

Silbey, J. H. (2002). From “essential to the existence of our institutions” to “rapacious enemies of honest and responsible government”: The rise and fall of American political parties, 1790 – 2000. In L. S. Maisel (ed.), *The parties respond: Changes in American parties and campaigns (4th ed.)*. New York: Westview Press.

Since the 1790s, few elections in America have occurred without the involvement of national political parties. From the Jeffersonian Republicans and Federalists in the first years of the new nation to the Democrats and Republicans of the present day, along with a range of third-party movements from the Anti-Masons in the 1820s to the supporters of Ross Perot and Ralph Nader in the 1990s, parties have dominated the American political scene. They have served as the main organizers of social and economic conflict, as the primary mobilizers of voters, and as critical cue givers to legislators and other officeholders.

In the functions they perform and in their outward appearance as they engage in these tasks, parties have seemed to enjoy great stability within the American system for over two hundred years. That appearance of stability is deceptive, however. The role and importance of political parties have significantly varied over time, reflecting major changes in the way Americans live, think, and go about their politics.

Scholars have usually distinguished five distinct party systems in our history: (1) the original Federalist-Republican system, which lasted from the early 1790s until about 1815; (2) a Democratic-Whig system, which arose in the 1820s and lasted until the mid-1850s; (3) the first Republican-Democratic system, which lasted from 1860 to 1896; (4) a second Republican-Democratic system, which held sway from 1896 to 1932; and (5) the New Deal party system, which began in the early 1930s. These analytic distinctions are based on the lineup of the particular interests and social groups that supported each party—distinct voting blocs that existed not occasionally and haphazardly but maintained themselves in a sustained, repetitive fashion in election after election throughout the years of a particular party system. Each system was bounded by an electoral realignment, a powerful overturning surge at the polls in which major shifts in voting choice occurred among some of these groups—shifts powerful enough, and long-lasting enough, to fundamentally change the lineup and the shape of subsequent party warfare (Chambers and Burnham 1975; Kleppner et al. 1981; Shafer et al. 1991).

But this notion of voter commitment to the parties is only one aspect of the story of America's political warfare from the past to the present time. In addition to these electoral shifts, sharp variations and significant changes have also occurred in the reach and importance of political parties throughout our history, changes that have to be taken into account in any analysis of the history of the American party system. Given the attitudes manifested toward parties at different moments in our past, the role they have played, the extent of their power, and, most critically, the centrality of their place in the political world at one time or another, we should consider, I suggest, a somewhat different delineation of the changing shape of the partisan dimension in the American political universe.

I propose that our political history in fact comprises four distinct political eras: (1) a preparty era from the 1790s to the late 1830s; (2) a party era that solidified in the 1830s and lasted to the 1890s; (3) a declining-party era that began in the 1890s and stretched into the 1950s; and (4) an increasingly postparty era in which, while the parties continue to perform certain functions in the political world, their reach, importance, and acceptance have sunk to levels unknown for almost two centuries.

The justification for arranging American party history in this way grows out of an analysis of the different kinds of political institutions, norms, and behavior that have predominated in each era. Thus, although two major parties have always operated on the scene, only once—from 1838 to 1893—did they totally penetrate the entire American political landscape and dominate the political culture in determinative fashion. Before 1838, they were incompletely developed and seen as foreign, unwelcome, and, many hoped, only a very temporary intrusion into public affairs. Since the 1890s, they have been in sharp decline throughout the nation's political system—until, in an increasingly nonparty, candidate-centered age, they have plummeted to their present position of limited relevance to most people (Formisano 1974; Wallace 1968, 1973; Wattenberg 1986).

Preparty Era: Factions Organized Around Temporary Issues

The 1790s were contentious years in American politics. The recently ratified Constitution had established a new national political arena with a central government of great potential, power, and authority. The efforts of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton to invigorate the federal government were not universally supported, however. Given all that was at stake and the geographic extent of the political battlefield, those opposing the Hamiltonian initiatives as detrimental to their own interests came together under the banner of Jeffersonian Republicanism in time to contest the congressional elections of 1794. Two years later, they bitterly fought to wrest the presidency away from their still-dominant enemies (Chambers 1963). These dramatic contests, occurring early in our history as a nation, were only the forerunners of ever-recurring conflict in American life and the constant need to mobilize in the battle for political power.

But these original attempts to establish political parties were incomplete. The Jeffersonian Republicans and the Federalists were only partially accepted by those involved in American politics, and they ultimately foundered, not just as electoral coalitions but as institutions having any role at all to play in American politics. They were neither deeply rooted in the political soil nor all-encompassing in their influence and importance. To be sure, some coordinated efforts were made to select candidates, manage campaigns, attract voters, and bring legislators and other officeholders under the discipline of a party. From Washington to the state capitals, party labeling and party coordination of political activities took place, as did the polarized articulation of contrasting policies. All of these practices were repeated in successive election campaigns in meetings of Congress and the state legislatures. Federalists and Republicans seemed to be everywhere (Banner 1970; Fischer 1965; Banning 1978; Goodman 1964).

