



American Party System



By *John Kenneth White*

Four decades ago, political scientist E.E. Schattschneider wondered aloud, “What does change look like?”¹ As I have reflected of late upon Everett Ladd’s extraordinary career, Schattschneider’s question has been foremost in my thoughts.

When I met Everett in the fall of 1977, he was busily applying Schattschneider’s question to answering how the emerging post-industrial economy (as it was quaintly called back then) was changing the American party system. In his foreword to my book, *The Fractured Electorate: Political Parties and Social Change in Southern New England*, Ladd amplified on sociologist Daniel Bell’s research by describing five interrelated components transforming the American workplace in the new post-industrial era:

- Post-industrial America is a society built upon advanced technology. Technology surely is not a recent phenomenon, but technology built primarily upon abstract and theoretical knowledge is new.
- This technology, based upon the elaboration of theoretical knowledge, requires an unprecedented commitment to science and education. And it permits an unprecedentedly large proportion of the populace to engage in intellectual rather than manual labor.
- In the post-industrial setting, the occupational makeup of the workforce differs from that of earlier times in American history and from that of most other societies. The white-collar and service sectors grow. “Bureaucracy” becomes the distinctive work setting.
- Post-industrial America is an affluent society, one in which the increase in national wealth has been so substantial as to move the bulk of the populace beyond active concern with matters of substance.
- In post-industrial America, the character of social classes and their relationships departs from previous experience.

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Increased wealth and increased education, along with a new occupational mix, come together to produce new organizations of the social classes and new class interests.

Everett Ladd’s keen insights led to many stimulating conversations about how the New Deal coalition first fashioned by Franklin D. Roosevelt had become like Humpty Dumpty—broken beyond repair. We agreed that racial divisions, along with the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s, played an important part in the New Deal’s demise.

But we also saw an emerging “New Class” that had been spawned by post-industrialism. White-collar workers had begun to outnumber their blue-collar New Deal counterparts. Labor unions were on the wane, save for those who represented some of the new white-collars. In this white-collar world, where intellectual productivity mattered, the college degree had become the new “union card” for employment. Moreover, this New Class enjoyed more wealth and leisure time than any generation of workers heretofore.

The New Class also eluded the appeals of both major parties, which wanted their support but were unable either to obtain it or keep it. In the post-Watergate/pre-Ronald Reagan era, Everett and I viewed the Republicans as hopelessly inept—reduced to “half-party” status. Having written off blacks, Republicans were by the late 1970s losing support among the white middle-class as well. Ideologically speaking, those Republicans not caught in a poor “me-too” imitation of the Democratic New Deal and Great Society liberalism were trapped in a mindless conservatism that rendered them into a twentieth century version of “the stupid party.”

Nowhere was this more apparent than in southern New England. There, the Grand Old Party was so decimated that in 1978 a local group of Massachusetts Republicans paid for an advertisement in the *Fall River Herald News* that read: “Wanted: A Willing Republican Living in the Eighth Bristol District with a Strong Belief in the Return of Two-Party Government.” The late Frank Sargent, the Republican governor who preceded Michael Dukakis in the Massachusetts statehouse, lamented that the few college Republicans left had become “the jokers on campus.”

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The New Class proved to be a mixed blessing for the Democrats. Many New Class Democrats, often dubbed the “Brie and Chablis set,” were inclined to back candidates who emphasized their managerial skills and issue-based approaches to politics.² But this support often came at a heavy price: alienation of the remaining New Deal Democrats, whose lunch-bucket concerns and opinions on social and cultural issues were at odds with those held by the New Class. This warfare between the New versus the Old Liberalism has its echoes in today’s Democratic party. As Ladd described it:

The New Liberalism’s attitudes are very different from—indeed, often at odds with—those of the New Deal liberals. For example, the New Liberals support the busing of school children to achieve racial integration; they reject the “equality of opportunity,” insisting instead upon “equality of result”; they want to extend civil liberties, notably the rights of the accused in criminal trials; and they sharply question the value of economic growth, believing that it damages “the quality of life.” The New Liberalism also differs from the New Deal ethos in the matter of personal morality; it takes a libertarian stance on such issues as abortion, legalization of marijuana, homosexuality, and racial intermarriage.³

Over the years, Everett and I had long conversations about how Democrats were unsuccessfully trying to integrate this new constituency into their electoral coalition. When I was writing my dissertation in 1978, Massachusetts Democrats were in the midst of a brutal internal war between Michael Dukakis, who best represented this New Class Liberalism, and insurgent Edward King, a political newcomer whose pollster Dick Morris advised him to attack Dukakis by taking conservative positions on abortion, the drinking age, and taxes that appealed to older Democrats. The battle between these two was fierce: King won in 1978; four years later Dukakis staged a comeback and later won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988, only to see his party lose to George Bush because of his New Liberalism.

Ladd’s stance that post-industrialism was reshaping American politics continued to the end of his life. Examining the 1996 election, he asserted that post-industrialism had engendered a “no majority” realignment that left both Democrats and Republicans bereft and adrift.⁴ Post-industrialism, Ladd argued, had produced a philosophical and programmatic change regarding big government that differed dramatically from Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.

This downsizing of voter expectations was not surprising, given the fact that loyalties to other industrial bureaucratic

behemoths such as IBM, Sears, and AT&T had become passé. The current environment was quite different from that of the New Deal, which was born in an industrializing era and spawned large government entities designed to regulate a more centralized marketplace. Now, the post-industrial era was producing smaller enterprises with fewer brand loyalties. New Class Generation Xers, if not working for themselves out-of-home, were likely to have several employers during their ever-longer professional careers.

