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1

The Puzzle of Programmatic Partisanship

THE WORLD WATCHED with anxiety and bewilderment as the United States grappled with a swelling debt ceiling crisis in the spring of 2023. If Congress failed to raise or suspend the debt limit, essentially denying the U.S. Treasury permission to issue new debt to pay government bills that had come due, the nation would default on its financial obligations for the first time in history. For government employees, contractors, Social Security beneficiaries, bondholders, and many others to whom the U.S. government owed money, this could mean missed payments. More broadly, many economists and financial institutions projected that default would harm the nation's credit rating, weaken its currency, and fling the domestic and global economies into recession.¹

Amid this high stakes financial environment, some of the sticking points in negotiations between House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and President Joe Biden on legislation to raise the debt limit had remarkably little to do with budgetary politics. Friction on these issues, like adjustments to rules for people to access the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or “food stamps”) continued as Congress considered—and ultimately passed into law—the deal struck by the president's and Speaker's negotiating teams.

A program with little budgetary impact (food stamps account for approximately 2 percent of federal spending) appears rather out of place in urgent talks to avoid default on the nation's financial obligations. While the agreement between Democrats and Republicans will affect many people who use or would use SNAP, it will have minimal consequences for the national debt. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that changes to SNAP will induce a \$2.1 billion change in spending in the *decade* between

2023 and 2033, a minuscule sum considering annual spending currently exceeds \$6 trillion.

Congress has performed the ministerial task of raising the debt ceiling 103 times since World War II, and the process was not always so confounding—even with prickly relations between party leaders. Many have pointed to the 1980s, when Republican Ronald Reagan occupied the Oval Office, and Democrat Thomas “Tip” O’Neill served as Speaker of the House. The two exchanged their fair share of jabs. O’Neill used to call Reagan “Herbert Hoover with a smile” and a “cheerleader for selfishness,” and Reagan joked that he “liked to keep in shape by jogging three times a day around Tip O’Neill” (who was less svelte than the former actor, as cartoonists loved to point out).² And they did not shy away from showdowns over policy. Still, Congress raised the debt ceiling eighteen times during Reagan’s presidency without generating a deluge of worldwide headlines. When Reagan first needed Democratic votes to raise the debt ceiling in 1981, the Speaker agreed to help on one condition: that the president write a letter to each Democratic member of Congress asking them to support the effort to raise the debt ceiling, which would insulate them from public blame for this perennially unpopular but necessary legislative action. He did, and they did, and it happened.³

Party dynamics are different now, and so by extension is American governance. Raising the debt ceiling has become more acrimonious in recent years, with lawmakers creeping closer and closer to the brink of default before reaching agreements. Further—and of greater import for this book—while attention to nonbudgetary (or barely budgetary) but highly partisan issues amid a brewing economic emergency may seem to defy rationality, it reflects the logic of the party system today.

Global stakes aside, the expression of different views on food stamps by Democrats and Republicans during debt ceiling negotiations is an example of an increasingly common phenomenon: parties competing for public attention and approval through opposing policy positions. Democrats and Republicans have staked out contrasting positions on a wide range of issues, like abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, gun control, environmental policy, and means-tested (i.e., income-qualifying) social welfare programs like SNAP. Party actors amplify these distinctions in various forums, from presidential debates to State of the Union addresses and opposition responses. Such distinctions have even entered venues where they are not germane, like debt ceiling negotiations and their surrounding publicity. Today’s parties want voters to know they support different courses of action for the nation.

Issue differentiation reflects what's known as a *programmatic party system*—that is, one in which policy positions serve as a key basis of electoral competition. Parties can use all sorts of tools to compete with one another, an insight dating back to early twentieth-century work by Max Weber, and they do not all involve issue positions. A common alternative to programmatic partisanship (or *programmatically*) is clientelism, or the exchange of goods, services, or other material benefits (e.g., jobs, known in this context as *patronage jobs*) for political support. Parties might also rely on charismatic candidates to woo voters. Of course, no system—past or present—relies entirely on one type of appeal, but the balance of tools can and does change over time.

The United States today has the most programmatic party system in the world. This may seem obvious and unsurprising to many observers of contemporary politics, who have grown accustomed to watching party leaders spar over issues in a ring that appears to lack basic rules of engagement. It may also seem natural to many who have noticed organized groups with opposing issue positions lining up behind different parties (e.g., gun rights groups tend to support Republicans, while gun control groups tend to support Democrats). From a historical standpoint, however, this level of programmaticism is striking. Rewind to the mid-twentieth century and we'd see the American Political Science Association (APSA), among others, criticizing Democrats and Republicans for excessive programmatic similarity.

Let's return for a moment to Tip O'Neill. His tenure as Speaker of the House, during which Congress raised the debt ceiling with minimal drama even under divided government, provides a historical contrast to the present. Yet he too could marvel at how much party competition had changed. Alongside a personal journey from cutting the grass at Harvard as a kid from a working-class neighborhood in Cambridge to delivering the keynote address at the university's 350th anniversary celebration as a household name, Tip O'Neill's personal and professional life illustrates a larger transformation in the nature of American partisanship.

O'Neill's high-profile policy battles with Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party bore little resemblance to the politics of his youth, in style if not in substance. After his father landed a patronage job as superintendent of sewers, which put him in charge of more than a thousand other jobs, their household became a hub of activity in North Cambridge. "People came to my father with their problems," O'Neill recalled.⁴ It was a predominantly Irish immigrant neighborhood, a community of modest means, at a time when there was

not much of a government safety net (programs like Social Security, unemployment insurance, and so forth would not emerge until the New Deal). But a clientelistic network of local party machinery stood ready to connect people with various goods and services: unemployment benefits, public jobs, clothing, food assistance, and so forth. After snowstorms, he had around fifty buttons to distribute to people, which gave them access to a day's work shoveling snow for three or four dollars. People would start lining up at five o'clock in the morning on snowy days for the chance to procure one. This is what made Democrats in Tip O'Neill's early years.

It's not so much that O'Neill himself changed—he was a self-proclaimed champion of working-class people at the beginning and end of his career. As a ward leader in Cambridge during the Depression, when machine politics loomed large, this meant handing out snow buttons and winter coats, as well as food baskets for Christmas and Easter; making phone calls to City Hall on behalf of constituents; and other small-scale interactions with his supporters. Over time, as parties developed opposing positions across a wide range of issues and competed largely on this basis, he remained “a true lunch-pail Democrat,” in the words of colleague Rep. Rosa DeLauro. And in his own words, in his book *Man of the House*, he proclaimed, “Every family deserves the opportunity to earn an income, own a home, educate their children, and afford medical care. That is the American dream, and it's still worth fighting for.”⁵ By the time he served as Speaker of the House, what it meant to be a Democrat fighting for such things had changed, as had people's sense of what to expect in exchange for their votes.

This story is bigger than any one policy or politician, even one known for the immortal assertion that “all politics is local” (an insight O'Neill attributed to his father). We can point to many issues embroiled in programmatic politics and politicians who have seen the nature of the party system evolve around them. This shift toward issue-based competition reflects a major development in American political life. How and why did this transformation occur?

Remarkably, we know little about it. One might wonder how such an important development could evade American politics scholars' attention for so long. The answer, I suspect, is that programmatic partisanship has become entangled with the notion of polarization in the American politics literature such that it *appears* to have been addressed by work on that subject. But, it has not; rather, it has been hiding in plain sight.

This book investigates the history of programmaticism in the United States, examining when, how, and why it has changed since the Democratic

and Republican parties began competing with each other in 1856. This is vital to understand as we think about the state of representative democracy, a subject about which there is considerable concern and introspection in the United States and in other democracies (and former democracies) around the world. Adam Przeworski's classic and still resonant definition of democracy points toward a "system in which parties lose elections."⁶ The nature of party competition tells us about the grounds on which these electoral losses occur, what parties at the elite level (i.e., Republicans and Democrats in Congress) and the mass level (i.e., Republican and Democratic voters) gain and lose and how.

