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1

The Problem of Hollow Parties

MAY 19, 1981: Richard Richards, chair of the Republican National Committee (RNC), sat alone at a table. It was a testy breakfast at the Capitol Hill Club. A who's who from the emergent New Right, whose myriad groups stood apart from the formal party, all avoided Richards: Terry Dolan of the National Conservative Political Action Committee, Paul Weyrich of the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, direct-mail impresario Richard Viguerie, Phyllis Schlafly of Eagle Forum and STOP ERA, Reed Larson of the National Right to Work Committee, Ed McAteer of Religious Roundtable, Tom Ellis of Jesse Helms's Congressional Club, and billionaire oilman and John Birch Society member Bunker Hunt. Richards, a conservative but tradition-minded political operative from Utah, had complained about the independent groups making mischief where the party did not want them. Their lavish advertising campaigns and repeated interventions in primaries usurped the traditional roles of the political party. The New Rightists were, he told them, like "loose cannonballs on the deck of a ship."[1]

Nonsense, responded John Lofton, editor of the Viguerie-owned *Conservative Digest*. If he attacked those fighting hardest for Ronald Reagan and his tax cuts, it was Richards himself who was the loose cannonball. The contretemps soon blew over, and no future formal party leader would follow Richards's example and again take independent groups to task. But it was a sign of the transformation sweeping American party

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politics, as the Right's loose cannonballs eventually came to dominate and define the Grand Old Party.

February 3, 2020: With all eyes on Iowa, the state Democratic Party offered up a kaleidoscope of party dysfunction. Following rules set down by the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the state's presidential nominating caucuses that year were set to be the most transparent on record. Iowans would gather in school gyms and cafeterias to debate their choices for a nominee, ascertain which candidates had met viability thresholds to elect county convention delegates, and reallocate supporters of candidates below the threshold. Precinct chairs would then use a smartphone app to submit three vote tallies: the number of supporters for each candidate both before and after reallocation, and, by a formula, the number of state delegate equivalents. That, at least, was the plan.

Then came reality. The cumbersome app, developed by a secretive start-up poetically named Shadow Inc., had not been properly debugged after last-minute modifications ordered by the DNC, and it soon broke down. Chairs who wanted to call the Iowa Democratic Party hotline to report results, as they had in caucuses past, failed to get through. Faced with catastrophe, the state party vanished, reporting no results until late the following afternoon, long after the candidates had departed for New Hampshire.[2]

Unable to implement the DNC's rules, the Iowa Democratic Party had failed to perform the basic task of election management. Enervation in the state party, of a piece with atrophied state and local party organizations throughout the country, had taken its toll. Meanwhile, para-organizations like Shadow that had emerged in the void left by formal parties faced distinct incentives and little accountability for grifting and incompetence. And in the days that followed the caucuses, the incompetence ironically fueled conspiracy theories that reached far beyond Iowa. The DNC, the theories alleged, was actually working all *too* competently to manipulate the process and deny the people's voice. Underneath all the recriminations was the caucus process itself, an artifact of the Democrats' 1970s-era party reforms. Their aim had been to

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take control from the bosses and give parties a new civic vitality. Inside the school gyms came signs of that civic vitality. But the breakdown that followed said something different.

The Richards breakfast and the Iowa debacle, four decades apart, tell two sides of the same story. Contemporary American parties are hollow parties. Hard shells, marked with the scars of interparty electoral conflict, cover disordered cores, devoid of concerted action and positive loyalties. Organizationally top-heavy and poorly rooted, the parties are dominated by satellite groups and command little respect in the eyes of voters and activists alike. Nobody, whether in the formal parties themselves or in the proliferating groups that swirl around them, has effectively brought political elites and the mass public together in positive common purpose.

Hollowness matters because parties matter. When vigorous and civically rooted parties link the governed with their government while schooling citizens in the unending give-and-take of political engagement, they give legitimacy to democratic rule. They bring blocs of voters together under a common banner, negotiating priorities among competing interests to construct agendas that resonate in the electorate. They render politics into ordered conflict, playing by the electoral rules of the game and gatekeeping against forces that might undermine such shared commitments. In each of these roles, competing parties at their best serve as stewards of democratic alternatives. When they falter, so does the political system.

Party hollowness has developed alongside polarization in linked but distinct processes. Paraparty groups like those that gave Dick Richards headaches in 1981 proved key instigators in both developments, as ideological warriors seeking simultaneously to tear down the power and prerogatives of the Republican Party and to make mercenary use of that very party. The two major parties now manifest hollowness asymmetrically, reflecting different pathologies in their approach to power—put bluntly, Democratic ineffectuality on one hand and Republican extremism on the other.

If ours are hollow parties, what might un-hollow parties look like? This book looks to the past for our yardstick. The long history of American

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party politics reveals no golden age but rather disparate fragments of a more vital organized politics to take to heart. Through the nineteenth century, parties rooted themselves deeply in everyday civic life. One of those parties stands out. Republicans in the party's first decades, from the 1850s through Reconstruction, pushed forward a party vision at its loftiest as they fought to save the Union and redeem the promise of American freedom. A century later, issue-oriented Democratic reformers mobilized partisan action for New Deal liberalism and civil rights. In those same years, cadres of practical-minded Republicans embodied a conservatism resistant to extremes and grounded in nuts-and-bolts organization. The past, in short, provides no model party to recover but offers suggestive models aplenty of American parties that succeeded where hollow parties fall short.

