



What History Teaches about Reforming U.S. Political Parties and Governance

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Issues about money in politics are hot-button concerns for both U.S. political parties in the early twenty-first century. But such issues are nothing new. Throughout U.S. history, both governments and parties themselves have debated reforms intended to make the political system more representative. Such debates were especially prominent during the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, and today's policymakers and advocacy groups hoping to reduce the disproportionate sway of affluent donors and corporate lobbies have much to learn from that era.

Around 1900, U.S. reformers tried to propel a transition from clientalism to programmatic party competition. For much of nation's first 125 years, clientalistic U.S. political parties used publicly funded "spoils" to woo voters with bribes and government jobs. In the late 1800s, reforms helped to encourage more programmatic, issue-oriented forms of party functioning and competition. This transition offers both insights and encouragement for today, revealing that major electoral reforms can be instituted and bring about some of their intended effects.

A Politics of Spoils and Patronage Takes Hold

After he was elected president in 1828, Andrew Jackson instituted the spoils system, rewarding political supporters and campaign workers with government jobs and other favors. This launched decades in which U.S. parties competed over patronage resources, using electoral victories to offer better prizes to their supporters. The key patronage resources included:

- Plum government jobs – posts in the United States Postal Service and Customs Houses and other appointments were granted to those who supported the winning party, often irrespective of qualifications.
- Congress distributed funds to support local projects in an ad-hoc manner divorced from considerations of policy or ideology.
- In turn, parties were financed through their members – as holders of patronage appointments paid "assessments" to support campaign activities and were expected to volunteer time and resources during elections.

During the era of patronage parties, the political development of the United States was, in the apt words of political scientist Samuel Huntington, "one long lesson in the use of public funds and public office to build party organization." Clearly, this system did not represent or address the concerns or needs of most voters. And parties rarely ran on clear policy platforms that constituents could choose at the ballot box.

The Shift from Patronage to Programmatic Politics

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, patronage peaked. As William Tweed, a New York politician and Tammany boss, was convicted for “redirecting” between 40 and 100 million dollars of public funds, public discontent mounted. In response, parties gradually developed new organizational strategies and tactics for connecting with voters, evolving into the kind of parties the United States has to this day.

- Parties developed alternative financial sources, seeking donations from individuals outside of the party rather than assessing and relying on incomes of patronage employees. As they cultivated new financial alternatives, parties could commit to civil service reforms, such as the 1883 Pendleton Act that required posts in the federal civil service to be filled through “merit” credentials and exams. By the turn of the twentieth century, parties could no longer reward supporters with public sector employment in most federal positions.
- Parties developed ongoing relationships and linkages with organized interests in society, making them more representative and accountable to groups of voters. As industrialization produced new cleavages – labor versus business, rural versus urban, industry versus agriculture – civic associations and interest groups took their political demands directly to parties.
- The Democratic and Republican National Committees coordinated and centralized their organizations, and developed advisory committees that consulted with civic and professional groups. When in government, the parties invited Congressional testimony from corporate, labor, and agricultural interests; during elections the parties produced pamphlets and speeches on issues of national import to disseminate to voters. In a clear departure from patronage operations, parties now mediated among competing interests and campaigned on policies of concern to citizens.

Changes to party organization were accompanied by significant institutional reforms and new ideas about the role of government – pursued through professionally staffed regulatory commissions and new cabinet departments charged with regulating an industrializing economy.

Lessons for Today

In the United States today, political parties rely on affluent voters and donors as well as corporate lobbies – and citizen distrust in politics is growing. What happens next? What could today’s reformers learn from those of the past? I see two possible lessons:

- Parties can try to be responsive to wider groups of citizens by making it easier for people to vote and participate in politics while strengthening relationships with citizens at the local level. Mobilization of underrepresented constituencies could help politicians respond to the needs and preferences of these groups.
- Parties can try to reform outdated institutions. America’s winner-take-all system of elections produces minority rule. Reforming the way members of Congress are elected, and perhaps also presidents, could lead to more legitimate democratic outcomes.

Read more in Didi Kuo, *Clientelism, Capitalism, and Democracy: The Rise of Programmatic Politics in the United States and Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).