

Making Sense of Our Hollow Parties

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Paper prepared for the State of the Parties: 2016 and Beyond conference  
University of Akron, Akron, Ohio, November 9-10, 2017.

Contemporary American parties are hollow parties. This paper steps back from the events of 2016 to offer a conceptual framework rooted in the distinctive sequence of American party development. American parties, we argue, should not be understood as either classically “strong” or “weak.” Instead, they are hollow. By historical standards, centralized party leadership in Congress is alive and well. At the mass level, party identification steers public opinion and voting. In the spaces in between, however, parties are neither organizationally robust beyond their roles raising money nor meaningfully felt as a real, tangible presence in the lives of voters or in the work of engaged activists. Parties can neither inspire positive loyalties, effectively coordinate their influencers, nor police their boundaries. They find themselves outspent by plutocrats’ dollars funneled directly to candidates and paraparty groups. And for all the money in American politics, parties cannot mobilize would-be supporters. The parties watch as bystanders in fights over policy, which is to say over determining priorities for reshaping the state.<sup>1</sup>

This hollowness has had dire consequences. The parties have failed to meet the challenges that the combination of polarization and fracture have thrown up. As Thomas Edsall summarizes, “Over the past 50 years, overarching and underlying conflicts about morality, family, autonomy, religious conviction, fairness and even patriotism have been forced into two relatively weak vessels, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.”<sup>2</sup> In a period when

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<sup>1</sup> Our diagnosis of hollowness shares deep resemblances with Julia Azari’s of “weak parties and strong partisanship,” but we do not foreground her language. See Julia Azari, “Weak parties and strong partisanship are a bad combination,” *Vox*, 3 Nov. 2016, <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2016/11/3/13512362/weak-parties-strong-partisanship-bad-combination>. “Hollowness,” more than “weak parties,” incorporates parties’ incapacities in building resonant programs and loyalties, as well as their inability to police their boundaries. Strong parties do not simply restrain or channel the passions of citizens and leaders; they give direction to the political system. Moreover, the word “partisanship” only imperfectly captures the distinctive qualities of today’s party-team loyalty, both among elites and in the mass public. Contemporary partisanship, in the long view, is notable less for its strength than its negativity. Though he wrote about Europe, our approach has deep affinities with Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, “President Trump Is the Enemy of Their Enemies,” *New York Times*, 4 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/opinion/president-trump-is-the-enemy-of-their-enemies.html>.

parties' alternatives define American politics, those parties cannot fulfill the tasks that fall under their traditional purview.

This paper puts the hollow parties in context. Our approach is historical and institutional: historical in examining similarities and differences across time, and institutional in emphasizing formal parties as distinct from various para-party groups and, for parties and para-party groups alike, thinking through their organization and incentives. We do not turn to history to find Arcadia in the convention hall of yore. We seek, rather, to make sense of the patterns—the more loaded term might be “pathologies”—that we call hollowness. This project requires bringing together ideas about party with facts on the ground, and engaging in systematic comparisons over the sweep of American history from Martin Van Buren to Donald Trump.

In the first section of the paper, we compare across different facets of partisan experience the visions of a series of four key collective historical actors. Their layered contributions, first in building, then transforming, but never entirely destroying the federated parties that arose in the Jacksonian Era, have together made the hollow parties. Although their contexts differed, the essential questions they faced in determining how and in whose interests to organize political parties remained. When Americans argue about parties, they package and repackage ideas, institutional solutions, practices, and orientations toward power that trace back further than they realize. “This historical comparison reveals not only what is new but what is old.”<sup>3</sup>

We explore the bundled visions of enthusiastic partisans in the nineteenth-century Party Period, of Progressives out to clean up morass of small and corrupt party politics, of mid-twentieth-century liberal reformers animated by the idea of responsible partisanship, and of the Democrats in and around the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (popularly

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel H. Beer, *Modern British Politics: Parties and Pressure Groups in the Collectivist Age* (New York: WW Norton, 1982 [1965]), xii.

known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission) that set in train the contemporary system of presidential nomination. We term these collective actors prophets of party, paraphrasing Thomas McCraw's portrait of four "prophets of regulation." For McCraw, the term "prophets" effectively expressed "the unusual combination each one represented of both theorizing about regulation and actually doing it, of both design and implementation."<sup>4</sup> So each of our prophets of party offered, in word and deed, answers, however partial, biased, or internally inconsistent, to essential questions about the role and structure of the political party in the Madisonian system.

The second section of the paper begins by identifying some general traits of today's Hollow Party Period—its formlessness, its negativity, its distance from Americans' lived experience—then turns to a genealogy of the period's partisan visions. While the hollow parties have produced no prophets of party, contemporary arguments about the organization of and purposes behind political parties rehash venerable questions. And so we analyze those arguments under the same framework that we use to explain parties' development. For six ideal-types, we make explicit their views about party typically expressed either in fragments or sub rosa. We examine party insiders and outside insurgents in both major parties, and also, from the center, "New Realists" who look back fondly on dealmaking parties of yore, and anti-party centrists lusting after a solutions-oriented technocracy.

In the pages that follow we treat parties as autonomous and thick collective actors. This view reflects a strong anti-monism. Akin to state-centered scholars who highlighted the failure of Marxist theorists to specify all the mechanisms at play in the workings of the state,<sup>5</sup> we see parties as autonomous, and particular parties' distinctive combinations as irreducible even to the

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas K. McCraw, *Prophets of Regulation: Charles Francis Adams, Louis D. Brandeis, James M. Landis, Alfred E. Kahn* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), vii-viii.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, translated by Timothy O'Hagan (London: Verso 1978 [1968]); Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

second- and third-order processes of outside forces. Parties emerge from complex, iterative interactions among diverse actors and exist in dense fields. Ideas, institutions, and rules all matter—and they do not emerge simply from congealed preferences. Parties should not be understood solely as the solution to the coordination problems of other, prior actors.

The most prominent explanations in contemporary scholarship, by contrast, posit parties as the vehicles respectively of ambitious politicians or of groups eager to extract benefits from the state. Make analytical sense of the underlying forces and the incentives that they face, and the resultant parties fall into place.<sup>6</sup> Parties, one might say, are the things that emerge from prior actors' coordination. Party positioning comes in the jostling of various shifting alliances of groups that collectively comprise a "party" banner. The parties, or else their allied para-organizations, undertake particular tasks, from raising money to selecting nominees to protecting a "brand." When the environment shifts, whether because the same actors face new pressures or else change their preferences, or because new actors enter the scene, the parties change in turn.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the road from politicians' or groups' desires for power to parties' wielding of it remains underdetermined. When the whole game is explaining coordination, preferences are exogenous by design. We reverse figure and ground. Rather than engaging parties' role in a roundabout fashion, asking what parties do for their claimants and then seeing what conclusions follow for parties themselves, we put parties first. We seek to understand both parties' internal

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<sup>6</sup> John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Kathleen Bawn, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, "A Theory of Parties: Groups, Policy Demands, and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2012): 571-597. The influence of endorsements by elected officials, above all sitting governors, in presidential nominations in *The Party Decides*, suggests the ways that these approaches dovetail.

<sup>7</sup> David Karol, *Party Position Change in American Politics: Coalition Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Hans Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

workings as they seek to win elections and their external goals to wield state power and remake the polity.

That parties want to win elections and wield power is an essential truth separating parties from all other actors in the political game, but only a paper-thin one. As a matter of definition, we follow E.E. Schattschneider: “a political party is an organized attempt to get control of the government.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, what else partisan actors have “wanted” has varied across American history. Some want spoils; others want policy; still others want reform. Some empower the loyal partisan or else the grassroots activist while others happily let the boss rule. Still others look to a transformative leader. Answers along one facet, reflecting pressures faced, bargains struck, or norms followed, feed back to and impinge on others. They change the incentives facing group claimants, who have their own internal structures and dynamics.<sup>9</sup> A synthetic view of parties understands these as a series of nested problems—and parties as more than the sum of their roles or tasks.

Finally, we ask not just how parties seek to obtain power, but in whose interest they seek to wield power. The groups that seek influence inside parties as they look to claim a share of society’s goodies<sup>10</sup> certainly understand as much. Parties have held very different ideas about

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<sup>8</sup> E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Rinehart 1942), ix. Bawn et al. in “A Theory of Parties” take up the Schattschneiderian mantle, as do Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson in “After the Master Theory: Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (2014): 643-662; and, more generally, *Winner Take All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); and *American Amnesia: How the War on Government Led Us to Forget What Made America Prosper* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016). We, too, see politics as group conflict, but, like Schattschneider himself, emphasize the distinctive qualities of parties in mediating that conflict. E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), 55. See also Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties: Electoral Alignments in American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18-21.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Christopher Baylor, *First to the Party: The Group Origins of Political Transformation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); many of what he sees as groups might more properly be termed factions.

<sup>10</sup> We take this phrase from Stanley Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants Since 1880* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 382.

whom to reward and about how to entrench themselves across the sprawling American state,<sup>11</sup> and those ideas have not served as mere dress or superstructure. Doctrine matters, both on the place of party in American political life and on the party's vision for the republic.<sup>12</sup> Even in the Hollow Party Period, those visions have consequences.

## Part I: Prophets of Party

Political parties across American history have all wanted to win office, but they have held very different notions of how to get there or what to do once they win. And because the notions that successive generations have held about the roles and functions of parties have imprinted themselves on the structure of parties and elections, their views still matter. Nineteenth-century parties and their Progressive challengers still circumscribe both thought and action in American party politics, while the visions of mid-twentieth-century reformers and the framers of McGovern-Fraser define aspirations and limits for principled partisanship in the twenty-first. When Americans vote in a direct primary for delegates pledged to a particular presidential candidate at a national convention, they simultaneously live out the layered legacies of the Party Period, the Progressive era, and the post-1968 reforms.

We examine those periods as prophecies of party—critical moments when actors reconsidered the role of party in public life, and put their views into action. For reasons of space, we limit our case selection. In particular, we do not do justice to the rich heritage of the nineteenth century, when prophets of party grappled directly with questions about the structure and reach of parties now engaged, as we shall see, only obliquely. A more complete saga would

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> See respectively Joseph Cooper, "Congress and Public Policy in a Separation of Powers System," in *Congress Reconsidered*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., edited by Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: CQ Press, 2017); and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

examine the difference between antebellum and Gilded Age parties, the Mugwumps whose critique prefigured but in important ways differed from that of the Progressives, and the series of radical challengers to the established order that embraced popular politics but took it in different directions from patronage-oriented organizations: Radical Republicans, the People’s Party, and the Socialist Party in its Debsian heyday. It would also engage pragmatic opponents of reform from the mid-twentieth-century through the McGovern Fraser era who affirmed on pluralist grounds the prerogatives of state and local parties, and the New Right of the 1970s that built a new conservatism from single-issue groups initially distant from the formal Republican Party.

This work is no antiquarian pursuit. When contemporary parties ask how and in whose interest they wield power, they ask the same questions as their predecessors since the dawn of mass politics—and when they search for answers, they combine and recombine old tropes and patterns, often in ways that practitioners themselves do not understand. We seek that very understanding.