Nevertheless, there was always an intermittent, ad hoc quality to all of these efforts and a casual attitude toward the partisan forms. Although these early combatants had much ideological vigor, they were quite deficient organizationally. There was little coordination between the national level and the political battles in the states of party warfare. The network of institutions needed to mobilize voters and to present each party's policy stances was only partially developed and was erratic in its activities and relevance. In some places, such as New York and North Carolina, these institutions were built quite early and were used extensively. Elsewhere party organization was not even rudimentary (Formisano 1974, 1981). Early political development remained focused on elites rather than on average voters. The voting behavior of the relatively small electorate remained quite volatile and was only occasionally party-oriented throughout the years of Federalist-Republican battles. Not until later years were Election Days characterized by sustained partisan alignments and behavior (Benson, Silbey, and Field 1978; Bohmer 1978; R. P. McCormick 1982).

The full development of political parties in the United States was hampered in this early period by a powerful mind-set against them, combined with little appreciation of their potential usefulness in an expansive, pluralist society. There was profound distrust of any institution that organized and sustained domestic political conflict. Such distrust originated in the still-potent eighteenth-century fear that recurrent internal conflict endangered all republics. Parties, by organizing such conflict, were seen to make matters worse and jeopardize a nation's very survival (Shalope 1972; Watts 1987).

According to some scholars of this early period, therefore, even to label the institutions of the 1790s as parties distorts the record, given the strong evidence of their weakness, incompleteness, and irrelevance, as well as the hostility toward them. Indeed, as one such scholar has written, "[U]ntil the idea exists that parties are legitimate, that there are necessary divisions within a complex society, that there are continuous, enduring group conflicts that can and should be organized in a sustained, partisan political fashion, [it is] anachronistic" to call what existed in the decade and more after the Constitution "anything but factions organized around temporary issues" (Benson 1981, 24). In a preparty era, Federalists and Republicans could be little else but factions.

Party Era: Essential to the Existence of Our Institutions

The failure of political parties to establish themselves as a normal part of American politics lasted for about a half century after the ratification of the Constitution. The era ended because political activities had increased in scope and vigor, thus leading to the need for a more extensive, powerful, and permanent system to deal with the problems of American politics. As the nation continued to grow after 1815, as incipient sectional tensions and regional rivalries became more vocal, as social antagonisms grew along religious and nationality lines, and as different economic interests renewed their battles to control government and its policies, it soon became clear that the pressing political needs of a pluralist nation of great size and many conflicts required political institutions beyond the Constitution and the limited forms of organization that had occasionally been present (Formisano 1971; R. P. McCormick 1967; Shade 1981; Silbey 1991).

The push for parties came out of three streams: the need to manage and guide a rapidly growing electorate; the need to bring together like-minded interests and factions into coalitions in order to win elections; and the need to enact specific policies in an arena where real differences over public policy existed alongside perceptions of serious public danger if the wrong policies, people, or groups dominated. For ten years after 1815, political excitement increased in intensity in America—initially at the state and local levels, stimulated by battles over economic development and social cohesion, and then in renewed contests over national problems and the presidency. As these conflicts developed, they involved more people than ever before, inasmuch as suffrage requirements for adult white males had eased up dramatically. Political leaders had to give sustained attention to dealing with a larger electorate that had spread much farther geographically than ever before and had been aroused by the renewal of a wide range of bitter policy and group conflicts (Nichols 1967; R. P. McCormick 1967; Benson 1961; Williamson 1960; Watson 1981).

These political leaders were successful in finding a way to deal with their political problem. At first, the impulse toward both mass politics and collective political organization originated with outsider movements such as the Anti-Masons, which took the lead, ahead of the conventional political leadership, in their willingness to mobilize the masses. Their example was not lost for very long on many astute political observers, who were searching for ways to structure the changing political landscape. New York's Martin Van Buren and his well-organized associates, the Albany Regency, learned from what was happening around them, made the case for parties, and acted collectively, accepting the direction and discipline that such action entailed. As Michael Wallace (1973, 138) has argued, "[F]or the individualism so dear to Whig and Republican theory, [they] ... substituted an almost servile worship of organization." A Van Buren lieutenant, Churchill Chambré, set forth the new tone clearly and forcefully in a speech before Congress in 1826: Political parties, he argued, are "indispensable to every Administration [and] essential to the existence of our institutions; and if ... an evil, [they are ones] we must endure, for the preservation of our civil liberty." But parties "never yet injured any free country. ... The conflict of parties is a noble conflict—of mind to mind, genius to genius" (*Register of Debates* 1826, 1546; Remini 1951; Benson 1961).

The original organizational impulse and the assault on ideological anti-partyism culminated in the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828. But that victory, far from being an end to party development, was in fact the beginning. In the subsequent decade, the intellectual defense of parties and the building up of partisan institutions utterly transformed the political scene into

something quite different from anything that had preceded it. The excitement of the process whereby the Jackson administration defined itself, and the persistent battles over the presidential succession and economic policy that followed, completed the movement toward a partisan-dominated nation (Benson 1961; Formisano 1971; Watson 1981).

Whatever hesitations some politically involved Americans continued to have about these organizations and however intense the organizations' demands for the subordination of the individual in the collective, more and more political leaders played by the new political rules in order to achieve their specific policy goals. The party impulse spread into the camp of Jackson's opponents. Still deeply imbued with the old-style antiparty attitudes of an earlier era, the Whigs (reluctantly at first) adopted the style of, and the argument for, political parties. Ultimately, many of them became powerful articulators of the necessity for party. They built up their organization as well and even celebrated the political parties (Silbey 1991; Holt 1999).

