

On the Relevance of US Political Parties

Preamble

Gentlemen:

Good evening. On this occasion of my second “Freshman” paper, please allow me some brief introductory remarks. As many of you may remember, I was a member of this esteemed group from the early ‘90s until the group decided through a careful democratic process to change the meeting night from Friday to Thursday. With that change, and because of professional responsibilities, I reluctantly resigned from the club. At that time the club leadership extended an offer of the potential to rejoin the club in the future, and now, as I have entered retirement from my profession, you have graciously allowed me to rejoin the group.

In the interim, I have noticed that there has been a substantial upgrade in the quality and overall impact of the presentations. PowerPoint visuals and multi-media presentations are very impactful. However, tonight I stand before you to evoke an older tradition of our Club. The opportunity for open discussion unencumbered by technology.

Introduction:

The topic of tonight’s presentation is the current relevance of the two predominant political parties in our national political life. And, at the beginning of our discussion, can we mutually agree that this isn’t just a Red Team or Blue Team problem? We have just experienced the third national election in a row where the electorate’s reaction to the proposed presidential candidates was, at least initially, “none of the above”.

Rephrased, none of the candidates for national leadership adequately reflected the traditions and current policy positions of the parties that the candidates ostensibly represented.

I submit to you that this consistent misalignment of candidate to party is not random, but rather a reflection of structural flaws in the operation of the both parties. The purpose of this paper will be to explore the

historical causes of these flaws and discuss potential future scenarios that may significantly impact the course of our national politics.

As I began to consider of the evolution of our current political parties, it occurred to me that this history seemed to fit a dialectical model. As you all remember from your “Intro to Philosophy” class, in dialectical logic, the process of historical development starts with an established state of affairs (Thesis). That state of affairs causes the emergence of social forces in opposition to it (Antithesis). The result of the conflict between those opposing forces results in a uniquely new state of affairs (Synthesis).

At this point, please allow me a footnote. This method of historical analysis is typically attributed to the German philosopher Hegel. However, that is a factual error. The terminology was initially proposed by a prior German philosopher Fichte. Hegel was a major critic of Fichte, but in one of those wonderful accidents of history, became identified as a proponent of the system. So let us begin our dialectical journey.

In the Beginning...

Following the advice of that noted political commentator, Lewis Carrol, let’s “begin at the beginning”. Our founding fathers were suspicious of political parties but ultimately could find no other practical method for organizing political decision making.

George Washington: In his *Farewell Address*, Washington warned against the “baneful effects of the spirit of party”. Political factions lead to divisiveness, weakened public administration, and created of rivalries that would compromise national unity.

James Madison: In *The Federalist Papers No. 10* Madison expressed concerns regarding factions. However, he recognized them as inevitable due to human nature. He thought the formation of a large republic could

dilute the negative effects of parties and he participated in the formation of the Democratic-Republican Party.

Alexander Hamilton: Hamilton, writing in the *Federalist Papers*, was initially critical of factions. However, he recognized that political organizations could be used to advance a strong centralized government which he saw as essential for national prosperity and stability. He was a founding member of the Federalist Party.

Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson disapproved of parties in theory, viewing them as threats to individual liberties and democratic values. Despite this he joined with Madison in founding the Democratic-Republican Party as a necessary counterbalance to Hamilton and his allies.

John Adams. Adams believed parties were divisive and would lead to corruption and demagoguery. His presidency was marked by increasing partisan tensions between the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans.

What we can conclude from the beginning of our Republic is that leaders viewed political parties with caution but accepted them as a necessary evil in the process of democratically determining national policy.

For our purposes of defining “Thesis”, I’d like to fast forward to the post World War Two period and begin the discussion of the function of political parties from 1948 through 1968.

THESIS:

The emergence from the experience of World War Two was also the emergence from 20 continuous years of national political life being controlled by the New Deal and the Democratic Party.

In 1948, Harry Truman confounds the “experts” by defeating Thomas Dewey, leading to that famous *Chicago Daily Tribune* headline and subsequent picture. Truman found himself in that position by virtue of

strong support from the Pendergast political machine in Kansas. He was first and foremost a “party man”.

In 1952, Dwight Eisenhower wins the presidency. Eisenhower was the result of specific recruitment by the Republican party and he was nominated from a convention where delegates chosen by state party conventions came together to determine the strongest possible national ticket. Nixon is chosen as vice-president to assuage the conservative wing of the party.

In 1960, Kennedy is chosen as the Democratic national candidate. Kennedy is a product of the urban, industrial base of the party. Johnson was nominated as Vice President to acknowledge the needs of the southern wing of the party.

Each of these contests were created in the “smoke filled rooms” of the respective party’s conventions where the task of mediating constituencies and balancing claims took place. This period of American politics is noteworthy for the primacy of party over candidate.

