Responsible, Functional, or Both? American Political Parties and the APSA Report after Fifty Years

John J. Coleman

Over half a century ago, the American Political Science Association (APSA) entered the arena and study of politics in an unusually blunt manner. With the publication of "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System," the association's Committee on Political Parties (1950) made a strong claim that American political parties—and American politicians—were serving democracy poorly. Stopping short of advocating widespread changes in U.S. constitutional structure, the report's authors called for extensive and far-reaching changes in elite political behavior and the internal operation of political parties.

At the same time that it entered the world of practical politics, the report also embraced a fundamental framework that would animate party scholarship for decades. The report's essence was that American political parties were weak, noncohesive, and insufficiently centralized. Parties were balkanized entities with little central control, vision, or identity. Controlled by local bosses, the parties were opportunistic and unprincipled, denying voters a significant lever on government. These criticisms were not entirely new: Similar arguments had informed Progressive, Mugwump, and even earlier complaints about the parties. Where Progressives saw the solution for decrepit parties as weaker, sanitized institutions, the APSA committee called for stronger, more aggressive organizations (David 1992).

To critics, who soon came out in force, the report was flawed in its empirical analysis of American parties and naive or worse about the normative value of responsible parties (Pennock 1952; Turner 1951). Touting a functional alternative, critics argued that American parties were as modern as their European counterparts and served critical systemic needs for the American polity (Epstein 1956, 1967; Herring 1940; Kirkpatrick 1971; Ranney and Kendall 1956; Sorauf 1975). Parties put together what the Constitution sought to separate. Perhaps responsible parties and a parliamentary ethos might reduce friction between the executive and the legislature, but this friction was a central premise of the Founders' vision and implicitly endorsed by the public (Jones 1994; Livingston 1976; Ranney 1951). And in a manner unlike parliamentary systems, critics argued, the political and party system in the United States did hold officials accountable—responsible parties were unnecessary for that task. Parties also performed "constituent" functions critical to the working of democracy: educating citizens, recruiting candidates, mobilizing voters, conducting campaigns, and providing incentives for cooperation across institutional and federal boundaries (Lowi 1975). American parties worked about as well as could be expected given a web of institutional, federal, constitutional, cultural, and pragmatic constraints (Herrnson 1992b).

Critics of the report saw American parties as a force for social cohesion and harmony in a tremendously heterogeneous society (Pomper 1971, 918). Political parties provided essential glue for a society facing any number of potentially debilitating divisions and conflicts.[1] Parties channeled disagreements that might otherwise lead to violence and repression. Fractious parties were the functional equivalent of "the frontier" in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous and influential analysis of American history: They provided an outlet for social stress and helped reduce tension in American society by discouraging and slowing down potentially inflammatory policy. In this interpretation of "indigenous" parties, the United States had precisely the parties it needed. Wistful thinking about responsible parties was impractical and perhaps dangerous.[2]

After fifty years, this debate between "responsibilists" and "functionalists" must be rated a draw. Especially given their inclination to avoid constitutional restructuring, responsibilists were too quick to dismiss the amount of responsibility already present in American parties.[3] Functionalists, on the other hand, wrongly asserted that responsible parties were incompatible with the American system, and they assumed rather than demonstrated that the parties clearly performed social cohesion functions.

More important that these shortcomings, however, the report embraced a false—and influential—dichotomy between responsible and functional parties. Scholars following the report embraced one side of the argument or the other, portraying responsibility and functionality as the flip sides of a single dimension of party politics (Pomper 1971; Kirkpatrick 1971).

A central reason responsibility and functionality were treated as mutually exclusive ends of a single dimension is that the two schools of thought disagreed fundamentally about the nature of parties and their relationship to the rest of the social order. Responsible party proponents typically saw parties as independent variables, as entities that potentially could and probably should shape their political environment. Functionalist analysts tended to take a more constrained view of what parties could accomplish. In this analysis, parties adjusted to fit into their environment and the changes in it. Func-

tional analysis accepted implicitly the idea of a "narrow path of history" on which society and the economy traveled, and to which the parties must adapt. In this perspective, social and economic forces push toward certain types of societal arrangements. Politics reacts to, but does not create, this societal shift.

"Responsible *versus* functional" is a stale debate with diminishing returns; one could assume instead that responsibility and functionalism are separate dimensions of political parties.[4] In this revised framework, parties can be simultaneously responsible and functional or simultaneously neither. It is possible, as in the traditional framework, that parties can be functional without being responsible, but neither characteristic precludes the other. Dropping the presumed pairing of responsible/shaping and functional/reactive opens up the possibility of conceptualizing functionality and responsibility as separate dimensions; It is not necessary that responsible parties be shaping and proactive, and that functional parties be adaptive and reactive.[5] Rather than simply reacting to change in the social and economic environment, parties can be functional for the political system by helping *build* that environment. In this role, functional parties can prevent some of the social tension that functionalist analysis emphasizes. One can certainly make a case, for example, that Roosevelt and the Democrats shaped the American political economy in a manner that smoothed some of the rough edges off corporate market capitalism and aided the stability of the economic and political systems.

Hints about treating responsibility and functionality as potentially compatible dimensions appear in macropolitical accounts such as realignment theory and micropolitical accounts in rational choice. By arguing that critical realignments serve as a "surrogate for revolution," Burnham in effect posits that responsible parties during realignments serve preservation functions for the overall political system (Burnham 1970). Aldrich argues that political parties solve key problems facing politicians and the system at large and that politicians rationally build the party organizations that best further their goals; it is conceivable (but not necessary) that responsible parties might be the organizational choice of particular politicians at particular times (Aldrich 1995). Hints about responsibility as a continuum also abound. Pomper writes about the current party system as being "semi-responsible" (Pomper 1998). Rohde analyzes "conditional" party government (Rohde 1991). Even the authors of the APSA report, if not later responsibilists, wrote about moving "toward" a "more responsible" two-party system.

