3. The questions asked whether the respondent has opinions about many things and if the respondent has more opinions than the average person. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for these items is 0.66.

4. These are not meant to be an exhaustive list of core values in American politics. Additional values are covered by Goren (2013) and Clawson and Oxley (2013). Rather, limited government and moral traditionalism have structured party conflict in the United States for an extended period.

# 4

# Why American Political Parties Can't Get Beyond the Left-Right Divide[1]

*Edward G. Carmines, Michael J. Ensley, and Michael W. Wagner*

In October of 2010, *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman predicted that "there is going to be a serious third party candidate in 2012, with a serious political movement behind him or her—one definitely big enough to impact the election's outcome" (Friedman 2010). The Pulitzer Prize–winning scribe claimed that this new party would not come from the right or the left, but the "radical center," which was tired of a failed two-party system. Two years later, Friedman followed up, promoting former U.S. Comptroller General David Walker as an independent who could appeal to moderate America (Friedman 2012). On the other side of the national paper of record's ideological spectrum, Ross Douthat, on the day after the 2012 election, wrote in one breath that President Barack Obama's reelection victory in 2012 was "a realignment" and in the next breath that it "may not even last after another four years" (Douthat 2012).

Popular accounts of American politics and predictions about its future like those described above are common. Whether the claims focus on a growing centrist goliath that brings the two major parties to their knees or describe a durable shift in the electorate that advantages one party over another, the element that these kinds of forecasts about the future of the American experiment have in common is the expectation of rapid, dramatic, and long-lasting change.

We argue that those who expect such vivid and enduring transformations in the American party system will be waiting a while. Just as record low levels of approval for Congress and a continuing decline in trust in the government's ability to do the right thing are not likely to translate into the rise of a

viable, centrist third party, there is not much evidence that President Obama's reelection has created a durable Democratic realignment (but see Judis and Teixeria 2004). When considering the state of the parties for 2012 and beyond in the United States, we argue that it is crucial to take into account the more diverse ideological orientations of the American electorate compared to the simple left/right divide that characterizes the contemporary two-party system. We explore a simple, but fundamental, question: *What are the consequences of the discrepancy between the one-dimensional structure of elite policy preferences and the two-dimensional structure of citizens' policy preferences?* In this chapter, we explain: 1) why many of those self-identifying as ideologically moderate are actually polarized *from each other*—making a centrist third party's rise very difficult; 2) why the parties are constrained in their ability to make major plays for parts of the electorate who do not share their ideological preferences; and finally; 3) why, at the same time, just focusing on increasing the support from their core ideological supporters is unlikely to lead to a partisan majority.

## The Contemporary Partisan Divide in the American Electorate

While partisan political elites are more polarized along a single left-right ideological continuum than they have been in several generations, nay, centuries (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), the coalitions supporting their bids for office on Election Day are structured in a way that makes sudden but durable change unlikely. The major reason is that the electorate does not solely divide its attitudes along the same left-right dimension that dominates elite debate (Jackson and Green 2011). The American public is made of polarized liberals and conservatives to be sure, but it is also made up of libertarians, populists, and moderates who not only face a party system with no natural home but also one that systematically cross pressures them day by day, issue by issue, and election by election.

Our previous research reveals deep divides in contemporary American politics—not just between liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans or between an active ideological minority and an inactive nonideological majority—but also between ideologically orthodox and ideologically heterodox citizens (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012a). We use the term *orthodox* to mean that individuals have attitudes on both economic issues and social issues that match the program of issue preferences advocated by one of the two major political parties. Liberals hold left-leaning views on both social and economic issues and conservatives hold right-leaning views on both types of issues, while libertarians hold conservative economic preferences and liberal social preferences and populists hold liberal economic views and conservative social ones. Moderates, in our definition, hold middle-of-the-road views across both issue dimensions.



The deep-seated ideological heterogeneity that we have discovered in the American electorate has led to two simultaneous but diametrically opposing developments in contemporary American politics. On the one hand, precisely because ideologically consistent liberals and conservatives share the economic and social issue preferences of Democratic Party elites and Republican Party elites respectively, they have become significantly more entrenched in the contemporary party system. They tend to be stable partisans, straight-ticket party voters with exceptionally strong attachments to their respective parties while strongly opposing the opposition party (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012b). While they do not vote at higher rates than their fellow citizens, they do participate in more campaign-related activities, which no doubt enhances their political visibility and influence (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2011). They are also more likely to use partisan media outlets to learn about politics. In short, ideologically orthodox citizens have become more aligned with the existing party system. They represent the mass tentacles from party elites that reach into the wellsprings of the American electorate.