The coming chapters trace the path, stretching back to the Founding in the eighteenth century and running all the way forward, that has brought American political parties to their present state. But before our historical narrative begins in earnest, this chapter frames the problem of hollow parties and our approach to explaining it. We first define party hollowness and sketch its emergence since the 1970s. We then outline our wide-angle view of party. Finally, we end the chapter with a discussion of our perspective as scholars and as citizens in a troubled democracy.

Party Hollowness

Worry pervades the American political scene. The watchwords blaring from covers in bookstores and newsstands all tend toward doom: "dysfunction," "division," even "crisis" and "democratic backsliding." Yet political parties' specific contributions to our present discontents remain a subject of strikingly little consensus or clarity. Commentators peg parties alternatively as culprits in or casualties of toxic political conflict.[3] But whether as villains or victims, parties are nowhere accounted for as collective actors whose trajectories require explanation in their own right. Instead, they occupy a paradoxical status in descriptions of the polarized country's predicament: seemingly everywhere and

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nowhere, overbearing and enfeebled, all at once. This book untangles that paradox.

Party teams in both government and the mass public now define the politics of a polarized era, whose signal feature is dislike of political opponents that often rises to anger.[4] And as measured in sheer activity, from electioneering to advocacy to outreach, the actors in and around the parties *do* plenty—and, at least within circumscribed realms, have significant impact in doing it. But for all that activity, political parties neither set the terms for nor control the passions of our unruly politics.

Hollowness, we argue, is the condition that makes sense of these contradictory tendencies. Hollow parties are parties that, for all their array of activities, demonstrate fundamental incapacities in organizing democracy. This distinctive combination of *activity* and *incapacity* manifests itself across multiple dimensions. As a civic presence in an era of nationalized politics,[5] hollow parties are unrooted in communities and unfelt in ordinary people's day-to-day lives. Organizationally, they tilt toward national entities at the expense of state and local ones. Swarming networks of unattached paraparty groups, without popular accountability, overshadow formal party organizations at all levels. Finally, hollow parties lack legitimacy. The mass public and engaged political actors alike share neither positive loyalty to their allied party nor deference to the preferences of its leaders.

Today's parties are distinctive for the presence of so many figures entwined with and buzzing around but not organizationally part of formal party organizations themselves. We give this disorderly assortment surrounding each party a collective term that captures its amorphous and undirected quality: the party blob.[6] Fueled by the dual explosions of Second Gilded Age wealth and small-dollar online fundraising, the two party blobs now overshadow the formal parties. For many of these paraparty organizations, neither electoral success nor policy achievements serve as the front-and-center goal or metric of success and accountability. That leaves the core tasks of a political party—to corral allies and build electoral coalitions sufficient to take control of government and implement an agenda—paradoxically underserved. With outside groups

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dominating political life, the formal parties serve as punching bags for ideological activists and candidate operations more than as conscious stewards of a political enterprise.

The party blobs contain multitudes: single- and multi-issue ideological groups, many of them with paper members or no members at all; media figures, from talk-show hosts to online personalities, guided by profit and celebrity at least as much as by substantive or electoral goals; think tank policy wonks generating party programs by proxy; traditional Political Action Committees (PACs), run by interest groups and politicians, trading favors with their colleagues; nominally uncoordinated Super PACs and dark-money 501(c)s; billionaire megadonors with varied and often idiosyncratic agendas; and an ever-changing array of consultancies peddling technical services in electioneering, digital politics, and political finance in hopes of grabbing a share of all the money sloshing through the system. The defining feature of the party blob is precisely this amorphousness—a jumble of principals and incentives that contradict scholarly depictions of "party networks" seamlessly coordinating in the pursuit of shared goals.[7]

With the parties' incapacity to power purposive action and the party blobs' ascendance have come diminished expectations. Raise the bar for parties, and contemporary limits come into sharper relief. Back in 1987, the political scientist Kay Lawson took prescient note of what had already been lost: "The weaknesses of the parties in articulating and aggregating interests, recruiting and nominating their own candidates, and devising programs for which such candidates can in fact be held accountable are regarded as no longer worth mentioning: such functions are no longer what parties are all about."[8] Parties now find themselves hobbled in pursuit of all of the tasks on Lawson's list. As real political actors with particular claims and commitments—as opposed to mere abstract markers of identity—parties neither engender trust and loyalty from nor provide a source of meaning and belonging to most Americans. And the problem feeds on itself: the activity and incapacity that together characterize hollow parties render them particularly unsuited for conscious public conversation about parties and their place in public life.

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How Hollowness Happened

We date the emergence of a hollow-party era to the demise of what scholars call the "New Deal order" by the late 1970s.[9] The historical accounts in ensuing chapters emphasize just how much was up for grabs, and how different party politics might have been, had the struggle come out differently during the critical juncture of the 1970s. Alternative political worlds for the parties, still possible at the eve of this "pivotal decade," became occluded in its wake.[10]

Two core processes worked in tandem to reshape American politics beginning in the 1970s: neoliberalism (to use an elusive but necessary organizing concept) and party polarization.[11] The postwar political economy had tied together steady growth, fixed exchange rates, active economic management focused on stimulating demand, and strong unions. Thanks to blows struck from both within and without, the arrangements that powered the New Deal order began to unravel rapidly in the late 1970s.[12] With time, as the neoliberal turn worked profound changes at all levels of party politics, the reentry of the South into two-party competition finally began to sort Democrats and Republicans into polarized teams. Even as this sorting drove a resurgence of partisan organizing and activism, however, the brittle and unrooted parties found they could not contain the conflictual politics that ensued.

