THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson that spawned the creation of political parties in the United States extended to different conceptions of how political parties should be organized. Recall that Hamilton sought national solutions to problems afflicting all Americans, which required having a strong federal government and an active president. Jefferson thought the national government should exercise restraint and let state and local governments take the lead in solving problems.

Not surprisingly, for Hamilton’s followers, global solutions to big problems required a type of party discipline that assigned great importance to national parties writing platforms and promising action. They wanted national parties to be powerful organizations, able to command enough discipline to get the executive and legislative branches of the federal government to act in concert—an objective not easily achieved in a political system defined by federalism and separation of powers. Jefferson’s preference for local solutions meant that state and local party institutions should be diverse organizations paying close attention to local customs and nominating candidates who best fit that state’s political culture.

The development of contemporary party organizations followed a jagged path oscillating between the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian models. It begins with the emergence of strong party machines at the turn of the twentieth century and subsequent attempts to reform them. These reform efforts were bipartisan, spearheaded by the progressive wings of both major parties, just as party machines were bipartisan, with Democrats using patronage to control cities and Republicans organizing rural and (eventually) some suburban areas. It continues with the rise of national party organizations from underdeveloped and under-resourced institutions to power players in American politics.

The Progressive Era

Party machines reigned over an America defined by great inequalities brought about by the Industrial Revolution. By the turn of the twentieth century,
colossal fortunes had been made by the likes of John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and J. P. Morgan, industrial giants who controlled the production and delivery of everything from oil to sugar, copper to beef, tobacco to rubber, and candy to locomotives. But many urban residents huddled in tiny tenements after working long hours in unsightly factories and sweatshops. Farmers suffered from falling prices for their goods, low inflation, and the private ownership of railroads. Appalachian coal miners were forced to accept insufferable working conditions because the government did little to help, and there was no other work available. Poverty-stricken twelve- and thirteen-year-old children were often pressed into work because their small bodies could fit more easily into the tiny mineshafts.

Calls for reform abounded but went largely unheeded. That meant virtually no government intervention in ending child labor, alleviating horrendous working conditions, and improving the poverty-level wages paid by the industrial giants. Frustrated by government inaction and gridlock, the working class mobilized. Labor unions, such as the Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor, quickly expanded. But they were no match for a government aligned with corporate interests. When the unions decided to strike, government injunctions were issued to summon workers back to the factories. Union leaders were jailed for conspiracy and contempt for not obeying the injunctions. Labor riots ensued, like the 1894 Pullman Car Strike that spread from Chicago to the Northwest. After several outbursts of violence, President Grover Cleveland sent thousands of federal troops and marshals into Chicago in August 1894 under the pretense of protecting mail deliveries. With that, the strike came to a screeching halt.

Without federal assistance, lower-class workers—many of whom were immigrants—looked for help from their local party organizations. As we saw in chapter 2, machine leaders could dispense jobs to the party faithful in return for supporting the party and voting for its candidates on Election Day. A reporter covering George Washington Plunkitt, leader of New York’s Tammany Hall machine, described in great detail how the life of a party boss was consumed by attending to the needs of the people who would keep the machine in power:

2 A.M.: Aroused from sleep by the ringing of his doorbell; went to the door and found a bartender, who asked him to go to the police station and bail out a saloon-keeper who had been arrested for violating the excise law. Furnished bail and returned to bed at three o’clock.

6 A.M.: Awakened by fire engines passing his house. Hastened to the scene of the fire, according to the custom of the Tammany district leaders, to give assistance to the fire sufferers, if needed. Met several of his election
district captains who are always under orders to look out for fires, which are considered great vote-getters. Found several tenants who had been burned out, took them to a hotel, supplied them with clothes, fed them, and arranged temporary quarters for them until they could rent and furnish new apartments.

8:30 A.M.: Went to the police court to look after his constituents. Found six “drunks.” Secured the discharge of four by a timely word with the judge, and paid the fines of two.

9 A.M.: Appeared in the Municipal District Court. Directed one of his district captains to act as counsel for a widow against whom dispossess proceedings had been instituted and obtained an extension of time. Paid the rent of a poor family about to be dispossessed and gave them a dollar for food.

11 A.M.: At home again. Found four men waiting for him. One had been discharged by the Metropolitan Railway Company for neglect of duty, and wanted the district leader to fix things. Another wanted a job on the road. The third sought a place on the Subway and the fourth, a plumber, was looking for work with the Consolidated Gas Company. The district leader spent nearly three hours fixing things for the four men, and succeeded in each case.

