TEACHER SYMPOSIUM

Writing about a Party System under Duress and in Dispute

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In late September 2013, W. W. Norton & Company sent us a contract to write a textbook on American political parties. A week later, as we discussed deadlines and advance copies and tried to figure out a writing routine, the Federal Government began a 16-day shutdown, motivated in large part by congressional Republicans seeking to defund the Affordable Care Act.

At the time, there was no reason for us to view these two events as even remotely related. Yet, our efforts to draft *Political Parties* (Masket and Noel 2021) would be defined by contentious and divisive moments in the history of America's political parties. We were attempting to describe a system that was in the midst of not only a drastic transformation but also, arguably, its own collapse.

Our contract called for a finished product by 2016. In fact, the textbook would not appear in print until five years after that. To be sure, many textbook projects run behind and at least part of our delays were because we were busier than we expected with other projects. However, the dramatic shifts in the very political system we sought to describe surely did not help.

Two types of changes in the real world affected our thinking about the textbook. The first was simply the surprising developments in American politics. Few observers expected Donald Trump to win the 2016 Republican nomination, much less the presidency. How he governed afterward was not the way most presidents have approached the office.

However, the more significant second change has been the way that shared understandings about our political system, both empirical and normative, have become politicized. This required us to adapt our writing style, proving facts that have long been recognized as true and distinguishing between what should and should not be open for dispute in a democracy.

A PARTY SYSTEM UNDER DURESS

Many textbooks seek to be topical, filled with references to recent events that capture students' attention and make arcane academic debates seem more relevant and vital. Some of our writing effort was focused in that way, as we continually sought interesting and sensational examples of presidential debates, runoff elections, nomination fights, dramatic protests, and more to keep our readers engaged. (Fortunately for our efforts, there was no shortage of interesting political moments while we were writing.)

We devoted even greater effort to updating our descriptions of the basic dynamics of American political parties—not to keep things relevant but rather to change descriptions that no longer were true. Many of these updates concerned aspects of Trump's 2016 campaign and his presidency.

We wanted a textbook that reflected the latest understanding of parties in the field, but the field was learning many new things. We had stated that people tend to tune out of politics after an election and not focus on early aspects of the presidential-nomination process; we were not sure if this was still true. We also had stated that parties are careful to nominate candidates who do not alienate voters; we now had reason to doubt this.

More consequentially, two running themes in our textbook are that party elites help to select presidential nominees and that the candidate with most of the insider support before the Iowa Caucuses tends to win their party's nomination. Much of our own research already had explored this process (Cohen et al. 2008; Masket 2020). Nevertheless, this definitely did not happen with the Republican presidential nomination of 2016. Several prominent Republican insiders expressed concerns with and even strong objections to Trump's candidacy; few insiders issued any endorsements; and Trump came in fourth among those who did but still managed to win the majority of delegates before the Republican convention. If we were wrong about this, we could be wrong about much else as well.

We also had to revisit the idea that the two major American political parties are fundamentally similar institutions. This idea does not mean that there are no major differences between them but rather that one party simply reacts as the other would under similar circumstances. Both parties, that is, are interested in winning elections, enacting policy changes to the status quo, managing coalitions, and finding an equilibrium between electability and policy gains. Moreover, both parties, the theory goes, are similarly interested in protecting democratic and major political institutions, holding similar degrees of reverence for American political norms. This common framework is important because it is difficult to understand the differences that do exist if we begin with the assumption that the parties are fundamentally different at their core.

A thread of research has challenged the idea of party similarity (notably, Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). However, it became far more obvious during the period in which we wrote the textbook that the current Republican Party is

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diverging from our conception of parties. As the 2013 government shutdown demonstrated, Republicans were willing to be far more reckless with governing institutions—even to the point of downgrading the nation's borrowing credit. Senate Republicans' refusal to consider Barack Obama's final Supreme Court nominee for almost all of 2016 and the party's willingness to rally behind Trump—even after he publicly pledged to jail his opponent and was caught boasting about sexual assault—suggested that the parties were fundamentally different. The Republican Party was not pursuing the interests of a coalition or its core conservative ideology, and it definitely was not expanding its coalition to win in the face of changing national demographics. The Republican National Committee's decision to forgo writing a 2020 party platform, abandoning any opportunity to articulate its ideology just as we were putting the finishing touches on our manuscript, only added to that list of irregularities.

We do not believe that we are at the end of these shifts. We cannot predict the future; however, there is sufficient reason to believe that more shocks are imminent. Both parties will struggle with internal democracy and their competing coalition members. Electoral reformers who advocate for instant-runoff or other institutional changes could alter the environment in which parties compete. Pressures for majority rule in a closely divided legislature could lead to reform of the filibuster. All of these changes affect both parties and are driven by partisan conflict.

A PARTY SYSTEM IN DISPUTE

Our concern was not only that the theories we thought we knew were being questioned. Our principle of impartiality also was under fire. Most instructors of a course on political parties do not want to favor one party over the other, and we wanted to write a textbook that would help them teach in this manner.

