

# PARTY REFORM



WILLIAM CROTTY

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## **Party Reform**

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# Preface

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Political parties are undergoing uncertain times. Much in the contemporary political and social environment appears hostile to the continuing functioning of the political parties in anything resembling the way in which they used to operate in the past. The political parties are changing, although whether quickly enough or in the directions needed to satisfy the demand of a social order in transition is open to debate.

One response of the party system has been to attempt “reform.” In the present context, this means a turn toward more open, participant-oriented, and representative party structures intended to revitalize parties along a more policy-oriented base. The movement has been controversial; in fact, it has been resisted with varying degrees of success by party professionals within both of the political parties. Yet reform has left its mark on the political parties. In particular, the presidential nominating procedures and power distributions have been significantly and, more than likely, permanently transformed. The impact of the reform movement on other aspects of political party operations is less certain.

This book reviews and assesses the reform era, from its earliest days in the late 1960s to the present. It analyzes the contributions of various reform bodies and the issues in contention between those wishing to move toward a new party system and those committed to preserving what they can of the old ways. The book is written from the perspective of one sympathetic to the reform objectives of openness, representativeness, and political accountability.

In writing a book such as this, I owe a debt of gratitude to a number of people. I would like to thank Irv Rockwood of Longman, in particular, for his continued assistance, Edward Artinian, Joan Matthews, David Estrin, and all the others who contributed to the book’s appearance.

*William Crotty*

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**PART ONE**

**The Basis  
for Reform**

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# ONE

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## Why Reform?

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American political parties are in serious trouble. The evidence is everywhere. One of the two major parties intersperses impressive, but short-run, electoral successes with a long-running flirtation with extinction. The other has been rocked by internal divisions and a hardheaded unwillingness or inability to adapt to a radically changing political environment. Factional bickering and attitudinal intransigence towards adaptation has resulted in electoral defeats severe enough to question the party's ability to govern and its self-proclaimed role as the champion, and representative, of the majority of subgroups within the diverse American electorate. The twilight of the American party system, at least in the form in which it has been known since the time of Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson, may be at hand.

Yet the crisis in party operations comes at a curious time. For once, and perhaps for the only time in their long and tumultuous history, the value of political parties within a democratic society is almost universally appreciated. In truth, the contributions of political parties to a representative democracy has been—at least among academicians of the last generation—virtually universally celebrated; an obsession that has closed many eyes to their faults and may, in part, contribute to their present difficulties.

The argument—dogma?—in favor of political parties runs something like this: Political parties are critically significant agencies for any democratic society. They perform a variety of services for a democracy, from nominating and helping to elect its leadership to representing and, in their own way, resolving the diverse sets of group pressures, policy demands, and festering social problems that beset the society, as well as join and divide their diverse constituencies. And most importantly, the political party executes its responsibilities better and more democratically than any comparable agency devised by man. Political parties, in short, are and have been indispensable to a functioning democratic society of any size.

So be it. If parties are as crucial as this argument suggests, then

society (as well as the parties) may be in for a period of uncertainty and rapid and uncharted change. For while the indispensability of parties to democratic governing is broadly agreed upon, the quality of the contributions the parties make, what it is or could or should be, is a matter of continuing dispute. Since the 1950s, a period of stability for the parties and one that gave birth to much of the currently accepted theorizing as to their utility and functioning, political party influence has been on the wane. By any objective indicator, the parties are in difficulty. Participation in elections is down to one-half of the eligible electorate in presidential contests and even less (30–40%) in many congressional, senatorial, statewide, and mayoral races. The number of people claiming identification with one of the two parties has been in steady decline, and the end of the attrition in partisanship is nowhere in sight. The continual erosion of the past several generations in Republican partisanship (to where it now wavers between 15 and 25 percent of the American electorate) has led forecasters to predict the party's eventual demise, a prognosis that periodic victories at the presidential level (Reagan, Nixon, Eisenhower) tends to mute. The Republican successes may be as much a product of the Democratic party's weaknesses and chronic divisiveness as they are of any positive Republican appeal.

