

PARTY GOVERNMENT, LABOR, AND THE LEFT

Taylor Dark
California State University, Los Angeles

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The election of 2000 brought forth a partisan configuration not seen in national politics since the 1950s: simultaneous Republican party control of the House, Senate, and presidency. This configuration was confirmed by the electorate in 2002 and 2004, leading to a sustained period of Republican party power at the federal level. Not only did Republicans gain majorities in Congress, they soon revealed a level of party unity and acquiescence to presidential leadership that many considered unprecedented in American politics.¹ This phenomenon was, naturally enough, quite startling for American liberals, who found themselves largely shut out of the federal policymaking process during the first six years of the George W. Bush presidency. This exclusion from power, and the fear that it might extend indefinitely into the future, prompted a rethinking on the part of liberal intellectuals about the appropriate role for political parties in the American political system. Long having defended strong political parties as a crucial element of majority rule, many liberals now came to fear political parties as machines that could generate far-right policies without any corresponding level of popular support. Despairing of ever regaining electoral majorities in the near future, and chastened by what they saw as the untrammelled rule exercised by the contemporary Republican party, liberal intellectuals found themselves returning to old doctrines celebrating the virtues of deliberation, consensus, bipartisanship, and the separation of powers.

¹For strong statements of this view, see Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing and How to Get It Back on Track* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Ronald Brownstein, *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

Visions of “responsible party government” by a cohesive, disciplined, and programmatic political party were now put aside as dangerous and foolhardy.

The key claim of liberal critics (and their allies in the political science discipline) is that a form of responsible party government was put in place during the Bush administration, and that it had demonstrably bad results. Through the use of rigid party discipline and various forms of concealment and deception, Republicans were able to shift public policy far to the right, and quite distant from the moderate preferences of the median voter who, democratic theory would suggest, ought to be the kingmaker in the policymaking process. For the liberal critics, the capacity of the Republican party to generate these “off-center” policy outcomes suggests that the traditional liberal support for strong parties is misguided – strong parties are just too dangerous. The body of thought that defended party government, summarized most famously in the 1950 report of the American Political Science Association’s Committee on Political Parties, aptly entitled “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” must now be rejected. “Be careful what you wish for,” these chastened liberals now tell us – you might not like it if you get it.²

The aim of this paper is to critique this turn in liberal thought (and, to some extent, in mainstream political science). I will argue that the new liberal attack on the doctrine of responsible party government is faulty in its empirical claims and misguided in its assessment of the strategic potential of political parties to achieve liberal ends. Little has occurred in the last ten years that

²See Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) and Daryl Levinson and Richard Pildes, “Separation of Parties, Not Powers,” *Harvard Law Review* (May 2006).

should lead a reasonable liberal (or, for that matter, any believer in good government) to forsake the idea of responsible party government. In truth, the liberal abandonment of the idea of responsible party government (RPG) seems to have been motivated by fear – a panicked response to the possibility, seemingly quite realistic in the aftermath of the 2004 election, that the Republicans would rule for many years to come and oversee a right-wing shift in public policy that might require generations to reverse. In their anxiety-driven reaction to the successive confirmations of GOP rule by the electorate, these liberals too quickly abandoned one of the best tools ever created for the advancement of liberal ends; namely, the disciplined political party.

The Old Liberal Arguments for Responsible Party Government

There can be little doubt that the arguments for RPG put forth by intellectuals in the 20th century were deeply tied to what we would call a liberal vision of the proper role of the state in society. I am using the term liberal here in the contemporary American sense of someone who endorses the creation of a universalistic welfare state intended to reduce risk and advance economic and social equality – essentially, a liberal in the mode of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, or Lyndon Johnson. These kind of New Deal (or social democratic) liberals have traditionally embraced the idea of RPG, seeing it as the best means for mobilizing the individual votes of workers and citizens on behalf of a collective project of social change. Their political aspirations thoroughly influenced the RPG literature of the middle-twentieth century, which while often presented in neutral social scientific terms is better seen as a statement of the political

strategy of New Deal liberals confronting the reality of a political system that seemed to generate many unnecessary barriers to their success.³

To appreciate these connections, a brief review of the model of RPG as put forth by the APSA report is necessary. The report began with a diagnosis: American politics was seriously flawed. The problem lay with the political parties. The parties were organizationally retarded and archaic, having failed to keep up with changes in American society and government. While the economy and government were becoming more centralized and nationalized, the parties lagged as “loose associations of state and local organizations, with very little national machinery and very little national cohesion.”⁴ The parties were incapable of enunciating a clear policy program, or carrying one out once in office. This was an especially “grave” problem in the modern era, the report asserted, because it was “no longer safe for the nation to deal piecemeal with issues that can

³See the history of the report by Paul David, “The APSA Committee on Political Parties: Some Reconsiderations of its Work and Significance,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 21, Iss. 2 (Spring, 1992), (available online at: <http://www.apsanet.org/~pop/APSA1950/David1992.html>) and comments by Ralph M. Goldman (available online at: <http://www.apsanet.org/~pop/APSA1950/apsa2000goldman.pdf>). Goldman recalls that Bertram Gross, a committee staff member who wrote much of the report, told him that the “common motivation” of the committee staff “was to keep the New Deal legislation of the day in place and growing. While the report commented on almost every facet of the party system, its recommendations were intended to strengthen the New Deal wing of the Democratic Party at that time.” See also John Kenneth White and Jerome M. Mileur, “In the Spirit of Their Times: ‘Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System’ and Party Politics,” in John C. Green and Paul S. Herrnson, eds., *Responsible Partisanship: The Evolution of American Political Parties Since 1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

