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The Decline of Collective Responsibility in American Politics

THOUGH THE FOUNDING FATHERS believed in the necessity of establishing a genuinely national government, they took great pains to design one that could not lightly do things *to* its citizens; what government might do *for* its citizens was to be limited to the functions of what we know now as the “watchman state.” Thus the Founders composed the constitutional litany familiar to every schoolchild: they created a federal system, they distributed and blended powers within and across the federal levels, and they encouraged the occupants of the various positions to check and balance each other by structuring incentives so that one officeholder’s ambitions would be likely to conflict with others’. The resulting system of institutional arrangements predictably hampers efforts to undertake major initiatives and favors maintenance of the status quo.

Given the historical record faced by the Founders, their emphasis on constraining government is understandable. But we face a later historical record, one that shows two hundred years of increasing demands for government to act positively. Moreover, developments unforeseen by the Founders increasingly raise the likelihood that the uncoordinated actions of individuals and groups will inflict serious damage on the nation as a whole. The by-products of the industrial and technological revolutions impose physical risks not only on us, but on future generations as well. Resource shortages and international cartels raise the spectre of economic ruin. And the simple proliferation of special interests with their intense, particularistic demands threatens to render us politically incapable of taking actions that might either advance the state of society or prevent foreseeable deteriorations in that state. None of this is to suggest that we should forget about what government can do *to* us—the contemporary concern with the proper scope and methods of government intervention in the social and economic orders is long overdue. But the modern age demands as well that we worry about our ability to make government work *for* us. The problem is that we are gradually losing that ability, and a principal reason for this loss is the steady erosion of *responsibility* in American politics.

What do I mean by this important quality, responsibility? To say that some person or group is responsible for a state of affairs is to assert that he or they have the ability to take legitimate actions that have a major impact on that state of affairs. More colloquially, when someone is responsible, we know whom to blame. Human beings have asymmetric attitudes toward responsibility, as cap-

tured by the saying "Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan." This general observation applies very much to politicians, not surprisingly, and this creates a problem for democratic theory, because clear location of responsibility is vitally important to the operation of democratic governments. Without responsibility, citizens can only guess at who deserves their support; the act of voting loses much of its meaning. Moreover, the expectation of being held responsible provides representatives with a personal incentive to govern in their constituents' interest. As ordinary citizens we do not know the proper rate of growth of the money supply, the appropriate level of the federal deficit, the advantages of the MX over alternative missile systems, and so forth. We elect people to make those decisions. But only if those elected know they will be held accountable for the results of their decisions (or nondecisions, as the case may be), do they have a personal incentive to govern in our interest.¹

Unfortunately, the importance of responsibility in a democracy is matched by the difficulty of attaining it. In an autocracy, individual responsibility suffices; the location of power in a single individual locates responsibility in that individual as well. But individual responsibility is insufficient whenever more than one person shares governmental authority. We can hold a particular congressman individually responsible for a personal transgression such as bribetaking. We can even hold a president individually responsible for military moves where he presents Congress and the citizenry with a *fait accompli*. But on most national issues individual responsibility is difficult to assess. If one were to go to Washington, randomly accost a Democratic congressman, and berate him about a 20-percent rate of inflation, imagine the response. More than likely it would run, "Don't blame me. If 'they' had done what I've advocated for *x* years, things would be fine today." And if one were to walk over to the White House and similarly confront President Carter, he would respond as he already has, by blaming Arabs, free-spending congressmen, special interests, and, of course, us.

American institutional structure makes this kind of game-playing all too easy. In order to overcome it we must lay the credit or blame for national conditions on all those who had any hand in bringing them about: some form of *collective responsibility* is essential.

The only way collective responsibility has ever existed, and can exist given our institutions, is through the agency of the political party; in American politics, responsibility requires cohesive parties. This is an old claim to be sure, but its age does not detract from its present relevance.² In fact, the continuing decline in public esteem for the parties and continuing efforts to "reform" them out of the political process suggest that old arguments for party responsibility have not been made often enough or, at least, convincingly enough, so I will make these arguments once again in this essay.

A strong political party can generate collective responsibility by creating incentive for leaders, followers, and popular supporters to think and act in collective terms. First, by providing party leaders with the capability (e.g., control of institutional patronage, nominations, and so on) to discipline party members, genuine leadership becomes possible. Legislative output is less likely to be a least common denominator—a residue of myriad conflicting proposals—and more likely to consist of a program actually intended to solve a problem or move

the nation in a particular direction. Second, the subordination of individual officeholders to the party lessens their ability to separate themselves from party actions. Like it or not, their performance becomes identified with the performance of the collectivity to which they belong. Third, with individual candidate variation greatly reduced, voters have less incentive to support individuals and more incentive to support or oppose the party as a whole. And fourth, the circle closes as party-line voting in the electorate provides party leaders with the incentive to propose policies that will earn the support of a national majority, and party back-benchers with the personal incentive to cooperate with leaders in the attempt to compile a good record for the party as a whole.

In the American context, strong parties have traditionally clarified politics in two ways. First, they allow citizens to assess responsibility easily, at least when the government is unified, which it more often was in earlier eras when party meant more than it does today.³ Citizens need only evaluate the social, economic, and international conditions they observe and make a simple decision for or against change. They do not need to decide whether the energy, inflation, urban, and defense policies advocated by their congressman would be superior to those advocated by Carter—were any of them to be enacted!

The second way in which strong parties clarify American politics follows from the first. When citizens assess responsibility on the party as a whole, party members have personal incentives to see the party evaluated favorably. They have little to gain from gutting their president's program one day and attacking him for lack of leadership the next, since they share in the president's fate when voters do not differentiate within the party. Put simply, party responsibility provides party members with a personal stake in their collective performance.

Admittedly, party responsibility is a blunt instrument. The objection immediately arises that party responsibility condemns junior Democratic representatives to suffer electorally for an inflation they could do little to affect. An unhappy situation, true, but unless we accept it, Congress as a whole escapes electoral retribution for an inflation they *could* have done something to affect. Responsibility requires acceptance of both conditions. The choice is between a blunt instrument or none at all.

