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**The Carter-Reagan Transition: American Society
in the 1980s International Context**

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The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou - *Caged Bird*, 1983

To Arturo, Ester, Giovanni my forever love.

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The Carter- Reagan Transition: American society in the 1980s

International Context

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Introduction

American social and political polarization

Recent surveys by the Pew Research Center reveal that Americans are more ideologically divided today than at any point in the past fifty years. This divide is especially pronounced in the United States compared to other countries, with partisanship deeply intertwined with personal beliefs about freedom and the meaning of life. Over the years, Pew Research has documented the growing polarization between Democrats and Republicans, particularly on key issues such as the economy, racial justice, climate change, law enforcement, and moral values. However, since the late 20th century, these ideological divisions have increasingly extended beyond political boundaries, reflecting deeper fractures over core American values¹. While partisan conflict has long been a recurring feature of American politics, it has become markedly more severe since the late 1970s, with polarization in government mirroring broader social and economic cleavages. This fragmentation has eroded the possibility of common ground, making it increasingly difficult to forge a cohesive national identity. Sustained polarization is often attributed to a combination of factors, including the decline of bipartisan cooperation, the growing influence of partisan media, the rise of social media, and most significantly, enduring cultural, historical, and regional divisions. Yet, experts are especially alarmed by the rise of ideological extremism over the past several decades. American society has become deeply divided over nationalist ideals and competing interpretations of what constitutes American identity. A central factor in this shift is the gradual erosion of the middle-class majority, historically the cornerstone of American liberal values. As this group has declined in both size and economic influence, so too has the set of shared communal values it once upheld. Since the late 20th century, economic inequality has widened, with higher-income groups expanding more rapidly than lower-income ones, leaving average households increasingly marginalized. In turn, these trends have intensified

¹ All survey results are available on the Pew Research Center website. Specifically: “As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System, *PEWRC*, August 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/>; Laura Silver and Patrick Van Kessel, “Both Republicans and Democrats Prioritize Family, But They Differ Over Other Sources of Meaning in Life”, *PEWRC*, November 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/22/both-republicans-and-democrats-prioritize-family-but-they-differ-over-other-sources-of-meaning-in-life/>; Richard Wike and Michael Dimock, “Can Americans Be Optimistic About Their Democracy?”, *PEWRC*, September 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/09/13/can-americans-be-optimistic-about-their-democracy/>; Drew Desilver, “The Polarization in Today’s Congress has roots that go back decades”, *PEWRC*, March 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/>, viewed April 2025.

social and political divisions across the nation. This research project aims to investigate the roots of contemporary political and social polarization in the US, examining how American society has evolved and why shared national consensus has weakened. The central objective is to identify the key drivers behind this paradigm shift. To this end, the study focuses on the pivotal presidential transition from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan between the late 1970s and early 1980s, evaluating its role in shaping the trajectory of polarization in the US through to the present day. This transition represents a defining moment of political, social, and ideological change in the US, that significantly reshaped the American social fabric. The study is organized into five chapters, each addressing different dimensions of this transformation.

The first chapter outlines the research methodology and reviews existing literature on the subject. It presents the founding research questions and defines the final objectives of the study. Additionally, it details the archival sources consulted and explains how they integrate with prior scholarship, as well as how they fill the existing gaps within it.

The second chapter offers a detailed overview of American society in the 1980s, providing context for the transformations examined more in-depth in subsequent chapters. Its goal is to frame how the presidencies of Carter and Reagan responded to, and influenced, the socio-political change. Hence, it describes the main outcome of the examined presidential transition.

The third chapter turns to the 1970s – a decade marked by domestic economic and institutional crises and a decline in international influence. It explores this period as a turning point for political realignment, setting the stage for the rise of Republican dominance and the emergence of new ideological forces. The dismantling of the New Deal consensus and the fragmentation of the political landscape progressively shaped a new political order and redefined American society.

The fourth chapter focuses on the Carter and Reagan presidencies, comparing their leadership styles and policy approaches to the crises of the 1970s. It demonstrates how each contributed to a fundamental ideological shift and social reconfiguration by 1980. This chapter includes two case studies: the Camp David Domestic summit of July 1979, organized by the Carter administration, and the transition process of Reagan. Specifically, it also highlights the influence of conservative think tanks – such as the Heritage Foundation - in facilitating ideological change and shaping public discourse aligning with the Republican Party.

The fifth and final chapter examines the broader implications of the Carter-Reagan transition for American society and its global role. It identifies key elements that make presidential transitions effective and explores the factors that led to the electoral victory of Reagan in 1980, ushering in a new conservative ethos and redefining American political identity.

The conclusion reflects on how such pivotal transitions can reshape the political, social, and economic foundations of a nation. Lastly, it also considers possible measures to reduce the divisive impact of future transfers of power and suggests avenues for further academic research.

Chapter 1

The founding research question

“It is not the existence of classes that is new, but the emergence of classes that diverge on core behavior and values – classes that barely recognize their underlying American kinship”². With this statement, in 2012 Charles Murray emphasized a shared concern among many contemporary observers for the intense societal and political upheavals in the United States. Since the second half of the twentieth century, scholars of different fields have pointed out to a deep divide within the US, primarily attributed to increasing income inequality and racial tensions between classes³. Recently, they have highlighted an even more worrying factor behind American polarization: a serious decline in civic engagement and social capital, threatening social stability, and reducing collective faith in a shared national narrative. Specifically, they emphasize that contemporary American society seems to lack the cohesive middle-class majority that once mediated between individuals and the state⁴. Since the 1980s, the affirmation of free market has fostered the rise of two distinct upper and lower socioeconomic groups, while the rise of conservatism in political and social spheres has exacerbated divides among Americans. Over the decades, the rise of formal egalitarianism – the principle that all individuals should be treated equally under the law,

² Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, Crown Forum, 2012, p. 12.

³ Even though also differing political ideals exacerbate the divide, inequality and racial beliefs have been considered the most polarizing issues. Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, Vol. 5, MIT Press, 2006; James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America*, Princeton University Press, 2016; Alice M. Rivlin, et al. *Why Consensus Matters*, Brookings Institution Press, 2022; Jeff Madrick, *Age of Greed: The Triumph of Finance and the Decline of America, 1970 to Present*, Vintage, 2012; Leah Boustan, *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets*, Princeton University Press, 2016; Thomas B. Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Texas in American Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1992; Ilyana Kuziemko and Ebonya Washington, *Why Did the Democrats Lose the South? Bringing New Data to an Old Debate*, American Economic Review, Vol 108, no 10, 2018, pp. 2830 - 2867. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20161413>, viewed October 2024.

⁴ Matteo Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio: La classe media americana dalle origini alla globalizzazione*, Mimesis, 2020; Putnam focuses on the decline of American social capital and social networking in society: Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Simon and Schuster, 2000; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1991; on the concerning loss of social capital resulting from the rise of the corporate system: Carl Boggs, “Social Capital and Political Fantasy: Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone”, *Theory and Society* Vol. 30, no 2, (2001): 281 - 297; available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657878>, viewed October 2024; on the impact of specific interest groups on American social capital: Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, Harvard University Press, 1996; William Ophuls, *Requiem for Modern Politics: The Tragedy of the Enlightenment and the Challenge of the New Millennium*, Routledge, 1998; William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, Broadway Books, 1987, ed. 2005; Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, Harvard University Press, 2010; John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, Penguin Publishing, 2004; James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, Basic Books, 1991.

regardless of social or economic background – alongside a growing emphasis on individual freedom has gradually weakened public support for collective rights and the pursuit of shared well-being⁵. These ideological shifts have ultimately reshaped the traditional tripartite structure of American society, undermining the stability and centrality of the middle-class as a cornerstone of American liberal values. Traditionally, this group played a key role in enhancing public order and social cohesion in the US, advancing a general code of conduct and embodying aspirations for prosperity. Most importantly, it supported the “American project” of pursuing individual happiness through active effort, while sustaining communal values and collectively addressing national issues⁶. Since the late nineteenth century, the existence of a strong middle-class majority has enhanced American soft power by supporting liberal ideals and showcasing the benefits of freedom and prosperity abroad. Originally, the American middle-class consisted of a vast number of individuals forming a “critical mass able to shape the local scene” and setting the standards for the “American way of life”⁷. Yet today, many question what has happened to this traditional social configuration and how the weakening of a middle-class majority has affected the image of the US. Since the 1990s and the end of the Cold War, the US has retained its economic and military leadership on the global stage. However, it has struggled to maintain internal political consensus and social cohesion. Growing political polarization, legislative gridlock, and deepening social divisions have weakened the sense of collective purpose, casting doubt on the stability of the American democratic model⁸.

This work seeks to understand the sources of the present condition of American social and political polarization by tracing its historical roots. Specifically, it focuses on the late 1970s

⁵ Battistini, *Storia di un Feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2013; Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, Princeton University Press, 2013; Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2017; Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism*, Yale University Press, 2008; Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁶ Murray *Coming Apart*, 2012, pp. 12, 127, 281 – 306.

⁷ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 25; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; On the role of American culture abroad: Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, 2004; Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Harvard University Press, 2005 and *Soft Power Internationalism*, Columbia University Press, 2021; Robert W. Rydell, and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922*, University of Chicago Press, 2012.

⁸ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: US Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, Cornell University Press, 2016; Niall Ferguson and Erez Manela, *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, Belknap Press, 2011; Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force*, Basic Books, 2017; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, ed. 2006 and *Liberalism and its Discontents*, Profile Books, 2023; Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*, 2015; Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Basic Books, 1990, and *The Powers to Lead*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

and early 1980s, analyzing the potential effects of the presidential transition from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan on American society and the US international role. This research seeks to offer a comprehensive study of how diverging domestic policies and abrupt shifts in national governance can impact US domestic stability and alter its global power projection. Its primary objective is to examine the political events and social reactions in the wake of the 1970s crisis, which gave rise to a new American society and national identity in the 1980s. Additionally, the intent is to explore how the inner contradictions and transforming ideas of America during this period connect to the current social and political polarization evident in the US. How did American society evolve in the final decades of the twentieth century? More specifically, how did the transfer of power from Carter to Reagan affect the social and political configuration of American society, compromising the persistence of a strong middle-class? By examining how the “American malaise” of the late 1970s was overshadowed by a significant national renewal under Republican leadership, this study highlights the consequences of this transformation for American society and for the US influence worldwide. Looking back at the decades of the 1970s and 1980s over forty years later can offer new perspectives on the significance of past events and clarify their outcomes. By integrating diverse interpretations of the period, this research validates the most recent perspectives: rather than signaling the actual decline of the American middle-class, the period since the 1980s reflects a loss of societal cohesion and the weakening of a unified majority capable of sustaining a shared national narrative and strengthening the US global appeal. Over time, increasing social divides have undermined civic engagement, leading to diverging interpretations of the “American project” and reshaping the premises of the “American way of life”⁹. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, American society underwent significant transformations, largely influenced by the transfer of power from Carter to Reagan, and ultimately affecting US social capital and national identity. During this period, the sustained relativization of traditional liberal values weakened American consensus and the presence of an economically and ideologically united majority¹⁰. In the aftermath of World War II, the US achieved substantial economic and military power, but its prominence also rested on the ability to inspire and influence other nations by promoting liberal values and culture. The “American way of life” attracted global admiration, ensuring domestic stability and international prestige. Similarly, the pursuit of the “American dream”

⁹ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020.

¹⁰ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980*, Simon & Schuster, 2021; John Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism: How Money, Power, and the Pursuit of Self-Interest Have Imperiled the American Dream*, Cornell University Press, 2016.

framed collective aspirations and contributed to the success of the liberal democratic model¹¹. However, American soft power was closely tied to a vibrant civil society willing to support the government and disseminate the benefits of liberalism abroad. Since the late twentieth century, the erosion of consensus on core behaviors and values among Americans has reduced collective solidarity as well as US attractiveness overseas¹². This research combines an analysis of the Carter and Reagan administrations with an overview of social developments in the US, to understand how domestic dynamics eventually reshaped American society and international impact. The crisis of the 1970s, alongside the rise of conservatism in the early 1980s, marked a critical turning point, altering the American social order and changing the configuration of US global power. These transformations were mainly driven by the libertarian shift in government policy and the increasing influence of conservative ideology following the rise of the Republican Party. However, they cannot be understood without the parallel weaknesses of liberalism and the challenges faced by the Democratic administration in the late 1970s¹³. The presidencies of Carter and Reagan marked the end of bipartisan consensus in US government, promoting individual freedom and entrepreneurial values within society. By dismantling the New Deal legacy, both presidents changed the American standard of living and altered public perceptions of the common good¹⁴. Unlike the existing literature broadly covering these presidencies, this work highlights distinctive features of the Carter and Reagan administrations that contributed to the transformation of American society in the early 1980s. To illustrate this shift, two representative case studies were selected: the Camp David Domestic Summit organized by Carter in July 1979, and the Republican transition process in 1980¹⁵. Specifically, these case studies explain why Carter failed to consolidate the Democratic base in the late 1970s, laying the groundwork for Republican success, and how Reagan inaugurated an era of national renewal in the 1980s. The two representative cases demonstrate that, while both presidents took different approaches to handling the crisis of the 1970s, neither succeeded in restoring bipartisan consensus or social cohesion. Reagan provided only short-term relief from the national gloom, increasing deregulation, and promoting greater individual freedom.

¹¹ De Grazia, *Soft Power Internationalism*, 2021; Nye, *Bound to Lead*, 1990; Samuel R. Lawrence, *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, Syracuse University Press, 2012.

¹² Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020.

¹³ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Aaron Donaghy, *The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy*, Cambridge University Press, 2021; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, Oxford University Press, 2021; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

¹⁴ Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2021; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021.

¹⁵ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021. In the following paragraphs further information of the two case studies is present.

However, by introducing neoliberal principles and revitalizing traditional values, he ultimately exacerbated the social and political transformations already underway in the US. Eventually, the transition between the two presidencies restructured both the American economy and society, fostering the emergence of new social actors, and deepening social and political polarization. The Domestic Summit highlights how internal tensions within the Carter administration hindered the development of an effective recovery plan. Most importantly, it clarifies why the President delivered the “Crisis of Confidence” speech on July 15, 1979, which became emblematic of the American malaise¹⁶. The focus of Carter on the ethical and psychological aspects of the crisis clashed with the pragmatic goals of more action-oriented advisors, who prioritized economic and energy issues. However, moderate liberals, along with intellectual and religious leaders, reinforced the concerns of the President and urged him to address the moral crisis facing Americans. By the late 1970s, this lack of agreement resulted in an ambitious recovery program that required significant public effort, and ultimately deepened public pessimism, weakened liberal consensus, and heightened social tensions. Over time, rising public distrust, a lack of shared purpose, and civic disengagement in American society exacerbated the economic consequences of the crisis, threatening the national character¹⁷. Conversely, the analysis of the Republican transition process reveals how Reagan crafted a precise recovery plan in the early 1980s to overshadow the crisis of the previous decade, culminating in the establishment of a new corporate system and the ascendancy of conservatism in the US¹⁸. Supported by experienced advisors and conservative think-tanks, Reagan aimed at rebuilding public trust and expanding the Right base by legitimizing new political influences. Beginning in the late 1970s, both his Campaign and Transition teams crafted a concise political agenda focusing on economic priorities and traditional liberal values. As observed by political scientist Pfiffner, through early strategic planning and astute political skills, the Reagan transition process “hit the ground running” and bolstered the rise of the Republican Party¹⁹. In 1980, the President

¹⁶ Elizabeth Drew, “A Reporter at Large: Phase – In Search of a Definition”, *The New Yorker*, August 1979. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1979/08/27/phase-in-search-of-a-definition>, viewed October 2024.

¹⁷ Michael W. Link and Betty Glad, “Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations”, Vol. 15, no 3, (1994): 461 – 480. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791567>, viewed November 2024; Stuart E. Eizenstat, *President Carter: The White House Years*, Thomas Dunne Books, 2018.

¹⁸ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004.

¹⁹ James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running*, University Press of Kansas, 1996; James P. Pfiffner, “The Carter-Reagan Transition: Hitting the Ground Running”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, no 4, 1983, pp. 623 – 645. Available at: <https://pfiffner.gmu.edu/files/pdfs/Articles/Carter-Reagan%20transition,%20PSQ%201983.pdf>, viewed October 2024; Wallace E. Walker and Michael R. Roepel, “Strategies for Governance: Transition and Domestic Policymaking in the Reagan Administration”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol 16, no 4, (1986): 734 – 760. Available at:

successfully reunited disaffected liberals, white libertarians, and moral and religious conservatives within the New Right coalition, fostering neoliberal ideals and a renewed moral order in the US. Over time, this coalition promoted conservative ideas and favored the transformation of US economy, society, and global influence throughout the 1980s²⁰. While Carter prioritized collective solidarity and the common good as means to address the national crisis, Reagan emphasized individual liberty and economic recovery. By addressing widespread discontent and shifting political allegiances, Carter sought to prevent social fragmentation and restore harmony in the US by investing in communal values. Differently, the Reagan administration focused on combating inflation and reaffirming traditional liberal values to foster economic growth and resume US primacy. Toward the early 1980s and during a profound moment of crisis, Americans sought national change and the recovery of foundational ideals, emphasizing individual happiness while building a shared national identity. Ultimately, despite their divergent approaches to governance and appeal to distinct American values, the Carter and Reagan administrations foreshadowed the transformation of American society. They reinforced the political realignment of the preceding decade, reshaped US economic priorities, and marked a turning point that contributed to the escalation of polarization that followed.

Context: The US between the late 1970s and early 1980s

In the late 1970s, the US experienced a serious institutional crisis marked by political uncertainty, rising global challenges, dynamic technological changes, and a deep national recession that weakened American self-confidence and international influence. Severe economic and energy shortages, along with rising inflation and unemployment, affected US abundance and altered the everyday habits of Americans²¹. These challenges fueled numerous theories of American decline, emphasizing US deficiencies relative to the Soviet Union, and exposing the inefficiencies of the Democratic government. By the end of the decade, the Carter administration failed to prioritize redistributive policies or reform American welfare, exacerbating economic and social divides. At the same time, the initial

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40574420>, viewed October 2024; Donald E. Abelson, *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy*, McGill Queen's University Press, 2006.

²⁰ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Michael Malice, *The New Right: A Journey to the Fringe of American Politics*, Macmillan, 2019; Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, 2014.

²¹ Dominic Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right*, Knopf, 2011; Meg Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump: The Energy Crisis and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s*, Hill and Wang, 2017; Ferguson, *The Shock of the Global*, 2011.

policy of appeasement toward Soviet communism reduced US global assertiveness, allowing the USSR to advance on the international stage²². At home, austere fiscal measures aimed at countering the national recession, combined with a focus on the moral and ethical concerns related to the crisis weakened the leadership of Carter and compromised public trust in institutions. Preventive deregulation measures and increased public-private partnerships further reduced liberal consensus, and distanced labor unions and blue-collar workers from the Democratic Party²³. Most critically, the emphasis of the President on moderation and self-restraint as means to revive the common good undermined public faith in the benefits of the American liberal system. In the late 1970s, the Democratic Party failed to advance New Deal-style reforms and revitalize communal sentiments within society²⁴. The Camp David Domestic Summit and the “Crisis of Confidence” speech in July 1979 were perceived as an explicit government admission of impotence and national crisis, effectively signaling the end of US prestige. Together, these challenges paved the way for a comeback of the Republican Party in 1980²⁵. According to mainstream historical narratives, the 1980s and the conclusion of the Cold War represented a period of renewed optimism in the US. However, this decade also marked a time of profound change and adjustment that deeply influenced American history²⁶. In the early 1980s, the Republican administration swiftly acted to revitalize the economy and reassert US global leadership. By promoting extensive tax cuts and increased defense spending, President Reagan shifted government policy in a libertarian direction and committed to restoring US power. As corporate power grew, a new professional and business elite emerged, while working- and middle-class Americans faced increasing impoverishment. With an experienced advisory team and through a strategic use of intellectual capital, Reagan revised federal budget priorities and advanced a bold economic recovery program²⁷. By then, disaffected liberals and libertarian conservatives endorsed the Republican Party hoping to regain their economic strength and standard of

²² Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, Metropolitan Books, 2008; Edward Luce, *Time to Start Thinking: America in the Age of Descent*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2012; Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, Scribner, 2009; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

²³ Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2006; Kuziemko, *Why Did the Democrats Lose the South?*, 2018.

²⁴ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

²⁵ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

²⁶ Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter*, Crown, 2018; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*, 2015; Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, Princeton University Press, 2005, and *Living in the Eighties*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

²⁷ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983; Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, 2014.

living. Most importantly, by appealing to Christian Right groups, Reagan consolidated the New Right and paved the way for the affirmation of moral conservatism in US politics. By leveraging on widespread opposition to modernity within religious communities and promising a new moral order, he revitalized American spiritual culture and reaffirmed traditional values²⁸. From the late 1970s, Christian evangelicals increasingly aligned with the Republican Party, promoting social traditionalism and personal virtues: “Since the 1970s evangelism fueled the determined and hardly playful campaigns against the decade’s most progressive social movements”²⁹. By the mid-1980s, the New Right had gained prominence pushing back against progressive ideals and greater openness in US society. In response to growing individual freedom and a redefinition of American ideals, conservative fundamentalists started launching sustained cultural wars against progressive liberals, aiming to reaffirm white supremacy and preserve traditional social hierarchies³⁰. Over time, economic growth, industrial modernization, and increased economic freedom allowed for greater participation in the public sector; however, the reduction of government assistance and escalating social conflicts hindered ordinary Americans from achieving financial stability or engage meaningfully in society³¹. By the end of the decade, although the economy had recovered from the severe recession, the benefits were unevenly distributed. Republican tax cuts disproportionately favored the upper-class, considerably widening the wealth gap, and leaving many middle- and lower – income families struggling with economic hardships. Reduced social welfare programs and weakened unionization further impacted American workers, reshaping public perceptions of poverty and wealth³². In the emerging free-market system, poverty became linked to personal effort, reinforcing notions of individual responsibility while diminishing collective social support. The rise of market individualism, coupled with the expanding influence of conservative ideology, gradually undermined social cohesion, transforming the US into a paradoxically “more equal but less equal” nation³³. As private concerns - such as faith, family, education, and gender -

²⁸ Randall Balmer, *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter*, Basic Books, 2014; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005.

²⁹ Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p. 174; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Robert Freedman, “The Religious Right and the Carter Administration”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 48, no. 1, (2005): 231-260. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4091685>, viewed November 2024.

³⁰ Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, 2014; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Matthew Continetti, *The Right: The Hundred-Year War of American Conservatism*, Basic Books, 2022.

³¹ David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics: Why the Reagan Revolution Failed*, Public Affairs, 2013; Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2017; George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty: A New Edition for the Twenty-First Century*, Regnery, 2012.

³² Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010.

³³ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012, pp. 15, 136; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2013.

dominated the political discourse, Americans struggled to reach consensus on the fundamental meaning of being American or on the characteristics of the “American way of life”. By the 1990s, economic and social divides deepened within the country, and the US began lacking a cohesive majority of middle-income earners in society. Additionally, although regaining economic and military prominence, increased polarization among Americans progressively undermined the US image as a stable and unified leader on the international stage³⁴. Eventually, the presidential transition from Carter to Reagan in the early 1980s marked a watershed moment in American history, initiating significant economic, social, and ideological shifts. Their transfer of power represented a period of “profound change and adjustment that reshaped the contours of American history”³⁵. The inability of the Democratic government to effectively address the national crisis, combined with the attentively structured Republican transition, set the stage for a new era in American governance, ultimately altering the economic and social landscape of the US. The transition between Carter and Reagan intensified political polarization and paved the way for ongoing ideological battles within American society. While Republican policies were celebrated for revitalizing the economy and restoring national pride, they left a long-term legacy of increased income inequality and entrenched social divisions³⁶. Since the late twentieth century, social capital in the US has significantly declined, signaling the weakening of a cohesive middle-class majority capable of sustaining an affluent standard of living and encouraging collective solidarity³⁷. More critically, domestic polarization has intensified inequalities among Americans, compromising the image of the US as a land of equality and opportunity, and reducing the credibility of American liberal values abroad³⁸.

Research objectives

By addressing American social and political changes in the 1980s, this study connects the analysis of institutions and leadership with an overview of public and cultural reactions from

³⁴ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000.

³⁵ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012, p. 3.

³⁶ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2015, pp. 5 – 6; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 2009; Helga Haftendorn and Jakob Schissler, *The Reagan Administration: A Reconstruction of American Strength?*, Walter de Gruyter, 1988; Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*, 2017; Rudolph G. Penner, “Cutting the Budget: The Painful Choices”, *Challenge*, vol. 24, no 1, (1981): 24 - 30. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40719944>, viewed October 2024; Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, 2012.

³⁷ Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000.

³⁸ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016; On the effects of polarization on soft power: Nye, *Bound to Lead*, 1990; Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 2008; Naren Chitty, Lilian Ji, Gary D. Rawnsley, *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power*, Routledge, 2nd ed., 2023.

the late 1970s to the early 1980s in the US. Following the latest trends in American historiography, it condenses social and political history to provide a more complete account of the US experience toward the conclusion of the Cold War. The primary aim is to examine the relationship between state power and everyday life during the presidential transition from Carter to Reagan, emphasizing its effects on the broader social structure. For this purpose, this research relies on secondary sources interpreting the two decades and the evolution of American society to the present day. Additionally, it assesses the influence on American society of the transfer of power between the two Presidents by connecting pre-existing analyses of their administrations with a new interpretation of primary documents supporting the central thesis. Ultimately, this study incorporates further research on the presidency and public policy to clarify the role of governmental transitions, explain the dynamics behind decision-making, and highlight the importance of contemporary policy-research institutions³⁹. Since the late twentieth century, think-tanks and similar non-profit organizations have significantly influenced policymaking in the US. Notably, President Reagan drew consistently on insights from the Heritage Foundation and the Hoover Institution to craft the Republican agenda and promote conservative ideas in the early 1980s. However, despite their considerable impact on modern American government, think-tanks remained underexplored in historical studies⁴⁰. This work seeks to draw attention to their emergence as a political force in the late 1970s, while encouraging further investigation into their dual role in shaping US politics and attracting public support. The activities of these

³⁹ This work specifically relied on the studies of the presidency by Professor James P. Pfiffner addressing the Carter and Reagan transition. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency*, 1996, and *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983. See also: Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*, Free Press, 1991; For further insights about the workings of presidential campaigns and administrations Charles O. Jones, *Preparing to be President: The Memos of Richard E. Neustadt*, Aei Press, 2000; Nicole Anslover, “Trouble with the Transition: The Transfer of Power From Carter to Reagan, *Nordic Association for American Studies*, (2020): 47 – 62. Available at: <https://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/assc/article/down>, viewed October 2024.

⁴⁰ Monographies on American think-tanks appeared only recently, mostly describing their activities and the role for different presidencies throughout the second half of the twentieth century and in the first decades of the new century. Most works have been published by Donald Abelson: Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?: Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, McGill Queen’s University Press, 2002, *A Capitol Idea*, 2006, and *Think Tanks, Foreign Policy and Geopolitics: Pathways to Influence*, Routledge, 2016; Donald E. Abelson and Christine M. Carberry, “Policy Experts in Presidential Campaigns: A Model of Think Tank Recruitment”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 27, no 4, (1997): 679 – 697. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27551794>, viewed October 2024. Further studies: Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*, University of Chicago Press, 2012; Andrew Dan Selee, *What Should Think Tanks Do? A Strategic Guide to Policy Impact*, Stanford University Press, 2013; Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy and the Politics of Expertise*, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Md Rahat Hasan, “From Policy Research to Political Advocacy: Differentiating Think Tanks from Pressure Groups in American Politics, *India Quarterly*, Vol. 66, no 3, (2010): 287 – 302. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45073154>, viewed October 2024.

institutions are difficult to define, and their influence is challenging to measure, yet they remain essential to understanding both past and present American presidencies⁴¹.

Lastly, although numerous studies have addressed the evolution of American politics and society throughout the twentieth century, relatively few have focused on the transformation of the middle-class between the late 1970s and early 1980s⁴². Most importantly, the transfer of power from Carter to Reagan intensified the ongoing social and political transformation, reshaping the American social landscape and warranting further investigation. Continued exploration of existing literature on their presidencies, along with the emergence of new perspectives, will help ensure that the effects of this transition on American society are not overlooked. By specifically analyzing the evolution of the American middle-class, this research aims to illuminate the roots of current social realities and divides in the US. The ultimate objective is not to advance an explicit blueprint, but to elucidate the historical origins of contemporary social and political polarization, offering insights into the erosion of a “New Deal-style” middle-class majority. Many significant aspects of late 1970s and early 1980s American history are addressed only incidentally in this study, such as the international events involving the US during the Cold War and the foreign policies of Carter and Reagan. Furthermore, while it explores the rise of conservative movements and class transformations, it does not extensively describe the perspectives of minorities or the emergence of new social movements advocating for greater inclusion and peace toward the conclusion of the Cold War. Ultimately, the work remains centered on the American experience without comparing similar developments in other nations. However, it underlines the effects of past domestic events to reflect on the sources of the current US crisis.

Social history

Social studies are essential to this work because they help clarify how American society and national identity changed during the Carter-Reagan transition. It particularly draws on new social history emerging in the late twentieth century to explore societal behaviors, practices, and beliefs more comprehensively than traditional “labor history”. Old social history was defined as “the history of the people”, primarily analyzing working-class cultures and social movements in Western Europe and the US. In the early 1960s, the British historian Edward P. Thompson pioneered the so called “history from below”, examining the ideals and

⁴¹ Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?*, 2002. See note 36.

⁴² Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2022.

aspirations of English workmen. In 1963, his book *The Making of the English Working Class* served as a watershed in the foundation of the field: “A book that rambled over aspects of human experience... [over] the beliefs and aims of those who were not on the winning side”⁴³. Following Thompson, in the 1970s, new social historians gradually began exploring broader social structures to assess “the fluctuation between social order and disorder, or between community and disintegration”⁴⁴. In the same period, American historians advanced “new labor history” to investigate US workers and unions⁴⁵. In the aftermath of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and the national crises of the 1970s, American scholars integrated ethnographic approaches to assess how historical and political developments impacted ordinary Americans: “Practitioners of the old new social history found it perfectly feasible to incorporate into their model-mongering, comparative, quantitative, collective-biographical endeavors the devices and insights of retrospective ethnography”⁴⁶. These scholars progressively examined state formation, democracy, and urban sociology alongside individual and group experiences in the US, enriching the field of social history⁴⁷. In this context, the first works of critical theory also emerged, aiming to distance themselves from “consensus history” and expose the inner contradictions of the American democratic system. Unlike consensus historians, social critics challenged pre-determined power structures, emphasizing the individualistic nature of American values and national character celebrating

⁴³ Thompson was also among the first to explore class experience and class-consciousness as changing over time according to the development of different values, ideas, traditions, and institutions. Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Vintage Publishing, 1966.

⁴⁴ Rowland Berthoff, *An Unsettled People: Social Order and Disorder in American History*, Harper and Row, 1971; Robert F. Berkhofer, “The New or the Old Social History?”, Review of “An Unsettled People: Social Order and Disorder in American History” by Rowland Berthoff, *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 1, no 1, (1973): 21 – 28. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2701680>, viewed October 2024.

⁴⁵ On US labor history: David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era*, Harper Collins, 1970; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872*, University of Illinois Press, 1981; Herbert Gutman, “Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 72, no 1, (1966): 74 – 101. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1848171>, viewed October 2024, and , *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, Vintage Books, 1977.

⁴⁶ Charles Tilly, “The Old New Social History and the New Old Social History”, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, Vol. 7, no 3, (1984): 363 – 406, specifically p. 395. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40241514>, viewed December 2024; Karen Halttunen, *A Companion to American Cultural History*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008. For an in-depth bibliography of works in social history see: Tilly, *The Old New Social History and the New Old Social History*, pp. 395 – 406.

⁴⁷ Carl N. Degler, “Remaking American History”, Vol. 67, no 1, (1980): 7 – 25. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1900438>, viewed November 2024; Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1949 – Present*, Pearson, 1980; Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, Russell Sage Foundation, 1989; Further references: David Potter, *People of Plenty and the American Character*, University of Chicago Press, 1954; David Riesman, Reuel Denney, et al., *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, Veritas Paperbacks, 1950, ed. 2020; Laurence Veysey: “The New Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing”, *Reviews in American History*, Vol 7, no 1, (1979): 1 – 12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700953>, viewed November 2024.

difference over effective integration⁴⁸. Works like *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) by Christopher Lasch reflected growing academic interest in the societal effects of postwar economic and cultural shifts. Lasch revealed how rising individualism and narcissistic behaviors undermined social cohesion in the US⁴⁹. Similarly, other intellectuals and journalists criticized American capitalist culture, showing how the prevailing emphasis on freedom and self-fulfillment engendered social and racial divides, and ultimately fueled general discontent⁵⁰. By the late 1970s, new labor historians focused on the economic rise of the Sun Belt and the decline of union power, emphasizing its detrimental effect on blue-collars and working-class families. At the same time, many social historians examined civil rights and anti-war movements in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and during the ongoing Cold War⁵¹. A significant group also addressed the rising power of New Left and radical right movements in the 1970s, which progressively intensified social tensions and altered public order in the US. Particularly, since the affirmation of the Republican Party in 1980, numerous analyses highlighted the long-term implications of grassroots support for the emerging New Right coalition on US politics and culture⁵². Other studies explored the influence of leftist and conservative political movements, which deepened social tensions and weakened collective solidarity. Emerging radical groups appeared to connect status anxiety with interest politics, advancing subjective idealism and fostering “paranoid” and

⁴⁸ An example of consensus history: Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, CreateSpace, 1983, ed. 2017; Charles A. Beard, *History of the United States*, CreateSpace, 1921, ed. 2016; Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made it*, Vintage, 1989; Critics to consensus history: John Higham, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’: Homogenizing Our History”, *Commentary*, February 1959. Available at: <https://www.commentary.org/articles/john-higham/the-cult-of-the-american-consensus-homogenizing-our-history/>, viewed October 2024; John Higham, “Beyond Consensus: The Historian as a Moral Critic”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol 67, no 3, (1962): 609 – 625. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1844104>, viewed November 2024; Daniel J. Singal, “Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography”, Vol 89, no. 4, (1984): 976 – 1004. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1866401>, viewed November 2024.

⁴⁹ Already in 1958, the economist Galbraith published the ‘Affluent Society’ exposing the effects of increased post-war wealth on Americans, denouncing the impact of consumerist culture. John K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Houghton Miller, 1958; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, 1976; Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1991; Ophuls, *Requiem for Modern Politics*, 1997. Following Lasch, also the American journalist Tom Wolfe published the famous article “The Me Decade”, emphasizing increased self-centeredness and egocentrism among American during the 1970s, Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade”, *New York Magazine*, August 1976. Available at: <https://nymag.com/article/tom-wolfe-me-decade-third-great-awakening.html>, viewed October 2024.

⁵⁰ Tom Wolfe also coined the term “radical chic” in a 1970 article titled “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s” satirizing social elites that even though endorsed leftist ideals, they mocked and marginalized minorities. Article in Tom Wolfe, *The Purple Decades*, Picador, 1993.

⁵¹ Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 1992; Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth since World War II*, University of Texas Press, 1984; Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South 1938-1980*, Duke University Press, 1994.

⁵² William Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 1997; Neil MacGregor, *Living with the Gods: On Beliefs and Peoples*, Penguin Books, 2019; Irwin Unger, *The movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959 – 1972*, Dodd, 1974; Raina Lipsitz, *The Rise of a New Left: How Young Radicals are Shaping the Future of American Politics*, 2022.

“suspicious” discontent⁵³. By the early 1980s, these various academic approaches converged with broader political studies to provide deeper analyses of US changes in the late twentieth century. Particularly, members of the so called “declinist school” began emphasizing how national recession and emerging radical political forces undermined the US democratic system and its international leadership. These scholars noted that economic crises, growing protests, and new political influences were weakening American power and fueling fears of decline⁵⁴. Ultimately, since the 1980s, a significant number of historical studies have explored the US experience and Cold War events beyond traditional political and diplomatic frameworks. These contributions dedicated substantial attention to the analysis of American economic and social dynamics, as developments within the nation increasingly affected US international projection and global appeal⁵⁵. Commenting on the failures of increased capitalism and nationalism worldwide, historians warned of the concerning primacy of individual success over social cohesion: “The cultural revolution of the latest twentieth century can thus best be understood as the triumph of the individual over society, or rather, the breaking of the threads which in the past had woven human beings into social textures”⁵⁶. Ultimately, these broadened accounts of American social history in the 1970s and 1980s provide a solid foundation for this work, contextualizing the diverse developments within the US.

⁵³ Richard Hofstadter specifically defined American radical conservative groups as advancing a “paranoid style” of American politics. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964. Available at: <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>, viewed October 2024. Further references: Volker Weiss and Wieland Hoban, *Theodor W. Adorno - Aspects of the New-Right Wing Extremism*, Polity Press, 2020; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, 1991.

⁵⁴ Richard Barnet, “The Decline of American Sway”, *New York Times*, July 1982; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Random House, 1987; Theodore H. White, *America in Search of Itself: The Making of the President 1956 – 1980*, Grand Central Pub, 1988.

⁵⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War: 1941 – 1947*, Columbia University Press, 1972, followed by *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, Clarendon Press, 1988. Gaddis also published *The Cold War: A New History*, Penguin Group, 2005. For US history within a broader framework: Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, Abacus, 1994; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1998, on the contradictions of the American “melting pot”, *The Cycles of American History*, Mariner Books, 1999, on the struggle between “pragmatism and idealism” in the US; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1998, on the evolution of US liberty throughout history.

⁵⁶ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 1994, p. 334. In addition to this statement, Eric Hobsbawm also defined the 20th century as the “short century” skeptical of world future progress, For an overview of American declinism: Alan W. Dowd, *Declinism: Three Centuries of Gloomy Forecasts about America*, Hoover Institution, August 2007. Available at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/declinism#note9>, viewed November 2024.

Social history after the end of the Cold War

Following the conclusion of the Cold War and the success of American liberalism over Soviet communism, scholars increasingly reconsidered the crises of the 1970s and the conservative ascendancy of the 1980s. By the 1990s, moving beyond theories of decline, many emphasized how the emergence of the “Right nation” enabled US economic recovery and revitalized its leadership⁵⁷. As the bipolar order collapsed, most historians and political scientists shifted their focus to the advancement of globalization and the evolving role of the US in a new multipolar reality. Studies primarily concentrated on American foreign policy, while others portrayed American liberal culture as an effective source of soft power influencing the rest of the world⁵⁸. At the beginning of the new century, social historians reviewed the 1970s as a transitional decade preceding the inauguration of a new American era in the 1980s, exploring the political, cultural, and social transformations in the US. Interdisciplinary analyses mainly highlighted significant developments that renewed American prominence and fostered the affirmation of a “unipolar” world order⁵⁹. Witnessing the success of American liberalism and the renewal of US power, observers such as Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the “end of history”, marking the universalization of Western liberal democracy. The strategic economic, military, and cultural advantages of the US were identified as key factors in strengthening national power and sustaining its global leadership⁶⁰. Within this context, social historians explored new public and cultural trends in the US, signaling a general reconsideration of liberal American values. The affirmation of the corporate system and a sustained emphasis on traditionalism inaugurated the so called “age of greed”, revitalizing public faith in American abundance, and promoting the cult of individual freedom⁶¹. Throughout the 1990s, most scholars highlighted the benefits of globalization for the US economy and its military prominence abroad. Meanwhile, market liberalism and increased freedoms initially bolstered American wealth and fostered new

⁵⁷ Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005.

⁵⁸ Bruce Berkowitz, *Strategic Advantage: Challengers, Competitors, and Threats to America's Future*, Georgetown University Press, 2008; Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies*, Liveright, 2014; Ferguson, *The Shock of the Global*, 2011.

⁵⁹ Robert Kagan, *The World America Made*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013; Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be US: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011; Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, 2016.

⁶⁰ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992; Nye, *Bound to Lead*, 1990.

⁶¹ Michele L. Camardella, *America in the 1980s*, Facts on File, 2005; Duncan A. Campbell and Kimberly R. Moffitt, *The 1980s: A Critical and Transitional Decade*, Lexington Books, 2010; Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years*, Columbia University Press, 2009; William Kleinknecht, *The Man Who Sold the World: Ronald Reagan and the Betrayal of Main Street America*, Nation Books, 2010; Madrick, *Age of Greed*, 2012.

social aspirations at home⁶². However, critical reexaminations of US social history during the Cold War re-emerged only in the early twenty-first century, likely spurred by the rise of terrorism, the 2008 financial crisis, and growing political polarization in the US. Most observers concentrated on various domestic and international issues affecting the US position in the world order⁶³. A series of books primarily addressed the rise of emerging national powers challenging US primacy and potentially signaling its decline within a pluralistic world. Similarly, others focused on the internal characteristics of the American crisis. These works specifically examined how capitalism and fundamentalist movements progressively destabilized American democracy, emphasizing middle-class decline as a critical issue⁶⁴. Most studies attributed contemporary societal changes to growing income inequality and racial tensions among different groups, stemming from the end of bipartisan consensus, and increased ideological divisions in the late 1970s. In this light, both the affirmation of free market and greater individualism encouraged the rise of entrepreneurial virtues in public and private spheres, concentrating wealth among the upper classes and reducing civic engagement⁶⁵. The emergence of these critical perspectives spurred further studies on American fundamentalist movements, progressively gaining prominence over the decades. By pressuring both the government and the opposition, these groups have exacerbated social divides undermining public participation and communal values within the nation⁶⁶. Thereby, social historians have increasingly focused on the deeper causes of US socio-political polarization. Recent reviews of American history since the mid-twentieth

⁶² On the risks for US power: Charles Kenny, *The Upside of Down: Why the Rise of the Rest is Good for the West*, Basic Books, 2014; Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline*, 2013; Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, 2016; Richard N. Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order*, Basic Books, 2014.

⁶³ Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 2008; Luce, *Time to Start Thinking*, 2012; Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2012; Niall Ferguson, "How America Lost its Way", *Wall Street Journal*, June 2013. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324798904578527552326836118>, viewed November 2024; Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*, Oxford University Press, 2013; Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*, Knopf Doubleday, 2013.

⁶⁴ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016; Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The US Standard of Living Since the Civil War*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

⁶⁵ Michael Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2000; Yannick Lemel and Heinz Noll, *Changing Structures of Inequality: A Comparative Perspective*, Queen's University Press, 2002; Philip Brown and Hugh Lauder, *Capitalism and Social Progress: The Future of Society in a Global Economy*, Palgrave, 2001; Samuel J. Abrams, "Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches", *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 5, no 3, (2007): 642-644. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707071873>, viewed November 2024; McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2006.

⁶⁶ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Holt Paperbacks, 2004; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, Princeton University Press, 2010; Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2017; Justin Vaïsse, *Neoliberalism*, 2010.

century investigate the roots of present fragmentation, moving beyond economic and racial disparities. Many scholars are now focusing on enduring cultural wars among Americans, which have fostered supremacist ideals and distorted mainstream national narrative⁶⁷. Among the numerous publications, *Coming Apart* (2012) by Charles Murray is particularly valuable for this study. This book provides a sociological and political overview of the changes in America since the early 1960s, emphasizing the erosion of the traditional middle-class. Murray describes the development of two distinct upper and lower classes in the US during the late twentieth century, compromising the stability of middle-class families and threatening collective consensus behind the “American project”⁶⁸. According to Murray, the new upper class has become increasingly detached from other groups in society, prioritizing self-realization and individual success over communal ideals and well-being. In contrast, the new lower class struggles with economic hardships and racial tensions, lacking social security and sufficient government assistance⁶⁹. In the aftermath of the civil right movements, the crisis of the 1970s, and the emergence of the New Right, Murray was among the first to reveal a more profound transformation in the US: a significant decline in social capital increasingly weakening American national identity⁷⁰. Since the late twentieth century, the lack of consensus on core values and unequal opportunities to pursue the “American way of life” gradually eroded the strength of the American sense of community. In the concluding passages of his book, Murray urged a return to vibrant civic engagement and increased neighborliness to restore harmony and prevent ongoing social clashes⁷¹. While “Coming Apart” provides a detailed account of the transformation of American society, it lacks a deeper historical and political context for the described changes. In 2013, Thomas Borstelmann expanded on these themes in *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, examining how the free market and increased individual freedoms exacerbated social divisions in the US. Unlike Murray, Borstelmann situates these developments within a broader historical framework, exploring the legacy of the 1970s crisis and the rise of conservatism in the US. He demonstrates how the coexistence of formal egalitarianism and sustained entrepreneurial virtues progressively compromised

⁶⁷ David M. Ricci, *Why Conservatives Tell Stories and Liberals Don't: Rhetoric, Faith, and Vision on the American Right*, Routledge, 2011; James D. Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis*, 2024; Continetti, *The Right*, 2022; Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, Viking Press, 2016; Joel Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict*, Telos press, 2014; McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2006; Boustan, *Competition in the Promised Land*, 2016.

