

TOWARD A MORE RESPONSIBLE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

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The American people are today faced with one of the most acute crises in their history. Our ability to measure up to the situation in which we find ourselves is being severely tested. The end of this tremendous struggle is nowhere in sight. Many of us can remember the slogan so often repeated in the thirties, "Prosperity is just around the corner." The implication was that we were dealing with a situation that could be overcome by our own efforts and before any considerable length of time had elapsed.

Although many would doubt the wisdom of much that was done to overcome that crisis, the second great world war, almost within the same generation, did a great deal to alleviate the depressed condition of our industry and agriculture and to put American workers back at their jobs. But the war created an even greater crisis, a more difficult situation, than the depression. Now we are faced with the alternative of either a third world war, far more destructive and more horrible than all the wars of the past taken together, or a generation of uneasy peace, of huge armament programs, of millions of American workers in some branch of the armed services, and of unprecedented demands upon our government with the resultant extensive controls and huge expenditures.

The purpose of this discussion is to examine only one of the fundamental institutions with which we

are trying to meet today's conditions and to make some suggestions as to how that institution can be improved. I shall refer frequently to the report of the Committee on Political Parties of the American Political Science Association, which was published by that organization this past year and which bears the same title as the present paper. That report deserves careful study. It was prepared by some of the leading scholars in the United States in the field of political parties. The chairman of the committee was E. E. Schattschneider of Wesleyan University, the author of another highly valuable and important work on the subject of responsible party government which bears the title *Party Government* and was published in 1942. Although this work was preceded by the efforts of such great men as Woodrow Wilson and Henry Jones Ford, it may well have served as a starting point for the present efforts in this field. Other members of the committee of the Association included Professors Berdahl of the University of Illinois, Barclay of Stanford, Fainsod of Harvard, Shannon of the University of Kentucky, and a number of other equally competent scholars.

The Committee seems to have predicated its report on the supposed fact that most Americans accept the fundamental place of political parties in our democracy. This hardly seems to me to be the case. Rather it

seems that most people take the contrary position that political parties at best are only a necessary evil, that they perform few services in our democracy which could not be better performed without them, and that efforts directed at making them more responsible will only serve to increase the evil rather than accomplish anything good.

It seems sufficient here to say that, in spite of their failings, there is no other institution in our democratic system which can perform the functions now undertaken by political parties. The real misunderstanding seems to arise out of the fact that although most people recognize the work of political parties in the elective process, few people take notice of their efforts or of their function in the legislative or the administrative processes. Ample proof of this can clearly be seen in the functioning of the parties themselves, and in the fact that few treatments of political parties contain even a single chapter on parties in the legislative process. Many people look with scorn if not real alarm on any efforts by the party to claim (for party platform and party promises) the support of a party member in Congress or in the state legislature.

The public seems not only to hold a high regard for the independent voter but to hold in even higher esteem the member of Congress who can thus appeal to those in his constituency on any sort of program which might be expected to appeal to their local interests regardless of the effect that such a program might have on the interest of the nation or on the state as a whole. To put it bluntly: many people will argue

that the only real function which the political party can and should perform is to help get men elected to office.

ADVANTAGES

What are the advantages which might accrue to us in the solution of our present serious problems if our parties were to be made responsible institutions which function not only in the selection of government officials but also in the passing of legislation and in the administration of law?

(1) Such a responsible two-party system could enable us to develop a national solution for national problems with the resultant subordination of local, sectional, and group interests to national interests when such subordination was desirable.

(2) It would develop policies more representative of the will of the majority of the American people. If such policies were developed by responsible parties the people could pass on the coalitions thus formed at the time of the election with reasonable assurance that the party for which they voted would be willing to back its campaign promises with legislative and administrative action if it won majority support.

(3) Responsible two-party government could do much to help prevent present-day log-rolling and pork-barrel tactics with their resultant extravagance and waste of public funds.

(4) Party responsibility could help to provide relief for an already over-worked President.

This final point needs further clarification. Throughout the last two decades at least, and in times of crises prior to that, it has always

been thought necessary to turn over much of government to the executive. Congress often proved too unwieldy when the situation called for immediate and effective action. Such failure has led many people to fear not only greater centralization of government in one man but to fear also the actual breakdown of democratic government should the situation become acute.

The American Presidency is truly a man-killing position. The Committee of the American Political Science Association pointed this fact out clearly in their report. Their description of the problem follows in their own words:

The President has been charged with the preparation of the annual budget—the work plan of the Federal Government that goes to Congress for review and final determination. He has also been charged with the presentation of the government's economic program, submitted to Congress in the periodic economic reports of the President. He cannot relinquish the burden of establishing the general lines of American foreign policy. He has been charged with the development of coordinated policies to safeguard the country's national security.

