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**Party Polarization and its Effects on
the American Electorate in the Twentieth
and Twenty-First Centuries**

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Abstract

This research examines the American political parties and their recent evolution towards polarization by highlighting their relation to the electorate to test the assumption of general polarization advanced by most media outlets. Scholars studying this trend have come to different conclusions. Taking all these positions into consideration, this dissertation shows that though party polarization has some impact on the electorate, it remains all the same an elite phenomenon. This dissertation concludes that as long as politicians are mainly ideologically driven, American voters will not be satisfied with the alternatives they will be proposed and will develop a mistrust of government. Losing their electoral base, the American political parties will continue to decline. Conversely, this research shows that the parties may be stable and effective and may regain confidence of the American public if they respond to the electorate's needs.

Résumé

Cette recherche étudie les partis politiques américains et leur évolution récente vers la polarisation tout en mettant en lumière leur relation aux électeurs afin de vérifier l'hypothèse d'une polarisation généralisée comme le prétendent la plupart des médias. Les scientifiques qui étudient cette évolution sont arrivés à différentes conclusions. Prenant en compte toutes ces opinions, cette dissertation montre que bien que la polarisation des partis a quelques effets sur les électeurs, elle reste tout de même un phénomène limité à l'élite. En conclusion, cette dissertation confirme que tant que les hommes politiques seront principalement guidés par une idéologie, les électeurs ne seront pas satisfaits par les alternatives qui leur seront proposées et, pire encore, développeront une méfiance envers les gouvernements. Perdant leur base électorale, les partis politiques américains continueront à décliner. Inversement, cette dissertation montre que les partis politiques pourraient être stables et efficaces et pourraient regagner la confiance du public américain s'ils répondaient aux besoins des électeurs.

ملخص

يتطرق هذا البحث إلى طبيعة الأحزاب السياسية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، تطوراتها الأخيرة التي تنتهجها نحو فكرة الاستقطاب، و العلاقة بينها و بين منتخبيها، مسلطين الضوء على ما توصلت إليه بحوث جمهور دارسي هذا التيار، و ما قدمته لنا وسائل الإعلام بغرض إثبات هذه الفرضية. و الذي سنتطرق إلى مضمونه فيما يلي، آخذين بعين الاعتبار كل ما ذكرناه، و خاصة آثار هذه الظاهرة على المنتخبين، و على النخبة بدرجة اقل.

إن هذه الدراسة توصلنا إلى أن السياسيين يدفعهم في أغلب الأحيان تيار فكري معين، و أن المنتخبين سيقون غير مقتنعين و غير راضين من البرامج المقترحة، مما يؤدي بالأحزاب إلى السقوط و الانحطاط، و الذي بدوره يؤدي إلى فقدان الثقة في السلطة الحاكمة.

و بصورة عكسية، تظهر هذه الدراسة في حالة استجابة الأحزاب السياسية لحاجات المنتخبين، فإنها تستطيع أن تصل إلى الاستقرار و النجاح و بالتالي تسترجع ثقة الشعب الأمريكي.

Contents

Introduction	p. 1
CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CONCEPTS “POLITICAL PARTY” AND “POLARIZATION”	p. 7
<u>I. Definition of “Political Party”</u>	p. 7
1. Difficulties in Defining the Concept of “Political Party”	p. 7
2. Debate on the Emergence of American Political Parties	p. 15
3. Assessing some Assumptions	p. 20
<u>II. Definition of “Party Polarization”</u>	p. 23
1. Definitions	p. 23
2. Assessing some Assumptions	p. 26
CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES	p. 28
<u>I. State of the Nation after its Independence</u>	p. 29
1. Difficulties linked to this New Status of Independence	p. 29
2. The Intellectual Debate around and the Institutional Environment of the Political Parties’ Formation	p. 34
<u>II. The Process of Emergence itself</u>	p. 40
1. From Consensus to Conflict in Early Republic Politics	p. 41
2. Indirect Factors in the Political Parties’ Formation Process	p. 41
3. Direct Causes of the Conflict and Nature of the Strife	p. 46
4. Legitimatization of the Principle of Opposition	p. 53

CHAPTER THREE: AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND AMERICAN ELECTORATE	p. 55
<u>I. American Political Parties: their Evolution</u>	p. 56
1. Characteristics and Nature of the American Political Parties	p. 56
2. Historical Explanation of the American Political Parties' Nature	p. 57
3. Consequences of the Political Parties' Nature on American Politics	p. 64
4. Factors that have Contributed to Make the American Political Parties' Nature Persist through Time	p. 65
<u>II. American Electorate</u>	p. 71
1. Survey of the Americans' Participation in National Politics	p. 71
2. Characteristics and Voting Behaviour of the American Electorate	p. 74
3. Reasons Explaining the Americans' Voting Attitudes	p. 79
4. The American Electorate's Stance Regarding the Nature of Political Parties	p. 82
CHAPTER FOUR: PARTY POLARIZATION AND THE ELECTORATE	p. 87
<u>I. Party Polarization</u>	p. 87
1. Study of the Phenomenon of Party Polarization in the United States	p. 87
2. Factors at the Origin of the Polarization Phenomenon	p. 91
3. Effects of Party Polarization on the Electorate	p. 93
<u>II. Apparent Polarization</u>	p. 101
1. Factors Contributing to Give the Perception of Polarization in the Electorate	p.101
2. From Apparent Polarization to Real Polarization	p. 105
3. Consequences of Party Polarization and Reasons of its Ineffectiveness	p. 107
Conclusion	p.109
Bibliography	p.112

Introduction

"The political parties of the United States are the oldest in the world,"¹ states political scientist Arthur M. Schlesinger in his introduction of the History of U.S. Political Parties. Political scientist and historian Richard Hofstadter, for his part, advances that "[i]n a certain sense American political parties were the first modern parties."²

Undoubtedly, there seems to be an agreement among professional observers that the United States was the pioneer nation in the development of the modern political party. Admittedly, there had been groups referred to "party" before but the parties that emerged on the national scene of American politics after the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, were new political engines representing legitimate opposition to one another.

In fact, American political parties emerged as a part of a democratic expansion. Their development was closely linked to the extension of suffrage as qualifications requiring property ownership were lifted during the early 1800s. With a vastly expanded electorate, a means was required to mobilize masses of voters. Political parties became institutionalized to accomplish this essential task.

By 1830s, two major American parties were a firmly established part of the political firmament and there has been little multi-partysism as political Allan P. Sindler's observations tell us: "[f]rom 1828 to the present with few exceptions the two parties together have persistently polled upward of 90 percent of the national popular vote."³

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, History of U.S. Political Parties (New York: Chelsea, 1973) xxxiii, qtd. in "The First American Party System: Events, Issues, and Positions," National endowment for the humanities, Edsitement, Marcopolo, Dec. 2005 <http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=558>.

² Richard Hofstadter, The Idea of Party System (U.S.A.: University of California Press, 1970) 8, qtd. in "The First American Party System: Events, Issues, and Positions."

³ Milton Cummings, Jr., and David Wise, Democracy Under Pressure: An Introduction to the American Political System, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1977) 213.

Nevertheless, the fact that the American party system is firmly entrenched does not mean that it has played an even role on the political scene. As a matter of fact, their place in American politics is constantly changing. This ebb and flow of party strength remains a puzzle for political scientists. Presently, there is considerable disagreement among professional observers as to whether American political parties are in a state of resurgence or decline.

For the proponents of the thesis of decline political party's role is diminishing – both as important player in American politics including presidential and congressional elections and as object of voter support and loyalty. Besides a decline in partisan loyalty and a decline in interest in election and voting among the electorate, a group of scholars suggest that parties have declined as organizations. Despite efforts to reform and modernize internal party organizations the precise role of political parties in future American politics remains uncertain. That is why, in the last decades there has been considerably more concern expressed about the apparent continuing decline in the influence of the national parties and growing scepticism about their future survival as viable political organization in an anti-party age and in the face of a series of changes in the political environment. Some even go further, asserting that political party as an institution is over in the United States.

In fact, those who claim that the role today's political parties play is quite different from that they once played and who support the argument that parties are in a state of decline, imply that political parties are less relevant as political institutions in American society – thesis which in turn present an underlying assumption – that political parties were once regarded as an important part of the political culture. They tend to forget, however, that political parties have always been regarded with a degree of scepticism and ambivalence in the development of politics in the United State and were accepted only as

an indispensable evil to bring an integrating mechanism to a fragmented constitutional structure and have not really played an essential role in American politics.

While contemporary discussion of American political parties remains generally pessimistic, some political observers think that the era of decline that began in the late 1960s is over and that the parties are in a new era of resurgence.

In fact, political parties seem to follow a dual path of development and the fact that parties have survived for so long in a difficult and complicated environment is evidence of their adaptability, and there is no reason to think that, even in a changed political environment, they will not continue to play a major role in political life.

As far as this research paper is concerned, the alleged decline of political parties is not the core theme. This work goes beyond the clamour of these arguments and studies what happened to voter's behaviour as politicians have polarized to see whether there is an increasing partisan polarization in the American public. This dissertation is then an attempt to evaluate the effects of the trend of polarization on the electorate. In other words, this work will try to estimate the degree of popular responsiveness of individual voters with regard to this national political phenomenon. A number of questions must be asked in this respect: what are the features of the American party system? What is the relation of American political parties and this of the American electorate to ideology? Is the polarization of the political parties a new phenomenon? Is it along the basic differences that were at the origins of party formation? Why have politicians decided for such an alternative? How does the fragmentation in national politics affect voting behaviour? Are Americans satisfied with such tendency? Is polarization an alternative way of party effectiveness?

Political party is a rich subject of study with numerous interesting facets. To study polarization and electorate in parallel and to study their impact on each other is more than

relevant in that political parties are agencies devised primarily for the public. They are acting as a political intermediary between candidates, politicians and citizens, above all. Certainly, winning the control of government is the primary rationale of most political parties, but in seeking this goal, parties historically have also provided the major link between the policy demands of citizen and the political authority vested in elected representatives. It is then interesting to approach political parties through the study of voting behaviours. Also, as polarization is a phenomenon that provides fertile research ground for political scientists, it is challenging to tackle one side of the dynamics of partisan polarization especially as they have been subject to surprisingly little attention, however sensible these ideas may be. It is only in the lights of the 2000 and 2004 elections that this connection has acquired relevance as increasing attention is being devoted to voter turnout.

Examining the political parties in interaction with the electorate provides a better understanding of American, to see how the divide in national politics affects voting behaviour and to assess whether polarization as an alternative for revitalizing parties is effective.

In order to carry out this research, an attempt has been made to rely on a combination of descriptive, argumentative and analytical methods. Because of the nature of the topic this dissertation endeavours to study, description has been useful in drawing a clear picture of American political parties and electorate. Analysis of the described aspects aimed to provide a true insight into the described aspects. Also, arguments have been used to give substance to this dissertation.

We have divided this work into four chapters. The first chapter presents the main concepts of the dissertation, limits the scope of the study and announces the hypotheses on which this work is based. Political parties and polarization will be studied from a

theoretical perspective. The second chapter provides an historical background, undertakes a wholesale examination of the circumstances and the nature of the first national conflict that led to the emergence of political parties. The third chapter describes how American political parties developed and how they acquired within time their characteristics, on the one side; and, on the other side, it analyses the American electorate. The last chapter analyses the elite polarization, its effects on the mass behaviour and the level of trust in government.

When conducting this research, great care has been taken to rely on primary sources whenever possible. These include official documents, addresses and letters. Also, some books have been especially useful in the conduct of this research as they related to the topic being studied. These include The Federalist Era: 1789-1801 written by John C. Miller, Sait's American Parties and Elections, by Howard R. Penniman and Parties and Politics in America, by Clinton Rossiter.

CHAPTER ONE:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CONCEPTS

“POLITICAL PARTY” AND “POLARIZATION”

In this chapter of the dissertation, we will begin with a theoretical part in which we will attempt to undertake a conceptual study of the key terms of the dissertation and to present some fundamental premises on which the study is based. This first chapter, a fundamental step in the work, aims then at making things clear from the very beginning as to attempt to remove risks of misunderstanding or ambiguity.

I. Definition of “Political Party”

1. Difficulties in Defining the Concept of “Political Party”

First, one of the main concepts of this thesis is “political party.”

To formulate a satisfactory definition of such a concept is far from being an easy task. As a matter of fact, when attempting to describe it, we met several difficulties.

First, we were confronted with the fact that “political party” is a broad concept. Like a big circus tent, encompassing so many different acts, it is as difficult to define it in shorthand way as it would be to define a circus.⁴ Certainly, the adjective “political” restricts somehow the meaning of “party,” but still we are puzzled over the extent of the concept. In other words, we cannot determine with accuracy from where we should begin our study and where to end it. Perhaps it is to escape from this very difficulty that some political scientists have used the concept “political party” in much of the literature of the discipline without bothering to define it. Others, for their part, have tried merely to provide

⁴ Cummings and Wise 212.

simple descriptions of "political party." Others, still, have strived to define the concept in a more detailed way emphasizing certain aspects or viewing the concept under a particular angle. After the presentation of a survey of the wide literature, we will refer to the descriptions of political party which we will judge most appropriate.

To begin with, the famous English statesman and philosopher, Edmund Burke, provided a classic definition of a political party in the mid-eighteenth century. A political party wrote Edmund Burke, is “a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.”⁵ This definition is worth mentioning because we will notice that many other ones formulated afterwards are simply variations of this one. More precisely, it is the notion of "joint endeavors" that we meet again in other descriptions. Of course, in other references, the emphasis is not always exclusively on this notion of common interests but can be on the aspect of promoting a specific government, action or candidate that represents people's views as well. Anthony Downs' well-known definition states that a party is “a team of men seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election,”⁶ or still writer E. M. Sait's description which defines “the party” as “an organized group that seeks to control both the personnel and the policy of the government,”⁷ are illustrations of the aforesaid case.

Moreover, a deeper analysis of the concept of “political party” will show that the various definitions provided by different scholars can be classified as broad or narrow definitions. Broad definitions are preferred to narrow ones because the latter ones present

⁵ Mary Smith Magruder revised by William A McClenaghan, Magruder's American government (U.S.A.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc, 1969) 125.

⁶ Anthony Downs, a renowned scholar in public policy, real estate markets and economic issues, qtd. in Kenneth Janda, "Comparative Political Parties: Research and theory," 165, Political Science: The State of the Discipline, II, ed. Ada W. Finifter (Washington, D.C. American Political Science Association, 1993) 163-191, Nov. 2005 <janda.org/comparative%20parties/Janda_on_parties.htm>.

⁷ E. M. Sait, author of An Introduction to Political Parties and Practical Politics, qtd. in American Government in Action: Theory, Politics and Constitutional Foundation, Edward Marshall Dimock and Gladys Ogden Dimock (U.S.A: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1949) 245.

some hindrances especially in comparative politics. That is why, we will not bother to refer to narrow ones but just mention that there are different degrees of broadness.

For example, political scientist Giovanni Sartori who calls “political party” “any political group identified by an official label that is present at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or nonfree), candidates for public office,”⁸ provides a broad definition. Still more broadly, a party can be defined in political scientist Kenneth Janda's terms as "an organization that pursues a goal of placing its avowed representatives in government positions.”⁹

Furthermore, as under the concept "political party" are gathered organisations that are not necessarily equal in weight and in complexity, some scholars consider it necessary to make the distinction between them. They classify them under the label “major”, “minor”, “third”... depending on the cases. As far as the United States is concerned, two major parties practically make up the party system. This is the reason why, we speak of a two-party system. "Party system" is a concept in political science concerning the system of government in a state where political parties exist,¹⁰ or as stated in Giovanni Sartori's definition, it is "the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition."¹¹ The party system of a state determines how many political parties in a state have a realistic chance of capturing power and forming the government, usually through winning elections. Among the five distinct types of party systems is the two-party system when only two parties can realistically compete to control the government. In this case, other parties might exist but they have no political importance. Along with Great Britain, the United States has the most obvious two-party political system with the Republicans and

⁸ Janda 166.

⁹ Janda 166.

¹⁰ “Party system,” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 22 Oct. 2006, Text of the GNU, Free Software Foundation, Inc., Boston, 2000, 2001, 2002, Nov. 2006 <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_system>.

¹¹ “History Learning Site,” Historylearningsite.co.uk., 2000-2007, Nov. 2006 <www.historylearningsite.co.uk/party_systems.htm>.

Democrats dominating the political scene.

The second difficulty we face when attempting to define "political party" is due to boundary problems. At the horizontal level, the concept has several facets and therefore can be tackled from different angles. Political scientist Frank J. Sorauf has pointed to this difficulty when he wrote "[a]s there are many roads to Rome and many ways to skin a cat, there are also many ways to look at a political party."¹² Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some of the elements that make up a major political party. In American politics the title “Democratic party” or “Republican party” can be used interchangeably to denote one of five fairly distinguishable human groupings, whether at the national, state, local level, or at all of them altogether. The latter human groupings can be grouped into three main entities. One of them is the legally-recognized organizations i.e. people who give all or a sizable part of their lives to manning and managing the extragovernmental machinery (most visible in the clubhouses and the conventions). Another entity is the governmental party i.e. those who have been elected or appointed to office under the party’s label (most visible in the legislature). The third one is the coalitions of voters who identify with a specific party and who are united in professing the same partisan loyalties. In this mass of potential voters we can distinguish the committed electorate, the loyal, “card-carrying” members of the party for whom party activity is a secular church; the habitual electorate, those who have a steady record of voting for the party’s candidates; the occasional electorate, all those who voted for the party’s candidates, or at least the most important of them, at the last election.¹³

Each of these groupings may be defined as the party. Hence when we speak of party we typically mean any one of these entities or all of them. In the examination of political parties, we have then to be reasonably clear about which of their several facets we

¹² Cummings and Wise 212.

¹³ Clinton Rossiter, Parties and Politics in America, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1960) 68.

are observing whenever the context is not sufficient to make things explicit. In American studies, we can find these categories respectively under the labels “party in the organization”, “party in the government” and “party in the electorate.”¹⁴

The problem of defining and situating the boundaries of a "political party" to serve as a unit of analysis is raised also at the vertical level. The very nature of the two major American parties makes the distinction with other organized groups tricky. Indeed, there is an intricate web of non-party groups that surrounds infiltrates, and complements the two major American parties.¹⁵ Because, they overlap in many ways, the line of demarcation may at times be blurred and indistinct especially with "interest groups", "pressure groups", or "lobbies" depending on how we call them. Both – political parties and interest groups – are collections of people trying to achieve certain goals, to express attitudes about government, to secure the enactment of public policies. Careful examination, however, permits to notice that at least within the American political system, there are many features specific to political parties that distinguish the latter ones from these groups.

One of the most important features specific to political parties is the dispersion of interests.¹⁶ A political party, as distinguished from other organized groups, does not confine itself to the exploitation of a single issue. As a matter of fact and in contrast to pressure groups – which by representing a limited number of people with a particular or private interests, have a narrow appeal – political parties, as described by Maurice Duverger, a Professor of Public Law and Political Science, draw "their support from a broad base" and present a programme dealing with many national issues such as education, health care.¹⁷

¹⁴ Political scientists, following V.O. Key, distinguish among three sense of the word party. There are partisan attachments in the electorate, parties as political organisations and parties in government.

¹⁵ Rossiter 20.

¹⁶ Howard R. Penniman, Sait's American Parties and Elections, 5th ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952) 151.

¹⁷ Maurice Duverger, qtd. in Janda 166.

Another characteristic specific to political parties is their aim which is to dominate the government.¹⁸ Their primary goal is the conquest of power or a share in its exercise. Instead of seeking only to influence government on a narrow range of issues, a major party runs candidates for public office, attempts to win elections and gain control of the government. Its political function is therefore much more comprehensive than that of an interest group.¹⁹ Contrary to other organized groups, then, a political party – be it a minor party, a mere party of protest, without any near prospect of victory – must offer itself as an alternative to the major parties and, in competition with them, define its position on outstanding political controversies; in brief, it must indicate what it will do if entrusted with power.²⁰

It is true that other organized groups may nominate candidates; but they do this so sporadically and neither as a settled practice nor in the methods of making nominations. American election laws distinguish between political parties and independent bodies, recognizing the fact that with the former the bringing forward of candidates is a normal and characteristic function. At the same time, it is true that non-party groups are often active in election campaigns.²¹

Now that the concept of “political party” is defined, we can address another main difficulty in defining this concept, namely the fact that the concept evolves according to two variables: time and place. Being not a fixed concept, its meaning is not necessarily the same: it can be different according to the context. These parameters must be taken into consideration in any rigorous study of political parties.

As far as the space variations of the concept “political party” are concerned, a definition of the concept which emphasises upon basic principles as the cement which

¹⁸ Penniman 151.

¹⁹ Cummings and Wise 213.

²⁰ Penniman 152.

²¹ Penniman 153.

binds the party's membership is not an accurate description of the two major parties in the United States. Indeed, attempts to define and describe American major parties in terms of "principles" and "issues" distort their true nature.²² Irrelevant, so, are Maurice Duverger's liberal notion of political party according to which a party is before anything else an ideological grouping and politician and writer Benjamin Constant's definition which states that a party is a human grouping that professes the same political doctrine.²³

Rather a major national political party in the United States is a coalition of state and local party organizations united primarily by a common desire to win control of the Presidency and elect a party majority in both branches of Congress²⁴ and not a "political organisation of persons united by certain common political ideologies about the way government should be run."²⁵ Instead of seeking "principles," or "distinctive tenets," which can only divide a federal union, a major national political party in the U.S. is intended to seek bargains between the regions, the classes, and the other interest groups and to be an organisation for "getting or keeping the patronage of government."²⁶ Clarifying this point will help in the understanding of the tendency of American political parties to converge.