Of course, the United States is not Great Britain. We have neither the institutions nor the traditions to support a British brand of responsible party government, and I do not see either the possibility or the necessity for such a system in America. In the past the United States has enjoyed eras in which party was a much stronger force than today. And until recently—a generation, roughly—parties have provided an “adequate” degree of collective responsibility. They have done so by connecting the electoral fates of party members, via presidential coattails, for example, and by transforming elections into referenda on party performance, as with congressional off-year elections.

In earlier times, when citizens voted for the party, not the person, parties had incentives to nominate good candidates, because poor ones could have harmful fallout on the ticket as a whole.⁴ In particular, the existence of presidential coattails (positive and negative) provided an inducement to avoid the nomination of narrowly based candidates, no matter how committed their supporters. And, once in office, the existence of party voting in the electorate provided party members with the incentive to compile a good *party* record. In

particular, the tendency of national midterm elections to serve as referenda on the performance of the president provided a clear inducement for congressmen to do what they could to see that their president was perceived as a solid performer. By stimulating electoral phenomena such as coattail effects and midterm referenda, party transformed some degree of personal ambition into concern with collective performance.

In the contemporary period, however, even the preceding tendencies toward collective responsibility have largely dissipated. As background for a discussion of this contemporary weakening of collective responsibility and its deleterious consequences, let us briefly review the evidence for the decline of party in America.

The Continuing Decline of Party in the United States

Party is a simple term that covers a multitude of complicated organizations and processes. It manifests itself most concretely as the set of party organizations that exist principally at the state and local levels. It manifests itself most elusively as a psychological presence in the mind of the citizen. Somewhere in between, and partly a function of the first two, is the manifestation of party as a force in government. The discussion in this section will hold to this traditional schema, though it is clear that the three aspects of party have important interconnections.

Party Organizations

In the United States, party organization has traditionally meant state and local party organization. The national party generally has been a loose confederacy of subnational units that swings into action for a brief period every four years. This characterization remains true today, despite the somewhat greater influence and augmented functions of the national organizations.⁵ Though such things are difficult to measure precisely, there is general agreement that the formal party organizations have undergone a secular decline since their peak at the end of the nineteenth century. The prototype of the old-style organization was the urban machine, a form approximated today only in Chicago.

Several long-term trends have served to undercut old-style party organizations. The patronage system has been steadily chopped back since passage of the Civil Service Act of 1883. The social welfare functions of the parties have passed to the government as the modern welfare state developed. And, less concretely, the entire ethos of the old-style party organization is increasingly at odds with modern ideas of government based on rational expertise. These long-term trends spawned specific attacks on the old party organizations. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Populists, Progressives, and assorted other reformers fought electoral corruption with the Australian Ballot and personal registration systems. They attempted to break the hold of the party bosses over nominations by mandating the direct primary. They attacked the urban machines with drives for nonpartisan at-large elections and nonpartisan city managers. None of these reforms destroyed the parties; they managed

to live with the reforms better than most reformers had hoped. But the reforms reflected changing popular attitudes toward the parties and accelerated the secular decline in the influence of the party organizations.

The New Deal period temporarily arrested the deterioration of the party organizations, at least on the Democratic side. Unified party control under a "political" president provided favorable conditions for the state and local organizations.⁶ But following the heyday of the New Deal (and ironically, in part, because of government assumption of subnational parties' functions) the decline continued.

In the 1970s two series of reforms further weakened the influence of organized parties in American national politics. The first was a series of legal changes deliberately intended to lessen organized party influence in the presidential nominating process. In the Democratic party, "New Politics" activists captured the national party apparatus and imposed a series of rules changes designed to "open up" the politics of presidential nominations. The Republican party—long more amateur and open than the Democratic party—adopted weaker versions of the Democratic rules changes. In addition, modifications of state electoral laws to conform to the Democratic rules changes (enforced by the federal courts) stimulated Republican rules changes as well. Table 1 shows that the presidential nominating process has indeed been opened up. In little more than a decade after the disastrous 1968 Democratic conclave, the number of primary states has more than doubled, and the number of delegates chosen in primaries has increased from little more than a third to three-quarters. Moreover, the remaining delegates emerge from caucuses far more open to mass citizen participation, and the delegates themselves are more likely to be amateurs, than previously.⁷ For example, in the four conventions from 1956 to 1968 more than 70 percent of the Democratic party's senators, 40 percent of their representatives, and 80 percent of their governors attended. In 1976 the figures were 18 percent, 15 percent, and 47 percent, respectively.⁸ Today's youth can observe the back-room maneuvers of party bosses and favorite sons only by watching *The Best Man* on late night television.

Table 1. Recent Changes in Presidential Nomination Process

	Number of States Holding Primaries	Percentages of Delegates Selected in Primaries	
		Democratic	Republican
1968	17	38	34
1972	23	61	53
1976	30	73	68
1980	36	76	76

Source: 1968-1976 figures from Austin Ranney, "The Political Parties: Reform and Decline," in *The New American Political System*, Anthony King (ed.) (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), Table 6-1. Figures for 1980 are from *National Journal*, October 20, 1979: 1738-9.

A second series of 1970s reforms lessened the role of formal party organizations in the conduct of political campaigns. These are financing regulations growing out of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 as amended in 1974 and 1976. In this case the reforms were aimed at cleaning up corruption in the financing of campaigns; their effects on the parties were a by-product, though many individuals accurately predicted its nature. Serious presidential candidates are now publicly financed. Though the law permits the national party to spend two cents per eligible voter on behalf of the nominee, it also obliges the candidate to set up a finance committee separate from the national party. Between this legally mandated separation and fear of violating spending limits or accounting regulations, for example, the law has the effect of encouraging the candidate to keep his party at arm's length.⁹

At present only presidential candidates enjoy public financing, but a series of new limits on contributions and expenditures affects other national races. Prior to the implementation of the new law, data on congressional campaign financing were highly unreliable, but consider some of the trends that have emerged in the short time the law has been in effect. Table 2 shows the diminished role of the parties in the financing of congressional races. In House races, the decline in the party proportion of funding has been made up by the generosity of political action committees (also stimulated by the new law). In the Senate, wealthy candidates appear to have picked up the slack left by the diminished party role. The party funding contribution in congressional races has declined not only as a proportion of the total, but also in absolute dollars, and considerably in inflation-adjusted dollars. The limits in the new law restrict a House candidate to no more than \$15,000 in funding from each of the national and relevant state parties (the average campaign expenditure of an incumbent in 1978 was about \$121,000; of a challenger, about \$54,000). A candidate for the Senate is permitted to receive a maximum of \$17,500 from his senatorial campaign committee, plus two cents per eligible voter from the national committee

