AMERICAN POLITICS IN THE W E TWENTIETH RY

PRESENT DISCONTENTS

BYRON E. SHAFER
with
Joel H. Silbey
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Present Discontents

Preface

THIS BOOK GREW out of two series of public lectures at Oxford University, series concerned with interpreting American politics in the very late twentieth century. Revised versions of those lectures constitute the chapters that follow. The postwar period—the years between the end of World War II and the present—was the focus for all speakers, and all were concerned with the evolution of American politics across that period. Otherwise, each began with a single and specific aspect of that politics: parties, society, institutions, culture, issues, agendas, and coalitions.

Those who already know these authors—Messrs. Barone, Carmines and Layman, Edsall, Ehrenhalt, Jones, Shafer, and Silbey—will know that they are distinguished by being macro interpreters of American politics; there are no political miniaturists here. Those who know them will also know that each has a distinctive perspective, even a distinctive voice; these too are very much in evidence. Those who do not yet know some or all of these authors are about to discover that they can organize and interpret a broad sweep of American politics in a concise, lively, and *forceful* way.

Some readers will surely be struck by the differences among them, in the conclusions they draw from their particular pieces of the puzzle. They do differ in evaluating present discontents, not only in the degree of alarm which they regard as appropriate, but in the degree to which they view current problems in American politics as unprecedented in an evolutionary sense or as merely the current incarnations of long-running (and recurrent) tensions. The view of the editor, however—my view—is that what is equally striking about all these analyses is the underlying similarity of the interpretations, and hence of empirical diagnoses. Beginning with separable but very major pieces of the puzzle, they are, one after another, led ultimately toward remarkably parallel analyses.

Or so it seemed to me, though that is inevitably a matter for each reader to judge individually. Large and rumbustious initial audiences at Oxford were certainly prepared to argue. Happily, Ed Artinian and his staff at Chatham House were not, at least about the process of

converting these essays into a book. None of this would have been possible without the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Fund, and thus ultimately of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, or without the encouragement of its committee at Oxford—Nigel Bowles, Desmond King, John Rowett, Alan Ware, and Laurence Whitehead. I hope they draw some satisfaction from the product. The result, in any case, is present—without discontent—in the seven chapters that follow.

Contents

PARTIES

Joel H. Silbey

Foundation Stones of Present Discontents: The American Political Nation, 1776–1945

IT IS NO SECRET that we live in troubled political times. Everywhere in the world, in nations with long and settled traditions of popular government and in those struggling to create new institutions of governance or to redefine themselves in the aftermath of the Cold War, there is widespread cynicism at the end of the twentieth century: enormous negativism toward existing political systems; an often frenetic impatience with, and frustration about, the failure of leadership; apparent deviousness by politicians at every level—"I won't be voting," *The Guardian* quoted an apparently not untypical Londoner just before England's local elections in early 1994, "they're all bleeding liars, ain't they?"—and the ultimate inability of our political institutions to deal with the daunting range of critical problems that affect us all.[1]

Much of the available evidence suggests that such negativism is not misplaced. In this line of argument, the world has indeed entered an age of stark political decline, not only in the macrocosmic economic and military sense of overstretch, the consequent rise and fall that Paul Kennedy has presented, but also in the current level of leadership skills and in the ability of many nations, settled systems and otherwise, to deal competently with the derivative and ordinary political affairs that occur everywhere on a day-to-day basis. Decline into ineptitude appears to define our lot.[2]

The United States has not been immune from these unhappy currents. Its political system has been unusually durable and, as many Americans like to believe, can be viewed as having evolved over time toward ever-higher levels of democratic achievement and ever-better ways and means of accomplishing the national purpose. The nation's political system, after all, reaches across a broader landscape than it ever has before, is undeniably more democratic than in earlier times, and remains an important focus for those seeking to get their way in a sprawling and complex society. But for a nation that has prided itself on its political stability, its ability to get things done, and its success in incorporating significant changes without great fuss, Americans are now undergoing a particularly unsettling version (for them) of the declinist complaint. The nation's political commentary is awash in unremitting, harsh, and despairing assertions about institutional and leadership inadequacies; about sleaze, corruption, scandal, and selfishness; about systemic incoherence, unresponsiveness, drift, and ineffectiveness.[3]