3 P.M.: Attended the funeral of an Italian as far as the ferry. Hurried back to make his appearance at the funeral of a Hebrew constituent. Went conspicuously to the front both in the Catholic church and the synagogue, and later attended the Hebrew confirmation ceremonies in the synagogue.

7 P.M.: Went to district headquarters and presided over a meeting of election district captains. Each captain submitted a list of all the voters in his district, reported on their attitude toward Tammany, suggested who might be won over and how they could be won, told who were in need, and who were in trouble of any kind and the best way to reach them. District leader took notes and gave orders.

8 P.M.: Went to a church fair. Took chances on everything, bought ice cream for the young girls and the children. Kissed the little ones, flattered their mothers and took their fathers out for something down at the corner.

9 P.M.: At the clubhouse again. Spent $10 on tickets for a church excursion and promised a subscription for a new church bell. Bought tickets for a baseball game to be played by two nines from his district. Listened to the complaints of a dozen pushcart peddlers who said they were persecuted
by the police and assured them he would go to Police Headquarters in the morning and see about it.

10:30 P.M.: Attended a Hebrew wedding reception and dance. Had previously sent a handsome wedding present to the bride.

12 P.M.: In bed.¹

In a different context, activities like these could be seen as remarkable constituent service. But as the power of the city machines grew, so did corruption. Plunkitt himself tried to justify what he did as “honest” graft, which he regarded as taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by being in power (“I seen my opportunities and I took ’em,” he once said)—as opposed to “dishonest” graft, or outright stealing from the city coffers. Not surprisingly, reformers didn’t see things this way. The early years of the twentieth century saw a strong enough reform movement to support a national Progressive Party, whose 1912 platform described how the party machines controlled by both Democrats and Republicans had become a threat to liberty:

Political Parties exist to secure responsible government and to execute the will of the people. From these great tasks both of the old parties have turned aside. Instead of instruments to promote the general welfare, they have become the tools of corrupt interests which use them impartially to serve their selfish purposes. Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people. To destroy this invisible government, to dissolve the unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics is the first task of the statesmanship of the day.²

Former president Teddy Roosevelt sought to reclaim his old job under the Progressive Party banner that year, despite his earlier association with the Republican Party establishment. Roosevelt began his political career after returning as a hero from the Spanish-American War in 1898. He was elected governor of New York, thanks to the backing of the GOP boss, Senator Thomas C. Platt, but was quickly sickened by the graft that characterized New York politics. Rather than abandoning party politics, Roosevelt hoped to make the Republican Party an agent of reform. His efforts did not sit well with Republican bosses, and they vowed to get rid of their nemesis. Platt engineered Roosevelt’s nomination as the 1900 Republican vice-presidential candidate, believing the then obscurity of the vice presidency (it had been mostly a dead-end job in the nineteenth century) would surely
bury Roosevelt. That plan backfired when President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, and Roosevelt became the twenty-sixth president of the United States.

Roosevelt’s initial reform agenda was relatively modest. Besieged by conservative, business-minded congressional Republicans on the one hand and reform-minded Progressives on the other, he chose a middle-of-the-road course. In 1908, Roosevelt declined to seek reelection, opting to support his longtime friend, Secretary of War William Howard Taft, who easily defeated Democrat William Jennings Bryan. But Roosevelt was frustrated by Taft’s failure to espouse progressive reforms and sought the presidency again in 1912. However, wresting the Republican nomination from an incumbent president proved impossible. After Taft’s renomination Roosevelt accepted an invitation to join with other disaffected progressive Republicans and run for president as a third-party candidate. Their new Progressive Party adopted the nickname “Bull Moose” (following Roosevelt’s declaration that he was “as strong as a bull moose”). The Bull Moose platform called for the direct election of US senators, women’s suffrage, restricting the president to a single six-year term, a constitutional amendment allowing an income tax, the institution of a minimum wage, the prohibition of child labor, the creation of a Department of Labor, and even overturning some judicial decisions. These proposals collectively sought to weaken the political parties, empower voters, and create a stronger social safety net.

