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WHY PARTIES?

A Second Look

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POLITICS AND PARTIES IN AMERICA

Political parties lie at the heart of American politics.¹ E. E. Schattschneider (1942, 1) claimed that "political parties created democracy, and . . . democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties." A fair, if minimal, paraphrase would be to say that democracy is *unworkable* save in terms of parties. All democracies that are Madisonian, extended republics, which is to say all democratic nations, have political parties. To be truly democratic it is necessary for any nation's leadership to be harnessed to public desires and aspirations, at least in some very general sense. The elected leaders, being granted political power by the public, must ultimately be held accountable to that public. It may be that each official can be held accountable for his or her own personal actions by the constituency that elects and reelects that official. But government policy is determined by the collective actions of many individual officeholders. No one person either can or should be held accountable for actions taken by the House, Senate, and president together. The political party as a collective enterprise, organizing competition for the full range of offices, provides the only means for holding elected officials responsible for what they do collectively. Morris P. Fiorina has written (1980, 26) that "the only way collective responsibility has ever existed, and can exist, given our institutions, is through the agency of the political party; in American politics, responsibility requires cohesive parties."

But perhaps there is more. The scholars mentioned above used the plural, "parties." It may be, as V. O. Key Jr. argued (1949), that at least two parties are necessary, that it is the plural parties that lie at the heart of, that make workable, and that provide responsibility for democracy.

Indeed, we might have to go even further. It may not be the mere presence of two parties at any one time that matters, for sometimes and in some places parties arise and then disappear from electoral competitiveness rapidly, as the American Independent Party and the Reform Party did in the United States in the 1960s and 1990s, respectively. What matters is the sustained competition that comes from the interaction between or among durable parties, such that it is the fact that any winning party must seriously consider the prospect of losing an election before democracy becomes tenable. A necessary condition for effective democracy, in this view, is that there must be a *party system*, an ongoing set of parties in sustained competition for access to power.

Of course, to think about a system of parties requires understanding the basis of individual political parties. Most of this book examines why the political party exists. It is important to know what the answer to this question is, because it is then a much shorter step than before toward understanding why a party system exists, and hence why some democracies are tenable and potentially durable. In this chapter, we begin by examining the political party and the elements that go into a theory of the political party, from which we can then consider what a party system might be.

THE POLITICAL PARTY

With the ability to shape competition for elected office comes responsibility. Many people, whether academics, commentators, politicians, or members of the public, place the political ills of the contemporary scene—a government seemingly unable to solve critical problems and a public distrustful of, apathetic toward, or alienated from politics—on the failures of the two great American parties. Members of Congress are too concerned with their own reelection, in this view, to be able or willing to think of the public good. The president worries about his personal popularity, spends too little time leading the nation, and when he does turn to Congress, finds it impossible to forge majorities—primarily partisan majorities—to pass his own initiatives or to form workable compromises with Congress. Elections are candidate centered, turning on personality, image, and the latest, cleverest ad. Party platforms are little more than the first order of business at national conventions, only to be passed quickly and, party leaders hope, without controversy or media attention, so that the convention can turn to more important business. Ultimate blame for each of these rests, from this perspective, on the major American party.

With few, if important, exceptions, in the 1970s and 1980s the scholarly study of American parties turned from foundational theory to an

examination of what appeared to be the central set of issues of the day concerning political parties: party decline, decay, and decomposition.² Since then, parties have revitalized. But now there are new ills—extremely polarized “red and blue” politics, bitter public debates that are essentially demagoguery, intractability, and failure to find compromise regardless of the consequences for the public. Where is the bipartisanship of that era of decline, decay, and decomposition? Parties are, in this view, the problem, whether they are too weak or too strong. And yet, whether stronger or weaker, they are there, and thoughtful observers see them as essential.

To address these two questions—how do we understand and evaluate political parties, and how do we understand their role in democracy—I return to consider the foundations of the major American political party and the two-party system (or, more generally, the multiparty system). My basic argument is that the major political party is the creature of the politicians, the partisan activist, and the ambitious office seeker and officeholder. They have created and maintained, used or abused, reformed or ignored the political party when doing so has furthered their goals and ambitions. The political party is thus an “endogenous” institution—an institution shaped by these political actors. Whatever its strength or weakness, whatever its form and role, it is the ambitious politicians’ creation.

These politicians, we must understand from the outset, do not have partisan goals *per se*. Rather, they have more personal and fundamental goals, and the party is only the instrument for achieving them. Their goals are several and come in various combinations. Following Richard Fenno (1973), they include most basically the desire to have a long and successful career in political office, but they also encompass the desire to achieve policy ends and to attain power and prestige within the government. These goals are to be sought in government, not in parties, but they are goals that at times have best been realized *through* the parties. The parties are, as we will see, shaped by these goals in their various combinations, and particularly in the problems politicians most typically encounter when seeking to achieve their goals. Thus, there are three goals, three problems, and three reasons why politicians often turn to the organized party in search for a sustainable way to solve these problems and thus be more likely to achieve these goals.

Ambitious politicians turn to the political party to achieve such goals only when parties are useful vehicles for solving problems that cannot be solved as effectively, if at all, through other means. Thus I believe that the political party must be understood not only in relation to the goals of the actors most consequential for parties, but also in relation to

the electoral, legislative, and executive institutions of the government. Fiorina was correct: only given our institutions can we understand political parties.

