American Political Parties

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The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of Party Politics

The most frequently quoted line in the study of political parties was penned in 1942: “It should be flatly stated,” wrote political scientist E. E. Schattschneider, “that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties.”1 Schattschneider’s proclamation is found in nearly every text on political parties written since the 1940s (you just read it here), and most political scientists still accept his assertion as a fact. Yet, to the average citizen, political parties are synonymous with corruption, gridlock, and elitism. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that political parties have had a tortured and tormented history. Although Americans, along with the British, can claim to have invented the modern political party, few take pride in this accomplishment and most deplore their modern-day manifestations. According to a 2021 survey, 78 percent of Americans agree that “traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people like me”; only 20 percent disagree.2 Thus, it should come as no surprise that for more than two hundred years, political parties have searched for their rightful place in the American polity without ever quite finding it.

The Colonial Experience

Contemporary political parties have their roots in colonial America, where pre-Revolutionary War parties were little more than extensions of rival family clans such as the Wards and Hopkins in Rhode Island and the DeLanceys and Livingstons in New York. The contests between these clans invariably centered on an ideological dispute over the reach of royal authority in the colonies, which began almost as soon as the British ships carrying settlers to Jamestown left port in 1607. On one side were those loyal to the Crown and the appointed royal governors; those opposed were faithful to the elected colonial assemblies. Those supporting the Crown were often wealthy, having received immense land grants from the king, whereas those who did not share these special privileges
were tradesmen, small shop owners, and those who tilled the soil and became accustomed to the hardships of the New World. These poor, adventurous outcasts were suspicious of authority figures, especially the king, and their political cynicism was deep-seated.

Although these divisions structured colonial politics, localism and diversity prevented mature parties from forming. In pre-Revolutionary America, each colony had its own customs, history, and political identity. Moreover, there was a great diversity of individual interests among small-freehold farmers, plantation slaveholders, merchants, ship owners and builders, emerging manufacturers, and others. In addition, there were numerous ethnic and religious groups, divided between those who desired an aristocratic and consolidated republic and those who preferred a more democratic regime with power concentrated in the states.

The American Revolution forged these cleavages into a debate about self-governance. Tradesmen and laborers despised King George III and favored severing ties with Britain. Dubbed patriots, many advocated violence to end what they saw as British subjugation. Increased taxation, coupled with Royal disregard of their interests, prompted several high-profile protests, such as the Boston Tea Party of 1773 and the sinking of the Gaspee off the Rhode Island coast one year earlier. Edmund Burke, a member of the British House of Commons at the time, noted that “the state of America has been kept in continual agitation. Everything administered as [a] remedy to the public complaint, if it did not produce, was at least followed by, a heightening of the distemper.”

Colonial loyalists remained faithful to the British Crown, and they regarded the patriots as rabble-rousers. With the uprisings at Lexington and Concord in 1775, the contest between the patriots and loyalists became an outright civil war, with well-organized patriots winning control of state governments throughout the colonies. Through societies like the Sons of Liberty, they held rallies, sponsored “committees of correspondence” to spread their views, and recruited important community leaders to their cause. Patriot leader Thomas Paine espoused the virtues of self-rule in his 1776 pamphlet Common Sense, and John Adams organized his fellow Bostonians to fight against “foreign” influence in colonial affairs. Their activities were less focused on winning elections (there were few voters at the time) than on shaping public opinion.

Even before the Revolutionary War ended, Adams wrote to a correspondent, “There is nothing I dread so much as a division of the Republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader and converting measures in opposition to each other.” But enduring conflict over the structure and scope of post-Revolutionary governing institutions moved the new nation inexorably in
the direction of opposing camps. Differences that turned violent precipitated
the collapse of the Articles of Confederation, the young republic’s first govern-
ing document. For a brief time after the Revolution, a short-lived boom in im-
ports from England pushed the cost of agricultural and manufactured goods
downward. Money became scarce, resulting in a severe economic depression that
began in the late 1770s and lasted nearly a decade. Working-class citizens and
small farmers were hardest hit. Bank foreclosures skyrocketed. Most states levied
heavy taxes in a largely unsuccessful attempt to eliminate their wartime debts.
By the mid-1780s, the demands for action grew louder.

To avoid bloodshed, some states passed laws to postpone foreclosures and
allow farmers to use agricultural products to help pay loans. But none of these
actions eased the governing crisis, which came to a head when former army cap-
tain Daniel Shays led a mob of farmers against the state government of Massa-
chusetts in 1787. Their purpose was to prevent foreclosures on their debt-ridden
land by keeping the country courts of western Massachusetts from sitting until
the next election. The state militia eventually dispersed the mob, but the upris-
ing, which became known as Shays’s Rebellion, galvanized the states to convene
delegates in Philadelphia for the purpose of drafting a new governing document.