This development involved more than rhetorical acceptance and behavioral exhortation. It meant moving from intermittence, individualism, and voluntarism to persistence, structure, and organized professionalism. Parties sank very deep roots into the system, among leaders and followers alike, and came to shape all but a small part of the American political world. Organizationally, their arrival meant the building of patterned, systematic institutions to do the necessary work. Elections were frequent in nineteenth-century America. Parties were always nominating, running, or preparing to nominate or run some candidate for one or another of the great array of elected offices. As they emerged, parties designated candidates at every level, replacing individual and group freewheeling with disciplined processes of choice. They collectively shaped what they would say and controlled all other aspects of the mobilization of the electorate. Party organizations grew into a regular array of committees, legislative caucuses, and conventions, designed to hammer out decisions about candidates, priorities, and programs, to run the actual campaigns, and to bring the voters to the polling booth on the day appointed. These institutions had a symmetrical shape across time and place. Their organization was decentralized, but they looked, and generally acted, the same everywhere. Wherever parties were present, their constituent elements and responsibilities remained constant from state to state across the country (R. P. McCormick 1967; Gienapp 1982; Silbey 1991).

The heart and soul of nineteenth-century party organization were the conventions that were held at every political level from the local to the national. Conventions had occasionally met earlier in American history, but it was only from the late 1830s onward that they became a widespread and normal part of the political scene. Each level of activity replicated the pattern whereby people were called together to hammer out policy initiatives, choose candidates, and select delegates to the next- highest-level convention. Topping all such activities was the national convention held every four years. All of these meetings, at every level, were cloaked with tremendous power. Their authority in party affairs was considered to be total, as they represented the place where major decisions were made about all things (Thornton 1978; Silbey 1991).

Once the conventions were over and the party's candidates had been chosen, their arguments clarified and formalized, the Whigs and Democrats proceeded to disseminate each campaign's political discourse, using a growing network of partisan newspapers, pamphlets, and organizing mass rallies. The parties' platforms originally codified each party's stance. In the debates that followed the conventions, Whigs and Democrats presented quite polarized images to the voters. They remained forever nose to nose. Party leaders drew on a rich pool of ideas about policies to sharpen differences among the voters overall and to draw together their own tribes. In their platforms, newspaper editorials, and campaign speeches, they enshrined the religious, nationality, sectional, and cultural animosities between groups, reflected the most up-to-date differences over the economic direction of the newly liberated, rapidly developing society, and provided a way for politically involved Americans to understand the world and its problems. The party leaders also became adept at mobilizing the tensions that were present and bringing them together into large policy frameworks. In sorting out the political world, they defined what was at stake and linked the different outlooks and perspectives into a whole (Benson 1961; Howe 1979; Silbey 1991, 1999).

Each political party in this dialogue aggregated society's many interests and social groups in a selective way, reaching out not to everyone but only to a portion of the electorate. The result, in the 1840s, was one party, the Whigs, that stood for social homogeneity and governmental vigor in all things, economic and social. Another party, the Democrats, espoused social and ethnic pluralism and was suspicious of too much government activity in human affairs. Both parties clearly and repeatedly articulated the differences between them. They hammered home, once again, how "utterly irreconcilable" they were—"as opposite to each other as light and darkness, as knowledge and ignorance" (*Louisville Journal* 1852; Benson 1961; M. Holt 1978).

The extent of party organization varied across the country and was never as complete or as tight as party leaders desired. As in most human situations there were holdouts against what was happening as well as incomplete areas of party development (Altshuler and Blumin 2000). But despite all of their reservations and the incompleteness of the structure, the ideal of comprehensiveness was always sought. The many elements constituting an efficient model were present, if not quite as developed as they would later become. More the point, I suggest, was the trajectory of party development and the similarity of party operations across the nation. There was a more widespread commitment than ever before, a movement in a particular direction, and a shift in values toward collectivities as the means to promote and achieve political goals. The atmosphere and mechanics of each campaign became the same everywhere (Shade 1981; Silbey 1991).

More critical still, popular voting behavior had become extremely party driven by the end of the 1830s, as the battles over policies penetrated popular consciousness and the parties' mobilization machinery matured. Turnout at the polls dramatically increased over earlier levels in response to each party's extensive mobilization activities. When voters cast their ballots, their sustained commitment to a party in election after election became the norm in a way that had never been the case before. Each succeeding election was viewed not as a separate contest involving new issues or new personalities but as yet another opportunity for people to vote for, and reaffirm, their support for their party and what it represented. As the editor of the *Albany Argus* put it in the 1840s, "[T]he first duty of a Democrat is to vote; the next to vote the regular ticket." Much more often than not, voters did both (*Albany Argus* 1846; Kleppner 1979; Formisano 1971; Benson 1961).

By the beginning of the 1840s the American people were worshipping more and more at the "shrine of party." Their commitment to the parties moved beyond instrumentalist calculation of the rewards of specific policies or the benefits to be gained from particular candidates. Each party's popular support was rooted in the intense, deep, and persistent loyalty of individual voters to their party home. The electoral pattern furthered such commitment. Party warfare split Americans decisively and evenly. The battles between Whigs and Democrats, and later between the Republicans and Democrats, were highly competitive. Close electoral contests were the rule. Indeed, their closeness reinforced the drive to organize and turn out the vote and to expand even further the commitment to individual parties and to the party system as the preferred mode of organizing the nation's political affairs and settling its major problems (Silbey 1967, 1977, 1985; Gienapp 1982).