⁶⁸ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, pp. 12, 127.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, pp. 21, 46, 100, 120, 230 – 238.

⁷⁰ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012. On the decline of social capital: Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000.

⁷¹ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, pp. 277 – 306.

American civic culture, transforming the US into a “more equal but less equal” country⁷². Together, the works of Murray and Borstelmann provide a broad view of contemporary American reality and serve as foundational references for this study, which addresses the changes in American society during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Complementing these analyses, *Storia di un feticcio* (2020) by Matteo Battistini offers a deeper analysis of the American middle-class, presenting a comprehensive account of social changes during the late twentieth century. Battistini takes a step further, tracing the evolution of American society over centuries and emphasizing the historical importance of the middle-class in shaping US identity and fostering national consensus. More than documenting its decline, Battistini argued for a diminished ‘idolization’ of this class. Historically, blue- and white-collar workers in this group shared similar income, education, habits, and opportunities, shaping a distinctive “American way of life”. By adhering to common liberal values, middle-class Americans established a universal code balancing individualism and work ethic, equal opportunity and personal responsibility, and competition for success with social mobility. According to Battistini, this class played a crucial role in defining US national identity and disseminating its culture abroad. However, the affirmation of the corporate system and growing political polarization have diminished the cohesion and appeal of the American middle-class, reducing its ideological influence⁷³. In the preface of his book, Battistini describes the modern American middle-class as an “illusory subject”, embodying US history but struggling to survive in the future. Over time it became an “out fashioned” symbol, still collectively imagined, but not effectively determining shared practices and beliefs⁷⁴. Since the late twentieth century, sharp economic disparities and ideological clashes among Americans have weakened the persistence of a cohesive middle-class majority. By arguing so, Battistini revealed how increasing conservatism and globalization significantly reduced the appeal of middle-class values, domestically and internationally⁷⁵. The works of Murray, Borstelmann, and Battistini contributed to shape the foundation of this study, which seeks to expand their findings by focusing on the specific impact of the Carter-Reagan transition on modern American society. Relying on the rich contributions on the topic, this study aims to address two additional pivotal questions: Why, according to many observers, has the American middle-class declined, and to what extent did the Carter and Reagan presidencies trigger this transformation?

⁷² Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 136.

⁷³ Battistini, “Ascesa e declino di un feticcio”, in *Storia di un feticcio*, Chapter 4, 2020.

⁷⁴ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020, pp. 1 – 12.

⁷⁵ Battistini, “La nuova classe del neoconservatorismo” and “La classe media come figura della crisi”, in *Storia di un feticcio*, Chapter 4, 2020.

Political history

Until the 1970s, traditional political history primarily focused on the study of political elites and diplomatic events, aiming at evaluating national policy and legislation. By emphasizing high politics and the state, historians excluded both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary pressures from their analyses of power and conflict⁷⁶. However, the historiographical turn toward culture and society of the late 1960s progressively reduced the prominence of conventional “top-down” perspectives also in political studies. By challenging centralized power conceptions and abandoning the mainstream focus on the state, historians broadened their interests beyond the study of “great men” politics⁷⁷. Since the 1970s, the works of the new political history have examined both the federal government and the presidencies with greater attention to individual behaviors and the broader social and economic trends influencing decision-making. Studies of politics, international relations, peace, and war increasingly incorporated ideological and cultural references, demonstrating how popular beliefs and collective experiences shaped political dynamics and vice versa. By applying social scientific methods and theories to political history, scholars have recognized the importance of processes over policy outcomes, achieving a more nuanced understanding of past events⁷⁸. This new political history has sought to provide pluralistic historical narratives while offering “structural interpretations of national problems” and “prescribing structural remedies”⁷⁹. During the late twentieth century, studies of political events, ideas, institutions, parties, and leaders increasingly emphasized the historical circumstances and social

⁷⁶ Bruce J. Schulman, “The New American Political Tradition”, *Modern American History*, Vol. 7, no 1, (2024): 76 – 86. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.6>, viewed November 2024; Allan G. Bogue, The ‘New’ Political History, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 3, no 1, (1968): 5 – 2. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259964>, viewed November 2024; Works of traditional political history: Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant*, Houghton Mifflin, 1956, ed. 2019; Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 1989; David Burton, *Theodore Roosevelt: Confident Imperialist*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968; Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1959.

⁷⁷ Schulman, *The New American Political Tradition*, 2024; Julian E. Zelizer, “What Political Science Can Learn from the New Political History”, *Annual Review of Political Science – Princeton University*, 2010. Available at:

<http://urban.hunter.cuny.edu/~schram/Grad%20American/Overviews%20&%20Syntheses/Overviews%20&%20Syntheses/Zelizer.What%20Political%20Science%20Can%20Learn%20from%20New%20Political%20History.pdf>, viewed November 2024; Meg Jacobs and Julian Zelizer, *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 1 – 19.

⁷⁸ Zelizer, *What Political Science Can Learn from New Political History*, 2010, p. 27; examples of works merging social and political history: David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865 – 1925*, Cambridge University Press, 1987; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919 – 1939*, Cambridge University Press, p. 199.

⁷⁹ Schulman, *The New American Political Tradition*, 2024; Lee Benson, “Quantification, Scientific History, and Scholarly Innovation”, *AHA Newsletter*, June 1996, p. 12, cited in Bogue, *The New Political History*, 1968, p. 27; Schulman, *The New American Political Tradition*, 2024.

environments that defined national power⁸⁰. Over time, greater historical awareness and the increased availability of Cold War documents expanded opportunities to reflect on the present by interpreting the past beyond traditional frameworks.

More recently, scholars have highlighted the mutual relationship between society and political institutions, recognizing that the existence of communities is inherently linked to the exercise and restraint of political power. By asserting the “political nature of lived experiences”, new historical analyses have valued both the institutional and intellectual settings of power⁸¹. Contemporary studies avoid purely top-down or bottom-up perspectives, instead they examine electoral politics and social movements as interconnected forces in continuous synchrony. Since the late twentieth century, cross-disciplinary and transnational approaches encouraged by recent historiography have energized the field of political history, fostering connections between historical events and broader political, economic, and social contexts. Recent works of political history encompass themes such as the evolution of political ideologies, the role of institutions, the impact of socio-economic forces, and the influence of key figures and events. Scholarly contributions largely focus on the transformation of political parties, the elaboration of governance and policy, and the intersections of social movements and political change⁸². Building on these developments, this research combines political and social history to assess the impact of the Carter and Reagan administrations on the 1980s American society. A review of the existing literature on the decades of the 1970s and 1980s reveals that many studies of modern political history have focused on the legacy of their presidencies since the second half of the twentieth century and after the conclusion of the Cold War⁸³. Particularly, the Carter and Reagan administrations have attracted broad historical interest due to the transformative events that

⁸⁰ Zelizer, *What Political Science Can Learn from New Political History*, 2010; Higham, *Beyond Consensus*, 1962; Barton Bernstein, *Twentieth Century America: Recent Interpretations*, Harcourt, 1969 and *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*, Quadrangle Books, 1970.

⁸¹ Schulman, *The New American Political Tradition*, 2024.

⁸² Some examples: Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2018; Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams, *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century*, University of Chicago Press, 2019; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity*, 2024; George Gilder, *Life after Capitalism: The Meaning of Wealth, the Future of the Economy, and The Time Theory of Money*, Gateway Editions, 2023; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; John S. Jackson, *The American Political Party System: Continuity and Change Over Ten Presidential Elections*, Brookings Institution Press, 2014.

⁸³ Some examples: Gary M. Fink and Hugh D. Graham, *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era*, University of Kansas Press, 1998; Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House*, Viking Press, 1998; Gil Troy, *See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate*, Harvard University Press, Revised ed., 1996, and *Morning in America*, 2005; Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*, Simon and Schuster, 2014, and *Reaganland*, 2021; William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan in the White House and the World*, Penguin Putnam, 2022.

characterized them, both nationally and internationally. Most monographs on the two presidents were published in the late twentieth century and initially focused on their lives, governance, and Cold War politics. Numerous biographies have also provided valuable insights into their personality and leadership styles, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that influenced their policies and decision-making processes⁸⁴.

Following the end of the Cold War, a substantial body of historical scholarship explored their presidencies in tandem in order to understand better US transformations in the late twentieth century. Political historians have particularly focused on the evolution of their foreign policies toward the Soviet Union and the consolidation of American liberal ideology. They highlighted how the crisis of US power in the 1970s laid the groundwork for the subsequent Reagan revolution in the 1980s⁸⁵. Many scholars emphasized the libertarian shift in government policy and increased military power under Republican leadership, which reasserted the prominence of American liberalism and revitalized US global stance⁸⁶. Although a significant body of work on the Carter and Reagan presidencies already existed, the early twenty-first century saw renewed interest in understanding their historical legacies. Recent studies have revisited their transfer of power to gain deeper insights into its lasting impact on contemporary America. Numerous political historians argue that Carter and Reagan dismantled the New Deal legacy and post-War World II consensus politics in both government and society, engendering a significant political and ideological shift in the US. Observers widely agree that, by emphasizing self-responsibility and personal fulfillment, the two presidents laid the foundation for current political polarization and civic dis-engagement among Americans⁸⁷. Furthermore, addressing a consistent gap in the literature, recent scholarship has increasingly focused on retracing the rise of modern liberal and conservative movements to assess how the two presidents influenced partisanship in the modern era and the development of radical trends in the US. Historians have sought to understand current ideological divides and uncover the deeper motivations behind fundamentalist trends and

⁸⁴ Some examples: Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, Public Affairs, 1991, ed. 2000; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, University of Arkansas Press, 1996; Peter G. Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Post-Presidency*, Scribner, 1997; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018.

⁸⁵ Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Gil Troy, *The Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University press, 2009; Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration*, Northern Illinois University Press, 2008.

⁸⁶ Beth A. Fisher, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*, University of Missouri Press, 2000; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Steven Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution: 1980 – 1989*, The Crown, 2010; Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, 2016.

⁸⁷ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2008; Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2017; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s*, Columbia University Press, 2016.

cultural divisions within American society⁸⁸. Sean Wilentz attentively describes the age of Reagan and his pivotal role in affirming conservatism in the US, presenting deeply right-leaning politics, and recovering the inner US spirit. William Martin examines the ascent of the New Right, highlighting the role of Christian evangelicals in propelling Reagan to power⁸⁹. Similarly, Randall Balmer analyzes how the unpopularity of Carter stemmed from the modern transformation of American religious beliefs, with progressive evangelicals introducing a new understanding of faith rooted in nationalism, individualism, and free-market capitalism. In the same vein, Justin Vaïsse reframed the history of neoconservatism, from its origins within the left-wing to its alignment with the Republican Party, aiming to preserve strong anti-communism abroad and social progress at home. He demonstrates how the fragmentation of the Democratic Party in the 1970s significantly drove disaffected liberals toward the Right⁹⁰. Overall, these scholars argue that increased political polarization largely stemmed from widespread dissatisfaction with the Democratic government in the late 1970s and the subsequent empowerment of radical New Right groups in the 1980s, which championed individual freedom and social traditionalism⁹¹. Over recent years, political historians have critically reconsidered the Carter and Reagan presidencies and their significance to US history in the late twentieth century and beyond. Most studies of the Carter administration often downplayed his domestic policy achievements during the crisis of the 1970s but praised his efforts in international peacebuilding and human rights advocacy. For example, Stuart E. Eizenstat in “President Carter: The White House Years” (2018) credits Carter with significant success in foreign policy, while acknowledging the difficulties of the administration in managing the economic and energy crisis⁹². Similarly, Scott Kaufman criticizes the inconsistent strategies of Carter, but exalts his moral approach to diplomacy, despite contrasting with geopolitical realities⁹³. Books such as *Jimmy Carter* (2010) by Julian E. Zelizer and *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (2022) by Gary Gerstle describe how the emphasis of Carter on austerity and morality alienated the

⁸⁸ McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2006; Ricci, *Why Conservatives Tell Stories and Liberals Don't*, 2011; Continetti, *The Right*, 2022; Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict*, 2014; Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity*, 2024.

⁸⁹ On the gap in the literature on conservatism: Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism”, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, no 2, (1994): 409 – 429. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/216728>, viewed November 2024; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974 – 2008*, Harper, 2008.

⁹⁰ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010.

⁹¹ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, Princeton University Press, 2001; Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, Princeton University Press, 2006; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁹² Eizenstat, *President Carter*, 2018.

⁹³ Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, 2008.

American electorate, paving the way for the conservative resurgence and affirmation of the neoliberal order⁹⁴. In *Stayin' Alive* (2010) and *The Great Exception* (2017) Jefferson Cowie argues that Carter weakened consensus for traditional liberalism, by distancing his Democratic base and neglecting the progressive decline of the American working-class⁹⁵. However, more recent scholarship - like the studies of Aaron Donaghy and Kai Bird - reassessed the tenure of the Carter presidency, examining how domestic and international pressures influenced Democratic politics during the late 1970s, and highlighting how divisions within the administration hindered cohesive policymaking⁹⁶. The analysis of the “Crisis of Confidence” speech (July 1979) by Kevin Mattson highlights the challenges of Carter in navigating a fragmented political landscape and articulating a convincing strategy to address national malaise, while his fiscal policy favored US economic recovery in the 1980s⁹⁷. Differently, works on Reagan initially credited him with fostering the Republican ascendancy and US recovery. Gil Troy (2005 and 2009) and Steven Hayward (2010) portrayed him as a transformative figure, who restored public confidence and ushered in an era of economic growth via supply-side policies⁹⁸. Nevertheless, recent studies have critically re-assessed the long-term consequences of the Republican policies on US economy, society, and global leadership. Analyses such as those by Micklethwait (2004) and Lowndes (2008) emphasize the role of Reagan in converting the US into a “Right Nation”, empowering fundamentalist conservative factions, and altering social stability⁹⁹. Other studies examined his ideological focus over pragmatism, highlighting how it facilitated the end of the Cold War, but increased US assertiveness on the international stage¹⁰⁰. Finally, scholars have explored the intellectual and financial foundations of Reaganomics that deepened income inequality and expanded national debt in subsequent

⁹⁴ Julian E. Zelizer, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, and Sean Wilentz, *Jimmy Carter: The American Presidents Series: The 39th President, 1977 – 1981*, Times Books, 2010; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

⁹⁵ Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010, and *The Great Exception*, 2017.

⁹⁶ Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; also: Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency*, 1998.

⁹⁷ Kevin Mattson, *What the Heck Are You Up to, Mr. President?: Jimmy Carter, America's Malaise, and the Speech that Should Have Changed the Country*, Bloomsbury USA, 2009.

⁹⁸ Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005, and *The Reagan Revolution*, 2009; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 2010; Cheryl Hudson, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies, Legacies*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; also: Johnathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s*, Cornell University Press, 2021.

⁹⁹ Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future*, Free Press, 2009; Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, 2016; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021.

decades¹⁰¹. In 2021, Rick Perlstein concluded his chronicle on modern conservatism by analyzing the interconnected presidencies of Nixon, Carter, and Reagan, illuminating on how these administrations dismantled the New Deal legacy and transformed contemporary American politics¹⁰². Despite extensive literature on these presidencies, ongoing archival declassifications and the emergence of always new historical perspectives suggest that research on the topic remains far from complete and warrants further interpretation. Eventually, this study aims to recenter the historical focus on the Carter and Reagan administrations, analyzing their governance and assessing their influence on US politics and society since the 1980s.

Merging new social and political history and archival research

While extensive scholarship exists on the Carter and Reagan presidencies and on the broader contours of US history during the 1970s and 1980s, relatively few studies have specifically examined the transition between these two administrations to analyze its effects on American society. This shift reflected and reinforced evolving social dynamics – rising economic anxieties, cultural realignments, and ideological shifts – that were reshaping the American landscape. Political decisions during this period were both responses to and drivers of broader social change, illustrating the complex interplay between governance and societal values. To address this gap in the literature, this research draws on contemporary analyses in social and political history, examining how the policies, rhetoric, and governing styles of Carter and Reagan both responded to and influenced the transformation of American society in the 1980s. the evolution of American society alongside the administrations of the two presidents. Archival materials from the Carter and Reagan Presidential Libraries, as well as the Hoover Institution, further ground this study in primary evidence, offering insight into how each administration articulated its vision for the nation amid growing polarization and shifting national priorities¹⁰³. Unlike studies that focus on documents related to specific events, this research pursues a more complex objective: aggregating diverse sources and

¹⁰¹ Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2009; Madrick, *The Age of Greed*, 2012; Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*, 2013; Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, 2016; Alan Greenspan and Adrian Wooldridge, *Capitalism in America: An Economic History of the United States*, Penguin, 2019.

¹⁰² Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 2009, *The Invisible Bridge*, 2014, and *Reaganland*, 2021.

¹⁰³ Most primary sources were consulted at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (GA) and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (CA). However, since initially all the materials of the Reagan administration were collected at the Hoover Institution, most of the personal papers of his senior aides were additionally examined at Stanford University, (Ca).

providing a nuanced interpretation of materials that vary in nature. The primary goal of this work is to reconstruct how the diverging approaches of Carter and Reagan shaped the transformation of American society between the late 1970s and early 1980s. Understanding their personalities, ideologies, and objectives presents greater challenges than directly analyzing sources tied to specific policy decisions and outcomes. During archival research, this study focused on two primary aims: first, to reconstruct the Camp David Domestic Summit organized by Carter in July 1979 and evaluate at the same time how its outcomes influenced the final months of his presidency; and second, to reassess the individuals and provisions that facilitated the transition of Reagan and the development of a successful recovery plan in the early 1980s. To meet these objectives, a broad range of archival files - including presidential documents, personal papers, chronological and speech files, and news summaries - were consulted. This comprehensive approach provided insights into how members of both administrations influenced policymaking processes and how contemporary media portrayed their politics to the American public.

Primarily, this study relies on the *Plain Files* of President Carter, which include his personal notes from the meetings at the Camp David Domestic Summit¹⁰⁴. These materials offer two main insights: first, the personal interpretation by Carter of the discussions with state and local leaders; and second, the identification of pressing national issues and the strategies proposed by participants to address the recession and the widespread national malaise. Pollster Patrick Caddell played a pivotal role, alongside religious and intellectual leaders, in emphasizing the moral dimension of the American crisis and urging the President to revitalize the collective good. In the late 1970s, Caddell authored two extensive memoranda for Carter, analyzing political surveys revealing public perceptions of his administration. These reports underlined widespread discontent, deep social divisions, and a significant decline in collective trust in institutions. Ultimately, the alarming results convinced Carter to use the crisis as an opportunity to restore public confidence¹⁰⁵. Both Caddell and the intellectuals consulted, deepened the concerns of the President about a perceived crisis of values among Americans and contributed significantly to the development of the “Crisis of Confidence” speech, centering on the national malaise. A comparison of the Summit records

¹⁰⁴ Personal notes, Jimmy Carter, July 1979, *Plain Files*, Subject Files - Domestic Summit, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Info and Background notes, Discussions at Camp David Summit, *Presidential Files*, Office of Staff Secretary, Box 122 – 124, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives. Available at: <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/archives/digital-library/sso/presidential-files>.

¹⁰⁵ Memoranda, Patrick Caddell - “Of Crisis and Opportunity I” and “Intellectual Framework for Leadership II”, June 1979, Domestic Policy Staff - *Subject Files*, Stuart E. Eizenstat, Box 52, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives. Both memoranda were followed by the memo “What has to Be Done III” after the Crisis of Confidence speech in July 1979.

with the speech drafts clearly indicates that less policy-oriented advisors exerted considerable influence on the Democratic agenda during the summer of 1979¹⁰⁶. Additionally, documents from the Domestic Policy Staff and the files of Hamilton Jordan provide a clearer picture of the internal divisions within the administration. These tensions hindered the development of coherent plans to address the American crisis and prepare for the 1980 elections¹⁰⁷. Finally, the White House News Summaries from July and August 1979 edited by Patricia E. Bauer reveal how media coverage negatively portrayed the leadership of Carter, framing the President as emblematic of the national crisis, and frequently criticizing the alienation of the Democratic Party from public concerns¹⁰⁸.

Regarding the impact of the Reagan presidency, this study focuses instead on reconstructing the stages that led to his transition and the elaboration of a successful national recovery plan for the 1980s. Primarily, it draws on the newly released Transition Series at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, containing diverse materials from the Transition team. These include the papers of Edwin Meese (director of Campaign and Transition teams), William Timmons (head of Transition Management), and Darrell Trent (Policy Coordinator)¹⁰⁹. These documents detail the operations and priorities of domestic and economic policy task

¹⁰⁶ Speech drafts, Crisis of Confidence Speech, July 1979, *Carter Presidential Papers*, Cabinet Secretary and Intergovernmental Affairs, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Speech material, Robert Lipshutz, *Speech Files*, Robert Lipshutz Papers, Boxes 6, 49, 97 – 98, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Speech drafts, *Speechwriters Chronological Files*, July 1979, Boxes 3, 5, 12, 50 – 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Speech material, *Subject Files*, Speechwriters, Boxes 2, 3, 5, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Memoranda and letters, *Subject Files*, Chief of Staff – Hamilton Jordan, Boxes 41, 77, 79, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; *Confidential Files*, Chief of Staff – Hamilton Jordan, Box 33, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives. Available at: <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/archives/digital-library/cos/hamilton-jordans-confidential-files>; Memoranda and letters, *1980 Campaign and Transition Files*, Stuart E. Eizenstat Papers, Boxes 73, 74, 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; *Subject files*, Stuart E. Eizenstat Papers, Boxes 50 – 52, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Memoranda and background material, *Subject Files*, Domestic Policy Staff – Stuart E. Eizenstat, Boxes 281, 283, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Memoranda and background material, *Subject Files*, Domestic Policy Staff – David Rubenstein, Boxes 30, 39, 81, 98, 104, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives.

¹⁰⁸ News summary, Patricia E. Bauer, *White House News Summary Files*, Patricia E. Bauer Collection, July – September 1979, Boxes 10 – 11; Press release, *Subject Files*, Press material - Jody Powell, Boxes 50, 79, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Press release, State of the Union, *Press Files*, Gerald Rafshoon Papers, Boxes 12, 16, 24, 31 – 33, 82, 89, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; mixed material, White House Press Office – Media Liaison, *Subject Files*, Jim Purk Files, Boxes 9, 41, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; mixed material, White House Press Office – Media Liaison, *Subject Files*, Charles Goodwin Files, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives.

¹⁰⁹ 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 45, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; 1980 Campaign Papers – Series III Ed. Meese Correspondence, Box 116 – 117, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; 1980 Transition Papers – Edwin Meese/Director of the transition, Administrative and Planning, Boxes 21, 22, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; 1980 Transition Papers – Timmons/Management, economic affairs, Boxes 59 – 61, 74, 84, 85 Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; 1980 Transition Papers – Darrell Trent/Policy Coordination, Domestic and Economic Policy Task Force, Boxes 94 – 96, 99, 102, 109, 110, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; 1980 Transition Papers – Darrell Trent/Policy Coordination, Policy Material, Box 117; Subject Files-Edwin Meese Papers, Boxes 12, 13, 27, 35, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; Subject Files – Martin Anderson Papers, Boxes 1, 11 – 13, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives.

forces, particularly their emphasis on addressing economic challenges to stimulate US growth. Additionally, by examining different materials from senior aides, the Campaign Team, and Republican Committees - such as Citizens for the Republic and Reagan for President - archived at the Hoover Institution, this research uncovers key early planning phases and domestic issues that shaped the Reagan campaign¹¹⁰. Among these, the papers of Martin Anderson include drafts of the policy memoranda on Economic and Energy Policy (from 1977 and 1979), which laid the foundation of the Republican agenda and the “Strategy for Growth” in the early 1980s¹¹¹. Furthermore, the extensive correspondence between the members of the Transition team and conservative intellectuals and business leaders reveals the strategic inputs that shaped Republican priorities during the campaign phase and post-election periods. Notably, programs such as the “Sunbelt strategy” (also known as “Southern strategy”) were recommended to solidify Republican influence in the South while targeting American workers and Black voters to weaken Democratic support. Similarly, a detailed analysis of the “Mandate for Leadership” by the Heritage Foundation underscores the policy guidelines implemented by the Reagan administration in the early 1980s¹¹².

Main findings

While the Camp David Domestic Summit and the Republican transition process are frequently referenced in US history, they are rarely analyzed in-depth. Detailed descriptions of the Summit are typically limited to contextualizing the “Crisis of Confidence” speech. Similarly, while scholars widely praise the Reagan transition, only a few specifically examined it¹¹³. For this reason, this work seeks to underline the significance of these events

¹¹⁰ Citizens For Reagan Records – Post 1976 Citizens for the Republic, Collection 81141, Hoover Institution Library and Archives; Young Americans for Freedom Records, Collection 2011C55, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

¹¹¹ Martin Anderson – Subject Files, Boxes 240, 245, 256, 264, 265, Hoover Institution Library and Archives. Specifically, Box 245 energy memo; Martin Anderson Papers, Boxes 237, 264, 294, 296, 301, 307, 312, 568, 622, 798, Hoover Institution Library and Archives. Specifically, Box 237 economic memo; Richard Allen Papers, Boxes 28, 32, 34 – 35, Hoover Institution Library and Archives; George Shultz Paper, Boxes 537, 1756, Hoover Institution Library and Archives; Edwin Meese Papers, Box 685, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

¹¹² “A Mandate for Leadership”, 1980 Transition Papers, Edwin Meese/Director of the Transition, Administrative and Planning, Box 21, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; Hoover Institution Annual Reports 1979 and 1980, Hoover Institution Library and Archives. Available at: <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/514349>.

¹¹³ The Camp David Domestic Summit is almost absent in most books on the Carter presidency. Besides being mentioned in several academic papers, it principally emerges in the diary of Carter and in the books of Kevin Mattson and Kai Bird. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Mattson, *What the Heck Are You Up to, Mr. President?*, 2009; Eizenstat, *The White House Years*, 2018; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; Robert A. Strong, *Recapturing Leadership: The Carter Administration and the Crisis of Confidence*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, no 4, 1986, pp. 636 – 650. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40574414>, viewed November 2024;

in understanding the different responses of Carter's and Reagan's to the crisis of the 1970s and their relationships with the American public. The Summit solidified the position of Carter on the national crisis but ultimately weakened his leadership and deepened public pessimism. In contrast, the strategic planning of both the Republican Campaign and Transition teams facilitated the rise of the Republican Party and inaugurated the neoliberal economic order, exacerbating ideological and political divisions among Americans. Moreover, documents from their senior aides reveal that their efforts were driven not only by their personalities and ideals, but also by internal pressures from their teams. Many political historians have noted this defining aspect of the Carter and Reagan presidencies, emphasizing how both leaders adopted different attitudes during their terms, especially regarding their foreign policy and the Soviet Union¹¹⁴. However, this study highlights the same influences on domestic policy, analyzing policy documents and drafts of the "Crisis of Confidence" speech (1979) of Carter and a "Humane Economy" (1981) of Reagan.

Together, these primary sources demonstrate how the two presidents contributed to redefine American society in the 1980s, weakening the American middle-class and increasing social fragmentation. By examining two critical but underexplored phases that shaped the politics of Carter and Reagan between the late 1970s and early 1980s, this research aims to provide new insights into the legacy of their presidencies. The Camp David Domestic Summit and the Republican Transition process are key to understanding how the two presidents shaped American reality in the 1980s. First, the records of the Summit clarify the motivations behind the approach of Carter to addressing the national crisis, explaining why he failed to bolster public confidence and ultimately lost his electorate to the Republican Party. Second, by analyzing the architecture and mechanisms behind the Campaign and Transition of Reagan, this research shows why the Economy Recovery Program (1981) achieved remarkable success and highlights the key strategies of the Republican Party that propelled the rise of modern conservatism in the US. Although their approaches differed, both Carter and Reagan influenced public perceptions in ways that profoundly transformed American society. Neither succeeded in addressing economic and social inequalities, intensifying instead

Jeffrey Smith, Snapshots of Camp David, *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, Vol. 205, no 4404, 1979, p. 379. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1748079>, viewed November 2024; Link and Glad, *Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994; Similarly, the transition process is widely praised within the literature but not analyzed in detail, except for the analyses by James Pfiffner and some former administration members. Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983, and *The Strategic Presidency*, 1996; Edwin Meese III, *Shaping the Presidency: Parties, Personalities and Press*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, no 4, (1983): 524 – 529. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27547976>, viewed November 2024.

¹¹⁴ Recently Aaron Donaghy attentively described this aspect of both Presidents in *The Second Cold War*, 2021.

divides among Americans, and ultimately affecting the resilience of the middle-class. While Carter failed to restore public faith during the crisis of the 1970s and empower lower – and middle- class Americans, Reagan favored the rise of corporate power and encouraged the emergence of hardline political influences. By advancing distinct national goals, both Carter and Reagan contributed to a profound societal shift, moving away from collective well-being toward individualism and private virtues. Although their intentions and priorities differed, they reshaped American society. Since the 1980s, sustained social and political polarization, coupled with a heightened emphasis on individual success, has undermined the collective aspiration of belonging to a cohesive and affluent middle-class. While this class did not disappear physically or economically, it has ceased to represent an aspirational model for Americans. The values of “expressive individualism” have reoriented American life while confining the role of the government and undermining general inclusiveness. Following the end of bipartisan consensus and the libertarian shift in government policy, the growing emphasis on individual freedom and private virtues has reshaped public aims, diminishing the importance of social cohesion and collective well-being in favor of self-realization and personal fulfillment¹¹⁵. By the late twentieth century, the inability to reconcile political and social ideals between liberals and conservatives- both in government and society- further exacerbated ideological fragmentation in the US. Over time, increasing polarization and the rise of extreme positions have fueled radical movements and conflicting interpretations of the foundational ideals behind the “American Project”¹¹⁶. Ultimately, the lack of a cohesive societal majority and the presence of a polarized public culture have diminished US credibility and international appeal. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly challenging for Americans to present a unified national narrative abroad, as they struggle to sustain one domestically among diverse social and political groups. Originally Americans embraced a dream of social order where individual capabilities and public recognition allowed them to live freely and in harmony. Since the 1980s, the abandonment of the general commitment to end economic and racial disparities has given rise to an enduring socio-political divide, eroding the social compact. By engendering significant political and social shifts, Carter and Reagan played pivotal roles in

¹¹⁵ Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 1996; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000; Lemel, *Changing Structures of Inequality*, 2002.

¹¹⁶ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Ricci, *Why Conservatives Tell Stories and Liberals Don't*, 2011; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004. Some scholars argued that by the year 2050 there will be no single majority group in the US because of radical trends: Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell, *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, National Academia Press, 2001; Madrick, *Age of Greed*, 2012.

framing this contemporary American reality. By re-examining their presidencies together, this research aims at offering a new lens to interpret the roots of current political and social polarization in the US.

Chapter 2

American society in the 1980s

In the 1980s, American society underwent significant economic, political, and cultural shifts, largely influenced by the events of the previous decade, and the transfer of power between two national leaders with contrasting attitude and governance. Following the 1980 elections, the presidential transition from Carter to Reagan marked a profound political and ideological transformation for the US, with lasting effects for decades to come. Despite numerous challenges stemming from the crisis of the 1970s, Reagan obtained a decisive victory over Carter and inaugurated an era of “national renewal”¹¹⁷. What were the consequences of this transfer of power and swift change in national direction for the US? And how did American society evolve in the 1980s? The 1970s were a critical decade for the US, characterized by a series of interconnected crises that affected American life and global standing. The combination of economic turmoil, energy shortages, Watergate, and growing social and political dissent reshaped public attitudes toward the government and altered the stability of American society. Moreover, the lingering effects of the Vietnam War and ongoing tensions with the Soviet Union undermined the appeal of US leadership, fueling anti-American sentiments. In 1979, the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan intensified criticism of US policy, reinforcing the perception of its lagging behind the USSR in the Cold War¹¹⁸. Even though Soviets were not much better off – struggling with economic stagnation, political repression, popular discontent, and high military costs – US hegemony was considered at risk. The hostage crisis highlighted American vulnerability abroad, symbolizing the progressive decline of US influence in the Middle East, as well as growing anti-American sentiment. Meanwhile the invasion of Afghanistan seemed to signal a renewed global assertiveness from the Soviet Union, which appeared to be regaining its grip on the geopolitical balance. Despite Soviet internal difficulties and growing discontent within the Communist Party, the perception of a declining American power contrasted sharply with the image of a Soviet Union expanding its influence in key global regions. This

¹¹⁷ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 2009; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; David Sirota, *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explains the World We Live in Now*, Ballantine Books, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Ferguson, *The Shock of the Global*, 2010; Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*, 2014; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010, and *The Great Exception*, 2016; Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, Scribner, 1997; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021. For further insights see chapter on the 1970s.

sense of US military and diplomatic decline fueled political anxieties at home, contributing to a desire for new leadership and a shift in foreign policy. Overall, the events of the 1970s compromised institutional transparency and accountability, while amplifying public distrust and worsening general pessimism about the US future. By the end of the decade, Americans struggled with soaring inflation, high unemployment, and rising interest rates, which impacted their quality of life and increased skepticism about the ability of the Democratic government to secure collective well-being¹¹⁹. Through the Crisis of Confidence Speech of July 1979, Carter asserted the end of American abundance by advocating for greater conservation and rationing to address economic and energy hardships. More critically, the President revealed that the ‘American malaise’ was rooted in a lack of shared purpose and hope for the future, and urged unity behind worthy goals to revive the national character and overcome widespread discontent¹²⁰. Carter exposed the deeper spiritual essence of the crisis and emphasized a return to simplicity and moderation for the common good. Nevertheless, as their certainties slipped away, Americans were wracked by confusion and a sense of failure. Over time, they had lost confidence in their means and opportunities, and started questioning the liberal system and its promises. Toward the 1980 election, the President was held responsible for the national downturn, as it failed to empower average Americans in political, social, and economic spheres, prioritizing instead social and moral issues related to the crisis¹²¹. The perceived inability of the Democratic administration to address national concerns, establish clear goals, and define a unified vision sparked a collective demand for greater personal freedom and entrepreneurial power to establish a more efficient economy and fair society. Widespread disillusionment with the government significantly decreased social trust, while most people turned their focus inward seeking personal improvement and

¹¹⁹ In a New York Times article, Herbert Gans defined widespread discontent in the US as “the American malaise”, Herbert J. Gans, “The American Malaise”, *New York Times*, February 1972. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/02/06/archives/the-american-malaise-the-american-malaise.html>, viewed October 2024; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2017; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, Edinburgh University Press, 2009; White, *America in Search of Itself*, 1982; Wolfe, *The “Me” Decade*, 1976; Bell, *The cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 1976; Madrick, *Age of Greed*, 2012. For further references on the 1970s see chapter 3.

¹²⁰ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 55; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2017. For further insights on Carter and the context of the Crisis of Confidence speech see chapter 4.

¹²¹ Philip Jenkins in Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012, pp. 3, 40 – 47; Seymour M. Lipset and William Schneider, “The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1983. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150494>, viewed October 2024; Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, Oxford University Press, 2008; David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70’s: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)*, Basic Books, 2000; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

self-fulfillment to cope with the crisis¹²². Rising individualism and social tensions progressively overshadowed New Deal egalitarianism and shared commitment to social and economic rights within society: “For a variety of reasons – said Carter - a sense of powerlessness shared by many of our citizens, increasing complexity of current issues, the persistence of social injustice – we are experiencing an erosion of confidence and trust in one another and in the institutions of public life”¹²³. Ultimately, prevailing uncertainty and distrust in public authorities laid the foundation for the advancement of deregulation and free market economy in the following decades¹²⁴. On the eve of the 1980s, by championing individual liberty and challenging big government to improve well-being, Reagan renewed public confidence toward the institutions and accelerated the rise of conservatism in the US. At the same time, by strengthening US military power, he was determined to contain Soviet communism and prevail in the Cold War. Since his inauguration in 1981, the President established a significant departure from the crises of the previous years, relaunching the American economy and reshaping public discourse with new visions of hope: “Reagan lent his name to an age by forging a new electoral coalition, - writes Hunt - proclaiming a fresh governing creed, and transforming his country’s role in the world, for better or for worse”¹²⁵. In the early 1980s, the US seemed to return rapidly to its international prominence while improving its economic growth. Most Americans trusted the market system for a brighter future. Reagan carried out a profound national shift capitalizing on a broad demand for change across the country and supporting the rise of influential right-wing movements. He advanced a new conservative philosophy in the US through persuasive rhetoric and vigorous leadership. Most importantly, relying on timely and effective planning as well as on key expert groups, he expanded the right-wing constituency and obtained early legislative endorsements from Congress¹²⁶.

¹²² Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2013; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2017; Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979; Theodore White, *America in Search of Itself: The Making of the President: 1956 – 1980*, Grand Central Pub, 1988; Samuel, *The American Dream*, 2012.

¹²³ Statement, comment by religious community on Crisis of Confidence Speech, July 1979, Carter Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Press Office Files, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2016.

¹²⁴ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012, p. 22; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, 2009.

¹²⁵ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, ed. 2021, p. 4.; Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Perslstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005; Hudson, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s*, 2008.

¹²⁶ As described in the following chapters of this study, Reagan leveraged specifically on Religious Right groups and conservative think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Hoover Institution. Thanks to broad teams of experts the President shaped a successful agenda targeting middle-class Americans, blue collar workers, and disaffected liberals. Eventually, the Republican constituency included neoconservatives, neoliberals, moral majoritarian groups, and party-line Republicans. James P. Pfiffner, “The Carter-Reagan Transition: Hitting the Ground Running”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, no 4, 1983, pp. 623 – 645,

Initially, the Republican administration succeeded in creating the impression of direction and accomplishment, advancing a bold economic program to curb federal spending and revise inflationary expectations. The Economic Recovery Tax Act (1981) attracted large grassroots support reversing political and budgetary priorities and increasing tax revenues for economic growth. By emphasizing neoliberal principles of free market and entrepreneurship, Reagan addressed public needs prioritizing political and economic rights over social justice¹²⁷. By the end of the decade, although the Republican program aimed at benefiting ordinary Americans, it ultimately widened economic disparities and intensified social tensions. Social and political polarization emerged as a critical consequence of the rapid shift in national direction, marking the decline of the middle-class majority that once sustained and encouraged a shared sense of national identity¹²⁸. Initially, extensive tax cuts, limited government intervention, and greater entrepreneurial liberty raised personal incomes, created new business opportunities, and decreased unemployment in the US. At the same time, through increased defense spending and military expansion the US regained its global leadership, showcasing technological progress and a renewed commitment to defending democracy and freedom worldwide. However, by mid-decade, lower federal incomes and vast military expenditures were not offset by higher revenues and created a significant budget deficit, which ultimately affected American taxpayers. Income inequality consistently widened, while average households and workers struggled with the accelerated pace of capitalist economy lacking sufficient government assistance¹²⁹. By the late 1980s, wealth concentration in the upper-class, growing individualism, and emerging hardline conservative movements progressively intensified social divides in the US. At the same time, assertive foreign policy and broader military engagement sharply contrasted with the

p. 628. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27547983>, viewed September 2024; Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency*, 1996; Anslover, *Trouble With the Transition*, 2020; Edwin Meese, *Shaping the Presidency*, 1983, pp. 524 – 529; Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2021, p. 3. Abelson, *Do Think Tank Matter?*, 2018, and *A Capitol Idea*, 2006; Hasan, *From Policy Research to Political Advocacy*, 2010; Hudson, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s*, 2008; Dan Rather, “Ronald Reagan: Communicating the America Within”, in *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s*, 2008.

¹²⁷ Wallace E. Walker and Michael R. Roepel, “Strategies for Governance: Transition and Domestic Policymaking in the Reagan Administration”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol 16, no 4, (1986): pp. 734 – 760, p. 734. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40574420>, viewed September 2024; Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2021; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983, pp. 629 – 640.

¹²⁸ On the idea of the dissolution of the middle-class: Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: The Conservative Counterrevolution*, Union Square Press, 2008; Harrington, *The Other America*, 1997; John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan*, Yale University Press, 2006.

¹²⁹ On the failure of the Republican administration to solve domestic issues: Penner, *Cutting the Budget*, 1981, p. 27; Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 1988, p. 289; Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2021, p. 5; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 1989; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Kleinknecht, *The Man Who Sold the World*, 2010.

sustained promotion of global freedom, increasing anti-war protests, and reduced the attractiveness of US international influence. In this context, the absence of strong civic solidarity among Americans hindered the spread of liberal ideology abroad and compromised the effectiveness of US leadership on the global stage¹³⁰. American society was divided along political, economic, cultural, and religious lines without sustained public engagement as in the early post-war years. Civic culture and shared national ideals steadily declined, as niche cultures and conflicting groups prevailed within society. Social tensions were rooted in competing views on American values and future, laying the groundwork for long-term political polarization and social conflict¹³¹. The events between the mid-1970s and early 1980s changed the traditional configuration of American society and altered its cultural identity: “The greatest threat [of the new American system] lied in the establishment of a new class order leaving diminishing prospects for the vast majority [...] eroding the traditional appeal of America and sense of promise” writes Cotkin¹³². Eventually, the crises of the 1970s and the rise of the Republican Party fundamentally reshaped US economy and politics, weakening the sources of middle-class stability and altering the ‘American way of life’¹³³. Originally, the American middle-class was defined by wealth and life quality, most importantly, by the embodied ideals and aspirations. In the 1980s, the waning influence of this group signaled a decline in the shared sense of community and optimism that once bound Americans together and distinguished the US as exceptional¹³⁴. By analyzing the presidential transition from Carter to Reagan, this study highlights that the transformation of American society and the decline of the middle-class majority were primarily caused by the shift toward free-market economy, and the affirmation of conservatism in the political and cultural spheres. Over time, both trends affected American civic life and the continuity of a

¹³⁰ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 1988; Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*, 2013; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; On neoconservative and fundamentalist influences within the US: Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2018; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005; On the peace movements of the 1980s against the foreign policy of Reagan: David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, 2008; Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The US Central America Peace Movement*, Chicago University Press, 1996; John Lofland, *Polite Protesters: The American Peace Movement of the 1980s*, Syracuse University Press, 1993. On the importance of civil society for soft power: Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004.

¹³¹ Specifically on the idea of “niche cultures”: Henry Olsen, *The Working-Class Republican: Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism*, Broadside Books, 2017, p. 62; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

¹³² Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict*, 2014; Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas*, 2004; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012.

¹³³ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979, and *The Revolt of the Elites*, 1994; Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, *The Betrayal of the American Dream*, Public Affairs, 2013; On divisions across society: Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*, 2013; Harrington, *The Other America*, 1997; Madrick, *Age of Greed*, 2012; Samuel, *The American Dream*, 2012.

¹³⁴ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016, pp. 4 – 5.

shared national narrative within society. More critically, broad public disagreement in economic, political, and social realms threatened the foundational ideals of the “American Project”. Since the nineteenth century, Americans have upheld a belief in a unified nation founded on the principle of consent, according to which individuals are free to pursue their own lives, while coming together to confront shared challenges in the name of equality and liberty¹³⁵. This enduring ideal, often referred to as the “American creed”, has served as a foundational narrative of national identity, emphasizing values such as democracy, individualism, and social cooperation. Despite the profound rupture of the Civil War, violently exposing national divisions over slavery, federalism, and citizenship, the ideal of national unity was reshaped but not dismantled. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, however, the ‘American creed’ was repeatedly tested and questioned, especially during times of crisis such as the Great Depression, World Wars and waves of social unrest¹³⁶. These moments not only strained public faith in institutions but also challenged the coherence of the ideals themselves, revealing underlying contradictions between the promise of liberty and reality for many Americans. As consensus on national ideals weakened, debates over what constituted American identity intensified, increasing political and cultural tensions. With the onset of the Cold War, dissent became even more pronounced, as the sustained promotion of freedom abroad contrasted with the persistent injustices and inequalities within the US. Particularly, New Left groups and civil rights movements exposed the contradictions of American democracy in the 1960s, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society. By the 1970s, the economic and energy crisis affected Americans across all social classes, deepening doubts about US power and raising concerns over the fading promises of the American dream¹³⁷. Finally, the affirmation of free market economy and the shift toward financial activities in the 1980s strengthened the corporate domain and established a political system that fostered material self-interests and contractual social relations. Increased deregulation and privatization undermined traditional class political alignments and weakened collective drives to advance joint claims, as Americans

¹³⁵ Charles Murray defines the founding ideal as “the American Project”: Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, pp. 12, 127, 285; Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 1998; Ian Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea*, University of Chicago Press, 2022; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, ed. 1998.

¹³⁶ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War 1929 – 1945*, OUP USA, 2001; Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 1998.