⁴Report of the Committee on Political Parties, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” *American Political Science Review* 3 (1950), p. v.

be disposed of only on the basis of coherent programs.”⁵ Since the parties lacked programmatic coherence, they also failed to provide the electorate with “a proper range of choice between alternatives of action.”⁶ What the parties needed to do was to set out a clear program, run campaigns based upon it, and then implement it once in office. This approach would foster the creation of “responsible” parties, i.e. parties that both party members and the general public could hold responsible for fulfilling their promises and effectively guiding the nation. Since responsibility for public policy would be very clear, so would accountability for success or failure; appropriate rewards or punishments could be easily imposed by the electorate.

To make this vision of programmatic partisanship a reality, the report proposed a major organizational renovation of American political parties. It was crucial that a platform be written that should be “the end product of a long search for a working agreement within the party.”⁷ To achieve this, old party institutions would have to be revamped, and new ones created. The national conventions would have to meet more often, at least biennially, and be considerably smaller so that they could carry out their function as “the principal representative and deliberative organ of the party.”⁸ The work of the conventions would be aided by the creation of a wholly new body called the “Party Council.” The Council would be composed of fifty party members drawn from the national committee, the congressional party organizations, state parties, the party’s state

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 1.

⁷Ibid., p. 4.

⁸Ibid., p. 5.

governors, various recognized party groups (such as the Young Democrats and Young Republicans), and finally the president and vice-president (or the most recent party nominees). The council would be a powerful integrative institution, uniting party members in the executive and legislative branches of the federal government and from the states in a single organization that would have the power to draft and interpret the platform, “settle the larger problems of party management,” “make recommendations” about congressional candidates, and “screen” presidential candidates. Reflecting the report’s concern with creating nationally cohesive parties, the Council would also be granted the power to “make recommendations” to other party organs about the “problem” of state and local party organizations that engaged in “conspicuous departures from general party decisions.”⁹ The council could also select a smaller group of advisers from within its own ranks that could serve as a “party cabinet,” somewhat similar to the shadow cabinet found in some parliamentary systems. The capabilities of the Council, National Committee, and National Convention would all be enhanced by the creation of a well-funded national headquarters that could engage in research and assist and coordinate national and congressional campaigns.

On Capitol Hill, the report advocated a “tightening up” of the congressional parties, with stronger and more centralized parties based on binding caucus decisions to carry out the party’s “principles and program.”¹⁰ Committee chairs would be expected to carry out the commitments of their party’s platform, and would not be selected unless they promised to do so (implying a clear

⁹Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 8.

diminution in the role of seniority).¹¹ All these changes at the top of the political system would be buttressed by a “new concept of party membership” based on dues-paying members drawn to the party on the basis of ideas, values, and policies – not personalities and patronage.

The clear intention of the committee was to create a vastly more majoritarian and streamlined policymaking process at the federal level. While it is common to acknowledge the committee’s interest in creating more distinct and programmatic parties organized along liberal and conservative lines, the full magnitude of the committee’s aspirations for American politics are less often noted. Take the filibuster, for example, which has become such a prominent feature of contemporary senatorial politics. The report was unambiguous: “The best rule is one that provides for *majority* cloture on *all* matters before the Senate.”¹² Take the electoral college, which has also been of notable significance in our recent politics: the report advocates majoritarian changes to give “all sections of the country a real voice in electing the President.”¹³ Take the problem of divided party government initiated in mid-term elections, as well as the treadmill-like fixation of members of the House of Representatives on fundraising for the next election: “It appears desirable to lengthen the term of Representatives to four years” and desirable “for a national body to assume more responsibility in the field of party finance.”¹⁴ Take the problem of barriers to voting: the

¹¹Ibid., p. 8-9.

¹²Ibid., p. 9, emphasis added.

¹³Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 11.

report advocates a national election day holiday, weekend voting, extension of voting hours, shorter ballots, and easier registration.

All these reforms were justified as essential in the age of big government: “The reasons for the growing emphasis on public policy in party politics are to be found, above all, in the very operations of modern government.”¹⁵ The committee repeatedly referred to the need for “more effective formulation of general policies and programs and for better integration of all of the far-flung activities of modern government.”¹⁶ The equation was simple: modern government requires coordination and planning at a national level, and parties must be modernized to help provide it. These views were also expressed by E.E. Schattschneider in his work *Party Government*, another key statement of mid-century RPG theory. “The function of planning, of integration, and over-all management of public affairs for the protection of the great interests of the nation can be handled only by a strong national party leadership supported by a well-mobilized majority,” Schattschneider wrote.¹⁷ At the end of his treatise, he concluded that “party government (party centralization) is the most practicable and feasible solution of the problem of organizing American democracy.”¹⁸ He continued: “In the new situation in which they find themselves, the American people need a government which is something more than a punching bag for every special and local interest in the

¹⁵Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁷E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2004 edition), p. 208.