Given this new post-industrial environment, Americans have begun to view big government in more skeptical terms. Put simply, during the New Deal voters believed that “big government works.” Today they don’t. Ladd was especially critical of George Bush and Bob Dole, seeing them as incapable of seizing the moment by positioning the GOP to catch the new public skepticism. Both men, he claimed, were rooted in the Republican failures of the 1970s. Newt Gingrich, meanwhile, mistook the voter mistrust of big government as an attack on *all* government. In this environment, Bill Clinton emerged as a superb tactician, leading the Democratic party to two consecutive presidential victories. But Clinton was inherently unable to remake his party into a new, cohesive majority. As Ladd once said of him: “It’s sometimes hard to tell precisely where ‘waffling’ and ‘lacking principles’ leave off and ‘pragmatism’ and ‘flexibility’ begin.”

Schattschneider’s question, “What does change look like?” not only required us to describe the changes in question, but to name them. Post-industrialism had produced widespread changes in American voting patterns and the party coalitions. But political scientists had frequently failed to capture the change, much less name it. It was on these grounds that Ladd reserved his most scathing criticism for his colleagues. While most academicians agree that the New Deal is no more, Ladd believed that the devotees of party realignment were hopelessly stuck in the past. The New Deal had produced a partisan transformation like no other, but to compare it to the changes wrought by post-industrialism seemed hopelessly naive. In 1952, V.O. Key coined the term “party realignment” to describe the electoral transformations ushered in by the New Deal. In 1970, Walter Dean Burnham broadened Key’s arguments to include five conditions that, he said, were the test of any future realignment:

- Short, sharp reorganizations of the major party voter coalitions, which occur at periodic intervals nationwide.
- Third-party revolts, which often precede party realignments and reveal the incapacity of “politics-as-usual.”
- Abnormal stress in the socioeconomic system, which is closely associated with fundamental partisan change.



- Ideological polarizations and issue distances between the major parties, which become exceptionally large by normal standards.
- Durable consequences, which determine the general outlines of important public policies in the decades that follow.⁵

Ladd was exceptionally critical of Key and Burnham's analysis, likening it to a case of Key "sneezing and political science catching a cold." In 1989, he met their arguments head-on in a brilliant article entitled, "Like Waiting for Godot: The Uselessness of 'Realignment' for Understanding Change in Contemporary American Politics." Believing that the advocates of party realignment had obscured a clearer delineation of the electoral changes that had occurred by the late twentieth century, Ladd vehemently rejected their arguments and demanded that the profession answer these questions:

- What are the major issues and policy differences, and how do they cleave political elites and the public? Do some partisan elites have special problems articulating the concerns of their co-partisans within the general public or in reflecting majoritarian values? If they do, why?
- What is the social and ideological make-up of each party, at both the mass public and the elite levels? What are the key groups and interests within each coalition? How faithfully does each of these support its party? How stable are the coalitions from election to election? How similar or different are they from office to office, or from one level of government to another?
- What are the principal features of party organization, nomination procedures, and campaign structure?
- In each of the above areas, are major shifts currently taking place? What kinds? What are their sources?
- Overall, how well is the party system performing? (Answering this requires, of course, explicitly stating objectives in democratic representation and elaborating standards by which such performance can be judged.)

The obsession with realignment theory, Ladd concluded, had produced its own form of failure—a misreading of politics in the 1990s because the discipline remained stuck on the wrong question: Is it realignment? Like poor Godot, political science was standing still.

The failure of the American electorate to behave as political scientists want them to has been a singular failing of the discipline. This collective desire for "normalcy," as presented in the desire for a "normal realignment" of the New Deal type, can only be derided in today's

Information Age, when revolutionary changes abound and await our collective analysis. Indeed, both the scope and breadth of change is astonishing. Americans are simultaneously rushing forward and backward: *forward* into an era where the global economy makes a mockery of nationalism and where computers link individuals to a vast panoply of data on the information superhighway, and *backward* into an age of heightened nationalism, old-fashioned conservatism, and an evocation of "traditional values."

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The effects of these forward and backward revolutions have been profound, and political parties have been grappling with them mostly unsuccessfully. The party-in-the-electorate (PIE) has become relatively "baseless," even as party organizations (PO) and the party-in-government (PIG) have been strengthened.⁶ This "decoupling" of the parties from the PIE, PO, PIG tripod has been a distinctive feature of the Information Age. In fact, the strengthening of the national Democratic and Republican party organizations may be driving voters further away from their already loosened partisan moorings. As the party system continues to struggle with this warp-driven headlong leap into the future, political scientists should reexamine Everett Ladd's work and answer his exact and demanding questions. It is to be regretted that he will not personally accompany us into this new, challenging, and different century. I shall always miss his insights and our long, engaging conversations about our country. Farewell, old friend. ●

Endnotes

- ¹E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 112.
- ²See, for example, Edgar Litt, *The Political Cultures of Massachusetts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965).
- ³Everett Carl Ladd, *Where Have All the Voters Gone? The Fracturing of America's Political Parties* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), p. 37.
- ⁴Ladd, "1996 Vote: The 'No Majority' Realignment Continues," in *Political Science Quarterly* 1997, Vol. 112, No. 1, pp. 1-23.
- ⁵Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), p. 10.
- ⁶See John Kenneth White and Daniel M. Shea, *New Party Politics: From Jefferson and Hamilton to the Information Age* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).