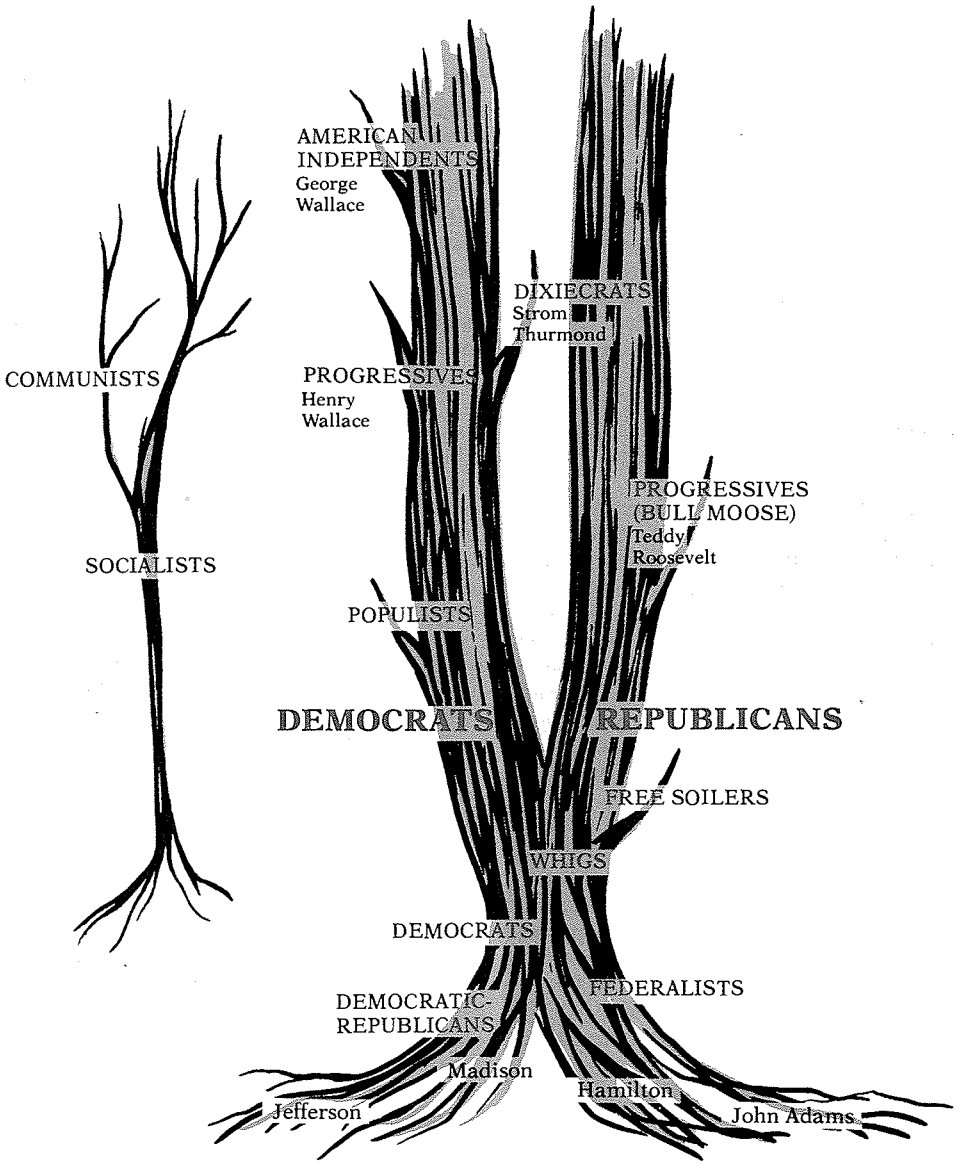

GROWTH OF MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES

The Founding Fathers saw no place for political parties in their vision of America. But, inevitably, competition for the presidency produced two political groupings that have survived occasional factionalism. Jeffersonian Republicans ultimately became Democrats preferring a strong chief executive. Federalists moved in the opposite direction as they became first Whigs, then Republicans. Leftists of a Communist or Socialist persuasion stood apart, pursuing self-defeating strategies of their own.

Party Politics in America

As the United States heads into its 1978 off-year elections for Congress and for state offices, the Democrats and Republicans seem as combative and vigorous as ever. On the national level, the two parties aren't quite what they used to be. Campaign reform, federal subsidies, television, more independent voting have all affected the parties' roles, especially in the election of Presidents. Yet, the United States' loose-knit two-party system endures, accommodating diverse interests and ideologies. Here, political scientist Howard Penniman assesses our "dual system" of electoral politics; sociologist Seymour M. Lipset analyzes the Socialists' political failure in America, even as a third party; and columnist David Broder notes a troubling gap between Presidents and their parties.

