Jeffrey M. Stonecash

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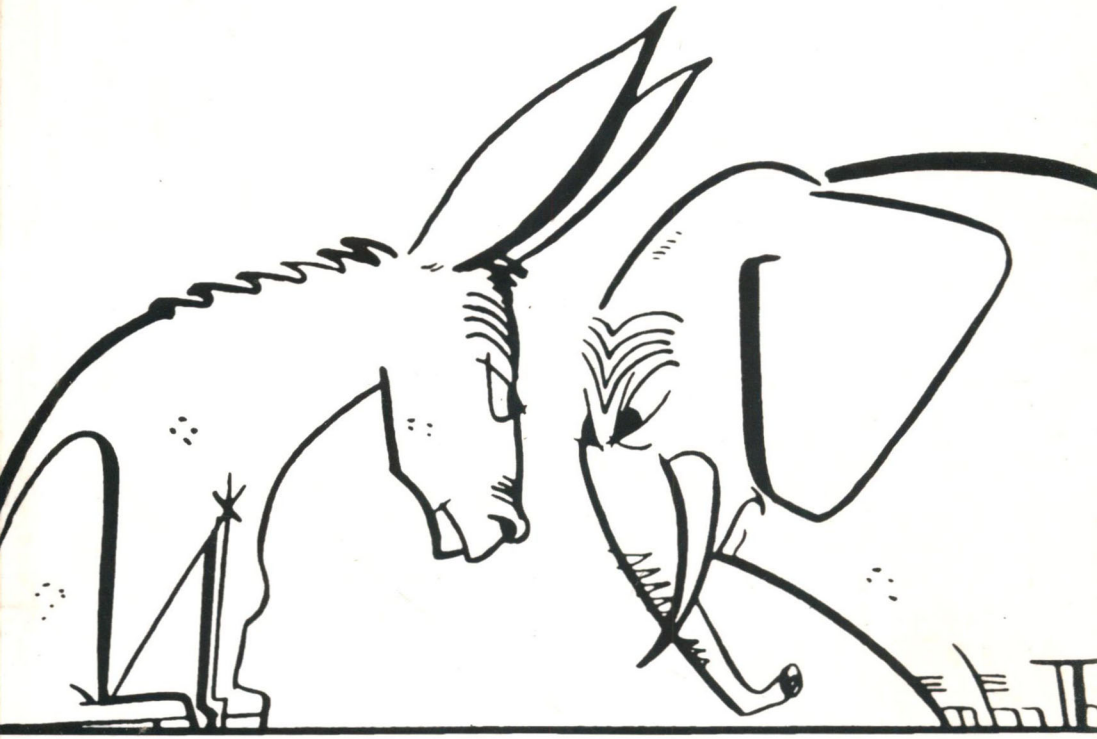

UNDERSTANDING AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Democratic Ideals, Political Uncertainty, and Strategic Positioning

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Understanding American Political Parties

How do parties respond to the electorate and craft winning strategies? In the abstract parties are the vehicles to make democracy work, but it is often difficult to see the process working as well as we think it might. Indeed, voters often struggle to see parties as the valuable vehicles of representation that so many academics describe. There is a clear discrepancy between the ideal expressed in many textbooks and the reality that we see playing out in politics.

Noted scholar Jeffrey Stonecash gives us a big picture analysis that helps us understand what is happening in contemporary party politics. He explains that parties behave the way they do because of existing political conditions and how parties adapt to those conditions as they prepare for the next election. Parties are unsure whether realignment has stabilized and just what issues brought them their current base. Does a majority support their positions and how are they to react to ongoing social change? Is the electorate paying attention, and can parties get a clear message to those voters? This book focuses on the challenges parties face in preparing for future elections while seeking to cope with current conditions. This coping leads to indecisiveness of positioning, simplification of issues, repetition of messages, and efforts to disparage the reputation of the opposing party. Stonecash sheds much needed light on why parties engage in the practices that frustrate so many Americans.

Jeffrey M. Stonecash is Maxwell Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University. His research focuses on political parties, realignment of their electoral bases, and the impact of changing alignments on the nature of policy debates.

Preface

We have an ideal about the role political parties should play in American democracy. They are expected to present alternatives and organize and lead policy debates. The electorate then reacts and renders its judgment, providing feedback to elected party members as they move to considering policy choices. While that ideal is regularly presented in textbooks, much of the American public has serious doubts about how well parties fulfill this ideal. They see simplistic proposals, negative ads, squabbling, and confrontations in Congress that do not seem to focus on and resolve problems. The reality does not appear to meet the ideal. The concern of this book is why does that seeming discrepancy exist? Why do parties engage in behaviors we don't like?