The third major force shaping the political party is the historical setting. Technological changes, for instance, have made campaigning for office today vastly different than it was only a few decades ago, let alone in the nineteenth century. Such changes have had great consequences for political parties. In the nineteenth century, political parties were the only feasible means for organizing mass elections. Today's technologies allow an individual member of Congress to create a personal, continuing campaign organization, something that was simply unimaginable a century ago. But there is, of course, more to the historical context than technology.

Normative understandings have changed greatly. Even Ronald Reagan, who claimed that "government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem," also held to the value of a "social safety net" provided by the government that is far larger than even the most progressive politician of the nineteenth century could have imagined. Ideas, in short, matter a great deal. Founders had to overcome antipathy verging on disgust over the very idea of political parties in order to create them in the first place, and Martin Van Buren's ideas about the nature and value of the "modern mass party" greatly shaped the nature of Jacksonian Democracy and political parties generally for more than a century. Neither Van Buren nor anyone else set out to create a system of competing mass parties (although he and others of that era recognized the importance of sustained partisan competition, they merely—but always—wanted to win that competition). But the creation of the modern mass party led quickly to the creation of the first modern mass two-party system.

History matters in yet another way, beyond the ideas, values, and technological possibilities available at any given historical moment. The path of development matters as well. Once a set of institutional arrangements is in place, the set of equilibrium possibilities is greatly reduced, and change from the existing equilibrium path to a new and possibly superior one may be difficult or impossible. In other words, once there are two major parties, their presence induces incentives for ambitious politicians to affiliate with one party or the other, and some of these incentives emerge only because of the prior existence of these two parties.

The combination of these three forces means that the fundamental syllogism for the theory of political parties to be offered here is just what Rohde and Shepsle (1978) originally offered as the basis for

the rational-choice-based new institutionalism: political outcomes—here political parties—result from actors' seeking to realize their goals, choosing within and possibly shaping a given set of institutional arrangements, and so choosing within a given historical context.

Before outlining this theory I provide a brief overview of the three major approaches that have long dominated the study of political parties. These prepare the way for understanding the theory of the political party, as each focuses attention on a different aspect and often on a different goal of politicians and their motivation to create or maintain a political party. I then turn to the question asked primarily in this chapter, briefly in chapter 2, and then more fully again in chapter 9 about the necessity of a system of political parties for an effective, functioning democracy. These preliminaries will provide a better sense of just what is at stake in the attempt to make sense of the major American party. Chapter 2 asks the most fundamental theoretical question: why are there parties? This discussion introduces three major theoretical problems that I believe have guided ambitious politicians as they have created, reformed, used, or ignored political parties. Part 2 puts the three major theoretical claims to test. Chapter 3 examines the origins of the first two political parties in the 1790s, emerging out of the legislative arena, attempting to solve a fundamental problem of social choice, and "completing ratification" by deciding just how strong and active the new national government was to be. Chapter 4 looks at the formation of the modern mass political party by focusing on its hallmark, the mobilization of the electorate—perhaps the most evident example of collective action and its inherent problems. Chapter 5 examines the other side of the Democratic and Whig parties of this period, the complex institutional arrangements these two parties helped shape that effectively kept the slavery issue off the agenda, making the union viable into the 1850s. That chapter then turns to the breakup of that party system and the rise of the Republican Party, looking especially at the interplay between the career goals of ambitious politicians and the slavery issue that culminated in the Civil War. The three chapters in part 2 conveniently illustrate the three theoretical problems that parties have been employed to attack (when it has been in the interests of politicians to use the parties), cover the formative period of political parties ending with the establishment of competition between Democrats and Republicans, and establish the form of parties and the basic nature of the historical path that survived, albeit with many important changes, through the post-World War II era.

Part 3 turns to the modern era. In this section I analyze the contemporary scene generally but look especially at the changes wrought

in elections, governance, and hence parties in the 1960s. It was this set of changes that set in motion the empirical patterns that some saw as the decline (dealignment, decay, even decomposition) of parties but culminated in the rise of polarized parties. Chapter 6 examines the "party-in-elections." Chapter 7 develops the theory of the party-in-government, in light of the electoral forces. Chapter 8 looks at the oft-ignored party-as-organization and the new form of party I argue emerged in response to the politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The lacuna that many noted as the decline of parties was not, by this account, so much simply decline as the change from what I call the "party in control" of its ambitious office seekers and holders to the "party in service" to them. Chapter 9 concludes by reexamining the historical dynamics of the post-World War II era and considers the role of a party system in American democracy.

PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Parties as Diverse Coalitions, Aggregating and Articulating the Interest in and of the Public

There are three basic views or understandings of major political parties in America.³ The first is most often associated with V. O. Key Jr. (e.g., 1964), Frank Sorauf (1964; now Hershey 2009), Samuel Eldersveld (1964, 1982), and others. The major American party, to them, is a broad and encompassing organization, a coalition of many and diverse partners, that is commonly called umbrella-like. In seeking to appeal to a majority of the public, the two parties are based on similar values, roughly defining the "American creed." McClosky (1969) said of political (which is to say partisan) elites, "The evidence suggests that it is the [political elites] rather than the public who serve as the major repositories of the public conscience and as the carriers of the Creed. Responsibility for keeping the system going, hence, falls most heavily upon them" (286). His basic finding was that such elites share most elements of this "creed."