Placed in this framework of responsibility and functionality continuums, parties historically were neither as irresponsible as the report asserted nor as functional as the report's critics assumed. This observation raises several issues. First, it suggests the authors of the APSA report were wrong in their diagnosis of the American polity, which may bring their prescriptions into

question. Second, it rejects the functionalist argument that responsible parties simply do not fit in the American framework. Third, it implies variations over time in the functionality and responsibility of parties in the American political system.

The Responsibilist Critique

Responsibilists lodged three chief critiques against American parties; they were too decentralized and disorganized, not unified on policy stances, and wedded to meaningless campaign practices. I consider each point in turn.

American parties are insufficiently centralized. The APSA report argued that the parochial interests of local party leaders dominated American parties. Local party chiefs, interested less in the substance of public policy than in the rewards of patronage and pork, dominated the national parties. Policy preferences varied widely within the parties, especially as one moved from state to state. The needs of local parties determined or heavily influenced the selection of party officials and presidential candidates and hamstrung national policy-making efforts. Even the New Deal, a prime period of American state building just prior to the publication of the APSA report, suffered from its obligations to local Democratic parties. Far-reaching measures, especially with regard to labor rights, were thwarted by the economic needs of Southern Democrats. To keep parochial partisans satisfied, programs such as unemployment insurance and Aid to Dependent Children (later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children) allowed vast disparities in benefit levels across states despite being "national" social assistance programs.

The report saw these ingredients as a recipe for disaster. In particular, the authors cited the following dangers to democracy (Committee on Political Parties 1950):

- "The inadequacy of the party system in sustaining well-considered programs and providing broad public support for them may lead to grave consequences in an explosive era."
- "The American people may go too far for the safety of constitutional government in compensating for this inadequacy by shifting excessive responsibility to the president."
- "With growing public cynicism and continuing proof of the ineffectiveness of the party system, the nation may eventually witness the disintegration of the two major parties."
- "The incapacity of the two parties for consistent action based on meaningful programs may rally support for extremist parties, poles

apart, each fanatically bent on imposing on the country its particular panacea."

Much in this account rings true. State parties often did have different policy priorities than the national party, and party-building efforts were often based on state or local elite needs rather than promulgation of a national program (Pomper 1971, 927–929; Aldrich 1995; Reynolds 1988). Skowronek (1982) argues that through the late-nineteenth century the American state was a "state of courts and parties." Party, in his view, was exceptionally strong in this era: Parties linked the national government to each locale, linked the discrete governmental units horizontally in a territory, and organized government institutions internally. Parties were notable less for their programs than for the "procedural unity" they lent the state. With most government activity occurring at the local and state level, it was a party structure designed to integrate national government services into local governing centers. This local emphasis weakened the likelihood of, and perhaps the need for, a positive national program (Skowronek 1982, 26). Milkis (1993) argues that Franklin Roosevelt was so convinced that responsible parties were futile that he sought to institutionalize programs in the executive branch to minimize potential future party interference—if parties were unable to coordinate policy control and priorities, the state would do it for them.

But there is another side to the story. The complaints of responsible party proponents that American parties were too decentralized and lacked cohesion sidestepped the point, often noted by functionalists, that the United States is a federal system. As Herrnson (1992b) suggests, surely one has to consider this limitation before pronouncing the party system nonresponsible. Conceptually, this is more difficult than it might seem. Should American parties be declared nonresponsible even though they must deal with federal pressures not faced by parties in most other countries? Or should scholars acknowledge the structural constraints placed on American parties and assess how well they perform within that structure? Ideally, depicting responsibility as a continuum allows analysts to have a firm sense of what "responsible" means but also the flexibility to grant that parties can be at differing, and still effective, levels of responsibility.

In other words, American parties may founder on the shoals of federalism, but this limitation need not mean writing off party responsibility altogether. First, the parties have often overcome these federal barriers. Bridges indicates that nineteenth-century workers, as a minority, found it necessary to work with partisan coalitions at the state and federal level. The tariff, a national-level issue with obvious local implications, was "the policy cement of the view that labor and capital shared the same interest. . . . Workers became Republicans and Democrats . . . in the service of quite objective

working-class goals" that stretched beyond local boundaries (Bridges 1986, 187, 192). Erie's stimulating work on party machines also indicates that central party leaders had more authority over state and local parties than the traditional story suggests. Local and state machines, dependent heavily on federal government largesse, accepted that "fiscal federalism" could reshape their priorities (Erie 1988). Finally, Bensel's (1990) depiction of the Civil War and Reconstruction makes clear that the Republican Party was a national party promoting a nationalist agenda: unity in support of this agenda tied the state and national parties together. Republican policies not only offered patronage and pork for the local party, but also defined areas in which the local and state party would be a lesser player.

