

A Choice, Not an Echo: The Creation of an Ideological Party System in America

Organization and Chapter Outline:

The book proceeds roughly chronologically, with chapters that alternate focus between liberal and conservative activists and party builders. The first four substantive chapters chronicle political developments in the exceptionally depolarized partisan era of the mid-twentieth century, a period characterized by high levels of legislative bipartisanship and two decentralized and non-programmatic national parties. Chapters 5-7 analyze the 1970s as a decade of underappreciated dynamism, flux, and experimentation in American party politics that produced one of the key characteristics of the modern political era—a tightening alignment between the policy positions and partisan affiliation of political activists and elites. Chapter 8 and the conclusion chronicle the unpredicted resurgence of partisanship and the transformation of national policymaking resulting from this tightening alignment, from the Reagan years to the contemporary period.

Introduction

An introductory chapter uses quoted remarks about the party system by both major twentieth-century political leaders and ordinary Americans as an entry point into discussing the distinction between ideology and partisanship and the historical variability of the relationship between these two forces in American politics. It traces the roots of modern polarization to a change in the relationship between ideological politics and partisanship during the later twentieth century, and identifies the historical actors who worked to bring that change about. Placing those actors at the center of the story of partisan change over time, the chapter argues, serves to recast dominant historical narratives of postwar politics while enhancing scholarly understanding of parties' organizational dynamics.

Chapter 1: The Idea of Responsible Partisanship

The first narrative chapter recounts the origins of the APSA Committee on Political Parties, its publication of *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System* in 1950, and the debate the report engendered. Shaped by the politics of the New Deal state, postwar responsible party doctrine offered a potent critique of the fragmented and undisciplined American party system and prescribed an alternative model involving disciplined, programmatic, and mutually distinct parties. The publication of the APSA report in turn motivated critics of that doctrine to mount a vigorous defense of traditional American parties as forces for stabilization and inclusion.

Chapter 2: Democrats and the Politics of Principle

The vision of parties articulated by the APSA report would influence most directly the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the 1950s, as “amateur”-style reform activism and the politics of civil rights increased liberals' receptivity to arguments made in behalf of ideological realignment. Chapter 2 documents Paul Butler's stormy chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee from 1954 to 1960 as a case study in the political and institutional tensions besetting the postwar Democratic coalition. Butler and key allies were students of responsible party scholarship. His tenure featured institutional innovations borrowed directly from the 1950 APSA report as well as incessant clashes with southern Democrats, party professionals, and the powerful congressional leaders Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson—two men who embodied a starkly different outlook on the value and function of parties in America.

Chapter 3: A Choice, Not an Echo

Political divisions within the Republican Party in the early postwar decades similarly reflected competing visions for the party and clashing theoretical claims about partisanship itself. Chapter 3 explores these conflicts, elucidating the dynamics they shared with the Democratic story. Factional disputes over political strategy in the early postwar years took on ideological coloring, as ubiquitous conservative charges of “me, too” posturing among GOP politicians prompted deeper questions about the very existence of an American consensus. Against the backdrop of declining transactional party organizations and a resurgent conservative intellectual movement, GOP politics in the later 1950s witnessed intensifying clashes between supporters of a moderate, Eisenhower-centered partisan vision and issue-driven, amateur-style activists on the right. In a mirror-image reflection of the Democratic dynamic, conflicting ideological visions for the Republican future aligned with conflicting strategic postures toward the Solid South, particularly with respect to civil rights. I trace the evolution of conservative advocacy for an ideological party realignment via GOP alliance with southern whites, from Senator Karl Mundt’s organization of a Dixie-focused Committee to Explore Political Realignment in 1951, to debates carried out within internal party councils during the Eisenhower years, and finally to the right’s capture of the party’s presidential nomination in 1964.

Chapter 4: Power in Movement

Chapter 4 explores the ways in which the explosive social movement mobilizations of the 1960s interacted with partisan politics. Even as Lyndon Johnson presided over a historic high tide of activist liberal policymaking, he sought to frame the Great Society in non-ideological, pragmatic terms while pursuing deliberately bipartisan coalitional strategies in Congress. But the politics of principle helped to explode Johnson’s consensus political project. The chapter identifies continuities, in both style and outlook, linking the era’s new left-liberal mobilizations to the issue-driven middle-class reform activism of the 1950s, and its account of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s campaign in 1964 highlights the long-running relationship between civil rights advances and party nationalization. The Democratic crisis of 1968 marked a culmination of postwar conflicts over the proper functions of parties and the role of issues in politics that would leave lasting institutional repercussions for both parties.

