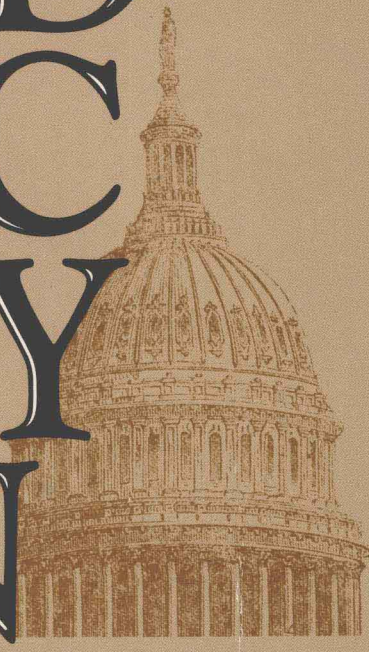
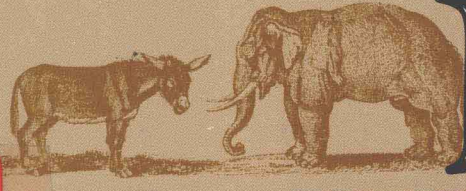
WILLIAM J. KEEFE

PARTIES, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC POLICY IN AMERICA





FOURTH EDITION

Parties, Politics, and Public Policy in America

Fourth Edition

William J. Keefe
University of Pittsburgh

Holt, Rinehart and Winston
New York Chicago San Francisco Philadelphia
Montreal Toronto London Sydney
Tokyo Mexico City Rio de Janeiro Madrid

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Keefe, William J.
Parties, politics, and public policy in America.

Includes index.
1. Political parties—United States. I. Title.
JK2265.K44 1984 324.273 83-22638

ISBN 0-03-068906-6

Address correspondence to:
383 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10017

Printed in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in Canada
4 5 6 7 090 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

CBS COLLEGE PUBLISHING
Holt, Rinehart and Winston
The Dryden Press
Saunders College Publishing

For Martha, Kathy, Nancy,
Mary Jo, and John

PREFACE

The American party system is in serious trouble. Voters ignore parties, politicians dismiss them, activists bypass them, and the media demean them. Almost everyone, it seems, distrusts them. The parties' loss of vitality shows up both in the government and in the electorate, perhaps especially the latter. Political outsiders—the political action committees of interest groups, the media, campaign management firms, political consultants, direct-mail fund raisers—often play a more important role in campaigns than the parties. It is not too much to say that party organizations often find themselves in the uneasy role of bystander, as individual candidates struggle to win office, using nonparty resources and all the techniques validated in mass merchandising. In the midst of party devitalization, interest groups flourish—their PACs, for example, have become singularly prominent in financing congressional campaigns. Interest-group influence in Congress appears to be at a high point.

The weakness of the parties is particularly noticeable in the presidential-election process. Party and governmental "reforms," ironically, have contributed to the debilitation of the parties. Presidential primaries have all but displaced the national convention in the nominating process. Party caucuses have become candidate-focused gatherings; the local caucus now belongs to whoever walks in off the street. Party spending in presidential campaigns has been subordinated to public financing. The preferences of party leaders count for less and less; the preferences of amateur activists for more and more. The presidential campaign itself has become a major media event. Everything is up for grabs. Any angle can play. For candidates and public officials alike, the party label is what matters, not the party mission. In sum, no period in the last century has exacted a greater toll on the parties than the present one. Further strains on the party system are promised for the years ahead.

The parties have suffered from prolonged neglect by the public and from overattention by the reformers. Scholars, meanwhile, continue to be intrigued by them. Numerous books, monographs, and articles have been published on American parties in recent years. I have drawn extensively on this interesting literature.

Much new material has been added to this edition. Yet the book is still on the lean side. One justification for brevity is that some things are more important to know than others. Another emerges in the observation of the late E. E. Schattschneider, a scholar whose work touches all who write about American politics: "The compulsion to know everything," he wrote, "is the road to insanity." Based on that firm ground, this book leaves some lesser aspects of party unexplored, some things unsaid.

