A Choice, Not an Echo: Polarization and the Transformation of the American Party System

My project offers an intellectual and institutional history of party polarization and ideological realignment in the postwar United States. I treat the construction of an ideologically sorted party system as a political project carried out by conscious actors within and around the Democratic and Republican parties. The work of these activists, interest groups, and political elites helped to produce, by the last decades of the twentieth century, an unpredicted and still-continuing era of strong, polarized partisanship in American politics. In tracking their work, I also account for changing ideas about the party system and partisanship as engaged by scholars, journalists, and political participants in the postwar decades.

National politics at mid-century involved historically high levels of bipartisanship in government given the presence of significant liberal and conservative factions within both parties; weak and highly federated party structures; and mass partisan attachments that were defined more by affective ties of tradition and communal affiliation than by policy issues and ideology. National politics at century's end involved levels of partisan discipline in congressional voting unseen since the Gilded Age; robust national party organizations; and an electorate that had followed political elites in sorting itself ideologically among the two parties. The movement from the first era to the second is the subject of this project, which argues that, during these decades, America's two-party system gained a programmatic cast and logic long considered alien to the country's political traditions. Long-term technological and demographic developments undergirded the rise to predominance of issue-driven party activism, while southern realignment provided a key electoral engine driving ideological sorting. But these processes took specific form through the work of activists and party elites, and they drive my narrative.

My account places particular emphasis on changing ideas about American political parties. In 1950, the American Political Science Association published *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*, a controversial report that called for the development of more programmatically distinct, disciplined national parties. This "responsible party" model would leave an enduring political and discursive legacy. Initially reflecting the frustrations felt by liberal Democrats toward their party's southern wing, the theory drew criticism from those who celebrated American parties' traditionally loose, non-ideological nature. When both parties entered a period of tumult and institutional experimentation from the late 1960s on, notions of party responsibility remained influential among important factions and leaders. The dominant scholarly and journalistic view during these years, meanwhile, was that American parties were becoming ever *weaker* and less relevant institutions. Thus an irony of post-1960s politics was that key tenets of the "responsible party" model came gradually to be fulfilled without most observers realizing it.

The project contributes a historical narrative and context to the abundant popular and scholarly discussion of contemporary party polarization, by identifying the origins of modern polarization in developments reaching back to the early postwar period and by historicizing Americans' longstanding debates over partisanship. By restoring parties as institutions to the forefront of an analysis of postwar political history, moreover, the project helps to recast key historiographic themes relating to the rise of the right and the decline of the New Deal order.

PART I: PARTISANS IN A BIPARTISAN AGE
The first four chapters recount political developments in the exceptionally depolarized partisan era of the mid-twentieth century, a period characterized by high levels of legislative bipartisanship and two federated and non-programmatic national parties. The intellectual revival of an alternative vision of party politics, the rise of issue-driven activism on both the left and the right, and the transformational politics of civil rights all served to strain existing partisan arrangements to the breaking point by the end of the tumultuous 1960s.

Chapter One: The Idea of Responsible Partisanship
The chapter recounts the origins of the APSA Committee on Political Parties, its publication of *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System* in 1950, and the debate the report engendered. Shaped by the politics of the New Deal state, postwar responsible party doctrine offered a potent critique of the fragmented and undisciplined American party system and prescribed an alternative model involving disciplined, programmatic, and mutually distinct parties. The publication of the APSA report in turn motivated critics of that doctrine to mount a vigorous defense of traditional American parties as forces for stabilization and inclusion.

Chapter Two: Democrats and the Politics of Principle
The vision of parties articulated by the APSA report would influence most directly the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the 1950s, as "amateur" reform activism and the politics of civil rights increased liberals' receptivity to arguments made in behalf of ideological realignment. This chapter documents Paul Butler's stormy chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee from 1954 to 1960 as a case study in the political and institutional tensions besetting the postwar Democratic coalition. Butler's tenure featured responsible-party innovations as well as incessant clashes with southern Democrats, party professionals, and the powerful congressional leaders Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson, two men who embodied a starkly different outlook on the value and function of parties in America.

Chapter Three: A Choice, Not an Echo
Political divisions within the Republican Party in the early postwar decades similarly reflected competing visions for the party and clashing theoretical claims about partisanship itself. Chapter Three explores these conflicts, elucidating the dynamics they shared with the Democratic story. Factional disputes over political strategy in the early postwar years took on ideological coloring, as ubiquitous conservative charges of "me, too" posturing among GOP politicians prompted deeper questions about the very existence of an American consensus. Against the backdrop of declining transactional party organizations and a resurgent conservative intellectual movement, GOP politics in the later 1950s witnessed intensifying clashes between supporters of a moderate, Eisenhower-centered partisan vision and issue-driven amateur activists on the right. In a mirror-image reflection of the Democratic dynamic, conflicting ideological visions for the Republican future aligned with conflicting strategic postures toward the Solid South, particularly with respect to civil rights. I trace the evolution of conservative advocacy for an ideological party realignment via GOP alliance with southern whites, from Senator Karl Mundt's organization of a Dixie-focused Committee to Explore Political Realignment in 1951, to debates carried out within internal party councils during the Eisenhower years, and finally to the right's capture of the party's presidential nomination in 1964.

