

THE HISTORICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF POLITICAL PARTIES

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Abstract: Classical theorists disapproved of political parties, but over time parties proved to be indispensable elements of representative democracy. We explore how and why parties emerged, and in doing so highlight three important revolutions in the historical development of political parties: an intellectual revolution, a legislative revolution, and an electoral revolution. Once parties became viable enterprises intellectually – that is, accepted as legitimate vehicles of constitutional opposition – ambitious politicians saw them as solutions to various problems that arose over time in conducting legislative business and contesting mass elections. Our focus is primarily on the world’s two oldest party systems – in the United Kingdom and United States – but we also discuss the French and German systems as well.

Key Words: political parties; legislative parties; electoral parties; mass parties; long coalitions; cartels; spoils system; machine politics; patronage

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Introduction

We discuss the historical transformation of political parties in terms of three “revolutionary” phases: an intellectual revolution of limited government that permitted the conceptual development of a constitutional opposition; a legislative revolution that was driven by the need to secure predictability in the face of the vagaries of majority rule and to address the socio-economic demands of the Industrial Revolution; and an electoral revolution that was occasioned by the advent of mass suffrage.

While our narrative touches on elements of both sociological and rational choice accounts of political parties, it does not evaluate their relative merits; that has been done elsewhere (see Boix 2008). Rather, our aim is to highlight two themes. The first is legislative in nature, and centers on the interaction between the pathologies of majority rule, legislative rules, and the incentive for leaders to organize political parties inside the legislature. The second is electoral in nature, and centers on the resource demands that a mass electorate made of political parties, the organizational strategies that parties adopted to meet these demands, and the implications of these organizational strategies for parties’ autonomy and the stability of the party system.

We develop these themes discursively, using examples drawn mainly from American and British history but also from Germany and France. We conclude that the legislative research agenda on

parties needs to pay closer attention to the symbiotic relationship between parties and legislative rules; correspondingly, the electoral research agenda should focus on the changing nature of candidate nominations and campaign financing.

The intellectual revolution

Classical writers, like Montesquieu and Madison, used “party” and “faction” interchangeably to signal their disapproval of political parties, but over the course of the 18th century a distinction began to be drawn between the two terms. Bolingbroke, for example, defined *party* as, “a national Division of Opinions, concerning the Form and Methods of Government, for the benefit of the whole Community,” whereas *faction* was, “a Set of Men arm’d with Power, and acting upon no one Principle of Party, or any Notion of Publick Good, but to preserve and share the Spoils amongst Themselves, as their only Cement” (quoted from Skjõnsberg 2016). Bolingbroke thus distinguished party and faction along three dimensions: scope, disposition, and motivation. A party was national in scope, ethical in disposition, and public-spirited in motivation; a faction, by contrast, was cliquish, venal, and selfish.

Burke provided the next evolution in thinking on parties. It is useful to quote fully the passage in which Burke defined parties because the first sentence is often used in isolation to imply that Burke understood parties as mere agglomerations of like-minded individuals; the full quote dispels this misconception:

Party is a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed. For my part, I find it impossible to conceive, that any one believes in his own politicks, or thinks them to be of any weight, who refuses to adopt the means of having them reduced into practice. It is the business of the speculative philosopher to mark the proper ends of Government. It is the business of the politician, who is the philosopher in action, to find out proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect. Therefore every honourable connexion *will avow it as their first purpose, to pursue every just method to put the men who hold their opinions into such a condition as may enable them to carry their common plans into execution, with all the power and authority of the State* (our emphasis; Burke 1990 [1770]).

Burke’s last sentence makes clear that a party’s principal objective is to (legally) obtain power in order to enact its favored policies. Burke’s definition is thus much closer to Schumpeter’s (i.e., “a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power” [1942, 283]) than is commonly held. The key difference is whether parties are (and ought to be) animated by sincerely-held principles (Burke) or whether such principles are instrumental (hence malleable) to the pursuit of power (Schumpeter). The overriding similarity, however, is that parties pursue power.

Burke's definition was revolutionary because it explicitly rejected the traditional presumption that the organized pursuit of power was inherently discreditable or dangerous. This was a watershed in that such a definition admits the possibility of pluralism and constitutional opposition (Sartori 1976). Such a notion is itself contingent on a theory of limited government in that it is only when government is limited that the existence of an opposition party no longer threatens the regime. In this respect, parties are fundamentally liberal institutions (Caramani 2017). Once these ideas—of limited government, pluralism and constitutional opposition—were in place, the extension of the suffrage created incentives for parties to argue that their claims were validated by the support of a disinterested electorate and, consequently, to ensure that their claims attracted electoral support. In this manner, *responsible* government became *responsive* government (Sartori 1976).

