

SECOND EDITION

PARTIES AND ELECTIONS IN CORPORATE AMERICA



HOWARD L. REITER

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HOWARD L. REITER

The University of Connecticut

Parties and Elections in Corporate America, Second Edition

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To the Student

This is an unusual textbook. If you compare it with others that are used at other colleges and universities, you will discover that this is very—even *radically*—different from them. Before reading it, you should know how it is different, and why.

First, this presentation of the realities of party politics in the United States is opinionated. This in itself is not unique. Most parties texts deliberately present a point of view, usually on the question of what kinds of parties would be best for America. Some prefer highly centralized parties that stress issues; others want parties that seek only to win elections and not to promote issues. Both approaches (and there are others) accept the fundamentals of the American political system—corporate capitalism and fragmented government—and merely try to make the best of it. This book begins with the premise that the American system is fundamentally flawed, that other systems would better serve the needs of the American people, and that the kind of party system we have is a major element of that flawed system. It is a radical approach, and I make no apologies for it.

Some of you are thinking, Why did I write a book that is so opinionated? Why couldn't I have written an "objective" text? The answer is that there is no such thing as an objective text. Some of them, as I have noted, take viewpoints different from mine and argue them. Others do try to be neutral, but with these there are two problems. One is that neutrality is painfully boring. I could have written a text that would say uncontroversial things like, "There are two major parties in the United States. One is the Democratic party, the other the Republican. The Democrats controlled both houses of Congress from 1955 to 1981, and since 1986. The Republicans have won seven out of the past ten presidential elections. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing is up to you." Had I written this, I would have fallen asleep at the typewriter before the first chapter was completed, and you would have fallen asleep reading the first page.

Even if an especially gifted writer could write an exciting text that strove for neutrality, the second problem with "objective texts" is more serious—they are impossible. Every author has biases, beginning with the decision of what to write. The author of a parties text

is implicitly saying, “I think that political parties are important, important enough to write a book about.” That judgment is a value judgment. The next decision concerns what to put in the book. Do we include (as some texts do not) a chapter on the presidency? How many pages will be devoted to national party conventions? How many to local organization? These judgments are value judgments. The relative amounts of space given to different subjects are an expression of their importance to the author. But most important of all, a “neutral” text has an implicit bias. *If it is not criticizing the system, it is tacitly accepting it.* Merely to *describe* the Democratic party organization in Congress without passing judgment on it is to imply, “The system works fine, and here’s what it looks like.”

There is a second way in which this book is different from all other parties texts, and it comes from the artificial and misleading way we teach about human life in our educational system. I teach political science; the folks upstairs in my building teach economics; next door they teach psychology; across the street in one direction they teach sociology, and in another direction they teach literature. The student is left to conclude that these disciplines are easily separable entities, that politics can be meaningfully studied without understanding economics, society, and so forth. And if you look at other texts on political parties or almost any other area of American politics and government, you will see a lot about narrowly political institutions (Congress, the presidency, the courts) and behavior (voting, running for office, writing to the mayor), but little or nothing about non-governmental power structures or about how closely entwined the political system is with the rest of American life. To be sure, authors will give lip service to how the diversity of the American people produces a multiplicity of interest groups and voting blocs with various claims on government, and how the government tries to balance their claims, but there is usually little or nothing about how the political system as a whole serves the needs of those who wield power in the private realm. One great advantage of a radical approach is that it pays close attention to this relationship, although you do not have to be a radical to see it. Scholars of various viewpoints have argued it, but political scientists who write parties textbooks seldom seem to do so.

Now some of you are thinking, Why is he trying to brainwash me with his radical opinions? First of all, I do not delude myself into thinking that a couple of hundred pages read over a few weeks will overturn two decades of socialization into dominant American values. Some of you will be convinced, others (perhaps most) not. But bear in mind that all education is a kind of brainwashing, and texts that argue for the existing political system, or claim neutrality, are brainwashing you in the other direction. And that direction, after all, has a lot more support in society than mine. So relax and try to keep an open mind.