New approaches to influencing policy and financing elections boxed in the parties just when they most needed to assert stewardship over their own destinies. The post-1970 "advocacy explosion" in Washington swelled the ranks of interest groups, think tanks, and lobbying shops.[13] A new system of campaign finance arose, suffused with cash but distinctly unhelpful for parties' efforts to shape and pursue agendas in power. The combination of the 1974 amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act and the Supreme Court's decision two years later in *Buckley v. Valeo* constrained party fundraising while doing nothing to stem the rising costs of campaigns. A rising class of professional operatives plied their trade, typically inside the network of a single party, for some mix of candidates, party committees, PACs, and, as time went on, independent-expenditure groups.[14]

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Initially, the formal parties' responses to this new environment seemed to revitalize them. The national party committees, with Republicans in the lead, ramped up funding, expanded staff, and reinvested national dollars into campaign support. With a label that suggests its very limits, scholars termed the model that emerged from these developments the "service party": parties would work primarily to provide campaign resources to, and broker interest-group support for, the candidate operations that now dominated electoral politics.[15] Even within those strictures, however, the formal parties' relative clout waned as outside groups, funded by both megadonors and armies of small-dollar givers, eventually overwhelmed traditional channels of political finance. In the wake of the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, a tangled and often hard-to-trace multiplicity of pass-throughs, Super PACs, and dark money outfits have all showered money on campaigns and consultants. Candidate campaigns and outside groups together spent three times as much as national party organizations in 2020.[16] The money glut has only deepened the problems of party management that so characterize the era of hollowness.[17]

These changes have manifested in starkly different ways across the two parties. The Democrats' battered labor-liberal alliance, long the great champion of program and discipline in party politics, found itself adrift in the 1970s, while party actors began to regroup along different lines. Starting in the 1980s, they built up the national party's financial might and embraced paraparty lobbies and hangers-on but struggled to define an underlying party purpose. Some heralded a postindustrial future, while others unapologetically filled the party's coffers in the name of organizational revival. The coalitional and financial consequences continued to hold sway even as the party lurched haltingly leftward in the new century. On the other side, the political tendency that we term the Long New Right decisively captured the Republican Party during the same years in the 1970s. The right-wing brokers of the Long New Right treated parties as "no more than instruments" in a struggle for power.[18] Their triumph broke through the fetters that had

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long restrained political action. Unshackled, the Republican Party became a vehicle to fight its political enemies on any institutional ground it could find.

At the GOP's core was a plutocratic-populist bargain: an electoral politics of resentment would serve as handmaiden to a regressive policy agenda.[19] Politics-as-culture-war in turn fueled the growth of a media-advocacy complex that has at various times acted as principal rather than agent—and has at all times undermined party actors' ability to police boundaries against extremism. The Republican Party that emerged in its wake, desirous of power however it can be gotten, has retreated from the commitments that make parties central pillars of small-d democratic and small-r republican politics.[20] In short, since the seventies, a hollowed-out Democratic Party has been rendered listless by conflicting actors and a hollowed-out Republican Party pulled to radicalism by committed actors.

By rooting party hollowness's genesis in the political-economic developments of the 1970s and emphasizing the decisive role of the right in bringing it about, we treat as secondary what other scholars often depict as pivotal: namely, the end of traditional party organizations and the demise of old intraparty arrangements beginning a decade earlier in the 1960s. Following the disastrous 1968 convention, the Democrats' Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, commonly known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission, unintentionally prompted the spread of state primaries to select presidential convention delegates. As political scientists have long noted, this shift undermined state and local party organizations that in the pre-reform system had benefited from control over their delegates.[21] It also left Democrats and Republicans rhetorically and politically ill-equipped to justify any special prerogatives for party actors in internal decision-making.

Critically, however, the McGovern-Fraser reformers' unrealized vision of open, activist-driven parties still operated within a venerable paradigm, ultimately tracing back to the rise of mass parties, which treated party forms as important and party contestation as a special category of conflict in the political system. This is precisely the paradigm

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from which the Long New Right made such a decisive break. Imagine a past that featured McGovern-Fraser but not the Long New Right. Such a scenario would have led to vastly different outcomes in later twentieth-century politics and beyond, not merely different rules for nomination. The counterfactual exercise helps to clarify the central point: in our actual past, hollow parties emerged from the world that the Long New Right made.

As our diagnosis looks rightward, its attention to the Republican Party gives our work particular urgency. The Trump era brought a torrent of scholarship on democratic crisis in America. One line of analysis emphasizes how polarized parties and fragmented Madisonian institutions together produce dysfunction and escalatory hardball.[22] Another looks to political behavior in the electorate and the toxic force of affective partisanship.[23] Still another has turned to America's troubled past for precedents and origin stories.[24] These inquiries inform ours, but none of them directly explain the parties' present incapacities. Indeed, even as many of the scholarly doomsayers have pointed the finger at the Republican Party, they have said less about exactly how the party took its present course.[25] By rooting present-day democratic discontents inside the history of American party politics, this book aims to meet that challenge. Hollow parties do not merely enfeeble governance, they endanger democracy.

