

Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System



*Report of the Committee on Political Parties,
American Political Science Association*

Part I. The Need for Greater Party Responsibility

1. The Role of the Political Parties

1. *The Parties and Public Policy.* Throughout this report political parties are treated as indispensable instruments of government. That is to say, we proceed on the proposition that popular government in a nation of more than 150 million people requires political parties which provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action. The party system thus serves as the main device for bringing into continuing relationship those ideas about liberty, majority rule and leadership which Americans are largely taking for granted.

For the great majority of Americans, the most valuable opportunity to influence the course of public affairs is the choice they are able to make between the

¹Ibid, p. 210.

parties in the principal elections. While in an election the party alternative necessarily takes the form of a choice between candidates, putting a particular candidate into office is not an end in itself. The concern of the parties with candidates, elections and appointments is misunderstood if it is assumed that parties can afford to bring forth aspirants for office without regard to the views of those so selected. Actually, the party struggle is concerned with the direction of public affairs. Party nominations are no more than a means to this end. In short, party politics inevitably involves public policy in one way or another. In order to keep the parties apart, one must consider the relations between each and public policy.

This is not to ignore that in the past the American two-party system has shown little propensity for evolving original or creative ideas about public policy; that it has even been rather sluggish in responding to such ideas in the public interest; that it reflects in an enlarged way those differences throughout the country which are expressed in the operation of the federal structure of government; and that in all political organizations a considerable measure of irrationality manifests itself.

Giving due weight to each of these factors, we are nevertheless led to conclude that the choices provided by the two-party system are valuable to the American people in proportion to their definition in terms of public policy. *The reasons for the growing emphasis on public policy in party politics are to be found, above all, in the very operations of modern government.* With the extraordinary growth of the responsibilities of government, the discussion of public affairs for the most part makes sense only in terms of public policy.

2. *The New Importance of Program.* One of the most pressing requirements of contemporary politics is for the party in power to furnish a general kind of direction over the government as a whole. *The crux of public affairs lies in the necessity for more effective formulation of general policies and programs and for better integration of all of the far-flung activities of modern government.*

Only large-scale and representative political organizations possess the qualifications needed for these tasks. The ascendancy of national issues in an industrial society, the impact of the widening concern of government with problems of the general welfare, the entrance into the realm of politics of millions of new voters—all of these factors have tended to broaden the base of the parties as the largest political organizations in the country. *It is in terms of party programs that political leaders can attempt to consolidate public attitudes toward the work plans of government.*

Modern public policy, therefore, accentuates the importance of the parties, not as mere brokers between different groups and interests, but as agencies of the electorate. Because it affects unprecedented numbers of people and because it depends for its execution on extensive and widespread public support, modern public policy requires a broad political base. That base can be provided only by the parties, which reach people touched by no other political organization. . . .

In brief, our view is this: The party system that is needed must be democratic, responsible and effective—a system that is accountable to the public, respects and expresses differences of opinion, and is able to cope with the great problems of modern government. . . .

1. An effective party system requires, first, that the parties are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and, second, that the parties possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs. . . .

Clearly such a degree of unity within the parties cannot be brought about without party procedures that give a large body of people an opportunity to share in the development of the party program. . . .

2. The Need for an Effective Opposition Party. The argument for a stronger party system cannot be divorced from measures designed to make the parties more fully accountable to the public. The fundamental requirement of such accountability is a two-party system in which the opposition party acts as the critic of the party in power, developing, defining and presenting the policy alternatives which are necessary for a true choice in reaching public decisions. . . .

Anything as close to the vital process of representative government as the party system is bound to affect the nation's political life in more than one way. Whatever impairs the essential operation of the party system also produces serious difficulties in other spheres of national existence. Inaction in the face of needed change in this central area therefore increases the dangers which may be present.

Four of these dangers warrant special emphasis. *The first danger is that the inadequacy of the party system in sustaining well-considered programs and providing broad public support for them may lead to grave consequences in an explosive era. The second danger is that the American people may go too far for the safety of constitutional government in compensating for this inadequacy by shifting excessive responsibility to the President. The third danger is that with growing public cynicism and continuing proof of the ineffectiveness of the party system the nation may eventually witness the disintegration of the two major parties. The fourth danger is that the incapacity of the two parties for consistent action based on meaningful programs may rally support for extremist parties poles apart, each fanatically bent on imposing on the country its particular panacea.* . . .

3. *The Danger of Overextending the Presidency.* The presidency is the greatest political office in this country. There is no other republic, in fact, that entrusts to its President as much constitutional responsibility as Americans have entrusted to the President of the United States.