It may be that the American party system needs to be rescued from its detractors, but that is not the main purpose of this book. Nor is it to sketch a blueprint showing where the best opportunities lie for making further changes in the parties. The central purpose is rather one of exegesis: to bring into focus the major features of the parties, to account for their form and functions, and to examine and interpret their present condition. This edition pays special attention to the changes that have come to the parties, to the difficulties that confront them as agencies for managing conflict and managing government, to their competitors, and to the forces that help to shape them.

The assistance and suggestions of friends, students, colleagues, and reviewers have been very helpful in preparing various editions of this book. I especially want to acknowledge Paul A. Beck, Keith Burris, Holbert N. Carroll, Edward F. Cooke, Stephen Craig, William J. Crotty, Robert L. Donaldson, John Havick, Charles O. Jones, Paul Lopatto, Roger McGill, Michael Margolis, Russell Moses, Morris S. Ogul, Bert A. Rockman, Robert S. Walters, and Sidney Wise. Despite their assistance and good intentions, errors of fact and interpretation nevertheless may have crept into a page here and there. If this turns out to be the case, I suggest the responsibility is properly theirs!

Marie Schappert, political science editor at Holt, Rinehart and Winston and a solid professional, deserves special mention for her counsel and support, and not just because this is her all-time favorite book. Catherine Buckner, project editor, skillfully managed the production of the fourth edition, and Barbara Heinssen, editorial assistant, paid meticulous attention to the matter of permissions.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Martha, for her substantial contributions to each of the editions. She edits, types, and pastes with the best of them. Nothing, it turns out, is as important to her as the opportunity to revise a book. She lives for it! In all truth, I couldn't count the number of times I've heard her say that the enjoyment and excitement of typing and pasting are surpassed by only one thing: the ecstasy of proofreading.

Oakmont, Pennsylvania
May 1983

W.J.K.

CONTENTS

FIGURES

TABLES

Chapter 1

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The American political party system has more than its share of mysteries. Any attempt to unravel them might well begin by recognizing the fact that the parties are less what they make of themselves than what their environment makes of them.[1] To a marked extent, the party owes its form and substance to the impact of four external elements: the legal-political system, the election system, the political culture, and the heterogeneous quality of American life. Singly and in combination, these elements contribute in significant and indelible ways to the organizational characteristics of the parties, to the manner in which they carry on their activities, to their internal discipline, to the behavior of both their elite and rank-and-file members, and to their capacity to control the political system and to perform as policy-making agencies.

THE PARTIES AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

The Legal–Political System

No careful student of American history can escape the conclusion that the United States Constitution was designed by men who were suspicious of popular majorities and who had little sympathy for the functions of party. Line after line of the Constitution discloses the basic intent of the designers: to establish a government that could not easily be brought under the control of any one element, however large, that might exist within the country. The underlying philosophy of the Founding Fathers was both simple and pervasive: power was to check power, and the ambi-

tions of some men were to check the ambitions of other men. The two main features in this design were federalism and the separation of powers—the first intended to distribute power among different levels of government; the second, to distribute power among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Division of the legislature into two houses, with their memberships elected for different terms and by different methods, was thought to reduce further the risk that a single faction (or party) might gain ascendancy. E. E. Schattschneider developed the argument in this fashion:

> The theory of the Constitution, inherited from the time of the Glorious Revolution in England, was legalistic and preparty in its assumptions. Great reliance was placed in a system of separation of powers, a legalistic concept of government incompatible with a satisfactory system of party government. No place was made for the parties in the system, party government was not clearly foreseen or well understood, government by parties was thought to be impossible or impracticable and was feared and regarded as something to be avoided. . . . The Convention at Philadelphia produced a constitution with a dual attitude: it was proparty in one sense and antiparty in another. The authors of the Constitution refused to suppress the parties by destroying the fundamental liberties in which parties originate. They or their immediate successors accepted amendments that guaranteed civil rights and thus established a system of party tolerance, *i.e.*, the right to agitate and to organize. This is the proparty aspect of the system. On the other hand, the authors of the Constitution set up an elaborate division and balance of powers within an intricate governmental structure designed to make parties ineffective. It was hoped that the parties would lose and exhaust themselves in futile attempts to fight their way through the labyrinthine framework of the government, much as an attacking army is expected to spend itself against the defensive works of a fortress. This is the antiparty part of the constitutional scheme. To quote Madison, the "great object" of the Constitution was "to preserve the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction [party] and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government."[2]