THE STATE OF THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

by Howard R. Penniman

Healthy two-party systems are in short supply in the world today. We may have seen an end to the time when a single party could win a majority of the seats in the British House of Commons and confidently form a government. The decline in the combined Labour and Conservative share of the popular vote in Britain (74.1 percent in 1974) may be part of a long-term trend aggravated by the rising strength of regional parties in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The Labour Party is in power today only because 13 Liberal Party members bolster a government that lacks a majority. Political parties in Canada and

Australia have had comparable difficulty in consistently obtaining a majority of seats in their Parliaments.

If the two-party system is ailing elsewhere, the same cannot be said of the United States.

The Republicans and Democrats have not been polarized into two "ideologically pure conservative and liberal parties," as the *New York Times* suggested two days after the 1970 congressional elections. Nor has the two-party structure fragmented into ideological factions on the European model. But there is an uneasy feeling among politicians and academics alike that the American political party system is in a transition of some sort and that it may be headed in new and uncharted directions.

Insofar as third-party challenges are concerned, the Republicans and Democrats seem secure. Their grip on Congress has never been stronger. Since World War II, Democrats and Republicans have controlled a larger share of lower-house seats than have two parties in any other Western democracy. This phenomenon is all the more striking when one considers that, during these postwar years, civil rights turned into just the sort of regionally focused issue that often produced a third party in the past (as occurred during the 19th century when disgruntled farmers supported the Greenback and Populist Parties in the West). Protest presidential candidates like Strom Thurmond in 1948 and George Wallace in 1968 did emerge, but their effect on the two-party system was negligible.

Despite a growing tendency of American voters to identify themselves as Independents rather than as Democrats or Republicans, the dominance of the two major parties in the House is even stronger today than it was a hundred years ago. Although the membership of the House of Representatives was considerably smaller in the 19th century, 422 third-party candidates were elected to the House during the last 70 years of the century.* By contrast in the first 76 years of this century, all but

**Guide to U.S. Elections,* Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1975, pp. 928–29.

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108 representatives were elected as Democrats or Republicans.

Why have third-party congressmen virtually disappeared in recent years, while presidential electors are chosen to support third-party presidential candidates (e.g., Robert LaFollette in 1924, George Wallace in 1968) almost as frequently as in the past?*

The answer is that two quite different political systems have existed side by side in the United States for much of this century. One system operates for elections of candidates for all public offices except that of President, while the other system is reserved for election to the highest office alone. What has differentiated the two systems has been the development of direct state and local primaries as the means of nominating candidates for the U.S. Congress, state governorships, and lesser offices.

The Umbrella Effect

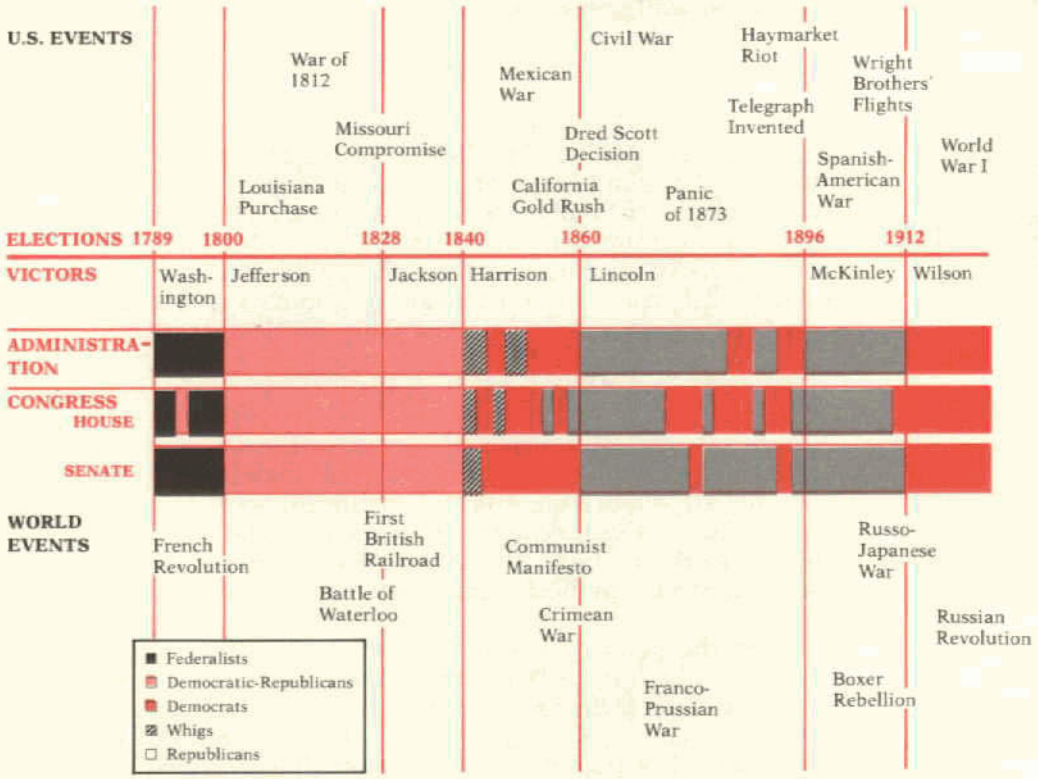
In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the direct primary became the most widely accepted means of choosing party candidates for all offices except President. In the Southern states, primary elections were conducted in and by the Democratic Party. In Northern states, the shift to the direct primary as a nominating device by both parties was accomplished by state law.