Table 2. Recent Sources of Congressional Campaign Contributions (in Percentages)

	House			
	Individual	PACs	Parties	Personal
1972	59	14	17	NA
1978	57	25	7	11
	Senate			
	Individual	PACs	Parties	Personal
1972	67	12	14	1
1978	70	13	6	11

Source: Michael Malbin, "Of Mountains and Molehills: PACs, Campaigns, and Public Policy," in Malbin (ed.), *Parties, Interest Groups, and Campaign Finance Laws* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), Table 1.

and a like amount from the relevant state committee (twenty-one senatorial candidates spent over \$1 million in 1978).

There is no detailed work on the precise effects of the contribution limits, but it appears doubtful that they are binding. If the national party were to contribute \$15,000 to each of its congressional candidates, and a flat \$17,500 to each of its senatorial candidates, that would be more than \$8 million. *All* levels of the parties contributed only \$10.5 million of the \$157 million spent in 1978 congressional races.

Probably more constraining than limits on what the parties can contribute to the candidates are limits on what citizens and groups can contribute to the parties. Under current law, individual contributors may give \$1,000 per election to a candidate (primary, runoff, general election), \$5,000 per year to a political action committee, and \$20,000 per year to a party. From the standpoint of the law, each of the two great national parties is the equivalent of four PACs. The PACs themselves are limited to a \$15,000 per year contribution to the national party. Thus financial angels are severely restricted. They must spread contributions around to individual candidates, each of whom is likely to regard the contribution as an expression of personal worthiness and, if anything, as less reason than ever to think in terms of the party.

The ultimate results of such reforms are easy to predict. A lesser party role in the nominating and financing of candidates encourages candidates to organize and conduct independent campaigns, which further weakens the role of parties. Of course, party is not the entire story in this regard. Other modern day changes contribute to the diminished party role in campaign politics. For one thing, party foot soldiers are no longer so important, given the existence of a large leisured middle class that participates out of duty or enjoyment, but that participates on behalf of particular candidates and issues rather than parties. Similarly, contemporary campaigns rely heavily on survey research, the mass media, and modern advertising methods—all provided by independent consultants outside the formal party apparatus. Although these developments are not directly related to the contemporary reforms, their effect is the same: the diminution of the role of parties in conducting political campaigns. And if parties do not grant nominations, fund their choices, and work for them, why should those choices feel any commitment to their party?

Party in the Electorate

In the citizenry at large, party takes the form of a psychological attachment. The typical American traditionally has been likely to identify with one or the other of the two major parties. Such identifications are transmitted across generations to some degree, and within the individual they tend to be fairly stable.¹⁰ But there is mounting evidence that the basis of identification lies in the individual's experiences (direct and vicarious, through family and social groups) with the parties in the past.¹¹ Our current party system, of course, is based on the dislocations of the Depression period and the New Deal attempts to alleviate them. Though only a small proportion of those who experienced the Depression directly are active voters today, the general outlines of citizen party identifications much resemble those established at that time.

Again, there is reason to believe that the extent of citizen attachments to parties has undergone a long-term decline from a late nineteenth century high.¹² And again, the New Deal appears to have been a period during which the decline was arrested, even temporarily reversed. But again, the decline of party has reasserted itself in the 1970s.

Since 1952 the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan has conducted regular national election surveys. The data elicited in such studies give us a graphic picture of the state of party in the electorate (Table 3). As the 1960s wore on, the heretofore stable distribution of citizen party identifications began to change in the general direction of weakened attachments to the parties. Between 1960 and 1976, independents, broadly defined, increased from less than a quarter to more than a third of the voting-age population. Strong identifiers declined from slightly more than a third to about a quarter of the population.

As the strength and extent of citizen attachments to the parties declined, the influence of party on the voting decisions of the citizenry similarly declined. The percentage of the voting-age population that reports consistent support of the same party's presidential candidate dropped from more than two-thirds in 1952 to less than half in 1976. As Table 4 shows, the percentage of voters who report a congressional vote consistent with their party identification has declined from over 80 percent in the late 1950s to under 70 percent today. And as Table 5 shows, ticket-splitting, both at the national and subnational levels, has probably doubled since the time of the first Eisenhower election.

Indisputably, party in the electorate has declined in recent years. Why? To some extent the electoral decline results from the organizational decline. Few party organizations any longer have the tangible incentives to turn out the faithful and assure their loyalty. Candidates run independent campaigns and deemphasize their partisan ties whenever they see any short-term electoral gain in doing so. If party is increasingly less important in the nomination and election of candidates, it is not surprising that such diminished importance is reflected in the attitudes and behavior of the voter.

Certain long-term sociological and technological trends also appear to work against party in the electorate. The population is younger, and younger citizens

Table 3. Subjective Party Identification, 1960-1976 (in Percentages)

Party ID	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976
Strong Democrat	21	27	20	15	15
Weak Democrat	25	25	25	26	25
Independent Democrat	8	8	9	10	12
Independent	8	8	11	13	14
Independent Republican	7	6	9	11	10
Weak Republican	13	13	14	13	14
Strong Republican	14	11	10	10	9

Source: National Election Studies made available by the InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.

Table 4. Party-Line Votes in House Elections

Year	1956	1958	1960	1962	1964	1966
Percentage	82	84	80	83	79	76
Year	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978
Percentage	74	76	73	74	72	69

Source: National Election Studies made available by The InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.

traditionally are less attached to the parties than their elders. The population is more highly educated; fewer voters need some means of simplifying the choices they face in the political arena, and party, of course, has been the principal means of simplification. And the media revolution has vastly expanded the amount of information easily available to the citizenry. Candidates would have little incentive to operate campaigns independent of the parties if there were no means to apprise the citizenry of their independence. The media provide the means.

