

# 5 The Changing Role of Political Parties

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'A democratic society has to provide a mode of consistent representation of relatively stable alignments or modes of compromise in its polity. The mechanism of the American polity has been the two party system. If the party system, with its enforced mode of compromise, gives way, and 'issue politics' begin to polarize groups, then we have the classic recipe for what political scientists call 'a crisis of the regime', if not a crisis of disintegration and revolution.'

– Daniel Bell, *The Public Interest*

'The American political party system is not an insoluble puzzle. But it does have more than its share of mysteries. The main one, arguably, is how it has survived for so long, or perhaps, how it survived at all, in a difficult and complicated environment.'

– William J. Keefe, *Parties, Politics and Public Policy in America*

To the outside observer, the American party system can be very difficult to understand. Parties appear to be coalitions of many interests. They are organizationally weak and in a constant state of crisis. In contrast, most European political parties have quite vivid public images based on class, regional, religious, linguistic, ethnic or ideological divisions.

While this is an oversimplified characterization of the two types of party system, it remains broadly true that American parties cover a narrower band of the ideological spectrum than do their European counterparts. Historically they have also been much less *programmatic*, offering their supporters very general and diffuse policy options rather than the more structured and specific policy programmes associated with European parties – although there are signs of some convergence in the two types of party systems in recent years. What is true of almost all party systems

is that they are constantly developing and adapting to rapid social and economic changes – a fact which leads so many commentators to attach the label ‘crisis’ to the most recent development or electoral event. The remarkable thing about the American system is that it has always had just two major parties – although not always the same two parties – competing for major offices at any one time. Moreover, these parties have been largely non-ideological and inclusive in style and policy substance, and this in a country constantly being buffeted by the very major social changes that immigration, industrialization and urbanization have brought. So a defining characteristic of both the Democrats and the Republicans is that they have constantly sought to appeal to as wide a spectrum of voters as possible. As such they have been obliged to promise *general* rather than *specific* benefits to voters. People’s expectations of what government can do have therefore been raised. Once in office, however, party politicians have been obliged to focus on the provision of specific benefits. Honouring specific promises to one group often means penalizing another group. We return to this point below.

A large part of this chapter is devoted to explaining why the American party system has taken the particular shape it has. As we shall see, however, although this system has retained its two-party, largely non-ideological status through history, it has by no means been static or unchanging. In organization and function the parties have changed quite dramatically over the past 230 years – and indeed have changed considerably over the past 30 years. To understand these changes it is first necessary to discuss the functions that political parties normally play in political systems.

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## The Functions of Parties

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Although often abused by politicians and publics alike, political parties do perform vital functions in every political system, and in countries with democratic traditions they are an indisputably necessary part of the democratic process. In the American context parties perform at least five major functions, discussed below.<sup>1</sup>

### *Aggregation of demands*

In any society, social groups with particular interests to promote or defend need some means whereby their demands can be aggregated and articulated in government. Traditionally, political parties have performed this function – hence the association of party with particular social groups, regions or religions. In the US, parties have acquired just such associations, although, as noted, to a lesser extent than in some other countries. Hence, the Democrats became the party of Southern interests quite early in history, although by the 1930s the Democrats had also become the party of Northern industrial workers. The Republicans were originally the anti-slavery party of the North, but eventually developed into the party of national unity and later became identified as the party most interested in defending free enterprise and corporate power, an identification that remains today.

But generally parties in the United States have not been exclusively associated with one social group or class or one geographical region. Instead they tend to be coalitions of interests, aggregating demands on behalf of a number of social groups and regional interests. Given the relatively low level of ideological division and conflict in the US (see chapter 3), this is, perhaps, unsurprising.

### *Conciliation of groups in society*

Even in the most divided society some conciliation between competing or conflicting interests has to occur if government is to operate efficiently. Political parties often help this conciliation process by providing united platforms for the articulation of diverse interests. Indeed, in the US, there has hardly been a major political party that has not performed this function. In recent history, the Democrats have attempted (and until 1964 largely succeeded) in reconciling a rural segregationist South with the interests of the urban industrial North. In specific elections, the particular coalition of support established is uniquely determined by contemporary issues and candidates. So in 1960 Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy managed to appeal to both the Catholic voters of the North (Kennedy was himself a Catholic) and Southern Protestants. In 1968 and 1972, the law and order issue cut across regions and classes and helped bring victory to Richard Nixon, the Republican candidate. By 1980 the Republicans had forged a new coalition consisting of a regional component (the West and the South), a religious/moral component (the Christian right) and an economic/ideological component (the middle classes and supporters of a 'return' to free enterprise). By conciliating such diverse groups and offering a common programme, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan was assured victory. In 1988 George Bush managed to retain the loyalty of sufficient numbers of these same groups to win. In 1992 Bill Clinton was successful in reviving at least parts of the old New Deal coalition by appealing to industrial workers, minorities, women and many middle-class voters on the issue of economic revival. His appeal in 1996 was slightly different, based as it was on a vote for the status quo. As in 1992, however, Clinton managed to form a complex coalition of support based on gender, ethnicity and region (the West and the industrial North).

In 2000, Gore almost managed to re-create this winning coalition. He won most of the north-eastern and Pacific states and won large majorities among women and ethnic minorities. Unlike for Clinton, however, his overall popular majority did not translate into a victory in the Electoral College. And, in contrast to Bob Dole in 1996, George W. Bush managed to win some key industrial states, such as Ohio, and, of course, the hotly disputed Florida vote, a feat he managed to repeat in 2004.

Clearly, political parties have to appeal to a number of competing and potentially conflicting interests if they are to succeed in a country as diverse and complex as the United States. As a result, parties have tended to move towards the middle of the ideological spectrum, avoiding those more extreme positions likely to alienate potential supporters. Noting this tendency towards moderation, political theorists have produced a more general model of party behaviour that assumes that if parties are rational and really want to win elections they will *always* move towards

the median voter or the centre ground in politics. Only in this way can they ensure majority electoral support.<sup>2</sup> Whatever its merits in other countries, this theory seems particularly apt in the United States, where with rather few exceptions (of which more below) parties have remained remarkably moderate.

