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Political Parties in American Political Development

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

This article examines the role of political parties in America's political development, with emphasis on parties as institutions. It considers three developments in American politics: the emergence of mass parties that flourished during the so-called Party Period in the mid-nineteenth century; the decline and increasing regulation of traditional parties since the Progressive Era; and the revival of parties in a new form since the 1970s. It also analyses how parties have influenced—and have been influenced by—major institutions such as Congress, the Presidency, the national bureaucracy, and interest groups. The article concludes by discussing two key concerns of scholars of American political development: development and exceptionalism.

Keywords: political parties, political development, America, politics, Congress, Presidency, bureaucracy, interest groups, development, exceptionalism

Where there is democracy, there are political parties. America, unique in so many ways, is no exception to this rule. Despite the Founders' well-known aversion to factions, parties arose rapidly in the United States. This was controversial, not least because strong parties can undermine the separation of powers established in the Constitution. Yet parties' sustained importance makes them an inescapable focus in any survey of American political development.

In this chapter I focus on parties as institutions rather than surveying the many changes in particular parties' fortunes, coalitions, and platforms. Scholars have long explored these topics, building models of realignment and dividing US history into several "party systems" (Key 1955, 1959; Schattschneider 1960; Burnham 1967; Sundquist 1983; Stonecash and Brewer 2009; but see Mayhew 2002).

An institutional focus yields a different periodization from the familiar party systems one. I examine three transformations here: the rise of mass parties, which flourished in the mid-nineteenth century "Party Period," the decline and increasing regulation of traditional parties beginning in the Progressive Era, and the revival of parties in a new form since the 1970s.

In investigating these changes, I describe how parties have both shaped and been shaped by the development of key institutions, including Congress, the Presidency, the national bureaucracy and interest groups. I highlight two key concerns of American Political Development (APD) scholars: development and exceptionalism. While the changes in party strength (rise, decline, and rise again) are not a straightforward developmental trajectory, parties have developed in important ways. They have become more regulated and more centralized. The two-party system has grown stronger as well.

As for exceptionalism, few dispute Epstein's (1986, 4) claim that, "The distinctiveness of American political parties is old and well established." Parties in the USA are said to lack discipline, to be uniquely decentralized and porous, and have no real membership. Regulation of parties has been greater in the USA than elsewhere. Another claim

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concerns the alleged narrowness of the ideological debate between parties in the USA. Finally, the American “two-party system” has been a uniquely robust duopoly. I argue that these claims have some validity, but few hold true in all eras.

Defining Parties

Assessing the development of parties is a challenge. Parties in the USA are poorly bounded entities compared to state institutions. On paper, the Democrats and Republicans are sets of committees isomorphic to the structure of government. Yet, as Schlesinger (1984, 379) notes, “the formal structure is obviously not the real organization.” The leading mid-twentieth-century party scholars, E.E. Schattschneider and V.O. Key, did not even agree on whether voters were part of parties. For Schattschneider (1942, 53), “whatever else they might be, parties are not associations of the voters who support the party candidates.” By contrast, Key (1952) wrote of “the party in the electorate” along with the “party in government” and the “party organization.” For a discipline heavily influenced by behavioralism Key’s formulation—which seem to justify voter-focused survey research—was more appealing, but not universally accepted.

Disagreement persists. Many scholars have focused on formal party structures and the local organizations that sought to control nominations in order to win the spoils of office. For Mayhew (1986) these were “traditional party organizations” and, where dominant, “machines.” For those sharing this conception of parties the rise of voter influence in primaries and the decay of such organizations produced “candidate-centered” politics and party decline (Polsby 1983; Silbey 2009) or, at most, “parties in service” to candidates (Aldrich 1995). By contrast, those asserting parties’ continued centrality de-emphasize formal structures, defining parties broadly as coalitions of politicians, activists, and interest groups (Schwartz 1990; Bernstein and Dominguez 2003; Skinner 2006; Cohen et al. 2008; Bawn et al. 2012; DiSalvo 2012). These definitional disputes underlie persistent disagreements over parties’ current status and their historical trajectory.

The Rise of the Traditional Party System: 1780s to 1890s

The first major transformation was the move to a party system. While some colonies had seen intermittent party activity,¹ national parties had not existed under the Articles of Confederation and the Founders did not anticipate their rapid emergence. The Constitution they wrote does not mention parties and is premised on their absence. For example, the procedure requiring members of the Electoral College to assemble in state capitals on the same day rather than convening to pick a President or meeting on different dates was justified as a way of minimizing the possibility of “cabal, intrigue and corruption.”² The rise of parties that picked presidential nominees and elected the electors who would formally select the chief executive quickly undermined these safeguards.