Federalism also works against the development of centralized parties. The federal scheme of organization guarantees that there will be not only 50 separate state governmental systems, but also 50 separate state party systems. No two are exactly alike. The prevailing ideology in one state party may be vastly different from that of another state party; for example, it takes no great imagination to picture the extraordinary differences that separate the state Democratic party of Mississippi from that of New York. And within each state all manner of local party organizations exist, sometimes functioning in harmony with state and national party bodies and sometimes not. Not only do the parties differ from state to state and from community to community, but the election laws that govern their activities also differ. A great variety of state laws, for example, govern the organizational features of parties, nominating procedures, ballots, campaign finance, and elections. The thrust of federalism is thus dispersive and parochial.

The Election System

The election system is another element in the environment of political parties. So closely linked are parties and elections that it is difficult to understand much about one without understanding a great deal about the other. Parties are in business to win elections. Election systems shape the way the parties compete for power and the success with which they do it. Several examples will help to illustrate this point.

Although a state's election calendar may appear neutral, even innocuous, it has a substantial bearing on party fortunes. Many state constitutions provide election calendars that separate state elections from national elections—for example, gubernatorial from presidential elections. The singular effect of this arrangement is to insulate state politics from national politics.[3] The national tides that sweep one party into the presidency may be no more than ripples by the time a state election is held two years later. Although the Democratic party won presidential election after presidential election during the 1930s and 1940s, a great many governorships and state legislatures remained safely Republican, in part because of their off-year election calendars. Recent Republican success in presidential elections (1968, 1972, 1980) was not translated into significant gains for the party at the state level. In similar fashion, the use of staggered terms of office for legislative and executive offices diminishes the likelihood that one party can take control of both branches of government at any one time. When the governor is elected for four years and the lower house is elected for two years, prospects increase that the governor's party will lose legislative seats, and perhaps its majority, in the off-year election. The same is true in the case of the president and Congress. Whatever their virtues, staggered terms and off-year elections heighten the probability of divided control of government.

The use of single-member districts with plurality elections for the election of legislative bodies also carries ramifications for the parties. When an election is held within a single-member district, only one party can win; the winning candidate need receive only one more vote than any other candidate, and all votes for candidates other than the victor are lost. Although the single-member district system discriminates against the second party in any district, its principal impact is virtually to rule out the possibility that a minor party can win legislative representation. Indeed, only a handful of minor party candidates have ever held seats either in Congress or in the state legislatures. The device of single-member districts with plurality elections has long been seen as one of the principal bulwarks of the *two*-party system.[4]

Few, if any, electoral arrangements apparently have had a greater impact on political parties than the direct primary, a product of the reformist movement in the early twentieth century. The primary was introduced as a means of combating the power of those party oligarchs who, shielded from popular influences, dominated the process of selecting nominees in state and local party conventions. By contrast, the primary was designed to democratize the nominating process by empowering the voters to choose the party's nominees. Today, all states employ some form of primary system, though the convention method survives for the nomination of presidential and vice-presidential candidates. The proliferation of presidential primaries

in recent years—35 were held in 1980—has diminished the significance of the national convention.

