The Democratic Party Heads North, 1877–1962

This book examines the dynamics of the American party system and explores how contemporary American politics was formed. Specifically, it asks how the Democrats, a party that had its main area of support in the South, could become sufficiently competitive in the American North as to be able to construct a national political majority. It rejects the conventional account, based on “realignment theory,” that between the end of Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Revolution, the base level of support for the Democratic Party varied greatly from one era to another. Instead, by distinguishing between the “building blocks” available to the Democrats in coalition formation and the aggregation of those “blocks” into an actual coalition, the author shows that there was much less variation over time in the available “blocks” than is usually argued. Neither the economic depression of 1893 nor the New Deal had the impact on the party system that most political scientists claim.

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Oxford University
To the memory of Michael Nast
and
For three other friends who have also discussed American politics with me over the years:
Joseph Chytry
Nelson Polsby
Art Shartsis
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Much of what we learn about politics in political science books is either wrong or highly misleading. I had reached this somewhat depressing conclusion long before I completed my previous book, *The American Direct Primary*, but my research for that book confirmed that my judgement was largely correct. The problem lies at the heart of how political science is conducted, especially in the United States, and is not the result of political scientists being either fools or knaves. In my experience the vast majority of its practitioners fall into neither of these categories. Rather, the problem is caused by the role played by fashion, especially fashions in methodology, which has two adverse consequences for the development of our knowledge about the political world.

First, the obsession with making one’s research compatible with the latest fashion in methodology, together with changes in those fashions, means that research is often conducted without any knowledge of similar work that was undertaken years ago. Thus, the equivalent of the wheel is often reinvented by political scientists about every quarter of a century.\(^1\) Secondly, as fashion changes, so do some conceptions and arguments go unchallenged and become part of the “evident truths” of the profession; they are held to be true because previous generations of political scientists believed them to be true. This was what I had discovered about the origins of direct primary elections in America – the events that led to their introduction actually bore no relation to the standard account that was found in every reference to the subject. Yet the last time anyone had done

\(^1\) I make this point in “Old Political Issues and Contemporary Political Science”, *Government and Opposition*, 38 (2003), 526.
extended research on the subject was in the 1920s. In the absence of continuing research on a particular topic, once the political science agenda has moved on, there is every possibility that highly contentious arguments become embedded as part of the received wisdom that is handed down from one generation of students to the next. That is what happened in the case of the direct primary.

In part, the origins of this book lie in work I undertook on the American Direct Primary. That book was focussed on party structures and not on the American party system, but, when writing it, I came to realize that much of the accepted view about long-term change in the party system did not seem to fit with what I was learning about the working of that system in the years between 1890 and 1915. Fortunately, during the later stages of the research I became aware of David Mayhew’s critical analysis of the idea of “realigning elections” – work that was first published in the *Annual Review of Political Science* and then in more extended form as a book. The idea that the American party system was transformed periodically by massive shifts in the pattern of voter alignments had been proposed in the 1960s, and had been accepted universally since then by those writing on American parties – including the present author. If, as Mayhew was arguing, realignment theory was seriously flawed, it might be doubted how much it really could contribute to our understanding of the American party system. Reinforcing my own doubts about how we should explain change in the party system, Mayhew’s work provided the intellectual “spark” that started me thinking about how party systems change over time.

The central theme of the book is that, as institutions, parties are much better at managing change than is usually claimed. It is wholly inadequate, in asking the question “how and why did the party system change,” to look just at voting behaviour in national elections. Yet this has been the dominant approach of those who have written on the subject. It is not the voters, acting as an exogenous variable, whose changed behaviour transforms the party system; it is the actors in political parties, whose decisions about strategy (and their failure also to take such decisions) shape the likely responses from voters. Given the resources available to parties, it should not be surprising that they can react to adverse circumstances, and can rebuild coalitions of support that are capable of winning

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elections later. Consequently, this book finds that over a very long period – 85 years – there was both a high degree of continuity in the coalitions that the American parties constructed and much less of an imbalance in relative strength between the two parties than has been usually claimed.

The data sources used in the research are specified in the Appendix to this book.

I commenced research on the book during a year of sabbatical leave in 2000–2001, and I am grateful both to Worcester College and to the University of Oxford for granting me that leave. I also wish to thank:

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