This intellectual and institutional revolution took place at different speeds in different countries. In England, limited government arrived with the Glorious Revolution of 1689 in the form of a constitutional monarchy (North and Weingast 1989; Pincus 2009). Parties, albeit in the limited sense of groups of like-minded individuals, were active in Parliament in advance of 1689, of course. Their normative and constitutional status remained contentious, however, and these issues were argued out over the course of the 18th century by theorists and politicians alike. Hence, the argument over the place of parties in the constitution was itself part of the evolution of responsible government. The confidence convention was the most important aspect of this institutional evolution because it created powerful incentives for the Cabinet to organize its parliamentary supporters via a whipping system (Cox 1992).¹ We discuss the legislative and electoral consequences of the British intellectual acceptance of political parties below.

Other countries do not fit Sartori's model of party development so neatly. The United States secured limited government in 1776 and manhood suffrage by 1820. Yet the political elite scorned parties. When the Founding Fathers organized a convention in 1787 to dispense with the Articles of Confederation, "they framed a Constitution, which, among its other ends, was meant to control and counteract parties" (Hofstadter 1969, viii). They soon found parties as necessary to effective governance, however. By the mid-1790s, the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, were the party in power, while the Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, positioned themselves as the "legitimate opposition." This legitimacy—and the larger legitimacy of a "party system"—was solidified in 1800 when Jefferson defeated Adams for the presidency and "gave the world its first example of the peaceful transit of a government from the control of one popular party to another" (Hofstadter 1969, ix).

Continental Europe accepted liberal ideals of limited government and religious toleration only fitfully. In many countries, liberal constitutionalism had to contend with an overbearing Catholic Church, on one hand, and reactionary monarchs, on the other hand—all while questions of

¹ Seaward points to suggestive evidence of informal and sporadic whipping of MPs as early as the 1640s, but he dates the origins of today's formal whipping system to the late 1700s. See <https://historyofparliamentblog.wordpress.com/2019/07/19/whips-and-the-origins-of-parliamentary-whipping/>

national integration were still being fought out. Thus, we see flashes of democracy in 1848, with constituent assemblies elected at Frankfurt and Paris. The speed with which deputies in these assemblies grouped themselves into parties, and the extent to which parties structured the outcomes of these assemblies is a matter of current research (e.g., Sieberer and Herrmann 2019).

The French Second Empire that followed the abortive constitutional experiment of 1848 shows how an electoral regime based on universal suffrage can function without vibrant parties.² This was accomplished by a variety of means. First, the regime regularly employed plebsites rather than elections to legitimate its measures. Citizens were thus habituated to vote for proposals not parties. Second, when elections did occur, they were tightly managed by the government. Political meetings were limited, newspapers were censored, and civil servants oversaw the electoral machinery. These constraints deprived parties of the means to mobilize voters and imbued elections with a technocratic rather than a popular character. Finally, the regime's assembly was consultative in nature; the assembly could not initiate legislation, and ministers were responsible to the emperor. These arrangements undercut the incentives to organize parliamentary parties. Thus, a weak legislature generated weak incentives to organize parties. It presumably follows that strong legislatures—ones capable of checking executives and shaping legislation—generated strong incentives to organize parties.

The legislative revolution

The American Case, Part I: Instability and the Early Constitutional System

Aldrich (1995) argues that American political parties arose in response to the collective choice problems that hampered decision making in the early Congresses. The “Great Principle” of the day was how strong and active the federal government was to be, with “federalists” favoring a strong federal government and “anti-federalists” preferring a limited federal government. The federalists had a majority in the First Federal Congress (1789-91) but were unable to translate that support into legislative victories. This was because the anti-federalists succeeded in injecting into debates and votes secondary issues on which the federalists were internally divided. In this way, the anti-federalist minority stymied the federal majority.

The anti-federalist strategy made the choice space multidimensional so that policy questions involved *more* than just how strong the federal government was to be. In doing so, the anti-federalists exploited how majority rule operates in multidimensional policy spaces. As social choice theorists would later show, majority rule outcomes in one dimension are stable, with the median voter's ideal point as the equilibrium (Black 1958; Downs 1957). In two or more dimensions, however, majority rule outcomes are generally unstable (Plott 1967) and potentially “chaotic” in that there exists an agenda that can lead via some series of majority votes to any outcome in the policy space (McKelvey 1976). The real-world implication of these theoretical

² This section draws heavily on Price (2001).

results is that losers from a prior round of voting can always raise secondary issues or manipulate the agenda to disrupt an erstwhile majority and overturn prior decisions.