Developments roiling American democracy resonate deeply with patterns abroad.[26] "Parties are failing," wrote the late Peter Mair, his eyes on western Europe, "because the zone of engagement—the traditional world of party democracy where citizens interacted with and felt a sense of attachment to their political leaders—is being evacuated."[27] In the distinct American institutional environment with a pure party duopoly, however, they take on a different cast.[28] Like other center-left parties in the rich democracies, Democrats have become increasingly dependent on votes from the college-educated middle class.[29] But polarized two-party politics renders Democratic hollowness distinct, as neither a continued march to the center nor inexorable electoral decline defines the party. For its part, like center-right parties elsewhere, the GOP has long mixed economic and noneconomic appeals. Now, its dominant figure

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echoes the rhetoric of right populists the world over, who stress the direct connection between leader and people.[30] In parallel with his counterparts abroad, Trump moved rightward on cultural and nationalist issues during the 2016 campaign, while sounding notes of a more welfare-chauvinist bent on economic issues, at least relative to Republican orthodoxy. But the uniquely polarized strategic environment in which Trump operated as president and party leader curbed those economic deviations.[31] The result has been a "plutopopulism" distinctive among global patterns, bringing together inside a single party enthusiasm to slash regulations and taxes, personalistic belief in a leader able to conjure up a people, and, above all, themes of cultural and ethnonational grievance.[32]

Party Projects

Even as we root the proximate rise of party hollowness in the 1970s, we delve much further back than that. When Americans argue about parties, they package and repackage ideas, practices, and institutional orientations that stretch back to the dawn of mass politics.[33] Parties have projects to wield state power on behalf of particular actors. Yet across history, very different social actors have sought to use parties for very different ends. Thus, we recognize in parties what Rogers Smith recognized in American political culture: no one true, transhistorical essence but rather a "complex pattern of apparently inconsistent combinations of . . . traditions."[34]

As a matter of definition, we follow E. E. Schattschneider: "A political party is an organized attempt to get control of the government."[35] Though many actors want influence in politics, only political parties formally contest elections whose winners then hold office.[36] But this essential truth explains only so much. The organizations that control parties' names and ballot access make up "the party" only in the most legalistic sense. What partisan actors "want" after taking their oaths has varied across American history. Some have empowered loyal partisans or grassroots activists, others have happily let the bosses rule, and still

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others have looked to a transformative leader. And so our approach rejects highly stylized theories of party.[37]

Cast a gaze across American history and consider the sheer scope of projects that collective political actors have pursued. The Jacksonians wanted spoils and a white man's republic. Progressives wanted energetic and capable administration. Postwar programmatic liberals wanted to fulfill the promise of the New Deal. The republic's greatest triumph—the destruction of slavery and building of a new, more equal country in the Civil War and Reconstruction—was quintessentially a party project of the Republicans. And with all these different projects have come varying organizational forms for partisans to realize their goals. More than enacting and administering policies or programs alone, parties design and attempt to realize projects that shape the material and symbolic distribution of "society's goodies."[38] They steer resources and prestige to favored claimants and rewrite the rules of the game to favor those claimants in future battles. Those regime questions of winners and losers are the real stakes in politics.[39]

Table 1.1 lists the distinct party formations that we explore, in greater or lesser detail, through the chapters to come, including the years when they were most significant in politics as well as two names of illustrative figures. Note that parties, even electorally successful ones, have not always made distinctive claims about the role and function of party politics. The Republican Party between the Gilded Age organizations and the Long New Right, electorally successful until Herbert Hoover and struggling thereafter, is a conspicuous case in point.[40]

As we follow the action across American political history, we examine party actors in differently constituted units, whether an entire major party (or the bulk of it), a minor party, or a party faction.[41] Party politics is politics done collectively, as individuals come together (or not) under a common banner. And so ours are all collective portraits.[42] Even as the depth of our treatments varies, these actors have all had projects for power that offered answers—however partial or inconsistent—to essential questions about the role and structure of the political party.[43] For those interested in looking under the hood at the building blocks of our framework, see appendix 1.

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TABLE 1.1. Collective Party Actors

	Years	Emblematic figures
Jacksonians	1828–1854	Martin Van Buren, Andrew Jackson
Whigs	1840–1854	John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay
Free Labor Republicans	1854–1877	Abraham Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens
Gilded Age Organizations	1877–1896	James Blaine, George Washington Plunkitt
Mugwumps	1872–1900	E. L. Godkin, Henry Adams
Populists	1874–1896	Charles Macune, Ignatius Donnelly
Socialist Party	1901–1919	Eugene Debs, Victor Berger
Progressives	1900–1916	Robert M. La Follette, Herbert Croly
Midcentury Pragmatists	1932–1968	Jim Farley, Richard J. Daley
Programmatic Liberals	1948–1968	Hubert Humphrey, Joseph L. Rauh Jr.
McGovern-Fraser	1968–1972	Donald Fraser, Anne Wexler
Long New Right	1952–1994	Jesse Helms, Paul Weyrich
Left Dissidents	2011–present	Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Dem Institutionalists	1981–present	Nancy Pelosi, Joe Biden
Neoliberal Centrists	2001–present	Michael Bloomberg, Michael Porter
Reaganite GOP	1981–present	Mitch McConnell, Karl Rove
Right Populists	1992–present	Donald Trump, Pat Buchanan

Party Strands

Party actors combine and recombine approaches that recur and endure over time. Six ideal types, which we term "party strands," comprise the political traditions drawn from and in turn forged by successive party projects.[44] Each strand expresses distinct views of the role and function of the political party. Figure 1.1 shows our mapping of how party projects have cohered into what we term the accommodationist, anti-party, pro-capital, policy-reform, radical, and populist strands.

