PROLOGUE

I
Party government and party politics

The nature of American party government

In studying the nature of American government, political scientists frequently point to the lasting significance of the political understanding and undertaking of the 'framers' of the federal Constitution of 1787. Historical inquiries are considered appropriate to this scientific study, for the current shape of the object of study, the American polity, can be well understood as a development of the regime which was founded and formed by the famous men who were members of the Philadelphia Convention. Knowledge of their intentions is rightly considered to be a firm foundation for understanding American politics. And not only the legal forms of the Constitution have endured. Indeed, some of them have been amended. However, when taken together with the work placed before the first Congress under the new Constitution by Alexander Hamilton, the political arrangements of the Federalists were such a comprehensive and durable achievement that they can with some reason be seen as the 'embryo' of American 'civilization' and an important contribution to 'the American philosophy.'[1] But important parts of American civilization are alien to Federalist intentions and accomplishments. And American political thought has been full of conflicts and divisions on issues which find characteristically Federalist notions on one side only; 'the American philosophy' is complex. So if we wish to consider the origins of the American polity in order to uncover something of its nature, we should study not only Federalism but also the successful alternative which quickly appeared and left its mark on the regime: Jeffersonian Republicanism. For the Republicans founded their party in order to oppose essential parts of the Federalist project.

When political scientists do look at the founding of American party politics, they usually see not such a formative antithesis, but a slight

modification and perfection of the Federalists' Constitution. The appearance of political parties in America in the years immediately following the ratification of the Constitution is seen as a development which confirms the indispensability of informal, quasi-private parties for the operation of the formal, public institutions of the Constitution. They see past the apparently irreconcilable opposition between Federalism and Republicanism, to the practical result, the pragmatic adjustment, which was a step or at least a drift in the direction of party government as it exists today. The first parties are not so much studied for any light that they might throw on the nature of the American polity as they are celebrated as the first example of institutions which proved to be both more and less necessary than the first partisans themselves supposed. The first partisans had healthy instincts, but they were too hesitant to use parties and too eager when they did use them. Parties were and are necessary not as emergency devices to remove threats to the safety of the Republic, nor as agents of progress, but as everyday methods of governing in a mass democracy. Americans need and accept parties not primarily as designers and implementers of programs, but for the population and lubrication of the constitutionally separate parts of government, for structuring and moderating the conflict of interest groups, and – perhaps – for improving the participation of citizens in government. According to this view, American party government has been truest to itself when it has appeared as a professional, pragmatic, patronage-oriented, cautious, 'accommodationist two-party system,'[2] in which the 'issue-oriented party' is the undesirable exception which causes the system to disintegrate.[3] Conflicts of principle like those which, unfortunately, marked the beginning of party politics in the 1790s are seen as events that hinder the growth of party government as a harmonizing system, even if they do have the advantage (if it is an advantage) of advancing the participatory, democratic thrust of party government.[4]

Advocates of this way of understanding the character of American party government are confronted by the paradox that 'a politics of interest is made possible by the fact that the American party system occasionally collapses under the onslaught of a politics of principle.' An occasional breakdown of the system seems to be necessary for its sustenance, for 'party allegiances exist today because in the past certain traumatic events precipitated a debate and a meaningful choice.'[5] Defenders of a moderate 'politics of interest' must admit the necessity of occasional implacable disagreements. The understanding of American party government would not lead to such a paradoxical stance as

this if the original and recurring 'politics of principle' could be comprehended as aspects of parties and of the system themselves, instead of being seen as an *ad hoc* remedy for an otherwise theoretically perfect system. Parties which completely forgot their principled origins might cease to be useful tools of pragmatic politics, because they might cease to be.