¹⁸Ibid, p. 207.

nation.”¹⁹ In a more popular work, *The Struggle for Party Government*, Schattschneider asserted: “As a nation we have had little opportunity to prepare ourselves for the realization that it is now necessary for the government to act as it has never acted before.”²⁰ If all this sounds a bit like a brief for a government capable of national economic planning and social democracy, the affinity was not unintentional, and has been remarked upon by numerous scholars.²¹

Liberals also realized that the creation of more programmatic parties could contribute to a realignment of American politics along *class lines*. As usual, Schattschneider was among the most perceptive. He noted that “it is deeply characteristic of American politics...that neither the class system of alignments nor the sectional alignment has ever been made the sole objective of party strategy but that the alignments formed have been partly sectional, partly class, and partly something else.”²² The focus on sectionalism and the lack of class orientation were in part caused by the decentralization of the parties, as parties of this character encouraged politicians to focus on *local* issues as the safest means for reelection. “In view of the fact that they are interested in state

¹⁹Ibid., p. 209.

²⁰Schattschneider, *The Struggle for Party Government* (University of Maryland,) p. 1.

²¹See Everett Carl Ladd (1987), “Party Reform and the Public Interest,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 102: 355-369; Everett Carl Ladd, “Political Parties, ‘Reform,’ and American Democracy,” in John Kenneth White and Jerome M. Mileur, eds., *Challenges to Party Government* (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1992); Evron M. Kirkpatrick, “‘Toward A More Responsible Two-Party System’” *Political Science, Policy Science, or Pseudo-Science?*” *American Political Science Review*, (1971) Vol. 65: 965-990; James Piereson, “Party Government,” *The Political Science Reviewer* (Fall 1982); and Sidney A. Pearson, Jr., “Introduction: E.E. Schattschneider and the Quarrel Over Parties in American Democracy,” in E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2004 [orig. 1942]).

²²Schattschneider, *Party Government*, p. 111.

and local elections as well as national elections, politicians are apt to conclude that *the sectional appeal is safer and easier than the class appeal.*²³ Necessarily, a move towards class-oriented politics would involve “a change from a decentralized form of party organization to a centralized type of organization.”²⁴ And it was centralization that Schattschneider specifically endorsed as the solution to America’s political travails.

The APSA report expected, in fact, that stronger parties would be supported by the labor movement. In general, the committee predicted that “large-membership organizations with wise leadership will generally support the turn toward more responsible parties.”²⁵ Narrow special interest groups might feel threatened by stronger parties, but the “broader the base and the more general the interests of the group, the more likely is the group to be favorable to party responsibility.”²⁶ On this basis, the report suggested that centralized organizations of both labor and business would fit well into the new party system the authors envisioned. The specific effect of national labor union organization, the report suggested, would be to advance a nationalization of issues and alignments that was conducive to the long-run development of more ideologically coherent, issue-based parties. The report noted that the “entry of organized labor upon the political scene has in turn impelled antagonistic special interests to coalesce in closer political

²³Ibid., p. 121, emphasis added.

²⁴Ibid., p. 118.

²⁵*Toward a More Responsible Two Party System*, p. 13.

²⁶Ibid., p. 86.

alignments.”²⁷ The synergistic interplay of stronger labor organization and stronger party organization would centralize parties and encourage the organization of politics along class lines.

Conservative critics were entirely aware that a more disciplined and ideological party system would be likely to foster greater class consciousness by organizing politics around national economic issues, and they were not happy about it. “A strongly disciplined, two-party system can be obtained only by creating a sharp division of the population along class-conscious lines,” wrote J. Roland Pennock in 1952. “If one party or the other gains marked ascendancy, the logical outcome is class rule and exploitation, rather than responsible search for the means of achieving the greatest possible general acceptability.”²⁸ Julius Turner likewise warned in 1951 that “violent upheaval is...a possibility. The behavior of labor and business in some non-political activities suggests that these groups are not averse to violence.”²⁹ Turner counsels that “those proposals...which would give greater power to dominant groups in either party should be rejected.”³⁰ Pendleton Herring similarly applauded the ways in which the non-class orientation of American parties contributed to a moderation of politics: “The isolation of classes into separate

²⁷Ibid., p. 20. Interestingly, the report observed that “any tendency in the direction of a strengthened party system encourages the interest groups to align themselves with one or the other of the major parties.” This prediction has been richly fulfilled; see Barbara Sinclair, *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policy Making* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2006), pp. 308-325.

²⁸J. Roland Pennock, “Responsiveness, Responsibility, and Majority Rule,” *American Political Science Review*, (1952) Vol. 46: 790-807.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

parties prevents that modification of extreme points of view that is possible when different elements join in compromise.”³¹ Writing in 1951, Ralph Goodman reviewed the report’s proposals for an “improved party structure” and concluded “it would be difficult to conceive of any system better designed to turn a major party into a labor party—at least in some sections—and facilitate the alignment of mass-membership farmer and labor organizations into one solidified voting block.”³² Summarizing the conservative perspective in 1982, James Pierson flat out concludes that “party government...is designed to bring class conflict to the surface in American politics.”³³ Clearly, conservatives were well aware that stronger party government could lead to a new alignment in American politics that would not only make liberal policymaking easier, but also *act back upon society to foster the development of class consciousness*. They were also aware that the elimination of such anti-majoritarian veto points as the Senate filibuster would make it easier for Congress to pass legislation facilitating the formation of labor unions, thus further shifting the nation’s politics towards a more pronounced class orientation.³⁴

For their own part, labor union leaders of the mid-twentieth century were quite conscious of the benefits of RPG, and were eager to see a more ideologically-based realignment of the party system. Asked in the early 1960s to describe the political strategy of organized labor, United Auto

³¹Pendleton Herring, *Presidential Leadership* (New York: Rinehart, 1940), pp. 129-130.