Populists and libertarians along with moderates, on the other hand, are much less connected to the two major parties and less likely to engage in political activities. They are being pushed out of conventional two-party politics, which leaves them with a classic "exit or voice" choice (Hirschman 1970): not participating at all, become the primary force of swing and split-ticket voting, or forming and voting for third parties.

What do these five ideological categories comprise and how are they measured? Mass policy preferences are not represented along a single left-right ideological divide (Converse 1964; see also Claggett and Shafer 2010; Shafer and Claggett 1995). Instead, the domestic policy preferences of the public vary along two major dimensions, the first associated with economic and social-welfare issues and a second dominated by social and cultural issues (Shafer and Claggett 1995; Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2011). While the preferences of party elites on these two dimensions are closely aligned—hence, the single-dimensional structure of elite opinion—for most of the public the economic and social ideological dimensions are largely separate and only weakly correlated (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012b).

To create empirically our five ideological categories, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on American National Election Studies (ANES) questions on citizens' issue positions from 1972 to 2012. The CFA model allowed the correlation between the dimensions to vary. Specifically, we identified questions that mapped onto either the economic or social ideological dimensions and used those questions to identify citizens'

underlying, latent positions on each dimension. Since the number of complete cases is diminished when all of the issue questions are used simultaneously, we chose to impute missing values before performing the CFA. We have taken advantage of this approach in our analyses examining how individuals' location in a two-dimensional measure of ideology helps explain variation in party identification and civic engagement (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012a; 2011).

We created five datasets through multiple imputation and then performed the CFA to estimate each individual's position on each dimension. The correlation between the two issue dimensions never exceeds 0.5 in any survey, which is crucial for our contention that there is a large proportion of the American public that does not fit into the traditional left-right continuum on both of these issue dimensions simultaneously (see Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012a; 2012b; 2011 for additional details).

We have defined ideological groups by dividing the two-dimensional policy space into five discrete areas that are represented in figure 4.1. The x-axis represents preferences for economic issues, ranging from the most liberal at the left end of the spectrum to the most conservative at the right end of the spectrum. The y-axis represents preferences for social issues. The lower end of the axis represents more liberal preferences on social issues such as abortion and gay rights, while the higher end represents more conservative social issue preferences.

Given that each dimension is set to have a mean of 0 and the standard deviation is 1, the origin (0,0) is roughly the center of the space. Moderates are defined as those respondents that are within a one-half of a standard deviation of the origin in any direction and are shaded gray in figure 4.1. The other groups are defined in terms of the quadrant in which they are located. We classify those that have a positive (negative) value on both dimensions as Conservative (Liberal). Those that have a positive (negative) value on the economic dimension and a negative (positive) value on the social dimension are considered Libertarian (Populist).

Figure 4.1 makes it immediately clear that the American electorate is made up of more than liberals, conservatives, and moderates. Liberals are located in the lower-left quadrant of the figure while conservatives find themselves in the upper right-hand corner of the figure. Moderates are in the middle. The "off-diagonal" is made up of libertarians in the lower-right corner as they prefer the government to play a less active role in the managing of the economy while simultaneously preferring that the government play a less active role in regulating questions of morality. Conversely, populists are in the upper left-hand quadrant of the figure, preferring government management of both the economy and government regulation of social behaviors.



