

gress would come up with its choice without any public referendum? That really isn't an issue, I think. In Britain and other parliamentary democracies, voters backing a particular party know who the prime minister will be should that party gain a majority. Americans, too, in voting for a particular individual as representative would know that they were, in the process, favoring the candidacy of one prime minister designee over another, and thus were "voting" for prime minister as well. [Globally, parliamentary democracies refer to the head of government as prime minister, or premier, or the equivalent. In the US, the title of president would probably be preferred.]

As I've said, I feel certain that any system that would centralize governmental control at any time in one party would be "voted down" in a US public opinion poll. At the same time, it's necessary if we

are to correct our present situation. Unless we give the party the public favors the power to act, and make it responsible for its failure to act or act well, we will continue with gridlock.

I suspect that what the public really wants is "better people" in government, rather than a change in our formal system. But reviling candidates for office in the press, having opponents for a given office defame each other, and having public opinion scorn politicians in general, will not lead to the "better people" that the public is looking for. Increasing the inability of these "better people" to accomplish anything while in office is not likely to attract more of them either.

Giving a party the power to act and putting it at risk if it doesn't act wisely, might well attract "better people" and end gridlock.

Endnotes:

¹ In the Roper Organization survey of February 1977, the question was asked: "With regard to our federal government, some people think it is better to have the majority in Congress and the President in the same political party, so they will work together and get more accomplished. Other people think it is better to have one party control Congress and the other party to be in the White House, so there are checks and balances between the two branches of government. What do you think...?" Thirty-six percent favored one party control, 48% favored split-party control, and 16% said "don't know." When this same question was asked in a survey of August 1992, 34% backed one-party control, 44% backed split-party control, and 22% said "don't know."

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AMERICANS NEED A MODEST RETURN TO PARTY GOVERNMENT (BUT STILL DON'T KNOW IT)

By Everett C. Ladd

From 1969 through 1992, a Republican occupied the White House all but 4 years while Democrats enjoyed a House of Representatives majority—usually a large one—every year. The Republicans have not, in fact, had a House majority since 1954. This historically unprecedented experience with (1) extended divided party control over the national government, and (2) extended continuous one-party dominance of a national government institution, has had devastating effects on the operation of the American polity.

The public knows something is amiss, but it still hasn't thought its way through to the source of the problem. I argue that the latter is evidently the case, even though come January next one party will again, at least temporarily, control the government at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Gordon Black and Benjamin Black argue in the lead article that the political malfunctioning which has deformed our politics and so troubled many Americans will be cured by the appearance of a "Mr./Ms. Right"—in the form of a new centrist party committed to "good government" reform. But the source of our present discontents isn't radical parties—we have two centrist ones now—or evil politicians. It's that the public has lost control over the government of the United States—which is Congress and the presidency—because it has so substantially diminished the mechanism it needs to exert that control, the political party.

Burns Roper sees the latter result, but goes on to argue that the US should therefore take a massive leap from its presidential to a parliamentary system. My objec-

tion here is that the end he seeks might be achieved without so violent a break with two centuries of political tradition—indeed without a break at all. We need only *return* to the limited, modest party government which *was* our tradition through most of our history, until the departure of the last several decades. To bring the public on board, a major educational effort is needed, and probably some legislation as well, but nothing here seems beyond the capacities of a people who have sustained the world's oldest democracy.

The Novel Experiment in Divided Government

Split results, where one party controls Congress and the other the presidency, were highly uncommon prior to the 1950s. When they did occur, it was

almost always when the public was saying something that took two elections to express; that is, one got split control following midterm elections when the incumbent president and his party were losing favor. Voters could not turn him out at that point, but they could punish his party. In recent elections, in sharp contrast, divided government has occurred routinely; even popular presidents winning reelection handsomely have been unable to carry Congress with them. Bill Clinton's party lost seats in the House this year.

