

The First American Party System

Introduction to Course:

I am delighted to be here and to be talking with you about American political parties. It's been a subject quite dear to my heart for a long time - ever since I became interested in history. As a youngster in the Depression 1930s I got a heavy dose of American politics and parties in a very strongly Republican household which detested Franklin D. Roosevelt and honored Wendell Wilkie and Senator Robert Taft. My first vote as a young adult in 1952 was for Dwight D. Eisenhower, Republican-but my second vote four years later was for Adlai Stevenson, Democrat. By then I was in graduate school and you guessed it, the liberal environment of academia had worked its influence on me. Nevertheless, I still think I can rise above naked partisanship and claim a capacity for objectivity: Looking back I think my second vote for Stevenson may have been an error; Seen from today Eisenhower looks like a pretty good president , perhaps better prepared and personally better suited than Adlai Stevenson.

Many of you know that I have done most of my research and writing in the period we historians call "the early Republic. " A book on the origins of the War of 1812; a book on the origins of the federal Constitution. This lifetime of work has brought me into close contact with the first American political parties. I know the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans pretty well and the story of their emergence and then disappearance is a wonderfully interesting story. I also have read widely through every period of American history and have taught survey courses in American political history and courses in presidential history and in constitutional history. Like all of you I try to keep up with contemporary politics. There are some good things out there written by the academic historians, but the political scientists and the journalists also have many good things to say.

I. Party Systems

The 6-page handout " Modern American Party Systems" you have before you is meant as a common reference guide. I hope you will take some time to become familiar with it. It took long hours of labor and my thanks to

Dick Kennedy for his suggestions. It would be helpful to bring it to class next week when we will be talking more specifically about the several party systems subsequent to the first party system - the Jeffersonian party system - which is today's topic. Note that the outline identifies six American party systems.

The conceptual construct "a party system" is not a new idea. It has, as the footnote to McSweeney and Zvesper on page 1 indicates, been around a good while. The party system idea is a useful way to organize a huge body of historical data - names, dates, players, events, etc - into manageable form. It helps make the history of political parties hospitable to overtaxed memories ; it reminds us that over the span of time, American political parties have changed. Changed in very basic ways. We can find similarities and continuities, but I think most historians consider the differences even important and requiring attention.

[Observation: The Democratic party today has an annual dinner in which common historical origins are affirmed; Democrats call it "the Jefferson/Jackson Day dinner" and it commemorates the claim to direct descent from the Jeffersonian Democrats and the Jacksonian Democrats. But beyond their common Democratic label and a claim to champion progress for the common man, the agendas and goals of the several Democratic parties since Jefferson are so different that it's a stretch to try force all the Democratic parties into one mold - as successive manifestations of the same party all with a common ancestor. Likewise today's Republican party; Republican party chiefs today claim descent from Abraham Lincoln's Republican party (that freed the slaves) but there are such major differences between today's Republican party and Lincoln's Republican party that they seem to be pretty different animals. Anyway, the periodization of five, maybe six party systems puts emphasis on the breaks and the differences. }

One more point. I haven't worked everything out for the four lectures as yet, but here's my tentative proposal for our four meetings together.

1. the First American Party System
2. Towards the Legitimation of Party and the Political Party at its Apogee
3. Third Parties in American History
4. Recurrent Electoral Patterns in American History

II. Anti-Party Attitudes in Early Republican America

Let's begin with a big difference - a really important one. **Legitimacy.**

Throughout American history political parties and party systems have enjoyed wide-spread acceptance, as positive, valuable institutions, as permanent and productive fixtures in the polity. Call it legitimacy; they have standing, their existence is OK. Not so in the case of the first party system - the Jeffersonian party system. In this instance - the Federalists versus the Jeffersonian Republicans - contemporaries deplored the formation of party structures and regarded their existence as a temporary, albeit perhaps necessary, evil of short-lived duration.

The builders and operatives of the first party system were afraid of parties, were highly negative about parties; they had no idea of building durable party organizations or a durable party system. Yet they built the first modern political parties. They were paradoxically, anti-party party builders.

By contrast, party builders and operatives that came after the Federalists and the Jeffersonians were much more positive about parties ; they saw them more or less as we see them - at least until recently - on the whole not negatively but positively , as useful, constructive, an asset , not as liabilities . If they were party-builders, they were reluctant party builders; In fact they were anti-party party builders.