The differences underlying Shays’s Rebellion persisted during and after the
Constitutional Convention. The Constitution’s supporters, who became known
as Federalists, and those who opposed its ratification, dubbed Anti-Federalists,
carried their disputes from Independence Hall in Philadelphia to the various
state capitals. Anti-Federalists contended that representatives in any national
government must reflect a true picture of the people, possessing an intimate
knowledge of their circumstances and needs. This could only be achieved, they
argued, through small, relatively homogeneous republics such as those already
constructed in the existing states. One prominent Anti-Federalist spokesperson
asked, “Is it practicable for a country so large and so numerous . . . to elect a rep-
resentation that will speak their sentiments? . . . It certainly is not.” Federalists
believed that a representative republic was possible and desirable—especially if
populated by those “who possess [the] most wisdom to discern, and [the] most
virtue to pursue, the common good of society.”

Federalists vs. Democratic-Republicans

George Washington assumed the presidency in 1789 believing that parties were
unnecessary and that he could bypass them by creating an “enlightened admin-
istration.” To that end, Washington took into his Cabinet the leading political
antagonists of his time: Alexander Hamilton as treasury secretary and Thomas Jefferson as secretary of state. Less than a year after becoming president, Washington’s experiment of having a government without parties faltered. Hamilton and Jefferson vehemently disagreed in the Cabinet councils over how to manage the growing economic crisis.

Hamilton offered a sweeping plan to revive the sagging economy—the most controversial portion of which involved the complete assumption of debts incurred by the states during the Revolutionary War. To Hamilton and his Federalist followers, this policy was not only sound economics but good politics: by helping those who backed the revolt against King George III, confidence in the national government would be restored, and nearly $80 million would be put in the pockets of those most likely to reinvest in the nation’s tiny infrastructure. The result would be an increase in the flow of goods and services accompanied by a general rise in living standards.

To pay for full assumption, Hamilton proposed an excise tax on distilled spirits that became known as the Whiskey Tax. Because most whiskey producers were farmers in the South and West, this measure shifted the tax burden from northeastern business owners to small farmers—in effect, punishing those most likely to support Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans. Additionally, to ensure that enough money would fill the federal coffers, Hamilton advocated establishing a Bank of the United States that would make loans and collect interest payments while it curbed the diverse practices of state-chartered banks. The idea of a national bank, not one of the powers specifically given to the Congress in the Constitution, created enormous animosity between advocates of states’ rights and those seeking a more powerful national government—a dispute that would not be resolved until 1819 by the Supreme Court in the case of McCulloch v. Maryland.

Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans believed that federal assumption of state debts would create a windfall for the monied class, especially those living in New England. Opposition to Hamilton’s scheme was led in the House of Representatives by James Madison. He agreed with Hamilton that the economy needed strengthening, but he fretted about the shift of capital from the agricultural states (including his native Virginia) to a few northeastern manufacturing states. Moreover, Madison thought the Whiskey Tax would be a financial disaster for small farmers. His prediction came true in 1794, when farmers in western Pennsylvania caused an uprising that became popularly known as the Whiskey Insurrection. Madison corralled seventeen House members to his side—about one-quarter of the chamber. About the same number of legislators opposed him.
At the conclusion of the First Congress, an exasperated Hamilton exclaimed, “It was not till the last session that I became unequivocally convinced that Mr. Madison, cooperating with Mr. Jefferson, is at the head of a faction decidedly hostile to me and my administration; and actuated by views, in my judgment, subversive to the principles of good government and dangerous to the union, peace, and happiness of the country.” Vice President John Adams likewise bemoaned the “turbulent maneuvers” of factions that could “tie the hands and destroy the influence” of those who desired to promote the public interest. Adams told his son-in-law that the partisan battles between Hamilton and Jefferson had created a “division of sentiments over everything.”

The battle between Hamilton and Madison extended beyond the halls of Congress to the newspapers. In a move that foreshadowed the inextricable link that would develop between political parties and the mass media, Hamilton forged a close alliance with John Ward Fenno, publisher of the *Gazette of the United States*. Madison, not willing to let Fenno’s editorials go unanswered, persuaded Philip Freneau to edit a rival newspaper, the *National Gazette*. These party-controlled newspapers, although having a small number of subscribers (the *Gazette of the United States* had only 1,500), quickly became the most popular method of communicating with the party faithful. Together, they helped clarify this first battle between Hamiltonian nationalism and Jeffersonian localism, even as they exacerbated the animosity between these two leaders. The battle of epithets that played out in the country’s young newspapers ensured that partisanship would overflow the Washington administration to capture much of American society.