¹³⁷ ‘American Creed’ here refers to the defining elements of American identity such as – liberty, equality, justice, and humanity – at the basis of the ‘American Project’. William T. Page, *The Book of the American’s Creed*, Kessinger Publishing, 2010; Forrest Church, *The American Creed: A Biography of the Declaration of Independence*, 2003; Herbert Marcuse and Douglas Kellner, *The New Left and the 1960s*, Routledge, 2014; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

prioritized individual concerns over common objectives: “Self-interest crowds the language of solidarity out of American public discourse and dulls the public imagination”¹³⁸. The emergence of multiple sources of influence shaping popular attitudes and beliefs prevented the creation of participatory ideals, instead encouraging self-determination and individual pursuit of happiness. Policymakers, media outlets, academic elites, and religious leaders progressively “colonized” the public sphere, impacting popular consciousness, and favoring depoliticization processes. Especially conservative fundamentalists and Christian Right groups turned social issues into the core of political rhetoric and action, as they engaged in cultural wars to restore moral order in the US¹³⁹. Observing social and political changes from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, several scholars argue that they intensified civic disengagement within society, ultimately diminishing American social capital and shared pursuit of public good. They define “social capital” as the set of interactions among individuals that foster reciprocity and cooperation for mutual benefit in all public realms. Over time, identity politics and corporate power oriented social capital toward the private sphere, affecting the vibrancy of American civil society, and decreasing public participation¹⁴⁰. Despite ideological and economic differences, until the 1980s most Americans endorsed common liberal ideals for a fair and just society; though, the affirmation of neoliberalism and the growing influence of moral conservatism prevented the endorsement of a shared national creed in the US. On the one hand, the capitalist economy fostered a culture of greed that linked material wealth with personal worth, as it differentiated social groups according to economic means and ability to conduct satisfying lives¹⁴¹. On the

¹³⁸ Nina Eliasoph, “Close to Home”: The Work of Avoiding Politics, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 26, no 5, (1997): 605 – 647, p. 607. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/658024>, viewed September 2024; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012.

¹³⁹ Bortselmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 47 – 51; Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict*, 2014; Geoffrey M. Vaughan, “Joel Kotkin: The New Class Conflict with a Forward by Fred Siegel”, *Society*, Vol. 52, no 3, (2015): 295 - 297. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-015-9902-6>, viewed September 2024; Carl Boggs, “Social Capital and Political Fantasy: Robert Putnam’s ‘Bowling Alone’”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30, no 2, (2001): 281 – 297, pp. 288 - 291; available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657878>, viewed September 2024; Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics in the Contemporary Moment*, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Robert Putnam provides an overview of the decline of social capital within the US, particularly highlighting the erosion of common networks during leisure times because of low civic engagement since the 1980s. Similarly, other scholars insist on a lack of social capital caused by the rise of the corporate domain and the free market system. Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, no 1, (1995): 65 - 78. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002>, viewed September 2024; Boggs, *Social Capital and Political Fantasy*, (2001): 281 - 297; Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict*, 2014; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2013, p. 238; Eliasoph, *Close to Home*, 1997; Vaughan, Kotkin, “The New Class Conflict with a Forward by Fred Siegel”, (2015): 295 – 297. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-015-9902-6>, viewed September 2024.

¹⁴¹ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 1998; Kleinknecht, *The Man Who Sold the World*, 2010; Madrick, *Age of Greed*, 2012; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority*, 2000; Brown, *Capitalism and Social Progress*, 2001, p. 199; Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, ed. 2022; Boggs, *Social Capital and Political Fantasy*, 2001, p. 295; Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

other hand, the conservative ethos promoted self-indulgence and self-progress, legitimizing inequalities as a natural effect of free market or personal faith. Both social and moral conservatives encouraged individual freedom and self-realization, as egalitarianism threatened traditional social structures and hierarchies. Similarly, Religious Right groups positively endorsed libertarian values linking economic success with spiritual salvation and considering money as catalyst for well-being¹⁴². By the end of the decade, free market system and conservative philosophy weakened the aspiration to build an affluent society through sustained effort and active civic involvement. The libertarian shift in government policy undermined the traditional optimism of middle-class Americans for supporting community life, work ethic, and upward mobility as key to progress. Rising individualism and consumerism substantially restructured American economy and society, creating two distinct upper and lower classes within the US, affecting the resilience of the middle-class majority¹⁴³. Over time, the emerging elite became the aspirational model encouraging individual success and privileges, while neglecting social ties and national interests. Economic independence and personal interests diminished the importance of belonging to a cohesive middle-class as synonym of opportunity, affluence, and freedom. Meanwhile, the possibility to enjoy the ‘American way of life’ gradually depended on economic resources and personal virtues, rather than collective experiences and goals. Historically, the American middle-class represented US national character and wealth: “Middle-class code of conduct enabled consensus in American democracy”¹⁴⁴. As a cultural and political identity, it sustained American values and symbolized the prosperity and opportunities promised by the American dream. Since the second half of the twentieth century, broad civic disengagement increasingly reduced collective responsibility and social well-being intensifying tensions

¹⁴² Bortselmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 15 – 17, pp. 247 – 258; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2018.

¹⁴³ Charles Murray specifically identifies the presence of new upper and lower classes in the US from the 1980s; similarly, Joel Kotkin divides American society into tech oligarchs (e.g., technical experts) and clerisy (e.g., policymakers, media, academic elites). Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict*, 2014; Barlett, *The Betrayal of the American Dream*, 2013; Wright C. Mills and Russell Jacoby, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, Oxford University Press, 2002. On the idea of a new concept of freedom: Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 1994. On the new American dream: De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 2005; Samuel, *The American Dream*, 2012. On the development of social capital: Boggs, *Social Capital and Political Fantasy*, 2001, p. 295. On the lack of communal engagement: Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979, and *The Revolt of the Elites*, 1994; Theda Skocpol and Fiorina P. Morris, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, Brookings Institution Press, 1999.

¹⁴⁴ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020, pp. 10 – 13, 209 – 221; Mariuccia Salvati, “Storia di un feticcio: la classe media americana”, *Parolechiave*, (2024): 127 – 132. Available at: <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.7377/113876>, viewed September 2024; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 2005; Brown, *Capitalism and Social Progress*, 2001; Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 2022.

among Americans and, eventually, compromising US political integrity, economic stability, and cultural identity¹⁴⁵.

Free-market economy

Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, the transfer of power from Carter to Reagan marked the end of the New Deal momentum and the decline of bipartisan consensus in American government. Diverging social and economic policy, rising conservative ideology, and conflicting Cold War objectives created two distinct and opposing party identities. Most importantly, the lack of common ground on national direction prevented effective focus on general welfare, ultimately alienating political elites from the public. Over time, increased polarization inside the government affected public opinion, intensifying partisan warfare and social divides among Americans¹⁴⁶. Since the 1960s, both Democrats and Republicans in power shifted their focus away from redistributive policies, widening income inequality and compromising the economic stability of lower- and middle-class Americans. On the eve of the 1980s, Carter and Reagan moved government policy toward a libertarian direction favoring the affirmation of capitalist economy, ultimately reshaping American society¹⁴⁷. At the end of the 1970s, Carter laid down the first provisions for deregulation aimed at eliminating expensive federal controls, and at increasing cooperation with the private sector to counter national recession and improve social welfare. The President recognized the limits of federal resources and invited Americans to restrain and moderate excesses for encouraging national growth. However, reduced government assistance and austere fiscal measures toward economic and energy shortages further harmed blue-collar workers and consumers, exacerbating the effects of high unemployment and inflation in the US¹⁴⁸. Even though the Democratic administration did not encourage free market values, by embracing egalitarian stances and increasing collaboration with the private sector, it laid the foundations for the affirmation of neoliberalism in the US.

¹⁴⁵ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979, and *The Revolt of the Elites*, 1994; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2013; Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 1998; Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 1996; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ Bruce L. R. Smith and James D. Carroll, “Reagan and the New Deal: Repeal or Replay”, *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 14, no 4, 1981, pp. 758 – 67. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/418700>, viewed September 2024; Campbell, *Polarized*, 2018; Alice M. Rivlin, Sheri Rivlin, et al., *Divided We Fall: Why Consensus Matters*, Brookings Institution Press, 2022; Eliasoph, *Close to Home*, 1997.

¹⁴⁷ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer – And Turned its Back on the Middle Class*, Simon & Schuster, 2010; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 1992.

¹⁴⁸ Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2017; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012.

Following Carter in the early 1980s, Reagan introduced a “neoliberal vision of American life” encouraging individual freedom, entrepreneurialism, and privatization. By advocating for substantial tax-cuts and free market to limit government action and social provisions, the President successfully built the architecture for the ascending neoliberal order in the US¹⁴⁹. At a time when most Americans distrusted the government and criticized liberal policies addressing the crisis, the Republican Party seized the opportunity to increase its influence. By promoting greater decentralization and social traditionalism for national renewal, Reagan attracted disaffected liberals as well as social and religious conservatives willing to offset federal regulations and reduce affirmative action. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, both Carter and Reagan progressively increased the individual freedoms of Americans, laying the groundwork for a political economy that emphasized autonomy and free market to solve national problems. The advancement of deregulation and the affirmation of neoliberalism in the US were considered a “bipartisan initiative” of both Democratic and Republican administrations, triggering a significant political re-alignment toward the Right¹⁵⁰. In the late 1970s, moderate liberals valued individual choice and market values, as they opposed restrictive government regulations and ineffective distributive policies; at the same time, conservatives prioritized freedom of will and entrepreneurship over federal controls and community restraints. Growing disillusionment with the public sector placed personal freedom and individualism at the center of political debate, prompting a general shift toward market values for a more productive economy and fair society. Personal emancipation and efficient economy became shared priorities of both the government and people: “Left and Right together contributed to the effort to free the individual from restrictive rules”¹⁵¹. Toward the 1980s, national recession and a decline of bipartisan consensus provided the opportunity to press for reform and improvement, as public policy moved toward the private sector and most Americans hoped to improve their standard of living relying on the free market¹⁵². Nevertheless, the US libertarian shift resulted in three main outcomes during the 1980s: first, the establishment of free market widened income inequality across the US, creating two separated upper and lower classes within society and

¹⁴⁹ Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 1992; McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2008; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2017; Hacker, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, 2010.

¹⁵⁰ Borstelmann, *1970s*, 2012, p. 148; Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2016; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

¹⁵¹ Borstelmann, *1970s*, 2012, pp. 173 – 174; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

¹⁵² Francis Fukuyama, in Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012, p. 173; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 12 – 13. Borstelmann briefly describes also how environmentalists, political reformers, feminists, human rights activists, and evangelical Christians between the mid-70s to early-80s pressed for reform and improvement of American society along their respective ideological lines.

compromising the stability of the middle-class majority; second, technological innovation and automatization restructured the working sector, weakening manufacturing industries and diminishing the safety of blue-collars; lastly, the affirmation of capitalist culture fostered consumerism and material interests over shared solidarity and effort among Americans, intensifying competition for individual pursuit of happiness. At the beginning of the 1980s, Reagan successfully reunited disaffected liberals, conservative white southerners, and ethnics of the North promoting individual emancipation and free market for national prosperity. By expanding personal freedom and strengthening national resources, the President aimed at renewing general confidence in US power, and at providing new economic opportunities for the middle-class. Besides leveraging on a widespread desire for freedom in society, the Republican administration strategically targeted the common aspiration among white middle-class Americans to reduce social integration and exclude the “unfitting” from the workforce. Within the Reagan administration, Meese emphasized: “Our theme should be energy and economic independence directly tied to economic prosperity, jobs creation, family security and equal opportunity for all Americans to share in the fruits of prosperity [...] If we fail to tie energy and economic independence directly to the aspirations of low-middle income Americans, to the jobs and economic security of a new generation of working Americans and to rebuilding our cities and industrial base, we have failed to make an energy and economic policy for all Americans”¹⁵³. By approving the free market and promising greater economic efficiency, Reagan successfully brought together white middle-class Americans, and disaffected liberals. On one hand, increased entrepreneurship favored open competition and demand for white collars, restricting access to the job market and reducing the share of low-skilled workers, while creating new employment opportunities for average Americans. On the other hand, liberals endorsed greater cooperation with the private sector and increased federal revenues to modernize the Democratic Party and improve collective livelihood. However, since the mid-80s, unleashing economic advantages of elites deepened inequality in the US. Despite the optimistic projections of the Republican government, increased corporate power benefited only a small share of wealthy Americans, at the expense of middle-and-lower income earners. Professionals and business leaders increasingly steered the US economy toward a capitalist model, reshaping the structure of American society. This shift contributed to a

¹⁵³ Comment on Letter, from Governor Pierre Du Pont to the President with comments by Edwin Meese, June 1980, Campaign Papers Series III, Edwin Meese files, Box 116, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives; Gerstle, “Triumph” in *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 1988.

growing socio-economic divided, in which a small, affluent elite accumulated disproportionate wealth and influence, while most Americans were effectively confined to the lower or working classes. As individuals were either part of the wealthy few or among the broader, less privileged “rest”, society became increasingly polarized. Notably, the emerging upper class was no longer limited to the traditional “establishment”, such as corporate executives, financial elites, and government officials. It also came to include influential individuals from academia, the entertainment industry, and the technology sector, all capable of shaping public discourse and opinion. Hence, collectively this group comprised those with the economic resources, institutional access, and cultural capital necessary to influence and define the political and economic trajectory of the country¹⁵⁴.

The new elite neither established general norms of conduct nor supported a collective ideology, people were culturally and ideologically diverse but shared the same wealth: “They were a congregation of talented and affluent people”¹⁵⁵. Dismantling old traditions and applying market principles to the social sphere, the rising corporate system formally recognized the equal worth of all people and individual power to fail or succeed within society: “The apotheosis of individual freedom and the paralysis of representative democracy”¹⁵⁶. Individualism and consumerism oriented American life, as corporate forces replaced the government to protect self-interest and favor national growth. During the 1980s, corporate powers and technological innovation reshaped the working sector, weakening manufacturing industries and reducing worker protections: as the service sector dominated American economy, blue-collar workers lost their work safety and union strength. Since the 1960s, the advancement of civil rights, the effects of national recession, and greater deregulation steadily reduced the influence of collective bargaining in the US¹⁵⁷. American unions gradually lost their power as the Democratic Party prioritized identity politics over economic rights, and as the Republican government advanced individual freedom and pro-business stances. In the 1980s, Reagan especially discouraged collective action increasing

¹⁵⁴ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 120; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020, pp. 203 – 209; Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016; Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System*, Vikin Press, 1932, and Edward A. Ross, *Sin and Society*, Houghton Mifflin, 1907 cited in Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016, pp. 142 – 143. Veblen and Ross defined professionals and managers as the only group exercising leadership in society since the late 1970s.

¹⁵⁵ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2013, p. 120; Mills, *White Collar*, 2002; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020, pp. 203 – 209.

¹⁵⁶ Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016, p. 5; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 4 – 6, Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012.

¹⁵⁷ Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010; Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016, pp. 146 – 147; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, 2014.

legal restrictions for organized labor and banning union strikes¹⁵⁸. Deindustrialization, free market, and resisted unionization efforts increasingly weakened worker rights and security, exacerbating income inequality. Essentially, by lacking strong bargaining power, blue-collar Americans lost political leverage to influence labor legislation and attain fair regulations¹⁵⁹. The new service-oriented economy prioritized corporate profits over worker benefits, concentrating wealth at the top of society. At the same time, increased white-collar employment limited upward mobility for both lower- and working-class Americans¹⁶⁰. In the early post-war period, through the combination of competitive wages, stable employment, and union representation blue collars could aspire to a middle-class lifestyle. However, the transition in the American economy and workforce of the mid-80s affected the stability of working-class families, ultimately fostering debt accumulation and collective insecurity. Toward the late 1980s, increased openness and formal equality contrasted with the underlying inequality in the US, and Americans became paradoxically “more equal and less equal” within the nation¹⁶¹. With the establishment of free market, the new upper class grew wealthier, while less affluent groups struggled to improve their condition without government benefits and security¹⁶². The enthusiastic celebration of freedom and individual choice masked the growing economic divide in the US. Over time, the libertarian shift in government policy weakened traditional links between capital and labor, affecting the economic mobility and living standards of lower-middle-class Americans. According to the logic of consumer capitalism, economic availability determined individual success while discouraging community engagement and blurring differences between classes, as everyone was entitled to progress within the free-market system¹⁶³. Eventually, the new welfare system not only favored the decline of the middle-class majority but also compromised social cohesion at its roots: “Every man left for himself, and the devil take the hindmost”, as Ehrenreich puts it¹⁶⁴.

¹⁵⁸ Particularly, Reagan marked the end of labor strikes banning the famous “PATCO” strike in 1981. In the US, the episode not only was perceived as the decline of American labor movement, but also as the loss of workers solidarity and right to strike. Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010, p. 364.

¹⁵⁹ Gil Troy, *The Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2009; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 60 – 61; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2021; On the consequences of labor decline in the US: Jake Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do*, Harvard University Press, 2014.

¹⁶¹ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 4, 15.

¹⁶² Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 314; Walter B. Michaels, *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, Metropolitan Books, 2006; Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, 2004.

¹⁶³ Hacker, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, 2010; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 17, 280.

¹⁶⁴ Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016, p. 154; Barlett, *The Betrayal of the American Dream*, 2013; Russell Jacoby in Mills, *White Collar*, 2002.

Neoliberalism and conservatism

Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, during the so-called “third wave of capitalism”, economic enterprise, technological advancements, evolving public-private relationships, and significant ideological shifts increasingly affected common well-being in American society¹⁶⁵. The libertarian shift in government policy widened income inequality and weakened civic engagement. More critically, it challenged the once-shared American ideal of collectively addressing national issues. Neoliberal values gradually reshaped American politics and culture, reducing the role of institutions and fostering entrepreneurial virtues in both the public and the private spheres. With the establishment of free-market public policy turned into a private concern, as the American system prioritized individual responsibility and self-determination to progress. Over time, the sustained emphasis on freedom and formal egalitarianism heightened political, moral, and cultural divides among Americans. Prevailing self-interest and competing perspectives on liberty placed social and ethical matters at the center of political debate, deepening fragmentation in the US¹⁶⁶. From the 1980s, the affirmation of libertarian philosophy marked a profound and lasting impact on American society, altering its traditional configuration and compromising the persistence of a strong middle-class majority. While the introduction of neoliberal principles and corporate growth mainly affected the economic dimension of lower- and -middle classes, the increasing ideological influence of conservatism further weakened broader social cohesion¹⁶⁷. In the early 1980s, Reagan aimed at reshaping social and political values, conveying images of hope for revitalizing national power and restoring American civic religion. Since the late 1970s, he pledged ordinary Americans greater security and improved quality of life through the revival of liberal traditional ideals¹⁶⁸. In the early 1980s, the Republican Party obtained a remarkable political victory fostering individual freedom and social traditionalism to restore moral commitment behind American actions. Following a

¹⁶⁵ Ehrenreich defined the period from the mid-70s to early 1980s as the beginning of the third wave of capitalism in the US. Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016, pp. 4 – 5; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Barlett, *The Betrayal of the American Dream*, 2013.

¹⁶⁶ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 316 – 317; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012.

¹⁶⁷ Most scholars agree that the American public is less divided along economic lines with respect to ideological concerns. Even though the majority considers public polarization a response to decreased bipartisan consensus within the government, Campbell also argues that the elite polarized as a reaction to popular divides for reelection concerns. McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2008; Campbell, *Polarized*, 2018; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2016.

¹⁶⁸ Gil Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 277 – 280; Collins, *Transforming America*, 2009; Jakob Schissler, “Political Culture and the Reagan Administration”, in Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 1988, pp. 31 – 49.

period of economic uncertainty, the conservative ethos instilled renewed confidence and pride in Americans who felt neglected and impacted by the leftward shift of the Democratic Party and the changes of the preceding decades¹⁶⁹. By leveraging on a widespread sense of disempowerment among the people, the Republican government emphasized autonomy and self-resilience as central to welfare, mobility, and success. Most importantly, by encouraging patriotism and traditional values, Republicans committed to restoring justice and stability in American society, according to Jakob Schissler: “[They] called into question old-ways of thinking and old models of public interest [...] directing the nation toward higher goals”¹⁷⁰. Reagan successfully appealed to voters motivated by both economic concerns and ethnocentric ideals that emerged in the wake of the civil rights movement, the counterculture, and the New Left of the 1960s. Supporters saw the President as having faith in the “wisdom and good sense of ordinary people”, and as genuinely wanting to explain “why he thought his solution was the right one”¹⁷¹. Although the conservative moment emerging in the 1980s was primarily focused on economic reforms, it was also deeply intertwined with cultural and social policies aimed at reinforcing American power and national identity. As Brinkley observed, conservatism is: “A cluster of related (and sometimes unrelated) ideas from which those who considered themselves conservatives draw different elements at different times”¹⁷². Progressively, the US seemed to transform in the “Right Nation”, where prevailed an amalgam of various conservative movements and enthusiasms sharing a common emphasis on freedom, morality, and faith to organize society¹⁷³. In the 1980s, Reagan managed to rally lower-and middle-class white Americans, disillusioned liberals, libertarians, and Christian evangelicals promising them to replace the insecurities of pluralistic New Deal society with a fixed moral and political order: “[Reagan’s] political views combined the economic prejudices of the newly well to do with

¹⁶⁹ Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2021, pp. 3 – 22; Schissler, “Political Culture and the Reagan Administration”, in *The Reagan Administration*, 1988, p. 35.

¹⁷⁰ Schissler, “Political Culture and the Reagan Administration”, in *The Reagan Administration*, 1988, pp. 48 – 49.

¹⁷¹ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005, p. 210.

¹⁷² Brinkley interestingly highlights how the confluence of different ideas within conservatism has compromised an effective and comprehensive scientific understanding of the movement. However, he believes that precisely this amalgam deserves greater analysis with respect to liberalism. Brinkley, *The problem of American Conservatism*, 1994, pp. 409 – 429, p. 414.

¹⁷³ Since the 1980s, the US was defined “The Right Nation” referring to the growing influence of conservatism in economic, political, and cultural spheres. Kenneth Minogue, “Exceptionally Conservative”, *Claremont Review of Books*, Vol. v, no 3, 2005. Available at: <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/exceptionally-conservative/>, viewed August 2024; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005.

the moral prejudices of the revolt against inclusion and modernity”¹⁷⁴. Particularly, the President recognized the widespread discontent among Christian evangelicals regarding Democratic social policies and sought to reinvigorate American spiritual culture, strengthening a sense of communal faith. Since the mid-70s, Christian evangelicals had become more politically active, resisting progressive movements that challenged traditional values and established norms. Alongside the Moral Majority, they aimed at revitalizing religious and patriotic fervor in response to modernity and egalitarianism. By adopting a Southern church rhetoric and delivering faith-based messages, Reagan strategically involved religious and moral conservatives in the political debate, actively supporting the rise of the Christian Right¹⁷⁵. During the 1980s, economic, religious, and moral conservatives merged into a broader New Right coalition closely aligning with the Republican Party and profoundly influencing American public culture. Conservative activists reunited envisioning how America could prosper socially, economically, and politically by adhering to traditional values and moral principles¹⁷⁶. Many white lower-and middle-class Americans increasingly endorsed the Coalition seeking greater security and well-being, as social and cultural shifts threatened US democratic ideals and the ‘American way of life’. Moral conservatism especially garnered large grassroots support, presenting morality and tradition as antidotes to the pervasive anxiety sparked by the crises of the 1970s and the subsequent rise of the corporate system. Eventually, by renewing communal spirit and presenting personal virtues as new avenues for success, moral conservatives consistently broadened their base. Even though these conservative groups supported individual freedom and limited government, they prioritized preserving American cultural values against ethical relativism and social decay¹⁷⁷. In response to prevailing market individualism and secularism in American public life, moral conservatives emphasized social and ethical issues such as family, education,

¹⁷⁴ Seymour Lispet and Earl Raab, in Robert Freedman, “The Religious Right and the Carter Administration”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 48, no. 1, (2005): pp. 231-260, specifically pp. 235 – 236. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4091685>, viewed October 2024; Seymour M. Lispet and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1970 – 1977*, University of Chicago Press, 1978.

¹⁷⁵ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Falwell, *Listen America!*, 1980; Schissler, “Political Culture and the Reagan Administration”, in *The Reagan Administration*, 1988, pp. 44 – 45; Kuziemko, *Why Did the Democrats Lose the South?*, 2018, pp. 2830 – 2867, p. 2834. On the factors influencing the rise of racial conservatism: Boustan, *Competition in the Promised Land*, 2016; Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 1992.

¹⁷⁶ Ricci, *Why Conservatives Tell Stories and Liberals Don’t*, 2011, p. 4; Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 1991; Sheldon Krinsky and Malcolm H. MacDonald, “The Social Costs of Genetic Welfare”, *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol 74, no 1, (1993): 230 – 232. Available at: <https://web-p-ebscobhost-com.biblio-proxy.uniroma3.it/ehost/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=4538a0fc-58e2-4029-b85d-c683c220a8f1%40redis&bdata=Jmxhbm9aXQmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=9303180898&db=ehh>, viewed October 2024; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 277.

¹⁷⁷ Jens Rydgren, *Class Politics and the Radical Right*, Routledge, 2012; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2018; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

gender, and cultural behavior as foundations for a shared moral code in the US¹⁷⁸. Although they supported legal equality, decentralization, and economic freedom as libertarian conservatives, they took a more radical stance advocating for social authority to maintain national order and stability. Hard-line moral conservatives viewed society as composed of “natural groups” –family, church, region, and social class – that grounded the common good. Civic bonds, tradition, inheritance, and religious faith were vehicles for rebuilding American communal life encouraging individual liberty and virtue. Both religious and moral conservatives valued traditional centers of authority, as secularization and formal egalitarianism threatened ‘holy’ principles and relationships¹⁷⁹. Conservative influence grew throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, forming an effective political movement alongside the Republican Party. While economic and social conservatives established networks of publications, organized action committees, and founded think-tanks to influence policymaking, moral and religious conservatives aimed at mobilizing the core of American society. Following the lead of the Moral Majority in the late 1970s, Christian Right groups primarily used the media to rally support among low- and middle- class Americans. Through televangelism, direct mass mailing, and news outlets, they sought to revive religious sentiment in the US and offer spiritual relief in a society they considered compromised by “modern corruption”¹⁸⁰. In the 1980s, the New Right became “an important part of the social, political, and cultural landscape”. By supporting the Republican agenda, it advanced conservative values in the US, shaping voter registration, lobbying Congress and the White House, and training young conservatives for leadership positions¹⁸¹. Particularly, fundamentalist factions within the movement embraced more extreme stances engaging in culture wars, as they resisted progressive ideals and norms. Culture Wars were a social construction to merge disparate cultural issues into a “compelling narrative frame” to define

¹⁷⁸ On the differences and similarities between Conservatives and Libertarians: Robert Nisbet, “Conservatives and Libertarians: Uneasy Cousins” in Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994, p. 419; Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality*, Routledge, ed. 2001.

¹⁷⁹ Rick Santorum offers a comprehensive overview of the moral conservative vision of community and common good. Rick Santorum, *It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good*, ISI Books, 2005; Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994, p. 422; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005.

¹⁸⁰ Different conservative organizations such as the Truth Squad and the Committee for the Removal of the President emerged with the aim to preserve American democracy according to traditional principles and laws. Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005, p. 83; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2018; Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio, e vulnerabilità*, 2018, pp. 26 – 41; Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005, p. 392; McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2017.

¹⁸¹ Following Brinkley, in this work “conservative fundamentalists” does not refer only to Christian Right groups, rather to all conservative extremists within the New Right coalition aiming at restoring traditional American culture. Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994, p. 423 – 424; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005, p. 393; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005.

US national identity. The political Right vigorously opposed modern progressive movements that aimed at reforming universally accepted norms and “moral absolutes”, to contrast different political positions and impose right-wing “cultural hegemony”¹⁸². One of the most powerful conservative groups targeted the attempts of modern feminists to redefine gender roles, leading to ongoing conflicts over abortion, birth control, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Since the 1960s, modern feminists were accused of challenging social norms as divinely ordained and sacred, as they framed gender as a social construction. In the conservative perspective, family and gender were crucial for the development of moral authority and societal cohesion in the US and were not subject to change: “The family is the core institution that decisively determines the nature of society itself. The primary source of moral authority for the developing individual. The moral authority is dependent on a consensus of core values within society”¹⁸³. In the 1980s, racial resentment gradually moved back from the economic to the social domain, as fundamentalists contrasted modern society and increased secularization within the US¹⁸⁴. While they opposed progress often using religious arguments to bolster their claims, they valued “historical middle-class constructions of family, community, and morality” prioritizing prescribed rules for organizing public policy and society¹⁸⁵. Through sustained culture wars, hardline conservatives aimed at mobilizing lower-and-middle- class Americans to uphold traditional moral standards. Since the 1980s, cultural conflicts against modernity gradually evolved into broader battles over US future, which fueled prejudice and discrimination among Americans. Even though radical conservatives sustained the modern neoliberal system, they held cultural and religious beliefs at odds with the basic assumptions of modernism and were committed to redefine American culture accordingly. While their political positions were not held by most Americans, their values, cultural norms, and behaviors had come to dominate public discourse and shape mainstream attitudes. As historian Martin Marty observes, although fundamentalists constituted an “ideological minority” in the US, they

¹⁸² Conservative Patrick Buchanan in 1992 defined the meaning of culture wars for the political Right: Patrick Buchanan in Irene Taviss Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, University of Michigan Press, 2010, p. 177; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005; Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994.

¹⁸³ Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994, pp. 423 – 424; Jane S. De Hart, “Gender on the Right: Meanings Behind the Existential Scream”, *Gender and History*, Vol 3, no 3, (1991): 246 – 267. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1991.tb00130.x>, viewed October 2024; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; statement by pro-family activist in Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right*, Temple University Press, 1987, pp. 23 – 25.

¹⁸⁴ Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994, p. 423 – 424; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005; Freedman, *The Religious Right and the Carter Administration*, 2005; Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, Oxford University Press, 2010; Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 2020.

¹⁸⁵ Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994, p. 423.

represented a “social and behavioral majority”. By polarizing national culture and amplifying collective hostility, they successfully attracted support from both white lower- and middle-class supporters, as well as segments of the elite¹⁸⁶. While in the 1950s and 1960s minorities and marginalized movements had challenged normative American culture for greater democratic equality and general reform, in the 1980s, fundamentalists sought to recover traditional values and civilizational ideals with the idea to protect the status quo¹⁸⁷. Right claims did not originate from a shared desire to reunite Americans and establish a fairer society, rather they were rooted in a common fear of losing historical certainties and predefined privileges, as social changes and greater openness threatened the traditional ‘American way of life’¹⁸⁸. At the core of social clashes there was a widespread belief that progress could reduce WASP dominance in the US: increased gains for minorities were perceived as threats and losses for most white lower – and middle-class Americans¹⁸⁹. The New Right often relied on binary ideological rhetoric, exaggerating contrasts with liberal counterparts, and reinforcing racist stereotypes to garner emotional and electoral support: “Right-wing propositions – says Ricci - linked up and held together constituting a powerful force in America’s political conversation”¹⁹⁰. By the late 1980s, culture wars became existential battles “for the soul of America”: fights over what it meant to be an American and pursue an American way of life. Although radical New Right groups, like the Old Right, aimed at reaffirming universal principles and extending conservative strategies, they gained more mainstream attention in the 1980s as dissatisfaction with liberal policies and the rise of the Republican Party created the environment for a more insurgent form of conservatism¹⁹¹. What distinguished New Right from Old Right activists was the intent of

¹⁸⁶ The historian Martin Marty defined religious conservatives a “cognitive minority” within intellectual realms but a “social and behavioral majority” within society, “owning” the middle-class. Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America*, Dial Press, 1970; Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 1991, and on how culture wars have evolved in the 21st century see: James D. Hunter, “How the Culture War Could Break Democracy”, Interviewed by Zack Stanton, *Politico*, May 2021, available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/05/20/culture-war-politics-2021-democracy-analysis-489900>, viewed October 2024; Lipset, *The Politics of Unreason*, 1978; On the idea of conservative movements polarizing the country: Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

¹⁸⁷ Rightists were defined “status-anxious extremists” resisting progress. De Hart, *Gender on the Right*, 1991, p. 246.

¹⁸⁸ Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 1991, p. 244; Alan Wolfe, “Sociology, Liberalism, and the Radical Right”, *New Left Review*, vol. 128, 1981, pp. 3 – 27.

¹⁸⁹ Hunter, *How the Culture War Could Break Democracy*, 2021; Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, 2004; Mickelthwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005, pp. 63 – 94;

¹⁹⁰ Ricci, *Why Conservatives Tell Stories and Liberals Don’t*, 2010, p. 2; Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 1991; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005.

¹⁹¹ In the 1980s, as a pioneer of the conservative movement, Richard Viguerie stated: “There’s not a great deal new about the new right, our views, our philosophy, our beliefs, are not that different, if at all, from the old right. It is our emphasis that is different at times”, Richard A. Viguerie, *The New Right: We’re Ready to Lead*,

the former to enforce traditional moral standards across American society to wipe out modern corruptions and restore WASP supremacy¹⁹². According to many observers, these groups gained significant influence by capitalizing on widespread discontent toward the Democratic Party since the defeat of Carter in the late 1970s. As liberals abandoned efforts to unify Americans under an optimistic vision, the Right advanced a compelling large-scale conservative narrative to reunite Americans and impact national politics. In a period of profound crisis for the US, without framing a counternarrative able to offer optimistic projections and become part of the political lexicon, the Left provided the space to assert conservative claims and ideals in American society: “While committed to disenchantment, liberals became disadvantaged in contemporary American politics”¹⁹³. At the same time, the ascendancy of the Right in 1980 created a powerful incentive to reconsider the direction of liberalism and push for further reform. Grassroots liberal groups began their own process of renewal, professionalizing operations within the Democratic Party and expanding their political influence. The 1980s marked a defining and tumultuous decade for American progressive forces, as they navigated a political landscape increasingly dominated by conservative ideals. The New Right directly challenged many earlier achievements of liberalism, including civil rights protections, feminist gains, and environmental safeguards. Additionally, the call of the Religious Right for a return to traditional values and morality brought social issues to the forefront of American political discourse¹⁹⁴. Despite the political realignment of the late 1970s, many loyal liberal progressives continued to pursue future victories in a post-New Deal and Reagan era. The disillusionment following the Carter presidency prompted introspection among Democrats and liberal intellectuals, contributing to the rise of new organizations such as the Democratic Leadership Council in the late 1980s. This centrist group aimed to redefine the message of the party in terms of economic competence and social moderation, and it would become instrumental in setting the trajectory of the left throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries¹⁹⁵. Since the 1980s, the preservation of equal rights and the advancement of identity politics have become key objectives for progressive activists. Issues of race, gender, and sexuality gained renewed urgency as efforts to address systemic inequality. The primary goal has been to establish a

Viguerie Company, 1981; Jeromme L. L. Himmelstein, *To The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*, University of California Press, 1992, pp. 77 – 78, 85.

¹⁹² Viguerie, *The New Right*, 1981; Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 1991.

¹⁹³ Ricci, *Why Conservatives Tell Stories and Liberals Don't*, 2010, p. 5; Andelic, *Donkey Work*, 2019; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2017.

¹⁹⁴ Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton*, University Press of Kansas, 2000, pp. 11 – 63.

¹⁹⁵ Baer, *Reinventing Democrats*, 2000, pp. 64 – 93.

more effective coalition of women, minorities, young professionals, and elite members, to overcome internal divisions as well as revitalize the ideological coherence and electoral strategy of the Party. Nonetheless, the sustained focus on social issues of both left and right groups has further exacerbated the divide between the Democratic and Republican parties, making it increasingly difficult to find a common ground and reestablish bipartisan consensus¹⁹⁶.

The impact on the “American project”

Throughout the 1980s, by persuading voters and increasing political engagement, conservative fundamentalists sought to revitalize traditional social and cultural values and restore order in the US. Since the eighteenth century, the US was considered an exceptional nation, recognized for its abundant resources and universal liberal ideals, while most Americans have sustained and promoted a unified ‘American creed’ over the centuries¹⁹⁷. During the Cold War, traditional American values and commitment to freedom served as catalysts for containing the advancement of Soviet communism abroad. Subsequently, the rise of civil rights protests in the 1960s, along with the economic and energy crisis of the 1970s, gradually weakened consensus on core national beliefs. By the 1980s, the rise of the Republican Party and its sustained emphasis on recovering American prosperity and self-assurance reshaped the original concept of the “American project”¹⁹⁸. By insisting on traditional values and personal virtues, conservatives progressively weakened American civic culture and collective solidarity. The affirmation of free market system and the rise of conservative ideology gradually eroded civic engagement and shared national assumptions. Historically, the feasibility of the American project rested on liberty, industriousness, honesty, marriage, and religiosity, allowing individuals to pursue happiness within a cohesive national framework¹⁹⁹. However, as Murray notes: “since the late 1980s, Americans have struggled to live a textured life in the midst of others who are leading textured lives”, as individual freedom and personal interests overshadowed the development of a strong sense of community²⁰⁰. This analysis shows that the affirmation of moral

¹⁹⁶ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 300 – 317; Ricci, *Why Conservatives Tell Stories and Liberals Don’t*, 2010, pp. 4 – 6; Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016.

¹⁹⁷ Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 2022, p. 198.

¹⁹⁸ Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 2022; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 12; Church, *The American Creed*, 2013.

¹⁹⁹ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 12; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 4.

²⁰⁰ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, pp. 306, and 12, 127, 285.

conservatism simultaneously revitalized and disrupted civic involvement among lower-and middle-class Americans. On one hand, conservative interest groups increased general confidence and hope, creating new opportunities for material and spiritual enrichment. On the other hand, populist nationalism and a sustained emphasis on social traditionalism intensified tensions among Americans, preventing the development of shared goals. Although the New Right aimed at preserving traditional societal hierarchies and structures, its approach ultimately undermined collective solidarity and destabilized the middle-class. Fundamentalist ideologies weakened American social capital, making it increasingly difficult to uphold the traditional ‘American way of life’²⁰¹. Over time, the affirmation of a neoliberal system, along with the rise of radical conservatism normalized discriminations in the US. As everybody was entitled to progress in the free market economy, all those who failed to achieve a good level of prosperity were naturally left out and confined to the lower classes. At the same time, racial and supremacist ideals affected habits of association, emphasizing personal virtue and moral superiority while excluding those who did not conform to traditional norms²⁰². The rise of the New Right threatened “to upset the valuable balance of religious and secular interests and to create a repressive theocracy that will trample on the freedoms of all who do not share its ideological and political beliefs”²⁰³. Since the 1980s, conservatism had grown influential in the absence of countervailing democratic forces both in government and society. Weakened unions, diffused community protests, and eroding collective solidarity, allowed conservatives to shape national politics promoting the interests of the few at the expense of the many and undermining the role of a cohesive majority within society²⁰⁴. Ultimately, the libertarian shift in government policy, combined with the ideological impact of conservatism, affected social stability and aspirations. By the late 1980s, Americans no longer aspired to create a cohesive middle-class majority, as community engagement and collective effort were replaced by individual freedom and self-reliance as paths to success. In essence, these trends compromised a shared national identity and the cohesive vision that post-war middle-class Americans had long upheld²⁰⁵. Since the 1980s, although the US reaffirmed its global leadership in the military and technological arenas, it lost a unified understanding of the ‘American creed’; both liberals and

²⁰¹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000; Boggs, *Social Capital and Political Fantasy*, 2001; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005.

²⁰² Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 15 – 17; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005; Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 1991; Brinkley, *The Problem of American Conservatism*, 1994.

²⁰³ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005, p. 371.

²⁰⁴ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2017; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2005.

²⁰⁵ Battistini, *Storia di un Feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012.

conservatives developed diverging visions for society and for living the ‘American way of life’. As the country reasserted its global presence towards the 1990s, it simultaneously lost ideological cohesion, fragmenting into a nation lacking a unified social majority to sustain its power²⁰⁶. Bitter partisanship and polarization, as well as shifting majorities and rapid shifts in policy direction, have compromised foundational ideals and the distinct American practice of working together to find common ground despite differences. As several scholars argue, both consensus building and negotiation are essential for framing economic and social policies that can lead to sustainable prosperity and equal opportunities. The effort to reinvigorate the American project should begin with the government engaging in civil debate and seeking common ground to reduce partisan warfare and restore social cohesion²⁰⁷. Without such efforts, abrupt changes in national direction would affect American economic and social welfare, ultimately endangering American democracy at its roots.

²⁰⁶ Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 2022; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America*, Oxford University Press, 1976; Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004; Barlett, *The Betrayal of the American Dream*, 2013.

²⁰⁷ Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016; Rivlin, *Divided We Fall*, 2022; Hacker, *Winner Take All Politics*, 2010; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2021; Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, pp. 281 – 306.

Chapter 3

The 1970s

For long, the decade of the 1970s and the pervasive American crisis that took place have been viewed as marking the decline of the US as a superpower, or as a watershed and an “half-decade” between two very significant eras for the history of the Nation: the 1960s and the 1980s²⁰⁸. On the one side, the post-war boom, the advancement of civil rights, and the growth of American social consciousness and mobilization; on the other side, a new and improved economy, and the successful conclusion of the Cold War with the spread of liberalism. Yet, the reversal of the 1970s looked multidimensional for the US: in the economic, political, social, and cultural realms²⁰⁹. Since the beginning of the decade, the oil-shock, and the economic crisis, as well as the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal compromised the American way of life and the credibility of the institutions. The government seemed to focus on promoting US power abroad while gradually distancing from public needs within the US, exacerbating pessimism among Americans.. Thus, the Americans perceived the period as a moment of collective, but also of personal crisis developing in the global framework of a prolonged Cold War with the Soviet Union, already undermining the confidence of the government and the people in their goals and values²¹⁰. During that decade, other states experienced several downturns, especially in the Western block and in the Eastern European countries controlled by the Soviet Union. The spread of financial crises, slow growth, and authoritarianism were compromising the Old World. Moreover, rising local tensions and upheavals characterized those years in the Middle East and Asia, fostering the intensification of Islamic fundamentalism²¹¹. Despite this, the

²⁰⁸ Cowie *The Great Exception*, 2010, p. 11; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 3 – 4; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Four Ages of American Foreign Policy: Weak Power, Great Power, Superpower, Hyperpower*, OUP USA, 2022.

²⁰⁹ Niall Ferguson et al., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 1 – 2.

²¹⁰ Ivi.; Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979, and *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, 1996.

²¹¹ Charles Maier, Malaise: The Crisis of Capitalism in the 1970s, in *The Shock of the Global*, 2011, pp. 6-14; 25-49; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 2017; James Harold, *Seven Crashes: The Economic Crises That Shaped Globalization*, Yale University Press, 2023; Richard Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Routledge, 2004. See also: Sigfrido M. Ramirez Pérez, “Crises and Transformations of European Integration: European Business Circles During the Long 1970s”, *European Review of History*, vol. 26, no 4, (2019): 618 – 635. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2019.1613964>, viewed April 2024; Anil Awesti, “The Myth of Eurosclerosis: European Integration in the 1970s”, *L’Europe en Formation*, vol. 3 – 4, no 353 – 354, (2009): 39 – 53. Available at <https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.353.0039>, viewed April 2024; William B. Quandt, “Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and US – Middle East Relations in the 1970s”,

American crisis of the 1970s has been consistently emphasized and reviewed in a comparative perspective with the rest of the world; to the extent that, many among the historians and the political scientists still question the impact and the consequences of the period on the present. Certainly, there are multiple reasons why the crisis of the Nation has been overexposed. Since the end of WWII, the US had held the primacy of a superpower spreading the benefits of liberal ideology and freedom. After the successful conclusion of the War, the economy improved significantly thus guaranteeing a wealthy standard of living for a large part of the American population. This positive record reinforced the confidence of national leaders in the power and goals of the US for initiating the confrontation against the Soviet Union and halting the expansion of communism. Being one of the primary war of ideas, a contest between two competing ideologies, the Americans further strengthened the messianic belief of exporting liberal universal values and culture to guarantee the advancement of democracy around the world²¹². Thus, it is no surprise that from the 1950s to the 1970s, the scars of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the general political turmoil, the civil rights claims, the oil-shock, and double-digit inflation were events significantly challenging the power and the image of the US. The evident mismatch between the words and deeds of the Americans exposed the flaws of decision-making and intensified social tensions. This has increased inequalities at home and has impacted the leadership of the nation abroad. The historical creed in the exceptional character of US democracy compared to the rest of the world started to fall apart: first among the Americans, then in the eyes of the other nations²¹³. Conservatives started to call for the restoration of traditional liberal values for white Americans, relying on patriotic themes and claims. Liberal democrats formed the New Left and denounced the exclusive nature of the American democratic system, condemning the alienation of the establishment and its aggressive international posture. Minorities struggled in a more inclusive social organization still nurturing the powerful forces and privileges of market capitalism. Moreover, the progressive end of the

Journal of Cold War Studies, vol 23, no 1, (2021): 243 – 246. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_r_00993, viewed April 2024; Peter Mansfield and Nicolas Pelham, *A History of the Middle East*, Penguin, 2013.