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Howard L. Reiter

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CHAPTER 1

The Limits of Voting

On Tuesday, November 8, 1988, more than ninety-one million Americans trooped to the polls, and a majority of them elected George Bush president. It was a remarkable exercise—ninety-one million people, each convinced that the act of voting was worthwhile. Some observers commented warmly upon this latest example of the vigor of American democracy; others noted that a million *fewer* people voted in 1988 than had voted four years earlier, and that only *half* the eligible voters had cast a ballot—one of the lowest turnout rates in American history.

Exactly one year later, on Wednesday, November 8, 1989, eastern Europe was in turmoil. In most of the nations that for more than forty years had been considered satellites of the Soviet Union, crowds were gathering regularly to call for the overthrow of their regimes. On November 8, for example, most of the ruling body of East Germany resigned, and on the following day the Berlin Wall was opened to allow free access between east and west. The day after that, the man who had headed Bulgaria's Communist party for thirty-five years abruptly resigned.

Where was democracy more effectively exercised: in the United States, with all the democratic trappings but a citizenry so uninvolved that only 50 percent of eligible voters showed up at the polls in 1988, or in eastern Europe, where meaningfully competitive political parties and elections did not exist, but where mass popular movements overthrew long-entrenched regimes? If the answer seems unclear, is it possible that competitive political parties and elections are not necessary for the effective exercise of democracy? And if competitive political parties and elections are not necessary for a meaningful democracy, what does this say about the political system of the United States?

THE PROBLEM WITH VOTING

When the subject of democracy arises, most Americans turn naturally to thoughts of voting. Indeed, when we evaluate other countries in terms of how democratic they are, the first thing we look at is whether they have free elections. In our own country, the least

controversial of the demands of the civil rights movement was to guarantee to African-Americans in the South the right to vote; even defenders of the old system of segregation seldom claimed that denying people the vote was a good thing in principle.

Why has voting been so venerated by Americans? The usual answer is that voting is the way in which the political beliefs of the American people are translated into government policy. Since we are given a choice of leaders, we supposedly can select the one whose views are closest to our own and, therefore, get those views carried out; of course, the stipulation is that a majority of the voters agree with us. In this way, the majority rules in our political system. This view of how American democracy works is pleasant, but it has a number of problems.

Most advocates of democracy agree that some form of election and that some sort of representative government is essential, especially in a large community where not everyone will fit in the same arena. In addition to voting, however, there are many other ways for the people to participate in democratic decision making. Some of these ways include telephoning and writing letters to officials, working for organizations that promote a specific cause, organizing and joining demonstrations, and even participating in civil disobedience.

Is Voting the Best Means of Democratic Participation?

In some respects, of course, voting has its advantages. It is easy to do, easy to understand, and does not require a high level of articulation. A person who votes for Bush or Dukakis does not have to give any reason for his or her vote. In the privacy of the booth, an individual does not have to explain anything to anybody. Unlike some other methods of political participation, voting takes little time, it can be done inconspicuously, and a person will not get arrested for doing it. For these reasons, voting remains the most widespread form of political participation.

On the other hand, there are clear drawbacks to voting as well. The vote is a blunt instrument; all it "says" is that you prefer Bush to Dukakis. It doesn't say, "On every issue, Bush is better than Dukakis." It doesn't say, "Bush is a better *person* for the job, but on many *issues* I like Dukakis better." It doesn't say, "I like Bush, but I wish he'd change his position on abortion." And it doesn't say, "I'm only voting for Bush as the lesser evil." All the other forms of political participation are superior to voting because they are more articulate.

Of course, victorious politicians love to read more into the vote than they legitimately can. They talk of a "mandate" for their policies—instructions on how they should behave in office—as though everyone who voted for them must have agreed with them completely on all issues. In fact, despite Bush's victory, many Americans polled in 1988 disagreed with him on many issues. A majority favored more government spending on liberal programs in such areas as social security, health, education, the environment, children, the elderly, the homeless, and fighting AIDS, and less spending on the Nicaraguan contras; moreover, a plurality wanted less spent on the Star Wars program.¹ This is often the case with elections, and people should treat with more than their usual degree of skepticism any elected official's claim to have a mandate.

