

in by one party or another, politicians install themselves forever in a position of power that promises high economic rewards: employment and retirement benefits, money and favors from lobbies and interest groups, lectures, consulting, books. Even the most inept end up rich(er) by telling the story of how they peddled their brand of political snake oil. The field is so lucrative that they groom their children to follow suit. Not unlike nobles associated with the king, they cultivate an understanding of rights and entitlements as hereditary.

It has always been thus. Of the fifty-five delegates to the Constitutional Convention, thirty-nine were former congressmen, and eight were current or former governors. Benjamin Harrison (a signatory of the Constitution) was already the fifth in a long line of politicians, going back to England. His son, William Henry, and his great-grandson, Benjamin, became America's ninth and twenty-third presidents, respectively. John Adams—the first vice president and second president, is another example: his son, John Quincy, became the sixth president, and his family continued as “America's First Dynasty.”⁵⁰ And so it continued with the Roosevelts, the Tafts, the Udalls, the Longs, the Kennedys, the Gores, the Bushes, and with newcomers: the Bayhs, the Clintons, and now the Pauls. These repeated incidences of privilege and succession occur within a tradition of demagogical posturing against inherited rights. They are enjoyed in defiance of democratic principles of representation. Party affiliation (even if occasionally switched) is almost like the genetic line of royalty. Jefferson, that “most democratic of the Founders,” once wrote to John Adams:

*The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. [...] May we not even say that the form of government is best which provides most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?*⁵¹

It is very unlikely that the members of dynasties mentioned appropriated Jefferson's notion; but voters, through the centuries, seem to share a willingness to perpetuate it. Failure to acquire and exercise political identity might explain this willingness.

Party, Party Über Alles

The Framers of the Constitution adopted a political system of representation without political parties. Office holders were accountable (in the meaning of the word at the end of the 18th century) to voters in their states. They worked:

50 “...the only family in our history to play a leading role in American affairs for nearly two centuries”; cf. R. Brookhiser, *America's First Dynasty: The Adamases, 1735-1918*.

51 Cappon, L.J. ed. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*. University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

that is, they owned farms or businesses in which others did the actual work. Occasionally, they met for deliberations, first in New York, later in Philadelphia and Washington. Jefferson, who gathered the Anti-Federalists around himself, opposed parties. Hamilton, his opponent, and the Federalists (who advocated a powerful federal government with a national bank) opposed parties as well: “Real liberty is never found...in the extremes of democracy.” Benjamin Franklin saw the dangers of abuse in the party system and how party allegiance could affect character. George Washington warned against the “baneful effects of the Spirit of Party.” And John Adams did not mince words in foreseeing “a division of the republic into two great parties.” In his words: this “is to be dreaded as the greatest evil under our Constitution.” Reciprocally, none of them would conceive of anything restricting the exercise of checks on power—the cornerstone of the system they designed. Freedom to express opposition, their own included, was not subject to debate.

The contradiction between the expected independence of a representative—sworn to serve the common good, not some privileged interest—and the need to constitute a community of support—a faction—did not go unnoticed. The Anti-Federalists came from a variety of perspectives and interests, their own and those of their constituency. In the party they eventually formed after the presidential election of 1800—the Democratic-Republican party, active up to 1824—these various perspectives melted away. The same happened with the Federalists who were dissolved by 1820.

In their attempt at shaping America, the Framers imagined the aseptic atmosphere of a perfect organization. That was their design. In molding Americans through the Bill of Rights, they assumed virtuous, yet imperfect, human beings. Puritanism dwelled on man’s sinful nature. Therefore, the Framers did not opt for direct election of representatives, but established the Electoral College. In what became known as the sequence of six party systems,⁵² the parties evolved from political entities to economic representation and, finally, into their own business.

Indeed, parties operate as businesses. They rely on the experience of merchants to attract new members and money. The outcome of the business of American politics is the corporate state, with its insidiously growing bureaucracy. Americans, those (few) who still care, deplore the condition described as the “United Corporate States of America”. They refer specifically to how corporate interests have become the agenda of politics for the price of

52 Hershey, Marjorie P. *Party Politics in America*. New York: Longman 2008.

getting the government to pursue their goals. In reality, the USA never was “of the people” or “for the people” as Lincoln so eloquently put it. From its beginning, it was designed to encourage individual profit-making, not the common well-being (the “general Welfare” declared in the Constitution).

