

American Government in Action

Party Government



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RINEHART & COMPANY, INC.

Publishers

New York

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American Government in Action Series

PHILLIPS BRADLEY, *Editor*



Party Government

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Editor's Foreword

THE LITERATURE of politics has been one of the major forces in our national life. Much of it, especially before the 1860's, although polemic in purpose and form, contributed significantly to the shaping of governmental institutions and policies. Another main current in the literature of politics emerged just over a century ago. We had by the 1820's matured sufficiently to begin to review our own development as a nation. Scholars and lawyers became interested in the observation and appraisal of the institutional patterns of our political order. The new approach was reflected first in formal expositions of the Constitution and later in hardly less formal analyses of the workings of government. As the state became more complex in its organization and more comprehensive in its activities, observation and appraisal of government were, however, too often channeled into rather rigid—and frequently narrow—categories of analysis. The influence of cultural, economic, and social forces on political organization and procedure, the concept of government as the nexus of reconciliation or adjustment of conflicting ideas, interest, and institutions within a dynamic society such as ours, only incidentally affected the scholarly “disciplines.” The attempt to apply to the American political scene the

catholicity of outlook of an Aristotle or a Montesquieu is indeed yet to be made. "The art of governance" is all too frequently identified with the minutiae of the government's structure or procedure.

There is one brilliant exception. Just a century ago this year there appeared the second volume of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. His unique contribution to our understanding of America—today no less than in the 1830's—was that he saw government in action as a focus of the desires and purposes of the people in all their daily manifestations, as an agency for the democratic accommodation of cultural, economic, and social tensions within society.

It is in this tradition that we who are co-operating in this series have thought it worth while to add to the already voluminous literature about American government. Current discussion of a "functional" approach to its study is in fact a return to the course which De Tocqueville charted as to how and with what tools government should be observed and appraised.

No single refracting lens can, however, today catch all the variables in a political spectrum, the "invisible radiations" of which filter into every aspect of the hopes, desires, and purposes of a people bent on making the ideals and practices of democracy effective. We have sought to bring together, therefore, in this series the special competence and the varied outlook of some of those who in recent years have been responsible in significant ways for setting government in action or of observing and appraising it as it functions in the many aspects of the nation's life. The series as a whole should give citizens and students alike an adequate view of how our national government functions. The individual volumes analyze the institutional forms—constitutional, legislative, executive, administrative, and judicial—at the critical points where they affect, often determine, the workings of a democratic system.

The problems selected for discussion in the series are today, as they have been in the past, foci of public debate and political pressure. They are areas in which emergent ideas and forces are molding the future of American democracy.

Professor Schattschneider's study of American party politics is particularly timely—as it is incisive. Tocqueville found many points at which our party system aided, as he thought, the survival of democratic institutions. The character and practices of parties have changed very considerably since he observed them in 1831. Some students have claimed, not without justification in the habits of the politicians of the past, that democracy was frustrated by partisan politics. Professor Schattschneider is not blind to the corrosive elements in a free political system operating within a capitalist economic and social framework. He does set forth, however, the balancing factors that have helped keep parties alive—and ultimately responsive to popular interests and desire. His study is both informing and informed. It should make us more aware of the essential soundness of party politics in America. It should also make us more alert to preserve that soundness by citizen-action within the parties—to advance democratic faith and democratic practices in our time.

PHILLIPS BRADLEY

Queens College
December, 1941



Preface

THE SUCCESS or failure of any attempt to understand political parties depends on whether or not the student knows what to look for and where to find it. There is doubtless an unlimited quantity of unimportant information about parties that might be assembled, arranged, and learned, but the promiscuous accumulation of facts about politics is likely to prove unprofitable. What, therefore, do we need to know about political parties in order to understand them?

The following are the crucial points in the system:

1. A political party is an organized attempt to get control of the government. What then is the position of the parties in the government? Has a system of party government been established, or does the government merely tolerate the parties? What organs of government have been seized (and magnified) by the parties as the instruments of their control? How have powers been redistributed within the government for party purposes? What is the position of public officials in the party?

2. The parties live in a highly competitive world. To what circumstances do they owe their supremacy and survival? What are the relations of the parties (as mobilizers of ma-

majorities) with pressure groups (the mobilizers of minorities)? Is it not strange that the parties tolerate the pressure groups? What are the relations of the parties and unorganized political movements?

3. The major parties manage to maintain their supremacy over the minor parties. How do they do so? More specifically, what are the relations between the second major party and the first minor party? This relation will determine whether or not a two-party system or a multiparty system will result from party competition. How does it happen that the two-party system does not become a one-party system? Obviously the health of the second major party is one of the crucial factors in the system.

4. The internal processes of the parties have not generally received the attention they deserve in treatises on American politics. What sort of association is the party? What is meant by party "membership"?

5. The party is a process that has grown up about elections. What is the effect of the special system of elections found in the United States on the parties?

6. Most important of all is the distribution of power within the party organization. This leads directly to the whole subject of the relations between the central and local party organizations, doubtless the most significant datum concerning any party. More than any other factor the balance of these relations determines the nature of the system. A vital point in this connection is the relation among the local party machines in the same region, for this relation determines whether or not local machines remain local in character.