²¹² Mark Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War”, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, (1999): 539 – 76. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097622>, viewed April 2024; Larry G. Gerber, The Baruch Plan and the Origins of the Cold War, *Diplomatic History*, vol. 6, no. 1, (1982): 69 – 85. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24911302>, viewed April 2024; Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789 – 1989*, Cornell University Press, 2005; Michael W. Doyle, “Kant Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 3, (1983): 205 – 235. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265298>, viewed April 2024; Peter Greis, “Beyond Power Politics: How Ideology Motivates Threat Perception – and International Relations”, *International Studies*, vol. 59, no. 4, (2022): 289 – 314. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817221132147>, viewed April 2024.

²¹³ Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 2022; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; see also: Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, Yale University Press, 2009.

New Deal consensus widened social fractures and disparities, lowering the cohesiveness of the domestic apparatus and the benefits of a liberal democracy. At the same time, the intensification of the conflict with the Soviet Union, for the sole purpose of containing the expansion of communism, continued to weaken the appeal of American soft power and diminish hard power resources.

These are some of the main reasons to state that the decade of the 1970s has set forth the beginning of the American decline. However, the most important reason to still recast the events of the period and the following final years of the 20th century is that the effects of the crisis have significantly transformed the US from that moment onward. Since the 1980s, the internal consequences of the crisis may have deeply changed the configuration of the country until these days, originating a clear and enduring socio-political divide, and withering the social compact of the American middle-class. For fair and objective analyses of the history of the US and of contemporary American policy, it is worthwhile to recapture the main causes originating and explaining the present outcome. The purpose of this work is to advance a possible interpretation of some specific developments that might have contributed to this often-underestimated change within the Nation. The perceived transformation of the American social fabric visible today seems to have taken place between the late 1970s and early 1980s. As resulting from both the crisis of the 1970s, and the transition between the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. As previously outlined, the two case studies in this work will support the description of the change in structure and direction of the US from the second half of the last century. They are going to better illustrate the spirit of American society and the orientation of both parties at the turn of the 1980s. Thus, they might reveal how national leaders shaped new political identities and a new social configuration within the US, through different domestic policies and with a diverse political rhetoric. Before pursuing a more specific analysis of the role of the two Administrations, it is necessary to highlight the context and the main events of the crisis of the 1970s that could have been the harbinger of the transformation of the US and the affirmation of the new American society of the 1980s.

The context of crisis

Recently, the decade of the 1970s has been re-evaluated as the inauguration of American modernity and an opportunity for the government and the people to present a new model of

America. Those years marked both “a cloven decade and a transformative one”²¹⁴. Surely, the events characterizing it have marked the course of US history in a significant way; nevertheless, since the conclusion of the Cold War, the Nation has held extensive power in the geopolitical arena.²¹⁵ In the 1980s, a general commitment to recover social stability and succeed in the contest with the Soviet Union had grown within the US. At the same time, the development of globalization, the affirmation of technological advances, and the transnational nature of contemporary global challenges had further enabled US institutions to rethink national priorities and elaborate more nuanced domestic and foreign policies²¹⁶. Only a decade later, in the 1990s, the US seemed able to recover national wealth and promote the liberal ideology around most of the world²¹⁷. Since then, a significant number of Americans has regained a significant standard of living, and the US government has sustained the leadership in progress and global engagement. But what happened to the composition of the American society? How did the social discontent of the 1970s affect the structure of the American society? As argued in this study, the positive recovery of the nation may have blurred the effects of the profound transformation that occurred towards the 1980s. In the near term, the economic gap, the religious revival, the new ideological orientation of the Democratic and Republican Parties, cultural wars, and social tensions seemed a temporary repercussion of the crisis of the 1970s. However, the subsequent affirmation of these tendencies and sources of influence has disclosed their imprint on the contemporary nature of the US. The social and political configuration of the country before the crisis of the 1970s has not re-emerged yet. The traditional structure of American society with a cohesive and pivotal middle class and a distinct bipartisan consensus have not reemerged so far. At present, many denounce a lack of social cohesion and of clear strategy at the domestic and international levels. The new multipolar world and an ever more globalized reality surrounding the nation have exposed the vulnerabilities of American policy and society. More interconnection between countries and people, and recent unconventional threats have

²¹⁴ John Heale, “Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class” by Jefferson Cowie, *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, (2013): 464-465. DOI:10.1017/S0021875813000339, viewed March 2024.

²¹⁵ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, De Capo Press, 2002; Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, 2016.

²¹⁶ Matthew Connelly, “Future Shock”, in Ferguson, *Shock of the Global*, 2011.

²¹⁷ Despite being a thesis now largely reviewed, around the 1990s, many scholars sustained the supremacy of the US within the international sphere. At the time, the spread of the liberal ideology and the success of the democratic system seemed to present a new unipolar world order for the US. After the fall of communism in 1989, always more countries embraced democratization processes and American soft power pervaded the international realm. According to the observers, the American model seemed the most effective. See: Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992; Nye, *Bound to Lead*, 1990; Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991; Ferguson, *Shock of the Global*, 2011.

significantly challenged the unity and purpose of the US. Nowadays, it is widely agreed that the Nation should strengthen its social and political order in the New Century: first, bringing together the American people narrowing polarization and mitigating radical forces; then, outlining a coherent and comprehensive Grand Strategy to face the international domain and abandon the tendency to embark on bipolar confrontations²¹⁸. Reconsidering US history, social fragmentation and the lack of a consistent transnational approach could be the shortcomings of the transformation between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The greatest drawback of the period was the intensification of social and political polarization, preventing unity and shared objectives. Towards the last decades of the 20th century, the abrupt changes of policy and direction of the country have mitigated through successful achievements the rising social and political tensions within the nation. Still today, besides the restoration of economic and military prominence, a cohesive social fabric is absent within the US. However, a vibrant and cooperative civil society is fundamental to support effective soft power and to display successful leadership abroad²¹⁹. The US must strengthen its primacy from the inside restoring an efficient government and recovering a well-regulated and balanced society. Reconsidering the 1970s, this study identifies the correlation of the following events as favoring the transformation of American society towards the second half of the 20th century: the end of the New Deal consensus; the economic crisis and the worsening of the American Standard of Living; the rise of new political movements and the shift in structure and direction of the mainstream Democratic and Republican Parties. More specifically, these events have mostly affected the policy-making process within the administrations of presidents Carter and Reagan and have brought about the new American society of the 1980s.

²¹⁸ Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Cornell University Press, 2014, and *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump*, Brookings Institution Press, 2018; Lecture by Prof. Daniele Fiorentino at University of Trento, “The End of the American Empire? Transnational and Exceptionalist Approaches”, February 2017. Available at: <https://it.usembassy.gov/lecture-prof-daniele-fiorentino-univ-trento-event/>, viewed April 2024; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton University Press, 2005; Joseph S. Nye, *Is the American Century Over?*, Global Futures, 2015; Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, 2009; Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era*, OUP USA, 2016; John G. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton University Press, 2012.

²¹⁹ Nye, *Bound to Lead*, 1990; Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004.

The transformations during the 1970s

Commonly, the New Deal legacy is a period spanning from the 1940s to the early 1980s. It is defined by Cowie as an era of “Great Exception”: a temporal arch during which the US reached the greatest level of social equality . In the 1930s, the government, headed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, directed national resources primarily to the working sector with the objective of guaranteeing collective economic rights: state resources had to assist non-elite Americans²²⁰. During this period, the US administration promoted an unconventional ideology considering individual liberty as ensuring freedom from want and securing pro-labor and efficient allocation of resources. This philosophy was related to a modern form of liberalism originating in the aftermath of the Great Depression, when the priority of the government was ensuring economic security for political equality. Modern liberalism prioritized common economic rights over moral and individual rights, to the extent that it has been named “labor liberalism”. In particular, the Democratic Party supported labor activism and the propositions advanced by American trade unions providing a space and a political dimension where corporatist bargaining could be legitimized²²¹. Consequently, the Americans tolerated state intervention for safeguarding democratic stability and equality of opportunity. Even during the early years of the Cold War, the labor protections of the welfare state were linked with free trade and internationalist engagement. A similar system set a common ground where workers and businessmen could engage with the capitalist market and resist communist threats²²². Overall, the New Deal is described as an “interregnum between gilded ages”, where the forces of capitalism seemed to be manageable through a balanced relationship between state and business. Labor organization, cooperation between liberal democrats and the government, and the mitigation of racial and ethnic divisions after the advancement of civil rights ensured a certain level of unity within

²²⁰ Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2017, Intro. See also: Wendy Wall, and Jefferson Cowie, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 122, no. 1, (2017): 186 - 87. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26576591>, viewed March 2024; Laurence Kenworthy, “The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics” by Jefferson Cowie, Princeton University Press, 2016, *Perspective on Politics*, (2017): 237. Available at: doi:10.1017/S1537592717002419, viewed March 2021.

²²¹ The Wagner Act of 1935 established the first American national labor policy, legitimizing labor unions and collective bargaining under the control of National Labor Relations Board. The Act regulated relations between workers and employers in industrial spaces, allowing shared decision-making. Subsequently, the provisions and insurances of the Wagner Act were threatened by the passing of the Taft Hartley Act (1947) by the Republican wing of the Congress, limiting labor organization and activism within the US. See: Charles J. Morris, *Labor Policy: A Critical Appraisal of the National Labor Relations Act*, Bna Books, 1987; Theodore J. St. Antoine, “How the Wagner Act Came to Be: A Prospectus”, *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 96, no 8, 1998. Available at doi: 10.237/1290171, viewed April 2024.

²²² Nelson Lichtenstein, “Labour, Liberalism, and the Democratic Party: A Vexed Alliance”, *Industrial Relations*, vol. 66, no 4, (2011): 520. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23078394>, viewed May 2024.

the country. Hence, the period has been considered an “exception” for the encouragement of progressive ideals and politics securing a model of society apparently difficult to recreate in the future²²³. The nostalgia for the harmony and the benefits diffused within the nation at the time has lasted until these days among Americans. New Deal culture had permeated American society until the 1970s, fueling subsequent nostalgia for the diffused harmony and benefits during that time. According to many observers, from the final decades of the 20th century, American society has been marked by “plutocracy”, consumerism, and inequality²²⁴. Through the process of de-industrialization and the affirmation of corporate entrepreneurialism, a small political and business elite seems to have pursued specific interests at the expense of the needy, the workers, and the overall social compact. Therefore, the peculiar concern of the policies of the New Deal towards the collective community and the workers, and the historical activism of labor organization have not lasted until the contemporary era²²⁵. Throughout the history of the US, individualism and economic independence have coexisted with economic centralization, allowing most of the people to preserve their social status and provide for basic needs. Nevertheless, the government has always played a key role in ensuring an appropriate balance between the two tendencies, so that the overall costs do not outweigh the benefits and progress is not prevented for specific groups. Since the second half of the last century, racial hostility, individualism, moral crusades, and cultural wars have permeated the electorate of both political Parties at the expense of a general commitment towards shared class interests and social security. At the same time, the American establishment has struggled for the affirmation of a broad policy

²²³ Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2017, p. 151; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022., Paul Krugman in Jefferson Cowie, and Nick Salvatore, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no 74, (2008): 3 – 32. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27673117>, viewed March 2024; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal*, Cengage Learning, 2003; Lichtenstein, *Labour, Liberalism, and the Democratic Party*, 2011, pp. 515 – 516; Andrew Battista, *The Revival of Labor Liberalism*, University of Illinois Press, 2008. To further explore the development of “labor liberalism” see also: Denis W. Brogan, *The American Character*, Vintage, 1956, cited in Ira Katznelson and Daniel Kryder, *Limiting Liberalism: The Southern Veto in Congress, 1933 – 1950*, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 108, no 2, pp. 283 – 306.

²²⁴ Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?*, Scribner, 2016; Robert Dallek, *How Did We Get There?: From Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump*, Harper, 2020. At the end the 1970s, Christopher Lasch emphasized the trend of the contemporary Americans of transforming the “nostalgia” for the past into a “marketable commodity on the cultural exchange” leading to an effective cultural devaluation of the past. As a result, nostalgia is molded according to specific political interests. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979.

²²⁵ Cowie, “The Era of Big Government Is Not Over (But the New Deal Probably Is)”, in *The Great Exception*, 2017, pp. 209 – 230; Frank, *Listen, Liberal*, 2016; Dallek, *How Did We Get There?*, 2020; Everett Carl Ladd Jr. and Charles D. Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System*, W. W. Norton, 1975; Ronald P. Formisano, *Plutocracy in America: How Increasing Inequality Destroys the Middle Class and Exploits the Poor*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010, and *The Great Exception*, 2017; Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place and Region*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

framework for the well-being of the people, exacerbating, instead, divergences in the social and political realms²²⁶. As Ibram Kendi argues, political decisions and policies from both parties have often failed to dismantle systemic inequities, using social issues as a divisive tool rather than addressing tensions at their roots²²⁷. Particularly, from the 1970s, the delicate balance between capitalism and individualism characterizing the American Standard of Living has been affected by the increase of dissent within American society²²⁸. The domestic and international events involving the US and the adoption of a more conservative ethos by the government have compromised the social order within the nation, thus, the endurance of a New Deal-style system. Additionally, the progressive affirmation of neo-liberal and neoconservative political movements has withered bipartisan consensus and altered domestic stability. Over time, the inability of major parties to prioritize policies that could address the common good has amplified divisions that compromise American social cohesion. Increased emphasis on individualism, as well as on divisive cultural and moral issues has eroded the possibility of creating a more participatory democracy, where to advocate for shared interests and a more equitable society²²⁹.

The white middle class and blue-collar workers in the 1970s

Towards the 1970s, a rapidly evolving society and the overall failure of the Democratic government to implement effective aid measures through ambitious initiatives, such as the Great Society Program, started to threaten the stability of the American lower-middle class²³⁰. Specifically, after the advancement of civil rights, white American workers resisted

²²⁶ Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2016, ch. 7; Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 1994; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Don De Lillo, *White Noise*, Penguin Classics, 1985; Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America*, Basic Books, 1984; Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the 15th Century to the 21st*, Harper, 2016.

²²⁷ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Nation Books, 2016.

²²⁸ Robert J. Gordon, "The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The US Standard of Living Since the Civil War", in the series *The Princeton Economic History - Economic History of the Western World*, Princeton University Press, 2016; Frank, *Listen, Liberal*, 2016; Greenspan, *Capitalism in America*, 2019; Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 1992; Jill Lepore, *The American Beast: Essays 2012 – 2022*, John Murray Publishers, 2023.

²²⁹ Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 2004.

²³⁰ The Great Society Program advanced by President Johnson promoted a set of domestic policy initiatives to reorganize the American social system and boost economic growth. The Program presented a set of ambitious measures and required a large federal investment to strengthen the national system. The inability of the government to effectively implement the promised changes affected and compromised the loyalty of the white Democratic electorate. Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, Hill & Wang Pub, 2001, and *Nixonland*, 2009; Gary Gerstle, "Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus by Rick Perlstein", *Dissent*, vol. 48, no 4, (2001): 135. Available at: <http://biblio-proxy.uniroma3.it/magazines/before-storm-barry-goldwater-unmaking-american/docview/227272793/se-2?accountid=13585>, viewed April 2024; Sidney Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism*, University of Massachusetts, 2005.

greater social inclusion and aimed at contrasting modern progress, fearing to lose their status and economic strength.. From the beginning of the decade, the general worsening of economic conditions and the rise of unemployment induced a strong personal and psychological struggle among average white Americans. Since 1964, the Civil Rights Act constitutionally prohibited job discrimination and allowed a greater openness of the working place, reflecting the post-war tendency of the new politics to include minorities and ensure equal opportunities. However, greater inclusion triggered a form of “inter-ethnic competition” amid the white blue-collar workers, who saw it as a threat to their own security and social status. Over time, they developed a “color-blind” ideology, reclaiming racial segregation and social division as natural outcomes of the free market system. According to them, despite its being previous focus on collective economic thinking and the protection of workers, the Democratic party had become primarily concerned with identity politics and social issues. By focusing on minorities and the poor, the priority of the Party shifted to ensuring individual rights and effective social justice²³¹. Workers were not excluded from this project but, in a truly liberal government, they had to share equal rights even with whom had been left out before. In other words, prior to job security, individual rights had to be granted for all social groups. Even though there was more openness within the workplace, there was no concrete social acceptance and unity between workers. The commitment of the Democratic Party to affirmative action had prompted a sense of discrimination and marginalization among the white blue-collars. The perceived feeling of underrepresentation at the top-level caused a widespread quest for self-definition and self-understanding. At the same time, the unfolding of a new cross-sectorial and differentiated job field did not preserve the existence of a definite social category for industrial workers²³². Since the end of the 1960s, the US economy adopted a free market orientation to cope with slow economic growth and rising inflation. By fostering the rise of corporate power, libertarian policies exacerbated the wealth gap among Americans. Gradually, with the differentiation of economic production, the territories of the South became both a new hub for economic progress, and a space for the formation of a different regional identity. Fearing a loss of their

²³¹ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 2005, p. 227; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; Nickerson, *Sunbelt Rising*, 2014; Charles W. Eagles, review of “The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South” by Matthew D. Lassiter, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 122, no 1, (2007): 147 – 149. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400849420>, viewed May 2024. On title VII of the Civil Rights Act 1964: Clay Risen, *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act*, Bloomsbury Press, 2014; Gregory F. Raymond, *The Civil Rights Act and the Battle to End Workplace Discrimination: A 50 Year History*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014; Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, 2022.

²³² Cowie *Stayin' Alive*, 2010, p. 365; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 2005; Nickerson, *Sunbelt Rising*, 2014.

social status, many working-class Americans started to look for other employment opportunities beyond the industrial states of the Rust Belt, and towards the emerging “Sun Belt”. The Southern and Western areas embodied an opportunity for social re-invention: a region where the “American Dream” could be remade²³³. For the average white American families, the Sun Belt represented a dimension where to find new occupations and renovated forms of community and entertainment. Since the 1930s, the idea of the American Dream had expressed the national belief and hope of the Americans to achieve personal progress and happiness through freedom of opportunity and hard work. Traditionally, the white middle-class Americans actively sustained this belief and aimed at holding the adequate means for a wealthy standard of living²³⁴. In the 1960s, the faith in its realization had substantially diminished because of the increase in economic and social inequalities. Towards the 1970s, the rise of the Sun Belt bolstered general confidence in the possible revival of the collective “dream” and social identity.

The political re-alignment

The geographical and demographic re-location towards the South concurrently mirrored a deeper shift at the political level: the alignment of many traditional democrats with the Republican Party. At the beginning of the 1970s, the social and political configuration of the South undergoing significant transformation, largely due to the unmet promises of the Great Society and the national events of the 1960s²³⁵. The politics of Johnson, which had aimed to

²³³ In 1969, Phillips coined the term “Sun Belt” states referring to the region representing the Southern tier of the US and comprehending the Southeast and Southwest. Since the 1970s, the Sun Belt has represented an increasingly expanding and profitable space within the US because of the shift of economic productivity from the Midwest and the Northeast towards the South. Most of all, due to the changing nature of American labor, this area has progressively reunited most of the white blue-collars in search of new economic opportunities and better living conditions. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, 1969; Nickerson, *Sunbelt Rising*, 2014; Katherine R. Jewell, “The Rise of the Sunbelt South”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 2020. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.833>, viewed May 2024.

²³⁴ In the 1930s, James Truslow Adams introduced the term and rephrased the idea of the American Dream referring to ordinary American people seeking to hold the inalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. Adams highlighted how in this collective project recognition plays a central role. Even though the actual realization of the Dream is achievable only individually, the element of the otherness - able to recognize, appreciate and, eventually, imitate one’s own status - is key to its effective fulfillment. Hence, this clarifies why white middle-class people perceived a moment of crisis and change as a threat to their social status and identity. See: James T. Adams, *The Epic of America*, 1st edition, Routledge, 2012. On the idea of the American dream throughout American history see also: Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 2005; Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 1999; De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 2006; Sandra L. Hanson and John K. White, *The American Dream in the 21st Century*, Temple University Press, 2011.

²³⁵ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Ladd and Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System*, 1975; Giordana Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio e vulnerabilità: Il controllo degli armamenti strategici negli Stati Uniti alla fine della distensione*, Mondadori Università, 2018, Ch. 1.3.

eradicate poverty, expand civil rights, and improve education and healthcare, had faced challenges in fully delivering on its ambitious goals, particularly in the South, where resistance to desegregation and federal intervention was strong. At the same time, the national events of the 1960s, including the Civil Rights Movement, urban riots, and escalating opposition to the Vietnam War, also fueled a sense of disillusionment. The promise of a better, more equitable society that had defined the Democratic Party seemed unfulfilled, prompting a realignment in their political ideologies. Initially, throughout the post-war decade, blue-collar workers, and a significant portion of the white American middle-class were strong supporters of the Democratic Party for its progressive policies championing social security and the well-being of the community. This support was deeply rooted in the historical advocacy of the Party for the rights of workers, labor protections, and a commitment to addressing economic disparities. The Democratic South, especially, had long aligned with it due to its focus on ensuring social safety nets and community-centered policies²³⁶. On the other side, the Republican Party had always seemed to praise principles of fiscal conservatism in the interest of the upper classes, promote white supremacy, and commit to strong defense and aggressive foreign policy. Yet, over time, the ideals and claims of many moderate liberals started to distance from the social goals of the Democratic Party²³⁷. As said, especially white working-class liberals did not support the great engagement of the Party in the promotion of racial equality and the rights of the marginalized groups, perceiving it as a form of racial exclusion at the expense of their own interests. Within that context, conservatives and right-wingers increasingly focused on white populist resentment to build a new right coalition and revive the Republican Party. Precisely, racial issues and dissatisfaction would become key for the later dismantling of the New Deal consensus and assertion of the New Right. From the 1960s, the emergence of the counterculture and the general focus on personal politics against the liberal state, as a “chain reaction”, enabled the building of a new conservative strategy²³⁸. Since the middle of the decade, influential conservative leaders, such as George Wallace and Barry Goldwater, had attempted to develop an appealing political rhetoric and a convincing strategy to attract

²³⁶ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

²³⁷ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; David Reinhard, *The Republican Right since 1964*, University Press of Kentucky, 1983; John R. Petrocik, “Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s”, by Everett Carl Ladd Jr. and Charles D. Hadley, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 71, no. 4, (1977): 1669 – 1670. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1961546>, viewed May 2024.

²³⁸ Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 1992; Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics and Culture*, Harcourt, Brace, 1996; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

dissatisfied white liberals²³⁹. In this respect, they started to combine “racism, antigovernment claims, populism, and economic conservatism” to foster a liberal response. Their goal was both a matter of racial and class politics. Already during the first years of the Cold War, conservatives had the aim to gather more forces opposing the New Deal both in the South, and beyond the traditionally right-oriented territories of the US²⁴⁰. However, the widespread acceptance of the liberal system and the success of collective provisions did not favor the creation of an alternative strong conservative politics. Moreover, in the 1960s, the emphasis on racism and authoritarianism during the civil rights and antiwar upheavals did not ease the opposition to right-wing populism. Only towards the 1970s, because of the rise in economic inequality and the growing resistance to the racial egalitarian politics of the Democratic government, the Republican strategy could be fulfilled. The possibility to merge racial identification with political discontent set the premises for the creation of an appropriate conservative party-apparatus. Through party building, linguistic appeals and emotional slogans, social movement organizing, and state power exercising the conservative coalition could turn effectively into a political identity. This development led, first to the victory of President Nixon in 1972, then of Reagan in 1981 and the affirmation of modern conservatism²⁴¹. Since the beginning of the decade, Nixon had undermined the New Deal coalition and reshaped the political identity of a large part of the Americans. Aided by the lack of a cohesive and influential Democratic counterpart, he favored the political convergence of many moderate democrats towards the Right and increased the assertiveness of the US within the international system. Following the affirmation of the civil rights, the

²³⁹ Already at the 1964 and 1968 elections, the white liberal electorate residing in the South, with the more conservative and segregationist groups, manifested the signs of an important political shift voting for the Republican Party and setting the ground for the following success of the conservative strategy. An important role was played also by the gradual diffusion of conservative ideals from influential political figures. Gary Donaldson, *Liberalism's Last Hurrah: The Presidential Campaign of 1964*, Sharpe, 2003, pp. 53-79; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 2001; Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio e vulnerabilità*, 2018, pp. 30 – 31.

²⁴⁰ Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 2001; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008, pp. 4 – 8. According to Lowndes, George Wallace appeared as among the first conservatives attempting to forge a Republican coalition against the New Deal and the Great Society Program pointing beyond the South. Moreover, the author points out how emerging conservative magazines, such as the “National Review”, “Commentary Magazine”, and the “National Interest”, seemed to have a fundamental role in developing the anti-New Deal language and political strategy targeting the South. Especially, they were key to re-modernize the common thought on conservatism as a prerogative of white elites, and to later forge neoconservative ideals. See: Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Jody Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness: The Wallace Campaigns for the Presidency, 1964 – 1967*, Routledge, 1980; Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963 – 1994*, Louisiana State University Press, 1996; Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, 1996; Norman Podhoretz, “My Negro Problem-And Ours”, *Transition*, no 20, (1965): 13 – 18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2934380>, viewed April 2024, and “Neoconservatism: A Eulogy” in Norman Podhoretz, *The Norman Podhoretz Reader*, Free Press, 1995.

²⁴¹ Following President Nixon, American conservatives progressively started to form the group later encouraging the Reaganite revolution. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008, pp. 4 – 6; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, , 2020, Intro; Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, 2009, p. 174.

President aimed at combining racism with conservatism and populism for the success of the Republican Party²⁴². He targeted white middle-class workers considering them the majority within American society. At the same time, stressing opposition to big government and bureaucracy, he presented his political agenda as an opportunity for the liberal democrats across the US to restrain the integration of minorities and re-organize the welfare state. Emphasizing both liberal and conservative themes, Nixon had the goal to empower the so-called “Silent Majority” of the nation. With his book, in 1969, Kevin Phillips formalized the strategy of the GOP and introduced the term referring to the “conservatives, the white Southerners, the Sunbelt dwellers and the blue-collar ethnics” reunited by the President²⁴³. These social groups shared the same commitment to recover individual freedom against centralization and big government, and to limit greater social inclusion: “instead of reducing federal power and money, the Nixon administration expanded and redirected it, in such a way as to deflect criticism by the liberals and satisfy other groups”²⁴⁴. A clear example of the scheme framed by Nixon was the proposal of the “Family Assistance Plan” (FAP) in 1969. Even though the Bill did not officially pass, it reflected the strong commitment of the Administration to create a new conservative majority pointing at the white American working-class besides specific party affiliations²⁴⁵. The FAP aimed to expand federal welfare for the working poor, while increasing federal spending in the Southern states. This approach could have appealed to both traditionally Democratic and Republican groups. Although the bill was still under discussion in government, it quickly became a political platform for the president to address the growing anti-welfare sentiments among blue-collar workers. At the same time, the anti-statist rhetoric also resonated with anti-racist, leftist, and countercultural movements of the era. This allowed the conservative establishment to envision the emergence of a new political identity among white American workers, willing

²⁴² Nixon and the Republican party were somehow advancing what would be called “the counter-reformation of capitalism”. Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2017, p. 202; Perslstein, *Nixonland*, 2008; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

²⁴³ *Ivi.*, p. 107; Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, 1969; Peter Hamill, “The Problem of the Blue-Collar Worker”, *New York Magazine*, April 1969. Available at: <https://nymag.com/news/features/46801/>, viewed April 2024, and “The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class”, *New York Magazine*, May 2008. Available at <https://nymag.com/news/features/46801/>, viewed March 2024. In the speech of November 1969, influenced by the writings of the time, Nixon re-used the term Silent Majority referring to all the Americans non engaged in civic realm but law-abiding. See: Richard Nixon, “The Great Silent Majority of My Fellow Americans”, Speech November 3, 1969, in Rick Perslstein, *Richard Nixon: Speeches, Writings, Documents*, Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 170 – 190.

²⁴⁴ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008, p. 125.

²⁴⁵ Lowndes; Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 2009. Following this line, also the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was introduced in 1973 to train workers and increase public jobs. The Act targeted specifically low-middle income workers and disadvantaged groups. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 2009.

to challenge both the Right and the Left. By the 1980s, these groups would coalesce around shared “neoconservative” ideals²⁴⁶. Primarily, Nixon aimed at gathering the support of both libertarian and social conservatives eager to strengthen the US at the domestic and international levels reinvesting in the national economy. The former willing to reverse the American establishment, affirm freedom of enterprise, and contain the expansion of communism; the latter calling for government regulation according to constitutional principles and traditional values, while supporting an aggressive foreign policy against the Soviet Union²⁴⁷. Together with the disaffected liberal democrats, these groups were the “Forgotten Men” at the margin of the political and economic structure of the US. The main objective of what became known as the “Southern Strategy” of the President was to break up the New Deal coalition and weaken the democratic alliance, while expanding the electoral base of the Republican Party²⁴⁸. Disillusioned liberals, who were not part of the more radical New Left of the 1960s, still sought to defend their position with respect to social demands. In the campaign of Nixon and in the Republican coalition itself, they envisioned a new space where to safeguard their concerns. Distancing from old-leftist claims, they started to elaborate a different “neo-liberal” rationale. According to historians, neoliberalism developed as the intellectual manifestation of the “Silent Majority”, determined to achieve an upper status and education to fit in the American system. Differently from traditional liberalism, this new reasoning encouraged free market economic policies to direct the national economy²⁴⁹. If the former was labeled “labor liberalism” for its collective awareness, the latter was more an “economic liberalism”, for its emphasis on free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurship. Assuming that the Democratic establishment was unable to

²⁴⁶ *Ivi.*, pp. 149 and 154. Lowndes affirms that the idealized new political subjectivity had to “eschew ideologies on the left and embrace those of the right”. Scott J. Spitzer, “Nixon’s New Deal: Welfare Reform for the Silent Majority”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2012. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41684513>, viewed April 2024.

²⁴⁷ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012, pp. 13 – 14; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Empire*, Yale University Press, 2004.

²⁴⁸ Despite having different intentions and referring to dissimilar social groups, Nixon emulated President Franklin Delano Roosevelt attracting the “forgotten men” of American society: the white blue-collars and the middle class within the US. According to Lassiter, the latter resided in Southern suburbs and initially defended consumer rights and residential privileges of white middle class families. The process of suburbanization progressively led to the convergence of the South with the rest of the country.

Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 2006, p. 227; Jefferson Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969-1973”, *Labor History*, vol. 43, no. 3, (2002): 257 – 283. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/14057772.pdf>, viewed April 2024; Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Radio Address From Albany, New York, available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-from-albany-new-york-the-forgotten-man-speech>, viewed April 2024. Amity Shales, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, Harper Perennial, 2008.

²⁴⁹ Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization”, *Political Theory*, vol. 34, no 6, (2006): 690-714. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20452506>, viewed April 2024.

secure national well-being and economic growth, market forces became the solution to govern US economy and society. Contrary to political liberalism supporting federal assistance, neoliberals imagine the function of the government as merely supervising the efficiency of the market system for the well-being of rational consumers²⁵⁰. According to this view, the state must sustain a free-market orientation and freedom of enterprise, allowing natural market trends to direct both the economy and society. Towards the beginning of the 1970s, market strategies appeared more reliable than government regulations to boost economic growth and restore the living standards of the American middle-class. Neoliberals began to project a business-oriented model of the state fostering a national culture according to need satisfaction and wealth²⁵¹. Precisely, contrasting the “big” government idea and promoting free market, the neoliberals could find a common ground with the conservative group supporting the Republican Party. Elaborating this reasoning, a large part of the working and middle-class Americans could positively embrace more libertarian principles to preserve their status²⁵². As this shows, any significant political re-alignment is not only a matter of embracing a different political faith and outlook; it is also a matter of finding the best means and opportunities to preserve social identities and culture. Despite an initial success following the 1972 elections, the lack of cooperation with other government divisions and mediating institutions restrained the abilities of Nixon to entirely achieve his goals before resigning. Particularly, the Vietnamization of the conflict in Southeast Asia as well as the subsequent impeachment for the Watergate scandal further prevented the consolidation of the Republican Party²⁵³. Nevertheless, through his strategy, Nixon succeeded in setting the ground for the formation of a neoconservative majority within the nation, and subsequent triumph of the right in the 1980s. The progressive break down of the New Deal system as well as the political re-alignment described so far seemed mainly a republican endeavor. However, reconsidering US history towards the end of the 1970s, both the growing popular domestic concerns and the following democratic presidency of Jimmy Carter greatly influenced the official conclusion of the New Deal consensus and the American socio-political configuration.

²⁵⁰ Brown, *American Nightmare*, 2006, p. 694. In this respect, according to Habermas, neoliberals called for the “equal right to inequality” within the American society against the democratic commitment to egalitarianism. Jürgen Habermas, “Learning from Catastrophe?” in *Postcolonial Constellations*, The MIT Press, 2001, pp. 51 – 52.

²⁵¹ Brown, *American Nightmare*, 2006; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

²⁵² Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

²⁵³ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008, pp. 138 – 139; Cowie, *Nixon’s Class Struggle*, 2002, pp. 257 – 283; Cynthia Tucker and Frye Gaillard, *The Southernization of America: A Story of Democracy in the Balance*, Georgia University Press, 2022.

Since the 1977 elections, three specific factors favored this outcome during his administration: the unfolding of the energy and economic crisis, the shared opposition for government intervention, and the rise in antiwar protests²⁵⁴. Carter inaugurated his term amid one of the most severe economic crises within the US. Because of the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, skyrocketing commodity prices, fuel shortages, and substantial unemployment dominated within the nation²⁵⁵. Moreover, the growing general distrust towards the government and the institutions influenced the collective perceptions of the Americans. In the final years of the 1970s, Carter faced a largely divided left skeptical on the issue of a centralized strong federal state, as well as a fragmented Democratic Party itself. The failure of previous leaderships and federal programs as well as the international shortcomings of the conflict with the Soviet Union undermined the unity of the overall democratic coalition. Moderate-centrist liberals increasingly endorsed free market and stronger anti-communist beliefs to strengthen the national economy; radical leftists denounced the inefficiency of the government and wanted to stop the confrontation with the Soviet Union. This internal division was reflected within the democratic Administration and would strongly influence its policy-making process. Throughout the presidential term, these diverging groups would orient the priorities and the targets of the President and would hinder the achievement of effective compromises. The selected case study of the Camp David Domestic Summit, presented in this work, would later show how certain members of the Administration conditioned the crisis perceptions of the President and were the main architects behind the Crisis of Confidence Speech of July 15, 1979²⁵⁶. The Domestic Summit and the following Speech were landmark events for both the White House and the Americans themselves. They were not only concrete evidence of the widespread crisis expanding within the nation, but also a signal of the progressive dissolution of the traditional American socio-political configuration. Throughout the Summit, by emphasizing the moral and spiritual nature of the malaise within the US, stressing the lack of confidence of the Americans towards the institutions, and insisting with denouncing consumerism and self-indulgence as the main causes of the national regression, the key figures of the Administration influenced the

²⁵⁴ Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

²⁵⁵ Ferguson, *The Shock of the Global*, 2010; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 2017; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

²⁵⁶ From the Presidential Files of the Camp David Domestic Summit, it clearly emerges that Stuart Eizenstat as Chief Domestic Adviser and Executive Director of the White House Domestic Policy Staff, as well as Patrick Caddell as Public Opinion Pollster within the Carter Administration were the main figures behind the domestic policy of the President from the end of the 1970s and towards the 1980 elections. Particularly, they would emphasize the crisis mood of the nation and would insist with the need to seize the energy and inflation problems as resulting from the consumerist American Standard of Living. Personal Notes, Jimmy Carter Notes Camp David Domestic Summit, July 1979, Box 19, Plain Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

emergency response of Carter and intensified popular discontent. Consequentially, Carter appeared as a President insisting on resilience, moderation, and self-restraint for individual and national salvation amid the crisis. Perceiving his political messages as a collective call to sacrifice and as a further confirmation of the limits of American abundance and opportunities, the public opinion progressively distanced itself from Carter and the Democratic Party²⁵⁷. Particularly, the image of a vulnerable leader favored the detachment of the remaining dissatisfied white liberals from the Party, not envisioning it as the expression of the middle-class and the working people²⁵⁸. I don't remember if you define what you mean by public opinion or not. You should somewhere At first, in the middle of the 1970s, Carter was elected also because he promoted a domestic agenda limiting federal spending and welfare provisions to decrease inflation and unemployment for the Americans. At the same time, being a Christian evangelical, he advocated human rights and peace, and supported appeasement strategies to address the growing anti-war protests within the US and mitigate the confrontation with the Soviet Union²⁵⁹. Carter was aware of the importance to reinvigorate the support of the white blue-collar, to reunite the Democratic Party and to halt the advancement of the emerging conservative majority. In this light, he was determined to reinforce popular confidence towards the institutions by reducing the size of the federal government and reorganizing federal bureaucracy. Already in his State of the Union Address of 1978, Carter admitted the limits of the government in solving national problems and setting clear goals at the domestic and international levels²⁶⁰. Following Nixon, he wanted to transfer federal powers to state and local governments to handle inflation and progressively decrease centralization. Witnessing a severe energy and economic crisis, deregulation, gas rationing and energy conservation, and state-private cooperation were the initial targets of his policy²⁶¹. Carter has been considered a "conservative-democrat"

²⁵⁷ Personal Notes, Jimmy Carter Notes Camp David Domestic Summit, July 1979, Box 19, Plain Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Statement, "Religious Community Comment Statement on Jimmy Carter Speech", 20/07/79, Carter Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Box 281, WHCF-Press Office Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982, pp. 567 – 577.

²⁵⁸ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2012; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

²⁵⁹ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982.

²⁶⁰ Since the beginning of his term, Carter appeared as a democratic president reasoning and acting beyond the New Deal framework. Already this initial admission was considered unconventional with respect to the previous administrations who, instead, stressed the benefits of an efficient regulatory system for national well-being. Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2012, p. 133; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Jimmy Carter, The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress, January 19, 1978. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245063>.

²⁶¹ Tracy Neumann, Privatization, Devolution, and Jimmy Carter's National Urban Policy, *Journal of Urban History*, vol 40, no 2, 2014, pp. 283-300, particularly p. 294. Available at DOI: 10.1177/0096144213508623, viewed April 2024; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010.

President, advancing a “middle of the road statism” to fight the major economic battle against inflation. Being both a “transitional and corrective” President, he established restrictive fiscal and monetary policies tightening government spending and establishing modest tax-cut reliefs for the upper-middle class²⁶². Willing to primarily solve the energy crisis within the US, in 1977, Carter enacted the Department of Energy Organization Act introducing the Department of Energy (DOE). The latter was headed by Secretary James Schlesinger with the objective to organize energy production and conservation. To cope with energy shortages and severe gas prices, the DOE would develop policies to decrease American dependency on foreign oil and reduce the consumption of fossil fuels²⁶³. Subsequently, in 1978, Carter released the Emergency Security Act transferring to the national government the allocation of interstate natural gas. Providing for the deregulation of oil and natural gas prices, from the 1980s, the American supply of energy would effectively increase, and the energy costs would significantly decrease²⁶⁴. Since the beginning of his term, he also established the deregulation of airline, trucking, and communication with the goal to foster state-private cooperation and increase the benefits for both industries and consumers. In this light, he released the first Comprehensive National Urban Policy (1978) fostering state-local-neighborhood cooperation for urban policies through privatization and devolution. Following this policy: “States, counties, local governments, and community organizations sought greater self-determination, less federal oversight, flexible policies, access to federal money for local programs [...]. Devolution and privatization have been the consequences of a general call for greater autonomy”, as Bird

²⁶² Despite Carter aimed at restricting the federal budget, his economic stimulus package had to offer several incentives for the middle-class and the workers impacted by substantial unemployment rates. You should insert part of what I highlight in these notes in the body of your text. This is part of your consequential reasoning. In this light, he extended the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and introduced the Revenue Act ensuring marginal benefits and tax cuts. Nevertheless, his measures have been strongly criticized within the White House and the middle-low classes counting, instead, on social security and welfare.

Burton I. Kaufman, *The Carter Years*, Facts on File, 2006, pp. 33 – 34, 64 – 65; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021, Intro.; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, p. 288.

²⁶³ From the polls of 1977 it clearly emerged that energy was considered the most important problem impacting the US: public concern grew up to 30% in the summer of 1977. Energy and inflation will remain the most critical issues throughout the presidency of Carter. Memorandum, Patrick Caddell and Gerald Rafshoon, 08/77-09/77, “Summary of Issues and Concerns of the American People”, Box 24, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

David H. Davis, Establishing the Department of Energy, *The Journal of Energy and Development*, vol. 4, no 1, 1978, pp. 29 – 40. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24807276>, viewed May 2024.

²⁶⁴ Robert A. Strong, “Jimmy Carter: Domestic Affairs”, *UVA-Miller Center*. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/president/carter/domestic-affairs>, viewed May 2024; President Carter’s Energy Proposals: A Perspective, *Staff Working Paper*, Congressional Budget Congress, 2nd edition, 1977. Available at: https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/95th-congress-1977-1978/workingpaper/77doc587_0.pdf, viewed May 2024.

notes²⁶⁵. Since the 1976 presidential campaign, he presented himself as a progressive leader for the common good and the people, acting beyond a New Deal framework and setting a vast political agenda to sort out the problems of the US. In doing so, he positively increased popular expectations of addressing the domestic and international crises of the nation; tough, he also increased the risks of failure and the possibility for the right-wing coalition to take hold²⁶⁶. Towards the middle of 1979, the delicate balance between expectations and reality rapidly fell apart, together with the efforts of Carter to revive the public mood and reinvigorate the strength of the US. Despite the domestic and foreign policy accomplishments during the first years of his presidency, the inability of the government to present consistent provisions to uplift the national condition further distanced the American people from Carter. Specifically, a complicated relation with the Congress, excessive focus on balancing the budget to solve inflation, feeble foreign policy against the Soviet Union, and vague positions regarding unemployment and social issues enhanced the criticism of both liberal and conservative constituencies. Carter disregarded conventional decision-making procedures and tended to assume executive-oriented postures with the Congress²⁶⁷. The lack of communication between the two bodies limited the possibilities of the President to obtain effective congressional approval and establish successful legislation for constructive changes. Moreover, his economic and social policies still disappointed the electorate. First, high interest rates and low money supply to meet the budget constraints disappointed the white blue-collars hoping for new federal investments in social programs and employment opportunities. Then, even though Carter was a southern Baptist and born-again Christian, the religious constituency contested his beliefs. On the one side, the Jews no longer supported the President in the aftermath of his peace efforts within the Middle East and, especially, after the unfulfillment of his promises to avoid interfering with the controversial status of Jerusalem²⁶⁸. On the other side, evangelical Christians condemned his

²⁶⁵ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Neumann, *Privatization*, 2014, p. 238 and p. 294; Thomas J. Sugrue, "Carter's Urban Policy Crisis" in Fink, *The Carter Presidency*, 1998.

²⁶⁶ Kaufman, *The Carter Years*, 2006; Timothy Stanley, *Kennedy vs Carter: The 1980 Battle for the Democratic Party's Soul*, Kansas University Press, 2010.

²⁶⁷ In terms of Foreign Policy, President Carter achieved the Camp David Accords – the "Framework for Peace in the Middle East" resulting in the first peace treaty between Israel and Egypt; moreover, he signed the Torrijos-Carter Treaties handing over the control of the Canal to Panama. See: Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Eizenstat, *The White House Years*, 2018.

²⁶⁸ Growing concerns on the anti-Semitism of Carter already emerged in the aftermath of the Camp David Accords reached through a "land-for-peace" approach. However, most of all, the passing of the Arab-sponsored U.N. Resolution 465 (1980), referring to Jerusalem as an occupied territory and condemning Israeli settlements, represented a significant loss of Jewish support for the President. It seemed to erroneously pass because of miscommunication with the U.N. ambassador McHenry, nevertheless, it signed a breakthrough moment for Carter and the Jews. See: Eizenstat, *The White House Years*, 2018; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021. Yet, you should underline that American Jews remained substantially democratic, although there was also a shift among some

“secular humanism” dealing with social issues, and pro-détente approach vis-à-vis the “evil” communism of the Soviet Union²⁶⁹. Since the affirmation of the New Left and the civil rights movements during the 1960s, the white Christian evangelicals embraced a more “progressive” form of evangelicalism engaging with the uprisings of the right-wing and entering the political sphere with the intent of breaking the Democratic coalition. Envisioning in the Republican alliance the opportunity to recover the prestige of the US at the domestic and international levels, they gradually aligned with the more libertarian and social conservatives.