Table 1 lists the facets of party that we consider for each historical prophet of party; these factors serve as a kind of organizing device to focus our intellectual inquiry and direct our narrative. They emerge from the complex American political system, with its comparatively decentralized but also, since the Progressive Era, highly regulated parties.<sup>13</sup> While parties do more than nominate candidates, it is in nomination that different visions of a party get aired and adjudicated. Thus, we ask not only *who decides*, but *what gets decided*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Leon D. Epstein, *Political Parties in the American Mold* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> For important efforts to extract common themes from across the sweep of American parties, see James MacGregor Burns, *Four-Party Politics in America* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Austin Ranney, *Curing the Mischief of Faction: Party Reform in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Epstein, *Political Parties in the American Mold*; Aldrich, *Why Parties?* We seek to synthesize those authors’ procedural concerns with the tradition of parties as agents of historical change prominent in and around the less behavioral side of the realignment tradition, from Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. and Arthur N. Holcombe through James Sundquist and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. A more decidedly materialist strain appears in the work of Walter Dean Burnham and

Parties, both rhetorically and practically, privilege certain actors, making them the repositories for the party's *raison d'être*. In political parties, beset with principal-agent problems, exactly who takes orders (or even cues) from whom depends on both doctrine and circumstance. Candidates appear on the ballot, though they may not always hold the cards. Whether a leader summons up a public, or the voters instruct their leader, and whether the party organization, be it composed of ideologues or regulars after patronage, controls or serves the holders of office—such relationships vary dramatically. Who, then, speaks for “the party”? To take Sam Lubell's old metaphor of party competition and apply it inside the party's own orbiting bodies, we want to find the party's sun, around which (or whom) everything else revolves.<sup>15</sup>

We then ask, rather straightforwardly, about views on the core task of nomination, and particularly presidential nomination (the direct primary having, since its adoption in the Progressive Era, reigned unchallenged in choosing nominees for Congress and for state office). Successive prophets of party built that system, and it reflects their view not just about who should nominate but about who should rule and in whose interest.

Next, rather than assaying polarization, or other characteristics of the party system in toto, and risk getting the causality backwards or misguidedly attempting to measure “extremism” across centuries, we ask about the prophets' orientation to compromise. Should parties seek agreement across their divides, or stand apart on principle? What kinds of compromises should parties accept? And by what principle?

Together, these first three facets of party cover much of the traditional remit of party scholarship, but they do not exhaust prophecy of party. Because parties organize conflict and mark out the organizable alternatives in national politics, we want to know how they seek to

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Thomas Ferguson. See Theodore Rosenof, *Realignment: The Theory that Changed the Way We Think About Politics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955 [1952]), 212.

wield state power, and to reshape society. Those are the real stakes in party politics.<sup>16</sup> Some parties may content themselves with the rewards of office or with presiding over an efficient and well-run government, while others want to remake America. A direct line connects privileged partisan actors and their goals in wielding state power. Parties' search for funding, and donors concomitant motivations to give, conditions their goals, and so we ask both about who funds each prophet of party, and how those funders relate to other facets of party. Finally, we apply the venerable distinction, first made by Tocqueville, between great and small parties:

What I call great political parties are those more attached to principles than to consequences, to generalities rather than to particular cases, to ideas rather than to personalities. Such parties generally have nobler features, more generous passions, more real convictions, and a bolder and more open look than others. Private interest, which always plays the greatest part in political passions, is there more skillfully concealed beneath the veil of public interest; sometimes it even passes unobserved by those whom it prompts and stirs to action.<sup>17</sup>

Though it has fallen into desuetude in recent decades,<sup>18</sup> this distinction long captivated prophets of party. The Progressives, in particular, consciously attacked the smallness of the machine boss and his small party. They looked back, along with so many others latching onto their own versions of its legacy, to the early Republican Party. An indisputably great party, maybe the only truly great party the country has ever produced, vanquished the Slave Power and made real the nation's professed commitments to freedom and equality.<sup>19</sup> If the distinction between great and small parties seems, to the contemporary eye, fusty or else overly subjective, it usefully fuses what parties *are* and what parties *do*, and so captures the connection between

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<sup>16</sup> Hacker and Pierson, "After the Master Theory."

<sup>17</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 175.

<sup>18</sup> For an important exception, see the discussion in Nancy Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels*, 72-73.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); James L. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Eric L. McKittrick, "Party Politics and the Union and Confederate War Efforts," in *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

parties as historical agents and the possibilities of the political regime to accommodate their visions of democracy.

### Nineteenth-Century Parties

The substructure of American party politics still traces back to the Party Period of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Its essential institutions endure: the convention, the appeal to some notion of party loyalty, and the party organization, formalized respectively at the local, state, and national level. That deep legacy is our starting point in tracing American parties' trajectory—even as we caution against viewing the locally oriented, distributive logic of the Party Period as the model for contemporary party renewal.

The Jacksonian era established the pattern for parties eager to reap the rewards of office and fill appointments through the spoils system. Popular enthusiasm sustained the system. Given weak national institutions, parties stitched politics together. The tight networks in the nineteenth-century party dominated every facet of American elections, from slating candidates to funding campaigns to printing ballots. State and local bosses and their organizations, with varying institutional bases, jostled against one another, newspaper editors in the partisan press, and the interests that bankrolled them. State legislatures chose senators, who in turn oversaw patronage relationships in the post office and customs house, and into state and local government.

Rather than mobilize around comprehensive programs, parties responded to these organizational exigencies. Party workers needed patronage jobs as a reward for their work, and

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<sup>20</sup> See 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); Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838–1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Michael Holt, “Change and Continuity in the Party Period: The Substance and Structure of American Politics, 1835–1885,” in *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775–2000*, ed. Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 93–115.

all the electioneering cost money. The distributive political economy of the Party Period formed a series of mutually reinforcing separations between the jobsite, where workers' radical sentiments routinely flared up, and party politics, which mobilized voters principally along ethnocultural lines and tamped down contention around economic power. The result, for all the fervor whipped up at each election, gave nineteenth-century party politics its seemingly issueless quality and insured that the parties largely "catered to whatever sources of political power capitalism produced."<sup>21</sup>

The mass party was made in America. It was the creation principally of Martin Van Buren and his circle in the Albany Regency during the 1820s.<sup>22</sup> The earlier proto-parties had formed out of elite cliques and rivalries, as deviations from a belief in the polity's organic unity. By contrast, these practical men, a notch down on the social spectrum from the grandees of the Founding, built a party that recognized irreconcilable differences, and then pledged its adherents, from politicians through party workers down to ordinary partisans, to that party. Loyalty to one's party in particular, as Van Buren later explained, meant support for the principle of party in general:

But knowing, as all men of sense know, that political parties are inseparable from free governments, and that in many and material respects they are highly useful to the country, I never could bring myself for party purposes to deprecate their existence. Doubtless excesses frequently attend them and produce many evils, but not so many as are prevented by the maintenance of their organization and vigilance. The disposition to abuse power, so deeply planted in the human heart, can by no other means be more effectually checked.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: the Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 136; see also Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>22</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), ch. 6; Michael Wallace, "Changing Concepts of Party in the United States: New York, 1815-1828," *American Historical Review* 74 (1968): 453-491.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Van Buren, *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren*, vol. 1, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1918* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 125, originally written in 1854.

Party, in a reworking of the Framers' doctrine, would restrain demagoguery. And good party men could not for mere temporary gain subvert a political order that rested on the parties' approbation. While Democrats and Whigs—and, later, Republicans—emphasized different elements, to an extraordinary degree, these precepts diffused beyond their origins to shape an entire era.

Two chaotic and dramatic institutional settings reinforced the primacy of party. At the convention, different factions would vie for primacy as they hammered out a platform and collectively selected a slate of nominees to put forth before the voters. “Conventions embodied the party itself,” argues John Reynolds; “in word and action they affirmed that it was the needs of the party that came first—not those of any particular candidate.”<sup>24</sup> The national convention to select a presidential nominee, with its delegates from across the land, replicated on a larger scale the same practices that defined party life in the states. And if dissident factions disliked the eventual slate, their only option was to bolt the convention, and print their own tickets to place before the voters. That happened on Election Day, the apogee of politics in the Party Period. Because parties had to print and distribute their own tickets, they had to organize in every hamlet in the land. As voters, all male and lubricated with plenty of alcohol, followed party agents' directions and placed their tickets into the ballot box, they affirmed their loyalty.<sup>25</sup>

The essential elements of distributive mass politics survived the collapse of the Second Party System and the divides of war and Reconstruction. The Gilded Age brought forth more elaborate campaigns, with marching bands and torchlight parades, and the organization—“machine” was a reformers' pejorative—to match. Its sky-high turnouts would never again be

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<sup>24</sup> John F. Reynolds, *Demise of the American Convention System, 1880-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 231.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Franklin Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

equaled. “The mill has been constructed, and its machinery goes on turning,” observed Viscount Bryce in 1888, “even when there is no grist to grind.”<sup>26</sup> The old system were beginning to crack, as parties faced their own problems of internal coordination and as a new educational style began to supplant the venerable appeals to the party faithful.<sup>27</sup> Still, the sustained and successful assault on the old parties came not from the radical challengers within its participatory tradition, but from the Progressives in the following generation.

Though they deserve separate discussion, impossible here, even the challengers to the dominant political order reflected its popular orientation. Throughout the nineteenth century, reformist causes hoping to exploit sublimated issue cleavages typically formed third parties, complete with officers and candidates for all manner of offices. The Republican Party, the successful one among them, in form fully replicated the Democrats and the Whigs. And even the Radical Republicans, for all their boldness in remaking the Constitutional order, never challenged the patronage-oriented model of party organization. Theirs was an abortive great party still grounded in the small parties of its time.<sup>28</sup> The Populists prefigured the Progressives as they embraced a series of procedural reforms, including the direct election of senators and the initiative and referendum, designed to bust up the cozy webs of influence inside the existing parties, while shying away from the rhetoric of absolute party loyalty. But at the same time, the

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<sup>26</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995 [1888]), 701-2.

<sup>27</sup> Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Mark Wahlgren Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in the Gilded Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Reynolds, *Demise*; Erik J. Engstrom and Samuel Kernell, *Party Ballots, Reform, and the Transformation of America's Electoral System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), esp. ch. 6 and 7. A more thorough-going Reconstruction that upended the political economy of the postbellum South, however unlikely a prospect, would have had enormous implications for practice of party politics, as well. See W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935), 353-63.

People's Party reaffirmed its commitment to a popular politics organized around mass participation and the democratic possibilities accruing to ordinary partisans. It was that essential connection that the Progressives would attack.<sup>29</sup>

## Progressives

Between the early 1890s and the American entrance into the First World War, waves of reform, inside and outside formal channels, transformed politics. "Electoral politics" was no longer a synonym for "party politics."<sup>30</sup> Henceforth the state controlled the registration of voters, set the polling place, and printed all ballots; gone was the madcap Election Day of the party ticket. For state and congressional office, direct primaries and not conventions of party delegates chose nominees.<sup>31</sup> Though they remained uncommon, the first presidential primaries appeared in 1912. The engine of intergovernmental party power in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century got switched out. Voters, not state legislators, now chose U.S. senators. In states where the currents of reform ran deep, notably in the West, municipal elections became nonpartisan, and citizens gained the power to vote directly on legislation via the initiative and referendum and, in a few instances, to recall elected officials.<sup>32</sup> Pressure politics in various manifestations, from the Anti-Saloon

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). While not principally a story about prophecy of party, the radical restriction of suffrage and the end of biracial, bipartisan politics in the South also forms an essential part of the end of the Party Period. See J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 162.

