

THE PARTY SYMBOL

Readings on Political Parties

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W. H. Freeman and Company
San Francisco

Sponsoring Editor: Richard J. Lamb
Project Editor: Pearl C. Vapnek
Copyeditor: Steven Dopkin
Designer: Marie Carluccio
Production Coordinator: Fran Mitchell
Illustration Coordinator: Cheryl Nufer
Compositor: Lehigh/Rocappi, Inc.
Printer and Binder: The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Party symbol.

Includes bibliographies.

1. Political parties—United States—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Crotty, William J.

JK2261.P316 329'.02 79-22945

ISBN 0-7167-1144-3

ISBN 0-7167-1145-1 pbk.

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Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PREFACE

This book is intended for students concerned with the operations and contemporary health of political parties. Its principal audience will be in courses that deal with the American political parties and their contributions to a productive and vital social order. The assessments contained in this volume come at a critical time in the life of the parties.

Political parties are in a process of transition. Potentially, the changes are enormous. They could reorder party operations and redirect the energies of the parties from activities more important in an older day to those that anticipate directly the needs of a nation undergoing fundamental social change. Or the political parties could muddle along, much as they have through their long and colorful history. They could attempt to keep to the old ways and traditions; adapt poorly to the newer social demands placed upon them; and, consequently, progressively lose their once dominant position in American electoral affairs. Should the latter occur—and, judged by present standards, it is the more likely possibility of the two—it would be most unfortunate. Political parties in America are critically important agencies for representing and linking the individual to his government. If, in fact, the parties are faltering—as it appears they are—the institution that best represents the collective voice of similar social and policy-oriented groups will be gone. (More than likely, political parties would continue, but merely as names; their powers would be dissipated and their influence negated.) There is no substitute for the political parties. Undoubtedly, American society as a whole could get along with less efficient and less viable party organizations. But we would do so at a cost. We would all be the losers.

Because political parties are in a process of change, “the party symbol,” as a standard of reference for voters and as a factor of consequence in elections and governing, is undergoing reassessment. The readings in this volume contribute to the understanding needed to make a reasonably informed judgment as to the place and contribution of political parties within the new political order of contemporary American society.

Political parties are extraordinarily complex institutions. They defy easy categorization or explanation even in the best of times. In periods of transition, the difficulties are compounded. The parties engage in a multiplicity of activities, relat-

ing to their clientele—the voters—in diverse and subtle ways. Their organizational structures are perversely unique. An understanding of these features is important for assessing the contributions of political parties to society. This is what this book is all about.

There are advantages, however, as well as difficulties, to studying an institution in transition. One is excitement. We know that political parties are experiencing fundamental change, and it is not too much to suggest that their very existence—at least as a viable and important force in American politics—may hang in the balance. The game is to appreciate what they have done, how they have organized to accomplish their goals, and what the significance of their activities is. Can the parties do better? How? Could some other social agency—the media, for example, or private interest or campaign groups—conduct the same activities with greater economy or efficiency? With what consequences? Are the parties adapting gracefully to the pressures being placed upon them? Can they change and grow, given their history and their present methods of operation?

A second major advantage of a book of readings on political parties during a period of stress involves learning. Many of the old ways and, to an extent, the old knowledge are not quite as applicable now as they once were. This affords both a challenge and an opportunity. It is possible, as many of the essays in this book proceed to do, to summarize the previous wisdom and then to push beyond it to chart new courses and test new explanations. If, for example, primaries are of increasing importance in presidential nominations, has the institution of the primary changed? Is it more representative of the party base than it had been previously, or than national conventions? Has participation in primaries increased, or has it continued to decline as many had predicted? Are the media assuming a dominant position of influence in presidential nominations and campaigns? Have state and national party organs modernized in line with the reform emphasis, developing competency as well as influence that capitalizes on the technological and political changes that have swept the nation? Have the ethnic and religious affiliations of voters continued to evolve in the ways assumed, with the consequences anticipated? How important are ideological, policy, or personal considerations in sustaining the electorate's involvement in the candidacy of a presidential contender (or in explaining the force of that challenge)? How relevant is ideology in motivating the individuals who contact the voters and run year-round the party organizations? And so on. Whatever the area, it can profit from a new look at its operations and the assumptions presumed to explain its functioning. Such concerns can be, and are, addressed in this book within a framework that allows for analyses that review and note the basic research findings on the topic and then proceed to supplement and extend these in light of more recent developments.