Roosevelt finished second, winning more votes than Taft—the best performance for a third-party presidential candidate in the twentieth century. But the Republican split enabled Democrat Woodrow Wilson to enter the White House. The Progressive Party faded from the scene in 1916, after Roosevelt refused its nomination, and most of its followers returned to the Republican ranks. Robert M. LaFollette Sr. was the Progressive Party’s presidential nominee in 1924 and attracted 16 percent of the popular vote but won only his home state of Wisconsin. In retrospect, though, the 1912 election had a decisive impact on the progressive struggle. Democrats, as well as conservative Republicans, could no longer withstand the power of the reform wave, and both parties became vulnerable to insurgents who promised to weaken their organizations. President Wilson won enactment of several Progressive planks, as did most state and local governments. By attacking political parties so vehemently and scoring so solidly with the voters, the Progressives ensured that the remainder of the twentieth century would be an anti-party age.

It took decades of gradual and persistent reform efforts for Progressives to change how political parties operated. Reform initiatives began in 1870, shifted into high gear during the 1890s, and slowed after the 1912 elections.
accomplishments set up subsequent opportunities, as once a state or city was “cleaned up,” residents elsewhere took notice and demanded reform in their own communities. Almost like an avalanche, the Progressive Movement gathered more followers as it pushed ahead, until large portions of its agenda were established. Key progressive reforms implemented during this period included the introduction of the Australian ballot, direct primary elections, a merit system to replace the spoils system, municipal ownership of utilities, ballot initiatives, nonpartisan municipal elections, direct election of US senators, and women’s suffrage.

**The Australian Ballot.** When each party was allowed to print its own ballot on distinctive colored paper, machine politicians could keep track of how people voted and retaliate against anyone who voted against them. Bribery in the form of vote buying was also easy. The Australian ballot, named after its country of origin, curbed these abuses. It required that election ballots be prepared by the states, not party organizations. Ballots were to be identical and to include the names of all candidates seeking office, thereby enabling voters to cast a secret ballot. It did not eliminate intimidation and bribery, but party henchmen could now lose an election and never know who was responsible. The new ballot also enabled citizens to split their tickets—that is, to vote for candidates of opposing parties running in the same election. The Australian ballot was first introduced in Kentucky in 1880; by 1896, most states had followed suit.

**Direct Primary Elections.** Existing election laws made it easy for party bosses to keep reform-minded candidates off the ballot by controlling the nominating process. To qualify for the ballot, candidates had to receive the party’s nomination, which was cleared by party leaders in private and subsequently ratified at local or state party conventions. A civic-minded reformer might consider running for office under a third-party label, but most state election laws were written with the consent of Democrats and Republicans, making it functionally impossible for insurgent candidates and parties to participate in the election process. Direct primary elections provided a solution to this dilemma. Instead of a small group of party leaders choosing a nominee, all party supporters would be given the opportunity. Nominations would be made through elections, called primaries, where the entire party membership had a say.

**The Merit System.** Supported by generally well-to-do urban reformers (called “mugwumps”), the idea of filling government posts based on merit rather than favoritism posed a direct threat to the patronage relationships at the heart of political machines. Attacking the patronage system denied party machines the ability to provide government jobs to faithful subordinates, while assuring that government positions would be filled with qualified people—a novel idea at the
time. Thus, the merit system (later termed the civil service) became a pillar of the Progressive platform, favored by reformers weary of lackluster government services. The idea was not initially well-received by party leaders but following the assassination of President James Garfield by a disappointed job seeker in 1881, Congress established the Civil Service Commission to set standards for employment and create thousands of permanent federal jobs that would continue regardless of which party controlled the White House. By the turn of the twentieth century, most states followed the federal government’s example, dealing a decisive blow to party leaders.

Municipal Ownership of Utilities. At the turn of the twentieth century, utility companies that had been awarded their franchises by the party machines charged exorbitant rates even as they provided poor service. The companies were guaranteed huge profits, raising costs on customers who had no choice but to pay. Party leaders kept profits high because they were receiving huge kickbacks from the companies in exchange for franchise rights. Reformers realized that breaking this cozy relationship required public regulation of utility companies, and they pushed measures to do so through state and local governments. Many of these businesses remained privately owned, but in exchange for the franchise they agreed to allow a public board or commission to set rates. Other services, such as garbage collection, sewage removal, and transportation, would be assumed by government under new agencies administered by employees who got their jobs through the merit system.

