

**History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for August 20, 2020**

Main Readings: articles by John Avlon, Alexander Keyssar, and Scott Porch

The purpose of opening our semester with these three short pieces was to help introduce everyone to some basic historical arguments about three essential pillars of American campaigns & elections: voters and voter participation, political parties and their candidates, and the media. The following selections come from student comments & questions along with some responses from Prof. Pinsker

John Avlon, “George Washington’s Farewell Warning,” *Politico* (2017)

STUDENT COMMENT: The way that Americans have handled the election of their presidents over the past 232 years has varied wildly from generation to generation. At the inception of America's constitution, the Founding Fathers were right to be wary of partisanship in their new government; history had proved to them that it can be a powerful vice of a country that would undoubtedly have the power to push the infant country to ruin. Though they formed the constitution with great vigilance around this particular problem, it was probably rather naïve for the founding fathers to prematurely celebrate their government as one that had the capacity to rid the new country of partisanship. In the end, it is human nature that we become passionate about the societies we live in, and this passion is what fueled the first political parties and every party after that. Avlon made it a point in his article to emphasize how disinterest, that is not being tied to one particular interest but still being *interested*, was such a valued trait in the period that American Government was formed that it became a core tenant of what the founders saw this nation could be.

STUDENT COMMENT: I was struck in reading Avlon’s piece by how much confidence George Washington seemed to have in the American people. While he took great measures to warn against the dangers of parties he offered no greater remedy than encouraging “wise people to discourage and restrain it” (Avlon, 2017). I believe his confidence in the virtue of Americans was almost certainly ground in republicanism.

STUDENT COMMENT: The two-party system in American politics has been widely criticized by many people and continues to be under scrutiny to this day. In fact, the system has been criticized since its inception. In the article *George Washington’s Farewell Warning* by John Avlon, we learn of George Washington's opinion on the two-party system, and how he upheld a legacy of moderation, as opposed to partisan extremism. I feel that this warning is still relevant today, as we continue to see the two major political parties become more polarizing. In my opinion, America would be in a significantly better place if we had heeded these warnings and done away with the two-party system, as well as adopting different policies such as ranked choice voting so that it is not a "winner take all" system. It is slightly infuriating that most, if not all current politicians have benefitted from this system and we therefore may never see any kind of

change in the system. It does however, show that the citizens vote still matters, and that we can make a change if we vote for politicians that support changes to the current, dated system.

STUDENT COMMENT: Reading those three articles especially when keeping in mind the current political climate, it very likely that George Washington is doing pirouettes in his grave. Washington's great fear of an America separated by factions and partisan divisions has been made reality, but I would contend that it is far worse today than he could ever imagine. Politics in America have not just been made divisive, they have become fanaticized. When White pulled back the curtain on the inner workings of the 1960 presidential campaign, he revealed a whole new world to the public, and they liked what they saw. By having endless knowledge about the candidates available so that every move can be scrutinized and twisted, the press has added to this dangerous concoction of partisanship. Presidential elections in America have been turned into sporting events in which people root for their favorite player. Washington could not imagine a world where citizens wore hats to immediately show to those around them which politician they are rooting for.

PINSKER'S RESPONSE: While John Avlon's work on Washington is well written and well researched, I am skeptical of his central claim about Washington that he was somehow "nonpartisan but he was not neutral." That sounds smart, but I consider it mostly word play. Washington repeatedly chose the Federalist side. Yes, he always couched his decisions in patriotic and nonpartisan terms, but he defined patriotism in a certain way that his equally patriotic critics rejected. That's the very definition of partisanship. Of course, Washington wasn't an open partisan in the way that modern-day politicians are, but that's only because the word "party" meant something much different to them. In that era before organized mass political parties with voter registration, they equated such terms with merely shifting factions or divisions of opinion. Washington wasn't warning against our type of parties, he was warning against corrupted, short-sighted opinions. But even despite all of his emphasis on moderation, prudence, and virtue, Washington presided over a political culture that became increasingly polarized around competing political views. It's easy to romanticize non-partisanship but even in Washington's day they never achieved that ideal. Sometimes Avlon is guilty of ignoring that reality. So perhaps were some of the student responses in our class. That's for you to decide. But this semester, I'm certainly going to try to challenge some of your assumptions about partisanship. I don't think it should be considered an automatic insult. Despite all of its obvious flaws, I'm not sure the two-party system has deserved the historic criticism that it usually gets.

Alexander Keyssar, "Strange Career of Voter Suppression," NY Times (2012)

STUDENT COMMENT: Our readings show that modern beliefs alone are not responsible for the tense political climate we see today. In fact, as Keyssar points out, we can look at voting suppression and the push back voters received during recent elections as evidence of prejudice, a prejudice that can then be traced back to the

partisanship between political parties. Prejudice was evidenced by the limitations of people's voting rights due to their socioeconomic status or race. Keyssar ultimately writes that "Americans of both parties ... preferred partisan advantage to fair democracy."