Second, in the federal system, some issues are simply more relevant at one level of government than another. As dual federalism evolved into cooperative federalism, these distinctions by governmental level became less clear, but for much of American history there was something like a division of labor. Given this division, how important a problem is it for the party system if Democrats in Pennsylvania in 1888 have different ideas about educational policy than Democrats in Rhode Island? This disparity across state lines might become more problematic when education becomes a more truly cooperative venture between levels of government, but even that is not obvious. If Democrats in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island largely agree on the relative roles of the state and national governments, but happen to differ on the best education policy within their state, responsibility need not be absent for voters within each state. If voters have clear choices and parties act in a relatively unified manner to fulfill their pledges, there is a level of responsibility.
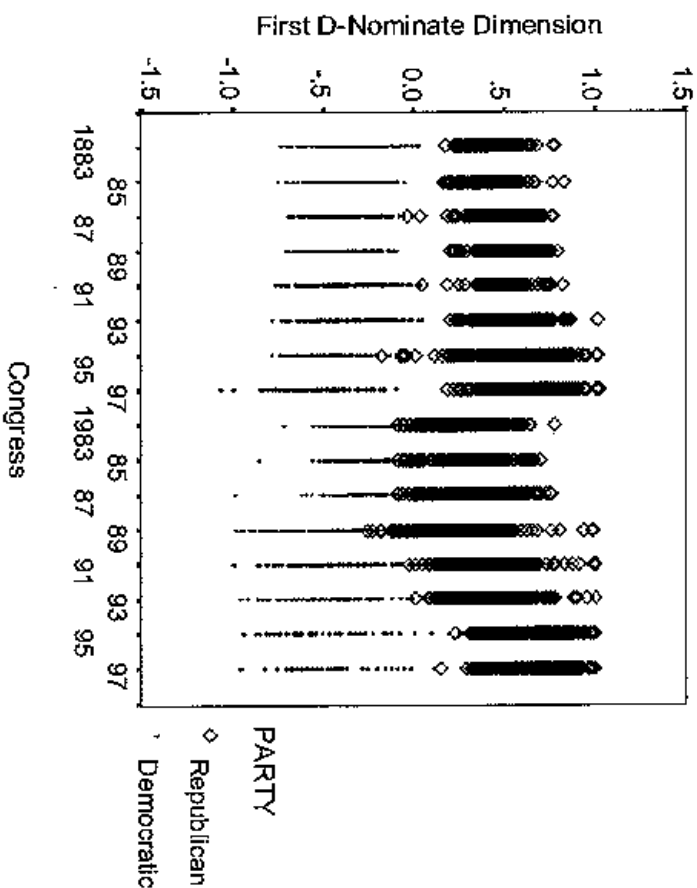
American parties are not cohesive. Responsibilists cared about party decentralization because they believed it impaired party unity and cohesion. On national issues, however, this charge is not convincing. Gerring (1998) makes a strong case for American party platforms and major presidential speeches as programmatic throughout American history; other scholars have similarly argued that broad thematic differences have separated the parties over time.[6] Part of the responsible model is indeed that parties compete electorally on broad themes that indicate to the public the general direction it can expect in public policy, so this historical pattern is a sign of responsibility. Are the parties programmatic in the same sense "on the ground," in day-to-day politicking and legislative conflict? Perhaps not, but such a standard overreaches. Even if not programmatic, American parties have been strongly policy-oriented and this policy orientation has mattered to both the mass public and elites (Bridges 1994; James 1992). The policy consistency of American parties is not easily dismissed. If not ideological, one might label the parties "policyist." Silbey (1984) argues that parties verged on the responsible party model at certain times in the nineteenth century, perhaps

most prominently in the 1830s and 1840s; Herrnson (1992b) and others point to the great realigning periods of the 1860s, 1890s, and 1930s as other instances.

The late nineteenth century is often seen as a heyday for American political parties: mobilization was high, policy differences were numerous, and parties controlled access to public office and organized the functioning of government at the local, state, and national levels. Late-twentieth-century parties were not mistaken for these heyday parties, but policy differences did appear to be significant. Responsible parties need to offer different visions to the public, and this was indeed the case in these periods. Figure 19.1 presents the distribution of the first dimension of Poole and Rosenthal's D-Nominate scores for the Congresses at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first dimension of the D-Nominate scores, based on roll-call votes, represents a general liberal to conservative ideological scale.[7] Democrats and Republicans in the late nineteenth century offered distinctive choices to voters, with little overlap in the ideological positioning of party members. The range of D-Nominate scores within the parties, though not insignificant, was relatively constrained. In the late twentieth century, there is more overlap between the parties and more dispersion within the parties, especially from 1983 through 1988. After that, the parties begin to separate and move toward the conservative and liberal ends of the scale. The 104th and 105th Congresses, from 1995 to 1998, begin to resemble the pattern from the prior century, suggesting that in roll-call voting contemporary parties are becoming more nearly like the parties of an earlier era. In two different historical periods and under highly contrasting social and economic conditions, American parties can be placed at the higher end of the responsibility continuum when measured by intraparty cohesion and interparty polarization (Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Coleman 1996a; Krehbiel 2000).

American campaigns are empty rituals. Responsibility involves not only cohesive elite behavior, but also elections that provide potential voters with an accurate sense of what the parties will attempt to accomplish in office. While the militarist campaign style of the nineteenth century—spectacle-driven campaigns designed to mobilize "armies" of voters—thrived on bombast and ritual, the campaigns were at their core driven by substance and content. As noted above, voters were partisan for specific policy reasons, whether these were cultural or economic in nature. McGerr (1986) suggests that the militarist style was broadly informative, particularly on broad matters of philosophy and approach. These militarist campaigns were by no means flawless—McCormick (1986) and Gerring (1999) suggest that national elites concentrated disproportionately more on economic matters in office than on the cultural and moral issues that purportedly drove voters. Overall, however, nineteenth-century campaigns performed well: Voters

Figure 19.1 **Distribution of D-Nominate Scores in the U.S. House, 1883–1898 and 1983–1998**

Note: Negative values represent liberal ideology; positive values represent conservative ideology.

were deeply familiar with the key concerns of each party and voted accordingly.

Campaigns in the latter half of the twentieth century have been criticized as candidate-centered affairs that de-emphasize linkages between the candidate and his or her party (Wattenberg 1991). Again, the empirical evidence presented in numerous studies provides substantial support for this view for most of the postwar period. Recent history, however, evidences signs of change: Studies of party platforms show a relationship between platform emphases and subsequent policies; survey respondents recognize that the differences between the parties are growing; and campaigns in the mid-1990s were often ideological in tone. Voters still tie candidates to parties to some degree (Coleman 1996b). Even within a candidate-dominated campaign system, then, there are some ways for responsible party campaign linkages to endure. This fact does not deny that these linkages are less constraining than in the past.