Finally, our present party system is an old one. For increasing numbers of citizens, party attachments based on the Great Depression seem lacking in relevance to the problems of the late twentieth century. Beginning with the racial issue in the 1960s, proceeding to the social issue of the 1970s, and to the energy, environment, and inflation issues of today, the parties have been rent by internal dissension. Sometimes they failed to take stands, at other times they took the wrong ones from the standpoint of the rank and file, and at most times they have failed to solve the new problems in any genuine sense. Since 1965 the parties have done little or nothing to earn the loyalties of modern Americans.

Party in Government

If the organizational capabilities of the parties have weakened, and their psychological ties to the voters have loosened, one would expect predictable consequences for the party in government. In particular, one would expect to see an increasing degree of split party control within and across the levels of American government. The evidence on this point is overwhelming.

At the state level, twenty-seven of the fifty governments were under divided party control after the 1978 election. In seventeen states a governor of one party opposed a legislature controlled by the other, and in ten others a bicameral legislature was split between the parties. By way of contrast, twenty years ago the number of states with divided party control was sixteen.

At the federal level the trend is similar. In 1953 only twelve states sent a senator of each party to Washington. The number increased to sixteen by 1961, to twenty-one by 1972, and stands at twenty-seven today. Of course, the senators in each state are elected at different times. But the same patterns emerge when we examine simultaneous elections. There is an increasing tendency for congressional districts to support a congressman of one party and the presiden-

Table 5. Trends in Ticket-Splitting, 1952-1976 (in Percentages)

	President/House	State/Local
1952	12	34
1956	16	42
1960	14	46
1964	15	42
1968	18	48
1972	30	54
1976	25	—

Source: National Election Studies made available by The InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.

tial candidate of the other (Table 6). At the turn of the century it was extremely rare for a congressional district to report a split result. But since that time the trend has been steadily upward. We may well be heading for a record in 1980 as a vulnerable Democratic president runs with 250-odd not-so-vulnerable Democratic congressmen.

Seemingly unsatisfied with the increasing tendencies of the voters to engage in ticket-splitting, we have added to the split of party in government by changing electoral rules in a manner that lessens the impact of national forces. For example, in 1920 thirty-five states elected their legislators, governors, and other state officials in presidential election years. In 1944 thirty-two states still did so. But in the past generation the trend has been toward isolation of state elections from national currents: as of 1970 only twenty states still held their elections concurrently with the national ones.¹³ This legal separation of the state and national electoral arenas helps to separate the electoral fates of party officeholders at different levels of government, and thereby lessens their common interest in a good party record.

The increased fragmentation of the party in government makes it more difficult for government officeholders to work together than in times past (not that it has ever been terribly easy). Voters meanwhile have a more difficult time attrib-

Table 6. Split Results, Congress and President

Year	1900	1908	1916	1924	1932	1940
Percentage of Districts	3	7	11	12	14	15
Year	1948	1956	1964	1972	1980	
Percentage of Districts	23	30	33	42	?	

Source: The 1900-1964 figures are from Walter Dean Burham, *Critical Elections and the Mainspring of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 109. The 1972 figures are from *Congressional Quarterly's* compilation of official election returns.

uting responsibility for government performance, and this only further fragments party control. The result is lessened collective responsibility in the system.

In recent years it has become a commonplace to bemoan the decline of party in government. National commentators nostalgically contrast the Senate under Lyndon Johnson with that under Robert Byrd. They deplore the cowardice and paralysis of a House of Representatives, supposedly controlled by a two-thirds Democratic majority under the most activist, partisan speaker since Sam Rayburn. And, of course, there are the unfavorable comparisons of Jimmy Carter to previous presidents—not only FDR and LBJ, but even Kennedy. Such observations may be descriptively accurate, but they are not very illuminating. It is not enough to call for more inspiring presidential leadership and to demand that the majority party in Congress show more readiness to bite the bullet. Our present national problems should be recognized as the outgrowths of the increasing separation of the presidential and congressional electoral arenas.

By now it is widely understood that senatorial races are in a class by themselves. The visibility of the office attracts the attention of the media as well as that of organized interest groups. Celebrities and plutocrats find the office attractive. Thus massive media campaigns and the politics of personality increasingly affect these races. Senate elections now are most notable for their idiosyncrasy, and consequentially for their growing volatility; correspondingly, such general forces as the president and the party are less influential in senatorial voting today than previously.

What is less often recognized is that House elections have grown increasingly idiosyncratic as well. I have already discussed the declining importance of party identification in House voting and the increasing number of split results at the district level. These trends are both cause and consequence of incumbent efforts to insulate themselves from the electoral effects of national conditions. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the vote garnered by the Democratic candidate in incumbent-contested districts in 1948 and 1972.¹⁴ Evidently, a massive change took place in the past generation. In 1948 most congressional districts were clustered around the 50-percent mark (an even split between the parties); most districts now are clustered away from the point of equal division. Two obvious questions arise: Why has the change occurred, and does it matter?

Taking the second question first, Figure 1 suggests a bleak future for such electoral phenomena as presidential coattails and midterm referenda on presidential performance. Consider a swing of 5 percent in the congressional vote owing to a particularly attractive (or repulsive) presidential candidate or an especially poor performance by a president. In the world represented by the 1948 diagram, such a swing has major consequences: it shifts a large proportion of districts across the 50-percent mark. The shift provides a new president with a "mandate" in an on-year election and constitutes a strong "message" to the president in an off-year election. In the world represented by the 1972 diagram, however, the hypothesized 5-percent shift has little effect: few seats are close enough to the tipping point to shift parties under the hypothesized swing. The president's victory is termed a "personal" victory by the media, or the midterm result is interpreted as a reflection of personal and local concerns rather than national ones.

