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978-0-521-85827-4 - The Democratic Party Heads North, 1877-1962

Alan Ware

Excerpt

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I

The South and the Democratic Coalition

1. The Democrats' Road from 1877

The presidential election of 2000 was not only one of the most closely contested in American history, but it was also an election that displayed significant regional differences in voting patterns. The Democrats won the popular vote by 0.5 per cent of the total, lost in the Electoral College (EC) by five votes, and yet won 79 per cent of the EC votes in (what might be called) the “Old North” and 66 per cent of those votes in the “West”. The Democratic defeat resulted from their winning a mere 29 per cent of EC votes in the Border states and not a single vote in the South.¹ Not the least of the remarkable features of this pattern of voting is that it is almost a mirror image of the result in 1880. That earlier election produced an even closer contest for the popular vote with the Republican plurality being a mere .0002 per cent of the total, although they won the EC by 59 votes. In 1880, however, the Democrats won only 5 per cent of the EC votes in the Old North and 20 per cent in the West, while at the same time they won every EC vote in both the Border states and the South.

¹ See Chapter 2, Section 5, for a discussion of regional divisions in the United States. The “Old North” consists of those 13 states to the north of the Mason-Dixon line that had achieved statehood by 1840. The “West” is the non-slaveholding states above the Mason-Dixon line that achieved statehood after 1840 – with the exception of Oklahoma, which is classified as a “Border” state. (Both its physical location and the pattern of immigration there during its years as a territory – primarily from the South – prompt its re-classification in this way.) The Border states category comprises the four states below the Mason-Dixon line that did not rebel in 1860, together with Oklahoma and West Virginia. The “South” is the 11 states that formed the Confederacy in 1860.

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Nor is this regional difference between the two eras merely a manifestation of the peculiarities of the EC system itself; similar, though rather less pronounced, differences are evident when looking at congressional elections in the two years. Ninety per cent of all southern congressional districts and 81 per cent of all Border districts were held by Democrats in 1881, compared with 43 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively, in 2001. Above the Mason-Dixon line the parties' fortunes had moved in the opposite direction: In 1881 the Democrats held 28 per cent of congressional districts in the Old North and 16 per cent in the West, but in 2001 they now held 56 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively. To put the matter another way, in 1881 the Democrats' congressional delegation was dominated by those from south of the Mason-Dixon line – only 36 per cent of them came from north of it – while in 2001 it was the northerners who dominated, for they now formed 68 per cent of the entire Democratic contingent in the House.

This movement of the Democrats from being a party that had the core of its support in the South to one that was mainly northern oriented is perhaps the most important long-term change in American electoral history. Paralleling it, of course, is the shift in the Republican Party – a party that originally had hardly any base south of the Mason-Dixon line, but which now counts that region as one of its most reliable areas of support in presidential elections, and from which it presently obtains over 40 per cent of its entire congressional delegation. It is a transformation of party politics that has several different components – most especially, the electoral realignment in the South since the 1960s, a realignment that made it possible for the Republicans to control both chambers of Congress in the 1990s, something the party had not done in successive Congresses since the 1920s. There is an impressive (and growing) literature both on the political strategy of Barry Goldwater that helped to stimulate Republican activism in the South and on the subsequent growth of Republican voting strength in that region; the current study makes no effort to replicate that work.² Rather, this book is about the earlier stages of the transformation

² On the rise of conservative political activism in the 1950s and early 1960s, and on the role in facilitating this, see Robert Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995; Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2001; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001. On the growth of Republican voting strength in the South, see, for example: Alexander P. Lamis, *The Two-Party South*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1984; Earl Black and Merle Black, *Politics and Society in the*

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(up to the end of 1962), and it deals with the question of how a party that was so rooted in southern rebellion could come to be a sufficiently strong electoral force in the North that was capable of forming a national political majority.

The book begins in 1877 – the year after the famous compromise that facilitated the final episode in the “normalization” of post-war American politics. From then on, the Democrats could contest national elections unhampered by the disenfranchisement of some of their potential voters or by the disputed status of the South in the national polity. For the first time since the beginning of the Civil War, the Democratic Party could begin the construction of a national coalition with all the southern states formally re-integrated into the national polity on the same basis as other states. Of course, the problem the party leaders faced was one of which they had been acutely aware since at least the time of the Union Army’s military victory in 1865. How could the Democrats forge a national coalition that was large enough to win national elections yet still contain some unpopular (if relatively large) minorities: the defeated Confederate states, their pro-slave allies in the Border states, and those northerners who had been ambivalent about the war?