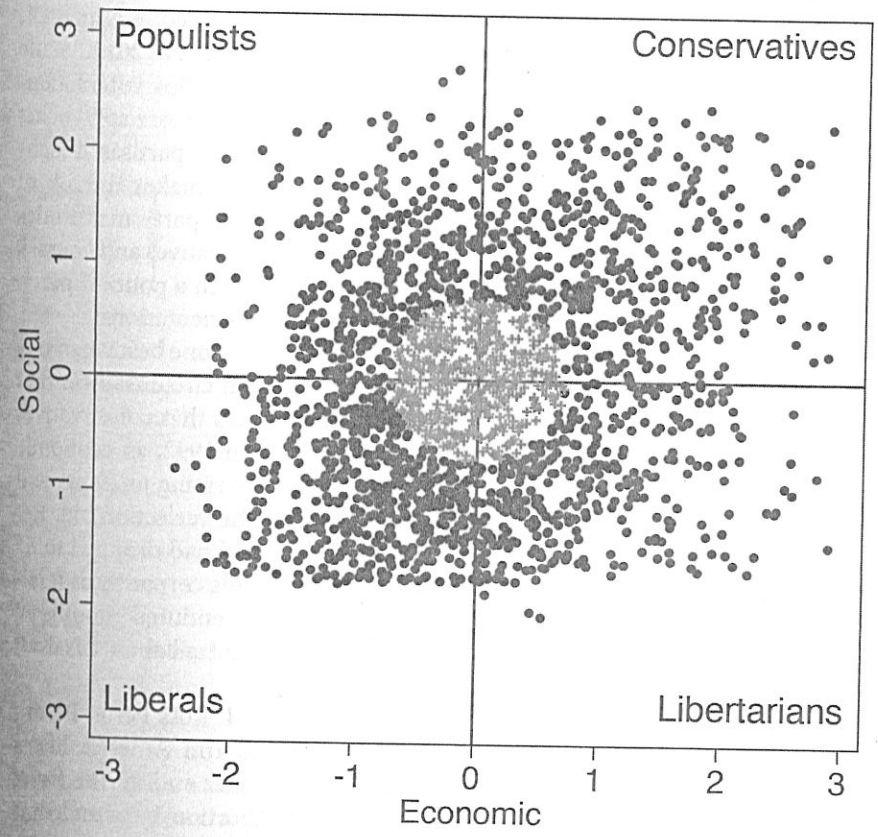


FIGURE 4.1
**Ideological distribution of the 2012 American electorate.**
*Source:* ANES 2012.

Importantly, libertarians, populists, and moderates all choose, on average, the middle value on self-reported ideology scales (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012a), but even a cursory glance at figure 4.1 makes clear that these three groups of people have little in common when it comes to their issue preferences. A candidate seeking to appeal to what Friedman calls the "radical center" would be on a fool's errand, as no candidate—no matter how skilled—could appeal to self-identified moderates who are ideologically libertarian and populist as they hold policy preferences that are precisely opposite of one another.

While liberals and conservatives are the most populated categories, figure 4.1 also shows that the number of libertarians, populists, and moderates in

the electorate is nontrivial. Based on the information displayed in figure 4.1, conservatives and liberals made up 46 percent of the electorate in 2012. While orthodox voters are more likely to be partisans, most heterodox voters identify with a party as well. While heterodox voters engage in more split-ticket voting and exhibit more variability in the durability of their partisan attachments, their general willingness to identify with a party makes the job of third-party candidates more difficult. Moreover, while their partisan attitudes and attachments are generally weaker than those of conservatives and liberals, most libertarians, populists, and moderates do identify with a political party, even if that party is not a perfect fit for their ideological orientations.

When third-party candidates have emerged, they have done best when trying to appeal to a particular ideological group in political circumstances that are challenging to the conventional two-party candidates that conservatives and liberals are predisposed to support. For example, in 1992, an economic recession drove President George H.W. Bush's approval rating to 29 percent in August of 1992, just months ahead of his unsuccessful reelection bid. Republicans still approved of Bush, but even their approval had dropped to 57 percent, the low point of the president's support from his co-partisans (Gallup 2014). Bush's Democratic opponent, Bill Clinton, endured months of scandals and media-feeding frenzies along the campaign trail about his draft record, personal life, and personal financial dealings.

Enter Texas billionaire and independent candidate H. Ross Perot. Perot's campaign focused on economic issues, promising to run America like a business as he excoriated President Bush for raising taxes and for the rising national debt. However, he was pro-choice on the abortion issue and thus more closely fit the ideological profile of libertarians than conservatives or liberals. Perot captured about 19 percent of the popular vote. From where did his votes come? We conducted a multinomial logit analysis of the 1992 presidential vote in which a vote for Perot is the baseline category.[2] In the regression, we control for partisan identification, retrospective and prospective economic evaluations, and trust in government. In the comparison of voting for Bush relative to Perot, socially conservative voters are to be more likely to support Bush. Economic conservatism does not have a statistically significant effect on choosing Bush relative to Perot. In the comparison of voting for Perot relative to Clinton, we found negative and statistically significant coefficients on the economic and social variables indicating that economically and socially conservative voters were likely to support Perot relative to Clinton.

The best way to analyze the results for our model is to consider predicted probabilities for different combinations of the social and economic issues variables. Figure 4.2 presents the predicted probability of voting for Perot for each of our five ideological groups. Specifically, we defined a conserva-