### *Staffing the government*

In a modern, complex society parties are a necessary link in the relationship between government and people. According to social-contract theory, governments must be held accountable for their actions. If they are perceived to be failing, then the people can always replace them at election time. Unfortunately, accountability and responsiveness can never be continuous or complete except in very small societies or communities. Given this, parties provide the public with a focus for accountability. Once elected, a president appoints government officials to fill the major posts in the new administration. Not only departmental chiefs (members of the cabinet) but also the top civil service positions are filled in the main through party linkages (see chapter 10). When judging the performance of the government, therefore, the public can look to the record of an administration united by a common party label and, presumably, a common set of policies. As the party is rooted in society via party organizations, staffing the government through party helps to ensure an intimate link between the implementation of policies and public preference. This at least is the theory of how party should operate in government. As we will discover below, the practice is rather different. One serious practical problem occurs when party organization, rather than reflecting the interests of social groups or regions, is instead merely the vehicle for the promotion and election of a particular *candidate*. Another problem, to which we now turn, occurs when different branches of government have different constituencies and therefore distinct party organizations.

### *Coordination of government institutions*

As has already been noted several times in this book, American government is uncommonly fragmented. National legislature is separated from executive. Federalism adds a further fragmenting influence by giving state (and through the states, local) governments considerable independence from the federal authorities. In centralized systems with cabinet government, parties actually dominate institutions. In Britain, for example, powerful political-party organizations nominate candidates, fight elections and, if successful, form the government out of a majority in the House of Commons. By exercising control over the party organization, governments (or oppositions) can usually ensure the obedience of individual Members of Parliament. In this sense party is hardly needed as a coordinating influence, because a system of *party government* prevails. In marked contrast, America's separated powers and federal arrangements greatly aggravate problems of coordination, and as numerous American political scientists have pointed out, party is the main means whereby disparate institutions can coordinate the formulation and implementation of policy.<sup>3</sup>

So, even if state and local government, Congress and president have different constituencies, a common party label can provide a means of communication and coordination. In fact, Democratic governors, mayors and members of Congress usually do have more in common with Democratic presidents than with Republican presidents – although we will discover below that they often do not. Certainly there have been periods in American history when relations between Congress and president have been greatly aided by political party ties. During the Jeffersonian period, for example, something approaching party government prevailed. More recently, Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson (both Democrats) used party ties greatly to enhance their relations with Congress and thus erect major new social programmes. During the 1969–77 and 1981–93 periods Republican presidents faced a Congress dominated by Democrats, although the Republicans held the Senate between 1981 and 1987. Divided government of a very different sort prevailed after 1994 when the Republicans controlled Congress and the Democrats the presidency. Most recently of all, George W. Bush enjoyed unified government after 2002, a fact that enabled him to make a significant impact on the legislative agenda.

At the state and local levels, the coordinating function of party has taken a rather different form. In the decades immediately following the Civil War, municipal and to a lesser extent state governments proved less than adequate in dealing with successive waves of immigrants from Europe. Hopelessly divided and fragmented institutionally and politically, local governments could do little to improve transport, housing and other urban facilities, or even to ensure a reasonable degree of public order. Political parties filled this void through the creation of the political machine – an informal ‘government’ based on patronage, bribery and corruption.<sup>4</sup> Machines depended on tightly knit grass-roots organization, with the party providing ordinary citizens with direct access to the political authorities. Officials in the legitimate government gained through patronage and bribes, and the party was given a guarantee of political power in return. Although hardly welfare organizations, the urban machines of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did at least keep government going in the great cities by providing an essential buffer between the immigrant masses and a hostile economic and political environment.

### *Promotion of political stability*

Parties do not always promote political stability. In many countries parties mobilize movements against existing regimes and are a major force in bringing regime change. Moreover, if *governmental* (as opposed to regime) stability is the measure, it is clear that the multi-party systems of western Europe do anything but promote stability, as the Italian and other systems testify (Italy has had more than 25 governments since 1970). In ‘mature’ democracies, however, parties do help to socialize citizens into an acceptance of the regime, if only by legitimizing national parliaments and assemblies and facilitating the peaceful transferral of power from one government to another.

For reasons to be discussed below, America’s two-party system has proved remarkably resilient, with the result that the country has never suffered the problems

associated with a proliferation of organized parties. Although the causal lines are blurred, it does seem reasonable to argue that American political parties have helped to promote political stability. Quite frequently, for example, political movements outside the mainstream of American political life have had their policies preempted by one of the leading parties. This happened to the Populists during the 1890s when much of their programme was adopted by the Democrats, and to a number of left-wing parties and movements during the early New Deal period. Moreover, the two most significant third parties of the twentieth century, the Progressives and the American Independent Party, grew out of existing parties and were eventually reincorporated into them. In both cases the breakaway was led by a single charismatic figure – Theodore Roosevelt in the case of the Progressives in 1912 and George Wallace in the case of the American Independent Party in 1968. In fact George Wallace effectively *was* the party and without him it simply disappeared. But the crucial point is that the issues which inspired both movements – dispute over the federal government’s role in economy and society and the racial integration of the South – and which the existing parties could not accommodate, did *not* lead to a permanent shift in party alignments. Instead, either the Democrats and Republicans adapted to the new demands or the movements themselves were reincorporated into the mainstream once the protest had been made. In a rather different context, Ross Perot’s strong showing as a third candidate in 1992 (19 per cent of the vote) showed disillusionment among voters with the Republican and Democratic Party candidates. Significantly, however, it did not lead in any way to the emergence of a third party.



**Plate 5.1** Jefferson Davis. Undated political cartoon

Indeed, Perot's second challenge to the two-party system in 1996 proved much less effective, when he managed just 8 per cent of the vote.

The constantly impressive ability of American political parties to absorb potentially destabilizing social movements has no doubt contributed to the stability of the system, although the more inquiring mind could note that the two major parties have been able to perform this function only because there have been so few deep divisions in American society. A more divided society could not possibly sustain such a monopoly of power shared by two such amorphous and adaptable parties. This is clear when the US is compared with divided societies such as Canada or Belgium. In both cases linguistic and religious cleavages are such that they are faithfully reflected in the party system.

### Crisis and Change in the American Party System

At least since the early 1950s political scientists have bemoaned the decline of American political parties. The 'crisis' has been identified mainly in terms of a constant erosion of the five functions listed above. In what is already a highly fragmented political system, the decline of these functions has, so the argument runs, led to inefficient government and an erosion of the legitimacy of institutions.