Americans' persistent focus on political morality has become a vehicle for relentlessly denouncing all politicians and the political pro-

cess itself. Expressions of resentment and anger at the way that the system operates (or fails to operate) have become cacophonous—and not only among the friends of Ross Perot. Current media frenzy focuses all but exclusively on highly negative and sour reporting of the failures, deceptions, and unrequited malignant conduct of our political leaders. Savage reports of personal and institutional failures are the everyday stuff of even the most sober commentary. Elections are swamps of chaotic and confusing name-calling. They neither improve matters nor clarify what we are about—they do not "solve" anything. In fact, a growing body of opinion suggests that America's normal political fare means little, except to reveal all too many moments of extreme manipulative and deceptive practices.[4]

All of this negativism has had an impact. In an era in which individual character failures constitute the primary emphasis of American political discourse and have become a major determinant of voter choice, whatever the issues argued and the policies articulated, popular political behavior has become highly volatile and itself unusually angry and negative. Few presidents survive for very long; all officeholders have become suspect—when they are not despised. Polls indicate deep distrust of our leaders and frustration about the system they manage. "The sad truth is," two professional analysts of polling data conclude, "that we have come to expect lies, distortion, and deception as everyday occurrences in politics." The professional politician has become very damaged goods—the epithet "Washington insider" is a redundant accusation—the survival of each threatened by popular protests and the future of all threatened by the passage of unprecedented reform legislation. At the same time, the policymaking apparatus that they inhabit is viewed as totally ineffective, except when it comes to confirming or extending the perks enjoyed by legislators and bureaucrats.[5]

Most troubling of all is that this miserable state of affairs is no longer viewed in the media or in the public at large as temporary and correctable, when matters inevitably return to an even keel, as they have always done in the past. As threatening as anything can be to the current health of American democratic politics is that much of the critical dialogue about it strongly articulates the notion not only of a major but of a permanent governability crisis, dominated by unremitting systemic dysfunction, deterioration, and irreversible, terminal decline. "It is now close to a universal belief among Americans," Walter Dean Burnham has written, "that time is not on our side," in confronting and successfully dealing with the problems that beset us and demand a political response.[6]

Time was once always on their side—or so Americans liked to believe. When it no longer is, or is believed not to be, one can only conclude that there is something deeply amiss in the American political system, an extraordinary loss of public confidence in it and in any commitment to be patient and tolerant of its difficulties, to await better days. Everywhere, there is the corrosive reality of failure and rejection. As the Brookings Institution scholar Thomas Mann suggested after the presidential election of 1992, there is little but "anger and contempt" in the United States "for the political process.... What is a normal political process is seen as somehow tainted and demeaning," not to mention cumbersome, unresponsive, ineffective, and ultimately debilitating. In fine, "the American people no longer believe in their government."[7]

There are some irreducible facts within all of this negativism, whatever the levels of hyperbole and exaggeration present in its expression. A great deal has changed on the American political landscape, and much of what now occurs there cannot be defined as a positive good. The American government has never been particularly nimble in its activities, but as the range of current expectations and policy entitlements has grown, all but exponentially, there has been a steep decline in the system's governing and socializing capabilities, even from the less-than-ideal situation of previous eras. But why has that happened at this moment in our history? Is such dysfunction inevitable, given massive technological changes and the exhaustion of reigning ideologies such as liberalism, which have for so long given shape and understanding to our political experience, or is it the result of the extraordinary power of other disruptive social and economic elements now intruding into the political realm? Unfortunately, we do not really know, although much scholarly speculation exists, not to mention a great deal of media analysis, much of it unfortunately confusing and contradictory.[8]

There is also a counterpart level of complacency among some observers, who suggest that there is less here than meets the eye—that popular and media negativism has missed the critical (and reassuring) point that there are always such moments of difficulty in political life, moments that are usually followed by the system righting itself in a rhythmic pattern of restoration. "Cheer up," *The Economist*'s American correspondent suggested in early 1994, "things are really not that bad." Some scholars agree with that proposition and point out that important and depressing political transformations have occurred before but that there has always been a self-regulating mechanism pres-

ent to restore the system to its normal keel after a period of disruption and tension. We should, in this view, step back, relax a little, take a long perspective, and await the impact of the system's inherent restorative forces.[9]