Chapter Four: Power in Movement
Chapter Four explores the ways in which the explosive social movement mobilizations of the 1960s interacted with partisan politics. It identifies continuities, in both style and outlook, linking the era's new left-liberal mobilizations to the issue-driven middle-class reform activism of the 1950s, and connects the Democratic crisis of 1968 to longer-running conflicts over the proper functions of parties and the role of issues in politics. The chapter concludes by assessing late-1960s debates over the "social issue" as a new fault line in American politics. This congeries of cultural and non-material issue conflicts underlay new coalitional visions on both the left and right that called for changes in existing party alignments.

PART II: REDRAWING THE LINES IN THE 1970s
Part II analyzes the 1970s as a decade of underappreciated dynamism, flux, and experimentation in American party politics that produced the key characteristics of our modern polarized era. Ultimately, the arc of change from Nixon's presidency to Ronald Reagan's inauguration involved a tightening alignment between the policy positions and partisan affiliation of political activists and elites. Though this dynamic would drive the revival of partisanship in subsequent decades, most analysts in the 1970s emphasized party decline *as the key theme of their political era, in part because they retained an older conception of the parties that automatically counterposed ideology and partisanship.*

Chapter Five: The Age of Party Reform
"The Age of Party Reform" reassesses the sweeping institutional changes pursued by Democrats in the 1970s relating to their presidential nominating system and their organization in Congress. It offers a new account of the transformations initiated by the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (1968-1972) and continued by successor commissions, with an emphasis on the intellectual premises that animated participants. It connects this story of party reform, moreover, to the congressional reforms enacted during the same years relating to the seniority system and committee structure. Responsible party doctrine informed the outlook of key figures in both reform projects. Often cast at the time as contributors to party fragmentation and decline, both reform initiatives in fact ultimately helped to create a newly receptive institutional setting for issue-based activism within the parties, with consequences for future ideological sorting and polarization.

Chapter Six: The Making of a Vanguard Party
The following two chapters shift focus from the formal reconstruction of partisan institutions to the political work done within this new institutional context by party-oriented activists on the left and right. Chapter Six recasts the familiar narrative of conservative ascendance in the 1970s as a project of ideological party-building. Strategists in the Nixon years articulated a vision of a new political majority waiting to be won through partisan realignment. Some activists would pursue an experiment in third-party building before backing Ronald Reagan's potent intraparty challenge to Gerald Ford in 1976, the immediate result of which was a rightward shift in the party's platform. Carter-era struggles would further drive conservatives' takeover of the Republican Party machinery amidst ongoing southern realignment, new business mobilizations, and a dramatic influx of "amateur" style political activism in the form of the Christian Right.

Chapter Seven: Liberal Alliance-Building for Lean Times
This chapter challenges the prevailing historiographic narrative of post-1960s liberal decline, arguing that liberal coalition-building and activism in the inhospitable 1970s contributed to the making of a more ideologically sorted party system.   The Ford and Carter years would see fracture and disarray among liberals at the policymaking level but a gradual process of coalitional reformation at the activist and interest-group level – seen most importantly in the reemergence of a labor-liberal alliance uniting progressive unions with "new social movement" groups. Reform-mandated midterm Democratic conventions in 1974 and 1978 served as forums for tightening such coalitional ties, an important factor in the decade's second major intraparty challenge to a sitting president, Ted Kennedy's 1980 bid for the Democratic nomination.

Conclusion: Polarization Without Responsibility
A brief concluding chapter surveys the unfolding dynamics of an ideologically sorted party system during the Reagan years and beyond. Partisan resurgence and divided rule defined politics in the Reagan era. Issue activists came increasingly and consciously to be drawn into the logic of two-party electoral competition, enlisting as soldiers for one or the other major party. Congress proved to be the leading edge in manifesting the resurgent polarization and partisanship that were soon found in other realms of government. The consequences of partisan sorting have underlay every major flashpoint in national politics since, from the Republican congressional takeover in 1994 to the Clinton impeachment of 1998 to the interbranch warfare of the Bush and Obama presidencies in the new century. Decades of work carried out by the activists, intellectuals, and political elites at the center of this dissertation had finally helped to produce the nationalized and ideologically distinct American parties prescribed by responsible party doctrine. In a political system still defined by separated powers and myriad veto points, however, party majorities find themselves with no sustained capacity to implement their program. Hence the modern American predicament of responsible partisanship *without* responsible party government – a volatile ill-fit between disciplined ideological partisanship and fragmented political institutions that turns routine conflict into chronic crisis.