Since the publication of the APSA report, the election system has moved

toward greater responsibility as measured by the prescriptions of the report. Baer and Bositis (1993; see also Herrnson 1992b; also see Green and Herrnson 2002) extract all of the reform suggestions from the APSA report. They then determine whether these reforms have been fully implemented, partially implemented, given "some de facto movement," been rejected by movement in the opposite direction, or had no action taken. Performing simple computations on Baer and Bositis's list shows that 83 percent of the suggested reforms in the election system have shown at least some positive movement.

The election system is not alone in this regard, as positive movement has also occurred on the other responsibilist critiques discussed above. On centralization and party organization reforms, the Democrats had at least some movement toward 90 percent of the reforms, while Republicans showed some movement toward 63 percent. On congressional party cohesion and structure, the Democrats showed at least some movement on 82 percent of the recommendations; Republicans tallied 51 percent. Baer and Bositis's report covers developments through 1992; the Republican percentage for congressional party reform would no doubt be higher since Republicans have controlled of one or both houses of Congress since 1995.

I have argued that the historical record casts doubt on the APSA report's arguments. American parties have been more responsible historically than responsibilists have acknowledged. This record, along with the significant movement toward many of the APSA report prescriptions over the past fifty years, is problematic for the functionalist account as well: The claim that these reforms are incompatible with the American political system does not hold.

The Functionalist Analysis

American parties have performed over time the "constituent" tasks delineated by Theodore Lowi (1975). By this term, Lowi means tasks that are constitutive for the political system, functions without which the political system could not operate. These include overcoming the constitutional separation of powers and branches, keeping conflict within boundaries, monitoring the fairness of the rules of the game, integrating new citizens into politics, recruiting and training candidates, running campaigns, and informing voters. The functional aspects of parties most frequently cited fall into two categories. First, parties are said to provide key components for the governing and political process. Second, parties contribute to social stability.

Assisting the governing process. Recruiting candidates, providing linkages across branches, and similar tasks have long been part of the party tool kit, but how vital parties are for each activity ebbs and flows historically. This fluctuation raises difficult questions but does not necessarily negate the

functionalist argument. As more candidates are self-starters and not recruited by parties, the *necessity* of parties for this function diminishes—candidates can now purchase most campaign tasks in the marketplace. But functional arguments do not merely state that parties perform functions. If that were so, letting the air out of the functionalist argument would be as simple as noting the presence of other entities performing these tasks. One could further deflate functionalism by pointing to the prevalence of nonpartisan—at least in formal terms—campaigning and governing at the local and county levels. Governments throughout the United States manage to govern while prohibiting party politics. It is simple enough, then, to show that American politics and governing can function even in the absence of formal party organization.

To say that parties are functional is therefore not simply to say that parties perform tasks, but that party control of certain activities seems on the whole *preferable* for governing in some respects. Two common measuring sticks are productivity and legitimacy. Regarding productivity, despite some questioning earlier in the 1990s, recent research shows that unified party control improves government's legislative productivity and responsiveness (Mayhew 1991; Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997; Binder 1999; Coleman 1999a). Regarding legitimacy, nonpartisan elections and elections focusing on candidates much more heavily than parties depress turnout and deprive citizens of useful voting cues (Bridges 1997). These elections also deprive voters of the powerful lever of the party label, a lever that can be employed to wield broad-scale changes to the political system even when, as is typical, voters are not deeply knowledgeable about all of the candidates on the ballot. This magnification of a voter's leverage, I would suggest, is an important legitimating device.

At about the same time as the APSA report, Key (1949; see also Schattschneider 1960) highlighted the dangers of personal-based factions, wild electoral swings, and issueless campaigning in the South's one-party states, particularly for the socioeconomic "have-nots." In these ways, parties not only perform functions but also *improve* the operation of the political system. It is worrisome, from the functionalist perspective, when parties are pushed out from or abdicate particular roles, because parties produce systemic advantages when they, rather than some other entity, perform these functions. This fact is one reason why functionalist and responsibilist analysts alike were concerned with the postwar decline of parties. Functionalists feared parties pulling away from roles that enhanced systemic productivity and legitimacy, while responsibilists worried about parties that seemed to become more alike, less internally unified, and less useful for voters.
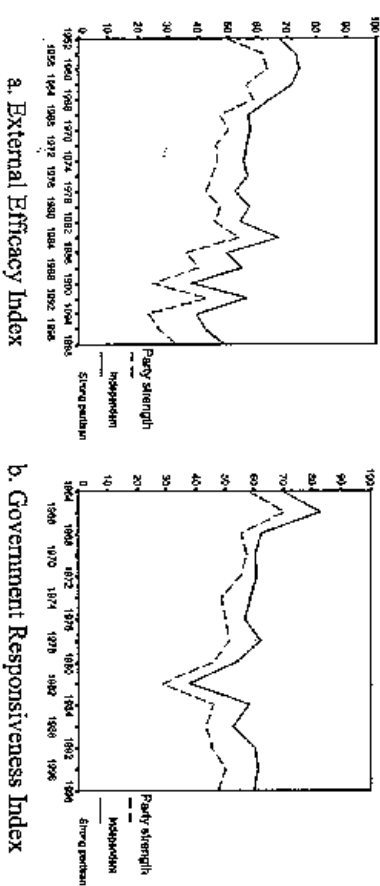
Survey data provide additional evidence of the legitimating assistance provided by parties. Although functional analysis often focuses on the performance of parties in government (e.g., legislative productivity), public atti-

tudes are also relevant. Strong partisans should, in the functionalist view, express more confidence in the political system and have more belief that their involvement makes a difference. Figure 19.2 graphs the External Efficacy and Governmental Responsiveness indexes from the National Election Studies from 1952 to 1998. Each index converts NES items into a 100-point scale and then averages the responses for each survey respondent. Data points in the figure represent the mean score on the index for each year (higher scores indicate higher efficacy and a higher sense of government responsiveness). The figure suggests both the functional strengths and weaknesses of parties. Respondents identified as "strong partisans" score about 20 points higher in efficacy and about 10 points higher than do "independents." The legitimating salve of partisanship clearly has its limits, however, as independents and partisans jointly exhibit a decline in efficacy and perceived responsiveness over time.[8]