STUDENT COMMENT: The topics of all three assigned readings hold heavy significance in today's political climate, especially regarding the upcoming general election and the campaign of Donald Trump. News outlets around the country are constantly running new headlines alleging widespread voter suppression by the Trump campaign, especially through attempts to discredit and defund the United States Postal Service. As Keyssar explains in his piece, these events are nothing new; voter suppression has a long-standing history in the United States. Along with traditionally-oppressed groups like Black and poor voters, however, a new group is seemingly being targeted by the Trump campaign: young voters. Millennials and Gen-Z-ers are beginning to involve themselves in politics for the first time, primarily in opposition to Trump and the Republican Party, and seeking a break from the traditional line of rich, old, cisgender, heterosexual, white men in power—the core of the GOP. Young progressive voters seek to reunite the country to face pressing issues such as climate change and crippling student debt without overwhelming partisan battles like the ones Washington warned about in his farewell address. Young people are finally speaking up, emboldened by social change and a terrifying pandemic that calls for immediate action, only to be met with sharp resistance by Trump because he is afraid.

STUDENT COMMENT: By framing the election as a sporting event, it is psychologically easier to justify doing anything for victory. For example, voter suppression has been one of the biggest issues leading up to the 2020 election. For the last few weeks, the president has unabashedly been attempting to destroy one of the public's greatest assets, the United States Postal Service to ensure the failure of mail in voting. The Postal Service has an approval rating of 91% (Pew) among all Americans and is incredibly important to lower income, conservative, rural communities. However, even with this astounding amount of support before it was politically weaponized, opposition from Republicans was virtually nonexistent. That is the power of the modern political divisions. The second that your team changes sides and starts throwing balls at the home fans, they can do nothing but cheer and clap.

***PINSKER'S RESPONSE:** Alexander Keyssar is one of the most important historians of voting rights in America. If you're not familiar with his work, then you should start looking for his articles and books. What I liked about many of the student responses to his piece from 2012 was how it provoked so many thoughtful connections to the present day. The charges and counter-charges over voter suppression and voter fraud are central to this campaign in 2020 and may well provoke a crisis after election day that all of us must strive to avoid. Therefore we should be reading up on this history of this debate this semester to prepare make our contributions to perspective, sanity and the continuation of constitutional democracy—even as we strive to reform and improve it.*

Scott Porch, “The Book That Changed Campaigns Forever.” *Politico* (2015)

STUDENT COMMENT: Porch's article also highlights a shift in American politics after the election of 1960 that turned political parties into personality cults and candidates into celebrities. Teddy White pioneered a new variety of journalism in his 1961 book *The Making of the President 1960*, reliant on insider access into the campaigns of political candidates, that highlighted the drama of a one-on-one battle for the highest office in the land and focused on the people the candidates were rather than the questions they answered or the issues they supported. Given this new journalism, the first televised debates, and the one of the youngest and arguably most charismatic candidates in presidential history all in the same year, a new era was born in which the electorate was far more interested in how well they liked a candidate rather than focusing on the policies they which gave the US a partisan divide in the first place.

STUDENT COMMENT: With the rise of media coverage, the effects of partisanship have become amplified. Teddy White, the author of *The Making of the President 1960*, kicked off an era in which the media would portray more than just the substance of a presidential candidate. White stepped away from the traditional methods of reporting, leaving out the spoken content and reactions to a candidate's speeches. Instead, he focused on the things that drove the action behind the scenes that the public paid little attention to such as their “body language” or “their aides, wives and families.” Unfortunately, White's work eventually led exactly to what Washington forewarned us of in his farewell address: “Most frustrating was to watch his motives twisted and attacked for partisan gain by ‘infamous scribblers’ in the newspapers.” White's work had an incredible impact on the ways in which reporters paid attention to the behaviors of candidates, and subsequently changed the perspectives people had of those candidates. No longer were reporters an ‘arms-length’ away from candidates. As evidenced by his retelling of George McGovern's experience “winning the democratic nomination in Miami beach”, White himself later admitted that he regretted the impact his work had upon the workplace. He described reporters surrounding “McGovern ... like a fish in a fishbowl.”

PINSKER'S RESPONSE: The irony of the personality-driven campaigns of modern times is that they represented a return –in a certain sense—to the campaigns of Washington's day. Teddy White's books didn't celebrate civic virtue and republicanism the way revolutionary and early national Americans did, but both eras downplayed policy over individual candidates. Other eras of American history have witnessed more ideologically-driven partisanship. Some analysts believe that has been the problem of our most recent times –a turn toward greater red / blue (Republican / Democratic) polarization with less room for compromise. I'm not sure that's an accurate analysis of the Trump era. But that's one critical theme for all of us to monitor this semester. What is the proper role of the media in a campaign? How much should coverage focus on candidates and their foibles or public issues and their policy ramifications?