Yet a basis for party division was already evident in the split between the supporters and opponents of the Constitution (Cohen et al. 2008) and parties appeared even during the administration of George Washington, who had portrayed himself as above such divisions. However, as Hofstadter (1969) noted, while parties emerged rapidly, the idea that they would persist and alternate in power was not widely accepted for many years. The Federalists imprisoned critics of President John Adams. Republican Presidents, especially Jefferson and Monroe, sought to co-opt Federalists, with much success. While the Jeffersonians’ tactics were more benign than the Federalists’, they too did not initially see party competition as a useful or even inevitable practice.

Yet as the suffrage expanded in the early nineteenth century, acceptance of parties’ inevitability and utility grew (Hofstadter 1969). The larger electorate and the decline of deference to social elites made the politics conducted as correspondence between gentlemen that Jefferson practiced obsolete. Mass parties, which mobilized large numbers of activists of humble origins via patronage and social activities, emerged and reached their apogee from the 1830s to the 1890s, an era historians term the “Party Period” (McCormick 1979; McGerr 1986; Silbey 1991; Formisano 1999). Presidential nominations were no longer made by a Congressional Caucus, but by larger assemblages, the National Conventions. These years saw more instability in alignments than later eras. The first leading party, the Federalists, was defeated in 1800 and defunct by the 1820s. Their rivals, the Democratic–Republicans became dominant, but splintered after a brief hegemonic period (the Era of Good Feelings). Two parties emerged: the Democrats and the Whigs. The slavery issue undid the Whigs in the 1850s. The two contenders for the alternative pole to The Democracy were the nativist American Party (the “Know-Nothings”) and

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the anti-slavery Republicans. The Republicans triumphed and remain the Democrats' opponents. Beyond the Democratic schism in 1860, important, if short-lived, third parties arose repeatedly in this era, including the Anti-Masonic Party, Liberty, and Free Soil Parties in the antebellum years, and the Greenbackers and People's Party (Populists) in the late nineteenth century.

Traditional Parties in Government

Unlike the presidency, both parties are always represented in Congress, so it is on Capitol Hill where partisan behavior is most easily observed. Scholars describe both the institutionalization of Congress and the growth of party organizations on Capitol Hill in the nineteenth century. These developments are related, but not always reinforcing. The role of Speaker of the House was established in the Constitution, but its current partisan character was not. Jenkins and Stewart (2012) show that the modern Speaker, an aggressive partisan leader elected on a party-line vote, only emerged in the 1850s.

Most congressional party leadership posts post-date the partisan Speakership. The Chairmanships of the House Democratic Caucus and the Republican Conference emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The House Minority Leadership gradually developed later in the nineteenth century and other key roles including the Majority Leadership and the party Whips followed in the 1890s (Heithusen 2011.) This elaboration of the formal party structure would continue in the twentieth century.

The establishment of standing committees in the House of Representatives in 1816 was another key step in the institutionalization of Congress. Yet until the mid-nineteenth century Congressional majorities did not monopolize committee chairmanships (Jenkins and Stewart 2012.) Once the Speaker consistently appointed co-partisans to chairs, the latter had reason to be party team players.

Many nineteenth century Members of Congress (MCs) left Capitol Hill only to return after a stint in private life or other office. Since Speakers appointed chairmen, accruing seniority was not essential. In some areas a norm of "rotation in office" (Kernell 1977), reinforced by intraparty interest in giving different factions their chance, encouraged MCs to retire after a term or two. Politicians made careers as partisans, but not necessarily as MCs. Even the Speakership was not the culmination of a political career until the late nineteenth century; many Speakers were elected after a short apprenticeship, served only briefly and later held other offices (Polsby 1968).

Despite its slow institutionalization, Congress was the dominant branch of government during the Party Period. Voting patterns were quite partisan and obstruction occurred in both Houses. While today we see obstruction as a Senatorial tactic, in this period the "disappearing quorum" was used by the House Minority to great effect, until the adoption of the "Reed Rules" in 1890.