Under the primary system, anyone who registered as a Democrat could vote in Democratic party primaries to select Democratic candidates, and anyone registered as a Republican could join in naming Republican candidates. There were no effective national, state, or local tests other than personal voter choice to determine who were Republicans and who were Democrats. In states where one major party was much larger than the other, candidates and voters, regardless of their political views, naturally gravitated to the larger party, since its nominees were almost certain to be elected in the fall. Virtually everyone was a Democrat in the Southern states, while most people called themselves Republican in a few Northern states, such as Vermont. This umbrella effect permitted ideological diversity and the formation of what, in essence, became a coalition of varied interests in each major party, rather than a centralized national party on the European model.

Between 1940 and 1970, for example, it was not uncommon for Southern Democratic voters to nominate white supremacy

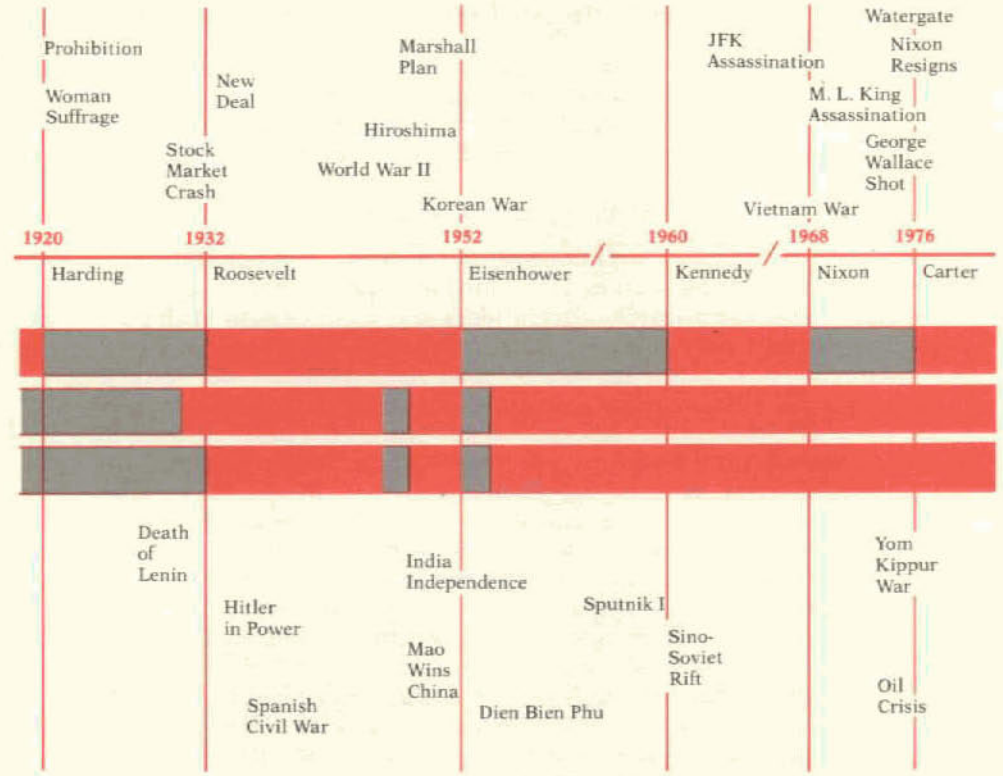
*In the six presidential elections preceding the Civil War, 6.9 percent of all members of the Electoral College voted for third-party candidates. In the eight elections since 1948, an average of 12.9 electors per election (2.4 percent) have voted for third-party candidates.