In each of these large areas, the President is called upon to prepare the ground, to initiate the process of program formulation, to come forth with proposed programs for which he is prepared to assume political responsibility. As a result, Congress has the benefit of prior effort and concrete recommendations. This division of functions reflects a sound formula, evolved in practical experience. But to apply it effectively, somewhere dependable political support has to be built up for the governmental program as finally adopted. When there is no other place to get that done, when the political parties fail to do it, it is tempting once more to turn to the President.

But the President has no magic wand. If he acts in pursuit of a broad program that has been democratically formulated in his party, nearly all of his party is likely to put itself behind the measures called for by the pro-

gram. Lacking his party's support for a broad program, the President is left with only one course. He can attempt to fill the void caused by the absence of an effective party program by working up a broad political program of his own.

Yet can there be much doubt about the ultimate implications? When the President's program actually is the sole program in this sense, either his party becomes a flock of sheep or the party falls apart. In effect this concept of the presidency disposes of the party system by making the President reach directly for the support of a majority of the voters. It favors a President who exploits skillfully the arts of demagoguery, who uses the whole country as his political backyard, and who does not mind turning it into the embodiment of personal government.¹

Our dependence upon the President for such a program subjects the program to all the limitations which are inherent in the vision and capacity of a single man to comprehend the needs of the country, to measure the will of the people, and to formulate such a program of action. I sincerely believe that no president can be equal to the task in the days ahead.

BARRIERS

The next step is to consider some of the more important barriers to such a system.

(1) The attitude of the people, their unwillingness to back party responsibility on the part of their elected officials when to do so would cause local or group interests to suffer. I am reminded of Mr. Dooley's comments on the tariff:

"I loathe the 'tariff'", says the Senator fr'm Virginya. "Fr'm arliest days I was brought up to look on it with pizenous hatred. At miny a conviction ye cud hear me whoopin agin' it. But if there is such a lot iv this mon-

¹ Toward A more Responsible Two-Party System, Supplement, *The American Political Science Review*, pp. 93, 94.

strous iniquity passin' around, don't Virginia get none! Gintlemen, I do not ask, I demand rights f'r me commonwealth. I will talk here ontill July fourth, nineteen hundred and eighty-two, agin' the proposed hellish tax on feather beds onless somethin' is done f'r the tamarack bark iv old Virginia."

"Th' argymnt iv the Sinitor fr'm Virginia are onanswerable," says Sinitor Aldrich. "Wud it be agreeable to me Dimmycratic colleague to put both feather beds an' his what-ye-call-it in the same item?"

"In such circumstances," says the Sinitor fr'm Virginia, "I would be forced to waive me almost insane prejudice agin' th' hellish doctrines iv the distinguished Sinitor fr'm Rhode Island," says he.²

Or perhaps the position of the American people on sectional and group's interests vs. national and party interests is better described by Odegard and Helms in the following words:

The great issues of States' Rights, Liberty, Individualism, and so forth, with which party leaders seek to identify themselves cease to be symbols of rival party *Weltanschauungen* and become rationalizations from behind which the competing blocs snipe at legislation deemed hostile to their interests. So long as the exercise of national power is promotional in character we hear no complaint, from the groups whose interests are thus promoted, against federal centralization. The representatives of business in both parties do not object to federal action in the field of trade promotion, or tariff protection. But when the national government seeks to protect workers in their liberty and the right to organize, it is decried as an unwarranted assault upon individual liberty and the rights of the states. When the automobile industry views with alarm the mounting burden of governmental costs it is not thinking of road-building activities. And so with the agrarian interests. Throughout most of our history they have carried the torch of state's rights. But they have not seriously objected to federal legislation conceived in the interest of agriculture. Government aid in the

form of unemployment relief, old age pensions and social insurance, say the representatives of business, will destroy individual initiative. But subsidies to banks, railroads, shipping and airplane companies are said to encourage rather than stifle the spark of individual enterprise.³

(2) The efforts of pressure groups in demanding special favors of administrators and legislators is well known to us all. We have witnessed a revealing investigation of the efforts of borrowers to bring pressure to bear upon government officials who they thought could influence their chances to get loans from the RFC. If such cases were isolated and confined only to that organization they might be more spectacular, but the total effect would be very much less alarming. Quite the contrary, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year by pressure groups to prevent the enacting of legislation which they consider unfavorable to their special interests regardless of the interests of the majority. A number of case studies have been made of bills which have been long delayed or even finally defeated by the efforts of a very small minority of the voters.