The national party’s strength was rooted in a strong connection to local party organizations. Local parties were supported by professional organizers whose “business was politics”. The goal of the local party was to promote a strong voter turnout. Party connectivity to the electorate was maintained by daily involvement in the life of the local community. The power of the local party was supported by local fundraising efforts and patronage. Shirley Chisholm once remarked that “the first lesson of politics was to follow the district leader”. Local parties gathered in state conventions to vet candidates, set priorities, and determine policies to be advocated to the electorate. State parties had ultimate control of the “ballot lines.”

This process was then replicated when the state parties met for national conventions. Delegates to national conventions owed their position to support from their state and local parties. Their deliberations including

selection of national candidates and party platform were tied directly back to the concerns of the voters at the precinct level.

However, as we approach the end of this period, there are subtle changes in the orientation of the national parties that presage the coming antithesis. Beginning with FDR, the concerns of the Democratic party become more national in focus and more focused on partisan policies. Additionally, national politics becomes focused on the Presidency. (Parenthetically, I observe that this corresponds to the expansion of the federal government and its increasing impact in the daily life of the citizenry).

Coincident with the increased focus on national policies is the desire to “moralize” public life, which is to say the tendency to rationalize the legitimacy of law by reference to moral values. The emergence of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement are examples of this tendency.

All of this leads us to the pivotal year of 1968 and the beginning of the antithesis.

Antithesis

While 1968 is a watershed year for the role of parties in national politics, there were early precursors of the antithetical movement. In 1888, Massachusetts was the first state to use the “Australian Ballot” (I.E. secret ballot). In 1904, Robert LaFollette was nominated as a candidate for governor by a state-wide primary in Wisconsin. The first presidential primary was held in North Dakota in 1912. And Teddy Roosevelt arguably was our first “personality based” presidential candidate, running independently of political party affiliation. However, things begin to change quickly as a result of the 1968 Presidential election.

Antithesis begins in earnest at the 1968 Democratic Convention. The 1968 convention is a contest between Eugene McCarthy, who arrives at the convention as the clear winner in state primaries opposing Hubert

Humphrey who arrives at the convention with a plurality (but not a majority) of the delegates. Chaos ensues, documented nightly by national television. The convention is choreographed by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley (who is operating at the height of the power of “urban machines”) and eventually Humphrey prevails at the cost of the alienation of a significant portion of the party.

In the aftermath of the 1968 election, the Dems created the McGovern – Fraser Commission to address the lack of transparency and disparity between the preferences of primary voters and the results of the delegate’s selection. The Commission recommended the following:

- Elimination of delegate selection by appointments granted by party insiders. Rather, delegates should be chosen by primaries or open caucuses that give voters direct control of the selection process.
- Selection of delegates will be in proportional representation to the demographic of the party electorate.
- No “winner take all” primaries. Proportional allocation of delegates to better represent voter preferences.
- Uniform rules for delegate selections across all states to prevent procedural inconsistencies.

The result of implementation of the McGovern -Fraser Commission recommendations is a significant increase in the number of open primaries and caucuses in 1972, with George McGovern ultimately being selected as the party’s candidate. By the end of the decade, direct primaries are the standard across both political parties.

As a final point in the discussion of procedural changes in the Democrat Party, in 1981 the Hunt Commission attempted to draw back some control of the nominating process to party officials. The report created “super delegates” to increase the influence of experienced party leaders in selecting candidates to prevent unelectable candidates from securing

the nomination. However, the role of “super delegates” was eliminated in 2018 in the aftermath of the failed Sanders challenge to the Clinton nomination.

The antithesis movement accelerated in the aftermath of the 1972 presidential election and the disclosure of the significant illegality of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (with the unfortunate acronym CREEP), culminating in the Watergate affair. In the aftermath of the Watergate hearings, Congress adopts and President Ford signs the *1974 Amendments to Federal Election Campaign Act*. This legislation:

- Establishes strict limits on contributions to federal candidates
- Imposed limits on campaign spending for federal candidates including total campaign expenditures, media advertising, and personal use of funds by candidates.
- Required comprehensive reporting of all contributions and expenditures.
- Created the Federal Election Commission (FEC) to monitor campaign finance reports, investigate potential violations, and provide advisory opinions to Congress.
- Provided matching funds for candidates in primaries who meet fundraising requirements.
- Limits contributions from individuals to PACs and PAC contributions to national party committees and political parties.
- Created penalties for violations, including fines and possible criminal charges.

Unfortunately, provisions of the law limiting overall campaign spending and personal spending were quickly struck down by the Supreme Court {*Buckley v Valeo 1976*} on grounds of the First Amendment’s free speech protections.