The point is not to idealize any style of party competition. The debt ceiling debacle of 2023 is not flattering for democracy, but neither were many aspects of American clientelism. Political machines were associated with corruption. Boston boss James Michael Curley allegedly had an open drawer in his office where people could leave envelopes full of money (while he stood aside, peering into a mirror) and find themselves entitled to future favors. Tip O'Neill recalled that Curley "liked to brag that he never accepted a donation from a person who couldn't afford it, but that still leaves a lot to the imagination."⁷ And not all people had equal access to machine largesse. As in many other dimensions of politics, Black Americans were underserved by machines, which tended to recruit coalitions of mostly Irish, Italian, and eastern European immigrants. (A notorious machine operative of Boston's West End neighborhood apparently met new immigrants where their boat docked, brought them to a site of party registration, and then to a public utility office to find employment.)⁸ It's no accident that Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to run for president, in 1972, employed the campaign slogan "unbought and unbossed."

The point is to understand, to have a clearer picture of how and why our party system has evolved. Comparing our current system to previous or otherwise alternative styles of party competition can be worthwhile, as long as we're doing so with clear vision and thought. This can help us avoid judgments against unrealistic, glossy standards like nostalgic memories or ideal states. Moreover, by analyzing motivations of key actors and details of the context in which they were operating, we can better understand outcomes we observe as well as paths *not* taken, whether by choice or by chance.

This chapter provides a foundation for the rest of the book. After discussing the concept of programmatic partisanship in more detail, I present a novel measurement strategy for demonstrating changes in issue-based competition

over a period of almost two centuries. This measure of programmatic partisanship over time is both a finding of the book and a tool to hone its central puzzle. I proceed to map my approach and argument, as well as consider implications for our understanding of parties and American democracy.

What Is Programmatic Partisanship?

The core principle of programmatic partisanship is an emphasis on policy positions as a basis of competition. Given the complexity of real world party systems, this dynamic is rarely if ever fully dominant or absent, but exists on a continuum. We can think of programmatic partisanship as the extent to which parties attempt to put forth clear, alternative positions on a range of policy issues.

Two criteria warrant emphasis: difference and breadth. For a party to be considered strongly programmatic, its positions have to be *distinct* from those of other parties. If the parties take similar positions on all matters, then issues cannot be used by voters in deciding between the parties in elections.⁹ Strong programmatic difference also *extends beyond one issue or set of issues*. Competition that revolves around a central cleavage in society is more factional than programmatic. Take white supremacy in the United States, for example. Slavery, segregation of schools and public spaces, and other tools of racial discrimination and harm undoubtedly involve policy. Such policies can be *part* of a programmatic system, but not its whole. Indeed, if one issue or set of issues is so prominent that it crowds out other matters, it can inhibit the growth of a programmatic system in which parties compete on a range of issues.

This does not mean parties need to—or should—distinguish themselves on every issue. Convergence is appropriate when it serves the public interest, the electorate is in general agreement, or there are not multiple positions befitting a liberal democracy, for example.¹⁰ Exhibiting similar positions on such issues does not undermine issue-based competition; in fact, it strengthens the normative foundation of programmaticism. The parties can engage in pro-democratic competition on a subset of issues facing a polity. They can also be programmatic while expressing moderate positions on many issues, so long as they maintain distinct central tendencies. And a programmatic system has room for parties to place different levels of emphasis on some (but not all) issues; this is, in a sense, an implicit argument about the perceived importance of certain issues.

Variation can exist across parties in the same system. While they may be affected by the same electoral rules, parties within a nation can have different histories and bases leading them to develop on separate paths with quite different features.¹¹ Looking across nations, the shift toward a programmatic system usually starts with one party, often a new party.¹² When there is imbalance between parties, with one focused more than the other on competition via policy positions, it is harder to achieve clear position differentiation. Yet, even if no party in the system completely satisfies the criteria for programmaticism, it is still possible to observe that one party is more programmatic than another or itself at an earlier point. We can consider a party system programmatic when its major parties are so.

Programmaticism is a characteristic of parties and party systems, not of individual candidates or officeholders. Individuals can be ideological in the sense of holding a set of positions that involve more or less government intervention in the market and society. Indeed, individuals may pursue policy goals even if parties are not programmatic. But no individual can carry out a program alone. A collective statement of policy positions has broader implications for a party system and a nation because it carries more significant potential consequences. Statements by individual politicians have less weight for people's sense of the system as a whole, the currency on which it runs.

As with other concepts, like democracy, scholars have developed alternative definitions of programmaticism, adding different types and degrees of complexity. Additional criteria relate primarily to institutions and legislative behavior.¹³ In this book, I employ a definition on the simpler side of this continuum because explication of alternative positions is essential to issue-based competition. Other criteria sometimes included in the definition of programmaticism, like orienting institutions toward position development and following through on positions in office, could be characterized as causes or consequences of position development.¹⁴

Relationship to Polarization

Programmatic partisanship and polarization are certainly related, both involving distinctions between parties. In fact, they are often conflated. The notion of programmatic difference frequently underlies discussions of polarized voting in Congress. It comes up as a potential upside to polarization, giving voters clear expectations regarding the types of policies each party is likely to pursue in office. This is thought to provide meaningful choices in elections and

facilitate a healthy democracy. It also comes up as a potential downside to polarization. Concern has been raised that, under polarized conditions, parties' positions are too far apart for them to find common ground. This is thought to slow the legislative process and produce gridlock.¹⁵

Yet, programmaticism and polarization are not synonymous. Polarization encapsulates a range of phenomena leading parties to resist connection, which includes but is not limited to programmaticism. There are partisan differences in ideology (*ideological polarization*), displays of in-group/out-group bias along party lines (*affective polarization*), and alignment of party identification with other identities (e.g., race, religion, class, etc.) that stoke anger and prejudice between Democrats and Republicans, motivating political activism while reducing productive cross-party discussion, understanding, and empathy (*social polarization*).¹⁶ These phenomena—along with programmatic partisanship, which involves partisan differences in issue positions—are each a different type of barrier to partisan coalescence. Together, they compose the broader phenomenon of polarization: the set of forces making it more difficult for parties, like repelling magnets, to connect even if other forces (e.g., routine responsibilities requiring bipartisan cooperation like passing the budget and major crises like a pandemic) are trying to push them together.

In sum, programmaticism contributes to polarization, but the existence of polarization does not ensure the presence of programmaticism. It may be a significant feature of polarization at some times in some places, but not others. Studying programmaticism can help us better understand polarization—an important contribution to the American politics literature, given that the rise of polarization is one of the most remarkable features of our time—but existing work on polarization cannot substitute for close analysis of programmaticism.

To understand the growth of programmaticism, we need more direct focus on this phenomenon than the American politics literature has provided thus far. While scholars of mass polarization have examined differences between Democrats and Republicans in the electorate on issues, insights from this literature are insufficient for understanding the puzzle driving this book, because programmaticism primarily involves elites. We have gotten glimpses of elite programmaticism from studies of particular issues (e.g., abortion), but a more comprehensive analysis is needed.¹⁷ None of these works was intended to address the question of why emphasis on issue-based competition varies over time.