Although the precise impact of the primary on the parties is difficult to evaluate, it seems plain that its influence has been substantial. The usual arguments presented follow: First, by transferring the choice of nominees from party councils to the voters, the primary has increased the probability that candidates with significantly different perspectives on public policy will be brought together in the same party. Whatever their views or policy orientations, the victors in primary elections become the party's nominees, and there is not much the party can do about it. Second, as a result, party responsibility has declined—candidates who win office largely on their own, who have their own distinctive followings within local electorates, have less reason to defer to party leaders or to follow party imperatives. Their party membership is what they choose to make it. Third, the presence of the primary has contributed to numerous intraparty clashes; particularly bitter primary fights sometimes render the party incapable of generating a united campaign in the general election.[5] Finally, the argument often advanced is that the primary has contributed to the spread and maintenance of one-party politics. Where one party ordinarily dominates the politics of an area, its primaries tend to become the arena where political battles are fought out. The growth of the second party is inhibited not only by the lack of voter interest in its primaries but also by its inability to attract strong candidates to its colors. One-party domination reveals little about the party's organizational strength—indeed, the prospects are high that one-party political systems will be characterized more by factionalism and internecine warfare than by unity, harmony, or ideological agreement.

Such are the arguments that have been developed against the primary. Of course, a number of arguments can be made on its behalf.[6] Moreover, in some jurisdictions the dominant party organization is sufficiently strong that nonendorsed candidates are seldom able to upset the organization slate. Potential challengers may abandon their campaigns once the party organization has made known its choices. Other candidacies may never materialize because the prospects for getting the nod from party leaders appear so unpromising. Nevertheless, taking the country as a whole, the evidence is persuasive that the use of the primary has led to a general weakening of party organization. Unable to control its nominations, a party forfeits some portion of its claim to be known as a party, some portion of its *raison d'être*. The loose, freewheeling character of American parties owes much to the advent, consolidation, and extension of the direct primary.

As a further example of the relationship between the election system and the party system, one may consider the use and impact of nonpartisan elections. In their search for a formula to improve city government early in the twentieth century, reformers hit upon the idea of the nonpartisan ballot—one in which party labels would not be present. The purpose of the plan was to free local government from the issues and divisiveness of national and state party politics and from the grip of local party bosses, which in turn, it was thought, would contribute to the effectiveness of local units. The nonpartisan ballot immediately gained favor and, once established,

has been hard to dislodge; indeed, the plan has grown in popularity over the years. Today, well over half of the American cities with populations over 5000 have nonpartisan elections.

A substantial variety of political patterns is found in nonpartisan election systems. In some cities with nonpartisan ballots, the party presence is nonetheless quite visible, and there is no doubt which candidates are affiliated with which parties. Elections in these cities are partisan in everything but label. In other cities, local party organizations compete against slates of candidates sponsored by various nonparty groups. In still other cities, the local parties are virtually without power, having lost it to interest groups that recruit, sponsor, and finance candidates for office. Finally, there are nonpartisan elections in which neither party nor nonparty groups slate candidates, thus leaving individual candidates to their own devices. This type is particularly prevalent in small cities.

It is difficult to say how much nonpartisan elections have diminished the vitality of local party organizations. Here and there the answer is plainly, "very little if at all"; elsewhere, the impact appears to have been substantial. Whatever the case, it is clear that where parties are shut out of the local election process, other kinds of politics enter—possibly centered around interest groups (including the press), celebrity or name politics (the latter favoring incumbents), or the idiosyncratic appeals of individual office seekers. Where party labels are absent, power is up for grabs. Whether the voters in any real sense can hold their representatives accountable, lacking the guidance that party labels furnish, is problematical at best.

Myths to the contrary, election systems are never completely neutral. Some election laws and constitutional arrangements, such as the single-member district system or the rigorous requirements that minor parties must meet to gain a place on the ballot, provide general support for the two-party system. Of the nearly two dozen minor parties that ran candidates for the presidency in 1980, for example, only the Libertarian party managed to get on the ballot in all 50 states. Other laws and constitutional provisions make party government difficult and sometimes impossible; included here are such system features as staggered terms of office, off-year elections, direct primaries, and nonpartisan ballots. The major parties, of course, are not always passive witnesses to existing electoral arrangements. At times they simply endure them because it is easier to live with conventional arrangements than to try to change them, or because they recognize their benefits. At other times they seek new electoral dispositions, because the prospects for party advantage are sufficiently promising to warrant the effort. It is a good bet that no one understands or appreciates American election systems better than those party leaders responsible for defending party interests and winning elections.