Both parties have fared poorly in attracting younger voters, a trend that indicates the demographics of change favor an increasingly anti-party evolution. Among those just entering the electorate, slightly better than one-half claim no party identification. As a consequence, the proportion of political independents has about doubled over the last three decades. Independents appear to be the wave of the future.

As the numbers affiliated with the parties, and the strength of partisanship more generally, has eroded, the parties themselves appear unable to offer coherent party programs, designed to seriously address the most pressing issues facing the nation. They appear incapable of even disciplining their own members once in office on issues of fundamental concern. The inability of the Democratic party in the Congress to fashion reasonably attractive alternatives to Republican policies or to deliver their vote as a bloc on the most crucial issues separating the parties is one indication of the vacuity and potential obsolescence of present party arrangements.

Third parties give promise of future challenge, a sure sign of the declining appeal of the major parties. Corporate, labor, ideological, and single issue PACs (political action committees) push their policy ends, fund campaigns and even recruit, and help nominate and elect, candidates. They have become parties within parties, an additional contributor to the fragmentation of the American two-party system.

The events of the last two decades indicate that the major parties

are, at least partially, aware of their problems. The extent of their awareness and of their willingness to do something of consequence about their problems is questionable. Both parties have attempted "reform"; change designed to quiet critics within the party's ranks and to ameliorate, on a short-term basis, the internal clashes and mini-crises that perpetually threaten party consensus. The efforts of the parties to reform themselves has led to some surprising results. How effective these changes have been in arresting the decline in American parties is open to debate.

This is, in effect, what this book is all about. The chapters that follow will take a look at the reform movements within the two parties and evaluate what they attempted and what they accomplished. Included in the assessment will be an examination of several of the unanticipated consequences of reform and the problems that these in turn have raised for the parties. It also includes a case study of party reform at the local level, linking the national party with its base constituency, an uneasy alliance that produces problems for both. Reform exacerbated these tensions. The book reviews the strengths and weaknesses of the reform era and analyzes the current state and possible future orientation of the party enterprise.

First, however, it is necessary to develop two areas that lend perspective to the events of recent years. While many social scientists have tended to venerate the political parties and their accomplishments, the general public has been considerably less enthusiastic about the parties and their contributions to modern society. In fact, the public has been highly critical of party operations and appears to tolerate them as a necessary evil. This attitude has provided a fertile ground for reform. The public's perception of political parties and the constant efforts, and their consequences, to mold parties into more acceptable social institutions ("reform") are covered in the next several chapters.

## A Party System under Siege

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Political parties have been with us for so long and have served for such a lengthy period as objects of derision that it is often difficult to think of them in any positive sense. Yet they are a vitally important ingredient in the democratic enterprise.

### A Brief in Defense of Parties

It is important to begin by recognizing that political parties grew out of a need. In effect, they were created to fill a void in the democratic system; they evolved because no other agency could as effectively serve as a force upon government acting in the name of a democratic mass. The American constitution ignored the possibility of parties, and the nation's early leadership was antagonistic to them. The Founding Fathers were frightened of the divisiveness and polarization parties, or factions as they referred to them, would create in political life. The distaste for parties, if anything, grew over the years. The excesses of democratic government—at least, as seen from the vantage point of the ruling elites—during the Age of Jackson and the inauguration of mass democratic institutions; the inability of a floundering party system to deal with secession or the issue of slavery; the association of parties with the evolving urban machine and its (and the ethnic groups it represented) threat to the established social order; the corruption synonymous with the “age of boodle” and the misuse of public monies; continuing on up to the present and the ineffectiveness of the parties in checking the worst of the Watergate abuses have all contributed to the negative associations made with the institution.