KEY AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND PARTY DOMINANCE



candidates for the House of Representatives while Northern central city Democrats named black civil-rights candidates. Both the white supremacists and the black civil-rights supporters won in the general elections and served as Democrats together in Congress, each voting more or less as his constituents wanted him to vote on certain sensitive issues. At the same time, Southwestern Republican voters nominated conservative candidates and Northeastern Republicans named more liberal candidates. Both types won in the general elections and served together as Republicans in Congress; they, too, voted as their constituents expected. The same was true of the U.S. Senate, although senators, with their larger constituencies, tend to be more moderate in their voting patterns.

Since both Republican and Democratic nominees reflected



the general views of their districts, there was no reason to create new parties. The major parties became increasingly heterogeneous while third parties that once named candidates for offices at every level of government gradually disappeared.* After 1923, third parties, like the Progressives in 1924 and the States' Rights Party in 1948, still named presidential candidates, but they ran few if any candidates for other offices.

Thus, the Democratic and Republican Parties have become permanent fixtures of the loose, two-party system in Congress. It is, to be sure, a system that not everyone admires. Those who believe that a party's candidates should reflect uniform policy

*Short-lived political organizations like the Liberty Party in 1840 and the Free Soilers in 1848 were nondoctrinaire in the sense that they tried to appeal to a broad range of voters and lacked any overriding doctrine except in regard to the key issue, slavery.

positions, as in Britain, and that national party leaders should enforce such uniformity, consider the current system confusing and inefficient. But neither tradition nor the rules of the game encourage that sort of uniformity. Candidates are beholden to those responsible for their nomination, and today this means, first of all, the voters who bear the appropriate major-party label in the nominee's state or district. Only these voters can decide whether the prospective candidate's views are acceptable.

Undisciplined Dissidents

As every politician knows, a two-party system—and the stability it provides—can exist in this large heterogeneous country only because maverick officeholders and dissenters in both parties are virtually immune from reprisal by the national party leadership. To put it another way, when party discipline and the two-party system come into conflict in the United States, it is party discipline that loses and variety within the party that wins.

Presidential elections have had a quite different impact on the two-party system. Since only one man at a time can be President, he cannot reflect all views on divisive issues. When voters in one region are at odds with much of the rest of the country, they force major-party presidential candidates seeking a *national* majority into an especially difficult position. If both major-party candidates take roughly similar centrist positions on the critical issues—assuming, like Alabama's George C. Wallace in 1968, that there "isn't a dime's worth of difference between them"—then regional dissidents may look elsewhere for a presidential candidate whose views are more acceptable. These voters are not looking for a new *party;* they are generally pleased with the votes of their representatives in the House and Senate on the divisive issues, but they want to be represented in the presidential race.

The future of such Independent candidacies remains uncertain. Recent legislation in the states has increased the number of presidential preference primaries from 16 in 1968 to 30 in 1976, and Congress has voted federal subsidies to authorized presidential candidates who seek nomination by either of the major parties. One possibility is that more candidates who are both impecunious and campaigning on a single narrow issue will tend to enter a major party's primaries in order to gain the advantage of federal campaign subsidies. This is what anti-abortionist Ellen McCormack chose to do in 1976 when she ran as a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 18 states. On the other hand, candidates with few financial prob-

lems and wide national appeal, such as George Wallace, will be able to choose between a personal presidential campaign effort and the major-party route. They will pick whichever strategy will best advance their political careers, block an electoral college decision on a major-party presidential winner, or "send the major-party candidates a message."

Of these two types of candidates, we may expect the McCormack version to crop up more frequently. Crises divisive enough to give a national candidate the electoral strength of a George Wallace just do not surface every four years. (Wallace received 9,906,473 popular votes and 46 of the 538 electoral votes in 1968.) The single-issue McCormacks will seek the February to August media coverage they garner by entering major-party primaries. The Wallaces will make their decisions to go outside their own major party only after weighing the alternatives as election year approaches.

The prospect of federally subsidized national exposure in 30 presidential primaries may entice some candidates, who would otherwise defect, back to one of the major parties. But at the same time, these primaries may create other problems for the national parties. For example, in 1968 and 1972, voters in Democratic presidential primaries did not constitute an accurate sample of Democratic voters, much less a cross section of the general public.* Primaries elect nearly three-fourths of the delegates to national party conventions, yet their candidate choices, as in the notable case of George McGovern in 1972, may be unacceptable to many members of the party and to the broader electorate as well.

As I see it, the two major parties will remain heterogeneous and undisciplined and will continue to dominate congressional, state, and local elections. More presidential primaries and the possibility, as yet remote, of direct election of the President make the future role of major parties in selecting occupants of the White House much less predictable.

*According to Georgetown University political scientist James I. Lengle, in a paper delivered at the 1976 convention of the American Political Science Association in Chicago.