Hamilton recognized the problem and set about creating informal institutions (caucuses, floor leaders, and whip systems) to encourage federalists to focus *exclusively* on the Great Principle and ignore any secondary issues raised by anti-federalists. The federalists quickly began to win more often. Those informal institutions would combine with the underlying policy preferences of the federalists to form the core of an institutional political party—the Federalists. (Here, Aldrich adopts Schwartz’s (1989; 2021) definition of parties as “long coalitions” or “ones organized and elected to stick together on all or most legislative votes.”) The anti-federalists copied those informal institutions to form an opposition political party—the Republicans.³ By the Third Federal Congress (1793-95), Congressional voting was visibly partisan (Aldrich 1995; Hoadley 1980; 1986) and “The First Party System” was in operation.⁴

The American Case, Part II: Building the Cartel

By the early 20th Century, Congressional parties had transformed from “long coalitions” into *legislative cartels* (Cox and McCubbins 1993). A legislative cartel had an organizational part and a procedural part. Specifically, the majority party first had to reliably secure the key leadership positions in the House (and become an *organizational cartel*) before it could later tamp down on minority obstruction of legislative business (and become a *procedural cartel*).

This transformation began in the 1830s, when Martin Van Buren, the Democratic leader, recognized that House officer positions—principally the Speaker, but also the Printer and Clerk—controlled resources that could provide substantial benefits for the majority party (Jenkins and Stewart 2013). The problem was that officer elections exhibited the same type of instability that plagued voting in the early Congresses; dissident majority-party members sometimes undermined their party’s efforts to win the officer elections by voting with the minority for ideological reasons. Van Buren consequently pushed for House officer elections to be held by a public ballot rather than a secret ballot (as had been the case) and for the creation of a legislative party caucus. With the public ballot in place, the party caucus would be the venue for intra-party coordination on officer elections. Decisions made in caucus would be honored by all party members on the floor and enforced by a system of carrots and sticks: “losers” were compensated with various benefits (policy, committee assignments); dissidents were threatened with expulsion. By the late-1860s, the “binding party caucus on organizational matters” had fully developed into an equilibrium institution (Jenkins and Stewart 2013, 242). The majority party

³ The Republican Party of Jefferson and Madison would later be known as the Democratic-Republicans and then simply the Democrats.

⁴ Parties were the “structure” that kept vote decisions one-dimensional and prevented voting cycles from emerging. In other eras, other institutions – like standing committees – provided similar structure (Gamm and Shepsle 1989; Jenkins 1998). Poole and Rosenthal (1997) find that instability has not impacted congressional voting much over time; aside from a few short periods – the Era of Good Feelings, the early-1850s, and the 1960s – a one-dimensional spatial model explains congressional vote choices extremely well. This implies that structure (parties, committees, and rules) has done its job.

thus became an organizational cartel capable of controlling the selection of the Speaker and other key House officers.

Thomas B. Reed's (ME) innovative Speakership during the 51st Congress (1889-1891) was critical to completing the transformation of the majority party into a legislative cartel. Prior to Reed's ascension, the House majority used mechanisms like special orders to manage business, but they did little to stifle minority obstruction (Binder 1997; Dion 1997). Accordingly, Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue that House politics during this era was governed by a "dual veto," wherein dilatory threats (and often behavior) by the minority and antiquated procedural rules meant that the two major parties effectively shared agenda power. Reed sought to eliminate minority obstruction by changing the rules by which quorums were counted, reducing the quorum requirement in the Committee of the Whole, and granting the Speaker the discretion to rule dilatory motions out of order (Schickler 2001). He also transformed special orders into special rules, which further enhanced the authority of the Rules Committee (chaired by the Speaker) and increased the majority party's control over the legislative agenda. Thanks to these changes, the House majority party was able to govern more effectively and efficiently. Specifically, the majority party's ability to control the agenda in a *negative* way, by preventing legislative change that would harm a majority of its members, spiked with Reed's innovations and has remained strong ever since (Cox and McCubbins 2005). Reed's actions thus transformed the House majority party into a procedural cartel.⁵

The British Case: The Industrial Revolution and the Plenary Bottleneck

Cox (2006) explains the partisan character of democratic legislatures by asking us to conceive of a "legislative state of nature" in which all legislators enjoy unfettered access to the plenary agenda. In this institutional environment, legislators who are pressured to advance legislation that delivers particularistic benefits to their supporters invariably overproduce legislation and overconsume plenary time. The result of this collective action problem is a plenary bottleneck: legislation grinds to a halt because there is simply not enough time to process it.