<sup>31</sup> Alan M. Ware, *The American Direct Primary: Party Institutionalization and Transformation in the North* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Charles Edward Merriam and Louise Overacker, *Primary Elections* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928); Frederick W. Dallinger, *Nominations for Elective Office in the United States* (New York: Longmans, 1897).

<sup>32</sup> Shefter, *Political Parties and the State*, ch. 5; Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

League to the women's clubs to state labor federations to the Chamber of Commerce to the Farmers' Union, stole the parties' thunder.<sup>33</sup>

The Progressives did not start anew. Instead, they disrupted but did not dislodge the old system. The 19<sup>th</sup> century party had simplified politics. By layering and trimming and swapping and venue-shifting, the Progressive attack on parties complexified it, attenuating the links that the Jacksonians had assiduously hitched together. Depending on place and circumstance, Progressives worked, albeit with somewhat different goals, inside both the Republican and the Democratic parties; for nonpartisanship, particularly in local elections; and, in 1912, with the support of many but by no means all movement adherents, for the new Progressive Party. The Progressive legacy emerges from all these streams.<sup>34</sup>

The Progressives stood foursquare against small parties—machines and bosses and invisible government—rather than opposing all parties. As a 1914 textbook summarized the view, so long as the party is bound together by “a common attachment to principles and a supreme regard for the national welfare its existence is justified. When it becomes a machine for the dispensation of patronage it is a menace to the state.”<sup>35</sup> The Progressives held up a heroic sense of party deeply connected to their collective desire to remake the polity and to make citizens better, but never resolved all the contradictions inside that vision. The reformer, wrote Walter Weyl, a founding editor of *The New Republic*, “labors for the democratic control of the

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<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth S. Clemens, *The People's Lobby: Organizational Innovation and the Rise of Interest Group Politics in the United States, 1890-1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> For a still-useful survey, see Benjamin Parke De Witt, *The Progressive Movement: A Non-partisan, Comprehensive Discussion of Current Tendencies in American Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1915). See also, with a revealing introduction from Theodore Roosevelt, S.J. Duncan-Clark, *The Progressive Movement: Its Principles and Its Programme* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1913).

<sup>35</sup> James Albert Woodburn, *Political Parties and Party Problems in the United States*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914), 471.

party, while simultaneously striving for its abolition.”<sup>36</sup> Progressives liked to cite Washington’s farewell address, but they were not simply anti-party. They understood parties as shapers of democracy rather than mere coordinators of preferences. Their nostalgic looks back to the Republicans of the 1850s, implicitly and occasionally explicitly equating bossism with slavery, may seem at best naïve, or else cruelly hypocritical given a generation that acquiesced in Jim Crow, but they should not be dismissed so lightly for all that.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, the Progressives celebrated the direct connection between leaders and citizens, without any intermediaries to disturb that bond, and above all the presidency that now claimed alone to speak to and for the people.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the model laid down by Van Buren and exemplified by Lincoln, of the politician who put party before self, Theodore Roosevelt, who more than any other figure defined the qualities of leadership that Progressivism sought, consistently elevated the state and citizenship above the party.<sup>39</sup> As TR told readers of *The Atlantic* in 1894, in a statement that explains well the bolt of 1912:

If we had no party allegiance, our politics would become mere windy anarchy, and, under present conditions, our government could hardly continue at all. If we had no independence, we should always be running the risk of the most degraded kind of despotism—the despotism of the party boss and the party machine.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Walter E. Weyl, *The New Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 305. See also “Future of the Two-Party System,” *New Republic*, 14 Nov. 1914, 10. The editorial, unsigned, was written by Herbert Croly.

<sup>37</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “The Heirs of Abraham Lincoln,” *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. XIX (New York: Scribner, 1925), 485-508. Speech at the Lincoln Day banquet. New York City, February 12th, 1913.

<sup>38</sup> Peri Arnold, *Remaking the Presidency: Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Eldon Eisenach, “A Progressive Conundrum Federal Constitution, National State, and Popular Sovereignty,” in *The Progressives’ Century: Political Reform, Constitutional Government, and the Modern American State*, ed. Stephen Skowronek, Stephen M. Engel, and Bruce Ackerman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Sidney M. Milkis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “The College Graduate and Public Life,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1894, 260.

Though the direct primary first emerged as much from party bosses worried about managing dissident factions as from heroic reformers, the Progressives made the reform their own, and welded a procedural change to a durable shift in the conduct of politics. The first statewide direct primary law came in Wisconsin in 1904 under Robert M. La Follette, after a bruising campaign against La Follette's "Stalwart" opponents inside the state Republican Party. In place of the wirepullers, La Follette championed the bond between the leader, who would set and then enact the party's policy, and the people.<sup>41</sup> The logic applied beyond Wisconsin. Even as conventions lived on as places for party loyalists to hammer out platforms and, more consequentially, assess factions' respective strength and give politicians the once-over, primaries gave the ambitious, hustling candidate, not the broadly acceptable party man, full quarter.

The Progressive impulse faded, and the parties retreated and adapted. Despite minor rear-guard actions in the 1920s, essentially no states reversed course on the direct primary.<sup>42</sup> The overhang<sup>43</sup> of the nineteenth century parties largely left in place the outward forms of traditional political organization, most prominently in the urban machine and the still-contested national convention. But the forms were stripped of their old sustaining claims to legitimacy. When the reformers around McGovern-Fraser carried forth in the context of the Rights Revolution the deep logic of Progressivism, the old guard folded. After all, it had few resonant claims to make.<sup>44</sup>

As successive generations have grappled with the Progressive legacy, they have seized on those pieces most salient to the parties of their own time. At midcentury, efforts to make parties responsible at a time when they seemed stalled and blurred sought to harness the nationalizing

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<sup>41</sup> Ellen L. Torelle, asst. Albert O. Barton and Fred L. Holmes, *The Political Philosophy of Robert M. La Follette* (Madison: Robert M. La Follette Company, 1920), 13-15. John D. Buenker, "Robert M. La Follette's Progressive Odyssey," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 82 (1998): 2-31 offers a good synthesis.

<sup>42</sup> Ware, *Direct Primary*, 228-9; William E. Hannan, "Opinions of Public Men on the Value of the Direct Primary," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 106 (1923): 59.

<sup>43</sup> We owe this felicitous word to Joseph Cooper.

<sup>44</sup> David B. Truman, "Party Reform, Party Atrophy, and Constitutional Change: Some Reflections," *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (1984): 637-55.

and programmatic side of Progressivism, to make the parties mean something. In the 1970s, when fears of dealignment and destructive reform filled the air, Progressivism seemed like a one-way ratchet to break apart the institutions Van Buren and his ilk had built up and so destroy the wellsprings of party.

The hollow parties do not trace back directly to the Progressive Era. The New Deal party system, the civil rights revolution and unfreezing of Southern political cleavages, and the new inequality have all intervened. But without the Progressive Era there is no making sense of why, once polarized politics arrived, the parties proved so ill-suited to respond. Energy against the parties now directs itself less at the machinations of small parties than at “party elites” and their procedures, giving them no autonomy and, at times of disagreement, no quarter. Bits of the Progressive vision, glimmers off the kaleidoscope, appear in vastly different places, whether in high-minded technocrats disdaining the machinations of politics, or earnest activists demanding openness and transparency in parties’ every move. Perhaps most consequentially, its personalistic and plebiscitarian tendencies weakened the restraints against demagoguery.<sup>45</sup> The Progressives killed positive party spirit, and the consequences flow alike into the anger and the apathy that together define contemporary American politics.

#### Midcentury Programmatic Liberals

In the decades after the Second World War, “programmatic liberals”<sup>46</sup> sought a Democratic Party that would complete the transformations initiated by the New Deal. Parties, the reformers, argued, should mobilize voters and organize governance on the basis of issues and program—not patronage, personality, or the ties of geography or demography. National parties

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<sup>45</sup> Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*, 318-27, offered a prescient warning.

<sup>46</sup> James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, revised edition (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1983), 263.

and their nominees should fight campaigns with clear policies on *national* issues, not a hodgepodge of parochial interests. And only if the two parties' programs were *distinct*—not blurred by crosscutting coalitions and rampant bipartisanship in policymaking— would voters be provided a meaningful choice, and a mechanism to hold officials accountable.

These were prophets of parties, fusing thought and action. The rising organized exponents of postwar liberalism—middle-class issue activists, organized labor, civil rights advocates—did battle against those longstanding figures in the Democratic coalition unreconstructed by the New Deal revolution: patronage-based organizations at the local and state levels in the North and the Border States; and southern Democrats who dominated Congress and its committees and thwarted liberals' legislative agenda, including, critically, on civil rights.<sup>47</sup>

The postwar liberals promulgated a distinct party type that flourished in select northern states. It had an outsized influence in shaping the national agenda of a highly factionalized party by the 1960s, while also powering a sustained period of electoral success.<sup>48</sup> Reformers in “regular organization” states<sup>49</sup> with robust existing parties established influential beachheads like the Democratic Federation of Illinois and New York's Committee for Democratic Voters.<sup>50</sup> Wholesale transformations of sclerotic state parties took place where, as in Michigan, Minnesota, and California, middle-class liberals successfully allied with organized labor and civil rights

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<sup>47</sup> Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932-1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>48</sup> The 1958 midterm election, when Democrats scored big gains in reform-minded states across the North and West, stands as a particular watershed in the expansion of both Democratic dominance in Congress and liberal predominance *within* the congressional Democratic caucuses. See Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 70-71; Julian Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 53-54; Sundquist, *Dynamics*, 240-268.

<sup>49</sup> David Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics: Organization, Electoral Settings, and Government Activity in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 24-77.

<sup>50</sup> James Q. Wilson, *The Amateur Democrat: Club Politics in Three Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Edward N. Costikyan, *Behind Closed Doors: Politics in the Public Interest* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World: 1966).

activists to fuse left-of-center forces.<sup>51</sup> Reformist parties provided the springboards for a slew of activist, multiterm governors— Orville Freeman in Minnesota, Mennen “Soapy” Williams in Michigan, Edmund G. “Pat” Brown in California—and liberal congressional leaders—Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Phil Hart, Phil Burton.

