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REVIEW ARTICLE

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In 1950 the Committee on Political Parties of the American Political Science Association (APSA) published 'Toward a more responsible two-party system' as a special supplement of the *American Political Science Review*.[1] It was a collective product, argued out and edited over four years, but the main author and inspiration was E.E. Schattschneider, a leading expert on parties and party government. Its main argument was that American parties were failing because they were fundamentally irresponsible. They were 'loose associations' that lacked coherent philosophies or ideologies or programmes and that were unable to act in the disciplined fashion necessary for effective governance. 'This is a very serious matter', the Report added, 'for it affects the very heartbeat of American democracy.' (p. v) To solve the problem, the APSA group made numerous recommendations, but the essence of the solution was more coherence and discipline.

Each of the three books reviewed here take this document as an important and rare intervention into policymaking by America's major professional organisation devoted to the study of politics. Wickham-Jones focuses closely on the making of the report itself, its assumptions and reception, and uses this story to reflect on the discipline and the study of parties and modes of government. Rosenfeld is more interested in how parties evolved since the report and he is clearly intrigued by the fact that the report called for greater coherence so as to distinguish the two parties but the recent increase in polarisation in American politics does not seem to have made parties more responsible or governance more effective. Rosenbluth and Shapiro are deeply disturbed by what they see as 'democracy's ills.' They, too, note the irony in recent developments: recurring efforts to 'bring politics closer to the people' and to make politicians 'more responsive to … voters' have 'been accompanied by dramatic increases in voter alienation from

politics'. Their recommendations are in much the same spirit as those in the 1950 report and are aimed at making parties and politicians more responsible.

The books are different, but not in conflict. Indeed, it is likely that the four authors would largely agree on substance. The differences, however, mean that the authors tell rather different stories. Wickham-Jones's story centres on political science as a discipline and a practice, but he situates it within the context of American and, to some extent, British politics in the late 1940s and 1950s. For all their efforts to be objective and explicitly bipartisan, he makes it clear that those who drafted the APSA report were intensely engaged in contemporary politics. Most were committed New Dealers and as such carried their enthusiasm into the postwar period, supporting Truman and his 'Fair Deal' and lamenting efforts to stymie it. An early battle in this struggle came over the Employment Act of 1946. Schattschneider and others had argued that for government to take responsibility for generating and maintaining full employment required that government itself be restructured into a more coherent institution and that more responsible parties were critical to achieving that. Over the next several years, it became obvious to the drafters of the report that the reformation of parties was imperative. What was particularly dysfunctional about parties in these years was that each was a coalition of what might be considered progressive and reactionary forces. The Republicans represented small-town, rural voters and conservative businessmen, particularly in the Midwest, opposed to the New Deal, but there were also more liberal Republicans, mostly urban and from the Northeast, within the party. Democrats were split in an even more harmful way, it was thought, because it was a coalition of Northern liberals and the working class with Southern racists who tended to have the seniority that brought them control of House and Senate committees. It was these conservative Democrats that Roosevelt sought to purge in 1938 and if the Democratic Party was ever to become ideologically coherent and disciplined, it was these politicians who would have to leave.

The difficulties that first Roosevelt and later Truman had with conservative Southern Democrats stood in stark contrast to how politics appeared to work in Britain. American political scientists typically knew more about Britain than about any other foreign country and were, in general, predisposed to admire its political institutions. This favourable view was much enhanced by the general election of 1945, which brought the Labour Party to power. Labour was not monolithic, but it was politically and ideologically coherent and, for the most part, disciplined. After 1945 it was able to implement a long list of promised reforms, from the creation of the National Health Service to the nationalisation of key industries. Westminster was clearly the model that the drafters of the APSA report had in mind. Wickham-Jones is very good on all this, and he manages to convey both the commitments and assumptions of Schattschneider and his collaborators and the seriousness and openness with which they went about their work.

The APSA report received a mixed reception and seemed to have little impact on parties and politics, although several cohorts of political scientists learned of it and occasionally referred to it. APSA itself chose to avoid such political interventions after the report and to remain scrupulously neutral on most issues, at least

until very recently.[2] But, of course, parties continued to evolve and transform themselves and in recent years parties have in key respects come to resemble the models held up in the report. Both Democrats and Republicans have become more disciplined, at least in Congress, and they have become more internally united on matters of ideology and policy. This development has not, however, resulted in parties becoming more responsible, representative and effective. Polarisation and gridlock are the more typical result and voters have responded with a significant withdrawal of faith in parties and their leaders and in politics more generally. Quite the opposite of what might have been expected from reading the initial report: it is now much more common to find scholars and commentators investigating the pathology of parties and the party system in the US, and elsewhere, than it is to find them praising the emergence of ideologically coherent and disciplined parties.

