

The Consequences of Ideas

Lesson 17: American Political Parties

Why do we have political parties? What good do they do? What is the consequence of having them? *"The difference between Democrats and Republicans is: Democrats have accepted some ideas of Socialism cheerfully, while Republicans have accepted them reluctantly"* Norman Thomas 6 Time Socialist Presidential Candidate

I. Introduction

- a. In order to make sense of the evolution of political ideas that have **shaped** our present day political parties we need to review how the two-party system originated in the United States.
- b. As with virtually every other idea that the Founders of our Nation considered, there was strenuous **debate** before, during and after the Constitutional Convention regarding the adoption of political parties.
- c. The framers made no provision in the governmental structure for the functioning of political parties because they believed that parties were a source of corruption and an impediment to the freedom of people to judge issues on **their merits**.
- d. James Madison argued in his "Federalist Paper #10" against a system in which "**factions**" (his word for parties) might be able to seize control of the government.
- e. George Washington, in accordance with the thinking of his fellow Founding Fathers, included in his cabinet men of **diverse** political philosophies and policies.
- f. Within a short time **informal** parties did develop, even though their adherents still insisted they disapproved of parties as a permanent feature in American politics.

II. Federalist and Democratic-Republican Parties

- a. One faction, commonly identified with Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Vice-President John Adams, became known as the **Federalist** Party.
- b. Federalists favored a pro-British foreign policy, an **active** federal government, a Treasury that played a vital role in the nation's economic life. It was strongly supported by merchants, manufacturers, and New Englanders.
- c. The other faction, whose central figures were Thomas Jefferson and fellow Virginian James Madison, became known as the Republican or Democratic - Republican Party (not be confused with the modern **Republican party**).
- d. The Jeffersonian Republicans advocated a limited federal government, little government **interference** in economic affairs, and a pro-French foreign policy. They were popular with debt-ridden farmers, and Southerners.
- e. Though **not** intended, the structure of government was conducive to the formation of political parties. In practice they became necessary in order to get things done and inevitably became a formal part of the political landscape.
- f. The Jeffersonian Republicans held power for **28** years following the inauguration of President Jefferson in 1801. During this period, the Federalist Party became increasingly unpopular.

III. New Political Alignments

- a. After the War of **1812**, far-reaching changes in the U.S. economy and social structure resulted in the gradual formation of new political alignments within a one-party system.
 1. The expansion of the country westward, which created a large class of pioneer farmers, whose frontier communities represented a type of **democratic** society never before seen in any country;
 2. The agricultural **revolution** in the Southern states, which resulted in the dynamic growth of the slave system producing cotton; and
 3. A considerable growth in the **wealth** and influence of manufacturers, merchants, bondholders, and land speculators of the Northern states.
- b. The ideas of **limited** government that became known as Jeffersonian democracy appealed strongly to the class interests of the Western frontier and the South, and also to the growing class of urban workers.
- c. The policies once advocated by the **defunct** Federalist Party, however, were still popular with the minority of Americans who favored a more active economic role for the federal government.

IV. Revived Two-Party System

- a. The second two-party system developed gradually as Republicans began quarreling. Those who asserted that the federal government **should** actively promote economic development became known as National Republicans.
- b. Their opponents, who were first known as Democratic-Republicans, by 1828 were called the **Democratic Party**.
- c. Jackson's controversial policies and contentious personality prevented any reconciliation with the National Republicans. By the middle of his second term, his opponents began to call themselves the **Whig party**.
- d. The Democrats controlled the national government for most of the years between **1828 and 1860**, although they lost two presidential elections to Whig military heroes.
- e. After 1840 the **Democratic** Party became the mouthpiece of the slaveholders. Northern Democratic leaders were often called "doughfaces," or northern men with southern principles, by opponents.