The suggestion that partisan principles are continuously important to American party government – in times of consensus as well as in times of conflict – should not be astonishing, for not only American but all modern party government had its origins in the attempt to make politics conform to certain kinds of principles. Modern government is everywhere party government. The existence and encouragement of party or parties is a part of the public constitution in modern regimes – a part of the way in which government is seen and allowed to work. The singularity or plurality of party is often used to distinguish among the variety of modern regimes, but party is a more or less respectable pursuit in all of them. The desirability of a single party or a system of two or more parties is publicly defended. This is a remarkable departure from the ways of Western politics for all but the last two centuries. Before the eighteenth century, party was generally thought of either as an emergency device, which might properly be used by public-spirited politicians in private; or as a tolerable pursuit of private ends, but hardly a laudable, public-spirited activity. This latter opinion persists today, not only in two- or multi-party regimes, but also in one-party regimes, where the party is after all distinguished from the government; nowhere is party completely public in the way that a constitution is. But, in all modern regimes, party is more public, and more closely associated with the common good, than the tolerable but unrespectable party of less recent times. Modern parties are publicly respectable parties, and they can be that because they have a principled side to their character. Even Edmund Burke's famous defense of the respectability of parties, which was directed against the idea and the practice of a party of abstract principle, had recourse to the idea of parties of principles derived from history.[6] Modern parties depend on publicized principles and programs which restrict the sphere of discretionary statesmanship. They resemble the parties which politicians employed before party became respectable and gentlemanly, in that they claim to be directed to the public good. But they are different in that they define themselves publicly, and therefore constrain those who lend them their support. Thus, statesmen sometimes find it necessary to alter their party allegiance. They do not thereby testify to the soundness of the apology for a plural party system

made by the opponents of a 'politics of principle,' for a statesman's party allegiance need not be less wholehearted for being altered; it could well be more. In fact, by lending their support to a party, for however long a term – and with however high a rate of interest – they testify to the power of party principles in modern politics. A sensible alteration of party allegiance makes the sufficiency of party principles questionable, but it merely confirms their power.

The least that can be said about American parties in this respect is that they are by nature potentially programmatic, even if they are actually so only infrequently. Examination of the intense conflicts that accompany the origins of the great American parties would make this potential more intelligible. But it might also be asked how far this potential affects the everyday character of parties and their overall impact on the American regime.

Depreciation or neglect of this principled side of American parties can lead to the neglect of important differences between American and British party government. In Britain, where party was first publicly advocated in opposition to a programmatic party of abstract principle, party government can be traced more directly than in America to 'the rise of legitimate opposition.'[7] But in the United States, party was first made publicly respectable by a particular party – the Jeffersonian Republicans – who were themselves attached to a program based on abstract principle. It is true that they did not intend a permanent establishment of the practice of party, but it is equally true that later American politicians who reintroduced party returned as well to a principled posture similar to that of the Republicans. Consequently, the defense of party in America was for several decades in the hands of those who denied equal legitimacy to any other party. Moreover, while a system of parties has become, with the recurrence of party and the disillusionment with party, a fixture of the American regime, and approved as such by its students, a system of legitimate opposition has yet to be politically established. The American two-party system is truly a capacious one-party system. The pressures sustaining the duality of parties in American national politics are numerous; the Presidential focus of American politics and the absence of proportional representation figure prominently among them. But one of the most important reasons for the existence and encouragement of two parties in America can be seen in the 'theory of critical elections.'[8] According to this theory, each of the great majority parties in American politics – the Jeffersonian Republicans from 1801 to the 1820s, the Jacksonian Democrats from the 1830s to the 1850s, the Republicans from the 1860s to the 1930s, and the

Democrats from the 1930s to the present – each of these parties, although born in intense conflict, has yet been so victorious that it has been able to enforce its own principles as a consensus. These parties have dominated the American political scene so much that party government has been in an important sense one-party government. This is true not simply in terms of the success or failure of partisan office-seeking, although the statistics here are impressive enough: to mention only the most impressive figure, in 1976, after 183 years of party politics, the minority parties – that is, the major parties in opposition to Jefferson's, Jackson's, Lincoln's and Franklin Roosevelt's parties – will have controlled simultaneously the House of Representatives, Senate and Presidency for a total of fifteen years; while the corresponding figure for the majority parties is 110 years. More important is the fact that these minority parties survive as well as they do by reshaping themselves in the image of their more formidable opponents. David H. Fischer has shown how the Federalists after their defeat at the turn of the century tried to imitate the electoral style of the Republicans.[9] The Whigs were most successful when they took their cue from the Democrats, denied their Federalist inclinations and nominated for President military heroes; even then their victories might more properly be attributed to the Democrats' misfortunes in economic affairs (in 1840) and intra-party divisions (in 1848). From the Civil War to 1932, 'The Democratic Party,' Adlai Stevenson once remarked, 'had the dubious distinction of wandering in the desert for a longer time than the children of Israel after their flight from Egypt.'[10] The oases provided by Cleveland's and Wilson's victories depended on divisions in the Republican ranks (the desertion of Mugwumps in 1884, discontented farmers in 1892, Progressives in 1912, and neutralists and some Progressives in 1916). These were 'deviating' rather than critical realigning elections;[11] they did not signal the arrival of a new party system. The same can be said of the Eisenhower and Nixon victories in the current party system, inaugurated by the Roosevelt Revolution of 1932, which was a critical realigning election. Again, the electoral hegemony of the majority party in each system is less significant than its enforcement of a policy and a rhetoric, and the pressures on the minority party to offer an 'echo' rather than a 'choice.' The national enforcement of the policy decision made by the election of 1860 was assisted by a conflict of arms; the consequence was a general acceptance of an end of the expansion of slavery, and a beginning of the expansion of nationally-encouraged industry. Neither major party could effectively oppose these policies; at the same time, both were able to bid for the support of reformers, and to speak for 'the response to