I do not agree. The evidence we have suggests that such restorative forces no longer exist in the way they once did. If there has been a rhythmic pattern to American politics involving, among other qualities, powerful mechanisms that operate to return the political nation to some efficacious balance even after the most disheartening episodes, it is no longer obviously present on the American landscape. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that to see our present political situation as part of a familiar cyclical pattern encompassing a sixth party system in a recurring line stretching back to 1789—each similar in style and basic organization, each defined, energized, and renewed by periodic electoral realignments, each eventually bringing the system back to a basic, sustainable norm of conflict, management, and reasonable accomplishment—inadequately locates our present situation.[10]

The reason for that conceptual inadequacy is that our prevailing notion of a cyclical pattern of change and restoration in American political history, driven by partisan and voting realignments, is too timebound to be useful for the analytic purposes to which scholars have put it. The conditions that underlay recurring party systems and allowed for periodic shifts in their nature, while retaining the basic stability of the system as a whole, existed for only part of our history. Most critically, they no longer do. Instead, and centrally, I believe Robert Dahl's formulation, that Americans now live in new and very unfamiliar territory, is correct. We inhabit a distinct moment unlike any previous one in our history, in which the central thrust of political life is very different from what has gone before, a moment that is, distinctively, largely disintegrative in nature. As Dahl suggests, the two dominating aspects of America's current political order are that "government policies are made in response to a greater number and variety of conflicting and substantially autonomous interest groups," and at the same time "political institutions for encouraging these conflicting interest groups to negotiate ... in search of mutually beneficial policies, are ... weaker than before."[11] The current order cannot be viewed as simply the recurrence, once again, of a periodic disruption that always challenges but does not overthrow the nation's basic political stability. As a result, our understanding of where we came from and what we now are politically has to be reconsidered through dif-

ferent lenses than that of the party-systems framework with its implicit assumptions of patterned restoration and regeneration.

American Political Eras and the Power of History

There is a second point to be made about these matters. Many scholars, as well as most popular commentators, emphasize relatively recent events as the source of our current dismaying political condition. Most of them focus, in particular, on the massive disintegrative impulses of the 1960s, a decade that did not see the expected electoral realignment supposedly due then, but in which much about American political life was transformed, and not for the better. "This book . . . is about a change in American society and behavior over the past thirty or so years," Jonathan Rauch has written at the outset of his angry analysis of our current situation, "which is compromising our ability to govern ourselves and to solve common problems." Other events, such as the antiwar uproar, the repeated iniquities of our political leadership, the challenges to most "establishment" institutions, and the rising power of television to affect and change people's perspectives about the political world, all made important additional contributions to shaping our current political nation and the polarizing and coarsening of our civic culture.[12]

There is a great deal of truth in notions about the contribution of events of the 1960s to the transformation of our political capabilities since. But a primary focus on that decade does not, it seems to me, go far enough into the previous patterns, structures, and shape of the political nation and the directions that it took at earlier moments in our history. The dynamics undergirding current political angst in the United States are much more long run than the focus on a single recent decade allows. The events of the 1960s had an impact on an environment that already was in the throes of transformative political changes, the result of a basic long-term metamorphosis of institutions, attitudes, and, ultimately, behavior—culminating in, and marked by, a shift in institutional structures and cultural perspectives of truly revolutionary dimensions.

To bring these criticisms to a point, I suggest that to comprehend what is now happening on the national political landscape, analysis has to begin by employing a different organizing concept, that of distinct political eras, as the basic structuring dimension of American political history. Whatever cyclical elements have been present to shape and set boundaries amid a recurrent pulse to American political his-

tory, they were not alone. Other elements existed as well, elements that shaped the system institutionally, first in an evolutionary and then in a degenerative pattern. The notion of political eras catches these alternative impulses and provides, I suggest, a quite useful and much more informative way of describing and understanding why we have reached our current problematic political state.[13]

Much happened in American politics between the founding of the nation and the end of World War II in 1945. On the surface, much of the political nation looks remarkably stable. It has not been. Beneath the same regular contests for office, the annual meetings of Congress and state legislatures, which do occur over and over, along with the other normal activities connected with national political development, the ways in which Americans dealt with their political needs have changed dramatically over two hundred years. As a result, there were distinctive frameworks organizing what happened on the landscape, these frameworks forming into four distinct political eras, and the period since 1945 has been only the most recent among them (see table 1.1). Each of these eras succeeded and built upon what was already on the ground. But each contained elements that were distinct from all of the others, with different ways of doing business and different centers of gravity, and each had quite different capabilities—and reputations—as a result.

