

The Long War over Party Structure

A long-standing debate in American politics is about the proper structure for political parties and the relative power that should be afforded to party professionals versus issue activists. In this book, Byron E. Shafer and Regina L. Wagner draw systematically on new data and indexes to evaluate the extent to which party structure changed from the 1950s on, and what the consequences have been for policy responsiveness, democratic representation, and party alignment across different issue domains. They argue that the reputed triumph of volunteer parties since the 1970s has been less comprehensive than the orthodox narrative assumes, but that the balance of power did shift, with unintended and sometimes perverse consequences. In the process of evaluating its central questions, this book gives an account of how partisan alignments evolved with newly empowered issue activists and major postwar developments from the civil rights movement to the culture wars.

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*Democratic Representation and Policy
Responsiveness in American Politics*

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Preface

Political parties are generally recognized as the great intermediary institutions of democratic politics. They are *intermediary* because they connect the social base for politics with the operative institutions of government. Yet they become *institutionalized* in a way that most other intermediaries do not because they are intended explicitly to manage this connection. In doing so, however, they always partially transform public wishes in the process of transmitting them. Sometimes this transformation is modest, a kind of side payment for necessary activity. Other times, it is much more substantial, shaped strongly by the operational character of the intermediary institutions that perform the activity. Either way, the crucial body in this transmission is expected to be the political party.

That is the grand theoretical justification for a concern with party structure and with the specific arrangements – offices, incentives, preferences – that constitute that structure and by which this mediating process occurs. Moreover, for much of American political history, this has not been a simple “academic” matter. Instead, there has been a kind of open war over the appropriate structure of American political parties, and hence over the implications of alternative structures for democratic representation. In effect, there have been two fronts to this war. One front was theoretical, involving the proper standards for judging political parties as intermediary institutions. The other front was intensely practical, involving struggles over the policy rewards of American government. Though unlike the situation in some other realms, theoreticians and practitioners were often intensely aware of each other.

A potted history of this two-front war could run all the way back to the Founders, who thought a great deal about what was for them the unhappy

prospect of political parties as crucial intermediaries.¹ This history would pause with the Jacksonians, who usually receive credit for launching the organized parties with their strong internal structures that came to dominate nineteenth-century American politicking.² The story would pause again with the Progressives, who took up both the intellectual and the empirical efforts to make intermediation work differently, that is, in a more participatory manner and on a volunteer basis.³ And it would be brought up to date in a most surprising fashion when political scientists began to survey party fortunes in the immediate postwar world – and discovered that the reported demise of organized parties had been grossly overstated.⁴

At that point, 130 years after the initiating efforts of the Jacksonians and 80 years after the countervailing efforts of the Progressives, the two grand alternative models of party structure were alive and well on the American political landscape:

- There were still what we shall call “organized parties,” built upon the tangible rewards – opponents would call these the “spoils” – of governmental policy. Such rewards became the central incentive for political activity; the operational result was a hierarchy of long-serving party officeholders. Seen from below, these individuals rose

¹ Most succinctly in the “Farewell Address” from President George Washington, his statement declining a third term, collected in James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Washington, DC: Bureau of National Literature, 1897–1913), Vol. 1, 205–216.

² For the birth and maturation of the organized party system, Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838–1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). For that story in the words of the politician commonly viewed as most influential in this creation, Martin Van Buren, *Inquiry into the Origin and Course of Political Parties in the United States* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1867).

³ On Progressivism, Richard Jensen, “Democracy, Republicanism, and Efficiency: The Values of American Politics, 1885–1930,” Chap. 6 in Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger, eds., *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); for the coming of an alternative party model, Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and for the extension of that model through the twentieth century, James W. Ceaser, “The Development of the Presidential Selection System in the Twentieth Century,” chap. 5 in James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁴ Most especially in Alan Ware, *The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization, 1940–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), and David R. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics: Organization, Electoral Settings, and Government Activity in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

up from localized social organizations. Seen from above, they could be put into the field as the metaphorical “machinery” that waged election campaigns and coordinated policy making.

