

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 12: Parties

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MIT

1. Readings

Aldrich, “Why Parties?”

Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, “The Party Decides”

Kollman, “Who Drives the Party Bus?”

Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

Readings

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Aldrich, “Why Parties?”

Parties as institutions

Unlike every other institution covered thus far, parties are **completely endogenous**.

- *It was the actions of political actors that created political parties in the first place, and it is the actions of political actors that shape and alter them over time.*

Question: How do parties emerge and how are they sustained?

Some answers from political science

Coalitional view: parties as strategic coalitions of groups

Responsible party thesis: well-differentiated parties are good for democracy

Downsian: parties as “teams” in electoral competition

Aldrich, “Why Parties?”

Primary Actors: Those who seek and those who hold elective office

- *“The major political party is the creature of the politicians, the ambitious office seeker and the officeholder. They have created and maintained, used and abused, reformed or ignored the political party when doing so has furthered their goals and ambitions.”*

Secondary Actors:

- Those who hold resources that office seekers need to realize their ambitions (e.g. donors)
- Those for whom the realization of their goals depends on the party winning office (e.g. activists)

What Do Politicians Want?

Not partisan goals per se, but personal and fundamental goals:

- To have a long and successful career in office (Fenno)
- To achieve policy goals
- To attain power and prestige in government

Parties help politicians realize these goals.

Aldrich, “Why Parties?”

Three types of institutional problems:

1. Problem of ambition: more aspirants for office than offices to go around
 - **Solution:** Parties as gateway to candidacy
2. Dilemmas of choice
 - **Solution:** The party bundles policy platforms, creating a stable coalition
3. Problem of collective action
 - **Solution:** Party invests in political organizing and creates **brand** that is an informational shortcut for voters

Politicians turn to partisan organization insofar as parties help to overcome these problems and win elections, and turn away from them when they do not.

Aldrich, “Why Parties?”

Thus, Aldrich defines parties by their usefulness to politicians.
(*Functionalism?*)

Discussion: What elements of the modern two-party system do not fit this mold? Are there ways in which it is unhelpful or constraining to politicians?

Are there other solutions besides parties to the problems above?

Readings

Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, “The Party Decides”

Why should politicians be at the center of the story?

What about interest groups, social movements, sectional interests, citizen activists, voters?

Primary and Secondary Actors

Primary Actors: Groups in society with **intense policy preferences**

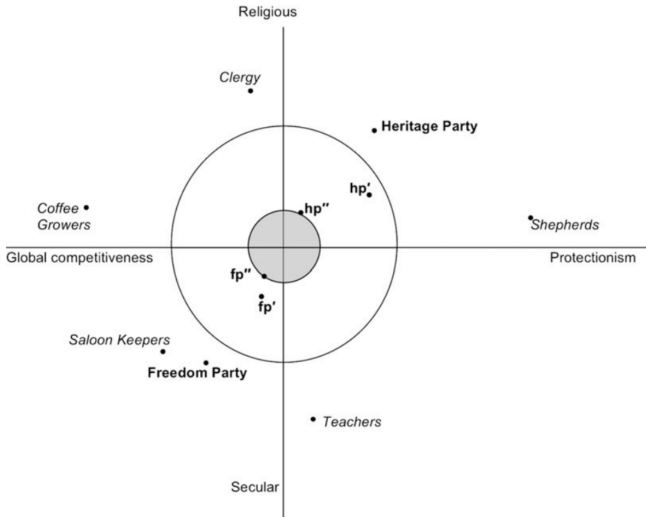
- Don't care about winning for winning's sake; have tangible policy goals
- Have **resources** (time, money) to help politicians get reelected

Secondary Actors:

- Politicians who want to be elected but need resources
- Generic voters with weak preferences/low information and engagement

The Electoral Blind Spot (Bawn et al. 2012)

Figure 2
The electoral blind spot and nomination trade-offs



Cohen et al., “The Party Decides”

1. Groups want to **sell resources** to candidates in exchange for policy promises
2. Generic voters do not pay much attention to politics, especially on certain issues
 - Groups can especially get policy gains by exploiting this **electoral blind spot**
3. But if one group becomes active, other groups are incentivized to do so as well → now there are too many groups competing for influence
4. Groups form **coalitions** → parties
5. Once a coalition backs a candidate, they can bias electoral rules in their favor to help them win (Examples?)

Readings

Kollman, “Who Drives the Party Bus?”

Kollman, “Who Drives the Party Bus?”

Noting that party elites **did not decide** on Trump:

- Is the “party decides” theory fundamentally wrong?
- Or did the theory just fail one time? (“*All models are wrong.*”)

Kollman, “Who Drives the Party Bus?”