Overall, the selections in this volume are important attempts to present as accurate and helpful a picture of the political parties as present research capabilities and understanding allow. As a whole, the readings constitute a working introduction to a valuable, although sometimes maligned, institution during a sensitive period in its evolution.

As editor, I am grateful to a number of people. I am especially pleased that the authors of so many superior original essays agreed to have their work appear in this volume. The willingness of many of these researchers to redevelop their materials

in a manner conducive to their presentation in this book is particularly appreciated.

Richard J. Lamb, Political Science Editor of W. H. Freeman and Company, was a constant source of good advice and good cheer. I thank him, Pearl C. Vapnek, who supervised the book's production, and Steven Dopkin, who skillfully edited the manuscript. To these people and all the others who have contributed to the production of this book, I am grateful.

October 1979

William Crotty

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OVERVIEW

The Party Symbol and Its Changing Meaning

Political parties are crucial to the stable operations of a democratic society. They serve a variety of needs in representing the individual citizen—or at least those individuals who participate in the political process—in selecting the principal nominees for a variety of offices from president to mayor; in representing the opinions of people on major issues and concerns of the day; in giving a continuity and stability to governments and their actions over time; and in developing coalitions and policy directions, both within the electorate and, once in office, among the various branches of the government. Political parties link voters to their government. They give electors the chance to pass binding judgment on the issues and political leaders of the day. The parties help educate voters to the means for exercising political influence, and officeholders to the nature of their responsibilities and the limits of their power. With the backing of the voters, parties attempt to shape national policy and manage the society. That political parties are essential to a democratic society as we have known it, few would argue.

I

Background

It is important to realize that political parties developed out of necessity. They were not planned and they are not specified in the Constitution. In fact, they were resisted and distrusted by the Founding Fathers. Yet, parties developed because they were needed to master the chaos of a pure democratic system. The parties were based on coalitions of groups at the local level that held similar political

objectives. The parties were used to screen candidates who shared the views of the coalitions and then to mobilize support both to place representatives in office and, once in office, to support the party policies.

The party system first came into prominence in the 1790s. It worked well and, in time, came to be regarded as an ingenious and vital contribution to democratic performance. Since their early days, the parties continued, in their fashion, to serve the needs of the electorate and the nation. As time passed, the evolving parties developed new, and progressively more democratic, institutions to serve their constituents and to better harmonize their activities with those of a maturing democracy. The national nominating conventions, primaries, the national committees, the national-party structures and, more generally, the successive reform eras, have all helped to shape a party system that paralleled the equally uncertain and exploratory development of the nation's democratic tendencies.¹

The coalitions of voters supporting the two main parties would shift and reshape with time and circumstance. The names of the parties would change, and the issues and personalities of one era would give way to those of the next. But the party system itself would continue, performing the duties that made it essential to the orderly exercise of democratic politics. Perseverance and adaptability, along with relevance, became the party system's distinguishing qualities.

Old, time-tested, needed, the handmaiden of democracy—if these characterizations are correct, then it must follow that political parties today are venerable institutions, honored for their contributions to the political enterprise and secure in their place in American life. Unfortunately, of course, this is not the case. Political parties in the United States have always been suspect.² Their past has been checkered and the publicity they receive often has more to do with what they do wrong than what they do right. More often than not, the parties have deserved the criticisms they have received. Their institutional and leadership failings and their actions, both in and out of office, have encouraged public disrespect and antipathy. Both parties have often been slow to realize their shortcomings and little inclined to do anything about them.

Today the parties' position is particularly vulnerable. Their weaknesses are evident. The parties have not been able to reverse the erosion of their popular support. They have failed to deal comfortably and meaningfully with an increasingly policy-oriented electorate. They have resisted adapting to, and coopting to their own ends, the technological and campaign-oriented communication developments. And they have proved reluctant to adapt antiquated and unrepresentative organizational forms to the exigencies of modern electoral politics.

