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Franklin D. Roosevelt and The Transcendence of Partisan Politics

SIDNEY M. MILKIS

We have witnessed a serious decline since the mid-1960s in the organizational strength and popular support of American political parties. Most scholars who have sought to explain the weakening of the traditional party system have looked to changes occurring in the electoral process that have had a direct effect on the disaggregation of party loyalty among voters. For example, Walter Dean Burnham stresses party reforms and political developments at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries that he feels irrevocably diminished the scope of party influence on the American political process.¹ Other analysts focus upon recent reforms affecting presidential elections that have weakened the parties' traditional roles in choosing candidates and in financing and directing campaigns. Austin Ranney suggests that these reforms, occurring during the late 1960s and early 1970s, have combined with rapid developments of public relations techniques and the projection of candidate images to reduce electoral politics to something closely approaching a "no-party system."²

This article does not seek to discount these developments but attempts to introduce a different factor, namely presidential leadership.³ In particular, this

¹ Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), especially chaps. 4, 5.

² Austin Ranney, "The Political Parties—Reform and Decline," in Anthony King, ed., *The New American Political System* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), 213–247.

³ For the most part, the decline of party literature has neglected the influence of presidential leadership. However, for useful discussions of the relationship between party leadership and party

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study will suggest that the decline of political parties was extensively influenced by the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt who, though a great party leader in certain respects, acted to weaken the influence of the traditional party system on the political process.

Roosevelt considered traditional party politics an obstacle to the modernization of American government. He anticipated, in part, the critics of the party system of the late 1940s and early 1950s, who advocated a more “responsible” party system comprised of national policy-oriented organizations capable of carrying out platforms or proposals presented to the people during the course of an election.⁴ Roosevelt wanted to overcome the state and local orientation of the party system, which was suited to congressional primacy and poorly organized for progressive action on the part of the national government, and to establish a national, executive-oriented party, which would be more suitably organized for the expression of national purposes. Unless such a development took place, Roosevelt argued, the Democratic and Republican parties would be merely “Tweedledum and Tweedledee to each other.” The system of party responsibility in America, he argued, “required that one of its parties be the liberal party and the other be the conservative party.”⁵

Ultimately, however, Roosevelt concluded that the public good and practical politics demanded that partisan politics be *transcended* rather than *restructured*. In fact, his party discipline, which culminated in the purge campaign of 1938, was directed less at party government than at administrative government. Many of the partisan efforts sought by the New Dealers were directed at legislating procedural reforms that would enhance the capacity and independence of the executive department in the making of public policy. The extensive effort to achieve a modernization of public administration between 1936 and 1940 was an important part of this project. Believing that a strong, independent presidency had a more secure place in the American tradition than “responsible” party government, Roosevelt aimed at building a more responsible democratic government within the presidency rather than through a more permanent link between the executive and legislature. This required extending the personal and

decline, see Lester Seligman, “The Presidential Office and the President as Party Leader (with a postscript on the Kennedy-Nixon era),” in Jeff Fishel, ed., *Parties and Elections in an Anti-party Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); also, Robert Harmel, ed., *Presidents and Their Parties: Leadership or Neglect?* (New York: Praeger, 1984), especially chaps. 1, 3, 10.

⁴ Roosevelt’s party leadership probably influenced the report of the American Political Science Association (APSA) Committee on Political Parties, which advocated and gave prominence to the doctrine of party responsibility. See APSA Committee on Political Parties, *Toward a More Responsible Party System* (New York: Rinehart, 1950), v, 22–25. An influential member of the committee, E. E. Schattschneider, considered Roosevelt’s attempt to reform the Democratic party “one of the greatest experimental tests of the nature of the American party system ever made.” See E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1942), 163–169.

⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, 13 vols. (New York: Random House, 1938–1950), vol. 7, xxviii–xxxii.

nonpartisan responsibility of the president to the detriment of collective and partisan responsibility.