Locally, grassroots “club” organizing by liberal activists spread across the country in the 1950s and 1960s, catalyzed especially by the egghead Adlai Stevenson. Theirs was a procedural politics, emphasizing permeability and internal democracy within party organization. James Q. Wilson’s famous study of voluntarist Democratic activism distinguished the outlook of the “amateurs” from that of professionals: “The amateur takes the outcome of politics—the determination of policies and the choice of officials—seriously, in the sense that he feels a direct concern for what he thinks are the ends these policies serve and the qualities these officials possess.”<sup>52</sup>

The politics of labor and civil rights, as both substantive cause and means of ideological coalition-building, similarly connected postwar Democratic liberals to a national project of party realignment and reform. The progressive wing of organized labor provided resources and manpower while tethering middle-class impulses to an ordered partisan strategy that would produce, in the words of a 1959 United Auto Workers resolution, a “real realignment” of the party system with “a clear demarcation” between a liberal party and a conservative one and “full assurance that when elected [the liberal] party will carry out its liberal program without

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<sup>51</sup> Dudley W. Buffa, *Union Power and American Democracy: The UAW and the Democratic Party, 1935-1972* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984); Jennifer A. Delton, *Making Minnesota Liberal: Civil Rights and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Jonathan Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, *The Amateur Democrat*, 3.

qualification, compromise, or delay.”<sup>53</sup> So, too, Hubert Humphrey’s breakthrough push for a strong civil rights plank at the 1948 Democratic convention fused of advocacy to end Jim Crow with a factional bid for liberal dominance. While civil rights lobbyists like the NAACP’s Clarence Mitchell adhered to bipartisan legislative strategies in an era of cross-cutting party commitments, moreover, they forged and sustained alliances with liberal Democratic actors at the local, state, and national levels.<sup>54</sup> They also helped to formulate a systematic critique of the internal organization of Congress and its entrenchment of segregationist southern power through seniority and the committee system.<sup>55</sup>

Reformers grounded their arguments about political reform and party practice—often explicitly so—in a scholarly doctrine with pre-New Deal roots: responsible party government.<sup>56</sup> Responsible party notions as expressed in the widely-read 1950 report of the APSA Committee on Political Parties, *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*—with their issue-oriented politics, national programs, and congressional organization accountable to the party caucuses—circulated and diffused across organized liberalism in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>57</sup> DNC chair Paul Butler adopted the APSA report’s recommendation for a national party issues council in the form of the controversial Democratic Advisory Council in 1956.<sup>58</sup> And the emphasis on party

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<sup>53</sup> Partial Report of the Resolutions Committee, 17<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Convention of the United Auto Workers, October 1959, Box 446, Folder “Chairman’s Files, 1960—Chapin, Arthur,” DNC Records, JFK Library, Boston, Mass. See also Stephen Amberg, “The CIO Political Strategy in Historical Perspective: Creating a High-Road Economy in the Postwar Era,” in *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994: The Labor-Liberal Alliance*, ed. Kevin Boyle (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 169-173; Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 4-7.

<sup>54</sup> Denton L. Watson, *Lion in the Lobby: Clarence Mitchell, Jr.’s Struggle for the Passage of Civil Rights Laws*, rev. ed. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill*, 39-44.

<sup>56</sup> Austin Ranney, *The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government: Its Origins and Present State* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962).

<sup>57</sup> Burns, *Deadlock of Democracy*; Joseph S. Clark, *Congress: The Sapless Branch* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Richard Bolling, *House Out of Order* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1965).

<sup>58</sup> Philip A. Klinkner, *The Losing Parties: Out-Party National Committees, 1956-1993* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 12-40; Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 31-40.

cohesion as an instrument for both programmatic achievement and democratic accountability colored the relentless critiques made by liberals of Democratic leaders' propensity to bargain across the aisle, both during the Eisenhower years and John F. Kennedy's frustrating tenure. When, in a widely circulated 1955 memo, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., described Eisenhower's "bear hug" of congressional Democrats as a ploy "to obscure and minimize the issues between the parties" and recommended that Democrats pass an array of sure-to-be-vetoed bills to clarify those differences, he was drawing on a responsible party outlook on partisanship that cut against the grain of midcentury practice.<sup>59</sup>

The reformist parties wrestled with contradictions of their own. The irony of a political movement that found organizational expression at the local and state levels championing a politics of *national* issue advocacy and ideological conflict eventually imposed a cost, as local and state parties atrophied. "Since the ideologies to which party workers are loyal are defined largely in terms of national politics," Frank Sorauf observed in his study of voluntary Wisconsin party committees in the 1950s, "the ideological bond has a paramount disadvantage in distracting the attention of the Wisconsin parties from state issues and government."<sup>60</sup>

Even as reformist Democrats collectively helped to bring about the programmatic breakthroughs of the Great Society,<sup>61</sup> meanwhile, internal tensions and external conflicts pushed against the limits of the incrementalist politics that postwar liberalism could accommodate. At the same time, issue-driven politics came uncoupled from formal party politics. Since the advocacy explosion of the late 1960s and 1970s, activists' energies have largely flowed into

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<sup>59</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Congressional Strategy and the 1956 Elections," undated, Box 73, Folder 10, Adlai M. Stevenson Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.

<sup>60</sup> Frank J. Sorauf, "Extra-Legal Political Parties in Wisconsin," *American Political Science Review* 48 (1954): 703; these themes presage Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1968), 389-415; Julian E. Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 11-60, 163-223.

paraparty networks or nonpartisan advocacy groups. The amateurs' postwar rise had reflected the lingering civic inclinations of midcentury cohorts acculturated to participation in mass-membership organizations.<sup>62</sup> Though the postwar reformers' prescription for nationalized, disciplined, ideologically differentiated parties resonates with facets of our contemporary polarized system,<sup>63</sup> the midcentury prophesy offered one important contrast: "Issue politics" were channeled into formal partisan activism. In this way the programmatic liberals, perhaps the most comprehensive prophets of party we have seen in the last century, sought to marry Progressive concerns for a politics of national policymaking to the participatory energy of nineteenth-century mass partisanship.

#### McGovern-Fraser Reformers

The reform movement that emerged from the debacle of the 1968 Democratic convention to drive the efforts of the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection left a surprisingly slim record of explicit normative engagement with the parties' role in the political system. Motivated more by practical goals than a philosophy of politics, "the reform movement of the 1970s," William Crotty concluded, "was remarkably atheoretical."<sup>64</sup> In the interstices of activists' arguments and the substance of the reforms they devised, however, a party prophesy can be gleaned that brings us close to the aspirations and dilemmas of our own age.

The era's "New Politics" activists bore some clear continuities with their midcentury liberal forebears. Most obvious was the critique of closed bossism that framed the new

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<sup>62</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 38-40.

<sup>63</sup> See John C. Green and Paul S. Herrnson, *Responsible Partisanship? The Evolution of Political Parties Since 1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), Nicol C. Rae, "Be Careful What You Wish For: The Rise of Responsible Parties in American National Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 169-191; and Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers*.

<sup>64</sup> William J. Crotty, "The Philosophies of Party Reform," in *Party Renewal in America: Theory and Practice*, ed. Gerald Pomper (Praeger: New York, 1980), 41.

reformers' analysis of the arbitrary and impermeable procedures rampant in the mixed presidential nominating system. They also shared the midcentury reformers' goal of nationalizing party power, manifested in the new authority that the national party would exercise to force state delegate selection practices to adhere to detailed standards.<sup>65</sup> Finally, they shared a belief in the centrality of substantive, programmatic motivations for party activism. "The real heart and soul of a political party is its policy, its philosophy, its stand on the great issues of the day," George McGovern declared at a commission hearing in 1969. "Really the only purpose of party reform is to provide a vehicle through which those policies can be determined by the people rather than by the bosses."<sup>66</sup>

The sweep of that final "the people," however, indicated a key distinction between the midcentury clubs and the McGovern-Fraser project. The movement cultures from which most of the latter reformers emphasized participatory and nonhierarchical organization. Gone were the advocacy of party discipline and the relative comfort with organization that both responsible party doctrine and the trade union influence had imparted to the midcentury reformers. Instead, parties would serve as the instruments of self-generating grassroots activism. Though the historical resonance of such views helped to saddle the reformers with a reputation as anti-party neo-Progressives,<sup>67</sup> in fact they envisioned highly active and institutionalized political parties.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Robert Mickey connects McGovern-Fraser's nationalizing project to the decades-long effort to destroy authoritarian enclaves in the South, calling it the "coup-de-grace" in southern states' transition away from lily-white party delegations and racist political institutions; *Paths out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 260.

<sup>66</sup> Transcript of the proceedings, Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection hearing, New York, NY, May 3, 1969, Box 22, Folder "3A New York Hearing," Democratic National Committee Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>67</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, *The New Presidential Elite: Men and Women in National Politics* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1976), 355. See also James W. Ceaser, "Direct Participation in Politics," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 34 (1981): 121-137.

<sup>68</sup> This was underscored by activists' support, in 1972, for a draft charter for the party devised by Donald Fraser and James O'Hara that called for dues-paying party membership and biennial issue conventions. "A New Charter for the Democratic Party of the United States: A Draft Proposal," March 24, 1972, Box 44, Folder "Democratic Party,

The parties prophesied by McGovern-Fraser activists were neither weak nor absent, but vessels for movement politics that might, through proper procedures and permanent mobilization, continually sidestep Michels' iron law and prevent parties from serving as career politicians' playthings.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, the pursuit of process—of the eternal refinement of rules—came itself to constitute an intrinsic value to the reformers of this era as well as a means to party renewal. McGovern-Fraser initiated a plunge into sustained Democratic procedural reform spanning four successor panels and over a decade of work. All this serial commissioning and incessant tinkering reflected in outsized form a longer Democratic tradition of proceduralism as the path to coalitional strength and party vitality.<sup>70</sup> In keeping with a prophesy of party that challenged comprehensively the legitimacy of entrenched intraparty leadership, the McGovern-Fraser activists put this tradition at the center of their approach to politics itself.

Few consequential reform movements have suffered from quite as early and durable a negative turn in their reputation. An initial, influential cycle of scholarly assessments cast the McGovern-Fraser reforms as misguided interventions that weakened the parties, fragmented political authority, and hastened the rise of candidate-centered politics.<sup>71</sup> Subsequent dissenters from such assessments' causal arguments have offered little normative defense of the reformers' vision for parties, instead emphasizing their ultimate failure to wrest real nominating power away

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O'Hara Rules Commission, Charter Proposal 2," James O'Hara Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (1915; repr., Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), esp. 393–409.

<sup>70</sup> Klinkner, *The Losing Parties*.

<sup>71</sup> Major early statements on the reform of the parties' nominating procedures include Ranney, *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction*; Jeane Kirkpatrick, *Dismantling the Parties: Reflections on Party Reform and Party Decomposition* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1978); Byron E. Shafer, *Quiet Revolution: The Struggle for the Democratic Party and the Shaping of Post-Reform Politics* (New York: Russell Sage, 1983); and Nelson Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). A more positive assessment is found in William Crotty, *Decision for the Democrats: Reforming the Party Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). Adam Hilton offers a more thoroughgoing revisionist analysis in "Party Reform and Political Realignment: The New Politics Movement in the Democratic Party" (PhD Diss., York University, 2016).

from party elites.<sup>72</sup> A scholarly debate with claims of destructiveness on one pole and mere ineffectuality on the other rendered McGovern Fraser activists, from a remarkably early date, as prophets without honor.

It is important to recognize the affirmative party vision that animated McGovern-Fraser activists' efforts. But it is equally important to identify the legacy of those reforms for contemporary party hollowness. First, deprived of much of their control over delegate selection, state parties lost their distinct role internal motivation and logic, and organization, in state capitols and at the grassroots, atrophied.<sup>73</sup> Second, stripped of its loftiest bromides about "the people" writ large, the reformers' vision amounted to a system privileging the voice of grassroots activists drawn from social movements and issue advocacy politics. Reformers seeking to enhance ideological activists' influence on party politics got their wish, but that influence would come from the outside via the unwieldy paraparty blobs rather than from within by a mobilized activist membership.

Third, the McGovern-Fraser era set a path for future reforms. The drafters of *Mandate for Reform* cited an old chestnut to justify their work: "The cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy."<sup>74</sup> Critique and prescription alike were grounded on the principle of democracy—and little else. The reformers' hesitance in "cautioning against a totally popular system and justifying some role for the party organization," to use James Ceaser's words, left them ill-equipped to resist the rapid proliferation of direct primary systems that followed as an

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<sup>72</sup> Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, *Party Decides*; David Plotke, "Party Reform as Failed Democratic Renewal in the United States, 1968–1972," *Studies in American Political Development* 10 (1996): 223-288; John S. Saloma III and Frederick H. Sontag, *Parties: The Real Opportunity for Effective Citizen Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

<sup>73</sup> But see Cornelius P. Cotter and John F. Bibby, "Institutional Development of Parties and the Thesis of Party Decline," *Political Science Quarterly* 95 (1980): 1-27; and James L. Gibson, Cornelius P. Cotter, John F. Bibby and Robert J. Huckshorn, "Assessing Party Organizational Strength," *American Journal of Political Science* 27 (1983): 193-222.

