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Organizations and Parties

An official section of the American Political Science Association Produced by the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, The University of Akron

THEME — NEW LITERATURE

PARTIES AND THE 1994 ELECTIONS: A VIEW FROM THE LITERATURE

he 1994 general elections raise numerous questions for American party scholars. On the surface at least, the major political parties played an unusually prominent role, most noticed in the Republican takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives after forty years of Democratic rule, and the role that the Republican "Contract with America" played in the campaign and in the initial behavior of the new Republican majority. But the Republican gains extended beyond the House to the U.S. Senate, governorships. state legislative chambers, local offices, and even to party identification in the mass public. Ironically, this surge in party politics comes just two years after the Perot campaign caused many analysts to predict the rapid decline of the major parties.

Were the Republican gains in 1994 more illusion than reality? Was 1994 a short-term aberration that will quickly dissipate as politics-as-usual returns? While answers to these and other questions will require the passage of time. but it is not too early to begin such assessments in earnest. As luck would have it, several excellent books have been published recently that together present a good picture of what might be called the "old order," which can be used as a yard stick against which to measure the "new situation," whatever that may ultimately turn out to be.

Paul S. Herrnson's new book Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington (Washington DC: CO Press, 1995) is a must read for understanding the congressional "situation." In effect, this book is a comprehensive description of the "old order" of candidate-centered politics. Using a vast array of data, including a survey of campaign officials, interviews, case studies, and public records, Herrnson covers nearly every aspect of the "electoral connection" at least through the 1992 general election. In many cases, the book confirms common scholarly conclusions, such as the role of money in campaigns, but in other cases, new information is forthcoming, such as the powerful impact of grassroots efforts. Chapter 9 provides a useful summary what does and doesn't work in congressional campaigns; Chapter 3 on candidate organizations and Chapter 6 on campaigning for resources also represent particularly useful summaries. And, of course, Herrnson covers the party and political organizations surrounding congressional campaigns with the skill and insight that the professional has come to expect of him.

Herrnson concludes that the major political parties are "centralizing agents" that generate bonds between members of Congress. Although these centralizing effects are often quite weak, they routinely provide some check on the many

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decentralizing elements of candidate-centered politics. From this perspective, assessments of the 1994 election might well begin by asking what factors may have strengthened the parties in 1994, and/or weakened the candidates, and whether or not these factors will persist beyond 1994. On this last count, Herrnson's careful analysis leads one to the conclusion that any party strengthening factors will have to be strong indeed to permanently overcome candidate-centered politics.

Of course, in 1994 the relative balance of centralizing and decentralizing forces were in flux outside of the beltway as well. Daniel M. Shea's new book Transforming Democracy: Legislative Campaign Committees and Political Parties (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) looks at the development of the counterparts of the party congressional campaign committees in state legislatures. Transforming Democracy is the first book in a new series entitled "Political Party Development" jointly sponsored by SUNY Press and the Center for Party Development under the general editorship of Susan J. Tolchin, George Washington University. Inquiries about the series as well as manuscripts and book proposals should be sent along with a curriculum vita to Clay Morgan, Editor, State University of New York Press, State University Plaza, Albany NY 12246-0001.

Like Herrnson, Shea uses a number of data sources to describe the activities and significance of state legislative campaign committees (LCCs). These data include surveys of state and local party leaders and a case study of LCC development in New York. The growth of LCCs has been widely heralded as an example of party renewal, but Shea concludes that the reality may fall far short of these expectations. Drawing explicitly on the responsible party model, Shea argues that LCCs tend to be narrowly focused on electing legislators with little concern for other functions of parties and quite different from the traditional geographic parties, particularly the state and county committees. And Shea finds evidence of extensive friction between traditional party leaders and the new campaign organizations arising from the state legislaturs. Ironically, one of the major factors found to be associated with rise of LCCs is increased legislative professionalism: "professional" legislators apparently don't mix all that well with "professional" party leaders. In this sense, Shea's work suggests that the congressional candidate-centered politics so lucidly described by Herrnson is coming to state legislatures as well.

But what about the partisans who challenged the "old order" and may or may not have brought it to an end? William F. Connelly and John J. Pitney's Congress' Permanent Minority?: Republicans in the U.S. House (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994) provides some invaluable insights. Readers should not be put off by the apparent bad luck the authors experienced with their title: events showed that the House GOP was not destined to minority status forever and the book helps explain why. Indeed, the accounts of Newt Gingrich, his allies and opponents, and

the behavior of House Democrats reads like background material for today's headlines. The chapter on Republican factionalism is an excellent summary of a much neglected subject.

