

Modern American Party Systems: an Overview

I. The terms “modern Political Party” and “Party System” are important for understanding the history of American party development and may be defined as follows:

According to political scientists Donald Herzberg and Gerald Pomper, the modern Political Party is a competitive political organization that has two defining characteristics: 1. its goal is to win public office and power and 2. its method is to seek office and power peacefully and constitutionally through the ballot box. Other scholars assign additional characteristics to the definition of the American political party such as: durability, ideology, agenda, and a grass-roots organization. But the idea of a quest for office and power peacefully and constitutionally through the ballot box is most important.

The term Party System as used by political scientists and historians signifies a durable arrangement of political competition in which political parties contest for votes and power and abide by the verdict of the voters in a regularized environment of alternating party primacy.

Although historians and political scientists are not unanimous, probably most students of American political would agree that at least five, possibly six, party systems can be identified as having played major roles in American political history.¹ They are:

1. The Jeffersonian party system (1800-1820)
2. The Jacksonian party system (1828-1854)
3. The Civil War party system (1854-1896)
4. The Progressive Party system (1896-1928)
5. The New Deal Party system (1928-1980)
6. The Reagan party system (1980-) ?

Each of the above party systems developed when a new political party or parties organized in response to the pressure of a new or neglected problem, or when an existing party or parties adopted a new agenda in response the pressure of a new or neglected problem.

Thus:

The **Jeffersonian Republican party** organized in response to perceived threats to cherished American institutions and values posed by an incumbent Federalist majority.

¹ See Dean McSweeney and John Zvesper, American Political Parties, London and New York, 1991. “In spite of the continuities [e.g. from the Jeffersonian Republicans through the Jacksonian Democrats through to the New Deal Democrats and the Democratic party of today], the historical breaks are significant. Historians and political scientists generally present the history of American political parties in terms of five distinct ‘party systems’ - that is, five historical periods in which two major parties have contended. The period of transition between historical ‘systems’ are periods of ‘critical elections’, during which party loyalties and agendas are established for several subsequent decades.” p.14. McSweeney and Zvesper also suggest the existence of a sixth party system - i.e. the sixth or Reagan party system. p. 37.

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The **Jacksonian Democratic party** was built to enshrine the principle of strict construction of the Constitution in order to quiet southern fears of future federal action against slavery and thus prevent a future breakup of the union. In part also the party sought to capitalize on the rise of white common man (WAM) democracy.

The **Lincoln Republican party** formed in response to the threat posed to cherished national values by the expansion of an aggressive Slave Power.

The **Progressive party** system formed when a new generation of Republican and Democratic politicians sought to tame rampant forces of industrialism and rising corporate power.

The **New Deal party** system formed when the Democratic party responded to the Great Depression with a new program for dealing with the economic crisis.

The sixth or **Reagan party** system formed when the existing Republican party responded to growing concerns about federal over-regulation, over-taxation, and excessive government spending.

I. The Jeffersonian Party System 1800-1820

Jeffersonian Republicans vs. Federalists

Federalists : Washington; A. Hamilton; J. Adams

In power, 1789-1801, the Federalists refinanced the accumulated state and federal Revolutionary war debt; created 1st Bank of U.S. ; built a small but effective blue water navy; and fought a limited maritime war against an aggressive Revolutionary France.

The main Federalist objective was to build support for the newly launched Republic by fostering trickle down prosperity through investor - and commerce-friendly policies.

Jeffersonian Republicans : Jefferson, Madison, James Monroe

The Jeffersonian Republican party formed in the mid-1790s in opposition to the Federalist regime and took control of federal government in 1800 election. Under President Jefferson the Republicans repealed internal taxes; reduced the army and navy; established democratic protocol; acquired the Louisiana Purchase; contested GB and Napoleonic France over Free Trade and Sailors Rights; and engaged in War of 1812 (free trade and sailors rights).

The main Republican objective was to rescue the Republic from unpopular 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.