As a result, parties had great vitality in the 1840s and thereafter. They were everywhere. For the first time, they were considered both natural and necessary. They came to control all but a small part of American politics, and they staffed the government through their patronage operations. Once in office, the party leaders were expected to carry out the policies their party stood for—as, indeed, they attempted to do. Although elaborate policymaking was unknown in the middle of the nineteenth century, whatever efforts were made occurred in response to party promises and arguments. Finally, both the appeals of the two major parties and the loyalty of voters and leaders to them occurred at a national level. Despite whatever sectional tensions there were in the United States, both the Whigs and the Democrats were able to attract support and make their influence felt as the parties developed, regardless of the pressures to divide along other gradients (Silbey 1967; R. L. McCormick 1986; Formisano 1981; Shade 1981).

Two major disruptions of the political system—first the electoral realignment of the 1850s and then the Civil War—demonstrated that the passionate commitment to one's party had limits. The

increase in ideological intensity along sectional lines in the 1850s and 1860s shook the political nation severely. It was a destructive, chastening experience for those in command of the traditional political channels. Nevertheless, when the smoke cleared after a series of intense voter shifts, after the death of one party and the rise of another, the essential structure of American politics remained largely as before. Electoral coalitions were reshaped, sectional tensions became the norm, and one of the parties, the Republican Party, was no longer national in its reach. But the central reality of partisan-defined and partisan-shaped political activities stood firm. The nation's agenda and institutions, as well as the reactions of both leaders and voters to the events of the day, continued to reflect the dominance of existing patterns of two-party politics and the intense loyalties that had been such a crucial aspect of them since the late 1830s (Gienapp 1987; Silbey 1977, 1991).

After the Civil War, the reach of political parties into American life expanded further than ever before as the party era continued. New partisan forms, such as the urban political machine, developed to meet new needs. In general, however, the structures, appeal, and meaning of parties remained much as they had been for the preceding thirty years. Much emphasis was put on reinforcing party loyalty and eliciting automatic partisan responses to new issues and conflicts, whatever their nature. Even as society began to change dramatically from agricultural to industrial-urban, Democrats and Republicans continued to confront each other in the well-disciplined, predictable phalanxes of people deeply committed to powerful, closely competitive institutions designed to fulfill group and individual needs (Kleppner 1979; Jensen 1971; McSeveney 1971; R. L. McCormick 1981).

The extent of the partisan imperative in nineteenth-century American politics was demonstrated, finally, by the behavior of the many challenges to the Democratic-Whig-Republican hegemony. From the beginning of this partisan political era, there were regular protests against the central tenets of the political nation from people ever impatient with or continually frustrated by the national parties, their advocacy, and their command of the system. Yet the way in which these challenges interacted with politics suggests the adherence of the protesters to many of the central political values of their era, despite their persistent outsider questioning, stance, and self-image. Between 1838 and the early 1890s, minor parties organized and campaigned much as the major political parties did; they also nominated candidates, thought about whom they wished to appeal to, and sought to mobilize particular voters behind their policies. Most held national conventions and issued national platforms. Somewhat more sporadically, they called state, district, and local conventions as well. They staged campaign rallies and organized to get out the vote. They issued pamphlets and published party newspapers. In emulating their enemies to the extent that they did, they underscored the power of the partisan impulse on this particular political landscape (M. Holt 1973; Kleppner 1979).

Declining-Party Era: Too Important to Be Left to Politicians

This party era lasted into the 1890s. With the electoral realignment of that decade, the role of the parties began to shift dramatically. Launched against them was a full-scale assault that included shrewd (and ultimately successful) legislative efforts to weaken their organizations, their command of the landscape, and the powerful partisanship that had made the system what it was. Parties found themselves less able than before to resist the reformist onslaught. As a result, the equilibrium between them and their challengers was upset. The churning and destabilization of the electoral landscape led to profound systemic disintegration. From the 1890s on, the nation's politics started to become nonpartisan. The vigor of American electoral politics, rooted in the passionate confrontations between two well-developed and dominant parties, gave way to an anti-party, and ultimately nonparty, way of carrying on political activities. America's political ways went from focusing specifically on the ceremonies and rituals of partisan polarization to appealing, organizing, and working beyond parties. As that happened, Americans moved from strong commitment to one party and angry dissatisfaction with the other to vituperative dissatisfaction with all parties (R. L. McCormick 1981; Burnham 1965, 1970; McGerr 1986).

There was no sudden upheaval or coup d'etat. The new era opened with an extended period of transition, during which many of the institutions, values, and approaches of the past continued to be important. At the national level, after 1896 the Democrats vigorously contested the new Republican electoral hegemony in the traditional manner. The two parties' internal processes of defining themselves, resolving their divisions, and choosing their candidates also remained largely as they had been. The same was true of their external behavior during campaigns as well as their approach to government staffing, responsibilities, and policymaking. But with the loss of electoral competitiveness in many parts of the country in the 1890s, the fires of political confrontation cooled. Organizing elements became flabby as the losers in one-sided electoral situations lost workers, coverage, heart, and vigor. As a result, politics shifted into new channels. At the same time, as a major element of the nation's transformation, an alternate vision of political propriety developed and then took firm hold. The basic ambivalence this vision manifested toward the political world evolved into a powerful negativism stimulated by what was seen as excessive political expediency and increasingly sordid partisan manipulation of democratic politics. Coupled with the rise of new, very powerful external forces that were reshaping the society, this negativism eventually imposed its view of prosperity on the American system (Benson 1955; Hays 1957, 1959; R. L. McCormick 1981).