- Yet, there were also numerous examples of what we shall call “volunteer parties,” likewise built around governmental policies but now conceived more as abstract and general programs. These again provided the central incentives for political activity, but this time by mobilizing those who cared intensely about one or more of these substantive domains. For them, pursuit of such programs was its own reward. The operational result – at least ideally and often initially but not always in perpetuity – was open and shifting networks of issue activists, built and rebuilt as candidates and issues changed with the times.

But almost at the very point when scholars were rediscovering the continued vitality of two alternative models for party structure, the balance between the two shifted in a major way. A mix of party systems dating to the 1830s and amended but not transformed from the 1880s onward met the cataclysmic combination of major social change and sweeping institutional reform, once more joining intellectual concerns about properly democratic intermediation with institutional moves to restructure that process in the real world of practical politics. The best-known result was a comprehensive reworking of the mechanics of presidential selection. Yet these presidential reforms were only the most visible product of a collection of institutional changes reaching well beyond them. If this larger complex of reforms was more geographically and temporally dispersed, it was also procedurally more far-reaching, leaving few states without recurrent and lasting impacts from a comprehensive reform surge.

At first, one associated result was the flowering – really the re-flowering – of scholarly work on the differential contribution of various forms of internal partisan organization.⁵ In short order, however, this result turned opposite and ironic. The long scholarly tradition of analyzing differences within American party systems at the grand level largely died away, in tandem with the alleged disappearance of the great historical distinctions

⁵ See, among many, Austin Ranney, *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction: Party Reform in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); William J. Crotty, *Political Reform and the American Experiment* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1977); and Nelson W. Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

between organized versus volunteer political parties. Or so the dominant narrative ran. By the late 1960s and early 1970s within this narrative, the forces championing autonomous participation, volunteer parties, and a fluid politics had routed the forces associated with social connection, organized parties, and representational stability – and come to dominate American politics.

This apparent resolution was assumed to be both general and permanent. An unsurprising but unfortunate corollary was that scholarly work in the immediate area began to die away. If political parties, headquartered in fifty otherwise diverse states, were now reformed in theory and similar in practice, there seemed little more to say. We take this to be an unhappy resolution, unhappy as befits a study of the long war over party structure on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Empirically, the details of a much-reported triumph by the volunteer model were more impressionistically asserted than systematically demonstrated. Yet the resulting balance between party types mattered – and still matters – even just on its own terms. Which is to say: if systematic investigation confirms this triumph, how general was it? Or, said the other way around, how much of the alternative (organized) model actually survived?

Theoretically as well, an alleged triumph by one of the two main models was taken, implicitly and – we think – incorrectly, to imply that an understanding of party structure in American politics no longer mattered in the terms that had been so central to the long-running debate. Yet even if that were true, the practical adoption by individual states of one model rather than the other did go on to affect both the degree of ideological polarization between the active parties and, even more consequentially, the nature of the ties between party activists and their own putative rank and files – and these effects were continuing, still, to make their contribution to policy responsiveness and democratic representation in American politics. Accordingly, this filtering effect has to be the larger focus (and hence the larger contribution) of an effort to return in a systematic fashion to these once-fundamental questions about the operational nature of American politics.

From one side, the dominant narrative, asserting the end of the long war and the homogenization of American party politics, would by itself suggest the need to return to the issue of organized versus volunteer political parties; to address this distinction with the kind of systematic indicators that are capable of tracing its evolution across all the postwar years; and, most especially, to consider some contributions of the modern result to the shaping of political representation in the United States. Even

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if this narrative were entirely correct (which it is not!), implications for democratic responsiveness would remain both omnipresent and subtly insistent in the modern world – magnified, of course, by whatever the changing balance in party types turned out to be.