Another spatial variation worth mentioning is that the term "political parties" is sometimes used by some scholars in American study to mean exclusively the Republican party and the Democratic party. Clinton Rossiter is one of them and he makes this clear in Parties and Politics in America where he states: "[w]hen I say "political parties" I ... mean

²² Magruder 125.

²³ Maurice Duverger, Les Parties Politiques (France: Librairie Armand Colin, 1976) 19.

²⁴ John D. Lees, The Political System of the United States, 3rd ed. (Great Britain: Faber and Faber, 1983) 168.

²⁵ Robert K. Carr, Marvin H. Berstein, and al., Essentials of American Democracy, qtd. in The Evolution of Early Political Parties: Connecticut, 1750 -1818 A Case Study, John James Valente, Jr., Dec. 2005 <www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1980/cthistory/80.ch.05.x.html>.

²⁶ William N. Chambers, "The Concept of Party: an Analytical Model," 66, Political Parties and Political Behaviour, ed. William J. Crotty, Donald M. Freeman and Douglas Gatlin (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1966) 66-78.

the Democratic party and the Republican party.”²⁷

Furthermore, as the institution of political party itself evolves with time, so does the concept "political party", logically. According to historian Jackson Turner Main, before the ratification of the Constitution, was considered a political party, "simply a number of persons confederated by a similarity of designs or opinions in opposition to others" that do not require necessarily “intensive organization” or “ideologies about the way government should be run.”²⁸ Used in this context we can notice that the meaning of political party is akin to that of faction. Then, we can understand why in traditional political speech the terms "political party" and "faction" were sometimes regrouped under the label “faction” or even used interchangeably to mean the same. This resemblance in meaning leads us to devote some room in this chapter to the study of the term "faction" so as to carry out a relatively complete conceptual study of "political party".

In Cato's Letters Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard described a “faction” as “the gratifying of private passion by public means.”²⁹ Similarly, in The Federalist papers Madison’s “Publius” defines it as:

a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.³⁰

Alexander Hamilton’s “Publius” uses the word in the same sense. Generally speaking, eighteenth century people called “faction” putting own interests before the interests of the community. The negative connotation in these descriptions which is particularly pronounced in the Madisonian meaning reflects a general antipartyism in

²⁷ Rossiter 68.

²⁸ Jackson Main Turner, Political Parties Before the Ratification, qtd. in James Valente, Jr.

²⁹ Daniel Walker Howe, Making of American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln (U.S.A.:Harvard University Press, 1997) 94.

³⁰ Publius [James Madison], “The Federalist No 10: The Utility of the Union as Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and insurrection,” Daily Advertiser, Thursday November 22, 1787, Dec. 2005 <www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm>.

American thought that we will study in the next chapter. From another perspective, “faction” can be regarded as a stage in the development of political party because it looks like a political party but it is less elaborate.

After the effective rise of political parties, each term – "political party" and "faction" – evolved in its own way and took different meanings. Thus, in modern political speech, "faction" means a group of persons forming a cohesive, usually contentious minority within a larger group,³¹ an organization (often within a political party) that has different goals than those of the party as a whole, and seeks to promote those goals. In this case the term has not necessarily a negative connotation.

In much the same way, new lights are thrown on the concept of “political party”. Among the last variations of the term is the emphasis on the political party as adjunct of the electoral process. Thus, according to some political scientists, the idea of a political party as a coalition of interests and groups bound together by many sorts of ties, including the hope of electing a president, is fast becoming an anachronism.³² Indeed, writers on American political parties increasingly refer to them as “primarily electoral devices,” interested in “job or personnel politics,” almost exclusively bent on winning and holding office.³³ In other words, the political party is increasingly a label for masses of individual voters who pick among various candidates in primary elections as they would do among any alternatives marketed by the mass media.

2. Debate on the Emergence of the American Political Parties.

The study of the evolution of the concept "political party" will help us in the following step of this chapter i.e. to date the effective rise of political parties and therefore

³¹ “Faction,” [Answers.com FreeOnline Dictionnary, Encyclopedia, Thesaurus](http://www.answers.com), 5 Juin 2007, Answers Corporation, 2007, July 2007 <www.answers.com/topic/faction>.

³² George Mc Kenna and Stanley Feingold, [Taking sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Political Issue](#), 6th ed. (Guilford, Connecticut: Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., 1989) 22.

³³ Dimock and Dimock 245.

to determine when to start the present research. If we assume that factions were political parties in their traditional meaning, we have to wonder from when we can speak of “political party” in its modern meaning. In other words, we will attempt to estimate when American politics passed from a state of pre-party politics or faction politics to that of party politics. As there is no general agreement among the political scientists and historians as to the date of emergence of political parties, an examination of American history is necessary to take a stance on the issue.

When the British settled in America in the seventeenth century, political parties had not yet become central in British government, and so there was no question of transferring a party system to the colonies. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, popular representation had come into being and political parties were established in Britain.³⁴ While a predominantly English heritage had created a healthy climate for the development of the political parties in the United States, the gestation period of the institution there had been a very long one.³⁵ Indeed, American political parties did not begin to take shape until the First Congress had been elected, and until a need for discipline evolved. Though there seemed little need for parties and though the assumption remained that parties were unnecessary, it had become obvious in the 1800 election that national parties existed as two political parties competed for power on the national scene with clear formulated ideas and as the transfer of executive power from one faction to another took place peacefully via an election.

For many historians, however, it is far from being so obvious. On the one hand, some claim that the emergence of American political parties took place later, in the history, in the mid-nineteenth century. Clinton Rossiter is one of them and makes this clear in Parties and Politics in America. He states that by "political parties":

³⁴ Dimock and Dimock 244.

³⁵ William J. Crotty, Donald M. Freeman and Douglas S. Gatlin, Political Parties and Political Behavior (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1966) 61.

I do not mean a series of abstract agglomerates floating about in the heavenly city of political theory. I mean a pair of real parties, visible entities with legal status, organization, records, and bank accounts, that have dominated our political landscape since 1856 and have now moved beyond mere domination to a point where they may be said to “hog”it. I mean the Democratic party and the Republican party.³⁶

For this category of historians, then, the emergence of political parties corresponds to that of the present party system i.e. the fifth one. To them, so, the Federalists and Republicans of the Early Republic cannot be considered as political parties.

However, after a careful examination we can sustain that while the Federalists and Republicans lacked the appurtenances of present-day political parties the latter organisations were all the same political parties in the modern sense. Indeed, as William Nisbet Chambers shows in "The Concept of Party: An Analytical Model", the emergence of the Federalists reveals a transition from the older "connections" of fluid factions, family cliques, or juntos to the newer, modern connection of party and the party of Thomas Jefferson in the 1790's – the Jeffersonian Republican party – for its part, was a new political engine, the first of its kind in modern history³⁷. It exhibited little continuity with antecedent formations, and it developed political relationships which carried it well beyond the Federalist party – which was rather elitist – as an archetype of a modern, “popular” party.³⁸ So, it is in terms of relationship between structure and following that the Republicans may be thought of as a new kind of political institution.³⁹ Clearly, both organisations were more than mere groupings and each contributed to the development of party machinery.

Moreover, they were true parties in the sense that they acted upon clearly formulated ideas, that they had leaders of marked intellectual and political ability, and that

³⁶ Rossiter 68.

³⁷ Chambers 72.

³⁸ Chambers 72.

³⁹ Chambers 75.

they aspired to administer the government for the benefit of sections and economic groups.

Last but not the least, the fact that both parties fulfill William N. Chambers' criteria that differentiate political parties from factions asserts them as effective political parties. In his intensive analysis of the Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican parties, William N. Chambers has constructed a definition or rather an analytical model in which four key distinctions between “party” on the one hand and “faction” on the other may be noted. The first is a matter of structure: “a relatively durable or regularized relationship between leaders and followers” as a mark of part. “Active leadership” and a “freely recruited following,” as Max Weber has pointed out, “are necessary elements in the life of any party.” Next, parties contribute continuing procedures for performing certain key political functions, namely nomination, electioneering, shaping opinion, mediating government and supplying connections between the branches of government. Gathered into the third criterion is “range, density, and stability of support.” Generally parties encompass “a wider range of groups in their power base than faction, a greater density of the number of individuals enlisted in their followings as a ratio of all possible supporters and a greater stability of alignments in the public.” The fourth one is “in-group perspectives”: a party in the full sense “entails a distinguishable set of perspectives, or ideology, with emotional overtones.”⁴⁰

On the other hand, other historians place the emergence of American political parties much farther back in the course of American history.⁴¹ Certainly, we cannot deny that the Americans have shown a tendency to divide and associate since the beginning of their history. Certainly, we cannot deny either that political strives have prevailed before the foundation of the national government. As a matter of fact, from Colonial times through the early years under the Constitution of 1787 there were political activities and

⁴⁰ Chambers 66. As an illustration, during the Colonial Period, political struggles frequently polarized around “Popular” (legislative) and “Prerogative” (gubernatorial) factions.

⁴¹ Rossiter 66.

movements centering around various factions, cliques, juntas, and caucuses.⁴² During the Philadelphia Convention the presence of faction is clear: small states vs. large states; North vs. South; those who wanted centralization vs. those who wanted to maintain the confederacy; slave vs. non-Slave; and so forth. The most significant political division engendered by the stresses and strains of the Revolutionary Period is the strife between the Federalist and Antifederalist camps in the battle over the ratification of the Constitution of 1787.

All of these groupings were political parties in the traditional sense of the term and would prove to be the basis of the two parties which would emerge after the ratification of the Constitution and did also have some effect on the political make-up of the first four Congresses. In modern political speech, none of these, however, constituted effective political parties in the roles they played, the functions they performed, or in their own organizational structure and outreach.⁴³ These forces were in no sense formal political parties. Logically, there were no real national political parties prior to the establishment of the national government since the first national parties could only emerge in a national framework, in the only institutions of national power – the executive offices and the halls of Congress.

Even the Federalists and Antifederalists who were near to the definition of modern political parties as they were sharply divided on issues relating to the new framework of government did not adopt the organizational elements associated with formal political parties and so did not fulfill the criteria of modern political parties. Moreover, they resorted to violent means while a political party, by definition is a peaceful instrument for the public needs. An illustration is the outbreak that took place in New York on July 4, 1788, between the Federalists and Antifederalists over ratifying the new Constitution, in

⁴² Chambers 66.

⁴³ Crotty, Freeman and Gatlin 61.

which men fought one another with swords, bayonets, clubs, and stones, killing one rioter and wounding eighteen others. Another illustration is the violent reaction of enthusiasm of the Federalists at the reception of the news of ratification. They, indeed, went to the home of the editor of the Journal, the organ of Governor Clinton, smashed the windows, carried off the type, surrounded the governor's home and beat the rogue's march to indicate their republicanism.⁴⁴

3. Assessing some Assumptions

To assert that the forces that opposed and supported the Constitution were in no sense formal political parties gives birth to another debate: if really the Federalists before the ratification and the Antifederalists were not political parties in the modern political speech, are they not then the respective ancestors of the Federalist party and the Republican party born after the formation of the national government? Formulated in another way, are the Federalist party and Republican party a continuity of respectively the Federalists i.e. pro-constitutionalists and Antifederalists i.e. anti-constitutionalists? This leads us to wonder whether the conflict Hamilton sparked is really a new one or a continuation of previous disagreements.

Most historians refer to the “Party” of the Washington Administration as the Federalists with those in opposition to the policies of that Administration as Antifederalists.⁴⁵ Even the contemporaries used such designation. When Alexander Hamilton, for instance, “saw an organized opposition to his policies developing in Congress, he concluded that Antifederalism was again menacing the Union.”⁴⁶

In fact, the idea of continuity was a plausible one. It can be argued that the party

⁴⁴ Howard Munford Jones, O Strange New World, American Culture: The Formative Years (New York: The Viking Press, 1964) 44.

⁴⁵ Richard Berg-Anderson, “A Brief History of American ‘Major Parties’ and the ‘Two-Party’ System in the United States,” The Green papers, 21 May 2001, The Green papers. Com Staff, 2000-2001, Nov. 2005 <www.thegreenpapers.com/Hx/AmericanMajorParties.html>.

⁴⁶ John C. Miller, The Federalist Era: 1789-1801 (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1963) 98.

discord of the 1790s had its antecedents in earlier disagreements given its similitude in some points of divergence with the political strife during the convention for the ratification of the Constitution. Indeed, while the major issue confrontation of the 1790s certainly provided the atmosphere for the parties to form, there is significant evidence, according to some historians to suggest that the ideological frameworks around which political parties formed existed prior to the period. Historian Joseph Charles, for example, assumes that "the resulting divisions existed, at least in the germ before the issues arose."⁴⁷ Also, other historians consider that the loose coalitions between state-based "factions" along the lines of those cosmopolitan vs. localist divisions in Revolutionary Era politics – suggested by historian Jackson Turner Main – would prove to be the basis of the two parties which was to emerge after the ratification of the constitution and did also have some effect on the political make-up of the first four Congresses.⁴⁸

It can also be argued that most of those who favoured the new Constitution at the convention of 1787 became Federalists in the 1790s, while those who refused to sign it became Republicans. Moreover, many districts (and thereby presumably interests) which “voted against the Constitution in the ratification controversy also stood as Republican bastions in succeeding years.”⁴⁹

Nevertheless, serious difficulties attend the assumption of clear continuity from pro-constitutionalists i.e. the Federalists to the Federalist party on the one hand and from anti-constitutionalists i.e. the Antifederalists to the Republican party, on the other hand. First of all, to use the Federalists and the Federalist party and the Antifederalists and the Republican party, interchangeably is, in fact, more than a little inaccurate. The use of the

⁴⁷ Joseph Charles, “Hamilton and Washington: The Origins of the American Party System,” William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, 12.2 (April 1955): 217-218, qtd. in “Ideological Origins of political parties in the Early Republic,” Ethan A. Schmidt, Oct. 2006
<www.earlyamerica.com/review/2002_summer_fall/party_formation.htm>.

⁴⁸ Berg-Anderson.

⁴⁹ Chambers 72.

term "Antifederalists" – originally applied to those who had opposed the ratification of the Constitution – was justified only in the sense that some Republicans were former Antifederalists.⁵⁰ In fact, the term “Antifederalist” ceased to have any real meaning as a designation of a political faction once the Constitution formally took effect on March, 4 1789, as anyone serving in the new Federal Government had to take an oath to the new Constitution before entering upon their duties; referring to members of Congress as “Antifederalist”, thus, makes little-if any-sense.⁵¹

Second, the divisions that arose during the ratification process were different from the alignments that emerged during George Washington's administration: while most leaders who had opposed the Constitution became Republicans, so did many who had favoured it, including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. The latter was closely aligned with Alexander Hamilton during the struggle for ratification but led the opposition to Alexander Hamilton's Federalist party throughout the 1790s.⁵² Conversely, though some Republicans were former Antifederalists, not all the centers of Antifederalism became Republican strongholds and not a few of the leaders of Antifederalism – notably Richard Henry Lee and Patrick Henry, revolutionary men – switched their allegiance to the party of Alexander Hamilton.⁵³

Third, the similitude in the principles and programmes between the Federalists and the Federalist party, on the one hand, and between the Antifederalists and the Republican party on the other hand is only apparent and misleading. In so far as there were lines from proponents or opponents of the Constitution to the Federalist party or the Republican party, they were broken or badly bent in the debt assumption controversy. The party

⁵⁰ Miller 102.

⁵¹ Berg- Anderson.

⁵² Chambers 73.

⁵³ Miller 102.

conflict Hamilton sparked was a really new conflict.⁵⁴ Moreover, whatever their former political convictions might have been, Republicans vigorously denied that their party was Antifederalism revived. Unlike the Antifederalists, the Republicans professed ardent devotion to the Constitution and the “beautiful equilibrium” it established between the central and state governments. If the Republicans were to be believed, their principal purpose was to preserve that sacred document from the profane hands of Federalists who wished to pervert it into “a consolidation of the union in a Republic *one and indivisible*.”⁵⁵ Thus, the assumption of continuity between the Federalists and the Federalist Party and between the Antifederalists and the Republican Democratic party, though defensible, is not sound.

II. Definition of “Party Polarization”

1. Definitions

Now that we have dealt with the major concept and premise of this research we can tackle another key though relatively less broad concept, namely "polarization". In general terms, "polarization" refers to the process that causes people who had stayed “neutral to take sides in a conflict.”⁵⁶ The people on the two sides take “increasingly extreme positions – becoming more and more opposed to each other and more clearly defined as “different” from the other;” hence moving toward the “poles” or becoming “polar opposites.”⁵⁷ These two sides interact in such a way that each act in a sequence brings about a greater sense of threat in the other party. According to linguist Peter Harder the felt and conceived distance between ‘them’ and ‘us’ increases with each step in the

⁵⁴ Chambers 74.

⁵⁵ Miller 17.

⁵⁶ International Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, 1998, Mars 2006 <www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/glossary.htm>.

⁵⁷ International Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict.

process.⁵⁸

In a recent study of conflict escalation, Paul Olezak and Dean Pruitt see polarization as the second of four stages in the process of conflict escalation. During the first stage, the conflict is not particularly escalated. Perceptions of the opponent are relatively accurate (not stereotyped) and the parties still have a good relationship. However, conflicts often escalate to a second stage, which they call polarization. Parties engaged in conflict typically focus on their differences, which can result in pushing the parties toward polar opposite positions. As parties move toward these opposite "poles," they define themselves in terms of their opposition to a common enemy. As conflicts polarize, Paul Olezak and Dean Pruitt note, “trust and respect are threatened, and distorted perceptions and simplified stereotypes [and enemy images] emerge” to the point where the enemy is considered less than human, and hence not worthy of respect or what might have previously been considered “fair” treatment. In these conditions, parties assume more rigid positions and may refuse to negotiate.⁵⁹ That is how, the relationship between adversaries cannot remain undamaged.

Moreover, the process is somehow a vicious circle since escalation seems to increase polarization. Formerly neutral parties are pulled to one side or the other and fewer community members can retain their moderate positions.

We will not deal with the following stages in this process of conflict escalation but we have to mention that the third one is segregation and the fourth, destruction.

When applied to physics, psychology or other fields, the concept "polarization" takes specific meanings. In politics, polarization is the process by which the public opinion divides and goes to the opposite ends on the ideological spectrum. In other words, it is the

⁵⁸ Peter Harder, “Blending and Polarization: Cognition Under Pressure,” *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37(2005): 1636-1652, received 9 Dec. 2002, revised from 19 Aug. 2003, accepted 10 Feb. 2004, June 2006 <P.Harder et al./Journal of Pragmatics 37(2005)/1636-1652>

⁵⁹ Paul Olezak and Dean Pruitt, qtd. in [International Online Training Program](#).

grouping of opinions around two ideologically extremes. Before going further we have to precise that “polarization” must not be confused with “extremism.” We have also to define what we mean by a person’s political ideology and what the implications on a person’s behaviour are. A person’s ideology is a shorthand way of categorizing what one knows about politics; it is used for speedily assessing new political observations. People with highly refined ideological antennae have an especially well structured way of analysing politics, and these ideologues judge political propositions on how liberal and conservative they seem.

In fact, polarization occurs “[w]hen people divide on an issue, unless they find a resolution, they tend to push each other further out toward the opposite ends of the spectrum. Each end represents a value that is legitimate, but that also must be balanced against another value. Polarization is one way the system preserves balance, but it is an unstable and conflictual balance.”⁶⁰ It can also refer to cases which occur when the extreme factions of a political party gain dominance in a party. In either case moderate voices often find that they have lost power.

At a larger scale, in an effort to build their power base, parties often seek alliances with other interest groups, which agree to help each other as they pursue their separate objectives. In order to remain competitive, interest groups tend to form as many alliances as possible. Over time, this process tends to divide communities into two large and opposing alliances – it is this process that is called “polarization.”⁶¹ It may be one of the first steps to a civil war.⁶²

In vice-president and director of Government Studies at the Brookings institution

⁶⁰ Andrew Bard Schmookler, qtd. in “Polarization: Beyond Intractability,” Michelle Maiese and Tova Norlen, ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, Oct. 2003, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, Apr. 2006 <<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/polarization/>>.

⁶¹ Harder.

⁶² “Polarization,” [Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polarization), 26 May 2007, June 2007 <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polarization>.

Pietro S. Nivola’s words, polarization of U.S. politics reflects “a sorting of political convictions by either the mass public or ruling elites, or both, into roughly two distinct camps: persons inclined to support the Democratic or the Republican parties' policies and candidates for elective office.”⁶³

Like the concept of "political party", "polarization" can be viewed under a double level. At the horizontal level, we can distinguish social polarization, geographical polarization and partisan polarization. The latter one, the interest of this thesis, occurs when citizens hold more divergent views on major policy issues (issue based partisan polarization) and are more divided ideologically (ideological partisan polarization).

In the case of partisan polarization, at the vertical level, we can distinguish between elite partisan polarization and mass partisan polarization dubbed “popular polarization” by political scientist Morris D. Fiorina.⁶⁴

2. Assessing some Assumptions

Also, in much the same way as we have determined the emergence of political party we will determine the beginning of the phenomenon of polarization. Here again there is not a general agreement among political observers. Some of them claim that the process of polarization is not a new phenomenon since political polarities can be already noticed before 1945. According to them, the norm in American politics has been extraordinary polarization and that the relative era of bipartisanship during the Cold War was unusual. If we follow their logic, American politics is simply reverting to the norm these recent years. For them, so, it is only the concept that is new not the phenomenon.

⁶³ Pietro S. Nivola, “Thinking about Political Polarization,” *The Brookings Institution*, Policy Brief 139, Jan. 2005, May 2006 <www1.hamiltonproject.org/printme.wbs?page=/comm/policybriefs/pb139.htm>.

⁶⁴ Bridget Murray Law, “The Culture War Myth,” *PsychNET* 36. 5 (May 2005) American Psychology Association, 2005, Apr. 2006 <www.apa.org/monitor/may05/myth.html>.