In that era few Chief Executives were memorable. Most were not even renominated. Presidents seemed more servants of their parties than their masters. In explaining "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents," Bryce (1914, 80) pointed to the party "wire-pullers,"—later observers would speak of the bosses in convention "smoke-filled rooms"—who sought qualities other than greatness in candidates such as acceptability to diverse factions, electability, and tractability.

Overseeing a small federal establishment in the era of the partisan press, Party Period Presidents did not dominate the media and were usually remote figures. Forced to appoint cabinets representing party factions and lacking the large staff of modern Presidents, Chief Executives were not well placed to address too many issues. They spent much of their time focusing on patronage appointments.

Prevailing norms stigmatizing overt political ambition helped produce campaigns dominated by parties rather than presidential candidates in the Party Period. Overt political ambition was stigmatized. Presidents did not stump when seeking re-election; even most non-incumbent nominees did not make speeches (Troy 1996). Nominees did not appear at conventions because this would have implied they actually sought the nomination (Ellis 1998). Instead, nominees issued an acceptance statement or speech days after the convention, conducted correspondence and met visitors. Party surrogates did the rest. The campaign was waged between partisan camps, not dueling personalities.

Traditional Party Organization

Power in nineteenth-century parties was concentrated at the local level. Campaign-focused national structures were eventually established; the Democratic National Committee dates from 1848, the Republican National Committee from 1856. House Republicans and Democrats formed campaign committees in 1866 and 1870 respectively (Kolodny 1998).³ Yet these organizations lacked significant permanent staffs or budgets until well into the twentieth century. The national committees were often active only during Presidential elections (Cotter and Hennessy 1964).

During this period the federal government was small, vis-à-vis both the national economy and state and local governments. Even most federal patronage positions were outside of Washington, in Post Offices, Customs Houses, and other agencies. Chief Executives consulted with state party leaders in making these appointments. Senators from the President's party played the leading role, with other officials or party leaders substituting in states in which Presidents had no co-partisan senators.

This period was the heyday of the "party press." Originally, parties published their own papers. Later privately owned papers with clear party affiliations that skewed news coverage were prevalent (McGerr 1986). The editors and publishers of these papers were often party leaders themselves.

Interest groups were less prominent than they would later become, leaving party organizations the dominant role in campaigns. Yet some important early lobbies had clear partisan ties. The Grand Army of the Republic, the organization of Union Army veterans, was increasingly aligned with the GOP, as was the American Protective Tariff League.

A look at late nineteenth-century party organization shows how time-bound some claims of exceptionalism are. Prominent nineteenth-century observers described American party organizations as *stronger* than European ones (Bryce 1891; Ford 1898.). The establishment of white manhood suffrage by 1830 in most states led to the growth of large party organizations that could reach the vast, far-flung electorate. The absence of civil service laws until the late nineteenth century meant that there were abundant "spoils" to motivate job-seeking party workers.

By contrast, suffrage was more limited in nineteenth-century Europe, where non-socialist parties were often mere parliamentary cliques with little grass roots organization. The Democrats and Republicans with their torchlight parades, patronage armies, and party press must have seemed quite substantial by comparison.

Polling data are lacking, but historical accounts (Hofstadter 1969; McGerr 1986) also suggest voters' emotional attachment to parties peaked in this era. Voter turnout was higher in the late nineteenth century than ever before or since. Split ticket voting was uncommon. The anti-party sentiment that pervaded American political thought in the Founding era had faded and the Progressive critique of parties had yet to emerge.

Weaker Parties but a Stronger Two-party System

The Progressive Era to the 1970s

From the Progressive Era until the 1970s traditional parties decayed as organizations, became less cohesive in government, and seemed less meaningful to voters. Parties became increasingly subject to regulation in this period as well, which may have contributed to their organizational decline. Yet in the same era the Democrats and Republicans developed more elaborate structures and ceased to face any real challenge from third parties.

Traditional Party Organizations in Decline

Many scholars assert that the growth of the state weakened parties. Skowronek (1982) saw the state's gain as parties' loss: administrative capacity grew as patronage declined; starting in the 1880s civil service reforms required applicants for government jobs to pass written tests or attain educational credentials. Similarly, for Carpenter (2001) "bureaucratic autonomy" developed when policy entrepreneurs built reputations based on expertise that won them bipartisan support patronage appointees never had. Coleman (1996) contends that the post New Deal "fiscal state" in which politicians focused on taming the business cycle weakened parties. This

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managerial agenda did not allow parties to adopt consistent policies meaningful to voters the way the earlier tariff issue had.