In order to understand this critique it is necessary to be familiar with the development of American political parties. Table 5.1 provides a schematic outline of their history by identifying five distinct stages of development. Such a brief summary of the parties' growth must oversimplify somewhat. In particular, the outline implies that the parties have mobilized different regions and social groups in a coherent way throughout history. But this has never been the case. With the notable exception of the Civil War period, the parties have always represented broad coalitions, and they have almost always eschewed appeals to those class-based ideologies that exploit social divisions in society.

Until the early years of the nineteenth century, parties were considered useful only as temporary expedients, or as 'factions' necessary to mobilize political power in response to particular crises. As was emphasized in chapter 3, the Constitution and the political culture generally in the New Republic were deeply suspicious of political parties and their implied threat of government by factions, tyrannical majorities and mass political action. Significantly, when, under the guidance of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, mass parties did develop, they did so in a way which largely avoided the dangers foreseen by the Founding Fathers. The new Democratic Party appealed to broad principles of political equality (at least for white males) rather than to narrow class and sectional interests. It also transformed the party into a highly *instrumental* organization. For the first time the idea that working for the party could bring specific rewards for the individual became influential. So party membership and loyalty brought with them rewards or political 'spoils', of which patronage was the most important. Clearly, delivering the vote and distributing patronage required organization, and it was during this period that local and state parties acquired permanent organizations. What united these new party organizations was a simple belief in equal opportunity for white males (and a concomitant opposition to aristocratic

**Table 5.1** The development of American political parties

	<i>Majority party</i>	<i>Minority party</i>
1789–1800	<p><i>Federalist</i> A coalition of mercantile and Northern land-owning interests led by Alexander Hamilton, George Washington and John Adams.</p>	<p><i>Republican</i> (the first Republican party): A coalition of farmers and planters based in the Central and Southern states and led by Thomas Jefferson.</p>
1801–56	<p><i>Democratic-Republican</i>: The original Republican coalition was consolidated in this period under James Madison. Later, under the leadership of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, the party broadened its mass appeal and was renamed the Democratic Party.</p>	<p><i>Federalist</i> then <i>Whig</i>: Federalists, Whigs and a number of smaller parties failed to challenge the Democratic-Republican ascendancy. Victories by the conservative Whigs in 1840 and 1848 were temporary exceptions and led to the rather inauspicious presidencies of William Harrison and Zachary Taylor, both of whom died in office.</p>
1857–1932	<p><i>Republican</i>: The Civil War produced a second Republican Party championing the unionist cause under Abraham Lincoln. Following the war, a coalition of industrialists, bankers, northern and western farmers and some industrial workers proved formidable. Apart from Abraham Lincoln, only Theodore Roosevelt (1901–9) proved a memorable president. The era of strong local and state party organizations and machine politics.</p>	<p><i>Democratic</i>: Democratic strength remained firmly rooted in the South where poor whites and larger landowners supported the party (those blacks briefly enfranchised after the war supported the Republicans). The four Democratic victories of 1884, 1892, 1912 and 1916 were greatly aided by splits in the Republican ranks.</p>
1933–64	<p><i>Democratic</i>: The era of the New Deal coalition, with the South, the unions, the big cities, ethnic groups and intellectuals providing a near-permanent majority in the House and the Senate. Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were notable presidents.</p>	<p><i>Republican</i>: Republican victories in 1952 and 1956 were attributable to the charismatic appeal of Dwight Eisenhower. Main Republican support came from rural areas, big business, middle-class suburbanites, the west and New England.</p>



*Democratic:*

Period of the breakdown of the New Deal coalition. The South first voted for segregationist candidate George Wallace and then increasingly for Republican candidates. Vietnam and social issues split the traditional blue-collar, industrial-worker Democrats, some of which defected to the Republicans. The Democrats remained the majority party in Congress and in state and local government but managed only one presidential election victory, in 1976.

*Republican:*

With victories by Richard Nixon in 1968 and 1972, the Republicans exploited divisions in the Democratic Party. They also made major inroads into the South. Their association with the Watergate scandal (1973–7), however, led to an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress in 1974 and indirectly helped the defeat of President Ford in 1976.

*No clear majority party**Democratic:*

Although the Democrats won the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections, their support was gradually eroded during these years. They lost the Senate 1981 to 1987 and both houses of Congress after 1994. Generally their support collapsed in the South, and they were no longer the dominant party at the state and local levels. Their appeal remained high among women, minorities, and in the north-east and Pacific west of the country, however. By 2000, popular opinion was almost exactly divided between the two parties. And although in the election of that year the Republicans nominally controlled the Congress and the Senate, Gore did win the popular vote and lose the Electoral College vote by a whisker, and the Senate was divided 50/50.

*Republican:*

With three presidential election victories and success in Congress after 1994, there was much talk of a Republican realignment. Although this was true of the South, the west and the north and east remained highly competitive at the state, local and national levels. The Republicans did, however, redefine themselves as the party of strength abroad, moral or family values and a transfer of power from the federal level to state governments. Generally, public identification with the two parties declined, which was reflected in lower electoral turnout and increasing voter volatility. By 2004, the electorate were almost equally divided between Republicans and Democrats, although George W. Bush won a second term in that year by a small majority.

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political values) and in the party as a distributor of spoils. Beyond this the party represented little that was tangible. Great local and regional variety was encouraged rather than tolerated.

A party based on equality and democracy (achieved mainly through the extension of the franchise) and which adopted a new instrumentalism in organization was hardly likely to undermine the republicanism and constitutionalism that the Founding Fathers so feared would be threatened by mass parties. From the very beginning, therefore, mass political parties in the United States built their electoral competition not on appeals to class, ethnic or religious division, but by adapting their programmes to what was always a broad base of support for individualism and democracy. In this context the parties were also able to aid the presidential nomination process by limiting competition and providing truly national constituencies.