Ballot Initiative, Referendum, and Recall. One way to link voters to their government is to give average citizens a direct say in what government does. Another is to dismiss elected officials should they lose voter confidence. In an era of partisan corruption, Progressives championed these reforms. The ballot initiative requires a legislature to consider specific measures. The referendum gives voters a voice on policy matters by gathering enough signatures to place a measure on a ballot. The recall allows voters to remove elected officials in a special election before their term of office is over. South Dakota was first to authorize ballot initiatives in 1898; Oregon was first with referenda in 1902 and with recalls in 1908. After California instituted ballot initiatives in 1910 under outspoken Progressive Republican governor Hiram Johnson, these measures earned national attention, and by the 1920s about three-fourths of the states allowed initiatives, referenda, and recalls. Today, these forms of direct popular participation are commonplace. In 2003, California voters recalled unpopular Democratic governor Gray Davis and replaced him with Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger. In 2012, Wisconsin voters rejected a recall of controversial
Republican governor Scott Walker after he successfully sought legislation limiting the collective bargaining rights of public unions. In 2021, California voters rejected a recall of Governor Gavin Newsom following measures he undertook in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, including mandatory mask wearing and business closures. Besides recalling unpopular officeholders, voters have voiced their preferences on a host of policy questions including LGBTQ rights, campaign finance reform, gambling, and the legal use of marijuana.

**Nonpartisan Municipal Elections.** Progressives generally believed that the problems facing most municipalities were technical and could be solved by a combination of professional administration and scientific principles. Following this logic, Progressives pushed for nonpartisan city elections, where candidates were not identified by party label. Boston was the first to implement this reform in 1909; two decades later, twenty-six of the nation’s largest cities followed suit. This reform has been only modestly successful. Although the party labels of municipal candidates may not be printed on the ballot, it is generally no mystery which candidates are sponsored by a particular political party.

**Direct Election of US Senators and Women’s Suffrage.** Two additional Progressive measures helped reduce the influence of party machines: the direct election of US senators and extending the vote to women. Under Article I of the Constitution, the election of senators was left to state legislatures. Progressives argued that this provision, combined with a six-year term and staggered elections, insulated the upper chamber from public opinion. They provided the impetus for the Seventeenth Amendment (ratified in 1913) that allowed citizens to cast a ballot for individual senatorial candidates. As a result, parties had to rally their supporters behind specific Senate candidates as opposed to supporting individual legislators who would confirm a senatorial choice. Women’s suffrage was another Progressive cause. In 1890, Wyoming was the first state to grant women the right to vote, followed by Utah and Idaho in 1896. Even though the women’s suffrage movement was centered in the East (primarily New York and Massachusetts), change did not come to that region until 1919, when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified and women everywhere attained the right to vote. Credit for its passage lies with the grit and determination of women demanding equality, especially Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But Progressive reformers also lent their voices to the cause because they believed that once women were enfranchised, corrupt party machines would suffer at the polls. Although the enfranchisement of women did not bring an immediate end to the party machines, the influx of women to the electorate required parties to pay greater attention to mass mobilization.
Over a period of decades, Progressives gradually but fundamentally altered the party system by changing politics from a private affair to a public concern. During the 1800s, parties operated as private organizations free from government interference. Progressives demanded public oversight and government regulation of most party activities, transforming the parties into quasi-public agencies subject to legislative control. The success of this effort weakened party machines: the direct primary stripped party leaders of their ability to completely control nominations; the secret ballot reduced voter intimidation and election fraud; the merit system lessened patronage opportunities; public control of utility companies drained party coffers; the direct election of US senators removed the ability to control federal elections through local officeholders; and women’s suffrage expanded the electorate.

Placed on the defensive by disclosures of corruption and a growing sense of public outrage, party bosses inevitably yielded to the reforms. But this did not mean that party organizations suffered. In fact, many reform measures that reduced corruption inadvertently worked to strengthen the two-party system. Although the direct primary precluded complete control over nominations by party leaders, a candidate’s ability to get on a state primary ballot required a massive number of signatures. This labor-intensive process was something parties were well-suited to accomplish. Senators were subject to direct popular election, but they needed a party nomination to win a place on the ballot and initially relied on party organizations to run their campaigns. The merit system reduced patronage, yet there remained scores of “exempt” and “temporary” positions to be filled. Utilities might be controlled by boards and commissions, but the city government-corporate nexus was far from broken. Party war chests continued to overflow with contributions from businesses.

Some Progressive reforms ironically strengthened the major parties’ legal standing. The new laws curtailed the worst abuses of the machine era but made independent and minor-party candidacies more difficult. Instead of adhering to the Australian practice of omitting party designation on the ballot, most states adopted a general election ballot that required party labels to be placed alongside a candidate’s name. It was easy for the two major parties to keep this official ballot recognition because state law reserved a place for the two parties that received the most votes in the last election. All other parties would have to circulate petitions before the next election to gain ballot access, a difficult and extremely time-consuming chore.