Chapter 5: The Age of Party Reform

This chapter reassesses the sweeping institutional changes pursued by Democrats in the late 1960s and 1970s relating to their presidential nominating system and their organization in Congress. It offers a new account of the transformations initiated by the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (commonly known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission) and continued by successor commissions, emphasizing the intellectual premises that animated participants. It connects this story of party reform, moreover, to the congressional reforms enacted during the same years relating to the seniority system and committee structure. Responsible party doctrine informed the outlook of key figures in both reform projects. Often cast at the time as contributors to party fragmentation and decline, both reform initiatives in fact ultimately helped to create a newly receptive institutional setting for issue-based activism within the parties, with consequences for future ideological sorting and polarization.

Chapter 6: The Making of a Vanguard Party

The following two chapters shift focus from the formal reconstruction of partisan institutions to the political work done within this new institutional context by party-oriented activists on the right and left in the 1970s. Chapter 6 recasts the familiar narrative of conservative ascendance in that decade as a project of ideological party-building. Strategists in the Nixon years articulated a vision of a new political majority waiting to be won through partisan realignment. Some activists would pursue an experiment in third party-building before backing Ronald Reagan's potent intraparty challenge to Gerald Ford in 1976, the immediate result of which was a rightward shift in the party's platform. Carter-era struggles would further drive conservatives' takeover of the Republican Party machinery amidst ongoing southern realignment, new business mobilizations, and a dramatic influx of ideologically driven grassroots activism in the form of the Christian Right.

Chapter 7: Liberal Alliance-Building for Lean Times

This chapter challenges the prevailing historiographic narrative of post-1960s liberal decline, arguing that liberal coalition-building and activism in the inhospitable 1970s contributed to the making of a more ideologically sorted party system. The Ford and Carter years would see fracture and disarray among liberals at the policymaking level but a gradual process of coalitional reformation at the activist and interest-group level, seen most importantly in the reemergence of a labor-liberal alliance uniting progressive unions with "new social movement" groups. Reform-mandated midterm Democratic conventions in 1974 and 1978 served as forums for tightening such coalitional ties, an important factor in the decade's second major intraparty challenge to a sitting president, Ted Kennedy's 1980 bid for the Democratic nomination.

Chapter 8: Dawn of a New Party Period

Partisan resurgence and divided rule defined politics in the Reagan era. Issue activists came increasingly and consciously to be drawn into the logic of two-party competition, enlisting as soldiers for one or the other major party. Congress proved to be the leading edge in manifesting resurgent polarization and partisan cohesion in government. The Democratic Speakerships of Tip O'Neill and Jim Wright revealed continued growth in the capacity of congressional party leaders to coordinate legislative behavior and articulate programmatic positions on behalf of their parties. As this chapter emphasizes, the increasing cohesion of Democratic forces that buttressed such leadership, even in the face of strong conservative headwinds, is an underappreciated development that complicates historical accounts of liberal collapse in this era. Among Republicans, Newt Gingrich's congressional faction grew to eventual dominance within the House caucus on the basis of an explicit critique of bipartisan engagement with the majority. The Republican congressional takeover in 1994, following a nationalized midterm election centered on an explicit party manifesto, marked a culmination of developments that had produced a new, ideologically-defined two-party system in the United States.

Conclusion: Polarization Without Responsibility

A brief concluding chapter surveys the unfolding dynamics of this ideologically sorted party system over the turn of the new century. The consequences of that sorting for resurgent partisan discipline and interparty conflict have underlay every major flashpoint in national politics since, from the Clinton impeachment of 1998 to the interbranch warfare of the Bush and Obama presidencies in the new century. Decades of work carried out by the activists, intellectuals, and

political elites at the center of this book had finally helped to produce the nationalized and ideologically distinct American parties prescribed by responsible party doctrine. In a political system still defined by separated powers and myriad veto points, however, party majorities find themselves with no sustained capacity to implement their program. Hence the modern American predicament of responsible partisanship *without* responsible party government—a volatile ill-fit between disciplined ideological partisanship and fragmented political institutions that turns routine conflict into chronic crisis.