Yet there is no denying their contribution to democratic government. Many have made the point. Political parties allow a sublimation

of the once bloody conflicts between ins and outs over succession to power. They permit a legitimate, organized resistance to authority, and they provide a vehicle through which officials in disfavor can be replaced. They represent the views of their constituent masses and they try to bring these to bear on government policies. The parties select through their nominating systems the finalists for the nation's major offices, and they attempt to establish some criteria to judge officials once in office. Ideally, they are agencies intended to express the democratic will; the bridge between the citizen and government. Political parties, it would seem, are indispensable to democratic government.

This certainly has been a theme among the more serious students of party developments. A knowledge of political parties, as Avery Leiserson has said, "is virtually a prerequisite to a realistic understanding of the problems of democracy, both in theory and in action."<sup>1</sup> E. E. Schattschneider goes further. Political parties, he contends, "created democracy, or perhaps more accurately, modern democracy is a by-product of party competition."<sup>2</sup> As Schattschneider indicates, their contribution to American democracy has been substantial:

American parties . . . have transformed the American constitution. They have substantially abolished the electoral college, created a plebiscitary president, and contributed powerfully to the extra-constitutional growth of that office. . . . The parties have greatly simplified the most complex system of government in the world. . . . More important than all other changes the parties have wrought in the system of government is the fact that they have democratized it. They took over an eighteenth-century constitution and made it function to satisfy the needs of modern democracy in ways not contemplated by the authors. . . . these parties have presided over the transformation of the government of the United States from a small experiment in republicanism to the most powerful regime on earth, vastly more liberal and democratic than it was in 1789.<sup>3</sup>

Their contribution to an organized, representative, and accountable democratic polity then would appear critical. "Political parties," concludes Schattschneider, "created democracy and . . . modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."<sup>4</sup> Schattschneider's defense of political parties is a categorical one. It leaves little room for dispute.

Most students of American parties would more than likely agree in principle with his contentions. V. O. Key, Jr., the most influential modern analyst of party behavior, might take exception to Schatt-

schneider's sweeping declaration as to the absolute necessity of parties, but he would argue that political parties have been one of the few institutions essential to the democratic experiment and that the functions they perform are vital to the preservation of orderly democratic government. Apparently, they represent the only effective agency that democracies of any size have been able to devise "for handling the problem of succession to authority more or less peacefully."<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Walter Dean Burnham has raised the spectre of what a democracy without political parties might be like. Burnham is concerned with tracing the electoral disaggregation of the parties' coalitions and the resulting "decomposition" (an unpleasant term) of the party-in-the-electorate, the party that coalesces and represents on different levels the policy views of relatively like-minded people. Burnham prophesizes: "the old-style American major party-in-the-electorate may very well be on its way out as a channel through which the collective power of the many can at least occasionally control the behavior of the elites who run this political system."<sup>6</sup> Should the party system continue to deteriorate, "a true crisis of the regime will emerge—perhaps sooner than later. If 'partisan decomposition' continues under . . . conditions of pervasive public discontent, democracy will be progressively emptied of any operational meaning."<sup>7</sup>

Schattschneider may well have been correct: democracy without a vital party system may be unthinkable. The outcome sketched by Burnham is not the only possible one of course. It is, however, a frightening prospect, made less unimaginable by a full appreciation of the implications of the Watergate episode and the internal repressions and civil disobedience of the Vietnam period. It does speak to the need for a strong and representative party system.

Two things most close observers of political parties would agree on then are:

1. Political parties are, at a minimum, extremely important to the American democratic enterprise.
2. Political parties are, as noted in the introduction to this book, in trouble.