<sup>74</sup> *Mandate for Reform: A Report of the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection to the Democratic National Committee* (Washington, D.C.: Democratic National Committee, 1970), 14.

unintended consequence of reform.<sup>75</sup> In turn, the spread of primaries as the dominant and defining method of presidential selection in the modern system has encouraged Americans to blur categorical distinctions between procedures for nomination and the general election, and to presume that unmediated participation sets the benchmark for procedural legitimacy in both. The Democrats' institution of superdelegates in 1982 marked the one significant against-the-grain exception to the continuity of more-democracy reform logic in party affairs over the last four decades. Given that superdelegates have never served as a collectively decisive intervening force, likely lack the capacity to serve that function if they ever attempt to do so, and the members of the Democratic National Committee now face their executioner in the form of the post-2016 Unity Reform Commission, they are also the exception that proves the rule. With more-democracy left as the only discursive game in town, leaders within the formal parties lack any grounds to claim a distinct voice within party affairs that merits due respect from loyal partisans. In moments of conflict or crisis when such a role may be needed most, the party's own voice, as a *party*, rings hollow.

## Part II: Parties in an Age of Fracture

In parties, as in American life more generally, ours is an “Age of Fracture.”<sup>76</sup> The hollow parties tell their own version of the story. As the historical survey across prophets of parties explains, we still live with the legacies of the locally oriented, federated parties of the nineteenth century, and of the Progressive reforms, and suspicion of parties' machinations, that dented but did not destroy them. While midcentury reformers attempted to collect the pieces, the liberal reworking of party that followed, in McGovern-Fraser, took up the Progressive suspicion of

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<sup>75</sup> Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*, 275.

<sup>76</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

backroom deals more than it affirmed a positive vision. As the re-entry of the South into two-party politics finally sorted Democrats and Republicans, the parties could not contain the conflictual politics that ensued.

Before we apply the same analysis to the partisan visions, such as they are, of contemporary Republicans and Democrats, insurgents and loyalists, we briefly take stock of the commonalities in the two hollow parties.<sup>77</sup> The salient features in the amorphous, mercenary, money-driven, candidate-led, nationalized game of contemporary party politics should be familiar ones to participants in this conference.

The organizational parties endure, though with few celebrants for themselves or their prerogatives. The party-as-organization has held on in the money chase, but without distinguishing itself as much of an innovator or even an ongoing day-to-day presence felt by the politically engaged, at a time when increased loyalty to the party team might have made it so. Though presidential turnout rates have remained roughly steady, they are still low in comparison either to peer nations or to the late nineteenth century, in a far less educated polity. And at midterm, especially for Democrats, the results are abysmal, and a clear failure of parties to mobilize.

Local parties soldier on, however tenuously linked to the para-organizations and movements that have roiled American politics, even as federated membership groups wither.<sup>78</sup> State parties have sustained their organizations and even bolstered their technological capacities while losing relative influence.<sup>79</sup> Recent fundraising schemes, moreover, have emasculated state

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<sup>77</sup> This list draws on Schlozman and Rosenfeld, forthcoming.

<sup>78</sup> Douglas D. Roscoe and Shannon Jenkins, *Local Party Organizations in the Twenty-First Century* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016); Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> John F. Bibby, "State Party Organizations: Coping and Adapting to Candidate-Centered Politics and Nationalization," in *The Parties Respond: Changes in American Parties and Campaigns* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. L. Sandy Maisel (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), 19-46; Rebecca S. Hatch, "Party organizational strength and technological

parties by rendering them as mere conduits in work-around schemes to direct large-dollar donations to presidential candidates.<sup>80</sup> The national committees, while comparatively robust, have found themselves eclipsed by para-organizations that reflect the influence of the newly ascendant super-rich.<sup>81</sup> Vast spending on campaigns goes mostly to television, despite its dubious effectiveness. And even the modern revival of person-to-person canvassing comes from the top down. Staffers parachuted in from outside coordinate lists concocted by uncertain and unseen algorithms. Para-organizations and campaigns alike close their storefronts the morning after Election Day, not to reopen again until the next cycle.<sup>82</sup>

The parties still organize the quadrennial conventions. At the same time, the primaries and caucuses that select the delegates provide months-long fodder for candidates and their supporters who feel aggrieved by the process. To state the obvious reality from 2016, Republican Party leaders, with no single favored alternative, failed to unite to stop a nominee whom few of them would have chosen. The process of nominating a president, the preeminent though far from singular task of American political parties, serves not as a celebration of party but as an extended opportunity to bash it, without the parties themselves, or anybody on their behalf, offering

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capacity: The adaptation of the state-level party organizations in the United States to voter outreach and data analytics in the Internet age,” *Party Politics* 22.2 (2016): 191-202; Raymond J. La Raja and Jonathan Rauch, “The state of state parties—and how strengthening them can improve our politics,” Brookings Institution, March 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Robin Kolodny and David A. Dulio, “Political Party Adaptation in U.S. Congressional Campaigns: Why Political Parties Use Coordinated Expenditures to Hire Political Consultants,” *Party Politics* 9 (2003): 729-46; Alan Greenblatt, “The Waning Power of Parties,” *Governing*, December 2015, 17. According to interim DNC chair Donna Brazile, Hillary Clinton’s joint-fundraising committee with 32 participating state parties raised a total of \$82 million in 2016—of which the state parties kept less than half of 1 percent. “Inside Hillary’s Secret Takeover of the DNC,” *Politico*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/11/02/clinton-brazile-hacks-2016-215774>.

<sup>81</sup> Raymond J. La Raja, “Why Super PACs: How the American Party System Outgrew the Campaign Finance System,” *The Forum* 10.4 (2012): 91-104.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel Schlozman, “The Lists Told Us Otherwise,” *n+1*, 24 December 2016, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-lists-told-us-otherwise/>.

principled responses. The rules for delegate selection seem opaque and the process confusing. Regardless of whether the party decides the nominee,<sup>83</sup> it wins few friends in the deciding.

To repeat a central premise, our theme is not weakness but hollowness. Polarization is the preeminent fact of contemporary politics, but it is a form of polarization with particular and corrosive dynamics. At the top, with the parties evenly matched and the stakes high, minorities in Congress have incentives to fight rather than to compromise.<sup>84</sup> Presidents find themselves in repeated cycles promising to cut through the gridlock and bring Americans together, yet the reach of the rhetorical presidency exceeds the grasp of an ever-more-partisan administrative presidency.<sup>85</sup> To these dynamics add the negative partisanship in the mass public, whose suspicion of disloyalty and distaste for process looks nothing like the older, positive partisanship of the torchlight parade. Nor does it resemble the issue- and rules-oriented partisan citizenship that Robert La Follette and, later, the McGovern-Fraser reformers hoped to inculcate. The through-line across these stories is the inability of anybody, whether the formal parties themselves or anyone in the circles around them, to bring elites and the mass public together in common purpose, to mobilize loyalties in a purposeful direction. That is the common story of hollowness, and one that needs its own explaining.

A key piece of the puzzle, we argue, comes from the particular *disorganization* of the space that parties once inhabited. Above all, today's parties are distinctive for the presence of so

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<sup>83</sup> Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, *Party Decides*; and Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, "Party versus Faction in the Reformed Presidential Nominating System, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (2016): 701-708.

<sup>84</sup> Frances Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>85</sup> Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*; Richard M. Skinner, "The Partisan Presidency," in *The State of the Parties: The Changing Role of Contemporary American Parties*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. John C. Green and Daniel J. Coffey (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 331-342; Sidney M. Milkis and John Warren York, "Barack Obama, Organizing for Action, and Executive-Centered Partisanship," *Studies in American Political Development* 31 (2017): 1-23; Andrew Rudalevige, "The Obama Administrative Presidency: Some Late-Term Patterns," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 46 (2016): 868-890.

many figures entwined with and buzzing around but not organizationally part of parties themselves. The list goes on and on: issue groups, many of them with paper members or no members at all; media from talk-show hosts to Twitter personalities; policy experts in think tanks generating party programs by proxy; engaged activists giving time or a few dollars to prominent and often extreme candidates; ideological warriors at CPAC and Netroots Nation; the mass affluent munching on canapés at fundraisers; high rollers with real access and, often, very specific agendas of their own; PACs; nominally uncoordinated “Super PACs”; leadership PACs from politicians looking to build their own brands and get chits out to colleagues; consultancies and staffers hoping for a share of all the money sloshing through the system.

See this Blob as a whole, grasp, if you will, its shapeless shape, its formless form, its headless body, and the picture starts to fall into place. Its constituent pieces—“members” is too strong a term—all have internal incentives of their own, many of which militate for them to work against rather than with other parts. The drivers of the behavior—the principals—and the underlying goals being pursued are difficult to identify. Consider the mixed motives at work within a GOP paraparty team that includes such a predominant role for a constellation of media-entertainment institutions and personalities guided by profit and celebrity at least as much as by ideological or electoral goals.<sup>86</sup> Or the redundancies and fragmentation of liberal issue advocacy groups and the philanthropists that fund them, replicated as we write in the ongoing proliferation of new actors waving the banner of “Resistance.” The jumble of principals and incentives is precisely how the Blob contributes to hollowness. A multiplicity of actors with doubtful loyalty to the long-term interest of their allied party ultimately weakens it.

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<sup>86</sup> Even ostensibly more substantive institutions in the Republican Blob increasingly find themselves pulled into commercial media’s preferred terrain—populist campaigns of position-taking, symbolic conflict, and mobilized resentment. See, e.g., Molly Ball, “The Fall of the Heritage Foundation and the Death of Republican Ideas,” *The Atlantic*, 25 September 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/09/the-fall-of-the-heritage-foundation-and-the-death-of-republican-ideas/279955/>.

The figures in the Blob cannot be reduced to a single analytic category without losing the internal variation across non-party actors that is precisely its defining feature. The Blob is porous, amorphous, and frequently directionless. Actors in the Blob include but are not limited to “policy demanders” who want goodies from the state. Nor are they just candidates, their supporters, or members of the candidate-money-consultant nexus. Nor are they just “groups,” with the internal structure that that label implies. Parts of the Blob tend to polarize the system, others to bring it toward the center. While some actors in the Blob, for instance various efforts to train candidates, perform functions once reserved for parties themselves, others do not. Activity in the blob is variously motivated by material incentives (typically not the patronage of yore but rather the rewards of, say, a tax break or a share of the lobbying dollars), solidary incentives (even the solitary solidary incentives of online activism); and purposive incentives (though, again, not always in a straight or clear line).<sup>87</sup>

The Blob looks different in the Democratic and Republican Parties. Whether or not, as Matthew Grossmann and David Hopkins argue, “ideology” is the distinctive characteristic, still less the glue, of the Republican Party, the GOP has adopted a take-no-prisoners, don’t-sweat-the-details zeal on both procedure and substance with no parallel on the other side, as our discussion of left-populism, with its heavy dose of Progressive reformist critique, well shows.<sup>88</sup> And the proof of the Blobs’ asymmetries are found in the exercise of electoral and political power.