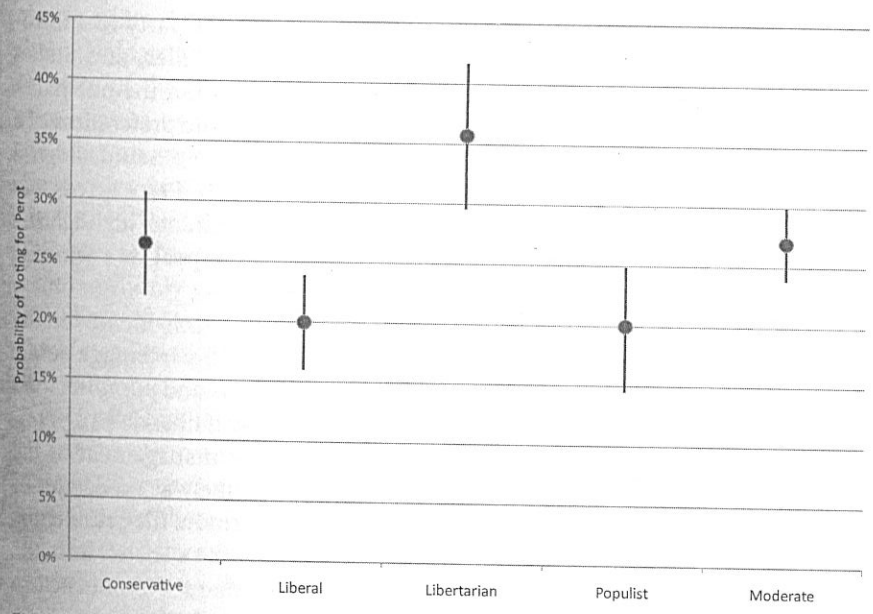


FIGURE 4.2
**Probability of voting for Ross Perot in 1992 by ideological group.**

tive (liberal) on a particular dimension to be one standard deviation above (below) the mean, and a moderate would be located at the mean on each dimension. Based on this, we calculated the predicted probability of voting for Perot for each of the five ideological types.

The economic and social scales have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. So for the purposes of creating figure 4.2, the moderate has a score of 0 on both dimensions. The conservative and populist have a score of 1 on the social dimension, whereas the liberal and libertarian have a score of -1 on that dimension. For the economic dimension, the conservative and libertarian have the same score of 1, whereas the liberal and populist have a score of -1 on the economic dimension. Figure 4.2 indicates that the independent candidate, Perot, appealed the most to libertarians, who (along with populists and moderates) are much less stable in their partisanship over time than conservatives and liberals (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012a). Given the choice between a Republican candidate who was consistently conservative across issue dimensions and an independent who was a better match for their own general views, libertarians had a 36 percent likelihood to vote for Perot. Of course, that also means a majority of libertarians were more likely to vote

for either Bush or Clinton, highlighting the importance of party identification in determining vote choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg 2008). On the one hand, the independent candidate who appealed to the precise issue preferences of a group of voters won more of their votes as compared to any other ideological group. On the other hand, even the voters who agreed with Perot across two issue dimensions were more likely to vote for another candidate, highlighting the incredible difficulty for independent candidates to appeal to a winning coalition of voters.

The other two ideological groups that are most likely to self-identify in the middle—populists and moderates—were about 15 and 10 percentage points less likely than libertarians to cast a vote for Perot. Liberals and populists were the least likely to support Perot. This makes sense as both liberals and populists prefer far more government intervention into the management of the economy than did Perot. Conservatives were about as likely as moderates to support Perot. Thus, even if an independent candidate enters the presidential race, gains significant media attention, participates in the debates, and airs advertisements, figure 4.2 highlights how unlikely it is that the candidate can appeal to a winning coalition of voters without the signal of a major party label behind him or her. There are nontrivial votes to be had in the "off-diagonal" ideological space occupied by many American voters, but it appears as though there are not enough votes among these heterodox voters, to win many elections.

## Opportunities and Constraints Facing Partisan Elites

The multidimensional character of American public opinion both gives opportunities to and constraints to the two major parties as they seek to build a stable electoral majority coalition. Since neither party has been able to assemble such a stable majority since the Democrats lost this status in the 1960s, both parties have won national elections by cobbling together a coalition that goes beyond their core ideological supporters. When Republicans triumph they must win millions of votes beyond those who have conservative positions on both economic and social issues, just as Democrats must extend their electoral reach well beyond their ideological core.

Given this situation, there are two alternative strategies available to each party as they seek to build a majority coalition. First, they can focus primarily on gaining additional support from their natural ideological supporters; Republicans appealing to conservatives, Democrats appealing to liberals. This would lead to an intensification of the already marked polarization that characterizes American parties today. The alternative strategy is to expand their ideological appeals by focusing on increasing their support among one or more of the three other ideological groups. This latter scenario actually encompasses two distinct strategies, one involving an appeal to moderates, the other an appeal to populists or libertarians (Hillygus and Shields 2009). The former strategy involves moderating their party's issue stances by moving toward the center on economic and social issues. Making an appeal to populists or libertarians, by contrast, necessitates the two parties making a move on only one issue dimension since both parties are already aligned with these of diagonal voters on one dimension. Thus, the Republican Party would need to move left on the social issues dimension to increase their appeal to libertarians or move right on the economic issue dimension to appeal to populists. Similarly, the Democrats could increase their appeal to populists by moving rightward on social issues or moving left on economic issues to appeal to libertarians.