By opposing modernity and corruption, progressive evangelicals aimed at restoring traditional values and biblical principles for policymaking. They were against the separation between church and state and promoted moral order through religious faith, white supremacy, individual freedom, and conservative ideology: “They envision the possibility to use power for moral purposes” writes Fukuyama²⁷⁰. Finally, towards the end of the 1970s, the peacemaking attitude of Carter towards the Soviet Union and his willingness to establish social and moral justice for the common good further alienated the conservative groups²⁷¹. Gradually, social, libertarian, and religious conservatives all aimed at strengthening the nation at home and abroad, and at limiting the power of the government becoming an effective political power. These different groups shared strong anti-communist ideals and aimed at restoring the prominence of the US through constitutional principles and military power. Particularly, the transformation into an effective political influence was favored by the parallel emergence of numerous right-wing religious broadcasters willing to influence public opinion spreading conservative ideals and shaking evangelical opinions. The so-called “televangelists” sought to create a new Christian-conservative majority within the nation through substantive mass mailing and tv-preaching²⁷². Among them, in 1979, the

democratic intellectuals who later became the cultural backbone of the neo-con. Think of Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol and others

²⁶⁹ Particularly, the positions of the President towards the Internal Revenue Service Act (IRS) and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) increased the critics of the conservative and religious groups. The creation of a new Department of Education and the continuation of the rules revoking tax-exemptions for segregate private Christian schools, were seen as a “big-government” intervention and an obstacle to education and freedom of religion. Moreover, the support of Carter for the rights of women and minorities were seen as attempts to destroy the traditional family. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982, pp. 561 – 562; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021.

²⁷⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 39; Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, The Guilford Press, 1995; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021.

²⁷¹ The commitment of Carter to reach agreements with the Soviet Union regarding arm controls and limitations further intensified the disappointment of the neoliberal and right wings. Both were willing to enhance the economic and military prestige of the US to halt the advancement of communism. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021.

²⁷² Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2018; Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio e vulnerabilità*, 2018, ch. 1.3; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Borstelmann, *The 1970s, 2012*.

Southern Baptist Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority as a political organization and movement supporting the right-wing. The Moral Majority was divided into numerous political action committees staging ad-hoc campaigns to disseminate Christian and ethical interpretations of social issues. Progressively, associating to the Republican Party, they joined the New Right coalition turning into a powerful grassroots movement engaging with day-to-day policymaking, and building relationships with the elites and government agencies. As a result, by the end of the 1970s, Christian evangelicals, conservative Jews, anti-communist cold warriors, converted liberals and social conservatives formed the “New Right” and supported patriotic values and expansionist foreign policy²⁷³.

Throughout the 1970s, the emergence of new religious and political influences close to the Republican Party as well as the fractures within the Democratic alliance, and the dismantling of the traditional liberal consensus influenced the political scene and altered the socio-political configuration of the US. Hence, towards the 1980 elections, both liberal and conservative wings increasingly distanced from Carter and the government itself. During this multi-dimensional crisis, the President still seemed to lack vigorous and coherent leadership in the public eye: “people miss a clear, coherent notion of what Carter is trying to do with the nation [...] people don’t believe that the President is deeply committed to any overall philosophical direction. They only know what the President is not. Not a traditional liberal, a traditional conservative. The result is that the President finds himself clear cut opposition but only fuzzy support ... with no substantial philosophical opposition and with no philosophical constituency of his own”²⁷⁴.

In this light, the summer of 1979 set-off the closing of the New Deal and the beginning of the republican ascendancy. Particularly, the Crisis of Confidence Speech significantly intensified public discontent and embittered the overall electoral base. It had to be breakthrough and present Carter as “a man of the hour, the one person to confront directly and appropriately the unique challenges and opportunities of the time”²⁷⁵. The President wholeheartedly addressed the Americans admitting the critical national condition and confirming his commitment to solving the problems of the US. He emphasized the deeper nature of the crisis pointing beyond energy and the economy: it was the culmination of a

²⁷³ Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio e vulnerabilità*, 2018, pp. 33 – 35; Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, 1995; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 2005.

²⁷⁴ Memo Gerald Rafshoon and Jimmy Carter, 13/07/1979, “Camp David Follow Up”, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Box 24, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁷⁵ Statement, “Jimmy Carter Remarks at Lunch with Camp David Meeting Participants”, 30/07/79, Carter Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Box 281, WHCF- Press Office Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

greater moral and ethical crisis developing since the previous decades. The loss of unity and cooperation among Americans reflected the impossibility to set common goals and find effective solutions at the personal and public levels. As stated by Carter: “the Americans were experiencing both an erosion of confidence and trust in one another and in the institutions”²⁷⁶. Considering consumerism and the excesses of the American Way of Life as among the main causes of the economic crisis, he invited the Americans to adopt self-restraint and moderation. By doing so, even though willing to deliver a statement in the name of truth, his speech appeared as an open accusation addressed to the people. Despite an initial approval from the Americans, the inability of Carter to effectively elicit trust within public opinion and his insistence with the spiritual character of the crisis further increased the gap between the people and the government. In a moment of great economic and political uncertainty, most of the Americans were already questioning their social status and identity. Throughout the decade of the 1970s, traditional conveniences and political faiths had been consistently challenged and recast. The economic and political polarization unfolding within the US impacted the affluent American way of life and slowly withered away the average white American middle class. Consulting selected popular spokesmen during the Domestic Summit and questioning his own administration, Carter intuitively perceived the social fractures that had originated among the Americans. He envisioned the deeper nature of the transformations that had occurred throughout the decade, and he consciously insisted on the need to recover general faith in the future and personal redemption for unity within the nation.

However, Carter failed to persuasively show how the crisis of the 1970s could be an opportunity to reexamine the value of common good; most of all, how the required short-term sacrifices could have led to greater progress and relief in the long run.²⁷⁷ Hence, while the nation was moving “left, right and center at the same time”²⁷⁸, the President seemed too overwhelmed by the consequences of the crisis in place to effectively uplift the Democratic Party and restore the social and political order within the US: “After the Speech, the quick rise of Carter in the polls was fueled by a rationalization on the part of voters that he had really been charged and steeled by the crises he faced”²⁷⁹. Overall, on the eve of the 1980

²⁷⁶ *Ivi*.

²⁷⁷ Memo, “Comment Statement by Religious Community on Jimmy Carter Speech”, 20/07/79, Carter-Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Box 281, WHCF-Press Office Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁷⁸ Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2017, Intro, p. 3; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020, book 4.

²⁷⁹ Paper, “Patrick Caddell First Cut on 1980 Election Strategy”, Box 77, WHCF- Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan Subject Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

elections, the widespread general discontent, the dissolution of the New Deal consensus, and the increasing affirmation of right-populist forces paved the way for both the victory of the Republican Reagan, and the developing of the new American society. Carter had to confront a united Republican Party and strong candidate as Reagan, as well as the Independent front-runner Anderson. Since the 1976 elections, numerous traditional democratic voters had progressively lowered their support for the President and moved away from the Party: Catholics, Jews, blacks, liberals, and young in the Northeast. Above all, most of the white blue-collars became reliably Republican, especially in the South and the suburbs; moreover, Reagan could count on converted democrats and on the rising New Right forces. On the other side, Anderson positively pinched off many liberals, young, upper-class members, and the suburban dwellers. The only possibility for Carter to reinvigorate his electoral base and restore the traditional Democratic coalition, was to target the white liberal and blue-collar workers by empowering them in the political, social, and economic spaces²⁸⁰. Nevertheless, the deep recession and the budget constraints prevented the realization of effective governmental provisions to uplift the group. Most of all, the political re-alignment at the end of the 1970s had significantly changed the configuration of US society not only in terms of social and political structure, but also of influence upon policymaking. Reconsidering this development, different scholars emphasize how the 1980s elections represented the end of the New Deal and of its safety²⁸¹. The ongoing transformations within the electorate and the American society were intended to be far more lasting than it looked. Since the 1960s, the gap between the rich and poor of society had gradually increased, resulting in the withering away the medium level between the two. In this context, relying on auspicious comparisons with the earlier decade, Reagan presented himself as a confident leader willing to resume an affluent standard of living for the Americans. Overlooking the national malaise of the 1970s and portraying optimistic visions of the future, he promised a return to a “limitless past” holding back the role of the government and recovering American universal ideals. Through an appealing rhetoric and an ambitious political agenda, the new President wanted to empower the ordinary people through personal emancipation and individual freedom. Aware of the social and political re-alignment developing throughout the previous decade, his main goal was to reinvigorate the Republican Party, extending its electoral base and reforming the

²⁸⁰ Paper, “Patrick Caddell First Cut on 1980 Election Strategy”, Box 77, WHCF-Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan Subject Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁸¹ Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2017; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022, ch. 4; Julio Borquez, “The Reagan Democrat Phenomenon: How Wise Was the Conventional Wisdom?”, *Politics & Policy*, vol. 33, no. 4, (2005): 672-705. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2005.tb00218.x>, viewed May 2024.

welfare system. Firstly, he continued the Southern Strategy of Nixon, and aimed at reuniting the white southerners with the white ethnics of the North to bring about the new “Reagan Democrats” and empower the American upper-class²⁸². The so-called “Reaganomics” would support free market economy and entrepreneurship to attract the average white Americans and businessmen able to reinvest in the economy of the US. Witnessing the extant deep recession, he and his team considered de-regulation, tax cuts and free trade would favor a supply-side economy and boost economic growth. Moreover, encouraging strong anti-communist beliefs and investing in a substantive military build-up, the President sought to appeal to the emerging New Right willing to roll-back the Soviet Union and restore the prominence of the US. Supporting patriotic ideals and ethical principles for a well-functioning democratic system he also easily engaged with the rising Christian Right²⁸³. Reagan has been considered both an idealistic and pragmatic leader, able to promote American liberal values believing in the exceptional character of the nation as well as to submit ideology and principles for politics being catering for public support and relying on a streamlined administration. The 1980 elections and the onset of the Reagan administration marked the resurgence of the Republican influence in politics. Promoting the synchrony between liberalism and economic conservatism he officially installed the neoliberal order within the US²⁸⁴.

The new classes toward the 1980s

Since the 1980s, the gradual affirmation of the free-market economy has shaped American culture and politics and has altered traditional hierarchies and social structures.

Throughout the post-WWII era, the US promoted the rhetoric and image of being a “classless” society, where the working and middle classes seemed to form a single homogenous group. The American middle-class enclosed “a vast number of people with distinctive tastes and preferences, gathering together and forming a critical mass able to shape the local scene and the general standard of living”²⁸⁵. The overall crisis and political

²⁸² Reagan himself had been a New Deal democrat before converting to conservatism towards the 1960s contrasting the appeasement and détente strategies against the Soviet Union. Hence, he was particularly aware of the importance to gather the support of the white liberals and the blue-collar workers to ensure the rise of the Republican Party. Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2022; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010, pp. 305 – 306; Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, 2009, p. 169.

²⁸³ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 127; Charles Krauthammer in James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy*, Duke University Press, 1996, pp. 1 – 13 and 14 – 39.

²⁸⁴ Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2022; Borstlemann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

²⁸⁵ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 25.

re-alignment of the 1970s as well as the affirmation of the market economy have threatened the survival of the traditional middle-class within the nation. Despite the establishment of the free market allows for formal equality and greater inclusion, at the same time, it strengthens economic inequalities within social groups who individually compete for the pursuit of their own happiness. Paradoxically, growing equality spawns growing inequality: “fewer have more”²⁸⁶; as everyone is entitled to succeed or fail according to market dynamics, social benefits from the government are significantly reduced while lower- and middle-classes struggle for their financial independence. Since the middle of the 1960s, the economic and political events unfolding within the US have displayed the differences between the groups composing American society, diverging not only because of economic possibilities but also for core behaviors and values²⁸⁷. Progressively, from the onset of the Cold War, the Americans “found their old certainty about the country’s unique place in world history as well as the peculiar American way of life as slipping away”²⁸⁸. The rising awareness of this transformation has led to the formation of two separate and distant classes within the nation: a new upper-class and a new lower-class. The new upper-class identifies a more affluent group focusing on self-improvement and self-indulgence and pursuing its own profit. It is mainly composed of educated and liberal people not actually sharing a common culture, but holding the same power and opportunities: “The new upper class is enabled by affluence... It is driven by people with distinctive tastes and preferences that emerge when large numbers of cognitively talented people are enabled to live in their own communities”²⁸⁹. On the other side, the lower-class includes the former working and middle classes as well as minorities and marginalized groups. Together these groups share narrow self-confidence and more limited economic accessibility, hence they endorse social and cultural issues to preserve their social condition. Despite being very different among them and having dissimilar beliefs, they share the consistent will to restructure the American democratic system. A more conservative portion supports the restoration of traditional values and the affirmation of white supremacy, while it encourages steady de-regulation and military build-up for the prominence of the US. A more democratic group, usually of minorities and marginalized groups, focuses on social identity and pushes for a more fair and inclusive American system.

²⁸⁶ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Ramsay MacMullen in Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 6; Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, Mariner Books, 2008.

²⁸⁷ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 12.

²⁸⁸ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 8.

²⁸⁹ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 120.

Since the early 1980s, according to this division individual socio-economic availability and productivity have defined the barriers within the different groups of society, and welfare has become always more a personal endeavor. Thus, government regulation must not outweigh the benefits of the social provisions. Since the 1970s, the economic and political crisis, the end of the New Deal and the erosion of bipartisan consensus have re-shaped the traditional social and political configuration of the US. The inability of both the Democratic and the Republican Party to share a common ground and reach more centered positions has strengthened the social divide within the nation. The former not restoring public trust and active political participation; the latter insisting with free enterprise and individualism, compromising public virtue. As a result, social cohesion and civic engagement have significantly diminished within the US and a middle ground seems to be increasingly out of reach.

Chapter 4

Recasting American politics in the late 1970s

On the eve of the 1980s, the US was experiencing the worst peacetime inflation in its history, eroding both its economic strength and global standing. Widespread public discontent and diminishing expectations regarding the government and the future were undermining the resilience of the American social fabric. The 1970s marked a period of political realignment, during which both Republicans and Democrats struggled to adapt to evolving social and political conditions, gradually shifting toward more right-wing ideologies.

Amid these challenging circumstances, President Carter bore the critical responsibility of restoring public confidence and reinvigorating the US international stance amid rising tensions with the Soviet Union. By the time of the 1980 elections, Carter faced a skeptical Congress and an often-hostile bureaucracy. Moreover, narrow public support and adversarial media made it essential to fully leverage his mandate to address national issues²⁹⁰. The election represented a political crossroads, offering the chance to redefine the national agenda. Increasingly aware of his pivotal role, Carter shifted his focus inward seeking to reduce internal tensions within his administration and to restore the credibility and functionality of the federal government. In the summer of 1979, he postponed the traditional Fourth of July address to instead convene a series of meetings with the White House Staff, selected experts, and congressional, state, business, and religious leaders. The goal was to solicit specific recommendations to resolve the ongoing American crisis²⁹¹. The “Camp David Domestic Summit” marked the first time a US president canceled an official address to seek counsel in response to a national emergency. During these meetings, energy policy, inflation, and unemployment emerged as central concerns. Yet Carter increasingly perceived a deeper issue at the heart of the crisis: the gradual erosion of trust between the American people and their institutions. His own reflections, reinforced by the input of key advisors, expanded the focus of the Summit into a broader discussion about the moral dimensions of the crisis²⁹².

²⁹⁰ Report, Heritage Foundation – “A Mandate for Leadership”, 1980 Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition Edwin Meese, January 1981, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; For further references on the events and consequences of the 1970s crisis see chapter on the 1970s.

²⁹¹ Eizenstat, *The White House Years*, 2018; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Jimmy Carter Presidential Library contains the personal notes of President Carter taken throughout the meetings held at Camp David in July 1979: Personal notes, “Jimmy Carter Notes at Camp David Domestic Summit”, Plain Files, Box 19, JCP Library.

²⁹² Specifically, in this work will be highlighted the influence exercised by the Pollster Patrick Caddell and Chief Domestic Policy adviser Stuart Eizenstat among the White House staff, as well as of the religious and

These conversations culminated in the “Crisis of Confidence” speech delivered on July 15, 1979, widely perceived as a sincere acknowledgment of the profound national challenges. In this address Carter emphasized the collective failure of Americans and of the government to reestablish a shared sense of purpose and to project strength abroad²⁹³. Initially, the speech received positive public reception, raising hope for the reelection of Carter.

Americans appreciated his empathetic tone and apparent commitment to restoring social and political cohesion, national unity, and solidarity. However, Carter also faced sharp criticism. The emerging neoconservative majority and disenchanted liberals decried the lack of concrete policies to address both domestic issues and the Soviet threat. In an effort to reunite the Democratic base, Carter targeted average American families, reaffirming his dedication to reorganizing government support systems and improving quality of life. His focus included reinforcing the allegiance of white blue-collar workers and drawing religious constituencies advocating for collective restraint and the common good²⁹⁴.

Yet, throughout the 1970s, rising economic and political uncertainty had deepened divisions within the progressive electorate, paving the way for the ascendancy of the opposition. As the Democratic Party faltered, the Republican Party steadily consolidated power, expanded its base, and incorporated new political forces. With the progressive dismantling of the New Deal consensus, conservatism gained traction, catalyzing the rise of the New Right – including conservative political leaders, disaffected liberals, neoconservatives, and Christian evangelicals. This coalition effectively mobilized public sentiment through targeted campaigns, promoting traditional values, free-market policies, and assertive foreign policy²⁹⁵. Since the late 1970s, it became a key component of the GOP success, as Reagan capitalized on the momentum of the Right and promised a resurgence of American power

academic leaders among the groups he consulted with in the last days of the Summit. Personal notes, President Jimmy Carter, Camp David Domestic Summit, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Owen on central policy theme, 12 July 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Statement, “Comment by the religious community to Jimmy Carter Speech”, July 1979, 1980 Carter-Mondale Reelection Committee papers, Press Office Files, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Caddell to Les Francis – “Campaign Strategy”, May 1980, Hamilton Jordan Chief of Staff Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁹³ Notes, Stuart E. Eizenstat – “Statement on the State of the Union 1979 – A New Foundation”, Stuart E. Eizenstat files, Box 96, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Gerald M. Rafshoon to Jimmy Carter – “Suggestions for Speech”, July 1979, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 16, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Draft Speech, “Summary Content Speech July 15, 1979, July 1979, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 16, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Elizabeth Drew, “Phase: In Search of a Definition”, in *A Reporter at Large, The New Yorker*, August 1979, p. 45. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1979/08/27/phase-in-search-of-a-definition>, viewed June 2024; Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986. For further details see Chapter on the 1970s.

²⁹⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014.

²⁹⁵ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, 2006; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010; Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020.

throughout his campaign. At the 1980 election, he won a landslide victory, driven by a platform focused on economic recovery and military strength, and by projecting strong and determined leadership. In time of national crisis, Reagan offered resolute authority and the promise of sweeping reforms. Through compelling rhetoric, he revived hopes for a successful national renewal, strategically targeting white blue-collar and middle-class voters – the “over-taxed, over-regulated and harassed by the government”²⁹⁶. With the help of experienced advisors, Reagan prioritized economic security and pledged a revitalized era for the nation. Unlike the Democrats, the Republican Party expanded beyond its traditional ideological base and inspired confidence in its ability to curb inflation and restore US international leadership²⁹⁷. Conservatives believed the crisis was primarily economic and identified deregulation and free enterprise as the only antidotes to overcome its challenges. Emphasizing American resilience and capacity for recovery, Reagan attracted a broad audience appealing to a blend of nostalgia, patriotism, and traditional values²⁹⁸. Meanwhile, disillusioned liberals and neoconservatives – though not fully aligned with conservative ideology – rallied to his side. They backed Republicans united by discontent with both the leadership and foreign policy of Carter, believing that the Democratic Party had failed to protect public and economic interests²⁹⁹. Even before the elections, Reagan appointed both a Campaign and a Presidential Task Force to ensure his nomination and final election. Through their policy advice and reports, these working groups became the driving force behind victory in 1980 and the accomplishments of his early presidency. Following the guidance of skilled advisors and specialists, he aimed to resolve economic turmoil and

²⁹⁶ Article, Robert Levey – Boston Globe “Reagan’s Think Tank: Stanford’s Hoover Institution to Wield Strong Influence”, November 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 296, folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Statement, Philip M. Crane – “Governor Reagan”, 1976, Martin Anderson papers, Box 240, folder 4, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Article, Lee Walzak – Business Week, March 1980, Richard Allen papers, Box 32, folder 13, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Correspondence, Richard Allen and Fred Ikle – “Analogies with the 1930s”, Richard Allen papers, Box 28, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Memorandum, Charles Schultze to Jimmy Carter – “Economic Themes for Debate”, October 1980, Council of Economic Advisers – Charles Schultze Files, Box 72, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Talking points, “Reagan Economic Announcement”, September 1980, Council of Economic Advisers – Charles Schultze Files, Box 72, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Charles Schultze to Jack Watson – “Reagan’s Economic Program”, September 1980, Council of Economic Advisers - Charles Schultze Files, Box 72, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁹⁷ Letter, Ronald Reagan to George P. Shultz, March 1981, George P. Shultz papers, Box 537, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

²⁹⁸ Article, The Wall Street Journal – “The Appeal of Ronald Reagan”, May 1976, Martin Anderson papers, Box 240, folder 4, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Jennifer Holland, Review of “Rick Perlstein The Invisible Bridge”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 131, no. 1, (2016): 203 – 205. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43828797>, viewed May 2024.

²⁹⁹ Statement, Ronald Reagan on “Consumer Price Index”, October 1980, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 73, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020; Scott M. McElwain, Review of “Rick, Perlstein, Reaganland: America’s Right Turn 1976 – 1980”, *Peace Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, (2020): 409 – 415. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2020.1867359>, viewed May 2024.

restore US prominence. At the same time, as he had done during his governorship, he established a Citizen's Cabinet to try to respond to the needs of his average constituents. The likely president promoted straightforward arguments for restoring healthy economic growth and productivity within the US. He encouraged public support for significant tax cuts for the upper-middle classes and advocated for new investments from the business community³⁰⁰. Reviewing US history in the second half of the 20th century, various observers have agreed that the shift toward the Right could not have been easily prevented. This was due, first, to widespread reluctance to support the Democratic Party apparently incapable of charting a sound political course during the crisis. Additionally, the negative media portrayal of Carter and his administration intensified public dissatisfaction. Second, the excessive emphasis of Carter on the spiritual nature of the crisis and his failure to advance convincing solutions further deepened collective pessimism and mistrust. Meanwhile, the scant confutation of opposing criticism and the weak attacks on his adversary allowed the aggressive tactics of the Right and the perpetuation of its program³⁰¹. Third, by the 1980s, Americans were seeking a shift in leadership to recover optimism and start anew. Carter and Reagan ultimately came to represent two opposing responses to the same socio-political phenomenon: a widespread desire for transformation within a growing anti-Washington sentiment dating back to the early 1970s. In attempting to resolve the energy crisis, Carter increasingly distanced himself and his party from the real needs of the American people. The long-term benefits of his austere policies were not readily apparent to the public. In contrast, Americans demanded immediate and practical solutions to their everyday struggles³⁰². Throughout the 1970s, with increased inclusion in the workforce, white blue-collar workers felt neglected by the government and demanded greater economic security. Likewise, moderate liberals gradually distanced themselves from the Democratic Party, opposing its emphasis on expansive social programs and appeasing foreign policy towards the Soviet Union. By the late 1970s, as inflation and unemployment worsened, they hoped for a way out of the national gloom.

On the other hand, the Republican Party appeared more receptive to public concerns and attuned to shared priorities, advocating for both individual initiative and reduced federal

³⁰⁰ Edwin Meese III, "Shaping the Presidency: Parties Personalities and Press", in Gordon Hoxie and Thomas Cronin, "Congress and the Presidency: Considerations on Leadership and Legislative Success", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, no 4, (1983): 524-530. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27547976>, viewed June 2024.

³⁰¹ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

³⁰² Newspaper article, "The Appeal of Ronald Reagan" - The Wall Street Journal, May 1976, Martin Anderson papers, Box 240, folder 4, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 2017.

oversight³⁰³. Thus, the sociopolitical realignment toward the 1980s reflected a widespread desire among Americans to reclaim their social³⁰⁴. Particularly, white middle-class Americans looked for a reliable authority to restore their socioeconomic standing: “The 1980 election was a referendum on national leadership focusing on the economy. Reagan gave hope to the Americans he could improve the circumstances within the nation both in the economy and in national security”³⁰⁵. In this context, Carter and Reagan developed differing approaches to inflation and energy, reshaping public perceptions and aspirations. Following the pressures of concerned advisors, Carter focused on the moral dimension, promoting collective moderation and resilience. Conversely, Reagan, supported by a team of conservative experts, advanced more pragmatic strategies to tackle the economic emergency and rebuild public trust³⁰⁶. The two candidates presented contrasting rhetoric and policy proposals, and they adopted distinct attitudes toward the existing crisis. As the elections neared, the ability of a leader to generate positive public expectations became more critical than ever. A compelling policy framework was essential not only to maintain grassroots support but also to reduce social and political divisions³⁰⁷. By the end of the 1970s, political realignment and increasing class polarization stemmed both from the gradual decline of the New Deal consensus and the rise of more conservative government policies. The failure of the Democratic Party to regain the trust of the middle-class, combined with growing resentment toward Carter, facilitated the ascendancy of the Right and deepened the sociopolitical divide within the US. Even though Reagan aspired to restore national unity and prosperity, his reliance on a neoliberal ethos and market-driven policies primarily benefited the wealthy. As a result, lower-middle-class Americans were left vulnerable, unable to save or invest in the economy. Over time, deepening inequality weakened the middle class and undermined the long-established American aspiration of a classless society. Moreover, the rise of white supremacy and Christian evangelical values further reinforced racial-ethnic divisions, making it even harder to achieve consensus and ease tensions³⁰⁸.

³⁰³ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021, pp. 306 – 333; Cowie, *The Great Exception*, pp. 179 – 209.

³⁰⁴ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Steven F. Hayward, “No Perls of Wisdom”, *Commentary*, Vol. 150, no 4, (2020): 54 - 57. Available at: <http://biblio-proxy.uniroma3.it/magazines/no-perls-wisdom/docview/2460107021/se-2?accountid=13585>, viewed May 2024; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010. For a further in-depth analysis see paragraph “The political re-alignment” in the Chapter on the 1970s.

³⁰⁵ Article, “The leadership implications of the 1980 vote for Reagan presidency”, Edwin Meese papers, Box 22, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁰⁶ Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983, pp. 623 – 645.

³⁰⁷ Article, “The leadership implications of the 1980 vote for Reagan presidency”, Edwin Meese papers, Box 22, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁰⁸ Matteo Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Kevin Phillips, *Boiling Point: Republicans, Democrats, and the Decline of the Middle-Class Prosperity*, Random House, 1992; Ronald P. Formisano, *Plutocracy in America*, 2015.

From the 1980s onward, the rapid economic recovery, resurgence of optimism, and renewed international assertiveness created only apparent national unity. Reagan succeeded in temporarily lifting the country out of the crisis of the previous decade, convincing Americans of his leadership capabilities, and inspiring a broad vision centered on individual and economic freedom³⁰⁹. However, social tensions persisted, regardless progress. Increasing individualism and new economic incentives widened class disparities and weakened the resilience of the American middle-class. The short-term success covered a deeper political and social transformation that would become entrenched over time³¹⁰. The contrasting regulatory priorities of the Carter and Reagan administrations disrupted political continuity and hindered the implementation of comprehensive relief. The shift toward increased deregulation and neoliberal policies redefined the social balance, emphasizing individualism and economic opportunities over collective interests³¹¹. Presidencies are typically judged not only by their tangible accomplishments but also by the confidence they inspire in the public. The rhetoric and ambitions of each leader shape national expectations, influence political coalitions, and contribute to a constantly evolving sociopolitical landscape. In the late 1970s, the ability of Reagan to align his actions with a renewed national hope ultimately defined his appeal and allowed meaningful change³¹².

By the late 1970s, Carter and Reagan adopted opposing political agendas that contributed to a reconfiguration of the American political and social landscape. Despite efforts to reassert American strength on the global stage, both leaders ultimately failed to restore the social consensus or reestablish the traditional structure of American society. This study focuses on

³⁰⁹ On the role of powerful visions through straightforward and ordinary portrays of reality, it is particularly interesting the parallel that the historian John Lewis Gaddis presents between Reagan and George Orwell. He compares the well-known work “1984” by Orwell and the State of the Union by the President of 1984. Both were able to advance a powerful vision to their audience: on the one side, Orwell envisaged the rise of totalitarianism for the 1984 and invited his readers to act for preventing such a gloomy scenario. On the other side, Reagan advanced the idea of young Americans and Soviets hanging out together and enjoying their shared time thanks to the triumph of liberalism and freedom. Orwell and Reagan portrayed two different prospects, however, they both convinced the people of new possibilities ahead and invited them to collectively ensure universal freedom. John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, Penguin Press, 2005; See also: Justin D. Garrison, *An Empire of Ideals: The Chimeric Imagination of Ronald Reagan*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013; Edward Yager, *Ronald Reagan’s Journey: Democrat to Republican*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

³¹⁰ Katherine S. Newman, *Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream*, Basic Books, 1993, and Lewis Coser, Review of “Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream, by Katherine S. Newman”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 108, no 4, (1993): 744 – 745. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2152415>, viewed May 2024; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

³¹¹ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, pp. 122 – 174, 312 – 318; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, pp. 240 – 257.

³¹² Article, “The leadership implications of the 1980 vote for Reagan presidency”, Edwin Meese papers, Box 22, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983.

how the transition from Carter to Reagan paved the way for the emergence of a new American society in the 1980s. Specifically, it assesses how their political strategies and policy decisions intensified domestic social and political polarization. The first section of this analysis explores how Carter became increasingly focused on the moral dimension of the American crisis. This shift became particularly pronounced following the Camp David Domestic Summit in July 1979, during which he met with national leaders to discuss economic and political challenges. In the early days of the summit, Carter engaged with members of his Domestic Policy Staff and energy and inflation task forces; subsequently, he broadened the scope of the summit to include discussions with governors, religious leaders, and academics. These dialogues focused on the ethical and spiritual state of the nation, with the aim to reconnect with the American people. The conversations underscored themes of collective insecurity and widespread insecurity, ultimately reinforcing the concerns of Carter about a national moral decline³¹³. This culminated in his “malaise” speech, which portrayed Americans as suffering from a spiritual crisis rather than merely economic hardship. In contrast, the second section examines the ideological and organizational foundations that propelled Reagan to the presidency. As early as 1978, a Task Force Plan was established to guide the political success of Reagan. Between 1979 and 1980, both a Campaign and a Presidential Task Force – led by Edwin Meese – helped shape the policy platform and electoral strategy of Reagan³¹⁴. During the primaries, right-wing objectives included energy deregulation, economic liberalization, and a more aggressive stance against the Soviet Union. These goals reflected a broader conservative resurgence and a reassertion of the influence of the Right as the nation entered the 1980s. A key factor for the success of the Republican transition was the work and integration within the White House of conservative think-tanks. Unlike his predecessors, Reagan actively embraced these institutions – notably the Hoover Institution and the Heritage Foundation – as formal advisory bodies, and many individuals who shaped his campaign and administration were drawn directly from these organizations³¹⁵. This sustained collaboration marked a turning point in American politics,

³¹³ Statement, Religious Community on Jimmy Carter Speech July 15, 1979, 20 July 1979, Carter/Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Press Office Files, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Essay, Patrick H. Caddell – “What Has to Be Done III”, 2 July 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 52, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Patrick H. Caddell to Jimmy Carter – “Meeting with Journalists”, 12 July 1979, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 12, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Essay, Patrick H. Caddell – “Summary Issue Concerns of American People”, August/September 1977, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 24, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³¹⁴ Memorandum, Martin Anderson to Ronald Reagan “Task Forces”, August 1978, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³¹⁵ For a complete list of the members of the Administration coming from policy institutes see: Donald Abelson, *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy*, Queen University Press, 2006, specifically, pp. 239 – 259; Robert K. Landers, *Think Tanks: The New Partisans?*, *Editorial Research Report*, Vol. 1, no. 23, 1986,

as think tanks became increasingly influential intermediaries between policymakers and the public. Their policy proposals not only helped shape the Republican agenda but also reframed national discourse and public priorities³¹⁶.

Since the 1980s, presidential administrations have increasingly relied on think tank tanks for both staffing and policy formulation. These institutions have played a pivotal role in translating public sentiment into concrete political agendas while influencing public opinion through targeted research and advocacy³¹⁷. In the case of Reagan, their support helped him consolidate a broad base, enter the presidency with a coherent policy vision, and distinguish his administration from the one of Carter. In doing so, the Republican administration reoriented the political trajectory of the US and helped define the ideological contours of American society in the decades that followed³¹⁸.

Carter in 1979: crisis and change

In the summer of 1979, after months of hesitation over formulating a concrete policy strategy, Carter organized the Camp David Domestic Summit to discuss the national problems affecting the country³¹⁹. Since the end of 1978, he had become increasingly aware of the serious challenges facing the nation both domestically and internationally. The energy crisis, following the oil-embargo, was severely affecting living standards and US prosperity. Escalating inflation and its fallout were a major concern for the Americans: as prices and unemployment continued to rise, they increasingly lost hope in the ability of the government

pp. 455 – 56, pp. 467 – 472. Available at: Library of Congress Catalogue No. 39 – 924, viewed June 2024; Gellner Winand, “The Politics of Policy Political Think Tanks and Their Markets in the US Institutional Environment”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 25, no 3, (1995): 497 – 510. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551464>, viewed June 2024; Donald Abelson and Christine M. Carberry, Policy Experts in Presidential Campaigns: A Model of Think Tank Recruitment, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 27, no 4, (1997): 679 – 697. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27551794>, viewed June 2024.

³¹⁶ Particularly, the Heritage Foundation and the Hoover Institution are considered a “3^d generation” type of Think Tanks, namely, “advocacy policy institutions”. Hasan Rahat, “From Policy Research to Political Advocacy: Differentiating Think Tanks from Pressure Groups in American Politics”, *India Quarterly*, vol. 66, no 3, (2010): 287 – 302. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45073154>, viewed June 2024; Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 2006, pp. 43 – 97, 147 – 163; Abelson, *Do Think Tank Matter*, 2018, pp. 150 – 180; Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*, 2012.

³¹⁷ Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 2006, and *Do Think Tank Matter?: Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, Queen University Press, 3d ed., 2018; Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*, 2012.

³¹⁸ Rahat, *From Policy Research to Political Advocacy*, 2010, specifically, pp. 293 – 299; Lauren McDonald, “Think Tanks and the Media: How the Conservative Movement Gained Entry Into the Education Policy Arena”, *Sage Publications – Educational Policy*, vol. 28, no 6, (2014): 845 – 880. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904813492372>, viewed June 2024; Weaver R. Kent, “The Changing World of Think Tanks”, *Political Science & Politics*, vol. 22, no 3, (1989): 563 – 578. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/419623>, viewed June 2024.

³¹⁹ Personal notes, President Jimmy Carter, Camp David Domestic Summit, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

to resolve the recession³²⁰. Inefficient social programs and limited federal aid distanced the Democratic electorate from both the President and the Party. Following the crisis of the early 1970s, especially Watergate and Vietnam, a widespread lack of trust in institutions prevailed throughout American society. To maintain popular support and attempt to reunite the Democratic coalition, Carter needed to “adjust public needs according to the equation of supply and demand, while also reducing federal spending and restricting the role of the government to address the recession”³²¹. Ahead of the January 1979 State of the Union address, the primary goals of the President were to rebuild national progress and reallocate resources to resolve the energy problem. The prevailing idea within the Administration was to focus on collective restraints and savings, as well as to enhance collaboration between the public and private sectors³²². Emphasizing the slogan “A New Foundation”, the White House Staff urged Carter to boost public optimism by predicting future progress, regaining trust, and asserting his leadership to guide the nation out of the “energy darkness”³²³. After the unfavorable results of the 1978 surveys conducted by White House pollster Patrick Caddell, it became clear that the distance between the people and the political establishment was growing at an alarming rate. The mood of the electorate was hostile and suspicious, dominated by a collective pessimism rooted in a “free-floating anxiety and frustration born out of a continued sense of drift in purpose and goals, a stage of anger that followed the heat and fury of the previous 15 years of cataclysmic events”³²⁴. Despite economic hardships, popular concerns appeared more complex, revolving around fear and despair. Carter needed to restore national hope and encourage collaboration with the American people. In his January 1979 address, the President highlighted the domestic and foreign policy accomplishments of his early tenure as evidence of effective leadership in addressing national problems³²⁵. He urged Americans to look beyond the immediate difficulties,

³²⁰ Theodore H. White, *America in Search of Itself: The Making of the President, 1956 – 1980*, Easton Press, 1986; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021. For further insights on the crisis of the 1970s and the impact of the oil embargo see chapter “The 1970s”.

³²¹ Memorandum, Simmons to Eizenstat – Policy Agenda for the 80s, November 1979, Eizenstat files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³²² Memorandum, Simmons to Eizenstat – Policy Agenda for the 80s, November 1979, Eizenstat files, Box 77 Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Lipset, *The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions*, 1983.

³²³ Notes, Eizenstat statement on the State of the Union 1979 – A New Foundation, Eizenstat files, Box 96, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Jimmy Carter, “State of the Union Address 1979”, 23 January 1979, *The Miller Center*. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-23-1979-state-union-address>, viewed June 2024.

³²⁴ Memorandum, Patrick H. Caddell to Jimmy Carter on the State of the Union Speech, December 14, 1978, Carter Presidential Papers – Staff Offices – Assistant for Communication Greg Schneiders Files – Current Office Files, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³²⁵ Notes, Stuart E. Eizenstat statement on the State of the Union 1979 – A New Foundation, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 96, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

promising major government reorganization and improved well-being: “America has the greatest economic system in the world. Let’s reduce government interference and give it a chance to work [...] To be successful, we must change our attitudes as well as our policies. We cannot afford to live beyond our means. We cannot afford to create programs that we can neither manage nor finance, or to waste our natural resources, and we cannot tolerate mismanagement and fraud. Above all, we must meet the challenges of inflation as a united people”³²⁶. Recognizing the difficult time that the country was undergoing, Carter sought to assure Americans of his commitment to managing inflation and eventually solving unemployment. Even though the economy was a major source of national anxiety, the President emphasized unity and cooperation as essential for a better future. The call to build a “new foundation” referred not only to governmental overhaul but, more importantly, to rediscovery of personal roots and national identity. Carter attempted to revive a sense of national direction by addressing the deeper concerns of the Americans and encouraging a collective effort to overcome the crisis. As Caddell noted in the late 1970s, the ability to confront fear with hope “would have decided more in the hearts and minds of the American people”³²⁷. Heading towards a possible second term, the Democratic administration became increasingly aware that the collective malaise extended beyond financial concerns. Major policy efforts – such as regulating energy production and adjusting economic growth – would not meet public expectations³²⁸. Without messages of opportunity, the Americans would have lost faith in the capacity of Carter to promote national advancement bearing higher economic costs. At the same time, the Department of Energy needed to develop a comprehensive energy policy aimed at reducing dependence on foreign oil, increasing domestic production and conservation, and promoting investments in alternative energy sources³²⁹. Any such policy implied a shift from a world of cheap, abundant resources to one of scarcity and limits. Especially since World War II, wealth had increasingly served as a marker of social status and increased national prosperity enhanced American living standards³³⁰. By the end of the 1970s, a turn toward moderation and conservation implied

³²⁶ Carter, *State of the Union Address*, 23 January 1979.

³²⁷ Memorandum, Patrick H. Caddell to Jimmy Carter on the State of the Union Speech, December 14, 1978, Carter Presidential Papers – Staff Offices – Assistant for Communication Greg Schneiders Files – Current Office Files, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³²⁸ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021.

³²⁹ Notes, Stuart E. Eizenstat statement on the State of the Union 1979 – A New Foundation, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 96, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Statement, Energy Talking Points, Carter/Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Press Office Files, August 1, 1979, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 2017.

³³⁰ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Tiziano Bonazzi, *Struttura e metamorfosi della civiltà progressista*, Marsilio, 1974; Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004; Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 1958; De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 2006; Rydell and Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 2005; Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the*

abandoning long-standing practices and comforts³³¹. Despite evident disparities, the shared values, widespread wealth, and common behaviors created a perception – especially among white middle-class Americans – of living in a fair and cohesive society. However, first the civil rights movements of the 1960s, then the domestic crises of the 1970s exposed the tensions among social groups and revealed sharp inequality, undermining the prevailing myth of national unity³³². The hardships of inflation and energy shortages pushed many Americans to look for individual relief; additionally, worsening economic conditions fueled racial divides and polarization, preventing a unified response to the crisis. Traditionally, middle-class families and white blue-collar workers supported the progressive ideals of the Democratic Party for shared economic and social security. However, fear of an uncertain future and a growing individualism weakened the drive for collective solutions. The severe recession was primarily blamed on government inefficiencies, while the pursuit of personal security and well-being became the dominant goal³³³.

Faced with the need for more austere policies, the goal of Carter of reuniting the Democratic base and appealing to working Americans became increasingly difficult. Beginning Since in spring 1979, the Domestic Policy Staff worked with the Department of Energy to develop a policy proposal that also addressed the ethical dimensions of the crisis³³⁴. Nonetheless, Chief Domestic Policy Advisor Stuart Eizenstat sought to highlight the economic nature of the emergency and convince Americans of its severity. He believed the assertive actions of

Betrayal of Democracy, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996; Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, , 1979.

³³¹ William t. Stead, *The Americanization of the World*, Markley, 1902; Daniel Brobbey, “The Americanization of the World in the 20th Century”, Lecture by professor Daniele Fiorentino at the John Cabot University, (March 2109). Available at: <https://news.johncabot.edu/2019/03/daniele-fiorentino/>, viewed October 2024; Paul Krugman, “The Realities of Class Begin to Sink”, *New York Times*, January 2014; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020, “Preface”; L. H. Ehrle, “The Myth of the Middle-Class”, *The Humanist*, (November/December 1979), pp. 17 – 120, in Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020. Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, p. 280; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 12; Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity*, 2007.

³³² Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity*, 2007; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; On the crisis of the American middle- class: Phillips, *Boiling Point*, 1992; E. Rubenstein, “Middle-Class Malaise”, *National Review*, December 1991; M. Novak, Middle-Class “Meltdown”?, *Forbes*, January 1992, pp. 94 – 95, in Kevin T. Leicht and Scott T Fitzgerald, *Middle-Meltdown in America: Causes, Consequences, and Remedies*, Routledge, 3rd edition, 2023; Mills, *White Collar*, 1951, ed. 2012.

³³³ At the time Tom Wolfe coined the term “Me decade” referring, specifically, to the tendency of the Americans to focus on their inner-self and individual pursuit of happiness, see: Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves & Madmen Clutter & Vine*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976, pp. 126 – 167. Throughout the 1970s, social critics sustained the idea of the US as a nation in decline and portrayed the Americans as self-indulgent and greedy due to the crisis and the shift in fortunes: Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979. On the idea of how the Americans capitalized on the psychological aspects of narcissism: Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Americanization of Narcissism*, Harvard University Press, 2014; On the middle-class and the Democratic Party: Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2016, and *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012. For further information on the support of the middle-class for the Democratic Party see chapter on the 1970s.

³³⁴ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Patrick Caddell, “Of Crisis and Opportunity I”, *Cambridge Survey Research*, April 1979, pp. 25 – 27.

OPEC and the oil-embargo were key drivers of the recession; therefore, Carter had to appear decisive in tackling inflation and committed to reducing dependence on foreign oil. Greater energy independence and deregulation would allow both the government and the people to take control of their economic future³³⁵. An effective energy address had to counter criticism of the Administration: “Energy is both a cause and a symptom of a deeper American problem: the nation can no longer achieve all its important goals [...] Fiscal and monetary restraint as well as reduction of government regulations [...] need to send the important message that the Administration follows a consistent course in calling to give up some things we want, to achieve other things we want more”³³⁶. By spring 1979, despite the joint efforts of the Domestic Policy Staff and the DOE, the energy policy remained debated. A few White House advisors supported Schlesinger and his call for price decontrol, despite potential inflationary risks³³⁷. In April 1979, however, the Administration and Congress agreed to phase out price controls and implement a windfall profits tax to prevent excessive oil industry revenues. This plan aimed to encourage conservation, increase domestic output, and invest in alternative energy sources. Within the government, moderate liberals and conservatives strongly opposed the decision as it hindered economic progress. Additionally, the repeal of the windfall profits tax became a central plank of the Republican platform for the 1980 election, encouraging a free-market economy³³⁸. In early summer 1979, although Carter scheduled his energy speech for the week of Independence Day, a final policy proposal was still under internal review. According to Eizenstat and his team, early drafts did not sufficiently outline concrete solutions or long-term benefits. The proposed policy had to renew collective spirit and strengthen the national resolve around the crisis³³⁹.

