

Parties: The Golden Age and Beyond

I. Party at its Peak

The developments begun by the Jeffersonian party system and accelerated by the Jacksonian party system continued right down until the end of the 19th century. The two party were now the primary central actors in American politics and their power reached its zenith in the post-Civil War period between 1877 and 1896 - the so-called Gilded Age of Parties.”

-The Patronage-Based Machine : Party machines now held dominant sway. Urban-based machines and state machines were in the driver’s seat: some were Democratic (Tammany Hall under Boss Tweed and Boss Kelly) some Republican (Simon Cameron and Matt Quay Penn); Roscoe Conkling (N.Y.), Zachariah Chandler Michigan. Their power rested on patronage and favors. When Democrat Grover Cleveland took office (1885), 90,000 Republican postal workers (out of 130,000) were replaced with loyal Democrats; and the same thing happened when the Republicans took power. The same thing in the state governments as well. At the same time, the parties collected money from these patronage appointees; each year the office holder received a letter dunning him for a party contribution (2%); if he refused, his superior would be notified by the party operatives. (text is in A.J. Reichley, The Life of the Parties p. 158). Besides collecting dues from office holders, these machines extracted contributions from contractors, public utilities, corporations wanting favors. Some money went into the pockets of the party leaders but much was spent on campaigning and on doing favors - valuable social services.

“A bucket of coals and a basket of food, a rent payment, funeral expenses, clothing and material benefits were made available to those in need, as were interventions with the law such as providing bail, cutting the red tape to receive a license or permit, or getting [legal] charges dismissed.” Reichley, p. 143.

Vote Buying. The machines were thoroughly corrupt and kept themselves in power not only by patronage and favors but by buying votes. “According to Morton Keller: “There does seem to have been large scale vote buying. The inhabitants of many small towns considered it a reliable income source. An estimated one out of three New Jersey voters took money for their votes.” “For farmers and workers living close to the bone, a vote was a fungible commodity, not to be given away. Humorist Finley Peter Dunne’s Mr. Dooley observed of turn-of-the-century Chicago

that many of its citizens had two pleasures in life, working and voting, both of which they did at the rate of a dollar and a half a day.” Keller, 143.

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Mediocre candidates: The calibre of each party’s candidates for office deteriorated. Case in point: none of the Gilded Age presidents achieved any distinction: Possibly the honest Grover Cleveland but although a Democrat Cleveland was stodgy, unimaginative, and even reactionary (he vetoed a federal relief bill for farmers and broke the great railroad strike); Hofstadter calls him “The flower of political culture in the Gilded Age.” Lord Bryce, in his classic study of American politics, noted the low calibre of America’s elected leaders: Men of ability and ethical principle are put off by the power of party bosses and the requirements of mass politics: why would anyone of principle want to go into that seamy, mercenary occupation?

Festering Problems Ignored

Maybe the biggest rap on parties in the late 19th century was their unconcern for the looming economic and social and human problems of the day. The party machines and many Democratic and Republican senators and congressmen were preoccupied with one thing only: holding on to power and feathering their own nests. Accordingly, they were indifferent to the evils of the new age of industrialization and corporate capitalism; (the plight of working people; poor people; farmers.) They were indifferent to the plight of the urban poor living in the urban slums.

Happily things took a turn for the better at the turn of the century as we enter the Progressive and New Deal Eras. The Political Parties became more constructive, productive, progressive, less seamy, less preoccupied with office for its own sake and with lining their own pockets. There were bursts of creativity in the Roosevelt and Wilson presidencies and again under FDR; both the Progressives and the New Deal laid the foundations of the regulatory welfare state.

II. Parties in Decline (?)

Is the modern two-party system in decline? Have the parties become weakened by atrophy, complacency, partisanship? Have their leaders become “brain dead” as one distinguished political scientist at Cornell

(Theodore Lowi) argues. David Broder's 1972 book The Party's Over captures the idea.

Many political scientists and historians think so. Some do not. My own view is somewhere in the middle. Party has declined in some ways, but not in others. I agree that :

1. The parties' hold on voters' confidence and loyalty has slipped

1. Increase in Independent voters. in the number of voters describing themselves as "independents," rather than identify as either Republican or Democrat has increased from 15% in 1942 to 36% in 1988 to 40% in 2000.

3. voter participation. Voter participation in the 20th century has steadily slipped from its zenith of 80% in the Jackson and Gilded Ages. in 1960, 63% of eligible voters (in a greatly expanded electorate) voted. In 1980, the percentage had slipped still further to 52%. Twenty western democracies are ahead of the U.S.

4. voter confidence in parties. Many people seem to be losing confidence in the parties as effective vehicles for serving their interests. A national survey done in 1985 found that 45% of Americans believe their political interests are best represented not by either the Republicans or Democrats but by "organized interest groups." 37% still believe parties best represent them.

4. ticket splitting

In 1991 an astonishing poll showed that the public did not want control of both Congress and the presidency in the hands of one party. A poll by the Wall Street Journal/NBC 1991 shows voters stating a 2-1 preference for divided government 63% to 29%.

Ticket -splitting also shows that parties do not control voters' preferences. In 1988, 34% of congressional districts gave majorities to one party's candidate for president and the other party's candidate for the House of Representatives. Likewise, for both the senate and house of representatives. Control of both houses by one party used to be the rule; now it is the exception. During 1899-1952, 5 Congresses out of 6 were

under one party control. By contrast, In the fifty years 1952-2002 2 Congresses out of 3 were controlled by different parties.

This data is powerful and persuades me that the near- monopolistic grip that parties and their leaders exercised over the electorate has got weaker. The “party- in - the electorate” has become weaker.