Cox (1987) argues that this was the situation in which British MPs found themselves at the beginning of the 19th Century. The Cabinet was under pressure to pass legislation to deal with the wide-ranging consequences of the Industrial Revolution. The rules of the House, however, treated all MPs' bills equally, imposed few constraints on how many bills an MP might introduce, and did not limit how long an MP could speak on them. The result was a legislative backlog for which the Cabinet was held responsible. The Cabinet reacted by revising the House's procedural rules to prioritize government business and limit the legislative time available to private MPs. The knock-on effects of this procedural revolution were twofold. First, MPs came to realize that their legislative aims could only be achieved through their active support of either the Cabinet of the day or of a Shadow Cabinet that acted as a government-in-waiting (Eggers

⁵ In the Senate, the lack of a Speaker-like presiding officer made it more difficult for party leadership to emerge. Instead of a single individual, a group of four powerful Republican senators coordinated party activities in the early-1890s. Key to their success was the expanding power of the Republican caucus (Gamm and Smith 2002).

and Spirling 2018). Second, as MPs increasingly aligned themselves for or against the Cabinet of the day, voters came to vote for MPs on that same basis. The long-run and perhaps unintended consequence of the Commons' plenary bottleneck was thus a party-based form of responsible government and a party-oriented electorate.

Considering the Commons' plenary bottleneck in greater detail shows the full impact of the Industrial Revolution on the internal organization of the House of Commons and the development of British parties. Fraser (1960) records that the House considered 2,348 items of business in 1760, increasing to 8,270 items by 1806. Private bills comprised a significant fraction of this increase (Harris 2000, 134). A private bill related to a private locality or entity, and it typically granted the entity a charter to enclose land, engage in trade, incorporate, etc.; they were, in short, vital to economic activity. In the 18th Century, the practice was for economic actors to engage a member of Parliament (MP) to guide their private bill through the House (Cox 1987, 15-18). Take as an example the parliamentary and commercial activities of Francis Egerton, the 3rd Duke of Bridgewater. In 1759, Egerton secured the passage of a private bill to establish a canal to transport coal from his Lancashire mines to the Manchester market (Harris 2000, 95-97). Egerton was not an MP (he sat in the Lords) and appears to have relied on Marshe Dickinson – a longstanding friend for whom Egerton had secured election at Brackley, a borough that Egerton's family controlled⁶ – to guide his bill through the Commons. Egerton was thus able to achieve his aims without relying on parties to organize elections or to pass legislation; he simply worked through his own intermediaries.

Whether the main business of the 18th Century House was conducted on such an independent (as opposed to a partisan) basis is contentious, however, with suggestions that independence and cross-party cooperation was confined to local affairs (Holmes 1987). Bogart's (2018) analysis of 107 private bills relating to river navigation speaks to this controversy. Bogart states that it was routine for towns downstream on a river to protect their privileged position by opposing private bills that sought to extend the river's navigability upstream. His analysis shows that a river navigation bill was more likely to fail as the share of majority party MPs downstream of the sponsoring town increased (Bogart 2018, Table 8). The inference is that party connections mattered. How they mattered is less obvious, however. Prior to 1832, many towns were unrepresented in Parliament, crowded out by dozens of pocket boroughs where MPs (often dominant business or landowners in the locality) bought their seats. Hence, it is not clear whether Bogart's results indicate that by the mid-1700s "party" was an institution that independently adjudicated the contending claims of organized interests, or whether "party" was merely a vehicle for and captured by those same interests.

Political scientists describe such matters in terms of the "institutionalization" and "autonomy" of political parties (Polsby 1968). A party is institutionalized and autonomous when it can operate and sustain itself independently of wider social and economic interests. The question, then, is when and how could British parties prevent their MPs from acting independently or as proxies for outside interests in ways that threatened the party's organizational effectiveness or

⁶ See <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/constituencies/brackley>, and also <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/dickinson-marshe-1703-65>

continuity. As we noted above, the House undertook a variety of reforms between 1790 and 1850 that dramatically reduced MPs' scope for acting independently: MPs who held government contracts were made to give up their seats in 1792; government business was given priority on certain days in 1811; the right of MPs to petition the House was curtailed in 1835; and committees were reformed in 1855 so that MPs could not influence legislation on matters in which they had vested interests. That party cohesion in divisions rose only in advance of the First Reform Act (1832) suggests that these reforms did not immediately increase the leverage of cabinet ministers over backbenchers.⁷ By the late-1850s, however, party cohesion had recovered from the Conservatives' 1847 split over the Corn Laws to the fairly high levels of the 1830s. Moreover, recent research indicates that the increased party cohesion of the latter half of the 19th Century was due more to efficacious whipping than to MPs sorting themselves into two homogeneous groups (Eggers and Spirling 2016; Nowaki and Cox 2022; Cox 2022).

