In political science, realignments are bloodless things. In the conventional telling, every 40 years or so, one or more major constituencies of one of the major American political parties shifts, redefining the political battleground until the next realignment comes. In 1832, large numbers of northern whites turned against Andrew Jackson’s Democratic Party and became the Whigs. In 1856, the Whigs collapsed and gave rise to the Republicans. Franklin Roosevelt ushered in an era of Democratic dominance in 1932, and Richard Nixon one of Republican dominance in 1968. But this conventional telling leaves out the enormous social strain that led to these moments: John Brown and Bloody Kansas, Hoovervilles, and the Watts riots. Two recent books in political sociology try to understand the current political turmoil, which may be the start of another realignment, from very different viewpoints. One—Crisis! When Political Parties Lose the Consent to Rule, by Cedric de Leon—tries to find a parallel for our current moment in the end of the Whigs and the run-up to the Civil War. The other—American Resistance: From the Women’s March to the Blue Wave, by Dana R. Fisher—looks at the mass protests against the Trump administration; both agree that the current party system has failed, and political and social change is coming from outside of it.

The concept of partisan realignments seems oddly mechanistic: why should the major political parties fail and reconstitute themselves in different forms every 40 years or so? But the historical pattern is undeniable: party coalitions forged in one era wind up confronting problems they were never designed for and fracture in the process. Those pieces then rearrange themselves into a form better suited for the new political environment. This process was easier to track earlier in U.S. history, when the new party coalitions carried new names: Whigs, and Republicans, and the party Jackson called “The Democracy.” More recently, the new party coalitions have retained some degree of continuity with the old ones, making the tracking of realignments a matter of contention. There is agreement, now, that Nixon’s victory in 1968—which involved winning over pro-segregation southern whites who had been in the Democratic Party for a century or more—marked a realignment, though it was not clear at the time. After all, it took a generation after the southern strategy for Republicans to complete their domination of the South: Democrats had unified control of the Mississippi state government as recently as 2003. But if 1968 was the last agreed-upon realignment, we are overdue for another one.

It was argued that Barack Obama’s winning coalition in 2008 represented a new dominant force in American politics; but the fading of that coalition in 2012 and the Republican victory in the 2016 presidential election have called that view into question. How will we know when that realignment, which will set the stage for the next 40 years, comes? Both American Resistance and Crisis! posit that the imminence of a realignment is clear from the way the major parties are unable to control or constrain the political debates raging in the country, and particularly in the failures of the Democratic Party nationally.

De León is mostly concerned with building a theoretical framework to try to explain...
the timing of realignments, building on a detailed case study of the collapse of the Whig Party in Alabama in the 1850s. With precinct-level voting data and an analysis of speeches from prominent Whigs in the area, letters to the editor, party newspapers, and the like, he shows how affluent Southerners turned from the economic conservatism of the Whigs to nativist Know Nothing-ism, and finally to rebellion. De Leon uses this data to argue for a general model of realignments, in which challengers to the party system are typically incorporated into the existing parties, as when the Republican Party of the mid-1990s co-opted Ross Perot’s platform, or the Democrats of the late nineteenth century took on the issue positions and even the presidential candidate of the insurgent Progressive Party. This incorporation neutralizes the challenge, and the party system rolls on.

Sometimes, though, de Leon argues, the insurgents cannot be so easily incorporated into the parties, and bringing them in requires one of the major parties to shift dramatically. This leads to a corresponding shift in the other party, which inspires a countershift in the opposition, in an escalating series of crises. There is general agreement that the collapse of the Whigs was driven by their inability or unwillingness to deal with the issue of slavery, but de Leon goes outside the consensus by finding the roots of the crisis in the largely forgotten presidency of James K. Polk. While generally overlooked as one in a series of forgettable leaders along with Tyler and Taylor and the first of the Harrisons, Polk was an enormously successful president—he came into office with four goals, left office after completing them in one term, and died shortly thereafter. For de Leon, the problem arises because Polk’s goals included dramatic expansion of U.S. territory through a war of conquest against Mexico and jingoistic threats against England that led to U.S. control of much of the Oregon Territory. These increases, coupled with the admission of Texas, reopened a fight over the expansion of slavery that the Whig party, which mostly dealt with slavery by not talking about it, was ill-equipped for. The resulting political crisis couldn’t be quelled by measures like the compromise of 1850, and it led to the Civil War. This story differs in important ways from the conventional account, which centers on the rising power of the abolitionist movement in the North rather than the waning power of the Whig Party in the South.