³²T. William Goodman, “How Much Political Party Centralization Do We Want?” *Journal of Politics* (Nov. 1951).

³³James Piereson, “Party Government,” *The Political Science Reviewer* (Fall 1982).

³⁴See Piereson, *Party Government* and Taylor Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2001).

Workers president Walter Reuther said: “The American labor movement is essentially trying to work within the two-party structure, but to bring about a basic realignment so that the two parties really stand for distinct points of view.”³⁵ Andrew Biemiller, the AFL-CIO’s Director of Legislation during the 1960s, explained the deeper political logic behind the federation’s support for civil rights reforms: “The 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights bill will greatly increase the voting strength of Negroes in some of the previously uncontested, conservative districts in the South, bringing new forces into play in this long dormant area.”³⁶ He continued: “We would have no objection to seeing a strong Republican party appear in the South. It might turn Southern Democrats into a more liberal group.”³⁷ The result would be two distinct parties (“polarized,” in our contemporary terminology), one liberal and even vaguely social democratic, the other more conservative. Labor was willing to take its chances with this arrangement, betting that they would get farther when it was their turn in power than they would under existing conditions (in which they were often stymied by the workings of the conservative coalition).³⁸

³⁵ Quoted in B.J. Widick, *Labor Today: The Triumphs and Failures of Unionism in the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 116.

³⁶Speech by Andrew Biemiller, no date, Andrew Biemiller Papers, Box 1/85/54, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland.

³⁷AFL-CIO News Release, January 6, 1964, “Congress, 88th” folder, AFL-CIO Library, Washington, D.C.

³⁸See Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats*.

Recent Attacks on Party Government from the Left

Given the history of the RPG concept and its clear relationship to liberal political goals, it is surprising that self-declared liberals would oppose it. Yet, by 2005, this is precisely what had occurred. Perhaps the most virulent attack on the practice and idea of RPG by American liberals comes from the pens of UC Berkeley political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson. In a book entitled *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*, Hacker and Pierson (HP) launch a full-blown attack not only on the substance of GOP rule, but on the very idea of party government. HP argue that after Republicans achieved unified party government as a result of the 2000 election, they used the power of partisanship to ram through a legislative program that was far more conservative than the majority of the public wanted. The result was policymaking that skewed far to the right, and thus decidedly “off center.”

“Much of what the report demanded did in fact come to pass,” write HP in reference to the work of the APSA Committee.³⁹ The response of HP and other critics to this development is captured, however, in the phrase, “Be careful what you wish for.”⁴⁰ They write: “The parties have

³⁹Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, p. 185.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 186. The phrase has become a favorite of critics of the APSA report who bemoan the polarization of contemporary American parties: see Brownstein, *The Second Civil War*; Mann and Ornstein, *The Broken Branch*, p. 90; Nicol C. Rae, “Be Careful What You Wish For: The Rise of Responsible Parties in American National Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (2007:10): 179-191; Morris Fiorina, “Parties, Participation, and Representation in America: Old Theories Face New Realities,” presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (online at: <http://www.stanford.edu/~mfiorina/Fiorina%20Web%20Files/Fiorina%20SOD.pdf>).

become stronger, more national, more unified, and much more distinctive,” but “the effects have not resembled the happy consequences the committee confidently forecast.”⁴¹ Rather than the promised land of accountability and informed deliberation envisioned by the committee, the contemporary approximation of RPG had only produced “relentless partisan warfare and a governing party committed to extreme ends.”⁴² Ironically, they claim, it has been extreme conservatives, not liberal and social democrats, who have best learned how to use strong parties to their advantage. Conservative Republicans have pioneered a new technique of political self-preservation, which HP dub “backlash insurance.” By this term, HP refer to “an assortment of strategies and procedures that party leaders use to keep quavering moderates in line and shield party loyalists against retaliation by moderate voters.”⁴³ Republicans have skillfully used techniques of agenda control and policy design to obfuscate responsibility for policy changes and hide their inegalitarian effects; the people, in short, have been fooled about *who* is doing *what*. The result has been “*irresponsible* party government. Parties (or at least one of them) increasingly have the power to act. But they have acted with the impunity that comes when such actions are not disciplined by accountability.” Writing as of 2005, HP saw a “new order” taking root: “A conservative governing coalition, balanced on a razor’s edge of partisan control, had seized the reins of power and was now dramatically remaking the laws of the land.”⁴⁴ In essence, HP claim that Republicans got about 51 percent of the vote, but used political organization and leverage to

⁴¹Ibid., p. 186.

⁴²Ibid., p. 186.

