

5.4 How and Why Political Parties Change and Adapt

Explain why and how political parties change and adapt.

As we have seen, political parties, in theory, play a vital role in our government and politics. In practice, however, that role seems to have diminished. Most political scientists have recognized a weakening of political parties over time. Gary C. Jacobson has written,

A fundamental factor [in the decline of parties] is clearly institutional: the rise and spread of primary elections as the method for choosing party nominees for the general election... Primary elections have largely deprived parties of their most important source of influence over elected officials. Parties no longer control access to the ballot and, therefore, to political office. They cannot determine who runs under their label and so cannot control what the label represents... parties typically have few sanctions and little influence [on nominations].

Similarly, James E. Campbell suggests,

Since the 1960s the role of the political parties in American politics has fundamentally changed. A series of technological, institutional, legal, and cultural shifts diminished their once central function as the organizers and inclusive mobilizers of American elections. They ceded control over nominations and were pushed aside by new candidate-centered campaigns. Technological advances allowed candidates to speak directly to the people, and the parties lost their monopoly.

Political parties have been weakened by changes to the nomination process and changes in technology. The result is a more candidate-centered political process. The partisan has been replaced by the personal. Direct primaries replaced party caucuses. This put the power of nominating candidates directly in the hands of the people. Candidates now increasingly create their own brand, relying less on party symbols and messaging. Yet without a nomination from one of the two major parties, any candidate, regardless of brand, is practically un-electable. To remain competitive, parties modify their policies and messaging in order to appeal to various demographic coalitions.

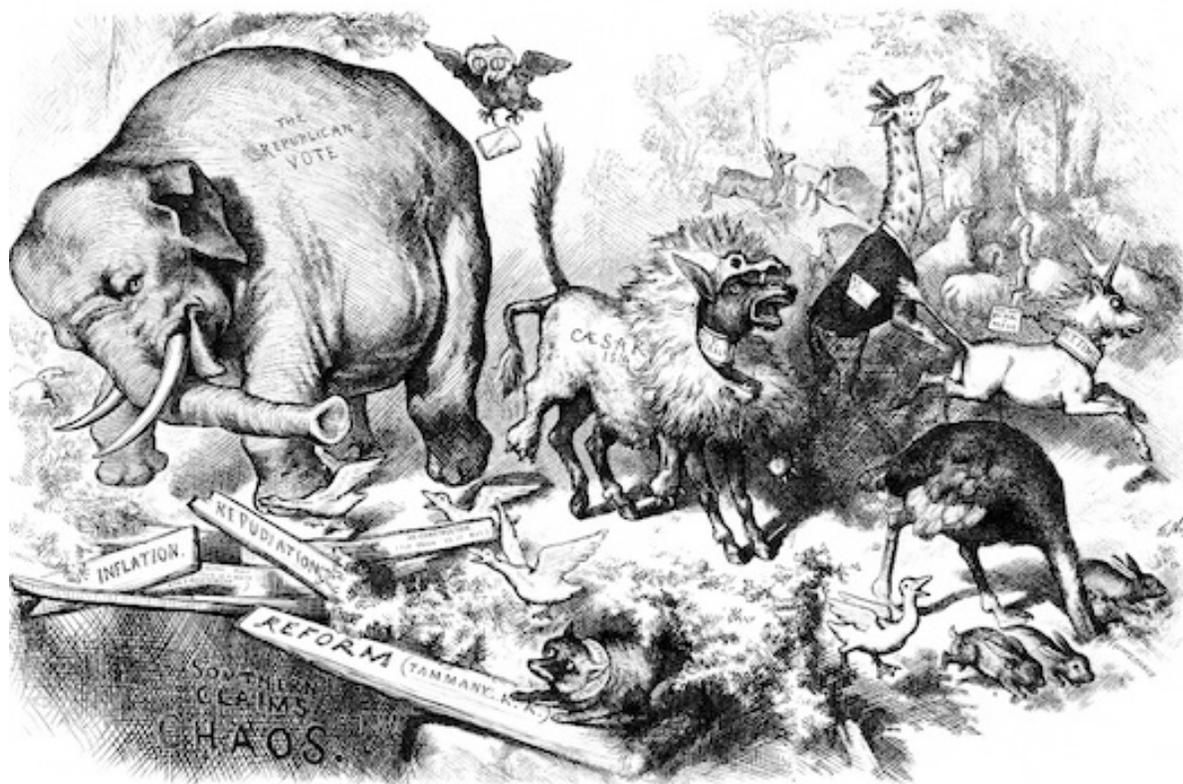
Structurally political parties have always reflected our commitment to federalism. Party organization was never fully centralized. Rather, state and local coordination of political interests varied significantly. A Democrat in New York might actually be quite different than a Democrat in Texas. Likewise, a Republican in South Carolina is certainly different than a Republican in California. There are regional differences. As these differences manifest themselves in real ways, our political parties weaken. Certain regions have realigned their political loyalties. The South, once deeply loyal to the Democratic Party, is now solidly Republican. There was a time when California was consistently conservative, siding with Republicans. Democrats now control our most populous state. When political parties realign, political scientists call this a critical election. Political parties have had to adapt to these structural and regional changes.

Historically political parties used to run like machines. Highly structured, they were the engines of our government. Loyalty was driven by patronage. New technologies like radio and television, however, challenged the historic party control over messaging. With direct primaries bypassing party bosses,

candidates now choose to broadcast their unique messages through new technologies. As information technology changes so too does our politics, often at the expense of certain institutions like political parties.

Campaign finance laws, as well, help explain the weakening of our political parties. When parties were machine-like, unrestricted money flowed generously. Money is the mother's milk of politics. Candidates once were dependent upon political party resources. New campaign finance reforms, however, have turned candidates into independent operators. Donors now face significant limits when giving money to political parties. It is easier for candidate-centered campaigns to access money outside of political party channels. Independent expenditures face far fewer restraints than those faced by political parties. This change in campaign finance also helps to explain why our political parties have grown weaker.

As parties weaken, our attachment to them as well is weakened. More and more of us claim no party. We have grown more independent. Parties have become less relevant. Political parties, therefore, have had to adapt to these new political realities. Their influence over the nomination process has changed. Their structure has changed. They reflect more and more popular influence. Even so, American democracy is unthinkable without political parties. Political parties still endorse and nominate candidates. This legitimizes candidates. Political parties can raise vast sums of money to support candidates. Political parties can mobilize campaign volunteers from state to state. Party messaging educates us. But perhaps most importantly, partisan identification still provides the single greatest clue as to who will get our vote. Political parties may have grown weaker, but they will always play a critical role both in our government and in our politics.



HERBER WEIRA
NOVEMBER 2, 1931