The answer involves the political conditions that parties face as they approach upcoming elections and seek a majority. These conditions and the resulting uncertainty create behaviors many do not like. We have many excellent studies that interpret what has happened in the past and how we got to where we are. They track the concerns and policy positions of the parties over time and how electoral groups change their partisan support in response. As valuable as those studies are, they miss something essential to understanding how American political parties see the political world and act. Studies invariably look backward, trying to interpret why some trends have happened.

Party politicians also look back to try to understand how they got to where they are, but they are enormously preoccupied with assessing existing conditions and deciding what positions they should take as the next election approaches. They must decide what issues and positions might help them connect with enough voters to achieve a majority. They draw upon the past, but they have to focus on what will work for the future.

The conditions they face are: awareness that considerable change has occurred over time in who is voting for each party; uncertainty whether this change is over; diverse interpretations of what brought them the base they have; an ongoing lack of a majority; continuing social change that they are uncertain how to react to; a disengaged electorate; and, a fragmented media that may not convey the positions the parties stake out. These

conditions prompt strategies and behaviors that much of the electorate does not like, but that parties see as a necessary part of coping with the conditions they face.

The following chapters review the conditions just listed and the behaviors that each prompts. The focus is on what party leaders and members face and how they are likely to see the political context within which they operate. It is an uncertain world and parties operate with much more of a trial and error approach than many of the historical interpretative analyses sometimes suggest. If this book has virtues, they are approaching the political world from the perspective of party leaders thinking about future elections and explaining why they behave the way they do.

Ultimately the important question is whether, despite these behaviors, the parties play out the ideal roles in democracy that we expect. That will be taken up at the end.

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Part I

American Political Parties

Democratic Ideals and Doubts

The rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties . . . have been the makers of democratic government. . . . political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.[1]

If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all—Thomas Jefferson.

The two parties can't come to a consensus even when the solution is obvious.[2]

A majority of Americans say it's more important that political leaders in Washington compromise in order to get things done, rather than stick to their beliefs, even as Congress heads for a government shutdown for the second time in less than two months because of partisan disagreements.[3]

1 Democracy and the Ideal Role of Political Parties

The fundamental premise of democracy is that the opinions and interests of people matter. At one time emperors, kings and religious authorities were presumed to possess wisdom and to be more capable than their subjects. Elites were seen as best suited to govern and the masses should defer to them. Democracy grew as a direct challenge to this idea that elites had a monopoly on wisdom. Elites were challenged as having no inherent right to determine what policies government should enact. Individuals had legitimate and differing views and their opinions should matter when decisions were made. Rather than the people listening to and accepting the decisions of elites, the rise of democracy meant that elites are expected to listen to and treat as legitimate the views of the people.[4]

The simple proposition that people's views matter, however, did not answer the question of how their views were to be communicated. We have a representative democracy and not a direct democracy. We elect and largely rely upon politicians who seek to interpret what people want, so politicians must find a way to discern public views. We could rely on mass gatherings but how can someone interpret what opinions exist in that gathering? We could rely on letter writing by constituents but who knows the opinions of those who do not write? We could elect people as individuals and try to sort out all the views of those elected, but with so many elected in America, the sorting through all these separate voices to discern what voters meant would be a challenge. The means of conveying public opinions is a fundamental challenge within democracy.

The situation is further complicated in that there are significant disagreements about what policies should be adopted. The challenge is not just to find out what "the people" want but to find a way to sort through differing views of what policies should prevail and find a way to represent them. Some believe that the federal government should play an active role in responding to social problems, while others believe that society works best if government is restrained, the national government in particular is limited, and individuals are encouraged to solve their own problems. Those who hold these opposing views do not hold them casually. They believe that the future of a free and democratic society hinges on whether their

views are followed in setting policies for the society. Others hold no clear opinions on these issues, making a debate more complicated.

It is the presence of differing and strongly held views about what society should do that prompted political parties as a solution.[5] If a group believes in their views they want their views represented because they think these policies are better for the nation. They may see a neglected social problem and think that a policy should be adopted to address it. Pollution levels are seen as too dangerous and policies are necessary to limit the ability of companies to pollute. Those who are younger or with lower incomes lack health insurance. A group may seek new government policies to respond to these perceived problems. Or a group may seek to mobilize to oppose and critique existing policies. Taxes and regulations are too high and are seen as stifling entrepreneurs. Opponents believe someone needs to call attention to the negative effects of this on society. They believe it will be beneficial to everyone to have someone present a critique of the policies in existence. The challenge in a democracy is to find others with similar views and demonstrate broad support for their position.