To connect our jargon: projects emerge at particular historical junctures, and strands convey their recurrent features. The most important party projects in American political history have no single manifestation in contemporary politics. Instead, divergent pieces of their legacies refract across the landscape. The free labor Republicans served as a vehicle of northern industry (pro-capital) and as a force that overthrew an

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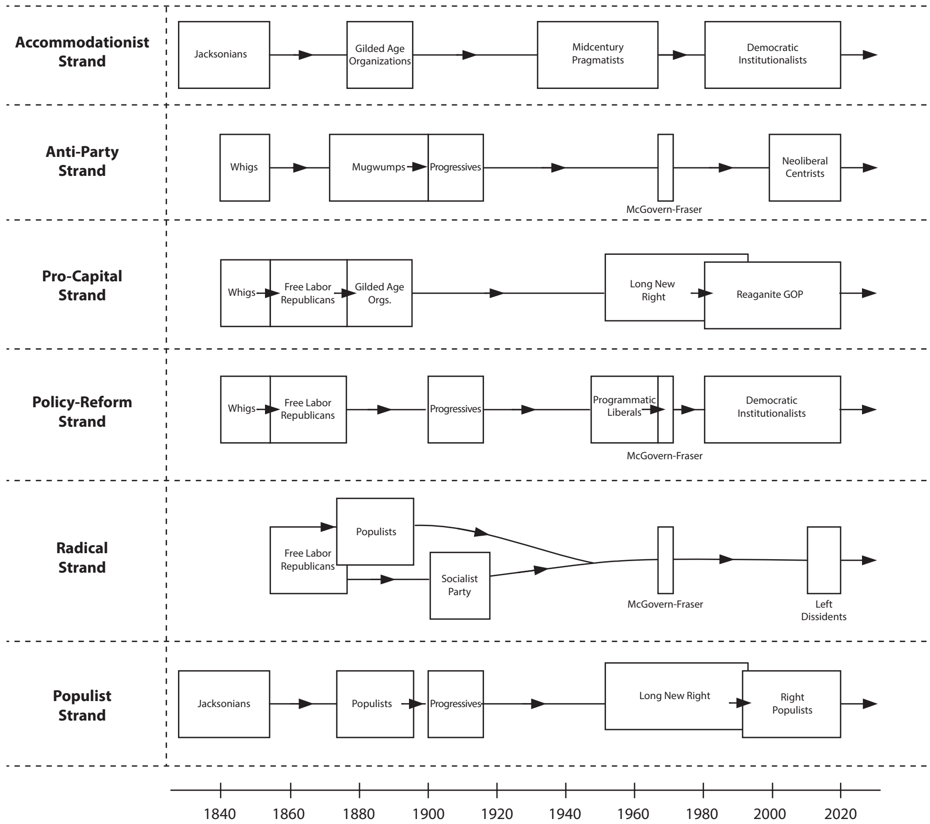

FIGURE 1.1. Strands in American Party Politics

entire economic order in the name of human freedom (radical). By the same token, the party-breaking Progressives have bequeathed a belief in the efficacy of technocratic government to solve public problems (policy-reform), a powerful executive that encourages adherents to look to the leader for political salvation (populist), and a plebiscitary tendency that liquidates party prerogatives (anti-party). A brief description of each strand helps to situate these pillars of our analysis.

Accommodationist strand: In the accommodationist strand, the art of government comes in the work of politics—and politics is a game of addition, not subtraction.[45] The goal, for ward heelers and party bosses alike, is to organize blocs of voters who can then divvy up the spoils of

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victory.[46] This is a politics not of inexorable conflict over first principles or of a search for a unitary public interest but of relentless dealmaking and jawboning, of favor traded for favor, of small courtesies remembered. Money for the party coffers can come from whatever source will pony up, with the expectation that contributions will not go unrewarded. Policy, then, is the by-product, not the driver, of accommodationist politics. Asked one evening in the early 1970s, late in the reign of Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley's political machine, about whether to give a donation to the Illinois Right to Life Committee, the legendary 25th Ward Democratic committeeman Vito Marzullo declined: "I don't want to get into any of those controversies. People for it and people against it."[47]

With group jostling against group, each with its own set of loyalties and enmities, the task of mediating among constituencies and balancing across claimants takes its own specialized skill. As accommodationists see it, the game ought to be played by political professionals who have learned on the job and risen through the ranks—not by dilettantes, amateurs, or theoreticians. Politics is its own sphere, organized by those who have walked the precinct and learned the rules. Though no form ever facilitated the accommodationist worldview so well as the regular party organization, the ethos has clung on even after the classic machines' eclipse.