Some observers even go to argue that real polarization was in the nation’s past and that in comparison with it today’s social and partisan strife is pale. Indeed, there had been long stretches of American history in which ruptures in society were far worse than they are now. To prove this case Pietro S. Nivola invites us to recall the racial apartheid that scarred America for a century after the formal end of slavery, and the urban riots and anti-war protests that inflamed the country during the 1960s.⁶⁵ Epic struggles were waged between advocates of slavery and abolitionists, between agrarian populists and urban manufacturing interests at the end of the nineteenth century, and between industrial workers and owners of capital well into the first third of the twentieth century. According to those who hold such viewpoint the modern observers who advocated polarization as a new phenomenon are misled by the recent period of relative political consensus and more precisely the bipartisan cooperation on foreign policy in the immediate post-World War II period.

There have been interludes when it was possible to speak of “the end of ideology,” in sociologist Daniel Bell’s phrase,⁶⁶ but for them, those periods may have been more the exception than the norm.

⁶⁵ Nivola.

⁶⁶ Daniel Bell, a sociologist and professor emeritus at Harvard University, qtd. in Nivola.

CHAPTER TWO:
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EMERGENCE
OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are long-lived institutions. Tracing back their origins and the circumstances in which they emerge is a fundamental step in the study of any political party. Without some preliminary knowledge of their development, many questions would be clouded in obscurity. Indeed, the study of political parties cannot be complete without a historical discussion of the conditions, circumstances and stages of their formation that contribute to explain for a great part for the nature of political parties and give insight on today's debate. The history of American political parties is a relatively recent one and a clear one as political parties took roots in the upper level of U.S. government and not in the bottom as other nations' parties.

This chapter may seem a little bit too long or too detailed but all the steps of the demonstration are essential to grasp the significance of the whole phenomenon and understand later argumentation. Moreover, great care is taken about examining the process of formation through lenses other than those of the framework of today to avoid being misled by any transposition of the current political views.

In this chapter we will first try to draw the historical, intellectual and institutional circumstances that surrounded the emergence of the political parties, find out the factors that contributed to give the appropriate conditions for their formation, analyse the nature of the conflict that gave birth to the political parties. In a second step, we will study the process in which political parties became accepted as a necessary evil and try to show how

they became institutions, part of the political system, or, said otherwise, how they became entrenched in the political arena.

In the previous chapter, we have tried to clear up the ambivalence existing in American history around the exact date of the emergence of political parties. After the examination of the debate among historians, we have concluded that the ratification of the constitution is the point of departure of the political parties' formation process. Nevertheless, to draw the historical context of the political party formation process properly we judge fair to go back to the end of the Revolution period.

I. State of the Nation after its Independence

1. Difficulties linked to this New Status of Independence

After having declared their independence on July, 4 1776, the thirteen American colonies waged a war against Great Britain and at last won their independence. With the Treaty of Paris signed in 1783, they became officially the United States of America but many European powers doubted whether that infant nation would survive. Naturally, it is difficult for the Americans as for us, researchers in American studies to conceive and understand how fragile a republic the United States of America was in the eighteenth century. Her weaknesses made her survival arduous and its success doubtful.

First of all, the Young Republic had to recover from the war. The latter depleted her economically – she was burdened with debts – as well as demographically. The loss of life was made even more dramatic as the war took place in the context of a massive smallpox epidemic in North America.⁶⁷ Besides the material and human casualties whose figures have varied over the years, a more striking consequence of the revolution was the

⁶⁷ “Casualties and Survivors,” [Reference. Com](http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/America_Revolutionary_War), Lexico Publishing Group, LLC., 2006, Jan. 2006 <www.reference.com/browse/wiki/America_Revolutionary_War> .

post-war disillusionment that affected the Americans: their joy of the victory and the prospect of freedom and independence rapidly let room to a bitter disappointment. To understand this state of mind, it is necessary to recall that the colonists had sought at first merely to redress grievances in general, to compel the ministry to relax certain irksome trade restrictions in particular. Because of some radical elements in the movement of protest, who insisted upon cutting the ties with the Mother Country, complete independence had been achieved, however. Its realization suddenly confronted the Americans with the exclusion from the British Empire within which the colonies used to enjoy substantial advantages and positive benefits⁶⁸. Also, Americans were confronted with the settlement of the status and the defence – against Indian, Spanish, French and British attacks that resulted into intermittent frontier warfare⁶⁹ – of a whole region South of the Great Lakes and East of the Mississippi conceded as under American control by the Treaty of Paris; and, with the settlement of the position of the nation on the international scene.⁷⁰

But above all, they were confronted first with how to instill a national feeling and how to shape a national identity and then how to hold together a whole nation in a consensual society so that it would not fall apart. With the independence, it was naively assumed that Americans would be perfectly free to order their economic and political society as one great family. Certainly the relative homogeneity of the population in terms of values, culture and nationality makes the task look easy. But the newly American society was far to be a great family. The differences born from territorial diversity between colonies must not be underestimated. During the whole settlement period and colonial era, indeed, the colonists had to adjust to their environment and therefore to develop specific

⁶⁸ Wilfred E. Binkley, American political parties: Their Natural History, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954) 8.

⁶⁹ Howe 58.

⁷⁰ Edward Countryman, The American Revolution (U.S.A.: Hill and Wang, 1985) 180.

patterns of life, different systems of values, aspirations and interests. James Madison, himself, recognized that the fundamental challenge to American statesmanship was to unite “the minds of men accustomed to think and act differently;”⁷¹ especially as the removal of a common denominator i.e. the common enemy, Great Britain hampered any prospect to rally the Americans as each state began to go its own way. As a matter of fact, “at times it seemed that the peace, by removing the British, had removed the one force capable of inspiring an effective union.”⁷²

Clearly, the surge of patriotism and solidarity that animated the war was exceptional; loyalty to the states and even to the British crown was put dormant temporarily for the sake of freedom. As soon as the independence was won, a return to the ante war state surfaced. In the early republic, provincialism prevailed over nationalism even in the highest national scale. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, when he used the expression “My country”, he meant Virginia and not the United States.⁷³

To instill a national feeling in the American mind is all the more difficult since even the term “national” used to arouse ill feeling and even suspicion. As a proof of this, in 1789 James Madison was rebuked in the House of Representatives for using the word “national”⁷⁴. The latter term was so suspect that it was deliberately omitted from the Federal Constitution.

Another basic problem linked to the new status of independence to which the American statesmanship was confronted is the framing of a sound national government. This task was all the more crucial since the circumstances which led the future Americans to the new world – escape from tyranny and quest for opportunity – made government a

⁷¹ Miller 2.

⁷² Hugh Brogan, The Penguin History of the United States, 2nd ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999) 188.

⁷³ Claude-Jean Kaspi and Bertrand Heffer, La civilisation américaine (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1979) 256.

⁷⁴ Miller 3.

primary concern in their lives. They were eager to devise a political system that would reflect the ideals for which they had overthrown the British crown. Asserting American concern was Thomas Jefferson for whom the establishment of a workable political system was “the whole object” of the American Revolution. “Should a bad government be instituted for us in future,” Thomas Jefferson observed, “it had been as well to have accepted at first the bad one offered to us from beyond the water without risk and expense of contest.”⁷⁵

Here again one can concede that some factors helped the Americans in their framing of government. They benefited not only of a whole leg of philosophic and political ideas coming from the Old World – as they had inherited an “Atlantic republican tradition” of political thought⁷⁶ – and already embodied in their system of government but also of a political debate about the problem of republican government that animated the intellectual scene throughout the 1780s, of the other nations’ experiences, of a relative experience in self-government for under the divide-and-rule policy or also called the policy of “salutary neglect,” the colonists, mostly ignored by the British Crown, had time to develop a thriving political atmosphere in North America. All the colonies had governor (the executive branch), legislatures, and a judiciary.⁷⁷ The Virginian House of Burgesses formed in 1619 was only an early formed example of functioning governments. But all these assets would have not been turned to good account if the Americans had not benefited of a remarkable group of writers and thinkers as the governing elite. Repeating writer Susan Dunn’s image, it was understood “that some Americans – the Fathers –

⁷⁵ Miller 2.

⁷⁶ “Republicanism,” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 22 Feb. 2007, May 2007 <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republicanism_in_the_United_States>.

⁷⁷ Cummings and Wise. 37.

would pilot society, as they piloted their families, while other Americans – the wives, the children, the ‘people’ – would sit in the back of the boat, obediently rowing.”⁷⁸

Nevertheless, despite this cushion of experience and assets the new Americans were unprepared for the sudden expansion of power from a regional setting to a national one. They had indeed no experience in *intercolonial* government.⁷⁹ Instead of dealing with issues only pertaining to their colony (now state), from that time on, politicians had to enlarge their focus to a national scale, to balance competing sections, interests and philosophies, and to tackle the problem of extensive government as the original settlers pushed westward and millions of others arrived from different parts of the world developing then a governmental problem on a continental scale.

Framing a government was all the more difficult since the states were reluctant to surrender part of their autonomy to a higher authority and since no federal or republican government had ever worked on so large a scale. In the eighteenth century how large and complex could a republic become before its own contradictions drove it to destruction was still an issue in political theory especially in David Hume’s writings.⁸⁰

No precedent either existed for the form of the executive. In spite of great achievements, the first attempt to establish government under the Articles of Confederation failed precisely because of the non existence of presidency. With the Federal Constitution and its great silences, the issue was not really settled since the article dealing with the prerogatives of the president (Article II) was not only short but also open to many interpretations.

⁷⁸ Charles Matthews, “A Lively View of Founding Fathers in Political Fray: Review of Jefferson’s Second Revolution: The Election Crisis of 1800 and the Triumph of Republicanism by Susan Dunn,” The San Jose Mercury News, 5 Sept. 2004, Humanities Williams college, Oct. 2005 <www.williams.edu/humanities/sdunn/books/pages/jefferson_revolution.htm> .

⁷⁹ James MacGregor Burns and Jack Walter Peltason, Government by the People: The Dynamics of American National, State, and Local Government, 7th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1969) 21.

⁸⁰ Countryman 210.

In spite of these difficulties, President George Washington and the nation as a whole were eager to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. There was a concern to preserve this consensus and anything that would jeopardize it was apprehended. Nevertheless, dissension could not have been prevented. The natural method of peaceful solution was to define the issues, choose rival groups of candidates to support them, and then let the voters decide. Parties arose, therefore, but the party system was only slowly accepted.

2. The Intellectual Debate around and the Institutional Environment of the Political Parties Formation

We will study the intellectual debate and the institutional environment that surrounded the formation process so as to draw a fairly exhaustive picture of the political climate at that time and as to understand why antipartysism is deeply rooted in the American mind.

First, by intellectual environment is here meant the positions and attitudes of philosophers and politicians towards factions and political parties. The analysis of their literature shows that antipartysism prevailed in the Western World in general and in the Anglo-Saxon writings in particular. When Thomas Jefferson declared: “[i]f I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all,”⁸¹ he was in fact reflecting this dominant feeling in American thought. Also when, for example, James Madison, George Washington, Andrew Jackson, David Hume, and Alexis de Tocqueville use pejorative connotations or harsh expressions to label political parties or factions like “evil,” “dangerous vice,”⁸² “deomon,”⁸³ “monster called party spirit,”⁸⁴ “intrinsically bad,”⁸⁵ “mal

⁸¹ Thomas Jefferson, Quotations from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson: a letter of Thomas Jefferson to Francis Hopkinson, 1789 ME 7:300, Jefferson Literary and debating Society, Eyler Robert Coates, Sr., 1995-2001, Dec. 2005 <<http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/>>

⁸² Publius, “The Federalist No 10.”

⁸³ George Washington, “Farewell Address,” 1796, Last modified on 12 June 2000, The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, 1996, Dec 2005 <www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm>.

inherent”⁸⁶... they were expressing the nature of this feeling, namely a mixture of fear, despise and even hatred. Even George Washington, a revolutionary hero and a chief-of-state, did hide neither his fear nor his contempt for political parties in his Farewell Address.⁸⁷ John Adams, the next president, for his part, confided one day: “there is nothing I dread so much as the division of the Republic into two great parties each under its leader.”⁸⁸ These feelings explain why the same men made incessant warnings against the existence of political parties and against their wrongdoings. George Washington, for instance, warned the people against “the baneful effects of the spirit of party.”⁸⁹

Such an attitude towards political parties is difficult to understand. It is relevant to our research to find out what made them view political parties unfavourably and to see whether their apprehension was legitimate or only the result of speculation, prejudice or paranoia. To bring an answer to this puzzle, we will try to look at the American thought and especially at the mind of those who had fought the Revolution.

One facet of the Americans’ character was their commitment to the achievement of their mission, namely to build a “city upon a hill,” their eagerness to succeed in their national experience, to preserve the unity born with the War of Independence – an asset of prime importance for the survival of the new born nation – to realize their ideal, namely “to create a union so perfect that the people be united in furthering the national welfare,”⁹⁰ to be one people and only one motivated by common intent rather than by the spirit of party – source of weakness and dissension potentially undermining the national consensus. That is why, the governing class, apprehending such thing, was determined to prevent the

⁸⁴ Rossiter 73.

⁸⁵ Publius, “The Federalist No 10.”

⁸⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville. *De la Democratie en Amerique*, Tome I (France: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981) 256.

⁸⁷ John Avlon, *Independent Nation: How Centrists Can Change American Politics. The Rise of Independents*, paperback edition, released Spring 2005, Harmony Books, 2004, May 2006 <http://www.independentnation.org/rise_of_independents.htm> .

⁸⁸ Cummings and Wise 214.

⁸⁹ George Washington, “Farewell address.”

⁹⁰ Miller 99.

spirit of party from taking shape into institutionalized organisations at the national level or at least to prevent its wrongdoings. In this respect, their ideal was a one-party state in which distinctions are to be absorbed by an all-embracing American patriotism.⁹¹

The governing class' fears were sharpened by the colonists' previous experiences with parties in Great Britain – where the personal followings of British politicians, the “King’s Friends” as they had been designated, sustained the ministry whose arbitrary policies had driven the colonists to revolt⁹² - and by the observations they made overseas in the Old World where vicious fighting for political interests had crippled the stability and strength of Europe. State of thing that statesman, physician and philosopher Benjamin Franklin took care to remind his audience of, on Saturday, June 2, 1787, when taking the floor at the Constitutional Convention. He declared that ambition and avarice, the love of power, the love of money “renders the British government so tempteous (and it is the source) of all those factions which are perpetually dividing the nation [and] distracting its councils.”⁹³

Another trait of Americans' character is their eagerness to succeed in their republican and democratic experience and to devise a political system that would reflect the values for which they overthrew the despotic rule of George III, and cut ties with the Mother Country, Great Britain. Far from preserving such cherished values, political parties, it was thought, would spoil the political system and nurture the spirit of revenge – idea clearly expressed by George Washington when he said “if we mean to support the Liberty and Independence, which it has cost us so much blood and treasure to establish we must drive away the deamon of party spirit and local reproach”⁹⁴.

⁹¹ Miller 99.

⁹² Binkley 18.

⁹³ “The Founding Farthers Political Party Affiliations,” Golden Nuggets from U.S. History, The Blue Quill Series, Concord Learning systems, 1999-2003, Dec. 2005

www.laughtergenealogy.com/bin/history/politics.html

⁹⁴ Miller 99.

To the Americans of the Early Republic, political parties are against the rhetoric of independence in that they do not reflect the aforesaid values and put intermediaries – themselves – between “we, [and] the people,” and in that they are based on the principle of personal interest. They were considered as bodies of self-aggrandizement and thought to smell corruption. They were feared as dangerous institutions that represented a corrupting self-interest. Indeed, party men would be more interested in contending with each other than in working for the common good – as James Madison justly pointed out when he wrote “public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties”⁹⁵ – and, according to George Washington, political parties become “in the course of times and things...potent engine by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the Power of the People, to usurp for themselves the reins of government.” Politicians would turn “this disposition to the purposes of [their] own elevation.”⁹⁶

Furthermore, when misused and when growing too rapidly, political parties present as well a risk of oligarchic government. Once again, George Washington observed shrewdly, “[t]hey [political parties] serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put, in the place of the delegated will of the nation, the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community.”⁹⁷ Clearly, the founding generation apprehended the presence of political parties and earnestly hoped that they would not rise in the United States.

Strangely enough, however, while being aware of the perverse effects of the political parties, the governing class and especially the Founding Fathers conceded that parties were necessary in several ways. For them, political parties are a necessary evil. Reflecting this ambivalence is George Washington’s Farewell Address. After decrying the “baneful effects” of sectionalism and partisanship, the incumbent president acknowledged

⁹⁵ Publius, “The Federalist No 10.”

⁹⁶ George Washington, “Farewell Address.”

⁹⁷ George Washington, “Farewell Address.”

that political parties were useful as checks upon the administration of the government and as devices to keep alive the spirit of liberty.⁹⁸ The governing class shared that concession. Political parties do serve some democratic interests by providing alternatives and so preventing through competition any dictatorship of one party, by working as an important check to the abuses in the representatives, by preventing precipitation, promptitude of decision and so promoting deliberation and circumspection though they may, sometimes, obstruct salutary plans argued Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist* 70.⁹⁹ One delegate to the Massachusetts ratifying convention upheld Alexander Hamilton's opinion saying that "competition of interest ...between those persons who are in and those who are out office will ever form one important check to the abuse of power in our representatives."¹⁰⁰ Still, political parties do serve some democratic interests by preserving the purity of the government Thomas Jefferson begrudgingly acknowledged when in 1798 he wrote to John Taylor: "[p]erhaps this party division is necessary to induce each to watch and delate to the people the proceedings of the other."¹⁰¹ To Joel Barlow, he wrote four years later: "[a] respectable minority [in Congress] is useful as censors."¹⁰² In another letter written in 1811 to Henry Lee, Thomas Jefferson expressed the same idea at length:

I am no believer in the amalgamation of parties, nor do I consider it as either desirable or useful for the public; but only that, like religious differences, a difference in politics should never be permitted to enter into social intercourse or to disturb its friendships, its charities or justice. In that form, they are censors of each other and useful watchmen for the public.¹⁰³

So where some see a tool for corruption, Thomas Jefferson sees an essential means to preserve the purity of the government through the censorship which these parties

⁹⁸ George Washington, "Farewell Address."

⁹⁹ Publius [Alexander Hamilton], "The Federalist No 70: The Executive Department Further Considered," *Independent Journal*, Saturday, March 15, 1788, Jan. 2006 < <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/funddocs/fed/federa70.htm>.>

¹⁰⁰ "The First American Party System: Events, Issues, and Positions."

¹⁰¹ Quotations from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Taylor 1798 ME 10:45

¹⁰² Quotations from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson, letter to Joel Barlow, 1802.

¹⁰³ Quotations from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson, letter to Henry Lee, 1824 ME 16:73.

habitually exercise over each other, and to keep alive the spirit of liberty since political parties are born where men think, speak and act freely according to “the diversities of their individual conformations.”¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, for Thomas Jefferson and James Madison the existence of political parties is more than a necessity, it is an obligation. “In every free and deliberating society, there must (emphasis added), from the nature of man, be opposite parties, and violent dissensions and discords,”¹⁰⁵ said the former. In the same logic, “possible factions [political parties] must (emphasis added) exist,”¹⁰⁶ said the latter. Their presence is the condition sine qua non to the preservation of liberty. In other words, political parties are indispensable to democracy since if we suppress political party activity we will suppress freedom of speech, freedom to organize, to think... seed bed of political parties.

This founding generation’s dual attitude towards the political parties is reflected in the Federal Constitution. Though the latter is entirely silent about political parties and the details that has to do with party machinery – “[t]he convention at Philadelphia [which consciously avoided to debate party government] produced a constitution with a dual attitude: it was pro party in one sense and anti party in another.”¹⁰⁷

On the one hand, the Framers, authors of the Constitution, provided a fertile ground for the development of political parties. As a matter of fact, even if they rejected party government, they established a system of party tolerance as they refused to destroy the fundamental liberties in which parties originate and as they or their immediate successors accepted amendments that guaranteed civil rights.

On the other hand, the framers set up an elaborate political structure and various constitutional arrangements to make parties ineffective or at least to discourage and

¹⁰⁴ Quotations from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson, letter to A.L.C. Destutt de Tracy, 1811 ME 13:21.

¹⁰⁵ Quotations from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Taylor 1798 ME 10:45.

¹⁰⁶ Publius, “The Federalist No 10.”

¹⁰⁷ Elmut Eric Schattschneider, “Party Government,” 173, American Government: Reading and Cases, 2nd ed., ed. Peter Woll (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965) 171-74.

control party or factional activity. As a matter of fact, the Constitution was designed to structure power relationships in such a way that the arbitrary exercise of political power would be prevented by any one group or individual.¹⁰⁸ In a very real sense, the separation of powers within the national government, together with the division of powers produced by Federalism and indirect election of the president by an electoral college – leading to the confrontation of president and congress and not that of political parties in the legislatures – provided a constitutional framework by which the Founding Fathers intended to insulate the new republic from political parties and factions.¹⁰⁹ These are the pro party and anti party parts of the constitutional scheme which make up the institutional environment in which the first national political parties emerged.

This dual attitude of the constitution was foreseeable when we know that the “great object” of the Constitution formulated by James Madison was “to preserve the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction [party] and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government.”¹¹⁰

II. The Process of Emergence itself.

That is how, in spite of the reluctance and all the measures taken against the development of political parties, the latter did emerge and their existence at the national level was a fact in the 1780s. But before dealing with the process of emergence itself it is worth examining how American politics shifted from a state of relative consensus and cooperation to one of conflict and adversary.

¹⁰⁸ Lees 169.

¹⁰⁹ Lees 169.

¹¹⁰ Schattschneider 171.