The indictment is harsh. It may well be that the American parties are in decline. The peak of their influence and their most significant contributions may be past. If so, the results would be sad. America would be losing its most effective voice for the millions that form the base of society. Walter Dean Burnham was one of the first to call attention to the "long-term trend toward a politics without parties." He put this rather well:

political parties with all their well known human and structural shortcomings, are the only device thus far unaided by the wit of Western man that can, with some effectiveness, generate countervailing collective power on behalf of the many individually powerless against the relatively few who are individually or organizationally powerful.³

The “unchallenged ascendancy of the already powerful,” Burnham contended, would most likely result.⁴ The prospect is not a pleasant one. Based on past experience, a strong, vital, and progressive party system would appear essential to the democratic order.

The Evil of Parties

The parties have had their crises, many of which they have not handled terribly well. In one sense, American political parties have been in a continual state of crisis. Their legitimacy, their values, and their integrity have been attacked from the very earliest days of the republic to the present.

Although needed, the concept of party was bitterly resisted. James Madison, in *Federalist No. 10*, apologized for the existence of party and sought ways to control its effects.⁵ In his farewell address, George Washington was even more concerned and outspoken. The spirit of party, he warned:

seems always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosities of one part against another, foment occasionally riots and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to government through the channels of party passions.⁶

Party warfare and factionalism, the outgoing president counseled, could lead to despotism.

The parties survived Madison’s defensiveness and Washington’s hostility because their contributions were absolutely vital and basically unanticipated by those who wrote the Constitution. The parties tied the voters to their leaders in a grass-roots representative and elective effort that made operable the formal institutions of the government. Often it would seem, however, that Washington’s warnings should have been heeded.

Interparty Competition

Many would argue that the strength of the two-party system lies in the competitive balance between the major parties. If elections are closely contested, the parties are likely to extend themselves to best represent the coalitional groups that identify with them. They expand the electorate, bringing in and representing new groups whose support they seek. They debate the issues aggressively, stand as a check on the government and its potential abuses, and generally perform as intended.

There are many periods of American history when one political party so dominated the allegiance of Americans that serious competition between parties for elective office was rare. In such cases the control exercised by one party—at national, regional, or local levels or in different historical eras—virtually destroyed the competitiveness and value of a second party.

The Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democratic parties overshadowed the sporadic opposition of the Federalists and the Whigs during the first three to four decades

of the nineteenth century. The Republican Party, in turn, created in the mid-1850s, dominated American politics during most of the years between 1865 and the 1920s. The Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s led to the New Deal and the Franklin Roosevelt-Al Smith coalition of the big cities, labor unions, workers, ethnics, Southerners, blacks, and the less well-off. The new coalition proved a potent source of new strength and the Democratic coalition quickly emerged as the dominant party from the middle to the late years of the twentieth century.⁷

As the Democratic coalition prospered, the Republicans were reduced to a relatively small following that had trouble extending its membership beyond its traditional one-fourth to one-fifth of the electorate. The two-party system at this point may best be described as a "one and one-half" party system.

The 1960s witnessed a series of new dislocations—the civil-rights revolution, a changing life style, Vietnam, urban rioting—to which the parties found it difficult to adapt. The intensity of individual party commitments appeared to lessen and the party system entered a period of stagnation. The drift of the 1960s continued into the 1970s, evidenced among other things in a weakening of the New Deal coalition ties. The Republicans, who have their own problems, have yet to benefit from the seeming disarray of the Democratic coalition.

On the state level, the Democratic Party controlled politics from the close of the Civil War—or, more realistically, from the time of the compromise that was reached with Northern Republican Party leaders in the Hayes-Tilden dispute of 1876—until the 1960s. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the civil-rights acts and a nation's changing priorities laid the groundwork for enfranchising blacks and building within the South a distinctive, issue-sensitive two-party system akin to the national model.⁸ The Republican Party, meanwhile, enjoyed little power in influencing elections within the region. Blacks were effectively kept out of the political system and, on the national level, the Democrats—in formulating national party positions and in selecting presidential nominees—had to contend, in the Congress, with a powerful and unified regional bloc that had little in common with the Northern wing.

Traditionally, other regions, especially upper New England, the Midwest, and the Great Plains, had equally strong party traditions that favored the Republicans. In recent decades, and as part of the general Republican decline, the Democrats have been able to win seats in once solely Republican areas. Today, even Maine, once a bastion of Republican support, has become a Democratic state (based on the number of registered voters declaring for the two major parties).