As we know, this new party system was far from being completely successful. Southern Democrats were determined to champion their exclusive sectional interests, and the Civil War effectively destroyed the first mass-party system. As table 5.1 shows, what emerged after the War was a dominant Republican Party, again depending on a broad coalition of support – although not, notably, including the South. It was also during the latter half of the nineteenth century that parties became associated with corruption and the growth of the large urban political machine. Much has been written about the machine, although no one quite captured the spirit of the period as did George Washington Plunkitt, the notorious boss of New York's Tammany Hall. His comment – that 'you can't keep an organization together without patronage. Men ain't in politics for nothin'. They want to get somethin' 'out of it' – gives some of the flavour of the time.<sup>5</sup> Milton Rakove has characterized the machine in slightly more academic terms: 'An effective political party needs five things: offices, jobs, money, workers, and votes. Offices beget jobs and money; jobs and money beget workers; workers beget votes; and votes beget offices.'<sup>6</sup> It follows that if one party controls all the offices it effectively controls the politics in that jurisdiction. Just such a pattern emerged in numerous nineteenth-century towns and cities (and in a modified form in some states). Scholars have cited a number of reasons for the spread of machine politics, the most important being the growing need for an institution capable of integrating a diverse and ever-increasing number of urban immigrants into American society. With state and local authorities unwilling or unable to provide immigrants with good government, political machines stepped in to fill the gap.

The new Americans, confused, intimidated or exploited by employers, landlords or the police, could turn to party precinct captains or ward bosses for help. In return, the machine demanded electoral loyalty.

Machine politics permeated party systems from the lowest ward and precinct level up to city and in some cases state committees. Figure 5.1 shows the basic party organizational structure which emerged during this period and which still holds true in most states today. As is developed below, this structure used to be very much a 'bottom-up' affair, with the committees at county level and below as the key organizational units.

In spite of the emergence of a largely middle-class reform movement intent on cleansing the cities of machine politics, the machine remained an important part of the American scene until well after the Second World War. But some of the reforms



**Figure 5.1** Party organizational structure

introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did have a significant and lasting effect on American politics. A major concern of the reformers was to remove the partisan element from the electoral process. Accordingly, most of the proposed changes involved weakening the link between parties and electors. Party labels were removed from voting lists; elected mayors were sometimes replaced by city managers appointed by the local assembly; candidates were elected ‘at large’ or from a list covering the whole city, rather than on a ward-by-ward basis; and, most significantly, *primaries* were introduced in order to deny the party machines control over nominations for office. Instead, voters were given a direct say in who was to be nominated through an intra-party primary election. These and other reforms hardly transformed the American party system. At best they had a limited effect in certain areas and regions, particularly in the more populist mountain and western states. *Local* party machines were, in any case, the main target of the reformers, for it was in the burgeoning industrial cities that the most corrupt regimes had developed.

Primary elections, however, soon affected national parties as an increasing number of states adopted them for presidential elections. By 1916 no fewer than 20 states required the parties to go direct to the voters to decide the selection of delegates to the national nominating convention (see table 5.2), rather than relying on party machines with party bosses deciding among themselves who should go to the convention pledged to a particular candidate.

In fact, between the 1920s and the 1960s this democratizing trend in American political parties received little fresh impetus. On the contrary, this period witnessed

**Table 5.2** Number of presidential primaries and percentage of convention delegates from primary states by party, 1912–2004

	<i>Democratic<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Republican</i>	
	<i>Number of primaries</i>	<i>Percentage of delegates from primary states<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Number of primaries</i>	<i>Percentage of delegates</i>
1912	12	32.9	13	41.7
1916	20	53.5	20	58.9
1920	16	44.6	20	57.8
1924	14	35.5	17	45.3
1928	17	42.2	16	44.9
1932	16	40.0	14	37.7
1936	14	36.5	12	37.5
1940	13	35.8	13	38.8
1944	14	36.7	13	38.7
1948	14	36.3	12	36.0
1952	15	38.7	13	39.0
1956	19	42.7	19	44.8
1960	16	38.3	15	38.6
1964	17	45.7	17	45.6
1968	17	37.5	16	34.3
1972	23	60.5	22	52.7
1976	29 <sup>b</sup>	72.6	28 <sup>b</sup>	67.9
1980	31 <sup>b</sup>	74.7	35 <sup>b</sup>	74.3
1984	26	62.9	30	68.2
1988	34	66.6	35	76.9
1992	39	78.8	38	80.4
1996	35	70.9	43	85.9
2000	39	65.6	42	82.7
2004	38	n.a.	34 <sup>c</sup>	n.a.

<sup>a</sup> Includes party leaders and elected officials chosen from primary states.

<sup>b</sup> Does not include Vermont, which holds non-binding presidential preference votes but chooses delegates in state caucuses and conventions.

<sup>c</sup> In 2004 the Republicans held party conventions in 11 states and caucuses in 5.

Source: Stephen J. Wayne, *The Road to the White House, 1996* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), table 6.2. Data for 1996 from Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics 2003–4* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003), table 1.23, p. 66. Data for 2004 from the US Federal Election Commission.

something of a return to old-fashioned party politics. Presidential primaries declined (to a mere 16 or 17 in 1968), as the nominating power reverted to the state party caucuses. And at the local level parties often found ways of bypassing the institutional obstacles to party hegemony.<sup>7</sup> However, it would be misleading to characterize these trends simply as a return to the old model. In many ways they were profoundly different from those of the late nineteenth century. Above all, after

1932 the Democratic Party emerged as the ‘majority’ party, constructed around a seemingly invincible coalition consisting of the South, northern industrial workers, ethnic minorities and an increasingly insecure middle class. Local, state and even national Democratic Party organizations were greatly strengthened by this enduring coalition, which scored victory after victory at every level of politics. But unlike in the nineteenth century, these party organizations did not primarily function as intermediaries between the authorities and urban masses. By the 1930s welfare and social-security reforms reduced the dependence of the poor on party workers, and government officials themselves became increasingly professional and less susceptible to bribery and corruption.

Instead, parties developed into modern organizations performing, albeit imperfectly, many of the functions described above. The parties also became markedly more ideological, with the Democrats clearly emerging as the party of the left and the Republicans as the party of the right. Indeed, almost all the major social and economic reforms in the 1933–68 period were initiated by Democratic administrations. While hardly socialist in conception or outcome, these have resulted in a greatly increased role for the federal government in society.

But even by the 1940s there were signs that the New Deal coalition was not completely secure. The South, in particular, found what were very hesitant steps taken by the Truman administration on civil rights unpalatable, and by the 1968 election the Democratic-led integration of the South resulted in open revolt, with George Wallace leading a breakaway Southern party intent on preserving racial segregation. As importantly, the considerable – and in historical terms very untypical – ideological cohesion of the Democratic Party began to crumble as suburbanization, affluence and a changing occupational structure slowly transformed the political agenda. We discuss the relationship between these changes and voting in some detail in chapter 6, but for now it is important to explain their effects on political parties.