1. From Consensus to Conflict in Early Republic Politics

In the very beginning of the Early Republic several parameters ushered a period of unity. The Antifederalists accepted their defeat, George Washington was unanimously chosen as president of the first national government, the first session of Congress succeeded in passing a series of key measures like the Judiciary Act passed in 1789 which came to define the structure of the federal judiciary – thing that the Constitution has not done.

Unfortunately for the Americans, this atmosphere of political cooperation and national unity was short-lived. Relations among the governing class, for example, between Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, deteriorated. While both were major Federalist thinkers, both were friends of the Union, both struggled for ratification; they came, however, to be opposed to each other for some reasons that will be dealt with later in this chapter. Whether or not their divergences were latent and whether or not they struck up an alliance, during the ratification campaigns, for their ends is another issue. What is certain is that their strongly nationalist views at this period were largely identical. The breach in their relation appeared first in Congress and then spread to all levels of government.

That is how, disagreements among the Federalists gave birth to the first national political parties. The Federalists, no more a faction, became a party, namely the Federalist party, and the opposition coalesced into the Republican party. Thus, the first national polarization was taking place.

2. Indirect Factors in the Political Parties' Formation Process

We will deal with the process of emergence itself by probing first into the factors favouring it. New political alignments among the governing class were accentuated by a

certain number of parameters which were indirect factors in the formation process of political parties and their relatively rapid crystallization. Apart from the property side of the constitutional framework and the great silences of the Constitution that let room to act according to different interpretations, the attitude of George Washington in this respect is worth mentioning. Certainly, according to some historians, the Revolution War made of him a symbol of national unity, surrounded him with an outstanding fame and prestige, endowed him with an intimate knowledge of men from all parts of the country and with an ability to size them up and get along with them.¹¹¹ Certainly, still again, his outstanding wisdom enabled him to temper the atmosphere – whenever confronted to the quarrels between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson especially as he became aware that the degree of the dispute could jeopardize the government – by trying to be impartial, by reminding them that “[m]ankind cannot think alike...but would adopt different means to attain the same end,” by advising them “to mark out a line by which both could walk in peace and understanding;” and, by urging both men to make “mutual yieldings.”¹¹² His outstanding wisdom enabled him as well to transcend differences in opinions, to put up with the faults of able men like those he appointed, to use their qualities so as to achieve his grand wish namely this of establishing in his country the golden reign of liberty. He declared “I was no party man myself, and the first wish of my heart was, if parties did exist, to reconcile them.”¹¹³

Nevertheless, we have not to be misled by the aforesaid assets which are for a large part product of American propaganda. We have to ask whether President Washington was really a break in the formation process or rather an accelerator. It seems, after a careful study, that George Washington’s impartiality and rallying force presented some limits.

¹¹¹ Samuel Eliot Morison. The Oxford History of the American People, 1789-1877, II (New York: Samuel Eliot, 1972) 36.

¹¹² Miller 95.

¹¹³ Avlon, The Independent Nation.

Further than that, we can even advance that he contributed to a great extent, in spite of himself, to the launching of the political parties formation process.

At first glance, one can think that it is George Washington's initiative to create a cabinet, an "extralegal body,"¹¹⁴ in Professor Richard F. Fenno, Jr.'s terms – aiming to palliate his lack of knowledge and diplomatic experience – that had provided a fertile ground for the sowing of the seeds and plantation of political parties. One can think as well that his choice of the members from different outlooks – aiming to offer the nation an alternative government and to promote the true and permanent interests of his country to "extract all the good [he] can"¹¹⁵ had the same effect. However, the President's part of responsibility lay neither on the creation of the cabinet since it was an alternative to the failure of the Senate to be an advisory body,¹¹⁶ nor on the choice of the members since his sphere of choice was limited. Benjamin Franklin was too old and feeble, John Adams had been elected Vice President and John Jay made enemies by negotiating with Spain a treaty thought to be detrimental to the United States.¹¹⁷ Still, in spite of these limitations the President chose only Federalists as members and if they were of different outlook, the president was in fact only following the principle of the Cabinet system as it was first established in Great Britain according to which the cabinet system requires for its healthy functioning, two rival parties to criticize each other and to offer to the nation a choice between two alternative governments. The cabinet, in fact, had only brought to light latent divergences by gathering in higher office positions men of different opinions. So it is not by creating a cabinet, that President George Washington played a role in the launching of the emergence process of political parties.

¹¹⁴ Cummings and Wise 49.

¹¹⁵ Miller 58.

¹¹⁶ Alfred H. Kelly, Winfred A. Harbison and Herman Belz, The American Constitution: its Origins and Development (New Delhi: Norton and Company, 1983) 127.

¹¹⁷ Morison 36.

Rather George Washington's responsibility in the formation process lies in his political affiliation while he advocated ideological neutrality and in his partial attitude when interacting with the members while protesting his affection for both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson and admitting that their views were "pure and well meant."¹¹⁸ Indeed, despite President Washington's attempt to transcend political divisions, his political leaning to federalism as well as his special treatment towards Alexander Hamilton aroused serious controversy and reaction.

Alexander Hamilton gained special favour from George Washington during the War of Independence as he was one of the General's aides-de-camp and since then he became one of George Washington's closest friends. Proof of this affinity is George Washington's correspondence with Alexander Hamilton when the Secretary was absent from Congress: "I'm sorry you went away. I wish you were back."¹¹⁹ This close relationship that Alexander Hamilton had with President George Washington made him one of the most important influences during the President's tenure. Indeed, the President used to consult the cabinet members upon general question of governmental policy – except those relating to finance where he relied almost wholly upon Alexander Hamilton.¹²⁰

Moreover, the President tended to lean towards Alexander Hamilton's side on several occasions. For instance, when he was hesitant about the public credit, he turned to Alexander Hamilton who convinced him of the necessity for such measure. When he was hesitant about the legislation for the establishment of the National Bank which aroused a heated debate about its constitutionality, he once again turned to Alexander Hamilton for

¹¹⁸ Miller 95.

¹¹⁹ George Washington, Letter to Alexander Hamilton (During an absence from Congress), July 19, 1787, The Alexander Hamilton Page, Nov. 2005 <<http://www.lambida.net/maximum/hamilton.html>>.

¹²⁰ Miller 84.

his opinion, considered Alexander Hamilton's doctrine of implied powers and signed the bill approving the national bank.¹²¹

Furthermore, George Washington did not sanction Alexander Hamilton when he encroached on other departments and undertook unilateral actions. Alexander Hamilton did not hesitate to interfere in the exploratory talks being carried on in London by Governor Morris.¹²² So completely did he dominate Henry Knox, the secretary of War that the latter became hardly more than a minion of the Treasury.¹²³ Neither did he confine himself to his subordinate status conducting himself more like a prime minister than as a mere head of department. Alexander Hamilton's unilateralism made historian Wilfred E. Binkley comment on his behaviour: "[w]ith a boldness at which even an English Prime Minister might have hesitated, the young Secretary began giving directions, even in matters of detail in their respective departments, to Secretary of State Jefferson, Secretary of War Knox, and Attorney General Randolph."¹²⁴

It seems natural that such favouritism and passivity from George Washington encouraged the Secretary of Treasury in his unilateralism and gave rein to his ambition especially as he was well aware of this special relationship as he confessed to Laird of the Grange on May, 2, 1797 "[i]t is pleasant reflection to me that since the commencement of my connection with General Washington to the present time, I have possessed a flattering share of his confidence and friendship."¹²⁵

Nevertheless, after a careful investigation of opinions relating to Alexander Hamilton expressed by his colleagues and opponents, President George Washington cannot be blamed for not confining the Secretary of Treasury into his prerogatives since it

¹²¹ Aly Bower, ed. Political Writings of Alexander Hamilton: the Nature of the Republic (New York: The Liberals Arts Press, 1966) 130.

¹²² Miller 86.

¹²³ Miller 87.

¹²⁴ Binkley 32.

¹²⁵ Bower 31.

was improbable that Alexander Hamilton would have remained within the sphere delimited by his office given his personality and thirst of power.¹²⁶

Anyway what is certain is that Alexander Hamilton's boldness reached such a pitch that Thomas Jefferson, after experiencing the imperious ways of the Secretary of the Treasury concluded that his colleague was bent upon usurping all executive power and converting President George Washington into a "roi fainéant."¹²⁷ Likewise, James Madison shared the same impression as he noticed that his colleague, when appointed in due course, proceeded "to administrate" the new government into something quite different from what the Constitution prescribed.¹²⁸ In fact, such feelings were shared by most of the Republicans who were concerned over Alexander Hamilton's involvement with Congress which harkened back to the dreaded days of 'ministerial influence in the British government,¹²⁹ by a great majority of the political class if not to say the Americans as a whole as "[t]he cry of executive influence [so apprehended] was first raised not against President Washington but against the Secretary of the Treasury."¹³⁰

3. Direct Causes of the Conflict and Nature of the Strife

Now that we have drawn a relatively exhaustive and clear picture of the circumstances surrounding the emergence of political parties and the factors contributing to it, we can turn confidently to our main focus in this chapter namely the direct causes of the first national political strife and, in this way, estimate fairly its real nature.

Unlike most continental Europe where religion has been a fomentor of discord or where nationalist or racial feelings have been source of antagonism, the newly U.S.A. was rather agitated by a conflict of a mixed nature. After probing into the years of the Early

¹²⁶ Miller 84.

¹²⁷ Miller 84.

¹²⁸ Binkley 35.

¹²⁹ Bower 131.

¹³⁰ Miller 84.

Republic, we can discern, indeed, several facets of the disagreement that led to the birth of political parties.

First and foremost, it was a philosophical conflict. Two contending doctrines – or rather “theories of government,” to use George Soule’s expression¹³¹ - namely agrarianism versus federalism respectively advocated by Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, soon ruptured the harmony of George Washington’s administration. The two secretaries, both being deeply convinced of and entirely devoted to their respective principles, waged a spirited contest in the national offices. They presented differing visions of the nation’s destiny, contrasting visions of the character of the Union and differed on the meaning of republicanism.¹³² As both of them were eager to implement their respective principles, they would clash and have indeed clashed and formed warring camps as they were joined in the struggle by supporters. Thus, they became leaders of two parties.

The main point of discord was about the desirability of encouraging in the United States large industrial establishments employing labour, such as were already flourishing in England as a result of the invention of power-driven spinning and weaving machinery. On the one hand, Thomas Jefferson, entertaining a well-founded dislike of the poverty and exploitation which had accompanied the beginning of the industrial revolution in England, as well as of the overcrowded and unhealthy cities in which industrial workers lived, favoured a nation of landowners, principally engaged in farming where the latter social category would possibly form a basis for a democratic, egalitarian society.¹³³ On the other hand, Alexander Hamilton, as a convinced and active economic planner, envisioned a developed American economy. For him, the United States of America, a new country with

¹³¹ Bower 131.

¹³² Hoffman Cobbs, Elizabeth and Jon Gjerde, Major Problems in American History to 1877, I (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002) 145.

¹³³ Miller 131.

almost unlimited potentialities had to be developed further, though after the Revolution it had to struggle with problems that seemed almost too great for its strength¹³⁴ - problems such as how to recover from the war, how to hold a whole nation in a consensual society and how to frame a sound national government.

According to historian Wilfred E. Binkley, Alexander Hamilton's political orientation which has nothing to do with his modest origins was determined by his social ascension to the well-to-do class via his marriage with Elizabeth, second daughter of General Philip Schuyler. The latter's economic interests were capitalistic rather than agrarian. In frequenting such milieu Alexander Hamilton "found ready-made the model he deemed so desirable in American politics."¹³⁵

In this respect and as mentioned earlier, the two secretaries differed in opinion on the meaning of republicanism. Though both acknowledged the importance of balancing liberty and authority, they disagreed about where one ends and the other begins. On the one side, Alexander Hamilton along with the Federalists, was careful to distinguish between democracy and republicanism. He feared the disruptive tendencies of popular politics and, therefore, together with the Federalists advocated a strong defence of the rights of property,¹³⁶ aimed at imposing restraints upon the power of the people, at teaching respect for law and order, at discriminating between liberty and licentiousness.¹³⁷ On the other side, Thomas Jefferson and his friend James Madison, "stressed the importance of defending liberty from the encroachment of government."¹³⁸ For them so rather than law and order it is the love of liberty that is one of the principles of republicanism.

¹³⁴ Bower 131.

¹³⁵ Binkley 30.

¹³⁶ Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble. The Free and The Unfree: A New History of the United States (U.S.A.: Carroll and Noble, 1977) 189.

¹³⁷ Miller 114.

¹³⁸ Carroll and Noble 189.

Though Alexander Hamilton's philosophy presented some shortcomings like his belief in a society not only static but even stratified while the most dynamic factor of developing American society, namely the westward expansion, was taking place and would give birth to an emerging democratic way of life,¹³⁹ some aspects of Hamilton's philosophy were all the same implemented in domestic policy. Indeed, when his financial programme, reflecting his doctrine, was presented, it was adopted but raised opposition. So did his proposal of a National Bank despite the debate over its constitutionality. Clearly, then, we cannot deny that one of the roots of the conflict was of a philosophical nature.

The rivalry between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton was not confined to taking opposing views of domestic policies and arguing finely drawn constitutional points as the former had a "strict constructionist" approach to the Constitution while the latter had a "loose constructionist" action. Deepening the existing cleavage was another spirited contest to determine the foreign policy of the United States as Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton presented differences over governmental attitudes towards the French Revolution. After the French Revolution, as France declared war on Britain, Spain, and Holland, the United States was pulled into this European conflict in the 1790s and the two leaders, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, took different political stances face to the conflict and supported opposed camps. Thomas Jefferson and his followers were sympathetic to the French Revolution which they consider as the heir to the American War for Independence; whereas Alexander Hamilton and the people who shared his views were unfavourable to it especially as it turned into unparalleled bloodshed.

Alexander Hamilton's leaning towards Great Britain was brought to light even shortly after the Independence when the wound of the war was still fresh. He, instead of

¹³⁹ Binkley 31.

holding a grudge against Great Britain, saw no solid ground of national differences between the two cousins. As a proof, Major Beckwith, the Governor General of Canada, when sent by Lord Dorchester, a British Captain General and Governor, to ascertain the attitude of the Washington administration towards a possible British request to move troops across United States territory in order to attack the Spaniards in Louisiana, found it difficult to believe that he was dealing with a former enemy of Great Britain. “Originally one people,” Alexander Hamilton told Major Beckwith, “we have a similarity of tastes, of language, and general manners.... I have always preferred a connexion with you to that of any other country, *we think in English*.”¹⁴⁰ As another proof, the secretary of Treasury “maintained [with George Hammond, the first official representative of the British government in the United States] a relationship that could hardly have been closer had the United States and Great Britain been allies.”¹⁴¹ There were few state secrets that were not known to George Hammond. Alexander Hamilton’s leaning could not have been more obvious particularly as he claimed that the British government was the best political system.¹⁴²

Here again Alexander Hamilton’s orientation in foreign policy resulted from environmental influence. The place of the Federalist party was New York, a city that became the most aristocratic and pro-British of America because of the Tories families that had remained in America some times after the evacuation of the British army. Naturally, then Alexander Hamilton and his followers expectably lined up with their inclination and nurtured that unbalanced admiration for the British system.

Thirdly, seen through the lenses of two centuries, the conflict between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton was not wholly based upon principles, ideas, policies nor was it always kept upon the lofty plane of ideological differences. As a matter of fact,

¹⁴⁰ Miller 85.

¹⁴¹ Miller 87-88.

¹⁴² Binkley 32.

the divergences between them were not only a matter of hard substance but a matter of tone, temperament and personality as well. At first glance, given that they were coming from different social milieus – not to say opposite worlds – the two statesmen developed contrasted personalities and were therefore predisposed to be opposed once put in the same cabinet. Alexander Hamilton, an insecure orphan who was eternally in search of legitimacy and Thomas Jefferson, the well-born – and therefore well-connected – favourite son of the Virginia plantation aristocracy would clash and wage furious and often vituperative battles.

Moreover, given that both were driven by ambition, a struggle for power between them was unavoidable. They were indeed arch-rivals on the national politics to be heir to George Washington. “The objective of each man, therefore, was to ingratiate himself and to blacken the other in the eyes of the President”¹⁴³ so as to win his favour and so that the other lost credibility. Hence the charges and accusations sometimes warranted sometimes not, especially from Thomas Jefferson. On the one side, Alexander Hamilton made Thomas Jefferson responsible for the excesses of the French Revolution.¹⁴⁴ On the other side, in February, 1792, Thomas Jefferson told George Washington that Alexander Hamilton was responsible “for the alarming growth of a get-rich-quick mania which had introduced its poison into the government itself.” Later he asserted that the Treasury “already possessed such an influence as to swallow up the whole Executive power, and that the future President (not supported by the weight of character which he [Washington] possessed) would not be able to make head against this department.”¹⁴⁵

Neither Thomas Jefferson nor Alexander Hamilton was preoccupied to hide their animosities to the political class and the public. Through accusations of all sort and verbal conflict in the high offices, their dissension was brought to light to the political class.

¹⁴³ Miller 94.

¹⁴⁴ Miller 93.

¹⁴⁵ Miller 94.

Through attacks on the press, their personal discord was not just exposed to the Americans who became aware that the cleavage in Congress had penetrated the executive branch of government but was brought to the forefront of the public arena. The two secretaries were really waging a battle in the newspapers: they were vilifying each other under pseudonyms, praising themselves by engaging surrogates. Here it is important to point up the use of the media by political parties, as a factor in the escalation of conflict in the polarization process.

At last, irrational factors as well contributed to aggravate the situation. In retrospect the quarrel would not have attained such pitch had not fear and suspicion arouse in the two leaders' mind. Naturally, the main actors in the conflict could not help having disproportionate rhetoric feelings about the real intent of the adverse camp. "Both men, being absolutely certain that they were right," explains John C. Miller, "were prone to regard criticism as evidence of malice as well as of wrong-thinking."¹⁴⁶

Their talks, in the press or elsewhere, reflect their fear of and suspicion from the other's intentions. For example, James Madison, cooperating with Thomas Jefferson, wrote that Alexander Hamilton "is at the head of a faction decidedly hostile to me and my administration; and actuated by views...subversive of the principles of good government and dangerous to the union, peace, and happiness of the country." To this Thomas Jefferson added that Alexander Hamilton's proposal "flowed from principles adverse to liberty, and ... calculated to undermine and demolish the Republic."¹⁴⁷

This suspicion reflected a peculiar republican myopia about political dissent.¹⁴⁸ The principle of legitimate opposition – as "recognized opposition, organized and free enough in its activities to be able to displace an existing government by peaceful

¹⁴⁶ Miller 89.

¹⁴⁷ Carroll and Noble 191.

¹⁴⁸ Carroll and Noble 191.

means”¹⁴⁹ – was yet to be formulated. “Believing still in a community of interests, politicians like Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson lacked an alternative explanation of political opposition.” They used to associate opposition with corruption.¹⁵⁰

4. Legitimatization of the Principle of Opposition

The last step but not the least in the political parties formation process is then the legitimatizing of the principle of opposition and by the same token that of the political parties. The emergence of political parties became effective and gave way to their entrenchment only when the idea of opposition became legitimate. We cannot put an exact date to this phenomenon but a good estimate is that it occurred a short time after the emergence ratification. It started with a change of attitude from the governing class towards political parties. The Founding Fathers who used to abhor political parties as institutionalized factions, destructive to democratic principles, eventually, came to accept them. As historian Richard Hofstadter has shown, the Founding Fathers “came to recognize that partisan opposition could be both legitimate and essential element in government.”¹⁵¹ Then, they became drawn to political parties as the most natural means of arriving at peaceful decisions between alternative lines of policy and as a means of gaining control and of achieving some goals or policies like the Federalist party did for the Sedition Act passed in 1798. Act actually designed to destroy Thomas Jefferson’s Republican party which had openly expressed its sympathies for the French Revolutionaries.

Besides this acceptance, a crucial episode in the legitimization process is the election of 1800 dubbed by some historians the “Revolution of 1800”. A constitutional crisis deadlocking the electoral college ensued the 1800 election as the two Republican

¹⁴⁹ Hofstadter, The Idea of Party System 8.

¹⁵⁰ Carroll and Noble 191.

¹⁵¹ Lees 169.

candidates, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, got the same number of vote and the Constitution before being amended with the twelfth amendment did not distinguish between presidency and vice-presidency. It is true that Congress was supposed to resolve the tie and had, indeed, done it by designating Thomas Jefferson president and Aaron Burr, vice-president, but nothing was so doubtful as to whether the Federalists would hand over power peacefully to their political enemies, the Republicans. That tense standoff could have plunged the country into a disastrous armed conflict, but instead cemented the legitimacy of peaceful, if not smooth, transfer of power.

Therefore, we can conclude that with the political class's change of attitude towards political parties and this crucial episode, the formation process was brought to completion. In spite of an anti-party climate, political parties became a legitimate apparatus throughout the country and a part of the political landscape; the party system became firmly entrenched. Then, though unanticipated by the Constitution, the United States in 1800 became the first nation to develop parties organized on national basis and to transfer executive power from one faction to another via an election.

CHAPTER THREE:
AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND
AMERICAN ELECTORATE

The growth of American political parties is closely linked to the extension of democracy: they proceed along parallel tracks. Political parties became part of the political firmament especially because there were elections to be won and because an institution was required to mobilize masses of voters. The evolution of political parties and that of the participation of the electorate are then tightly correlated not to say interdependent. For instance, political parties' strength is affected directly by the ebb and flow of the participation while their nature is determined by the demands of the electorate and vice versa. It is interesting, then, to see how the evolution of one depend on the evolution of the other.