II. The Jacksonian Party System

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Jacksonian Democrats vs. American Whigs 1828-1854

Jacksonian Democrats: Jackson, Van Buren, James K. Polk, John C. Calhoun, Stephen A. Douglas

The Jacksonian Democratic party was formed in the mid-1820s and won control of federal government in 1828 election. The party was built by New York's Martin Van Buren and southern Republicans out of the remnants of the 1st party system. Its goal was to enshrine "strict constructionist" policies (narrow view of federal power) that would counter "broad constructionist" policies (broad view of federal power) championed by "American System" advocates, National Republican (and future Whig) leaders Henry Clay and President J.Q. Adams. Democratic party-builders feared future southern secession over federal anti-slavery initiatives (based on "broad constructionist" constitutional interpretation) and sought to quiet southern fears by taking broad constructionist policies off the table. Simultaneously they trumpeted "egalitarianism" and other "common man" causes.

Jackson's Bank War neutralized the 2nd Bank of the U.S. (BUS recharter vetoed 1832, federal funds withdrawn 1833 ff.). Jackson also vetoed federal funding bills for transportation projects. Faced with nullification of the federal tariff by a militant states-rights South Carolina, Jackson effectively isolated and neutralized the Nullification Movement.

In the 1830s the Democratic party's focus was on strict construction and equality but this focus shifted in mid-1840s to territorial expansionism.

In the 1840s Democratic leaders began championing annexation of the newly independent Texas Republic, U.S. possession of the Oregon Country, and U.S. acquisition of California. The 1844 Democratic platform called for the annexation of Texas and Oregon. James K. Polk, elected president on this expansionist platform, also wanted California. Polk's aggressive diplomacy resulted in U.S. acquisition of half of Oregon but the same tactics directed against Mexico boomeranged and produced the Mexican War. The U.S. military defeat of Mexico resulted in the annexation by treaty of the Mexican cession.

Slavery, heretofore under wraps, now became a salient issue. Whether or not slavery should be permitted in newly acquired California, and the New Mexico and Oregon territories took center stage. In the Deep South, a secessionist movement got underway in response to attempts by anti-slavery forces to bar slavery from the new possessions (Wilmot Proviso). The Compromise of 1850 took the slavery issue off the table but only temporarily.

American Whigs : Henry Clay, J.Q. Adams, Daniel Webster, Abraham Lincoln

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In the 1830s, the American Whig party had formed out of discontent with Jackson's anti-business, anti-National Republican policies. The new Whig party championed economic growth and individual material and moral improvement through federal government action: i.e. a 3rd national bank to replace the 2nd Bank of the U.S.; a protective tariff; federal funding for roads, canals, river, and railroad projects; state and federal aid to education (land-grant agricultural and mechanical colleges, etc.); and moral improvement such as temperance legislation.

Only the protective tariff was enacted during a brief Whig interlude (1841-45). In a second Whig interlude (1849-53), president Millard Fillmore joined other Whigs like Clay and Webster in engineering the Compromise of 1850.

III. The Civil War Party System

Lincoln Republicans vs. Democrats 1854-1896

Republicans: Abraham Lincoln, W.H. Seward, U.S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, James B. Blaine.

Democrats: Samuel Tilden, Grover Cleveland, Horatio Seymour, Horace Greeley

The Civil War party system formed around the issues of slavery and the place of freed blacks in American life. The Lincoln-led Republican party emerged (1854-6) out of the ruins of the Whig party, which broke apart over the issue of whether slavery should be permitted to enter the federal territories (Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, 1854). Faced with a Democratic party leadership apparently bent on expanding slavery, the new Republican party organized against slavery's expansion into the free federal territories of the west and the free North. Slavery was to be contained within the South where it existed and where it hopefully would eventually die; mainline Republicans did not claim to end slavery by direct federal action.

But after the South's secession and Lincoln's decision to resist secession, the Republican party took an increasingly radical stance against slavery (Emancipation Proclamation; 13th Amendment). After the war, when the White South began to force racial subordination and economic exploitation onto southern blacks (night riders, KKK, black codes), northern Republicans took up an agenda of legal and political rights designed to help southern freedmen protect themselves (14th and 15th amendments; Civil Rights acts; Military Reconstruction).

Although Lincoln in 1860-61 had been willing to guarantee the South against any direct federal action to end slavery within the slave states, the South's master class saw slavery as lethally threatened and fatally doomed by a growing anti-slavery Northern majority. Secession in 1860-61 was their "pre-emptive counter-revolution" intended to protect and preserve southern slavery against an anti-slavery North.