Despite intense congressional opposition, Hamilton’s economic plan won approval after some wily backroom maneuvering. Jefferson played a key behind-the-scenes role, endorsing the bill in exchange for assurances that the federal capital would be moved south from New York City to a new District of Columbia. But Jefferson’s role in advancing Hamilton’s initiative alienated his agrarian constituents. Seeking to mend political fences, Jefferson embarked on a tour with his ally James Madison during the spring of 1791 that was to have profound consequences for party development. Ostensibly, the duo set out on a nature tour to “observe the vegetation and wildlife in the region,” but their real purpose was to sample public opinion. In effect, they were testing the waters for the formation of a new political party. In New York City, Jefferson and Madison met with Robert Livingston and George Clinton—two longtime rivals of Hamilton—as well as Senator Aaron Burr, who was attempting to broaden his political influence.
Two years later, in 1793, Jefferson and Hamilton renewed their struggle. This time, the issue was how to respond to the French Revolution. To Jefferson and his followers, the French cry for “liberty, equality, and fraternity” was an extension of the American Revolution. Thomas Paine was so moved by the French revolutionaries that he journeyed to France to help the cause. At the same time, the German Republican Society was formed in Philadelphia. Its members sympathized with the French revolutionaries and believed that the American Revolution was losing momentum because of Hamilton, who, they claimed, was endangering the promise of democracy contained in the Declaration of Independence. By 1798, there were forty-three of these popular societies, organized in every state except New Hampshire and Georgia.

To Hamilton and his Federalist backers, the French Revolution signaled the emergence of anarchy and a rejection of traditional Christian values. They were horrified by the mob violence and feared that the emerging republican movement could lead America down the same path. Jefferson remarked that these different reactions to the French Revolution “kindled and brought forth the two [political] parties with an ardor which our own interests merely could never incite.” Jefferson dubbed Hamilton’s party the “monocrats.” For his part, Jefferson never referred to his party as the “Democrats” because the term conjured visions of mob rule; he preferred the name “Republicans” to describe his emerging political organization. Historians use the term Democratic-Republicans to describe Jefferson’s party.

When the bloody beheadings of the Terror of 1793 became known, reservations about the French experiment became widespread. Seeking to cool the growing political passions in his own country, President Washington sent James Monroe to Paris and John Jay to London to obtain treaties that would protect American shipping interests and keep the United States out of the European political thicket. But when Jay returned with an agreement that many believed was partial to the British, a political firestorm erupted. The treaty was so controversial that Washington waited six months before submitting it to the Senate for ratification in 1795, where it barely received the two-thirds majority required for passage.

By 1796, Hamilton’s controversial economic policies and the Jay Treaty divided public opinion and led to the creation of the nation’s first official political parties. The Federalists took their name to signal their intention to create a strong, centralized government. (Note that this group of Federalists does not refer to the supporters of the Constitution crafted in Philadelphia in 1787.) The opposing Democratic-Republicans wished to make clear that they were...
devoted to the people and “the republican principle” of representative governance. (During the Andrew Jackson era the Democratic-Republicans became known as the Democrats, which continues to exist today.) Most Federalists were affluent businessmen from the northeastern states, whereas Democratic-Republicans won backing from small farmers in the mid-Atlantic and southern states. The division proved so powerful that in 1796 a presidential election was hotly contested for the first time. Thomas Jefferson was so opposed to the Jay Treaty that he accepted the Democratic-Republican call to lend his name as a presidential candidate. The battle between Federalist John Adams and Democratic-Republican Jefferson was a close one, with Adams winning 71 electoral votes to Jefferson’s 68. Under the peculiar constitutional arrangements of the time—which did not anticipate or account for political party competition—runner-up Jefferson became vice president.

The 1796 Adams-Jefferson contest was more than a struggle between two men—it was a battle between two political organizations. Although there were scores of local political groups before 1796, some even using the term parties, the election of 1800 saw the emergence of political organizations as we know them today. Propelled by a strong conviction that the Federalist-controlled US government was abandoning sacred “republican principles,” Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans formed a party replete with grassroots supporters, which ran slates of candidates for numerous offices on a platform of issues that appealed to the American sense of limited government and a prevailing fear of placing too much authority in one individual.