In other words, any victorious candidate is likely to have received many votes from people who disagreed with him or her on many issues. Even those voters who agreed with

the victor on most or all of the highly visible issues probably dissented without realizing it from their candidate's less-publicized positions. Indeed, it is possible for a candidate to win a majority of the vote while the voters reject most of his or her stands on issues. Imagine that Bush and Dukakis are running against each other in a three-person electorate; we'll call those voters John, Cathy, and Lee. There are five issues that are important to the voters: the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), budget cuts, arms control, abortion, and busing. In the following table, we can see which candidate each voter agrees with on each issue:

	<i>John</i>	<i>Cathy</i>	<i>Lee</i>
ERA	Bush	Bush	Dukakis
Budget cuts	Bush	Dukakis	Dukakis
Arms control	Dukakis	Bush	Dukakis
Abortion	Bush	Dukakis	Dukakis
Busing	Dukakis	Bush	Dukakis

If you read *across* each issue in the table, you will see that two out of three voters agreed with Dukakis on every issue except the Equal Rights Amendment. If you read *down* each voter's column, you will see that John and Cathy voted for Bush—assuming that each voter chose the candidate with whom he or she agreed the most—and Lee voted for Dukakis. Therefore Bush won two-thirds of the voters, who agreed with him on only one out of five issues! I do not suggest that this kind of outcome ordinarily happens, but it is a good illustration of why an election does not always serve as an expression of public opinion.

Another variation of this problem is the possibility that a candidate may win by amassing a coalition of small groups of voters, each of which favors a policy that is highly unpopular with all other voters. By making selective appeals, a candidate can win the votes of people who want to bring back slavery, people who want to outlaw the eating of meat, people who want to expel New England from the union, and so forth, until that candidate has a majority—but on a platform that nobody supports.

As though these problems with voting were not serious enough, they are magnified when we consider how many people do not vote. Even if Bush could claim a mandate for his views, he was supported by only 53 percent of the 50 percent of the eligible voters who showed up at the polls. Therefore slightly more than one out of four eligible voters supported him, in an election that has been referred to as a solid victory or even a landslide!

Another problem with voting as the prime means of democratic participation is that it is less effective than other means. First, despite all the denials by civic groups, one vote has only an infinitesimally small chance of affecting the outcome. In the average state in 1988, nearly two million people voted, and the chances of any one voter's changing the outcome in a statewide election was just about zero. In the case of a presidential election, the odds are much less that your one vote will affect the outcome. First, your vote would have to be the swing vote in your state, and second, your state's electoral votes would have to swing the election. Compare this situation to the potential influence of one persuasive participant in a town meeting, an organization, or a demonstration.

Another problem with voting follows from the two previous arguments that one vote is (a) a poor way to express an opinion on an issue, and (b) likely to be lost in the shuffle. If

these two arguments are true, then voting for someone who shares your view on an issue is not a very effective way to put that view into effect. First, your vote is highly unlikely to affect the outcome of the election, and second, even if your candidate wins, he or she may not conclude that it was your issue that helped him or her to win.

In fact, in American history, the great causes were typically won *outside* the ballot box. Slavery ended not because Abraham Lincoln won the election of 1860; he did not run on an abolitionist platform. Only when he thought that emancipation would help to win the Civil War did Lincoln decide to abolish slavery. In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt won the White House on vague promises to balance the budget and end the prohibition of alcoholic beverages. His New Deal program of economic recovery was a slogan that took definite shape only after he was in office. Elections played a strange role in the Vietnam War. American involvement in Vietnam escalated in 1965, right after Lyndon Johnson overwhelmingly defeated Barry Goldwater, who had called for a military victory. The treaty that signaled the withdrawal of American forces was signed in 1973, soon after Richard Nixon crushingly defeated George McGovern, who had called for an end to the war. In both cases, the *defeated* candidate's policies seem to have won out.

If elections have not been nearly as effective at getting the people's views into public policy as defenders of the American system would have us believe, then what *is* effective? The abolition of slavery, the New Deal, and the ending of the war in Vietnam were all promoted by mass movements that pressured government and other elites to change certain policies. We can add to this inventory the civil rights movement and such recent examples as the mass movements around women's issues (including both sides of the abortion controversy), environmentalism, consumerism, and antitax protests. In all these cases, people took to the streets and lobbied officials in ways that were more pointed, and had much greater impact, than elections ever have.

