

# THE Nation.

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## Voting the Fate of the Nation (Page 2)

by **CHALMERS JOHNSON**

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*Chalmers Johnson is the author of three linked books on the crises of American imperialism and militarism. They are **Blowback** (2000), **The Sorrows of Empire** (2004), and **Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic** (2006). All are available in paperback from Metropolitan Books. This essay originally appeared on **TomDispatch**.*

### The Regional Factor

Regionalism is the other obvious obstacle standing in the way of attempts to mobilize the electorate on a national basis for a turning-point election. In their book ***Divided America: The Ferocious Power Struggle in American Politics***, the political scientists Earl and Merle Black argue that the US electorate is hopelessly split. This division, which has become more entrenched with each passing year, is fundamentally ideological, but it is also rooted in ethnicity and manifests itself in an intense and never-ending partisanship. "In modern American politics," they write, "a Republican Party dominated by white Protestants faces a Democratic Party in which minorities plus non-Christian whites far outnumber white Protestants."

Another difference on the rise involves gender imbalance. In the 1950s, the Democratic Party, then by far the larger of the two parties, was evenly balanced between women and men. Fifty years later, a smaller but still potent Democratic Party contained far more women than men (60 percent to 40 percent). "In contrast, the Republican Party has shifted from an institution with more women than men in the 1950s (55 percent to 45 percent) to one in which men and women were as evenly balanced in 2004 as Democrats were in the 1950s."

Now, add in regionalism, specifically the old American antagonism between the two sides in the Civil War. That once meant Southern Democrats versus Northern Republicans. By the twenty-first century, however, that binary division had given way to something more complex--"a new American regionalism, a pattern of conflict in which Democrats and Republicans each possess two regional strongholds and in which the Midwest, as the swing region, holds the balance of power in presidential elections."

The five regions Earl and Merle Black identify--each becoming more partisan and less characteristic of the nation as a whole--are the Northeast, South, Midwest, Mountains/Plains and Pacific Coast. The Northeast, although declining slightly in population, has become unambiguously liberal Democratic. It is composed of New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont), the Middle Atlantic states

(Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania) and the District of Columbia. It is the primary Democratic stronghold.

The South is today a Republican stronghold made up of the eleven former Confederate states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia). A second Republican stronghold, displaying an intense and growing partisanship, is the Mountains/Plains region, composed of the thirteen states of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming.

A second Democratic stronghold is the Pacific Coast, which includes the nation's most populous state, California, joined by Alaska, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington. The Midwest, where national elections are won or lost by the party able to hold onto, and mobilize, its strongholds, is composed of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, West Virginia and Wisconsin. The two most important swing states in the nation are Florida (27 electoral votes) and Ohio (20 electoral votes), which the Democrats narrowly lost, generally under contested circumstances, in both 2000 and 2004.

These five regions are today entrenched in the nation's psyche. Normally, they ensure very narrow victories by one party or another in national elections. There is no way to get around them, barring a clear and unmistakable performance failure by one of the parties--as happened to the Republicans during the Great Depression and may be happening again.

### **Why This Might Still Be a Turning-Point Election**

Beyond these negatives, in 2008 there have been a number of developments that speak to the possibility of a turning-point election. First, the weakness (and age) of the Republican candidate may perhaps indicate that the Party itself is truly at the end of a forty-year cycle of power. Second, of course, is the meltdown, even possibly implosion, of the US economy on the Republican watch (specifically, on that of George W. Bush, the least popular president in memory, **as measured by recent opinion polls**). This has put states in the Midwest and elsewhere that Bush took in 2000 and 2004 **into play**.

Third, there has been a noticeable trend in shifting party affiliations in which the Democrats are gaining membership as the Republicans are losing it, especially in key battleground states like Pennsylvania where, in 2008 alone, 474,000 new names have gone on the Democratic rolls, **according to the *Washington Post***, even as the Republicans have lost 38,000. Overall, since 2006, the Democrats have **gained** at least 2 million new members, while the Republicans have lost 344,000. According to **the Gallup organization**, self-identified Democrats outnumbered self-identified Republicans by a 37 percent to 28 percent margin this June, a gap which may only be widening.

Fourth, there is the possibility of a flood of new, especially young, first-time voters, who either screen calls or **live on cell phones**, not landlines, and so are being under-measured by pollsters, as black voters may also be in this election. (However, when it comes to the young vote, which has been ballyhooed in a number of recent elections without turning out to be significant

on Election Day, we must be cautious.) And fifth, an influx of new Democratic voters in states like Virginia, Colorado and New Mexico threatens, in this election at least, to dent somewhat the normal regional loyalty patterns described by Earl and Merle Black.

Above all, two main issues will determine whether or not the November election will be a realigning one. The Republican Party's failure in managing the economy, its involving the country in catastrophic wars of choice and its ignoring such paramount issues as global warming all dictate a Democratic victory. Militating against that outcome is racist hostility, conscious or otherwise, toward the Democratic Party's candidate as well as deep-seated regional loyalties. While the crisis caused by the performance failures of the incumbent party seems to guarantee a realigning election favoring the Democrats, it is simply impossible to determine the degree to which race and regionalism may sway voters. The fate of the nation hangs in the balance.

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#### **About Chalmers Johnson**

Chalmers Johnson is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Revolutionary Change* (Stanford), *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (Holt/Owl) and, most recently, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (Metropolitan). [more...](#)

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