Locally, many county and district races historically have been, and to this day continue to be, noncompetitive. Roughly 60 percent of the smaller cities cannot by law hold partisan elections, and other elections—for example, those involving school district and taxation questions—have been kept nonpartisan by statute or custom. Intense and sustained two-party competition at any level may well be the exception rather than the rule in the United States.

Ethical Behavior

Both political parties have known periods of rampant corruption when the party organizations and their leaders used the party machinery to further their own im-

mediate economic ends. Historians like to point with a certain perverse pride to what they call the "age of boodle." Many consider it the clearest example of political corruption of some magnitude, and the exploits of the age have become legendary. The decisive role of the machine in using its insiders' knowledge for the following is well documented: to buy property and then resell it at a handsome profit to a city or state government for roads, parks, or public buildings; to modify zoning restrictions; to award contracts; to build roads; to authorize subways; and, in general, to do whatever it could to exploit public office to earn a few dollars. The abuses of the late 1800s, and the reaction to them, laid the basis for the Progressive era and the ambitious schedule of reforms it advocated.

A reading of the newspaper or a half-hour spent watching the evening news on television would indicate that economic abuse of public office is a consistent temptation. Mayors, legislators, and government officials accepting transportation, lodging, and vacations from lobbyists; contracts let without bid to friends and relatives; a corporation's law business directed to a congressperson's home-town firm; government buildings constructed at three times the cost of comparable private buildings; new highways, stadiums, repairs, and building contracts awarded to financial supporters; kickbacks on contracts to politicians; insurance, legal business, and special and lucrative court appointments steered to an alderman's law firm; "friends," whose businesses are regulated by the government, contributing trust funds to politicians and their families; stocks sold to legislators below market value; partnerships established specifically to receive designated federal contracts; city advertising and insurance contracts awarded to firms controlled by politicians; campaign funds used for personal expenses—these are just a few examples. The variety of, and opportunity for, graft, payoffs, kickbacks, and the like appear endless.

It may well be that the greatest potential for political corruption is present today. In terms of dollar amounts involved and the number of people and businesses that can benefit from legally borderline operations, it is difficult to believe that any past period exceeded the opportunities at present. At the federal level, courts, the media, the attorney general's office, and such regulatory agencies as the Securities and Exchange Commission appear to be involved in one case after another. It may be, of course, that the public tolerance for illegal activity is decreasing and that the incidents of bribery or unethical conduct that do surface receive a great deal of attention. Or it may be that the full airing of such cases—once hidden from the public's or media's view—is just beginning to come into the public domain.

The corruption of individual elective and party officials has done little to better the public perceptions of parties. Even more serious, however, are the political (as against economic) abuses of public office. Watergate represented the epitome of this strain. Personal financial gain was an aspect of the overall problem. Profiteering has been uncovered in the awarding of defense contracts; agreements for such things as work programs; the overall stimulus given to specified business developments; and the use of public funds to furnish, and increase the value of, private homes. The campaign funds—laundered through Mexican banks—some of which ended up with the Watergate break-in crew, were donated with a clear *quid pro quo* in mind.⁹ Still, this was one of the more familiar, and even benign, aspects of the Watergate scandal.

The exploitation of the powers of office to silence dissent and to stifle opposition, the employment of the instruments and resources of government to punish adversaries, and the effort to place a public official above the normal restraints of the political system (whether these be political parties, the courts, the Congress, the media, or public opinion) went well beyond economic manipulations. They went to the very heart of the democratic system. Neither of the political parties were in any sense responsible for Watergate. But the parties, also, did little to check the exploitations of public office obvious even in the early years of the Nixon presidency. The contribution of either of the parties to resolving the difficulties encountered in a trying period of American history was marginal.

Watergate was a frightening low in American politics. If one were to compile a list of such low points, the worst for political parties might well have come during the years immediately preceding the Civil War. At this point, the party system, in effect, collapsed. It could not resolve the dominant social issues of the day. There were, however, extenuating circumstances. The United States was torn by controversies over the nature of the Union, the meaning of the Constitution, and the relative position of the states in the federal system. The issues were outgrowths of the slavery question and the sectional differences in values, economic developments, and priorities that had existed, unresolved, since the nation's birth. The issues far transcended the ability of the parties to deal with them. The collapse of the party system in the critical decade of the 1850s, in effect, foresaw the inability of the nation to resolve such fundamental differences amicably. In one sense, the rise of the new Republican coalition in the mid-1850s foreshadowed both the likely resolution of the conflicts and a new postwar party system more attuned to the social concerns of the coming age.