³³⁵ Memorandum, Al- Stern to Stuart E. Eizenstat on Energy, April 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Eizenstat, *The White House Years*, 2018.

³³⁶ Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Owen on central policy theme, 12 July 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³³⁷ Memorandum, Al- Stern to Stuart E. Eizenstat on Energy, April 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Statement, “Energy Talking Points”, August 1, 1979, Carter/Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Press Office Files, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Eizenstat, *The White House Years*, 2018.

³³⁸ The Tax was officially repealed in 1988, after clear evidence of its limited impact on national growth. Salvatore Lazzari, “The Windfall Profit Tax on Crude Oil: Overview of the Issues”, Congressional Research Service – The Library of Congress, September (1990): 1 – 29, specifically pp. 1 – 4, 7 – 9, 23 – 25. Available at: https://taxfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/05/110805crs_windfall.pdf, viewed June 2024.

³³⁹ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Eizenstat, *The White House Years*, 2018; Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986.

“Of Crisis and Opportunity”

Concerns within the Domestic Policy Team, alongside negative polling trends indicating growing disapproval toward the government, heightened the doubts of the President. To support the President in formulating a comprehensive strategy during the crisis, Caddell prepared two sets of principles and guidelines for more coordinated and effective action: “Of crisis and opportunity I” (April 23, 1979) and “An Intellectual Framework for Leadership II” (June 12, 1979). These documents included various analyses of the evolving condition of American society in the post-war era and were a valuable input for interpreting national circumstances³⁴⁰. The proposed recommendations were grounded in poll results and sociological studies. Their purpose was to raise awareness of the peculiar national situation, outline potential dangers, and propose feasible solutions for recovery. Although originally intended to assist the President, the reports ultimately intensified concerns within the White House. In retrospect, reflecting the deeper worries of the President, they contributed to the postponement of the presidential address and the organization of the Domestic Summit³⁴¹. Through his assessments, Caddell emphasized the psychological nature of the crisis affecting all American classes and the widespread skepticism about personal redemption and the future: “For the first time in twenty-year history, the number of long-term pessimists has almost reached 50% [...] especially in the upper socio-economic groups and the young – always the most optimistic about their ability to prosper”³⁴². As more Americans resigned themselves to the recession, Carter was expected to uphold his values and responsibilities without making unrealistic promises. It became essential for him to reassert leadership, redefine national purpose, and reconnect with the public. As argued by Caddell, Americans increasingly saw him as a “leader of the government more than of society”, unable to manage divergent views or realize his ambitious campaign goals³⁴³. The Democratic administration

³⁴⁰ Among the intellectuals cited within the reports there were Christopher Lasch, Robert Bellah, Daniel Bell, Keynes, and Alexander De Tocqueville, all emphasizing the loss of morality within the US and the dangers of growing wealth and secularism on the American community. For a brief summary: Memorandum, Caddell to Jimmy Carter “Talking Points on Survey Results and Readings”, July 12, 1979, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 12, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library. Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Patrick Caddell – “What Has to Be Done”, July 2, 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Papers, Subject Files, Box 52, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Essay, Patrick H. Caddell - “Of Crisis and Opportunity I”, April 4, 1979, pp. 1 – 75; Domestic Policy Staff, David Rubenstein Subject Files, Box 30, The Jimmy Carter Library; Essay, Patrick H. Caddell, “Intellectual Framework for Leadership II”, June, 6, 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Papers, Subject Files, Box 30, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁴¹ Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986, pp. 639 – 642; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021. On the influence of White House aides on the President: Link, *Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994, pp. 461 – 480, specifically p. 470.

³⁴² Caddell, *Of Crisis and Opportunity*, 1979, pp. 6 – 9.

³⁴³ Caddell, *An Intellectual Framework for Leadership II*, 1979, pp. 21 – 22, 27.

had to consider public perception and expectations in crafting its policy agenda to produce meaningful transformation. Without inspiring national confidence and restoring public trust, Americans would have been unlikely to cooperate, and Carter would have had little chance of reelection in November 1980. The Independence Day speech was expected to frame the crisis as an opportunity to foster a renewed sense of community and solidarity, focusing on the risks associated with cultural and social decline. Caddell stressed that it had to: “Concentrate on the larger crisis of confidence that grips America [...] generating hope for a better future... To unlock and articulate the unconscious feelings of the country and reunite the President and his people [...] anything else than a demonstration of boldness is doomed to failure”³⁴⁴. The pollster urged the administration to address the broader dimensions of the national crisis in addition to advancing a consistent economic strategy to combat inflation and achieve energy independence. He wrote: “In the end America will pay the price for the loss of national spirit and will [...] The political society as we have known it faces steady and massive disintegration [...] The linkage between those who lead and those who are led, the bond which holds any democracy together, is breaking down”³⁴⁵. By this point, the primary goal of Carter was to craft an effective message for the public and present a coherent plan. A prevailing idea supported by Eizenstat, Vice President Walter Mondale, and Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan, was to deliver a substantive speech centered on the economic crisis and introduce an anti-inflation program to ease national anxieties³⁴⁶. Although sharing similar concerns, Caddell placed greater emphasis on the moral and ethical aspects of the crisis. He insisted on recovering national confidence openly denouncing the problems of the US and promoting greater popular cooperation. Conversely, advisors from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, along with the Department of Energy, prioritized increased domestic production and reduced unemployment as key strategies for improving the economic and social landscape. Addressing the energy shortage, greater investment and new job opportunities would alleviate public concerns and project effective leadership³⁴⁷.

³⁴⁴ Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Patrick Caddell – “What Has to Be Done”, July 2, 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Papers, Subject Files, Box 52, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁴⁵ Caddell, *Intellectual Framework for Leadership*, 1979, p. 57; Patrick Caddell, in personal notes President Jimmy Carter, “July 5, 1979 – meeting with White House Staff”, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁴⁶ Stuart E. Eizenstat, Walter Mondale, and Hamilton Jordan in personal notes, President Jimmy Carter, “July 5, 1979 – meeting with White House Staff”, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Owen to the President, “Policy Theme”, July 12 1979, Eizenstat files, Box 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Al Stern to Stuart E. Eizenstat, “Energy Theme”, April 1979, Eizenstat files, Box 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Essay, Patrick Caddell “What Has to Be Done III”, July 2, 1979, Eizenstat files, Box 52, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁴⁷ Joseph A. Califano in personal notes, President Jimmy Carter, “July 5, 1979 – meeting with White House Staff”, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; James R. Schlesinger comments in

Meanwhile, the White House Office of Communications cautioned against an excessive focus on cultural and psychological issues, as it would distract the public from the material aspects of the crisis and exacerbate social tensions. Communications Director Gerald Rafshoon strongly opposed what he termed the “apocalyptic” tone of the recommendations of Caddell, believing they be counterproductive for both the President and the broader efforts of the administration³⁴⁸. Rafshoon repeatedly advised Carter to avoid self-deprecating remarks and negative comments about the nation. Instead, he suggested acknowledging the seriousness of the energy crisis and the broader malaise, while focusing on the enduring capacity of the US to overcome challenges. He wrote to the President: “They don’t want to hear you talking about hope and confidence [...] they want to perceive you are beginning to solve problems and lead [...] The speech must avoid a long ‘mea culpa’ and must be action-oriented”³⁴⁹.

The Camp David Domestic Summit

Carter had to decide whether to adopt a political approach focused on the tangible problems of the nation, as suggested by his closest advisors, or a moral perspective emphasizing the ethical nature of the crisis, as encouraged by Cadell. His main goal was to develop a comprehensive strategy that could unify available means for restoring national welfare. However, failing to reach a significant agreement within the Administration on the issues to prioritize and the tone of the proposed address, Carter delayed his speech and organized a Summit for further reassessment on the crisis. By consulting selected experts and leaders beyond the White House staff, he aimed to attentively formulate a plan to inspire Americans and restore US standing³⁵⁰.

On July 5, 1979, Carter met with his advisors to organize the upcoming meetings. From July 6 to 11, 1979, he invited various governors, energy specialists, congressional leaders, members of the religious community, and intellectuals to discuss the crisis in a broader

memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to President Jimmy Carter, “Comments on July 5 Speech”, July 4, 1979, Eizenstat Papers, Box 96, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁴⁸ Memorandum, Gerald M Rafshoon to the President, “Suggestions for Speech”, July 1979, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 16, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁴⁹ *Ivi*.

³⁵⁰ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Mattson, *What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?*, 2009; Ronald Lee, Review, “What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?”, by Kevin Mattson, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, no 4, (2010): 809 – 811. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2010.03820.x>, viewed June 2024; Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986, pp. 636 – 650; Jeffrey Smith, “Snapshots of Camp David”, *Science*, Vol. 205, no 4404, (1979): 379, available at: [DOI: 10.1126/science.205.4404.379](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.205.4404.379), viewed June 2024.

framework and examine all related policy issues. These individuals were regarded as “the political muscle and business power of the country” and were expected to support the government in combating the recession³⁵¹. Although scarcely covered in existing literature, the Summit represented a defining moment in US history, as a President unexpectedly canceled a formal national address and left to seek feedback and guidance. At the same time, it was also exceptional for Carter himself to make such decision, given that he was perceived as “abundantly self-confident”, competitive, and always in pursuit of “excellence”³⁵². Amidst the crisis of the 1970s – and due to political inexperience – Carter put himself on the line in search of self-assurance and recommendations. According to the media reports, the summit was an explicit search for consensus and a manifestation of both personal and political crisis. A journalist of *The Nation* wrote: “The Camp David Summit represented above all an attempt to start rebuilding an image of purposeful leadership [...] and overcome the reputation for hesitancy and indecision”³⁵³. Initially, the event generated widespread surprise and sympathy; nevertheless, several senior advisors and many Americans considered it unpresidential and ineffective at the height of the crisis.

The Domestic Summit resulted in a major government reorganization, including the resignations of key administration members. Furthermore, the meetings helped Carter to prepare the Speech of July 15, 1979, in which he addressed the perceived malaise of the American people and presented a strategy to counter the national emergency³⁵⁴. Although

³⁵¹ The personal notes of the President cover all the days spent at Camp David and various handwritten annotations on the different meetings: Personal notes, President Jimmy Carter, “Camp David Domestic Summit 5-11 July 1979”, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Hamilton Jordan to the President, “Meeting with Camp David Summit Participants”, July 26, 1979, Chief of Staff - Hamilton Jordan Files, Box 41, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁵² Remarks, President Jimmy Carter – “Lunch with Camp David Meeting Participants” July 30, 1979, Carter/Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Press Office Files, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Link and Glad, *Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994, pp. 467 – 469; Bruce Mazlish and Edwin Diamond, *Jimmy Carter: A Character Portrait*, Simon and Schuster, 1979, p. 254; James D. Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 1977, Pearson, 4th ed. 2008, p. 509; Walter Weintraub, “Personality profiles of American Presidents as Revealed in Their Public Statements: The Presidential News Conferences of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 7, no 2, (1986): 285 – 295, specifically p. 292. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3791126>, viewed June 2024.

³⁵³ Press articles, in “The Nation”, July 1979, Jim Purk, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Stuart E. Eizenstat, “Exit Interview”, 1981, p. 15 in Link and Glad, *Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994, p. 473; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986.

³⁵⁴ Personal notes, President Jimmy Carter, “Camp David Domestic Summit 5-11 July 1979”, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; News release, “Announced Official Resignations”, July 20, 1979, Richard Goodwin Files, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Copy of Resignation letters to Jimmy Carter, July 19-20, 1979, Richard Goodwin Files, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Jimmy Carter, “July 15, 1979: Crisis of Confidence” Speech, 23 January 1979, *The Miller Center*. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-15-1979-crisis-confidence-speech>, viewed June 2024. A full list of the resignations that followed the Summit is available at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: “White House news releases”, 20 July 1979, Richard Goodwin Files, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

the discussions had mainly focused on energy and the economy, analysis of the 15 July Address reveal that Carter emphasized the psychological character of the American crisis. As a man of faith, he sought to use the crisis as an opportunity to display effective moral leadership and possibly restore a sense of community and solidarity. The ethical discussions held with religious, and the intellectual leaders mirrored his authentic beliefs and ultimately prevailed over efforts to introduce more pragmatic policy changes. He concluded the retreat at Camp David firmly convinced of having identified a clear path for renewing his administration and rehabilitating the country³⁵⁵. Following the speech, most advisors encouraged a substantive follow-up to the summit, leveraging on public curiosity and more favorable mood. Despite these recommendations, by late July 1979, Americans still lacked a clear understanding of how the President and his administration intended to address national challenges³⁵⁶. According to the media, the failure to adopt a strong ideological stance reflected an ineffective decision-making process: “The continued failure to develop a recognized philosophical underpinning for this Administration has been extremely costly [for the government]”³⁵⁷. Carter appeared hesitant and irresolute, focusing on broader existential trends rather than concrete national needs. Despite his positive impressions of the summit and Cabinet changes, he seemed out of touch with the challenging reality³⁵⁸.

By not effectively addressing inflation and unemployment, Carter failed in his goal of reuniting the Democratic electoral base and improving the national social system. White middle-class Americans and blue-collar workers had hoped to rediscover in Carter a New Deal-style leadership – one that prioritized traditional liberal democratic ideals and aimed to restore collective well-being amidst the crisis. Instead, the Democratic president appeared overwhelmed by the national situation, increasingly leaning toward more conservative

³⁵⁵ Personal notes, President Jimmy Carter, Camp David Domestic Summit, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Link and Glad, *Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014; Drew, *Phase*, 1979.

³⁵⁶ Memorandum, Schlosstein to Eizenstat – “Counter Cyclical Assistance and Energy/Economic Speech”, July 11, 1979, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 51, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁵⁷ News summary file, June/July 1979, Patricia Bauer Collection, Box 10, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Press articles, in “The Nation”, July 1979, Jim Purk Files, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Matthews to Schneiders, “Camp David Follow-Up”, July 13, 1979, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 24, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Link and Glad, *Exploring the Psycho-political Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994, pp. 477 – 478.

³⁵⁸ At the lunch on July 30, 1979, with the participants of the Camp David Summit, Carter affirmed: “There is no doubt in my mind that I now have a stronger and more cohesive, and perhaps even a more competent Cabinet. We have replaced excellent people with excellent people”. Remarks, President Jimmy Carter – “Lunch with Camp David Meeting Participants” July 30, 1979, Carter/Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Press Office Files, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Statement, Jimmy Carter in news releases, “Resignations July 20, 1979”, Goodwin, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Rubenstein, “Follow-through to Camp David Meetings”, July 1979, Rubenstein, Box 39, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

economic and religious ideals by calling for fiscal restraints and mutual sacrifice. His belief in the common good and the possibility of national redemption led him to focus on rebuilding trust and faith among the Americans. While he seemed to empathize with the people, he did prioritize the impact of the crisis on the everyday lives of Americans, promoting convincing short-term solutions to overcome the national malaise³⁵⁹.

Fractured priorities in the Carter administration

The personal notes of Carter illustrate that members of his administration were deeply divided between those in favor of strengthening the government and those advocating for greater deregulation. Drafts of the anti-inflation and energy program, as well as of the speech, were repeatedly rearranged without articulating a coherent political path. Likewise, the notes taken by the President during the Summit reveal diverging beliefs on the alleged widespread lack of confidence. Aside from Caddell, the religious representatives, and intellectuals, most presidential advisors overlooked public moral concerns and favored a pragmatic approach to confronting the crisis, including a major government re-organization³⁶⁰. Religious and intellectual leaders encouraged the President to consider the profound moral crisis afflicting Americans, hindering commitment to the common good and unity around shared goals. In their view, the people had become overly dependent on materialistic values, and Carter needed to re-orient national priorities by promoting joint sacrifice. They argued that: “A more modest way of life, free from dependency on luxuries mistaken for necessities [...] will restore loyalty to a moral standard higher than mere materialism”³⁶¹. In contrast, several chief advisors emphasized energy and inflation, believing that Carter needed to explore effective solutions for reinvigorating federal spending and educating the public on how to achieve greater economic and social relief³⁶².

³⁵⁹ Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2016, and *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986; Link and Glad, *Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994.

³⁶⁰ Personal notes, President Jimmy Carter “Meeting with religious and intellectuals”, Camp David Domestic Summit, July 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁶¹ Statement, Religious Community on Jimmy Carter Speech July 15, 1979, 20 July 1979, Carter/Mondale 1980 Reelection Committee Papers, Press Office Files, Box 281, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁶² Background paper, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Jimmy Carter – “Meeting with Outside Energy Experts”, July 8, 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Background Paper, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Jimmy Carter – “Meeting with Congressional Leaders on Energy”, July 9, 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Moore to Jimmy Carter – “Congressional Energy Group July 9, 1979”, July 8, 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Alfred Kahn et al. to Jimmy Carter – “Meeting with Congressional Inflation Working Group July 9, 1979”, July 8, 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Jimmy Carter – “Employment Discussion July 11, 1979”, July 10, 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library;

Ultimately, both the personality of Carter and the conflicting pressures from Summit participants hindered the formulation of a consistent recovery strategy. Typically, the absence of a unified team around a president impairs the decision-making process. In this case, although many senior advisors opposed a moralistic approach and restrictive policies, they neither firmly advanced their perspectives nor coordinated effectively to help Carter rethink national priorities³⁶³. **Nevertheless, the stability and effectiveness of a democratic system depends on the ability of the government to mitigate social fractures and reduce economic gaps.** In the late 1970s, ideological divisions within the government mirrored the cultural and political polarization emerging in American society. Progressive liberals called for stronger government action to address the environmental and social fallout of the crisis, which was depleting national resources and exacerbating inequality. In contrast, moderate liberals focused on the consequences of rising inflation and unemployment, which threatened their standard of living and future opportunities. These moderates increasingly leaned toward restoring the traditional liberal values and promoting a free-market economic system. As noted earlier, in seeking greater economic and social security, many gradually embraced the right-wing ideals that prioritized individual interests and national progress. Throughout the 1970s, middle-class and blue-collar Americans reassessed their economic priorities and shifted politically toward the Republican Party. Affected by the recession, they lost confidence in the status quo and looked to improve their living standards³⁶⁴. However, through his public messages, Carter appeared to overlook the practical consequences of the crisis on the jobs and incomes of the groups that traditionally formed the backbone of the Democratic coalition. While drafting long-term economic and energy programs, he demonstrated limited assertiveness in addressing the everyday concerns of his electorate. At the same time, the surge in inflation forced the government to prioritize fiscal restraint and regulatory measures, leaving little room for new social programs or for revitalizing national welfare. Thus, even while grasping the deeper moral malaise of Americans, Carter appeared overly focused on the emotional consequences of the crisis, rather than forcefully addressing its underlying causes. Without meeting the expectations of average American families, his chances of reelection diminished. After all, much of public anxieties stemmed from the inability to sustain and enjoy the traditional American way of life. As the core of American society weakened, so too did the ability of Carter to secure their support and prevent the rise

Memorandum, Watson to Jimmy Carter – “Meeting with State and Local Leaders July 11, 1979”, July 11, 1979, Plain Files, Box 19, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁶³ Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986, pp. 642 – 645 and 645 – 647; Link and Glad, *Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations*, 1994; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014.

³⁶⁴ Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012.

of right-wing opposition³⁶⁵. As described, since December 1978, the Administration had grown increasingly concerned over the ethical dimension of the American crisis. The results of public opinion polls and the unsettling memos presented by Caddell further exacerbated the fears of Carter. At the same time, a broad and unfocused policy agenda, combined with an unaligned staff, undermined the ability to meet public expectations. On the eve of the 1980 elections, Carter would have needed more coherent and strategic advice – serving both his political instincts and, when necessary, reorienting national priorities. Thereby, Carter could have mitigated the social and economic polarization spreading across the country. To renew public trust and secure a second term, the President worked closely with his newly restructured Cabinet to develop a more comprehensive policy plan. He established the “Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties”, which conducted independent studies on the most pressing national issues and proposed innovative recommendations to address them³⁶⁶. Following the July 15 speech, Carter prioritized reexamining the role of the government and enhancing the private sector to foster new economic and social opportunities for Americans. Within the White House, the prevailing consensus was to focus on fewer priorities than in the past, presenting Carter and the Democratic Party as the most reliable force to resolve the national crisis³⁶⁷. Acknowledging growing public skepticism, the administration emphasized the uniqueness of the 1980s challenges, as observed by advisor Rubenstein: “The proposed solutions are designed to meet the peculiar problems of the 1980s [...] they must be presented in the context of being especially appropriate for the decade, focusing on the fact that the new economic, energy, and international realities that exist now... did not exist ten or five years ago”³⁶⁸. Facing two strong candidates in the election, Carter needed to highlight his “honesty and integrity” and his commitment to making the government less wasteful and encouraging technological advancement³⁶⁹. The

³⁶⁵ Nye, *Soft Power*, 2004; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 2010; Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021.

³⁶⁶ Jimmy Carter, Executive Order 12168 – President’s Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties, October 24, 1979, by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/248207>, viewed June 2024; Memorandum, Rubenstein to Stuart E. Eizenstat – “Domestic Agenda for the 1980s”, February 1980, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “President’s Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties - Statement on Receiving the Commission’s Final Report”, January 16, 1981, *The American Presidency Project*. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250751>, viewed June 2024.

³⁶⁷ Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Jimmy Carter – “Comments”, July 4, 1979, Eizenstat Files, Box 96, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁶⁸ Memorandum, Rubenstein to Stuart E. Eizenstat – “Domestic Agenda for the 1980s”, February 1980, Eizenstat Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁶⁹ Memorandum, Neustadt to Stuart E. Eizenstat – “Speech for the 1980s”, November 2, 1979, Eizenstat Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Neustadt to Stuart E. Eizenstat – “Outline Democratic Agenda for the 80s”, November 5, 1979, Eizenstat Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential

question of the role of the government dominated the political debate, and both Anderson and Reagan strongly criticized the record of the Democratic presidency. Anderson supported the advancement of the ERA and civil rights to reunify American society, along with increased federal investment in business and academia to attract young voters and minorities. In contrast, Reagan advocated for greater decentralization, tax cuts, and increased military spending to reassert US strength³⁷⁰. In this context, the Staff of Carter suggested to emphasize the long-term benefits of their programs, as Rafshoon wrote to the president: “We must be resolute in playing to our strengths, not pandering to our weaknesses”³⁷¹. Economic renewal and industrial revitalization would foster deregulation and promote collaboration between government and business: “With airline, trucking, banking, and rail deregulation passed, and communications deregulation as a possibility, you will have done more in four years to free the economy from the shackles of excessive regulation and involvement than any President in modern times”³⁷². Despite these efforts, to be reelected Carter had to strengthen the credibility of the Democratic Party and heal its internal divisions. In November 1979, the unexpected announcement of Senator Ted Kennedy of his presidential bid, further underscored the rift within the left and weakened public trust in the government. Kennedy sought to rally progressive voters around traditional liberal ideals and a New Deal-style system. Though he initially gained traction – especially among labor unions and minority groups – he failed to reclaim the support of white Southerners and Midwesterners, who increasingly aligned with right-wing forces. Moreover, the Iran Hostage crisis prompted a rally-around-the-flag effect that momentarily strengthened the position of Carter. Hence, without securing a compelling strategy, Kennedy eventually withdrew from the primaries, leaving Carter with the singular challenge of reunifying the Democratic coalition.³⁷³

Toward November 1980, once it became clear that the Republican Party had gained substantial support from rising New Right, the Carter Administration reinforced its focus on the domestic agenda for the 1980s. Primarily, in an effort to strengthen the Democratic electoral base, Carter aimed to target disillusioned white middle-class Americans and

Library; Memorandum, Simmons to Stuart E. Eizenstat – “Policy Agenda for the 80s”, November 1979, Eizenstat Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷⁰ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020; Bird, *Outlier*, 2021; Statement, Ronald Reagan on “Consumer Price Index”, October 1980, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 73, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Charles Schultze to Jack Watson – “Reagan’s Economic Program”, September 1980, Council of Economic Advisers Charles Schultze Files, Box 72, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷¹ Memorandum, Rafshoon to Jimmy Carter – “Suggestions Campaign 1980”, December 1979, Gerald M. Rafshoon Files, Box 16, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷² Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Jimmy Carter – “Briefing on Interview”, August 1980, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 73, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷³ Jon Ward, *Camelot’s End: Kennedy vs Carter and the Fight that Broke the Democratic Party*, Grand Central Publishing, 2019.

prevent further defections to the right³⁷⁴. By emphasizing the impracticality of the Republican platform, he highlighted the inflationary risks such policies would pose to both the people and the federal budget in the long term. Adopting a more combative tone and projecting a hopeful vision for the country, the President sought to convince the electorate of his ability to support those in need and revitalize the American economy: “The US has always lived off hope [...] the view ahead must be credible, there has to be recognition that the presidency has the decency, and the strength, and the character to overcome the dangers and the difficulties [...] The people need an historical frame of reference with a future positive cast”³⁷⁵. He emphasized his plan to re-organize and reduce the role of government in domestic affairs. By focusing on social security, Medicaid and Medicare, the minimum wage, occupational safety, and consumer protection, he aimed to appeal to white-blue collar voters by cutting unnecessary red tape. To contrast himself with Reagan Carter stressed the need for adequate government oversight to ensure a fairer and healthier economic system, and he stressed: “We need to put the government on the backs not of the people, but on the backs of the self-motivated interests in the midst endangering the public”³⁷⁶. Throughout his campaign, Reagan steadily gained public approval attacking the record of the incumbent presidency and offering optimistic projections for the future of America. At the same time, neoconservative and New Right groups effectively amplified their patriotic and religious messages through media outlets and public events. According to polls, Carter continued to lose support – especially in the wake of several high-risk international developments that further damaged his image. The grain embargo, the Olympic boycott, and the Iran Hostage Crisis compounded the effects of escalating inflation alongside restrained federal and consumer spending, further alienating voters³⁷⁷. Amidst the ongoing domestic and international crises, average American families longed for reassurance and optimism. Yet, since the summer of 1979, they had increasingly come to view Carter as a weak leader incapable of reviving national progress. In retrospect, the Camp David Domestic summit,

³⁷⁴ Memorandum, Patrick Caddell to Les Francis – “Pre-convention Polling”, May 1980, Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Patrick Caddell to Jimmy Carter – “First Cut at a General Election Strategy”, Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Patrick Caddell to Jimmy Carter – “General Election 1980”, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷⁵ Memorandum, McIntyre to Jimmy Carter – “Budget Effects of the Republican Tax Program”, August 1980, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 73, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Memorandum, Stuart E. Eizenstat to Jimmy Carter – “Comments on Acceptance Speech”, August 1980, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 73, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Position paper, “Groping for a Central Message or Theme for the Autumn”, Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan Files, Box 77, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷⁶ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982, p. 567; Statement, Jimmy Carter Position on Government Regulation, October 1980, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 73, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷⁷ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982, pp. 543 – 544, 561 – 562, 568; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021.

and the July 15 speech, may have left a lasting impression of vulnerability that the President was unable to overcome in the ensuing months. In the final period of his presidency, Carter attempted to confront the moral malaise of the nations in hopes of restoring social consensus and stability. However, he might have been more effective emphasizing how solving tangible problems – inflation and energy – could help resolve the crisis of national spirit. As his advisors put it, “The President confronted the moral and spiritual malaise making it difficult for us to reunite and tackle our most pressing national problems”³⁷⁸. Ultimately, as the 1980 election approached Carter failed to convince his electorate and secure a second term, while facing an opponent who capitalized on the loss of confidence in the Democratic government and the rise of new conservative political forces.

Reagan and the conservative turn

By the late 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran Hostage Crisis further distanced Americans from President Carter and the Democratic Party, which seemed increasingly unable to handle the mounting crises. Meanwhile, growing national discontent with inflation, big government, and international challenges steadily pushed voters toward the Right³⁷⁹. Exploiting the prevailing distrust of American politicians and the left-wing, Governor Reagan emerged as a strong candidate, effectively delivering reassuring messages to the public. Centering his domestic policy on balancing the budget, limiting government interference, and cutting taxes for wealthy Americans, he attracted disillusioned Democrats and aimed to end the malaise of the 1970s. Above all, Reagan envisioned a national spiritual revival, promoting a recovery of moral values and relying on the support of the New Right and neoconservative groups. As journalist Elizabeth Drew wrote: “Reagan has been the conservatives’ beau ideal for years now, he has a gift for speaking to what is bothering them. He is the leader of that wing of the Republican Party which took over in 1964 and changed the party’s politics and its culture”³⁸⁰. Reagan appeared as a leader for financial elites, Southern entrepreneurs, WASPs, blue-collars, Catholics, and young Democrats calling for governmental change and improved economic well-being. Beginning in the late 1970s,

³⁷⁸ Memorandum, Rasphoon to the Administration – “After Speech July 1979”, July 1979, Lipshutz Files, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁷⁹ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982, pp. 568 – 569.

³⁸⁰ Newspaper article, Elizabeth Drew – A Reporter at Large “1980: Reagan”, Richard Allen papers, Box 32 folder 13, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Newspaper article, The Wall Street Journal “The Appeal of Ronald Reagan”, May 1976, Martin Anderson papers, Box 240, folder 4, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

Reagan and his campaign team developed a powerful strategy to solicit and engage moderate liberals and emerging neoconservatives in the run-up to the 1980 election. These groups increasingly viewed conservative principles as ethically and intellectually appealing³⁸¹. Following the strategy of Nixon of the early 1970s, the right-wing hoped to attract also neoconservative intellectuals and Jews beset by federal overreach. Although still valuing social justice and economic security, these voters were no longer aligned with Carter. At that point, greater sensitivity to the needs and values of these rising forces was essential to draw them away from Anderson. As Fred Ickle wrote to Reagan: “Such attention will help frame many domestic campaign issues so that the governor’s conservatism will not alienate, but rather attract large numbers of presently anti-Carter independents and moderates who I believe to be up for grabs”³⁸². In this context, Reagan focused on inflation and unemployment, promoting a major tax cut benefiting workers. By leveraging economic incentives and advocating for decentralization, the Republican Party successfully appealed to a broad spectrum of Americans. Specifically, Reagan promised job security, new employment opportunities, and home ownership for urban dwellers and average American families³⁸³.

Inflation represented the most pressing concern for the public. Despite the efforts of Carter to counter the promises of Reagan and resist the Republican surge, Americans steadily gravitated toward the opposition. By fall 1980, it was clear that Carter would not secure a second term. When it was announced that the hostages would not be released before the election, nearly all remaining undecided voters shifted to the right. The President and his foreign policy team appeared compliant and ineffectual, enabling the Soviet Union to gain strategic advantages at the expense of the US. The mismanagement of the Hostage Crisis resulted in a major loss of public support for the Democratic Administration and deepened national disillusionment³⁸⁴. Furthermore, the Cleveland Debate of October 1980 highlighted the ascendancy of Reagan, as he confidently presented his agenda and vigorously criticized

³⁸¹ The Campaign Team was chaired by Senator Paul Laxalt and William Casey. The files covering the work of the Team are collected at the Hoover Institution. See: Campaign and Presidential files, Martin Anderson papers, Box 264, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁸² Letter, Fred Ickle to Ronald Reagan, “Neoconservatives in Policy Advisory Group”, Martin Anderson papers, Box 264, folder 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Statement, Reagan Bush Committee – “Scholars Endorse Reagan”, October 1980, 1980 Campaign Series I/Hannaford Files, Box 45, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; Press article, “Jewish vote for Ronald Reagan”, Richard Allen papers, Box 32, folder 13, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Memorandum, Horowitz to Senator Laxalt – “Domestic Policy – Solicitation of Democrats and ‘neoconservatives’”, June 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 264, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁸³ Handwritten Letter, John Henry Norton to Ronald Reagan – “Policy Issues to Appeal Blue-Collar Workers”, October 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 568, folder 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁸⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982, pp. 568 – 569; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021.

the incumbent presidency. Relying on his oratory skills, Reagan emphasized the failures of Carter in fulfilling promises and improving the nation: “There is only one phrase to describe the last three years and eight months. It has been an American tragedy. The tragedy lies in what Carter has failed... He has failed to lead because of his view of government and of the American people [...] The time has come for the Americans to reclaim their dream”. Reagan advocated a sharp reduction in government spending, cuts in public taxes and increased military spending, persuading many that he could uplift both the American people and the nation as a whole³⁸⁵. As Carter and his team later recalled, they had not anticipated the scale of the defeat to come, naively believing the public would not be swayed by the rhetoric of the challenger³⁸⁶. Reagan held a strong inner conviction in the destiny and resilience of America, drawing in both moderate liberals and conservatives during a time of crisis. He attacked Carter underscoring his failure to support Americans or assert US power abroad: “I’d like to speak about a new concept of leadership, one that has both the words and the music. One based on the faith in the American people, confidence in the American economy... The problem with US is swollen inefficient government, needless regulation, too much taxation, and limited military spending”³⁸⁷. From the beginning of his presidential campaign, he aimed to reform the US economic system to combat inflation and address energy concerns. Economic prosperity, he argued, was tied to energy independence. In his view, the goal of the GOP was: “to give all Americans an opportunity to participate in a new American dream, offering an economic and energy policy of hope, of jobs creation, and national growth”³⁸⁸. Rising inflation affected the aspirations of low- and middle-income Americans, while the energy crisis undermined their economic security and the possibility of rebuilding the industrial base. Reagan needed to promote programs that benefited average Americans by increasing domestic resources and revitalizing the economy, offering a compelling alternative to the Democratic approach to the crisis. As suggested in a letter to the President: “Working Americans are far more interested in energy prices and supply

³⁸⁵ Debate transcript, “The Carter-Reagan Presidential Debate”, October 1980, *The Commission on Presidential Debates*. Available at: <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-28-1980-debate-transcript/>, viewed June 2024; News release, Reagan-Bush Committee – “Ronald Reagan’s Strategy for Economic Growth and Stability”, September 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 264, folder 7, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁸⁶ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982, pp. 568 – 571; McElwain, Review of “Rick Perlstein, Reaganland: America’s Right Turn 1976 – 1980”, 2020, pp. 409 – 415; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020.

³⁸⁷ Statement, Ronald Reagan versus Carter, Stuart E. Eizenstat Files, Box 73, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; Newspaper article, Elizabeth Drew, A Reporter at Large – “1980: Reagan”, Richard Allen papers, Box 32, Folder 13, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Remarks, Ronald Reagan – “Chicago Speech”, September 1980, Box 264, folder 7, Martin Anderson papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁸⁸ Letter, Governor Pierre Du Pont to John Tower, June 1980, Campaign Paper Series III/Meese Files, Box 116, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

reliability than in energy production, they do not directly fear an OPEC oil cut off as much as they fear lines at gas pumps, shortages of heating oil, and the loss of their jobs”.³⁸⁹ Unlike Carter, Reagan and his team did not focus on the moral character of the crisis. Instead, they identified government overreach and the mismanagement of the economy as the main factors worsening inflation and prolonging national stagnation. Advocating for a more “humane economy”, Reagan proposed reorganizing the American tax system through a three-year plan to cut personal income tax rates and eliminate counterproductive federal regulations. By increasing productivity and fostering technological innovation, both citizens and businesses could invest in the US economy and help restore American leadership. At the same time, increased national productivity could enhance energy supplies and meet domestic demand, reducing dependence on foreign oil. Many Republicans believed that price deregulation and subsidies for both consumers and producers were the most effective means of addressing the energy problem ³⁹⁰.

Republican task forces

On top of being a “great communicator”, Reagan assembled a team of professionals to create a consistent agenda and a successful electoral strategy. Drawing from his experience as governor, he deliberately established task forces that would play a crucial role in conducting an effective political campaign and later in managing the government. Acting on the advice of conservative political experts, he appointed a range of specialists to address the most pressing policy issues: social security, economic and energy policy, welfare reform, and government regulation³⁹¹. Since the summer of 1978, economist and close advisor Martin Anderson had emphasized the importance of establishing both a campaign team and a potential presidential task force. These groups would offer concrete plans of action developed by who he defined “the best and brightest” within the US³⁹². For the campaign, Reagan organized approximately 25 issue-oriented task forces with over 200 members, led

³⁸⁹ *Ivi.*

³⁹⁰ Position paper, Gary Jones to Meese – “The Economy 1979”, November 1979, Martin Anderson papers, Box 256, folder 11, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Speech, ABC News – “A Humane Economy”, October 1980, Box 798, folder 22, Martin Anderson papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Position paper, Gary Jones to Meese – “Energy 1979”, November 1979, Martin Anderson papers, Box 256, folder 11, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁹¹ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 2000; Yager, *Ronald Reagan’s Journey*, 2006; Memorandum, Martin Anderson to Ronald Reagan “Task Forces”, August 1978, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁹² Memorandum, Martin Anderson to Ronald Reagan “Task Forces”, August 1978, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

by academics unlinked with the campaign organization that would present their recommendations in November 1980. While Nixon and Carter had experimented with similar advisory structures, their efforts did not yield comparable results. Smaller groups and worsening domestic conditions prevented them from working effectively with policy teams. Generating sound ideas was only part of the political battle, most of all, these experts also needed to guide the Party toward key national priorities³⁹³. Both the campaign and presidential task forces had similar structures and objectives; however, the former consistently engaged with the media to communicate the platform of Reagan and reach the widest possible electorate. Similarly, presidential task forces evaluated emerging issues after the election and developed specific policies. In October 1980, Reagan created 23 Domestic and Economic Policy Task Forces and 25 Foreign Policy and Defense working groups to examine major national challenges³⁹⁴. Most members of these task forces were distinguished professor, scholars, and researchers of conservative policy institutes. However, the domestic policy teams assisting Reagan after the election also included senior advisors and more specific experts in economy and energy issues³⁹⁵. Notably, they included former Democrats and neoconservatives, helping to shape the tone and image of the Republican agenda. Influential neoconservatives such as as Nathan Glazer, Arthur Burns, and Charles Fried were part of the domestic policy team, while others like Jane Kirkpatrick and Paul Nitze contributed to the foreign and defense groups. The formation of these task forces and the careful selection of their members aligned with the broader political strategy of Reagan to secure Republican success. These groups offered valuable insights and contributed a wide range of representative viewpoints from both political elites and the public³⁹⁶. Reagan and his staff aimed to present attractive campaign promises that could match the policy decisions they would implement in office³⁹⁷. To build broader consensus and cooperate with Congress With the aim to intensify popular consensus, he also relied on two key political action committees: “Citizens for the Republic” and “The Cabinet of the Citizens” – both

³⁹³ *Ivi*.

³⁹⁴ News release, Reagan Bush Committee “Presidential Task Forces”, Martin Anderson papers, Box 256, folder 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Memorandum, Anderson to Ronald Reagan “Task Forces”, August 1978, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁹⁵ News release, Reagan Bush Committee “Presidential Task Forces”, Martin Anderson papers, Box 256, folder 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁹⁶ Statement, Ronald Reagan, “Foreign Policy and Defense Policy Advisory Group”, April 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 264, folder 4, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Memorandum, Horowitz to Senator Laxalt – “Domestic Policy – Solicitation of Democrats and ‘neoconservatives’”, June 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 264, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Letter, Fred Ikle to Ronald Reagan, “Neoconservatives in Policy Advisory Group”, Martin Anderson papers, Box 264, folder 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁹⁷ Report, “Economic Policy Coordinating Committee”, November 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 296, folder 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

instrumental in engaging the public and disseminate conservative philosophy³⁹⁸. *Citizens for the Republic* had three main objectives: to support the election of conservative republicans, to shift public opinion in favor of conservative principles, to raise funds, and to aid Republican leaders by coordinating with the media³⁹⁹. Similarly, *The Cabinet of the Citizens*, which had assisted Reagan during his governorship, acted as a vital liaison between the American public and the right-wing. Such forums helped reach average voters with conservative ideas and distance them from the Democratic Party. Engaged citizens could monitor the government and offer suggestions to improve efficiency⁴⁰⁰.

Strategic priorities for winning outcomes

Since the summer of 1979, his closest advisors, under the direction of Martin Anderson, developed a successful economic policy known as “Reaganomics”, aimed at promoting material progress for all Americans. Financial distress and public pessimism were the primary targets of the Right, rejecting the economic “bellyache myth” that greater employment would inevitably lead to higher inflation. By late 1970s, Republicans were determined to counteract the economic misconceptions perpetuated by the Democratic Party and craft a realistic strategy to address the recession. *Policy Memorandum No. 1* laid the foundation for the economic plan: to reduce federal expenditures and increase revenues by relying on the private sector. Eliminating wasteful and counterproductive government regulations was expected to increase national productivity, improve American standard of living, and balance the federal budget⁴⁰¹. Economic freedom was considered a fundamental individual right that to be granted to recover from the crisis. Together with economist David Stockman, Anderson championed the doctrine of the “supply-side economics”, which focused on reducing top income tax rates, lowering interest rates, and encouraging domestic

³⁹⁸ Since the presidential campaign of 1976, Reagan was assisted by the committee “Citizens for Reagan”, the precursor of “Citizens for the Republic”. The few collected records of both committees are retained by the Hoover Institution. See: Citizens for Reagan records, collection 81141, Online Archive of California, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Statement, “Citizen for the Republic”, February 1977, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³⁹⁹ Statement, “Citizen for the Republic”, February 1977, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁴⁰⁰ Article, William A. Rusher, *The Conservative - “A Citizen’s Cabinet”*, Martin Anderson papers, Box 240, folder 4, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Statement, “Citizen for the Republic”, February 1977, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Speech, Draft – “Economic Program”, September/October 1980, Box 264, folder 7, Martin Anderson papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁴⁰¹ Memorandum, Martin Anderson to Ronald Reagan – “Policy Memorandum no. 1”, August 1979, Martin Anderson papers, Box 237, folder 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Address, Draft of “President’s Address on Economic Policy”, March 1980, 1980 Transition Papers Series III/Deputy Director for Executive Branch Management – William Timmons, Box 74, folder 2, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

investments⁴⁰². On the eve of the 1980s, in addition to the Republican Task Forces led by Meese and the insights of close advisors, Reagan and his team maintained ongoing collaboration with major conservative think-tanks in Washington. Reagan actively drew on their expertise, as a journalist noted: “While in previous administrations the advisory task forces primarily provided work for people who had the reason to think they ought to be consulted... Reagan is more likely to make real use of them to win the elections and direct his presidency”⁴⁰³. Throughout the campaign, Reagan consulted multiple study clusters offering suggestions on key appointments and urgent legislative initiatives for the first 90 days of his presidency and beyond⁴⁰⁴. Beginning in Autumn 1980, the Republican staff collaborated with the Heritage Foundation, the Institute of Politics at the Harvard School of Government, and the Hoover Institution to develop comprehensive “game-plans” for achieving conservative goals. Unlike liberal or non-partisan research centers, these organizations played an active advocacy role, endorsing conservative principles and influencing both policy decisions and public discourse⁴⁰⁵. Particularly, the Heritage Foundation began developing a sweeping transition study titled “A Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration”, which became a key guide for policymaking in the Reagan presidency⁴⁰⁶. Its 19 task-teams, organized by cabinet agencies and departments, produced in-depth studies commissioned papers offering strategic recommendations. Initiatives⁴⁰⁷. The Mandate served not only as a repository of policy

⁴⁰² David Stockman was eventually appointed Director of the Office of Management and Budget during the Reagan administration. Towards the 1980 elections, he wrote an influential essay that reinforced the position of the Republican economists on the economic strategy. Essay, David Stockman – “How to Avoid an Economic Dunkirk”, 1980 Transition Papers Series IV/Office of Policy Coordination Darrell Trent, Box 109, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁰³ Article, Robert Levey – Boston Globe “Reagan’s Think Tank: Stanford’s Hoover Institution to Wield Strong Influence”, November 1980, Martin Anderson papers, Box 296, folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁴⁰⁴ Article, Heritage Today – “Reagan Transition Team to Rely on Heritage Study”, November 1980, 1980 Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition Edwin Meese, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁰⁵ Landers, *Think Tanks*, 1986; Hasan, *From Policy Research to Political Advocacy*, 2010; Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 2006, and *Do Think Tank Matter*, 2018, pp. 150 – 180; Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*, 2012; Article, Heritage Today – “Reagan Staff’s Collaboration”, October 1980, 198’ Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition – Edwin Meese, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁰⁶ Interestingly, it appears that the choice of the name was carefully selected by the Campaign Task Force and the Heritage Foundation rather than “transition study” to make it look less presumptuous and allow greater cooperation to draft it. Report, Heritage Foundation – “A Mandate for Leadership”, 1980 Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition Edwin Meese, January 1981, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; Working paper, Heritage Foundation – “Workbook on Presidential Leadership”, 1981, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁰⁷ Report, Heritage Foundation – “A Mandate for Leadership”, 1980 Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition Edwin Meese, January 1981, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; Article, Heritage Today – “Reagan Transition Team to Rely on Heritage Study”, November 1980, 1980 Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition Edwin Meese, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; Memorandum, Edwin Meese to Ronald Reagan – “Reception with Conservatives and Heritage Team”,

proposals but also as a powerful statement validating conservative ideology and educating the public about the challenges and opportunities facing the federal government. It offered a comprehensive roadmap for Republican priorities by integrating the perspectives of traditional conservatives, neoconservatives, New Right activists, and economic libertarians⁴⁰⁸. The GOP greatly benefited from continuous collaboration interaction with advocacy think-tanks, which bolstered its ideological coherence and helped build public trust. Unlike the Carter administration, which had promoted a broad and ambitious policy agenda without effective implementation, Reagan and his team concentrated on fulfilling specific objectives engaging with the electorate. The Party maintained systemic relationships with the press, Congress, and the public especially through a robust Office of Public Affairs, and an Office of Special Liaison collecting various inputs. By the late 1970s, amid critical national conditions, an efficient media-management team became a powerful vehicle for promoting the conservative agenda⁴⁰⁹. Reagan dominated headlines in mainstream newspapers, portraying him as the figure best equipped to revitalize the nation and steadily outshining his political rivals. Opinion polls left no doubt: the messages of optimism and renewal were winning over most Americans⁴¹⁰. Thus, in November 1981, Reagan secured a decisive victory and delivered a Republican majority in the Senate. Moderate liberals and conservatives alike supported the shift to the Right, particularly upper-middle-class Americans in the South and West, drawn by the promise of improved quality of life and reassertion of US international strength⁴¹¹. With a united team supporting the president and a sustained presentation of optimistic programs, Reagan overshadowed the moral introspection that had characterized the national crisis. He presented a revitalized conservative philosophy as a counterpoint to the New Deal – Great Society agenda⁴¹².