Anti-party strand: For adherents to the anti-party strand, the partial commitments of party, and the low arts of party politicians, divide society and threaten the common good.[48] Such a view marks out the edges, as a political vision, of a skepticism toward political parties that runs deep in the American vein. Anti-partisanship cast a lengthy shadow over American political practice. Presidential candidates long stayed off the stump, leaving the campaign to party organizations; as late as 1932, when Franklin Roosevelt flew from Albany to Chicago to accept the Democratic nomination in person, it turned heads.[49]

The anti-party strand's adherents have shifted their targets of condemnation, from the very fact of party organization itself in the Early Republic to the mercenary corruption of Gilded Age machines to the extremist straitjackets and litmus tests of our polarized age. The Progressive Era marked an important turning point. In the anti-party tradition

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prior to the twentieth century, classical virtue served as liberty's necessary protector, and conniving majorities an omnipresent danger. After the Progressives, anti-party rhetoric would come to praise ordinary voters whose passions had formerly provoked fear. In the process, the strand's beau ideal shifted from the classically educated statesman to the market-oriented technocrat. Nevertheless, anti-party actors' core belief in enlightened leadership, and their apprehension about the baleful effects of party scheming, still endure. When parties take the patchwork quilt of society and make it the stuff of politics, the anti-party strand sees two conjoined perils—both an attack on individual conscience and a threat to social order.

Pro-capital strand: The pro-capital strand applies the logic of business to party politics. It offers only a thin conception of party. In contrast to accommodationism, politics for this strand is not an autonomous sphere of human life but simply another arena for capital to deploy in search of reward. When its exponents speak directly, their claims recast arguments for business's own pecuniary interests in terms of the common good.[50] But the tactical issues of party politics are epiphenomenal to the larger challenge: using the political system to secure advantage against those who seek to curb the power and influence of economic elites. Parties, thus, are instruments to be used or discarded as the situation requires. Formal parties themselves loomed larger in the Gilded Age than in the hollowed politics of recent decades. Substantive priorities come first.

The pro-capital strand emerges in the entente between business and right parties.[51] Its power waxes during the periods when political brokers can successfully bring together business sectors with strata that typically keep their distance—magnates and shopkeepers, financiers and industrialists—and then extend their reach into party politics.[52] If this happens, business moves beyond a search for stability and uses party as the lever to remake the state, while parties reach beyond the inevitable search for campaign funding to reshape themselves in business's service. In turn, the crucial question for the pro-capital strand comes in its willingness or unwillingness to make alliances, tacit or explicit, with exclusionary politics often represented by the populist strand.

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Policy-reform strand: For the policy-reform strand, parties solve public problems. Diverse actors come together to overcome the barriers of a divided political system and achieve big things. The hybrid name reflects a dual emphasis, bringing together issues and good government. Parties serve as instruments to sweep away accumulated privilege and patronage and supplant them with well-crafted programs. Active and robust parties build an active and robust state. The policy-reform strand, which flourished among northern Democrats during the postwar heyday of the New Deal order, envisions a cross-class project powering a cohesive substantive agenda.

This strand offers a fervent brief for a particular, bounded view of parties' possibilities, rather than a defense of parties come what may. Reflecting the contradictory qualities in American liberalism, it takes from and builds on other views. It critiques accommodationism as too small, too myopic, in its workaday concerns, and generally too corrupt. It sees the anti-party strand as too aloof and too tethered to private solutions. Yet the politicians, activists, and intellectuals whose writings and actions make up the policy-reform strand owe a substantial debt to both of those traditions. From the accommodationists, they take a bedrock appreciation for parties themselves, as they bring interests and constituencies together under a common banner. From the anti-party strand, they take a suspicion of the boss and a commitment to expertise. And even as they share with the radical strand a desire to shake things up, they accept and work inside the system's limits.

Radical strand: For the radical strand, the political party serves as a lever to build an egalitarian society. Radicals want vast social transformation, and parties serve as a means to achieve that purpose. What sets the radicals apart is the sheer scale of their ambitions and the concomitant challenges they face when confronted with the daunting rules of the American electoral game.[53] Repeatedly, radicals searching for an electoral majority have foundered on different versions of the same problem: whatever their chosen strategy, they fail to bring together broad constituencies that bridge ethnic, racial, and religious divides to vanquish the powers of the existing social order.

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Because the frustrations of electoralism feed on each other, exponents of radical party politics fight a two-front war. When radicals fail to deliver systemic change from a beachhead of concentrated support—a mayor here, a member of Congress there—they strengthen the arguments of both maximalists who want to make change through direct action rather than electoral politics, and pragmatists who want to focus on building majorities inside the system.[54] The radical party strand, then, is simultaneously an argument for the thoroughgoing reconstruction of state and society and an argument for party politics as the preeminent route to social change. In turn, the differences that distinguish the policy-reform and radical strands are of both degree and kind. The radical strand sets its sights on power—who wields it across society, and in whose interest—rather than on the mechanics of party or state action. So, too, the radical strand places greater emphasis on organizing oppressed groups themselves.[55]