He is the Chief Executive, and as such in command not only of the civilian departments of the Federal Government but also of the whole military establishment. His executive authority puts at his disposal all the administrative resources—in management, fact-finding, analysis and planning—that are available in the departmental system. By making authoritative legislative proposals and exercising his veto power, the President under the Constitution has a significant share in the work of Congress. In addition, he is the central figure in the leadership of his party, in and out of Congress.

It is still more important, perhaps, that the President is the only politically responsible organ of government that has the whole nation as constituency. Elected by the people at large, the President must look upon himself as its spokesman. In him alone all Americans find a single voice in national affairs.

It is therefore a natural tendency that time and again governmental responsibility for formulation of coherent programs and unity of action has been placed upon the President. He has been charged with the preparation of the annual budget—the work plan of the Federal Government that goes to Congress for review

and final determination. He has also been charged with the presentation of the government's economic program, submitted to Congress in the periodic economic reports of the President. He cannot relinquish the burden of establishing the general lines of American foreign policy. He has been charged with the development of coordinated policies to safeguard the country's national security.

In each of these large areas, the President is called upon to prepare the ground, to initiate the process of program formulation, to come forth with proposed programs for which he is prepared to assume political responsibility. As a result, Congress has the benefit of prior effort and concrete recommendations. This division of functions reflects a sound formula, evolved in practical experience. But to apply it effectively, somewhere *dependable political support has to be built up for the governmental program* as finally adopted. *When there is no other place to get that done, when the political parties fail to do it, it is tempting once more to turn to the President.*

But the President has no magic wand. If he acts in pursuit of a broad program that has been democratically formulated in his party, nearly all of his party is likely to put itself behind the measures called for by the program. Then the question of political support presents no difficulties, which is the solution suggested in this report. Lacking his party's support for a broad program, the President is left with only one course. He can attempt to fill the void caused by the absence of an effective party program by working up a broad political program of his own.

If he does, however, he has to go out and build the necessary support for that program through his personal effort without benefit of party. There are people who say that this is a realistic way of getting somewhere with good political ideas, especially ideas bound to leave cool both Congress and the larger part of the President's party. Some others say that the scheme is not the happiest thing but the only one practically available under presidential-congressional government.

Yet can there be much doubt about the ultimate implications? *When the President's program actually is the sole program in this sense, either his party becomes a flock of sheep or the party falls apart.* In effect this concept of the presidency disposes of the party system by making the President reach directly for the support of a majority of the voters. It favors a President who exploits skillfully the arts of demagoguery, who uses the whole country as his political backyard, and who does not mind turning into the embodiment of personal government. . . .

4. *The Danger of Disintegration of the Two Parties.* It is a thing both familiar and deeply disturbing that many Americans have only caustic words or disdainful shrugs of the shoulder for the party system as it operates today. . . .

A chance that the electorate will turn its back upon the two parties is by no means academic. As a matter of fact, this development has already occurred in considerable part, and it is still going on. Present conditions are a great incentive for the voters to dispose of the parties as intermediaries between themselves and the government. In a way, a sizable body of the electorate has shifted from hopeful interest in the parties to the opposite attitude. This mass of voters sees itself as the President's or his opponent's direct electoral support.

Continued alienation between increasing numbers of voters and both major parties is an ominous tendency. It has a splintering effect and may lead to a system

of several smaller parties. *American political institutions are too firmly grounded upon the two-party system to make its collapse a small matter.*

Orientation of the American two-party system along the lines of meaningful national programs . . . is a way of keeping differences within bounds. It is a way of reinforcing the constitutional framework within which the voter may without peril exercise his freedom of political choice.

The author of the following selection points out that parties can be viewed from various perspectives. Parties perform important roles in government, but also within the electorate by encouraging and reflecting partisanship. The role of parties in government and within the electorate is inextricably linked, requiring party effectiveness in each area if parties are to do their job.

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Perspectives on American Political Parties

Martin P. Wattenberg

Political parties have been accorded a preeminent position in the study of American politics. For nearly a century political scientists have written of the potential of political parties to establish effective popular control over the government. In a system designed to fragment political power, parties have been held to be the one institution capable of providing a unifying centripetal force. The functions that parties have been said to perform in American society are impressive and diverse. These include:

1. Generating symbols of identification and loyalty.
2. Aggregating and articulating political interests.
3. Mobilizing majorities in the electorate and in government.
4. Socializing voters and maintaining a popular following.