It is obvious that if parties are to perform their functions competently they must have some internal cohesion. Within Congress a party label must mean something more than mere nomenclature. If a common party is the major means whereby Congress and president can cooperate, then president and legislators must have at least some shared policies and perspectives. When a president staffs the executive branch, he must assume that his appointees broadly share his philosophy of government. Such party cohesion must have roots in the broader society; in effect some form of party organization must exist to facilitate the exchange of ideas, and to mobilize electoral support and nominate candidates. It was the apparent erosion of cohesion and party organization from the mid-1960s to the 1990s that worried so many commentators. Three major questions are raised here. What was the nature of party decline? What explains it? And, more controversially, does it really matter – especially given recent evidence of revival in the state and national parties?

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## Party Decline?

In *The Party's Over*, first published in 1971, the journalist David Broder argued that American parties were in a process of disintegration, with their main functions being

replaced by special interest groups and media images.<sup>8</sup> Since then claims that the parties are declining have never been far from the surface, and by many measures parties are now much less influential than they were in earlier eras. There are a number of ways of measuring party decline, the most common of which are membership, party identification, organization and control over candidate nominations, ideological cohesion, the role of party in government and, of course, voting patterns, including electoral turnout. Party membership is not a meaningful measure in the US, as it is equivalent to the simple act of registering (usually as a Democrat or Republican) to vote in most states. In other words, people do not *join* and pay dues in the European manner. Party identification, or the psychological attachment which individual voters have to particular parties, has been weakening steadily over the past 40 years, with the number of independents clearly on the rise – at least until the late 1970s (see chapter 6, figure 6.1, p. 116).

Weaker party identification produces a more fickle electorate prone to sudden shifts in loyalty, to ticket splitting and to voting for individual candidates or issues rather than according to traditional party ties. Measuring changes in party organization is rather more difficult. Certainly the party-machine model no longer applies. Research has shown that even in what used to be archetypal machine cities such as Chicago or Philadelphia, elected officials no longer expect party loyalty and service in return for the patronage they dispense.<sup>9</sup> But the typical party organization described above still applies, even if individual activists' motivations have changed.

Party organization has always been loose in the United States, and it used to be the case that the higher the level of committee, the looser it became. Much of the essential work of fundraising and campaigning occurs at the precinct level, with the counties also playing a major role in some states. State parties vary in organizational strength. In some states (mainly in the West) state parties are quite powerful in such areas as fundraising and slating state-wide candidates. Unfortunately, there is no consistent pattern; much depends on the history and tradition of individual states.

Until the 1970s it was normal to characterize the national party committees as little more than very loose *ad hoc* organizations that emerged every four years to help to arrange the national conventions. They are very much more than this today, however. The Republican National Committee (RNC), in particular, has acquired a range of new resources and powers since the 1970s, including a capacity to run direct mailing campaigns on behalf of candidates at the national and the state levels. The RNC also provides staff and technical services (polling, breakdowns of local and regional voting patterns) for candidates. Much of the impetus for this new role came from RNC Chairmen William E. (Bill) Brock (1977–81) and his successor Frank Fahrenkopf (1981–8), both of whom realized the potential for a national role in what had become a much more ideologically unified Republican Party. The staff of the RNC grew from just 30 in 1972 to 600 in 1994 and had acquired a budget of over \$100 million. In addition, the Republican committees responsible for helping House and Senate candidates also grew in strength and influence. Under the leadership of Bill Paxon of New York the national Republican Party played a key role in the famous mid-term Congressional victories in 1994. The Democratic national committees got off to a slower start than did the Republican ones, but by the early 2000s the committees were rivalling the Republicans' in size and influence.

Perhaps the greatest change in the role of the national committees concerns the growth of 'soft money' contributions to the various national committees. 'Soft money', or donations not tied to any particular candidate's campaign, is essentially unregulated by national campaign finance law. It can be used for generic advertising and issue advocacy and can be transferred to state parties, which in turn can use it to boost the election chances of state and local candidates. The rising strength of the national committees has, therefore, also helped to revive state party committees. In 1995–6 the Republicans received over \$138 million and the Democrats \$124 million in soft money. This represented a threefold increase for the Democrats on 1991–2 and more than a doubling for the Republicans. Such was the concern at the distortions in information that soft money could produce, a campaign began to ban the practice. Congress seemed reluctant to act, however until the Enron corporate scandal spurred them into action (for a discussion of the Enron affair, see chapter 13). The result was the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, which eliminated all soft money donations but also doubled the contribution limit of 'hard' money from individuals from \$1,000 to \$2,000.

Until the 1990s one of the most important functions performed by the Democratic national committees was the initiation of a series of inquiries into the presidential nominating process, including how the party chooses delegates to the national convention. The first of these, the McGovern–Fraser Commission (1969), recommended that state parties change their rules so as to allow greater participation by minorities, women and the young at the convention. Two subsequent inquiries, the Mikulski Commission (1972–3) and the Winograd Commission (1975–8), further refined these rule changes. Most recently the Hunt Commission (1981–2) and the Fairness Commission (1984–5) moved the party in a quite different direction, requiring as they did increased representation of party regulars and elected officials (the so-called super-delegates). The background to these changes is discussed below.

What of the party activists themselves? Only about 2 per cent of the adult population are active participants in party organizations, almost all of which are locally based. Generally, over the past few years these activists have become more candidate- and issue-oriented, one of their main motivations being to promote a particular candidate or to fight for just one special issue. Critics argue that these trends have weakened party organization and coherence even further.

One area where the role of party organization can be accurately measured is control over nominations. At the presidential level, at least, the trend here was, until 1980, unequivocal. As table 5.2 shows, primaries spread to the point where, in 1980, around 75 per cent of Democratic and Republican delegates to the national conventions were chosen or bound by primary elections. In quite dramatic fashion, therefore, the intra-party means of choosing delegates (party caucuses and conventions, whose use actually increased between 1916 and 1968) were rejected, leaving this key decision to the mass of voters themselves. After 1980, concern in the Democratic Party in particular that it was losing control of nominations led to a partial return to the caucus method (table 5.2). However, even these are more open to popular pressure than 'old-style' party meetings. In fact, by 1988 the trend towards the use of primaries was re-established, although in the Democratic Party a partial return to the caucus method reduced the percentage of primary selected delegates



**Figure 5.2** Cross-cutting issues in the later 1960s and early 1970s

Source: Adapted from W. N. Chambers and W. D. Burnham (eds), *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 340. Reprinted with permission.

to 65.6 per cent in 2000. In 2004 the number of primaries fell again, especially in the Republican Party, mainly because some Republican-controlled state legislatures opted to choose their delegates via state party conventions. As we discuss below, these particular changes have had especially significant consequences for the state of the modern presidency.