Assisting social stability. Critical to analysts such as Pendleton Herring (1940) was the notion that parties provide a forum for consensus rather than a means to emphasize differences: "The present party system helps to preserve existing social institutions by blurring sharp issues and ignoring others. Party rule discourages the alignment of economic differences through political channels" (131); "Capitalism and the party system grew up together. All went well so long as the economic sphere fulfilled the hopes of the citizens" (125); "our party system is significant not as a way of clarifying differences but as an institution for seeking broad terms of agreement" (168). These

Figure 19.2 "Constituent" Parties in the Public, National Election Studies, 1952–1998

a. External Efficacy Index

b. Government Responsiveness Index

a. Do public officials care what the respondent thinks? Do people like the respondent have any say in government?

b. How much does government pay attention to the people? Do elections make government pay attention?
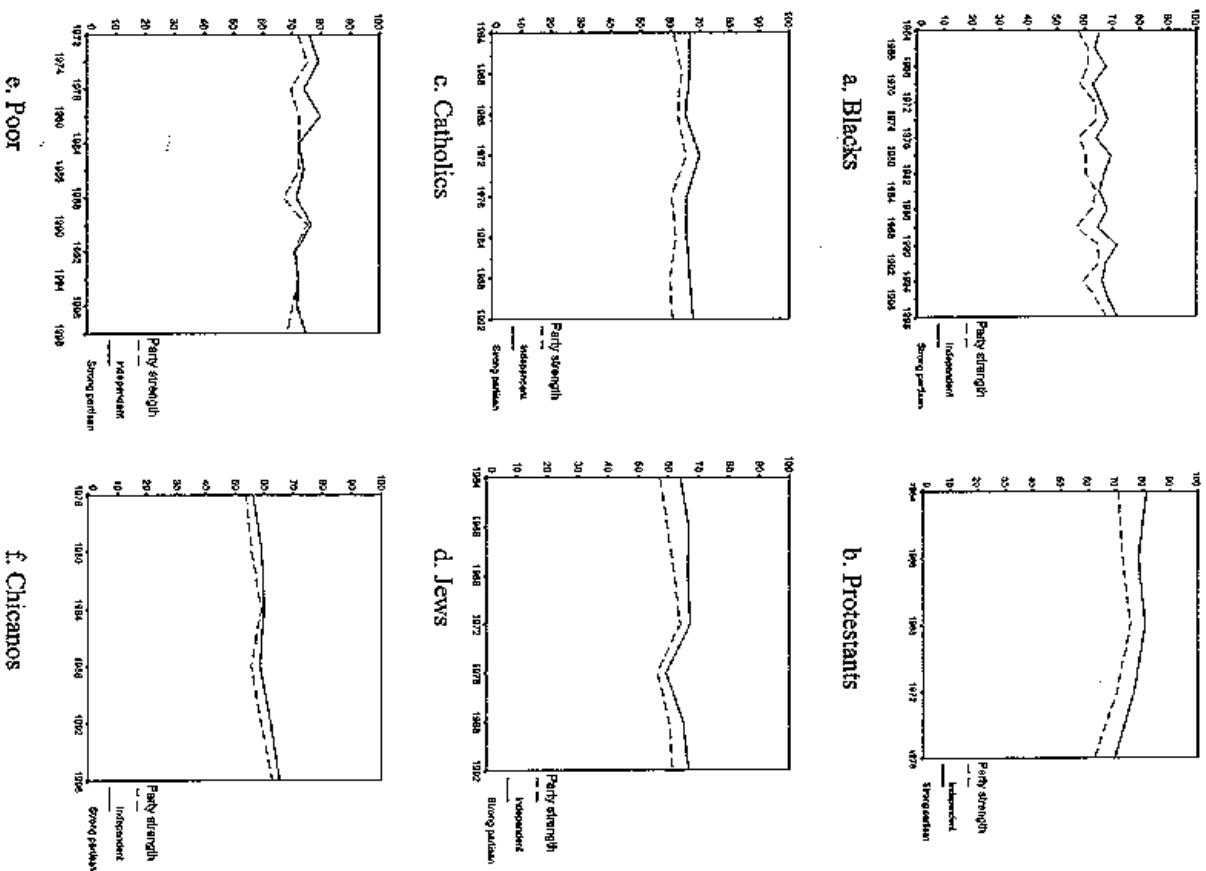
remarks concern contests between economic groups, but the functionalist point encompasses other social groups as well.

One need only recall some of the campaign rhetoric of the nineteenth century to recognize that a system of vibrant parties did not deter brutal charges of one group toward another. Indeed, the entire ethnocultural line of analysis in political history stresses the organization of ethnic and religious values, cultures, resentments, and hatreds as a prime ingredient in nineteenth-century politics (Kleppner 1970; Jensen 1971), and the period after Reconstruction was laden with party-based racial appeals. One cannot conveniently overlook the fact that blacks, native Americans, and other racial and ethnic groups were deprived, often violently, of basic civil rights and civil liberties by elected officials and their constituents (R. Smith 1993). The functionalist argument works only if we turn a blind eye to history.