Relationship to Clientelism and Other Types of Appeals to Voters

Considering the relationship of programmaticism to other types of appeals helps sharpen its definition. The concept, like most, has a clear center and fuzzy borders. Programmatic appeals are most crisply distinguishable from charismatic appeals, which are based on “unique, idiosyncratic personal qualities of [party] leaders that instill confidence and allegiance in voters,” rather than on policy positions.¹⁸

To separate programmatic from clientelistic appeals, it is useful to specify what is meant by *policy*. Any system could be said to run on policies, considered simply as rules. In this context, however, the term *policy* generally refers to public policy, defined by its scale and rules for distribution. Policy-related goods and services are broad (i.e., collective goods or club goods for large groups like social classes) rather than narrowly targeted. And while benefits from clientelistic linkages are given only to people who have supported the party, benefits from programmatic linkages are not distributed on this condition. Such benefits may or may not be distributed at all, depending on decisions made by those in power. And their distribution may, on average, disproportionately benefit one party’s base as a result of differences in demographic composition. But if benefits from a policy are distributed at all, they are not restricted to political supporters.¹⁹

There are gray areas between clientelism and programmaticism, especially with respect to some distributive policies.²⁰ As leading scholars of comparative party systems Herbert Kitschelt and Steven Wilkinson (2007b) note, it’s relatively easy to identify clientelism when parties are handing out jobs and goodies in exchange for votes, “but much harder to separate from policy linkage where politicians deliver local club goods, such as infrastructure projects. To the extent that specific localities get preferential access to such facilities contingent upon electoral choices of small groups of voters and contributors to parties and candidates, the production of local public goods constitutes the currency of clientelistic politics.”²¹ In this light, we might consider some “earmarks” or “pork” directed toward particular constituencies in the United States to be clientelistic or at least quasi-clientelistic, for example.

Susan Stokes et al. (2013) offer additional guidance for identifying programmatic distributive policies, distinguishing them from nonprogrammatic types in a manner that cross-cuts traditional ways of thinking about differences between clientelism and programmaticism. For distribution to be considered programmatic, two criteria must be met: (1) “the criteria of distribution

must be public”; and (2) “the public, formal criteria of distribution must actually shape the distribution of resources in question.”²² In the case of notorious “earmarks” in the United States, a simple blanket categorization should be avoided. As they note, “Not all bridges are ‘bridges to nowhere’—there must be something about the process determining how resources are spent that makes some legitimate and others illegitimate.”²³ Attention to rules for distribution can aid this endeavor.

This does not necessarily mean the rules are fair. Indeed, public policies have been implemented according to rules that are deeply inequitable. Policies may explicitly exclude people based on certain characteristics, which sometimes have a logic of equity (as in programs like Medicare aimed at meeting needs of older people, for example) and sometimes a logic of illiberal exclusion (as in New Deal-era programs, like Social Security, that at their inception excluded categories of work performed primarily by African Americans, like agriculture and domestic labor). Public policies can and do evolve over time, becoming more or less equitable. Programmaticism is not wholly just or unjust by definition; rather, it is a style of political competition based on public policy, the normative character of which will be affected by the nature of those policies.

In sum, with sensitivity to nuances relating to certain distributive policies, programmatic appeals can be distinguished from other types by their emphasis on public policy. In addition to clientelistic and charismatic appeals, other types of appeals classified by some scholars as nonprogrammatic include those based on personalism, populism, and identities (e.g., ethnicity).²⁴ To the extent that voters associate any of these types of appeals with particular policy positions and priorities—as might occur with identity politics, for example—the line between programmatic and nonprogrammatic may blur. To count as a strongly programmatic appeal, however, policy positions should be communicated (through explicit statements or dog whistles), not just left to inference based on identity.

Why Not “Responsible Party Government”?

Readers may wonder why I have chosen to focus on programmaticism, a relatively unknown concept in American politics literature, rather than *responsible party government*, famously discussed in a 1950 report released by APSA, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” and separate works by E. E. Schattschneider and many others. In fact, given the amount of attention

devoted to responsible party government over the past seventy years, and the centrality of programmaticism to this concept, readers might wonder why a book on programmaticism is even necessary. To address these questions, it will be useful to step back and discuss the former concept in greater depth; for, to its credit and detriment, responsible party government is many things.

Most broadly, it is a theory of democracy based on the notions of majoritarianism and collective responsibility. The 1950 APSA report devotes significant space to making the case for assessing democracy by the state of its parties. Schattschneider, who chaired the committee that penned the report, also makes this argument in his classic 1942 book, *Party Government*. While parties have been reviled since the nation's founding and continue to be unpopular, they play a critical intermediary role in democracy, organizing conflict so voters face clear, manageable decisions at the polls. When parties offer alternative policy programs, voters understand the stakes of their electoral choices—voting for X party means that policy will head in one direction; voting for Y party means it will head in another. Parties are thus “the makers of democratic government.”²⁵ References to responsible party government will, for some, invoke this argument about parties' key role in democracy.

In addition to serving as a theory of democracy, responsible party government can also be considered a set of processes. The most well-known set describes responsible party government's basic mechanics. Parties stake out alternative positions across a wide range of issues, communicate them to voters, and nominate candidates who will adhere thereto. Once in office, party members exercise discipline with respect to these positions. Voters then assess whether they are happy with the resulting policies and hold the governing party responsible for the current state of affairs. The first stage of this process is quite close to the notion of programmaticism I have described in this chapter, and the stages in toto approximate more complex definitions of programmaticism. But responsible party government goes further than even these maximalist definitions, also describing processes for intraparty democracy that its adherents view as essential to the realization of responsible party government as a model of democracy. For some readers, the notion of responsible party government will bring these processes to mind.

For others, the term responsible party government may conjure the report's rather granular arguments about the types of institutional change that should be enacted to facilitate responsible party government (e.g., parties should have midterm conventions, create party councils to work on policy, etc.). This sweeping, multifaceted nature has been a source of strength and weakness. It

likely explains responsible party government's enduring resonance with scholars across the discipline, while also making the concept difficult to apply in a manner that's both precise and true to its scope. Work on this subject has tended to be either very broad, assessing its value as a democratic theory or the extent to which the United States has lived up to this ideal over time, or very narrow, analyzing a specific slice of the concept. The most highly cited works—by far—on responsible party government following APSA and Schattschneider's seminal publications demonstrate this impressive yet awkward range: an intellectual history of the concept by Austin Ranney (1962), who was both student and critic of Schattschneider's; an analysis of lawmakers' responsiveness to public opinion on issues (Miller and Stokes, 1963); and a study of agenda setting by party leaders in the House of Representatives (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005).

In this light, centering my analysis on the notion of responsible party government would be hazardous. While it may involve programmaticism, it also encompasses a range of other processes and phenomena that are outside the scope of my analysis. This may explain why a focused analysis of programmaticism has never emerged from the literature on responsible party government. I could, in theory, start with the notion of responsible party government and amend it. Given its legacy in American politics scholarship, however, this seems unwise. The term is too well known, and it raises a host of ideas that would distract from my analysis. It seems more prudent and useful to start from the idea of programmaticism and build from there.

Programmatic Partisanship over Time

With a discussion of programmatic partisanship's meaning in hand, we can now consider measurement. This is important because a clearer and more continuous picture of variation in programmaticism over time will offer a stronger sense of the puzzle we want to explain. Although we have a general sense that programmaticism is stronger today than it once was, the exact timing and pace of change remain unclear. Many excellent studies examine party positions and their evolution in specific issue areas.²⁶ But there has, to my knowledge, been little attempt to create a broad, systematic measure of programmaticism in the United States over time. Rather, it tends to be inferred from standard measures of polarization.

Well-established, readily available measures of elite polarization in the United States go back to the nineteenth century, the most common of which

relies on DW-NOMINATE scores for members of Congress. These scores, based on lawmakers' coalitional behavior in roll-call votes over the course of their careers, are typically interpreted as measures of ideology.²⁷ It stands to reason that the distance between the DW-NOMINATE scores of the median Democrat and Republican in each chamber of Congress would increase as the parties become more programmatically distinct. The availability of this proxy may help explain why a direct measure of programmaticism covering a long period has not been developed.