Other factors outside the state worked against parties in this period. Changes in the newspaper business and emerging norms of professionalization important throughout American society in this period led to a decline of the party press (Schudson 1978). Newspapers still endorsed candidates, but their political coverage was less skewed, especially as the number of papers shrank and the survivors sought broad appeal.

Scholars writing in and about this period often saw parties and interest groups in competition. Schattschneider (1942, 192) stated that effective parties “would shut out the pressure groups.” Hansen (1990) describes parties and interest groups as competing sources of intelligence for re-election seeking MCs. Clemens (1997) sees the rise of modern lobbies in the Progressive Era coming at parties’ expense. Major interest groups that arose during this period, including the Anti-Saloon League and the American Legion, were explicitly non-partisan. Even unions did not become entrenched in the Democratic Party until the 1930s, although they also had aligned with Democrats earlier (Greene 1998). Lobbies with national constituencies would almost necessarily be non-partisan at a time when the parties’ strength varied so much by region.

In an age when civil service reform had weakened traditional party organizations and electronic media provided new ways to reach voters a new profession arose; the political consultant (Sheingate n.d.). Specialists in polling, advertising, press relations, and fund-raising became very prominent in politics by the 1960s. For many the rise of consultants was further evidence that politics had become “candidate-centered” and no longer “party-centered” (Menefee-Libey 2000). If candidates raised money from interest groups and other donors to hire consultants to craft a campaign to reach voters, why did they need parties and why would they guide candidates’ behavior once elected?

The Decline of Parties in Government

During this period the Congressional party leadership structure continued to grow. The House Majority Leadership was separated from the Chairmanship of the Ways and Means Committee in 1919 (Polsby 1968, 158). Since the 1930s the once solitary House Majority and Minority whips have led a growing whip “system” (Ripley 1964; Sinclair 1998). Party leadership was slower to arise in the Upper House. Gamm and Smith (2002) detail the emergence of the Senate Majority and Minority Leadership from the 1890s to the 1930s, with whips appearing around 1915 and other roles following still later.

Yet a larger leadership structure is not necessarily a more effective one. The mid-twentieth-century Congress had more elaborate party organization, yet less party-line voting than late nineteenth-century Congresses (Poole and Rosenthal 2007). After the 1910 revolt against Speaker Joseph “Czar” Cannon by a coalition of Democrats and progressive Republicans, Speakers lost the power to appoint committees and the “seniority system” became entrenched (Polsby 1968; Polsby, Gallaher and Rundquist 1969). According to this custom (which was never even a formal rule of the House, let alone a law), the majority party MC with the longest continuous service on a committee would become chairman. Chairs who did not owe their posts to party leaders or caucuses were not party agents. The Speaker also lost his role as Rules Committee Chair, allowing this crucial agenda-setting post to fall into the hands of unreliable Representatives.

In the Democratic Party, which long dominated Congress, many of the safest seats were in the South where the GOP was largely absent. Thus Southern Democratic MCs accrued more seniority and accordingly were over-represented among committee chairs (Wolfinger and Heifetz 1965). Given the ideological gap between Northern and Southern Democrats emerging in the New Deal years (Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder 1993), this meant that there would be a wide range of views among chairs, rather than all chairs reflecting a common party line.

In this period policy stands taken by representatives were more aligned with constituency attitudes and less a function of party affiliation than before or since (Ansola-behere, Snyder and Stewart 2001). Writing late in this period, Mayhew (1974, 27) contended, “no theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far.” With a few prominent exceptions obstructionist tactics were uncommon, and where used, as on civil rights, were not typically partisan.

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The factors undermining party cohesion in Congress were not necessarily those that weakened traditional party organizations. The case that civil service reform and primaries weakened Congressional parties is weak. Social changes and shifts in party coalitions reduced the cohesiveness of Congressional parties for much of the twentieth century. The rise of industry helped produce the divide between the progressive Republicans and the trust-friendly "Old Guard," resulting in the Revolt against Speaker Cannon. Similarly, the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities and their incorporation in the northern Democratic Party, along with newly formed CIO unions sympathetic to them, helped produce the divide between northern and southern Democrats.