Notice that there is a tradeoff in these partisan appeals to moderates versus populists and libertarians. The former only involves moderating—not fundamentally altering—their economic and social issue stands, but involves altering their positions on both issue dimensions. Contrariwise, to increase their appeal to libertarians or populists each party would have to adopt a new issue position, but only on one of the issue dimensions.

To examine the implications of these alternative strategies facing the currently constituted Republican and Democratic parties, we turn to the analytic model developed by Robert Axelrod (1972). His model calculates the contribution that different groups make to a party's electoral coalition. The group's contribution is defined as the proportion of a party's total votes provided by a given group and is based on the three components of the group: its size, turnout, and loyalty. Simply, a group's contribution to the party's coalition is greater if the group is large, its turnout is high, and its vote is lopsided for one or the other party. Conversely, a group's electoral contribution is less when it is small in size, has low turnout, and its members evenly split their vote between the two parties. Since these components can differ substantially across and within groups and can change over time, the formula provides a useful mechanism to evaluate the contribution that any group makes to a party's overall electoral coalition. Axelrod's model initially was used to calculate the contribution of various demographic groups to the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions, but the model can readily be applied to ideological groups.

Figure 4.3 shows the contribution of each of our five ideological groups to the Republican presidential electoral coalition from 1972 to 2012, while figure 4.4 presents the same information for the Democratic presidential coalition.

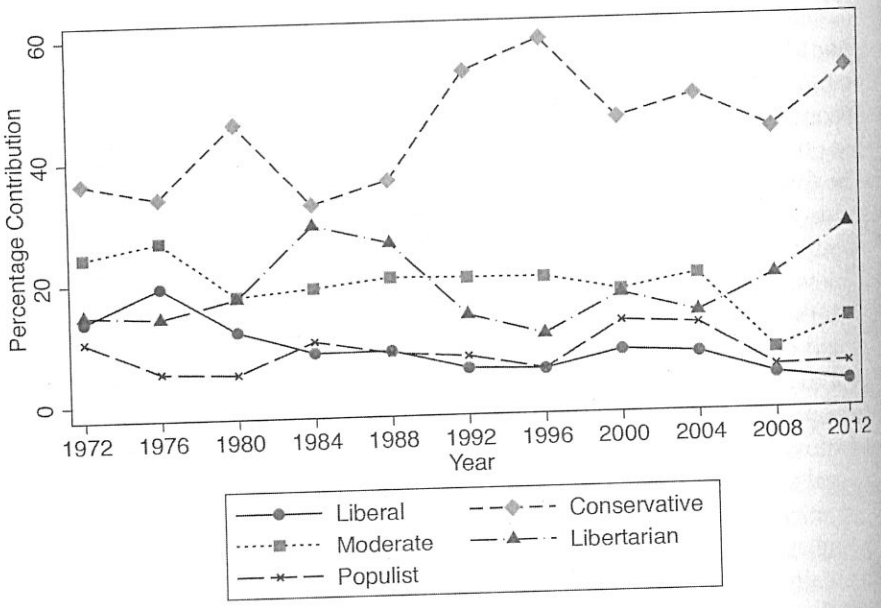


**FIGURE 4.3**
**Contribution to the Republican presidential vote by ideological group.**
*Source:* ANES 1972–2012.

One can see that over time, Republican reliance on conservative votes has increased substantially, going from the mid-30 percent level in the 1970s to an average of over 50 percent in the 1992 to 2012 period. That is, more than half of Republican electoral support is now provided by conservatives. Simultaneously, the contribution of liberals to the Republican electoral coalition has declined to less than 10 percent in each of the last eight presidential elections. Figure 4.4 indicates that ideological liberals make the largest contribution to the Democratic coalition, averaging 42 percent throughout this entire period. Thus, Republicans are far more dependent on conservative support than Democrats are on liberal support. In this sense, Republicans can be considered more of an ideologically oriented party than Democrats.

When we examine the three components of size, turnout, and loyalty for each of the ideological groups for 1972, 1992, and 2012, we gain some insight into the possible strategies for each party as they attempt to assemble a lasting electoral majority. Turning first to the Republican Party, the question, stated bluntly, is can an electoral Republican majority be constructed from additional conservative votes? The proportion of conservatives in the electorate has remained remarkably stable throughout this entire period, averaging 27 percent of the public. Consequently, if a Republican majority is to be based