On many policy issues, however, there are clear and sometimes sharply drawn lines between the two parties. What Benjamin I. Page (1978) referred to as "partisan cleavages" are possible, even likely. On civil rights, as on many other issues, the Democratic Party has been more liberal than the Republican Party for decades, and on New Deal economic issues even a generation longer. In chapter 6 we will see a great deal of evidence that Democratic officeholders and activists are,

in fact, more liberal than comparable Republicans on many issues and that the public perceives those differences (see table 6.1). The line of cleavage now is especially sharp, but it has been clearly discernible for a long time, even when parties were at their most diverse.

On other issues the line is less sharp and at times all but invisible. Even in this era of resurgent polarization between the two parties, many (and often most) roll call votes are not partisan. Survey researchers rarely choose to ask about issues that do not divide parties, but table 6.1 illustrates several policies on which the two parties are less clearly distinguished. Although both parties value democratic principles, the free market, equal opportunity, and the like, and though both adhere to the principles of a strong economy, peace maintained by a defense adequate for that purpose, and so on, they differ in the relative emphasis they place on such values, and they differ even more in the means or policies they consider appropriate for achieving those ends. Thus the Democrats are more likely to favor the active intervention of the government, especially the national government, on economic and social welfare issues, whereas the Republicans are much less so inclined. Democrats have long appealed to the poor, the working class, and Franklin Roosevelt's "common man." Republicans have sought support from the middle class and up, suburbanites, and the burgeoning Sun Belt.

With few exceptions these distinctions between the two major parties are tendencies, not certainties, and differing values are typically matters of emphasis rather than fundamental disagreements. As a consequence, with the exception of race, socioeconomic groups divide their votes broadly between the candidates of both parties. As Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde report (2010, 128–29, table 5–2), excepting only race, the proportions of major socioeconomic groups voting for one presidential nominee compared with the other rarely reached or exceeded a difference of twenty percentage points from 1952 through 2008. Thus, in a close election, a group that split its vote by as much as, say, 60–40 would be understood as giving a very large vote for one party, but the disadvantaged party nonetheless would be supported by a substantial minority of that group.⁴

Each party is a coalition of many and diverse groups. This is most evident in the New Deal coalition Roosevelt forged in creating a working Democratic majority in the 1930s. It consisted of the then-solid South, cities, immigrants, blacks, ethnic and religious groups of many types, the working class and unions, and so on. Over half a century later this "coalition of minorities" has frayed considerably; some parts of it have exited from the coalition entirely, and the remnants are no longer

capable of reaching majority size in presidential elections. Although some elements have left entirely or their loyalties have weakened, they have been replaced by others. For example, the Democratic coalition may no longer be home to as much of the South or as many blue-collar voters, but teachers' unions, women's groups, and organizations representing blacks, Hispanics, gays, environmentalists, and many others have been added since the 1960s to the panoply of voices seeking to be heard at their national convention. The Republican Party may once have been defined more easily by what wasn't included in the New Deal coalition, but it too has attracted a range of groups and interests. At Republican conventions one can find both Wall Street and Main Street fiscal conservatives, and westerners who seek to remove government interference in their lives (and lands), but also southerners who are social conservatives, the latter including pro-life groups, fundamentalist Christians, and so on, who seek active government intervention in behalf of their central concerns.

Although there are good reasons why these groups are allied with their particular parties, there is still great diversity within each party. There are even apparent contradictions latent—and at critical moments active—within each party. Blacks and white southerners may have found alliance comfortable when both were so deeply affected by the Great Depression, but when civil rights made it onto the national agenda in the 1950s and 1960s, the latent tensions in their respective views become active and divisive. Recent Republican conventions may have been noncontroversial, but fundamentalists and Wall Street business leaders, or other pairings, may well find that latent disagreements will become just as divisive when circumstances and the political agenda change. As of this writing, “tea party” and other conservative activists are engaging the Republican “regulars” on many such fronts.

In this view James Madison was correct. There is no small set of fixed interests; there are, rather, many and diverse interests in this extended Republic. He argued that a fundamental advantage of the new Constitution in creating a stronger federation was that the most evident and serious concern about majority rule—that a cohesive majority could tyrannize any minority—would be alleviated because there could be no cohesive majority in an extended republic. So too could no political party, no matter how large, rule tyrannically, because it must also be too diverse.

In a truly diverse republic, the problem is the opposite of majority tyranny. The problem is how to form *any* majority capable of taking action to solve pressing problems. A major political party aggregates these many and varied interests sufficiently to appeal to enough voters

to form a majority in elections and to forge partisan-based, majority coalitions in government. In this view, parties are intermediaries that connect the public and the government. Parties also aggregate these diverse interests into a relatively cohesive, if typically compromise, platform,⁵ and they articulate these varied interests by representing them in government. The result, in this view, is that parties parlay those compromise positions into policy outcomes, and so they—a ruling, if nonhomogeneous and shifting, government majority—can be held accountable to the public in subsequent elections.