December 1980, 1980 Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition Edwin Meese, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁰⁸ Report, Heritage Foundation – “A Mandate for Leadership”, 1980 Transition Papers Series II/Director of Transition Edwin Meese, January 1981, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; Working paper, Heritage Foundation – “Workbook on Presidential Leadership”, 1981, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁰⁹ Specifically, the congressional relation office was headed by Paul Laxalt and Tom Evans, while the Office of Public Affairs was directed by Robert Garrick. Memorandum, Richard Wirthlin to Edwin Meese, “Transition of the President”, September 1982, Edwin Meese papers, Box 685, folder 6, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁴¹⁰ Hudson, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s*, 2008, specifically, pp. 19 – 28, 249 – 261; Yager, *Ronald Reagan’s Journey*, 2006; Cannon, *President Reagan*, 2000; Abram C. van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism*, Yale University Press, 2020; Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism*, 2022; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010.

⁴¹¹ CBS News and New York Times, How Groups Voted in 1980, RoperCenter – Cornell University. Available at: <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-1980>, viewed July 2024.

⁴¹² Article, Robert Levey – Boston Globe “Reagan’s Think Tank”, Martin Anderson papers, Box 296, folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Cowie,

In retrospect, Reagan had the ability to suspend public disbelief during a time of deep national crisis, offering a hopeful vision of the future. In a period of crisis relying on positive visions of the future. In the short term, he succeeded in delivering broad benefits to average Americans and restoring US primacy in progress. However, over the long-term, his policies contributed to a significant economic deficit and a more individualistic society. This transformation altered the structure of American society, widening social and political divides. While the Republican Party may have provided a timely solution to the crisis, it ultimately left behind a more fragmented legacy⁴¹³. Carter and Reagan embodied two fundamentally opposing approaches to the crisis of the 1970s. The moralistic pragmatism of Carter contrasted sharply with the market-driven optimism of Reagan. Yet, despite their differences, both failed to rebuild the bipartisan consensus that had long underpinned American political stability. While Reagan initiated a period of national renewal and advanced neoliberal ideals, he also perpetuated many of the social tensions that had challenged the Democratic leadership. In the long term, the emphasis on individualism and market efficiency came at the cost of collective cohesion, setting the stage for increased polarization and a redefinition of American political identity⁴¹⁴. The transition from Carter to Reagan thus marked not only a shift in leadership but a change in the priorities, values, and structures that shaped the US in the late 20th century.

Stayin' Alive, 2010; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

⁴¹³ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 12; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020, Intro; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

⁴¹⁴ Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal order*, 2022, chapters 5 – 7; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013, ch. 6, pp. 278 – 311.

Chapter 5

Key elements of an effective presidential transition

Since the 1930s in the US, presidential transitions have taken place over a very limited period - spanning the eleven weeks between the election and the inauguration of the incoming president. Transitions represent a crucial moment when the rotation between two administrations can either ensure the continuation of certain policies or project a new legacy⁴¹⁵. In 1933, the establishment of the 20th amendment introduced significant reforms to the timing and functioning of the federal government. It moved the presidential inauguration from March 4 to January 20 and the start of Congressional sessions to January 3, improving government efficiency and reducing the “lame duck” period⁴¹⁶. Since the Great Depression, this change has expedited transitions of power and ensured prompt action on national issues, clarifying procedures for presidential succession, and shortening Congressional terms to allow faster legislative action. Typically, transfers of governmental authority are complex periods of reassessment and change that offer the president-elect a critical opportunity to advance his policy agenda and reconfigure the relationship between the executive branch, Congress, and broader public opinion. Given the limited duration of the process, advisory and planning efforts usually begin during the campaign phase, with expert groups formulating preliminary plans for prospective presidencies. From the early 1930s, shortly after the election incoming officials assemble a transition team responsible for preparing the new administration - covering staffing, policy planning and logistical arrangements. These teams involve experienced advisors, political allies, and external experts who outline priorities and strategies for the White House staff⁴¹⁷. President Franklin

⁴¹⁵Elaine L. Halchin, *Presidential Transitions: Issues Involving Outgoing and Incoming Administrations*, Congressional Research Service, 2017. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RL34722.pdf>, viewed July 2024; Edward J. Larson, “The Constitutionality of Lame-Duck Lawmaking: The Text, History, Intent, and Original Meaning of the Twentieth Amendment,” *Utah Law Review*, Vol. 2012, no 707, (2012). Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2198636, viewed March 2025; Karl B. Dean, *Executive Reorganization and Reform in the New Deal: The Genesis of Administrative Management, 1900 – 1939*, Harvard University Press, 1963.

⁴¹⁶ The “lame duck” period refers to the time between an election and the inauguration of newly elected leaders, where the outgoing president still holds official power. During this phase, the president-elect typically works with his predecessor to ensure peaceful transfers of power. James R. Hedtke, *Lame Duck Presidents: Myth or Reality*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.

⁴¹⁷ John P. Burke, *Presidential Transitions: From Politics to Practice*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000; Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency*, 2011; Nicole Anslover, “Trouble with the Transition: The Transfer of Power from

D. Roosevelt was who inaugurated this modern-style presidency, committing to provide relief for Americans and foster economic recovery. He reshaped the American presidency, emphasizing the urgency of constitutional reform, particularly during times of crisis. As Michael Riccards highlights, “Roosevelt changed the nature of the presidency, the alignment of the political parties, and America’s role in the world”⁴¹⁸. Among the various measures adopted at the time, the Executive Reorganization Bill of 1939 allowed FDR to establish the Executive Office of the President, expanding the federal government and introducing greater professionalism into the system. He was the first president-elect to develop a formal team of policy advisers – known as the “Brain Trust” – with the goal of bringing greater expertise into the Cabinet and sub-cabinets addressing policymaking. The federal government was seen as a positive agency for recovery and reform, closely aligning public opinion with New Deal goals⁴¹⁹. As the presidency has assumed greater importance both domestically and internationally, transitions have become more structured and supervised. Since 1963, official transfers of power have been regulated by the Presidential Transition Act, which guarantees that all classified materials and reports are accurately transferred between presidential teams⁴²⁰. Over time, as presidential power has expanded, national leaders have also assumed a broader psychological role - addressing public fears and restoring trust. In the US, presidents serve as both chief of state and head of government, embodying national unity and acting as symbols of national pride⁴²¹. Particularly in times of crisis, they aim to be responsive to collective needs, engaging the public and inspiring confidence in the future⁴²². Throughout modern American history, national leaders have increasingly regarded public opinion as critical to the success of their policies: visions of hope and reassuring rhetoric have proven essential to curb public concerns and build credibility with the electorate⁴²³.

Carter to Reagan”, *The Nordic Association for American Studies*, Vol 52, no 2, (2020): 47 – 62, Available at: <https://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/assc/article/download>, viewed July 2024.

⁴¹⁸ Michael P. Riccards, “Franklin Delano Roosevelt: The Establishment of the Modern Presidency”, in *Destiny’s Consul: America’s Greatest Presidents*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012, pp. 221 – 291, specifically p. 221, 288 - 291.

⁴¹⁹ With the Reorganization Act, FDR not only set up the Executive Branch but also the Bureau of the Budget, transferring greater power to the White House. George H. Skau, “Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Expansion of Presidential Power”, *Current History*, Vol. 66, no 394, (1974): 246 – 275. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45313079>, viewed March 2025.

⁴²⁰ Henry B. Hogue, “Presidential Transition Act: Provisions and Funding”, *Congressional Research Service*, (updated May 2024). Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46602>, viewed July 2024; Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, Simon and Schuster, 1991.

⁴²¹ Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency*, 2011, p. 260.

⁴²² Michael P. Riccards, “Franklin Delano Roosevelt: The Establishment of the Modern Presidency”, in *Destiny’s Consul: America’s Greatest Presidents*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012, pp. 221 – 291, specifically p. 221, 288 - 291.

⁴²³ Riccards, *Destiny’s Consul*, pp. 221 – 225; John W. Sloan, *FDR and Reagan: Transformative Presidents with Clashing Visions*, University Press of Kansas, 2008; Henry Olsen, *The Working-Class Republican*:

Given the rise in public appearances, incoming presidents must skillfully steer collective sentiment and exhibit strong leadership to maintain majority support throughout their administration. More importantly, publicly endorsed presidential campaigns and transitions can facilitate early legislative approvals in Congress, which are vital for the implementation of consistent reforms⁴²⁴. From the outset of presidential campaigns, party leaders and their teams focus on shaping public perception and institutional support to help achieve future policy goals. However, holding national leaders to high standards can complicate impartial evaluations: instability, party affiliation, and widespread hope often encourage biased praise or blame from the electorate. In this context, campaign promises are fundamental to the “representation” and “accountability” of a president, as voters interpret them through their own perceptions of candidate priorities, trust in government, and expected policy outcomes⁴²⁵. Since public impressions play a central role in determining the success and cultural impact of public figures, presidential candidates gain influence by fostering partisanship and building trust with voters. Unlike general campaign statements, promises can have a psychological effect on the electorate: they shape expectations around the commitment and reliability of political leaders. Upon election, incoming presidents and their teams must translate rhetoric into tangible policy outcomes that satisfy party priorities and broader public sentiment⁴²⁶. Throughout the transition and the presidency, opinion polls serve as valuable tools for measuring presidential power and public support – “a continuous referendum” on government action⁴²⁷. Referring to the available data, economic and peace-related issues typically emerge as primary electoral factors and remain central to assessments

Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism, Broadside Books, 2017; Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency*, 2011, pp. 260 – 262.

⁴²⁴ Riley L. Russell, “Presidential Transitions Didn’t Use to Matter: Here’s What Changed”, *The Washington Post*, (January 2021). Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/01/05/presidential-transitions-didnt-use-matter-heres-what-changed/>, viewed July 2024; Anslover, *Trouble with the Transition*, 2020.

⁴²⁵ Andreas Born and Magnus Johannesson, “An Experimental Investigation of Election Promises”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 39, no 3, (2018): 685 – 705. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45095198>, viewed August 2024.

⁴²⁶ Tabitha Bonilla, *The Importance of Campaign Promises*, Cambridge University Press, 2022, Ch. 1, and “Promises Kept, Promises Broken, and Those Caught in the Middle, Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, (2022): 1 – 35. Available at: <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/2022/wp-22-27.pdf>, viewed August 2024; Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 1980; Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese, *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁴²⁷ Charles W. Ostrom, and Dennis M. Simon, “Promise and Performance: A Dynamic Model of Presidential Popularity”, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79, no 2, (1985): 334 – 358, p. 335. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1956653>, viewed September 2024; Godfrey Hodgson, *All things to All Men: The False Promise of the Modern American Presidency from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan*, Simon & Schuster, 1980.

of presidential effectiveness⁴²⁸. Especially during national crises, citizens evaluate leadership on these matters by comparing present conditions to the past and by judging responsiveness of leaders to collective needs. As MacKuen emphasizes, presidential rhetoric is crucial in such contexts: “Little that the president does directly affects individual citizens’ personal experiences. They can only judge his quality by his ability to evoke the proper symbolic responses when he acts”⁴²⁹. From the campaign phase onward, party leaders must focus public attention on a limited set of fundamental issues to enhance mass appeal and implement meaningful change⁴³⁰. In the modern era, since presidential performance is assessed through both symbolic and partisan lenses, it is also heavily influenced by media, lobbies, and think-tanks that shape public understanding. Since mid-20th century, these actors exploit the transition and governance phases to frame national debate and influence the policy process in Washington. Most importantly, they aim to highlight specific issues and drive public consensus toward favored leaders⁴³¹. Primarily, media coverage tends to focus more on presidential personalities than on policy outcomes, often prioritizing entertainment over substantive civic engagement. Since the early 20th century, media outlets have emphasized internal governmental dynamics while neglecting critical policy discussions that could enrich public debate. More recently, media priorities have shifted toward speed over depth and accountability; they provide immediate institutional information, but their coverage is often biased and lacks analytical rigor. However, due to their wide reach and accessibility, these mass mediums shape public opinion and amplify political spectacle to capture attention⁴³². Similarly, think-tanks and expert groups engage with political issues by offering informed recommendations and developing specialized policy proposals. From the campaign period through the transition and presidency, they

⁴²⁸ Michael MacKuen, “Political Drama, Economic Conditions, and the Dynamics of Presidential Popularity”, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 27, no 2, (1983): 165 – 192. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111014>, viewed September 2024.

⁴²⁹ MacKuen, *Political Drama, Economic Conditions, and the Dynamics of Presidential Popularity*, 1983, p. 167.

⁴³⁰ Anthony B. Atkinson, “Contemporary Political Economy, by Douglas A. Hibbs & Heike Fassbender”, *Journal of Public Economics*, Elsevier, Vol. 17, no 1, (1982): 123 – 128. Available at: <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/pubeco/v17y1982i1p123-128.html>, viewed September 2024; Ostrom and Simon, *Promise and Performance*, 1985, pp. 335, 356 – 357.

⁴³¹ MacKuen, “*Political Drama, Economic Conditions, and the Dynamics of Presidential Popularity*”, 1983; Richard A. Brody, and Benjamin I. Page, “The Impact of Events on Presidential Popularity”, in Aaron Wildavsky, *Perspectives on the Presidency*, Little Brown, 1975, pp. 136 – 148.

⁴³² Herbert Schmertz, “The Media and the Presidency”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, no 1, (1986): 12 – 21. Available at: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein:journals/pstlssqy16&i=21>, viewed September 2024; Claudio Riva, *Social media e politica: esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*, UTET Università, 2021; Luigi Bobbio e Franca Roncarolo, *I media e le politiche: come i giornali raccontano le scelte pubbliche che riguardano la vita dei cittadini*, Il Mulino, 2015; Michael A. Genovese and Lori Cox Han, “The President Over the Public”, in *The Presidency and the Challenge of Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 119 – 137.

establish close relationships with presidential teams and often join the White House post-inauguration⁴³³. Echoing the 1930s, these “brain trusts” and modern research teams are composed of well-connected insiders selected for their expertise and influence, forming a “shadow government” behind perspective administrations. They conduct research, raise funds, increase party visibility, build strategic networks, and publish reports to inform public discourse⁴³⁴. As a result, since the late 20th century, technologically advanced media and advocacy think-tanks have significantly influenced political dialogue and policymaking preferences. The extent to which presidents and administrations engage with these resources directly affects governance, voter influence, and electoral success. In the absence of media support or sound policy guidance, party leaders increasingly struggle to run effective campaigns and manage transitions⁴³⁵. In summary, despite varying contexts, modern presidential transitions involve engaged campaign and transition staff, consistent media coverage, widespread advertising, and active party leadership. Nonetheless, a systematic and forward-thinking preparation increases the likelihood of a successful administration⁴³⁶. As Pfiffner notes, effective transfers of power are characterized by early planning, clear advice, organizational strength, and carefully vetted appointments⁴³⁷. Collaboration with experienced advisors and research institutions helps to define national priorities and strengthen policy development, while enhancing public engagement. Leaders who combine compelling rhetoric with proactive personalities can inspire widespread trust and mobilize collective action⁴³⁸. Lastly, open dialogue between outgoing and incoming administrations

⁴³³ Ostrom and Simon, *Promise and Performance*, 1985, pp. 335; Heath Brown, “Status and Expertise: A Typology of US Presidential Transition Team Members”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 53, no 4, 2023, pp. 501 – 516. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12847>, viewed July 2024, and *Lobbying the New President: Interests in Transition*, Taylor & Francis, 2012; Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, *The Lobbyists: How Influence Peddlers Work Their Way in Washington*, Three Rivers Press, 1993.

⁴³⁴ Brown, *Status and Expertise*, 2023; Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, *The Lobbyists: How Influence Peddlers Work Their Way in Washington*, Three Rivers Press, 1993.

⁴³⁵ Ostrom and Simon, *Promise and Performance*, 1985; Brown, *Lobbying the New President* 2012; Birnbaum, *The Lobbyists*, 1993.

⁴³⁶ Richard Wirthlin, memo – “Report on the transition of the President and President-elect”, September 1982, Edwin Meese, Box 685, folder 6, Hoover Institution & Library.

⁴³⁷ Wallace E. Walker and Michael R. Roepel, *Strategies for Governance: Transition and Domestic Policymaking in the Reagan Administration*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol 16, no 4, (1986): 734 – 760. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40574420>, viewed September 2024; Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency*, 2011, pp. XII, 260 – 262, and *The Strategic Presidency*, 1996; Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, Simon and Schuster, 1991; Martha J. Kumar, George C. Edwards, et. al., “The Contemporary Presidency: Meeting the Freight Train Head On: Planning for the Transition to Power”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, no 4, (2000): 754 – 769. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0360-4918.2000.00142.x>, viewed July 2024. For further insights on how contemporary transitions teams are built see: Brown, *Status and Expertise*, 2023.

⁴³⁸ Jeffrey Cohen, “Presidential Personality and Political Behavior: The Theoretical Issues and an Empirical Test”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol 10, no 4, (1980): 588 – 599. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27547626>, viewed August 2024; Anthony King, *Leaders’ Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*, Oxford University Press, 2002; Bert Rockman, “The Style and

reduces institutional tensions and ensures continuity in governance. Typically, peaceful transitions facilitate the exchange of information and uphold stable national leadership, reinforcing democratic values⁴³⁹. Since the presidency of FDR, policymaking has increasingly depended on the specific vision and structure of each incoming administration. New presidents shape national direction through trusted advisors, centralized executive power, and well-defined policy priorities⁴⁴⁰.

The Carter – Reagan transition

The presidential transition between Carter and Reagan, from November 1980 to January 1981, serves as a pivotal case study in the evolution of executive power and administrative restructuring within the US. This transition not only marked a significant ideological shift in both the government and the electorate toward the conservative goals championed by Reagan, but also underscored the complexities involved in transferring governmental authority. In the collective imagery, the handover between Carter and Reagan is often remembered for its remarkable organization and smooth formal procedure. It is widely described as one of the most comprehensive and well-executed transitions in US history, especially for what concerns the work of the Republican team⁴⁴¹. However, an attentive examination of this period reveals, the strategic decisions, organizational challenges, and political realignments that have come to define modern presidential transitions. By the late 1970s, the change between administrations represented a significant political and ideological turning point for the nation: while the handover was orderly and peaceful, it laid the groundwork for a transformative presidency and set off major changes within the government⁴⁴². It redefined American public trust, governance, and party polarization,

Organization of the Reagan Presidency”, in Charles O. Jones, *The Reagan Legacy*, Chatham House, 1988. On the link between individual personality of the presidents and American foreign policy: Maryann E. Gallagher and Susan H. Allen, “Presidential Personality: Not Just a Nuisance”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2014, Vol. 10, (2013): 1 – 22. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24910784>, viewed August 2024.

⁴³⁹ On the effect of transitions on democratic governance: Patrick H. Sanaghan, Larry Goldstein, et al., *Presidential Transitions: It's Not Just the Position, It's the Transition*, Preager Pub, 2007; Michael Nelson, Lara M Brown, et al., *The Presidency and the Political System*, Cq Pr, 10th edition, 2013; Bill Clinton, *Mastering the Presidency*, Public Affairs, 2007; Burke, *Presidential Transitions*, 2000; Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency*, 2011; Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, 1991.

⁴⁴⁰ Mattia Diletti, *Divisi: Politica, società e conflitti nell’America del XXI secolo*, Treccani, 2024, p. 75.

⁴⁴¹ Wirthlin, memorandum *Report on the transition of the President and President-elect*, 1982; Anslover, *Trouble with the Transition*, 2020; Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency*, 1996; Allan Lichtman, *The Keys to the White House: A Surefire Guide to Predicting the Next President*, Lexington Books, 1996, ed. 2005; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History 1974 – 2008*, HarperCollins, 2008; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020; Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 2006.

⁴⁴² Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983.

ultimately shifting US priorities. The victory of the Republican Party marked the end of bipartisan consensus, generated a major political re-alignment among the electorate, and inaugurated the neoliberal era in the US⁴⁴³. Most notably, beyond the provisions adopted by the two administrations, the differing leadership styles of the two presidents also emerged as key factors shaping decision-making and public opinion. The vigorous authority of Reagan, coupled with a perfectly orchestrated transition process by his team, facilitated the success of the Republican Party⁴⁴⁴. In 1980, the election of Reagan primarily reflected widespread dissatisfaction with the work of the Carter Administration during a time of crisis, along with a collective desire for national change. An alarming economic recession and perceived weakness in foreign policy, particularly toward the Soviet Union, played a significant role in pushing many moderate liberals and average Americans toward the Right. The conservative agenda - committed to reducing government intervention, lowering taxes, and increasing military spending - offered new economic opportunities to blue-collar workers, and promised white middle-class Americans to reassert their status⁴⁴⁵. At the same time, the pledge to strengthen the US against the Soviet Union and restore its international prominence resonated with the objectives of many neoconservatives and convinced Republicans.

The Reagan administration relied primarily on three factors to ensure an effective and successful transition, influencing the trajectory of American politics and social configuration to this day: 1. Thorough policy planning and clearly defined political priorities; 2. Effective public image and media management; 3. Broad demand for change and strong display of leadership targeting specific segments of the American society.

Defining policy goals

On the eve of the 1980 election, the economic and energy crises critically undermined the leadership of Carter, weakening public support and hindering his chances for reelection. Most notably, internal divisions within the Democratic administration prevented the development of cohesive recovery plans: loyal moderate advisors emphasized the moral

⁴⁴³ Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

⁴⁴⁴ Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983.

⁴⁴⁵ Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2020; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

nature of the crisis to align with the views of the President, while progressive liberals advocated more action-oriented strategies amidst the crisis⁴⁴⁶.

From the beginning of his presidency, Carter personally appointed members of his Democratic administration based more on loyalty than expertise and remained directly responsible for policy initiatives. According to Burns, he was a pragmatic and policy-driven leader who valued negotiation and diplomacy to achieve legislative successes. However, his difficulty in delegating tasks and limited media exposure negatively affected public approval and the overall success of his administration. While regarded as a moral and ethical leader, he struggled with public perceptions of indecisiveness and lacked the visionary qualities needed to inspire significant transformations⁴⁴⁷.

In the late 1970s, the memorandum “Crisis of Confidence” by pollster Pat Caddell highlighted these divisions, warning the administration about an alienated electorate whose disillusionment could hinder national unity and escalate the crisis. Caddell confirmed the existence of a deeper crisis of confidence and urged Carter to restore self-resilience and faith in government to address the national malaise⁴⁴⁸. In response to growing political disaffection, Carter organized the Camp David Domestic Summit (July 7, 1979) to discuss strategies with national leaders for addressing the emergency and easing tensions within the administration. Overall, while the summit discussions duly emphasized growing discontent and the absence of a shared vision, they ultimately failed to produce proactive measures to restore public confidence. By its conclusion, the Carter administration underwent significant reorganization to address internal conflicts and establish order, strengthening public perceptions of uncertainty and lack of shared vision within the government. Moreover, the extensive set of measures introduced to recover from the recession deepened pessimism among Americans and amplified the prevailing national gloom. The “Crisis of Confidence” speech (July 15, 1979) promoted fiscal restraint to combat inflation and conservation efforts

⁴⁴⁶ Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency*, Putnam, 1982; Eizenstat, *President Carter*, 2018; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982. For further references on the divisions within the Democratic administration see chapter on Carter and Reagan - chapter 3.

⁴⁴⁷ Burns defined Carter as a “transactional leader” aiming at incremental policy implementation rather than transformational. James M. Burns, *Leadership*, Harper & Row, 1978; Eizenstat, *President Carter*, 2018; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999; Gordon R. Hoxie, “The Cabinet in the American Presidency 1789 – 1984”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, no. 2, (1984): 209 – 230, specifically p. 228. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27550068>, viewed August 2024; Geoffrey P. Miller, *From Compromise to Confrontation: Separation of Powers in the Reagan Era*, Miller – The George Washington Law Review, Vol. 57, no 3, (1989): 401 – 426, specifically, pp. 409 – 413. Available at: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/gwlr57&div=32&id=&page=> , viewed August 2024.

⁴⁴⁸ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014; For further insights on the memorandum of Caddell and on its influence see chapter 3.

to reduce dependence on foreign oil, ultimately confirming the severity of the emergency and reinforcing public anxiety⁴⁴⁹. In his remarks, while the President acknowledged collective concerns and offered a substantial response plan, he failed to instill renewed hope or present firm solutions for the worrying moral malaise of Americans⁴⁵⁰. The perceived absence of strong leadership, combined with austere measures and a heavy emphasis on the consequences of the crisis, increased public distrust. As historian Kevin Mattson notes: “Carter did not radiate optimism. Instead, he pointed out the hard truth that Americans had been avoiding for some time, and while it was intellectually honest, it was not what the public wanted to hear”⁴⁵¹. Since presidential promises shape public perception and accountability of national leaders, the personality of a president and his communication with the public are critical for policy changes in times of crisis. Carter carefully crafted an ambitious recovery plan aimed at long-term progress, but its benefits required short-term sacrifices. High costs and unemployment had already strained the economic conditions of many average Americans, and “stagflation” deeply affected their traditional way of life. The lack of immediate relief from the crisis and the perceived weakness of Carter obscured the future benefits on the economy and collective wealth that the program of his administration might have delivered. By the late 1970s, the “spiritual malaise” that Americans were experiencing directly affected their lifestyles, as fiscal austerity further compromised their condition and threatened the foundation of liberal ideology. In the final months of the Carter presidency, many Americans began to criticize not only the inefficiencies of regulatory government for national well-being but also the underlying principles of liberalism⁴⁵². As affluence and government assistance waned, the Democratic administration appeared to withdraw from its commitment to economic security.

Thus, public pessimism reflected not only economic distress but a broader disillusionment with the liberal ideology that had once underpinned the American dream. The government no longer seemed capable of delivering on promises of abundance and shared opportunity⁴⁵³. Historically, white middle-class Americans and blue-collar workers had embraced liberal

⁴⁴⁹ Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; Eizenstat, *President Carter*, 2018; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 1982. For further insights on Camp David Domestic Summit and Crisis of Confidence speech see chapter 3.

⁴⁵⁰ Jordan M. Smith, *Humanity: How Jimmy Carter Lost an Election and Transformed the Post-Presidency*, Kindle Single Edition, 2016; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2021; Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter’s Journey Beyond the White House*, Blackstone Pub, 1999.

⁴⁵¹ Mattson, *What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?*, 2009, p. 182; Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 372; Stephen Hess, and James P. Pfiffner, *Organizing the Presidency*, Brookings Institution Press, 2002.

⁴⁵² Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 2012; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979, and *The Revolt of the Elites*, 1994; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021.

⁴⁵³ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

ideals that first encouraged individual prosperity and consumption, then sustained economic safety and collective well-being through New Deal programs. Since the 1960s, however, the advancement of civil rights, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and successive economic and energy crises had gradually altered their beliefs and expectations, shaking the foundations of social stability. Consequently, at the end of the 1970s, many Americans turned toward the promises of renewed prosperity and greater individual freedom advocated by the Republican Party⁴⁵⁴. As the 1980s approached, while the American crisis contributed to the defeat of the Democratic administration, it generated a significant political re-alignment and facilitated the rise of the Republican Party. By the late 1970s, the critical situation provided Reagan with a strategic opportunity to redirect the economic and political path of the country, expand the right-wing base, and advance a new conservative agenda. As a charismatic leader, Reagan capitalized on the challenges of the time, campaigning on themes of economic revitalization, renewed optimism, and a stronger stance against the Soviet Union⁴⁵⁵. His compelling vision, grounded in American exceptionalism and national pride, aimed to counter both national recession and political cynicism. Reagan was described as a “visionary pragmatist” and an “exceptional grand strategist” who skillfully employed rhetoric and symbolism to mobilize support and promote freedom during the Cold War⁴⁵⁶. Usually, newly elected presidents are more likely to enact significant reforms, as public opinion tends to be more flexible and receptive to promises of change. From the outset of his campaign, Reagan displayed a “transformational” leadership style, advocating foundational values and substantial reforms that resonated with a disillusioned public. His strong communication skills and clearly defined priorities simplified complex ideas and helped for mobilizing broad support⁴⁵⁷. Much of the success of Reagan stemmed especially from a broad network of like-minded advisors, who shared his visions and adopted a systematic and professional approach to governance. Since the late 1970s, Republican working groups had outlined an effective

⁴⁵⁴ Cowie, *The Great Exception*, 2016; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022.

⁴⁵⁵ Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021.

⁴⁵⁶ Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 2006; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021.

⁴⁵⁷ Born and Johannesson, *An Experimental Investigation of Election Promises*, 2018; Burns, *Leadership*, 1978; Richard Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, M W Books, 1986; Michael Barone, *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan*, Free Press, 1990; Ronald Reagan and Douglas Brinkley, *The Reagan Diaries*, Harper Press, 2007; Cannon, *President Reagan*, 1991. On transactional and transformational leadership: Karl W. Kuhnert and Philip Lewis, “Transactional and Transformational Leadership: A Constructive/Developmental Analysis”, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 12, no 4, (1987): 648 – 57. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/258070>, viewed September 2024; Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works*, Ballantine Books, 1988.

policy agenda targeting economic reform, social welfare, and defense to reinforce public confidence in US prominence⁴⁵⁸.

After the Carter administration publicly acknowledged the national crisis in summer 1979, Republicans aimed to present Americans with a hopeful alternative by reducing government intervention and endorsing free-market principles. The immediate and favorable response of Americans to these objectives rested not only on the ability of Reagan to communicate his vision but, most of all, on their clear articulation by qualified research teams who studied public sentiment and identified them well in advance. As early as fall 1979, the Heritage Foundation began developing the “Mandate for Leadership”, a set of policy proposals designed to assist future Republican officials in revitalizing the economy and reducing centralized power⁴⁵⁹. In a memorandum to the President, advisor Edwin Meese described the project as “the most extensive study of government prepared for a new administration in the history of the country”⁴⁶⁰. The document aligned with the priorities of Reagan and served as a blueprint for his economic recovery plan. His promise to establish a “humane economy” focused on restoring dignity and opportunity to American families as well as greater freedom of enterprise to national businesses. By advocating tax cuts and limited government, Reagan pledged to revive both economic progress and collective possibility: “What the American people want is a “humane economy”, one that sees them not as interchangeable parts to whom unemployment is a temporary inconvenience, but as individual human beings”⁴⁶¹.

In the 1980 election, Reagan offered a new and optimistic narrative renewing American power while downplaying the severity of the crisis and the broader social transformations underway. He triumphed over Carter by emphasizing individual liberty, unity, and restored confidence in American prosperity⁴⁶². Starting in November 1980, the Transition Team led

⁴⁵⁸ Reagan surrounded himself of many advisors: senior staffers, members of congress, policy experts, think-tank fellows. The Transition Team was divided into 7 cabinets and the task forces counted 100 teams with at least 50 experts from Heritage Foundation and Hoover Institution. Wirthlin, memorandum *Report on the transition of the President and President-elect*, 1982; Walker, *Strategies for Governance*, 1986, p. 753 – 755; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983, p. 626; Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 2006, and *Do Think Tanks Matter?*, 2009.

⁴⁵⁹ Andrew Blasko, “Reagan and Heritage: A Unique Partnership”, *Commentary – The Heritage Foundation*, June 2004. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/reagan-and-heritage-unique-partnership>, viewed July 2024; Brown, *Lobbying the New President*, 2012, p. 1 – 2; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983, p. 629.

⁴⁶⁰ Most of the original the publications of the Heritage for the Republican Presidency are collected at the Reagan Presidential Library, Transition Papers Series II/ Director of Transition – Edwin Meese, Box 21, folder 1 Memorandum, Meese to Ronald Reagan, December 1980, Transition Papers Series II/ Director of Transition – Edwin Meese, Box 21, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives.

⁴⁶¹ Televised Speech, Ronald Reagan - “A Humane Economy”, October 1980, ABC News, Martin Anderson, Box 798, folder 22, Hoover Institution & Library.

⁴⁶² Henry Olsen, *The Working-Class Republican: Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism*, Broadside Books, 2017.

by Meese organized a streamlined power transfer and developed a strategic roadmap aligned with Republican goals to secure congressional and public support. Composed of loyal advisors and experts from conservative think-tanks, the team was divided into task forces to establish a “mandate for change”, shifting the national narrative from economic distress to recovery⁴⁶³. Economist David Stockman warned that tax cuts and entrepreneurial freedom were essential to revise inflationary expectations and avoid “an economic Dunkirk”⁴⁶⁴. Throughout the campaign and transition, the economy remained the top-priority of the Republican team, simplifying policymaking and maintaining rhetorical consistency. Early policy planning and broad strategic guidance shaped the Republican agenda and reinforced efforts to spread conservative ideology across the US⁴⁶⁵. Unlike previous administrations, the task forces of Reagan not only supported the campaign and entered the White House post-election but also played a crucial role in shaping policy throughout his presidency, helping define a new vision for America.

Prominent conservative leaders linked to influential think-tanks provided recommendations for far-reaching government reforms, forming a trustworthy “brain trust” reminiscent of the inner circle of FDR. After the election of Reagan, many of these individuals joined the administration, where their input was highly valued. As Meese wrote to Reagan: “Ed Fuelner, as director of Heritage Foundation, has been particularly helpful to us in a number of ways [...] the Heritage has been key for finding qualified candidates for middle management appointments to the administration and Ed is personally serving on the Transition Team... He has continually been a source of good advice during the campaign, and he has also been very helpful in maintaining lines of communication with all elements of the conservative movement”⁴⁶⁶. From the start of the transition, Reagan relied on department heads and advisory teams to draft detailed policy proposals aligned with his vision, while he focused on securing public support and negotiating with Congress⁴⁶⁷.

⁴⁶³ Walker, *Strategies for Governance*, 1986, pp. 739 – 741; Miller, *From Compromise to Confrontation*, 1989, p. 410.

⁴⁶⁴ Stockman, memo *How to Avoid an Economic Dunkirk*, 1980, p. 19; Charles Schultze, “Problems Yes, Crisis No”, *Challenge*, Vol. 24, no 1, (1981): 21 – 24. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40719943>, viewed September 2024.

⁴⁶⁵ Dick Kirschten in Walker, *Strategies for Governance*, 1986, p. 743.

⁴⁶⁶ Memorandum, Edwin Meese to Ronald Reagan, December 1980, Transition Papers Series II/ Director of Transition – Edwin Meese, Box 21, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives.

⁴⁶⁷ Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983.

Publicized political pressure

The success of the election and transition of Reagan was significantly bolstered by what is known as “publicized political pressure”: the President systematically promoted his vision of national purpose through televised appearances and addresses, press interviews, personal appeals, public tours, debates, and conventions designed to persuade and mobilize the electorate⁴⁶⁸. Reagan consistently projected optimism to reinforce the substance of his rhetoric and inspire collective confidence. He skillfully directed public attention toward a unified economic goal, effectively deflecting criticism. As advised by his team, he maintained a sharp focus on the economy during both the campaign and early months of his presidency, avoiding divisive debates on social issues that could polarize Americans and undermine broad support⁴⁶⁹. Most importantly, the systemic and advertised appearance of competence helped sustain public trust and enabled him to mobilize Americans before the opposition could effectively organize. The Reagan team outlined conservative objectives and ensured that presidential directives could be operationalized without administrative friction or public disapproval, legitimizing the proposed economic overhaul. Working groups capitalized on momentum and media presence to advance conservative goals, setting the tone for an administration committed to clarity, control, and confidence. In this way, the structure and spirit of the transition, managed by experienced professionals, became a crucial factor in the initial success of Reagan⁴⁷⁰.

The broader Republican strategy sought to reverse the austere course of the previous Democratic administration by deliberately targeting white middle-class Americans, blue-collar workers, and disaffected liberals - undecided voters most likely to endorse conservative objectives in order to reclaim their economic and social standing. These voters were particularly skeptical of the ability of anti-Washington outsiders – such as Carter in 1976 and Reagan in 1980 – to perform competently as presidents and improve national conditions. Targeting them and forging a new coalition of disaffected working-class Democrats, orthodox Republicans, and independentists was key to ensuring the Republican victory⁴⁷¹. At the same time, the emphasis on tax cuts and reduced government spending

⁴⁶⁸ Walker, *Strategies for Governance*, 1986.

⁴⁶⁹ Steven Weisman, “Can the Magic Prevail?”, *The New York Times Magazine*, April 1984, p. 42, in Walker, *Strategies for Governance*, p. 748; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983; Lyn Nofziger, in Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983, p. 628.

⁴⁷⁰ Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983.

⁴⁷¹ Lou Cannon, Newspaper article – The Washington Post, August 1980, Richard Allen collection, Box 32, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

also appealed to upper-class constituents and corporations by promoting greater freedom of enterprise and investment. Furthermore, by championing US supremacy and traditional values, the Republican Party aligned itself with the beliefs of neoconservatives, Evangelicals, and more fundamentalist religious right groups eager to reassert moral order and American prominence⁴⁷². As observed by Lou Cannon in a Washington Post article: “At age 69, Ronald Wilson Reagan, a cultural democrat, has become the last best hope of Republican conservatives to capture the White House... In 1980, the rhetoric of a new coalition of shared values has taken hold with the blue-collar, ethnic voters of the Eastern and Midwestern cities, and religious communities”⁴⁷³. Reagan effectively appealed to a broad and varied electorate with the promise of restoring the American dream of shared wealth while recovering traditional communal values. In the early 1980s, beyond explicit policy measures, his strategic use of the media to communicate the conservative vision, along with frequent public appearances, was particularly effective in redirecting the national direction and influencing collective psychology⁴⁷⁴. The media played a key role in advancing the Republican agenda and portraying Reagan as a symbol of national strength and virtue, in contrast to Carter. As Mark Rozell reminds: “The president’s public standing is significantly influenced by how well the White House succeeds in convincing the press to adopt the president’s symbols and strength”⁴⁷⁵. Running a public-oriented campaign and presidency allowed Reagan to present himself as both a defender of national interests and a leader of his party. At that time, he combined his professional reputation, public standing, and human qualities to advance a politics of aspiration⁴⁷⁶. Among the numerous media outlets, editorials from conservative think-tanks endorsing the Republican Party served as

⁴⁷² Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 1996.

⁴⁷³ Lou Cannon, Newspaper article – The Washington Post, Richard Allen collection, Box 32, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

⁴⁷⁴ Leonard Silk, “Reagan: Can He Cure Stagflation?”, *The New York Times*, January 1981; Theo Zenou, “American Messiahs: The Narrative Strategies of FDR and Reagan, 1933 and 1981”, *European Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 15, no 2, (2020). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15963>, viewed March 2025.

⁴⁷⁵ Mark J. Rozell, “President Carter and the Press”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105, no 3, (1990): 419 – 434, specifically, p. 433. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150825>, viewed September 2024; Strong, *Recapturing Leadership*, 1986, pp. 636 – 650; Edwin Meese, “Shaping the Presidency: Parties, Personalities and Press”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, no 4, (1983): 524 – 529, p. 528. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27547976>, viewed September 2024; Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Blue Smoke and Mirrors: How Reagan Won and Why Carter Lost the Election of 1980*, Viking Press, 1981, p. 670; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio e vulnerabilità*, 2018; Robert Freedman, “The Religious Right and the Carter Administration”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 48, no 1, (2005): 231 – 260, p. 252. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4091685>, viewed September 2024; Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, Oxford University Press, 2010; John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, Penguin, 2004, p. 90.

⁴⁷⁶ Genovese and Cronin, *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*, 2003, p. 226; Richard Neustadt in Julia R. Azari, Lara M. Brown, et al., *The Presidential Leadership Dilemma: Between the Constitution and a Political Party*, State University of New York Press, 2013, p. 5.

one of the most influential communication platforms for promoting conservative ideas and engaging with policymakers and intellectuals. Since the late 1970s, the weekly magazine *Heritage Today* provided readers with conservative viewpoints on policy, economics, government, and culture, aligned with the principles of the Heritage Foundation. The magazine featured in-depth analyses and research reports, providing a counterpoint to prevailing progressive perspectives and promoting the agenda of Reagan. Back then, a journalist wrote: “The debate between parties depends even on the authenticity of facts and numbers provided by think-tanks, campuses, and press... One reason for this is that the Republicans now have a highly talented shadow government that sustains itself when out of power through the above institutions”⁴⁷⁷. The contribution of political elites, intellectuals, think-tanks, partisan media, and personal networks both legitimized the work of the Reagan administration and increased its credibility. They formed a “counter-establishment of polarizing actors” who sided with the President and influenced policymaking and public opinion, ultimately cultivating social and political polarization⁴⁷⁸. Some scholars believe that the reputation of Reagan as a great communicator had more to do with his ability to influence opinion elites than it had with his impact on overall public opinion⁴⁷⁹. As far as intellectuals, reporters, and the Washington elite believed the President influenced public opinion, they supported the Republican establishment⁴⁸⁰. Reagan was more successful in mobilizing his conservative base than in persuading the broader electorate; however, the press portrayed this ability as a sign of popularity and effective communication. King and Schudson argue that: “The evidence indicates that Reagan came to be described as a Great Communicator in the press not because of special skills in communicating directly to the American people but because of significant skills in communicating with key elites, including the media itself”⁴⁸¹. As an “oratorical president”, Reagan achieved results also by conveying the impression that he was succeeding in exceeding the expectations of other leaders. His televised addresses particularly influenced the calculations of political actors deciding whether to support his

⁴⁷⁷ Most of the printed copies of *Heritage Today* are collected at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, while few others can be found in the personal collections of some advisors at the Hoover Institution. Press article, *Heritage Today*, November 1980, 1980 - Transition Papers Series II/ Director of Transition – Edwin Meese, Box 21, folder 1, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives.

⁴⁷⁸ Diletti, *Divisi*, 2024, p. 38.

⁴⁷⁹ Elliot King and Michael Schudson, “The Press and the Illusion of Public Opinion: The Strange Case of Ronald Reagan’s Popularity” in *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*, edited by Theodore L. Glasser and Charles T. Salmon, Guilford Press, 1995.

⁴⁸⁰ Press articles on Heritage Foundation and Hoover Institution - US News & World Report, National Journal, Summer-Fall 1980, Martin Anderson Collection, Box 568, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

⁴⁸¹ King and Schudson, *The Press and the Illusion of Public Opinion*, 1995, pp. 148 – 149.

proposals⁴⁸². Despite different scholarly interpretations on the matter, evidently the messages of Reagan were consistently conveyed to Americans either directly or through media appearances. Yet, both partisan and nonpolitical media amplified the assessment of voters, emphasizing the character and leadership of Reagan, thus personalizing political judgements. The goal of the President was to offer visions to the public while convincing political actors that he was influencing the general opinion; at the same time, his idea was to speak clearly and through simple words to the citizens in order to get closer to them and reassure them with promises of a brighter future. The launch of the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN) in 1979 and Cable News Network (CNN) in 1980 further enhanced opportunities for national officials to shape their message and communicate with voters⁴⁸³. They created new opportunities for political messaging and commentary, challenging traditional news programming and shaping public engagement. More importantly, 24/7 news channels further strengthened the so called “permanent campaign” effect on screen, fastening news speed, increasing partisanship, and expanding public appeal⁴⁸⁴. The Reagan team worked daily with reporters to control the media narrative and ensure that the Republican agenda could stage coverage. Storytelling became a crucial strategy for the success of Reagan, who as a master of “narratocracy” served as both narrator and a protagonist of his political stories, fulfilling his ambition to transform American politics⁴⁸⁵. Stories were specifically used as a strategy with a political endgame to portray himself as he wished to be seen and foster support for the Republican agenda. As journalist Sidney Blumenthal wrote in 1981: “Reagan is more than White House leading man; he’s the auteur”⁴⁸⁶. Like FDR did in the early 1930s, Reagan portrayed himself as a “messiah” with the goal to make America rise again in the wake of national crisis⁴⁸⁷. His populist rhetoric

⁴⁸² Fred I. Greenstein, “Reagan and the Lore of the Modern Presidency: What Have We Learned?” in *The Reagan Presidency: An Early Assessment*, edited by Robert I. Greenstein, The John Hopkins University Press, 1983; Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern President: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*, Free Press, 1990, p. 265.