But despite their problems and their times of crisis, the parties have survived and, in their uncertain way, prospered. The longevity of the parties testifies to their utility. Political parties exist because they serve a variety of social and political needs better than any institution devised by man. The services they contribute are (or have been) necessary to the survival of a democratic order. To this point in American history, they have been critical to the sustained functioning of a broad-based democracy.

II

The Contemporary Scene

Whatever their past, political parties are in trouble today. At a time when their contributions on a general level are accepted and recognized as helpful, the parties themselves have entered a particularly trying period. The problems the parties must face have been brought on in large part by changes in the society. During the 1970s, both parties attempted in some manner to deal with the difficulties they were encountering. The reform movement that ensued had its principal impact on the large and more divided of the two parties, the Democrats. Reform may have introduced more problems than it resolved.

In this section, we will look at the principal areas of concern for the modern party. Both parties will have to arrive at some type of accommodation with the problems posed by a changing electorate, new campaign and communication technology, and the reforms initiated by the parties themselves.

The Electorate

The American electorate is in a period of change. The old party system was based on a process of accommodation. The major groups within the electorate viewed symbolic and economic rewards as returns for long-running party support. Negotiations and compromises were worked out among interest-group and party leaders at national conventions and in the Congress. In return for financial and electoral support, the party chose candidates who appealed to the main centers of strength within its coalition.

The process allowed for a good deal of flexibility at the top in negotiating policy commitments, and it tacitly excluded from consideration any group that did not vote in sufficient numbers to make its will felt. The influence of the grass-roots party membership was indirect; its role was to elect candidates and support issue positions agreed upon by the party and interest-group leaders. Even then, it was expected that the major groups in the coalition would vote loyally—election year after election year—for the party symbol. Defections to the other party on an issue because of a candidate were normally considered short-term aberrations.

The goal of the party was to win office. Should it win, all in the coalition were presumed to share in the rewards. The party's success, in turn, should reinforce the individual's commitment and thus help continue his (or her) loyal electoral support.

The party division was based on the issues and coalitions of the New Deal. The commitment to the party, in V. O. Key's words, was a "standing decision." It was made early in life based on economic and social forces and was reasserted during each election year.

The assumptions underlying this model came under attack in the 1960s. They had held up well during the 1940s and 1950s. The early voting studies, and specifically *The American Voter*, described an electorate that was relatively apathetic, psychologically committed to one of the two major parties, and loyal in supporting that party and its candidate.¹⁰ The voters tended to have little issue information and few ideological predispositions. The party symbol was the chief factor explaining election results.

Turnout

Voter changes during the 1960s introduced an uncomfortable period for the parties. First, and least commented on, the proportion of voters participating in elections began to decline. From relatively stable levels in the 1950s and early 1960s, the proportion of the eligible voters began to decrease. The trend persevered, and in fact, was accelerated by the enfranchisement of the eighteen-year-olds.¹¹ Presidential elections in which roughly one-half of the legally eligible population does not participate are not uncommon. Congressional and state elections draw even lower turnout. A 30- to 40-percent turnout of those eligible can be found in many localities.

There is cause for alarm in these figures. One-half of the American adult population—seventy million people—find so little of interest in the issues, candidates, or parties during elections that they simply do not bother to vote. Neither political party is especially alarmed at the situation. Both are comfortable with electorates

whose loyalties can be assured. A higher turnout might well mean a less predictable vote.

The parties aside, there is something troubling about a system in which tens of millions of people refuse to participate at even the most rudimentary level.

Perceptions

A second factor of consequence is the public view of parties and politics. It appears to be unusually harsh and negative and has become progressively more cynical since the early 1960s. Perhaps, this is not surprising. The public perception of the parties has never been very favorable. That it should worsen—and the negative view should encompass all of government—during a period that witnessed the escalation of the Vietnam War, the assassination of a number of prominent public figures, and the events of Watergate, is predictable. The problem is what to do about it. The sporadic reforms entertained by the Congress, successive administrations, and the parties themselves were meant to allay public suspicions. It is unlikely they have succeeded.