Yet this narrative could also be false, and in two fundamentally different ways, each with its own implications for democratic responsiveness. In the first, the situation that serious researchers uncovered in the 1960s – a world where organized parties, despite previous obituaries, had survived surprisingly well – might still hold in the 2010s, rebalanced no doubt and ever-elusive in its measurement, but continuing to make important contributions to American democracy. Alternatively, the dominant narrative could be more or less completely misleading in the polar opposite fashion. The 2000s were to bring a small but persistent body of new work arguing forcefully that the alleged triumph of volunteer parties had never had the behavioral consequences claimed by their proponents.⁶ Recast in the analytic terms used here, this work implied that the participatory reforms associated with that triumph had in practice served to *resurrect* what was nothing less than a modern incarnation of the old organized-party model.

Either contrary result would push implicitly in the same theoretical direction: back toward a set of classical – time-honored – questions about party structure and policy responsiveness. Together, those possibilities have set the stage, we think, for a return to what was long one of the major issues, both theoretical and practical, in American politics. This involves the internal structure of US political parties and the implications of this structure for the larger nature of democratic representation. In historical terms, we now possess better evidence than was ever available at the height of this war through which to confront arguments about the true evolution of conscious party reform. In contemporary terms, we can finally ask in a systematic fashion about the representational and policy impacts of an alleged behavioral triumph.

In that light, how is the active party linked to its rank and file under organized versus volunteer systems? This is perhaps the crucial aspect of *democratic representation*, and hence the operational nub of political intermediation. What then happens to the policy preferences of party

⁶ Most pointedly, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, & John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations before and after Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Seth E. Maskett, *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

activists – the operative party elite – when one structural model largely supplants the other? This is in turn the crucial contribution to *policy responsiveness*. What is a changing balance of party types doing to partisan policy alignments overall? This is the question of how parties organize policy demands, and it is the second key aspect of democratic representation. And lastly, what is this changing balance doing to different *policy domains*, both those that have attained overall partisan alignment and those that have not? This is the second key contribution to policy responsiveness.

Those are the questions that we propose to address in *The Long War over Party Structure: Democratic Representation and Policy Responsiveness in American Politics*. Chapter 1 begins this effort by way of a small set of scholarly landmarks. These address what party structure is, the alternative forms it can take, and the representational implications of adopting one or the other of two great alternatives. The chapter moves to a systematic effort to convert previous work on the topic – varied and impressionistic but always circling back to the same central concerns – into a set of indicators that can be followed systematically. With that accomplished, Chapter 1 closes by setting out the actual distribution of organized and volunteer parties in the fifty states across the postwar period, 1950–2010. Within this description, the year 1970 does indeed prove to be a critical change point, in effect the formal triumph of the volunteer model.

Chapter 2 turns to an effort to demonstrate the impact of these alternative structures (and of the changing balance between them) on American politics, most especially with regard to policy responsiveness and democratic representation. The hunt begins in the policy domain that has long been the bedrock of the modern party system, namely social welfare. Fortunately, the relevant literature comes prepackaged with hypotheses about how party structure interacted with welfare preferences, even if they were initially created for other purposes. When these hypotheses are largely sustained in our inquiry, albeit as elucidated in some new ways, social welfare can go on to provide an analytic template for asking about the impact of organized and volunteer parties in other major substantive domains. The chapter closes with one of these others, the domain of civil rights.

Chapter 2 suggests that the choice between organized and volunteer structures did filter policy preferences in notably different ways, though not necessarily the ways that their proponents intended. The resulting list of impacts proves to be imposing: affecting overall partisan alignments, the manner of their arrival in American politics, the degree of ideological

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polarization between the active parties, the size of the gap between party activists and their rank and file, and the behavior of specific populations inside all of this. So Chapter 3 cannot escape going in search of the rest of the major policy conflicts that have characterized postwar American politics. The first element in this involves the policy domain of cultural values. Yet once that is available, it proves possible to move to a more comprehensive level, using social welfare and cultural values jointly to isolate the major *ideologies* in American politics during this period, namely liberalism, conservatism, populism, and libertarianism. The chapter closes with the fourth of the four substantive domains usually regarded as central to policy conflict in the United States in the postwar years, namely foreign affairs and national security.