industrialism.' The decades between the Civil War and the New Deal were a Republican regime not only because the Republicans were able to win most of the electoral battles, but also because they had in any case already won the decisive battle, the one which determined the principle of the regime. In the 1930s there was another decisive battle – not between the old armies, however. As in the 1790s and the 1850s, an essentially new political party was created – the New Deal Democrats – and this party successfully defined the new principle of consensus. At first, the Republicans clung to opposite principles, but they soon came to respect the new regime; as early as 1936, new-model Republicans emerged, sympathetic to the goals of the interventionist welfare state. By 1940 this conformity to the principle of the new Democratic party extended to the Republican Presidential nominating convention, where – except in 1964 – it has ruled ever since. A new Republican party took its place alongside the new Democratic party.[12]

The reasons for the two-party system thus vary with the presence or absence of conflict over leading principles. When a new principle is to be introduced, it requires a party to advance it. This new party can be composed of elements of old ones, but the principle to which they adhere is a new formula which binds all the elements together and defines the new compound. The opposition party, which can contain many elements of the former majority party, will become the new minority party, defined at first by a principle opposed to the new one, but at last, after being clearly defeated in one or more critical elections, by the victorious new principle. In this way, the 'two-party system' has been an instrument of the 'politics of principle,' not only in the obvious case when principled conflicts between parties have been the order of the day, but also when these conflicts have been resolved and one party's principles have become common ground of both parties. This is not to deny that the 'politics of interest' has played an important role in the party system. Especially in times of uncritical elections, major American parties have appeared as uneasy coalitions of interest groups. Indeed, this role has been no less important when principles have been disputed than when they have been settled; the presence of a 'politics of interest' does not guarantee pacific moderation. But neither does such moderation require the absence of a 'politics of principle'; it only requires that the 'principle' be an object of consensus. Recognition of the importance of principle in American party politics does not imply acquiescence in traumatic party strife.

Additional reassurance on this last point can be produced by arguing that even when principles have been disputed rather than agreed by

American parties, the disputes have not concerned fundamentals. Although modern governments are avowedly party governments, they also claim to be impartial governments, representing the people rather than ruling them. Accordingly, under whatever party regime, American government is supposed to be limited government, restricted from the realm of society by being restrained from the comprehensive direction of men's lives, which would be partial to a particular way of life. The best means to maintain this liberal kind of government has been disputed – and decided by critical elections – but such liberty has been accepted as the proper end by all the major parties. Partisan controversies have therefore concerned the best way to secure impartiality. This may seem paradoxical, but it is historically reasonable, for modern party government did not arise until impartiality had been advanced as the end of government. Recoiling from the devastations of partisan Christian politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men came to accept the modern idea that partisanship regarding the proper way of life need not be the primary concern of politics, which could be fully occupied with the necessary means to life. Once the settlement of politico-theological partisanship was effected in this way, political parties could be considered tolerable, if petty.[13] It is true that the respectability granted to modern parties in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries required the reintroduction of principles into parties. But it also required the maintenance of that fundamental modern principle, political impartiality. Modern parties advance public-spirited principles of government, but they do not reintroduce the superseded notion of ruling. If they did, they could not present themselves as parties; they would have to claim comprehensiveness and impartiality. As it is, they claim partiality, but their underlying impartiality is evident. They often promote interference in the way people live, but this interference is justified by scientific or historical arguments that it tends to the self-realization of people; it 'forces them to be free.' It is not justified as forcing or teaching them to be good men, as defined by the regime, in the traditional manner of ancient and medieval polities. Modern parties do not return to the traditional definition of man as a naturally political creature, whose rulers are determined through the use of his natural power of argument about good and bad.[14] American parties are no exception.