The party as a **train**:

- *“The party elites structure the institutions of primary elections and caucuses and use their vast resources to determine the direction of the party. These party elites build the railroad tracks, place the train cars on the tracks, and then find the candidates to drive the trains in the direction predetermined.”*
- Party elites resolve their conflicts before the primary.

The party as a **bus**:

- *“The candidates themselves... define what the party stands for and where it should go. The party is a bus that awaits a driver, and the candidate-driver can go in many different directions.”*
- The primary is how party elites resolve their conflicts.

The “Party Decides” Theory Over Time

See video.

Discussion: How have recent changes in political communication, campaign finance, and political polarization affected the importance of party elites? What does it mean now for the “party to decide”?

Who or what is “**the party**”?

- *Parties as institutions*: the rules and structures politicians build and exploit to maintain power
- *Parties as agents*: intense policy demanders who form stable coalitions
- *Parties as ideologies*: the unifying frameworks that organize political beliefs

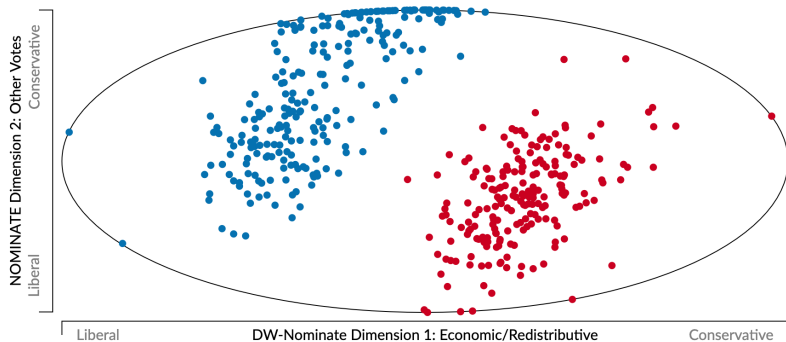
Readings

Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

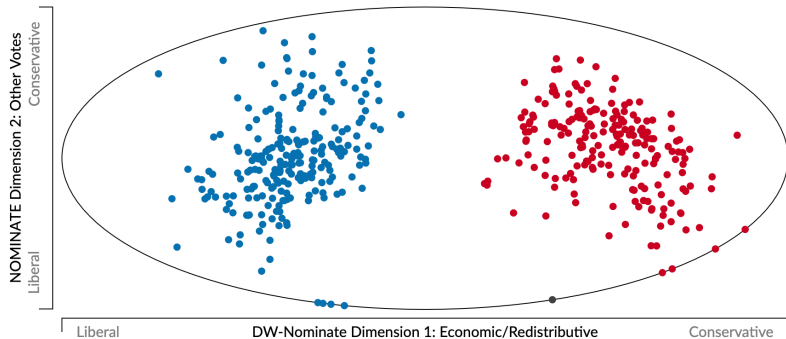
Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

- Today, **Democratic partisanship**, **economic liberalism**, and **racial liberalism** cohere under a common programmatic banner
- It was not always this way! (Watch this.)
- A **partisan realignment** happened in the 1960s, absorbing Southern Democrats into the Republican party
 - New Deal coalition: racist but economically liberal Southern Democrats + Northern progressives united to support economically liberal agenda
 - But a tenuous alliance: FDR did not even pass anti-lynching legislation (comparison to Republican party now?)
 - Eventually, the alliance fractured: Southern Democrats chose race and went to Republican party

House of Representatives, 1957-58



House of Representatives, 2019-20



(More here.)

Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

The conventional account:

1. **National party elites** played the decisive role (**top-down reform**)
 - Lyndon Johnson (D) v. Barry Goldwater (R) taking sharp opposite stances on the Civil Rights Act of 1964
2. National political actors took action to **overcome blockage from federalism**
3. The **1960s** was the critical juncture: a sudden seismic shift

Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

Schickler's account:

1. **State parties and locally oriented members of Congress** played the decisive role (**bottom-up reform**)
 - By the time of the Johnson-Goldwater election in 1964, the parties had already shifted under the candidates' feet
2. Federalism actually **enabled change**
 - Union leaders and progressive activists pushed for change at the local level
 - AFL-CIO united racial & economic justice
3. Slower, more gradual change from **1930s-1950s**

Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

Racial realignment: implications for party theory

- Support for Cohen et al.: groups/intense demanders for civil rights changed Democratic party position
- **BUT**, the party is not a single coherent entity: federalism/geography
- To achieve their goals, activists exploited fractures in the party coalition

Discussion: How does adding a vertical dimension to party politics complicate the Aldrich, “Party Decides,” and “party bus” schools of thought?