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.

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Dynamics of American Political Parties

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From Mark Brewer: To Megan and Jack

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

Figures and Tables  page viii
Preface xi

1 DEMOCRACY, REPRESENTATION, AND PARTIES 1

2 OVERVIEW: SOCIAL CHANGE AND SHIFTING PARTY BASES 16

3 TAKING SHAPE: PARTY COALITIONS IN THE POST-BELLUM NINETEENTH CENTURY 33

4 REPUBLICAN ASCENDANCY AND DEMOCRATIC EFFORTS TO RESPOND, 1896–1928 48

5 TABLES TURN: THE NEW DEAL ERA AND DEMOCRATIC DOMINANCE, 1932–1948 66

6 THE DEMOCRATIC DRIVE TO THE GREAT SOCIETY 81

7 REPUBLICANS: REASSERTING CONSERVATIVE PRINCIPLES AND SEEKING A MAJORITY 104

8 THE STRUGGLE OF DEMOCRATS TO INTERPRET CHANGE AND RESPOND 145

9 GEORGE BUSH AND FURTHER POLARIZATION 166

10 THE 2008 ELECTION AND ITS INTERPRETATION 184

11 PARTIES AND THE PURSUIT OF MAJORITIES 200

Bibliography 211
Index 233

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Figures and Tables

FIGURES

2.1. Percentage voting for Democratic presidential candidates within regions, 1900–2008

2.2. Democratic source of electoral votes, South and Non-South, 1900–2008

2.3. House Democratic voting percentages, by region, 1900–2008

2.4. Correlation of presidential results, with results in Senate (by state) and House (by district), 1900–2008

2.5. Percent of districts and states with same party winning presidential and congressional elections, 1916–2008

2.6. Distribution of Senate Democratic members’ voting records, 1900–2006

2.7. Distribution of Senate Republican members’ voting records, 1900–2006

2.8. Average party unity score by party, Senate, 1870–2006

2.9. Average congressional party differences, 1856–2006


3.1. Democratic and Republican presidential candidates vote percentages, South, 1876–1892

3.2. Democratic and Republican House candidates vote percentages, South, 1876–1892

3.3. Democratic and Republican presidential candidates vote percentages, Northeast, 1876–1892

3.4. Democratic and Republican House candidates vote percentages, Northeast, 1876–1892
Figures and Tables

3.5. Democratic and Republican presidential candidates vote percentages, Midwest, 1876–1892 38
3.6. Democratic and Republican House candidates’ percentage of the total vote in the Midwest, 1876–1892 39
3.7. Democratic and Republican presidential candidates vote percentages, West, 1876–1892 40
3.8. Democratic and Republican House candidates’ percentage of the total vote in the West, 1876–1892 41
4.1. Vote percentage for House Republican candidates by region, 1890–1928 52
4.2. Vote percentage for Republican presidential candidates by region, 1892–1928 57
5.1. Democratic House candidates’ percentage of the vote by region, 1920–1948 71
5.2. Democratic presidential candidates’ percentage of the vote by region, 1920–1948 71
5.3. Democratic House percentages by population density of districts, Northeast, 1900–1948 78
6.1. Percentage of Democratic House seats derived from regions, 1900–1960 86
6.2. Democratic House percentages by density of districts, Northeast, 1900–1964 97
7.2. Correlation of House–president results and percent of split-outcomes, 1900–1972 118
7.3. Presence of liberals, moderates, and conservatives in the House Republican Party, 1900–2000 131
7.4. Percentage of conservatives identifying with Republican Party and percentage of party derived from conservatives, 1976–2004 137
7.5. Party identification (with leaners) for white men, 1952–2004 138
7.6. Republican success in the South: Number of House candidates and average percentage of vote, 1950–1998 139
7.7. Percentage of voters identifying as Democrat or Republican, including leaners, NES Data, 1952–2004 140
7.9. The association of House–president results: Correlation and split-outcomes, 1900–2004 142
Figures and Tables

8.2. Democratic Party identification by self-identified ideology, non-South, 1972–2004 157
8.3. Democratic Party identification by self-identified ideology, South, 1972–2004 158
10.1. Democratic presidential voting by income groups, 1952–2004 188
10.2. Abortion views, class, and Democratic presidential voting, 1976–2004 189
10.3. Republican Party’s image vs. President George W. Bush’s overall job approval rating, September 2001–November 2008 192
10.4. Correlation between Obama’s lead and “negative” views of economy 193

TABLES

1.1. Party success by years, 1900–2004 7
6.1. Party identification in the early 1950s 83
6.4. House regional and party divisions, 1964 Civil Rights Act 101
8.1. Democratic support by income: Percent voting for and identifying with Democrats, by decade, 1950s–2000s (whites only) 159
8.2. Pre-tax average household income by income groups (2004 dollars), 1979–2004 160
8.3. Distribution of House districts by the percentage nonwhite, 1960s–2000s 162
9.1. Presidential outcomes in 2004 and House winners in 2006 180
10.2. Distribution of Republican presidential support in House districts, 2004 and 2008, and how Democrats fared 195
10.3. Percentage of Democratic House Party from district types, 2008 198
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. 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.

1 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. 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.

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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.