One of the most revealing studies of this kind which I have seen is recorded in the book *Congress on Trial* by James M. Burns. The following is Mr. Burns' own description of what happened to one important piece of legislation, the Fair Labor Standards Act:

Viewing the American political scene early in 1937, one might have assumed that no bill would have an easier journey through Congress than one seeking to shorten the working day and to abolish starvation wages. This reform, which had been in effect in other countries for years, was long

² Quoted in Odegard, Peter, *American Public Mind*, p. 142.

³ Odegard and Helms, *American Politics*, p. 155.

overdue in the United States. Following the 1936 elections the political setting seemed ideal for quick action by President and Congress. Both party platforms had made pious gestures toward the need for improved wage and hour standards. Candidate Roosevelt had proclaimed that he "had only just begun to fight" for improved working conditions, and in forty-six states the voters had endorsed his stand. His party dominated Congress, holding nearly four-fifths of the seats in each Chamber. Opposition strength was so low that only two Republicans were on the 13-man Committee on Education and Labor in the Senate.

As it turned out, the Fair Labor Standards Act emerged only after a stormy twelve-month period of gestation. Surviving a series of near miscarriages and attempted abortions during three separate sessions of Congress, the infant bill finally appeared, crippled, undersized, and hardly recognizable to its progenitors.⁴

The story told by Mr. Burns of what happened to this important piece of legislation backed by the platforms of both parties and strongly urged by the President is a chronicle of the efforts of one pressure group after another using every means at its disposal to defeat the will of the majority. They almost succeeded.

(3) But the greatest barrier to a responsible two-party system outside the parties themselves is the decentralized organization and procedure of Congress. Such decentralized effort, such legislation "by the piece," makes the efforts of the parties almost impossible. Three things in the organization and procedure of Congress serve as effective barriers to party responsibility.

First, the committee system with its attendant diffusion of responsibility results in the making of many important decisions in thirty-five places behind closed doors and be-

yond the reach of party leaders and citizens alike. No party organization can control the efforts of its members under such conditions. Furthermore the decisions so made, while not final, are of the utmost importance in the entire legislative process.

Second, the practice of giving prospective legislation to committees without first considering the effect of such legislation upon national interests, the party's program of legislation, or upon other important issues before the American people serves to further weaken the efforts of the parties to be responsible.

Third, the seniority rule for selection of committee chairmen serves to elevate Congressmen to positions of great importance regardless of their willingness to support party programs. The facts seem to indicate that at least as often as not the chairmen of important committees are almost entirely opposed to the party program and unwilling to support even the most insignificant planks in that platform.

PARTY WEAKNESS

No attention thus far has been given to the weaknesses of the party itself. In failing to mention them I do not want to create the impression that such weaknesses do not exist. Schattschneider points out that decentralization is characteristic of American political parties. Others have argued that rather than one Republican and one Democratic party we should speak of at least 48 Republican and 48 Democratic parties. A strong case could be made for increasing that number. Nor can it be said that American parties have

⁴ Burns, James M., *Congress on Trial*, p. 69.

made great efforts to strengthen themselves from within. The only important national institutions of our parties are those which are concerned with the conduct of Presidential elections and have nothing to do with carrying out party programs of action.

We are all aware of the important position of the great party bosses. Such captains of political power are far more important and far better known than members of the national committees, unless they happen to be one and the same person, or even the national chairman of either party. Furthermore the decentralization of power and the lack of effective control over them leaves such bosses the real power in the parties, able to dictate party policies and to defeat any efforts which would result in action contrary to their supposed interests.

In fact, it might be argued that American political parties have shown great reluctance to take on responsibility for formulating and carrying into effect either a state-wide or a national program of legislation or administration.

STEPS TO PARTY RESPONSIBILITY

I come now to the real purpose of this paper, to discuss steps which could lead to greater party responsibility. The suggestions are somewhat the same as those presented by the Committee of the American Political Science Association in its report, which, I believe, has considerable merit. The Association points out that such suggestions do not present panaceas but, if adopted individually, will help to improve the situation.

The committee's suggestions are presented under the following headings: 1. National party organization, 2. Party platforms, 3. Party organization in congress, 4. Political participation, and 5. Research on political parties.