As the British case demonstrates, party government and administrative reform need not be incompatible. Woodrow Wilson, who believed that a strong presidency might develop into a partisan force similar to the British prime minister, looked to the reform of parties *and* administration. Such reform might influence the development of a bureaucracy that would “professionally” implement the programs stemming from a government more effectively organized by a majority political party.⁶

The central thesis of this article, however, is that the New Deal gave impetus to an extension of presidential responsibility that tended to *replace* partisan politics with executive administration. Thus, the development of the modern presidency,⁷ beginning with the Roosevelt administration, has focused additional responsibility on the executive department while party politics have continuously been neglected or relegated to being personal tools of presidential ambitions and programs. It is misleading to view the New Deal party alignment, as Walter Dean Burnham does, as “a temporary if massive deviation from a secular trend toward the gradual disappearance of the political party in the United States.”⁸ Rather, the New Deal and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s party leadership can be seen as contributing to, rather than simply interrupting, the demise of partisan politics.

This article credits the Roosevelt administration with a rather coherent understanding and program in terms of partisan politics and public administration. This contrasts somewhat with most treatments of the New Deal, which stress the pragmatic and experimental nature of this program. To James MacGregor Burns and most other New Deal scholars, Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency was one of “broker leadership”; that is the New Deal was for the most part an improvisational response to the social and economic crises of the 1930s, rather than a planned and conscious direction of events based upon firmly established political values.⁹ But this article suggests that the New Deal needs to be taken more seriously as a *political program*, based upon firmly established values, rather than a series of hastily contrived reactions to social and economic developments. However, the focus here is not so much Roosevelt’s intentions and deliberations; the central concern is to unravel the intricate and significant relationship between party politics and administrative reform during the 1930s.

⁶ Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908); “The Study of Administration,” *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (June 1887).

⁷ On the development of the modern presidency, see Fred I. Greenstein, “Continuity and Change in the Modern Presidency,” in King, ed., *The New American Political System*, 45–85.

⁸ Burnham, *Critical Elections*, 132–133.

⁹ See James MacGregor Burns, *The Lion and The Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), 197–202. For a more complete discussion of the ideology and planning of the New Deal, concerning party politics and administrative reform, see Sidney M. Milkis, “The New Deal, the Decline of Parties and the Administrative State,” unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981.

PRACTICAL COMMITMENT TO RESPONSIBLE PARTY GOVERNMENT

Franklin Roosevelt was strongly influenced by the thought and practice of Woodrow Wilson, who is recognized as the first writer to advance the doctrine of responsible party government. In his later writings, particularly, Wilson stressed the importance of extending the influence of the presidency to facilitate responsible partisan politics. The separation and division of powers weakened somewhat the strength of the president as party leader. Yet the independence of the president from the Congress and his unique position within the political system imposed an "extraordinary isolation" on the president, which, if used effectively, established the chief executive as his party's "major link" with the nation.¹⁰

To a degree, Roosevelt shared this vision. But his concerns were focused on *practical* rather than *theoretical* considerations. He did not consider a responsible party system to be an essential element of democratic government. Roosevelt did express some concern that the organized opposition to him in Congress was practically obliterated in the election of 1936. But as Turner Catledge suggested at the time, it was more than "mere good sportsmanship" or a "philosophical attitude toward opposition" that caused such regret. Roosevelt's concern for loyal opposition was dominated by practical considerations; without an organized opposition on which he could depend to oppose everything he advanced, Roosevelt would be beset by unorganized groups within his own party ranks, presenting an "undefinable and unpredictable collection of shifting blocs, the most annoying opposition with which any leader would have to deal."¹¹

The work of Wilson and a few others notwithstanding, parties have never been defended on theoretical grounds in American democracy to the extent they have in Britain and most other industrial nations; they have rarely been viewed by political representatives as desirable ends-in-themselves. Still, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, they have been recognized by public officials as the most effective instruments of control within a fragmented power structure. For this reason, during times of political crisis, political leaders have sought to become, at least in part, party leaders.