DW-NOMINATE scores cannot provide a basis for a reliable measure of programmatic partisanship, however. While they do gauge intrapartisan cohesion and interpartisan distinction, they cannot tell us what is holding co-partisans together and keeping opposing partisans apart. It could be policy positions, though a significant difference between Democrats' and Republicans' roll-call voting behavior could also emerge without programmatic distinction. In the words of Herbert Kitschelt and Kent Freeze (n.d.), scholars at the helm of efforts to measure programmatic partisanship cross-nationally, "Programmatic cohesiveness of a party is a *sufficient* condition for legislative discipline, but *not a necessary* one: There may be instances of legislative discipline even in the absence of programmatic cohesiveness, because the compliance of legislators with partisan unity is enforced by external institutional incentives and punishments (e.g., side-payments for electoral supporters in a legislator's district)."²⁸

Frances Lee (2016b) puts forth a strong argument against interpreting the large difference between DW-NOMINATE scores of the median Democrat and Republican in Congress as programmatic polarization during the Gilded Age. She notes that this period, from the end of Reconstruction through the turn of the century, is characterized differently by political scientists relying on DW-NOMINATE and historians studying Congress at a more granular level. The former view it as a period of high polarization, in which programmatic difference is assumed. In the historical literature, by contrast, "the conventional portrait of the era depicts the two parties as locked in battles over distributive benefits and patronage, with little, if any, programmatic national policy content."²⁹ They were both parties of limited government, broadly speaking, and neither offered particular stances on major issues of the time. Lee's analysis shows that most congressional action during this period was not about ideology or issues that could map onto ideology; rather, it was largely about distributive policy, patronage, and electoral contests with implications for the distribution of patronage. Even policies that seemed potentially ideological

were ultimately distributive. Conflict between parties was strong, which leads to a larger distance between the DW-NOMINATE scores of the median member of each party, but this conflict was not rooted in programmatic differences.

Existing measures of polarization are also insufficient for measuring programmatic partisanship because DW-NOMINATE scores, based on roll-call votes, capture only a sliver of congressional behavior. Most bills introduced in Congress never receive a roll-call vote. And, strikingly, when Clinton and Lapinski (2008) examined legislative enactments and roll-call data from 1891 to 1994, they found that only 5.5 percent of bills signed into law received recorded roll-call votes in both chambers of Congress.

Alternative measures of polarization, like those based on interest group ratings of members of Congress, are also insufficient for measuring programmaticism. While some may be connected to members' behavior on policy issues, these measures are based on a small and nonrandom sample of roll-call votes, covering a limited range of issues. Moreover, they are of limited use in historical analyses because they became common only in the mid-twentieth century.³⁰

By developing a more direct measure of programmaticism over the entire course of competition between Democrats and Republicans, we can get a better sense of its trajectory over time. Even if we are reasonably certain that parties are more programmatic than they used to be—it is easy to point to examples of issues on which Democrats and Republicans have taken opposing positions—significant uncertainty remains regarding the timing and extent of changes in programmatic partisanship. We should not assume that it rose at the same time as the difference in DW-NOMINATE scores, or that it has continued to rise, unabated, as have other measures of polarization. A certain degree of programmatic commitment could draw people into a party and solidify their attachments, obviating the need for further increases in programmaticism. There may even be room for programmatic decay without significant penalty.

Measurement Approach

One of my book's central contributions lies in developing a quadrennial measure of programmaticism from 1856, the first year of competition between today's major parties, to the present.³¹ I use advancements in machine learning to estimate differences in orientation toward issues overall, comparing

national Republican and Democratic platforms on the whole and within topic areas for each year.

Doing so is instructive for a few reasons. Looking within topics enables us to gauge the breadth of issue differentiation, assuring that one set of issues is not driving the overall measure. This strategy also offers a nuanced picture of programmaticism. While the United States is known in the comparative politics literature as a case of high programmatic partisanship, the parties do not disagree on every issue. Thus, measuring party difference within issue areas can offer a sense of the limitations of even a very strong case of programmatic partisanship. Variation in levels of programmaticism across issues also suggests that the measure based on whole platforms is not simply capturing interparty differences in language style or broad ideology.

DATA

I focus on the extent to which Democrats and Republicans express programmatic differences through speech. Party platforms are central in my analysis.³² They are the official encyclopedic statements of party policy and should be taken seriously as such. It is easy to criticize them as unenforceable “cheap talk” and minimize their importance for this reason, but research has shown an association between platform pledges and lawmakers’ actions in the realms of expenditures and policy.³³ Moreover, the energy and anxiety surrounding platform content over the postwar era belies such dismissal. As Paul T. David, scholar of party conventions and long-time professor of government at the University of Virginia, remarked in a 1971 article entitled “Party Platforms as National Plans”:

The platforms involve a remarkable paradox of perception. Editorial writers and some leading politicians, usually of the Legislative Branch, have made it their business for generations to denigrate the platforms as campaign trivia—ephemera to be forgotten as soon as the campaign is over. On the other hand, it is not possible to watch the amount of struggle that goes into any party platform, the thousands of manhours of toil, sweat, and strain that are devoted by people who value their time highly, without concluding that the platforms must be important to some people for some purposes.³⁴

Indeed, disagreement over the platform’s civil rights plank led to an exodus of southern Democrats from the party’s convention in 1948 and a challenge by

Strom Thurmond under the States' Rights ticket to Democratic incumbent Harry Truman.³⁵

Finally, there is no other centralized statement of party policy. Party actors make various statements about policy, of course, but the platform is the only official comprehensive statement of party positions. Although it is not the only source of data used in this book, it plays an important role, reflecting its unique standing.

METHODOLOGY

I take a novel two-stage approach to measuring programmatic partisanship through platforms, leveraging the power of machine-learning tools to identify systematic patterns in large volumes of text.

First, I estimate a structural topic model (STM) on party platforms over time at the sentence level, using word co-occurrence to identify topics in the platforms and to calculate the degree to which each sentence relates to each topic. This analysis reveals twenty major topics. They are, in order of prevalence: (1) economy; (2) American dream; (3) foreign affairs; (4) rights; (5) territories and statehood; (6) labor and antitrust; (7) development; (8) businesses and jobs; (9) defense; (10) trade and markets; (11) education; (12) regulation and bureaucracy; (13) healthcare; (14) energy; (15) liberal democracy, at home and abroad; (16) culture, arts, and multiculturalism; (17) land and natural resources; (18) law enforcement and border patrol; (19) transportation and infrastructure; and (20) social welfare.

In the second stage, I take a two-pronged approach to measuring programmaticism, looking at platforms on the whole (i.e., generating one estimate per platform) and within issue areas (i.e., generating a separate estimate for the set of sentences on each issue area in each platform). In both cases, I begin by creating estimates by party and year using a scaling technique called Wordfish, developed by Slapin and Proksch (2008). I take the difference between the estimates for each party as a measure of programmaticism.

A detailed explanation of this methodology, along with validation of the estimates it produces, can be found in the appendix.

Results

Figure 1.1 plots programmaticism over time. The solid line shows raw numbers, and the dotted line is a loess curve (reflecting locally weighted regression) with a 95 percent confidence interval shaded in gray.³⁶

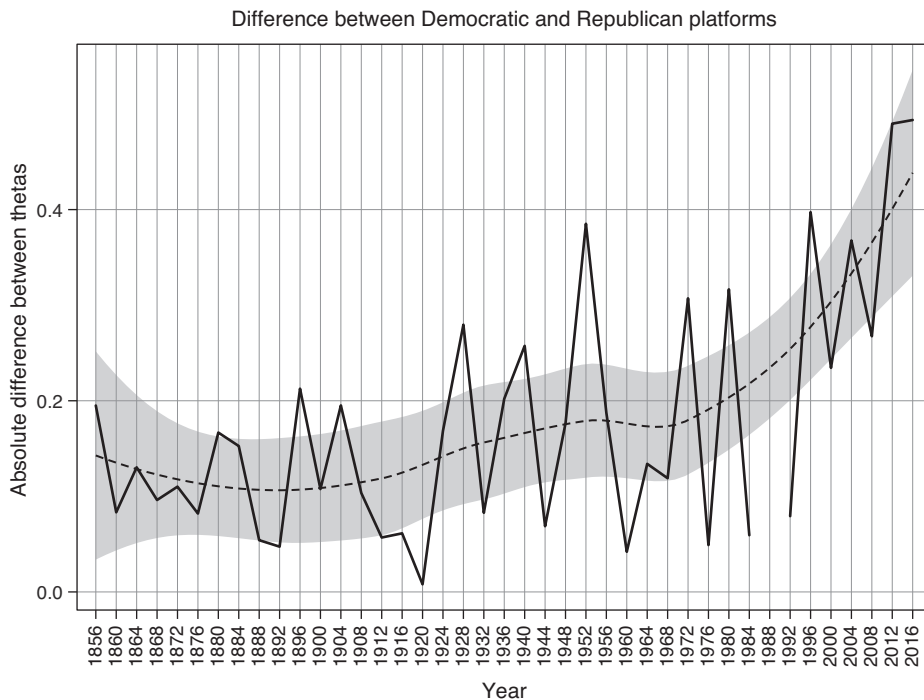


FIGURE 1.1. Programmaticism in the United States, 1856–2016.

