Contentious Institutions and Party Orders in American Politics

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Abstract

What are political parties, and how and why do they change? This set of questions is foundational to party research, yet scholars of American parties sharply disagree about the answers. In this paper we present a new theoretical framework capable of bridging these scholarly divides and coming to terms with the processes remaking American party politics today. First, we argue that political parties should be seen as fundamentally *contentious institutions*. Due to their mediating position between state and society, parties are subject to rival claims of authority from a range of political actors, including elected officeholders, party officials, interest groups, and social movements. To manage intraparty contention, win elections, and govern, political entrepreneurs construct and maintain *party orders* -- institutional and ideational arrangements that foster an operational degree of cohesion and constraint through time. Party actors manage contention across a party's five key dimensions: institutions, ideology, issues, interests, and identity. Together, the dynamics of intraparty contention and the rise and fall of distinct party orders over time illuminate the patterns of American party development.

Introduction

Since the Civil War the American polity has been host to two coevolving partisan coalitions -- one Democratic, one Republican -- whose relations and transformations have profoundly shaped the patterns of political development. Yet American parties scholars remain divided over foundational questions regarding what parties are and how and why they change. In this paper we present a new theoretical framework capable of bridging these divides and coming to terms with the processes remaking American party politics today. First, we argue that political parties should be seen as fundamentally *contentious institutions*. Due to their mediating position between state and society, parties are subject to rival claims of authority from a range of political actors, including elected officeholders, party officials, interest groups, and social movements. To manage intraparty contention, win elections, and govern, political entrepreneurs construct and maintain *party orders* -- institutional and ideational arrangements that foster an operational degree of cohesion and constraint through time. Party actors manage contention across a party's five key dimensions: institutions, ideology, issues, interests, and identity. Together, the dynamics of intraparty contention and the rise and fall of distinct party orders over time illuminate the patterns of American party development.

This paper proceeds in five parts. First, we review the two broad schools of thought that have characterized American party scholarship since the mid-twentieth century. While they differ in significant ways, both share a functionalist approach to political institutions that we argue limits their theoretical and empirical grasp of partisan politics and the processes of party change. In the two sections that follow we elaborate our alternative conceptual framework, which grounds parties in contentious relations and the contingent orders meant to contain them. Part four then recasts prevailing theories of party change by distinguishing the "normal"

contention that typically infuses party orders from the more infrequent "durable shifts" in party authority that fundamentally reorder partisan coalitions and commitments (Orren and Skowronek 2004, 123). Finally, we demonstrate the usefulness of our "contentious orders" framework by illuminating the divergent paths of the Democratic and Republican orders since the 1970s. Contrary to popular belief regarding the crisis of the American party system, we conclude that both Democratic and Republican orders display remarkable continuity and resiliency.

Perspectives on Parties

Although American parties have been a longstanding concern of political scientists (e.g., APSA 1950; Wilson 1885), scholars remain divided over foundational questions about what parties are and how and why they change. These scholars can be sorted into two broad schools of thought, which, on closer inspection, share similar assumptions.[1] The politician-centered tradition, stretching back to the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1942) and Anthony Downs (1957) and continuing through the scholarship of Joseph Schlesinger (1994) and John H. Aldrich (2011) conceives of parties as solutions to collective action problems faced by politicians in government. Officeholders in legislative bodies form "long coalitions" to sustain logrolls (Aldrich 2011), shape the agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2005), define a signature party brand (Snyder and Ting 2002), and extend leadership control to assist with reelection and retention of majority control (Kroger and Lebo 2017). While party activists or social movements may play an important role in shaping partisan strategy (Aldrich 2011; Carmines and Stimson 1989), officeholders are clearly in the driver's seat.

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[1] For reasons of space, we bracket discussion of the literature on partisanship in the mass public (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Following the lead of the party scholarship under examination here, we exclude from our analysis the "party in the electorate" (Key 1964).

In recent years, an alternative perspective has emerged, reaching back to the work of E.E. Schattschneider (1942, 1960), which conceives of parties as solutions to collective action problems encountered by intense policy-demanding groups outside government (Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008). Treating groups as the raw material of parties, this group-centered perspective locates parties in the cooperative efforts of organized groups to form a long coalition of their own. They coordinate around an agenda, nominate acceptable candidates for office, and extract benefits from the state (Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008). From this perspective, it is groups that are the principals and politicians their agents. Because most group coordination occurs outside formal party organizations, researchers have elaborated the insights of this alternative view into an encompassing "extended party network" (Desmarais et al. 2015). Making use of social network analysis to trace linkages between the party apparatus and the wider "partisan webs" of campaign donors, activists, interest groups, advocacy organizations, and media outlets (Koger et al. 2009), these scholars have shown that the relevant categories for understanding party action stretch well beyond politicians in government or the campaign organizations they build to help them.

Despite their obvious differences, these competing approaches share a functionalist approach to the study of political institutions. For both politician- and group-centered scholars, parties are institutions that facilitate the cooperation of their principals. This approach, rooted in rational choice theory, typically frames politics as a series of collective action problems in which legislators (or groups) construct a coalition to avoid "endless haggling, frequent reneging, complexity, uncertainty, and other sources of heavy transaction costs" (Moe 2005, 217). Party coalitions then endure over time so long as members continue to derive benefits from them and lack any incentive to defect.

