

‘No real principle divides us...some queer mechanical balance holds the two parties even.’ (Henry Adams) What were the sources of party identification 1874-96, and how do you differentiate between the Republican and Democratic parties in this period?

One of the most noticeable features about American political life in the most part of the nineteenth century is the stark contrast of the fiercely partisan nature of public affairs with the profound disinterest which many people found in the workings of politics outside of election time. Isaac Wayne MacVeagh, who was Attorney-General in Garfield’s presidency, wrote in *Century Magazine* in 1884 that ‘the truth, however, will be found in the fact that the average American citizen cares very little about politics at present, because the government under which he lives touches his life very rarely, and the only points of very little interest to him. From his rising up until his lying down, the vast aggregate of his interests and activities are entirely beyond its scope.’¹ If this was true, then the actual effect of elections was certainly not to differentiate between the exact policies the electorate liked or disliked. Instead, elections marked out certain groupings of peoples, almost in a social grouping rather than one which expressed an interest in any sort on the actions a government might undertake. Even though at the moment he wrote it, Isaac MacVeagh’s comment was becoming obsolete with increased governmental intervention in daily lives, parties in themselves did not seek to engage the voter in details. Consequently, the differences between parties were in terms of identity and how that identity shaped the aspirations rather than the detailed views of their members. Grand principles emerged such as the conflict between limited government and state rights in the shape of the Democrats as opposed to the more centralising tendencies of the Whig-Republicans. In many senses the conflict this brought about was eternal in American politics, such that when Samuel Tilden spoke of ‘the master-wisdom of governing little and leaving as much as possible to localities and to individuals’², he was not in fact expressing any fundamental difference from his predecessors forty or fifty years previously.

If the outlooks of the parties did not substantially change through this period, then also, neither did the supporter base which each party succeeded in maintaining for itself - voters tended to vote in the same manner as they had in the previous elections to a staggering extent. Throughout the whole of the period of 1860-92, Paul Kleppner estimates that only 5% of the electorate changed party between elections³. Since voting patterns were not based on individual policies but outlooks and ‘political churches’, this may be unsurprising; indeed as one politician said ‘We love our parties as we love our churches and our families. We are part of them.’⁴ Voter stability and party affiliation became ingrained deeply into the psyche of American voters, such that it became a means of differentiating one group of people from another

The legacy of the early nineteenth century also firmly entrenched the stability of the two-party structure in that it created a definite them-and-us attitude in voters. It also divided the different segments of the population neatly down the middle such that neither party could guarantee victory. The upshot of this made for very tight and very competitive elections throughout the whole of this period, when every single vote counted. Indeed, Hayes could only take up his presidency due to a one vote victory in the electoral college in 1876, despite the fact that his vote was 250,000 less than his rival Tilden. Through the period of the Gilded Age, only Cleveland’s victory in 1892 saw him with a lead of over 100,000 votes nation-wide - voter stability which was

¹ quoted in Leonard White *The Republican era: a study in administrative history*

² quoted in H Wayne Morgan *The Gilded Age*

³ quoted in Silbey *The American Political Nation 1838-93*

⁴ quoted in Calhoun *The Gilded Age* p.215

quite extraordinarily reliable. In fact the very stable nature of voting patterns in this period served equally to give the small numbers of floaters a disproportionate influence. For instance, the Mugwumps who defected from the Republican party in the 1884 election effectively carried the presidency to Grover Cleveland, while the formation of the Greenback party in time for the 1880 effectively stopped the Democrats winning that year's presidential election at a time when they had gained a measure of control over both houses of Congress. This fact that there were but two main contending partisan points of view gives another reason why the parties felt unable to articulate any very detailed policies on almost any issue. The coalitions of interests which formed the body of party supporters were so diverse that definitive policies as often as not split the party rather than bring in new supporters. A crucial example of this in action was in the election of 1884 when Catholic Irish voters in the cities of the eastern seaboard - who had wavered in their support for the support for the Democratic party in the Congressional elections - felt alienated by a Republican preacher condemning the former for being the 'party of rum, Romanism & rebellion.' Four years later, a renewed Republican appeal to Catholic voters had instead outraged existing Protestant supporters, and indeed the Republicans polled less than the Democrats overall - being saved by the electoral college. In fact, the distinct and largely new policy of the Democrats in the 1896 elections based on silver coinage led to their virtual collapse as a serious challenger for the next twenty years - attempts to beat a new and distinctive policy rather than to follow the prevailing opinions of the electorate invariably failed. Another example of the impossibility of creating detailed partisan policies comes from the impossibility of maintaining a consistent party line in a Congress where President Hayes found himself with only three supporters of which one was a relative, and in a country where parties were organised at state and local level coming together only once every four years in a Convention