The signal political victory in our 50-50 era of party competition has been Republican success in the states. Via gerrymanders in Congress and aggressive uses of federalism in lawsuits against Obama-era administrative actions, they have imprinted that victory on national politics.

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<sup>87</sup> The scheme belongs to James Q. Wilson, *Political Organizations* (1973; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); see also Wilson, *Amateur Democrat*.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Matthew Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group-Interest Democrats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Rather than stemming from strong state parties, Republicans' state-level success has emerged from linked actors outside, but entwined with, formal parties. The critical non-party actors, including the Koch network and the American Legislative Exchange Council, seized the opportunities that the midterm gains of 2010 offered, consolidated power, and changed the playing field by starving out their opponents, foremost in public-sector unions. The structural power of business, the alliance between conservatism and right populism, and, critically, a set of powerful actors that knew what it wanted, all came together. Such achievements do not characterize the entire Republican story, as the shambles of the 2016 nomination contest and first year of unified Republican control at the national level indicate. But the point is that they have no equivalent on the other side. Liberal efforts to engage in states have repeatedly failed. The Democracy Alliance, a collection of big liberal donors and interest groups, has generated no discernable impact.<sup>89</sup>

The same underlying reality that we characterize as the Blob other scholars have termed the networked party.<sup>90</sup> Such an approach has both great virtues and significant limits. In specifically political networks, the internal structures and motivations of participants are as important as their external patterns of cooperation and non-cooperation. *The American Prospect*, where one of us once worked, may share the same aspirations for the good society as the Cambridge (Mass.) Ward Eight Democratic Committee, which the other of us once chaired, but they operate with very different rules, incentives, and modes of governance.

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<sup>89</sup> Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016); Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism," *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (2016): 681-699.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., Gregory Koger, Seth Masket, and Hans Noel, "No Disciplined Army: American Political Parties as Networks," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks*, edited by Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Alexander H. Montgomery, and Mark Lubell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

While a focus on partisan networks draws attention to points of cooperation and coordination, we emphasize less the particular ties than the overall structure (or non-structure) of the party network, and the weaknesses of the connections that might bring its pieces together. The failures of coordination in contemporary parties go beyond the failure of signaling games, in nomination or elsewhere. The vast failure to build the collective goods through which parties helpfully channel citizens' passions and organize political conflict is the central non-event in the hollow parties. The Blob is more than just its nodes and ties, even though the looseness of contemporary parties makes network analysis a particularly appealing strategy. We see the Blob filling a void, and merely focusing on how it tries to fill the void risks missing the point.

Table 2 extends to the contemporary scene our analysis of how key actors think about parties and their purposes. These are ideal types, useful in making sense of a complicated landscape. They reflect our distillation of the politically savvy and sophisticated in each category. Precisely because, as this paper emphasizes repeatedly, contemporary American politics has produced no genuine prophets of party, we have had to serve, as best we can, as interpolators of actors' oft-inchoate sentiments, rather than as stenographers of their coherent and comprehensive views.

We consider, moving row by row, the Democratic and Republican parties and then the center, with the more pro-party actors in the left-hand column of the table and the anti-party actors on the right. The Democratic Institutionalists and Republican Establishment make up the world of the Blob—and as our discussion should show, calling these congeries “pro-party” is, in absolute terms, a stretch. One would be hard-pressed to find a down-the-line, “party-before-self

politician”<sup>91</sup> in word still less in deed in contemporary American politics. Compared not with their temporal predecessors but with their internal antagonists, however, each defends its respective world in which politicians and the interests around them set the terms for the party, and nominations do not mimetically reflect the popular will. Left and right populists in the American context should by no means be equated, but they each reject those propositions, instead seeking, somehow, parties that speak authentically for the people.

Finally, we consider two kinds of centrists aiming to combat polarization and return American politics to the sensible middle. To anyone who has read about municipal politics at the turn of the twentieth century, both types should appear familiar. New realists look back fondly to transactional small parties of yore and want to strengthen partisan actors who are more interested in holding office than in remaking state or society. Neoliberal centrists, heirs to the elite technocratic strands in Progressivism, instead seek to banish parties and partisanship in the name of public-spirited efficiency. The centrists’ policy prescriptions may not differ much, but their views of party diverge radically.

#### Democratic Institutionalists

The Democrats at their party’s core suffer from the ailments of a hollow age. They lack legitimacy, and find great difficulty mounting positive arguments in disputes over policy, strategy, and nominations. Even more than their counterparts in the Republican establishment, Democratic institutionalists, the foils to left-liberal insurgents, lack recourse to an open language

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<sup>91</sup> John S. Wright, *Lincoln & the Politics of Slavery* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1970), 133.

of *party* tradition and lineage. Often they stay in a technocratic crouch, hoping to reap the rewards of good policy without making the connections to party politics.<sup>92</sup>

Yet explicitly partisan efforts often fall flat, as well. Inheritors of both the participatory and the pluralist practices of earlier eras, establishment Democrats now find themselves squeezed between McGovern-Fraser's commitment to radical openness and continual reform and accommodation to the party's many stakeholders, itself a reflection not only of the party's coalitional diversity but of the less reformist strands in its heritage. They have failed to find a prophecy of party that squares the circle. Many of the sincerest partisan soldiers in American politics, are, ironically, also the most cowed and surreptitious in their defense of party itself.

In program and organization alike, Democrats stand out in the modern era by their association with the politics of straddling. The *groupedness* of the Democratic coalition of interests, moreover, is more visible and pronounced than in the GOP case—comparatively speaking, the seams show.<sup>93</sup> The party's electoral base encompasses both liberals and moderates—or, to those skeptical of such self-identifications, voters with relatively discrete and varying issue commitments and little explicit ideological binding.<sup>94</sup> Its twentieth-century transformation on civil rights and racial equality has hardly solved for the party of the “out-groups” the thorny electoral and coalitional politics of race in the twenty-first. So, too, the Democrats remain cross-cut and compromised programmatically on questions of political economy. Their historic New Deal commitments, reinforced as sorting removes the moderates and conservatives who long frustrated liberals' ambitions,<sup>95</sup> stand often in tension with increased

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<sup>92</sup> Daniel J. Galvin and Chloe N. Thurston, “The Democrats’ Misplaced Faith in Policy Feedback,” *The Forum* 15 (2017): 333-43.

<sup>93</sup> This comparison held true, at least, until 2016, when the Republican Party's tricky internal bargain and the potent ethnonational group politics of its voter base became much more openly exposed than it had before.

<sup>94</sup> Grossmann and Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics*, 21-69.

<sup>95</sup> This is a familiar narrative, well told in Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

support from the upper-middle class.<sup>96</sup> The rising costs of campaigns and the long decline of organized labor have helped to ensure that the Party of the People relies for financial support on business and super-rich donors.<sup>97</sup>

Given all of these internal tensions, Democratic institutionalists engage constantly in the art of the deal within their own party. Particularly in the twenty-first century, they have accommodated important leftward shifts in the party's program. McGovern-Fraser's children have grown up to become the party establishment,<sup>98</sup> but they have not found the role an easy one. Amid all the particular accommodations, the affirmative case for parties—a celebration of its democratic and egalitarian commitments, and the organizational strength required to honor them—falls victim to the vices of the regular and reform traditions alike. Some Democratic institutionalists, at their most candid, echo the new political realists (their scholarly champions) in emphasizing the unromantic exigencies of elections and the political inevitability of mammon. Hillary Clinton, in her own moments of frankness during her nomination battles with Barack Obama in 2008 and Bernie Sanders in 2016, sounded just such notes—to her political detriment.<sup>99</sup> Far more often, with the language of participation the coin of the realm, the institutionalists dare to voice old defenses of party regularity and pluralism only sotto voce.

In February 2016, Democratic National Committee chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz spoke up for those beleaguered embodiments of institutional party authority, the unpledged “superdelegates” to the national convention. But she did not offer the straightforward defense

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<sup>96</sup> Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Daniel Gross, *Bull Run: Wall Street, the Democrats, and the New Politics of Personal Finance* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000).

<sup>97</sup> Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, 116-193, 223-252; Thomas Ferguson, Paul Jorgensen, and Jie Chen, “Party Competition and Industrial Structure in the 2012 Elections: Who’s Really Driving the Taxi to the Dark Side?,” *International Journal of Political Economy* 42 (2013): 3-41.

<sup>98</sup> Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 279-297.

<sup>99</sup> See, e.g., Ezra Klein, “Hillary Clinton and the Audacity of Political Realism,” *Vox*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/28/10858464/hillary-clinton-bernie-sanders-political-realism>.

that leading, loyal Democrats should have a voice in picking their party's nominee. Instead, she risibly argued that their purpose was to allow grassroots activists a chance to attend the convention without having to run against elected officials to earn a slot.<sup>100</sup> Little so perfectly captures the disappearance of a public rationale for party than the Democrats' chair cloaking her own party's hard-fought procedures in a bogus, people-versus-the-establishment cover story.

### Left Populists<sup>101</sup>

The left dissidents in and around the contemporary Democratic Party chafe against the blatantly transactional politics of a decidedly small party—the very factors that, in their view, explain the Democrats' present electoral woes.<sup>102</sup> Bernie Sanders in 2016 came close to winning the nomination of a party that, despite loyal parliamentary support across a quarter-century in

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<sup>100</sup> Callum Borchers, "We need more questions like this one from Jake Tapper to Debbie Wasserman Schultz [video]," *Washington Post* online, 12 February 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/12/we-need-more-questions-like-this-one-from-jake-tapper-to-debbie-wasserman-schultz-video/>.

<sup>101</sup> We use the term "left populism" as a heuristic for readers who will expect such a label, rather than as the descriptor we would have chosen were we not entering into a conversation already long underway.

Populism, as Margaret Canovan wisely notes, "can have different contents depending on the establishment it is mobilizing against." Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 4. Nor, friend or foe, is the overworked term an objective one. A delightful line attributed to the Southern writer Louis Rubin, equally applicable with the shoe on the other foot, holds that "A populist is a rabble-rouser you like. If you don't like him, he's a demagogue." See George B. Tindall, "Populism: A Semantic Identity Crisis," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 48 (1972): 518.

The Sanders campaign—and behind and around it the left anti-system currents in social movements that arose late in the Obama years—shared deep affinities with older American radicalism. Though his program hewed closer to social democracy than to anti-monopolism, Sanders spoke a producerist language little heard on the left in decades, pitting the mass of "the people" against exploitative interests defined by their wealth and influence. In a strictly American sense, then, a clear line connects the Populism of the 1890s through to contemporary left populism. See Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Daniel Schlozman, "The Sanders Phenomenon," *n+1*, 13 October 2015, [nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-lists-told-us-otherwise/](http://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-lists-told-us-otherwise/).

Widen the gaze, however, and the story changes. Neither Sanders nor the circle around him claimed that his supporters were "the people" as such, or else that Sanders alone spoke for "the people" as a whole. These make up the core definitions of populism in, respectively, Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017). The label unequivocally does not fit.

<sup>102</sup> For a good presentation of these themes, see "Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis," Action for a Progressive Future, 30 October 2017, <https://democraticautopsy.org/wp-content/uploads/Autopsy-The-Democratic-Party-In-Crisis.pdf>.

Congress, he steadfastly refuses to join. His candidacy coalesced a broader critique than his candidacy, one that raised but did not answer central questions of party.