In what proved to be a futile attempt to stem the growing Democratic-Republican tide, John Adams and his Federalist followers in Congress sought to emulate Jefferson’s organizational skills. Because they had less grassroots support—there were no Federalist clubs to speak of—organizing proved difficult. Yet, by virtue of the fact that they ran the government, they could use their positions to press their advantage in the process confirming some of the Founders’ fears about the factional dangers of partisanship. Thus, the Federalist-controlled Congress passed the 1798 Sedition Act, which made it a misdemeanor to publish false or malicious information and provided that anyone convicted of conspiring to hinder the operations of the federal government would be subject to heavy fines and possible imprisonment. The Alien Acts, which became law in the same year, made it easier to deport political adversaries who were not citizens—especially the growing Irish population, which was pro-Democratic-Republican, as well as any migrating French revolutionaries. Fourteen indictments were issued between 1798 and 1800. One Democratic-Republican was jailed because
he carried a placard protesting the acts; another was sentenced to six months for attempting, in the words of a Federalist-appointed judge, to “mislead the ignorant and inflame their minds against the President.”

Jefferson worried that these new laws might make it possible for the Federalists to install one of their own as a president-for-life. Thus, the organizing efforts of Jefferson and Madison became a whirlwind of activity as the election of 1800 approached. Democratic-Republican members of Congress met in Philadelphia and formally endorsed Jefferson for president and Aaron Burr for vice president. The Federalists responded by nominating a ticket consisting of John Adams of Massachusetts and Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina—the first of many North-South pairings.

As in 1796, the Adams-Jefferson contest was hard fought. Hamilton warned his Federalist followers that no defections would be tolerated in the Electoral College. But Hamilton’s admonition notwithstanding, Jefferson prevailed. As in the first Adams-Jefferson race, the southern states backed Jefferson while most of the Northeast sided with Adams. But the switch of New York from Adams to Jefferson—the culmination of Jefferson’s courting of New Yorkers that began with his 1791 “nature tour”—paid off. Clinton and Livingston, together with Burr’s New York City organization, rallied the troops on Jefferson’s behalf. New York’s electoral votes gave Jefferson an eight-vote plurality in the Electoral College. The Democratic-Republican victory, which had to be ratified in the House of Representatives, extended to both houses of Congress. As Jefferson later recalled, “The Revolution of 1800 was as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its forms.” That revolution, as John Adams later observed, was the rejection of what Adams called “the monarchial principle”—a reference to his belief that those in power would do what is right for the country regardless of partisanship. After Jefferson’s victory, future presidents would be party leaders. Adams himself blamed his lack of party standing for his defeat: “Jefferson had a party; Hamilton had a party; but the commonwealth [a reference to Adams] had none.” Jefferson replied that political parties had become an inevitable part of public life that had separated the two founding brothers.

In the two decades following Thomas Jefferson’s election, Democratic-Republicans strengthened their hold on the government. But this did not stop the partisan bickering between Jeffersonian localists and Hamiltonian nationalists and their successors. One of the very first, and most bitter, partisan battles Jefferson faced involved the “midnight appointments” of loyal Federalists to the federal judiciary made by John Adams upon leaving the presidency in March
1801. The Federalists hoped that by making these appointments they could limit the damage done by the Democratic-Republicans until the next election in 1804. One of those appointed by Adams was William Marbury, who was slated to become a justice of the peace. The incoming secretary of state, James Madison, refused to deliver Marbury’s nominating papers after the outgoing Federalist secretary of state, John Marshall, failed to deliver them in time. In response, Marbury and seven others sued the government, claiming that Madison had defaulted on his duty to serve his appointment papers. The Supreme Court heard the case of Marbury v. Madison in 1803. In a landmark ruling, Chief Justice John Marshall (the same former secretary of state who had been appointed to the court by John Adams) wrote that Marbury was entitled to his appointment, but Congress had exceeded its authority when it gave the Supreme Court the power to order Madison to surrender the papers, which it had done in a provision of the Judiciary Act of 1789. Marshall thus wormed his way out of a certain confrontation with President Jefferson while expanding the Federalist principle of strong central government by claiming for the court the authority to declare acts of the other branches unconstitutional, an authority known as judicial review.\(^\text{14}\)

The next twenty years saw what historians sometimes call the Era of Good Feelings because of the apparent lack of political disagreement. In truth, the Democratic-Republicans were so powerful and organized that for the only time in American history there was essentially a one-party government with no serious electoral competition. The trio of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe established a Virginia dynasty that controlled the White House; in the five elections held between 1804 and 1820, Democratic-Republicans won between 53 and 92 percent of the Electoral College votes and held between 61 and 85 percent of the seats in Congress.