Voter registration is another Progressive Era change that may have undercut the interests of reformers. In a provocative book entitled *Why Americans Still*
Don’t Vote, and Why Politicians Want It That Way, scholars Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argue that voter registration requirements, implemented around the turn of the twentieth century, were designed to shrink the size of the electorate. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, voter registration has again become a controversial issue. During his reelection campaign, Donald Trump attacked direct mail voting, falsely claiming the practice is riddled with fraud (in fact, the states of Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Utah, and Hawaii conduct their elections entirely by mail without incident). After Trump lost, dozens of states enacted restrictive laws to address unsubstantiated claims of fraud that had the effect of making voting more difficult. Many of these laws seek to shorten the time frame during which voters can request an absentee ballot; allow states to purge voters from the rolls; eliminate drop boxes for absentee ballots; impose strict signature requirements on absentee ballots; require strict voter identification; limit the time period for early voting; reduce the number of polling places in African-American communities; and even, in the case of Georgia, prohibit the distribution of food and water for those waiting in line to vote. Some states went so far as to remove the responsibility to certify elections from their secretaries of state and to place it in the hands of Republican-controlled state legislatures, raising the prospect that electoral votes from those states would not be awarded to the popular voter winner in future presidential elections.

The New Deal and Party Politics

Progressive reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries directly attacked Jeffersonian style of local governance by empowering nonpartisan administrative agencies to fight corruption at the local level. Jeffersonian localism was dealt a second blow during the 1930s when Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies directed the national government to take an unprecedented role in protecting its citizens. FDR’s ascendency followed decades of Jeffersonian ascendancy made possible by Republican Party dominance of national politics. Except for the presidencies of Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, Republicans controlled the federal government from Reconstruction through the Great Depression. Warren Harding in 1920, Calvin Coolidge in 1924, and Herbert Hoover in 1928 were elected by decisive margins and profited from a strong national economy and an enduring Republican majority in the electorate. But everything changed on October 24, 1929, when the stock market crashed, and the Great Depression began. Stock values dropped nearly 75 percent, and by 1931 unemployment reached 25 percent. Farmers were especially hard hit, seeing
prices for commodities drop to their lowest levels since 1910. Thousands of children were unable to attend school due to a lack of shoes.

In 1932, Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the popular governor of New York (and cousin to Teddy) was elected president in a landslide. FDR won forty-two states to President Hoover’s six, and Democrats carried both houses of Congress by overwhelming margins. In the Senate, Democrats won fifty-nine of ninety-six seats; in the House, Democrats had 312 members to the Republicans’ 123. Roosevelt moved rapidly to take advantage of these enormous majorities, proposing a flurry of legislation designed to provide immediate relief to the “ill-nourished, ill-clad, and ill-housed.” Congress approved the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Social Security Act. The first hundred days of Roosevelt’s administration, which saw the creation of what came to be known as the New Deal, set a standard for legislative activity against which all of Roosevelt’s successors have been measured.

FDR’s New Deal drastically transformed the national government and the political parties. Abandoning its laissez-faire posture, the federal government became an active, national player whose primary responsibility was to ensure the economic well-being of the people. The New Deal signaled the emergence of an administrative state whereby the federal government regulated some elements of the economy; elevated the cause of organized labor, farmers, and the elderly; and redistributed wealth through a progressive income tax. It also transformed the relationship between citizens and government. Prior to Roosevelt, a rugged individualism prevailed. But the Great Depression made it possible for Roosevelt to construct a federal foundation for economic security. The inalienable rights secured by the Constitution—speech, press, worship, due process—were supplemented by Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, two of which included “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear.”

The rise of executive-centered government was a serious blow to local party organizations. Local and state powers diminished as Americans looked to the president for leadership. Under Roosevelt, Democrats established a national headquarters in 1932, and Republicans quickly followed suit. By the 1950s, the cumulative effects of the Progressive and New Deal reforms on political parties became apparent. The rise of nonpartisan administration was so complete, and the concentration of power at the federal level so entrenched, that the last vestiges of the spoils system had been removed. Hamiltonian nationalism was enjoying a renaissance, both in terms of policy and marking the beginnings of
stronger party organizations, the latter not becoming fully apparent until the beginnings of the twenty-first century. On a policy level, the desire for federal action was so great that Jefferson’s preference for a more limited federal government came to be viewed as a radical departure from the norm. In 1964, Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater pledged to restore Jeffersonian localism, telling the Republican Convention: “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.” He lost forty-four states to Lyndon B. Johnson.

