The Nationalization of American Political Parties, 1880–1896

This book investigates the creation of the first truly nationalized party organizations in the United States in the late nineteenth century, an innovation that reversed the parties’ traditional privileging of state and local interests in presidential nominations and the conduct of national campaigns. Between 1880 and 1896, party elites crafted a defense of these national organizations that charted the theoretical parameters of American party development into the twentieth century. With empowered national committees and a new understanding of the parties’ role in the political system, national party leaders dominated American politics in new ways, renewed the parties’ legitimacy in an increasingly pluralistic and nationalized political environment, and thus maintained their relevance throughout the twentieth century. The new organizations particularly served the interests of presidents and presidential candidates, and the presidencies of the late nineteenth century demonstrate the first stirrings of modern presidential party leadership.

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For Cheri
The Nationalization of American Political Parties, 1880–1896

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Preface

This study began as a search for remedies for the familiar disease of party decline. It made sense to look for such remedies in the late nineteenth century, the period of American parties’ supposed peak performance. Perhaps, I supposed, by better understanding the parties’ defense of methods that have since come to be mistrusted, today’s parties could be strengthened. This original purpose quickly collapsed. As I pursued the public and private writings of party leaders of the time, I was struck by just how willing they were to jettison much of what political scientists believe made the parties strong, and just how willing they were to adopt practices that presaged twentieth-century party politics. Instead of a ringing defense of traditional methods – along the lines of George Washington Plunkitt’s famous series of very plain talks on very practical politics – I found a raging debate over the need to renew party organizations in America. This is odd. Why would party leaders be experiencing a crisis of confidence in parties at precisely the time that many political scientists believe parties to have been operating at optimal productivity?

This book is an account of their collective wondering, their struggle to preserve institutions that held great emotional and practical value to them, while adjusting them to a new political environment. It is a story of changing ideas and changing institutions, but it is also a story of what it is that allows institutions as loosely constructed as parties to perpetuate themselves. In an age in which partisan politics was viewed as suspiciously as any (except perhaps in the Founding era or our own), these elites struggled to force the parties to adapt without abandoning their commitment to the two-party system. Despite the frequent charge that the parties have done little but weaken since the dawn of the twentieth century, their work made the two-party system stronger. It effectively silenced a generation of third-party challenges, made peace with a flurry of extra-partisan citizen associations, updated parochial and dysfunctional party methods to meet the emergent demands of a newly nationalized political environment, and fashioned a new style of campaigning that was particularly well suited to this new mode of organizing. This is a reminder that
party organizations are not just about facilitating participation on a particular scale – an activity with high normative but variable practical value – but about ordering political conflict – an activity with ambiguous normative and enormous practical value.

Throughout the late 1800s, the parties were challenged by a variety of entities (third parties, national interest associations, reform organizations) that suggested the parties had lost their relevance to the conditions faced by most voters. These entities did not succeed in displacing the Republican and Democratic parties from their preeminent place in American public life; but by exploiting some of the parties’ weaknesses (and the period’s tight electoral competition), they did arouse national party leaders to new openings for popular leadership. For all the zeal of the late-nineteenth-century reform movement, party leaders were not forced to accept reform; they were persuaded that the newly nationalized political environment provided opportunities as well as threats. Thus, the two-party system survived – and emerged stronger from – the late nineteenth century because it served the purpose it was established to serve: helping ambitious politicians obtain power.

In particular, national party leaders became aware of the potential for expanding the parties’ national campaign operations to craft a truly national party-in-the-electorate. The parties had originally been organized to resist just this kind of nationalization. Although party competition as an abstract concept had become widely accepted by the mid-nineteenth century, it was party competition of a particular sort – distinctively republican in structure and style, presuming the proper and safest form of political organizing to be grounded in local communities. A national party organization that reached a national party-in-the-electorate could not simply be asserted; a national party politics had to be defined and defended.

Others are left to decide whether or not this is a positive development (the thrust of much of the decline of party literature). This work is limited to two chief contentions. First, the nineteenth-century opposition to party did not have the effect of neutering the parties but provided a new intellectual heritage for the parties that shaped them during the twentieth century. Second, this new idea of party triggered constitutional potentials that had lain dormant under the republican revolution of the Jacksonian organizational mode. Without revising the Constitution, the Jacksonian party system grafted republican political practices onto the American regime that diminished its liberal elements; especially its fostering of a national community of conflicting interests (as articulated by James Madison in *The Federalist*), and its endorsement of positive presidential leadership (as articulated by Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist*). To prevent the salience of national communities of interest, the Jacksonian mode rigorously enforced geographic communities as the sole means of entry into the national party organization and subordinated the presidency to a nominating system dominated by state and local party organizations. The late-nineteenth-century idea of party, however, envisioned a party-in-the-electorate that transcended geographic boundaries (some of which, it should be noted, were also supplied
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by the Constitution), a special role for national interest associations in party politics, and a presidency that could mobilize mass publics independently of local partisan communities.

This transformation in the fundamental idea of party did not effectively remake the party organizations by 1896 – the end point of this study. Not until the solidification of the presidential direct primary in the 1970s did the new idea of party achieve something like full institutionalization. In the meantime, the new idea underwrote the emergence of the direct primary in the early 1900s, an emergent style of national presidential leadership, and an increasingly confident public interest association sector, even as the first half of the twentieth century saw the reassertion of state and local organizational power. Although most previous studies of these twentieth-century developments have emphasized the creation of institutions and laws that have formalized these changes, this study makes the case for the formative role of party leaders’ ideas of how political conflict should be ordered. Those ideas coalesced into broad agreement among a critical cadre of national elites between 1880 and 1896; and this consensus formed the parameters of the ways their successors – in politics, the media, and the social sciences – evaluated the parties. Concurring with Richard Hofstadter, I do not describe this as anything as systemic as a “theory,” nor as pleasing as an “ideal” of party. It was a political thing, crafted by practical politicians (who, like Plunkitt, were more concerned with what worked than with reconciling their practice to democratic theory). It was used to promote individual politicians’ competencies and to legitimate party politics to the public. The idea was shaped by a variety of insights into the ways in which political life changed in the late nineteenth century and the ways in which parties would continue to order political affairs despite these changes. It was not written in any textbook; but it became part of the language politicians used to communicate with one another – sometimes openly, sometimes in a kind of insider shorthand. It told politicians how to behave, how to win votes, and where to concentrate resources. In short, it envisioned a distinct mode of party operations. If this idea did not achieve immediate organizational transformation from within the parties, it provides a powerful explanation of the source of the long process of party transformation in the twentieth century.
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