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- f. In 1854 the party system dominated by Whigs and Democrats **collapsed** due to the controversy sparked by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which made it possible to establish slavery in western territories.
- g. This act outraged northerners and convinced many Democrats and Whigs in that region to abandon their parties. Many of these voters initially joined the **Know-Nothing** party.
- h. The Know-Nothings were an **anti-Catholic**, anti-immigrant organization whose antislavery reputation in the North helped it attract more than 1 million members.
- i. One outcome of the Kansas controversy was the creation of a **new** Republican party. They promised to prevent the admission of new slave states and also to diminish slaveholders' influence in the federal government.
- j. The appeal of this platform quickly enabled the Republican Party to overpower the Know-Nothings. Although the Republicans lost their first campaign for the presidency in 1856, they triumphed in 1860 with Abraham **Lincoln**.
- k. The Republican victory resulted in part from the **division** of the Democratic Party into northern and southern factions, each of which ran its own presidential candidate.
- l. During the Civil War, the Republicans temporarily called themselves the **Union** Party in an attempt to win the votes of pro-war Democrats.
- m. From 1860 to the close of the **19th** Century, both the Republican and Democrat Parties strengthened their respective identities and took root in the American political landscape.
- n. Even though the two Party system had taken hold, another ideology emerged in the early 20th Century, whose adherents were drawn from **both** Republican and Democrat ranks, as well as from non-aligned individuals.
- o. This ideology, called **Progressivism**, has subtly shaped policies and politics for the last 100 years and is today at the center of the most fundamentally sweeping change since the founding of American system of government.

V. Core Distinctions

- a. Although the Democratic and Republican Parties have similar aims (to get and hold onto **power**) and similar forms, they are different in some very important ways.
- b. These can be seen not so much in policy outcomes, which must pass through the filter of political reality, that is, what the party **can pass** as legislation, but the chief difference is the way in which internal politics is conducted.
- c. The Democratic Party is composed of **constituencies**. These constituencies are ones which identify themselves as having a common characteristic creating a common agenda which they feel the party must respond to.
- d. The Republican Party also has relevant components, but they are not as important as the Democratic Party's constituent groups because they are not mechanisms for exercising power and tend to be driven by **ideology**.
- e. Republicans tend to represent the **center** while Democrats view society from the periphery. The Democratic periphery feels a strong government is necessary in order to counterbalance private economic domination.
- f. The Republican Party believes that they represent the national interest, and that their concept of representation is as a "**trustee**" pursuing the long range best interests of the represented. Ideologically, they are Constitutionalists.
- g. The Democrats have a very different world view and a different concept of the meaning of representation. To them, representation means the **inclusion** of all relevant groups and viewpoints.
- h. Republicans believe that that which most benefits the whole will most benefit each part. Democrats think of themselves as outsiders pounding on the door seeking programs which will facilitate **entry** into the mainstream.
- i. As is typical of outsiders, Democrats are predisposed toward "**change**" and "experimentation" in the belief that what is may not be inherently desirable, and something new might lead to something better.
- j. The Republican idea of a national interest can be summed up in a single phrase: **individual success**. For government to interfere, other than to remove barriers to individual action, is undesirable.
- k. The word that would most aptly characterize what Democrats want is **fairness**. This is a common goal of outsiders who do not accept their fate as caused by their own failure, but see unequal distribution of wealth as a cause.
- l. They are rather skeptical that there is a linear relationship between individual effort, ability and reward and feel that a major **function** of government is to make life fairer.

VI. Application

- a. Due to the inherent fallenness of man, factions are an inevitable political consequence in any governing system man can devise. The quest for power and control can not be kept out of the motivations of those who would lead.
- b. Within the Church we have developed our own brand of factions which we call Denominations. Here, individual believers often fall into the same trap as secular politics, "believing that my particular faction is the right one".
- c. Scripture reveals the source of this problem. Gal 5:19-20 *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions* NIV [**Seditious**] *Dichostasiai*. Divisions into separate factions; parties, whether in the church or state.
- d. To what extent do you hang on tenaciously to your factious ideas (Biblical or otherwise?) How does this drive you?