Thus by the 1860s the two main British parties were highly cohesive and fully capable of effecting well-defined policy programs. As the parties became more cohesive, they also became more internally differentiated and hierarchical (Cox 1987; Eggers and Spirling 2014, 2018; Goet 2021). That is, government parties dominated opposition parties in terms of agenda control and legislative production, and within all parties, front benchers overshadowed back benchers in terms of speaking time and legislative activity.

The electoral revolution

The arrival of universal (manhood) suffrage marked the third revolution in the development of political parties. Parties required more resources—money, candidates, and activists—to contest elections in an expansive electorate than a limited one, and as we relate below, they used a number of strategies to acquire these resources. A long-standing argument in the literature is that the strategies by which parties acquired the resources to contest elections shaped their capacity to respond to the diverse demands of a mass electorate (Duverger 1951; Panebianco 1988). This dynamic interacted with electoral rules to incentivize new parties to enter the party system (see Caramani 202X), with significant implications for the stability of the party system and, sometimes, of the regime itself.

While scholarly attention has focused on the role of the electoral formula in generating multi-party competition, variations in the historical timing and legal basis of enfranchisement are also theorized to shape electoral competition. Where mass suffrage occurred after the integration of the nation state, the class cleavage dominated and the social demand for new parties was attenuated (Duverger 1951; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). By contrast, in countries where the suffrage was extended before church-state, urban-rural, or center-periphery questions had been settled, opportunities arose for confessional, agrarian, or ethnic parties to enter the party system. In theory, the abolition of censitary voting in favor of manhood suffrage imparted an economic gradient to these entry opportunities because the poorer the district, the greater the

⁷ The rate and magnitude of the increase in party cohesion is hard to pin down because division lists were systematically recorded only after 1835. Popa (2015) provides a concise description of the condition and availability of recorded divisions from the 18th century.

proportion of new and receptive voters in the district electorate (on which see Hanlon 202X and Stasavage 202X). In practice, however, local notables frequently exploited their authority as mayors or justices of the peace to subvert voter registration or manipulate the ballot (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Mares 2015; Stokes et. al 2013). The suppression of political contestation was thus a viable electoral response to enfranchisement; it explains why elections in many rural areas and company towns went uncontested even after the franchise was extended (Caramani 2003), and further why inducing candidates to contest hostile districts was one of party leaders's major challenges.

The American Precedent: Van Buren's Spoils System and the Progressive Reaction

American politicians confronted the organizational challenge of a mass electorate in the 1820s, when most states dropped their property qualifications for voting (Engerman and Sokoloff 2005). The challenge was twofold: first, leaders had to mobilize large numbers of voters who were scattered across diverse districts; second, leaders had to find candidates to contest (and fund) elections in all these districts. The initial solution to this challenge was the *spoils system*. Developed in New York by Aaron Burr and scaled up to national politics by his protege, Martin Van Buren, the spoils system was a distributive bargain: legislators provided legislative support in exchange for control of government patronage in their respective districts. This patronage—which consisted of local government appointments, post office jobs, and the like—was in turn distributed to local activists in exchange for their assistance in organizing elections. This system met two objectives: first, it provided a disciplined block of legislative support; second, it exploited the resources and the geographic reach of the state to meet the challenges of conducting campaigns in the context of a mass electorate.

Van Buren's most important innovation was to link the spoils system to the convention system for nominating candidates. The chief product of the convention was the party (or "slip") ticket, which listed the party's nominees for every level of elective office. The party ticket served to unite the local, state and national elements of the Democratic coalition, but it can also be understood as a contractual expression of the distributive bargain on which the Democratic party was based.

Van Buren was the first politician to organize the distribution of patronage so that it generated a mutually reinforcing relationship between the party's legislative and electoral coalitions. Government patronage was used to secure party discipline in the legislative chamber; that legislative power was then used to direct more patronage to legislators' districts; recipients of that patronage then mobilized voters and fought elections on the legislator's behalf. The system allowed American parties to contest mass elections without the need to develop and adhere to detailed policy platforms. Over time, the spoils system evolved into machine politics with spoils distributed based on electoral performance: those who delivered more votes received more lucrative sinecures (James 2006). The political efficacy of this organizational model is evidenced by the fact that it was widely copied and remains in effect in many countries (Piattoni 2001; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Robinson and Verdier 2013).