The evidence on intra-party cohesion in the Democratic Party is also pretty unequivocal. A host of surveys have shown how, since the mid-1960s, the issues which bound the New Deal coalition together – and which provided a convenient target for the Republicans – have either receded in importance or been diluted by the emergence of other, less class-based issues. Until the mid-1970s, the major change involved the decline of economic issues in relation to ‘social’ issues. In 1975 Walter Dean Burnham characterized this shift in the terms shown in figure 5.2.

What Burnham was describing here was what social scientists call ‘cross-cutting cleavages’ or the fact that individuals and social groups often lack ideological coherence across all issues. Hence, in the late 1960s many industrial workers and labour union members remained left-wing on economic or class issues, while finding themselves on the right of the political spectrum over racial questions and the Vietnam



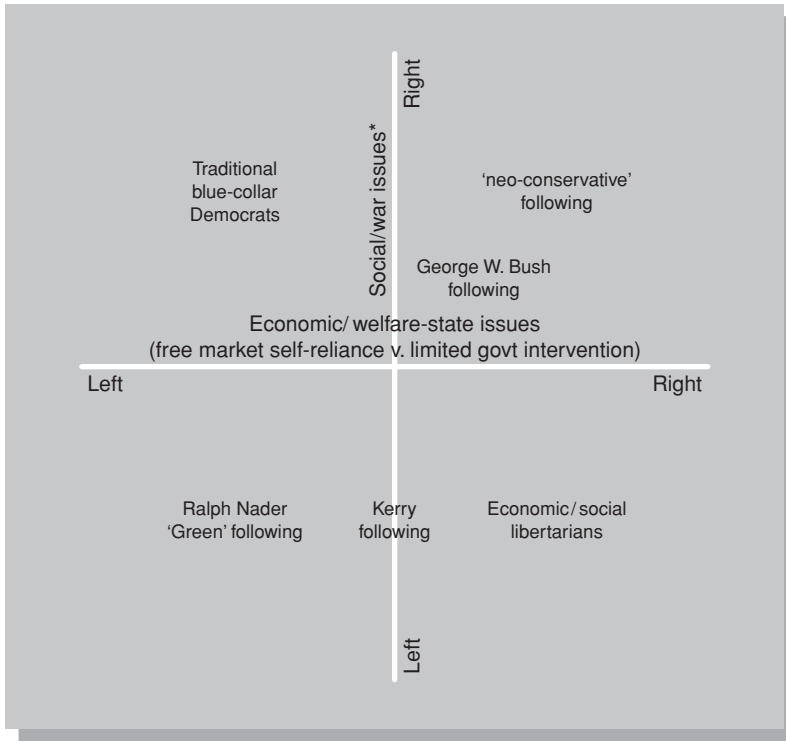


**Figure 5.3** Cross-cutting issues in the mid-1990s

\* 'Social issues' include affirmative action, abortion, civil liberties and the environment.

War. While figure 5.2 is now out of date, the phenomenon of cross-cutting cleavages is still very much with us. Figure 5.3 attempts to characterize the divisions of the mid-1990s. Although not shown by these figures, which give no indication of the *distribution* of support for these issues, the major shift from the earlier period was the emergence of a more ideologically coherent right that first appeared with the Reagan presidency. In the early 1970s, the majority party, the Democrats, were in disarray, their support being split between the two left-hand segments of figure 5.2. By the mid-1990s this division continued to affect the Democrats, and a number of commentators were claiming that the Republican right were fast assuming the status of majority party. But the Reagan victories were not repeated at the Congressional or state levels, and by 1988 Democratic presidential prospects improved, even though George Bush Senior was the eventual winner. Both Bush and the Republican candidate in 1996, Bob Dole, were relatively close ideologically to Clinton, but this partial convergence was to be dramatically reversed in 2000, when the two candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush were deeply divided on most issues.

This ideological polarization was to continue in the presidential election of 2004, when the two candidates, George W. Bush and John Kerry, were deeply divided on most issues, but in particular social issues and those civil liberties questions raised by the administration's conduct of the 'war on terrorism'.



**Figure 5.4** Cross-cutting issues in the mid-2000s

\* 'Social/war issues' include affirmative action, abortion, civil liberties, the environment and the US role abroad.

This polarization is shown in figure 5.4, which provides a slightly different definition of the two issue dimensions. Economic/welfare state issues refer to such questions as job security (providing a minimum notice of dismissal for laid-off workers), education, training, relief for economically distressed regions and health-care and equity in the federal taxation system. The social/war dimension refers to the conscience and gender issues (abortion, civil liberties), affirmative action (civil rights enforcement), the environment, consumer protection, childcare and, for the first time since the 1970s, public and candidates' position on America's role abroad. Very generally, the Republicans support a more interventionist and unilateral foreign policy, while the Democrats favour a more cautious and multilateral approach.

Indeed, by the early 2000s the Republican Party had acquired a much more ideologically cohesive profile, with most supporters locating themselves quite close to the president's position (the upper right-hand quadrant of figure 5.4). And while the Democrats remain a much broader coalition than the Republicans, they too have become more cohesive, especially on social, civil liberties and foreign policy issues.

One of the great paradoxes of modern American politics is that while the parties are more ideologically divided than they used to be, many voters remain generally apathetic and uninterested in politics. We will return to this question in the next chapter.

A further and related development of note is that the influence of parties *in government* has by some measures increased since the 1980s. Following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Republicans managed to forge a new unity organized around reform of the economy and conservatism on moral issues. By the mid-1990s this new agenda was the centrepiece of the Republican electoral victories in Congress, which were followed by an unusual degree of ideological cohesion among House (and, to a lesser extent, Senate) Republicans. Later, the Bush administrations were also to display an unusual degree of ideological cohesion in government. We examine these developments in greater detail in later chapters, but for now it is important to note that this new ideological cohesion was not part of a dominant social movement rooted in the electorate in the manner of the New Deal of the 1930s. Democrats retained strong support among many members of the public, and the dramatic Republican congressional advances in 1994 were not consolidated in later elections. Instead, the electorate remains remarkably evenly divided between the two parties.