This graph plots the difference in Wordfish estimates (thetas) for Democrats and Republicans in each year. It includes all sentences from all platforms with an STM topic probability threshold above 0.1 for at least one topic. The solid line shows raw numbers, and the dotted line is a loess curve (reflecting locally weighted regression), with a 95% confidence interval shaded in gray.

I find differences between the parties' platforms on the whole, as well as within various issue areas, over this entire period. The measure in figure 1.1 is always above zero. This is consistent with John Gerring's classic argument that parties have always displayed some ideological distinction.³⁷ It also squares with the notion that parties employ multiple tools to appeal to voters, and no tool is likely to be fully dominant or absent at any given time.

Programmatic differences have not been constant, however; their magnitude has varied over time. While the degree of programmaticism can vary significantly from year to year, the loess curve displays a clear trend: an initial, relatively modest increase between the turn of the twentieth century and its midpoint, a flattening or even slight decrease beginning around the 1950s, and a steep increase beginning in the late 1960s that has continued to the present.

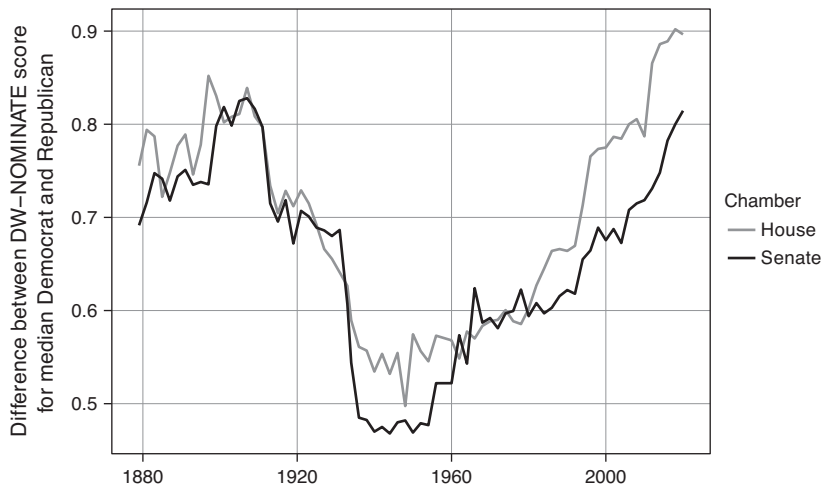


FIGURE 1.2. Polarization in the United States Congress, 1879–2020.

This graph uses data from Voteview (Lewis et al. 2023) to plot the difference between the first dimension DW-NOMINATE score for the median Democrat and Republican in each chamber of Congress in each year.

This trend is interesting in its own right, and in relation to standard measures of polarization. Measured with DW-NOMINATE, as figure 1.2 shows, polarization in the United States follows an infamous U-shaped curve, with high levels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, low levels in the mid-twentieth century, and a steep increase beginning in the early 1970s.³⁸ Programmaticism has risen sharply, along with the difference in ideology between Democrats and Republicans in Congress, in the contemporary era. But comparing figures 1.1 and 1.2 makes clear that the field’s standard measure of polarization should not be used as a proxy for programmaticism, which was not high in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As a robustness check, I broke the data into four periods and ran separate Wordfish models on each one to make sure that the trend shown in figure 1.1 is not an artifact of changes in the meaning of words. Figure 1.3 shows that the trend remains substantially similar. There is some more undulation in the loess curves in this graph than in figure 1.1, but the steep and consistent rise in programmaticism clearly does not occur until the contemporary era. And though there is a small rise around the turn of the twentieth century, this graph still does not come close to following the U-shape of the field’s standard measure of polarization.³⁹

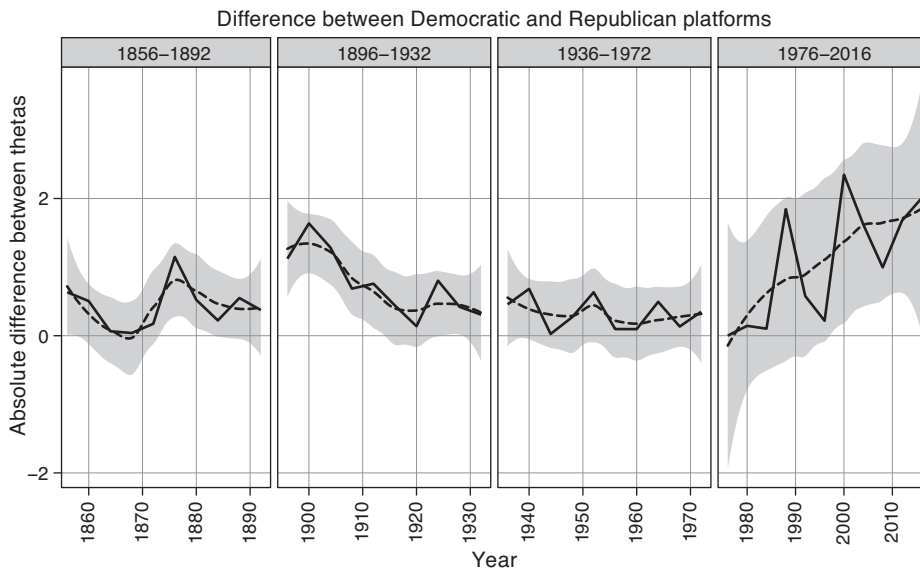


FIGURE 1.3. Programmaticism in the United States, separate models by period. This graph plots the difference in Wordfish estimates (thetas) for Democrats and Republicans in each year, with separate models for different periods. It includes all sentences from all platforms with an STM topic probability threshold above 0.1 for at least one topic. The solid line shows raw numbers, and the dotted line is a loess curve (reflecting locally weighted regression), with a 95% confidence interval shaded in gray.

Figure 1.4 plots differentiation within each issue area.⁴⁰ We can see an increase in programmaticism in the contemporary era across many important issue areas, like business and jobs, culture, energy, social welfare, and rights. In 2016, for example, the parties espoused divergent views on rights. For Democrats, rights meant those for women (including support for the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion), workers (including the right to collective bargaining), LGBT individuals (including same-sex marriage), and voters (with explicit emphasis on the importance of the Voting Rights Act and reduction of barriers to voting), and so forth. For Republicans, rights meant Second Amendment guarantees, right-to-work laws, opposition to abortion, support for traditional family values, and definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman. A century earlier, in 1916, the parties had expressed much more general and similar views on the need to protect the rights and safety of citizens at home and abroad, as well as specific endorsement of suffrage for women through action by the states.