Meanwhile, the Federalists had started down a path to political obscurity, sealed by their reaction to the War of 1812. Federalists, who retained a strong base of support in the New England states, vehemently opposed the war, believing that it would seriously impede vital trade with England. They dubbed the conflict “Mr. Madison’s War,” and New Englanders continued to illicitly trade with the British, sometimes even withholding money and militia from the war effort. Democratic-Republicans, in turn, stoked popular outrage at the British impressment of American sailors—the removal of British-born sailors from American vessels and forced entry into the British navy—and believed that the rampant nationalism would unify their diverse party. Partisan passions escalated after Congress declared war on Great Britain in 1812. When the Federal
Republican, a Federalist newspaper located in Baltimore, editorialized against the war, an angry mob razed the building where it was printed. Elsewhere, Federalist sympathizers were beaten, stabbed, and even tarred and feathered. Two years later the Federalists met in Hartford, Connecticut, and proposed generous peace terms. Rumors persisted that the Federalists favored the secession of the New England states from the Union, and the party, already weakened by its antirwar stance, fell into disrepute. By 1820, the Federalists had become political dinosaurs, not even bothering to nominate a token candidate to oppose James Monroe in that year’s presidential contest. Hamilton’s party faded into the history books; however, Hamilton’s ideas did not.

Jackson and Mass-Based Parties

The strength of the Democratic-Republicans ultimately was their undoing. By 1810, the House of Representatives was filled with a variety of Democratic-Republicans. Some were traditional states’ rights advocates; others wanted an enlarged role for the federal government to enhance westward expansion. Thus, even though most elected officials were Democratic-Republicans, the label became increasingly ambiguous. By 1824, the intraparty divisions had widened into a chasm. Five candidates, each representing a different faction, aggressively sought the presidency: Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House and champion of westward expansion; John C. Calhoun, secretary of war and supporter of states’ rights; Andrew Jackson, the hero of the Battle of New Orleans; John Quincy Adams, son of the former president and secretary of state under Monroe; and William Crawford, former treasury secretary and, like Calhoun, a doctrinaire states’ rights advocate. The Congressional Caucus (the means by which Democratic-Republican nominees had been chosen since 1800) convened in Washington, DC, in February and selected Crawford to be the party’s standard-bearer with Calhoun as his running mate. The remaining three candidates boycotted the caucus and persuaded their respective state legislatures to place their names in contention.

On election day, Jackson led in the popular votes cast, winning 153,000 more than the combined votes cast for Adams and Crawford. But Jackson failed to win an electoral majority. The all-important Electoral College vote split, with Jackson receiving ninety-nine votes; Adams, eighty-four; Crawford, forty-one; and Clay, thirty-seven. Under such conditions, the Constitution turns the matter over to the House of Representatives for a final decision among the top three contenders. Clay, excluded from consideration, backed Adams, who reciprocated
by promising to make Clay secretary of state in the new administration. Because he was the powerful speaker of the House, Clay was able to clinch the House vote, and the presidency, for Adams.

Jackson’s supporters were outraged by what they believed was a corrupt bargain between Adams and Clay. They considered Adams a usurper in the White House, and in several state capitals they plotted a comeback, with New York senator Martin Van Buren providing the organizational muscle. Van Buren correctly suspected that his home state could be decisive in the 1828 election, and he formed an alliance with Jackson that would help put “Old Hickory” over the top and avenge his 1824 defeat.

By 1826, several states had changed their laws allowing voters to choose delegates to the Electoral College rather than leaving the task to the various state legislatures. A general loosening of voter qualifications also greatly enlarged the size of the potential electorate. Meanwhile, Jefferson’s party continued fracturing. On one side were the Adams-Clay followers who were determined to implement internal improvements to the nation’s infrastructure. Like the Federalists of two decades earlier, they were convinced that national prosperity necessitated an active government. On the other side were the so-called traditional Democratic-Republicans whose ranks included Van Buren. They opposed internal improvements, including road and canal construction, because they believed such projects would violate state sovereignty. Jackson had managed to keep his distance from both factions, remaining a popular figure without an official party organization—until Van Buren took charge of his campaign.