5. Organizing dissent and opposition.
6. Recruiting political leadership and seeking governmental offices.
7. Institutionalizing, channeling, and socializing conflict.
8. Overriding the dangers of sectionalism and promoting the national interest.
9. Implementing policy objectives.
10. Legitimizing decisions of government.
11. Fostering stability in government.

Given all of these functions, many political scientists have accepted E. E. Schattschneider's famous assertion that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties. Not surprisingly, then, the various indications that political parties have weakened in recent years have been met with a great deal of alarm among commentators on American politics. David Broder, for example, has stated flatly, "The governmental system is not working because the political parties are not working." Although most experts would not go so far, few would deny that the decline of American political parties has had a significant impact on the character of politics in this country.

Perhaps the most frequently cited consequences of the decline of parties are the growing importance of special interest groups and the dwindling of the principles of collective responsibility. The result, as Morris Fiorina has written, is that we now have "a system that articulates interests superbly but aggregates them poorly." The making of public policy has thus become a more conflictual process with far less central direction and coherence. Individual policy decisions are increasingly made by ad hoc coalitions without relation to other policies. As Jimmy Carter found out during his four years in office, governing without the continuous support of a political party is an extremely difficult task.

Yet the question of party decline is a complex one, for political parties are complex, multifaceted institutions. While most of the attention has been focused on the aspects of parties that have been weakened, there is evidence suggesting that in certain aspects parties have been strengthened. According to Malcolm Jewell and David Olson, for example, state political party organizations have been revitalized with the result being a more active role for state parties. And on the national level, Cornelius Cotter and John Bibby have concluded from their extensive study of the history of national party organizations that there has been a growth in terms of institutionalization and nationalization of the parties in recent years.

Thus, although most of the evidence does point toward party decline, to make global statements about the decay, decomposition, disappearance, or end of parties (as many have) may lead us to overlook the aspects of parties that have not been weakened. In order to get beyond the "sky-is-falling" stage in the discussion of parties, it must be recognized that not all the trends match and that evidence about one particular aspect is not necessarily generalizable to the condition of parties as a whole. As Austin Ranney has noted, those who have written about changes in the strength of parties all have something in mind, but the "something" differs from one observer to another.

Political scientists who write about political parties fall into two main types, according to the noted British author S. E. Finer—"those who think of parties as

things that *do*, and those who think of them as things that *are*." The former primarily concern themselves with how well parties as organizations perform functions related to the machinery of government and the contesting of elections. Those among this school who are most empirically oriented study party activists and what they do; others study the various structures of the parties and how they operate. In contrast, writers who concern themselves with what parties are focused mainly on partisan attitudes among the mass public. Authors of this school address questions of alignment and dealignment in the party system, largely based on micro-level survey data on party identification and voting patterns. . . .

[The study of political partisanship] belongs in the latter category, but what political parties do . . . [is related.] If it were not for the crucial role that parties play in the operation of American government, the study of partisanship in the electorate would be far less important. Furthermore, one can reasonably infer that what parties are from the perspective of the mass electorate will have a major impact on what parties do in the political system. For example, if members of the electorate cast their ballots on the basis of factors other than partisanship, then those public officials who are elected can be expected to act more as individuals and less as members of a collective body committed to common goals. Similarly, if the mass public conceptualizes issues in terms of candidates rather than in terms of parties, then the direction of public policy can be expected to be hardly any more stable than the names on the ballot from year to year.

Of course, the flow of causality is by no means a unidirectional one from the state of parties in the electorate to the state of parties in government. If parties in government are weakened, the public will naturally have less of a stimulus to think of themselves politically in partisan terms. In fact, it will be argued here that one of the major factors behind the decline of partisanship in the electorate is that parties have become less integral in the processes of governing and campaigning, thereby resulting in the mass public's more neutral attitudes toward them. However, these altered public attitudes have themselves become a major reason why it will be very difficult to go back and reinstitutionalize political parties. Political behavior has a distinct habitual flavor to it—conceptualizing politics in a nonpartisan and candidate-centered fashion may well become a behavior pattern that could be difficult to alter. . . .

Political Parties in Divided Government

A recurring and important theme of commentators on the American political system is that the separation of powers between the president and Congress produces a deadlock of democracy. Major constitutional change to unify the president and Congress by creating a parliamentary system is unrealistic and completely out of the question. Critics of divided government have proposed more disciplined political parties to unify the president and Congress, thereby helping to overcome the effects of the separation of powers. Putting aside the fact that the separation of powers itself makes party government difficult if not