Sources of the 18th century's negative attitude towards parties.

The anti-party attitudes of the American Founding generation - the Founding Fathers of the Republic - were shaped by their English and classical inheritance. This inheritance was transmitted through British controversialists, essay writers, and political theorists whose writings crossed the Atlantic, were read by America's political class, and carried considerable weight. The Tory publicist Lord Bolingbroke : his book The Patriot King (1740s) ; the London journalists Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard (Cato's Letters 1730s essays published in colonial newspapers) ; the Scottish enlightenment philosopher David Hume (1750s) . Read and talked about by the elites of colonial and Revolutionary America, these and other English writers took a dark view of the "parties" of 17th and 18th century Britain . The Founders were also influenced by the works of the classical writers of ancient

Greece and Rome. They read the works of Cicero and Sallust on Roman history; Plutarch's Lives on the public careers of both Greek and Roman statesmen. These works too drew a dark view of parties.

The rap on parties was that parties and party warfare too often degenerated into assassination, mob violence, coup d'etat, civil war, and revolution. But for the most part these writers weren't talking about parties as we know them today (defined in the handout). They were talking about party as faction. By "faction" they meant a group that operates outside the closed confines of a parliament and that is given to stirring up physical violence and mass discontent by seditious action. The modern political party as a peaceful, constitutional entity pursuing votes and power by peaceful constitutional means was not yet invented and hence not yet on their radar screens.

Here is David Hume's condemnation of "the party as a faction."

"Of Parties in General," wrote Hume in the late 1750s, the "founders of sects and factions" ought to be "detested and hated" . . . "because the influence of faction is directly contrary to that of laws. Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other." Hume is talking here about an oppositional formation of men pursuing illegitimate goals and using agitation means among the mass of people. Hofstadter, Idea of a Party System, p. 25.

On the other hand by the second half of the 18th century the oppositional party as an in-house "formation" or "side" of like-minded individuals working together indoors was gaining traction. An early statement that seems to accept as OK "the parliamentary party" formed in doors (as opposed to out-or- doors) was famously expressed by the Anglo-Irish politician Edmund Burke in 1777: "Thoughts on Present Discontents. " "Party is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." Hofstadter, p. 32. says "This is [may be] the first statement in which party is put in a favorable light. " Other moments of positive valuation of party appear, but in colonial and Revolutionary America they are few and far between. (see Hofstadter, pp. 36-38)

Here's a statement by the American John Adams that draws a distinction between the in-house parliamentary kind of party that's OK and the out-of-doors kind of party that is not OK:

1779: JA : "an opposition in parliament , in a house of assembly, in a council, in Congress, is highly useful and necessary to balance individuals, and bodies, and interests against one another and bring truth to light and justice to prevail."

1780 : JA: " There is nothing which I dread so much as the division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humblest apprehension is to be dreaded as the greatest evil under our Constitution." Hofstadter, p. 38.

Washington's Farewell Address: handout. Washington here seems to be putting negative emphasis on out-of-doors oppositional activity. Discuss.

III. Building the First American Party System: Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans

The key idea here is to be found in the phrase "Minute men springing to the defense of the Republic." In the early 1790s the Jeffersonian Republicans organized their party as an emergency expedient in response to highly toxic Federalist domestic and foreign policies. As my handout suggests, their "main objective was to rescue the republic from Federalist policies of class and sectional favoritism (pro-business, anti-farmer/planter) as well as from domination by a pro-British , pro-aristocratic elite class." They saw themselves as engaged in emergency action to save the Republic from monarchy - from, dare I say it, from monarchization (arrggh!). They thought the Federalist leader and their policies were designed to subvert the new Republic and establish a British style monarchy (king, lord, and commons) in its place. Their conviction that the Federalist - a least the leading Federalists -were anti-republican crypto monarchists guided the Republican party right down through the War of 1812.