As Richard Jensen has succinctly noted, the Progressives sought, early in the new era, "to banish all forms of traditionalism—boss control, corrupt practices, big business intervention in politics, 'ignorant' voting and excessive power in the hands of hack politicians" (Jensen 1978, 27). For the Progressives, political reform, especially the concerted attack on the parties, was a prerequisite to everything else they wished to accomplish. Party politics was corrupt, irrational, and unprincipled. They thus redefined politics as a detached search for objective, and therefore correct, policies—a search unrelated to the passions, rituals, self-interest, and deception connected with political parties (Hays 1957; Wiebe 1967; Ranney 1975).

In the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, the Progressives and their allies were able to take a series of legislative actions that attacked and ultimately destroyed several of the links between parties and voters. They energized the efforts under way since the 1880s to reform election laws—especially to institute voter registration and government-controlled official ballots. Their successful passage of a large number of such legislative initiatives had a major impact on the political system. Nonpartisan electoral reforms weakened the partisan imperative by challenging, first, the politicians' control of nominations and the election process and, second, the party-dominated, unrestrained wheeling and dealing over policy priorities (Kousser 1974; R. L. McCormick 1981).

At the same time, in the economic realm the Progressives successfully promoted the growth of government power and a shift in focus from generalized, distributive policies to new regulative channels, which demanded technical expertise, well-developed budgeting and financial skills, and an ability to deal with sophisticated control mechanisms—rather than the more generalist negotiating talents of party leaders, which had previously dominated a simpler, more limited government apparatus and its activities. As a result, there was a steady increase in the number of, and the activities engaged in by, specialized nonpartisan interest groups, each of which sought to shape specific government policies without the mediation of political parties. In addition, government eventually took over responsibility of matters the parties had traditionally controlled, social welfare being one prime example. The nonpartisan civil service continued to expand—challenging, and ultimately weakening, the partisan patronage resources that had been so important to party operations (Benson 1955; R. L. McCormick 1981; Wiebe 1967).

All of this indicated the success over several decades of what Daniel T. Rodgers (1982) has called "the explosion of scores of aggressive, politically active pressure groups into the space left by the recession of traditionally political loyalties" (114). This nonpartisan occupation had significant long-range effects on the political nation. The emerging organizational society of technicians, bureaucrats, and impersonal decisionmakers had no faith in or commitment to mass politics—especially as expressed through the parties. Although no one group was solely responsible for the changes that occurred, all reforming groups, whatever their interests, aims, and

nature, shared a commitment to move in the same direction. As their numbers and reach increased, their vision grew to be quite popular. The Progressives' political agenda was antipartisan in direction and was vigorously pushed (R. L. McCormick 1981; Hays 1957, 1959).

The many changes taking place slowly worked their way through the political nation. The impact of each of the pressures was cumulative. From the beginning, the reform challenge meant that parties had competition at the center of the political world for the first time since 1830s. For decades to come, however—well into the 1940s—there were different balances between old and new. In some areas, parties retained vestiges of influence and the capacity to shape events, as evidenced by the electoral vigor of the urban political machines and the success of their policy initiatives. For a time during the New Deal years, there was evidence that political parties still had a strong kick, reminiscent of an earlier era and perhaps suggestive of a return to dominance by them. An electoral realignment in the 1930s not only restored the Democrats to power with a new agenda but also invigorated the loyalties of voters fired by the Great Depression and the Rooseveltian response. These loyalties took deep hold and shaped much about electoral politics and some aspects of policy as well for a generation thereafter. The period from the 1890s into the 1950s, therefore, was a mixed, postparty era, and amid the signs of party decay in government affairs, in policymaking, and in the structure of electoral involvement, partisanship still anchored much voter choice as it had in the past (Campbell et al. 1960; Burnham 1970; Andersen 1979; Silbey 1991).

Postparty Era: Anarchy Tempered by Distrust

But the partisan honeymoon of the 1930s and 1940s, however powerful and dramatic, was only a deviation from the long-range pattern of party collapse. The decline of political parties resumed and quickened as the New Deal began to fade from popular memory after World War II. Other, extraparty elements became even more firmly entrenched on the landscape. Over time, parties as organizers and as symbols of the battles over public policies lost more and more of their relevance. Party control of the electoral process continued to weaken. Shifts in the way political information was presented, from partisan to nonpartisan sources, had been under way throughout the twentieth century. Party newspapers, with their relentless, clear, direct, and unambiguous message, gave way to a different journalistic style serving a broader clientele. Newspapers—cheap, sensationalist, nonpartisan, and often cynical about politics—came into their own at the turn of the century. But they failed to provide quick and easily absorbed partisan guides, as their predecessors had done—an oversight that had a long-term effect (McGerr 1986; Burnham 1970, 1982).

This transformation accelerated greatly with television's rise in the 1950s. In its style of presentation and dominance of the scene, television even more sharply curtailed the parties' ability to shape what was at stake; this had been a central factor in mobilizing voters into loyal party channels in the nineteenth century. Parties had once been able to argue that all political legitimacy lay with them. Independent newspapers and television challenged that assumption in both direct and indirect ways. Television, to the parties' detriment, emphasized imagery and personality, in contrast to the allegedly artificial styles and deceptive auras of the political parties; it also ignored or downplayed the distinguishing features of parties that made them important to the political process (Ranney 1983).

