidential nominee.

If Trump is defeated, what is left of the GOP establishment might try to effect a restoration of the old economic dogma of free trade, mass immigration and entitlement cuts. But sooner or later, a Republican Party platform with policies that most of the party's core voters reject will be revised or abandoned—over the objections of libertarian Republican party donors and allied think tanks and magazines, if necessary.

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Why is this all happening now? Because the decades-long "culture war" between religious conservatives and secular liberals is largely over.

Most culture-war conflicts involve sexuality, gender, or reproduction (for example, abortion, contraception, LGBT rights, and same-sex marriage). The centrality of culture-war issues in national politics from the 1960s to the present allowed both major

parties to contain factions with incompatible economic views. For a generation, the Democratic Party has included both free traders and protectionists — but support for abortion rights and, more recently, gay rights have been litmus tests for Democratic politicians with national ambitions. Conversely, Republicans have been allowed to disagree about trade and immigration, but all Republican presidential candidates have had to pay lip service to repealing *Roe v. Wade* and outlawing abortion.

Social issues spurred a partisan realignment by changing who considered themselves Democrats and Republicans. Over decades, socially conservative working-class whites migrated from the Democratic Party to join the Republican Party, especially in the South. Socially moderate Republicans, especially on the East Coast, shifted to the Democratic coalition. Now, there's little disagreement within each party on social issues. Liberal Republicans are as rare as Reagan Democrats.

Like an ebb tide that reveals a reshaped coastline, the culture war remade the parties' membership and is now receding. In its absence, we are able to see a transformed political landscape.

The culture war and partisan realignment are over; the policy realignment and "border war" — a clash between nationalists, mostly on the right, and multicultural globalists, mostly on the left — have just begun.

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For the nationalists, the most important dividing line is that between American citizens and everyone else—symbolized by Trump's proposal for a Mexican border wall. On the right, American nationalism is tainted by strains of white racial and religious nationalism and nativism, reinforced by Trump's incendiary language about Mexicans and his proposed temporary ban on Muslims entering the U.S.

But while there is overlap between nationalists and racists, the two are not the same thing. The most extreme white nationalists don't advocate nationalism as a governing philosophy in our multiracial country; they hope to withdraw from American life and create a white homeland within the nation-state. Nationalism is different than white nationalism, and a populist American nationalism untainted by vestiges of racial bigotry might have transracial appeal, like versions of national populism in Latin America.

The rise of populist nationalism on the right is paralleled by the rise of multicultural globalism on the center-left.

For multicultural globalists, national boundaries are increasingly obsolete and perhaps even immoral. According to the emerging progressive orthodoxy, the identities that count are subnational (race, gender, orientation) and supranational (citizenship of the world). While not necessarily representative of Democratic voters, progressive pundits and journalists increasingly speak a dialect of ethical cosmopolitanism or globalism — the idea that it is unjust to discriminate in favor of one's fellow nationals against citizens of foreign countries.

This difference in worldviews maps neatly into differences in policy. Nationalists support immigration and trade deals only if they improve the living standards of citizens of the nation. For the new, globally minded progressives, the mere well-being of American workers is not a good enough reason to oppose immigration or trade liberalization. It's an argument that today's progressive globalists have borrowed from libertarians: immigration or trade that depresses the wages of Americans is still justified if it makes immigrants or foreign workers better off.

The disagreements within both parties on trade is a living example of the inchoate policy realignment. Every major Republican presidential candidate supported free-trade agreements — with the sole and major exception of Donald Trump, the presumptive nominee, who routinely slams free-trade deals and has called for the reintroduction of certain tariffs on foreign goods.

Likewise, the current opposition of many Democratic politicians to free-trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership reflects the residual influence of declining manufacturing unions within the party According to a March 2016 study by the Pew Research Center, by a margin of 56 percent to 38 percent, Democratic voters believe that free-trade agreements have been good for the U.S. Among Republicans, those numbers are almost reversed: by a 53 percent to 38 percent margin, a majority of Republicans believe free-trade has been a bad thing. Among younger Americans, who tend to prefer Democrats to Republicans, support for free trade is high: 67 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds say trade agreements are good for the country. Even progressives who campaign against trade deals feel obliged by the logic of ethical cosmopolitanism to justify their opposition in the name of the labor rights of foreign workers or the good of the global environment.