⁴³Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 1.

achieve something like 98 percent of the policymaking power in Washington. The party then went on to enact dramatic tax cuts that (supposedly) had little public support, a bankruptcy bill that injured consumers and workers, a Medicare prescription drug bill that mainly served the interests of the drug and insurance industries, and numerous other conservative policies.

Based on these judgements, these authors conclude that the most important thing to learn from the story of the APSA report is “a cautionary lesson. Political reform is not easy.”⁴⁵ They proceed to suggest that we return to the virtues of the Founding Fathers, concluding in the final pages of their text that the Madisonian model of ambition countering ambition is a better guide to democratic practice than notions of a quasi-parliamentary system of party government. The Founders’ “greatest insight,” HP conclude, “was contained in James Madison’s observation that mere ‘parchment barriers’ were not sufficient to protect and further democratic ambition.”⁴⁶ Thus, Hacker and Pierson come to embrace the very fragmentation of power that has bedeviled the American left since the first efforts in the late 19th century to use the federal state to protect the rights of workers and minorities, and achieve a more equitable society. We have traveled quite far indeed from the days of E.E. Schattschneider, the APSA report, and the mid-century faith that strong political parties are the essential basis for achieving robust majority rule.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 188.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 223.

Instead of advocating that those on the left build *their own* powerful party machinery, HP instead turn to a familiar list of political reforms intended to promote a “push to the center.”⁴⁷ They endorse such changes as nonpartisan redistricting of congressional districts, open primaries, restoration of the Fairness Doctrine, and adoption of a Question Time format based on the Westminster parliamentary model. To encourage moderation in Congress, they suggest that majority party rule in Congress should be limited by new restrictions on the use of closed rules and other procedures that allow the majority party to govern expeditiously. The solution they propose is to set up “high hurdles (a two-thirds vote, for example) to departures from certain established procedures designed to ensure that the minority party has a true vote.”⁴⁸ Of course, this only means that a minority party will be in a stronger position to block the measures of the majority – precisely what RPG advocates were trying to avoid through their advocacy of strong parties and simple majority rule within the US Congress.

The peculiar twist, and a confusing one, is that the above does not exhaust the list of HP’s reforms. They also strongly advocate a renewal of the power of organized labor, stating that “perhaps no single social change would do more to reverse the off-center tilt of contemporary American politics than a revitalization of the American labor movement.”⁴⁹ HP do not support any specific changes in the labor law, except to say “unions will not come back on their own. They will need assistance at both the state and national levels from sympathetic politicians and friendly

⁴⁷Ibid, p. 191.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 221.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 194.

judges willing to tilt the legal playing field back in their direction.”⁵⁰ There seems to be some confusion here: HP claim to want to bring politics back only to the *center*, not to the left. Yet, they also advocate a strengthening of the core constituency of the *left*, not the center. Is their goal, then, the “raging moderation” of authors like Tom Mann and Norm Ornstein, or the social democratic ethos of authors such as Schattschneider? If the latter, it would seem more logical for HP to *defend* RPG rather than to castigate it. The confusion deepens when HP advocate an increase in voting turnout as a means for remedying the off-center character of American politics. HP encourage the use of shorter ballots, easier voter registration, electoral college reform, and a national holiday on election day – all without ever mentioning that all these ideas were explicitly endorsed *in the original APSA report!* Perhaps the report got things right after all?

The hostility to the emergence of more coherent parties among American liberals is also found in an influential recent article by Harvard Law School professor Daryl Levinson and New York University Law professor Richard Pildes. Writing in the *Harvard Law Review* in 2006, this duo, much like Hacker and Pierson, see only disaster in the emergence of strong unified party government. Their goal in their essay is to find ways of “compensating for the disappearance of checks and balances during periods of strongly unified government.”⁵¹ They begin their treatise with concern, noting that “the rise of a mature system of two-party competition nationwide, gerrymandered ‘safe’ election districts, and more powerful party organizations, among other factors, has led to the resurgence of more internally unified, ideologically coherent, and polarized

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 200.

⁵¹Levinson and Pildes, “Separation of Parties, Not Powers,” p. 36.

parties than we have seen in many decades.”⁵² The result is that “under unified governments, smaller partisan majorities will be able to effect major policy changes without the full range of checks and balances that are supposed to divide and diffuse power in the Madisonian system.”⁵³ Although Levinson and Pildes acknowledge the existence of a large political science literature that celebrates unified party government, they finally conclude that the evidence suggests that RPG is simply too unsafe for any reasonable thinker to endorse.

There is a need, Levinson and Pildes conclude, to consider ways “to mitigate the corrosive effects of unified parties on separation of powers aspirations – in particular, on preserving Madisonian checks and balances under conditions of party-unified government.”⁵⁴ As law professors, they suggest that federal courts should exercise greater skepticism towards executive power during periods of unified government, essentially acting as a checking force when Congress is, because of party affinity, unlikely to do so. Of more interest to political scientists is their recommendation that “strongly unified government” should be avoided, if necessary, by “fragmenting, or moderating, the political parties themselves.”⁵⁵ Like HP, they advocate nonpartisan “neutral” redistricting and open primaries. They go further, however, and suggest that it may be necessary to “roll back some of the internal legislative changes of the last forty years that

⁵²Ibid., p. 26.