The study of American government must include a study of the origins of American party government, in order to understand more completely the founding of the regime. In addition, the origins of American party politics must be studied, in order to comprehend the

phenomenon of critical elections in general, and particularly the origins of the cycle of American party alignment;[15] to be able to judge how much the principled aspect of parties is employed in their uncritical operation; and to understand some of the possibilities of partisanship after the impartial, apolitical aspirations of modern politics are taken into account.

The origins of American party politics

In studying the origins of American party politics, historians have suggested several valuable ways of understanding the conflict between Federalists and Republicans. Each way reveals part of the truth about party government.

Sometimes an international focus is adopted. Most historians have not gone as far along this route as a few contemporaries did, in reducing the Federalists to a British party and the Republicans to a French party. There are two kinds of difficulties with such a reduction. First, it simply does not fit the facts. The parties had plenty to quarrel about aside from international affairs. Foreign labels played a greater role in exacerbating already existing partisanship than in causing it in the first place. The first partisan election campaign took place in 1792, before the issues between the parties were complicated by the disputes over foreign policy which followed the outbreak in 1793 of war between France and the First Coalition. And when these disputes did come to the fore, the parties could perhaps be more truthfully described as anti-French and anti-British, than as pro-British and pro-French. The British and French governments were aware that they were dealing with Americans, proud of their independence and anxious to reap the benefits of neutrality. Secondly, in so far as it is true that the Federalists leaned toward Britain and the Republicans toward France, there remains the question of the reasons for these tendencies. Were they economic? social? ideological? strategic? accidental? Whatever they were, these causes rather than their effects would be the more essential features of the party conflict.

Many historians suggest that the heat of this party conflict was essentially accidental, a product of unwarranted and even imaginary friction. Each party is seen to have harbored unreasonable suspicions of the other's motives. It is suggested that the truth about the division between Federalism and Republicanism can be seen more clearly if, instead of thinking about it 'as a contest of abstractions, we regard it as one between two shifting groups of men who, differing upon practical problems as they arose, came to suspect the views and purposes of those

in the opposite camp and to regard their own pursuit of power and their determination to defeat their opponents as the supreme consideration.'[16] The decade preceding Jefferson's election in 1800 is interpreted as an 'age of passion' in which negligible or at most negotiable differences of opinion were exaggerated out of all proportion in the minds of the partisans, so much so that they became obstacles that prevented Americans from seeing their shared political assumptions. The unnecessarily desperate and acerbic political conflict of the 1790s was caused by the American consensus being forgotten or mislaid. Happily, it was eventually recalled or rediscovered, and in retrospect the benefits of the conflict between Federalists and Republicans can be highlighted, even if these first partisans must be chided for their immature hostility to organized political parties. One of these benefits was their unintended demonstration of the tolerableness of organized opposition. Equally unintended was another major benefit: the advancement of democracy. Neither Federalists nor Republicans were democrats, but their competition for votes helped to democratize American politics. This historical interpretation is intended to support the case for the 'accommodationist two-party system.' It argues that there were no foundations for serious partisan conflict in the 1790s. It is not surprising that much of the history written from this point of view is directed against the work of the progressive historians, who assert the substantial nature of these foundations, in two different accounts.

One of these accounts is the idealistic interpretation of the conflict between Federalists and Republicans as an epic confrontation between aristocracy and democracy. Jefferson's victory is enthusiastically attributed to the 'democratic temper' of the country.[17] The contention that the Jeffersonian Republicans were democrats has been as effectively challenged as the contention that the Federalists were aristocrats or monarchists. However, this pro-Republican interpretation does have the advantage of reflecting some of the idealism which was undeniably more Republican than Federalist.

This is an advantage which the self-proclaimed realists among the progressives felt able to do without. Their mood was one of 'honest realism,' which was thought to be 'putting away the naïve myths that passed for history and substituting homely authentic fact.'[18] The most famous and influential of these realists, Charles Beard, argued that the main issue between Federalists and Republicans was whether capitalistic or agrarian interests should prevail in America. What is more, he insisted that the parties *presented* themselves as mere agents of these economic interest groups: Hamilton's hard-headed, realistic program