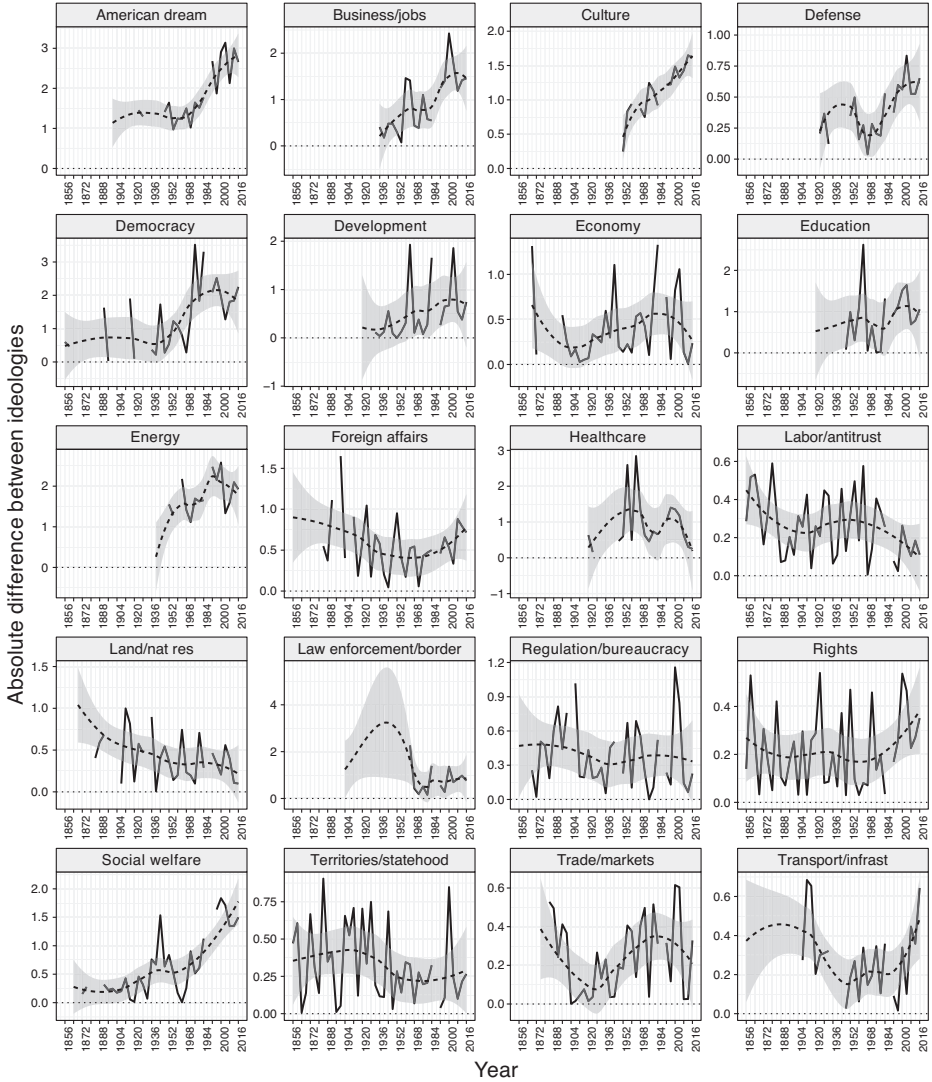


FIGURE 1.4. Programmaticism in the United States by topic, 1856–2016.

This graph plots the difference in Wordfish estimates (thetas) for Democrats and Republicans in each year by topic. All quasi-sentences with topic probability thresholds above 0.1 for the topic are included. The solid line shows raw numbers, and the dotted line is a loess curve (reflecting locally weighted regression), with a 95% confidence interval shaded in gray.

There is considerable variation across issue areas. This is noteworthy, given that the United States is considered an exemplar case of programmatic partisanship from a comparative perspective. Even in the world's most programmatic system, the parties don't differ substantially on all issues. In some cases, the timing reflects the overall trend, with the major rise beginning around the late 1960s. In other cases, the trend begins earlier. In some areas, distinctions between parties actually declined, in ways that meet expectations. For example, in land and natural resources, this decline reflects a growing settlement consensus. In labor, it reflects an increasing neoliberal consensus. The fact that variation exists across issue areas, both in the baseline level of programmaticism and in the trajectory over time, suggests that the overall estimate of programmaticism shown in figure 1.1 is not simply capturing differences in vague ideology or language style.

As we interpret these results, it's important to keep in mind that this is a measure of programmatic difference, not an absence of clientelism. Even if they have an inverse relationship, these two types of tools can and do coexist, and they are not the only instruments in parties' toolboxes. A low level of programmaticism in a given year does not necessarily indicate a high level of clientelism in that particular year.

The Puzzle of Programmatic Partisanship

This analysis sharpens the puzzle of programmaticism. Why has it risen to historic heights over the contemporary period? And why wasn't the earlier, if less dramatic, rise sustained? These questions are related; answering the second can offer valuable insight into the first. We have as much to learn from relatively low levels of programmaticism earlier in American history as from its rise in recent decades. By taking a long view, we can see not only what ultimately sparked and facilitated the steep rise of programmaticism in the contemporary era, but also what depressed attention and squelched attempts to increase it earlier.

A long-term study of the United States is also well positioned to contribute to American and comparative literatures, given what we know about programmaticism's relationship to development. Figure 1.5 plots GDP per capita at purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2008 against a DALP cross-national measure of programmaticism from 2008 to 2009.⁴¹ The dashed line shows the

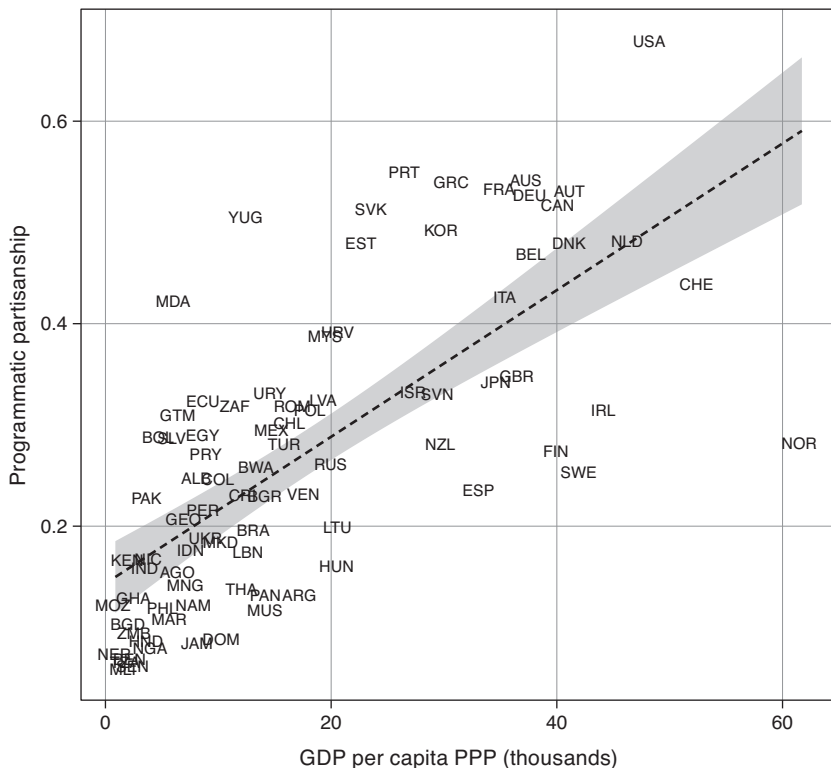


FIGURE 1.5. Economic development and programmatic partisanship. The measure of programmatic partisanship comes from the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP), and GDP data come from the World Bank. The dashed line shows the linear relationship with a 95% confidence interval shaded in gray (adjusted r-squared = 0.49, $N = 88$). A similar graph appears as figure 2.1 in Kitschelt and Wang (2014).

linear relationship, which is strong and positive: more affluent nations (e.g., the United States in the top right corner) tend to have more programmatic parties than do poorer nations.⁴²

The United States stands out as an interesting case in this regard. While it is far above the line in figure 1.5, indicating higher levels of programmaticism than its wealth would predict, my measure of programmaticism shows that it did not begin its steep rise until the late 1960s, well after it had achieved a relatively high level of economic development. This further deepens the puzzle, as it suggests that the United States has been both a “late bloomer” and an “overachiever” in its programmatic development. Why?