Finally, it should be observed that politics is the most intensely practical of all studies. There is a good reason for this condition. Politics is an extremely competitive enter-

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prise and politicians who try procedures that do not work are put out of business.

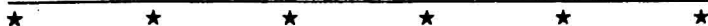
E. E. S.

Middletown, Connecticut
December, 1941



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Chapter I

In Defense of Political Parties

"No force acting on mankind has been less carefully examined than Party, and yet none better deserves examination."—SIR HENRY MAINE.

THE rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties, in fact, have played a major role as *makers* of governments, more especially they have been the makers of democratic government. It should be stated flatly at the outset that this volume is devoted to the thesis that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties. As a matter of fact, the condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime. The most important distinction in modern political philosophy, the distinction between democracy and dictatorship, can be made best in terms of party politics. The parties are not therefore merely appendages of modern government; they are in the center of it and play a determinative and creative role in it.

American major parties deserve to be treated with great respect by all students of political science, for their age if for no other reason. The Democratic party, for example, is truly venerable. Its history is substantially coterminous with

that of the Republic, making it the senior of all but three or four of the governments among the original signatories of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Its vitality is proved by the fact that it survived the Civil War when the Republic itself was torn apart and organizations as viable as the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Baptist Church were split by the conflict between the North and the South. The Democratic party is therefore one of the most tenacious governing organizations in the world. Moreover, the partnership of the Democratic and Republican parties, having survived twenty-two presidential elections, has demonstrated its capacity to outlive most of the governments in the world. The limited rivalry of these potent organizations began approximately at the time of the admission of Japan into the family of nations; it antedates the unification of Italy, the creation of the first German Reich, and the establishment of the Third French Republic. Compared with American major parties, nine tenths of the governments of the world have had a volatile and turbulent existence.

American parties are important in view of their accomplishments. It can be said justly that they have transformed the American Constitution. They have substantially abolished the electoral college, created a plebiscitary presidency, and contributed powerfully to the extraconstitutional growth of that office. As a result of the efforts of the political parties the President of the United States today receives a mandate to govern the nation and is responsible for the safety and welfare of the Republic. The parties have greatly simplified the most complex system of government in the world, and we may be certain that the work of reconstruction will continue as long as the party system endures. More important than all other changes the parties have wrought in the system of government is the fact that they have democratized it. They took over an eighteenth-century constitution and made it

function to satisfy the needs of modern democracy in ways not contemplated by the authors. As the political entrepreneurs who have mobilized and organized the dynamic forces of American public life, these parties have presided over the transformation of the government of the United States from a small experiment in republicanism to the most powerful regime on earth, vastly more liberal and democratic than it was in 1789. They have supervised or adapted themselves to the conquest of a continent, the transformation of the economic system, the absorption of the largest immigrant population in the history of the world, a series of great economic crises, and the rise of the modern administrative state, to mention only a few of the developments in which the parties have participated.

The significance of the parties in this system of government is illustrated by the fact that the fall of a major party or a major shift of power within one of the great parties is likely to be followed by the gravest consequences. It is more than eighty years since a major American party was forced out of business and a new major party rose to take its place; that party crisis was followed by the Civil War. Superficial students of politics sometimes speak lightly of producing new alignments that would wipe out the existing parties and substitute therefor other systems of antagonisms and tensions as if these explosive materials were mere sticks and stones to be tossed about as we like.

It should not surprise anyone that the parties have irritated and alarmed philosophers, for the discovery of the party tactic was certain to disturb relations and to transfer power within the regime. The victims of these transformations and transfers have naturally hated the instruments of their discomfiture. What is surprising is the fact that the beneficiaries of the revolution in government wrought by the parties have not generally been grateful. That William III and the friends

of the old British monarchy did not relish party government is understandable because the parties stripped the monarchy of power and importance. It is possible even to understand the irritation felt by George Washington at the rise of parties a hundred years later, for the parties subverted the Constitution of the United States before it was a decade old. But where have the friends of democracy been? How does it happen that Jefferson's resignation from Washington's cabinet (indicating the collapse of the Washingtonian attempt to govern without parties) is not marked by a national holiday? Why are not the primitive experiments in party government, the Boston Caucus Club, the Congressional Caucus, and so on, celebrated in song and story, along with Bunker Hill, and the Declaration of Independence? How does it happen that the Constitution rather than the parties is described in the schoolbooks as the bulwark of American democracy? If we are not surprised to observe that Washington preserved intact ideas about parties first expressed by Bolingbroke a century before the American Revolution, what are we going to say about John W. Burgess, who maintained a Washingtonian attitude toward parties in the 1890's? The parties created democracy, or perhaps more accurately, modern democracy is a by-product of party competition. How does it happen that the literature of democracy is on the whole hostile to political parties, seems to reserve its enthusiasm for nonpartisan popular government? Tories, reactionaries, royalists, and fascists ought to hate parties, but fantastically the parties are treated with contempt by the champions of democratic government.

The reception of political parties into political theory is so remarkable that it requires further comment. More amazing than the condemnation of parties by democratic and anti-democratic philosophers alike, has been an overwhelming tendency of all philosophers to ignore the subject altogether.