Persistent divided control could not have occurred were Americans profoundly uncomfortable with the results, as French voters so plainly were with "cohabitation" in their brief experience with it between 1986 and 1988. Indeed, many US voters seem to see split control of national government as an almost natural extension of their country's historical commitment to the separation of powers—something they clearly like. This confusion is a big contributor to the larger problem. Besides this, contemporary opinion research shows an American public highly ambivalent on many of the central questions of public policy. It endorses, for example, very high levels of government protection and services, but at the same time insists that government is too big, too expensive, and too intrusive.¹ In wanting somewhat contradictory things from the modern state, segments of the public seem in some respects to welcome pitting the two parties' views of government against each another.

Unhappiness With The Bottom Line

However, it's one thing to argue that there are reasons why the American public is comfortable with aspects of divided party control, quite another to maintain that the public has planned or consciously intended it—or that it is happy with the bottom-line results. As to the latter, there is abundant evidence that Americans are frustrated by the performance of the current system, a frustration manifest in a number of ways, including strong criticisms of the performance of Congress. The data which we present in this issue's

Public Opinion Report attest to the extent of the current dissatisfaction with the national legislature.

Split control has come about in the modern era primarily through the confluence of two distinct developments: (1) growing advantages for incumbents in resources relevant to their reelection, including staffs for keeping their names before their constituents in ways vaguely positive, and in direct campaign funding, and (2) the weakening of party ties across much of the electorate. In highly visible races such as those for president, governor, and US senator, voters often acquire enough information about the candidates to make up for the declining guidance that party ties historically provided. In elections for school-board members, aldermen, and other local officials, to move to the other end of the spectrum, voters often have enough personal knowledge. But House races and other "intermediate" contests evince a different dynamic. Here party voting is no longer decisive, but substantive knowledge of candidate records, approach to governance, and so on is insufficient to furnish a substitute base. Enjoying huge advantages in resources for self-promotion, incumbents in these contests cannot readily be challenged—even in a year like 1992 when there was so much general dissatisfaction with Congress—so long as they avoid scandal. *No one planned this.*

A Confused Public

The public has ample means to end the situation if it makes up its mind to do so, but it finds it hard to make the connection between its institutional dissatisfactions—government seeming unresponsive, out of effective control, "special interests" too strong—and the absence of an effective link between party, policy, and congressional voting. This is all the more the case because incumbent congressmen seem nice enough personally, and in each individual contest are typically much better known than their rivals. Furthermore, since the public has long been taught that parties are really not very important as representative institutions, that they are little more than unavoidable

nuisances in the grand game of democracy, it is singularly unprepared to deal with the novel challenge that the persistence of divided government presents.

But a challenge it is. Even if Americans are not wildly unhappy with divided control and to some extent find it satisfying, they would probably find the quality of their representative democracy enhanced much of the time, if on a regular, not just intermittent, basis they gave one party or the other a majority voice in both halves of elective national government. In those instances where they thought a change of direction was in order, it would be helpful if they could kick the "ins" out at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and give the other side a chance. Such a system would be more responsive to popular control.

The Party Collapse Is Recent

Americans have long practiced a type of democratic politics in which individual voters play a large role in selecting candidates; hence, the institutional parties—their leadership committees, conventions—play relatively limited roles. Nonetheless, until the last several decades, party organizations maintained enough of a role to leave the overall system "mixed." This mixture of party and direct citizen involvement was evident in the selection of presidential nominees. Primaries were common enough to test meaningfully the popular appeals of contenders in both parties, but the leadership structure of the party still had a central role.

Many analysts are now inclined to look back fondly on "the good old days of the 1950s," when a balance of popular and party roles was still maintained. Today that balance is no more. In presidential electioneering, candidates decide on their own whether to run. There are no enduring party bases to nurture and sustain them. No longer does any party body have a role, much less influence, to make meaningful its efforts at planning for a nominee best able to (1) satisfy the party's principal constituencies, (2) assemble the breadth of backing needed to win a national election, and (3) govern ably if elected.