American political machines were strongest in the large cities of the Northeast where they could exploit dense social networks to monitor and mobilize voters. By contrast, they were much weaker in the Western states. This was so for two reasons. First (and consistent with Lipset and Rokkan's argument), voters in the West were integrated into the national electorate in piecemeal fashion, as Western territories acquired statehood over the latter half of the 19th century. Second, the entry of the Republican and Democratic political machines into the Western states was retarded by the railway companies, which had little interest in voter mobilization (Shefter 1983); they used their economic position and communications networks to stage-manage the elections of pliant state assemblies. The large pools of unmobilized voters in these later-integrated Western states served as the electoral cores of a series of third-party efforts, including the Greenbacks, Populists, and Progressives. (A similar story could be told about Canada, with agrarian and populist third-parties emerging from a later-integrated west).⁸

These third-parties enjoyed significant electoral success at local and state levels, but not at the national level. Nonetheless – and despite significant differences in their economic policies and social bases – the activists embodying these third parties sought a series of institutional reforms that eventually overturned the caucus and convention systems at the heart of machine politics. These reforms had their biggest “bite” during the Progressive Era (1870-1920). Two of them, the introduction of direct primaries and the direct election of U.S. senators, are worth further discussion.

Direct primaries, which were adopted by a majority of states in the first two decades of the 20th century, allowed voters to choose party nominees directly. This was especially important in states that were one-party dominated and citizens were little more than spectators. Hirano and Snyder (2019) find that direct primaries were almost always adopted when one party had a distinct electoral advantage; indeed, they find that in 40 of 45 cases, primaries were adopted when one party had unified control of state government. Yet Ware (2002) cautions us to avoid claiming that progressive reformers *forced* change (via primaries) onto the parties. He argues that the parties themselves had incentives to move beyond the convention system, as intra-party conflict over convention decisions (at different levels) had been increasing for some time. Party leaders needed nominations to be viewed as legitimate – that is, free of fraud and corruption – by co-partisans, so that nomination “losers” and their factions would continue mobilizing voters (and working generally) for the party. Direct primaries were seen as an institutional reform that provided that intra-party legitimacy. Thus direct primaries generated benefits both externally (to anti-party reformers) and internally (to party leaders).

The direct election of U.S. senators – instead of indirect election by state legislatures (where party caucuses controlled the nominations) – was a reform effort pushed at the same time as party primaries. In addition to making the Senate more reflective of the popular will, progressive reformers sought direct election to limit corruption in the electoral process by making influence costlier, since it had to be spread over many more people, and to avoid the increasingly common seat vacancies that resulted from deadlocked state legislatures (Schiller and Stewart

⁸ There is an extensive literature on these agrarian populist movements, e.g. Lipset (1950), Leithner (1993), Lewis-Beck (1977), Mayhew (1972), and McGuire (1981).

2015). And there is reason to believe direct election (following the adoption of the 17th Amendment to the Constitution in 1913) was successful: seat vacancies became less common and the ostensible “buying” of senators became harder. Over time, Senate elections more closely mirrored House and presidential elections (Engstrom and Kernell 2014) and senators shifted their voting behavior toward the median voter in their state electorate (Gailmard and Jenkins 2009). But, like the story of direct primaries, the direct election of senators should not be seen as something that was forced on the parties. As Schiller and Stewart (2015, 11) note, the major parties came to realize that direct elections would “enable them to knockout minor parties more easily in the contest for Senate seats.” This gave them a strong incentive to support the change to direct elections.

Organic Innovation and mass parties in Britain

In Britain, organizational innovation to address the challenge of a mass electorate quickly followed the passage of the 1832 Reform Act. Recognizing the importance of registering voters under the new franchise, party leaders encouraged the establishment of local registration societies (Salmon 2002). The Carleton and Reform clubs were also founded shortly after the passage of the 1832 Reform Act. The two clubs were less headquarters than clearinghouses where prospective candidates could be matched to parliamentary constituencies (Gash 1983; Thevoz 2018). These initial developments were not centrally directed, however; the rise of voter registration societies was organic, the nomination of candidates remained the preserve of local notables, and funding remained largely the preserve (and burden) of individual candidates (Gash 1953; Gash 1983; Newbould 1985). Thus, up until 1867 British parties operated as networks in which central party figures coordinated with provincial notables rather than as centralized and hierarchical bureaucracies.

