

AMERICAN POLITICS

State of the Parties 2022: The Changing Role of American Political Parties.

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In September 1993, the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron hosted a conference on the “State of the Parties.” That gathering produced a book with 23 chapters from a mix of prominent and emerging scholars. The essays were designed to offer punchy and student-friendly evaluations of political parties and their role in the American political system. A few synthetic chapters at the beginning and end framed larger issues. The authors expressed skepticism that Bill Clinton’s election augured a durable change in the Democrats’ fortune and looked ambivalently at larger themes. The laments of party decline that had dominated scholarly discourse in prior decades had gone into abeyance, but the master theme of polarization that would loom ever larger in coming years had not yet congealed. The guts of that 1993 volume, 10 of its 23 chapters, dug deep into the activities of the political parties themselves. In keeping with scholarship on the rise of the “service party,” they documented just how parties worked to provide campaign resources to the candidate operations that dominated electoral politics.

The epochal shock of the 1994 midterm elections occasioned another conference in Akron two years later and another edited volume. Publication ever since then has followed a regular schedule, with a new edition of *State of the Parties* following each presidential election. Each volume has followed the same pattern: many short chapters, with some attention to the shape of the party system and a more intense focus on what parties actually do, especially on where and how they spend money. John C. Green has edited each one, along with a changing retinue of coeditors; some contributors have been regulars, and many scholars on parties have made an appearance along the way. (I coauthored a chapter for the eighth edition.)

The ninth volume in the series, *State of the Parties 2022: The Changing Role of American Political Parties*, offers a good occasion for stocktaking in this long-standing project. The Bliss Institute has generously posted the previous eight volumes of *State of the Parties* on its website. A graduate student looking to understand the field as it has responded to changing developments in American politics—the first volume was closer in time to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than it is to the present—would do well to download everything and take a good look through to find patterns of continuity and change.

This institutional legacy frames the latest volume in both its considerable strengths and its telling omissions. The product of a virtual conference in November 2021, it covers a tumultuous period. The denouement of the 2020 election came not on Election Day but with the formal counting of electoral votes, delayed by insurrectionists storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Yet, understandably given its lineage, the volume largely takes up and extends long-standing themes treated in previous volumes, rather than striking out in new directions. In particular, the editors’ brief opening essay offers capsule summaries of the 2020 election and the coming chapters more than it provides a frame for larger issues. Above all, the question of how to understand the Republican Party in the Trump years, electorally viable but careening and, to many observers, dangerous, gets tackled in fits and starts more than as a motivating theme.

Polarization—and not questions of democratic performance or democratic decline that have been much in the air in recent discourse—dominates the discussion of the party system. Important essays from Alan Abramowitz and Morris Fiorina bring their diverging perspectives to offer something of a reprise of their debate that framed many a “Parties” course in the 2000s and early 2010s. Abramowitz emphasizes partisan-ideological consistency as the ongoing force behind polarization, motivating both the rise in affective partisanship and in straight-ticket voting. The correlation between liberal-conservative identification and relative-feeling thermometer evaluations of the two parties has risen from 0.33 in 1980 to 0.52 in 2004 to 0.67 in 2020. By contrast, Morris Fiorina, in a somewhat reframed idiom but still colored by his long-standing skepticism of party elites, casts a jaundiced eye from the top down. He expresses doubt that either an identitarian Democratic Party or a populist-nationalist Republican Party will be able to command sufficient support to break the long political deadlock. For their part, Byron Shafer and Regina Wagner frame the transformation of recent decades in terms of activists vanquishing party regulars in the wake of party reform after 1968. Yet they say less about how the “activists’ revenge” played out in the context of a divided system and a Trump-Biden election in which the protagonists were, in very different ways, hardly creatures of their parties’ hardcore activists.

It is worth calling attention to some standout essays, all of which hit the sweet spot of providing easily digestible new data on party activity within the context of longer-term trends. Robert Boatright tackles primary challenges to House incumbents, noting that the wave of ideologically motivated challenges to Republicans peaked in the 2014 cycle while the Democrats have seen a new burst of challengers. In turn, as incumbent Democrats largely bested leftist insurgents, he notes that “there is little evidence that the Republican Party has as robust a party operation to tamp down primary competition as Democrats do” (70). Stephen Medvic and

Berwood Yost nicely consider GOP factional differences in Pennsylvania, concluding that “Republicans in the Trump faction are less concerned about racism and are less optimistic about their economic circumstances” (120). In a model essay—syllabus-makers, take note!—Kenneth Miller shows how party congressional committees have responded strategically to the rise, especially on the Senate side, of individual donors sending vast sums to candidates running against loathed figures from the opposing party in an increasingly nationalized system. Such donations from party committees can fill in the gaps where individual donors are less inspired to give, but they “cannot remove superfluous money from a candidate with resources beyond their needs” (176). And Laurel Elder provides a crisp précis of why, even after the “Year of the Republican Woman,” Democratic women officeholders so outnumber their Republican counterparts. In state legislatures as of 2021, 44 percent of Democrats but only 9 percent of Republicans were women.

In addition to the inevitable unevenness to be expected from an admirably open edited volume, there are omissions. Although the coverage of gender is excellent, the book has less to say about race and racism, including the paradox of the ongoing polarization by white voters along lines of racial resentment and Republicans’ improved performance in the 2020 election among nonwhite voters, especially Hispanics. Questions of political economy also get short shrift. Alongside increasing concerns about democratic performance have come welcome conversations with comparative politics, but this remains a resolutely US-centric and Americanist book.

Still, another edition of *State of the Parties* is always a cause for celebration, both for its new insights and its adding to the impressive work that John Green and his collaborators have produced over the last three decades. Perhaps more than we might wish, scholars of US party politics have plenty to study.