The perceptions the voters held of the parties in the early 1970s were anything but favorable. In 1972, well before the full dimensions of Watergate were even suspected, the Center for Political Studies asked a national cross section of Americans to rank political parties in relation to other governmental institutions (see Table 1). The electorate was unambivalent. Political parties were ranked the least powerful, the least trusted, and as doing the worst job. The parties won these dubious honors by extraordinarily large margins.

Professor Jack Dennis has been a continuing observer of the levels of support for the party system in the United States. His research indicates that respondents' rankings of the parties (and, for that matter, elections), vis-à-vis other political institutions, on the extent to which they are concerned with what the people want has declined precipitously over the period 1964–1972.¹² In his study, respondents in Wisconsin in 1972 and 1974 were asked to rank the various political institutions (the Congress, the Supreme Court, the president, etc.) in terms of the “good” that they have done people. The parties ranked last of the seven institutions tested in 1972 with a score of 3.9 on a 7-point scale. In 1974, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, the study's respondents ranked the parties even lower (3.5) and still dead last among the institutions examined. The presidency, for all its problems, still managed to do much better (a 4.1 ranking) than the parties.

The study is extensive. From it, Dennis concludes:

First, these data show that public support for the parties, both in historical and cross-institutional perspectives is relatively weak. Attitudes toward the parties and the evaluations of the importance of the party institution show, with few exceptions, a general state of low public regard and legitimation. More importantly, even the areas . . . [that showed] relatively strong points of support a decade ago, have shown a significant decline since that time.¹³

The parties command little public respect. Dennis found the base of support especially weak in the early- to mid-1970s, and becoming weaker with each passing year.

Table 1 Voter Evaluation of Political Institutions: 1972 National Election Study

Government Institution Is:	Percentage of Response			
	Congress	Supreme Court	President	Political parties
Doing the best job in last couple years	33.1	16.1	47.0	3.8
Doing the second-best job	42.1	23.5	23.9	10.5
Doing the worst job	8.3	27.6	12.6	51.4
Most powerful	34.4	27.7	33.6	4.3
Second-most powerful	36.3	24.7	31.3	7.8
Least powerful	7.5	10.6	9.4	72.5
Most trusted	31.7	25.5	41.4	1.4
Second-most trusted	41.4	23.7	29.6	5.3
Least trusted	4.4	17.7	10.7	67.3

Source: Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, 1972 Presidential Survey.

Party Loyalty

Party identification is a psychological measure used in voting studies to gauge the intensity (strong or weak) and the direction (Democrat or Republican) of individuals' support for the political parties. It is a powerful measure not given to random fluctuation and, once introduced in the 1950s, it proved the most significant of the three indices (candidate appeal and issue orientation being the other two) devised to explain election results.

The evidence demonstrates that party identification is becoming less important for voters. Data for the period 1952–1976 supplied by the Survey Research Center of the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan indicates that there is evidence of a decline in the number of voters identifying with each party. The Republican coalition is small, and its decline in partisan identification is modest but consistent. More worrisome, the proportion of “strong” Republican identifiers has decreased significantly and the proportion of “independent Republicans” has increased to where they now outnumber the strong identifiers. The modal (or most commonly found) group among Republicans are the “weak” identifiers.

The same pattern holds true for the Democrats. The number of party identifiers is down dramatically. The biggest drop is in the portion claiming to be “strong” Democratic identifiers; the decrease in this category is far steeper than for the Republicans. The number of “independent Democrats” has increased, and the party's modal group is the “weak” identifiers.

If this thumbnail sketch of the decline in party identification is relevant for elections, it is reasonable to expect that party would be less powerful in structuring the vote. This is exactly what happens. Voters, as noted, are inclined to turn out less, but when they do vote, they are considerably less likely to vote the party label for all offices on the ballot. Whereas straight-ticket voting was common in the 1950s, split-ticket voting appears to be the norm for more recent elections. The incidence of split-ticket voting, once below 20 percent, increased noticeably during the 1960s. Better than one-half the voters in the presidential elections of 1968, 1972, and 1976 split their vote between the parties. It seems extraordinary now, but in the 1950s, 70 percent of those sampled consistently voted a straight party ticket,