Sam Rosenfeld's book on *The polarizers* deals with the curious path that brought US parties to this state, while Rosenbluth and Shapiro consider the current condition and its manifestation in different polities and argue why it has happened and what might be done about it. Both books are compelling reading and they have much in common. In particular, they both emphasise the irony of how efforts to make politics more democratic and transparent led to changes in how parties operate that have had much the opposite effect, rendering them more responsible to funders or activists whose views are often at odds with large numbers of the parties' voters and thus less responsive to large swathes of the electorate. Rosenfeld tells the story historically, Rosenbluth and Shapiro adopt a more formal and comparative approach, though one also informed by history.

A distinctive feature of Rosenfeld's telling of the coming of polarisation is that he pays roughly equal attention to what was happening on the right and the left. The benefits of this strategy are obvious: it allows a fuller picture than a study focused on just the Republicans or the Democrats and one that illuminates developments that would otherwise be easily overlooked. The danger of the approach is that it might leave one with the sense that polarisation in America has been essentially bipartisan, with Democrats and Republicans equally responsible. As a number of recent studies have clearly shown, of course, polarisation has been strikingly asymmetrical: on almost any measure Republicans have moved further to the right than Democrats have moved to the left; ideological conformity has become much more the norm among Republicans than among Democrats – think about the anti-tax pledge that Grover Norquist has extracted from virtually all Republicans or the nearly slavish devotion to gun rights among Republicans, and the utter lack of bipartisanship on the part of Congressional Republicans. Rosenfeld is clearly aware of this imbalance, but his narrative is not structured so as to explain it. His approach is nonetheless extremely useful in what it does reveal.

Rosenfeld begins his account in the 1950s, when Democrats disappointed at the defeat of Adlai Stevenson urged him to act as a genuine leader of the opposition, which would mean giving direction to the party in Congress and the states even though he was not in office. That would require a party organisation with

more clout, endurance and expertise than in the past – a national party structure that would replace the decaying urban machines that had provided institutional support for the New Deal. Reforms would mean an increased role for what were called 'New Look' Democrats supported not by officeholders focused on reelection but by 'amateurs' committed to the party's programme and ideology. The most significant products of this effort were the Democratic Advisory Council and the mostly informal 'Finletter group'. The former issued a series of reports and policy recommendations in the late 1950s, but it was resisted and resented by Congressional Democrats like Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson, who merely tolerated its presence. It was duly abandoned after the election of 1960.

This failure suggested two enduring facts about American politics. The first was that reformers were likely to be routinely unhappy about the compromises that governing entailed and hence likely as well to propose institutional reforms to resolve problems that might well have been less the result of institutional shortcomings and more a product of divisions among voters. The second, and even more important, fact was that at the root of the frustrations experienced by liberal Democrats was the problem of race. It was race and civil rights, and the outsize influence of Southern Democrats in Congress that frustrated most efforts at reform. And the issue of race and civil rights was becoming more and not less important during the 1950s and would become even more salient in the decades following.

Republicans were similarly split over the extent to which the party should adhere to a set of basic principles. During the Eisenhower presidency, the answer seemed to be 'not much', and the former general's preference was for a 'third way' that would create a centrist 'modern Republicanism' that could appeal to a majority of voters. That vision had, however, little appeal to the Taft-supporting core of Republican activists and to an emerging group of suburban voters and right-wing students and conservative intellectuals. These groups responded more favourably to the 'movement conservative' views espoused by the National Review and people associated with it. They developed a vision based on 'fusion', a combination of traditional moral stances, intense anticommunism and laissez-faire. Equally important was the question of race. 'Modern Republicanism' aimed to maintain the party's commitment to civil rights, but the reaction to federal enforcement of Brown v Bd. of Education and other civil rights policies made that impossible. From the late 1940s on, there was open talk of 'realignment' in which Republicans would win over conservative Southern Democrats and create viable electoral competition in the South. That project would not triumph until much later, but the effects were felt much earlier. Movement conservatives helped to formulate and legitimise 'states' rights' arguments and resistance to civil rights and 'fusion' came to cover racial resentments and fears as well as less explosive social and cultural matters. All of this ferment would make itself visible and effective as part of Goldwater's capture of the presidential nomination in 1964. His massive defeat disguised the seriousness of the Republican drift to the right for another decade and a half, when Ronald Reagan was nominated for president, but it was at least as significant over the long term as the Democrats' recurrent but faltering interest in reforms.