Yet the cooperative theory of parties has significant theoretical and empirical limitations. As political institutions, parties are more than voluntary arrangements; they are also structures of power (Moe 2005). As opposed to the relatively flat, horizontal image that a "team of officeholders" or an "extended network" might suggest, party coalitions distribute resources and authority in highly unequal ways, creating an unstable, inherently contentious environment. Institutional arrangements always advantage some political actors at the expense of others, incentivizing a status quo preference for the former and a disruptive preference for the latter. While it is true that in a comparative sense American parties have never been tightly "disciplined armies" (Koger et al. 2017), neither have they typically been "harmonious" coalitions (Cohen et al. 2008, 38).

Conceptualizing parties in functionalist terms and obscuring the role of power in them further limits the ability to explain the mechanisms at work in processes of party change (Galvin 2016). For choice-theoretic models, change typically comes from the outside. Long coalitions among politicians or groups produce self-sustaining equilibria in which no actor has a strong incentive to defect. Incentives can be altered, of course, by a change in circumstances: the loss of an election, an unexpected gain from a rival party, or the entrance of a new policy-demanding group. Yet the exogeneity of the impetus for change leaves unexamined the actual processes of party response. Precisely how and on what terms parties digest a loss, respond to a national crisis, or absorb the demands of an interest group or social movement are often left in a black box, restricting us only to describing outcomes rather than offering clear explanations. Moreover, equilibria-based models unduly circumscribe the scope for endogenous sources of party change that emerge from the ambiguity, uncertainty, and instability of institutional arrangements (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). As sites of political power, parties' internal dynamics appear to

recommend themselves as at least equally important analytic considerations as exogenous factors.

Empirically, recent events, such as Donald Trump's rise to the Republican Party leadership and then his 2016 presidential victory, have also indicated the shortcomings of American party scholarship. The near-universal state of shock that permeated the discipline during those years gave rise to a spate of efforts to bring Trump's victory within the remit of existing frameworks (e.g. Cohen et al. 2016), though few amounted to more than ex post facto rationalizations of the oversight. Given this, as well as the conceptual problems profiled above, we are inclined to see these problems as an opportunity for a more wholesale revision of party theory.

To be clear, parties may well be harmonious, stable coalitions that reflect the preferences of their principals. But party coherence, cohesion, and consensus must be seen as contingent political outcomes that need to be explained, not assumed. In the next section, we ground our theory of parties on the contentious relations that result from their unique institutional position in the polity. Given parties' fundamental contentiousness, we then explore the role that ordering plays in creating coherence in party character and behavior across time. Our larger aim is to provide a framework for understanding the sources and dynamics of order and change in partisan politics.

Political Parties as Contentious Institutions

Political parties occupy a unique position in the architecture of the democratic polity, straddling the boundary between state and society. Parties are simultaneously in government, acting as principals of the state, and in the mass public, serving as mobilizers and conduits of popular

participation. As Schattschneider (1942) pointed out, this dual role is what makes modern representative democracy possible. Elected officials, temporarily empowered by voters at the last election, translate public preferences into policy through the agency of the party, the collective political actor of democratic politics.

Yet in bridging the state-society divide, parties necessarily encompass two sets of differently situated actors, each of whom carry distinct expectations and seek to use parties for different purposes (see Figure 1). Politicians in government see the party as a tool of governance and a helpful resource in their bid for reelection. From their perspective, the party appears as a mere "service provider" (Aldrich 2011). For groups anchored in society, the party appears as a vehicle for claims making, whether for rights, policy, or patronage. From their perspective, parties are indeed a coalition of policy demanders (Bawn et al. 2012). As intermediary institutions, both politicians and groups are constituent parts of parties. Neither can be excised from the picture. Thus, to the extent that parties can be considered instruments, they are in the hands of multiple actors seeking to use them for different purposes.

[See Figure 1]

This essential quality of parties creates an inescapable ambiguity about the precise location of party authority. Even in cases where parties have formal constitutions based on majority rule by its members or convention delegates, in practice the question of who governs is perpetually unsettled (Hilton 2021). On the one hand, party elites can plausibly lay claim to ultimate authority based on their specialized policy expertise and their electoral mandate. On the other hand, groups of voters, activists, or allied interests can claim parties as their own because it

is public sovereignty that is temporarily delegated to representatives on election day and it is their interests and preferences that ostensibly shape party platforms and policy agendas. Who exactly should "steer the party ship" is unclear (Fishkin and Gerken 2014, 199). Official statements and procedural mechanisms for intraparty accountability may help manage this ambiguity, but it can never fully resolve it.

As a result, parties are host to rival and often discordant claims of authority from politicians in government and groups in society, locking both sets of partisan actors into relations of contention (Heaney and Rojas 2015; McAdam and Kloos 2014; McAdam and Tarrow 2010). Ambitious office seekers, officeholders, and party officials are likely to prioritize their continuation in office as well as maximizing the number of legislative seats to ensure majority control. Their work of constituency service often plods along at a slow pace, taking shape in the staid atmosphere of committee hearings and the idiom of statutory law and parliamentary procedure. By contrast, interest groups, advocacy organizations, and social movement activists typically demand immediate action. Given the ups and downs of movement mobilization, as well as their stark moral discourse, activist demands for rights, recognition, and responsiveness are often incongruent with the painstaking and complex processes of policy making. Officeholders are also likely to be protective of their autonomy, enjoying information asymmetries that make group monitoring difficult, and may be insulated from some groups that are electorally "captured" (Frymer 1999). Coming from different sides of the state-society divide, politicians and groups pursue their respective party priorities with different cognitive and normative frames, resources, capacities, and time horizons, placing them in tension with one another despite their shared partisanship.