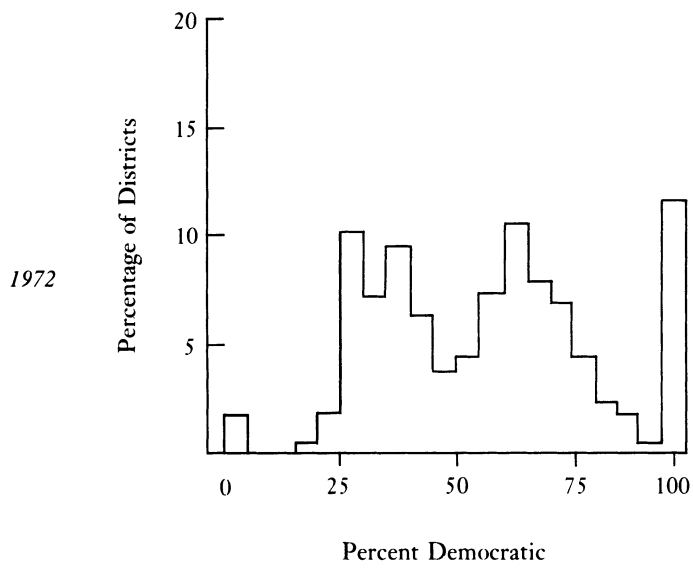
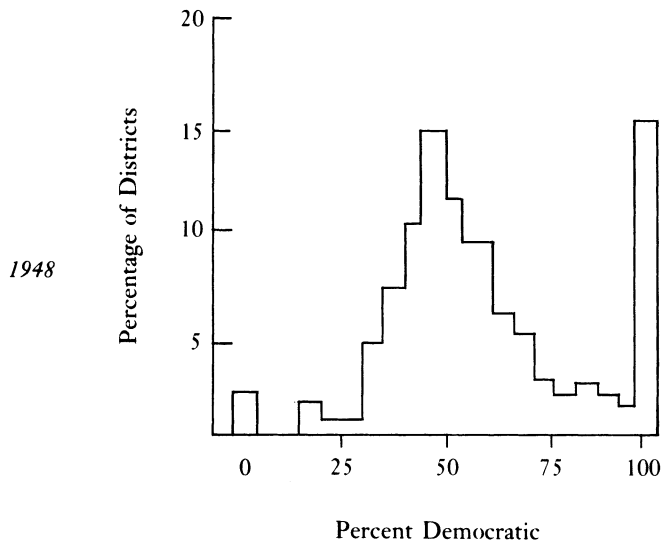


Figure 1. Congressional Vote in Districts with Incumbents Running

Why has the distribution of the congressional voting results changed over time? Elsewhere I have argued that much of the transformation results from a temporal change in the basis of congressional voting.¹⁵ We have seen that party influence in House voting has lessened. And, judging by the number of Democrats successfully hanging onto traditional Republican districts, programmatic and ideological influences on House voting probably have declined as well. What has taken up the slack left by the weakening of the traditional determinants of congressional voting? It appears that a variety of personal and local influences now play a major role in citizen evaluations of their representatives.¹⁶ Along with the expansion of the federal presence in American life, the traditional role of the congressman as an all-purpose ombudsman has greatly expanded. Tens of millions of citizens now are directly affected by federal decisions. Myriad programs provide opportunities to profit from government largesse, and myriad regulations impose costs and/or constraints on citizen activities. And, whether seeking to gain profit or avoid costs, citizens seek the aid of their congressmen. When a court imposes a desegregation plan on an urban school board, the congressional offices immediately are contacted for aid in safeguarding existing sources of funding and in determining eligibility for new ones. When a major employer announces plans to quit an area, the congressional offices immediately are contacted to explore possibilities for using federal programs to persuade the employer to reconsider. Contractors appreciate a good congressional word with DoD procurement officers. Local artistic groups cannot survive without NEA funding. And, of course, there are the major individual programs such as social security and veterans' benefits that create a steady demand for congressional information and aid services. Such activities are nonpartisan, nonideological, and, most important, noncontroversial. Moreover, the contribution of the congressman in the realm of district service appears considerably greater than the impact of his or her single vote on major national issues. Constituents respond rationally to this modern state of affairs by weighing non-programmatic constituency service heavily when casting their congressional votes. And this emphasis on the part of constituents provides the means for incumbents to solidify their hold on the office. Even if elected by a narrow margin, diligent service activities enable a congressman to neutralize or even convert a portion of those who would otherwise oppose him on policy or ideological grounds. Emphasis on local, nonpartisan factors in congressional voting enables the modern congressman to withstand national swings, whereas yesterday's uninsulated congressmen were more dependent on preventing the occurrence of the swings.

Actually, the insulation of the modern congressman from national forces is even more complete than the preceding discussion suggests. Not only are few representatives so vulnerable that a reaction to a presidential candidate or his performance would turn them out of office, but such reactions themselves are less likely to find a reflection in the congressional voting. Several years ago Professor Edward Tufte formulated an elegant statistical model that predicts the magnitude of the in-party's losses in midterm elections as a function of two variables, the popularity of the incumbent president and the state of the national economy as measured by changes in real income.¹⁷ For most of the post-World

War II period the model predicts quite accurately. But in recent years the predictions have begun to go awry; specifically, in 1974 and 1978 the model significantly overpredicts the losses of the in-party.¹⁸ The reason is quite apparent. As congressmen increasingly build personal organizations (largely with taxpayer-provided offices, staff, and communications resources) and base their campaigns on local issues and their personal record of service to the district, national conditions and the performance of the party leader have less and less of an impact on House races. In fact, analysis of the 1978 Center for Political Studies Congressional Election Study reveals that evaluations of President Carter's performance had no effect on the electoral fortunes of Democratic incumbents, and citizen evaluations of government's handling of the national economy had only the barest trace of an impact.¹⁹

The effects of the insulation of congressional incumbents have begun to show up in a systematic way in the governmental arena. Table 7 presents data on presidential success and presidential support in Congress for the first two years of the administrations of our last five elected presidents. As is evident, Carter ('77-78) was less successful than earlier presidents who enjoyed a Congress controlled by their own party; he was only as successful as Nixon, who faced an opposition Congress. Moreover, in the House, Carter has done relatively poorly in gaining the support of his own party. It is noteworthy that John F. Kennedy ('61-62) earned a significantly higher level of support from a congressional party that was nearly half Southern, whereas Carter enjoyed a majority in which the regional split was much less severe.²⁰

Of course, it is possible to discount the preceding argument as an unjustified generalization of a unique situation—a particularly inept president, a Congress full of prima donnas still flexing their post-Watergate muscles, and so on. But I think not. The withering away of the party organizations and the weakening of party in the electorate have begun to show up as disarray in the party in government. As the electoral fates of congressmen and the president have diverged, their incentives to cooperate have diverged as well. Congressmen have little personal incentive to bear any risk in their president's behalf, since they no longer expect to gain much from his successes or suffer much from his failures. Only those who personally agree with the president's program and/or those who

Table 7. Recent Trends in Congressional Support of the Executive (in Percentages)

Congress	Year	Presidential Success	Presidential Support within His Party	
			House	Senate
83rd	'53-54	83	72	72
87th	'61-62	83	73	64
89th	'65-66	87	69	61
91st	'69-70	76	62	63
95th	'77-78	77	61	67

Source: *Congressional Quarterly Almanacs*

find that program well suited for their particular district support the president. And there are not enough of these to construct the coalitions necessary for action on the major issues now facing the country. By holding only the president responsible for national conditions, the electorate enables officialdom as a whole to escape responsibility. This situation lies at the root of many of the problems that now plague American public life.