The diversity of interests a party must seek to aggregate and the diversity of actors in the party lead to an equally diverse set of party arrangements. Key's (1964) and Sorauf's (1964; Hershey 2009) long influential texts, for example, have presented the political party as divided into three parts: the party-in-the-electorate, the party-in-government, and the party-as-organization, meant to provide some coherence for understanding the wide variety of activities parties must engage in. These diverse structures make possible the key concepts of the party in this view: interest articulation and aggregation and electoral accountability (see Eldersveld 1964).

The Responsible Party Thesis

If the first view of interest aggregation and articulation was primarily empirical but with normative overtones (if parties are a major way by which the public interacts with and shapes its government, then that must be a good thing, right?), the second view, that of responsible parties, is primarily normative and aspirational, with critique of the empirics of party politics thrown in. This thesis is most directly associated with E. E. Schattschneider (1942) and the Committee for a More Responsible Two-Party System, sponsored by the American Political Science Association, that he chaired (1950). But this view has deeper historical roots. Woodrow Wilson's *Congressional Government* (1881), for example, included a plea for parties more in the responsible party mold, and as Ranney (1975) and Epstein (1986) report, prominent political scientists at the beginning of the twentieth century were much enamored of this doctrine.

Ranney (1975, 43) lists four criteria that define responsible parties. Such parties (1) make policy commitments to the electorate, (2) are willing and able to carry them out when in office, (3) develop alternatives to government policies when out of office, and (4) differ sufficiently between themselves to “provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternative actions.”⁶ This doctrine derives from an idealized (and more closely realized) form of the British sys-

tem, what Liphart (1984, 1999) calls the "Westminster model." As a normative standard, it has several obvious defects. For example, it reduces choices for the public to exactly two. If the United States is a diverse and extended Madisonian republic, it is not obvious that the public would find its views adequately articulated by exactly two options, no matter how clear and distinct. A mélange of compromise proposals may be more suitable. Alternation of parties in office may also make policy trajectories shift dramatically back and forth. And if one party does capture a longtime working majority, majority tyranny could follow. This is a normative standard that thus places great weight on the accountability of elected officials, through their party's control of office, and less weight on interest articulation. In more practical terms, it is an idealization that fits more readily with a unified, essentially unicameral assembly that combines the legislative and executive branches and that is elected all at once. It fits more poorly with a government designed around the principles of separated but intermingled powers, with officials elected at different times from differently defined constituencies for the Madisonian purpose of making ambition check ambition.

Notwithstanding these problems, the responsible party thesis retains its attractiveness to many. In the 1970s, when parties seemed in more serious decline than usual, electoral accountability was seen as not just weakened but virtually nonexistent (e.g., Fiorina 1980). Such pressing problems as the budget deficit could not be solved because of too-weak and nonresponsible parties—as contrasted to today, where budget deficits are seen as insoluble because of too-strong and nonresponsible parties. Campaigns seemed to turn on the trivial, the personal, and the irrelevant, leaving debate—let alone action—on significant problems off the agenda. Finally, the public perceived the government as increasingly ineffective and incompetent. Cynicism was up, trust and confidence in the government were down. Alienation increased, participation decreased (see Abramson 1983; Lipset and Schneider 1987). And the public came to see the political parties as increasingly irrelevant to elections and to governance (see Wattenberg 1990; this volume, chap. 6). When the parties' candidates did address issues, it is often felt, they were too similar. Conservative Republicans in the 1940s and 1950s complained that the dominant, moderate wing of their party engaged in "me-too-ism"; whatever Democrats said, the moderate Republicans responded "me too!" Or as George Wallace, the once and future Democrat, claimed in his third-party presidential campaign in 1968, "there ain't a dime's worth of difference" between the two parties. It was not always so, responsible party advocates claimed. In other eras parties were stronger, and they were stronger in the sense of re-

sponsible parties. At the very least they were sufficiently united in office to "be willing and able to carry out" whatever policy commitments the majority party chose. They may not have been then, and today may not truly be, responsible parties, consistent with that doctrine, but they once were stronger, more effective, and more easily held accountable. Perhaps they could become so again.

The advocates had a point. In much of our partisan history, American parties were stronger than when Schattschneider, Ranney, et al., were writing. The Republicans and Democrats have competed nationwide since the end of Reconstruction. Beginning in the late 1930s, these two parties began parallel declines, at least by some measures such as the level of party voting in Congress (see chap. 7), bottoming out in the early 1970s. Both then started to climb back toward what now appear to be the historically more common levels of partisan "polarization." It so happens, by this account, that the 1950s and 1960s were the historical anomaly, and part of the anomalous and unique nature of this period was that it was far from fulfilling Ranney's four conditions.

And, from a normative perspective, if my claim is correct that a party system is necessary for effective democracy, the major but partial defect in our democratic system was coming home to roost. That defect was the systematic violation of the principles of democratic competition in the South. This had long been a problem, of course, but the elevation of concerns about those systematically excluded by presumptively unconstitutional law and by force was moving up onto the national agenda. As a result, the weakness of one-third of the nation's failure to be democratic was being revealed, in large part, through its party system.