Television and Candidate-Centered Politics

Aside from Progressivism and the New Deal, the Cold War deeply affected party politics and helped to make politics more of a national affair. Initially, the rise of communism was a boon to Republicans, who had been shut out of the White House in five consecutive elections from 1932 through 1948. From 1952 to 1988, Republican presidential candidates benefitted from increased Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Promising to deliver “peace through strength,” Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard M. Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush won the presidency in part by projecting a combination of steadiness and toughness. Republicans won seven of the ten presidential elections held between 1952 and 1988. But the party paid a high price for its victories. Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and the first President Bush were “plebiscitary presidents”—winning personal triumphs without increasing the number of people who called themselves Republicans. Thus, although the Cold War served the interests of Republican presidential candidates, the growing personalization of political campaigns initially weakened the Republican Party. Democrats also grew weaker, as their congressional incumbents ran increasingly personal campaigns, often emphasizing their own local accomplishments rather than broad party themes. Over time, voters came to view politics in terms of individual candidates rather than party competition.

At the same time, a professional class of political consultants pushed aside the party activists who had conducted campaigns since the emergence of American political parties. These professionals used mass-based voter contact techniques to reach large numbers of voters through television and direct mail, employing techniques learned in marketing firms rather than in the trenches of partisan political warfare. The professionalization of campaigning turned electioneering into a contest driven by strategists and handlers. Today, the national party organizations and nearly every congressional candidate, most state legislators,
and a growing number of municipal officials hire campaign consulting firms, who provide a breathtaking range of services necessary to waging mass campaigns: polling, conducting focus groups, demographic research, message development, fundraising, managing direct mail, radio and television production, and event planning.

More than any other factor, television turned campaigns into exercises in consumer marketing and candidates into clay to be molded and sold to the public as reflections of what people tell pollsters they want in their politicians. As an entertainment medium that plays directly to people’s emotions, television is an ideal vehicle for reaching voters at a gut level, and smart candidates managed by savvy handlers used it to great effect to connect with voters on a large scale—without forming the direct associations characteristic of the machine era of patronage politics. In the television age, politics became an exercise in manipulating mass public opinion.

Acquiring a party’s nomination by abandoning the party in favor of personalized voter outreach dates back to when television was an infant medium in the 1950s. Dwight D. Eisenhower was the first presidential candidate to employ television advertising, and, not coincidentally, he was the first of several “citizen politicians” to seek and win the presidency on the strength of their personal biographies and with the help of a carefully calibrated television campaign. On February 2, 1952, Citizens for Eisenhower opened its doors, managed not by Republican partisans but by a mortgage banker and the president of the Ford Foundation and propelled by advertising executives who had run successful television campaigns for consumer products like aspirin. They presented Eisenhower as a nonpartisan office seeker who was simply renting the top slot on the Republican ticket, selling the public on the idea that the likable World War II hero with humble Midwestern roots was a natural for the presidency. For their part, voters could support Eisenhower without making a partisan commitment. It was a marriage of convenience.

Richard M. Nixon emulated Eisenhower’s approach in 1968 but took it a giant step further by using television to reinvent himself after his failed 1960 presidential campaign and an unsuccessful run for governor of California in 1962. In the parlance of hired image consultants, Nixon suffered from “high negatives” among voters who did not trust him after a checkered career clouded by ethical questions. But television, and the consultants Nixon hired, allowed him to create the image of a “New Nixon”: honest, open, sympathetic, and accessible. In an age of candidate-centered campaigns, Nixon could not have been elected without an image makeover; however, in the previous era of strong party
organizations it is unlikely that party leaders would have given him the opportunity to try.

Candidates continue to employ television to sell themselves to voters, spending enormous amounts on advertising. But cable television, the Internet, social media, and the ability to gather detailed information about voters have revolutionized campaign advertising. In the late twentieth century when three broadcast networks reigned supreme, ad campaigns were broad in scope, repeating the same themes and messages to a national audience. Today, candidates can target specific groups of voters, customizing the campaign’s message and selecting the most efficient medium for communicating it.