The Political Culture and the Parties

A third important element in the environment of American political parties is the political culture—"the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place."[7] As commonly

TABLE 1. The Distribution of Sentiment on Items Pertaining to Support for the Party System

Items	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	
Diffuse Support	*Strongly Agree*	*Agree*	*Agree-Disagree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*	*Don't Know*	*Not Ascertained*	*Total Percent*
The parties do more to confuse the issues than to provide a clear choice on them.	4%	50	19	20	1	5	1	100%
The party leaders make no real effort to keep their promises once they get into office.	6%	30	28	31	2	3	1	101%†
Our system of government would work a lot more efficiently if we could get rid of conflicts between the parties altogether.	9%	44	8	28	6	4	1	100%
The political parties more often than not create conflicts where none really exist.	5%	59	13	15	*	7	1	100%
It would be better if, in all elections, we put no party labels on the ballot.	3%	19	7	54	13	3	1	100%
People who work for parties during political campaigns do our nation a great service.	7%	61	19	10	*	4	*	101%†
The best rule in voting is to pick the man regardless of his party label.	23%	59	6	9	1	2	*	100%
Support for Responsible Party Government								
A senator or representative should follow his party leaders, even if he doesn't want to.	1%	22	9	56	7	4	1	100%
We would be better off if all the Democrats in government stood together and all the Republicans did the same.	2%	28	12	49	5	4	1	101%†
It is good to stick with your party through thick and thin.	3%	33	14	41	6	3	1	101%†

*Less than 1%.

†Totals do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Jack Dennis, "Support for the Party System by the Mass Public," *American Political Science Review,* LX (September 1966), p. 605 (as adapted).

represented, the political culture of a nation is the amalgam of public attitudes toward the political system, its subunits, and the role of the individual within the system. It includes the knowledge and beliefs people have about the political system, their feelings toward it and their identification with it, and the evaluations they make of it.

Although there is little systematic information on the public's political orientations toward the party system, scattered evidence exists that large sections of the public do not evaluate parties or party functions in a favorable light. Studies of the Wisconsin electorate between 1964 and 1976 by Jack Dennis bear on this point. Table 1 shows the range of public attitudes on a series of propositions about American parties, including those that reveal diffuse or generalized support for the party system as a whole and the norm of partisanship and those that reveal acceptance of the ideas or practices congruent with a system of responsible parties.[8]

The principal conclusion to be drawn from the table is that the public is highly skeptical of the parties and their activities. In 1964, 82 percent of the Wisconsin electorate endorsed the idea that "the best rule in voting is to pick the man regardless of party label." By 1976, 93 percent accepted this idea.[9] A clear majority of the public believes that the parties do more to confuse issues than to clarify them, that government would perform better without conflicts between the parties, and that the parties provoke unnecessary conflicts. In the most recent study (1976), less than 40 percent of the voters of Wisconsin believed that party labels should be kept on the ballot.[10]

Also of interest, the Wisconsin data reveal that support for cohesive and disciplined parties is extremely limited. In 1964, only about 23 percent of the state's respondents agreed that "a senator or representative should follow his party leaders, even if he doesn't want to." By 1974, this proportion had shrunk to 10 percent.[11] Overall, there is little in this profile of popular attitudes that portends public understanding or acceptance of the tenets of a responsible party system.[12]

Generalizing about national attitude patterns from the data gathered in one state is risky. Nevertheless, it appears likely that the orientations of the Wisconsin voters to the parties are fairly representative of the nation as a whole. Although most people vote within the framework of their party affiliations, their interest in parties often stops at that point. Nationwide surveys of voter attitudes toward control of the presidency and Congress by the same party, shown in Table 2, help to make the case. Only about one-third of the voters believe that the country is better off when the same party controls both the executive and the legislative branches of government. Figure 1 shows the principal advantages that the public believes result from divided party control. Chief among these is the belief that it increases the likelihood that corruption will be detected and that power will not be abused. It seems clear from these data that most Americans are dubious of government by party.

Additional evidence on popular dissatisfaction with the party system appears in trends concerning party identification and straight-party voting. The number of people who identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans dropped from 80 percent in 1940 to 70 percent in 1982; on several occasions during this period, the