The simultaneous and mutual impingement of these distinct motives imbues parties with contention at their core. Because mediating state and society are a constitutive function of all governing parties, we speculate that contention is likely present across national contexts. US parties, however, are likely to be particularly contentious. Given the strict duopoly that has characterized the American party system since its beginning, the significant barriers to new-party entry raise the stakes for influencing one of the major parties. At the same time, the private system of campaign finance and the use of primary elections broadens the opportunities for movements, groups, and well-resourced individuals to impress their agendas on both Democrats and Republicans.

None of the foregoing is meant to suggest that a successful coalition is unlikely. On the contrary, officeholders, party officials, and groups need each other and regularly ally as a means to their respective ends (Schlozman 2015; Schwartz 2010). Without access to politicians and policy makers, groups are unlikely to be able to achieve their goals, mobilize their members, influence the public, or receive the benefits or rights they demand. Politicians, on the other hand, need the resources that only groups can supply, namely votes, money, information, networks, audiences, endorsements, mobilizing infrastructure, and volunteer labor (Skinner 2007). However, contrary to the image of a harmonious extended network of groups and officeholders, we contend that the resulting alliance is likely to be uneasy, fraught with contentious relations that may be expressed more or less overtly but are permanent nonetheless. While electoral success remains the modus operandi of parties, managing these endemic forces of intraparty contention is the mandatory means to that end.

Managing Contention: The Construction and Maintenance of Party Orders

Given parties' endemic contentiousness, we argue that *party order* must be understood as a contingent political, institutional, and ideational outcome constructed by political entrepreneurs to manage intraparty contention, win elections, and govern. These entrepreneurs -- whether formal or informal party leaders, factional operators, or interest group spokespersons -- foster explicit agreements, maintain durable arrangements, and adopt critical assumptions that facilitate an operational degree of cohesion and constraint across a party's five key dimensions: institutions, ideology, issues, interests, and identity (what we call "the Five Is" below). Parties are more than just component parts of other, larger political regimes or party systems. They are themselves internally ordered coalitions that cut across institutional venues and generate and disseminate distinctive public philosophies. Party orders structure intraparty politics by defining the site and character of party authority. They also shape and are shaped by interparty competition and broader developments in the political landscape.

We introduce this novel concept to foreground a specific mid-level institutional space typically overlooked by existing frameworks. As shown in Figure 2, party orders are located between the well-examined arenas of voters, activists, and politicians, on the one hand, and the party-system level on the other. While these traditional foci of party research offer rich insights into party activity, neither adequately captures the institutional dynamics within parties themselves. We have already argued that because parties are contentious institutions, they cannot be understood as mere aggregations of individual actors' preferences or behaviors. Nor can they be fully subsumed into a periodized party-system chronology that structures the terms of competition throughout the polity, such as the "New Deal order"(Fraser and Gerstle 1989; Plotke 1996; Polsky 2012; Skowronek 1997; Sundquist 1983). Shifting our attention to the meso-level

of party order offers insights into how individual parties articulate with, undergird, or challenge

larger polity-level regimes, adding an additional dimension to the "multiple orders" model of

intercurrent institutional change proposed by Orren and Skowronek (2004). Moreover, the

framework of party order illuminates how party institutions and legacies "refract" the

preferences and strategies of individual society-based or governmental actors, reshaping their

interests, goals, and identities in the process (de Leon et al. 2014; Mudge 2018).

[See Figure 2]

Most significantly, introducing the concept of party orders enables us to relax the system-

level assumption that the dynamics of stability and change affect both parties symmetrically. As

Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) have convincingly argued, Republicans and Democrats are

fundamentally different kinds of parties. Party orders not only explain how the parties differ (see

below), but also why system-level dynamics are likely to affect the parties in different ways.

Party order is a fundamentally temporal concept; it draws attention to the fact that each

party is an institution that develops through time. Operationalizing the concept of party order

requires that we theorize the terrain of party development. To this end, we introduce the "Five

Is" framework -- five interrelated dimensions along which parties order politics: institutional

form, ideology, issues, interests, and identity. Examining party development within and across

these dimensions allows us to disentangle the mechanics of party development. It also allows us

to draw together hitherto separate streams of party research. Like the parable of the blind men

and the elephant, party scholars have been laboring over specific dimensions of parties without

bringing these disparate perspectives together. In the subsections that follow, we briefly explain

the substance of each of these dimensions. Though conceptually distinguishable, we acknowledge that in practice these five dimensions of party development are overlapping, mutually constitutive, and interconnected.