The authors adopt "Rubik's cube" as a metaphor for the puzzle facing the House Republicans, with each of the cube's physical dimensions representing institutions, interests and ideas respectively, while the actions of individual politicians are captured by the twisting and turning of these dimensions into an alignment that would produce majority status. As Connelly and Pitney demonstrate, the puzzle was a daunting one. Indeed, much of their description of the institutions, interests, ideas, and individuals in the House Republican Conference reflects Herrnson and Shea's description of the "old order" and the forces that sustained it. But one can also see the sources of the puzzle's successful solution in 1994. One important factor was the leadership of Newt Gingrich and his associates, who were able to overcome the decentralizing tendencies of institutions and interests, at least for a short while. Of equal importance were the ideas pushed by the leadership, particularly the "Contract with America," which at the very least allowed House Republican to campaign for something, instead of as simply opponents of President Clinton and the Democrats. And finally, the Democrats gave the GOP both an opening and strong incentives to hang together. These points suggest that leadership and ideas can, under the right circumstances, give parties the strength to overcome the "old order."

What about the Democrats? Two recent books shed light on the party defeated in 1994 as well. The first is Nicol C. Rae's Southern Democrats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), which is a companion piece to the author's previous book on the liberal Republicans. Rae takes an indepth look at the once dominant faction in the Democratic Party that appears to be going the way of the liberal wing of the GOP. Using historical documents and extensive interviews, Rae provides a good description of the traditional Southern Democrats and their travails. This book also deals well with the much neglected subject of party factionalism.

Like Connelly and Pitney, this book has direct relevance for to today's headlines. The chapter on Southern Democrats in Congress reads like a "whose who" among the founders of the "Coalition," a quasi-party caucus founded in the wake of the 1994 election. One of the leading lights of the Coalition has defected to the GOP and more are rumored to follow. Thus, the continued decline of the Southern Democrats could have important implications for the "new situation." As Connelly and Pitney point out, the replacement of liberal and moderate Republicans by Southern and Western conservatives set the stage for Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America, while the "old order" described by Herrnson and Shea gave these new ideologues strong incentives to ban together against the system. Indeed, Rae himself points out the frailty of the forces that brought the Democratic Leadership Council **New Literature** (continued from page 2)

and the Clinton/Gore ticket to the head of the National Democratic Party, thus foretelling many of the problems the Democrats would have in 1994.

The American Prospect Reader in American Politics, edited by Walter Dean Burnham (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1995) provides some important information on the dominant wing of the Democratic Party, in Congress and elsewhere. This is a different kind of book that the previous four, being a collection of essays from a consciously leftof-center magazine and meant primarily for classroom use. But many of these essays represent excellent assessments of both the "old order" and the "new situation." Burnham's own contributions are gems, while the middle section of the book on contemporary politics is brimming with insight. The debate between Jeff Faux and Will Marshall on the meaning of the "new Democrat" label is a good summary of tensions within the Democratic Party, while Karen Paget's essay on political movements and John Judis chapter on advocacy groups are well worth the read. In light of the work of Herrnson and Shea, Robert Kuttner's chapter on the congressonal Democrats and the "old order" shows the down side of candidate-centered politics.

Like the other books discussed here, the Burnham reader did not predict the 1994 elections, and yet, like the other works, it anticipates the "new situation" to an extraordinary degree. These pages, written for the left by the left, drip with pessimism. One gets the sense on a new political order slouching towards Harvard — or Kennesaw College, take your pick — to be born. And yet there are enough good ideas in these pages to reinvigorate the Democratic Party: the possibility of a Democratic alternative to the "Contract with America" and the leadership to propose it are clearly evident in many of these essays. The House Republicans had to struggle with their Rubik's cube for forty years before they found a solution. One wonders how quickly the Democrats can respond in kind. Of course, if the "old order" reasserts itself soon, the Democrats may face a equally long sojourn in the political wilderness.

The fact that political innovation tends to occur mostly

with the party out of power is a pattern well-known to scholars. Philip A. Klinkner's new book *The Losing Parties: Out-Party National Committees, 1956-1993* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) is a good description of this phenomenon, albeit largely at the presidential level. Ironically, the book covers exactly the period of time during which the Republicans were a minority in the House of Representatives, but when they won the White House six times. During this period, candidate-centered politics flourished largely at the expense of parties, both at the presidential and congressional levels. Somehow both parties managed to cope with the candidate-centered politics in the quest for the White House, while the GOP lagged behind in congressional politics.

Klinker provides useful descriptions of each turn-of-the-screw in presidential politics, from the Kennedy to Clinton. In this review of recent party history, Klinkner discovers an important reason why parties do not always innovate successfully when faced with defeat: party leaders and activists have other motivations besides simply winning elections, the very sorts of things that Dan Shea points to in his review of traditional party organizations. This pattern leads Klinkner to focus on party culture as a potent variable in accounting for innovation. For example, he finds that the Republican emphasis on the "culture of business" has lead them to adopt organizational responses to defeat in every case. On the other hand, the Democratic emphasis on "democracy" has generated procedural responses most of the time.

This insight about the impact of party culture was implications for both the "old order" and the "new situation." It may be, for example, the culture of House Republicans ante-Gingrich, and indeed, the culture of the decentralized Congress, strongly mitigated against innovations that could have made the GOP more competitive. And the similar factors may hamper the return of the Democrats to power. Struggles between various kinds of party "professionals" as well as party factions may thus be as important as the quest for office in explaining the ability of parties to serve as centralizing agents in the political process.

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"Patrons, Choices, and Public Interest Groups" Anthony J. Nownes, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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FROM THE FIELD

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