A further factor in the post-World War II years was that the size, reach, and influence of the federal government became the central fact of the political nation. With this growth of state power, a partisan-directed model of activities and behavior lost its last vestiges of importance among many Americans. Instead, the interest-group pattern, unmediated by partisan priority setting and influence, finally replaced it. Well-entrenched, nonpartisan, economic interest groups began to forge and make permanent the kinds of links with the legislative and administrative branches that they had been groping toward since the end of the partisan political nation in the 1890s. Their earlier belief that parties were a barrier to their best interests was succeeded by a growing sense of the irrelevance of parties to their activities at any level. From the 1930s on, the expansion of

nonpartisan interest groups accelerated, reaching well beyond their original economic base among the new industrial forces to encompass any segment of the society that sought government assistance. By the 1960s, every policy impulse had its own organization that moved readily into the legislative and administrative arenas, largely as if parties did not exist. Many different groups, with many different agendas and enthusiasms, articulated issues, mobilized voters, financed campaigns, and organized legislative and administrative support for their limited goals. These in turn became vested interests in their areas of concern and became dominant as articulators of specific demands. The result was a cacophony of voices, continuous discordant battling, and, often, policy fragmentation (Lowi 1979).

At the same time, in the 1960s, the legitimacy of parties was subjected to a renewed assault, echoing a theme once dominant and now reborn with a virulence and power long forgotten. All of the earlier deficiencies of parties, from corruption to elite manipulation and the denial of democracy, were once again widely rehearsed. Much media commentary took up the assault and gave it a repetitive reality, especially during such unpleasant episodes as the Democratic National Convention of 1968. This unrelenting negative commentary took a toll. Its intellectual offensive against parties, coupled with the massive shifts in communications—both of which rested on the Progressives' changing of the playing field and the rules of the game—added up in such a way as to impel the creation of a new nonparty political nation (Ranney 1975; Burnham 1982).

By the end of the 1950s, all of the antiparty tendencies at play had become quite clear, and these determined the course of the next decade. A *New York Times* reporter later argued that John F. Kennedy, at the outset of the 1960s, was "the last great representative of the politics of loyalty, human intermediation, compromise and tradition" (1980). With Kennedy's death, the parties' last bastion—the electoral arena—gave way. Throughout the 1960s, there was certainly a profound shift in the ways in which mass politics was organized, its rituals displayed, its supporters mobilized. Party-dominated mass meetings, conventions, and campaign rallies continued, but they were in a prolonged state of decay and became increasingly irrelevant to the country's political business. The parties' ability to coalesce a range of interests around themselves significantly ebbed. Although national party conventions still nominated and labeled candidates, they had less and less influence over the actual process of choosing the candidate whom the party would put forward. Delegates were no longer the key players they had once been. They had lost their bargaining, reviewing, and reflecting power. In Richard Jensen's apt summing up, more and more "candidates for office selected themselves" (1981, 219) by mobilizing the nonpartisan resources on the political scene. This situation affected the candidates' subsequent runs for office as well. In many campaigns, party labels became less prevalent than they had previously been. Increasingly, presidential candidates preferred to run as individuals, emphasizing their personal qualities rather than their adherence to party norms.

The impact of the successful century-long assault on parties and on the way the American voter engaged in politics was enormous and emblematic of the whole thrust of the post-1893 American political nation. To begin with, individual involvement in the electoral system changed dramatically over the years. American voters in the 1990s no longer behaved as their ancestors had exactly one century earlier. The size of the electorate grew throughout the twentieth century as various legal and social constraints on the participation of particular social groups fell away. But even while that was happening, popular interest in politics waned. It could be reinvigorated from time to time, as in the New Deal years, but once again the trend line was clear: downward, toward popular nonparticipation. All of the destabilizing elements working against political parties were coterminous with a massive fall-off in other aspects of political involvement, demonstrated most starkly by the steep decline in turnout at the polls over the course of the twentieth century. By the 1990s, in fact, there was a sizable "party of nonvoters" on the American scene. This group was, at best, sporadically mobilized; it consisted of people who were eligible to vote but usually did not do so (Burnham 1965, 1970, 1982).

Added to popular disinvolvement was popular partisan dealignment. When they did come to the polls, the voters demonstrated that they had become increasingly unstuck from party moorings and instead were caught up in what Walter Dean Burnham (1973, 39) has referred to as a "volcanic

instability." The all but automatic identification with parties became the minor key in voter behavior. Despite the occasional power of certain economic or other issues to reawaken such party identification for a while, such issues became less and less influential as time passed. Whatever the parties' differences, whatever distinct ideological and policy stances they fostered, parties could no longer draw voters to them as they had once routinely done. Less and less did the electorate consider "voting for 'my party' a sociological or psychological imperative," as Everett Ladd put it (1985, 2). At every level of political activity, each election became a new throw of the dice; the electorate behaved differently each time, and the ordering of choice among many voters between the parties became increasingly unpredictable from contest to contest. "The politics of the 1930s and 1940s resembled a nineteenth-century battlefield, with two opposing armies arrayed against each other in more or less close formation," wrote one scholar, but "politics today is an altogether messier affair, with large numbers of small detachments engaged over a vast territory, and with individuals and groups frequently changing sides" (King 1978, 372).