The presidency grew in the first half of the twentieth century. Presidents acquired large staffs and a more prominent public role aided by changing norms and the rise of electronic media. Accordingly, scholars came to differentiate between "traditional" and "modern" Presidents, with the moderns beginning typically with FDR.⁴ Rossiter (1956), one of the first to discuss the modern President, still considered "chief of party" to be a key presidential role. Yet Neustadt (1960) held that the increasing prevalence of divided government and intra-party divisions barred modern Presidents from governing as partisans. Starting in the late 1930s, Democratic Congresses rejected the domestic programs of Democratic Presidents, while Eisenhower won more support from Democratic MCs than Republicans on some key foreign policy issues (Karol 2000.)

Neustadt's view of Presidents as increasingly unmoored from parties was long shared (Lowi 1985; Seligman and Covington 1989; Milkis 1993). Scholars held that the decay of party organizations and Presidents' new ability to "go public" (Kernell 1986) via electronic media meant chief executives increasingly won support both in Congress and the electorate across party lines. With state administration more complicated and chief executives less beholden to party organizations, appointments increasingly went to "technocrats" and cronies, with fewer chosen for their party ties (Polsby 1983). In short, scholars saw a less partisan presidency.

The Rise of Regulation and the Entrenchment of the Two-party System

While traditional party organizations had been declining since the late nineteenth century, the two-party system itself was becoming both more entrenched and more regulated. These are developments of the party system toward exceptionalism. Most other stable democracies have several parties. Even in other countries with two major parties employing the single-member district plurality electoral system (Duverger 1954), at least one other party wins some legislative seats or a significant percentage of the vote.

Duvergerian logic can explain two major parties, but not why the American ones are more dominant than those in other countries with single-member districts and plurality voting like the UK, Canada, and India. Another factor said to explain the exceptional two-partyism of the USA is the presidency, which encourages factions to coalesce into two camps, each large enough to capture the White House (McCormick 1982, Epstein 1986). Yet the presidency dates from 1789, so it cannot account for the disappearance of significant third parties in the mid twentieth century on its own.

Before the mid-twentieth century the two leading parties faced at least intermittent challenge. Free Soilers, Greenbackers, Populists, Progressives, and Socialists all elected MCs in multiple states. Other parties prospered in a single state, including the Farmer-Laborites in Minnesota, and the Wisconsin Progressives (Valelly 1989). Yet even these local exceptions to the Democratic-Republican duopoly are long gone.⁵ The notable recent independent Presidential candidates had no ties to significant third parties. The few "independents" elected to high offices have been aligned with a major party, or have had brief careers.

Individual third parties were short-lived. As Hofstadter (1955, 97) observed, "When a third party's demands became popular enough, they are appropriated by one or both of the major parties and the third party disappears. Third parties are like bees; once they have stung they die." Yet while third parties did not last, they arose repeatedly. Their disappearance requires some explanation.

Another trend was the rise of political regulation affecting American parties, which is uniquely intrusive in comparative perspective (Ware 2006.) This exceptionalism is a modern one however. America's party regulation regime emerged, like much else APD scholars study, in the Progressive Era. American parties long "operated without any legal recognition or restriction" (Winkler 2000, 876), yet later became seen to occupy an intermediate position between state and society akin to a "public utility" (Epstein 1986.)

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Elsewhere, primaries are not the norm. Where in place they are often restricted to dues-paying members and run by parties (Hazan and Rahat 2010). By contrast, American states mandate and conduct these party contests. Party “registration,” which underpins “closed primaries” and is the closest thing to membership in the USA is also state administered.

In other countries one party can alter its rules without having any direct impact on its rivals’ procedures. For example, the UK Labour Party opened up their leadership elections—once restricted to Members of Parliament, to ordinary party members in 1981, but the Conservatives only did in 2001.

By contrast, the Democrats’ post-1968 reform of their presidential nomination process had an immediate effect on the GOP (Polsby 1983, Bartels 1988). Several states controlled by Democrats responded to the new rules by instituting presidential primaries. As states typically hold both parties’ primaries on the same day, Republican contests were created at the same time, insuring that most delegates to both parties’ Conventions were elected via primaries.

Ware (2002) and Reynolds (2006) explain why partisan state legislators enacted “anti-party” progressive reforms, including the state-printed or Australian Ballot and the direct primary. They assert that such reforms actually served some party interests. State-printed ballots ended the danger of dissident factions “pasting”, that is, handing out ballots with different names substituted for the official nominees. The nominating conventions primaries supplanted were already in decline as norms changed and “hustling candidates” arose who won delegates before conventions opened. Divisive conventions where nominations were still fought out were messy, allowing losers to cry fraud more easily than they could after a primary. So party regulars as well as Progressives had reason to support some reforms.