Institutions

Historically, parties have assumed distinct institutional forms that endow them with variable capacities and characteristics. Central axes of institutional development include: decentralized vs. nationalized parties; patronage vs. mass parties; strong vs. weak national organizations; and congressionally-led vs. presidentially-led parties. Nominations are at the institutional core of parties and have received paramount attention from reformers and researchers alike. The "long war" over the control of nominations relocated the site of decision making power over time, from legislative caucuses and state and local officials in the nineteenth century to national conventions and primary electorates in the twentieth and twenty-first (Shafer and Wagner 2019). Other research has shown that party committees, once thought to be "headless, drifting organizations" (Cotter and Hennesy 1964, vi), involve themselves deeply in party politics to steer the nomination process as best they can and define and promote a distinctive national party brand (Hassell 2018; Heersink 2018). Inside Congress, parties have constructed various institutional mechanisms to coordinate political action, from loose, caucus-style formations to tight-knit, disciplined factions (Bloch Rubin 2017). At the national level, polarization and institutional reforms have facilitated stronger party leadership structures, which control the legislative agenda and sharpen the party brand (Rhode 1991; Koger and Lebo 2017; Lee 2016). A party's institutional influence can also extend to political institutions in which parties have entrenched themselves, such as the courts (Elinson 2017; Gillman 2002) or non-political institutions that

serve as party surrogates, such as mass media organizations (Hemmer 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2020).

Ideology

Parties are also ideological coalitions that promote distinct social, cultural, and political perspectives, broadcasting to voters and the larger public normative conceptions about the proper role of government, the obligations and rights of citizenship, and substantive values of the good life. Policy agendas connect these ideological principles with the specific means to achieve them. Shared ideology enables linkages between parties and social movements, interest groups, voters, donors, and media outlets, which also develop and disseminate ideological politics and impose on parties their demands for "ideological patronage" (Milkis 1993, 54). As a form of coalition-making and behavior rationalization, ideology is a dynamic but defining feature of parties (Gerring 1998; Lewis 2019; Noel 2014), even if issue constraint has only a modest effect on the mass public (Converse 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017).

Issues

In translating ideological perspectives into policy positions, parties are distinguished by their signature issue bundles that define their "party brand" (Cox and McCubbins 2007; Heersink 2018). As they privilege particular issues and adopt and promote specific positions, parties come to "own" one issue or another, often resulting in a decline in party competition over the specific issue or the constituency promoting it (Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003/2004; Egan 2013). Issue agendas represent both the push and pull of parties' relationships with interest groups and social movements as they use issues to recruit support and are themselves lobbied by interests

(Karol 2009; Schlozman 2015). Parties seek to maintain loyalty to their recognized brand while also distinguishing themselves from the opposing party and endeavoring to enlarge their electoral coalition (Brewer and Stonecash 2008). Contestation occurs not just between parties but also within parties as their ideological factions and aligned interest groups compete to influence specific policy positions (DiSalvo 2012).

Interests

Notwithstanding Madisonian hopes of avoiding consistently aligned factions, parties emerged to represent interests (Hofstadter 1968). While parties and interest groups were typically contrasted in the classical political science literature (e.g. Schattschneider 1942), interests are now seen as the core elements of parties (Krimmel 2017). Indeed, parties themselves have been reconceptualized as policy-demanding groups and their relations with non-party entities in the extended networks that surround them blur the boundaries that were once thought to sharply separate parties from interest groups (Bawn et al. 2012). In this blurring of lines, we can see that parties and interest groups shape one another (Fagan, McGee, and Thomas 2019). The influence of non-party groups on parties may help explain modern forms of polarization (Layman et al. 2010; Rosenfeld 2019), but the causal arrow likely runs the other way as well: group interests and political behavior are reshaped by their relationships with parties (de Leon et al. 2014).

Identity

Finally, parties also represent and shape political identity. In their conquest of legitimate political authority, parties inevitably address the critical question of "who are we?" (Morone 2020), articulating "stories of political peoplehood" that define and redefine the boundaries of the

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political community (Bateman 2018; Smith 2015). The intertwinement of partisanship and identity has grown especially salient in recent decades as political, cultural, and demographic changes have brought historical marginalized groups into the political mainstream and provoked a powerful, status-based backlash from those who perceive their privileges to be eroding (Mutz 2018). The emergence of these new forms of *political* identity (i.e. the fact that these identities have become politically salient) has made possible the linkages between these identities and parties along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and immigration status (e.g. Jardina 2018). Partisan identity has subsumed other social identities and is now a defining, all-encompassing meta-identity (Mason 2018).

Each dimension of the Five Is -- briefly stretched here -- constitutes an essential, yet variable, element of parties. In practice, these dimensions of party cohesion and change are overlapping and co-constitutive. While we can isolate a given feature of party development for scholarly investigation, e.g. the role of whiteness in the Trump-era Republican party, a probing treatment finds that political identity is connected to specific issue positions (e.g. voting restrictions, permissive gun laws, hostility toward social welfare programs), ideology (e.g. conservatism), interests (e.g. the NRA), and indeed other identities (e.g. Christianity). The embrace and flourishing of specific identities, ideologies, issue positions, and interests by and within a party is shaped by the institutional form of the party. For example, the adoption of the primary system by both parties allowed for greater penetration and influence by interest groups and social movements. The increasing nationalization of both parties in the past four decades has generated strong intraparty ideologically coherence and the widespread adoption of identical issue positions. Grounding analysis of party development on the dynamics of party order and

change across the Five Is allows for both a clearer view of intraparty development and the

relationship of intraparty development to exogenous sources of change, including partisan

competition, changes at the party system level, and exogenous shocks (e.g. a recession or war).