Some Consequences of the Decline of Collective Responsibility

The weakening of party has contributed directly to the severity of several of the important problems the nation faces. For some of these, such as the government's inability to deal with inflation and energy, the connections are obvious. But for other problems, such as the growing importance of single-issue politics and the growing alienation of the American citizenry, the connections are more subtle.

Immobilism

As the electoral interdependence of the party in government declines, its ability to act also declines. If responsibility can be shifted to another level or to another officeholder, there is less incentive to stick one's own neck out in an attempt to solve a given problem. Leadership becomes more difficult, the ever-present bias toward the short-term solution becomes more pronounced, and the possibility of solving any given problem lessens.

Consider the two critical problems facing the country today, energy and inflation. Major energy problems were forecast years ago, the 1973 embargo underlined the dangers, and yet what passes for our national energy policy is still only a weak set of jerry-built compromises achieved at the expense of years of political infighting. The related inflation problem has festered for more than a decade, and our current president is on his fourth anti-inflation plan, a set of proposals widely regarded as yet another instance of too little, too late. The failures of policy-making in these areas are easy to identify and explain. A potential problem is identified, and actions that might head it off are proposed "for discussion." But the problem lies in the future, while the solutions impose costs in the present. So politicians dismiss the solutions as unfeasible and act as though the problem will go away. When it doesn't, popular concern increases. The president, in particular, feels compelled to act—he will be held responsible, both at election time and in the judgment of history. But congressmen expect to bear much less responsibility; moreover, the representatives face an election in less than two years, whereas the president can wait at least four (longer for the lame duck) for the results of his policy to become evident. Congressmen, logically enough, rebel. They denounce every proposed initiative as unfair, which simply means that it imposes costs on their constituents, whereas they prefer the costs to fall on everyone else's constituents. At first, no policy will be adopted; later, as pressure builds, Congress adopts a weak and ineffectual policy for symbolic purposes. Then, as the problem continues to worsen, congressmen join with the press and the public and attack the president for failures of leadership.

The preceding scenario is simplified, to be sure, but largely accurate, and in my opinion, rather disgusting. What makes it possible is the electoral fragmentation produced by the decline of party. Members of Congress are aware that national problems arising from inaction will have little political impact on them, and that the president's failures in dealing with those problems will have similarly little impact. Responsibility for inflation and energy problems? Don't look at congressmen.

In 1958 the Fourth Republic of France collapsed after years of immobilism. The features of congressional policy-making just discussed were carried to their logical extremes in that Parliamentary regime. According to contemporary observers, the basic principle of the French Deputy was to avoid responsibility.²¹ To achieve that goal the deputies followed subsidiary rules, the most important of which was delay. Action would take place only when crisis removed any possible alternative to action (and most of the alternative actions as well). A slogan of the time was "Those who crawl do not fall."

No one seriously believes that the American constitutional order is in danger of collapse (and certainly we have no de Gaulle waiting in the wings). But political inability to take actions that entail short-run costs ordinarily will result in much higher costs in the long run—we cannot continually depend on the technological fix. So the present American immobilism cannot be dismissed lightly. The sad thing is that the American people appear to understand the depth of our present problems and, at least in principle, appear prepared to sacrifice in furtherance of the long-run good. But they will not have an opportunity to choose between two or more such long-term plans. Although both parties promise tough, equitable policies, in the present state of our politics, neither can deliver.

Single-Issue Politics

In recent years both political analysts and politicians have decried the increased importance of single-issue groups in American politics. Some in fact would claim that the present immobilism in our politics owes more to the rise of single-issue groups than to the decline of party. A little thought, however, should reveal that the two trends are connected. Is single-issue politics a recent phenomenon? The contention is doubtful; such groups have always been active participants in American politics. The gun lobby already was a classic example at the time of President Kennedy's assassination. And however impressive the antiabortionists appear today, remember the temperance movement, which succeeded in getting its constitutional amendment. American history contains numerous forerunners of today's groups, from anti-Masons to abolitionists to the Klan—singularity of purpose is by no means a modern phenomenon. Why, then, do we hear all the contemporary hoopla about single-issue groups? Probably because politicians fear them now more than before and thus allow them to play a larger role in our politics. Why should this be so? Simply because the parties are too weak to protect their members and thus to contain single-issue politics.

In earlier times single-issue groups were under greater pressures to reach accommodations with the parties. After all, the parties nominated candidates,

financed candidates, worked for candidates, and, perhaps most important, party voting protected candidates. When a contemporary single-issue group threatens to "get" an officeholder, the threat must be taken seriously. The group can go into his district, recruit a primary or general election challenger, or both, and bankroll that candidate. Even if the sentiment espoused by the group is not the majority sentiment of the district, few officeholders relish the thought of a strong, well-financed opponent. Things were different when strong parties existed. Party leaders controlled the nomination process and would fight to maintain that control. An outside challenge would merely serve to galvanize the party into action to protect its prerogatives. Only if a single-issue group represented the dominant sentiment in a given area could it count on controlling the party organization itself, and thereby electoral politics in that area.