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Throughout the entire era the Democratic party had clung to its pre-war creed of strict construction, states rights, low tariff, retrenchment, and limited government. By the mid- 1870s White America and Republicans had grown tired of the “negro” question and Republicans withdrew the last troops from the South. With Home Rule now ascendent, the South became solidly Democratic. At the same time the Democrats expanded their northern base by building urban machines that provided programs of jobs for immigrants and aid to immigrant families. Having dropped their Reconstruction agenda, the Republican party touted prosperity-enhancing measures (high tariff and sound money), and pushed prohibition, Bible -reading in schools, and anti-machine reforms.

IV. Progressive Party System Republicans v. Democrats 1896-1932

**Republicans: Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, Robert LaFollette.
Democrats: William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, Louis Brandeis.**

Progressivism at the turn of the 20th century was mainly a middle class movement that sought, in various ways, to reform machine politics and to counter the evils of industrialism and growing corporate power. Its principal channel for doing so was state and federal government action. Progressive causes ranged from the direct primary and commission regulation of business to tenement house reform and factory regulation; from fair railroad rates to trust-busting; from conservation to the prohibition of alcohol; from financial aid to farmers and the urban poor to efficient management of cities and public utilities. Although neither the Democratic or Republican parties espoused all these reforms, both parties made important elements of Progressivism part of their agenda.

Republican Progressive agenda:

Under President Theodore Roosevelt, the Republican party pushed railroad rate regulation (Hepburn Act); consumer protection (Pure Food and Drug act); Conservation; and anti-trust prosecutions (Northern Securities Company, Standard Oil).

Democratic Progressive Agenda

Under President Woodrow Wilson, the Democrats enacted stronger pro-competition measures (Clayton Anti-Trust Act; lower tariff); a more flexible, more open system of financial credit (Federal Reserve Act); and stronger regulation of trade and business (Federal Trade Commission).

V. The New Deal Party System

Republicans vs/ Democrats 1928-1980

Republicans: Herbert Hoover, Thomas E. Dewey, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon

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Democrats: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Jimmy Carter

Both the Republican and Democratic parties responded to the Great Depression (1929-1940) by fashioning policies designed to foster economic recovery and relief for the downtrodden. Under Hoover, the Republicans moved gingerly to enact the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and increase federal spending for federal public projects.

Under Franklin D. Roosevelt the Democrats, who took power in 1932, went much further with a cascade of measures designed to boost economic recovery (NRA, PWA, AAA, etc); reform financial abuses (SEC) and protect banks (HOLC); bolster working men (Wagner Act, Fair Labor Standards Act); and provide a basic safety net of direct aid to jobless, aged, handicapped, and (Social Security Act).

On the other hand, during the 1930s the Republican party's Progressive wing gave way to anti-New Deal Conservatives, who championed policies designed to return to the nation to limited government, rugged individualism, and anti-pluralist white Protestant rule. After WWII Republican presidents began to accept parts of the New Deal (Eisenhower: increased social security payments and Federal Highway Act; Nixon: EPA, Clean Air and Water Acts). Subsequent Democratic presidents pushed the New Deal further (Fair Deal, Great Society) by including civil rights and quality-of-life policies.

VI. The Reagan Party System Republicans vs. Democrats

Republicans: Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush
Democrats: William Jefferson Clinton, Barak Obama, Hillary Clinton

Disenchanted with New Deal/Great Society-inspired federal regulation, federal bureaucracy, and federal spending, in the late 1970s and 80s the Republican party once again began championing reductions in federal social programs, less federal regulation, welfare reform, lower taxes and other measures designed to unshackle business enterprise and entrepreneurship. Similarly, the party's most conservative - and increasingly stronger- wing pressed socially conservative measures such as moral renovation, abortion, and other family-values issues. The question arises (posed by Alan Lichtman's recent White Protestant America) whether today's Republican leadership is genuinely interested in reviving smaller "hands-off" government and economic freedom, or is really pursuing its own recovery of power to restore "our kind of America" in the new multi-racial cosmopolitan America in which White Protestant elites no longer call the tune.