Institutional Retrenchment

Just as presidential campaigns were becoming candidate-centered affairs, the national political parties engaged in efforts to reinvent themselves to become relevant in changing political times. The Republican Party was the first to reform. In 1973, the GOP was in serious trouble as the economy soured; then, in 1974, the Watergate scandal forced Nixon’s resignation. The 1974 midterm elections proved disastrous for Republicans, when a large class of Democratic freshmen, dubbed “Watergate babies,” was elected in heretofore safe Republican districts. Following Jimmy Carter’s 1976 victory, some prognosticators predicted that the Republican Party was headed for extinction.

Given the prevailing pessimism, leaders in the Republican National Committee (RNC) decided to reconfigure the party. The task of reimagining the GOP fell to the newly appointed party chair, William Brock, a former US senator from Tennessee. To enhance Republican electoral prospects, Brock initiated a four-part strategy: (1) aggressive fundraising; (2) organizational improvements; (3) better candidate recruitment; and (4) changing the party’s image.

Fundraising. Believing Republicans needed more money to win elections, Brock decided to solicit funds from ordinary voters, using some of the same techniques for party building that campaign consultants used on behalf of electing candidates. Computerized lists of potential supporters were used to send letters asking for small contributions. Although the response to these direct mail solicitations was low, those who gave were placed on a donor list and asked every six months or so to contribute more money. The approach worked. In 1977, the RNC expanded its base of contributors from 250,000 to 350,000. Three years later, a phenomenal 1.2 million Republicans were sending in checks payable to
the RNC. Even though the average contribution was just $25, total receipts grew from $12.7 million in 1976 to more than $26 million in 1980.\footnote{58}

**Organizational Improvements.** Brock revamped the organizational structure of the national committee by installing fifteen regional directors to help plan strategy and bolster the state parties; establishing task forces to encourage states to develop long-range plans; providing regional finance directors to help raise money; and assigning one organizational expert to each state committee. Brock also initiated a program whereby state and local party organizations could use RNC-owned equipment and sophisticated technologies at a minimal cost. A massive computer network enabled the state and local Republican parties to download a variety of software programs to expedite accounting, word processing, direct mail, get-out-the-vote drives, mailing list maintenance, and political targeting. Finally, the RNC provided GOP candidates with low-cost polling services.

**Candidate Recruitment.** Brock also realized that these tools meant nothing without good candidates. He instituted a “farm team” approach to candidate development by recruiting prospective Republicans to seek lesser offices with the support of the national party, believing that successful local candidates would be the rising Republican stars of the future. Between 1977 and 1980, more than ten thousand Republicans, mostly state and local candidates, attended candidate-recruitment sessions sponsored by the Republican National Committee.\footnote{59}

**Image Repair.** Finally, Brock sought to refurbish the Republican Party’s tattered image. Prior to his tenure, the Republican Party had the reputation of appealing primarily to older, white well-to-do men. Brock wanted these “country club Republicans” to make way for more women and minorities. To help these efforts along, he began publishing the lively opinion journal *Commonsense* whose purpose was to invigorate the party with new ideas designed to appeal to voters who might be open to becoming Republicans.

The Democratic Party’s reaction to Brock’s reforms was to say, in effect, “Stop until we can catch up!” Following Jimmy Carter’s defeat in 1980, Democrats knew that the national party needed an overhaul. Under the leadership of Charles Manatt, who was chosen to serve as party chair in 1981, the DNC was reorganized to provide stronger managerial leadership and fundraising prowess. Manatt tripled the number of DNC staffers, began a series of training seminars for state and local candidates, organized a State Party Works program that allowed state parties access to state-of-the-art campaign techniques and strategies, devised a massive voter registration program, and copied the RNC’s successful direct mail efforts.\footnote{60}
Besides the Republican National Committee and the Democratic National Committee, the congressional campaign committees also underwent an overhaul and grew both in power and prestige. These congressional committees perform candidate recruitment and development functions for House and Senate candidates, with the objective of winning (or preserving) party majorities in the House and Senate. They are the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), and the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC).

Organizationally, congressional campaign committees are very old institutions. The NRCC was established in 1866 by radical Republicans from the Northeast to protect against political retaliation from their rival Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, who became president after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination in 1865 and controlled the Republican National Committee by virtue of his holding the presidency. Not to be outdone, a group of pro-Johnson Democrats created the DCCC. Senators had little need for these legislative party organizations until the Seventeenth Amendment instituted direct election of senators in 1913. Senate campaign committees were established by both parties shortly thereafter.