Writing a textbook about parties that does not take sides should be easy. We have our own partisan preferences, of course, but we also strongly believe that democracy flourishes with more than one party. We expected we could write from the position that whereas our political parties might differ about a great range of issues, they would not differ over the value of democracy itself or basic outcomes of a democratic system. However, we are not sure we can believe that now.

We completed our final edits in December and January 2021, before the January 6 attempted insurrection at the US Capitol. Even before that, however, attitudes about respect for democratic outcomes showed signs of becoming partisan. In November 2020, the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group (Drutman 2021) estimated that 68% of Republicans believed that the 2020 election was "stolen" from Trump (who, in reality, received 7 million fewer votes and 74 fewer Electors than Joe Biden); 46% believed that state legislatures should overturn their own state's popular vote and award electoral votes to Trump.

We also had stated that parties are careful to nominate candidates who do not alienate voters; we now had reason to doubt this.

When the current edition of our textbook was written, we were not ready to interpret this pattern as evidence that support for democracy itself was becoming partisan. However, it is increasingly apparent that it might be. Support for the "Big Lie" about the 2020 presidential election is now central to the Republican agenda.

This type of factual disagreement is different from questions about whether gun-control measures are effective, for example, or how a minimum wage affects unemployment. From the point of view of understanding politics, the *correct* answers to those questions are less important than the fact that they are disputed.

For instance, in several places, we discuss the divergent approaches of Democratic and Republican leaders toward the COVID-19 epidemic. It is not necessary for us to weigh in on whether masks work, vaccines are effective, or any other factual disagreements behind those approaches. That the science was tangled up with politics is both indisputable and important—and consistent with our understanding that everything becomes tangled up with party politics. However, partisan disputes over democracy and democratic outcomes and historical facts are different.

A textbook can be agnostic on whether "the party" actually "decides," how independent "independent" voters really are, and whether majorities will control the agenda to their advantage. We can present the alternatives and let students decide. A textbook, however, should not be agnostic on basic questions of democracy. We increasingly are forced to take a stance.

We devoted part of one chapter to the realignment of the political parties on racial issues. After the Civil War, the Republican Party was behind the efforts of Reconstruction to force Southern states to offer some type of equality to their Black citizens; the Democratic Party was the party of the Redeemer resistance to those efforts. Today, Black voters

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overwhelmingly support the Democratic Party (White and Laird 2020), and Democratic elected officials are more likely than Republicans to support policies that promote racial equality. This transformation illustrates how political parties are coalitions of interests. Black voters moved into the Democratic coalition and anti-equality groups moved out, eventually aligning with Republicans.

This reversal is well established in the historical and political science literature (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Kruse 2018; Noel 2013; Schickler 2016), but disputing it has become common among conservatives. Conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza (2018) has made a career out of claiming that the Democratic Party is still the party of white supremacy. In the debate about removing Confederate symbols from the National Statuary Hall of Congress, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy pointed out that most of the Confederate statues were of Democrats, and he suggested that the Democratic Party would "change its name" if it really opposed its racist past (*Congressional Record* 2021).

We are comfortable in pointing out the inaccuracies in this approach. However, we also know from experience that some conservative students will decide that our textbook lacks credibility because it takes an anodyne factual position that now is deemed partisan. Our approach has been to be explicit and to thoroughly document what we are describing. However, the result is that we must provide additional justification for long-accepted historical facts, which may be tedious for students who are not already exposed to the falsehood—which brings us back to the Big Lie.

FIGHTING CONSPIRACIES WITH SOCIAL SCIENCE

Fights over the nature of democracy have always been part of American politics, and sometimes it is obvious when advocates are acting in bad faith. The white primaries in Southern states during the Jim Crow era clearly were designed by the Democratic Party to disenfranchise Black voters (Klarman 2006). There also are possibly principled disagreements over the need for election security versus the need for ease of access.

Unlike questions about pandemic response, minimum wage, or taxation, on which partisans simply take opposing views, questions about democracy require our adjudication. There is no evidence of systematic voter fraud in American elections (Levitt 2007; Minnite 2011; Pennycook and Rand 2021). There also is only mixed evidence that voter-identification requirements have significant effects on election outcomes (Mycoff, Wagner, and Wilson 2009); however, whether that burden stops voters is not the same as whether it is fair.

There certainly is no evidence for fraud driving the 2020 presidential election result. For us to claim a nonpartisan impartiality on this issue would require us to ignore reality and to contribute to the erosion of American democracy—hardly a helpful or neutral position.

We can and do examine misperceptions about democracy among those on the right and those on the left. Today, however, most of the resistance is coming from one direction—which, ultimately, is the real problem. The problem is not politicized differences over issues, facts, or even respect for democracy itself but rather politicized opposition to the basic ideas of social science on which we wrote our textbook.

A textbook can be agnostic on whether "the party" actually "decides," how independent "independent" voters really are, or whether majorities will control the agenda to their advantage. We can present the alternatives and let students decide. A textbook, however, should not be agnostic on basic questions of democracy. We increasingly are forced to take a stance. ■

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