If they can band together and create a common identity party members can also work toward solving the problem of mobilizing support. It is not enough to just make an argument about the need to do something. The need is to find those who agree with these positions and demonstrate that there is widespread support for these views. They believe in something and see the issue as an opportunity to create support that might endure. A Democrat believes that workers should get a minimal wage rate and wants to enact a minimum wage. If they can make this a campaign focus it may garner some attention among some who might support the idea but have not seen politics as relevant and create political support. In the 1936 presidential election President Franklin Roosevelt and his Democratic Party campaigned on a minimum wage, which was eventually enacted in 1938. It created more support for President Franklin Roosevelt and made the conditions of workers part of public discussions. Republicans wanted this to remain a matter for employers and employees to work out without the mandates of a national law. This process of Democrats seeking to represent workers expanded the scope of what was considered a public matter.[6] It also brought Roosevelt continuing support from urban workers.[7]

In the 1980s, following the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which made abortion legal and a private decision, many conservatives thought that allowing this practice was immoral. They saw it as a matter that should not just be left to individuals but as one for which there should be a public social policy. They wanted to bring it back to the public arena and have Congress enact legislation making it illegal. Some Republican candidates agreed with them and saw this as a chance to increase their support among social conservatives. They gradually increased their comments about the importance of limiting or banning abortion and their support among social conservatives increased.[8] An issue once banned and then

allowed by the court decision was brought back to the public arena by those troubled by a decision making it legal. In advocating for limiting abortion, Republicans were seeking to attract opponents of abortion who had not previously voted Republican. The process of a party seeking support for a position brought about representation of an issue and those concerned about it. The result was more of a debate about whether abortion should be allowed.[9]

If a party can create some internal consensus on an issue they can in turn present that position to voters. This may involve considerable simplification—abortion is immoral or a woman's decision, government intrusion is beneficial or detrimental to society—but it allows the presentation of a general principle to voters. This makes it possible to present voters with a simple message that conveys broad principles, which makes it easier for voters to connect with either party. Some voters will be reluctant to accept these two simplistic alternatives, but for the bulk of voters these alternatives may well constitute meaningful choices. The formation of a clear party position solves a communication problem.

If the party creates a clear identity it will allow them to mobilize sympathetic voters. It may get them interested enough to identify with the party, contribute to it, perhaps work for the party, and to turn out and vote for the party. To achieve these goals, the party must make sure it is focusing on concerns important to a substantial segment of the electorate. If a party focuses on matters that are not important to voters it is unlikely to prompt their support and garner their votes. The need for votes should function to keep a party focused on issues relevant to voters.

The Dynamic

If this process works as we hope, the following dynamic occurs. Party leaders hold certain beliefs about what government policy should be. These leaders interact with and listen to activists. They may conduct polls to verify whether a substantial segment of voters agree with positions they support. If they find this support, the party members discuss among themselves whether to make this a theme during the upcoming campaign. Those who are running for various offices consider how much they agree with a theme and how much they wish to be identified with the theme. Perhaps each party is comprised of those who generally share the same views about the proper role of government. Most candidates then decide to campaign on the same general theme.

Throughout a campaign each party's candidates present their views of the role of government. The voters then render their judgment of which party they support or do not support. Out of this process comes a majority party that then assumes power over government. If during the campaign candidates of the party winning a majority express roughly the same policy positions,[10] the presumption is that there is support for their proposals.

The party can assume they have support from the electorate for their positions.

If this works as indicated, and a party wins the presidency, the Senate, and the House, it can contribute to overcoming one of the central problems of American democracy: separation of powers within the national government. When American institutions were formed, one of the central concerns was that American colonists had experienced national governments that were too powerful, that could intrude in people's lives too much. Government was seen as an institution that deprived people of freedom. The solution was to create separate institutions, each with some ability to check the power of the others.[11] To the extent that power was dispersed it would be harder to pass legislation and intrude on personal freedoms. This separation of powers can work very well, and over time many have worried about the inability of American government to respond to problems because one party will control Congress and another the presidency, creating a stalemate.[12] If elected officials come from the same party and share the same views then they can propose and enact legislation that reflects their positions. The argument is that the party label gives voters the chance to put like-minded voters in power so something can be accomplished in response to problems.

The majority party then prepares for and conducts the next campaign with a focus on having fulfilled their policy promises. The opposing party, perhaps still believing that the majority of voters do not really support what has been done, presents critiques of what has been done. The minority party may present what they see as the flaws in the policies adopted. The voters then render their judgment, and the cycle begins again.