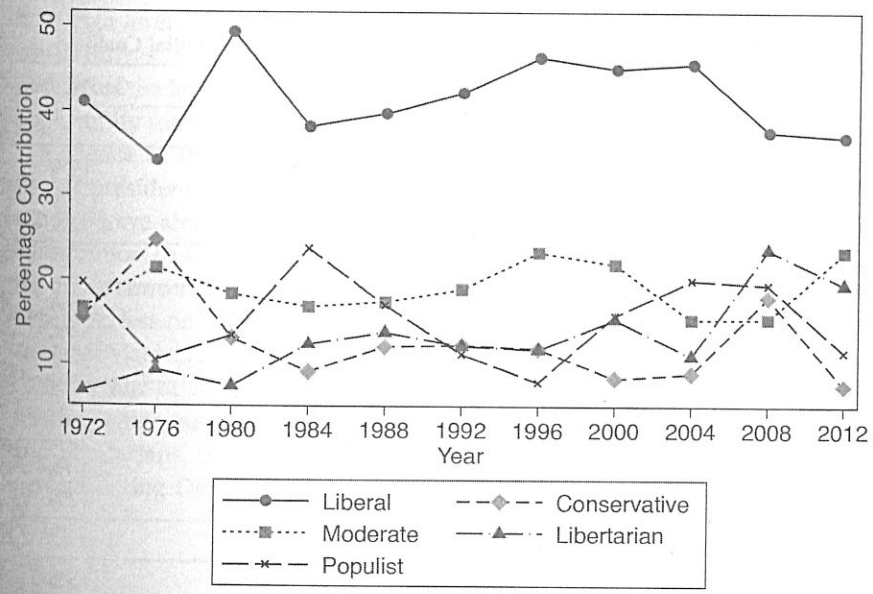


**FIGURE 4.4**
**Contribution to the Democratic presidential vote by ideological group.**
*Source:* ANES 1972–2012.

on conservative votes, it must rely on increases in the group's turnout and loyalty. But as table 4.1 indicates, average voting turnout among conservatives is already close to 80 percent, as is Republican Party loyalty among conservatives. The 2012 election is especially revealing in this regard. Mitt Romney won 86 percent of the conservative vote, and 83 percent of conservatives voted in the election, but he still lost the election. The implication: there are probably not enough inactive, disloyal conservatives to make the Republicans a majority party.

But this does not mean a Republican majority is beyond reach. Neither moderates nor especially populists are likely to contribute significantly to a Republican majority. As table 4.1 shows, populists are not only the smallest group in the ideological universe, but they also have the lowest turnout. But perhaps most importantly, they have shown a strong disinclination to vote for Republican presidential candidates, especially in recent elections. The high watermark of Republican populist support was 49 percent in 1972. But the average level of populist support for Republicans throughout this entire period is only 34 percent, and the last two presidential elections saw a mere 17 percent and 27 percent of populists vote for the Republican ticket.

Moderates offer a more promising target for Republican efforts. They are a larger portion of the public than populists and turn out in higher numbers.

TABLE 4.1
**Size, Turnout, Loyalty, and Contribution to Republican Presidential Coalition**

| Year | Turnout | Loyalty | Size | Contribution |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Liberal** | | |
| 1972 | 88% | 38% | 23% | 14% |
| 1992 | 77% | 8% | 25% | 5% |
| 2012 | 80% | 8% | 19% | 2% |
| | | **Conservative** | | |
| 1972 | 81% | 81% | 30% | 36% |
| 1992 | 76% | 76% | 29% | 54% |
| 2012 | 83% | 86% | 27% | 54% |
| | | **Moderate** | | |
| 1972 | 88% | 73% | 21% | 24% |
| 1992 | 65% | 43% | 22% | 20% |
| 2012 | 65% | 32% | 21% | 12% |
| | | **Libertarian** | | |
| 1972 | 88% | 80% | 12% | 15% |
| 1992 | 72% | 60% | 12% | 14% |
| 2012 | 79% | 56% | 22% | 28% |
| | | **Populist** | | |
| 1972 | 79% | 49% | 15% | 10% |
| 1992 | 59% | 31% | 12% | 7% |
| 2012 | 61% | 27% | 11% | 5% |

Most significantly for Republican prospects, moderates exhibit the most variable pattern of partisan support among the five ideological groups. Of the eleven presidential elections since 1972, Republicans have won a majority of the moderate vote in six of them and have done so as recently as 2004. But the most recent presidential elections saw the Republican ticket garner its least amount of moderate support in this entire period, only 29 percent in 2008 and 32 percent in 2012. Moderates would seem to be trending away from the Republican Party as it has become more attractive to conservatives since 1992.