⁵³Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 35.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 66.

have enabled party leaders to marshal united partisan political power in Congress.”⁵⁶ Among the changes that need to be addressed, they argue, is the current tendency to replace seniority with partisan merit as a basis for selection of committee chairs. They also advocate the use of ballot designs that would *encourage* split-ticket voting (such as prohibiting the party column ballot or straight-ticket voting with a single ballot mark), with the hope that unified government could occur less often. With these proposals, we see prominent voices on the American academic left backtracking almost completely from the mid-twentieth century affinity for strong unified party government. The goal now is to avoid this phenomenon altogether.

Critique of the New Critique

Most of the critiques of RPG theory that emerged in response to the APSA report in the 1950s had a distinct ideological coloration: they were the products either of conservatives or “establishment” liberals who felt that the existing party system was sufficiently responsive to the popular will over the long run to merit preservation. Those further to the left tended to support the RPG project (to the extent they accepted the two-party system at all). What is interesting about the new critiques is the extent to which they reflect a broader left-wing dissatisfaction with RPG, viewing it as simply too threatening in a society prone to electing an “extreme” GOP government. These liberals seem to have given up (at least as of the 2005/6 period) on any hope of achieving their own run of unified party government. Before other liberals (or political scientists more generally) join these authors, however, a review of the credibility of their claims is in order.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 71.

First, it should be noted that the current system of partisan polarization is far from a complete fulfillment of the RPG vision of partisanship, and therefore cannot be seen as a comprehensive test of this model. Hacker and Pierson conclude “much of what the report demanded did in fact come to pass.”⁵⁷ While it is indeed true that the parties are now more ideologically distinctive, unified, and disciplined, it is also the case that significant parts of the APSA program have not been implemented. I have noted that RPG theorists had a very comprehensive program centered around majority rule and clear accountability. To achieve this, they advocated the construction of large national party organizations that could set out a clear party platform, recruit candidates, and organize campaigns. A new system of dues-paying membership would be established, and the national organizations would use these monies to wage clearly *partisan*, not candidate-centered, campaigns across the entire country. Voters would be provided a good deal of information about each party’s policy commitments, and would comprehend that the partisan affiliation of candidates would necessarily be crucial in their voting decisions. Voters would know exactly what they were getting, and candidates would not be able to run away from or otherwise obfuscate their party identification. This system would allow for both responsibility and transparency. But this is clearly *not* what we have now. At present, we still have fairly weak and uncoordinated national party organizations, a good deal of local variation in the nature of party appeals, and mainly candidate-centered campaigns. Candidates generally do not emphasize their partisanship in general election campaigns, and do not run on the basis of their fealty to a worked-out party program (naturally, since once does not exist). While voters may be

⁵⁷Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, p. 186.

becoming more efficient at discerning the implications of partisanship, we are still some distance from the original RPG model of primarily partisan and programmatic campaigning.

Additionally, the APSA report embraced markedly majoritarian changes in the rules of American politics. The filibuster would be eliminated, and the electoral college reformed in the direction of a system of national popular election. Without such reforms, the APSA authors realized, stronger parties might indeed have negative and indeed unintended effects. It was obvious that more disciplined parties combined with minority veto systems like the filibuster (which still required a *two-thirds* cloture vote as of 1950) could exacerbate deadlock. That is why the report advocated simple majority rule in the Senate. Likewise, the threat to democracy posed by the possibility of the electoral college producing a winner with a minority of the popular vote (as occurred in 2000) is compounded if that winner can use party discipline to push a strong program that has not been endorsed by the people. The solution they embraced, however, was not to weaken parties, but to reform the electoral college system. There was, it appears, a coherence to the APSA program that many contemporary critics have overlooked.

In this regard, it is interesting to contemplate how American politics might have played out over the last decade if the full APSA program had been implemented, not just a fraction of it. In the absence of the electoral college system, George W. Bush would in all probability not have been elected president in 2000. Perhaps with more clearly partisan campaigning, the Democrats would have gotten more credit for the benign economic and social conditions prevailing in 2000, thus gaining congressional majorities (or at least increased numbers) in Congress that would in turn

provide a solid basis for governance by a President Al Gore. Policymaking by the Democratic party would have been facilitated by the lack of a super-majority vote requirement in the Senate, leading to legislative outcomes that were closer to median voter preferences. In this scenario, the worst things produced by partisan polarization, namely, the supposedly off-center, right-wing policies of the Bush administration, would have never occurred. From the RPG perspective, the problem in 2000 was not excessively strong partisanship, but rather the persistence of minoritarian features of the American political system that have undermined the proper expression of the popular will. The solution, therefore, is not to end partisanship, but to fulfill it by ending the filibuster and abolishing the electoral college. To castigate the APSA report, therefore, when key parts of its reform program have not been implemented is not a solid critique. To be sure, the report did not specifically warn about the possible adverse consequences of only a partial fulfillment of its program (and nary a word was said about the possibility of divided government or extreme polarization), but it is still must be recognized that the report advocated far more than simply greater differences between the parties.