### At Best, an Uncertain Tradition

Americans could never be said to have had a love affair with their political parties. Rather, they have tended to view these institutions with suspicion. Their existence has been seen as a necessary evil. George Washington would not have gone this far. During the period of their birth, he cautioned against institutions and leaders that would

divide a nation and a people. James Madison, himself a party tactician of the first rank, shared Washington's concern. Writing in *Federalist No. 10*, Madison warned against the "instability, injustice, and confusion" parties introduced into the public's business. "The public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties; and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority."<sup>8</sup>

Washington and Madison were among the first of many. As the party system evolved in concert with a developing nation, experimental political arrangements, and a changing social order, others came to view them in much the same light. Alexis de Tocqueville drew attention to the lack of principles in the parties he encountered in the 1830s. Their squabbling and materialism he believed would "threaten the future of the Union."<sup>9</sup> James Bryce, writing a half-century later, was equally critical:

Neither party has anything definite to say on . . . issues; neither party has any principles, any distinctive tenets. . . . [their] interests are in the main the interests of getting or keeping the patronage of the government. Tenets and policies, points of political doctrine and points of political practice, have all but vanished. . . . All has been lost, except office or the hope of it.<sup>10</sup>

M. I. Ostrogorski, Russian émigré and student of democratic institutions, would agree. After extensively studying the American parties near the turn of the century, he concluded that "God takes care of drunkards, of little children, and of the United States."<sup>11</sup>

Political parties had come to be identified with corruption, weak candidates, the exploitation of the public trust, graft, bossism, crime, rowdyism, and about everything else that was held in disrepute. Equally odious, political parties were seen as ties to the immigrant masses, the unlettered newcomers to city life that made up the bulk of the urban work force and the political base for the machine. These newer groups had a different perception of government and what it should do that, along with their strange customs and the political bosses they spawned, unsettled the older immigrants.

### *Reform in the early twentieth century*

A school of journalism, the Muckrakers, made their reputations to a large extent at the expense of the parties of their day. One consequence was the reform wave—the Progressive Era—of the period roughly from the late 1890s to 1920. A serious attempt was mounted during these

years to reconstruct the economic and political priorities of the nation. Politically, the chief targets were the parties and their abuses. The objective was to incapacitate the parties and destroy the boss while returning power to the hands of the citizenry. Toward these ends, the "good government" advocates pressed for such reforms as nonpartisan elections; city manager or council forms of government (with policy areas supervised by those with the necessary professional expertise); registration laws and other safeguards against a fraudulent vote; the secret ballot; primaries to destroy the boss's control over nominations for elective office; the statutory regulation of party finances, party activities, and party structures; the initiative, referendum, and recall to give citizens a direct voice in creating legislation and some control over legislators once elected; and an expansion of civil service protections to minimize the evils of patronage.

The intentions of these earlier reformers appear commendable. They attack citadels of power and abuse: the plutocracy of wealth (the Rockefellers, Morgans, and Mellons), who disproportionately controlled the nation's economic resources; and the parties and their bosses that managed the country's politics. Their goal was to give the individual a direct voice in their political and economic destiny.

The people who were to benefit the most from these reforms were, interestingly, remarkably similar in economic status and civic values to the reformers themselves. They were the middle class burgers, professionals, and academicians with the desired interest, skills, and disposition to conduct governmental affairs in the impersonal manner the Progressives thought proper. If political parties were to be destroyed in the process of achieving broader aims, so much the better. They were considered to be of little value, barriers to honest and effective government.

The reformers succeeded to a large extent in getting the changes they wanted adopted. But they failed in their major objectives. Political parties and the party boss were not destroyed. After a period of readjustment to the new political environment, the boss continued to exercise power much as he did in days gone by. There is a lesson here. The Progressives did not understand politics or the value or functions of a political party. Reform is best understood as change and change that: (1) adapts to current political realities, and (2) rewards some groups and emphasizes some values at the expense of others. The boss (and the political party) survived, despite their profiteering and marked abuse of authority, because he (and it) performed a number of crucial (if less obvious) political services. The Progressives wanted a political arrangement that nicely rewarded the virtues upon which they had been weaned and the talents they had developed. Their "reforms"