

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 13: Parties

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Readings

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

Evolution of parties over time: link

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

Downsian: parties as “teams” in electoral competition

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

Coalitional view: Parties as strategic coalitions of groups

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)

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.

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
- Generic voters with weak preferences/low information and engagement

Cohen et al., “The Party Decides”

1. Groups want to **sell resources** to candidates in exchange for policy promises
 - Particularly effective in domains most voters don't know/care about
2. But there are too many groups in society → they form coalitions (**parties**)
3. Once a coalition backs a candidate, they can bias electoral rules in their favor to help them win

Cohen, Marty, David Karol, et al. From *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform*. University of Chicago Press, 2008. © University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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

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

Noel: the party failed to coordinate on an alternative.

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.

Kollman, “Who Drives the Party Bus?”

According to Kollman, Trump got on the bus and drove it away, with the Republican party running to catch up.

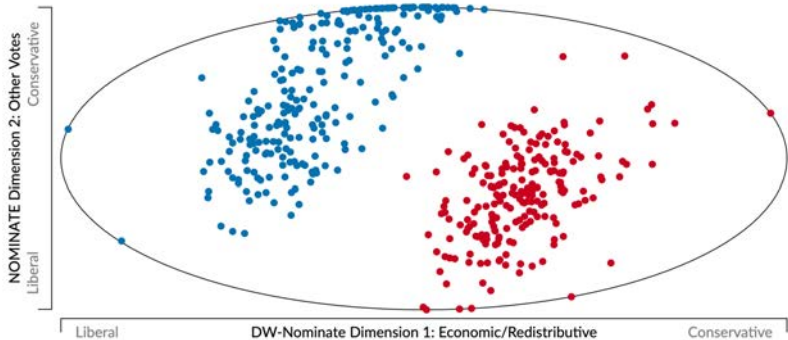
Discussion: Which metaphor seems more plausible to you, the bus or the train?

- In 2016?
- In 2020?

Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

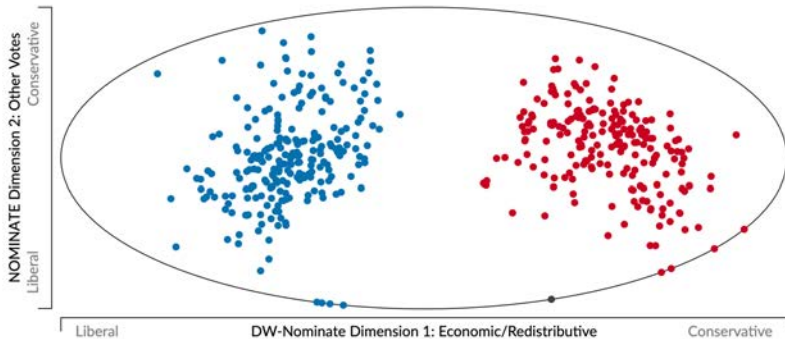
- Today, **Democratic partisanship**, **economic liberalism**, and **racial liberalism** cohere under a common programmatic banner
- It was not always this way! (Watch this.)
- A **partisan realignment** happened in the 1960s, absorbing Southern Democrats into the Republican party
 - New Deal coalition: 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



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House of Representatives, 2019-20



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(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, Eric. “Introduction.” Chapter 1 in *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965*. Princeton University Press, 2016. © Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Schickler, “Racial Realignment”

Schickler’s account:

1. **State parties and locally oriented members of Congress** played the decision 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

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