Populist strand: Party politics, for the populist strand, cleaves the polity into "us" and "them," with only "us" as authentic members of the political community.[56] As the populist strand wields the language of republican liberty for those who fit inside its bounds, politics becomes a battle between "the people," invested with the requisites of civic membership, and everyone else, who are not.[57] In comparison with the other strands, the populist strand appears less as a cohesive approach to party politics than as a set of recurring tendencies and resonances. It roots itself less in the variegated terrain of civil society, as parties seek to assemble coalitions and mediate between elites and masses, than in the fundamental distinction between allies and enemies and the direct connection between leader and people.[58]

The populist strand has developed in combination with, and helps to shine an unforgiving light on, trends that cross the political landscape. It shares with the anti-party strand the same distaste for the connivances of the small party, but it celebrates the very transformative leader that the anti-party strand long feared as a demagogue who can prey on the mob. With its core support from members of the petty bourgeoisie, it often meshes with the pro-capital strand to make common cause against adversaries on the left. Finally, like the radical

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strand, it claims to speak on behalf of the plain people against malign elites who manipulate them.[59] But the records of the populist and radical strands diverge wildly when it comes to race—and the centrality of race to the American experience puts their worldviews in diametric opposition.

All six of these strands shine light on different dilemmas in party politics. The accommodationist strand foregrounds the omnipresent challenge of building coalitions. The policy-reform strand lingers on the connection between parties' appeals and the substantive workings of government. The pro-capital and radical strands point to ineluctable conflict rooted in political economy. And the anti-party and populist strands both cue questions about party and statesmanship.

One might also identify a reactionary lineage that connects ideas and practices across political eras. But such a politics—tethered to John C. Calhoun's doctrine of concurrent majority, overlapping at times with the populist strand, and rooted in the South—typically took the form not of us-versus-them party battles but of a flight from party altogether. Prior to the Long New Right's rise, southerners' commitment to regional power as they conducted what V. O. Key termed "the 'foreign relations' of the South with the rest of the nation" was less *anti*-party than *a*-party.[60] This explains why, from the Civil War era until the later twentieth century, ours is largely a northern saga.[61]

The critical 1970s link the historical trajectory of party strands to the emergent story of hollowness. Long-teetering traditional political organizations finally collapsed just as crises battered the New Deal political economy. Of these two linked developments, the latter is key. As the coming chapters argue repeatedly, a different balance of class power in a post–New Deal world would have led to different manifestations of party politics. Though the machines' hour had passed, if social forces had aligned differently, then accommodationism might have had fuel to sustain itself, both in a pragmatic and civically rooted politics of the center-right and in an organizationally dense politics of the center-left. The policy-reform strand would have been more willing to get its hands dirty in the political trenches rather than relying on expertise. And the pro-capital and populist strands that have strained the system

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to the breaking point would have faced far stronger headwinds pushing against their projects.

Instead, each strand now manifests its incapacities in its own way, as the more robustly party-supporting sides of each approach have given way to hollowing tendencies. Adherents of the accommodationist strand have found no shortage of deals to be struck and palms to be greased, but the open celebration of party as such that had long distinguished this tradition has fallen silent. The anti-party strand runs deep in public consciousness, but with no strong foil against which to make its distinctive claims, its voice has retreated to the soggy ground of neoliberal technocracy. By the same token, times have been good for American business, with myriad points of entry for influence into the political system. But the corporate statesmanship that brings forth the best in the pro-capital strand has been in shorter supply. As the vision of programmatic party renewal faded, proponents of the policy-reform strand have instead searched for political salvation via good policy alone. Actors toiling at the leftward margins within the radical strand have mounted a surprising return as factional battlers in the Democratic fold—but with a vision of party that remains ambivalent. And, perhaps most important of all, the populist strand has gained a new potency—in culture-war flash fires, in the prospect of strong-man demagoguery, and in an anti-system politics that looks to blood-and-soil nationalism.

Our Approach

Readers should get from this book a new way of thinking about present-day political problems—our concept of party hollowness—and a new way of thinking about how parties have shaped and been shaped by history—our framework of party strands. But understanding what these ideas mean in practice requires digging into the actual particulars of party politics. And so the bulk of the pages in this book are devoted to a new historical narrative of American politics, one told through its parties.

We seek to understand parties as party actors have seen them. At the core of this book is close, sustained engagement with the words and actions of elite political figures grappling with the challenges of their

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historical experiences. We scour diverse evidence, piecing together our account from a mixture of periodicals, monographs, and, wherever possible, archives. At the same time, we bring divergent party projects together in a common framework.

Our goal is a kind of arbitrage, both opening up the study of American parties to broader perspectives and bringing party to bear on conversations where it has been too often absent. We treat the back-and-forth between social forces and political change as the very heart of party politics. This attention to social structure departs somewhat from the emphasis on formal and informal organization dominant in political science. If, in some sense, ours is an old-fashioned work, it is also one that looks far beyond the confines of the convention hall.