Chapter 4 returns to our underlying concern with the filtering effect of party structures, reorganized and presented in two ways. In the larger of the two, this chapter puts the four major domains of postwar policy conflict back together and considers their evolution as a collective whole, in common with the evolution of the comprehensive ideologies that accompanied these individual domains. Yet the chapter also attends to the variety of generic ways in which party structure can shape this evolution. These include its impact on individual partisan populations, on overall partisan alignments, and on ideological polarization within these alignments, along with the manner in which all of these evolve from one era to another.

In the end, however, an attempt to resuscitate a major perspective on democratic representation can hardly announce that this resuscitation is complete, much less that the long war is over, and thus that history has ended. So there must be an Afterword, addressing a major new twist on the argument about links among party structure, policy responsiveness, and democratic representation. No analysis can be definitive about a hypothesized future, but it is possible to close with some of the major questions that a fresh look at prospective impacts would involve – most especially the prospect that party activists have ultimately defeated the reformers, restoring control over superficially participatory parties and pulling their activist components further than ever from the voting rank and file. Much more work would have to be done before anyone could confirm or dismiss the accuracy of this latest salvo in the long war, but the Afterword suggests that successor scholars with similar concerns could indeed do such work.

* * *

The obvious wisecrack about the intellectual roots of this project is that it begins with the decision by Andrew Jackson, as implemented most

centrally by Martin Van Buren, to create the organized Democratic Party in response to being denied a presidential nomination in 1824. Its direct roots are more mundane but still hardly linear. One of us (Byron) wrote a thesis prospectus involving party structure and its differential impact on policy outcomes – a prize-winning proposal, he said proudly – but then ended up writing a very different doctoral dissertation. The other of us (Regina) wrote her very first graduate paper on – what else? – the differential impact of party structures, focused on the United States but with a comparative hook. Yet she too then went off in a different direction, with a doctoral dissertation on the interaction of gender, party, institutional rules, and local cultures in American politics.

Several years later, we were working together on other projects when we began to return to an old common interest. The first step in converting a mutual curiosity about party structure into something real was to collect and organize the available indicators, to see if the dominant narrative had any patterned reality. When it did – organized parties survived a good deal longer than the received wisdom would suggest, but there was a huge shift toward volunteer parties around 1970 – we then went in search of actual policy impacts from this shift. The search began with social welfare, the ostensible base of the New Deal party system. When these appeared, somewhat to our surprise, we expanded the focus to include the other major domains of postwar policy conflict, namely foreign affairs, civil rights, and cultural values.

By then, we were generating papers and giving conference presentations. For these latter, the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association and the biennial conferences of the Policy History Association were particularly helpful. We thank the latter in particular for some conscious intellectual support.

Specific individuals also made distinctive contributions. Shannon Johnson, currently in Washington School of Law at American University, created the measures that underpin the Afterword to this volume. Monica Busch, currently in graduate school in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, came to the project late, but early enough to create and manage the index. Byron benefited from extended conversations with Alan Ware of Oxford University and Richard Johnston of the University of British Columbia. Regina benefited from insights into the inner workings of R from Bradley Jones, research associate at the Pew Research Center, and from a variety of thoughts on different aspects of the project along the way from Elizabeth Sawyer, also currently in graduate school in political science at the University of Wisconsin.

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When the time came to move this project from manuscript to published work, Sara Doskow at Cambridge University Press took it under her wing and adeptly managed that particular transition, all the while urging us to sharpen the argument in several key regards. Danielle Menz at Cambridge then held all the specific pieces in line on the way to a final product. We thank both of them. Formal classes on research design often suggest a kind of synoptic approach to the research enterprise. We think that many serious projects are more likely to look like this one, emerging from a latent curiosity and progressing through one result that leads to another.

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