Courts have also regulated parties, often issuing hostile rulings in areas such as campaign finance, ballot access, primary statutes, and civil service protections (Peltason 1998; Winkler 2000; Lowenstein 2006.) These decisions are harder to explain as stemming from parties’ interests.

These regulations may help explain the disappearance of third parties in the USA.

Issacharoff and Pildes (1998) warn against anti-competitive “lockups” in which the two leading parties use state power to protect their duopoly status. Before the Australian ballot reform, states merely counted ballots parties gave to voters. Anyone with a printing press could start a party. Once states began printing ballots, they could and did limit access to parties who had received a certain vote share in the past, or presented a certain number of petition signatures and a filing fee.

Epstein (1986) suggested that the Australian Ballot and the creation of primaries encouraged interest groups to capture parties via the primary process, rather than create their own parties, as they had done previously. Yet Hirano and Snyder (2007) find only limited support for these claims, chiefly in the South.

Another possible explanation is “anti-fusion” laws adopted in the Progressive Era banning candidates from appearing on the tickets of multiple parties (Scarrow 1986). Yet such laws cannot explain the disappearance of third parties that had not relied on fusion, including the Minnesota Farmer-Laborites and Wisconsin Progressives. Other reforms, such as the public financing of presidential campaigns starting in the 1970s were biased in favor of the established parties (Issacharoff and Pildes 1998). Yet that system postdates the decline in third parties by several decades.

Party policy shifts also played a role. Valelly (1989) argues that New Deal agricultural and labor policies left the Minnesota Farm Labor Party unable to sustain the coalition that it developed in the 1920s. Hirano and Snyder (2007) also see the New Deal as a key development, contending that the Democrats’ leftward turn during the 1930s stole the thunder of smaller parties, most of which were on the left.

Centralization of Parties

Another trend during this period was the growing power of national party institutions vis-à-vis state parties. President Taft was renominated in 1912, despite Teddy Roosevelt’s many primary victories due to Taft’s control of Southern delegations to the Republican National Convention. In the solidly Democratic South of that era these

delegations represented few voters and were easily plied with patronage. The unseemliness of this and the resulting party schism, led the GOP in 1916 to adopt a delegate allocation rule that took account of Republicans' political strength in states, as well as states' electoral votes. Democrats followed suit in 1944 (Norrender 2010).

The civil rights movement prompted further national party encroachment on state parties' traditional prerogatives. In 1964 Democrats agreed that future delegations elected in a racially discriminatory manner would not be seated (Norrender 2010, 17). In the "post-reform" era of presidential nominations (1972 to present) national parties have increasingly regulated state parties' delegate allocation and scheduling of primaries and caucuses. Democrats also imposed affirmative action criteria (Miroff 2007, 22) and, briefly, barred delegations selected in primaries in which Republicans could participate.

In many respects parties were weaker in this era than they had been in the Party Period or would be subsequently. Traditional party organizations *were* in terminal decline. Congressional parties were fragmented and Presidents were less defined by their party affiliation than in other eras. Ticket-splitting was widespread, leading to chronic divided government. Turnout declined and surveys revealed an increase in self-described independents.

Yet some developmental processes that strengthened parties began or continued during this period. The two-party system ceased to face serious challenge in any state after the 1930s. National party organizations began to exert some authority over state parties in presidential nominations. Party leadership structures in Congress also became more elaborate during this period, even if they did not command vast authority initially.

Contemporary Parties

Since the 1970s parties have revived, albeit in a different form from the traditional one (Karol 2014). They lack the patronage armies of old, yet link voters and elected officials more effectively than they did several decades ago. They have achieved this despite being subject to regulations that did not burden their nineteenth century predecessors. Restrictions on traditional party activity have been strengthened as judicial rulings have restricted parties' remaining patronage prerogatives and campaign finance laws have further complicated parties' missions. The revival has been so thorough as to generate concerns about excessive polarization.