In the minds of many political scientists, the question of how, during the next 80 or so years, the Democrats succeeded in constructing coalitions that could do this has already been answered satisfactorily, but the aim of the present author is to provide a different explanation from the conventional account among political scientists. I will argue that much of that received wisdom is, at best, only partially correct and, at worst, misleading or wrong. So what is the received version in the political science community? There are three main elements to it:

- (1) Despite the apparent evidence of electoral dominance in the North by the Republicans after the Civil War, much of the country was exposed to highly competitive electoral politics until the early 1890s. As a result, neither Democrats nor Republicans had secure electoral bases that embraced most of the country.

South, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1987; John R. Petrocik, “Realignment: New Party Coalitions and the Nationalization of the South”, *Journal of Politics*, 49 (1987), 347–75; Harold W. Stanley, “Southern Partisan Change: Dealignment, Realignment, or Both?”, *Journal of Politics*, 50 (1988), 64–88; Norman V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945–1980*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1995; Earl Black, “The Newest Southern Politics”, *Journal of Politics*, 60 (1998), 519–612; Byron E. Shafer and Richard G. C. Johnston, “The Transformation of Southern Politics Revisited: The House of Representatives as a Window”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 31 (2001), 601–25.

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- (2) That competition largely ended in the 1890s when the country became divided into two regions in each of which one party predominated – a South where the Democrats reigned supreme and a North where the Republicans won most elections. Under these conditions, with the Democrats a minority party nationally, usually only the Republicans could build a national political majority – that is, until the New Deal made the Democrats competitive again in the Old North and the West.
- (3) Between 1932 and 1936 (or, on some versions, between 1928 and 1936), the Democrats acquired a political advantage nationally because while they remained dominant in the South, they became competitive again throughout most of the North. By the later 1930s, the New Deal had led to the creation of Democratic Party superiority in the nation, a superiority that was challenged successfully only when the Democrats lost their electoral stranglehold on the South.

Common to all three elements is the idea that the underlying strength of the two parties varied greatly over time. Parties won or lost at the national level because they either possessed or lacked the necessary “building blocks” from which to construct a winning coalition. National politics was merely the sum of local politics; from time to time the size of the “blocks” that each of the parties could mobilize would change, for reasons largely beyond the parties’ immediate control, and that change affected the long-term prospects of a party’s success in presidential and congressional elections.

The arguments presented in this book differ from the version just outlined in six main ways. Underpinning these arguments is the claim that the parties’ “building blocks” varied much less over the 86 years covered by this book than is usually realized. The main changes in the party system had less to do with the strength of the parties in particular states than with their ability to get the “blocks” potentially at their disposal to cohere. Coalition building is not just about which potential members may be available for constructing an electoral alliance but also about how they can be made to coalesce (see Chapter 2). Various problems in uniting potential allies were to become evident to both parties over the years – problems of leadership, of internal party division, and so on – and these factors created radically diverging election results, even while the underlying strength of the parties changed much less. In brief, the book does not deny that there were major discontinuities in the way the American

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party system operated, nor does it deny that the problems of coalition building varied significantly over time, but it does argue that there was also much greater continuity in the dynamic of the system, over a period of more than eight decades, than is often claimed.

The six main respects in which the argument presented here differs from the conventional wisdom are as follows:

- (i) The state of competition between the parties in the years between 1877 and the beginning of the 1890s was peculiar. Throughout the country one party was dominant in most states, in that it normally won elections during years of presidential contests. This imbalance in the parties was evident both in the South, where the Democrats were the dominant party, and in the North, where the Republicans usually held the advantage. Only five to seven states provided for a more even balance between the parties. The *appearance* of more extensive competition than this in the North stemmed largely from the problems of managing the internal relations of a majority party, because that management depended on the distribution of patronage, of which there was a limited supply. The losing party at the national level – normally the Democrats – could thereby win elections in the intervening years in these northern states. (See Chapter 3.)
- (ii) Until at least 1910 (and arguably later), the underlying dynamics of the party system in the North remained unchanged in many respects. The main changes in these years after the early 1890s were the emergence of a largely one-party South; the consolidation of Republican advantage in a number of non-southern states, where earlier the Democrats had sometimes been able to win elections in non-presidential years; and the growing complexity of the potential Democratic coalition. That the Democrats appeared now to be a minority party in much of the North was mainly the result of difficulties, until after 1908, in recruiting suitable presidential candidates; this distorted the operation of what had earlier seemed to be a party system that did generate a kind of self-equilibrium. (See Chapter 4.)
- (iii) Arguably there was an opportunity to re-configure the Democratic coalition after the 1912 victory, and it was missed. Unlike the later, successful attempts by Franklin D. Roosevelt to create long-term adherents to the party throughout the North, Woodrow Wilson

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failed to exploit the chance to expand his party's coalition in the West. (See Chapter 5.)

