Perspectives on American Political Parties

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Political parties have been accorded a preeminent position in the study of American politics. For nearly a century political scientists have written of the potential of political parties to establish effective popular control over the government. In a system designed to fragment political power, parties have been held to be the one institution capable of providing a unifying centripetal force. The functions that parties have been said to perform in American society are impressive and diverse. These include:

1. Generating symbols of identification and loyalty.
2. Aggregating and articulating political interests.
3. Mobilizing majorities in the electorate and in government.
4. Socializing voters and maintaining a popular following.
5. Organizing dissent and opposition.
6. Recruiting political leadership and seeking governmental offices.
7. Institutionalizing, channeling, and socializing conflict.
8. Overriding the dangers of sectionalism and promoting the national interest.
9. Implementing policy objectives.
10. Legitimizing decisions of government.
11. Fostering stability in government.

Given all of these functions, many political scientists have accepted E. E. Schattschneider’s famous assertion that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties. Not surprisingly, then, the various indications that political parties have weakened in recent years have been met with a great deal of alarm among commentators on American politics. David Broder, for example, has stated flatly, "The governmental system is not working because the political parties are not working." Although most experts would not go so far, few would deny that the decline of American political parties has had a significant impact on the character of politics in this country.

Perhaps the most frequently cited consequences of the decline of parties are the growing importance of special interest groups and the dwindling of the principles of collective responsibility. The result, as Morris Fiorina has written, is that we now have "a system that articulates interests superbly but aggregates them poorly." The making of public policy has thus become a more conflictual process with far less central direction and coherence. Individual policy decisions are increasingly made by ad hoc coalitions without relation to other policies. As Jimmy Carter found out during his four years in office, governing without the continuous support of a political party is an extremely difficult task.

Yet the question of party decline is a complex one, for political parties are complex, multifaceted institutions. While most of the attention has been focused on the aspects of parties that have been weakened, there is evidence suggesting that in certain aspects parties have been strengthened. According to Malcolm Jewell and David Olson, for example, state political party organizations have been revitalized with the result being a more active role for state parties. And on the national level, Cornelius Cotter and John Bibby have concluded from their extensive study of the history of national party organizations that there has been a growth in terms of institutionalization and nationalization of the parties in recent years.
Thus, although most of the evidence does point toward party decline, to make global statements about the decay, decomposition, disappearance, or end of parties (as many have) may lead us to overlook the aspects of parties that have not been weakened. In order to get beyond the “sky-is-falling” stage in the discussion of parties, it must be recognized that not all the trends match and that evidence about one particular aspect is not necessarily generalizable to the condition of parties as a whole. As Austin Ranney has noted, those who have written about changes in the strength of parties all have something in mind, but the “something” differs from one observer to another.

Political scientists who write about political parties fall into two main types, according to the noted British author S. E. Finer—“those who think of parties as things that do, and those who think of them as things that are.” The former primarily concern themselves with how well parties as organizations perform functions related to the machinery of government and the contesting of elections. Those among this school who are most empirically oriented study party activists and what they do; others study the various structures of the parties and how they operate. In contrast, writers who concern themselves with what parties are focus mainly on partisan attitudes among the mass public. Authors of this school address questions of alignment and dealignment in the party system, largely based on micro-level survey data on party identification and voting patterns.

[The study of political partisanship] belongs in the latter category, but what political parties do . . . [is related.] If it were not for the crucial role that patty play in the operation of American government, the study of partisanship in the electorate would be far less important. Furthermore, one can reasonably infer that what parties are from the perspective of the mass electorate will have a major impact on what parties do in the political system. For example, if members of the electorate cast their ballots on the basis of factors other than partisanship, then those public officials who are elected can be expected to act more as individuals and less as members of a collective body committed to common goals. Similarly, if the mass public conceptualizes issues in terms of candidates rather than in terms of parties, then the direction of public policy can be expected to be hardly any more stable than the names on the ballot from year to year.

Of course, the flow of causality is by no means a unidirectional one from the state of parties in the electorate to the state of parties in government. If parties in government are weakened, the public will naturally have less of a stimulus to think of themselves politically in partisan terms. In fact, it will be argued here that one of the major factors behind the decline of partisanship in the electorate is that parties have become less integral in the processes of governing and campaigning, thereby resulting in the mass public’s more neutral attitudes toward them. However, these altered public attitudes have themselves become a major reason why it will be very difficult to go back and reinstitutionalize political parties. Political behavior has a distinct habitual flavor to it—conceptualizing politics in a nonpartisan and candidate-centered fashion may well become a behavior pattern that could be difficult to alter.

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