

# WHY PARTIES?

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JOHN H. ALDRICH



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A Second Look

JOHN H. ALDRICH



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## **PART ONE**

### POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY



# 1

## POLITICS AND PARTIES IN AMERICA

Political parties lie at the heart of American politics.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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