Even in 2000, Al Gore managed to register more votes than did his winning opponent George W. Bush. Congress was very finely balanced between the two parties. In ideological terms, the 2000 vote confirmed the Republicans as the party of rural and Southern conservatives, older white males, and white nuclear families, while the Democrats became increasingly associated with metropolitan areas, working women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the less advantaged. This trend continued in 2004 but with the balance of support tilting slightly towards the Republicans.

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### Explaining Party Change

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Reference has already been made to the social and economic changes usually invoked to explain party change. From the 1950s through the 1980s, affluence, increasing levels of education, and suburbanization produced less 'solidaristic' communities, as the sociologists put it. In other words, a political life based on an individual's place of work or neighbourhood became increasingly irrelevant as the mobile service-sector worker living in a sprawling suburb or semi-rural area replaced the blue-collar inner-city industrial worker as the 'norm' in American society. This new, essentially middle-class, citizen acquired a political life defined not just in terms of occupation or geographical location, but also in terms of his or her individual characteristics, preferences, prejudices and particular interests. In response to this much more complex and less categorizable voter, the parties themselves changed, becoming even less programmatic and ideological. But in trying to be all things to all citizens, parties at once raised public expectations of government, while proving much less adept at meeting specific demands. It stands to reason that an ideology or class- (or region-, or religion-) based party can have instant attraction to voters whose lifestyles and occupational interests coincide closely with those represented by party policies. A more amorphous, non-ideological party is rarely as appealing and always runs the risk of alienating a particular section of society should it commit itself to a specific policy. Should one of the parties decide to commit itself to a single position or grouping – much as did George McGovern on the left in 1972 and, to a lesser degree, as did the Congressional Republicans on the right after 1994 – then it risks a hostile reaction by the electorate.

While it is appealing, this sociological analysis seems less relevant in the early 2000s than it once was. Many Americans – including African Americans, many Hispanics and working women – show considerable ideological consistency across many issues. They tend to be anti-war, supportive of social programmes and childcare and are generally critical of what they see as a white-male dominated agenda that undermines civil rights and liberties. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Republican right has shown an impressive ideological cohesion on a range of issues. More importantly, this analysis suggests some simple past when American political parties represented ‘left’ and ‘right’ in society with reasonable coherence. But as repeatedly pointed out in this chapter, this has never been the case. Parties have historically tended towards the non-ideological, and even the New Deal Democratic Party was marked by a degree of internal dissension and compromise over policies, which would be unusual in European class-based parties. By comparison, the modern Republican Party looks remarkably cohesive.

A related explanation for the changing role of parties concentrates less on societal changes and more on the performance of government itself. Hence the ‘overload’ thesis argues that the increasing democratization of American society has placed an excessive load on what is in any case a complex decision-making system. Unable to cope with the array of competing demands placed on them, institutions have increasingly come under fire from a disenchanted public. Indeed, during the early 1970s a burgeoning literature on declining trust in government hinted that public disillusionment with political institutions posed a threat to democracy itself.<sup>10</sup> Although this particular argument is now largely discredited, it remains the case that parties continue to take much of the blame for public disenchantment with politics. To repeat the point, it has been the failure of parties to provide coherent programmes, to staff the government, to help smooth relations between Congress and president which, so the criticism goes, accounts for the apparently growing gap between public expectations of government and the ability of political institutions to satisfy them.

Paradoxically, the historical attempts within the parties to improve their performance may actually have aggravated the situation. By the late 1960s activists in both parties, but particularly from within the ranks of the Democrats, became increasingly disillusioned with the undemocratic nature of intra-party decision-making. Both parties were dominated by age cohorts recruited during the New Deal period – male, white, middle-aged and middle-income (upper middle-income in the case of the Republicans). The new activists, most of whom were strongly committed to the ‘new’ issues of the 1960s – social reform in the case of the Democrats, economic liberalism with the Republicans – slowly but surely began to take over local and state party organizations. In doing so they insisted on more open decision-making structures and better access by under-represented groups – within the Democratic Party, African Americans, women, the poor and younger people. It was this quite virulent intra-party reform movement that paved the way for the spread of primary elections and for new rules at nominating conventions favouring delegates from under-represented groups (as recommended by the 1969 McGovern–Fraser Commission). As we have mentioned, the spread of primaries actually weakened both parties, as the crucial power of control over nominations passed directly to the voters. And

more open conventions led, in the case of the Democrats, to party opinions and policies seriously out of tune with those supported by the 'typical' Democratic voter. Hence, the now famous 1972 Democratic convention was dominated by new 'social issue' delegates (see bottom left quadrant of figure 5.2) who nominated a candidate, George McGovern, with very little support from traditional 'economic issue' Democrats. After 1972 the Democrats modified the party rules so as to permit a less rigid selection of delegates and to ensure some representation of party regulars and elected officials (the so-called super-delegates), but in one important sense the change was permanent, for the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s reduced the influence of regular activists in myriad state and local parties. In their stead, a new breed of party volunteers had taken over many party organizations. Paradoxically, these new activists were *more* middle class than the people they replaced, in spite of the fact that the changes were themselves inspired by calls for equal opportunity and greater representation of the poor and minorities. The explanation here is simple: people who *volunteer* their services and who care about issues are usually educated, competent and well informed. They are also more committed to particular issues or causes. Thus party activists who support pro-life candidates in the Republican Party or pro-environment candidates in the Democratic Party are likely to hold more 'extreme' positions on these issues than are the typical Republican or Democratic voters.

In contrast, many of the old-style party workers were recipients of party patronage or had become active during the 1930s and 1940s, when there was a clearer relationship between party and class. As a result, the old-style Democratic activists, although white, male and middle-aged, were decidedly less well educated and generally of lower socio-economic status than the new-style party workers who replaced them. They also tended to hold generally moderate opinions on the issues of the day.