Parties did not consistently perform the functionalist role of social integration at the political system level, but did partisanship at least affect the views of individuals? If parties perform the functional work of societal consensus building and group integration, then partisanship should help diminish sharply negative impressions of social groups. Looking at the latter half of the twentieth century, however, partisanship does not matter much in evaluations of social groups. Figure 19.3 presents the NES mean "feeling thermometer" ratings for groups by all respondents identifying themselves as strong partisans or independents (i.e., figure 19.3 looks at overall public attitudes *toward* these groups, not attitudes of the members of these groups). Differences between partisans and independents are minimal. Strong partisanship does not equate to dramatically—or, in most cases, even marginally—more generous or tolerant appraisals of social groups. Differences between strong Democrats and strong Republicans are similarly negligible. Looking at other groups—women, the middle class, welfare recipients, Southerners, the elderly—though not shown in figure 19.3, produces the same results.

A less restrictive functionalist formulation would be that parties do not reduce group antagonisms, but instead bring competing interests and groups into the political arena to settle disputes, rather than resolving conflicts through other means. The "consensus" here is not necessarily about policy but about process—parties provide the organizational mechanism that makes groups willing to accept temporary defeat and compete again another day. Parties are coalitions of social groups that, as Aldrich (1995) suggests, see these organizations as the most reliable way to achieve their ends over the long haul. This formulation also implies greater social peace. Parties have an incentive, in this framework, to find common ground between groups by adjusting and fine-tuning agendas and priorities to maintain majority status. As a general principle, this softer version of functionalism is plausible, but

Figure 19.3   Mean NES Feeling Thermometers for Selected Social Groups

a. Blacks

b. Protestants

c. Catholics

d. Jews

e. Poor

f. Chicanos

the experience of numerous groups in American political history, including women, blacks, and poor whites, suggests that parties often manipulate and accept groups grudgingly rather than actively seeking to incorporate these groups into political life (Frymer 1999; Harvey 1998). Even more problematic for this account, the presence of purportedly functional parties in American history did *not* repel other methods of solving group conflict. American political history has been laden with violence, from the mobs of early American history, to labor uprisings and repression in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, to race riots and violent outbursts across the landscape from the earliest times to the 1960s and later. No one making a functionalist argument has shown that the geographical distributions of these outbreaks has been related to the ability of local or state parties to defuse social tensions.

Parties as Functional and Responsible

The "responsible versus functional" debate was common even before the APSA report, perhaps most classically in Schattschneider's (1942) and Herring's (1940) dueling volumes, but the report gave this conception pride of place in the study of American parties. Generations of students and scholars have been influenced by the basic framework that parties were or should be *either* responsible *or* functional. To functionalists, functional parties fit the American constitutional framework and social conditions precisely; the need to build social cohesion, consensus, and compromise argued against responsible party tenets. Responsible parties advanced representation and choice at the expense of stability, social peace, and perhaps even legitimacy if any side perceived itself as permanently subordinate in the governing process. The very conditions that made the United States hospitable to functional parties made it most unlikely that responsible parties would emerge, and particularly unlikely that they would persist. To responsibilists, functional parties were almost guaranteed to be dysfunctional. Voters would lose interest in campaigns that seemed bland and unimportant. Linkage between leader and led would be sketchy and uncertain. Rather than organizing politics by ideas, functional parties would organize politics by social groupings, symbols, or slogans, thereby accentuating rather than diminishing conflict based on culture or social characteristics.
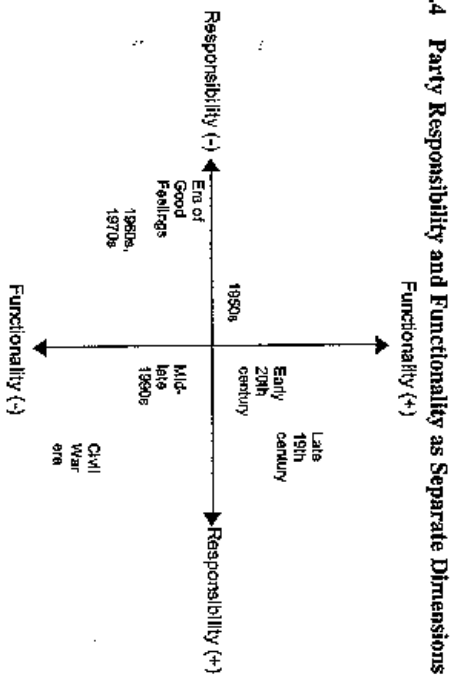
Using the single yardstick of "responsible or functional," the party system most always seemed to fall on the functional end. With this standard measure, scholars have identified responsibility in the party system on only limited, highly contingent occasions such as the first years of a realignment. To some scholars, even these moments pale in comparison to responsible party behavior in other political systems. By considering functionality and

responsibility as potentially compatible rather than inversely related, however, a broader conceptualization of American parties is possible.

The grid in figure 19.4 presents functionality and responsibility as separate dimensions. By thinking of these characteristics as continuums, one can place any period in party history on the grid. These dimensions are straightforward. For responsibility, to what degree do parties represent the kind of unified, cohesive coalitions depicted in the APSA report? For functionality, to what degree do parties perform the governing (legitimacy) and consensus-building (social stability) functions cited by functionalist accounts? This dimension is not wed to the particular interpretation of functionalist critics of the APSA report. Those critics assumed that responsible parties were likely to increase social division and conflict, and nonresponsible parties would defuse these problems, but those assumptions are absent here. In the grid, responsible parties can coexist with governing legitimacy and social cohesion.