In this chapter we will carry out the analysis of the characteristics of these two variables, namely the American political parties and the American electorate, stressing their respective relationship to ideology. A parallel study seems then to be the most appropriate way to proceed. We will analyse each variable separately under a specific angle. On the one hand, we will show how through their process of development the major American political parties came to present a certain number of features, or put in another way how they came to acquire their very typical nature. On the other hand, concerning the study of the American electorate, as it is relatively a recent subject of inquiry in the political scientist field, we will not proceed likewise. First, all that we can do is a brief overview of the different steps in the extension of suffrage i.e. in the evolution of the potentiality of American citizens to participate. Then, thanks to a literary review we will

draw some characteristics of the American electorate with some historical perspective and special focus on the twentieth century.

I. American Political Parties: their Evolution

1. Characteristics and Nature of the American Political Parties

The American political parties have been a longstanding subject of academic inquiry. Studies in comparative politics stress their typical nature among all democracies large and small. Indeed, contrary to their European counterparts which tend to be located across a wide ideological spectrum, to exhibit considerable consistency in their ideological locations and “to appeal to their followers through sharply defined, coherent, and logically related doctrines,”¹⁵⁴ the American major political parties “have been largely non-ideological, inclusive in style and policy substance,”¹⁵⁵ and are thought “to fit their convictions to the changing demands of the political contest.”¹⁵⁶ In fact, from the very beginning, mass political parties in the United States built their electoral competition not on appeals to class, ethnic or religious division, but on programmes to what was always a broad base of support. Until the twentieth century following their traditional evolution, the Democratic Party and Republican Party were still regarded in the political scientist field as “brokerage” organisations, weak in principle, devoid of ideology, and inclined to differ chiefly over unimportant questions;¹⁵⁷ or, still as “big tents” or “vast umbrellas” “under which all Americans, whoever and wherever and however-minded they may be, are

¹⁵⁴ Herbert McClosky, Paul J. Hoffmann and Rosemary O’Hara, “Issue Conflict and Consensus among Party Leaders and Followers,” 186, *American Government: Reading and Cases*, 2nd ed., ed. Peter Woll (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965) 186-213.

¹⁵⁵ David McKay, *American Politics and Society*, 6th ed. 6th chapter: “The Changing Role of Political Parties,” Jan. 2006 <<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/mckay/pdfs/chapter5.pdf>>.

¹⁵⁶ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 186.

¹⁵⁷ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 186.

invited to stand for the sake of being counted in the next election.”¹⁵⁸ Because they used to encompass various interests, they were qualified of “creatures of compromise,” “coalitions of interest” in “which principle is muted and often even silenced;” and, in which “ideological or programmatic commitment in both the front and the rear” is usually lacking.¹⁵⁹ In a word, they were moderate and tolerant, have diverged slightly and divided so seldom on fundamental issues. As political scientist William Crotty and his colleagues put out “American political parties are not characterized by ideological orthodoxy, firm membership lists, clear lines of authority in an effective hierarchical structure, responsibility, discipline, and historically consistent group allegiances.”¹⁶⁰

Outside observers are most of the time puzzled by this supple, interest-directed, coalition-forming, loosely confederated nature of the American party system. Our task, as researchers in American studies, is to try to remove this puzzle by shedding some light on this striking state.

2. Historical Explanation of the American Political Parties’ Nature

In the previous chapter, we saw how with the election of 1800, political parties became legitimate and institutionalized. In the present chapter, we will depart from the same event but we will analyse it through another perspective. This time what matters for us is not the peaceful power shifts but Thomas Jefferson’s Inaugural Address, itself. We will try to see what made Richard Hofstadter qualify this document as “a conciliatory document contrived to bind up the wounds of the bitter period from 1798 to 1800 and to

¹⁵⁸ Rossiter 11.

¹⁵⁹ Rossiter 11.

¹⁶⁰ Crotty, Freeman and Gatlin 64.

attract moderate Federalists to his support,”¹⁶¹ and what its impact on American politics was.

Once he captured the national government, and after the confusing dust of conflict had settled, Thomas Jefferson admitted in his address that the areas of agreement between the two camps were indeed great as he observed that “every difference of opinion is not a difference in principle.” The new elected president even went to declare that “[w]e are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”¹⁶² This statement not only reflected what happened in American politics before his administration – we have to concede indeed that the areas of agreement were larger and perhaps more important than either side was willing to admit in the heat and joy of political rivalry during the Federalist era – but, above all, it heralded a whole trend of political conciliation and of party convergence in American politics. By party convergence – as opposed to party divergence or party disparity – we mean some degree of similarity between the two parties and this could be possible only if the political parties are pragmatic and do not stick to a given ideology.

In fact, Thomas Jefferson’s statement might have been just idle talk but in office the new president showed that he practised his dictum: he kept his promises to friends and enemies alike. To show his good will, he put in practice some measures of the Federalist programme – and did not remove the ones already at work. Indeed, the Republicans, with no more constitutional warrant than Alexander Hamilton could find for his bank, retained the hated bank, paid off the fearsome national debt, undertook the building of a national highway from Maryland to Ohio, embargoed the states in the interest of the national policy and doubled the territory of the Union by purchasing Louisiana.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition: And the Men who Made it (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948) 34.

¹⁶² Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1801, The Avalon Project at Yale law School, 1996, last modified on 05.04.2007 10:18, March 2006
<www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/jefinaul.htm>.

¹⁶³ Carl N. Degler, Out of the Past (U.S.A.: Colophon Books, 1960) 91.

By adopting policies that did not deviate too widely from those of the Federalists, the new president was proud of reconciling the two camps and by the same token the whole society. Thus, he succeeded in re-establishing an era of societal consensus; the latter having been interrupted by the period of conflict necessary to the birth of any party system.

Undoubtedly, according to some writings, Thomas Jefferson appeared to have led his fellow Americans into a better age. During his term the country grew and prospered, the commercial classes sharing in the bounty along with the farmers so close to Jefferson's heart.¹⁶⁴ In historian and author John Garraty's words, Thomas Jefferson satisfied a large part of the population by achieving prosperity and orderly government without sacrificing freedom and without losing moral duties. In a word, he stroked a balance between individual liberty and responsible government. Whether or not this positive image is part of American propaganda it remains that Thomas Jefferson's achievements cannot be overlooked.

Behind the new president's judicious manoeuvrings is an insight that there is no need to raise one section of the society against another. "It is material to the safety of Republicanism," he wrote in 1803, "to detach the mercantile interest from its enemies and incorporate them into the body of its friends."¹⁶⁵ He understood that to appeal to the whole society and win the support of all who could vote one has to make concessions, to be ready to give up some doctrinal purity; in short, to move toward the centre of the political spectrum. And this was what he was setting out to do.

By such an attitude, Thomas Jefferson created a precedent in American politics: he established a tradition of party convergence. Later on, indeed, this tendency has been asserted by the heirs of Thomas Jefferson and by subsequent administrations. Not only had

¹⁶⁴ John A. Garraty, The American Nation: A History of the United States, 4th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979) 154.

¹⁶⁵ Garraty 154.

they accepted most of the economic policies advocated by the Hamiltonians but more significantly in 1816, James Madison, one of the former fervent opponent of Alexander Hamilton's policies, put his signature to a bill "creating a new national bank almost exactly in the image of Alexander Hamilton's one, which had expired before the war of 1812 and to a protective tariff as well which, if less comprehensive than the kind Hamilton had wanted, marked an important concession to the rising manufacturing interests."¹⁶⁶

Later again, still following the same trend is President James Monroe. Still according to historian John A. Garraty, the latter seemed to epitomize the concern of national reconciliation and to sustain the move toward centrism. Certainly, the context, first, was favourable to societal consensus since the divisive issues of earlier days of the republic had vanished. Nevertheless, James Monroe contributed to a great extent to their effective disappearance by avoiding creating new ones and by beginning his first term with a tour to rally people throughout the country. After the President had visited Boston – once the headquarters and now the graveyard of Federalism – and New England – heartland of the opposition – a Federalist newspaperman gave the age its name. Pointing out that the celebration attending James Monroe's visit "had brought together in friendly intercourse many persons whom party politics had long severed, ""he dubbed the times the "Era of Good Feelings."¹⁶⁷

Also, President James Monroe's measures, lining up with the previous ones, reflected a sustained concern for compromise and cooperation. For instance, he, though a democrat, accepted the principle of federal aid for transportation projects, approving a bill authorizing Congress to invest \$ 300,000 in the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Garraty 144.

¹⁶⁷ Garraty 182.

¹⁶⁸ Garraty 182.

The reverse side of the medal is a crisis that took place during the “Era of Good Feelings” but whose early signs could have already been detected under Thomas Jefferson’s second term of presidency. Indeed, some difficulties appeared after the 1804 and 1808 landslide victories. The successive spectacular success of the Republicans would knell the death of the party in opposition, the celebrated Federalists. After the 1816 election, James Monroe administration with its “Era of Good Feelings” has only drawn it to a close. As often happens in such situations, lack of opposition weakened party discipline and encouraged factionalism among the Republicans. So apart from some economic and political factors – transition from older condition to the modern industrial state, the aftermath of the war of 1812, pressures of invention and expansion which were already hard at work during the “Era of Good Feelings”, the economic depression that struck the country in 1819 – the crisis is mainly due to the fact that parties converged to the point of in-existent opposition, that is to say, reached a point that is harmful to democracy and undesirable for the strength of any party. Naturally, then, the “Era of Good Feelings” went to an abrupt end with the election of 1824 as the necessity of an opposition not necessarily as an ideological opposition but just as a formality was made clear. Indeed, a healthy democracy is no place for a political monopoly, and America was already too heavily committed to political and social democracy to permit this state of affairs to exist for long.

In spite of this uncalculated turn of events, party convergence kept on being adopted within its limits in American politics for still a long time to the point of becoming one characteristic of the American political parties.

Apart from his inaugural address and his subsequent measures, Thomas Jefferson’s openness to compromise with adversaries would have immense consequence for the future of American politics as well. Reflecting such quality is his clasping of hands with Aaron

Bur.¹⁶⁹ The significance of this act can be appreciated at its true value only when we know that though both were democrats each represented different sections of the population: Thomas Jefferson was a leader of the rural, agrarian South and Aaron Burr, leader of the urban, labouring North.

Also, symbolizing the new unity and paving the way to national reconciliation and cooperation is Thomas Jefferson's restored friendship with John Adams after ten years of icy relations. While in 1801, "Adams had slipped sulkily out of Washington without waiting to attend his successor's inauguration, ... after ten years of icy silence [however]," narrates Clinton Rossiter "the two old collaborators effected a reconciliation. Although they continued to disagree vigorously about matters of philosophy and government, the bitterness between them disappeared entirely. By James Monroe's days, Thomas Jefferson was writing long letters to "my dear friend" and receiving equally warm and voluminous replies."¹⁷⁰

In both cases, the bargains Thomas Jefferson struck with these men, both explicit and implicit, would leave a print, not to say create a precedent in the logic of American politics for a long time thereafter. From that time on, indeed, to win elections party men are ready to transcend differences, make compromise, and form coalitions even if some alliances are uneasy ones.

Thus, from the very early national period, became apparent the main features of the political parties, namely party convergence and coalition-forming tendency, with which we will deal in details afterwards. Admittedly, some political divisions obscured the atmosphere of consensus and compromise in American politics and interrupted the era of party convergence but they occurred only sporadically and were the exception rather than the rule as we have shown in the first chapter of this paper.

¹⁶⁹ Rossiter 72.

¹⁷⁰ Rossiter 5.

Such controversies resulted mainly from pressures of invention, economic growth and political expansion and not from fundamental divergences. These are periods in the American history when things were moving so rapidly under a common impulse that conflicts arose agitating a public divided into “the sanguine who are inclined towards every movement proposed and the cautious who distrust them all.”¹⁷¹ Such conflicts could not be absorbed by the policy of party convergence. Willing or not, the political parties, as an institutionalized connection between the people and government, had to adopt the issues, had to participate in the resolution of the conflict so as to be political parties worthy of the name and to be praised to be close to the society. They could neither overlook nor repress the cleavage. But, at the same time, by proposing alternative policies the political parties were tearing apart the public along partisan lines in spite of themselves and by the same token breaking down the existing consensus. Inevitably, conflict escalation resulted from this vicious circle. For instance, sectional political issues in the nineteenth century led to such course of events.

In The Government of England, A. Lawrence Lowell, professor of the Science of Government in Harvard University, shares this concession. He observes that there are periods of disturbance, when temperamental reactions become significant. For him, it is precisely under such abnormal conditions that new party alignments appear, “tearing men loose from their old partisan moorings, dissolving long-established connections, and putting public affairs in a new perspective.”¹⁷² Others view the occasional occurrence of such conflicts from another perspective. According to them, they come within a cyclic evolution with certain regularity. So, they naturally interrupt the existing consensus from time to time only.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ In A. Lawrence Lowell’s words, qtd. in Penniman 156.

¹⁷² Penniman 156-157.

¹⁷³ Nivola.

3. Consequences of the Political Parties' Nature on American Politics

Apart from these sporadic conflicts, the overall tendency was of party convergence and political consensus. One of the immediate consequences of such tendency was “the blurring of the outer edges of each party’s area of loyalty and service” and “the deep overlapping of the beliefs and programs and even voters of the parties.”¹⁷⁴ Put it in simpler way, political parties tended to likeness as far as the platforms and policies they put forward were concerned. Another consequence – interrelated to the previous – was centrism. Sarah Binder, a Congress scholar at the Brookings Institution, defines “centrists as those members whose ideology positions are closer to the mid-point between the two parties than to the median members of their own party.”¹⁷⁵

But these observations must not make us draw hasty conclusions. In contrast with the short-cuts of some observers who associate party convergence and the tendency to compromise with a total absence of ideology, we advance that if the nature of American parties has not allowed ideological purity, it, all the same, has not excluded totally the presence of principles. In other words, convergence and compromise in American politics do not mean a total void of principles and ideology.

Another commonly held belief – related to the aforesaid one – that we have to rectify concerns the relationship between party convergence and consistency. Some think that “as the two-party system is based upon combinations of economic and social groups, or – to describe the phenomenon more accurately from the standpoint of American experience – upon combinations of sectional economic interests, the political alignment of one epoch can never be identical with the political alignment of the epoch that precedes or follows it. The composition and therefore the character of parties must vary with the

¹⁷⁴ Penniman 11.

¹⁷⁵ King.

shifting economic forces.”¹⁷⁶ However, “some elements of continuity” – in the words of Professor Howard R. Penniman’s – in the evolution of political parties can be noticed.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, after a careful examination of the itineraries of the two major American parties, we find out that, in spite of the various realignments, each of the two parties keeps some spirit, each is faithful to its tradition, each respects and follows its great lines, each conforms with the popular image in which “the Democrat party is seen as the more “progressive” or “radical,” the Republican as the more “moderate” or “conservative” of the two.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, centrism and pragmatism do not prevent some degree of continuity and consistency from taking place and some degree of ideology from being present in the institution of political parties.

Considering the nature of American political parties under this new revised perspective, we can conceive why and how despite a tradition of party convergence, a tendency of centrism and some realignments, “the centers of gravity of the two parties are quite distinct,” and the images they give of themselves and which the American public perceive are rather stable and proper to each one’s tradition. ““The Democratic party basically is a party of innovation, with a “pro-government” bias. The Republican party is an essentially “consolidating” party with a limited-government bia.””¹⁷⁹

4. Factors that have Contributed to Make the American Political Parties’ Nature Persist through Time

Once we have analysed the nature of American political parties under a historical perspective and with a critical eye, it is worth probing into the factors that make the trend heralded by Thomas Jefferson i.e. party convergence and compromise persist through

¹⁷⁶ Penniman 191.

¹⁷⁷ Penniman 191.

¹⁷⁸ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara.188.

¹⁷⁹ Stephen K. Bailey, “The Condition of Our National Political Parties,” 183, American Government: Readings and Cases, 2nd ed., ed. Peter Woll (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965) 180-186.

time, because it is one thing to launch the tendency but quite another to sustain it. Surely, some reasons motivated the American political parties to maintain this policy. It seems that some conditions in American politics, more than just being favourable to convergence, put constraints on political parties against the development and enforcement of a sharply delineated ideology and against enlarging intellectual differences. Under these pressures towards uniformity American political parties tend to lose ideological purity. These conditions are interrelated in some cases but have been separated for the sake of classification.

Some of the reasons can be found in the history of the formation of the nation. As professor political science emeritus Herbert McClosky and his colleagues show: “[c]ultural and historical differences [that characterize the American nation] may also contribute to the weaker ideological emphasis among American, as compared with European, parties.” The United States, they explain, has not experienced many of the great historical cleavages that have divided European nations for centuries like “monarchism vs.-republicanism; clericalism vs. anticlericalism; democracy vs. autocracy,” nor the “intense caste or class conflict.”¹⁸⁰ American political culture stresses compromise and negotiation rather than ideological rigidity. The political parties must respect this and permit no sharp cleavage.

Also, American political parties need to form coalitions to win electoral majorities. Because of the aforesaid cultural and historical differences that characterize the American nation, neither major party represents an absolute majority of Americans. When a political party does not have a natural majority, there is internal tension between getting elected and ideological purity. In other words, some people in the party will care more about winning elections, even if it means compromising on some issues. Others will be unwilling to make

¹⁸⁰ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 188.

certain compromise, even if the price is losing. But as long as the party's natural constituency is less than fifty per cent of the population, the party has to find out the sort of compromise upon which discordant minorities can be brought together as a majority in order to win the presidential election. As Howard R. Penniman points out "[t]here is so much discord in a country of large area and large population that a preponderant mass of voters can seldom be suited by clear-cut proposals."¹⁸¹

Added to this pressures towards uniformity, progress was made in the United States argue Herbert McClosky and his colleagues "towards neutralizing the forces which ordinarily lead to sharp social, and hence intellectual and political, differentiation."¹⁸² The attainment of a high rate of mobility as far as the class and status structure of American society are concerned, the development of the popular education and other facilities for the creation of common attitudes, the improvement in transport and communication, the rapid shifts in population and industry were factors contributing to the weakening of sectionalism as a source of political cleavage.¹⁸³

Other reasons can be found in the structure of American politics. As already mentioned, some are related to the previous reasons but have been separated for the sake of classification. The American party system and electoral system are not compatible with doctrinal purity. Political reforms, structural changes and realignments of the electorate have accentuated this tendency instead of remedying it. To begin with, "the loosely confederated nature of the American party system" compels each national party to "adjust its policies to the competing interest of the locality, the state, and the nation."¹⁸⁴ As many "party units are more concerned with local than with national elections, and prefer not to

¹⁸¹ Penniman 153.

¹⁸² McClosky, Hoffmann and O'Hara 188.

¹⁸³ McClosky, Hoffmann and O'Hara 188.

¹⁸⁴ McClosky, Hoffmann and O'Hara 187.

be handicapped by clear-cut national programs,”¹⁸⁵ a great deal of compromise must enter into the position taken by the central party on national issues if it is to retain the support of its local factions. Thus, they move towards the center of political spectrum in national politics.

Even if the two political parties were eager to present a coherent ideology the very little national machinery, the very little national cohesion and the “absence in either party of a firmly established, authoritative, and continuing organizational center empowered to decide questions of doctrine and discipline”¹⁸⁶ deprive the politicians of having a means to adopt and stick to an ideology. American national parties are indeed little more than loose alliances of strong state and local parties with weak central organization. They have no formal organization at the national level that controls membership, activities, or policy positions, though some state affiliates do. Thus, neither major party, when in power, is equipped to organise its members in the legislative and executive branches into a government held together and guided by the party programme. Clearly, neither party has a sufficiently unified structure to enable them to dramatize their programmes around a given ideology.

In addition to this, “because of the methods by which President and Congress are elected, the parties aim to establish predominance in particular localities rather than an even distribution of strength throughout the country.”¹⁸⁷ National politics is, therefore, inseparable from sectional politics; and the national parties are “organizations through which sectional interest-groups promote their specific objects and ambitions. By means of

¹⁸⁵ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 187.

¹⁸⁶ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 187.

¹⁸⁷ Lees 170.

concession and compromise, which are likely to produce a rather colorless platform, these diverse economic groups are brought into fairly harmonious cooperation.”¹⁸⁸

The last but not the least structural reason – “the entrenchment of a the two-party system which, by affording both parties a genuine opportunity to win elections, tempts them to appeal to as many diverse elements in the electorate as are needed to put together a majority.” As Herbert McClosky justly points out:

[i]t is one thing for a small party in a multi-party system to preserve its ideological purity, quite another for a mass party in a two party system to do so. The one has little hope of becoming a majority, and can most easily survive by remaining identified with the narrow audience from which it draws its chief supporters; the other can succeed only by accommodating the conflicting claims of many diverse groups – only, in short, by blunting ideological distinctions.¹⁸⁹

Anyway, politicians are far more preoccupied with getting offices than they are with proclaiming policies. It has been said with some insight that “the two great parties exist in America, not because there are two sides to every question, but because there are two sides to every office – an outside and an inside.”¹⁹⁰

This is the essence of competition: since both parties are interested in the votes of men more than in principles, the task that they have uppermost in mind is the construction of a victorious majority and in a country as large and diverse as the United States this calls for programmes and candidates having as nearly universal an appeal as the imperatives of politics will permit. To that end making concessions and building coalitions are necessary.

Such phenomenon can be explained through a theoretical perspective. Theories that come within the spatial modelling framework¹⁹¹ – one of the major schools of thought in party competition - predict convergence of party positions. The pioneer of such school is Anthony Downs who in 1957 formulated the median voter theorem. In his theory he

¹⁸⁸ Penniman 153.

¹⁸⁹ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 187.

¹⁹⁰ Penniman 152-153.