Today's left populists embrace radical democracy, but have less sense of what form the political party ought to take as a means to realize that vision.<sup>103</sup> Cause and justice come before party. Thus the disconnects between the scale of organizing and the critique of party, and between substance and procedure. Sanders, an ardent admirer of Eugene Debs, ran to recreate and then to transcend the limits in the New Deal order. His internal critics look also to feminism and the black freedom struggle. Yet Sanders's call for a "political revolution" hardly embraced the radical possibilities in mass popular politics that such a lineage might suggest, instead looking to the tradition of procedural reform.<sup>104</sup>

Like the framers of McGovern-Fraser, and before them the Progressives, left populists elevate openness, decry grubby deals, and show impatience with any special role, in nominations or elsewhere, for long-serving party functionaries or elected officials. Yet where reformers in the 1970s put procedure on a pedestal, left populists, impatient with manipulable rules and anxious for substantive change, show little patience with it. "Superdelegates" come in for special opprobrium, as part of an abiding, perhaps even conspiratorial interest in the activities of a Democratic National Committee, imputed with powers far beyond its actual remit. Nor do the left dissidents embrace party democracy even as aspiration. Their justifications, instead, are instrumental. Calls for openness in opposition to closed primaries soon become defenses of engaged participation in support of delegate-selection caucuses. And after Sanders, in a

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<sup>103</sup> The work of Chantal Mouffe, often cited as an important thinker by left populist intellectuals, emphasizes resisting the drift of center-left politics toward some chimerical consensus and reconstituting the people, but is remarkably thin on how to conceptualize the role of the political party. See, e.g., *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>104</sup> As a socialist intellectual wrote at the height of Progressivism, "Workingmen who vote for parties which make the direct primary the paramount, or even an important, political issue, cannot have any serious political grievances." L.B. Boudin, "Labor Is Not the Issue, But You Can Make It," *New York Call*, 8 Nov. 1910.

concession not uncommon from winning candidates, extracted a 2016 platform much to his liking, the erstwhile opponents of overweening parties became positive apostles of party responsibility, urging candidates from Hillary Clinton on down to fall in line behind the stated positions of the Democratic Party. Through all the caterwauling and factional struggle, a left vision of party remained tantalizingly just out of reach.

### Establishment Republicans

Mainstream Republicans in the twenty-first century, doctrinaire heirs to the tradition of Ronald Reagan, embody some of the very deepest paradoxes of party hollowness, juxtaposing tenacity with weakness, militancy with lassitude. Another juxtaposition helps to set the puzzle of modern Republicanism in relief. In the drama of Donald Trump's capture of the party's presidential nomination, coverage and commentary often depicted a team of sober-minded "grown-ups" scrambling belatedly but earnestly to resist a political force they associated with reckless extremism (and, more to the point, electoral weakness). That very same staid establishment, however, had become in the years leading up to 2016 the subject of increasingly alarmed diagnoses depicting the modern GOP as an extremist "insurgent outlier" in American politics driving forth "a slow-moving constitutional crisis."<sup>105</sup> To distinguish Trumpist populism from the GOP mainstream is correct—Trump's takeover truly was a hostile one. But the longstanding interpenetration of ethnonationalist elements speaks to the distinct incapacities of the party to claim internal authority and police boundaries.

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<sup>105</sup> Quotes respectively from Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the Politics of Extremism*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2016), xxiv; and Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, "Confronting Asymmetric Polarization," in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, 60.

Establishment Republicans, more so than their Democratic counterparts, do have a shared story they tell themselves and their voters to cement loyalties to a party lineage: that of the modern conservative movement. The postwar remnant, the Goldwater insurgency, and the apotheosis of Saint Reagan all provide the narrative backdrop for a party catechism—a language of common, conservative purpose and commitment—recited by virtually every leading GOP figure.<sup>106</sup> Behind that lingua franca, however, is a decidedly more pragmatic coalitional and electoral bargain. GOP electoral success over the last half century has ridden the partisan realignment of the South and the potency of racial resentments and cultural grievances felt by large numbers of white voters, North and South. Electoral appeals that speak to identity and culture have won the party majorities—which in turn have facilitated a policy agenda advancing regressive economic and fiscal policies far dearer to the party’s donors than its voters.<sup>107</sup>

Trump instinctively identified and exploited that gap in his nomination campaign, doubling down on the virulent politics of in-group identity while jettisoning rhetorical or substantive fealty to the economic side of the conservative catechism. What is remarkable about Trump’s nomination victory was less how responsive Republican voters turned out to be to Trump’s message than how *unresponsive* they were to Republican elites’ “what-would-Reagan-say” charges of ideological apostasy. Larger numbers of base Republicans, it turns out, were

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<sup>106</sup> Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York: Free Press, 1999) offers a pitch-perfect example of the genre. Scholars tell the story differently; see Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98 (2011): 723-43.

<sup>107</sup> See the classic discussion in Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991). On donors’ views, see Peter L. Francia, John C. Green, Paul S. Herrnson, Lynda W. Powell, and Clyde Wilcox, “Limousine Liberals and Corporate Conservatives: The Financial Constituencies of the Democratic and Republican Parties,” *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (2005): 761-778; Sean McElwee, Brian Schaffner, and Jesse Rhodes, “Whose Voice, Whose Choice?: The Distorting Influence of the Political Donor Class in Our Big-Money Elections,” *Demos*, December 8, 2016, [http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Whose%20Voice%20Whose%20Choice\\_2.pdf](http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Whose%20Voice%20Whose%20Choice_2.pdf).

happy to toss out the conservative hymnal altogether, undercutting establishment Republicans' key claim to party stewardship.<sup>108</sup>

Once Trump's unlikely candidacy led to Trump's unlikely election, however, the GOP establishment proved characteristically disciplined in coalescing support for their new president and sustaining—however unsteadily—the basic GOP bargain in governance. The tests that Trump's presidency poses for the American political system are thus *fundamentally party tests for the GOP*. Animated by cycles of insurgency and the language of ideological purity, the party has shown an incapacity or disinclination to police boundaries and set lines that cannot be crossed. This is where the historical experience of conservative parties that proved weakly resistant to radical infiltration—that lacked, in Daniel Ziblatt's words, “the capacity to stimulate but subordinate outside groups” so as to balance party activism and temperance—becomes illuminating, and worrisome.<sup>109</sup> Facing a substantively disaffected rank and file, an array of conservative institutions structured to stoke permanent outrage at GOP capitulation, and a decreasingly resonant rallying cry for the party itself, the establishment Republicans proceed down a political path devoid of guardrails.

### Right Populists

With the election of Donald Trump, who conjured up a nightmare scenario of a nation plunged into chaos and decline and pledged that “I alone can fix it,” the United States found its own version of a revanchist right populism that has manifested itself, in various guises, across

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<sup>108</sup> This fact also, we contend, undercuts depictions of a Republican electoral base oriented around ideology. Cf. Grossmann and Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics*.

<sup>109</sup> Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 49.

the globe.<sup>110</sup> “People who work hard but no longer have a voice,” he told the Republican convention in language that uncannily matched scholars’ textbook definitions of transnational populism, “I am your voice!”<sup>111</sup>

Right populism is, in a curious sense, the tendency in contemporary American party politics least riddled with inconsistencies: it is fundamentally anti-party. And it has a dispositive resolution to any tensions inside its worldview: the leader knows best. The privileged partisan actor under right populism is unquestionably the leader. That leader’s legitimacy is rooted in an essential connection with supporters among the people, whom the leader conjures up and for whom the leader alone may speak.

This populism’s anti-party tendencies are a far cry, however, from small-r republicanism, predicated on a common interest. Right populism ceaselessly exploits divisions between the people and the forces out to thwart them, while denying political parties their place as mediating institutions and their role in restraining the baser passions. While parties themselves would not wither away what Schattschneider long ago described as “The zone between the sovereign people and the government, which is the domain of the parties”<sup>112</sup> empties out. The usual meso-level players inside parties, group or politician, Blob or otherwise, may serve an instrumental but not a legitimizing function. Ironically for an ideology that celebrates the traditional ties of church, family, neighborhood, and, at times and more ominously, blood all plowed under, the

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<sup>110</sup> Trump belongs to what Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser define as xenophobic populism, though Trump routinely invokes what the euphemism of the hour terms “racially charged rhetoric” against the native-born, as well. “Populism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Müller, *What Is Populism*; Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism*.

<sup>111</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio; July 21, 2016,” <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=117935>. Exclamation point original.

<sup>112</sup> Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 15.

political party, maybe *the* defining intermediary institution in civil society, has no meaningful role to play.<sup>113</sup>

## New Realists

Cutting deliberately against the grain of pan-ideological sentiments concerning democracy, transparency, and political principle, scholars and journalists loosely grouped under the moniker “new political realism” offer hardnosed counsel tinged with nostalgia. Their prescriptions all aim to channel power and resources away from more ideologically driven actors toward the parties, the only institutions in the system preoccupied chiefly with the task of winning elections, and thus incentivized toward moderation and bargaining. Stronger formal parties, they suggest, can save us from polarization.<sup>114</sup>

The new realists’ comprehensive critique of the “romantic” reform tradition indicts efforts to keep money out of campaigns, bring the grassroots into party decision-making, and let the sunshine of transparency disinfect political and legislative relations. All of these, they contend, have rendered the political system prisoner to extremists and purists who prevent the

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<sup>113</sup> Cf. Joshua Mitchell, “A Renewed Republican Party,” *American Affairs*, Spring 2017, 7-30; and Publius Decius Mus [Michael Anton], “The Flight 93 Election,” *Claremont Review of Books*, 5 September 2016, <http://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/the-flight-93-election/>. For a rejoinder, see E.J. Dionne, “Even if Trump loses big, the anger will remain. Here’s how the left can address it,” *Washington Post*, 14 October 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/even-if-trump-loses-big-the-anger-will-remain-heres-how-the-left-can-address-it/2016/10/14/c848c4b0-8f02-11e6-9c52-0b10449e33c4\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.045a1bd3fbae](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/even-if-trump-loses-big-the-anger-will-remain-heres-how-the-left-can-address-it/2016/10/14/c848c4b0-8f02-11e6-9c52-0b10449e33c4_story.html?utm_term=.045a1bd3fbae).

<sup>114</sup> Bruce E. Cain, *Democracy, More or Less: America’s Political Reform Quandary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Richard H. Pildes, “Romanticizing Democracy, Political Fragmentation, and the Decline of Government,” *Yale Law Journal* 124 (2014): 804-52; Raymond J. La Raja and Bryan F. Schaffner, *Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Jonathan Rauch, *Political Realism: How Hacks, Machines, Big Money, and Back Room Deals Can Strengthen American Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2015); Nathaniel Persily, “Stronger Parties as a Solution to Polarization,” in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, ed. Nathaniel Persily (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 123-135. The moniker is Rauch’s.

“everyday give-and-take of dickering and compromise” that American political institutions require to function.<sup>115</sup>

The nostalgia that suffuses their provocations is for the pragmatic transactionalism that distinguished American parties from their 19<sup>th</sup> century heyday into the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. They notably echo the institutional arguments offered by the anti-McGovern-Fraser Democrats who organized the Coalition for a Democratic Majority in the early 1970s.<sup>116</sup> Though dutiful in acknowledging the infeasibility and undesirability of replicating old-style machine politics under modern conditions, the new realists are emphatic about the relative appeal of mercenary political motivations over ideological zeal—and thus the folly of the reform tradition. Nathaniel Persily, a leading new realist, has defined his view as a “‘pro-party’ ‘bad-government’ approach” to analysis and reform.<sup>117</sup> The scholarship’s main popularizer, Jonathan Rauch, revels in the language of “machines,” “back rooms,” and “big money” (the latter being preferable to the ideological tinge of small donors). He also situates new realism in a lineage that runs from George Washington Plunkitt to (more tellingly) James Q. Wilson’s *The Amateur Democrat*.<sup>118</sup> The parties the realists envision would be controlled by professionals, funded by pragmatic goodie-seekers, skilled in the art of the bargain, and in the Tocquevillian sense, proudly—productively!—small.