Despite these early origins, congressional campaign committees were unimportant players at the national level until the 1970s. Serving as little more than fundraising apparatuses for incumbents to collect money in Washington and channel it back to their local districts, the committees lacked professional staff and permanent headquarters. That began to change in the 1960s, as the cost of campaigning began to escalate, television became an integral part of political campaigns, and progressive reformers stripped local parties of much of their patronage, resulting in fewer volunteers showing up at party headquarters. Members of Congress turned to the congressional campaign committees for help. Once again, Republicans were the first innovators. Taking their lead from Bill Brock, the Senate and House Republican campaign committees devised extensive direct mail programs. The result was an avalanche of cash that continues to build. During the 2020 calendar year, the Republican national and congressional party committees raised a combined total of $845 million.14

Democrats followed a similar path. Under the aggressive leadership of California congressman Tony Coelho, the DCCC implemented scores of new fundraising programs. Coelho made it a practice to visit hundreds of business and trade associations asking for contributions. According to then-Representative Barney Frank, “Tony Coelho was very good at explaining the facts of life to
PACs: If you want to talk to us later, you had better help us now. In 2020, the combined Democratic national and congressional party committees raised a total of $457 million.

Parties and the Advent of Social Media

Richard Nixon’s success at reinventing himself became the template for how to run a media campaign and was emulated by other candidates who, with professional assistance, crafted biographical appeals that resonated with iconic American lore: Jimmy Carter as the Lincolnesque figure who would never lie to you; Ronald Reagan as the cowboy who came to town to clean up the mess made by others; Bill Clinton as the everyman from Hope, Arkansas; Barack Obama as the candidate of “hope” and “change”; Donald Trump as a symbol of the unchecked power of wealth and celebrity in America; and Joe Biden as the blue-collar kid from Scranton, Pennsylvania.

But the advent of social media moved us into a new age when politics is not driven exclusively by television. Today, social media websites like Facebook and Twitter are a major source of news and information. According to a 2020 IPSOS survey, a plurality of Americans (27 percent) say their main source of news comes from social media or digital online sources. Internet activism has emerged on both the left and right as countless numbers of Americans engage in political action.

As we will see in chapter 6, the development of online presidential politics can be traced to the 2004 presidential campaign of former Vermont governor Howard Dean who shocked the political world by taking an obscure, long-shot candidacy to the verge of the Democratic nomination on the strength of hundreds of thousands of supporters who self-organized on the Internet. Four years later, Internet supporters made the difference in Barack Obama’s unlikely run against Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination and the presidency. Obama updated his online presence in 2012 to incorporate social media that was in its infancy during his first campaign. In 2016, presidential candidate Bernie Sanders nearly overcame overwhelming odds by garnering supporters and dollars via the Internet in his primary battle against the party favorite, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton. As for Clinton, she hired many of Obama’s web-savvy advisors, while her general election opponent, Donald Trump, elevated tweeting into a campaign art form. In 2020, the Trump campaign again relied on mining
data from online users and using his Twitter feed to engage his followers, while Joe Biden beefed up his digital engagement after ending most in-person events during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Americans have never fully embraced political parties. As we have seen, public distaste for parties lingered throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even as they became more deeply rooted in the political system. Parties were tolerated because they helped create an efficient means of organizing mass-based politics. Just when they reached their zenith, a reform wave swept the nation and systematically dismantled much of the leverage party machines held on the system. Progressives stripped party organizations of their institutional strengths and helped change public attitudes toward them. Direct primaries reduced the capacity of party leaders to control who got on the ballot. Referenda allowed average citizens to go over the heads of elected officials to change public policy. Through it all political parties have proved to be resilient, emerging in the 21st century as strong national institutions.

The long arc of party institutional development has witnessed a shift from local, Jeffersonian-style organizations to national operations that are Hamiltonian in their approach to politics. The national parties now occupy permanent buildings in Washington, D.C., raise enormous sums of money, and play an important role in candidate selection (particularly at the congressional level). Party leaders hold positions of national importance. The chairs of the party committees are key spokespersons for their parties, and they help to establish the party message. Even state parties have assumed more power and have become reliant on help from their national counterparts. This is a profound change from their initial incarnation as grassroots, locally based organizations with little involvement in national affairs.

But chapter 4 will show that when it comes to presidential campaigns, the national parties are not so dominant. Like the transformation of party organizations over the past century, there has been a major upheaval in the way parties choose their presidential candidates. However, instead of centralizing power in the party organizations, these changes have handed control of the nomination process to rank-and-file primary voters, sometimes producing results that party leaders wanted to avoid but were unable to stop.