¹⁹¹ Spatial models as opposed to voter-choice models that emphasize the existence and persistence of strong partisan loyalties or that view voting as rooted in class, ethnicity or other socio demographic factors.

highlights centripetal forces in party competition that draw party positions toward the centre of the policy spectrum. By forces, he means the policy-oriented voters who support parties based on ideological or issue proximity to party platform. Since both political parties want to attract support from the centrist and moderate segments of the electorate, the pivotal “median voter”, parties’ views on basic issues will, it is thought, tend to converge to the “sensible center” to use politician Richard Darman’s phrase.¹⁹² This is the essence of Downs’ theory.

Anthony Down’s theory is all the more relevant in national politics. As Nicole Mellow and Peter Trubowitz state in Red Versus Blue: American Electoral Geography and Congressional Bipartisanship, 1898-2002, “[t]he theory of Downs is essentially compelling in a presidential contest, where a national electorate and a reasonable degree of two-party competition usually force candidates toward the centre to compete for a small group of “undecided””. To support their case, they cited evidence of Richard Nixon’s talks. The latter formulated the logic of this tendency when he advised 1996 presidential hopeful Bob Dole to “run to the right in the primary and then run to the middle in the general election.”¹⁹³

As already mentioned and as we can once again deduce from the aforesaid argument, the nature – not to say the logic – of American political parties on the one side and the electorate’s behaviour on the other are, therefore, correlated.

¹⁹² David C. King, “The Polarization of American Political Parties and Mistrust of Government,” 21 Mar. 1997, Harvard University, May 2006 <<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/prg/king/polar.htm>>.

¹⁹³ Nicole Mellow and Peter Trubowitz, Red Versus Blue: American Electoral Geography and Congressional bipartisanship, 1898-2002, 23 Mar. 2005, Sciencedirect, Elsevier Ltd: 2005, Sept. 2006 <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/search/database/navigator>>.

II. American Electorate

After surveying the major characteristics of American political parties and their relation to ideology, we can examine, then, individuals so as to understand the subsequent demonstration of this paper. We will, therefore, devote a section of this chapter to a deeper study of the American electorate, and in particular its relation to ideology – though, due to several limitations this study will not be as exhaustive as the one relating to the political parties.

1. Survey of the Americans' Participation in National Politics

We can begin our analysis of the American electorate and its relation to ideology with a historical survey of the Americans' participation in national politics. Given that participation in America, unlike in other countries, is not reflected in the quality and quantity of participation in party activities but just through voting, we will overview the suffrage landmarks in American politics.

The Republic established in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 was not premised upon the active engagement of great numbers of ordinary citizens in the affairs of state. Reflecting the convictions entertained by men of substance everywhere, the Framers of the Constitution condemned “the turbulence and follies of democracy”¹⁹⁴ and felt that “the people seldom judge or determine right.”¹⁹⁵ Because of this state of mind, important elements of the old aristocratic distinctions between the “few” and the “many” were present in the new national Constitution, and shaped electoral practices through such

¹⁹⁴ In the words of Edmund Randolph, qtd. in Penniman 11.

¹⁹⁵ Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) 14, Netlibrary, Jan. 2006 <<http://www.netlibrary.com/Reader>>.

provisions as the Electoral College and the selection of United States senators by state legislatures.¹⁹⁶

Above all, franchise was considerably restricted through property and literacy qualifications, and to white men – as certain traditional assumptions prevailed. The first of these assumptions was that unless a man owned property, he could not be expected to vote his own interests soberly and with respect for the property rights of others. A second assumption was that unless a man knew how to read and write he could not be expected to learn the facts and form a valid opinion on community affairs. A third assumption was that women should be satisfied to be represented by the men of the family. And, a last one, it was assumed that the control of the franchise should be held by the white population, and that the African Americans and other coloured people should be excluded.¹⁹⁷

Clearly, universal franchise was not a prime preoccupation for the governing class in the Early Republic. Even Thomas Jefferson, a defender of liberty, supported, in 1776 and 1783, property qualification for the suffrage in Virginia; and, in his later years, while endorsing the principle of manhood suffrage, he did not regard it as an essential element of Republican faith. Nor did his followers generally accept it during his lifetime.¹⁹⁸

Because of all these hindrances to participation, political disengagement in the Early Republic – and for a long time thereafter – could be felt. Historian Ronald P. Formisano observes that by the mid-1820s, “the vast majority of citizens had lost interest in politics. They had never voted much in presidential elections anyway, and now they involved themselves only sporadically in state and local affairs.” As a proof, the “voting levels in national and state elections in the new republic had, never been high not even in the years of greatest partisan contention.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Dimock and Dimock 270.

¹⁹⁷ Dimock and Dimock 270.

¹⁹⁸ Penniman 11.

¹⁹⁹ Altschuler and Blumin 14.

In fact, democracy – as extension of franchise – must be associated with the period of Andrew Jackson rather than with that of Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, the legal barriers that the Founding Fathers took for granted were eliminated under the influence of Jacksonian democracy and to a lesser degree of the frontier influence of Lincolnian equality. In 1828, when Andrew Jackson was elected to the presidency, the broadening of the franchise took place. Full manhood suffrage prevailed in fourteen of the twenty-four states; and the property qualification, which had been universal in the eighteenth century, survived in four states only.²⁰⁰

The next stage in the extension of the franchise in the United States is the enfranchisement of African Americans, with Civil War amendments to the Federal Constitution, introduced between 1868 and 1870. Nevertheless, these suffrage landmarks were followed by exclusionary voter registration systems introduced by the states at the end of the nineteenth century. Southern planters pushed through poll taxes, literacy tests, and obstructive voter registration policies to slash voting among African Americans and poor whites. Northern businessman reformers, claiming a “quality” electorate as their goal, introduced similar practices (including poll taxes in a number of New England states). Low voting rates resulted from their policies.²⁰¹ The last phase in the democratization process is the woman suffrage with the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920.

We have to note that the chief consideration in the extension of franchise to all social categories does not rest solely or even primarily on an abstract doctrine of democracy nor was it for the sake of the nation but due to the concerned social groups’ awareness: as these social categories have advanced in enlightenment, in economic power,

²⁰⁰ Dimock and Dimock 270.

²⁰¹ Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, Why Americans Don’t Vote, viii, Third World Traveler, Pantheon Books, 1988, Feb. 2006
<[www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Political/Why AmericansDon'tVote.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Political/WhyAmericansDon'tVote.html)>.

and in political consciousness, they have insisted upon recognition.²⁰² Also, worth mentioning is the fact that apart from pressure from those social groups who would thereby secure the privilege of voting for their members, suffrage was granted to these new groups in the community with a view to improving the position of one or another of the political parties. For example, suffrage was thrust upon the southern African Americans after the Civil War, not because they demanded it, nor because they were represented by a powerful pressure group of their own people, but because African Americans' suffrage in the South would work to the advantage of the Republican party.²⁰³

Though restrictions persisted for more than half a century in some of the original states once the democratization process at the national level was brought to completion, the United States has the distinction of being the first country to establish manhood suffrage – however with restrictions on African Americans. But it remains that the fact that only a segment – though expanding – of the society could participate in the early national period does not enable this study to be exhaustive with regard to the evolution of the electorate's behaviour.

2. Characteristics and Voting Behaviour of the American Electorate

American electorate. Swing voting is the attitude of a voter who has The study of the electorate itself and its behaviour has been a recent subject of inquiry. In the 1950s it came to the forefront of the political and social scientist fields. In classical literature some social scientists like Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky advocate that voting is influenced by party loyalty and ideology; others, like social scientist and economist Joseph A. Schumpeter writing in 1966 claims that the electorate is ill-informed and that the “typical citizen will, in political matters tend to yield to extra-rational or

²⁰² Penniman 15.

²⁰³ Penniman 15.

irrational prejudice and impulse.”²⁰⁴ Our analysis of American electorate will be based on political scientist Philip E. Converse’s thesis because it is not only the most appropriate approach for this dissertation’s ends but because it also provides a historical perspective.

Using the notion of attitude consistency, Philip E. Converse shows that most people do not organize their attitudes coherently and, therefore, have no true political ideology and that major ideological debates have little impact on elections. Drawing upon the election of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, the histories of the Republican party and other events, Philip E. Converse provides a case for his claim that most people are not ideological thinkers and states that “during the election of Abraham Lincoln, most Northerners had little, if any, knowledge of the tremendously heated debate concerning slavery.”²⁰⁵

Thanks to a sound argumentation, Philip E. Converse’s thesis sheds light on the relation of the American electorate to ideology. In general, an American is not driven by ideological impulse. His relation to ideology is not tight. So is his relation to policies. Rather, the American citizen is more affected by personality. “The electorate may be less satisfied with bold declarations of policy than with “sound men”... [For the American public] a choice between men may mean more than a choice between policies.”²⁰⁶

Nevertheless, we have to concede that, though most Americans are not highly ideological, most have preferences one way or the other, either intense or not. So the word “preferences” is more appropriate for the American electorate than ideological leaning.

Furthermore, Philip E. Converse states that the vast majority of the American voting public is socially ignorant and, worse, has little desire to consider and understand

²⁰⁴ A.T. Coram, “The Rise and Fall of support for Political Parties: a Dynamic Analysis,” Electoral Studies, 22. 4 (December 2003): 603-616, Sciedirect, June 2006
<www.sciencedirect.com/science/search/database/navigator>.

²⁰⁵ Bruce Sabin, “Review of Philip E. Converse’s “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” Rev. of The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics, by Philip E. Converse, Apr. 2006
<www.brucesabin.com/nature_of_belief_systems.html>.

²⁰⁶ Penniman 153.

the issues which are not clearly and directly related to them as individuals. His article “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” was an effort to demonstrate that political behaviour and ideology are less connected with intelligent decision-making than with ignorance and whim.²⁰⁷

Also, Philip E. Converse shows that the American electorate does not present a consistent behaviour. In other words, voters’ preferences have become more volatile. “In longitudinal research,” Philip E. Converse finds that “people did not even maintain their own stated beliefs over two year periods.”²⁰⁸ The latter observation can be regarded as a consequence of the previous feature since when someone is not strongly attached to a given ideology he manifests inconsistency. Manifestations of inconsistency on the part of the American electorate were noticed on several occasions. By the early 1990s, for instance, the United States seemed in the midst of a conservative shift, only to reject the most conservative proposals in Congress by the mid-1990s.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, this tendency is not total. The Americans do present, all the same, some degree of consistency. Evidence from public opinion polls shows that the country’s basic balance between liberals and conservatives changes only gradually, not all at once.²¹⁰

In addition to Philip E. Converse’s findings, there are several other well-documented generalizations we can make about the political attitudes and behaviour patterns of Americans and most of them are striking to the eye of comparative politics students. Most of the works in political science reassert Philip E. Converse’s findings. Above all, they stress an absence in American behaviour, as a nation and as individuals of a deep commitment to politics. Most Americans indeed “play it cool” in the area of politics; they give less scope to politics in comparisons with their fellow Europeans, for

²⁰⁷ Sabin.

²⁰⁸ Sabin.

²⁰⁹ King.

²¹⁰ King.

instance.²¹¹ The first evidence of this coolness of American politics is to be found in a low level of partisanship with a strong inclination towards centrism. This coolness can go to a total absence of commitment, to indifference to and even apathy in front of political matters. According to some sources “[n]early half of all adult Americans do not vote in presidential elections and the trend has been in the direction of an ever-higher proportion of non-voters.”²¹² In other words, only few Americans hold partisan views; they are rather moderate since they stand somewhere near the middle ground on many issues of American politics. And some are even side liners and absentees in the great game of politics. Some observers qualify the latter category of passive citizens.²¹³

Another bit of evidence of the coolness of the American electorate in politics, related to the precedent, is a low level of party affiliation. Few Americans give the Democrats or Republicans the deep and encompassing allegiance claimed by parties like the Socialists in Belgium and the Nationalists in South Africa. There is indeed little sense among the American electorate of belonging, few signs of “shared concern.” In the words of political scientist and sociologist Samuel Lubell, the American electorate “seems to have undergone a curious quickening of its voting reflexes” in the elections since 1948. It has become a great deal “easier to shift the party allegiance of the American voter.”²¹⁴ The high rate of swing voting in today’s American politics is a concrete proof of this volatile character of the no allegiance to any political party and whose unpredictable decisions can swing the outcome of an election one way or the other.²¹⁵

²¹¹ Rossiter 24.

²¹² Mc Kenna and Feingold 20.

²¹³ Angus Campbell, “The Passive Citizen,” *Political Opinion and Electoral Behavior*, ed. Edward C. Dreyer and Waiter A. Rosenbaum, Dec. 2006
< [links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0033-362X\(196923\)33%3A3%3C425%3APPIANL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0033-362X(196923)33%3A3%3C425%3APPIANL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y) >.

²¹⁴ Rossiter 25-26.

²¹⁵ “Swing voter,” *The Free Dictionary Online*, 5 Jan. 2007, Farlex, Inc., 2007, May 2007
<www.thefreedictionary.com/swing+voter>.

A related aspect of this refusal of most American to be politically engaged is “the high incidence of independence.”²¹⁶ An independent voter is one who refuses to identify with either party. It has been estimated that not more than sixty per cent of the American electorate is partisan and regular in its voting habits,²¹⁷ or said in another way, one third of all adult Americans consider themselves independent.²¹⁸ This phenomenon is not new. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Francis Delano Roosevelt had already noticed this trend and predicted it was to rise. In this respect, he declared that “[t]he growing independence of voters, after all, has been proven by the votes in every Presidential election since my childhood – and the tendency, frankly, is on the increase.”²¹⁹ In these recent years independent voters outnumber democrats or republicans.²²⁰ In fact, neither party has made a constant good-faith effort to reach out and claim their allegiance of the independent voters who are, by and large, fiscally conservative but socially liberal.

In some cases independence reflects not a real detachment from politics but rather a deliberate reaction. Indeed, some Americans declare themselves officially independent on purpose so as to express their dissatisfaction with what is proposed and as to put the political class under pressure. Others are only reluctant to acknowledge membership to a party. This makes some political scientists speak of the “myth of the independent voter”²²¹ to show that voters who identify themselves as independents are not independent inner mostly but are leaning consciously or not on one side or the other of the political spectrum.

Another related evidence of this refusal of most American to be politically engaged is the growth in the proportion of non-partisans, dubbed the “no-preference” – growth that has been much more rapid than the growth of the self-identified independents. These

²¹⁶ Rossiter 26.

²¹⁷ Rossiter 26.

²¹⁸ Mc Kenna and Feingold 25.

²¹⁹ Avlon, Independent Nation.

²²⁰ Avlon, Independent Nation.

²²¹ Bruce E. Keith, The Myth of the Independent Voter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) Netlibrary, June 2006 <<http://www.netlibrary.com/Reader>>.

respondents are the most vehemently opposed to the political parties and dissatisfied with their performance. They do not consider themselves to be independents simply because in their minds there are no meaningful partisan objects to be independent from and because they do not perceive parties as relevant to the political process.²²²

All the traits of the American electorate and the latter's behaviour with which we have dealt are common to all level of the electoral system. But it is worth mentioning that these traits are accentuated in national politics – that is the political level interesting this study. Any observer of the American political scene feels a strong temptation to moralize over the fact that most Americans present such characteristics. In this dissertation we are rather interested in probing into the reasons that determine Americans' behaviour and so to see whether or not the American electorate attitudes are warranted.

3. Reasons Explaining the Americans' Voting Attitudes

Several factors can justify the voting attitudes of the American electorate. Most of them can be found in the peculiar spirit of Americans. The first ingredient of this spirit is the strong antipolitical bias that crops up the American culture. This bias goes back to the early times of the American history and had been dealt with fairly enough in the previous chapter. Although political parties have played an essential role in American politics for more than one hundred and fifty years and although politicians have been the brokers of democracy, many Americans have not moved one inch beyond the fears and prejudice of the Founding Fathers. The feelings of the latter men, indeed, persist: parties as institution and politicians as people rank low in the Americans' scale of values. "Politics," for the Americans, "is sin, and politicians, if not sinners, are pretty suspicious fellows."²²³ Most Americans would not like to see a son go into politics as a life's work. It is not a

²²² Rev. of *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952-88*," by David Pomerantz, *Washington Monthly*, March, 1990, FindArticles, 2007, May 2007
<findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1316/is_n2_v22/ai_8876089>.

²²³ Rossiter 34.

coincidence that in 1952 General Eisenhower enjoyed the support of many voters who felt he was “above politics” or “not a politician”. The same was true of Ronald Reagan when he ran for governor of California for the first time in 1966, in a campaign that emphasized his nonprofessional political status.²²⁴ A more recent example is Arnold Schwarzenegger, a former movie star, who ran for the governorship of the state of California and who was elected. So, even if the opinions about parties bettered, prejudice is entrenched.

A second ingredient of the peculiar spirit of Americans is a lack of motivation to participate despite the recent efforts of civic teachers to heighten public awareness of politics. A free man goes to the polls because he is motivated to do so, and surely some part of his motivation arises out of the assumption that the results of the election will make a difference in his life. The plain fact is that, quite apart from the some aspects of the two-party politics, the results of elections make less of a difference in the lives of Americans than they do, let us say, in the lives of Frenchmen or Italians or South Africans, for example. Since Americans expect less from politics, they give less to it.²²⁵ Moreover, in such a large federal country, Americans do not feel concerned by national politics or at least less than by local politics. Also, as in the case of independent voting behaviour, this lack of motivation can be regarded as a civil statement of discontent with the two dominant choices and their divisive approach to common problems.

David Riesman, a U.S. sociologist, views this indifference from another angle. According to him:

[t]his apathy of the great majority is not the classic, quiescent indifference of the tradition directed. It is to a large degree the indifference of people who know enough about politics to reject it, enough about political information to refuse it, enough about their political responsibilities as citizens to evade them.

²²⁴ Cummings and Wise 246.

²²⁵ Rossiter 34.

David Riesman qualifies this category of people as the “new style indifferents.”²²⁶

Still from another perspective, there seems to have been a sizeable number of Americans whom indecision rather than indifference, cynicism or civility keep them from the polls. Many non-voters are anything but apathetic in front of the choice they are proposed. They follow the campaign closely, indeed much too closely, for they apparently end up paralyzed by the desire to vote for both candidates; thereby they prove a point that students of political behaviour had known for some years: that “cross-pressures”²²⁷ can force many would-be participants in the political process to withdraw for a time, or even for good, into a state of indifference.

This said, the responsibility for the behaviour of the American electorate does not lie only on the individuals and their peculiar spirit but also on the political system at large. Indeed, other factors can be found in the nature of the political system. One of them with which we have dealt under the perspective of the lack of motivation – is the two-party system. The question our own two major parties always ask is this. Do you prefer Democrats or Republicans? It is a loaded question. The American electorate is not allowed to reject the shared premises of the two-big government parties. There is little doubt that many voters see nothing to choose between the Tweedledumism of the Democrats and Tweedledeeism of the Republicans. By Tweedledee and Tweedledum we mean two people or two groups resembling each other so closely that they are practically indistinguishable and so hard to tell apart.²²⁸ Lacking any third choice they fail to choose at all.²²⁹ Some scholars even speak of the “tyranny of the two-party system”²³⁰ to evoke

²²⁶Rossiter 35.

²²⁷ Expression used in political socialisation.

²²⁸ “Tweedledum, Tweedledee,” Answers.com. Freeonline Dictionary, Encyclopedia, Thesaurus, 3 Apr. 2007. Answers Corporation. 2007. July 2007 <www.answers.com/topic/tweedledum-and-tweedledee>.

²²⁹ Rossiter 33.

²³⁰ Lisa J. Disch, The Tyranny of The Two Party System, Columbia University Press, June 2002, last modified 27 Nov. 2006, Dec. 2006 <www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/catalog/data/023111/0231110340.HTM>.

the extent of the implication of the monopoly of the two major parties on American politics.

Moreover, the American electoral system presents some cumbersome procedures that frustrate broader participation which is already discouraged given the fact that the Americans are not really attracted by politics. The first of these special disabilities is the fact that the American Constitution, laws, and electoral practices put an unusual number of technical difficulties in the path of the would-be voter and the multiplication of elective offices burdens the voter with tasks that are quite beyond the competence to fulfil. The pity is that nothing seems to be done to remedy to such drawbacks. Apparently, it is not one of the main concerns of the government. Few of the states, which are – under the federal pattern of government – primarily responsible for setting the conditions of the suffrage, have done anything to make things easier for Americans to qualify and vote.

4. The Americans' Stance Regarding the Nature of Political Parties

We will analyse the position of the Americans concerning the present situation, to see whether the fact that they are centrist and not ideologically-driven automatically means that they are pleased with such a system. When studying the various attitudes and reactions, we can distinguish two schools of thought. On the one hand, those who are not satisfied with the present system think that democracy has the right to answer questions and that political parties to offer meaningful choice. As there is no real difference between the ideals and political stance of American political parties, the latter are not effective democratic devices. Also, those who are not satisfied with the system complain that party platforms are so evasive, obscure and vague and the candidates' statements so ambiguous

that they have no basis on which to choose. In their view, the typical platform seems to be designed to pick every vote rather than to speak out in a forthright manner on the vital questions of the day. According to an old saying, party platforms are like train platforms – something to get in on, not to stand on.²³¹ They denounce political parties as “empty bottles, distinguished only by ancient labels, and accuse them of conspiring, in their refusal to take a definite stance on important questions, against the public interest.”²³² In his classic complaint about the similarity of American political parties, political scientist James Bryce claimed that “neither party has any principles, any distinctive tenets.”²³³ In a famous talk made after surveying the positions of the major political parties in 1968, George Wallace, a third-party presidential candidate, for his part, remarked, “[t]here ain’t a dime’s worth of difference between them.”²³⁴ Observing today American political parties, politician J.J. Murphy compared politics with business. “Parties take up issues as a merchant replenishes his stock,” says J.J. Murphy, “when the public demands something new, the merchant brings out the new fashions. The primary purpose of the merchant and the party is the same, to make a living. Parties have an existence entirely independent of the principles they advocate or profess.”²³⁵ The criticism of national political parties was brought to a head in 1950 by a Committee on Political Parties set up by the American Political Science Association. In its report, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System” the committee stated its dissatisfaction with the present party system and made a large number of recommendations for more responsible political parties.²³⁶

²³¹ George S. Masannat and Vernon Martin, The American Political System: Introductory Readings (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1971) 289.