Thus, *party order* refers to the contingent configuration of the Five Is over a given period of

time.

Mobilizing party orders

Concretely, party orders shape party politics in several distinct ways. First, an order establishes

expectations of how individuals and factions ought to behave within the context of intraparty

politics. Ideas concerning what forms of behavior are acceptable or likely to be rewarded,

tolerated, or punished can be codified in formal rules, but they are more likely to be the product

of unspoken norms and may be the result of individual, pragmatic efforts to emulate success.

Second, an order defines a balance of power between distinct party elements, such as national

versus subnational levels, regional, sectional, or factional divisions, or party-group relations in

nominating and policymaking processes. Given the inherent ambiguity of party authority, party

orders attempt to pin down the site of leadership and the specific relations of authority that flow

from it. Third, a party order necessarily promotes particular campaign strategies and types of

candidates while discouraging or dismissing others (see Klinghard 2010). In short, party orders

configure the distribution power inside partisan coalitions. The construction of order by

entrepreneurial party leaders is an ongoing attempt to discipline contention within the party and

steer institutional agency.

The term should not be interpreted to necessarily imply top-down or centralized forms of

order. On the contrary, decentralization or localized authority is itself a distinctive type of party

order. As seen in the "party period" of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Democrats, Whigs, and Republicans built partisan coalitions that intentionally lodged institutional authority at the state and local levels, inhibiting the potential for nationalized parties and presidential leadership (Klinghard 2010). In Congress, party order has appeared as both the centralized power of leadership to control the voting behavior of their copartisans as well as the dispersal of legislative authority to autonomous committee chairs (Rohde 1991; Schickler 2001). Both extremes constitute deliberate arrangements of party authority associated with distinctive coalitions of interests, ideas, and visions of political possibility.

Order should also not be taken to imply the imposition of an ideal model or preconceived blueprint on a party coalition. Rather, party orders are pragmatic creations assembled by an ensemble of political entrepreneurs with a mix of motives and a requisite number of supporters willing to follow along for the benefits the order has to offer. Given that parties encompass both society- and state-based actors, party entrepreneurs can be found within all major governing institutions as well as outside them: presidents, courts, legislatures (party leaders, factions, blocs), interest and advocacy groups, media outlets, and social movements. However, given their advantages in knowledge, experience, and resources, politicians, especially those in formal leadership positions, are likely to play dominant roles in any given order.

Still, party orders are unlikely to be harmonious networks of political actors. As distinct arrangements of political power, party orders always advantage some individuals and groups more than others. These "junior" members of the coalition may find their ideological preferences frustrated, their signature issues marginalized, or their interests addressed with mere lip service. Given the constraints of the American party system, however, aggrieved interests have few realistic options of exit. A party order, then, while beneficial to most, also provides incentives for

continual intraparty agitation. Indeed, while party orders are constructed and maintained to contain contention by defining a shared "idea of party" (Klinghard 2010), they may well inspire recurrent efforts to *reorder* the party.

Party Contention, Order, and Development

Rethinking parties as contentious orders recasts how party scholars have typically understood the processes of party development. Within the American party literature, no theory of party change has been more influential than realignment theory (Burnham 1970; Key 1955; Schattschneider 1960; Sundquist 1983). Implicitly based on a punctuated equilibrium model, the classical theory of realignment posited a recurring disjuncture between dynamic change in voter preferences and the relatively inert party coalitions in government. Approximately every three decades or so an exogenous shock broke the deadlock, displacing existing lines of cleavage in the process and recomposing the two major parties along a new axis of conflict. Critical elections such as 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932 demarcated the beginnings of new party systems that would endure for a generation until the next critical election. While the elegant architecture of the classical realignment literature has fallen into disrepute (Mayhew 2002), the basic framework remains alive, having replacing abrupt forms of party change with more gradual "secular realignments" or more "evolutionary" forms of change (Brewer and Stonecash 2008; Carmines and Stimson 1989).

A contentious orders framework provides an alternative to realignment theory, specifically by overcoming three shortcomings characteristic of that literature: namely, a narrow focus on the party system rather than parties themselves; a theory of party change constricted to moments of abrupt change; and the inability to explain asymmetrical changes between parties.

First, realignment scholars have typically focused their attention at the level of the party system as a whole. As a result, the organization of the party itself, the relations between its parts and external actors, and its inner dynamics have tended to be overlooked. In other words, realignment scholars have tended to focus on the nature of contention *between* parties rather than relations of contention *within* them, occluding from view what we argue to be the primary dynamic driving party change. Shifting focus down to the level of the party to investigate its internal dynamics of order and contention does not mean jettisoning attention to the party system, which plays a significant role in conditioning the tense bargains struck among various party actors. However, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, party system realignments often begin as dissenting minority movements within party coalitions decades before they are able to displace or convert their intraparty rivals (e.g. Rosenfeld 2017; Schickler 2016). Even exogenous shocks like an economic downturn, a foreign policy crisis, or a new social movement mobilization need to be interpreted by party actors in light of their preexisting normative frames, interests, and coalitional commitments (Plotke 1996; de Leon et al. 2014). Placing parties as the primary units of analysis foregrounds their contentiousness and assists in explaining party and system-wide changes alike.

