antiparty sentiment

Hostility toward the political party has been an important dimension of American culture from the earliest days of the republic. During the first three or four decades following the adoption of the Constitution, antiparty sentiment derived primarily from the central tenets of classical republican theory, as this ancient body of thought was developed and reshaped by British political philosophers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Particularly important were two related concepts: that effective and just government flows from the decisions of virtuous leaders pursuing the public good rather than their own or others’ private interests; and that the political influence of those interests and interest groups that do emerge within society must be transitory and contained, so that no single interest acquires enduring power over all others and over the republic as a whole. The notion of party was antithetical to these concepts and was universally condemned by the Founding Fathers (who used the terms party and faction interchangeably), even before anything resembling an institutionalized political party appeared on the American landscape.

To be sure, some of the most prominent spokesmen for the republican creed—Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and even George Washington, whose Farewell Address of 1796 remains the classic American warning against the dangers of party—quickly behaved in accordance with the first system of enduring alignments that could be identified as partisan. But the Federalists and Republicans of the early republic did not develop the elaborate institutional structures of later political parties, and their leaders perpetuated antiparty principles in public discourse at least, by claiming that they and their allies worked for the common good while their opponents threatened good government by representing a specific constellation of interests. As the historian Richard Hofstadter has pointed out, neither party accepted the legitimacy of the other, while in power or as a formal opposition. Both sought to eradicate the other, and when the Republicans succeeded in doing this in the aftermath of the War of 1812, they were able to interpret their success as the fulfillment of classic republican principles.

The factionalism that soon bedeviled the triumphant Republicans gave way during the 1830s and 1840s to a fully institutionalized and enduring two-party system, and to a new set of ideas that legitimated the party as necessary to the functioning of a viable democracy. In this era of mass voter mobilization by Democrats and Whigs (the latter replaced by Republicans before the Civil War), well-organized parties linked themselves not only to new theories of power and legitimate opposition but also to popular ideas and symbols intended to establish each party as truly national and fully American, and therefore less worrisome as ongoing representatives of specific programs and interests. Antiparty sentiment, in this new environment, was deliberately weakened; yet, it survived not merely as an old-fashioned idea but discovered a new foundation in the very success of political parties as institutions.

As the parties grew, they developed professional roles and a set of cultural and behavioral codes that emphasized institutional loyalty and reward. Perhaps more than party platforms supporting or opposing one or another interest-based program, professionalism and patronage undermined each party’s republican character. Increasingly, Americans defined partisan activists as “politicians,” driven by the quest for power and for private reward in the form of government jobs or contracts rather than by service to the public good, even when that good was loftily declared in the party’s specific program. And in the pursuit of power and its spoils, politicians debased the electoral process with vulgar campaign practices and widespread bribery and intimidation at the polls. The corruption that followed from self-interest was now to many Americans—including regular voters and avid partisans—the concrete property of the party system.

Even before this system was fully formed, antiparty sentiment helped fuel a number of dissenting movements, including several that put themselves forward as alternative political parties, freer from the corruption inherent in routine partisan activity. The Know-Nothings of the 1850s, for example, attracted some of their adherents by portraying themselves in this way. Such dissent could emerge, too, from
within the parties, as it did in the decades following the Civil War, when groups of mostly well-to-do Republicans, and somewhat later their counterparts in the Democratic Party, urged civil service reform, educational campaigns, voter registration, secret balloting, and other changes to a party system increasingly perceived as disreputable.

These reforms may have succeeded in elevating the reputation of the political system, but they did not prevent a general weakening of partisan identity during the course of the twentieth century. Traditional antiparty themes such as political careerism, corruption, and the pursuit of interests opposed to the general good continued and still remain persuasive in political discourse. They have manifested themselves in a long trend toward independent voter registration (by the end of the twentieth century, independents were as numerous as either Democrats or Republicans among registered voters), toward the elevation of nonpartisanship as apolitical ideal, and toward more personalized political campaigns, stressing the qualities of the candidate rather than his or her party affiliation and in many cases portraying the candidate as a political outsider transcending mere partisanship. Even third-party movements have been more frequently organized around highly visible and often charismatic leaders, from Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette to Ross Perot and Ralph Nader.

Parties remain central to the American political process. But they continue to function within a culture long suspicious about partisan methods and motives and newly inclined to reduce the role of parties in the shaping of public affairs.

See also republicanivism.


STUART M. BLUMIN