Second, it is quite possible to dispute just how far off-center policymaking was during the George W. Bush presidency. As several studies have shown, the pattern of policymaking during the Bush years does not suggest a party with fifty percent plus one of the electorate implementing its entire agenda without regard to the consequences.⁵⁸ Actually, fear of anticipated reactions in

⁵⁸For similar conclusions, see David W. Brady, John Ferejohn, and Laurel Harbridge, "Polarization and Public Policy: A General Assessment," and Keith Krehbiel, "Comment" in Pietro S. Nivola and William A. Galston, "Toward Depolarization," in Nivola and Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation, Vol. II*.

upcoming elections prevented Republicans from changing a single thing in Social Security, or in dismantling welfare state programs of any type (rather, the story was one of expansion, albeit in a fashion quite favorable to GOP-supported economic groupings). In these areas, at least, most off-center impulses were ultimately constrained by fear of future actions by the electorate. To the extent this claim is true, it supports RPG theory, not those who would attempt to dismantle or undermine the emerging system of party government.

Third, it is rather astonishing how many papers, books, and articles have been written that generalize from a rather brief period of time (no more than a decade, and often just a few years), and a very distinctive (arguably peculiar) version of partisan governance, to construct strong claims about the essential character of party government for the foreseeable future. The prestige (albeit limited) of political science has been put forth to argue that there is a *scientific* understanding of partisan polarization that is powerful enough to justify – even mandate – major reforms to dismantle stronger parties. Yet all such ruminations were based on either the case of the late-Clinton era of divided government with Democrats in control of the executive, or the Bush era of unified Republican government. Other possible constellations, such as unified government under the Democrats, had not been experienced when contemporary critics decided it was time to write off the very idea of responsible party government. But on the face of it, it is entirely plausible that the problems that emerged during the Bush years reflect certain features of the Republican party coalition and leadership at that time, and would not necessarily tell us a whole lot about the possible productivity, accountability, and effectiveness of a period of Democratic party rule.

Indeed, early indications are that the emergence of polarized parties and our current system of partial or weak RPG (also frequently called “conditional party government”) is serving American liberalism well as we enter the Obama years. Given the persistent claims of mid-century critics (as well as candid defenders) of the RPG project that it was destined to turn the Democrats into a labor party and realign American politics along class lines, it is interesting to note that in some ways their predictions about the effects of RPG have come true. An examination of congressional voting on labor law reform bills (see Table 1) shows that Democratic unity in support of labor has increased markedly over the past fifty years, in close conjunction with increasing partisan polarization along the lines advocated by RPG theorists. While labor’s position within Congress as a whole has not improved appreciably, its place among Democrat partisans is clearly stronger than ever before (notwithstanding the declining percentage of the workforce represented by unions – a mere 12% in 2009). Of course, whether Democratic unity will be sufficient in the months and years ahead to bring about labor law reform and other liberal reforms is still very much an open question.⁵⁹ But if liberals fail due to a *lack* of party unity, this only strengthens the argument for RPG, rather than weakens it. In addition, there is considerable evidence that the two parties are diverging along class lines, with the Democrats attracting more support from those with lower incomes, and the Republicans from the wealthy.⁶⁰ This, too, is in

⁵⁹For an early skeptical view, see Jonathan Chait, “Why the Democrats Can’t Govern,” *The New Republic* (April 15, 2009), available online at: <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=07bd4a20-60a7-44a9-ab92-115eeb62bd92>.

⁶⁰See Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Mark D. Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani, *Diverging Parties: Social Change, Realignment, and Party Polarization* (Boulder: Westview, 2003); Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do*

keeping with the RPG vision of how American politics should work, and with longstanding liberal dreams of how the nation's party system should be organized.

Based on the above analysis, it seems rash and presumptive to now argue for major changes in American nominating processes, congressional procedures, and electoral rules with the intent of undermining party-based governance. It is hard not to believe that much of this advice was based on a latent fear by liberal Democrats that their party would not regain a congressional majority or control of the presidency for many years or decades to come (a palpable fear among liberals in the period immediately following the 2004 election). Having lost faith in the capacity of the electorate to ever hold the Republican majority accountable at the ballot box, these liberals turned to the idea of electoral and procedural reforms to compensate for their political failures. Hacker and Pierson thus argued in 2005 that what the US had was “*irresponsible party government*” that allowed the ruling party to act “with the impunity that comes when such actions are not disciplined by accountability.”⁶¹ Rarely has a political prediction been more quickly falsified. In fact, the voters were more aware than the liberals gave them credit for, and imposed severe sanctions on the ruling party in 2006 and 2008. The outcomes in these elections were *exactly* what RPG theorists would predict would happen. The off-center and incompetent governance of the ruling party (which dominated all three branches of government) was easily recognized by the people, and they took decisive action against it. This outcome strongly supports

(New Haven: Princeton, 2008); and Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁶¹Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*, p. 187.

the RPG model of how government should work, and radically undermines the critics of polarized partisanship who saw Republican governance as somehow beyond popular accountability. In short, events after 2005 have rendered ridiculous the somewhat hysterical jeremiads against party government that were published at that time. These authors succumbed to a rush to judgment that had little foundation in political science.