The previous paragraphs illustrated a number of the concerns raised by the decline of parties thesis, and that thesis often has some version of responsible parties as the standard for measuring the extent of the claimed decline. Not all agreed that the parties had declined—at least as much as, or in the same sense as, was held by the major adherents of decline. One characteristic of the older, stronger party periods was that large regions of the country were dominated by a single party. The South was solidly Democratic for a century, machines ruled in many cities and in some rural areas, and in such areas of one-party dominance there was for long periods effectively no competition for office by the opposing party. Thus articulation, aggregation, and accountability were all lost. Today both parties can seriously imagine competing effectively—and possibly winning—in every region of the nation.⁷ And genuine competition for elective office has long been claimed as one of the most important virtues of political parties. As Hofstadter

argued (1969), the legitimization of opposition made possible the success of the young Republic, solving perhaps the greatest internal threat to any nation by making possible the peaceful, legitimate transfer of power. The emergence of the Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican Parties made legitimization of opposition possible and effected such a transfer in 1800 (see chap. 3). The absence of regular—and that means partisan—competition for elective office, moreover, risks tyranny or corruption (that is the simplest statement of Key's argument [1949], which I expand upon below and in chap. 9).

Parties and Electoral Competition

The third view of parties focuses on the importance of this competition for office. Of course both earlier views also saw electoral competition as a central characteristic of partisan politics. But this third view sees competition for office as the singular, defining characteristic of the major American political party. The most rigorous advocates of this position are Anthony Downs (1957) and Joseph A. Schlesinger (1991; see also Demsetz 1990). Both are rational choice theorists, positing that actors are goal seekers and that their actions, and eventually the institutional arrangements they help shape, are the product of their attempts to realize their goals. At the center of their theory are the partisan elites: the aspiring office seekers and the successful officeholders. Their theories rest, moreover, on a simple assumption about the goal of each such partisan elite, office seeking and holding *per se*. That is, party leaders are motivated to win elections. As a result a party is, in the words of Downs (1957, 25), "a team seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election." The political party therefore is the organization that team uses to realize its goals. Electoral victory is paramount; other motives are at most secondary. Most important, as Downs puts it, parties formulate policies to win elections rather than winning elections to promulgate policies. In a two-party system, the "health" of the system is measured by how competitive the two parties are for a wide range of elective offices over a long period. In Schlesinger's view (1991), the hallmark of a party is its ability to channel the competing career ambitions of its potential and actual officeholders, forming them into an effective electoral machine. More accurately, he argued that each office and its partisan seeker serves as one "nucleus" of a party, and a strong party is one that has many strong nuclei connected to each other for the purpose of supporting its ambitious partisan office seekers.

The genius of democracy, in this view, is rather like the genius Adam Smith found in the free market. In Smith's case individuals acting in

their own self-interest turn out to be guided, as if by some unseen hand, to act in the economic interests of the collective. In Schlesinger's case ambitious politicians, seeking to have a long and successful career, are all led by the necessity of winning broad support in the face of stiff competition to reflect the desires of those citizens who support them. Without competition for office—without at least minimally strong political parties—career ambition is not necessarily harnessed to reflect the desires of the public. In elections, political parties serve the Madisonian principle of having ambition clash with, and thereby check, ambition. Seeking popular support in the face of competition yields officeholders who find it in their self-interest to respond to the wishes of the public so that that public will continually reelect them, thereby satisfying their career ambition. All else about parties flows from this Schumpeterian view. Office seekers will try to create a strong electoral machine for mobilizing the electorate, but only if competition forces them to do so. Thus will the party-as-organization flow from competition for office. So too will the party-in-government flow naturally from electoral competition—but only so long as it is in the long-term career interests of office seekers and holders to do so. Only so long, that is, as there is a shared, collective interest in working together in office, and doing so to remain in office.⁸ And that collective interest must come from a common electoral fate.

These, then, are the three major views or understandings of political parties. I will offer a fourth. Like those of Downs and Schlesinger, it will be a rational choice theory, and it will be one that takes career ambitions of elective office seekers and holders as one of its central building blocks. It will differ, however, in seeing office seeking as only one of several goals held by those with political ambitions. To be sure, winning elections is an intermediary end on its way to achieving power and policy in addition to being an end in itself. Motivations for policy ends and for power and prestige in office, that is, require electoral victory. But for many, winning office *per se* is not the end of politics but the beginning. As we will see, this leads naturally and inevitably to drawing from the other views of parties, and it will be necessary to trace the historical, "equilibrium" path of development. My aim is also to develop a theoretical account of parties that can help us make sense of the widest possible array of empirical findings relevant to party politics. Understanding the nature of the political party, however, takes us only part of the way to understanding the party's role in democracy. For parties are engendered by but also reflect back on democratic politics. But it is not any one party alone that can achieve that reflection. Indeed, democracy fails when there is but one party. Instead it is necessary to

have a party system, an ongoing competition between two or more durable parties.

A THEORY OF POLITICAL PARTIES

These and other astute observers might come to very different conclusions, but they all agree that the political party is—or should be—central to the American political system. Parties are—or should be—integral parts of all political life, from structuring the reasoning and choice of the electorate, through all facets of campaigns and seemingly all facets of the government, to the very possibility of effective governance in a democracy.