The result should be a process in which party leaders and candidates, with their own beliefs, interact with activists, interest groups, and voters to assess just what views exist in the public. Candidates must be attentive to what the public thinks because they need votes. They must assess whether a majority supports their views, whether they need to adjust their positions, or whether they need to be careful in how they present their views. Campaigns are the vehicles for presenting ideas and positions to voters. Voters in turn render their reaction. A majority is chosen, presumably reflecting what the majority of voters want. This presentation becomes a justification for taking action if a party wins a majority.

The central premise of democracy, that voters matter, is fulfilled. A party must secure a majority vote from the electorate before it can acquire power to change policies. Parties may err sometimes in their judgments but in the long run this process should keep policies roughly in accord with majority views in the society.

Some Examples

1930–1932: This ideal of how the process might work has actually played out numerous times in American history. In October 1929 a major economic

Table 1.1 Republican Fortunes, 1928–1932

	Year of Elections		
	1928	*1930*	*1932*
House			
Seats won	270	218	117
% of seats	62.1	50.1	26.9
Senate			
Seats won	56	48	36
% of seats	58.3	50.0	37.5

American collapse began. Republicans had dominated American politics for most of the prior 30 years. Republican Herbert Hoover was president, elected in 1928. Both houses of Congress were held by Republicans. The dominant economic thought of the time was that markets adjusted by themselves if left alone. This was very compatible with conservative Republican thought; that individuals should be encouraged to adjust and take care of their own problems. President Hoover adhered to the belief in the ability of private markets to adjust, as did the remainder of his party. As economic decline persisted, the Republican Party continued to affirm their faith in private markets and offered no programs to respond.[13] As the party in power, the electorate assessed their position in the 1930 and 1932 elections and the judgment was not positive (Table 1.1). A party stood for a policy and was soundly rejected. From 1928 to 1932 their percentage of seats in the House declined from 62.1 to 26.9 and from 58.3 to 37.5 in the Senate. It was clear what the electorate thought of the Republican position. The public chose the symbol of the Democratic Party label as a better alternative than the Republicans.

1964: In 1964 the Republican Party presented Barry Goldwater as their presidential candidate. He reflected a growing conservative movement within the Republican Party. Conservatives felt the party was too accommodating to Democrats. Goldwater clearly stood for less government and specifically opposed the 1964 Civil Rights bill, which addressed problems of inequality of rights for blacks. The party was by no means united in its support for Goldwater, but the party had been struggling to escape minority status since the 1930s and many felt it was time to present a clear alternative.[14] President Lyndon Johnson presented a clear alternative by supporting the Civil Rights bill and many other liberal programs. Goldwater's image and his positions were dominant in the election, and Republicans lost the presidential contest and experienced a decline in their percentage of House and Senate seats (Table 1.2). The conclusion of Democrats was that they had a mandate to do what President Johnson had presented.[15]

1992–1994: In 1992 Democrat Bill Clinton was elected president and chose to make expanding access to health care a major initiative. Democrats

Table 1.2 Republican Fortunes, 1960–1964

	Year of Elections		
	1960	*1962*	*1964*
House			
Seats won	174	176	140
% of seats	40.0	40.5	32.2
Senate			
Seats won	36	34	32
% of seats	36.0	34.0	32.0

controlled both houses of Congress. He appointed a task force in 1993 that began creating new regulations and legislation to achieve his goal. As the process unfolded, Republicans, conservatives, and interest groups criticized the effort as inappropriately expanding the role of government and giving government officials too much control over individual medical issues. While Bill Clinton emphasized fairness and providing health care to those who lacked it, opponents stressed their fears about government intrusion and the loss of individual freedom. As the process continued, Democrats in Congress, despite their general sympathy with the goal, became nervous about being seen as favoring "big government" and the legislation was never enacted. The years 1993 and 1994, however, were dominated by arguments about the legislation, with the parties taking opposing sides. Each party presented a relatively clear image of where they stood on the issue.[16]

The 1994 elections were seen by many as a verdict on the Clinton effort. Democrats had 57 of 100 Senate seats in 1994 and after the election they lost the majority and held 48 seats. Democrats had held a majority in the House since 1954. Republicans took the majority in the 1994 elections, increasing their seats from 176 of 435 (40.5 percent) to 230 (52.9 percent). There are always disputes about the meaning of elections, but the reaction of voters to the health care issue was important. In 1992 and 1994 voters were presented with this survey question:

> There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan, which would cover all medical and hospital expenses. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. (Others feel that medical expenses should be paid by individuals and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or some other company paid plans). Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. Of course, some people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2,3,4,5 or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Table 1.3 Responses to Health Care Question and Voting in House Elections, 1992 and 1994

	Distribution of Q Responses			*Percent Voting Democratic*		
Position	*1992*	*1994*	*Change*	*1992*	*1994*	*Change*
1 (govt)	17.8	12.0	–5.8	72.8	74.1	1.3
2	13.6	7.8	–5.8	73.1	61.6	–11.5
3	13.9	10.1	–3.8	67.4	62.8	–4.6
4	18.1	20.5	2.4	53.6	49.2	–4.4
5	10.8	14.2	3.4	42.9	39.1	–3.8
6	8.9	14.4	5.5	41.3	30.6	–10.7
7 (individ)	7.2	16.2	9.0	40.8	21.9	–18.9
1–3	45.3	29.9	–15.4	71.2	67.0	–4.2
5–7	26.8	44.8	18.0	41.8	30.1	–11.7

Source: ANES 1948–2008 Cumulative File.

The responses and how those people voted in the 1992 and 1994 House elections are presented in Table 1.3. The table first presents the percentage choosing the responses of 1 (strong support for government role) through 7 (individual responsibility) for 1992 and 1994. The right side of the table indicates how individuals with different opinions about this issue voted in 1992 and 1994 for Democratic House candidates. Two changes occurred between 1992 and 1994 that conveyed voters' reactions to politicians. The emergence of the issue of who should provide health care and the criticisms of Republicans and interest groups had an effect on public opinion. The distribution of opinion shifted away from the Democratic view that government should play a role and toward the view that individuals should be responsible. In 1992, 45.3 percent of voters chose positions 1–3 (more favorable to government) and 29.9 percent chose positions 5–7 (more favorable to individual responsibility). The rest had no opinion. In 1994 the respective percentages were 29.9 favorable to a government role and 44.8 favorable to an individual role. The percentage more favorable to individual responsibility increased by 15 points over two years. Republicans took a stance against government involvement and were able to significantly shift public opinion. Parties can play a role in making an argument about an issue and shaping, to some extent, public opinion.

As the Republican Party presented itself as opposed to more government involvement in health care, this clarity brought them a greater percentage of votes among those who were more inclined to see individuals as responsible for securing health care insurance. Among those choosing 5–7 on the scale, 58.2 percent voted Republican in 1992. In 1994, with greater clarity of their position, Republicans secured the votes of 69.9 percent of this group. Republicans staked out a position against a policy proposal and benefited in two ways. They increased the percentage agreeing with their

Table 1.4 Opinions on the Iraq War and George Bush and Republican Fortunes in 2006

Vote in 2006 House Elections		
	Democrat	*Republican*
War in Iraq opinion		
Approve	18	81
Disapprove	80	18
George Bush job approval		
Approve	14	84
Disapprove	82	16

position and secured a higher percentage of votes among those agreeing with their position. Republicans took the campaign and the election results as an indication there was more support for conservative positions.[17] President Bill Clinton appeared to accept that conclusion and in his 1996 State of the Union address he declared that "The era of big government is over."

2006: Following the 9/11 attacks on America, the Bush administration decided in 2003 to attack Iraq, arguing that Saddam Hussein and Iraq were a threat to America and might possess weapons of mass destruction. Democrats, following the fear created by the 9/11 attacks, were reluctant to be seen as strong opponents of the attack. While initially the March 2003 attack on Iraq was seen as successful, no weapons of mass destruction were found and a relentless internal war by insurgents within Iraq made it difficult for the administration to claim things were going well. Gradually, Democrats increased their criticism of the war effort in Iraq. The 2006 elections became in many ways a referendum on the war and the administration's handling of subsequent events in Iraq.[18] President George Bush and congressional Republicans had staked their reputations on the war.

Opinions about the Iraq War and George Bush were strongly associated and they had a powerful role in voting decisions. By November 2006, 40.4 percent approved of the war and 59.7 percent disapproved. George Bush's job approval ratings were at 38 percent. Those who approved of the war and of George Bush voted very strongly for Republican House candidates. Those who disapproved of both voted very strongly for Democratic House candidates. The parties in Congress were diverging in their opinions about the war and President Bush and voters used party labels to register their reactions. Given the majorities disapproving of what George Bush and Republicans were doing, voter reactions cost Republicans control of Congress. Republicans went from 55 of 100 Senate seats to 49 and from 232 of 435 seats to 202 after the elections. The Republican Party had to accept the voter message and choose what to do next.[19]