De Leon’s data from the collapse of the Whigs is compelling, even if the details of voting patterns in Alabama can be daunting to nonexperts. De Leon is on thinner ice, though, when he tries to draw parallels between the 1850s and the present day. This is not to say that there aren’t some to be drawn: the nativist Know-Nothings have a lot in common with the current anti-immigration and white nationalist movements. In de Leon’s telling, the crises of the 1850s were motivated by the economic, social, and racial anxieties of the white middle class, a dynamic that has certainly been on display recently. But the parallels can also be stretched too far. De Leon argues for a parallel between Polk and Obama, on the grounds that both were dark-horse candidates and that their elections led to the disintegration of the party systems, as the people called into question the legitimacy of the governments that had elected them. You could certainly make the case that both Obama and Polk were able to win because of the inability of their parties to enforce their will on unruly nomination systems, but the same could be said for Eisenhower, or Goldwater, or Carter. Moreover, we don’t have to look at the dynamics of party systems to explain the reaction to Obama: the racism of the attacks on his legitimacy could not have been more public.

The dynamics of the 1850s and the parallels with the present day make for a tidy theoretical story, but, perhaps fortunately, there haven’t been enough crises of the sort de Leon is interested in to fully test it. Five or six collapses akin to the Civil War would be terrible for our society, but good for testing de Leon’s model. We’re left with the idea that sometimes the parties successfully reincorporate the malcontents into the party system—as with FDR in 1932, or perhaps Nixon in 1968—and sometimes they don’t. Is this success a product of the institutional strength of the party, or the ideological flexibility of elected officials, or the extent to which the opposition party has strongly

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held beliefs about the issue, or something else? Unfortunately, de Leon doesn’t put forward an argument, focusing instead on two instances in which, in his judgment, the parties failed to reincorporate the dissidents and splintered, with catastrophic effect.

But while de Leon focuses on the labor movement as the key player that the Democratic Party failed to reincorporate, Fisher finds insurgents in a very different group: well-educated suburban white women. While de Leon is mostly interested in presenting his theoretical approach, Fisher’s work is unapologetically descriptive, drawing from a unique series of surveys of protestors in Washington, DC in 2017 and 2018.

Starting in January 2017, just days after Obama left office, Americans took to the streets in the largest mass protests in modern history. Fisher has a background in surveying large-scale protests, mostly regarding climate and environmental issues, and she tells us that she was not expecting the march to be as big as it was, nor the start of a series of large-scale protest actions. Beginning with the Women’s March in January 2017, she worked with a research team to survey participants at all of the major marches in Washington, DC until the 2018 Congressional midterm election.

The data that resulted from these surveys are the most important contribution of Fisher’s book, as measuring the attitudes of protestors is a fraught business. The protests were well enough attended that a survey researcher could, in theory, ask respondents in a national survey if they had marched; but that approach raises the possibility of response bias, with some non-marchers claiming that they were there, and some marchers claiming that they were not. Researchers could try to get lists of participants from organizers, but, as Fisher finds, many of the protestors have only a limited connection to the organizations sponsoring the events. By being on the ground at many of the major marches, Fisher and her team were able to get something close to a simple random sample of the marchers with a very low refusal rate.

Those data are enormously valuable in telling us about who the marchers are and why they say they’re protesting, but Fisher does sometimes push it a little too far. For instance, for several of the marches, her sample sizes are fairly small—fewer than one hundred respondents. There’s nothing necessarily wrong with that: more data would be better, but a small representative sample is generally better than a large non-representative one. The problem comes when Fisher tries to compare participants across marches, based on these small samples: simply put, the margins of error on sample sizes this small are just too big for us to have any confidence that we’re seeing real differences between the composition of the marches. Aggregating the data across marches to show what protestors in 2017 and 2018 looked like is great; claiming that there was a higher percent of Latinx marchers at the Families Belong Together march (9 percent) than at the March for Racial Justice (7 percent), based on a combined sample of less than 400, isn’t. Moreover, the fact that Fisher is only surveying marches in Washington, DC means that her results may not be representative of the resistance movement, or marchers, as a whole.

Fisher also carried out follow-up interviews with her respondents in 2018. However, these surveys were less successful. Even with a perfectly respectable response rate, the two follow-up surveys only garnered a combined 402 responses. If we’re convinced that this is a random sample of all of the participants in the initial surveys, there’s nothing wrong with drawing conclusions from a sample of this size, provided we take note of the large margins of error associated with them. But Fisher continues her tendency to push the data further than she should, sometimes drawing conclusions from differences between groups of fewer than 50 respondents.

Still, even if the data aren’t perfect, this is the best snapshot we have of who was marching, and some of the findings are a little troubling. While Fisher talks about the resistance movement being diverse, including groups like Black Lives Matter, environmental protesters, and Antifa (though she hedges on whether Antifa should be considered part of it), marchers were disproportionately college-educated white women. The resistance groups, it seems, were most successful at mobilizing people who already
had the most social capital, rather than bringing in those that don’t.