²³² Penniman 4.

²³³ Cummings and Wise 247.

²³⁴ Sean M. Theriault, “The Case of the Vanishing Moderates: Party Polarization in the Modern Congress,” 2, 23 Sept. 2003, May 2006 <<http://www.msu.edu/~rohde/Theriault.pdf>>.

²³⁵ Penniman 153.

²³⁶ Peter H. Odegard, Robert K. Can, Marver H. Bernstein and Donald Morrison, American Government: Theory, Politics and Constitutional Foundation (U.S.A.: Row Peterson and Company and Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961) 147.

On the other hand, some observers like Edward Pendleton Herring are satisfied with and defend the present American system. The latter developed the thesis that a democratic society “can survive only where there is a constant reconciliation of conflicting economic and social interests.”²³⁷ In his book The Politics of Democracy, he wrote, “[t]he accomplishment of party government lies in its demonstrated ability for reducing warring interests and conflicting classes to cooperative terms.”²³⁸ So, the “brokerage” role of political parties in mediating among interest groups, whether such groups are organized or not, and in resolving social conflict, is of tremendous importance in a democracy under pressure.

Historian Walter Lippmann, for his part, has come to the conclusion that the country is better off without a sharp cleavage on some flaming issue of principle, without a political bifurcation that would disrupt national unity. “There are some,” he wrote, “who dream of the day when the people will be divided into two great parties, each with its dogmatic creed, each with its rigorous tests of faithfulness to the creed.” Such a development would, he believes, involve the destruction of American constitutional system and even lead to civil war.”²³⁹

In much the same way, political scientist Max Lerner thinks that it is by no means clear that extremes polarization of the parties on issues that divide American society is desirable. “The difference between Democrats and Republicans,” Max Lerner has observed, “while it is more than the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, is not such as to split the society itself or invite civil conflict ... The choices between the two are usually substantial choice but not desperate ones.”²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Odegard, Can, Bernstein and Morrison 147.

²³⁸ Edward Pledleton Herring, The Politics of Democracy. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1940) 132.

²³⁹ Penniman 4.

²⁴⁰ Cummings and Wise 247.

Moreover, contrary to the view of many writers, political scientist Stephen K. Bailey advances that “the parties do not need to be strongly ideological or even strongly programmatic in order to accomplish the kind of re-alignment of the party system that would stabilize the national power and help to make it responsible. “There are vast areas of overlap in the rather vague programmatic shadows,” Stephen K. Bailey shows, “that our two great parties cast over the nation – and this is as it should be if consensus is to continue in the making of public policy and in the administration of foreign policy.”²⁴¹

Some defenders of the present party system claim that there are differences between the two major political parties. They concede that there are many similarities between the presidential wings of the two parties and also between the leadership of the congressional Republicans and their Democratic counterparts. But which party occupies the White House does seem to make a difference, regardless of the fact that the presidential candidates of the two parties often agree on many important issues of public policy, particularly in foreign affairs. Some of these differences can be measured by comparing contrasting party platforms in presidential elections. Although the conventional view is that platforms are “meaningless,” political scientist Gerald M. Pomper claims that platforms in fact “are reasonably meaningful indications of the party’s intentions” and serve to commit the parties to “particular policies.” And these policies vary. Moreover, in a majority of cases, Gerald M. Pomper advances, political parties actually carry out the promises contained in their platforms. Analysing 1400 platforms pledges over two decades (1944-64), Gerald M. Pomper concluded that 72 percent of these promises were fulfilled.²⁴²

The last but not the least, Americans generally accept the prevailing political and economic structure. Voters have a high regard for the Constitution and for American

²⁴¹ Bailey 183.

²⁴² Cummings and Wise 247.

political institutions (although not necessarily for the politicians which operate those institutions). A majority of the electorate do not identify with political extremes and consider themselves standing near the middle ground of politics and so, are pleased with the present state.

CHAPER FOUR:

PARTY POLARIZATION AND THE ELECTORATE

By the end of the last century a new phase in the development of American political parties tolls the knell of the previous era of party convergence. Indeed, observers in American politics noticed that both national major political parties have been moving towards the poles of the ideological continuum; or in other words, political parties are aligning themselves farther from the center of the political spectrum. This phenomenon, labelled party polarization, established a climate of conflict escalation and of party disparity in the American political arena and heralded the near collapse of national consensus in public policy.

We will devote this last chapter to the analysis of the current phase in the evolution of the American political parties and to the evaluation of its real impact on the electorate. We will try to see what happened to voters as politicians have polarized. Have the political preferences of individual voters been related to party polarization?

I. Party Polarization

1. Study of the Phenomenon of Party Polarization in the United States

First of all, to approach and comprehend such a phenomenon as party polarization appropriately, we have to trace back its origins and probe into its causes.

As far as the twentieth century is concerned, signs of party disparity in American politics can be noticed by the beginning of the century. They were, no doubt, intensified

by “the advent of the New Deal, and by its immense electoral and intellectual success.”²⁴³ By rallying the diverse forces that were to be crucial to all subsequent Democratic majorities into a firm alliance, by moving significantly leftwards by making explicit the doctrines of the “Welfare State” with which the party was from that time on to be inseparably identified, the Democratic party along with its New Deal, probably, stirred the opposition, rallied it, deepened the fervour of its Republican adversaries, drove into the opposition the staunchest defenders of business ideology and, above all, aroused a move rightwards.²⁴⁴

Once launched, the cleavage has been sustained by the tendency for each party to attract into its active ranks a disproportionate number of voters who recognize and share its point of view. In the post-war period Republicans have been never more separated from Democrats.²⁴⁵ By the mid-twentieth century we can speak of party polarization (even if the concept itself began to be used in the political science field only by the late twentieth century).

We can make such estimation thanks to the conclusive findings that emerge from a reliable study carried out in 1957-58 by Herbert McClosky and his colleagues comparing the two sets of party leaders of the two national political parties. According to them, “despite the brokerage tendency of the American parties, their active leaders are obviously separated by large and important differences. The differences, moreover, conform to the popular image in which the Democratic party is seen as the more “progressive” or “radical,” the Republican as the more “moderate” or “conservative” of the two.”²⁴⁶ In other words, the results of this study point up not only that the major national American

²⁴³ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 205.

²⁴⁴ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 205.

²⁴⁵ Sean M. Theriault, “An Integration Explanation for Party Polarization in the U.S. Congress,” 1, The University of Texas at Austin, Dec.15 2005, May 2006 <www.la.utexas.edu/~seant/model.pdf>.

²⁴⁶ McClosky, Hoffmann and O’Hara 192.

political parties were polarizing in the late fifties but also that while doing so they remained loyal to their respective traditions.

From that time on, the gap between Republicans and Democrats has been widening over time and the scientific field began to embrace the phenomenon of party polarization. In the early 1960s in an article entitled “The Polarization of American Political Parties and Mistrust of Government,” political scientist David C. King asserts that both parties have grown more extreme since the early 1960s especially after the breakdown of the New Deal Democratic Coalition.²⁴⁷

With President Lyndon Johnson’s determination – following John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 – to pass civil rights legislation even if it meant the loss of the “solid South”; America’s two major political parties ““have gradually moved away from the “Big Tent” concept whereby each party included liberals, moderates, and conservatives.”” They were henceforth beginning to look like European-typical parties consisting of people who share the same ideological orientation.²⁴⁸

Also, with the 1964 national election opposing Senator Barry Goldwater and the incumbent President Lyndon Johnson, the American public began to perceive the trend towards polarization, though it was not yet plain and though the public expected sharper divergences given the candidates and given Barry Goldwater’s reputation of “pure conservative.” Indeed, as Philip E. Converse and his colleagues note, “the mass public had some sense that “important differences” between the two major parties were heightened in 1964 compared with parallel data from either 1960 or, as is more impressive, the relatively tense election of 1952.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ King.

²⁴⁸ Daniel Yankelovich, “Overcoming Polarization : The New Social Morality,” Jan. 2006, Public Agenda, 2007, May 2006 <www.publicagenda.org/aboutpa/aboutpa_articles_detail.cfm?list=28> .

²⁴⁹ Philip E. Converse, Aage R. Clausen, and Warren E. Miller, “Electoral Myth and Reality: the 1964 Election” 349, Political Parties and Political Behavior, ed. William J. Crotty, Donald M. Freeman and Douglas S. Gatlin (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1966) 349-79.

By the 1970s the phenomenon of party polarization grew in scale, became a plain phenomenon and started to be a main point of focus among political observers. In a paper published in 1984 in the Journal of Politics titled “The Polarization of American politics” political scientists Howard Rosenthal and Keith P. Poole advance that beginning in the mid-1970s, “American politics became much more divisive. More Democrats staked out consistently liberal positions, and more Republicans supported wholly conservative ones.”²⁵⁰

Likewise, political scientists Jeffrey D. Gynaviski and Shang E. Ha demonstrate through figures in “Party Activists and the Ideological polarization of American parties” published in 2004 that “the Democratic party-in-government has moved in barely perceptible, yet generally steady, biennial increments in the direction of greater liberalism, whereas the Republican party-in-government has similarly moved more and more toward greater conservatism.”²⁵¹

By the 1980s as the phenomenon achieved its ripeness stage and as it was on a noticeable subsequent increase, it was brought to the forefront of the public arena especially in the media. In his book entitled The Independent Nation, John Avlon comments on the aforesaid increase in the following way: “[t]his trend [speaking of polarization] has especially been on the increase since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and continued to grow with the anti-Clinton fervour of the 1994 Newt Gingrich-led Republican Revolution.”²⁵² Today, Washington, according to John Avlon, has grown more

²⁵⁰ Keith T. Poole, “The Decline and Rise of Party Polarization in Congress During the Twentieth Century,” Extensions (Fall 2005) University of California, San Diego, May 2006 <www.ou.edu/special/albertctr/extensions/fall2005/poole.pdf>.

²⁵¹ Jeffrey D. Gynaviski, and Shang E. Ha, “Party Activists and the Ideological Polarization of American Parties [Draft],” figure 1, 27 Jan.2004, Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, Prepared for Political Economy Workshop, University of Chicago, May 2006 <harrisschool.uchicago.edu/Academic/workshops/pol_econ_papers/PartyActivism_paper.pdf>.

²⁵² Avlon, Independent Nation.

polarized, driven by ideology and disdaining compromise, than at any time in the recent past.

2. Factors at the Origin of the Phenomenon

While the actual occurrence of the phenomenon is no more a subject of doubt, the factors that can explain the phenomenon remain object of wonder and puzzle. Indeed, if under the logic of American politics as we have seen in the previous chapter, political parties increase their chances to win elections when they announce convergent platforms and if elected they come to greater achievements when they opt for compromise, it is interesting, then, to find out the reasons that pushed American politicians to launch such phenomenon.

Political scientists have offered various explanations for the growing divide. In the same way as some pressures exerted homogenizing tendencies toward uniformity, many forces also divide the population culturally, economically, and politically and impel political parties to diverge from each other in order to sharpen their respective appeal.²⁵³ Apart from these and other exterior factors like political reforms, redistricting, the realignment of the electoral bases of the parties, the shifting demographic composition of America, the political sorting and ideological migration of voters which have made the parties polarize,²⁵⁴ it is mainly the parties that have determined (even if they were pushed under pressure) the polarization of the political race. When looking for their motivations so as to comprehend the reasons behind such phenomenon, we find out that they decided to apply such policy for their own sake, for that of the electorate and that of the nation as a whole.

First, politicians adopted polarization for strategical purposes. There is a basic political logic that prevents rational partymen from cooperating across party lines.

²⁵³ McClosky, Hoffmann and O'Hara 188.

²⁵⁴ Theriault, "An Integration Explanation for Party Polarization in the US Congress."

Because they need the support of key constituencies (partisans) to be fund-raised and get-re-elected, politicians tend to avoid taking policy positions that might antagonize campaign contributors, core supporters, and above all, party activists. Party activists are not merely more extreme than average Americans, they are significantly less likely to compromise core beliefs. As these groups have intense policy preferences, partymen are reluctant to reach across the edge and vote for policy positions their partisans might deem too “soft” or “weak”. At the same time, polarization was strategically used to provide incentives to candidates, demonstrate Cecilia Testa in “Party Polarization and Electoral Accountability”²⁵⁵.

Then, faced with the declining role of parties and with the criticism and complaints made against the two-party system, politicians decided for polarization as an alternative to several shortcomings of the past system. Politicians became aware that when parties converge to the median voter not only there is no real choice but that electoral accountability also is inevitably compromised. To palliate such drawback and present more responsible parties, politicians are, henceforth, interested in rallying the basis rather than attracting the swing voters and this can be achieved only through polarization. In this respect, politicians hope to stimulate and motivate the electorate and by the same token to revive the institution of political parties.

Politicians became aware as well that party diffusion, loss of credibility and coherence results from party convergence and lack of ideological orientation. International and domestic policies, indeed, may lack rationality, consistency in their substance because

²⁵⁵ Cecilia Testa, “Party Polarization and Electoral Accountability,” Abstract, Royal Holloway University of London and STICERD (LSE), June 2006
<zeus.econ.umd.edu/cgi-bin/conference/download.cgi?db_name=mwet2005&paper_id=39 >. If we take her model Citizens have preferences over a multimensional policy space comprising an ideological and a monetary dimension. Candidates are policy motivated on the ideological dimension only and have opposing interest with respect to citizens on the monetary dimension. Policy motivation implies that candidates care more about winning elections the bigger the ideological distance from the candidate of the opponent party.

of this tendency.²⁵⁶ Having considered the wrongdoings of party diffusion, politicians are no more indifferent with respect to the quality of policies. They “view winning an election not only as a goal per se” but also as a means to implement their policies.²⁵⁷ Then, to present more credible and coherent policies on the national and international scenes, some politicians have opted for polarization.

3. Effects of Party Polarization on the Electorate

We will move to the assessment of the extent of its impact on the American electorate. In other words, we will examine whether the electorate is affected by the aforesaid trend, or still in political science terminology whether party polarization is a general phenomenon extending to all meanings of “party” that we have seen in the first chapter, or a limited one. In fact, how much of this sorting process is taking place i.e. how deeply is the United States divided is hard to tell and lets room to interpretation and supposition. Undoubtedly, it has poured much ink. After trying to bring an answer to such a puzzle, we will strive to probe into the causes of the findings.

No one has embraced the concept of polarization more enthusiastically than journalists. Their reports, in particular and the media, in general, present polarization as a phenomenon that concerns the whole society. Basing themselves on polls and sometimes on some data as the number of entries to some polemic films, journalists tell us that contemporary voters are sharply divided (especially on moral issues). Indeed, claims of bitter national division were standard after the 2000 elections. “Nation fractured,” “great divide,” “value chasm” are usual headlines that we can find in the American media. Even

²⁵⁶ Bailey 184.

²⁵⁷ Alberto Alesina, “Credibility and Policy Convergence in a Two-Party System with Rational Voters” 796, *The American Economic Review*, 78, 4 (Sep. 1988): 796-805, JSTOR, 2000-2007, July 2006 <links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8282(198809)78%3A4%3C796%3ACAPCIA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>.

respectable newspapers nurture this idea. A February 2002 report published in the USA Today declared that “[w]hen George W. Bush took office, half the country cheered and the other half seethed,”²⁵⁸ pointing up the degree of national division. Some months later the Economist wrote that “such political divisions cannot easily be shifted by any president, let alone in two years, because they reflect deep demographic divisions ... The 50-50 nation appears to be made of two big separate voting blocks, with only a small number of swing voters in the middle.”²⁵⁹ More than one year later the same newspaper asserted that “America is more bitterly divided than it has been for a generation.”²⁶⁰ In general, so, journalists have all signed on to this vision of America as a house divided.

Moreover, the 2000 election brought the public the familiar pictorial representation of polarization in the form of the “red” and “blue” map of the United States. “Vast areas of the heartland appeared as Republican red, while coastal and Great Lakes states took on a Democratic blue hue. Pundits reified the colors on the map, treating them as prima facie evidence of deep division.”²⁶¹ From that time on, it has become trendy – in the media – to describe America as a collection of culturally conservative blue states that vote Republican and culturally liberal red states that vote for Democrats. “Because it is understandable and offers an explanation for the climate of bitterness and frustration in Washington, the red/blue paradigm dominates today’s political discourse,” Daniel Yankelovich, chairman and co-founder of Public Agenda, confirms in his article.²⁶²

More than just diagnosing an increasing polarization, some political commentators in the media have gone even as far as to say that the country is in the midst of a cultural

²⁵⁸ “Debunking the myth of a polarized America,” 14 July 2004, Hoover Institution, Hoover Digest, 2004, Aug. 2006 <www.hoover.org/publications/digest/3010006.html ->.

²⁵⁹ “On His High Horse,” Economist, November 9, 2002:25, qtd. in “Political Polarization and the Electoral Effect of Media Bias,” 1, Dan Bernhardt, Stephan Krassa, and Mattias Polborn, 22 Aug. 2006, Oct. 2006 <pier.econ.upenn.edu/Events/Media%20Bias.pdf>.

²⁶⁰ “America’s Angry Election,” Economist, 3 Jan. 2004, qtd. in Bernhardt, Krassa, Polborn.

²⁶¹ “Debunking the Myth of a Polarized America”

²⁶² Yankelovich.

war. Culture War is a metaphor that refers to a displacement of the classic economic conflicts that animated twentieth century politics in the advanced democracies by newly emergent moral and cultural wars. One of them is E.S. Dionne, Jr. of Washington Post who after having studied a November 2003 report from the Pew Research Center, commented: “[t]he red states get redder, the blue states get bluer, and the political map of the United States takes on the coloration of the Civil War.”²⁶³ Another one is David Broder who wrote in Washington Post in November 2000, “[t]he divide went deeper than politics. It reached into the nation’s psyche... it was moral dimension that kept Bush in the race.”²⁶⁴ Regarding Michael Barone, a journalist proponent of polarization, he removed any doubt when claiming that he is not persuaded that the cultural divide is imaginary. In an interview he said, “[y]ou ‘ve got two blocs of votes that are pretty thoroughly committed and they are on the basis of strong moral views that correlate with strong religious beliefs and religious observation. You’ve got two armies in a culture war.”²⁶⁵

Without totally refuting the journalists’ remarks we will look at what scholars observe so as to have a scientific perspective on the phenomenon. One of the most widely accepted propositions among the political scientists concerns the elite partisan polarization. Indeed, previous research leaves no room for doubts that candidates and party activists i.e. the party-in-the-government and the party-in-the-electorate (in political science terminology) are polarizing “with each party having a greater tendency to direct its appeals to votes with extreme, rather than middle-of-the road preferences;” and, that trend

²⁶³ “Debunking the myth of a polarized America.”

²⁶⁴ “Debunking the myth of a polarized America.”

²⁶⁵ John Gerstein, “Dispute Emerges on How Deeply US is Divided - Morris Fiorina Demurs,” 6 July 2004, The New York Sun, June 2006 <www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~sabrams/NYSun.htm>.

shows no sign of reversing itself.²⁶⁶ The new consensus is that both political parties in their campaigns place emphasis on turning out the vote of their base rather than embracing bipartisan campaign messages²⁶⁷ to the point that we, as Brookings Senior Fellow Tom Mann does, doubt to whether there are still independents, and if swing voters truly exist. “Is there any more room in the system?” Tom Mann queried, “[i]s the partisanship so strong that the right candidate, even with the right conditions and the right pitch, can’t appeal to the opposite side?”²⁶⁸

Besides this accepted proposition, disputes in the scientific field emerge on how deep the United States is divided. It is a controversial issue because scholars have to rely on data that are open to various interpretations and on conventional measures that leave doubt about their reliability. We will review their debate and examine whether the aforesaid elite polarization has fuelled a potential mass polarization. On the one hand, some researchers line up with the media. They claim that the partisan component in the American public revived and that by 1960 and 1964 a surge in consistency characterized voting behaviour.²⁶⁹ According to them, so, the electorate is henceforth ideologically polarizing.

All these observations fuelled a series of articles. The most significant is John R. Petrocik’s “Changing American Voter” which came to challenge Eric R. A.N. Smith’s picture of the “Unchanging American voter”.²⁷⁰ According to the latter description, the typical American voter knows little about politics, is not interested in politics, does not participate in politics, does not organize his or her political attitudes in a coherent manner,

²⁶⁶ Shanto Lyengar and Morin Richard, “Polarization Across Party lines, or Politics as Contact Sport,” March, 29 2006, *Washington Post*, Washington Post Company 1996-2007, June 2006 <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/29/AR2006032901882.html> .

²⁶⁷ “Event Summary: A look at the American Electorate,” Washington D.C., September 17, 2004, The Brookings Institution, 2004, May 2006 <www.brookings.edu/comm/op-ed/20040917elections.htm> .

²⁶⁸ “Event Summary: A look at the American Electorate.”

²⁶⁹ “Event Summary: A look at the American electorate.”

²⁷⁰ Eric R. A. N. Smith, *Unchanging American Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 2, Netlibrary, Sep. 2006 <<http://www.netlibrary.com/Reader>>.

and does not think in structured and ideological terms. Moreover, the basic character and behaviour of American voters would not change.²⁷¹

In contrast, the former descriptions argue that “the electorate had made a great leap forward in political sophistication and ideological thinking between 1960 and 1964 presidential elections.”²⁷² To be sophisticated, in political scientist terminology, people must have some sort of abstract principles with which they organize their beliefs and attitudes on the issues.²⁷³ Furthermore, as the authors of such articles claim that voting behaviours change in response to the changing environment and, in particular, to the surge of protest and ideological rhetoric, it is clear that these authors lay the responsibility for the mass polarization on elite polarization.