A full elaboration of all the elements constituting each of the nation's political eras would range from the notions about politics held

TABLE 1.1
AMERICAN POLITICAL ERAS

Era	*Description*	*Dates*
1	Prepartisan/prealignment	1789–1838
2	Partisan/alignment-realignment	1838–93
3	Postpartisan/realignment-dealignment	1893–1945
4	Nonpartisan/postalignment	1945–90 and beyond

by both political leaders and the general population at different moments, up to and including the power and reach of government itself. Such an elaboration would include the process by which policy was made; the extent and nature of popular involvement in formal political activity; and the role played by particular institutions, most especially national political parties, in organizing the system, articulating

what was at stake in each era, bringing Americans into contact with their government and the rest of the political process, and influencing how they acted to achieve their particular ends.[14]

Parties have existed in America since the 1790s. But their function and importance have constantly varied, as dictated by needs and pressures in the political nation at different moments as well as by the shifting balances among particular ideological constructs that existed—ideological constructs that continually debated the appropriateness of such institutions.[15] The nature of the issues defining the political world, and identifying what was at stake at a given moment, were usually readily agreed upon. But how political participants were to accomplish their purposes has always been vigorously contested, in particular over the correct balance between distinct institutional ways of dealing with political matters, that is, over the role played by political parties in shaping and influencing individual and aggregate behavior. The way that this contest played out is, to reiterate my main perspective, the key to understanding not only the nature of our past politics but why the nation's political present is what it has become.

All of which brings me, at last, to the point of this essay. A consideration of the nature of our current political landscape will be undertaken by those who follow me in this collection. My intention is to set the stage for their analysis by locating and describing the foundations on which our present situation rests, since, given what I have said, such an examination provides the necessary long-range context for understanding the roots and nature of our political transformation. My argument is that however much recent socioeconomic conditions, ideological shifts, and particular events in the 1960s contributed to it, America's current political malaise is rooted first and foremost in the collapse, beginning with the onset of the third political era at the end of the nineteenth century, of the partisan institutional framework critically and absolutely necessary for the effective operation and health of the American political world.[16]

From its beginnings in the colonial era, the American scene was contentious and grew steadily more so. The problem of disciplining and directing a political nation subject to roiling fragmentation and unremitting factional and real conflicts preoccupied a great many American political leaders from the outset, beginning with James Madison and continuing through Martin Van Buren, John C. Calhoun, and, later, a range of Progressive reformers, academics, and outside observers right into the present. If the United States was destined to be the scene of persistent social, economic, and political con-

flict, these needed to be managed effectively. But how was this to be done; how far would any attempts to bring order extend throughout the political community? What impact would such management have on the autonomy of individuals and communities to go their own way or on the particular needs of specific groups, the security of different interests, classes, and sections?[17]

The answers to these questions were always elusive because they were fiercely contested. There was a persistent and powerful disagreement about them, in fact about the arts of political management generally. This disagreement has materially contributed to the framing of America's political experience, divided it, and helped shape it into the distinctive eras the nation has had. Most pertinently, the contestation over how to organize politics led to the further bifurcation of America's political development, a bifurcation that involved two critical transformative changes in direction in the way that we organize and articulate the political world.

The first of these changes occurred between the first and second political eras, the second occurred between the second era and the two eras that have followed. The first transformation, growing out of the dangerously divisive turmoil of the post-1815 decades, led to the establishment of America's only partisan dominant era, which existed between the late 1830s and the early 1890s.[18] The second of these critical shifts in direction, associated with the Populist-Progressive years, initiated a long secular trend that powerfully challenged, and then overthrew, the deeply rooted partisan way of organizing and articulating American political life.

In that long secular trend lie the roots of our current situation, though a number of other things filtered into it as well. Our experience during the moments of great reformist energy between the 1890s and the 1940s, encompassing America's third political era—beginning with the Populist uprising of the 1890s and the Progressive assault on partisan politics and followed by the New Deal and then the expansion of government during World War II—all had in common an extraordinary assault on the ability of Americans to make their politics coherent and functional through the established partisan institutions that had traditionally performed those tasks.[19]

These challenges, followed in turn by the massive uproar against normal politics that we associate with the 1960s, accumulated and synthesized into a very different political situation from what had earlier been present and created the particular landscape on which subsequent forces operated. The fourth American political era, beginning