⁴⁸³ Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, in *Exploring the C-SPAN Archives: Advancing the Research Agenda*, Purdue University Press, 2015; Miller Center, “The 24/7 Presidency”, *Miller Center – Teaching resources*. Available at: https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/teacher-resources/recasting-presidential-history/247-presidency#_ftn8, viewed September 2024.

⁴⁸⁴ Greenberg, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency*, W.W. Norton & Co, 2015, p. 421; Howard Kurtz, *Spin Cycle: How the White House and the Media Manipulate the News*, Simon & Schuster, 1998, p. xviii.

⁴⁸⁵ Christian Salmon, *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*, Verso, 2017, p. 90; Zenou, *American Messiahs*, 2020, pp. 3 – 4.

⁴⁸⁶ Sidney Blumenthal, “Marketing the President”, *New York Times Magazine*, September 1981.

⁴⁸⁷ Some scholars also defined Reagan a “political messiah”: Jan Hanska, *Reagan’s Mythical America: Storytelling as Political Leadership*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 26; Paul D. Erickson, *Reagan Speaks: The Making of An American Myth*, New York University Press, 1985, pp. 86 – 87; Stephen Skowronek, “Presidential Leadership in Political Time”, in *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*, University Press of Kansas, 2008, pp. 27 – 28; Mary E. Stuckey, *The Good Neighbour: Franklin*

targeted government bureaucracy and the political class he believed had diminished American greatness. At the same time, his religiously toned messages emphasized hope, opportunity, and freedom, aiming to restore faith among Americans⁴⁸⁸. Although journalists substantially scrutinized the background of Reagan and questioned his ability to manage governance complexities living up campaign rhetoric, partisan media emphasized his vigorous stance for national revitalization. Drawing attention to his former acting career, major newspapers presented Reagan as paradoxically adept at out-debating rivals and managing the press, yet of questionable intellectual depth⁴⁸⁹. However, the extensive funds invested in a systemic publicized political pressure created opportunities for the President to express his agenda and maintain visibility, ultimately boosting approval ratings. Media coverage played a key role in shaping public perception particularly during the transition from Carter to Reagan, highlighting tensions and contrasting approaches to governance, ultimately amplifying political divisions in the US. Despite official reports of smooth cooperation between the two national leaders, the media often emphasized conflicts during the transition period and reinforced public skepticism. From January 1977 to January 1981, leading national newspapers – such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* - portrayed the two presidents very differently, often providing poor reviews of the Carter administration while praising the work of the Republican “brain trust”⁴⁹⁰.

Unlike Reagan, Carter maintained a more distant and variable relationship with the media throughout his presidency. For several reasons, journalists often characterized him as an ineffectual leader, blurring the line between media perception of his work and historical reality⁴⁹¹. First, influenced by the post-Nixon era, the press frequently searched for

D. Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of American Power, Michigan State University Press, 2013; Zenou, *American Messiahs*, 2020, pp. 4, 8.

⁴⁸⁸ Ronald Reagan, Address to the nation – “On Federal Tax Reduction Legislation”, July 1981. Available at: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-federal-tax-reduction-legislation>, Election Eve Address, November 1980. Available at: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/election-eve-address-vision-america>, Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination, July 1980. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-detroit>; Dick Wirthlin and Hall C. Wynton, *The Greatest Communicator: What Ronald Reagan Taught Me About Politics, Leadership, and Life*, Trade Paper Press, 2005, p. 93; Gary S. Smith, *Faith and the Presidency From George Washington to George W. Bush*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 338.

⁴⁸⁹ Lou Cannon, Newspaper article – *The Washington Post*, March 1980, Box, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

⁴⁹⁰ Researching the records of Carter and Reagan presidential libraries it is evident that these newspapers were considered the most reliable and influential for Americans. At the same time, they were also collected by the closest advisers of the president – Patricia Bauer Collection, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Archives; Martin Anderson and Richard Allen papers, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

⁴⁹¹ Amber Roessner, “A Media Looking for Mistakes Portrayed Jimmy Carter as a Failure. It’s Time to Look Deeper”, *Time Magazine*, December 2024. Available at: <https://time.com/6340538/a-media-looking-for-mistakes-portrayed-jimmy-carter-as-a-failure-its-time-to-look-deeper/>, viewed March 2025; Mark J. Rozell,

dishonesty and evidence of lies, intensifying public skepticism. At the time, an adversarial political press scrutinized the Carter administration, capitalizing on the domestic challenges amid the economic and energy crises, as well as broader international threats faced by the US⁴⁹². Second, Carter presented himself as an “outsider” from the Washington establishment, exposing his leadership to constant evaluation and criticisms for perceived unpreparedness. He often adopted an “apolitical approach”, focusing more on the development of ambitious programs than on offering broad appeals or clear public exposition of his policies⁴⁹³. Emphasizing problem identification and policy analysis over public and congressional relations, Carter attracted criticisms from journalists and outside observers. Furthermore, his commitment to ethics at home and human rights abroad appeared misaligned with the harsh national reality of the late 1970s. Some journalists remarked: “Carter is inclined to moralize on the issues that, far from being moral, are matters of practical politics”⁴⁹⁴. Third, the White House staff was composed mainly of “Georgian” political advisors who lacked experience in politics, limiting the effectiveness of the democratic agenda and the creation of a unified vision. The Carter team appeared both unable to promote convincing and appealing policy programs and present a coherent political narrative to overcome the political confusion of the time⁴⁹⁵. Especially in the summer of 1979 the media intensified criticisms of the Democratic president during the height of the American crisis. From July to September 1979, all leading national newspapers devoted significant coverage to the energy crisis and the recovery program of the administration. Most notably, in July 1979, the Camp David Domestic Summit – along with the subsequent cabinet reorganization and address to the nation – sparked widespread concern about the leadership of Carter and his strategy for overcoming the recession. Although the “Crisis of Confidence” speech was initially assessed positively by the media and the American public, the cabinet shakeup was perceived as a sign of weak leadership and a lack of direction within the government. As journalist of *The New Yorker* - Hendrik Hertzberg - emphasizes: “Carter’s diagnosis of the country’s spiritual ills was accurate and was recognized as such by millions of people, but when he proved unequal to the task for curing those ills, he was

“Carter Rehabilitated: What Caused the 39th President’s Press Transformation?”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, no 3, (1993): 317 – 330. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27532281>, viewed March 2025.

⁴⁹² Roessner, *A Media Looking for Mistakes Portrayed Jimmy Carter as a Failure*, 2024.

⁴⁹³ Rozell, *The Carter Press Transformation*, 1993, p. 318-319.

⁴⁹⁴ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Carter’s Energy Package: A Problems with Tactics”, *The Washington Post*, September 1977, p. A27; Rozell, *The Carter Press Transformation*, 1993, p. 319 – 320, 328.

⁴⁹⁵ Rozell, *The Carter Press Transformation*, 1993, p. 319

reviled with special bitterness”⁴⁹⁶. The resignation of 34 Cabinet and staff aides in the days following the speech gave the impression that the stability of America was at risk, as Washington was rocked by rumors and the dollar plunged. These major cabinet changes were not accompanied by convincing explanations, increasing public doubt at a time when Americans were hoping for promises of relief and a brighter future. By the late 1970s, the democratic team lacked substantial professional input from external experts as well as workable political strategies to enact its plans and effectively present them to both the Congress and the American public. In this regard, David Broder noted: “What is missing is the sense of strategy - of choosing those problems that are important for the idealized goals ... and of tackling the specific problems in a way that illuminates the principles”⁴⁹⁷. Unlike the Republican administration, the staff of Carter seemed to miss an appealing narrative around national issues⁴⁹⁸. Only more recently, journalists and scholars have begun to rehabilitate the reputation of Carter, shifting their focus from judgment to a more nuanced understanding of his presidency. In retrospect, opinion elites have reappraised his work and acknowledged his significant accomplishments despite the difficult political context of the time –such as the Camp David Accords, Panama Treaties, and the long-term benefits of the energy program⁴⁹⁹. Whether due to the unique challenges of the Carter - Reagan transition at the dawn of the 1980s, or the effective efforts of the conservative team during the campaign and election periods, it is evident that publicized political pressure played a critical role in facilitating a successful Republican election and transition in 1980.

Targeted segments of US society

In the early 1980s, alongside experienced advisory, leadership, and public engagement, targeting specific segments of society was also critical to ensuring a successful Republican victory and transition. Particularly, forming a broad coalition of varied constituents was essential to enacting an effective political agenda and implementing meaningful national change⁵⁰⁰. The Republican Party capitalized on widespread discontent with New Deal

⁴⁹⁶ Hendrik Hertzberg, “A Very Merry Malaise”, *The New Yorker*, July 2009. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/hendrik-hertzberg/a-very-merry-malaise>, viewed March 2025.

⁴⁹⁷ David Broder, “A Lack of Strategy in the Carter Camp”, *The Washington Post*, June 1977, p. A23; Rozell, *The Carter Press Transformation*, 1993, p. 320.

⁴⁹⁸ Roessner, *A Media Looking for Mistakes Portrayed Jimmy Carter as a Failure*, 2024; Zenou, *American Messiahs*, 2020, p. 14; Rozell, *The Carter Press Transformation*, 1993, p. 320.

⁴⁹⁹ Rozell, *The Carter Press Transformation*, 1993, pp. 327 – 328.

⁵⁰⁰ Lou Cannon, Newspaper article – *The Washington Post*, August 1980, Richard Allen collection, Box 32, Hoover Institution Library and Archives; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983.

liberalism and growing anti-government sentiment to promote a new conservative philosophy and anti-welfare state politics. Following the disillusionment of the 1970s, the political idealism advanced by Reagan blended of American exceptionalism, anti-communism, free-market capitalism, and traditional moral values, shaping both the domestic and foreign policies of the Party⁵⁰¹. Primarily, Reagan addressed the “white question”, focusing on gaining the support of white middle- and lower-class Americans who rejected the idea of a post-racial America and feared the loss of their economic security and social status⁵⁰². Similarly, many white former liberals – the neoconservatives – supported his strong anti-communist stance and renewed commitment to winning the Cold War, disappointed by the foreign policy of Carter. Secondly, Reagan sought to strengthen the conservative base by appealing to religious groups with promises of a renewed moral order and a revival of faith. As advised by his team, Reagan aimed to respond to the broad demand for change and protection felt by most average white Americans. In 1980, he effectively secured the support of Republicans in the North, as well as of Republicans, Christian evangelicals, and moderate liberals in the South⁵⁰³. The mutually beneficial relationship with these key constituents was critical to the success of the Republican Party and would significantly influence American politics throughout the following decades.

Religious Right

Since the late 1970s, through rhetoric invoking faith and patriotism, Reagan attracted large groups of Christian conservatives. They rejected the social and political liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s, sharing with the Republican leader a common vision of a nation grounded in traditional American values and individual freedom. Following the advancement of civil rights - particularly the amendments to the Voting Rights Act in 1975 - many socially conservative Evangelicals criticized the leftward shift of the Democratic Party, calling for a

⁵⁰¹ On how Reagan developed his political philosophy and idealistic vision: Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 1988, pp. 42 – 48; Cannon, *Ronald Reagan*, 1991; Craig Shirley, and Tom Parks, *Reagan's Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign That Started It All*, Harpercollins, 2023; Thomas Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism*, Columbia University Press, 2008; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, Simon and Schuster, 1990.

⁵⁰² Diletti, *Divisi*, 2024, p. 39; Heritage Foundation, “A Mandate for Change”, 1980; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021.

⁵⁰³ Giulia Buccione, and Brian Knight, “The Rise of the Religious Right: Evidence from the Moral Majority and the Jimmy Carter Presidency”, Harvard Department of Economics, (January 2024): 1 – 30. Available at: https://economics.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/econ/files/moral_majority_draft_january_2024.pdf?m=1707246317, viewed September 2024; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Williams, *God's Own Party*, 2010; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio e vulnerabilità*, 2018; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 2009.

return to social and religious traditionalism⁵⁰⁴. In the previous 1976 election, Evangelicals had enthusiastically endorsed Carter as the first Born-Again president, committed to restoring collective morality and self-determination among Americans. Especially in the post-Watergate context, he appeared to be an authentic leader, recalling the nation to a renewed sense of purpose⁵⁰⁵. Christian magazines – such as *Christian Today*, and *Christian life* - initially endorsed the Carter presidency, praising his character and emphasizing the virtue-driven consensus of many believers. Nevertheless, as the Democratic Party increasingly embraced social justice and progressive policies, conservative Evangelicals began to distance themselves from it. Specifically, they denounced the “secular humanism” of Carter questioning his faith and perceiving the Democratic agenda as an attempt to redefine American culture⁵⁰⁶. According to various scholars, three key events sparked widespread indignation among religious groups, ultimately prompting the entrance of many evangelicals into politics. First, the Internal Revenue Service Act in 1978 that mandated religious desegregation of academic institutions, depriving private schools of critical tax subsidies and threatening the continuity of their conservative educational programs; Second, the White House Conference on Families (1979-1980) that challenged traditional Christian views of the family, harnessing rage among white, patriarchally-minded Evangelicals loyal to idea of the Christian home; Third, the support of Carter for the ERA and pro-abortion policies, which sustained women rights and equality, further alienating religious conservatives⁵⁰⁷. Although Carter was a genuine Born-Again Christian, his politically progressive stances intensified opposition from many Evangelicals and conservative Catholics. The growing resentment among these fundamentalist groups gradually fueled the rise of the Evangelical Right as a national political force. By the late 1970s, especially in the South, many socially conservative whites and hardline Evangelicals aligned with the Republican Party, driven by ethnocentric ideals and advocacy for traditional liberalism. They increasingly embraced neoliberal ideology, emphasizing individual liberty, religion, and free enterprise as means to restore the common good. As Bruce Nesmith notes: “The rise of the Religious Right gave the republicans something which they had always previously lacked: a vital connection with Southern culture”⁵⁰⁸. Reagan strategically used simple

⁵⁰⁴ Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014; Bird, *The Outlier*, 2018; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008.

⁵⁰⁵ Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014.

⁵⁰⁶ Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014.

⁵⁰⁷ Buccione, *The Rise of the Religious Right*, 2024, pp. 2 – 4; Bird, *Outlier*, 2018; Balmer, *Redeemer*, 2014; Jimmy Carter, *Living Faith*, Broadway Books, 1998; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Benjamin L. Rolsky, *The Rise and Fall of the Religious Left*, Columbia University Press, 2019.

⁵⁰⁸ Bruce Nesmith, *The New Republican Coalition: The Reagan Campaigns and White Evangelicals*, Peter Lang Pub Inc, 1994, p. 96; Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 1992; Kuziemko, *Why Did the Democrats Lose the South?*,

religious language to advance anti-establishment and populist messages, employing universal motifs to restore confidence in American exceptionalism⁵⁰⁹.

Though not a Born-Again Christian, he viewed faith as a source of inspiration and believed that national challenges held redemptive purpose. He portrayed himself as a “messiah”, merging American religion and politics to reform the cultural ethos and inspire a spiritual revival in the US⁵¹⁰. By 1980, the Republican promise to revitalize Christian beliefs in public life contributed to the reemergence of religious groups as a comprehensive political movement aligned with a partisan cause. Hardline conservatives and Christian Evangelicals coalesced in what became known as the New Right, aiming to defend Christian values and morality against progressive reforms. In the early 1980s, Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell founded the leading national Religious Right organization – the Moral Majority - merging social and economic conservatism to counter federal regulation and defend evangelical religion⁵¹¹. The “new evangelicals” viewed politics as a form of ministry to promote collective action for the preservation of individual salvation. Their primary focus was on cultural and social issues, with the goal of mobilizing Republican voters through televised ministries, mass mailings, and public conventions. The consistent media exposure and press coverage of these groups played a crucial role in shaping public perception of the influence of the Religious Right within the US⁵¹². Unlike during the 1976 election, Christian news outlets severely criticized the religiosity of Carter, accusing him of downplaying traditional values and weakening American power through his moderate-to-progressive stance on social and political issues. In contrast, religious broadcasters portrayed Reagan as “God’s man for the hour” - a leader destined to restore American prominence through morality and law.

2018; Leah Boustan, *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets*, Princeton University Press, 2016; McCarty, *Polarized America*, 2006; John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, Penguin, 2004.

⁵⁰⁹ Buccione, *The Rise of the Religious Right*, 2024, p. 4; Kuziemko, *Why Did the Democrats Lose the South?*, pp. 2830 - 2867; Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 1988, p. 34; Seymour M. Lipset and William Schneider, “The Decline of American Confidence in Institutions”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 98, no 3, (1983): 379 – 402. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150494>, viewed September 2024; Gennaro Sangiuliano, *Reagan*, Mondadori, 2021.

⁵¹⁰ Zenou, *American Messiahs*, 2020, pp. 9 – 11.

⁵¹¹ Daniel K. Williams, “Jerry Falwell’s Sunbelt Politics: The Regional Origins of the Moral Majority”, *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 22, no 2, (2010): 125 – 147, p. 125 – 128. Available at: doi:10.1017/S0898030610000011, viewed March 2025.

⁵¹² It is important to keep in mind that mostly the hardline fundamentalists reunited under the Moral Majority, advancing a racially exclusive rhetoric and linking individual morality to law. Many traditional evangelicals, disaffected liberals and moderate Religious Right groups did not fully endorse the movement. Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 2010, p. 160; Freedman, *The Religious Right and the Carter Administration*, 2005, pp. 235, 259 – 260; Buccione, *The Rise of the Religious Right*, 2004, p. 15; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism*, Oxford University Press, 2002; Leah Boustan, *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets*, Princeton University Press, 2016.

Particularly, leaders of the Moral Majority used televangelism to counter “liberal media elites”, who they claimed distorted the message of religious conservatives and the values of average Americans⁵¹³. By capitalizing on mass media, the movement publicly endorsed the Republican Party and rallied widespread supporters across the US, significantly influencing the 1980 election and shaping the trajectory of right-wing American politics. Through sustained media pressure, the Christian Right became instrumental in polarizing public discourse and mobilizing Republican voters nationwide. Conservative TV preachers and broadcasters such as Jerry Falwell and Rush Limbaugh redefined conservatism as the ideology of the “vulnerable” middle-brow class in need of protection, skillfully combining media strategies with evangelistic messages⁵¹⁴. They aimed to inspire confidence in the possibility of reshaping national purpose through moral law and cultural warfare. Falwell, and later Limbaugh, led weekly television and radio programs that targeted American workers and middle- to lower-class families promising societal uplift and innovation through the church. By the late 1970s, they had drawn thousands of supporters to megachurches across the US, campaigning Christian rights and aligning with GOP politics⁵¹⁵. After the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in the 1980s, partisan conservative voices dominated news channels, staking out political positions and engaging directly with their audience. Shows like *The Rush Limbaugh* one, paved the way for the rise of new conservative talk radios, thriving on partisan conflict. During the 1980s, they created a loyal audience-base that would later support the launch of Fox News and similar partisan outlets, transforming the national information landscape⁵¹⁶. Since the late 1970s, the alliance between Reagan, the Moral Majority, and Evangelical conservatives helped cement the Religious Right as a powerful force in American politics, laying the groundwork for future conservative political movements. Even though, by the mid-1980s, the religious New Right and the Moral Majority

⁵¹³ Williams, *God's Own Party*, 2010, p. 160; Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 1996.

⁵¹⁴ The televangelist Jerry Falwell defined Reagan as “God’s man of the hour”, Michael S. Winters, *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican*, Harperone, 2012; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004; Samuel J. Abrams, “Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches”, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 5, no 3, (2007): 642-644. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707071873>, viewed September 2024; Falwell, *Listen America*, 1981; Joseph Tamney and Stephen Johnson, “Explaining Support for the Moral Majority”, *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 3, no 2, (1988): 234 – 255. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/684366>, viewed September 2024.

⁵¹⁵ Williams, *Jerry Falwell's Sunbelt Politics*, 2010, p. 142.

⁵¹⁶ Ai Tompkins, “How Rush Limbaugh’s rise after the gutting of the fairness doctrine led to today’s highly partisan media”, Poynter.com, February 2021. Available at: <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2021/how-rush-limbaughs-rise-after-the-gutting-of-the-fairness-doctrine-led-to-todays-highly-partisan-media/>, viewed April 2025.

had lost momentum, subsequent Evangelical and pro-family organizations have continued to influence American politics and the Right up to the present day⁵¹⁷.

Neoconservatives

Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, the American economic and social crises opened-up a political space for an outside political movement to reconfigure American foreign policy.

As occurred for many Christian evangelicals, numerous former liberals progressively moved toward the Right, criticizing the redistributive policies, economic austerity, and appeasing foreign policy of the Democratic Party. In a letter to the President, scholars endorsing Reagan wrote: “While domestic and foreign affairs continue on a chaotic course [under Democratic control], scholars and members of the academic community are beset by federal intrusion into their professional lives [...] In dramatic contrast, Governor Reagan promises an unwavering defense of academic freedom”⁵¹⁸. Most of these intellectuals were part of the cultural and religious liberal elite, who embraced the Republican ideology to restore old-fashioned liberalism in the name of high culture, a vigorous economy, strong anti-communism, and an assertive foreign policy. They became known as the “neoconservatives”, forming networks and engaging in academic and political initiatives to influence conservative decision-makers. Through organizations like the “Committee on the Present Danger” and the “Coalition for a Democratic Majority”, they aimed to reshape policymaking in Washington and promote US and global leadership⁵¹⁹. Among the most prominent neoconservatives, Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz are considered the founding fathers of the movement advancing American democratic values and aligning with Republican policy objectives. Both were former liberal political philosophers and editors who shifted rightward in reaction to the liberal intellectual establishment and its handling of foreign and domestic issues⁵²⁰. Through their writings, they articulated a neoconservative

⁵¹⁷ Michael Sean Winters, “Party of Reagan? No, Party of Falwell”, interview by Michel Martin, NPR.org, April 2012. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2012/04/26/151444474/party-of-reagan-no-party-of-falwell-writer-says>, viewed April 2025.

⁵¹⁸ Letter, neoconservative scholars endorse Reagan, Reagan-Bush Committee, October 1980, Campaign Papers Series I/Hannaford, Box 45, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives.

⁵¹⁹ Most neoconservatives were part of prominent think tanks across the US, influencing policy-making processes. Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 2008; Micklethwait, *The Right Nation*, 2004, pp. 63 – 94, pp. 72 – 73; Jacob Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*, Anchor, 2009; Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2015; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021.

⁵²⁰ Justin Vaïsse, “Was Irving Kristol a Neoconservative”?, *Foreign Policy.com*, September 2009. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/09/23/was-irving-kristol-a-neoconservative/>, viewed April 2025.

philosophy rooted in defending American democratic values, opposing communism, and maintaining an assertive foreign posture. and influence Republican politics, aiming to reassert American international prominence. Under their editorial leadership, influential magazines such as *Commentary*, *The Public Interest*, and *The National Interest*, became central platforms for disseminating neoconservative ideas and aligning them key Republican objectives⁵²¹. Though they diverged from some aspects of traditional conservatism – especially on issues like social welfare and race – neoconservatives advocated for disciplined fiscal policies and a pragmatic-realist approach to international relations. Their research and publications, however, significantly shaped the intellectual debates on and ideological terrain of the Republican Party⁵²². This ideological alignment found its most prominent expression in the Reagan presidency; particularly, his emphasis on American exceptionalism, robust national defense, and the restoration of traditional values. Key figures like Jeane Kirkpatrick served not only as influential thought leaders but also as direct contributors to Republican policy frameworks, especially in foreign affairs⁵²³. Her seminal 1979 essay- “Dictatorships and Double Standards”- argued that the US should support authoritarian regimes aligned with American interests to contain communism and promote global stability. Her critique to the human rights – focused diplomacy of Carter marked a strategic departure, favoring the development of realist foreign policy over moral absolutism⁵²⁴. Following the publication of her essay, Kirkpatrick was US ambassador to the United Nations under Reagan, where she actively defended US interests and supported allied regimes⁵²⁵. In 1981, Elliot Abrams – Assistant Secretary of State for International

⁵²¹ Nathan Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons*, Continuum, 2012; Irving Kristol, *Neo-Conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Ivan R. Dee, 1999, and *The Neoconservative Persuasion: Selected Essays 1942 – 2009*, Basic Books, 2013; Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010.

⁵²² Jeane Kirkpatrick – leading neoconservative figure within the Republican administration - argued that the policy of Reagan drifted toward idealistic interventionism, rather than pragmatic realism: Jeane Kirkpatrick, *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics*, Simon and Schuster, 1982, and *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State*, Aei Press, 1992; Norman Podhoretz and other neoconservatives – the core group of New York Intellectuals – opposed Republican foreign policies and arms control: Norman Podhoretz, *Ex-Friends: Falling Out With Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer*, Encounter books, 2000; Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead*, Basic Books, 1983; Krauthammer, *The Unipolar Moment*, 1990, and *Things That Matter: Three Decades of Passions, Pastimes and Politics*, Forum Books, 2015; Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, 2021.

⁵²³ Jesús Velasco, *Neoconservatives in US Foreign Policy Under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush: Voices Behind the Throne*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

⁵²⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards”, *Commentary*, November 1979. Available at: <https://www.commentary.org/articles/jeane-kirkpatrick/dictatorships-double-standards/>, viewed April 2025; Christopher Bright, “Neither Dictatorships nor Double Standards: The Reagan Administration’s Approach to Human Rights”, *World Affairs*, Vol. 153, no 2, (1990): 51 – 80. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20672265>, viewed April 2025.

⁵²⁵ Kirkpatrick considered totalitarian regimes more threatening than authoritarian regimes, as they were more repressive, susceptible to change and against US interests. Tamar Jacoby, “The Reagan Turnaround on Human

Organization Affairs- echoed this approach through a State Department memo that placed human rights at the center of US foreign policy, but in a way that strategically supported American geopolitical objectives⁵²⁶. This evolution reflected a broader neoconservative effort to reframe the Republican platform in terms of cultural revival and military assertiveness. As Velasco notes, they became the “voices behind the throne” on foreign policy during the Reagan presidency. As many entered the Reagan staff, they established a new paradigm for Republican governance and expanded the appeal of Reagan among both traditional conservatives and defecting liberal elites⁵²⁷. By bridging the ideological gap between the Old Right and a new values-driven conservatism, they helped consolidate the electoral coalition that brought Reagan to power. Moreover, the growing influence of neoconservatives within think-tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute and direct advisory roles in the Reagan administration marked the institutionalization of neoconservative thought⁵²⁸. This transformation carried significant social, ethical, and global implications for the US. By fusing elite intellectualism with conservative nationalism, neoconservatism redefined American identity and intensified partisan polarization. Moreover, the defense of authoritarian regimes as an anti-communist strategy exposed contradictions in US diplomacy and promotion of human rights. Lastly, the assertive neoconservative ideology – merging moral rhetoric with pragmatic realism - fueled Cold War escalation and future US interventions⁵²⁹. Since the 1980s, this first generation of neoconservatives laid the groundwork for the future waves, increasingly professionalized and politicized, aiming to reaffirm US moral authority and military strength through intellectual and policy channels⁵³⁰. Their legacy persists in how American policymakers continue to grapple with interventionism, exceptionalism, and the balance between strategic interests and democratic ideals.

Rights”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, no 5, (1986): 1066 – 1086, specifically p. 1067. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20042781>, viewed April 2025; Seymour Maxwell Finger, “The Reagan-Kirkpatrick Policies and the United Nations”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 62, no 2, (1983): 436 – 457. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20041826>, viewed April 2025.

⁵²⁶ Abrams was later appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. Jacoby, *The Reagan Turnaround on Human Rights*, 1986, pp. 1070 – 1071, 1085 – 1086.

⁵²⁷ Velasco, *Neoconservatives in US Foreign Policy*, 2010; Finger, *The Reagan-Kirkpatrick Policies and the United Nations*, 1983; Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right*, 2008.

⁵²⁸ Vaïsse, *Was Irving Kristol a Neoconservative?*, 2009; Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 2010.

⁵²⁹ Velasco, *Neoconservatives in US Foreign Policy*, 2010.

⁵³⁰ Velasco, *Neoconservatives in US Foreign Policy*, 2010; Timothy Noah, “Fathers and Sons”, book review of *They Knew They Were Right*, by Jacob Heilbrunn, 2008, *The New York Times*, January 2008. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/books/review/Noah-t.html>, viewed April 2025.

The far-reaching effects of the Carter-Reagan transition

The Carter-Reagan transition illustrates of how skillful management of leadership, early advisory study and planning, chosen targets within society, and mass media engagement can help build a powerful presidency capable of implementing meaningful change⁵³¹. In 1980, Reagan successfully connected with Americans by promoting a new conservative ethos across the nation. US politics shifted in a libertarian direction, marking a departure from the crisis of the previous decade, and contributing to a renewed sense of optimism nationwide. The handover between the two presidents revealed two distinct political philosophies and governance approaches that significantly influenced American politics and society, ultimately strengthening the Republican Party. This shift provided immediate relief but also generated long-term social and political fractures, whose effects are still visible today. It accelerated transformations rooted in the crisis of the 1970s, weakening the middle-class majority, increasing partisanship, and empowering new political actors. By the end of the 1980s, the optimistic promises of the decade stood in sharp contrast to a complex national reality, significantly affecting the economic, political, and social dimensions of the US⁵³². According to several scholars, both Carter and Reagan were ultimately perceived as out of touch with reality. Carter alienated his electorate by failing to renew the Democratic commitment to redistributive policies and by not improving the economic condition of Americans. Similarly, Reagan made reassuring and ambitious promises to white middle- and lower- class Americans, which created misleading expectations and ultimately worsened their economic and social stability⁵³³. As envisioned by Reagan, average households in the early 1980s were generally better off than they had been during the previous administration. However, by the end of the decade, the economy had stagnated, and more importantly, social and political polarization had deepened. The Economic Recovery Plan of 1981 helped restored credibility to American institutions and renewed confidence in US power, creating opportunities to regain an affluent standard of living. Nevertheless, the short-term benefits of tax cuts and increased entrepreneurial freedom gradually widened income inequality and deepened the budget deficit. In the long-run, the reforms benefited upper-class individuals

⁵³¹ Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1983.

⁵³² Diletti, *Divisi*, 2024; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

⁵³³ Walker, *Strategies for Governance*, 1986, p. 734; Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980 - 1989*, The Crown Publishing Group, 2010; Ross Douthat, "Another One for the Gipper", Review of Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980 - 1989*, *New York Times*, September 2009. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/books/review/Douthat-t.html>, viewed September 2024; Cronin, *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*, 2003.

and corporations, while reduced government assistance and limited investment opportunities significantly affected the economic position of lower-middle-class Americans⁵³⁴. Over time, slower wage growth, rising inequality, and competitive free-market system increased the economic vulnerability of most average Americans, while the wealthiest segments of society accrued greater financial gains. Additionally, reduced government intervention and increased military spending led to growing federal deficits and a significant rise in national debt, raising concerns about eventual cost increases or further spending cuts that could harm ordinary Americans⁵³⁵. Amid these economic changes, an even more worrying development occurred: the rapid rise of radical intellectual and political movements. Alongside the emergence of partisan media, these forces empowered new actors who intensified culture wars and social divisions in the US. Despite Reagan achieved broad electoral victories in 1980 and 1984 -fueled by reduced inflation and stimulated economic growth - his policies created lasting challenges for lower- and middle-income Americans. A new class of professionals began to dominate national economic and social trends, diminishing the appeal of the traditional American standard of living and the collective sense of shared identity⁵³⁶. By the end of the 1980s, although the US had regained its global leadership in progress, American society grappled with worsening inequality, social tensions, and political polarization, compromising overall national stability. The economic and political revolution driven by the Republican Party eroded consensus around liberal founding values and the effective meaning of freedom⁵³⁷. Since the latter half of the 20th century, polarization in the US has produced several consequences: increased social tensions and dysfunctional income distribution; amplified fragmentation and declining shared values; weakened soft power abroad, due to the absence of a unifying national narrative and a strong middle-class capable of projecting American ideals and culture⁵³⁸. The transfer of power between Carter and

⁵³⁴ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 2013.

⁵³⁵ Bruce L. R. Smith and James D. Carroll, *Reagan and the New Deal: Repeal or Replay?*, *American Political Science Association*, Vol. 14, no 4, (1981): 758 - 766. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/418700>, viewed September 2024; Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1996, pp. 629 – 641; Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2015; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Rudolph G. Penner, “Cutting the Budget: The Painful Choices”, *Challenge*, vol. 24, no 1, (1981): 24 - 30. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40719944>, viewed September 2024; Walker, *Strategies for Governance*, 1986.

⁵³⁶ Pfiffner, *The Carter-Reagan Transition*, 1996, pp. 629 – 641; Anslover, *Trouble with the Transition*, 2020; Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Perlstein, *Reaganland*, 2021; Troy, *Morning in America*, 2005; Hunt, *The Reagan Moment*, 2015.

⁵³⁷ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012.

⁵³⁸ Battistini, *Storia di un feticcio*, 2020; Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012; Haftendorn, *The Reagan Administration*, 1988; Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, 1994; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 2010 and *The Great Exception*, 2017; Fiorina Morris P, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Pearson Longman, 2004; McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, Vol. 5, MIT Press, 2006.

Reagan highlights how, in the long term, abrupt transitions can expose deep structural fractures within a nation. During periods of crisis and vulnerability, it becomes crucial to anticipate and mitigate the most detrimental outcomes of sudden paradigm shifts. Failure to do so risks undermining not only the political trajectory of the country, but – more importantly – the cohesion of its social fabric. This often results in a polarized society, divided along ideological, economic, and lifestyle lines. The absence of a cohesive and integrated social and political structure ultimately weakens the US international standing as defender of liberal values. Such a stance becomes inconsistent if the country fails to fully realize and protect those same values within its own borders⁵³⁹.

⁵³⁹ Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, 1991; Burke, *Presidential Transitions*, 2000; Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency*, 2011; Anslover, *Trouble with the Transition*, 2020; Cronin, *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*, 2003.

Conclusion

Reflections on the Carter-Reagan transition

Historically, American power has rested on economic and military resources, as well as universal liberal ideals that fostered global admiration. The American idea of freedom attracted the rest of the world, combining individual effort and self-realization with collective endeavors to address shared challenges and promote equal opportunity. This ideological framework gained even more traction during the mid-20th century, especially in the aftermath of World War II and throughout the Cold War, when it offered a compelling alternative to authoritarian governance and colonial rule. For many around the world, the US represented a model of democratic governance, cultural dynamism, and socioeconomic mobility. Despite inherent social and economic disparities, Americans united around shared aspirations of liberty and the foundational values of the broader “American project”⁵⁴⁰.

Until the first half of the twentieth century, a large middle-class majority set a general code of conduct and promoted the advantages of the “American way of life”, both domestically and abroad. However, beginning in the late twentieth century, neoliberal policies and cultural shifts have reshaped the US economic and social landscape, weakening consensus among Americans. Since the 1980s, free market ideals and the increasing influence of conservatism redefined American priorities, emphasizing free market ideals and individual freedom over the collective well-being. These shifts compromised US domestic stability, weakened the middle-class, and fueled polarization. Over time, growing inequalities and ongoing culture wars between partisan groups have reduced civic engagement and undermined US influence. As John Ehrenreich highlights: “Today in the US, freedom seems to be less about the absence of constraint than about freedom from obligations to one another. Social critics have documented a decades-long decline in the sense of community and decried the rampant greed, litigiousness, and belligerent egoism of today. The very idea of the common well-being has all but disappeared from political discourse”⁵⁴¹. In order to trace the origins of contemporary social and political polarization in the US, this study investigates the evolution of American society during the final decades of the twentieth century. Specifically, it examines how the presidential transition from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan influenced this transformation between the late 1970s and early 1980s. By

⁵⁴⁰ Murray, *Coming Apart*, 2012, p. 12.

⁵⁴¹ Ehrenreich, *Third Wave Capitalism*, 2016, p. 4.

refocusing historical attention on their administrations, this research highlights how shifts in economic policy, political rhetoric, and cultural identity laid the foundation for current American reality. The Camp David Domestic Summit organized by the Carter administration in July 1979 and the transition process of Reagan in 1980 illustrate the contrasting responses of the two presidents to the crisis of the 1970s and their roles in prompting a pivotal economic and ideological shift. The emphasis of Carter on collective solutions and self-indulgence contrasted sharply with the advocacy for individual liberty, economic deregulation, and moral conservatism of Reagan. Ultimately, these differing approaches to leadership had lasting effects on US domestic stability, social cohesion, and global image. In the late 1970s, facing a fragmented Democratic establishment and a national crisis extending beyond economics to a loss of shared purpose, Carter sought to revive the common good through public-private cooperation and increased moderation. Following the advice of Patrick Caddell and more concerned advisors at Camp David, he committed to restoring social harmony by addressing national issues at their roots. However, his inability to transcend the crisis and articulate an inspiring vision of the future undermined his leadership. The “Crisis of Confidence” speech epitomized his forward-looking vision but further amplified collective concerns for the American malaise, deepening public pessimism and alienating the liberal electorate. By the 1980s, the perceived weaknesses of the Democratic government, along with its initial deregulation policies, fueled calls for greater economic freedom and paved the way for the ascendancy of the Republican Party. Reagan, in contrast, offered a vision of renewal rooted in collective nostalgia and traditional values. His rhetoric of American strength, coupled with economic deregulation and military revitalization, resonated with middle- and lower class Americans seeking to reclaim lost affluence as symbol of liberty and wealth. Supported by an organized network of conservative advisors and policy experts, he promoted change reframing the future as a continuation of a prosperous past. Since the late 1970s, the Republican campaign and transition teams had strategically defined a conservative political agenda aimed at achieving significant national renewal. Following policy frameworks such as the “Mandate for Leadership”, the Reagan administration prioritized economic recovery and the restoration of US power. Particularly, by leveraging traditional values and increased moral order, the President fostered the rise of moral conservatism and the development of the New Right coalition. In 1980, he successfully expanded right-wing constituencies and inaugurated the neoliberal order in the US. However, while Republican policies delivered short-term economic gains, they also altered US social fabric, entrenching inequalities, weakening the

middle-class, and deepening ideological divides. By the end of the decade, the affirmation of the corporate system and the growing influence of conservative fundamentalists increased the wealth gap and heightened political polarization among Americans.

Comprehensively, the Carter-Reagan transition underscores the transformative power of presidential leadership and ideological framing in times of national crisis. By the 1980s, the pragmatic moderation of Carter and the assertive conservatism of Reagan shifted governance toward free market ideals and greater individualism, weakening the bipartisan consensus that had characterized post-war America. Together, both presidents dismantled the New Deal legacy, exacerbating social and political divisions in the US. Toward the end of the decade, these shifts empowered corporate elites and compromised middle-class stability, fostering disparities and ideological divides that persist today. At the same time, the affirmation of moral conservatism further entrenched cultural conflicts, weakening the sense of a unified national identity. As private and social issues have progressively dominated political discourse, Americans have increasingly struggled to achieve consensus on the core foundational values. By the late twentieth century, the ideological schism between liberalism and conservatism became even more pronounced, as media outlets and advocacy think-tanks increasingly shaped public debate and influenced policymaking. The emergence of these political influences amplified ideological extremism and fostered the rise of “affective polarization”, focusing on identity issues and driving “us-versus-them” dynamics. Over time, growing emotional polarization has increased misbeliefs among Americans and destabilized democratic norms. The transition from the Carter to Reagan administrations between the late 1970s and early 1980s marks a pivotal turning point in the evolution of American political and social life, laying the groundwork for the heightened polarization that defines the present era. This shift was not merely electoral or ideological – it represented a profound transformation in national priorities, cultural attitudes, and socioeconomic structures. The long-term consequences of this shift - rising economic inequality, weakened social cohesion, and the intensification of affective polarization – continue to shape the American experience today. Despite the promises of prosperity and growth accompanying the 1981 Republican tax reform, the realities of post-Reagan America have revealed deep structural fissures. Income inequality has grown steadily, and the share of American adults living in middle-income households has declined significantly. This trend reflects more than just economic changes – it signals a rupture in the social fabric. The traditional middle-class, once regarded as the bedrock of American democracy and a stabilizing force in civic life, has lost its coherence as a collective entity. Although it remains demographically present, it

no longer functions as a unified class bound by shared aspirations and cultural norms. Instead, Americans have increasingly embraced a value system that privileges individual achievement and personal autonomy over collective responsibility and social solidarity. This fragmentation of class identity has coincided with a broader ideological unraveling. The absence of a cohesive middle-class majority has contributed to a decline in shared national narratives and diminished the potential for broad-based civic engagement. In place of unified, cross-class coalitions, political mobilization has become more fractured and identity-driven, further eroding a sense of national purpose. As a result, the American middle-class has ceased to serve as a cultural and ideological anchor capable of sustaining the post-war vision of national unity and social progress. Moreover, this internal ideological transformation has undermined the ability of the US to project ideological influence abroad. As intense domestic polarization has intensified – driven not only by differing views but by emotional and identity-based antagonisms – US global credibility as a model of democratic stability and pluralism has diminished. While polarization is not a new feature of American society, since the 1980s it has strengthened. The rise of partisan media ecosystems, the strategic use of divisive social issues in policymaking, and the decline of institutional trust have all fueled emotional polarization, deepening the divide between political identities and making compromise increasingly elusive. In this context, media and public policy institutions have not merely mirrored polarization, but they have actively amplified it. By capitalizing on identity politics and cultural tensions, these institutions have transformed political discourse from ideological debate into existential conflict. At the same time, polarized political parties have shifted their focus away from redistributive policies and welfare, increasing disparities and fostering ideological extremisms. Nowadays, while Americans remain less ideologically polarized than Congress, personal and emotional divisions increasingly permeate daily life. As Americans grow more divided politically and socially isolated, the capacity for cross-cutting solidarity diminishes, threatening not only domestic cohesion but the broader democratic project itself.

These developments foster the importance for contemporary government of exploring new strategies for bridging divides and promote a sense of unity. Eventually, the Carter-Reagan transition stresses the necessity of developing shared national purposes for a stable and prosperous society. The struggles of Carter in the summer of 1979 illustrate the challenges of navigating complex economic and social crisis without a unifying vision, while the success of Reagan demonstrates the importance of aligning political agendas with public sentiment. In the early 1980s, the Republican administration successfully showcased

national strengths overshadowing the deeper social and political transformations stemming from the 1970s crisis. However, by then, optimistic visions both revived American power and reshaped American society, laying the groundwork for long-lasting effects. Increasing civic disengagement and sustained polarization have affected the US social fabric and fostered divergent interpretations of democracy and power among Americans, eroding the possibility to reach effective consensus. Ultimately, rapid shifts in national direction significantly affected the stability of contemporary America and its cultural influence abroad. By describing the American experience in the late twentieth century, this study aims at highlighting several areas for further investigation. First, future research should explore the role of media and think tanks in fostering emotional polarization and influencing public perceptions. The rise of globalization and digital media has amplified these dynamics, creating new forms of sharp power that shape political discourse. Second, historical studies could examine the economic and social implications of middle-class erosion, particularly its impact on shared national identity and aspirations. Finally, comparative analyses with other nations experiencing similar transformations and polarization could yield insights into mitigating effects and rebuilding bipartisan cooperation. In conclusion, the Carter-Reagan transition offers valuable insights for addressing contemporary challenges in the US. It demonstrates how leadership, policy priorities, and ideological framing during times of crisis can have profound and lasting impacts on national direction. To counteract polarization and restore public trust in institutions, a renewed commitment to balancing individual freedom with collective responsibility is essential. Policymakers must prioritize collaborative solutions to shared problems, addressing income inequality, improving media reliability, and fostering inclusive political dialogue. Looking forward, rebuilding bipartisan cooperation requires efforts from both government and society to bridge ideological divides and nurture a sense of shared identity. Without such efforts, the premises of the American Project risk further fragmentation, jeopardizing the possibility of a unified national community. The lessons from the late twentieth century remain critical as the US navigates the challenges of the twenty-first century, highlighting the need for presidential leadership that inspires collective action while preserving democratic principles and inclusivity.

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