Van Buren’s first step toward involvement in national politics was to solidify his following in Congress. He quickly became leader of the Democratic-Republicans, a name he preferred to “Republicans” because it expressed solidarity with the more egalitarian agrarian wing of the party. Van Buren undertook scores of trips around the country, campaigning for Jackson wherever he went. His goals were to arouse public indignation against the Adams-Clay deal, conduct door-to-door canvasses in every town, and make sure that Jackson supporters went to the polls on election day. Adams’s forces derided Jackson as a military butcher and even called the chastity of his wife into question. Nonetheless, Jackson handily beat Adams, winning all of the South, the new western states, and Van Buren’s New York. Just as significant, voter turnout doubled from 25 percent in 1824 to 50 percent in 1828. Jackson and Van Buren were the first to understand the power of mass-based party politics. Political parties were now firmly established as a primary vehicle for translating public sentiments into governing policies. Henceforth, parties became a mainstay of American political life.
With his victory, Jackson’s Democratic-Republican wing, which shortened its name to the Democratic Party, had consumed Jefferson’s Party. Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and others banded together as the opposition Whigs. Their name was intended to summon up the spirits of those who composed the patriot party during the heyday of the American Revolution and the British Whigs of the eighteenth century. Whigs stood for restrained executive powers, western expansion, and protective tariffs. Thus, by the mid-1830s, a two-party system had taken root on American soil. But unlike the earlier political skirmishes between Hamilton and Jefferson, ideological differences were gradually supplanted by a “politics of personality,” as people decided they either loved or hated Jackson. In addition, by raiding the federal treasury Van Buren purchased an additional degree of party unity. The bargain was straightforward: State and local Democrats would be given dollars from the national treasury if they called themselves Democrats, supported Jackson on most matters, and took no controversial policy stands. As for issues of local concern, they were free to do as they saw fit. This move established a pattern of reciprocal deference characterized by both linkages and autonomy between state and federal party organizations. In this case, local party organizations would be linked to the state and national organizations, but they were also free to manage their own affairs.

By forming a political machine capable of winning elections, Van Buren won the grudging admiration of his opponents. Van Buren’s organization consisted of a single recognized party leader capable of mobilizing supporters and awarding valuable patronage (i.e., jobs). By virtue of superior organization and ample resources, parties had moved beyond a mere collection of like-minded followers to organizations able to control government. Indeed, organization has been a watchword in party politics ever since. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the resource-driven nature of party organizations shapes contemporary politics and defines the role parties play in the twenty-first century.

During Jackson’s presidency, power shifted from the affluent to the common citizen. Jacksonian Democracy had several consequences, the most significant of which was an immense increase in both the number of officials chosen by election and the number of people allowed to participate in electoral politics. Between 1824 and 1848, voter turnout increased from 25 percent to 79 percent, and in some states was as high as 92 percent. State and national party conventions emerged as important decision-making bodies in selecting candidates for office. A partisan press flourished, as parties used newspapers to communicate with their expanding ranks of followers—a low-tech precursor to the partisan websites of the twenty-first century.
To Van Buren, this new political environment posed both challenges and opportunities. Could the ever-increasing range of political voices be harmonized into consistently supporting one political party? Could issues attract new backers, or would appealing personalities be the key to winning new supporters? Van Buren maintained that the answers to these questions lay in building a party organization that was committed to principles even as it dispensed political favors. But jobs, not principles, formed the basis of politics in the 1830s and 1840s. The emergence of the spoils system (as in, “to the victor belong the spoils of the enemy”) had a single purpose: to fill government jobs at every level with loyal party workers. Even the mailman was a party loyalist. The spoils system meant that those filling these so-called patronage jobs would work diligently for the party or risk being bounced from the payroll. Because holding a job depended on one’s party activity, giving time and money to the party became a means of ensuring economic security.

Over time, the spoils system changed the essence of politics. Elections were no longer solitary affairs confined to the affluent. Instead, they were community events, as issues and candidates were debated over the “cider barrel.” Party organizations sponsored picnics, socials, and dinners and held rallies, demonstrations, and conventions. By immersing themselves in the social fabric of civic life, parties kept citizens involved and inspired their loyalty on election day. Many voters proudly displayed their party affiliation by wearing political buttons on their lapels, a practice that was commonplace through the twentieth century and anticipated automobile bumper stickers. Indeed, party devotion affected more people and reached more deeply than many ever considered possible. The result was a stable pattern of voting; true independents and vote-switching between elections were rarities, phenomena that also characterize today’s politics.

By the late nineteenth century, parties organized politics byaffording social outlets, presenting tickets of candidates, drafting platforms, and initiating meaningful cues and symbols for voters. American politics became party politics. Parties provided coherence to political thought, even as they created a politics of “us versus them,” which was heightened during and immediately following the Civil War.