But the historian in me has a couple of observations to make about this:

1. this is not a recent trend.

The weakening of the ability of the party and its leaders to command party loyalty among the masses began about 1890. It started with reforms such as the secret ballot, the nomination primary, civil service reform; and the rise of the welfare state.

1. the Australian ballot replaces the party ticket.

This was a reform put into effect by the states between 1888-1900. It meant that the parties could no longer effectively control how people voted. Previously the party provided the ballot with its own slate of its candidates (printed on different sized colored paper); party operative stood by and watched how you voted. Under the Australian ballot, the state printed the ballot with all the candidates from both parties and provided a closeted voting booth where you could make your choice.

Jerrold Rusk has tabulated how the Australian ballot promoted split-ticket voting across party lines.

2. state and national primaries replaces the boss system of selecting candidates

The Progressive reformers put forward the election primary as a method designed to break the ability of insider party chieftains to select party candidates. The idea of course is to remove choice by the bosses and place it in the hands of the party's own registered voters. Begun during the Progressive era, it has extended to the presidential nomination process. The old way of choosing presidential candidates was to have the chieftains of each state party choose the state's delegates to the party nominating convention; in 1950, about 10-15% electors chosen by primary, now about 80% of the convention delegates are chosen by primaries, (popular election or caucus)

Similarly, 80% of Congressional candidates; back in 1950, 15% were thus chosen.

3. Civil Service Reform

Civil Service reform Pendleton act (1883) required that federal office holders be selected by merit (job qualifications and examinations) and be protected from removal by a new administration. Also, federal office holders are not to make campaign donations to the war chests of either party or engage in advocacy for either party. This had the effect of removing one of the key tools by which party bosses rewarded the faithful and thus maintained their hold on the party faithful.

4. Public welfare instead of party welfare.

In the 19th century voters were bound by machine rewards and constituency services. (Thanksgiving baskets; fuel; help in finding jobs and housing). Today the poor and vulnerable are served by government-funded safety nets such as social security payments; food stamps; Medicaid; job-training; and employment bureaus. The parties no longer have social services with which to pay off the faithful.

More recently the parties' once near-monopolistic ability to market their party's agenda to the voters and win their support has been weakened by technological innovations such as television (and the computer) and by the influence of hired professional consultants.

-the Rise of Television

The advent of television in the 50s and 60s has "supplanted much of the communication function formerly performed by party workers" - Reichley. As the saying goes, Boss Tweed has yielded to Boss Television. One political consultant says, "The television set has become the political party of the future."

-the rise of hired political consultants

Most national and state campaigns are now managed by professional consultants, fund raisers, and pollsters who sell their services on a contract basis (usually within some partisan or ideological bounds) rather than by career politicians who have worked their way up through the party

organization. These for-hire professionals now have significant influence in what used to be what used to belong to the professional politicians. Here is what Thomas Edsall of the Washington Post writes: “As the role of parties in mobilizing voters has declined, much of the control over both election strategy and issue selection - key functions in deciding the national agenda - has shifted to a small, often interlocking network of campaign specialists, fund-raisers, and lobbyists.”

What's more the influence of outside-the-party money in determining strategy and agendas has also increased. The high cost of television has meant that campaigning has become more expensive. Likewise the need to employ marketing and campaign experts and pollsters are costly. To pay these costs, they turn to big donors outside of the parties, and these wealthy outside individuals exercise influence on candidate and agendas that is independent of the parties. Even more, wealthy PACs and super PACS, labor unions, and other wealthy individuals outside the party structures now greatly influence the agendas and outcomes of elections.

II. As for whether the parties have lost their ability to be effective in making good policy and turning it into legislation, here I have to plead scepticism. In my view, the party leaders are not brain-dead; they may be wrong-headed but they're not brain dead. True, we've got a deadlocked Congress but a deadlocked Congress is nothing new. It's happened before. And deadlock has always finally ended in a burst of creative government - the Progressive Era, the New Deal era.

If we define party strength in terms of cohesiveness, party strength measured by cohesiveness is alive and well. Party-in-Congress (as opposed to party in the electorate) looks stronger than ever. Think of the Affordable Health Care Act which passed on a straight party-line vote. The best antidote for the present stalemated system is for the voters to restore full control of the two houses of Congress and the presidency to either the Democrats or the Republicans.

I am still a fan of the two-party system .

1. In my view, the two-party system does serve democracy. It isn't

actually democracy per se, but it serves democracy. As we have said, our national parties gather, organize and gives coherence to the interests and preferences of a sprawling and diverse American society. Once a party gains a majority, it then has to develop public policies, which ultimately get the approval or disapproval of the voters at the next election. The way the majority party deals with policy - or fails to deal with policy - eventually translates into its being approved or disapproved by the citizens. Thus people do eventually have a say in what's been done by their government.

2. the two-party system not only serves democracy but stabilizes this sprawling diverse heterogeneous nation. As we have emphasized, it helps moderate extremes - not all the time but certainly much of the time - and it offers peaceful constitutional change as an alternative to violent revolution.

1. The rise of Party organization at the national level may be showing new signs of life.

The two national party committees are "both now housed in imposing campaign headquarters on Capitol Hill [and] employ numerous campaign consultants, fundraisers, pollsters, computer specialists and mass communications experts, many of whom shuttle back and forth between national headquarters and ongoing field operations." The funds raised by these committees are, in great part, pumped out to state and local party parties to help them finance candidates' campaigns. As the campaigns of individual candidates become more dependent on expensive television advertising, these party funds from national headquarters become more valuable. A. James Reichley, The Life of the Parties: a History of American Political Parties (1992), pp. 8-9.