The moves toward great ideological coherence and party discipline nevertheless continued among Democrats and it would be within the Democratic Party that the political consequences of the protests and unrest of the 1960s were most dramatically registered. Reform efforts persisted during the Kennedy administration, but their sole fruit was a change in how the House Rules Committee worked. The President himself was cautious about upsetting the entrenched power of Southern Democrats. Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy after his assassination, was even less likely to challenge the system. Moreover, his massive victory in 1964 and the legislative achievements that followed were a strong argument in favour of his preferred 'big-tent' politics and willingness to compromise. Johnson's undoing, and the discrediting of his approach to politics and party management, occurred despite his achievements on civil rights and 'great society' legislation and were due primarily to the upsurge of protest over civil rights and Vietnam.

The civil rights movement was a massive mobilisation, over decades, of African-Americans largely outside the political system; and the antiwar movement was a response to the war by people not typically active in party politics. Nevertheless, political parties were compelled to respond; and Democrats did so much more quickly and with more sympathy and enthusiasm than Republicans, who were basically hostile to both. And yet, the impact of civil rights and antiwar protests caused major ruptures among Democrats that had, at least in the short run, negative consequences electorally. While civil rights activism grew outside normal politics, the battle over the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party roiled the 1964 and 1968 conventions, and led the party to make reforms designed to prevent racial discrimination in their internal processes and to integrate African-American voters and activists in the party. The campaigns of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy were mainly about Vietnam and they drove Johnson from the field. Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's Vice President, nevertheless emerged as the nominee at the contentious convention in Chicago. The effect was to convince reformers – including civil rights advocates and opponents of the war – that the party's institutions and processes required a major opening up. The upshot was the McGovern/Fraser reforms that essentially transformed the nomination process by requiring state parties to hold caucuses or primaries and to select a more balanced and integrated slate of delegates. It was the death of the old Democratic Party organisations, especially in the south but also in big cities, and it would lead to the nomination of George McGovern in 1972. McGovern was crushed in the general election and there was predictable pushback against the reforms associated with his name, particularly from the moderate leadership of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Most of the changes in institutions, procedures and rules survived, however, and turned the Democrats into a fundamentally different party.

The Republican Party changed as well, but in very different ways. If reform among Democrats was produced in large part by the protests and social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, the transformation of the Republicans was mostly a reaction to these same forces. Nixon had sought to use the 'social

issue' – resentment against blacks, against feminism, against environmentalism, against the antiwar movement – as an electoral wedge, but his politics remained relatively flexible and non-ideological. After his disgrace and resignation over Watergate, a new generation of more ideologically-driven conservatives came to power within the party. Their rallying cry was not, as with the Democratic reformers, about opening up the party and giving a greater voice to members and voters but about the need for a more principled and coherent Republican Party. They were successors to Goldwater – fierce advocates of free markets and opponents of government spending and programmes, but to these traditional principles were added new and powerful resentments. The Republican turn to the right was also aided by two novel mobilisations: of evangelical Christians angry at the cultural liberalism of the 1960s and, more specifically, by abortion; and of big business, eager for less regulation and lower taxes. The number of PACs (political action committees), mostly linked to business, grew from 89 in 1974 to 1204 in 1980 (p. 204). Republicans drew heavily on these new sources of support, and they also profited from anti-tax movements like Proposition 13 that were mostly a response to inflation. Rosenfeld also makes much of the rise of 'supply-side economics' in the late 1970s. Its political usefulness came from the fact that it promised to reduce taxes but claimed that the effect would be economic growth that would generate additional revenue which could be used to pay for social security and other popular programmes. Before this, conservatives had felt compelled to make the honest admission that lower taxes meant cuts. The 'supply-side' argument made it possible for Republicans to offer reduced taxes with no negative consequences. By 1980, with the nomination and then victory of Ronald Reagan, the Republican Party was not only transformed but, for the moment, ascendant.

Though there were complications and detours along the way, the shifts toward more coherent, ideological and ultimately disciplined parties would lead to the highly polarised and dysfunctional politics of the present. That condition is the subject of Rosenbluth and Shapiro's thoughtful and elegant book on *Responsible parties*. They choose not to begin with the APSA report, but to end by recalling it and commending its analysis and recommendations. Their starting point is a paradox: the fact that successful efforts to reform politics and make parties and politicians more responsive to voters have been accompanied by 'dramatic increases in voter alienation from politics'. (p. 2) Their argument is that these phenomena are causally related. The authors acknowledge that 'Voter disaffection has many causes … ' and list growing inequality, slowing growth, the dire effects of the 2008 economic crisis and failed public policies on many fronts. But, they insist,