Second, realignment scholars have tended to locate party change during periodic explosions of party system stress in which the disjuncture between an unchanging party system and new voter demands is temporarily resolved. Outside these once-in-a-generation moments, during periods of "normal politics," the public has "no means of expressing a choice on crucial issues" of domestic policy (Sundquist, quoted in Mayhew 2002, 29). However, realignment theory's implicit model of punctuated equilibrium neglects to consider other, more gradual mechanisms of change that are, in the end, no less transformational. From our perspective,

"constant low-level contention and incremental change are the norm" inside parties (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 12). Moreover, low-level contention can flare into explosive confrontations, such the infamous 1968 Democratic Convention, or harden into durable factions like the Tea Party-inspired Freedom Caucus (Bloch Rubin 2017; Blum 2020; DiSalvo 2012; Hilton 2021). High-level contention can in turn influence or result from electoral upsets that mark rapid moments of change. Thus, whether one is trying to explain a specific election, a high-profile party crisis, or a period of party stability, contentiousness is critical for understanding the durability and dynamics of parties.

Finally, theories that look primarily at system-level realignments are at pains to explain asymmetrical party change. The era of modern polarization has pushed many political scientists to recognize that the Republican and Democratic parties are not mirror images of each other (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Mann and Ornstein 2016). Given that system-wide changes to presidential nominating procedures, congressional committees, and campaign finance regulations have affected the parties with very different impacts, only party-specific factors such as their group relations, ideological commitments, and governing priorities -- all of which are suffused with contention -- can explain how and why the two parties are operating in profoundly dissimilar ways simultaneously.

In sum, a contentious orders framework presents an alternative to prevailing views of parties and party change, one that eschews rigid periodization schemes in favor of seeing party development as a "continuously dynamic process of organizing and redistributing political power" inside parties and within the party system (DiSalvo 2012, 31). The contentiousness at their core drives their development, which takes both gradual as well as abrupt forms over time.

Contemporary Party Politics in a Contentious Orders Perspective

The real value of the framework presented above lies in its ability to explain what other frameworks overlook or obscure. Since 2016, party scholars have been attempting to make sense of a perceived crisis within the American party system. Trump's candidacy was initially perceived as generative of a fracture within the Republican Party. Yet after his nomination and election, the party cohered around him, presenting a near-united front throughout his presidency and in the run-up to the 2020 election. Democrats, while opting for a more traditional presidential nominee with Biden (Masket 2020), have pursued a remarkably progressive policy agenda in spite of their razon-thin majorities in Congress. These developments have received a range of surprise reactions from observers across the spectrum. On the Democratic side of the aisle, Biden has invited analogies to the presidencies of his liberal forebears Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt. On the other side, a stream of journalistic and academic commentary continues to characterize Republican Party politics in the post-Trump era as mired in an "identity crisis" (Sides et al. 2018), in the midst of a "civil war" (Alberta 2019), and on the verge of a full-scale "crackup" (Popkin 2021).

Cutting through claims of imminent party transformation, a contentious orders perspective allows us to separate ongoing intraparty contention from more durable shifts in party order by identifying the dynamics of stability and change across the Five Is in each party. We find that neither party is in the midst of a crisis or profound change. Rather, contemporary party politics is largely continuous with the distinct party orders Democrats and Republicans have built and maintained since the 1970s.

Democrats have managed intraparty contention by constructing and maintaining a party order centered around interest group and social movement advocates, on which the party depends

for its legitimacy and electoral success (Hilton 2019, 2021). Democrats' dense linkages to outside advocacy groups has partially compensated for its "hollow" structure and its persistent failure to make organizational investments in in-house capacities to recruit and train candidates and officials, expand voter databases, innovate new communications technologies, or build state and local party organizations (Galvin 2010; Klinkner 1996; Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2019). This perspective on Democratic Party development cautions against overemphasizing the role of proximate causes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in explaining Biden's surprisingly bold policy agenda. Biden's initiatives fall far short of the signature issues animating the progressive wing of the party. Yet they may still mark the most significant effort to reconstruct the American welfare state since the 1960s. While Biden's ambition may be surprising, his agenda is not. It is largely in line with the trends animating the Democrats' advocacy party politics for nearly two decades (Malpas and Hilton 2021).

In contrast to the Democrats, Republicans have constructed and maintained an authoritarian party order: an organizationally robust party apparatus that has a long tradition of presidential domination (Galvin 2010). The GOP travelled to the present on a fundamentally different and divergent developmental path than the Democrats due to the party's intractable minority status during the New Deal era, the absence of any surrogates comparable to the Democratic-aligned advocacy groups prior the advent of the Christian Right in the 1980s and Fox News in the 1990s, and the path-dependent decisions of Republican presidents and national committee leaders to invest in their organization as a result. Over the last several decades this distinct configuration of the Five Is created a potent combination of robust party organization on the one hand *and* an army of highly motivated activists on the other. Rather than a hollow party that outsources its functions to advocacy groups, Republicans entered the twenty-first century

with a solid organization staffed by ideologically committed movement cadres. Immensely strong patterns of presidential leadership since the Eisenhower years paved the way for Trump, who deviated from this tradition in degree only -- his personalization of the party and demand for total loyalty reached new heights and took a public form rare in the annals of Republican Party politics (Galvin 2020). Indeed, the Republican National Committee's remarkable decision to not issue a party platform ahead of the 2020 election -- a novel departure in American party history -- caused little in the way of intraparty contention. Yet the real significance of such an unprecedented act and its non-reaction was in confirming the consolidation of the Republicans' authoritarian party order and its unmitigated success in managing intraparty contention.