For the next decade or longer, as the parties' stances adjust, this "border war" that has succeeded the "culture war" will define and remake American politics.

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The outlines of the two-party system of the 2020s and 2030s are dimly visible. The Republicans will be a party of mostly working-class whites, based in the South and West and suburbs and exurbs everywhere. They will favor universal, contributory social insurance systems that benefit them and their families and reward work effort—programs like Social Security and Medicare. But they will tend to oppose means-tested programs for the poor whose benefits they and their families cannot enjoy.

They will oppose increases in both legal and illegal immigration, in some cases because of ethnic prejudice; in other cases, for fear of economic competition. The instinctive economic nationalism of tomorrow's Republicans could be invoked to justify strategic trade as well as crude protectionism. They are likely to share Trump's view of unproductive finance: "The hedge-fund guys didn't build this country. These are guys that shift paper around and they get lucky."

The Democrats of the next generation will be even more of an alliance of upscale, progressive whites with blacks and Latinos, based in large and diverse cities. They will think of the U.S. as a version of their multicultural coalition of distinct racial and ethnic identity groups writ large. Many younger progressives will take it for granted that moral people are citizens of the world, equating nationalism and patriotism with racism and fascism.

The withering-away of industrial unions, thanks to automation as well as offshoring, will liberate the Democrats to embrace free trade along with mass immigration wholeheartedly. The emerging progressive ideology of post-national cosmopolitanism will fit nicely with urban economies which depend on finance, tech and other industries of global scope, and which benefit from a constant stream of immigrants, both skilled and unskilled.

While tomorrow's Republican policymakers will embrace FDR-to-LBJ universal entitlements like Social Security and Medicare, future Democrats may prefer means-tested programs for the poor only. In the expensive, hierarchical cities in which Democrats will be clustered, universal social insurance will make no sense. Payroll taxes on urban workers will be too low to fund universal social insurance, while universal social benefits will be too low to matter to the urban rich. So the well-to-do in expensive, unequal Democratic cities will agree to moderately redistributive taxes which pay for means-tested benefits—perhaps even a guaranteed basic income—for the disproportionately poor and foreign-born urban workforce. As populist labor liberalism declines within the Democratic party, employer-friendly and finance-friendly libertarianism will grow. The Democrats of 2030 may be more pro-market than the Republicans.

Of the two coalitions, which is likely to prevail most of the time?

While progressives claim that nonwhite Americans will become a majority, this is misleading for two reasons. To begin with, according to the Census Bureau, from this point until 2060, there will be only limited growth in the African-American population (a rise from 13.2 percent to 14.3 percent) and the Asian-American population (5.4 percent to 9.3 percent) as shares of the whole. The growth of the nonwhite category by 2060 is driven overwhelmingly by the increasing Latino share of the population, from 17.4 percent to 28.6 percent.

Second, Latino Americans increasingly identify themselves as white. Between the 2000 Census and the 2010 Census, about 7 percent of Hispanics changed their self-description from "some other race" to "white." At the same time, according to the Census Bureau, three-fourths of "white population growth" in 21st-century America has been driven by individuals who declared themselves white and of Hispanic origin. If increasing numbers of Hispanics identify as white and their descendants are defined as "white" in government statistics, there may be a white majority in the U.S. throughout the 21st century.

More important than unscientific Census classifications will be how the growing Latino population votes. Trump's unpopularity among Latino voters is likely to help the Democrats in the short run. But Democrats cannot assume they'll have a solid Latino voting bloc in the future. In Texas, in particular, Republicans have been successful in winning many Latino voters, all the way back to Senator John Tower and Governor George W. Bush. In Texas' 2014 elections, Republican gubernatorial nominee Greg Abbott won 44 percent of Latino Texans. Republican U.S. Senator John Cornyn did even better, with 48 percent.

In the coming decades, it is possible that Latinos will be reliable Democratic voters and condemn the Republican Party to minority status at the presidential level, if not everywhere. But it is also possible that as Latinos assimilate and intermarry, they will move from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, following a trail blazed in the past by many "white ethnic" voters of European descent, including Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans.

The policy realignment of the present and near future will complete the partisan realignment of the past few decades. And though it's impossible to know exactly how it will end, one thing is clear: In 2016, the old political system is crumbling, and a new American political order is being born.