Unravelling cause and effect when explaining party change is difficult. The rise in the importance of social issues from the 1960s and through the 2000s resulted in large part from changes in American society. Parties and political institutions were profoundly affected by these changes and, once affected, in turn influenced the public's perception of the performance of government. This complex interaction of institutions and society is, of course, a continuous process, and it may well be that, not only in the US but also in other mature democracies, the age of the highly organized political party rooted in socially stable communities is over. A crucial question is raised by this prospect: can liberal democracy function properly with a different sort of political party that is rooted not in community but in personalities and issues that cut across community and region?

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### After 2000 – Political Party Revival?

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Pointing to the indicators discussed above, the more pessimistic observers reluctantly accept the demise of traditional parties, warn of the deleterious consequences, and plead, somewhat forlornly, for party revival, or more 'consensual' institutions.<sup>11</sup> In essence, they claim that modern parties tend to erode the vital five functions discussed earlier. Presidential–Congressional liaison becomes difficult; presidents

have few cues to guide them when appointing officials; a presidential nominating process outside the control of party boosts 'media created' candidates who may be skilful at campaigning and winning primaries but rarely make good presidents. Above all, loose, amorphous parties are obliged to make general promises to the electorate rather than offer to satisfy specific demands. As a result, the public's regard for parties has declined and the gap between public expectations of government and the ability of politicians to meet these expectations has increased.

Before we accept the critique in full, however, we should note the following. First, amid all the furore over the decline of traditional parties, not a single third party has emerged with even the semblance of electoral strength. Third-party *candidates* have sometimes done well, but they represent more of a protest vote than some discernible social movement. Such was certainly the case with John Anderson in 1980 and Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996. The institutional obstacles in the way of third parties in the US are well known and continue to apply.<sup>12</sup> But a much more significant obstacle is the continuing distaste among the American electorate for parties based on class, region, religion and ethnicity. Second, it is important to stress again that the parties have *not* declined in the sense that they have ceased to be important *in government* or to be an indicator of electoral behaviour. Instead they have *changed*, and today perform rather different functions or perform traditional functions in a different manner. As already noted, state and national party organizations have been strengthened in recent years and the influence of party in Congress has undoubtedly increased since the 1980s.

The very same forces which precipitated the reforms of the early 1970s also set in motion a period of soul searching which is still very much with us. As noted above, the Democrats have launched a series of inquiries into the presidential nominating process, and, as is elaborated in chapter 10, disquiet with the ways in which Democratic candidates are selected remains. National parties are now stronger, but their authority in part depends on the support of incumbent presidents. This is one reason why the Republican National Committee was able to achieve so much during the 1980s compared with its Democratic counterpart. With Bill Clinton as president the Democratic National Committee experienced a revival during the 1990s, as did the Republican National Committee during the Bush Years, 2001–9.

Recent party revival is not equivalent to the party strength associated with smoke-filled rooms and party machines, but more, not fewer, people are now actively involved in party organizations. Party activists may be motivated more by issues or candidates than by party loyalty, which in any case is nothing new in American politics, but the label 'Democrat' or 'Republican' continues to mean a great deal to most Americans. That this is so is amply demonstrated by the continuing importance of a party label in congressional elections – very few candidates dare to call themselves independent. Moreover, the emergence of an ideologically committed Republican Party with unusually strong links between party supporters at the state, Congressional and the Presidential levels surely represents the best evidence yet of party revival. In response, the Democratic Party too has become more cohesive – even if only as an oppositional force against the Republicans.

Indeed, not since the 1960s – or possibly even the 1930s – have American politics been so ideologically charged. This may not be an ideology rooted in cohesive

and stable communities as it was in earlier eras, but it is palpable none the less. Above all it is a divide on what in this chapter has been called the ‘social issue’ that relates more to values and life styles rather than to simple economic issues. Today, the two political parties are deeply divided over such questions as civil rights and liberties, abortion, the US role abroad and the role of the family in society. And although most Americans continue to describe themselves as political ‘moderates’, opinion is increasingly led by politicians and activists who help polarize views on contentious issues. As the next chapter will show, this new divide has had profound implications for how Americans vote in national elections.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 What are the main differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties? Answer with respect to their positions on social, economic and foreign policy issues.
- 2 Describe the ideological and organizational differences between the Republican and Democratic Parties. In these terms are the parties becoming more or less alike?
- 3 Why has the Republican Party been so successfully revived in recent years? Is the revival sustainable?
- 4 What are the main functions of parties in the American political system? Do they perform these functions adequately?

### NOTES

- 1 This list of functions – although not the discussion of them – is taken from Gerald M. Pomper, ‘Party functions and party failures’, in Gerald M. Pomper et al., *The Performance of American Government: Checks and Minuses* (New York: Free Press, 1972), pp. 46–63.
- 2 Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
- 3 This has been a recurring theme among critics of the separation of powers at least since the time of Woodrow Wilson (president, 1913–19), who wrote on this subject as a political scientist before becoming president.
- 4 The classic account of the machine is by Harold F. Gosnell, *Machine Politics: Chicago Model* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937).
- 5 William Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), p. 63.
- 6 Milton Rakove, *Don’t Make No Waves, Don’t Back No Losers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 42.
- 7 The city of Chicago, for example, was ‘reformed’, but the mayor retained his position as ‘boss’ through control of the Cook County Democratic Party, which contains the city.
- 8 David Broder, *The Party’s Over* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

- 9 For a general discussion of party decline, see Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952–1994* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 10 See, in particular, the Tenth Anniversary edition of *The Public Interest*, essays by Daniel Bell and Samuel P. Huntington, no. 41, Fall 1975.
- 11 An eloquent essay on this theme is Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- 12 The American electoral system puts additional burdens on third parties, for all states require a minimum number of registered voters to sign a petition before a party can field a candidate. Furthermore, acquiring strength in one state or region – the usual pattern for American third parties – is rarely enough to ensure national impact. Victory in a presidential election is achievable only via mass national support, and without at least the prospect of winning at this level, third parties cannot hope to be taken seriously.

### FURTHER READING

An excellent account of the origins and changes in the party system is provided by John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995). The best historical (but analytical) account of American parties is William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (eds), *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). See also David R. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). A good recent account of changes in American political parties is Jeffrey E. Cohen et al., *American Political Parties: Decline or Resurgence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Books, 2001). One of the better textbook treatments of parties is William J. Keefe, *Parties, Politics and Public Policy in America*, 8th edn (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1998). A more general account of parties is provided by William J. Keefe and Marc J. Hetherington, *Parties, Politics and Public Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003).