Conclusion

The new liberal critique of the concept of responsible party government far outruns any grounding in confirmed knowledge. The experience of the Bush years does not prove that RPG is innately inimical to liberal ends (or the goal of good government more generally), nor does it reveal fundamental or irremediable flaws in the RPG theory of governance. Exactly as RPG theory predicts, the unsatisfactory policymaking of the Bush years stimulated major acts of checking and balancing by the American electorate, which chose to decisively repudiate the Republican party at the ballot box. That same electorate then gave power to a unified Democratic party government which has gone about using the mechanisms of partisanship to achieve legislation and policy aims entirely in keeping with the party's agenda as expressed in the previous campaign (albeit more often by the candidates than the "party" itself). These are all examples of robust democratic accountability, not the "impunity" of extremist parties beyond the reach of majority opinion. So far, the policies of the new Obama administration seem to be comfortably within the range of center-left politics that most voters would have expected from the 2008 campaign. This suggests, again, that the claims so often made during the Bush years that RPG would produce an inevitable

alternation between extremist governments of the left and right is unconvincing – the Bush experience may well have been *anomalous*, and thus a very poor basis for justifying a series of reforms to undermine recent trends towards more meaningful partisanship.

There is one last reason that, from a purely partisan standpoint, it seems odd that so many liberals of the 2000s were willing to abandon the concept of RPG. To the extent that RPG overcomes the traditional separation of powers, it facilitates policymaking. There is a large academic literature suggesting that parliamentary systems, which often produce a concentration of power similar to that embraced in RPG theory, are more conducive to the creation of larger and more comprehensive welfare states than are presidential systems with their characteristic multiplication of veto points.⁶² And a comparably large literature shows that cutting welfare state benefits is a far more difficult task than creating them in the first place.⁶³ This combination suggests a ratcheting-up effect in which RPG can facilitate the growth of welfare state programs more effectively than it does their diminution. While this is a largely speculative claim at this point, it is at least as convincing as the various attacks on RPG of the last decade, which tend to view RPG as actually *detrimental* to the kind of welfare state that liberals would embrace. Of course, whether such tendencies toward larger government are to be welcomed or opposed remains a

⁶²A useful summary of the literature can be found in John Kingdon, *America the Unusual* (New York: Worth, 1999), esp. pp. 50-55 and 79-84; see also Sven Steinmo, “American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Culture or Institutions,” in Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson, eds., *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches and Interpretations* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994).

⁶³Ironically, the point was made skillfully by Paul Pierson himself in his first book, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

matter of political values, not political science. But, given the stated policy preferences of American liberals, it is peculiar that any would support a political program that explicitly repudiates the theory of responsible party government.

HISTORICAL COMPARISONS OF VOTING ON LABOR LAW BILLS

Employee Free Choice Act, 2007 (failed)

House (March 1, 2007)
Democrats: **228 yes (99%), 2 no**
Republicans: 13 yes, 183 no
Total: 241 yes, 185 no

Senate (June 26, 2007 cloture vote)
Democrats: **48 yes (100%), 0 no**
Independents: 2 yes
Republicans: 1 yes, 48 no
Total: 51 yes, 48 no

Percentage of House Democrats for Labor

1947: 47%
1949: 75%
1965: 70%
1977: 79%
1993: 87%
2007: 99%

Note: 44 members of *Blue Dog Caucus* in 2007.

Percentage of Senate Democrats for Labor

1947: 50%
1949: 56%
1966: 67%
1978: 72%
1993: 89%
2007: 100%

Note: Percentages of Democrats *voting*, not entire caucus.

Workplace Fairness Act (Striker Replacement Bill), 1993 (failed)

House

Democrats: **221 yes (87%), 33 no**
Independents: 1 yes
Republicans: 17 yes, 157 no
Total: 239 yes, 190 no

Senate (cloture vote)

Democrats: **50 yes (89%), 6 no**
Republicans: 3 yes, 40 no
Total: 53 yes, 46 no

Labor Law Reform Act, 1977-1978 (failed)

House

Democrats: **221 yes (79%), 59 no**
Republicans: 31 yes, 104 no
Total: 252 yes, 163 no

Senate (1978 cloture vote)

Democrats: **44 yes (72%), 17 no**
Republicans: 14 yes, 22 no
Total: 58 yes, 39 no

Repeal of Section 14(b) of Taft-Hartley Act, 1965-1966 (failed)

House

Democrats: **200 yes (70%), 86 no**
Republicans: 21 yes, 117 no
Total: 221 yes, 203 no

Senate (1966 cloture vote)

Democrats: **45 yes (67%), 22 no**
Republicans: 6 yes, 26 no
Total: 51 yes, 48 no

Repeal of Taft-Hartley Act, 1949 (failed)

House

Democrats: **193 yes (75%), 62 no**
Republicans: 18 yes, 147 no
Total: 211 yes, 209 no

Senate

Democrats: **29 yes (56%), 23 no**
Republicans: 12 yes, 30 no
Total: 43 yes, 53 no

Initial Passage of Taft-Hartley Act, 1947 (passed over labor opposition)

House

Democrats: **93 yes, 84 no (47%)**
Republicans: 215 yes, 22 no
Total: 308 yes, 96 no

Senate

Democrats: **21 yes, 21 no (50%)**
Republicans: 47 yes, 3no
Total: 68 yes, 24 no

**Percentage of House
vote for Labor**

1947: 24%
1949: 50%
1965: 52%
1977: 61%
1993: 55%
2007: 57%

**Percentage of Senate
vote for Labor**

1947: 26%
1949: 45%
1966: 52%
1978: 60%
1993: 54%
2007: 52%

Note: Percentages of total *voting*,
not entire membership.