Book Structure and Central Contributions

This book offers fresh perspective on the puzzle of programmatic partisanship. Much of the existing literature on issue-based competition has been cross-national, focusing especially on new democracies and developing nations in the contemporary era. We can gain new insight into this subject by examining a single case over a long period, following American parties as the nation grew from a relatively new, embattled democracy with an industrializing economy and largely clientelistic parties to an advanced postindustrial democracy with the most programmatic party system in the world.

In doing so, my analysis centers on party organizations, as there has been far more research on issue differentiation in the electorate and Congress.⁴³ This choice may raise questions among American politics scholars accustomed to the subfield's conventionally dismissive attitude toward party organizations. It is clear from work by comparative scholars, however, that programmaticism bears an important relationship to clientelism, which was historically carried out in the United States primarily by local party organizations (e.g., the Curley machine in Boston) at a time when the national party organizations (the Democratic and Republican National Committees, or DNC and RNC) were relatively meager and inactive.

Moreover, party organizations serve as custodians of the official encyclopedic statements of party positions: the platforms. This renders them particularly interesting in the study of programmaticism. And while the national committees may lack traditional sources of power, they play an important organizational role in the process of position development. Other institutions, like Congress, enter the narrative at various points, as there has been some cooperation and complementarity across institutions. But the book centers primarily on party organizations. Future work can and should examine the rise of programmaticism from other angles, as such a complex phenomenon is inevitably multicausal.

Chapter 2 offers a theory of programmatic partisanship in the United States, building on a foundation of important work predominantly by comparative scholars on modes of appealing to voters. My theory contributes to existing knowledge by focusing specifically on factors facilitating the development of programmaticism. Perhaps because programmaticism has long been treated as a foil for clientelism, work on the former tends to focus on explaining the decline of the latter. Evidence indicates that the two linkage types do, indeed, have an inverse relationship.⁴⁴ Thus, in considering factors that

influence the growth of programmaticism, it makes sense to pay careful attention to factors leading to a reduction of clientelism. The negative association between these two linkage types, however, is far from perfect.⁴⁵ The decline of clientelism does not guarantee the rise of programmaticism. To understand the latter, we need explicit theories thereof.

Didi Kuo (2018) provides a strong foundation on this front in her study of shifts toward programmaticism in the United States and Britain in the late nineteenth century, emphasizing the role of capitalists in demanding both reliable policy and an increase in bureaucratic capacity necessary for policy implementation. Others have also noted that a certain degree of political development, including but not limited to bureaucratic professionalization, is needed for programmatic appeals to be credible to voters.⁴⁶ But this argument is typically presented as a reason clientelism develops or endures, rather than as part of a theory of programmaticism in particular. Moreover, these studies—including Kuo’s—focus on institutions facilitating policy implementation. While this is certainly important, it leaves a vital aspect of programmaticism uncovered: factors influencing parties’ ability to develop policy positions in the first place. Institutions designed for implementation will not necessarily be helpful for the task of position development.

To understand the steep and sustained growth of programmaticism in the contemporary era, we need a theory that covers position development. My argument is rooted in the notion that developing party positions across a wide range of issues is labor-intensive and risky. In a large, diverse nation with a complex economy and only two major parties, inevitable contradictions arise between the preferences of different coalition subgroups. Parties may not even be sure of the ideal position with respect to each group. There is no crystal ball for this—the party needs to gather and weigh information to figure it out. Even after parties do this work, announcing issue positions can cause intractable problems. Unlike organizations relying primarily on material incentives (e.g., distributing jobs, benefits, etc.), which can “divide the dollar” between members, organizations running on “purposive” (i.e., nonmaterial, goal-oriented) incentives face more constraints in resolving internal conflicts.⁴⁷

Developing a party program is hard. Parties have criticized each other for policy actions (and inactions) since the dawn of the republic, but that is not the same as putting together a set of policy stances underpinning the party. As former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn was known to say, “Remember, any jackass can kick over a barn door. It takes a carpenter to build one.”⁴⁸

He was not talking about developing a party program, but the sentiment still applies.

Institutions are needed to facilitate this process. I focus specifically on party organizations, which can both hinder and help the process of position development. Drawing on comparative work showing an inverse relationship between clientelism and programmaticism, I argue that sustained programmaticism was unlikely to arise while local party machines remained strong in the United States. Machines would have reason to resist a shift toward programmaticism. Moreover, I argue that programmaticism will tend not to be a first-line tool for parties. They could, in theory, attempt to fire on all cylinders; but this is unlikely to happen in practice, given the challenges and risks involved in party position development. So long as they are able to rely on another strategy (e.g., clientelism), parties will tend not to turn in full force to programmatic tools. Thus, I theorize that local party machines constrained the development of programmaticism in the United States, even as it experienced economic development that would have predicted a turn toward issue-based competition.

Yet, party organizations can also have the opposite effect. I argue that national party institutions, which were weak until the second half of the twentieth century, ultimately played an important role in promoting programmaticism. Some degree of policy differentiation may arise naturally; at least some politicians, after all, are thought to be drawn to office to affect policy, and groups of like-minded politicians may be drawn to the same party. Such organic party position development has limits, however. Differentiation across a wide range of issues requires institutions for gathering information about policies and groups' preferences, as well as for resolving conflicts. This imperative only intensifies as a nation becomes larger and more complex, with more issues facing the federal government. In this sense, programmaticism is a moving target; it will tend to become more challenging as the state develops and widens its scope. This helps explain why the initial growth of programmaticism, discussed by Kuo (2018) and shown in figure 1.1, was not sustained.

The growth of national party institutions for policy development during the mid- to late twentieth century provided an important foundation for the steep rise of programmaticism seen in the contemporary era. They may not be as powerful as some parties in other nations, and their strength and autonomy may be underwhelming in some respects—provoking a characterization of “hollowness” from prominent party scholars Daniel Schlozman and Sam

Rosenfeld—but their growth over time remains notable and impactful.⁴⁹ The barebones national organizations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with their lack of stable staff and tendency to disband between elections, could not have made the critical contributions to issue position development that the stronger and more professionalized DNC and RNC would offer later.

To recap, I have argued thus far that (1) theories of clientelism's decline are useful for understanding variation in programmaticism but cannot substitute for explicit theories of the latter; and (2) additional work on programmaticism is needed to cover the challenge of position development. Further study is also needed because existing theories relating to the United States have not sufficiently considered the role of *racial orders*, a term coined by Desmond King and Rogers Smith (2005), in the history of programmaticism. Since the founding of the United States, two orders—sets of institutions, organizations, and people—have been wrestling for control of the nation's present and future: a *white supremacist* order and an *egalitarian transformative* order. Although the specific institutions and actors may have changed, and some have even switched sides over time, the orders have been omnipresent and have shaped almost all aspects of our nation's politics in some way. Thus, King and Smith (2005) argue that nearly all studies of American politics should consider the role of racial orders. This imperative seems especially relevant to understanding something so fundamental to the nature of electoral competition as programmatic partisanship.

I argue that racial orders have shaped the trajectory of programmaticism in at least two important ways. First, they extended the life of nonprogrammatic practices. Major New Deal programs were tailored to the preferences of southern lawmakers, key players in the white supremacist order.⁵⁰ Among the mechanisms allowing these programs to discriminate against African Americans was the decentralization of program implementation, so that local bureaucrats and private firms committed to white supremacy could use the discretion afforded to them to direct benefits from New Deal programs primarily toward whites. While these policy design features were meant to exclude African Americans, they also rendered benefits from New Deal programs more vulnerable to nonprogrammatic distribution, under Stokes et al.'s (2013) criteria, than they would have been otherwise.