The further extension of the suffrage in 1867 provoked the invention of the Birmingham Caucus. The caucus was a grass-roots organization that mobilized and coordinated Liberal voters, and which over time came to exert influence over the nomination of Liberal candidates. The caucus model was transplanted in other localities, and its influence on nominations eventually placed in the hands of the Liberal whip. The Conservative party developed the Primrose League as a counterpart to the Birmingham Caucus (Ostrogorski 1902), and by the late-nineteenth century Conservative whips were also able to influence the odds of favored candidates being adopted in safe seats (Cox and Nowaki 2022).

The passage of the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act pushed the British Liberal and Conservative parties to expand and diversify their resource base. The Act limited the amounts that individual candidates could spend on their own elections, and thus made the central parties principally responsible for campaign finances. The National Liberal Federation (the descendant of the Birmingham Caucus) and the Primrose League provided the Liberals and Conservatives, respectively, with volunteers and subscriptions. These resources were supplemented by contributions from business, industry, and labor, who increasingly pushed the parties to develop programmatic policies (Kuo 2018). Consequently, by the 1890s, the Liberals and Conservatives

were well-funded mass organizations that fought elections on a programmatic basis.⁹ A substantial fraction of this funding was nonetheless obtained via a species of patronage: the sale of aristocratic titles (Hanham 1960). These lucrative transactions were handled by the party whips, with the funds directed to the central parties' coffers (Jenkins 1990).

The organizational changes generated by the extension of the franchise in Britain were important for three reasons. First, the shift in financial capacity and responsibility from candidates to central parties gave leaders greater control over candidate nominations. The standard view is that British party leaders' increased control over nominations reinforced party discipline, but just as importantly it enabled leaders to recruit candidates to contest hard-to-win districts. This was critical to the nationalization of British electoral politics. Second, the development of extra-parliamentary parties provided British party leaders with the labor if not the capital to contest elections. Third, these changes allowed the parties to build broad coalitions with civil society and interest groups, without making them over-reliant on any one element of their support coalitions. In short, these organizational changes enhanced party autonomy.

Organizational Stagnation: Germany's Conservative and Liberal Parties

The importance of a party's organization to its autonomy is demonstrated by the experience of the German Conservative and Liberal parties. The German Conservative Party (*Deutschkonservative Partei* [DKP]) was by dint of its opposition to democratic reform and its agricultural protectionism, increasingly confined to rural East Elbia. In this region, the DKP could rely on its candidates' positions as major landowners and local government officials (*Landräte*) to stifle and subvert electoral competition. However, when Bismark was removed from power in 1890, the anti-socialist laws were allowed to expire and Prussian municipal government was reformed. The DKP was simultaneously deprived of a powerful government ally, exposed to the full force of the SPD, and left with weakened control over local government. Without a popular base, the DKP was wholly reliant on the Agrarian League (*Bunde der Landwirte* [BdL]) for resources. The BdL hamstrung the DKP's ability to moderate its economic policies to widen its electoral appeal. This made the party even more reliant on the restricted Prussian franchise and electoral intimidation to win elections. The result was a vicious cycle: reliance on state-assisted electoral fraud led the DKP to ignore the construction of a mass base, leaving it more vulnerable to the demands of the BdL, which further limited the DKP's capacity to broaden its electoral appeal and made it even more reliant on electoral subversion. In this fashion, Ziblatt (2017) argues, the DKP became an implacable opponent of electoral democracy.

Kreuzer (2001) offers a similar analysis of the German Liberal parties (the *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* [DDP] and the *Deutsche Volkspartei* [DVP]) in the Weimar era. The Liberals were caught between the deflationary demands of their urban middle-class electorate and the inflationary demands of their industrial and business backers. The large size of the

⁹ Various scholars find that the central parties' financial capacities increased ten-fold between the 1840s and 1910s (Gash 1953; Hanham 1960; Jenkins 1990; Rix 2016; Kam and Newson 2021).

Weimar's electoral districts under proportional representation, and its frequent elections and referenda, resulted in massive electioneering costs that the DDP's and DVP's small membership could not cover. This left the two Liberal parties reliant on the financial backing of the *Kuratorium*, a business lobby, which demanded both strict adherence to its preferred policies and also safe positions on the party list for its own members—to ensure that the DDP and DVP pursued those policies in the legislature. The result, as with the DKP, was that the two parties were wholly captured by an interest group that was indifferent to the concerns of liberal voters. The DDP and DVP slid into electoral irrelevance.