Not only did the party organization have greater ability to resist single-issue pressures at the electoral level, but the party in government had greater ability to control the agenda, and thereby contain single-issue pressures at the policy-making level. Today we seem condemned to go through an annual agony over federal abortion funding. There is little doubt that politicians on both sides would prefer to reach some reasonable compromise at the committee level and settle the issue. But in today's decentralized Congress there is no way to put the lid on. In contrast, historians tell us that in the late nineteenth century a large portion of the Republican constituency was far less interested in the tariff and other questions of national economic development than in whether German immigrants should be permitted to teach their native language in their local schools, and whether Catholics and "liturgical Protestants" should be permitted to consume alcohol.²² Interestingly, however, the national agenda of the period is devoid of such issues. And when they do show up on the state level, the exceptions prove the rule; they produce party splits and striking defeats for the party that allowed them to surface.²³

One can cite more recent examples as well. Prior to 1970 popular commentators frequently criticized the autocratic antimajoritarian behavior of congressional committee chairmen in general, and of the entire Rules Committee in particular. It is certainly true that the seniority leadership killed many bills the rank and file might have passed if left to their own devices. But congressional scholars were always aware as well that the seniority leadership buried many bills that the rank and file wanted buried but lacked the political courage to bury themselves. In 1961, for example, the House Rules Committee was roundly condemned for killing a major federal aid to education bill over the question of extension of that aid to parochial schools. Contemporary accounts, however, suggest that congressmen regarded the action of the Rules Committee as a public service.²⁴ Of course, control of the agenda is a double-edged sword (a point we return to below), but today commentators on single-issue groups clearly are concerned with too little control rather than too much.

In sum, a strong party that is held accountable for the government of a nation-state has both the ability and the incentive to contain particularistic pressures. It controls nominations, elections, and the agenda, and it collectively realizes that small minorities are small minorities no matter how intense they are. But as the parties decline they lose control over nominations and campaigns, they lose the loyalty of the voters, and they lose control of the agenda.

Party officeholders cease to be held collectively accountable for party performance, but they become individually exposed to the political pressure of myriad interest groups. The decline of party permits interest groups to wield greater influence, their success encourages the formation of still more interest groups, politics becomes increasingly fragmented, and collective responsibility becomes still more elusive.

Popular Alienation from Government

For at least a decade political analysts have pondered the significance of survey data indicative of a steady increase in the alienation of the American public from the political process. Table 8 presents some representative data: two-thirds of the American public feel the government is run for the benefit of big interests rather than for the people as a whole, three-quarters believe that government officials waste a lot of tax money, and half flatly agree with the statement that government officials are basically incompetent. The American public is in a nasty mood, a cynical, distrusting, and resentful mood. The question is, Why?

Specific events and personalities clearly have some effect: we see pronounced "Watergate effects" between 1972 and 1976. But the trends clearly began much earlier. Indeed, the first political science studies analyzing the trends were based on data no later than 1972.²⁵ At the other extreme it also appears that the American data are only the strongest manifestation of a pattern evident in many democracies, perhaps for reasons common to all countries in the present era, perhaps not. I do think it probable, however, that the trends thus far discussed bear some relation to the popular mood in the United States.

If the same national problems not only persist but worsen while ever-greater amounts of revenue are directed at them, why shouldn't the typical citizen conclude that most of the money must be wasted by incompetent officials? If narrowly based interest groups increasingly affect our politics, why shouldn't citizens increasingly conclude that the interests run the government? For fifteen years the citizenry has listened to a steady stream of promises but has seen very little in the way of follow-through. An increasing proportion of the electorate

Table 8. Recent Trends in Political Alienation and Distrust (in Percentages)

	Government Run for Few Big Interests	Government Officials Waste "A Lot"	Government Officials Don't Know What They're Doing
1964	29	46	27
1968	39	57	36
1972	45	56	34
1976	66	74	49
1978	68	77	50

Source: National Election Studies made available by The InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.

does not believe that elections make a difference, a fact that largely explains the much-discussed post-1960 decline in voting turnout.²⁶

Continued public disillusionment with the political process poses several real dangers. For one thing, disillusionment begets further disillusionment. Leadership becomes more difficult if citizens do not trust their leaders and will not give them the benefit of a doubt. Policy failure becomes more likely if citizens expect the policy to fail. Waste increases and government competence decreases as citizen disrespect for politics encourages a lesser breed of person to make careers in government. And "government by a few big interests" becomes more than a cliché if citizens increasingly decide the cliché is true and cease participating for that reason.

Finally, there is the real danger that continued disappointment with particular government officials ultimately metamorphoses into disillusionment with government *per se*. Increasing numbers of citizens believe that government is not simply overextended but perhaps incapable of any further bettering of the world. Yes, government is overextended, inefficiency is pervasive, and ineffectiveness is all too common. But government is one of the few instruments of collective action we have, and even those committed to selective pruning of government programs cannot blithely allow the concept of an activist government to fall into disrepute.

The concept of democracy does not submit to precise definition, a claim supported by the existence of numerous nonidentical definitions. To most people democracy embodies a number of valued qualities. Unfortunately, there is no reason to believe that all such valued qualities are mutually compatible. At the least, maximizing the attainment of one quality may require accepting middling levels of another.

Recent American political thought has emphasized government *of* the people and *by* the people. Attempts have been made to insure that all preferences receive a hearing, especially through direct expression of those preferences, but if not, at least through faithful representation. Citizen *participation* is the reigning value, and arrangements that foster widespread participation are much in favor.

Of late, however, some political commentators have begun to wonder whether contemporary thought places sufficient emphasis on government *for* the people. In stressing participation have we lost sight of *accountability*? Surely, we should be as concerned with what government produces as with how many participate. What good is participation if the citizenry is unable to determine who merits their support?²⁷

Participation and responsibility are not logically incompatible, but there is a degree of tension between the two, and the quest for either may be carried to extremes. Participation maximizers find themselves involved with quotas and virtual representation schemes, while responsibility maximizers can find themselves with a closed shop under boss rule.²⁸ Moreover, both qualities can weaken the democracy they supposedly underpin. Unfettered participation produces Hyde Amendments and immobilism. Responsible parties can use agenda power to thwart democratic decision—for more than a century the Democratic party

used what control it had to suppress the racial issue. Neither participation nor responsibility should be pursued at the expense of all other values, but that is what has happened with participation over the course of the past two decades, and we now reap the consequences in our politics.