National Party Organization. — Foremost among the committee's suggestions under the heading of national party organization is that a national party council of 50 members be created to perform the following functions:

1. Consider and settle the larger problems of party management.
2. Propose a preliminary draft of the party platform to the national convention.
3. Interpret the platform in relation to current problems.
4. Choose for the national convention the group of party leaders outside the party organization.
5. Consider and make recommendations to appropriate party organs in respect to congressional candidates.
6. Make recommendations to the national convention, the national committee or other appropriate party organs with respect to conspicuous departures from general party decisions by state and local party organizations.

To this list of six functions might be added the suggestion that this council of 50 help formulate a program of legislation designed to serve the national interests, in line with the party platform after taking into account such modifications as public opinion seems to demand. Such a program of legislation should then be submitted to a caucus of that party's members in Congress, and when approved by such a body, become the basis for an over-all program of legislation backed by the Congressmen of that party.

It is important to note that this committee of 50 must be democrati-

cally selected and broadly representative of all of the elements which make up the party itself. It might be composed of the party's leaders in Congress, important state governors who are members of that party, members of the national committee, leaders of business, of agriculture, and of labor, the President or the defeated candidate for that office as the case may be, and members selected by the national convention to represent that larger body of party opinion.

It seems to me that organizing this committee of 50 would be the most important single step which could be taken by our parties to provide for greater responsibility and better, more democratic government.

The committee of the Association also suggested that the national convention should meet at least every two years and should take a greater part in the determination of party affairs and of party programs.

Party Platform.—The party platform should be formulated at least every two years and should represent the work and the considered opinion of party leaders both in and out of Congress. The committee of 50 should give considerable effort to initiation of the platform but the convention should serve as the final authority as to what it should contain. Public hearings on party platforms might well be held prior to their submission to the convention. State and national platforms should be integrated as far as possible and all contradictions which they might contain should be eliminated. Above all, Congressional candidates should be well aware of the platforms upon which they are seeking election.

As things stand now, the platform is not drawn up until after the nominating process is completed. Thus a candidate who seeks the nomination of his party is often not even aware of the stand his party will take on many important issues. So long as this remains the case it will be difficult if not impossible to hold candidates to party programs in the November elections and thereafter, nor will it be possible for local party members to select candidates in the primaries who will pledge themselves to carry out broad programs of action suggested and backed by the party.

Party Organization in Congress.—In Congress both the selection of committee chairmen and committee members should depend upon their willingness to support the party's program. Caucuses or conferences of each party's members should be held more often and should be the means by which details of party policy on pending legislation should be filled in. Decisions of the caucus would thus be decisions arrived at more democratically and would naturally have the support of a greater share of the membership. Such support would make party discipline as such very much less essential.

The procedure suggested here may be better understood if applied in outline to Congressional procedure in passing legislation.

The steps which I have advocated are as follows:

1. The party program should be formulated by the committee of 50 well in advance of the April primaries and be publicized to such an extent that candidates and local party members are clearly aware of its broad outlines.

2. Such a program would then be submitted to the party convention and, after due consideration and necessary changes, adopted by that body.
3. It would then become the program of that party throughout the nation in its November election. I would like to stress those words, *throughout the nation*. No platform should be adopted which is not sufficiently a compromise that each element of the party could back with conviction.
4. When approved by the majority of the voters of the nation the party caucus of members of that party in Congress should be called to meet with the committee of 50 to decide upon a program of legislation designed to carry out platform promises. The minority party should do likewise, formulating alternatives to the majority program.
5. The majority program and the minority alternatives would then become the basis for a debate on the floor of each house. Only after a vote was taken on the general outlines of such a program should the matters involved be submitted to the Congressional committees for action on the details. Committees would then serve in their proper place in the entire legislative program.
6. Following committee action the detailed legislation should then be examined and voted by Congress.

(These suggestions represent a somewhat more drastic change than was suggested by the Committee.)

No program of responsibility for political parties can be expected to succeed unless it eventually receives the backing of the rank and file of the voters of this nation. As social scientists we have the responsibility for studying the proposals made here and in other such studies and lending our support to those suggestions which we feel are most desirable. Through our efforts the citizens of this country may be made aware not only of the dangers of inaction, but also of the possibilities which lie ahead if satisfactory solutions are found which might make our parties more responsible.

Such action on our part requires not only effective teaching but also effective research. Changes which we advocate must be based upon careful consideration of all possible results and the result of careful study. It is our responsibility to offer the best possible suggestions for the solution of not only this problem but also to all social problems and make our efforts as effective as possible. We cannot sit back longer and expect matters to work themselves out.