Contemporary Parties in Government

A party resurgence is evident on Capitol Hill. Legislators voting patterns have become far more partisan since the 1970s (Poole and Rosenthal 2007). Committee leadership positions are also filled in a more partisan manner. Parties' senior MCs on a committee are no longer guaranteed the chair or Ranking Minority Member (RMM) position (Rohde 1991). To win these posts MCs must now work with leaders and raise funds for co-partisans. The seniority norm remains stronger in the Senate, but committees are less important in that body. Republicans in both chambers have also term-limited chairs and RMMs since the mid 1990s, further devaluing seniority and weakening committee heads vis-à-vis party leaders, who are *not* term-limited. The combination of cohesive parties and committee chiefs subordinated to party leaders makes the contemporary Congress more similar in key respects to Capitol Hill of the late nineteenth century than to the mid-twentieth century Congress. Polarization again fuels partisan obstruction, although now this activity is concentrated in the Senate.

Another aspect of the institutionalization of Congress that has bolstered parties is the growth of the Congressional staff. As the Executive Branch expanded, Congress acquired more staff. MCs were first granted a full-time employee only in 1893 (Malbin 1980, 14). Committee staffs, which date to the mid-nineteenth century, remained small for decades. Yet by 2009 the average Representative had 16.6 employees, while the average Senator employed 40.2 staffers (Petersen, Reynolds, and Wilhelm 2010.) Committee chairs and Ranking Minority Members also control many positions (since committees have staff for the majority and minority); in 2003 the average House Committee had 68 staffers; the average Senate Committee had 46 (Pontius and Bullock 2003, 2).

This growth in staff was once said to foster candidate-centered politics. Where MCs had depended on party organizations to win re-election, each now had his own taxpayer-funded "enterprise" allowing him to pursue legislative and electoral goals in an individualistic manner (Salisbury and Shepsle 1981). From this perspective, the growth in staff may be seen as another case of state-building weakening parties.

Yet at a time when civil service laws have curtailed patronage, the growth of Congressional staff allows thousands to make a living in politics, *as partisans*. Moreover, the share of staff employed in the offices of party leaders and organizations has increased (Lee 2009). Congressional staff has continued to grow slowly since the 1970s, while party line voting has skyrocketed, undercutting claims that giving MCs more employees would foster individualism among them and undermine parties. Some staffers build careers working for MCs from the same party. Others become MCs themselves (Herrnson 1994), or fill executive branch positions when their party wins the White House. Many ex-staffers become lobbyists and support the campaigns of MCs of their party. A considered view of Congressional staff reveals it to be part of the “expanded party” (Bernstein and Dominguez 2003).

The party revival has not bypassed the White House. The modern Presidency theorists’ view of a Chief Executive increasingly disengaged from parties is outdated. New patterns are evident since the 1980s. Congressional–Presidential relations are now highly structured by party ties. Presidential support for a bill attracts co-partisans, but repels legislators from the other party (Lee 2009). Split-ticket voting, which cross-pressured MCs between their parties and Presidents who carried their districts, has greatly declined (Bartels 2000, Jacobson 2013).

Presidents’ party ties extend beyond Capitol Hill. Public opinion about the Chief Executive is now strongly associated with voters’ party identification. Presidents have increasingly engaged in “party-building” activities as well (Galvin 2010). Presidential appointees now typically have strong party ties, as it was in the period before the modern President. Noting these trends, Skinner (2012) delineates a “modern presidency” running from FDR to Carter and a “partisan presidency” starting with Reagan.

Contemporary Party Organization

Scholars note growing activity since the late 1970s, in both national (Herrnson 2013), and state (Cotter et al. 1984) party organizations. The National Committees now have large budgets, permanent staffs and headquarters. The national committees subsidize state parties where the party’s minority status made it hard to raise funds locally. The parties’ Congressional campaign committees have also become more active (Kolodny 1998), recruiting and financing candidates, far beyond anything that occurred during the Party Period.

Yet the centralizing trend has its limits. The various national party bodies are independent of one another. Local parties retain autonomy. The more centralized nomination procedures of British parties, in which candidates must be approved by both the constituency association and the national leadership, and Canadian party leaders’ practice of “parachuting” candidates into a riding remain alien to Americans. Presidential nomination contents remain protracted affairs, in part because state parties retain discretion in determining how and when their delegates will be chosen.

Much of the resurgence of partisanship exists outside of the formal party structure. Partisan commentary has emerged on radio, television, and the web since the late 1980s that recalls the nineteenth-century party press. These outlets reinforce the partisanship of the activists who play an outsize role in parties (Levendusky 2013).