THE LESSONS OF VOTING

In the final analysis, voting is an odd way to foster the participation of the masses, for it is like a spectator sport. If the authorities promote voting as the prime way to get involved in politics, then they are sending certain messages:

Politics Is Individualistic

At various times and places in history, people have conducted politics by bringing the community together in one place to determine collectively the outcome of major issues. The best-known examples include the ancient Greek city-states, Israeli *kibbutzim*, New England town meetings, and communes of various kinds. This concept is based on the argument that if politics is society's way of deciding its collective future, then what better way than to have people resolve the issues through face-to-face argumentation and brainstorming? In contrast, voting is an isolated, individualized act. People do not share their ideas or persuade each other. Each person is like an unconnected atom; Americans tend to see social life in general in this manner.²

Politics Is Private

Which question is a greater invasion of privacy, whom did you vote for in the last election, or what deodorant do you use? There is no obvious answer. People whose only political activity is voting are left to infer that politics is intensely personal and private, almost shameful. We vote not only individually, but often in booths with curtains, like Roman Catholics confiding their sins in the confessional. Again, instead of treating politics as the most *public* of activities because it is concerned with the future of us all, we treat it as something to be hidden. I do not suggest that there is no reason for a secret ballot, only that a nation whose most important political act is conducted in private is one that does not take politics seriously as the highest *public* endeavor of the community.

Politics Is Episodic

Politics, we are encouraged to believe, occurs once a year on election day, and for most of us it occurs only once every four years, if that. We discharge our highest civic responsibility by taking a few minutes to go into a booth and make a few choices, once in a rare while. Although we are all free to engage in other political activities, such as collective action, writing to officials, working on campaigns, or organizing protests, most adults are content to limit their political activity to that occasional act of choice. And if we think of voting as the core of what democracy means, we will not think that democracy requires anything else.

This emphasis on a passive citizenry, bestirring itself from its lethargy—getting up from the couch, if you will—once every four years in order to go to the polling place and flip a few levers, is consistent with a broader view of politics that has long been dominant in the United States. This view is the doctrine of classical liberalism, the philosophy of long-ago theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume, as well as the framers of the U.S. Constitution. Among the most important tenets of classical liberalism are individualism, the notion that people's identities and fates are essentially derived from their individual talents rather than from some group to which they belong, such as a social class or a race (as though children born into wealthy families have no greater chance of material success than those born into poor families); individual rights, the concept that we all have certain claims with which nobody else, including government, should interfere (as though we have no responsibilities to others, only claims against them); and limited government, the idea that some of the most important activities in which we engage must be protected from such broader interference (as though the state cannot expand freedoms by guaranteeing them to all people). Among the other products of classical liberal thought, although not shared by all its major proponents, has been capitalism, the economic doctrine that vests ownership of the means of production in private hands.

From this brief inventory we can see that the emphasis of classical liberalism and capitalism alike is on private affairs rather than public activities. The people are to be left alone; government, in this view, as Ronald Reagan often said, is the problem and not the solution. If government is at best a necessary evil—in James Madison's words, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary"³—then involvement in public life is not very attractive. Pursue private activities, and stay out of trouble. Leave politics to the sleazy politicians, and community affairs to the do-gooders. Good citizens should vote, but nobody will object if they spend their leisure time at sports, watching television, or washing

the car. Better yet, if they spend their spare time at the mall, they will be supporting the economy by consuming goods. Politics can seem simply another form of consumption, rather than the way in which a community decides its future.

Contrast this picture with a view of citizenship that assumes that people will be active participants in the decisions that affect their lives. Assume that most people take a strong interest in the issues and candidates of their day, and discuss them frequently with friends, neighbors, and relatives. This situation is not difficult to imagine, for historians of nineteenth-century American politics tell us that people back then were far more engaged in politics than they have been in our century. When Charles Dickens traveled to the United States in 1842, not long after a presidential election in which 80 percent of the eligible voters participated, he noticed that on trains,

Quiet people avoid the question of the Presidency, for there will be a new election in three years and a half, and party feeling runs very high: the great constitutional feature of this institution being, that (as soon as) the acrimony of the last election is over, the acrimony of the next one begins; which is an unspeakable comfort to all strong politicians and true lovers of their country: that is to say, to ninety-nine men and boys out of every ninety-nine and a quarter.⁴