How is it, then, that such astute observers of American politics and parties, writing at virtually the same time in the 1970s and 1980s and looking at much the same evidence, come to such diametrically opposed conclusions about the strength of parties? Eldersveld provided an obvious answer. He wrote that “political parties are complex institutions and processes, and as such they are difficult to understand and evaluate” (1982, 407). As proof, he went on to consider the decline of parties thesis. At one point he wrote, “The decline in our parties, therefore, is difficult to demonstrate, empirically or in terms of historical perspective” (417). And yet he then turned to signs of party decline and concluded his book with this statement: “Despite their defects they continue today to be the major instruments for democratic government in this nation. With necessary reforms we can make them even more central to the governmental process and to the lives of American citizens. Eighty years ago, Lord James Bryce, after studying our party system, said, ‘In America the great moving forces are the parties. The government counts for less than in Europe, the parties count for more. . . .’ If our citizens and their leaders wish it, American parties will still be the ‘great moving forces’ of our system” (1982, 432–33).

The “Fundamental Equation” of the New Institutionalism Applied to Parties

That parties are complex does not mean they are incomprehensible. Indeed complexity is, if not an intentional outcome, at least an anticipated result of those who shape the political parties. Moreover, they are so deeply woven into the fabric of American politics that they cannot be understood apart from either their own historical context and dynamics or those of the political system as a whole. Parties, that is, can be understood only in relation to the polity, to the government and its institutions, and to the historical context of the times.

The study of political parties is also necessarily a study of a major pair of political *institutions*. Indeed, the institutions that define the political party are unique, and as it happens they are unique in ways that make an institutional account especially useful. Their establishment and nature are fundamentally extralegal; they are nongovernmental political institutions. Instead of statute, their basis lies in the actions of ambitious politicians who created them and who maintain them. They are, in the parlance of the new institutionalism, *endogenous institutions*—in fact, the most highly endogenous political institutions of any substantial and sustained importance.

By endogenous I mean it was the actions of political actors that created political parties in the first place, and it is the actions of political actors that shape and alter them over time. And political actors have chosen to alter their parties dramatically at several times in our history, reformed them often, and tinkered with them constantly. Of all major political bodies in the United States, the political party is the most variable in its rules, regulations, and procedures—that is to say, in its formal organization—and in its informal methods and traditions. It is often the same actors who write the party’s rules who then choose the party’s outcomes, sometimes at nearly the same time and by the same method. Thus, for example, on one night, national party conventions debate, consider any proposed amendments, and then adopt their rules by a majority vote of credentialled delegates. The next night these same delegates debate, consider any proposed amendments, and then adopt their platform by majority vote, and they choose their presidential nominee by majority vote the following night.

Who, then, are these critical political actors? Many see the party-in-the-electorate as comprising major actors. To be sure, mobilizing the electorate to capture office is a central task of the political party. But America is a republican democracy. All power flows directly or indirectly from the great body of the people, to paraphrase Madison’s definition. The public elects its political leaders, but it is that leadership that legislates, executes, and adjudicates policy. The parties are defined in relation to this republican democracy. Thus it is political leaders, those Schlesinger (1975) has called “office-seekers”—*those who seek and those who hold elective office*—who are the central actors in the party.⁹

Ambitious office seekers and holders are thus the first and most important actors in the political party. A second set of important figures in party politics comprises those who hold, or have access to, critical resources that office seekers need to realize their ambitions. It is expensive to build and maintain the party and campaign organizations necessary to compete effectively in the electoral arena. Thomas Fergu-

son, for example, has made an extended argument for the "primary and constitutive role large investors play in American politics" (1983, 3; see also Ferguson 1986, 1989, 1991). Much of his research emphasizes this primary and constitutive role in party politics in particular, such as in partisan realignments. The study of the role of money in congressional elections has also focused in part on concentrations of such sources of funding, such as from political action committees (e.g., Sorauf 1988), which political parties have come to take advantage of (for early accounts see Hernson 1988; Kayden and Mayhew 1985). Elections are also fought over the flow of information to the public. The electoral arm of political parties in the eighteenth century was made up of "committees of correspondence," which were primarily lines of communication among political elites and between them and potential voters, and one of the first signs of organizing of the Jeffersonian Republican Party was the hiring of a newspaper editor (see chap. 3). The press was first a partisan press, and editors and publishers from Thomas Ritchie (see chap. 4) to Horace Greeley long were critical players in party politics. Today those with specialized knowledge relevant to communication, such as pollsters, media and advertising experts, and computerized fund-raising specialists, enjoy influence in party, campaign, and even government councils that greatly exceeds their mere technical expertise (see Aldrich 1992).

In more theoretical terms, this second set of party actors include those Schlesinger (1975) has called "benefit seekers," those for whom realization of their goals depends on the party's success in capturing office. Party activists shade from those powerful figures with concentrations of, or access to, large amounts of money and information, as described above, to the legions of volunteer campaign activists who ring doorbells and stuff envelopes and are, individually and collectively, critical to the first level of the party—its office seekers. All are critical because they command the resources, whether money, expertise, and information, or merely time and labor, that office seekers need to realize their ambitions. As a result, activists' motivations shape and constrain the behavior of office seekers, as their own roles are, in turn, shaped and constrained by the office seekers. In chapter 6 I argue that the changed incentives of party activists have played a significant role in the fundamentally altered nature of the contemporary party, but the impact of benefit seekers will be seen scattered throughout this account.