The shift from the concept of an “ideal common, shared good” to one based on the commercial success of the party, benefiting political entrepreneurs, is typically American. The party as a political entity is supposed to coalesce around ideas and to foster activism for its support. This is an *ideal* condition. The party as an instrument for achieving the economic goals of politicians is consonant with the *real* condition. Parties became growing enterprises with a chief executive officer and a chief financial officer. Today they employ thousands of people (lawyers, technical staff, writers, strategists and tacticians, marketing personnel). An increasing number of consultants (various types of “political engineers”) work for them on tactical and strategic matters. Since the end of the Civil War, the parties have given up the people as their constituents. Parties establish their own agenda based on their own economic motivations, sometimes affirmed as political or social goals. Like any other segment of the economy, they compete in the marketplace for money in order to expand their power. In political terms, opposition effectively eliminates the notion of shared responsibility. In an adversarial system of parties, which are in the business of succeeding to the detriment of their competitors, egotism replaces shared responsibility.

In the hands of privileged groups, whose economic interests and methods for pursuing them too often go unchallenged, parties have transformed politics into business. Americans rarely question why this is the case.

Observers of what the system presents as a democratic process—the primaries, for example—often take note of how candidates are chosen. It is obvious that if indeed all Americans can vote, not all of them can effectively become candidates. Democracy implies political equality. As long as only persons with money—their own or that of their supporters (to whom they will owe a debt of gratitude)—can run for election, the equation of democracy is not one of equal opportunity, but rather of unequal opportunism. It has been said and written⁵³ many times that in the final analysis, parties are less different than they want their members to believe. The demagoguery of highlighting differences (“They are for the rich. We are for the poor and middle class. They

53 Hinich, M.J. and M.C. Munger. *Ideology and the Theory of Political Choice*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

are for free markets and globalization. We are for competition and fairness.”) would be comical if it were not so depressing. Posturing is supposed to create the appearance that voters have a choice. But regardless of the brand, and of the discount—“Read my lips. No new taxes,” or “Healthcare for everyone”—parties are in the service of the corporate state and of corporations. Therefore, slogans about loving peace and caring for the less fortunate, thrown out to entice voters, will always hide the profitable economics of arms exports and wars and of convenient subsidies. Slogans regarding the (mythical) right to privacy are a cover-up for security policies that violate constitutional proclamations (e.g., search and seizure). The latest call for transparency does not prevent the government from erecting smokescreens between state authority and the public. The same politicians who voted against raising the national debt limit when the other party was in power in effect merely blackmailed them with the cheap phraseology of transcending party interests. They know that short-term memory characterizes stupidity, including their own.

The Price of Patronage

Since Andrew Jackson’s presidency, patronage has become a fixture of political mercantilism: “To the victor go the spoils.” Thirty percent of ambassadorial appointments—officials who are supposed to represent the USA rather than some individual or group or party—are political (read: “bought with heavy money”). “Embassies for sale” became the title of a publication dedicated to this form of political commerce. In John F. Kennedy’s administration, there were 400 political appointees; in our days, the number increased twenty times. In the spoils system, government jobs are the reward for those supporters who contributed the most to the success of parties and candidates. Logic would say: Let parties pay for their appointments. The reality: Americans actually pay, as though it were their duty to please the winners.

Seen from the outside, modern America is in a continuous state of a soft *coup d’etat*. No day passes without investigations. Most of the time, these are triggered by party (i.e., economic) interests rather than by the real inadequacies related to representing the people. “We the People” has become “We the Party,” or, to state it even more precisely, “We the Party Lawyers.” Each side is convinced, or is trying to convince everyone, that they best represent Americans.

Polarized and successful, the USA was sucked into the destructive path of adversarial means and methods. Within this framework, to talk about patriotism is at best disingenuous. Probably everyone who parades patriotism by displaying a flag on the front lawn, or by wearing a flag pin, or declares