Given all this volatility and the absence of strong, widespread partisan influences across the voting universe, electoral strategy had to shift. Candidates for lesser offices, already themselves free from many party constraints, copied the presidential nominees and no longer ran for office primarily by mobilizing the party faithful, if they did so at all. There were no longer enough of such faithful to be effectively mobilized. Rather, the candidates' effort centered on appealing to uncommitted, or partially committed, voters. Campaign advertising almost never identified candidates with their party, emphasizing their personal attributes instead. Who or what an individual was, rather than a party's policy stance or deeply rooted partisan loyalties, became the centerpiece of political affairs. In campaigns for offices where incumbents seemed all but immune, such as in the House of Representatives after the 1960s, campaigning turned more and more on emphasizing extreme personal deficiencies in one's opponent (King 1978; Brady 1988; Wattenberg 1991).

All this was of a piece. By the end of the twentieth century it was crystal clear that America's political present was very different from its political past. The contrast is marked indeed. The nineteenth-century political nation reflected a culture that sought first to bring people into the system and then to tame them and their desires through disciplined collectivities. America's powerful individualism, it was felt, needed such discipline. In the 1890s, it was impossible to think about American politics without paying close attention to the political parties involved at every point. In sharp contrast to this, in "the dealigned political universe of the 1990s," the political process powerfully highlighted that individualism and showed little regard for the political parties—except as conceived negatively. It became a system in which a premium was placed on the seeking of individual, rather than party-defined, objectives. The reputation of political parties continued to plummet—irreversibly, it seemed (Lawrence 1996, 166).

The success of Ross Perot in drawing almost 20 percent of the popular vote in the 1992 presidential election from two candidates perceived as particularly flawed leaders only underscored, once again, how far the party system had fallen (Pomper 1993; Nelson 1993). Perot's 1992 platform emphasized highly individualistic, self-centered claims to personal virtue and denounced the normal ways of parties and politicians and their inability to pursue effective policies or discipline themselves to be have responsibly. His less successful third-party effort four years later did not detract from that point, for his weak showing was due more to his personal idiosyncrasies and fall from public grace than to any resurgence of robust two-partyism.

To be sure, there continued to be occasionally intense and often strident shards of partisanship in the political system, also evident among some voters some of the time. Parties continued to serve important purposes in organizing electoral activities. Party identification still mattered, although, as we have seen, among a declining proportion of those who went to the polls on Election Day. And in the late 1990s, analysts discerned a particular strengthening of the parties at the elite level, both generally and especially in Congress after the Republican electoral success in 1994. The newly elected 104th Congress, dominated by militant, ideologically driven freshmen members, was highly partisan both rhetorically and behaviorally. In the early stages, the degree of party unity in roll-call voting for and against the Republicans' "Contract with America" agenda

reached levels not seen for a very long time in national politics (Pomper 1996; *Congressional Quarterly Almanacs* 1994, 1995).

But such partisan survivals, and the apparent reinvigoration of partisan power, do not seriously call into question the main trend: the long-range institutional and ideological collapse of the party system. Such survivals never added up to the kind of ail-encompassing partisan commitment characteristic of the party era. Whatever many congressmen and other party leaders felt and did, it did not have the reach and power that would have been mediated by fully developed political parties. Partisan decay in the electorate, which had been occurring for so long already, continued throughout the 1990s (Wattenberg 1996). And the high degree of unity manifested in congressional roll-call voting in 1995 did not last, except among the most intense partisans. Others moved away from such commitments, demonstrating instead in their votes a commitment to issue and constituency elements. Significant internal rifts within the legislative parties also led to some fragmenting of the party coalitions, defections from them and repeated challenges to what had once been normally expected partisan commitments.

In the last presidential election of the twentieth century—despite some efforts to influence voters by attaching negative labels of ideological extremism to both of the major parties—neither the candidates themselves nor the voting public showed particular interest in any strategy that emphasized the party label. Quite the contrary, in fact. Some observers were fascinated by the existence of a base of loyal voters committed to each party. But a large and growing middle group continued to be motivated by nonpartisan influences, and they were up for grabs in each election season and cast their ballots for reasons other than the strength of their partisan commitment. And politicians could not even fully count on their party's base come Election Day (Wattenberg 1998).

I will leave it to my colleagues to explore in more detail the current situation of parties in American politics. But a few concluding remarks are in order. First, despite the occasional tightening of party lines in some parts of the public in the 1990s, at the same time the role and relevance of parties continued to weaken elsewhere on the political landscape. Certainly, even though partisan behavior among legislators and voters might at times be extreme, popular attitudes toward the parties continued to range from dismissive to very negative. Whatever the partisan survival and the occasional eruption of partisan perspectives among the extended American public, parties at the outset of the twenty-first century were routinely considered to be "at best interlopers between the sovereign people and their elected officials and, at worst, rapacious enemies of honest and responsible government," irrelevant to, or destructive of, our ability to solve the critical problems facing the nation (Ranney 1978a, 24). Few Americans seem to care whether the parties ever returned to their former position in national affairs (Wattenberg 1998). This indifference, or perhaps it was cynical negativism, was a very far cry from the celebration of the political parties and the widespread appreciation of their critical role that had once filled the American scene so forcefully. At the beginning of a new millennium, the Democratic and Republican parties continue to play a political role in the United States. But without such widespread appreciation among voters, they can hardly be seen as the vigorous, robust, and meaningful players within the nation's political system that they once clearly were.

