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Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash  
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## DYNAMICS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

In *Dynamics of American Political Parties*, Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash examine the process of gradual change that inexorably shapes and reshapes American politics. Parties and the politicians that comprise them seek control of government to implement their visions of proper public policy. To gain control, parties need to win elections. Winning elections requires assembling an electoral coalition that is larger than that crafted by the opposition. Parties are always looking for opportunities to build such winning coalitions, and opportunities are always there, but they are rarely, if ever, without risk. Uncertainty rules and intraparty conflict rages as different factions and groups within the parties debate the proper course(s) of action and battle it out for control of the party. Parties can never be sure how their strategic maneuvers will play out, and even when it appears that a certain strategy has been successful, party leaders are unclear about how long the apparent success will last. Change unfolds slowly, in fits and starts.

Mark D. Brewer is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Maine. His research focuses on partisanship and electoral behavior at the mass and elite levels, the linkages between public opinion and public policy, and the interactions that exist between religion and politics in the United States. Brewer is the author of *Relevant No More? The Catholic/Protestant Divide in American Politics* (2003) and *Party Images in the American Electorate* (2009), and he is coauthor of *Diverging Parties: Realignment, Social Change, and Party Polarization* (2003); *Split: Class and Cultural Divides in American Politics* (2007); and *Parties and Elections in America*, fifth edition (2008). He has published articles in *Political Research Quarterly*, *Political Behavior*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

Jeffrey M. Stonecash is Maxwell Professor in the Department of Political Science, The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. He researches political parties, changes in their electoral bases, and how these changes affect political polarization and public policy debates. His recent books are *Class and Party in American Politics* (2000), *Diverging Parties* (2003), *Parties Matter* (2005), *Split: Class and Cultural Divides in American Politics* (2007), *Political Polling*, second edition (2008), and *Reassessing the Incumbency Effect* (2008). He has done polling and consulting for political candidates since 1985.

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# Dynamics of American Political Parties

**Mark D. Brewer**

University of Maine

**Jeffrey M. Stonecash**

Syracuse University



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*From Mark Brewer: To Megan and Jack*

*From Jeff Stonecash: To Lindsay, Cassie, and Maggie*

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## Preface

Political parties are an essential and often puzzling element of American politics. They consist of individuals with varying degrees of attachment to a party trying to gain representation of their concerns. Officeholders and prospective officeholders hope to attract enough voters with diverse concerns so they may control government. Although this interaction seems simple, parties are often puzzling. They pursue policies and constituents in ways that often leave us wondering: Why are they trying to advocate for specific groups and win their votes? Why are they supporting a position that we might think does not make sense? Why are they pursuing a particular strategy in a particular election cycle? Then about the time we figure out these various interactions, something changes, leaving us puzzled again.

At various points in our careers, each of us has experienced such puzzlement. We also share the experience of reading James Sundquist's *The Dynamics of the American Party System* and finding the book enormously helpful in providing a broad overview of parties and their constituencies and why both changed over time. Sundquist wrote the book in the 1970s, a time of enormous change in American political parties.<sup>1</sup> Each party was seeking and incorporating new constituencies and changing its bases of support. He finished that book at a time when it was very difficult to see where that change was headed. It is now clearer. We humbly submit this book as an update and expansion of his work and hope we can contribute to understanding the last several decades of change. Indeed, at its most fundamental level, this book is about change and the attempt to make sense of it.

<sup>1</sup> Sundquist did offer a slightly revised edition in 1983.

There are numerous excellent texts about political parties that explain the intricacies of party rules and organization, candidate selection, campaign finance, and how specific election rules vary across the states.<sup>2</sup> This book has a different focus. The goal is to understand how change occurs and how change has brought us to the point where the parties differ significantly in whom they attract and what policies they support. The process of change is lengthy and often confusing while occurring. It is driven by political actors who believe in some policies but also want to build a majority so that they can enact their policies. The following provides an example of change that was driven by political hopes and that was gradual, erratic, but persistent and ultimately successful.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, conservatives in America were frustrated. They felt that government was becoming too big and too intrusive. They saw the state as providing too many benefits to individuals that undermined individual initiative, which they saw as the bedrock of a growing economy. Liberals appeared to be dominating American politics, and conservatives felt underrepresented with their concerns neglected.

They channeled this frustration into the Republican Party, seeking to get the party to nominate someone who would forcefully make the conservative case. They eventually worked to nominate Barry Goldwater as their presidential candidate in 1964. He was then soundly beaten by Lyndon Johnson. The defeat carried many Democrats into Congress, and they enacted a flood of liberal legislation.

Conservatives were discouraged but persisted. In 1968, the party accepted Richard Nixon as their presidential nominee. He gave voice to some conservative views, backing law-and-order positions, but he was not consistently conservative. Then conservatives suffered a severe setback in 1973 when Nixon was forced to resign because of scandal. The party lost numerous seats in Congress in 1974, and conservatives had to rededicate themselves to finding someone to give voice to conservative views.

Finally, in 1980 the GOP nominated Ronald Reagan, the former conservative governor of California, as its candidate. Helped along by bad economic conditions, Reagan defeated the incumbent Democratic president

<sup>2</sup> John F. Bibby and Brian F. Schaffner, *Politics, Parties, and Election in America*, sixth edition (Boston: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2008); Marjorie Randon Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, thirteenth edition (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009); Marc J. Hetherington and William J. Keefe, *Parties, Politics, and Public Policy in America*, tenth edition (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007); L. Sandy Maisel and Mark D. Brewer, *Parties and Election in America*, fifth edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

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## Preface

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Jimmy Carter. Reagan then proceeded to finally give a clear voice to conservative concerns. He opposed many government programs. He sought and won large tax cuts. He expressed support for numerous conservative social principles, such as the idea that welfare was undermining personal responsibility, a constitutional amendment banning abortion, and the return of prayer to public schools. It was the beginning of greater impact for conservative ideas.

It was a long struggle for conservatives to gain a strong voice through the Republican Party. Conservatives had been trying to reestablish the credibility and relevance of their views since the 1930s. The Republican Party, long based in the less conservative Northeast, had been uneasy about pursuing voters by focusing on conservative social issues. Gradually, the party began to gain seats in the more conservative South, and more party members saw the possibilities of expanding their base into the South. As they won seats in the South, they added members who were conservative on fiscal and social issues and steadily lost Northeast Republicans. The party changed its electoral base and composition, and the views of conservatives became more prominent. The struggle of some groups to work through a party eventually gave conservative views greater prominence in American politics. Representation was achieved, and a political party was changed.

Conservatives' effort to take over the Republican Party is just one example of the dynamic between representation and parties, of the change that ultimately defines American politics. This type of dynamic is the focus of this book.

In the course of completing this project, we each incurred a number of debts that need to be acknowledged here. Brewer wishes to thank his colleagues in the Department of Political Science at the University of Maine for the wonderful intellectual environment that they create, and also Nancy Lewis, Head Reference Librarian at Fogler Library, for her assistance in tracking down historical data. Lauren Laroche did an excellent job entering historical election data. Brewer promises his children, Megan and Jack, more playtime now that this project is completed, and thanks his wife, Tammy, for picking up the slack at home and for her strong support throughout this process. Stonecash wishes to again express his appreciation for the supportive environment within the Maxwell School at Syracuse University. Brewer and Stonecash both thank Ed Parsons and the staff at Cambridge University Press for all of their advice and assistance with this project.