Note the reference to “men and boys,” because women (and, for that matter, most nonwhites) were not in the pool of eligible voters in the nineteenth century. That issue aside, compare Dickens’s picture with the often dispirited lack of interest shown in elections today. At the climax of the 1988 campaign, for example, a national survey found that only 28 percent of Americans were “very much interested” in the campaign, and that nearly half had discussed politics no more than one day during the preceding week.⁵ Compare your experience with Dickens’s: have you ever been on a train or public bus where everyone was arguing about politics? Why has politics, arguably the subject of the most far-reaching and universal concerns that we have, become so remote from ordinary citizens? And what meaning remains to citizenship when people are drawn to their private interests and to such matters as sports and celebrity gossip, to the virtual exclusion of public life?

A COUNTERARGUMENT

I should emphasize here that I have not been saying that elections are unnecessary, or that people shouldn’t vote. I *am* saying that voting isn’t all it’s claimed to be. Some readers are undoubtedly uncomfortable reading this disparagement of the significance of elections for democracy, and have some hard questions to ask. Let us examine one such rebuttal: Hasn’t the acquisition of the vote made a huge difference for African-Americans in the South? Until the 1960s, few African-Americans were permitted to vote, and the politics of the region was dominated by white politicians who often made racist appeals as they sought votes. Today, as a result of the mass enfranchisement of blacks in the South, the region has been transformed. From local officials to Governor L. Douglas Wilder of Virginia, African-Americans have won public office, and even where they have not, their presence has had a major influence on white politicians: some, such as Governor George Wallace

of Alabama, dropped their racist appeals and began to court black voters, and others, such as Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, retired from politics when they saw that African-American votes were going to keep them from getting re-elected. Some scholars have argued that having the vote has also gotten southern blacks returns in the form of more favorable government policies.⁶

There is no question that being able to vote has been a major development for African-Americans in the South, but this fact does not negate the arguments of this chapter. The fact that many African-Americans were forcibly denied the vote until the 1960s and 1970s makes this truly a special case. For any group emerging into a position of legal equality, rights and practices that other citizens regard as trivial or take for granted assume a special role. At the same time that black southerners were winning their voting rights, for example, they were ending such practices as segregated drinking fountains and rest rooms. For the remainder of society, drinking fountains and rest rooms were not an important political concern; for this oppressed group, every gain in status was a major breakthrough. So it was with voting.

How much did African-Americans achieve with the vote? Have the underlying conditions that plague so many been overturned? Certainly, the overt forms of official discrimination died, partly as a result of black votes. But the election of numerous African-Americans to office has not ended unofficial segregation and substandard conditions in housing, schools, and jobs, or the tacit discrimination that continues in those realms. Indeed, most examinations of the changing status of blacks since the 1960s conclude that, while a substantial number have “made it” into the middle class, the rest have fallen farther behind than they used to be.⁷ The vote, helpful to some, has not overcome many underlying conditions.

Indeed, we might cynically (and with only some exaggeration) suggest that most African-American candidates are elected to high office under two conditions: first, that they can only take charge of such troubled areas as the “rust belt” cities of the North and poverty-stricken rural towns of the South, leaving whites in control of the most comfortable places; and second, that they must not rock the boat. Successful black politicians such as Governor Wilder and Mayors Tom Bradley of Los Angeles and David Dinkins of New York are often bland and moderate figures who were elected by showing that they could be as accommodating to the local business community and to the needs of “responsible” leadership as any white conservative.

Finally, there is an underlying irony to gaining the vote, and that is that the vote was *not* achieved through the ballot box. From organizing voter-registration campaigns under threats of violence in the South to massive rallies in the North, the civil rights movement resorted to almost every form of political participation *besides* voting in order to overthrow the old system in the South. To be sure, the federal government played an important role, notably through the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was made possible by the election of President Lyndon Johnson and an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress the year before. Yet there were probably few political contests in 1964 outside the South that focused mainly on civil rights, and it is unlikely that a purely electoral strategy would have been enough to get the Voting Rights Act passed.

So we conclude that for an oppressed group, the vote certainly has a greater significance than it has for most citizens. Even there, however, we should realize that it has been of only limited help to African-Americans—or to anybody else.