Although sectionalism had been a factor in American politics since 1796, the growing economic disparities between North and South during the first decades of the nineteenth century intensified those regional differences. The North was increasingly urban and ethnically pluralistic as it developed a strong industrial-based economy, whereas the South remained mostly agricultural. These economic disparities led each region to see its political interests differently. Over
time, the politics of the two regions became increasingly irreconcilable. In 1846, Pennsylvania Democratic congressman David Wilmot introduced legislation prohibiting slavery in any territory acquired from the Mexican War. The Wilmot Proviso passed in the House, where representatives from states prohibiting slavery were in the majority, but pro-slavery Southerners blocked it in the Senate. Bitter animosities ensued, splitting the Democrats and Whigs in half. Northern Democrats moved toward establishing a new abolitionist party while Southern Democrats defended slavery. The Whig Party split into two factions: Conscience Whigs supported the Wilmot Proviso while Cotton Whigs believed that the federal government had no business outlawing slavery. When the Whig Party refused to consider the Wilmot Proviso during the 1848 election, many Conscience Whigs left the party in disgust.

By 1854, any remnant of party unity was shattered when the Kansas-Nebraska Bill became law and annulled the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by permitting slavery if voters in these two states approved. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill created a political firestorm and ignited violence between supporters and opponents in the two states. Proslavery Democrats backed the new law and excluded abolitionist Democrats from party councils. Opposition to the new law was widespread in the North, resulting in protests that led to the creation of the Republican Party. After an 1854 Republican gathering in Ripon, Wisconsin, one participant observed, “We came into the little meeting held in a schoolhouse Whigs, Free Soilers, and Democrats. We came out of it Republicans.”

Four years later, the Republicans attained major party status when Democrats lost 40 percent of their northern seats in the House of Representatives, enabling the Republicans to win control—an extraordinary achievement. In 1860, Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln for president; in a four-way race, he won every free state except New Jersey. Democrats became the party of the South; Republicans, the party of the North; and the Whigs collapsed from their inability to reconcile the incompatible demands of their Conscience and Cotton factions.

While slavery sealed the Whigs’ fate, the question of immigration also contributed to the party’s demise. Powerful nativist, anti-Catholic sentiments buffeted northern Whigs following a huge influx of Irish immigrants. The failure of the Irish potato crop in 1840, and the death from famine of over a million people, prompted more than 750,000 Irish to emigrate to the United States from 1841 to 1850, eroding Anglo-Saxon Protestant denominations of many northern cities. Anti-Catholic riots erupted in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York.

As anti-immigrant fervor spread, an organization called the Know-Nothings gained influence. The Know-Nothings believed that “foreigners ha[d] no right
to dictate our laws, and therefore ha[d] no just ground to complain if Americans see proper to exclude them from offices of trust.” Their name derived from members’ statements that they “know nothing” about this secret society’s existence. Appearing on the ballot as the American Party, their contempt for the foreign-born was directed at Roman Catholics, who, they believed, owed their primary allegiance to the Pope rather than the Constitution—a prejudice that was not fully expunged until John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic president in 1961.

The Know-Nothings enjoyed their greatest success in 1854 when they successfully competed in Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Kentucky, and California. In Massachusetts, where Irish Catholic immigrants had been pouring into the state at a rate of more than 100,000 per year, the Know-Nothings won all but 3 seats in the more than 350-seat state House of Representatives, every congressional seat, and all statewide offices including the governorship. One despondent Whig declared, “This election has demonstrated that, by a majority, Roman Catholicism is feared more than American slavery.” In 1856, the Know-Nothings attempted to capitalize on their victories by selecting former president Millard Fillmore to be their presidential candidate. Fillmore and Republican candidate John C. Fremont split the antislavery vote, resulting in Democrat James Buchanan’s victory.

The schism was eventually repaired as the Know-Nothings became subsumed into the ranks of an insurgent Republican Party, which established a popular majority and retained it from its inception until the Great Depression of the 1930s. Republicans benefitted at the polls from having been the party that saved the Union and emancipated the slaves. Civil War veterans were reminded by GOP leaders to “vote as you shot,” and their partisan loyalties were reinforced by generous benefits allocated by Republican-controlled Congresses.

Republicans became associated with Hamiltonian national measures as the nineteenth century progressed, and industrialization swept the country. They appealed to farmers by supporting the Homestead Act, which offered cheap land in the West. They won support from business and labor by advocating high protective tariffs and land grants designed to develop transcontinental railroads. During this period, Democrats were more closely associated with Jeffersonian localism and states’ rights, as they remained the party of the South. But they rarely won national elections. Only when the Republicans were divided, or nominated weak candidates, were Democrats able to win the presidency, as happened with Grover Cleveland in 1884 and 1892, and with Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and 1916.
Political Machines