For illustrative purposes, I place several periods of party history on the grid. Others might place these periods differently. My objective is not to argue for a particular placement of a particular period but to suggest that party analysis will improve by taking the steps of conceptualizing responsibility and functionality as, first, continuums, and second, continuums that are not inversely related. These are necessary first steps before scholars can proceed to other tasks such as the quantification of these dimensions (see Katz 1986 for "partyness" as a continuum). They are necessary steps to move beyond the stale debate of functional versus responsible parties.

High Responsibility and High Functionality. I place the late-nineteenth century, for many of the reasons discussed above, as a period relatively high

Figure 19.4 **Party Responsibility and Functionality as Separate Dimensions**

on both functionality and responsibility. The period is not at the extreme end of either dimension, however. Waves of violent responses to labor and incipient socialist uprisings, deep ethnic tensions in the cities, and widespread and often violent removal of blacks from the post-Reconstruction Southern political system suggest serious weakness in the functionality of the dominant parties. On the positive side, parties were keenly important in organizing elections, legislatures, and the public's perception of political reality. During this period, party differences were acute, and parties in Congress were highly cohesive. Speakers, making use of reforms such as Reed's Rules, more effectively pushed party agendas through the House of Representatives. However, the impressive rise of the Populist movement, a result of the two-party system's failure to process some of the key economic issues of the day, suggests serious shortcomings in responsibility (Ritter 1997). In the early twentieth century, functionality and responsibility diminished as party differences began to erode, centralized party power in Congress weakened, and party machinery became less central to candidate nomination and election.

Low Responsibility and High Functionality. By dropping the notion that responsibility or functionality are either present or absent and by dropping the idea that responsibility and functionality must be mutually exclusive, it becomes surprisingly difficult to find the ideal type of the combination that the critics of the APSA report emphasized: low responsibility, high functionality parties. One period that seems to fit this combination is the 1950s. Congressional parties were cohesive and distinctive, though at a diminished level from the 1930s and 1940s. The sectional split in the Democratic Party over racial issues kept possibly divisive issues from the floor. In this manner, party leaders exercised some significant control, but, overall, power in Congress devolved further to committees and subcommittees and away from central party control. These parties are fairly placed at about the midpoint on a responsibility scale. For functionality, the parties of this era are closer to the higher than the lower end. Although their role in organizing government and running campaigns declined from previous levels, these parties retained significant salience with the public. Attitudes toward parties and government were relatively positive, turnout substantial, and the impact of partisanship as a perceptual filter was considerable. By focusing heavily on voting rights, the incipient civil rights movement effectively endorsed the utility of partisan and electoral politics as vital routes toward group empowerment and social integration. In these ways, the parties afforded the political system some measure of legitimacy.

High Responsibility and Low Functionality. High responsibility and low functionality marks the party system in the Civil War era. This system proved unable to process deeply contentious issues and preserve or build consensus or social harmony, thus ranking very low on functionality. One cannot fault the Civil War era parties for lack of responsibility, however—

they were relatively cohesive and distinctive, and carried through with their plans. I also include the most recent period of party history in this quadrant. I discuss this period below.

Low Responsibility and Low Functionality. In the third quadrant, I place two periods in which party functionality and responsibility were both at a low ebb: the Era of Good Feelings and the 1960s and 1970s. Regarding the Era of Good Feelings, clearly responsible parties are absent in a one-party period. Bogue (1994) notes, "By the early 1820s a state of highly factionalized nonpartisanship had been attained" in Congress. I also place this era on the lower half of the functionality scale. This era precedes mass mobilization and modern party organization. Selection of presidential candidates was the province of clubby, personalized caucuses. Sectional pressures displaced the partisan resolution of lingering national strains, notably slavery. In the House, Henry Clay displayed strong control and leadership, but it is arguable whether that leadership is properly considered partisan in the manner of powerful Speakers toward the end of the century.

Parties in the Present Era. The 1960s–1970s and the mid- to late 1990s are located on the bottom half of the functionality dimension, but on opposite sides of the responsibility dimension. The diminution of parties in the American political landscape during the first decades of the postwar period is a frequently told story, as is the recognition that the status of parties improved somewhat in the 1980s and after. The 1990s also culminated in the kind of secular and critical realignment commonly linked to responsible parties (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Burnham 1996).

The public did not reject political parties in the 1960s and 1970s, but there was increased skepticism about exactly how the increasingly indistinct parties made much of a difference and, especially among the young, movement toward interest groups as the preferred way to express political preferences (Mayer 1998; Wattenberg 1998). As noted above, partisans along with independents grew decreasingly confident and trusting in government and in their own efficacy. Other signs the two-party system was failing to some degree in providing functional assistance to the broader political system were the widespread protests, demonstrations, and riots of the 1960s, the dysfunctional Democratic Party convention of 1968, the rise of social movements and interest groups to promote the views of people feeling locked out of party power structures, increased third-party activity, and a drop in voter turnout.

For parties to reverse these postwar functionality and responsibility deficits, changes in the parties' role in policy making were necessary (Coleman 1996a). Changes began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s. They show that, contrary to the "responsible versus functional" rubric, parties need not purchase responsibility at the expense of functionality, as some progress was made on both fronts. Most significantly, Congress—and con-

gressional parties in particular—began to take a more aggressive role in fiscal policy formation through the passage of budgetary reforms, and the consensus over Keynesian nostrums broke down with the stagflation of the 1970s. With the old policy formulas no longer working, the arena was open for new ideas about economic management. As Keynesianism faltered, Republican and Democratic visions of government's role in the economy and society, as reflected in congressional voting patterns, began to diverge. These diverging party visions revealed a fundamental struggle underway to define economic policy for perhaps the next two to three decades. Simultaneously, divisions over social and cultural policy hardened and became more politically salient. Given this stimulus, the party organizations became much more adept at raising funds and professionalizing their operations (Cotter et al. 1984; Herrnson 1990). Large pools of individuals and groups feeling threatened by economic, political, social, and cultural disarray were eager to invest their money in the "right" message. By the mid-1990s, the result was stronger, more active party organizations and stronger, more unified congressional parties.