Voters, however, are neither office seekers nor benefit seekers and thus are not a part of the political party at all, even if they identify strongly with a party and consistently support its candidates.¹⁰ Voters are indeed critical, but they are critical as the targets of party activi-

ties. Parties "produce" candidates, platforms, and policies. Voters "consume" by exchanging their votes for the party's product (see Popkin et al. 1976). Some voters, of course, become partisan benefit-seekers by becoming activists, whether as occasional volunteers, as sustained contributors, or even as candidates. But until they do so, they may be faithful consumers, "brand name" loyalists as it were, but they are still only the targets of partisans' efforts to sell their wares in the political marketplace.

Why, then, do politicians create and recreate the party, exploit its features, or ignore its dictates? The simple answer is that it has been in their interests to do so. That is, this is a *rational choice* account of the party, an account that presumes that rational, elective office seekers and holders use the party to achieve their ends.

I do not assume that politicians are invariably self-interested in a narrow sense. This is not a theory in which elective office seekers simply maximize their chances of election or reelection, at least not for its own sake. They may well have fundamental values and principles, and they may have preferences over policies as means to those ends. They also care about office, both for its own sake and for the opportunities to achieve other ends that election and reelection make possible. In chapters 3–5, I recount several historical cases in some detail. None of these make sense under the assumption of a single-minded office-seeking goal. All are understandable as the rational actions of goal-seeking politicians using the political party to help achieve their ends. Their ends are simply more numerous, interesting, and political than mere careerism. Just as winning elections is a means to other ends for politicians (whether career or policy ends), so too is the political party a means to these other ends.¹¹

Why, then, do politicians turn to create or reform, to use or abuse, partisan institutions? The answer is that parties are designed as attempts to solve problems that current institutional arrangements do not solve and that politicians have come to believe they cannot solve. These problems fall into three general and recurring categories.¹²

The Problem of Ambition and Elective Office Seeking

Elective office seekers, as that label says, want to win election to office. Parties regulate access to those offices. If elective office is indeed valuable, there will be more aspirants than offices, and the political party and the two-party system are means of regulating that competition and channeling those ambitions. Major party nomination is all but a necessary condition for election in America, and partisan institutions have been developed—and have been reformed and re-reformed—for

regulating competition. Intra-institutional leadership positions are also highly valued and therefore potentially competitive. There is, for example, a fairly well-institutionalized path to the office of Speaker of the House trod by Speakers from Sam Rayburn to Nancy Pelosi. It is, however, a Democratic Party institution. Elective politicians, of course, ordinarily desire election more than once. They are typically careerists who want a long and productive career in politics. Schlesinger's ambition theory (1966), developed and extended by others (see especially Rohde 1979), is precisely about this general problem. Underlying this theory, though typically not fully developed, is a problem. The problem is that if office is desirable, there will be more aspirants than there are offices to go around. When stated in rigorous form, it can be proved that in fact there is no permanent solution to this problem.¹³ And it is a problem that can adversely affect the fortunes of a party. In 1912 the Republican vote was split between William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt. This split enabled Woodrow Wilson to win with 42 percent of the popular vote. Not only was Wilson the only break in Republican hegemony of the White House in this period, but in that year Democrats increased their House majority by sixty-five additional seats and captured majority control of the Senate. Thus failure to regulate intra-party competition cost Republicans dearly.

For elective office seekers, regulating conflict over who holds those offices is clearly of major concern. It is ever present. And it is not just a problem of access to government offices but is also a problem internal to each party as soon as the party becomes an important gateway to office.

The Problem of Making Decisions for the Party and for the Polity

Once in office, partisans determine outcomes for the polity. They propose alternatives, shape the agenda, pass or reject legislation, determine how to implement what they enact, and oversee that implementation. The policy formation and execution process, that is, is highly partisan. The parties-in-government are more than mere coalitions of like-minded individuals, however; they are enduring institutions. Very few incumbents change their partisan affiliations. Most retain their partisanship throughout their careers, even though they often disagree (i.e., are not uniformly like-minded) with some of their partisan peers. When the rare incumbent does change parties, it is invariably to join the party more consonant with that switcher's policy interests. This implies that there are differences between the two parties at some fundamental and enduring level on policy positions, values, and beliefs. When incumbents do change parties, they almost invariably lament

(often correctly) that they did not change their ideas or beliefs, but it was their party that changed and thus moved away from them. They were surprised by these important but occasional changes, reflecting the prevailing belief of partisan stability.

Thus, parties are institutions designed to promote the achievement of collective choices—choices on which the parties differ and choices reached by majority rule. As with access to office and ambition theory, there is a well-developed theory for this problem: social choice theory. Underlying this theory is the well-known problem that no method of choice can solve the elective officeholders' problem of combining the interests, concerns, or values of a polity that remains faithful to democratic values, as shown by the consequences flowing from Arrow's theorem (Arrow 1951). Thus, in a republican democracy politicians may turn to partisan institutions to solve the problem of collective choice. In the language of politics, parties may help achieve the goal of attaining policy majorities in the first place, as well as the often more difficult goal of maintaining such majorities. To the extent that this problem tends to reside most often in policy choices, it tends to be the problem that is confronted most often by legislative parties, although it certainly applies to electoral and organizational aspects of the parties, as well.