The groups that scholars saw replacing parties, political consultants and interest groups work within parties to a great extent. Campaign consultants usually work exclusively with Democrats or Republicans. Even some scholars focused on party structure see consultants more as partners more than rivals for contemporary parties (Kolodny 2000). Like Congressional staff, consultants are best understood as part of the “expanded party” network (Bernstein and Dominguez 2003).

Interest groups, also once cast as rivals to parties, are now central to party activity in both campaigns and governance. Party organizations lacking the patronage armies of old now work with interest group allies to get out the vote (Skinner 2006). Unions and Black churches play this role for Democrats and evangelical churches for Republicans. Some interest groups also make “independent expenditures” that overwhelmingly aid one party’s candidates.

The long-term coalitions of such groups *are* the core of parties in one view (Karol 2009; Bawn et al. 2012.) Karol (2000, 2009) finds that party issue positions derive from interest groups’ preferences. When groups’ preferences change politicians from their party adapt. Democratic MCs’ protectionist turn following union pressure is one example.

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Other scholars reverse this causal arrow. Unions followed the lead of Democratic politicians on healthcare (Gottschalk 2000). GOP Congressional leaders insisted that corporate lobbies support Republicans' broad-based tax cuts before business's more parochial demands would be met (Sinclair 2006). Part of the story of polarization is the movement of interest groups into party coalitions: religious conservatives, gun rights activists and anti-tax advocates in the GOP, and racial minorities, feminists, LGBT rights supporters, trial lawyers, and environmentalists for the Democrats. Voter turnout has increased in this polarized era.

Conclusion

The American party system remains distinctive. No other duopoly has been as durable or as free from significant challenge. American parties stand out since the Progressive Era due to their decentralized and porous structure and the degree to which they have been subject to regulation.

Other claims for the exceptionalism of American parties, including their incoherence and the narrowness of their disagreements, are dated, however. The contrast between the heterogeneous American parties and the disciplined, programmatic European ones that inspired the 1950 American Political Science Association report, "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System" is no longer clear. Polarization in the USA along with the decline of class-based politics and party membership in Europe has made American parties less distinctive (Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012; Rae 2013).

Relatedly, there has been a "durable shift of governmental authority" (Orren and Skowronek 2004) *within* parties paralleling the growth in participation over the course of US history via suffrage expansion and the decline of indirect election. Presidential nominations shifted from the informal Congressional caucus to the larger, more transparent conventions in the 1830s, followed by voters gaining influence via primaries and open caucuses during the twentieth century (Ceasar 1979, Polsby 1983, Cohen et al. 2008).

The Progressive era building of a "new American state" did *not* destroy parties, but did undermine a certain type of party. The complex tasks government now performs would be impossible for precinct captains with little expertise and less job security. Many observers believed that the traditional parties were the only possible kind. For them the decay of machines and the rise of civil service meant parties were in decline, if not irrelevant.

Yet focusing less on form and more on function reveals that parties are thriving despite the Progressive Era reforms and more recent anti-party court rulings. Parties aggregate interests, nominate candidates and organize governing coalitions with greater effectiveness today than they did fifty years ago. Parties take different forms in the twenty-first century than they did in the party period, but they are no less consequential. The national party organizations are more active than ever before. Groups scholars once saw as rivals to parties have been integrated in them. Party-linked interest groups have taken on functions that the old patronage-based organizations once performed. Other tasks have been outsourced to consultants entrenched in party networks. Congress is as polarized along party lines as it was in the late nineteenth century. The durability of the "red and blue map" reveals that parties have stable coalitions in the electorate as well.

Parties provide cues for voters and party competition increases turnout. Yet given the greater importance of the state in modern life, the routine partisan obstruction and gridlock strong parties may produce is more disruptive today than in the equally polarized Gilded Age. For better and for worse, parties are resilient. Despite the hopes of the founders and the best efforts of generations of reformers, parties have not only endured, they have prevailed.

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Notes:

(1) Benjamin Franklin was a leader of the "Quaker Party" in the Pennsylvania legislature during the 1750s (Zimmerman 1960). Parties were also present in colonial New York (Becker 1908.)

(2) *Federalist* 68.

(3) Senate campaign committees were established in 1916 when direct election of Senators began (Herrnson 2013, 134.)

(4) Some find early evidence Presidents behaving in the "modern" manner in some respects as early as Wilson (Tulis 1988) or even Cleveland (Klinghard 2010).

(5) The absence an anti-fusion law in New York has permitted the survival of minor parties there, although they have rarely captured a major office (Shefter 1994).

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