The corollary of the German Conservatives and Liberals incapacity to retain their electoral support is that their electorates were available for the Nazis to capture. In this fashion, the organizational strategies that parties adopted to mobilize voters in the context of a mass electorate shaped their autonomy vis-a-vis socio-economic interests. Where these strategies see parties cede their autonomy to interest groups, they lose their capacity to retain electoral support, and this opens the door to new parties.

Conclusion

The Legislative Research Agenda

We have argued that parties originated in “strong” legislatures, that is, legislatures that were capable of checking their executive counterparts, and without which the executive could not govern effectively. The first legislatures to enjoy this kind of strength were the British House of Commons and the U.S. Congress—and this is where we first see parties emerge. By the late-1700s, American and British legislators appreciated that their assemblies were susceptible to a set of pathologies, notably, the unpredictability of majority rule and the inefficiency of egalitarian and open-ended agenda rules. There is a broad consensus that the groups of like-minded politicians who came together to control access to the parliamentary agenda were the general solution to these problems. These procedural coalitions—that is, parties—operated by altering legislative rules to obtain disproportionate influence over both the distribution of perks and access to the legislative agenda. Leaders then selectively distributed perks and legislative access to maintain members' loyalty to the procedural coalition. This relationship explains the historical correlation and interplay between legislative rules, on one hand, and the existence and strength of legislative parties, on the other.

While this interpretation of the development and *raison d'être* of political parties enjoys a broad scholarly consensus, it is worth emphasizing that it remains in many places a post-hoc induction based on two canonical cases. Thus, one of the areas most pressing needs is simply for data on the evolution of parties outside the US and Britain. This is because our continued reliance on just a few canonical cases leaves us poorly positioned to discern whether we are eliding idiosyncratic historical outcomes with the evolution of a set of common institutional responses to the generic problems of majority rule.

This straightforward research agenda of digitizing and analyzing roll calls of a more diverse set of national cases is proceeding (e.g., Hansen and Debus 2012; Godbout and Høyland 2013; Høyland, Bjørn and Søyland, Martin G., 2019). Ideally, the development of these efforts will be as comprehensive as the renewed research agenda on British political development (Spirling 2014). Students of British political development are now able to draw on a variety of electronic resources to link together MPs' voting records, biographies, speeches, and statistical portraits of their constituencies and constituents. These resources have facilitated increasingly sophisticated descriptions of the evolution of British political parties in the House of Commons (e.g., Eggers and Spirling 2016; Cox 2022).

In future work, we need to think harder about – or simply describe in a more systematic and detailed way – the interplay between legislative rules and party organization (e.g., Goet 2021). The current thinking is that defective or incomplete rules generate incentives to construct alternative institutions like parties. But once parties are formed, they often make further changes. Party leaders alter existing rules to strengthen their hold over their followers, and established parties do the same to limit the power of minor parties or to foreclose the entry of new parties. Of course, as in the American case, minor parties also seek to change the rules of the game to enhance their own electoral prospects.

The Electoral Research Agenda

Party theorists have long argued not just that “parties matter” but that how a party is organized matters. Our take on this idea is that the strategy by which a party acquires the resources necessary to contest elections in the context of a mass electorate affects the party's ability to attract, turn out at the polls, and retain the loyalty of voters. These resources included money, increasingly derived from interest groups rather than wealthy individuals; workers, preferably voluntary in nature; and candidates.

Parties responded to the demands of a mass electorate in several ways: some rejected electoral democracy and fell back on electoral subversion; others transformed themselves into political machines that exploited state patronage; others developed into programmatic mass parties; and yet others forged close links with economic interest groups. Our comparison of American, British, and German parties suggests that two aspects of these organizational strategies were critical to party autonomy: election funding and candidate nominations.

A dominant strand of the historical democratization literature focuses on the decline of clientelism and the concomitant rise of programmatic electoral competition. Politics in the first-wave democracies was undoubtedly “cleaner” by the end of the 19th century than it was at the beginning. The arrival of the mass electorate nonetheless ensured that money remained critical to elections – and that parties required much more of it. This begs the questions: who provided these funds and who controlled them? How candidates were nominated and who controlled those nominations are similarly important questions. Contemporary scholars tend to view the control of candidate nominations as a bulwark of party discipline: it is stronger where leaders exercise central control over nominations, and weaker where they do not. Such a perspective

assumes an over-supply of candidates. By contrast, one of the historical party leader's major challenges was finding enough candidates to contest elections, especially in hard-to-win districts. The capacity of existing parties to field candidates was critical to electoral mobilization and to preventing new competitors from emerging. Together, these observations suggest a research agenda focused on intra-party battles over candidate nominations and the changing relationship of interest groups with parties.

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