The notion that the heads of the federal government and their supporters were trying to subvert remake central government into a British -style monarchy seems far-fetched. But the statements of Jefferson himself, Madison, and many other Republican party chieftains echoes this idea and

its constant recurrence in private correspondence as well as in public rhetoric lends weight to its authenticity. Here's Hofstadter, "There can be little reason to doubt that notable Republican partisans like Madison, Jefferson, and Monroe were quite sincere in charging that many of their leading opponents favored monarchy and would scheme for its restoration, perhaps in some thinly disguised form under a 'consolidated state.'" Hofstadter, Idea of a Party System. p. 85. As early as 1792 Madison was casting the contest as between "enemies and friends of republican government." Hofstadter, p. 83. see handout.

Guided by the idea that the notables around President Washington - esp. Hamilton - were secret -champions of British monarchy, Jefferson, Madison, and their fellow cohorts felt they had to come up with an acceptable oppositional strategy. Policies that undermined popular support for the republic needed to be reversed; suspected anti-republican Federalists needed to be replaced with good loyal republicans committed to republican institutions and republican policies.

The result was their construction of what looks in many ways like a modern political party, adapted and applied to an 18th century setting. Much of what they used were tactics previously applied to block obnoxious British tax and regulation measures during the run-up to the American Revolution - except the Jefferson Republican bent over backward to avoid any resistance by mass violence.

1. united action within doors

In Congress and the state legislatures the Jeffersonian Republicans coalesced around blocs of like-minded colleagues and voted unitedly and consistently against Federalist-sponsored measures. (voting studies show this taking place in the early 1790s.)

2. public opinion- forming tactics They

- set up party newspapers (Philip Freneau's National Gazette) - maybe 60 newspapers in all were founded which proceeded to excoriate Federalist policies. Federalists countered with their newspapers
- published and distributed of handbills, essays, and pamphlets

- formed Democratic-Republican clubs to educate voters (some 35 or so)
- organized parades and rallies and mass meetings
- got their state legislatures to pass resolutions condemning Federalist measures. (e.g.) . The most notable and significant were the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions that challenged the Federalist enacted Sedition law. A measure of their desperation was that Jefferson and Madison floated the idea of state nullification as last resort to stop the Sedition law's operation.

3. election- organizing activity

They developed machinery for choosing and electing to office candidates who shared their views and for building popular support for these candidates. We see

- conventions and caucuses to nominate candidates
- voting tickets to coordinate and unify voters behind a given slate of candidates (tell story of 50,000 handwritten tickets in Pennsylvania in 1796 election)
- get out-the vote operatives to get voters to the polls.
- soap box oratory (Irving's Rip Van Winkle)

It looks like we are seeing the development of what looks like a popular political party - This Republican party was becoming what Hofstadter terms "the first truly popular party in the history of the western world."

The Federalist Reaction

The Federalists (contemporaries termed them Federalists because they were the group that had engineered the new Constitution) reacted badly to these oppositional tactics. Having no sustained personal experience with formed peaceful opposition other than the pre-revolution resistance movement that had ended in Revolution, they saw the Republican party-building as "faction," writ large. (Remember "faction is a seditious party.")It was everything the British and classical anti-party theorists had warned against. And so the Federalists proceeded to try to stifle and silence the Republican opposition and drive it out of business.

- they branded their opponents as unscrupulous street demagogues and French Jacobin agitators and terrorists.

-they denounced the Democratic Republican societies, claiming publicly that they were responsible for the Whiskey Insurrection, a farmers' taxpayers revolt in western Pennsylvania.

-they flirted with using federal troops, mobilized to fight off the French during the Quasi-war (1798-1800), against the Republicans, who they suspected of stockpiling arms. (At one point, they actually believed the Republicans were ready to co-operate with a French army poised to land on the coast of South Carolina.)

And they passed the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts, which were intended to cripple the Republican opposition by stifling its criticism and curtailing its recruitment of Irish and French immigrants.

Under the Sedition law, the editors of 14 Republican newspapers were prosecuted. Some of the prosecutions were botched, but several editors were convicted, fined and imprisoned in federal prison.

IV. The End of the First Party System

The Republican strategy paid off in the election of 1800 when Jefferson replaced John Adams and Republican majorities took over both houses of Congress. (many reasons for the Federalist defeat including a divided party leadership; and especially unpopular taxation (a window and hearth tax). Despite the Federalist distaste - not to say contempt for Jefferson - they grudgingly accepted the election verdict. It took weeks of sorting out whether Jefferson or Burr was to be president in the House of Representatives balloting. There was some talk among the more partisan Federalists of not giving up office. Eventually cooler heads prevailed. (the Federalists really had no alternative and calculated that Republican incompetence would put them back in power in 2004. As for Burr vs Jefferson, they chose the lesser of two evils. John Adams did not attend his former old friend's inauguration but departed Washington by coach before dawn.