On the one side, we attend to parties' particular stamp on social change.[62] We stress the ways that nuts-and-bolts party maneuvering affects big transformations, from patronage in the Civil War–era Republican Party to Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley's calculations when the Democratic National Convention met in his city in 1968. In contrast to much recent work in political history that dwells on the social and political constellations surrounding parties, we bring the parties back in, put them center stage, and shine the klieg lights on them. In particular, we push forward a growing line of scholarship on the links between social movements and political parties by emphasizing dynamics inside the parties themselves.[63]

On the other side, we see parties as essential players on a larger terrain of struggle, embedded in social systems shaped by class, race, gender, and nationality.[64] Any interpretation of American party conflict must confront those systems foursquare, rather than treating them as background to party machinations. The Jacksonian Democratic Party, for instance, created the spoils system—and the Trail of Tears. Yet a book about political parties such as this one necessarily focuses on those included in or on the edges of formal politics, rather than seeking out the political expression of those excluded. And so, especially in earlier chapters, this story is predominantly male and white.

We work inside three intellectual traditions: scholarship on American political parties, on American political development (APD), and

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on American political history. From scholars of party, we take our core focus on what parties have done and how they have done it; from scholars of APD, we take our multivalent approach to political development; and from historians, we take our concern to understand party actors in the full context of their lives and times. For an extended discussion of how we build on, and also critique, the scholarship in each of these traditions, see appendix 2.

Where We Stand

Part of being fair means being open about where we come from. We write about American political parties because we care about them. We are partisans of parties. Democracy, we believe, is not only "unthinkable save in terms of the parties" but best served by being largely organized and enacted *by* those parties.[65] Nevertheless, our vision for civic reinvention transcends any by-the-numbers checklist. Party forms have always varied along with party projects. As we explore possibilities taken and forgone, we seek not to retreat into bygone glories but to open up new vistas.

We are proud and loyal, albeit often-disillusioned, capital-*D* Democrats. Our politics are broadly left-liberal. Since the New Deal, the Democratic Party's finest moments, in our judgment, have come when it forthrightly stood up for principles and advanced a universalistic and solidaristic politics. While many American liberals look to technocratic solutions, claims of a unitary public interest often deny the realities of social conflict. As for the radical tradition, it too often fails to face head-on the problem of building majority coalitions in the American electoral system. At a critical hour, we write to put contemporary concerns in historical context.

Coming Attractions

Proceeding largely chronologically, the pages that follow flesh out these themes. Chapter 2 explores the uneven rise of party politics emerging out of the fluid factionalism of the Early Republic. In the 1830s, Jacksonian

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Democrats brought the mass party to fruition. Controlled by men devoted to the practice of politics and desirous of the fruits of office, the Jacksonian project embodied the core ethos of the accommodationist strand. In turn, their Whig opponents ambivalently combined an abiding anti-partyism celebrating moral virtue with frenzied campaigning at election time.

Chapter 3 traces the Republican Party from its founding in 1854 until the Compromise of 1877. In form, the party innovated little. Nevertheless, as it fought the Civil War, freed the slaves, and remade the Constitution, free labor Republicanism pursued a transformative party project without peer, one that deserves pride of place in any reckoning with the possibilities of party in the United States.

Chapter 4 delineates the wide variety of party responses to industrialism during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. With Democratic and Republican organizations at full flower, Mugwumps, Populists, and Socialists all sought alternatives. In their stead, the Progressives recast old anti-party sentiment in a newly plebiscitarian light, aiming to strip away the middlemen and recenter politics on the unmediated relationship between leader and citizen.

Chapter 5 examines three visions of party that emerged amid the breakthroughs and contradictions of the New Deal order. Midcentury pragmatists, most prominent in the cities still under machine rule, held fast to the accommodationist politics of wheedling and dealmaking. Programmatic liberals—their factional opponents across the North—epitomized the policy-reform strand's issue-oriented politics. Finally, the framers of McGovern-Fraser envisioned active parties working alongside social movements, only to find that continual vigilance against capture by entrenched interests turned procedural reform into an end in itself.

The Long New Right is the subject of chapter 6, which traces conservatives' encounter with party from the 1950s to the 1990s. Generations of conservatives, exploiting grievance and mobilizing status resentments, broke free from the strictures of the old party politics. Even as the relevant issues and organizations shifted over the years, the Long New Right's commitment to conflict and the ruthless instrumentalism toward institutions remained constants. If readers want evidence that

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the right broke American party politics, this chapter is where they should turn.

Chapter 7 looks at the Democrats in the decades since Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1981. Its twin themes are polarization and neoliberalism, and its central story is of a party whose project remained continually out of reach. Even as ideological sorting of the party system removed old-line conservatives from its ranks, an increasingly middle-class party struggled to bring its diverse constituencies and claimants together, or to connect political strategy with the levers of public policy.

Chapter 8 follows the Republican Party from Newt Gingrich to Donald Trump. It portrays a party confident in its use of state power to reward friends and punish enemies—but not to solve public problems. In contrast to portrayals of the GOP that emphasize either its allegedly brutal effectiveness or its ruthless efficiency, our depiction shows a party beset by forces it cannot control and dangerously incapable of policing itself *or* governing the country.

Chapter 9 concludes, offering recommendations both left and right for party renewal that meets the crises of our time. To ground our prescriptions, we travel to Las Vegas to investigate the intertwined successes of the Nevada Democratic Party's "Reid Machine" and of the powerful Culinary Workers Union. We seek vigorous, participatory parties with broad legitimacy across the polity and a deep commitment to enacting their democratic visions. As a scholarly Committee on Party Renewal affirmed in 1977, just on the cusp of our hollowed era, "Without parties, there can be no organized and coherent politics. When politics lacks coherence, there can be no accountable democracy."[66]

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