> the decentralizing democratic reforms are a separate, and important, source of voter disaffection. They feed political dysfunction and produce policies that are self-defeating for most voters … The seeming truism – that increasing voters' direct control of decisions and politicians enhances democratic accountability – has, in fact, the opposite effect. (pp. 2–3)

At the heart of their analysis is the belief that 'political parties are the core organs of democratic politics'. Unfortunately, they argue, reforms meant to enhance the power of ordinary voters have often weakened parties as organisations and as aggregators of interests and preferences by allowing motivated and ideologically-driven minorities, or narrow special interests, to capture de facto control of parties. Their preference is for 'two disciplined parties – or pre-election coalitions of parties capable of competing for broad public support on deliverable and responsible party platforms'. This is the classic 'Westminster system', which was also the model informing the analysis and recommendations of the APSA Report of 1950.

Rosenbluth and Shapiro know well enough the recent problems of parties and politics across the developed world, including in countries where the Westminster model once worked effectively. The substance of their book is a well-informed tour of the state of democratic politics and their political systems. Their key cases are the United States, the UK, Britain and France, but they also write intelligently of other parts of Europe, as well as of New Zealand, Italy, Japan, Mexico and parts of Latin America. Their descriptions, and the historical backgrounds they sketch in briefly, are unfailingly helpful and, at least to someone not expert in the politics of these varied places, convincing.

The account of the weakening of the Westminster model in its home in Britain, for example, starts off with the obvious point that, had the model worked as it was supposed to, the vote for Brexit would not have happened. It happened because the 'noisy right wing' of the Conservative Party pushed an overconfident Prime Minister to call for a vote that he and his Eurosceptic opponents and almost everyone else expected to fail. Behind this peculiar decision, however, was a long-term weakening of the leadership of both parties, reflected most clearly in shifting rules governing the selection of the party leader. The battle of how to choose a leader was most intense within the Labour Party, where in the 1970s and 1980s the left – organised fittingly as the 'Campaign for Labour Party Democracy' – pushed to give party members control over the leadership, over parliamentary candidates, and over the party's election manifesto. They were disillusioned over the fact that the Labour government elected in 1974 on a quite radical platform had been forced, by the global economic crisis and its effects on Britain, to tack to the centre. The campaign largely succeeded and resulted in an electoral college that greatly diluted the influence of the Parliamentary party. Further shifts occurred in the 1990s and after 2000 and the ultimate consequence was the election of Jeremy Corbyn, a previously marginal politician with very little support from Labour Members of Parliament. With some hesitation and delay, the Tories followed the same path, and its leaders were also weakened vis-à-vis party members. This weakness tempted David Cameron to try to go above the heads of party activists and the party's Eurosceptic right wing in a referendum. The result was Brexit.

Responsible parties provides equally apt assessments of political systems and parties elsewhere but, as the authors admit, 'Our brief tour of modern democratic politics has not been encouraging … ' (p. 247). If the Westminster model has developed in ways that weaken voter faith in the system, so, too, have the

varied systems in place in France or Germany or other European countries. The American system has flaws that stem from misguided efforts to democratise parties and elections, from the large number of veto points that hinder the making of wise public policy, and from the vast infusion of money into the system. What Rosenbluth and Shapiro offer as at least a partial solution, at least for Britain and the United States, is a redrawing of electoral districts so that each represents a microcosm of the electorate as a whole and candidates everywhere would need to craft appeals and develop policies that would transcend local interests and needs and speak instead to the needs of the country as a whole. In Britain, this would mainly require larger districts which could be more diverse. In the US., it would mean districts purposely designed for economic, social and ethnic diversity and eliminating gerrymandering. It is difficult to disagree with either suggestion. How feasible such reforms are may well be doubted; and it is not obvious that they would suffice to counter the powerful forces behind polarisation and the turn toward illiberalism.

It thus seems reasonable to ask whether the crisis of political parties – and some would say of democracy itself – has deeper causes than the poor design of party systems and electoral systems. The authors of each of these books hint at other factors – social, economic, racial and ethnic – that have helped bring about the current dysfunction. What they would all presumably agree on, therefore, is the importance of studying the evolution of these additional factors alongside the focus on parties and their development. These fine books would obviously be useful starting points for such a broader, and presumably more historical, study or set of studies.

Notes

1. It was also published as a book, Committee on Political Parties (1950). *Toward a more responsible two-party system*. New York: Rinehart.
2. See Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin, 'Negotiating agreements in politics,' American Political Science Association, 2013; and also Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin, (Eds.) (2016), *Political negotiation: A handbook*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

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