In 1970 journalist David Broder wrote:

what we have is a society in which discontent, disbelief, cynicism and political inertia characterize the public mood; a country whose economy suffers from severe dislocations, whose currency is endangered, where unemployment and inflation coexist, where increasing numbers of people and even giant enterprises live on the public dole; a country whose two races continue to withdraw from each other in growing physical and social isolation; a country whose major public institutions command steadily less allegiance from its citizens; whose education, transportation, law enforcement, health and sanitation systems fall far short of filling their functions; a country whose largest city is close to being ungovernable and uninhabitable; and a country still far from reconciling its international responsibilities with its unmet domestic needs.

We are in trouble.²⁹

Broder is not a Cassandra, and he was writing before FECA, before the OPEC embargo, before Watergate, and before Jimmy Carter. If he was correct that we were in trouble then, what about now?

The depressing thing is that no rays of light shine through the dark clouds. The trends that underlie the decline of parties continue unabated, and the kinds of structural reforms that might override those trends are too sweeping and/or outlandish to stand any chance of adoption.³⁰ Through a complex mixture of accident and intention we have constructed for ourselves a system that articulates interests superbly but aggregates them poorly. We hold our politicians individually accountable for the proposals they advocate, but less so for the adoption of those proposals, and not at all for overseeing the implementation of those proposals and the evaluation of their results. In contemporary America officials do not govern, they merely posture.

REFERENCES

My thinking on the matters discussed in this essay has benefitted from the critical commentary of Lawrence Joseph and Robert Salisbury.

¹This may sound cynical, but it is a standard assumption in American democratic theory. Certainly the Founders believed that the government should not depend on the nobility of heart of officialdom in order to operate properly.

²This argument was expounded at the turn of the century by writers such as Woodrow Wilson and A. Lawrence Lowell. It enjoyed a resurgence at mid-century in the thinking of scholars such as E. E. Schattschneider. For a thorough exegesis of the party responsibility argument, see Austin Ranney, *The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962).

³During the postwar period the national government has experienced divided party control about half the time. In the preceding half century there were only six years of divided control.

⁴At this point skeptics invariably ask, "What about Warren G. Harding?" The statement in the text is meant to express a tendency. Certainly, in the first sixty years of this century we did not see a string of candidates comparable to the products of the amateur politics of the past fourteen years (Goldwater, McGovern, Carter, Reagan).

⁵See Gerald Pomper, "The Decline of the Party in American Elections," *Political Science Quarterly*, 92 (1977): 21-41; John Kessel, *Presidential Campaign Politics: Coalition Strategies and Citizen Responses* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey, 1980), ch. 10; Austin Ranney, "The Political Parties: Reform and Decline," in Anthony King (ed.), *The New American Political System* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), pp. 213-47. Both Kessel and Pomper have discussed the increased

importance of the national party organizations in terms of maintenance of continuing operations, imposition of national rules and standards on the local parties, and so on. I believe with Ranney, however, that, considering all levels of the party together, there has been a decline in organizational strength even as the national party apparatuses have grown more influential.

⁶Though federal employment increased considerably during the New Deal era, the proportion covered by civil service declined. Thus the erosion of the patronage system was temporarily halted. In addition, scholars have documented the political basis of New Deal spending and program decisions. See Gavin Wright, "The Political Economy of New Deal Spending: An Econometric Analysis," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 56 (1974): 30-38.

⁷Jeanne Kirkpatrick, *The New Presidential Elite* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation and Twentieth Century Fund, 1976).

⁸Ranney, "The Political Parties," p. 233.

⁹Michael Malbin (ed.), *Parties, Interest Groups, and Campaign Finance Laws* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), pt. 3.

¹⁰Angus Campbell, et al., *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960), chs. 6, 7.

¹¹See Morris Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming), ch. 5.

¹²For a discussion, see Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970).

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁴These diagrams are representative of the pre-1950 and post-1970 periods. To see how the earlier world gradually changed to the later, examine the series of diagrams in David Mayhew, "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," *Polity*, 6 (1974): 295-317.

¹⁵See Morris Fiorina, *Congress—Keystone of the Washington Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

¹⁶Thomas Mann, *Unsafe at Any Margin* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1978).

¹⁷Edward Tufte, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review*, 69 (1975): 812-26.

¹⁸Gary Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *The Structure of Choice*, forthcoming, ch. 5.

¹⁹Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting*, ch. 10.

²⁰This compositional change in the Democratic party has a lot to do with the recent increase in party cohesion in Congress, which some might regard as evidence inconsistent with the argument in the text. Kennedy faced a congressional party that was almost half Southern; Carter faces one only about a quarter Southern. *Ceteris paribus*, this fact should have produced significantly higher levels of party cohesion and presidential support. But party cohesion has only marginally increased, and, as shown in the text, party support for its nominal leader has declined. I suspect that the increase in party cohesion also stems partly from the explosion in roll-call votes. Under the electronic voting system it is now common to record votes on relatively minor legislation. If the Republicans perfunctorily object on a proportion of these, party votes would result, and the overall party cohesion figures would be inflated by such relatively unimportant votes.

²¹Nathan Leites, *On the Game of Politics in France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

²²Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York: Free Press, 1970), ch. 2.

²³*Ibid.*, chs. 3, 4.

²⁴James Sundquist, *Politics and Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1968), pp.

²⁵Arthur Miller, "Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974): 951-72; Jack Citrin, "The Political Relevance of Trust in Government," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974): 973-88.

²⁶John Ferejohn and Morris Fiorina, "The Decline in Turnout in Presidential Elections," paper presented at the Conference on Voter Turnout, San Diego, 1979.

²⁷There is, of course, a school of thought, dating back at least to John Stuart Mill, that holds that participation is a good in itself. While I am prepared to concede that self-expression is nice, I strongly object to making it the *raison d'être* of democratic politics.

²⁸S. E. Finer, *The Changing British Party System, 1945-1979* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1980).

²⁹*The Party's Over* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. xxv.

³⁰For example, party cohesion would no doubt be strengthened by revising existing statutes to prevent split-ticket voting and to permit campaign contributions only to parties. At the constitutional level, giving the president the power of dissolution and replacing the single-member district system with proportional representation would probably unify the party in government much more than at present. Obviously, changes such as these are not only highly improbable but also exceedingly risky, since we cannot accurately predict the unintended consequences that surely would accompany them.