The Media Vs. The Parties

There has also been a pronounced expansion of the part played by the national communications media. The latter is most apparent in presidential selection. The increased role of the national press in American electoral politics both resulted and was precipitated from the diminished role of the parties. Increasingly, the press has taken over important facets of the political communications functions once performed largely by parties. Two decades ago, journalist David Broder observed that newsmen had begun serving as the principal source of information on what candidates were saying and doing. They were acting the part of talent scouts, conveying the judgment that some contenders were promising while dismissing others as of no real talent. They were also operating as race callers or handicappers, Broder went on, telling the public how the election contest was going. At times they functioned as public defenders, bent on exposing what they considered the frailties, duplicities, and sundry inadequacies of a candidate, and in other instances they even served as assistant campaign managers, informally advising the candidate and publicly, if indirectly, promoting his cause.² Even more today, we know, self-starting presidential candidacies run a guntlet not of party but of press-based review.

Doris Graber has discussed the confluence of factors that has ended in such an elevation of the press role and so diminished a place for the parties. Since the "full flowering of the electronic age," Graber writes, "the candidate as a personality has become the prime consideration at the presidential level." When voters focus directly on candidates with little intermediary involvement by political

parties, Graber continues, "the media become more important because they are the chief sources of information about these matters. Correspondingly, political parties take on less importance....More than ever before media personnel can influence the selection of candidates and issues. Candidates, like actors, depend for their success as much on the roles into which they are cast as on their acting ability. In the television age media people usually do the casting for presidential hopefuls, whose performance is then judged according to the assigned role."³

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the press's part in nominee selection has become too large and intrusive. Democratic governance would be enhanced if the balance was shifted at least moderately away from nonelected, "non-responsible" news media to parties whose nominees regularly face the scrutiny of voters. Given the enormous resources now available to communications organizations—accruing from revolutions in communications technology and the consequent jump in audience reach—it's hard to see how media domination of electioneering can be curbed unless ways are found to rebuild the party presence at least modestly.

But Is It Possible?

Can American political parties ever again be made as responsible as they were in 1950? On this the jury is out. But surely the task is not so daunting that we should start by assuming failure. One reason why so many incumbent Congressmen win, even in an adverse environment for incumbents like this year's, is that they have been given such immense electoral advantages over their challengers. Surely it's not beyond reach to mount a campaign on behalf of a reasonably level playing field for incumbents and chal-

lengers—which would mean, among other things, that the latter would be assured the base of financial support needed to mount credible campaigns.

Similarly, the dissatisfaction with "politics as usual" that we see in the sweeping criticism of Congress and (misplaced, I believe) in the huge protest vote for Ross Perot, is the necessary raw material for bringing critical segments of the public on board. Americans don't need to be convinced that political change is in order. They need only to be shown that they already have the mechanism to get the change they want, and without recourse to such potentially harmful measures as term limits. They can themselves impose sensible term limits—by shifting party control over both Congress and the presidency on a reasonably frequent basis, whenever they find the government's performance insufficient. They must be helped to see more clearly that their frustrations will be unending until they abandon the idea of "voting for the man," or woman, and resume voting for the party.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, Everett C. Ladd, "Politics in the '80s," *Public Opinion*, December/January 1983, p. 206; Idem., "The Reagan Phenomenon and Public Attitudes Toward Government," in Lester M. Salamon and Michael S. Lund, eds., *The Reagan Presidency and the Governing of America* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 1984); and Ladd and Karlyn H. Keene, "Attitudes Toward Government: What the Public Says," *Government Executive*, January 1988, pp. 11-16.

² David S. Broder, "Political Reporters in Presidential Politics," in Charles Peters and Timothy J. Adams (eds.), *Inside the System: A Washington Monthly Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 3-22.

³ Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Books, 1989), pp. 197-98.

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