As the public perceived Congress taking a more central role, saw the congressional parties as increasingly critical in the policy-making process, and sensed important differences on policy preferences, party was elevated as a component of citizen decision making. Signs of this rebound are evident in the declining proportion of split-ticket voters and the declining proportion of congressional districts in which voters elect a candidate of one party while supporting the presidential candidate of the other major party. The point, simply, is that the more functionally important parties appear to the governing process on fundamentally important policy domains, and the more parties offer cohesive and distinctive choices, the more seriously citizens take the parties. If parties matter in the political system, they will matter to citizens, particularly if the parties are also behaving as responsible parties.

In other areas, progress toward responsibility and functionality was more modest or nonexistent. In the electorate, turnout and efficacy remained generally low and skepticism high. Except for 1994, when public attitudes turned sharply negative, these and other measures of public dissatisfaction generally leveled off in the 1990s at low rates. The explosion of scholarly interest in "civic engagement" was, in part, a telling sign of the shortcomings of contemporary parties and the fraying linkage between the public and the parties. Accordingly, I place the 1990s on the higher end of the responsibility scale and the lower, but not polar, end of the functionality scale.

Entering into the early years of the twenty-first century, there is little reason to expect much change in the parties' location on the grid. Responsibility should remain on the higher end of the continuum. With the parties' balance of power nearly split down the middle nationally, each party would employ a risky gambit if it moved toward the center or toward the ideological

extreme, so staying put will have strong appeal. Nonetheless, individual members of Congress might see a move to the extreme or the center as electorally advantageous, resulting in less party cohesion. If that is so, one might place the parties slightly lower on responsibility than in the 1990s. Functionally, we might also anticipate a slight decline along the continuum as the elimination of soft money eliminates a major source of party financing. All of this projection relies on a rather static vision of party politics. If the arguments of campaign finance reformers are correct, then the elimination of soft money should move parties toward alternative forms of voter mobilization and education and should allow members of Congress to vote their conscience rather than the interests of large contributors. If this view is right, then parties would improve both in functional and responsible terms, compared to the 1990s. The jury is obviously still out on this matter, but the results of previous episodes of campaign finance reform do not suggest that this rosy scenario is a sure thing.

Conclusion

The publication of "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System" was momentous not only for the American Political Science Association but also for party scholarship. Whether a report proponent or dissenter, one has to admire the association's audacity in staking out these twin turfs of practical politics and party scholarship. The report significantly shaped scholarship on political parties. Whether American parties were responsible or functional, and whether American parties *could* be responsible, became a major theme in scholarship on the historical development of American parties as well as analyses of contemporary parties. The report did not invent this debate, but it solidified "responsible versus functional" parties as the key yardstick by which to measure American parties.

Once analytically enlightening, placing functionality and responsibility on a single yardstick has proven problematic. Over half a century after the APSA report, it is time to reconceptualize this basic framework. Considering responsibility and functionality as potentially complementary rather than contradictory characteristics of parties provides a means to rethink parties throughout American political development. This two-dimensional approach separates the more responsible parties of the 1990s from the parties of the 1950s–1980s without having to say the United States has returned to the party system of the 1890s. This analytical flexibility allows scholars to test empirically whether party periods with varied mixes of functionality and responsibility differentially affect political development. Abandoning the notion that more of one must mean less of the other, analysts can also become more empirically precise about what functionality and responsibility entail.

Looking ahead, such a rubric could assist in informed speculation about the paths party politics might take during an era of historic economic and social transformation—particularly paths that might help reconnect the public and the parties.

Notes

1. Other scholars were more skeptical. To Burnham (1970), a gap developed between the inertial political party system and the dynamic socioeconomic system that could only be solved by periodic electoral earthquakes in the form of realignment. These realignments, not normal party politics, served as a "surrogate for revolution."

2. See Pomper 1971 for an extensive rebuttal of the central points made by the critics.

3. The most significant constitutional changes advocated by the report were a four-year term for members of the House of Representatives (coinciding with the president's term) and abolishment of the Electoral College. As White (1992) notes, later scholars would suggest that constitutional reform was essential for the party system to become responsible.

4. In a similar vein, White (1992) notes, "Far from furthering academic inquiry, the report froze the debate on various points because both supporters and critics accepted the critical assumptions contained in the report."

5. Shaping versus adapting may well be a third dimension on which parties could be characterized, but not one I will pursue here.

6. See John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ian Budge and Richard I. Hofferbert, "Mandates and Policy Outputs: U.S. Party Platforms and Federal Expenditures," *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990): 111–132; Douglas A. Hibbs Jr., *The American Political Economy: Macroeconomics and Electoral Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Richard I. Hofferbert, "Society, Party, and Policy, Party Programs as Mechanisms of Mediation," paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1993; Richard Jensen, "Party Coalitions and the Search for Modern Values: 1820–1970," in *Party Coalitions in the 1980s*, ed. Seymour M. Lipset (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1981); Joel H. Silbey, "The Salt of the Nation': Political Parties in Ante-bellum America," in *Political Parties and the Modern State*, ed. Richard L. McCormick (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

7. Poole and Rosenthal (1996) exclude only roll-call votes that were nearly unanimous (100 percent of one party voting in a particular direction and at least 97.5 percent of the other party voting in that direction).

8. For all figures comparing strong partisans to independents, I also looked at weak partisans and independents who lean toward a party. In almost all instances, these two groups fall between the strong partisans and independents.

The State of the Parties

*The Changing Role of Contemporary
American Parties*

FOURTH EDITION

Edited by John C. Green
and Rick Farmer

2003