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<sup>115</sup> Rauch, *Political Realism*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> See especially two CDM reports from 1973, “Toward Fairness and Unity for ’76” and “Unity out of Diversity: A Draft Position Paper on a New Charter for the Democratic Party of the United States,” both in Series RG9-003, Box 42, Folder 9, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Md.

<sup>117</sup> Persily, “Stronger Parties as a Solution to Polarization,” 126.

<sup>118</sup> Rauch, *Political Realism*, 2-16.

## Neoliberal Centrists

If the new political realists and their anti-reform reform agenda occupy a cohesive public niche, a far more diffuse but broadly disseminated reform disposition shares with them a common enemy—the politics of ideological extremism—while challenging it from the opposite procedural direction. What we term the neoliberal centrist analysis sees political parties not as the solution to purism but as its handmaiden. In the centrists’ technocratic tradition, policy emerges not from conflicts over values and power but from the rational pursuit of “solutions.”<sup>119</sup> The soundness of real solutions arrived at through deliberation and compromise—like the objective “public interest” such solutions serve—is self-evident.

The assumption of an underlying and unitary common good, distorted by the mischiefs of faction, traces a line from republican thought in the Founding period through the Mugwumps who despaired at parties in the Gilded Age to the technocratic strain in Progressivism, though the particular offenses of the parties condemned have changed from the mercenary corruption of a century ago to the extremist straitjackets and litmus tests of our polarized era. Whether calling for bipartisanship, a third party, or, as the Centrist Project advocates, “America’s first Unparty,” the centrists seek end-runs around the barriers to solutionism. This tendency, manifested in the output of elite commentators<sup>120</sup> as well as splashy efforts like *Unity ’08*, *Americans Elect*, and *No Labels*, serves as a perennial punching bag for political scientists. The centrists’ blitheness to the collective logic of party formation is one reason, as is their cluelessness that the substantive commitments they assume an antiparty reform project would advance—business-friendly social

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<sup>119</sup> According to Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter and Centrist Project board member Katherine Gehl, “solutions are policies that address important problems or expand opportunities for citizens. Solutions actually work and make things better in practice.” “Why Competition in the Politics Industry is Failing: A Strategy for Reinvigorating Our Democracy,” Harvard Business School, September 2017, 2.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas Friedman, “Third Party Rising,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2010, WK8; Ron Fournier, “Talkin’ About Revolution: 6 Reasons Why the Two-Party System May Become Obsolete,” *The Atlantic*, January 14, 2013; Jim VandeHei, “Bring On a Third Party Candidate,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2016, A13.

liberalism and deficit hawkery—are so staunchly unpopular with the actual American electorate. Their outlook on democracy and conflict, by contrast, resonates with enduring popular assumptions.<sup>121</sup>

The language of personal courage and honesty suffuses the centrists’ admonishments to public officials. Fittingly for an outlook that tends toward savior scenarios during presidential election years, their institutional prescriptions betray a presidentialist streak—fast-track legislative authority, line-item veto power, quick up-or-down votes on appointments—running alongside measures to induce deliberation and compromise in Congress.<sup>122</sup> A discourse of markets, innovation, and disruption, meanwhile, sits uneasily with classic Progressive reliance on independent expertise and regulation. The same Harvard Business School reform plan that uses “the lens of industry competition” to offer “an investment thesis for political reform and innovation” also laments that “there is no truly independent regulation of politics that protects the public interest” and proposes, among other reforms, “the establishment of an independent Legislative Reform Commission to... design a set of rules that liberates the process of lawmaking from partisan control.”<sup>123</sup> Underlying both tendencies is the desired evasion of organized, enduring conflict in politics—and thus the escape from party.

Conclusion:

So far, we have tried to diagnose how we got here, to a Hollow Party Period where parties have proven incapable of bringing order to a politically divided society. And we have tried to cut through the bluster and identify alternative understandings of party that cleave left,

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<sup>121</sup> John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans’ Beliefs About How Government Should Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>122</sup> Compare the proposals made by No Labels in its report *Make the Presidency Work!* with those in its *Make Congress Work!* <https://www.nolabels.org/make-it-work/>.

<sup>123</sup> Porter and Gehl, “Why Competition in the Politics Industry is Failing,” preface, 2, 41.

right, and center. When Americans argue about party, they carry on a venerable lineage. But in today's twist, they hardly realize it.

We have deliberately focused on parties, and not on partisans, on cue-givers and not cue-takers. When party elites change their positions, whether strategically or tactically, and offer cues to as their new views, then party-team loyalists typically respond in turn. Whether or not voters are competent to make decisions, and exactly how activists, groups, politicians, or candidates pull away from what “the public” wants, via an “electoral blind spot”<sup>124</sup> or some other mechanism, we live in a polity cleaved by negative partisanship. We have no real idea how to heal that partisan divide nor, as a normative matter, do we want to. Parties, at their best, offer clear and compelling choices. The Progressive notion of the individual citizen deciding on the basis of preferences has little basis in fact. Instead, we take as a starting-point voters' lack of sophistication around issues. Party politics, in this view, reflects a clash less of *attitudes* than of *interests*, with the prize being control over state power and the ability to articulate and enact the party's partial democratic vision. If voting behavior, as Christopher Achen and Larry M. Bartels emphasize, emerges more from tribal loyalty than from rational weighing of evidence, then parties' role in determining the nature of the polity becomes all the more important.<sup>125</sup> The promise and peril of parties lie in whether they turn group conflict into principled disagreement or tribal hatred.<sup>126</sup>

If the diagnosis is hollowness, strengthening parties offers the solution to a political system vulnerable to the predations of disorganized politics and lockstep partisan behavior alike. No end-run or short-cut can substitute for building responsible parties with complementary

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<sup>124</sup> Bawn et al., “A Theory of Parties.”

<sup>125</sup> Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>126</sup> See the classic statement in Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: The Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), ch. 14.

commitments to mobilize voters, define priorities, and organize conflict. And if parties are the fundamental shapers of democratic politics, we had better make them strong enough, up and down, to play that role effectively. This is an approach, like the New Realists', designed to strengthen party, but more than they, we emphasize parties not as brakes on polarizing groups and candidates, but as solvers of collective problems. Like the reform Democrats of midcentury, we celebrate parties offering clear and compelling choices rooted in principle. And we seek parties that do active things—starting, critically, with the local parties that do the work on the ground. Finally, given the evolution of norms about intraparty democracy, parties have to face the legitimacy problem foursquare. That means party actors will have to go beyond *sub rosa* workaround solutions, and openly and clearly make the affirmative case for strong parties. The cause of party renewal is a venerable tradition among publicly engaged political scientists. As a scholarly Committee on Party Renewal affirmed in 1977, amid a previous cycle of hand-wringing over the parties' incapacities at once similar to and different from our present predicament, "Without parties, there can be no organized and coherent politics. When politics lacks coherence, there can be no accountable democracy."<sup>127</sup> This warning from an age of party decline resonates in an age of hollow parties.

Our account of how we got to the hollow parties should leave readers neither nostalgic for a golden past nor terribly sanguine about our present discontents. The task of building responsible parties that police their boundaries will not be an easy one; ours is not a call for party renewal come what may. And so comes the central challenge, to take the old ingredients of party-building, the inherited Jacksonian institutions, modified by the Progressive impulse, and shape them to respond to a polity divided but also disordered.

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<sup>127</sup> "Professional Notes," *PS* 10 (1977): 144.

In 1979, Arthur Schlesinger, the venerable liberal historian and confidante to Kennedys, offered a warning and a challenge. “Political adventurers will roam the country like Chinese warlords,” he predicted, in language that resonates with the current president, albeit with a key difference as to his governing allies, “recruiting personal armies, conducting hostilities against some rival warlords and forming alliances with others and, as they win elections, striving to govern through ad hoc coalitions.” His solution was to strengthen the parties, but he warned “not to engage in artificial resuscitation of a system that has served its time, but to invent the morals, machinery, and ideas required by the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>128</sup> Four decades on, that challenge still stands: to build two great and responsible political parties.

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<sup>128</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “Crisis of the Party System: II,” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 May 1979, 20. Schlesinger, obviously fond of the warlord metaphor, repeated it in *The Cycles of American History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 273-274; “Faded Glory,” *New York Times Magazine*, 12 July 1992; and “Not the People’s Choice,” *American Prospect*, 25 March 2002, 23-27.

**TABLE 1: Prophets of Party**

Party facets	Prophets			
	19 <sup>th</sup> Century Parties	Progressives	Programmatic Liberals	McGovern-Fraser Reformers
<b>Privileged partisan actors</b>	Brokers (bosses)	Presidents; leaders who transcend or mold party	Party leadership; cross-institutional	Grassroots activists
<b>Method of choosing nominees</b>	Convention	Pure primary	Mixed	Primary; activist-dominated
<b>Orientation to interparty compromise</b>	Agreement to disagree	Acceptable/preferable	Want less of it	Acceptable if principled
<b>Goals in wielding state power</b>	Spoils	Procedural reform	Ideological patronage; welfare state	Procedural reform; adversarial regulation
<b>Funders of party</b>	Local notables and party workers	Ordinary citizens in theory; big donors in practice	Mixed	Checkbook activists
<b>Great or small parties</b>	Small	Anti-small	Great	Anti-small

**TABLE 2: Contemporary Party Visions**

<b>Party facets</b>	<b>Contemporary Actors</b>	
	<b>Democratic Institutionalists</b>	<b>Left Populists</b>
<b>Privileged partisan actors</b>	DC cross-institutional; groups	Grassroots activists
<b>Method of choosing nominees</b>	Mixed	Pure primary
<b>Orientation to interparty compromise</b>	Rare but not unacceptable	Unacceptable
<b>Goals in wielding state power</b>	Mixed	Ideological patronage
<b>Funders of party</b>	Mixed; high- and low-dollar	Low-dollar checkbook activists
<b>Great or small parties</b>	Small	Great but under-theorized
	<b>Establishment Republicans</b>	<b>Right Populists</b>
<b>Privileged partisan actors</b>	DC cross-institutional; donors	Strong leader
<b>Method of choosing nominees</b>	Mixed	Pure primary
<b>Orientation to interparty compromise</b>	Unacceptable	Unacceptable
<b>Goals in wielding state power</b>	Ideological patronage	Ideological patronage via status
<b>Funders of party</b>	High-dollar donors	Anyone they can find
<b>Great or small parties</b>	Small but radical	Leader's party
	<b>New Realists</b>	<b>Neoliberal Centrists</b>
<b>Privileged partisan actors</b>	Election-seeking pols and donors	None (solution-oriented individualists)
<b>Method of choosing nominees</b>	Ideally, convention	Agnostic
<b>Orientation to interparty compromise</b>	Acceptable	Desirable
<b>Goals in wielding state power</b>	Perquisites of office only	Efficient governance
<b>Funders of party</b>	Interest-seeking donors	High-dollar donors
<b>Great or small parties</b>	Small	Irrelevant parties