Libertarians would seem to offer better prospects for Republicans. As seen in figure 4.3, libertarians made the second highest contribution to the Republican electoral coalition in 2008 and 2012. Furthermore, they are a significantly larger part of the electorate than populists, and while generally smaller than moderates overall they have actually surpassed moderates as a portion of the electorate in the last two presidential elections. Moreover, libertarians



have high levels of turnout, slightly higher than liberals and matching that of conservatives. Finally, a majority of libertarians have voted for Republicans in three of the last four elections. Libertarians would seem to provide the best opportunity for the Republican Party to expand its ideological coalition.

Evidence of the size, loyalty, and turnout in support of the Democratic Party's presidential nominee for 1972, 1992, and 2012 are presented in table 4.2. We have already noted in figure 4.4 that while liberals make the largest contribution to the party's coalition, it is significantly smaller than the contribution conservatives make to the Republican coalition. Democrats have depended less on liberals than Republicans have on conservatives to produce electoral victories. Should Democrats focus their efforts on increasing the contribution of liberals to their electoral coalition? Liberals already are a relatively high turnout group, approximating the turnout of conservatives and libertarians. They are also extremely loyal to the Democrats, with 95 percent voting Democratic in the 2012 election. Additionally, liberals make

TABLE 4.2
**Size, Turnout, Loyalty, and Contribution to Democratic Presidential Coalition**

| Year | Turnout | Loyalty | Size | Contribution |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Liberal** | | |
| 1972 | 88% | 62% | 23% | 41% |
| 1992 | 77% | 92% | 25% | 41% |
| 2012 | 80% | 95% | 19% | 37% |
| | | **Conservative** | | |
| 1972 | 81% | 19% | 30% | 16% |
| 1992 | 76% | 24% | 30% | 16% |
| 2012 | 83% | 14% | 27% | 8% |
| | | **Moderate** | | |
| 1972 | 88% | 19% | 30% | 16% |
| 1992 | 76% | 24% | 29% | 12% |
| 2012 | 83% | 14% | 27% | 8% |
| | | **Libertarian** | | |
| 1972 | 88% | 20% | 12% | 7% |
| 1992 | 78% | 55% | 12% | 12% |
| 2012 | 79% | 44% | 22% | 20% |
| | | **Populist** | | |
| 1972 | 79% | 51% | 15% | 20% |
| 1992 | 59% | 69% | 12% | 11% |
| 2012 | 61% | 73% | 11% | 12% |

up a somewhat smaller part of the electorate than conservatives do. It would appear that Democrats cannot add much to their coalition by concentrating on liberals. There are simply not enough inactive, nonloyal liberals to form a Democratic majority.

We have already seen that libertarians are more likely to become a permanent part of the Republican coalition than any of the other ideological groups. That leaves populists and moderates as potential Democratic recruits. On its face, populists seem to be a tempting target. They are already quite loyal to the party, supporting Democrats at an average rate of 66 percent from 1972 to 2012. But as a group, they have two major disadvantages. First, their turnout is by far the lowest among the five ideological groups (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2011). Perhaps more importantly, they also represent the smallest slice of the electorate, averaging 13 percent of the public. If Democrats were to concentrate on increasing the contribution of populists to their electoral coalition, they would need to make a major effort to boost their turnout since a political party can do relatively little to increase a group's size.

What about moderates? As we saw in figure 4.4, moderates have been an important part of the Democrat's electoral coalition. Since 1972, only liberals have exceeded their average contribution to the Democratic coalition, but moderate turnout is second lowest among these ideological groups. In terms of loyalty, they split their votes more evenly between the parties than any other group, averaging 51 percent for Democrats during this period. Democrats have done much better among moderates since the New Democrats represented by Clinton came on the scene in 1992. In five of the last six presidential elections, moderates have given a majority of their votes to Democrats, a figure that reached impressive levels of 71 percent and 68 percent in 2008 and 2012 respectively. Thus, in the last two decades moderates have moved firmly into the Democratic electoral coalition, and along with populists would seem to provide the best opportunity for Democrats to expand their coalition.

## Beyond the 2012 Elections: The Future of Partisan Politics

It is often suggested that both parties can become more electorally viable by simply extending their ideological reach, making greater appeals to less ideologically oriented orthodox voters. However, our analysis suggests that this is not so easy. Because liberals and conservatives are the strongest partisans and the citizens most likely to participate, they represent the core ideological constituency of their respective party. It is difficult—indeed, it is quite risky—for partisan elites to move ideologically to attract populist or libertarian support (Karol 2009). The same logic affects the extent to which party elites are able



to moderate their positions to gain votes from more centrist voters. They do so at the clear risk of losing support among their natural ideological base.

In a two-dimensional policy space, "flanking" strategies aimed at highlighting one issue dimension over another in an election might be enough to appeal to voters who hold ideological preferences that do not match what one of the parties is offering. Presidential candidates of competing parties tapped libertarians' economic issues conservatism and social issues liberalism during the past forty years (Miller and Schofield 2003). This makes sense given that the economic issues dimension is more highly correlated with partisanship than the social issues dimension (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012b), while the social issues dimension has come to be more important in explaining self-identified ideology (Levendusky 2009).