It also seems odd that in a time where policies changed very rarely and electoral results generally mirrored the one beforehand that the turnout for late nineteenth century elections remained so high. The average national turnout for presidential elections in this period was 80%, a figure which was maintained also for Congressional elections and indeed gubernatorial contests and those for state legislatures. Indeed in some key states such as New York it even reached almost 90%.⁵ There are several reasons for this very commendable figure, of which the foremost must be the intense excitement which extremely competitive elections produced. The almost identical numbers of votes which each party could muster produced two effects. For observers, it meant that the result of an election was constantly in the balance, a situation which made the voter feel valued. For party bosses, it meant that a drop in its turnout could easily spell defeat. It is not coincidence that the great party machines such as Boss Tweed's or Tammany Hall in New York City came about at this time in electoral history - their assistance was crucial to aspiring Congressmen and Presidents, and corruption could in this sense be more easily borne. By offering a turkey and a bucket of coal each Christmas to loyal voters, Boss Tweed was an essential part of the system which produced such enormous popular participation in politics - especially in a time when no welfare provision was available to the poor and immigrant communities of the eastern cities. The excitement produced by election-day itself also served to provide a great social event in communities who given the changing demographic effects of nineteenth-century America were only rarely firmly rooted and established. According to the census returns of the period, only a half of the population of an area remained in the same location for two consecutive censuses - with a transient population, party affiliation provided a great stabilising influence and helped to maintain a person's sense of identity. Silbey has suggested that the party machinery such as that provided by the organisations of Tweed and Tammany Hall helped integrate newcomers into a community - public voting of course helped even further to ensure that the competitive elections of the last quarter of the century formed a

⁵ Silbey *The American Political Nation 1838-93* p.145-7

distinct social role as well as a purely political one. It is extremely noticeable that the steady drop in turnout in the twentieth century came from the era where disenfranchisement in the South of blacks and poor whites removed the possibility of there being genuinely competitive elections. As whole areas of the country increasingly became sectionalised, such that upper New England which invariably voted Republican, and the Solid South became so clearly Democrat, so the turnout declined. There can be not doubt that the sectionalisation geographically of voting patterns led to the decline in active party organisation which in turn led to a loss of excitement over elections which reduced turnout as a vicious cycle. Between 1880 and 1892 for example, none of the 15 South and Border states gave an electoral vote to a Republican presidential candidate - in other words Democrats could almost guarantee 135 electoral votes -only 50 short of the total needed for victory in 1876.⁶ Even without the effect of state franchise laws, the popularity of politics was declining.

This is not to say that sectionalism had not been an essential part of the party structure throughout the good times of partisan America. However, the difference had not been a factor of geography but rather of ethno-religious identity - the earlier melting pot of these had ensured that the combination was conducive to participation not apathy. Indeed geographic proximity of different ethno-religious cultures often increased the influence of the political process, as parties moulded themselves into reflecting the values of the religious grouping whose votes they aspired to gain. Certainly the emphasis of the Republican parties in espousing nativist 'Protestant' and pietist values became extremely pronounced in terms of the policies they advocated. Sound money, civil service meritocracy and temperance were particular examples of dour, sober morality which the Republican party borrowed from the north European-orientated Protestant sects. Inasmuch as these values clashed with the immigrant and more Catholically-inclined ritualistic communities, it is clear that the latter would instinctively feel more inclined to support the Democrats. Of course this is a simplistic assessment, which individual cases belie. For instance Catholic immigrant French-Canadians in New York voted not for the Democrats, but the Republicans - a function of ethnic strife between themselves and the large Irish community. Conflicts therefore which reappeared again and again in local, state and national politics, became fiercely imbued with a form of cultural conflict between different ethnic groups. Apart from the ethnic origins of much of the debate in this period, Republican party policy also tended to support the values of Americanisation of new immigrants and to further integration into the Republican community. On issues such as English-language teaching in schools, for instance, the Republican party gained hugely in the rural, native-born communities such as those in Massachusetts detailed by V.O. Key, while enraging recent immigrant communities such as Wisconsin Norwegians.

As I have already mentioned, though, the party support were constantly comprised of unstable coalitions of mutually antipathetic sub-groups for a clear statement of party aims to ever be clearly and firmly expressed, since electoral results previously such as the realignments of the 1830s and 1850s had shown that votes once lost, proved hard to regain. The Democrats after 1896 were to learn this hard truth again. Even where an apparently popular policy was followed, it had the risk of losing supporters. The example of the German Lutheran community in New York state for instance showed that the Republican party lost their votes when the issue of temperance was raised, but regained them over the issue of gambling and Sabbath-observance. However the crucial difference which divided the parties in this period was the overarching issue of paternalism in economic matters, which pitted the traditional Jacksonian Democratic values of small government against the moral issue of state interference for the benefit of the community at large. Certainly the partisan rhetoric reflects this division most of all, with Cleveland for

⁶ quoted in H Wayne Morgan *The Gilded Age*

example railing against ‘vicious, inequitable, illogical source of unnecessary taxation’⁷ of the people while Harrison on the other side said ‘we should be slow to abandon that system which looks to the promotion and development of American industry and the preservation of the highest possible scale of wages for the American workman.’⁸ Allied with the concept of an overmighty federal government, of which Samuel Tilden said that ‘the master-wisdom is of governing little and leaving as much as possible to localities and to individuals’ there was a definite constituency wary of the actions of government. However, in the final analysis, it was always impossible for parties to manoeuvre fast enough to capitalise on the inconsistencies in their opponents arguments. The case in point is that on the issue of the gold standard made by William J. Bryan when he said ‘thou shalt not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.’ Although extremely popular with the Convention and attractive to the potentially significant Populist vote, the partisan machinery of the Gilded Age remained too inflexible - mechanical indeed as Henry Adams put it - to adapt without severe consequences. For the Democrats it spelt twenty years in the electoral wilderness, albeit with still a very creditable 40+% of the vote.

⁷ quoted in H Wayne Morgan *The Gilded Age*

⁸ Calhoun *The Gilded Age* p.216