- (iv) This missed opportunity notwithstanding, there were already factors undermining the basis of the old, 19th century, party balance. The growing diversity of the country made coalition building more difficult nationally for both parties, but, in particular, it had created problems for the Democrats. Cultural divisions – between old-stock Americans and newer immigrants – created political cleavages over particular issues such as prohibition, and these, too, made the process of coalition formation far more difficult. The Democratic Party was not a minority party nationally between the 1890s and the 1930s, but rather, at times, the more badly divided of two divided (but potentially evenly balanced) parties. It was that factor that was to contribute to its seemingly weak electoral performance nationally in the 1920s. (See Chapter 6.)
- (v) Although Democratic gains in most major cities in the 1930s did make the party a more effective competitor in a number of non-southern states, the Republicans were far from becoming a minority party in these states. To the contrary, once the initial impact of the New Deal programmes had waned, Republicans were remarkably successful at containing the Democrats at the state level in the North. Between 1938 and 1952, the Republican Party enjoyed considerable electoral success in all regions except the South. (See Chapter 7.)
- (vi) During the 1950s, the conditions that produced this relative Republican advantage in the North started to be undermined, and by the early 1960s there was evidence that the Democrats were in a position to improve their share of elected public offices in that region. At the same time, though, the Civil Rights Revolution was starting to destroy their hegemony in the South, and thereby opportunities were provided for the Republican Party to become a more southern-oriented party. (See Chapter 8.)

One of the main arguments in this book, therefore, is that while it was a hugely important turning point in helping to make the Democrats the party of the North, the New Deal did not bring into being a fully formed northern-oriented party. For more than 20 years after 1938, there was a serious struggle for political control of the North, and it was only afterwards that the transformation of the Democratic Party into a largely

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northern-oriented party came closer to completion. Moreover, the struggle by the Democrats to compete on at least equal terms with the Republicans in the North was not something that had, somehow, been interrupted by the political upheavals of the early 1890s, as the conventional political science accounts allege. The entire period from 1877 to 1962 can be characterized as one in which a party that started at a disadvantage in the regions that embraced a majority of the population, and also of the states, sought to establish the kind of electoral strength that would enable it to construct a national majority on a regular basis. How it tried to do that altered, and indeed had to alter, in light of major changes in American society and its economy. Nevertheless, the fight for sufficient political control in the North was at the centre of American politics until the 1960s. Only when the South became less “solid” and also a dynamic sector of the American economy did the electoral geography change. By 2000, of course, both parties had long been fighting for control of the South, as well as of the North. A more national party system had emerged eventually.

The position of the South in the party system was the reason that competitiveness in the North was so important for the Democrats. Throughout the period under consideration here, the South was both the Democratic Party’s greatest asset and its greatest liability. It was its greatest asset in that it generated nearly a quarter of the Electoral College votes and a similar proportion of members of Congress. It was a liability in two respects. First, at various times, southern interests made coalition building more difficult for the party. In the 19th century, its very existence made it possible for Republicans to “wave the bloody shirt” in election campaigns; after 1948 it complicated the Democrats’ continuing attempts to mobilize black voters and placate its urban, liberal wing. Secondly, throughout the period, though, the presence of such a large interest tended to reduce the flexibility of the party in aggregating interests at the national level. For example, until 1936 the South had its own protection built into the system for nominating the Democrats’ presidential candidate, in the form of the two-thirds rule – a rule intended to ensure that anyone hostile to its interests could not be nominated. Although it was not the fault of southerners, the application of those rules in successive elections in the 1920s, for example, contributed to the party’s problems in constructing a winning coalition.

But what had the South done to the American party system in the years before 1877? Historians and political scientists are divided in the answer they provide to this question, and there are three main kinds of answer – all

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of which provide a different interpretation of long-term change in that party system. As we see, each provides a useful insight into the position of the South in the Democratic Party in the post-Civil War period, and each has its limitations.

2. The South and the Party System After the 1850s: Three Accounts

The Majority Party Account

This account, which is more commonly given by historians, is that the growing conflict over race in American politics, from about 1850 onwards, followed by the Civil War, transformed the basis of the party system by creating a majority party, the Republicans, whose dominance persisted until the Great Depression. According to this view, the price the Democratic Party paid for siding with the South over slavery in the 1850s was a lack of influence over the country's policy agenda for 70 years. The years after 1865 saw a combination of Republican administrations and the courts facilitate the growth of industrial capitalism; the primary producing interests that supported the Democratic Party, and the limited role for government that formed the core of that party's ideology, counted for relatively little in the development of public policy. Only exceptionally could the party win a presidential election – it won only 4 out of 17 contests between 1868 and 1932 and only 2 elections consecutively (1912 and 1916).