In more recent years, political scientist Gary Jacobson appeared to be one of the most outstanding proponents of mass polarization. Indeed, he is among those who argue that mass parties have become more ideologically distinct over the past few years. Moreover, when he states that “(t)he emergence of party polarization is because the electoral base of each party has evolved from being fairly diverse to being more uniform,”²⁷⁴ not only does he mean that there is more uniformity among the electorate but also he implies that this is what, in fact, was at the origin of party polarization phenomenon, itself. So more than just claiming mass polarization, he challenges the usual direction of the lineal connection: it is not the party polarization in the government that has fuelled a party polarization in the public but the reverse.

Even the fears of cultural war can be found in the mind of some political scientists. In Red versus Blue: American Electoral Geography and Congressional Bipartisanship, 1898-2002, Nicole Mellow and Peter Trubowitz repeat Abraham Lincoln’s famous

²⁷¹ Smith 2.

²⁷² Smith 2.

²⁷³ Smith 2.

²⁷⁴ Matt Levendusky, “Dissertation Précis,” 15 Sept.2005, Mar. 2006
<www.stanford.edu/class/polisci353/2004spring/reading/levendusky.pdf>.

statement: “A house divided against itself cannot stand” and continue by notifying, “[w]hile Lincoln’s ominous Civil War warning may seem out of place in the 21st century American politics, the events of the last four years lend a different sort of urgency to calls by today’s leading politicians for a new national unity to transcend existing partisan and geographic positions.”²⁷⁵

On the other hand, other scholars advocate that partisan polarization is largely and exclusively an elite phenomenon. In other words, according to them, only a thin layer of elected officials and activists are truly polarized. They argue that the American public at large has not become more polarized in the sense of being more divided ideologically, or still in the sense of holding more divergent views on major policy issues, or in the sense of being more extreme in their political convictions. According to the American National Election Studies we can notice, as David C. King has done in his article “The Polarization of American Political Parties and Mistrust of government,” that the majority of the electorate is “middle of the road”. From 1972 “extreme” conservatives and “extreme” liberals have fluctuated between one and three percent of the population over the last quarter of the century.²⁷⁶ According to the same source, “[t]he number of self-identified moderates [rose] from a bare plurality of 36 percent in 1980 to 50 percent in 1998 and 2000. At the same time, the number of Americans who are reluctant to identify themselves completely with either political party has been steadily rising ... A plurality of Americans cannot identify themselves along an ideological spectrum, and we

²⁷⁵ Mellow and Trobowitz.

²⁷⁶ Alan I. Abramowitz, “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along? The Realty of a Polarized America,” May 2006 <www.dartmouth.edu/~govt/docs/Abramowitz.pdf>.

should suspect that these voters may grow more restive if and when the political parties portray their positions in highly ideological terms.”²⁷⁷

Rather, according to this group of scholars, it is partisan polarization in the electorate that has been on the rise: the Democrats and the Republicans in the electorate have become increasingly divided ideologically and the issue differences between them have been widening. In other words, the upper stratum of the political class in the United States – the candidates, the activists, the interest group leaders are more divided than they have been in quite a while.²⁷⁸

By using a technique of investigation which does not present usual shortcomings and which aims at resolving the polarization debate, political scientist Matt Levendusky comes to the same conclusion. He shows that “there has not been dramatic polarization of the electorate at large, but rather that polarization has been confined to a narrower segment of the electorate, namely strong partisans and activists.” In other words, only a thin layer of elected officials and activists are truly polarized. The polarization over the past generation has been confined to those most engaged with the party system: “the most committed and active segments of the electorate,” he observes, “have grown further apart over time, particularly since the Clinton Era. The elite polarization so characteristic of the Clinton and George Bush presidencies has driven those most engaged in politics further apart from one another.” He claims that “[t]he electorate as a whole tends to take moderate positions on the issues today as they did a generation ago.”²⁷⁹ In a word, polarization is exclusively an elite phenomenon and not a mass one.

²⁷⁷ Laura Stoker and M. Kent Jennings, “Aging, Generation, and the Development of Partisan Polarization in the United States,” Apr. 2006 <repositories.cdlib.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=igs>.

²⁷⁸ Lou Dobbs, “The Polarization Myth,” 20 Oct. 2004, Cable News Network LP, LLLP, A Time Warner Company, 2005, Apr. 2006 <www.cnn.com/2004/US/10/19/polarization.myth/index.html>.

²⁷⁹ Levendusky.

Lining up with these scholars are the well-known authorities, co-authors of Cultural War? The Myth of a Polarized America, political scientists Samuel Abrams, Jeremy Pope and Morris Fiorina. They argue that even though partisans may be more polarized, there is a larger center of voters who are largely ambivalent or indifferent. Referring to the partisan component in the American public, Morris P. Fiorina declares in an interview that “[t]here’s no indication that it’s any different than the last 25 years ... People keep forgetting that there are over 210 million adults in the country. There are 105 million voters,” said Fiorina “I’m willing to grant that 10% of people are highly polarized and it’s always been that way.” “The truth of the matter” according to him, “is simply that the political class, the officeholders, the activists, and the contributors, they are indeed highly polarized.”²⁸⁰

In the same logic, Morris Fiorina and his colleagues reject the red and blue dichotomy on the basis that the facts do not support the view. According to them, “[t]he country is gray, not red or blue.”²⁸¹ Sharing this observation is Pietro S. Nivola who comments on the TV maps that depict “red” America clashing with “blue” one in an article entitled “Thinking about Political Polarization”: “[t]hey are colourful but misleading. Most of the country ought to be painted purple.”²⁸² Also, after a thorough examination of the U.S. political situation, another observer declares that “[t]he actual political geography of the United States, in short, bears little resemblance to the simplistic picture of a nation divided between solidly partisan states or regions.”²⁸³ The simplicity of pictorial representation while the reality seems more complex makes us, researchers in American studies, as well puzzle and wonder whether there is a systematic connection

²⁸⁰ Gerstein.

²⁸¹ Samuel Abrams co-author of Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America, qtd. in Gerstein.

²⁸² Nivola.

²⁸³ Nivola.

between geography and partisanship or whether it is simply an artifact of the two elections in which George W. Bush has competed.

Morris Fiorina and his colleagues' point of view reveals all its soundness as they advance that polarization of the public about which everybody speak is apparent – argument that would silence most of the objections. During an interview, Morris Fiorina defended his case by claiming that “[e]verybody’s been told about how divided they are, but most Americans don’t experience it in their everyday life.”²⁸⁴

II. Apparent Polarization

If any polarization there is, it is an illusion, an artifact, a product. The commentaries made during the campaigns of the election 2000 put this in evidence: “President Bush and Sen. Kerry have less than two weeks to try to sway the remaining undecided voters before the November presidential election. It’s hard to image there are still undecided voters after months of non-stop campaigning and three so-called debates, especially when the pundits claim the American public is more polarized than at any time in recent history.”²⁸⁵

1. Factors Contributing to give the Perception of Polarization

In Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America, Morris Fiorina and his colleagues argue that the perception of a country at loggerheads is based on several fallacies. Taking into account their findings and other sources, we will attempt to find out the factors contributing to the perception of a divide.

²⁸⁴ Morris D. Fiorina, qtd. in Gerstein.

²⁸⁵ Dobbs.

To begin with, Americans who lack strong political feelings have dropped out of politics altogether, putting to the forefront those who are highly devoted and convinced and, therefore, partisan giving, in this way, the impression of a polarized public.²⁸⁶

Worth mentioning among the factors giving the impression of polarization, is the use of self-placement, an uncertain and subjective and so unreliable technique. As a proof, while three quarters of Americans can place themselves along the ideological spectrum, an overwhelming majority of voters are not true ideologues in that their political ideologies do not highly constrain or structure the ways they behave. According to political scientists' estimations "no more than a quarter of Americans show consistent signs of ideological thinking...For many Americans, calling themselves liberals or conservatives is a momentary fashion statement without much depth."²⁸⁷

But the two main factors contributing to the perception of polarization are the elite and the media, each having its own way to operate. On the one side, by presenting voters with polarizing alternatives and choosing polarized candidates, political elite "impel" voters to take sides in the strife and so to appear polarized. In this case, according to Morris D. Fiorina there is polarization in voters' "choices" and not in their "preferences". Clearly, so political elites do not take extreme positions because of the voters' leanings. Proving this case is the fact that voters opt for moderation when they have a choice of more moderate alternatives.²⁸⁸

But then if the voters are not looking for polarization in national politics what is then the politicians' motivations? In fact, the political elites proceed to such manoeuvring not for the sake of the voters but to give themselves the opportunity to advance their own interests and to attract the public during the campaigns. Indeed, as moderation does not play well at election times, they play up the myth of polarization.

²⁸⁶ Gerstein.

²⁸⁷ King.

²⁸⁸ "Debunking the Myth of Polarized America."

On the other side, by defining, shaping, and often exacerbating conflict by the stories they choose to cover, by those they omit, by the sources they use, by the facts they include, by the way they use language, by their biases, or news frames, the representatives of the media have a great part of responsibility in this apparent polarization as well. The media unavoidably, necessarily mediates conflicts and do not do that scientifically. Several recent books argue that most major media outlets in the U.S. report the news with a severe bias.

First, media bias manifests itself as suppression of information. For example, conservative and liberal media outlets, each, present only the negative news about the opposing candidate. In this way, suppression of information by the media can influence voters' preferences and incentives so that even moderates look like partisans.²⁸⁹

Moreover, the media bias plays as the representatives of the media do not base their observations on sound ground. For instance Michael Barone, who after having analysed campaigns drew his conclusion from intuition. Indeed, he said: “[i]n watching the candidates and their supporters in the primary, I sense (emphasis added) more bitter partisanship than in most other elections.”²⁹⁰

Other representatives of the media use unreliable data. One of these data is the polls. Stressing their lack of accuracy is Samuel J. Abrams, colleague of Morris D. Fiorina. Pollsters, claims Samuel J. Abrams, feed the sense of division by asking questions that allow only for answers such as “yes” or “no”, “agree” or “disagree”. He said there should be little surprise that when questions are framed that way Americans appear to be divided. To prove his case, Samuel J. Abrams cited evidence of a recent survey where respondents were asked in an open ended interview about their views on abortion. Based on several criteria, each person was assigned a number between zero (totally pro-life) and

²⁸⁹ Bernhardt, Krasa and Polborn.

²⁹⁰ Gerstein.

six (totally pro-choice). The average score was 4.2 leaning towards pro-choice, but not overwhelmingly so. Samuel J. Abrams claims that no state or region differed from that average by more than a few tenths of a point. His concluding words are “[t]hat’s not a war. That’s not statistically significant.”²⁹¹

Another unreliable data used by the representatives of the media is the number of entries to polemic films. For example, some outlets take the fact that about eight million people have seen Mr Moore’s anti-Bush film “Fahrenheit 9/11,” as an expansion of the Democratic base and as evidence of a deep political divide.

In addition to the aforesaid factors contributing to the perception of great divide, Morris D. Fiorina and his colleagues mention several fallacies that feed, according to them, the media’s Culture War Myth. One of them is “portraying “closely divided” and “deeply divided” as the same.”²⁹² Indeed, the reports of the journalists do not regard close elections as signal of indifference and ambivalence. According to them such elections reflect evenly matched blocs of deeply committed partisans. While for Morris D. Fiorina, Americans “are closely divided, but ... [they] are not deeply divided, and ... [they] are closely divided because many of us are ambivalent and uncertain, and consequently reluctant to make firm commitments to parties, politicians, or policies. ... [They] divide evenly in elections or sit them out entirely because ... [they] instinctively seek the centre while the parties and candidates hang out on the extremes.”The other fallacies with which we have sufficiently dealt are “equating political elites with typical Americans,” “presenting skewed news values,” and “confusing positions with choices.”²⁹³

Like the political elite, the representatives of the media as well have some motivation and interest in contributing to further the image of a polarized nation especially as the media people are among the political elite. Because their primer preoccupation is to

²⁹¹ Samuel Abrams, qtd. in Gerstein.

²⁹² Murray Law.

²⁹³ Murray Law.

sell, journalists are ever alert for subjects that have “news value”. Conflict is high in “news value”. Disagreement, division, polarization, battle, and war make, indeed, good copy while agreement, consensus, moderation, compromise, and peace do not.

2. From Apparent Polarization to Real Polarization

From another perspective, more than just giving the impression of great divide, the media together with the political elite may encourage polarization and extremism in the party-in-the government, in the party-in-the-electorate and indirectly in the electorate. In other words, the apparent polarization can lead indirectly to a real polarization.

On the one side, elite partisan polarization has indeed somehow fuelled mass polarization. An early version of this proposition was developed by political scientists Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson in their theory of issue evolution. As they put it, “visible changes in elite behaviour serve to redefine party images, to affect emotional response to the parties, and ultimately to realign the constellation of voter issue attitudes and party identification.”²⁹⁴

On the other side, the media also play a role in encouraging polarization as well. In the party-in-the government, the mediating effect manifests itself by marginalizing certain parties and by only quoting their most extreme members and positions, by identifying parties with their positions, using the “party X says, party Y says” model of reporting” – a format that can tend “to lock parties into their positions, and to make their positions more intractable.”²⁹⁵

In the electorate, the mediating effect boosts polarization in several ways. It is worth mentioning that all the following mediating effects have an impact all the more on the electorate since the latter is ignorant politically speaking. Firstly, media bias manifests

²⁹⁴ Stocker and Jennings.

²⁹⁵ Article Summary of *The Media as Mediator* by Melissa Bausmann and Hannes Siebert. Conflict Research Consortium staff NDR Forum. Winter1993. May 2006
<www.beyondintractability.org/articlesummary/10038/>.

itself as suppression of information – the news suppression bias. Even if voters know that media are biased and update rationally, they cannot completely recover the suppressed information. Lacking exhaustive information, they will behave, politically speaking, as the media want them to do. For this reason and others, the media are often blamed for the fact that voters' beliefs on key policy issues are sometimes blatantly false.

Secondly, media bias can lean voting behaviour towards polarization in that it provides, show political scientists Dan Bernhardt, Stefan Krasa and Mattias Polborn in a paper published in 2004, a mechanism through which political polarization can affect electoral outcomes i.e. the attitudes of the mass public in elections.²⁹⁶

Last but not least, the mediating effect manifests itself on the electorate by presenting only the negative news about the opposing candidate, by depicting him/her deliberately choosing terms with negative connotations and by exaggerating some aspects. In this respect, media play a great role in conflict escalation, feed a sense of polarization among the electorate. For example, "Fahrenheit 9/11," depicts President Bush as a dangerous oaf. In the radio and Fox News, voters can hear that any sentient being would support a wide-eyed liberal like Senator Kerry.²⁹⁷ In other media, Democrats get portrayed as "a bunch of morons who don't know what they are doing."²⁹⁸

Instances of mediating exaggeration are not lacking either. The cultural chasm is said to be getting wider with on one side "latteddrinking; Volvo-driving liberals who eschew religion and with conservatives who never miss a Nascar race or a Sunday service at their suburban superchurches," on the other side.²⁹⁹ The columnist George Will's lines confirms that tendency at exaggerating: "[s]ome ideologically intoxicated Republicans

²⁹⁶ Bernhardt, Krasa and Polborn.

²⁹⁷ Gerstein.

²⁹⁸ Yankelovich .

²⁹⁹ Gerstein.

think Democrats are not merely mistaken but sinful...Some Democrats, having lost their ideological confidence, substitute characters assassination for political purpose.”³⁰⁰

Moreover, because some newspapers are partisan and reflect the author’s stance, subjectivity inevitably operates and the deplored bias is either to the left or to the right. Political scientist Alan Abramowitz cited examples of polls in which the polling sample favoured a particular party. His arguments gain traction in light of the recent release of two polls with drastically different polling numbers for candidates George Walker Bush and John Kerry. Also, Alan Abramowitz reminded members of the audience that right before the 2000 presidential election, Vice President Al Gore leading by 10 points in the polls, yet only won the popular vote by a narrow margin.³⁰¹

3. Consequences of Party Polarization and Reasons of its Ineffectiveness

Besides reducing law production and major policy proposals by generating legislative gridlocks and making managing and resolving conflicts much more difficult, polarization’s major shortcomings is on the electorate. Indeed, polarization is not suitable for the electorate either. After analysing the two variables and their evolution, we find out that polarization of voters’ preferences and the polarization of the political race do not necessarily go in the same direction. It is interesting to see why polarization in the ruling elites has not led to one in the mass public. In fact, it has not the expected effects for several reasons.

First, polarization is against Americans’ perception of democracy. Americans see democracy as the form of government best suited to enabling people of diverse cultural persuasions to unite in pursuit of their common interests. Americans “reject the

³⁰⁰ Avlon, Independent Nation.

³⁰¹ Abramowitz.

proposition that any significant fraction of the U.S. electorate is bent on imposing its partisan moral vision on the remainder.”³⁰² For them, polarization means a decline of the so cherished consensus and a corresponding danger to democracy. Moreover, they – who are not inclined to vote because they understand, at least on an instinctive level, that what is really at stake when they are called in is a breakdown of compromise and trust among the politicians themselves – will be even more reluctant to participate when the political parties are sharply divided.

Then, faced with issues that seem contentious, a majority of Americans admit they are not informed enough to hold a firm opinion, to be highly partisan and to take part in the tendency towards polarization.³⁰³ Apart from ignorance, disinterest also hampers the process of polarization to be brought to completion in the electorate.

Furthermore, the vast majority of American citizens want mundane things out of politics like comfort and physical security.³⁰⁴ Many citizens may resent being dragged into complicated problems that they elect and employ politicians to resolve. But they are demoralized by the tendency towards polarization. They are disillusioned with today’s “political order dominated by purists who brought their strong views about particular issues to the political forefront, by activists and elected officials who behave like squabbling children in a crowded sandbox,” in the words of Morris Fiorina.³⁰⁵ As a result, ordinary citizens and moderate voters oftentimes feel apathetic about politics while extremists – thinking that the country would be better off if one party stood for the established social order and its rival sought to wreck the whole edifice – fight each other for control.

³⁰² John Gastil, Dan M. Kahan and Donald Braham, “Ending Polarization,” *Boston Review*, March/ April 2006, Boston Review, 1993-2006, June 2006 <bostonreview.net/BR31.2/gastilkanbraman.html>.

³⁰³ Dobbs.

³⁰⁴ Gastil, Kahan and Braman.

³⁰⁵ Morris D. Fiorina, qtd. in Murray Law.

Conclusion

The findings of this research bring some answers to the questions addressed in the introduction. This work shows that the trend of polarization in national politics is a recent phenomenon and does not lead to a left-right polarization among the public. Extreme parties may speak the loudest, but they are not accurately representing everyone's view.

From a theoretical perspective this failure can be expected. As we have seen, in standard spatial voting models changes in the political preference distribution are irrelevant as long as the position of the median voter does not change. Contrary to a misapprehension purveyed by more than a few casual commentators and by some political scientists, the bulk of the U.S. electorate is still leaning towards centrism, continues to share moderate political persuasions, and is not increasingly split by wedge issues. A proof of this is that when the political parties have nominated presidential candidates who have been perceived as representing extreme opinions, as did the Republicans with Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the Democrats with George Mc Govern in 1972, they have been badly defeated at the polls. Conversely, voters elected George W. Bush in 2000 because he promised to be “a uniter, not a divider,” to practice “compassionate conservatism,” and to pursue a “humble” foreign policy. Indeed as a candidate, George W. Bush positioned himself rhetorically close to the centre of gravity of American politics – slightly right of centre and he won the presidency on the basis of his promises. Unfortunately, once in office and during his tenure he has not practised his platform losing the allegiance of the moderate voters.

This dissertation further shows that a growing resentment among the public towards the polarized political parties can be felt since American citizens are more trusting of politicians who share their concerns and are more accepting of political institutions that advance citizen interests. Americans are demoralized since they are not looking for

polarization. They have not been captivated by its offerings. Not only does frustration and even alienation rise as the political parties are far from satisfying Americans' basic needs but worse mistrust of government arouses in the public's mind as the polarization of the ruling elite will be seen as a conspiracy of intense minorities against the less involved.

This work concludes that the gap between people and politics which already existed is widening. Worse than being ineffective polarization had the reverse effects completely. In the long term, this will mean a decline in consensus and a corresponding danger to democracy.

At best, polarization might be successful in the future knowing that the Young, the so-called Generation X, presents already some signs of polarization and is predicted to be highly ideological.³⁰⁶ In this respect, American political parties may have anticipated a new trend in the American electorate. But this will be verified only with time.

For the moment, to palliate the discrepancy between the American public and the political parties, the latter have to regain the confidence of the electorate. Instead of focussing on the differences of opinion that divide Americans and instead of amplifying that diversity to score political points and higher ratings, political parties should rather dwell on the similarities that unite Americans as a nation.

Several interesting areas of inquiry emerge from this study. In further research one may wonder whether the recent increase and strengthening of interest groups is a simple coincidence or a consequence of the Americans' dissatisfaction with the present party system. Have Americans turned to interest groups as an alternative to the political parties' non responsiveness to their interests? Are interest groups more effective devices to respond to Americans' needs?

³⁰⁶ Douglas Coupland, qtd, in Avlon, Independent Nation. Daniel Coupland coined the term "Generation X" with his novel of the same name.

Another subject worth inquiry is the role of the media in American politics and their power to influence elections. Is it not the increasing use of the media during campaigns that contributed to a great extent to the weakening of political parties as electoral devices? Are the media still credible in the eyes of a nation that has experienced its power on several occasions? Is it a coincidence that only 44 percent of Americans expressed confidence in the media's ability to report stories accurately and fairly? This query is all the more relevant since it is the lowest level of confidence in the media since Gallup first asked the question in 1972.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁷ Dobbs.

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