While flanking is a theoretically plausible strategy for partisan elites to use, the parties-in-the-electorate must be careful not to go too far and upset the coalition of members that make up their base (Bawn et al. 2012). Moreover, since both parties have incentives to engage in flanking, the same members of the "off-diagonal" will be the targets of both parties. For example, Republicans should be expected to target libertarians on economic issues, but those same libertarians should be expected to receive messages about social issues from Democrats. In an era that has campaigns relying on the tools of "big data" to make inferences about voters' preferences, and thus, the kinds of messages they should receive, we might expect more flanking to occur in the future as parties improve their ability to estimate how efficient their targeted messages might be. Regardless, the irresistible force of efforts to highlight one dimension over another for ideologically heterodox voters should always be expected to run into the immovable object of two parties that have identical incentives to flank.

Another complicating factor for the two major parties, and perhaps especially for the Republican Party, has been the growth of a particular kind of polarization—not the distance between the two parties, but an asymmetric polarization in which the newly elected Republican members of Congress are becoming increasingly conservative as compared to their co-partisans continuing to serve in office, while newly elected Democrats are *also* more conservative than the Democrats who held office previously (Carmines 2011). As the Republican lawmakers become more conservative, appeals to ideologically heterodox voters become increasingly risky.

In the past few elections, a noteworthy number of Republican stalwarts lost to Tea Party–supported candidates. In 2010, Tea Party—funded candidate Christine O'Donnell upset nine-term Representative Mike Castle in the Delaware Republican Senate primary (Theiss, Morse, Wagner, Flanagan, and Zingate, 2011). In 2012, Indiana treasurer Richard Mourdock defeated

six-term U.S. Senator Richard Lugar in the GOP Senate primary. Both O'Donnell and Mourdock lost their bids for the Senate in the general election where a more moderate Republican candidate might have won (Fanagan, et al. 2014).

Table 4.3 shows the predicted probability of approval of the Tea Party for the mean member of each of our ideological groups. Approval for the Tea Party is measured along a 7-point scale (7 = strongly approve) in the 2012 ANES. First, it is noteworthy that no group crests the midpoint of the scale; the average American, regardless of her or his ideological stripes, disapproves of the Tea Party. Stipulating that, conservatives hold the most favorable attitudes toward the Tea Party while liberals hold the least favorable. Moderates, libertarians, and populists once again find themselves in the middle.

Table 4.4 suggests that Tea Party identifiers in Congress cannot afford to alienate conservative voters—the very voters we have previously shown to be enthusiastic participators and strong, durable Republican Party identifiers (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012a; 2012b). While intra-party battles over legislative strategy might occasionally dominate the headlines and cause headaches for party leaders as they did during the 2013 government shutdown and lead to speculation about forming a new, Tea Party–centered political party, Tea Party Congress members need the support of conservative voters, and conservative voters are reliable Republicans.

In the end, then, there is no great mystery as to why American political parties can't get beyond the left-right divide. Parties are by nature risk-averse organizations, and as such, they are tightly moored to the status quo. Only under the most extreme circumstances—for parties, that means repeated losses at the polls—do they adopt changes in their electoral strategy. Thus, as long as both parties can plausibly convince themselves that their ideological appeals are not responsible for their electoral defeats, they will avoid making any fundamental changes in their basic strategies. At the same time, as we have seen, neither Republicans nor Democrats will be able to cultivate a majority by only focusing on their core ideological supporters. There are simply not enough additional conservative and liberal votes to be harvested to produce an electoral majority. So, for the time being, both parties are

**TABLE 4.3**
**Approval for the Tea Party, 2012**

| | *Conservatives* | *Libertarians* | *Populists* | *Moderates* | *Liberals* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predicted Approval | 3.22 | 2.55 | 2.26 | 2.41 | 1.74 |
| (Std Error) | (0.199) | (0.180) | (0.162) | (0.135) | (0.115) |

*Source:* 2012 American National Election Study; scale ranges from 1 to 7 (7 = strongly approve).



caught in a fundamental dilemma—they lack the incentive to move beyond their ideological anchors, and yet they cannot become a majority party by becoming more closely tied to these anchors. They are thus set adrift in a sea of future uncertainty.

## Notes

1. We are grateful to John Green, Daniel Coffey and David Cohen for their careful attention to our project. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the State of the Parties Conferences: 2012 and Beyond at the University of Akron, Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, November 7–8, 2013.

2. To save space, we do not report the model here. Contact the authors for the results.