In short, from a contentious orders perspective, contemporary American politics, bewildering though it is, continues to be undergirded by two sharply contrasting party orders that in broad, developmental terms have been with us for decades and may well continue to be for some time. The Democrats' bold policy agenda represents a continuation of a long-running Democratic trend of strong reliance on advocates and weak institutional capacity. Consequently, while advocates have seen their issues registered at the highest levels of the party, leaders have had to manage the frustration that results when promissory commitments for social, racial, environmental, and gender justice outstrip -- perhaps undermine -- the party's ability to achieve sizable majorities. What is most significant about the Republican Party today is its unparalleled capacity to keep contention contained in spite of all the political turbulence. The GOP remains a resilient party order. More impressive than those exceptional figures that spoke out against Trump's rise and his reckless presidential behavior, or denounced his lies about election fraud and voted for impeachment or conviction, are the overwhelming number of party officeholders and officials that doubled down on their public support and personal devotion to him throughout

his disruptive tenure in office and thereafter. Indeed, effective Republican opposition to Trump and his proxies was so sparse that terms like "civil war" grossly misrepresent the actual balance of power inside the party. This is less of Trump's doing than it is the product of the authoritarian party order that he inherited, personalized, and operated with perfection. Thus, rather than being in doubt, the future of the Republican Party is all too clear and disturbing. That the party is *not* mired in crisis is precisely the reason that it poses such a threat to American democracy.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to provide a new theoretical framework for the study of American political parties. Synthesizing and transcending both politician- and group-centered traditions, we have argued that parties are inherently and inextricably contentious institutions. Due to their mediating position between society and the state, parties are subject to rival claims making from both social groups and governing politicians as to where exactly party authority lies and who exactly steers the party ship. Moreover, politicians and groups compete for party influence. These relations of contention, we assert, cannot be resolved, only managed. Party entrepreneurs of various stripes try to contain competition and conflict within tolerable bounds by forming party orders: durable arrangements which create a functional level of coherence and cohesion across the Five Is.

This framework is useful for explaining the nature of modern party politics by highlighting the far-reaching differences between Democrats and Republicans and the divergent developmental paths they travelled to the present. As we have shown, Democrats and Republicans constructed fundamentally distinct party orders to manage intraparty contention, build a majority coalition, win elections, and govern. Party actors confronted these common concerns from different vantage points, electoral fortunes, and group alliances. As a result, the

Democrats pressed their advantage with advocacy groups, letting their institutional capacity atrophy, while Republicans built a well-oiled party machine that, later, was colonized by loyal conservative activists devoted to the agenda of their party leader.

While our proposal for a contentious orders approach to party research is far-reaching in scope, this paper has only scratched the surface of a far more ambitious research agenda. Specifically, the level or degree of party contention is likely to be the result of a complex set of factors that require further theoretical elaboration and empirical examination. These include the evolving capacities and strategies of non-party organizations to reshape partisan agendas, but also those of party leaders, including presidents, to employ the power of the governing institutions they occupy to manage the party's contentious relations and keep them within tolerable limits. Media outlets and social media networks also play an instrumental role in shaping the political agenda, and their evolving norms, partisanship, and organizational forms have made their profit-driven search for audiences' data an increasingly central influence on party behavior.

Finally, the contentiousness at the heart of parties cuts against the grain of their role in ordering democratic politics. This insight likely has significant implications for the recurrent debates about responsibility in American party politics. Parties, many argue, are meant to provide the scaffolding of democratic politics. Yet the contentiousness that lives inside them is a constant source of perturbation. While this debate is beginning anew in light of the challenges of populism and democratic backsliding (e.g. Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018), we recognize the meaning of party responsibility is likely to depend on how parties are defined. If we look at parties as contentious orders, "responsibility" is likely to take on more complex dimensions. This

does not suggest that they are not an essential feature of representative democracy, only that they