References

Albany Argus. 1846. November 3.

Andersen, Kristi. 1979. *Creation of a Democratic Majority: 1928-1936*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Banner, James. 1970. *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815*. New York: Knopf.

- Banning, Lance. 1978. *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Benson, Lee. 1981. "Discussion." In Patricia Bonomi, ed., *The American Constitutional System Under Strong and Weak Parties*. New York: Praeger.
- _____. 1961. *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- _____. 1955. *Merchants, Farmers, and Railroads: Railroad Regulation and New York Politics, 1850-1887*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Benson, Lee, Joel H. Silbey, and Phyllis F. Field. 1978. "Toward a Theory of Stability and Change in American Voting Behavior: New York State, 1792-1970 as a Test Case." In Joel H. Silbey, Allan G. Bogue, and William H. Flanigan, eds., *The History of American Electoral Behavior*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bohmer, David. 1978. "The Maryland Electorate and the Concept of a Party System in the Early National Period." In Joel Silbey, Allan G. Bogue, and William H. Flanigan, eds., *The History of American Electoral Behavior*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brady, David W. 1988. *Critical Elections and Congressional Policy Making*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Burnham, Walter Dean. 1982. *The Current Crisis in American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1975. "American Politics in the 1970s: Beyond Party?" In L. Sandy Maisel and Paul M. Sacks, eds., *The Future of Political Parties*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- _____. 1973. *Politics/America: The Cutting Edge of Change*. New York: D. Van Nostrand.
- _____. 1970. *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*. New York: Norton.
- _____. 1965. The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe. *American Political Science Review* 7.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: John Wiley.
- Chambers, William N. 1963. *Political Parties in a New Nation: The American Experience, 1776-1809*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chambers, William N., and Walter Dean Burnham. 1975. *The American Party System: Stages of Political Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Fischer, David Hackett. 1965. *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gienapp, William. 1982. "Politics Seem to Enter into Everything!: Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860." In Stephen Maizlish and John Kushma, eds., *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press.
- Goodman, Paul. 1964. *The Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hays, Samuel P. 1959. *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 1957. *The Response to Industrialization, 1877-1914*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Holt, Michael. 1999. *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1978. *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*. New York: John Wiley.
- _____. 1973. "The Antimasonic and Know Nothing Parties." In Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of U.S. Political Parties*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. 1979. *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jensen, Richard. 1978. "Party Coalitions and the Search for Modern Values, 1820-1970." In Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics*. San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies.
- _____. 1971. *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- King, Anthony. 1978. *The New American Political System*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute.
- Kleppner, Paul. 1979. *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters and Political Cultures*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Kleppner, Paul, et al. 1981. *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

- Kousser, J. Morgan. 1974. *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ladd, Everett C. 1985. "As the Realignment Turns: A Drama in Many Acts." *Public Opinion* 7: 2.
- Lawrence, David G. 1996. *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority: Realignment, Dealignment, and Electoral Change from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Louisville Journal*. 1852. September 8.
- Lowi, Theodore J. 1979. *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic in the United States*. New York: Norton.
- McCormick, Richard L. 1986. *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressives Era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1981. *From Realignment to Reform: Political Change in New York State, 1893-1910*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- McCormick, Richard P. 1982. *The Presidential Game: The Origins of American Presidential Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1967. *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- McGerr, Michael. 1986. *The Decline of Popular Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McSeveney, Samuel T. 1971. *The Politics of Depression: Voting Behavior in the Northeast, 1893-1896*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, Michael. 1993. *The Elections of 1992*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Nichols, Roy F. 1967. *The Invention of the American Parties*. New York: Macmillan.
- Pomper, Gerald M. 1996. "Alive! The Political Parties After the 1980-1992 Presidential Elections." In Harvey L. Schantz, ed., *American Presidential Elections: Process, Policy, and Political Change*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- _____. 1993. *The Election of 1992*. Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House.
- Ranney, Austin. 1983. *Channels of Power*. New York: Basic Books.
- _____. 1975. *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Remini, Robert. 1951. *Martin Van Buren and the Making of the Democratic Party*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Shade, William G. 1981. "Political Pluralism and Party Development: The Creation of a Modern Party System, 1815-1852." In Paul Kleppner et al., *Evolution of American Electoral Systems*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Shafer, Byron, et al. 1991. *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Shalope, Robert. 1972. "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography." *William and Mary Quarterly* 29: 49.
- Silbey, Joel H. 1999. *The American Party Battle: Election Campaign Pamphlets, 1828-1876*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 1991. *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- _____. 1985. *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1977. *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860-1868*. New York: Norton.
- _____. 1967. *The Shrine of Party: Congressional Voting Behavior, 1841-1852*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Thornton, J. Mills. 1978. *Politics and Power in a Slave Society, Alabama, 1800-1860*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Wallace, Michael. 1973. "Ideologies of Party in the Early Republic." Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Public Law and Government, Columbia University.
- _____. 1968. "Changing Concepts of Party in the United States: New York, 1815-1828." *American Historical Review* 74: 453.
- Watson, Harry L. 1981. *Jacksonian Politics and Community Conflict*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Watts, Steven. 1987. *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wiebe, Robert. 1967. *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Williamson, Chilton. 1960. *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy, 1760-1860*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.