European immigration exploded between 1890 and 1930, when more than fifteen million left Europe—roughly equal to the total number of immigrants from all countries to enter the United States between 1820 and 1890. For those stepping from the steerage ships, confusion about where to stay and find employment predominated. The Industrial Revolution provided jobs, but at low wages and under insufferable conditions. Few services existed to help the downtrodden. In this every-man-for-himself atmosphere, political party machines helped ease the transition for many immigrants and in the process cemented one-party rule in large American cities. By 1900, robust party machines ruled in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Boston, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Kansas City, and Minneapolis. At the state level, machines controlled Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

In exchange for a job, food, and occasional help with the law, party “bosses” asked for votes on election day. George Washington Plunkitt, one-time head of New York’s Tammany Hall machine, was infamous for his candid portrayal of how the machine worked, and he won the undying loyalty of those who benefited from it. The more people the machine helped, the greater its grasp of the reins of power. State political bosses, mayors, and ward leaders doled out thousands of patronage jobs to loyal party workers. Awarding jobs after a campaign was a top priority. One party leader reputedly met with his director of patronage every week to pursue every application for every city job down to the lowliest ditch digger. In fact, patronage was an important party tool that continued to be widely used until the 1960s and, in some places, until the end of the twentieth century.

Party machines were aided by local election laws that ensured voting was not a private matter, permitting machines to exercise a corrupt hold on power. Prior to 1888, each party printed its own ballot, usually in a distinctive color. Voters chose a party ballot and placed it in the ballot box. Split-ticket voting was not possible under this system, and the public selection of a ballot made it no secret whom the voter preferred. Moreover, election “inspectors” were appointed by the party bosses to view the proceedings, sometimes even getting their supporters to vote more than once or to vote under the name of a deceased person. Characteristically, the bosses required firms doing government business to pay a kickback fee. The same held true to secure favorable health and safety inspections and zoning regulations.
Overt corruption was tolerated because party leaders had such a devoted following. If someone’s house burned, a child was arrested, or there was no food in the pantry, it was the boss who came to the rescue. As Chicago resident Jane Anderson wrote in 1898,

If the Boss’s friend gets drunk, he takes care of him; if he is evicted for rent, arrested for crime, loses wife or child, the Boss stands by him and helps him out. . . . The Boss gives presents at weddings and christenings; buys tickets wholesale for benefits, provides a helping hand at funerals, furnishing carriages for the poor and a decent burial for the destitute when they are dead, keeping his account with the undertaker and never allows a county burial. To ask where the money comes from which the Boss uses this way would be sinister.19

From the 1830s to the 1890s, political parties shaped the government and the way average citizens thought about politics. But the twentieth century saw profound changes in the characteristics and relative influence of the parties. Starting with the progressive era at the dawn of the twentieth century, parties began to lose their strength and entered a long period of decline, only to emerge, reinvented and revived, as something quite different than they were during the era of the party machine. We will consider that part of the story in chapter 3.

Throughout their history, however, the rivalry between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson persisted, as party leaders split over how much influence the federal government should have in local affairs. In the nineteenth century, Democrats supported Jeffersonian limits on the national government; in the twentieth century, this would become the Republican Party’s position. But so deeply embedded is the ongoing debate between Hamilton and Jefferson that it endures in the twenty-first century. For instance, consider this entry from the conservative blog Red State, which attempts to connect support by Democrats for Donald Trump being “silenced” by Facebook and Twitter to another time when Democrats attempted to, in the words of the diarist, “silence dissenting political opinion by force”:

During the war of 1812, Federalists opposed the war as they believe it was manufactured by the Jefferson Democrats to further that party’s political interests. As soon as war started, Alexander Hanson used the Federal Republican to denounce Madison and the war. Within days, a mob of Jefferson Democrats destroyed the newspaper’s office including the printing press. Hanson fled for his life.20
In a different context, this entry appeared on the progressive blog Daily Kos, citing a moment of agreement between Jefferson and Hamilton as it pertains to the Senate filibuster:

Thomas Jefferson wrote an early manual for the Senate establishing “procedures for silencing senators who debated ‘superfluous, or tediously.’” They had experienced the need for supermajorities in the Articles of Confederation, and explicitly abandoned them in the Constitution. In Federalist 22, Alexander Hamilton wrote about supermajority requirements, “What at first sight may seem a remedy, is, in reality, a poison.”

In an era defined by instantaneous communication, debates invoking Hamilton and Jefferson about the role of government persist on the major parties’ websites, on ideological blogs, and on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Parler. Thus, remnants of nineteenth-century American political development continue in the very partisan and highly networked twenty-first century, a reminder that party competition today remains heavily influenced by the differences responsible for the emergence of the party system.