The Problem of Collective Action

The third problem is the most pervasive and thus the furthest-ranging in substantive content. The clearest example, however, is also the most important. To win office, candidates need more than a party's nomination. Election requires not only persuading members of the public to support that candidacy but also mobilizing as many of those supporters as possible. Mobilizing is perhaps the quintessential problem of collective action. How do candidates get supporters to vote for them—at least in greater numbers than vote for the opposition—as well as get them to provide the cadre of workers and contribute the resources needed to win elections? The political party has long been the solution.

As important as wooing and mobilizing supporters are, collective action problems arise in a wide range of circumstances facing elective office seekers. Party action invariably requires the concerted action of many partisans to achieve collectively desirable outcomes. Jimmy Carter was the only president in the 1970s and 1980s to enjoy unified party control of government. Democrats in Congress, it might well be argued, shared an interest in achieving policy outcomes. And yet Carter was all too often unable to get them to act in their shared collective interests. In 1980 not only he but the Democratic congressional parties

paid a heavy price for failed cooperation. The theory here, of course, is the theory of public goods (Samuelson 1954) and its consequence, the theory of collective action (Olson 1965).

The Elective Office Seekers' and Holders' Interests Are to Win

Why should this crucial set of actors, the elective office seekers and officeholders, care about these three classes of problems? The short answer is that these concerns become practical problems to politicians when they adversely affect their chances of winning. Put differently, politicians turn to their political party—that is, use its powers, resources, and institutional forms—when they believe doing so increases their prospects for winning desired outcomes, and they turn from it if it does not.¹⁴

Ambition theory is about winning *per se*. The breakdown of orderly access to office risks unfettered and unregulated competition. The inability of a party to develop effective means of nomination and support for election therefore directly influences the chances of victory for the candidates and thus for their parties. The standard example of the problem of social choice theory, the “paradox of voting,” is paradoxical precisely because all are voting to win desired outcomes, and yet there is no majority-preferred outcome. Even if there happens to be a majority-preferred policy, the conditions under which it is truly a stable equilibrium are extremely fragile and thus all too amenable to defeat. In other words, majorities in Congress are hard to attain and at least as hard to maintain. And the only reason to employ scarce campaign resources to mobilize supporters is that such mobilization increases the odds of victory. Its opposite, the failure to act when there are broadly shared interests—the problem of collective action—reduces the prospects of victory, whether at the ballot box or in government. Scholars may recognize these as manifestations of theoretical problems and call them “paradoxes,” or “impossibility results,” to emphasize their generic importance. Politicians recognize the consequences of these impossibility results by their adverse effects on their chances of winning—of securing what it is in their interests to secure.

So why have politicians so often turned to political parties for solutions to these problems? Their existence creates incentives for their use. It is, for example, incredibly difficult to win election to major office without the backing of a major party. It is only a little less certain that legislators who seek to lead a policy proposal through the congressional labyrinth will first turn to their party for assistance. But such incentives tell us only that an ongoing political institution is used when it is useful. Why form political parties in the first place? The answer is what part 1

of this book is about, and the theory will be developed in the next chapter and tested in the following three. A brief statement of three points will give a first look at the argument.

First, parties are institutions. This means, among other things, that they have some durability. They may be endogenous institutions, yet party reforms are meant not as short-term fixes but as alterations to last for years, even decades. Thus, for example, legislators might create a party rather than a temporary majority coalition to increase their chances of winning not just today but tomorrow and into the future. Similarly, a long and successful political career means winning office today, but it also requires winning elections throughout that career. A standing, enduring organization makes that goal more likely.

Second, American democracy chooses by plurality or majority rule. Election to office therefore requires broad-based support wherever and from whomever it can be found. So strong are the resulting incentives for a two-party system to emerge that the effect is called Duverger's Law (Duverger 1954). It is in part the need to win vast and diverse support that has led politicians to create political parties.

Third, parties may help officeholders win more, and more often, than alternatives. Consider the usual stylized model of pork barrel politics. All winners get a piece of the pork for their districts. All funded projects are paid for by tax revenues, so each district pays an equal share of the costs of each project adopted, whether or not that district receives a project. Several writers have argued that this kind of legislation leads to “universalism,” that is, adoption of a “norm” that every such bill yields a project to every district and thus passes with a “universal” or unanimous coalition. Thus everyone “wins.” Weingast proved the basic theorem (1979). His theorem yields the choice of the rule of universalism over the formation of a simple majority coalition, because in advance each legislator calculates the chances of any simple majority coalition's forming as equal to that of any other. As a result, expecting to win only a bit more than half the time and lose the rest of the time, all legislators prefer consistent use of the norm of universalism.¹⁵ But consider an alternative. Suppose some majority agree to form a more permanent coalition, to control outcomes now and into the future, and develop institutional means to encourage fealty to this agreement. If they successfully accomplish this, they will win regularly. Members of this institutionalized coalition would prefer it to universalism, since they always win a project in either case, but they get their projects at lower cost under the institutionalized majority coalition, which passes fewer projects.¹⁶ Thus, even in this case with no shared substantive interests at all, there are nonetheless incentives to form an enduring