More broadly, I argue that the white supremacist order long depressed support for the very notion of programmaticism. Parties and their responsibilities are not described in the Constitution. This deliberate omission, rather

than squelching impulses for their rise as the founders had hoped, instead facilitated centuries of disagreement about what exactly parties are and what they should be doing. Academics are not the only ones who have faced this challenge—proponents of programmaticism also had to contend with the question of whether taking positions across a wide range of issues constituted behavior befitting parties.⁵¹ Those benefiting from the white supremacist order had strong reasons to resist this interpretation of parties' purpose.

Programmaticism bestows power in party leaders to manage party position development. While this may sometimes amount to a service, when high stakes issues fundamental to democratic functioning—like major franchise restrictions—remain substantially unresolved within parties and the broader polity, it can feel threatening to some party members. In the United States, southern lawmakers were likely to oppose the very notion of programmaticism so long as Jim Crow laws buttressing white supremacy were the status quo. Such contentious conditions would make programmaticism difficult to cultivate; party positions are more like orchids than weeds. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, the stakes of programmaticism changed substantially, opening space for programmaticism to develop.

My theory helps explain why programmaticism rose sharply beginning in the late 1960s, after the civil rights revolution and substantial fizzling of political machines. It also addresses some of the nuances of the puzzle of programmaticism, such as why its earlier rise was limited and unsustainable, and why its more significant, steady rise occurred well after the nation's level of economic development would predict. In this light, it is not surprising that the modern rise has been sharp—there was a great deal of pent-up demand.

Chapter 3 analyzes the relationship between clientelism and programmaticism in the United States over time, showing how and why the former endured for so long and hindered the latter's growth. Chapters 4 and 5 trace the history of programmaticism through the lens of party organizations, examining the theory I outline in chapter 2 and learning inductively from the process of reading primary materials from 1856 to the present. This illuminates not only who and what ultimately facilitated programmaticism's contemporary rise, but also who and what hindered earlier attempts to increase it. I trace the history of when and how parties increased their emphasis on position development, how and why the process for position development became more advanced and institutionalized over time, and who pushed and who resisted these efforts and why, drawing on transcripts of Democratic and Republican

National Conventions and party committee meetings, oral histories, archival materials collected at various presidential libraries, historical newspapers, and secondary sources.

This book's uncommon but complementary mix of methodologies reveals systematic patterns in party attention to issue development and differentiation on matters of policy, as well as important factors that constrained and facilitated the growth of programmaticism in the United States over time. It also elucidates important institutional roots of the distinct but related phenomenon of political polarization. Remarkably, a large literature on the origins of contemporary polarization has developed with almost no attention to the fact that the United States transitioned toward a different type of party system over time. By examining the rise of alternative party positions and changes in the process by which they were created, this book offers new insights—from an institutional perspective—into a trend that's generally considered ideological.

More specifically, it contributes to the way in which we think about the role of racial politics in facilitating polarization. The realignment of the South after the civil rights revolution is an oft-cited factor in the rise of polarization, as the Democratic Party lost its conservative contingent, and southerners made Republicans even more conservative.⁵² This rather mechanical explanation for polarization misses a critical way in which racial orders contributed to its trajectory. The white supremacist order did not just oppose civil rights for African Americans and eventually abandon the party that adopted and effecuated a pro-civil rights stance—its steadfast commitment to preserving Jim Crow laws long constrained acceptance of the notion of programmaticism more broadly. This is a sobering example of the ways in which racial orders can powerfully shape the nation's politics well beyond the scope of what we might consider "racial issues."

After the fall of Jim Crow laws, racial politics would continue to shape issue-based competition. The parties became more distinct on issues surrounding the rights of Black Americans, turning these issues into fuel for programmaticism in some respects, raising questions about boundary conditions for this style of party competition in a liberal democracy. Institutions and agents of racial oppression also retained the power to disrupt programmatic competition. When civil rights have become very salient, there are instances when Democrats and Republicans have each taken steps back from programmaticism.

In addition to contributing to our understanding of polarization and racial politics, this book also intervenes in a high-profile debate among American politics scholars about the very nature of parties: are they, as in the traditional view, coalitions of office seekers or coalitions of policy-demanding groups, as argued by a new “group-centered” theory of parties? Rather than choose between these options, I argue that we need to move toward a more dynamic conceptualization of parties.

Toward a More Dynamic Conceptualization of Parties

Traditionally, parties were thought to be coalitions of office seekers. V. O. Key (1942) famously complicated this view by breaking the monolith into three distinct but interconnected pieces: parties in government, parties as organizations, and parties in the electorate. Parties are not one-dimensional entities whose operations we can observe on one plane, he argued; to fully understand them, we need to analyze all three dimensions. In John Aldrich’s classic 1994 book *Why Parties?*, he refines this framework, replacing parties in the electorate with parties in elections, arguing—as had Schattschneider (1942) before him—that parties in the electorate are better conceived as consumers of party messages than as components of parties. Either way, this framework encourages us to think of elite-level parties as collections of individuals aiming to win office and govern in a way that maximizes their ability to win office in the future, as well as institutions built in this pursuit.

Over the past decade or so, a fresh view of parties has risen to prominence. This group-centered theory (also known as the UCLA school) argues that political science has been guided, or rather misguided, by a distorted characterization of parties. Political parties are not simply teams of ambitious office seekers, as scholars have typically portrayed them; rather, parties “are best understood as coalitions of interest groups and activists seeking to capture and use government for their particular goals, which range from material self-interest to high-minded idealism.”⁵³ This coalition develops a party program reflecting the wishes of its policy-demanding members and works, usually successfully, to ensure the nomination of candidates who will adhere thereto. Bawn et al. (2012) refer to this theory of parties as “group-centric.” It is more than this, however. Policy-demanding interest groups are not merely important to parties in this view; they are inherent. They compose parties.

What the UCLA school describes is a conceptual fusion of parties and interest groups.

This school of thought has taken a major step forward in advancing scholarly and popular discourse on parties by shedding new light on the critical role of interest groups in contemporary party politics.⁵⁴ And yet, there is reason for caution in pushing forth at full speed with the school's conception of parties as coalitions of policy-demanding groups. The closeness of group-party relationships varies a great deal over time and even at particular historical moments—too much, I have argued, to justify breaking down the conceptual wall between parties and groups.⁵⁵ The overlap between them is something we should measure empirically, not assume theoretically.

Of course, if I am to insist on defining parties and groups separately, I must face the question of how to distinguish between them. In contrast to parties, interest groups are traditionally thought to be focused on achieving particular policy outcomes. Schattschneider defines special interests in contrast to common interests, as the former are “shared by only a few people or a fraction of the community; they exclude others and may be adverse to them.”⁵⁶ When people with shared characteristics or values endeavor to enact new policies or preserve existing policies serving their common interests, they become *interest groups* in the political sense. Thus, two features distinguish parties from groups: their goals and their scope. Parties are concerned primarily with winning elections, while groups are concerned primarily with policy outcomes. And groups are relatively homogenous, while parties bring many interests together. Parties must do so in order to build winning coalitions in elections.

In the most widely cited articulation of group-centered theory, *The Party Decides*, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller point to Schattschneider as the UCLA school's closest ancestor. While they do share the notion that groups are “the raw material of politics,” they depart sharply in their vision of group-party fusion.⁵⁷ Schattschneider spent much of his career championing parties, arguing in his classic *Party Government* (1942) that strong parties were essential for democracy and cautioning against interest group power. Since parties must mobilize broad majorities, while groups guard unrepresentative minorities and “[sing] with a strong upper-class accent,” group power ultimately hurts the populace.⁵⁸ Not only did he see parties and groups as distinct types of institutions, he argued that they had an inverse relationship. He even went so far as to say “pressure groups thrive on the weaknesses of the parties.”⁵⁹ This concern undergirds *Party Government*

(continued...)

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