In this first iteration of the peaceful transfer of power, the two-party system in the United States took a long step forward. Yet the practice of legitimate opposition through the vehicle of a political party was still not

established. Jefferson the new president was not about to accept the Federalists as a valid legitimate opposition party. He still regarded the Federalists as anti-republican subversives and as dangerous enemies of the Republic.

His strategy was not suppression but to detach and absorb by artful conciliation the more moderate rank-and-file Federalists. Like the defeated Federalists when they were in the driver's seat, his was the goal of political unanimity - the removal of Federalist party opposition. He would absorb the Federalist rank-and-file by conciliation and leave their leaders without a following. That is in large part why he did not dismantle Hamilton's funding system. Thus: He did not purge all Federalists from federal office; he did not abolish the Bank of the U.S. He did cut expenses, he did put the U.S. navy in mothballs, and he did allow the army to deteriorate. And he acquired Louisiana, a marvelous windfall that dropped in his lap; he hardly raised a finger. By 1804 the Federalists were in full retreat: in that election only two states returned Federalist legislative majorities - Connecticut, and Delaware. In the House, Republicans outnumbered Federalists 5-1 and in the senate 4-1.

(There were some gestures of retaliation; the impeachment of Federalist judges like Samuel Chase and John Pickering; a move by Jefferson to have a Pennsylvania Federalist newspaper prosecuted by Republican-controlled Pennsylvania under the common law of sedition.)

Jefferson's quest for a Federalist party demise was set back somewhat by the difficulties attending the maritime controversies with Britain and France on the high seas that led to the Anglo-American War of 1812. The embargo and the War of 1812 saw a temporary revival of Federalist party fortunes; they gained seats in 1808 and their fusion ticket with Dewitt Clinton came close to defeating Madison in 1812. But again the somewhat resurgent Federalists overreached. Their unanimous and obstructionist opposition to the War of 1812 (including crucial military and financial measures); their sponsorship of the ill-considered Hartford Convention did much to brand them in the public mind as a disloyal and even treasonous opposition. And the American military victories at Plattsburgh, Baltimore, and New Orleans enabled Republican partisans to spin the War as a victory for the Madison administration and the Republican party.

Discredited by their obstructionist behavior during the War of 1812, the Federalists went down to a stinging defeat in the presidential election of 1816 when they ran Rufus King as their candidate. King won 34 electoral votes; James Monroe won five times as many - 183. This was the last presidential election in which the Federalists ran a candidate; in 1820 Monroe ran for a second term unopposed and garnered 231 electoral votes to 1. 1820 marked the end of the first American party system and we must wait another half a dozen years until 1828 to see the start of the second party system - the Jacksonian party system.

The formation of this Second American Jacksonian party system - and of subsequent party systems - was managed by men who were much more comfortable with the existence of popular parties and electioneering activity than were the Jeffersonian and the Federalists. That will be the subject of next week's class.

QUESTIONS :

1. How do we explain the misdirected and distorted views that the parties took towards each other? quotes in Hofstadter, pp. 84-5.

2. Is the polarized condition of today's parties the same as the polarized condition of the Jeffersonian Republicans and Federalists?

-Olympia Snow, retiring senator from Maine sat down last night on the WETA news hour with Senator Bingman, retiring senator from New Mexico. They were civil; respectful of each other; called each other by their first names. Social comity was certainly there.

-The Federalist and Jeffersonian political parties thought of themselves as temporary expedients, not permanent structures part of an established system. They never recognized the validity of their opponents' party either in or out of office. ¹

The parties today seek primacy but not the total elimination of their party rivals.

¹ "Jefferson never recognized the validity of the Federalist party either while Adams was in office or as an opposition party during his [Jefferson's] administration." Hofstadter, p. 125.

3. Can we imagine how a positive case for parties could be made? Can we identify what might be termed “the functional merits of the two-party system, ” to use Hofstadter’s phrase.