impart a tension that drives political development

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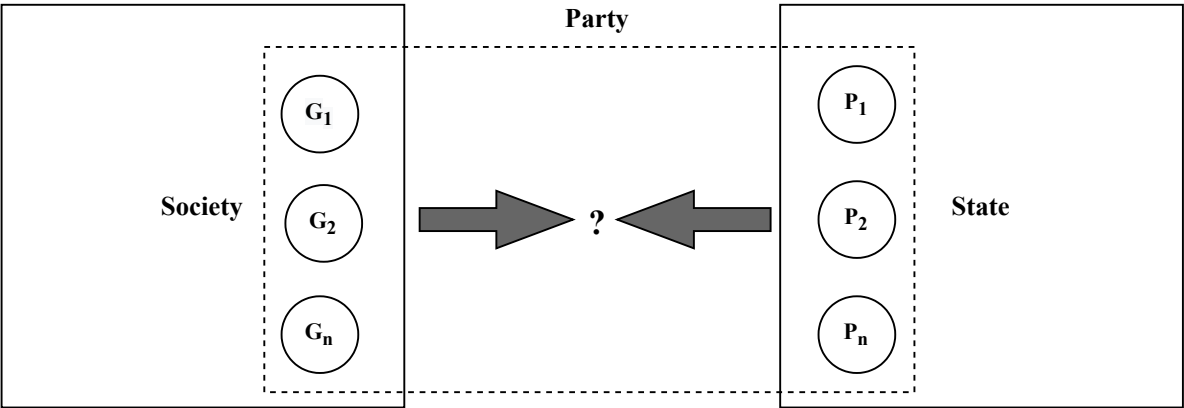
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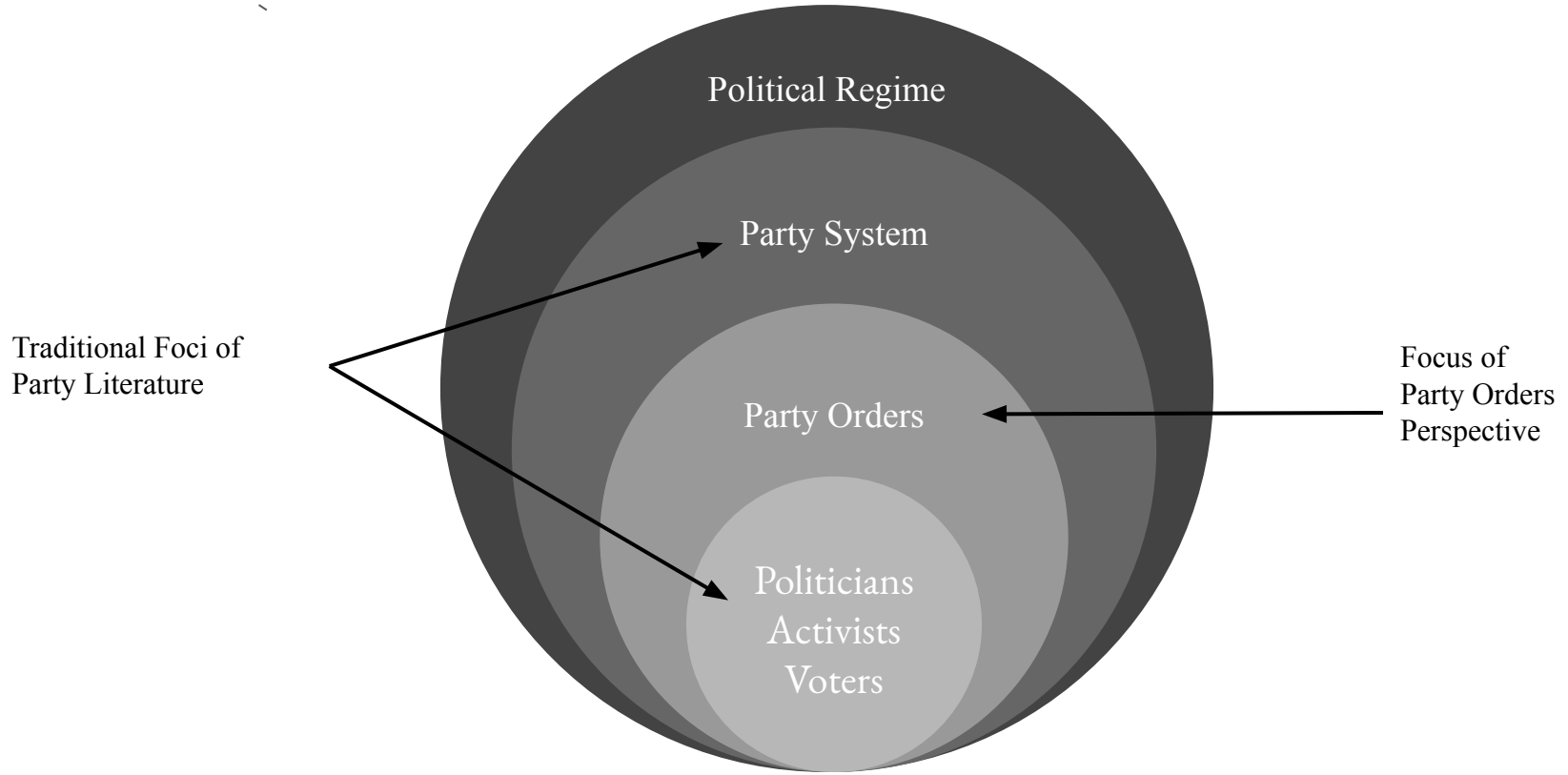Schlesinger, Joseph A. *Political Parties and the Winning of Office*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

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Figure 1. Groups (G) and Politicians (P) as Constituent Parts of Parties

Source: Adapted from Hilton (2021, 5).

Political Regime

Party System

Traditional Foci of
Party Literature

Party Orders

Focus of
Party Orders
Perspective

Politicians
Activists
Voters

Figure 2. The Place of Party Orders