What is undeniable about this interpretation is that, in general, the course of public policy did favour the interests that tended to support the Republican Party. However, the age-old mistake of confusing “luck” with “power” should not be made here.³ It could be the case that the interests of industrial capital would have triumphed irrespective of how many (or few) elections the Republicans actually won, or, alternatively, it might be that it was the courts who were the primary agent in their success. The issue of concern to us is whether the electoral position of the Democratic Party after the Civil War was that of a minority party, and we shall see that it is far from evident that it was. It was not until after 1876 that the full complement of white southern voters were restored to the electoral rolls, and in the five presidential elections between 1876 and 1892, the Democrats won a popular plurality in every one except 1880. Moreover,

³ For a formal analysis of some aspects of the relationship between power and luck, see Brian Barry, “Is It Better to Be Powerful or Lucky? Part II”, *Political Studies*, 28 (1980), 338–52.

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as we have seen already, that exceptional election (1880) produced an extremely close result in the popular vote. Of course, the distribution of the vote across the nation *could* provide a slight, but significant, advantage to the Republicans, but that advantage was not always decisive in this period. With only a 0.3 per cent plurality in 1884, for example, the Democrats could still win in the Electoral College.

The Changing Party Systems Account

Another account, popular with political scientists rather than historians, holds that there was electoral parity between the major parties after the Civil War – just as there had been from the mid-1830s until the early 1850s. However, it was not a restored party system that was evident after the Civil War but an entirely new system. Moreover, that system itself would break down and be replaced by a yet different system in the 1890s. The leading scholar of this view is Walter Dean Burnham, who argues that a so-called third party system was formed by 1860; organized initially around the issue of slavery, that system replaced the “second party system”, the one that had started in the Jacksonian revolution of the 1830s. Thus, the Burnham analysis focusses on disjuncture, and on rather sudden changes in how the parties constituted themselves.⁴ The alignment of the Jacksonian-era parties started to change from 1850 onwards as the debate about the extension of slavery into the territories, and the related issue of the admission of additional states to the Union, substituted a new line of division between the parties for a pre-existing party cleavage that centred on the scope of government activity. The result was a more pronounced regional split, although the proponents of this view usually concede that it did not produce a major change in the broader ideological divisions between the parties. Throughout the 19th century, the Democrats remained a party committed to a limited role for the federal government, and to “small government” more generally. The Whigs – and later the Republicans – championed a more active role for the federal government in opening up the country to trade and industry. By 1856 the new political alignment was largely in place, although the collapse of the remnants of the Whig Party would not occur until after the presidential election of that year.

⁴ Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and Mainsprings of American Politics*, New York, Norton, 1970, and Walter Dean Burnham and William N. Chambers (eds.), *The American Party Systems*, Second Edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975. The “first” party system on this schema was the one that emerged in the 18th century in the dispute between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans.

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But if the distinction between the second and the third party system hinges on different patterns of regional support, just how different was the third system? Was it really a “third” system? That is, how was it linked to the politics that preceded it, and was it, perhaps, merely a modification of the existing party system rather than an overturning of the older political order? For Burnham, there was, in Barbara Sinclair’s words, a “cataclysmic event”, to which the parties could not respond adequately and which thereby prompted new forms of electoral behaviour.⁵ His analytic framework sees the move from one so-called party system to another as being marked by the inability of the parties to respond to mounting conflicts in American society and economy. However, this is a misleading account of the pre-1853 period in three important respects.

First, the issue of the expansion of slavery was not a cataclysmic event in the way that a major war or an economic depression might be; it was not an exogenous variable that had a sudden impact on the political process. Rather, it was an issue that had cross-cut party lines earlier because the structure of American political institutions had made it impossible to change the status quo.⁶ The balance between slave and non-slave states in the U.S. Senate provided the former, in effect, with a veto over any policy change that threatened their interests. Consequently, divisions between the two major parties developed over other issues, ones that were suitable for party mobilization. This would have been a stable institutional solution but for three incompatible factors:

- (1) Virtually all American political elites accepted as an objective the creation of new states once the population sizes of territories warranted it.
- (2) The territories in which settlement was occurring were generally areas for which a slave economy was unsuitable, and hence there was little prospect of many new slave states being admitted to the Union, while there was growing pressure to admit new “free” states. Inevitably, that would end the South’s veto in the Senate.⁷

⁵ Barbara Sinclair, *Congressional Realignment, 1925-78*, Houston, University of Texas Press, 1982, p. 5.

⁶ See, for example, Barry R. Weingast, “Political Stability and Civil War: Institutions, Commitment, and American Democracy”, in Robert H. Bates et al., *Analytic Narratives*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 148-93.

⁷ To many southerners, part of the attraction of a policy of American imperialism in the Caribbean and in Central America was that it would have brought land into the United States that could have supported a slave economy.