While the intention of the legislation was laudatory, it had the unintended consequence of moving national fundraising for individual

candidates (and causes) out of the shadows and validating the rules by which that activity could be legitimately pursued. The traditional source of political funding based in the parties was quickly replaced by independent sources of “issue oriented” money

Subsequent Supreme Court decisions have further promoted the separation of the funding of the political process from party control. *McConnell v. FEC 2003* allowed political parties to coordinate expenditures with candidates and effectively allows unlimited independent expenditures. *Citizens United v. FEC 2010* allowed corporations and unions to directly spend money in elections. And the DC Circuit’s decision in *Speech Now v. FEC 2010* unleashed independent spending by Super Pacs.

In our most recent election, total Democratic spending on all political ads totaled \$4.5 billion of which \$2.4 billion came from independent groups. Total GOP ad spending was \$3.5 billion of which \$2.4 billion came from independent groups (AdImpact). If money is the “life blood of politics”, it’s clear that parties continue to play a diminishing role in sustaining the vitality of our politics.

Coincident with the structural changes that decreased party influence in the selection of national candidates and the change in the structure of campaign finance, there is a third factor that contributed to antithesis. Since 1968, political alignments (and presidential campaigns) have become increasingly “single issue” focused. Newt Gingrich summarizes it: “Politics is a fight for majority. The Party only matters if it supports formation of a majority”... “We are fighting a war. We are more concerned with achieving certain objectives than working with in the system...”

This mono-issue focus occurs within both parties. On the Blue side, groups like Emily’s List (Early Money is Like Yeast) begins to vet candidates and provide independent funding. Obama ignored party building by focusing on reaching voters directly using a theory of “good

policy sells itself”. And, more notably, Bernie Sanders refuses the label “Democrat” in favor of “Democratic Socialist”. On the Red side, the Tea Party and the subsequent Freedom Caucus will hold “righteous positions” in opposition to their party even if it means eventual political defeat for the party.

Compounding the focus on individual issues is a new group of billionaires who are essentially unrooted to society. They “went away to college”, created businesses that provide now essential services with incredible income streams and who now are fashionably inclined to consider “post-materialist” concerns such as ecology, consumer protection, rights of minorities, globalization, etc.

And finally, throw into this mix the rise of “political info-tainment” represented by MSNBC, Fox News and any number of blogs and podcasts. The entire economy of the “info-tainment” world is based upon the commercial value of the audience, and nothing drives audience numbers like issue-oriented controversy.

The result of this political fragmentation is our most recent presidential contest. Wherein, in my very personal assessment, we are presented with a choice between a candidate that was selected by fiat by a group of influential donors who had very little practical political credentials and an apparent inability to formulate the organizing principles of her candidacy. Running against her is a egomaniacal individual of mercurial temperament unrestrained by any ethics who had previously failed at one of the basic jobs of Chief Executive (I.E. the orderly transfer of power at the end of his term). By the way, his policy prescriptions in many cases run diametrically opposed to prior positions taken by his nominal party. As an indication of the abdication of the influence of party, the 2024 Republican National convention failed to put forward a platform.

So as Antithesis reaches it’s logical conclusion. Political Parties are reduced to service organizations for candidates that would like to “rent”

the party's place on the ballot. Voters experience extreme political fragmentation. We're left with a political system that is incapable of formulating a consistent foreign or domestic policy, with a government locked into inaction by a perpetual 50/50 tie, and with a majority of voters who can be categorized as "center left" and "center right" feeling disenfranchised. Oh, and by the way, the world is changing in ways that endanger our continued "comfortable" existence. In this environment, what come next?

SYNTHESIS

One potential future is that antithesis continues to fragment our politics to the point that government action at the national level becomes irrelevant to solving the most basic of social goods – safe streets, adequate energy, clean environment, etc. In that environment, I believe that a basic instinct of American society will assert itself. We are a people who are philosophically (dare I say genetically?) practical. Our history is one of identifying problems and creating solutions to those problems. I believe that the solution that will emerge from our current politics will start with focused local action. Groups of citizens gathering together to solve macro problems at a micro level. For example, we (as in you and I) really cannot address the problem of the "un-housed" at a national level. But we don't have to. All we need to do is figure out how to solve the problem of the "un-housed" in our community, for the benefit of our community. In the process of addressing this problem (as well as others) we will inevitably need to get involved in our local politics, and this will re-energize and re-form our political parties from the ground up.

Local civic engagement is the solution to our political malaise. But it will not happen automatically. Each of us needs to put down our phones and turn off the 24/7 flow of national news. Instead, devote some time to a local organization. Speak with your friends. Perhaps even worship with them. Set an example of community engagement for your friends

and family. Tip O’Neill was fond of saying “all politics are local”. Let’s start the rebuilding of consensus and accommodation by focusing on what we can impact – the society immediately around us.