In some respects, Fisher’s story about the protests aligns with de Leon’s. When Fisher talks to organizers about why the marches are happening, she is repeatedly told that the marches are a consequence of the failure of the Democratic Party nationally, how the party’s inability or refusal to integrate the grass roots led local activists to seek out alternate paths for engagement. She holds that the marchers, and the resistance more generally, regard the Democratic Party as insufficient, a necessary evil at best. Like de Leon, Fisher sees the Obama campaign of 2008 as a critical lost moment. For Fisher, the failure came when Obama incorporated his campaign into the machinery of the national party, losing the connection to local activists that led him to victory in his first campaign. For de Leon, the failure came after the election, when Obama failed to deliver on radical policies he had campaigned on, alienating the base of the Democratic Party, splintering it, and leaving an opening for the Republicans to win the 2016 presidential election.

Much of this account could be questioned. Obama was certainly seen as being more liberal than he was, but did he really run on a radical reform agenda? Obama’s successes were half-measures by any standard, but they still represented the biggest liberal policy gains in a half-century. De Leon goes on to claim that Obama’s radical 2008 agenda allowed him to “reassemble” FDR’s New Deal Coalition, which would have been a surprise to the conservative southern whites who were the linchpin of FDR’s support and Obama’s biggest opponents. Too often, de Leon seems to ignore the structural barriers that Obama faced—in the absence of any Republican support in the Senate, his policies were largely constrained by what the most conservative Democrat would vote for—and succumbs to what scholars of the presidency have called “Green Lanternism,” the idea that a president’s power is limited only by his willpower.

If the 2016 presidential election and the rise of the resistance that followed were driven by the failures of Obama, it would make more sense to blame a Republican Congress than the Obama administration. From the time Obama lost majorities in the House and Senate in 2010, Republican legislators adopted a nihilistic strategy of refusing to work with him at all in the hope of making him a one-term president. Even after he was reelected in 2012, the Republican-led Senate continued to treat him as illegitimate, refusing, for instance, even to consider his nomination of Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court. Fisher and de Leon both seem to hold that such losses could have been averted by a more responsive, and perhaps more liberal, Democratic Party; but the electoral pattern of surge and decline seen in 2008 and 2010 is less a failure than a long-standing fact of U.S. politics.

Whoever is to blame, both Fisher and de Leon see the resistance to Obama as a harbinger of realignment, even if they never put it in those terms. For de Leon, activists on the left are a response to the takeover of the Republican Party by the Tea Party groups that rose up in opposition to Obama’s election. By pushing the Republican Party to the right, they encouraged the rise of the resistance on the left, a pattern that might be extended to the increased visibility of white nationalist groups on the right and Antifa groups on the left, eventually spiraling out of control unless the parties can successfully bring these groups back into the fold. Fisher’s findings about the way organizers view the Democratic Party and the case de Leon makes for the parallels between today and the 1850s suggest real pessimism about the likelihood of such a reincorporation.

Proponents of pluralist democracy, though, may be happy with the increased mobilization of the public, with activism happening outside the boundaries of the parties. One of the fascinating findings that Fisher presents has to do with the nature of the relationship between activist groups and the people they mobilize. These people don’t necessarily go to meetings or contribute funds: their membership may amount to getting more emails from one group than they get from others. In Fisher’s data, the majority of participants say they decided to participate without having any connection to the organizations putting the event on. This distributed model seems to be a test of whether digital organizing through email, Facebook, and Slack can really be
a substitute for in-person, on-the-ground organization. Fisher explicitly recognizes the tension with Robert Putnam’s work on social capital and remains noncommittal about whether the distributed organization model she is discussing can garner electoral success going forward.

What do these books tell us about the changing U.S. political landscape going forward? Fisher argues that the resistance was mobilized by a series of moral shocks: Muslims with visas being turned away at airports, immigrant children locked in cages, mass shootings. In 2019, the affronts to norms, rules, and law coming from Washington didn’t stop, but the mass protests largely did. Is this because activists put their energy into electoral politics, or because they felt the Democratic-controlled House was doing a sufficient job of reflecting their interests, or because the marchers had become inured to the moral shocks that had once driven them? The resistance organizers Fisher interviews argue for the first option, but time will tell. De Leon’s argument implies that the cycle of escalating responses and counter-responses is likely to continue, and 2019 is nothing more than an abeyance. Indeed, regardless of the outcome of the 2020 elections, it is easy to imagine the losing party taking to the streets in even greater numbers than in 2017.

Even if Fisher’s resistance is brought back into the Democratic Party, it seems likely that they will transform Democratic politics in much the same way that the co-opting of the Tea Party transformed Republican politics. The question then is whether this makes the parties more supple, allowing moderates within each to find common ground while distancing themselves from the extremes, or makes them more brittle, with policies and sacred cows dictated by the ideologues and backed up with the threat of destructive primary elections. From both of these worthwhile books—and while I have quibbles with them, they’re both valuable resources—it is clear that the clock has run out on the party system ushered in by Nixon in 1968, and something new is coming. Whether it will come through a conflagration like the Civil War or by a gradual transformation of the parties as they rebrand to appeal to the changing priorities of voters is yet to be seen; but the realignment is upon us, and we are lucky to have scholars like Fisher and de Leon studying it in the moment.