Unlike Wilson, Roosevelt never developed a theory of the party system. But his concern with policy reform led him to try to circumvent the resistance he encountered from his party to a much greater degree than did Wilson. Up until the 1930s, the Democratic party remained committed to its Jeffersonian origins, that is individual autonomy, limited government, and states' rights. In fact, although Alexis de Tocqueville felt that equality required centralization of authority, American democracy had been allied to decentralization until the New Deal. Herbert Croly and Theodore Roosevelt had talked about "new nationalism" and the possibility of resurrecting Alexander Hamilton's nationalism as the "steward

¹⁰ Wilson, *Constitutional Government*, 64–68.

¹¹ Turner Catledge, "Huge Majority Means Threat of Bloc Tactics," *New York Times Magazine*, 8 November 1936, 4.

of the public welfare.”¹² But prior to the New Deal, Democrats associated American liberalism with its Jeffersonian origins, which identified positive government with conservative efforts, beginning with Hamilton’s economic policy, to promote business enterprises. Even Woodrow Wilson’s program of extending the role of the national government remained committed to individual autonomy from the authority of the central government. Wilson’s administration intervened to protect women and child workers, and the Federal Trade Commission was established to prevent unfair and deceptive business practices. But progressive Democrats, as Richard Hofstadter suggests, “preferred to keep the positive functions of government minimal, and, where these were necessary, to keep them on the state rather than the national level.”¹³ Previous great reform movements in the United States can be seen as reaffirmations of the American tradition of limited constitutional government, but the New Deal, though certainly not a direct rejection of this tradition, most seriously questioned the adequacy of traditional American freedoms.

One significant manifestation of Roosevelt’s “new liberalism” was his assault on traditional party politics, a significant watershed in presidential party leadership. Wilson was a strong party leader but, like all previous presidents, he reconciled himself in the last analysis to the strong fissures within his party. In his use of patronage particularly, Wilson pursued a strategy directed at controlling rather than reforming his party in order to get his programs passed. Consequently, Wilson made little effort to strengthen the Democratic party’s organization or its fundamental commitment to progressive principles.¹⁴

On the other hand, Roosevelt made a concentrated effort to influence a party realignment along less ambiguous liberal and conservative lines. He sought to make the Democratic party a party of “militant liberalism,”¹⁵ encouraging those who were not part of that commitment to join the Republican camp. In Roosevelt’s second administration, as in that of Woodrow Wilson, Congress was “chafing at its subordinate position.”¹⁶

James Farley, Roosevelt’s Democratic party chairman, suggested that the President’s attempt to dominate his party indicated his thirst for personal

¹² Theodore Roosevelt, *Works of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1923–1926), vol. XIX, 10–30; also Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 201–219.

¹³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 305. Also see Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 18–21, 74. Apparently, Wilson became more committed to national reform toward the end of his presidency. Commenting on Wilson’s expressed agreement with most of the English Labour program announced by the Labour party in 1918, Colonel House wrote in his diary: “. . . the President has started so actively on the liberal road that I find myself, instead of leading as I always did at first, rather in the rear and holding him back.” From the Diary of Colonel House, 24 February 1918, in Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 436.

¹⁴ Arthur S. Link, “Woodrow Wilson and the Democratic Party,” *Review of Politics* 18 (April 1956): 146–156.

¹⁵ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 7, XXXI.

¹⁶ Lindsay Rogers, “Reorganization: Post-Mortem Notes,” *Political Science Quarterly* 53 (June 1938): 170.

power.¹⁷ But FDR's actions to establish a "personal party" can probably be better understood if they are viewed as part of an effort to alter the character of constitutional government in the United States. As early as 1933, in a speech at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, he argued that where once equality of opportunity was provided by limited government interference in society and expansion in the American economy, certain economic and social changes in the American system demanded that Americans now recognize the "new terms of the old social contract."¹⁸ The closing of the Western frontiers and the growth of industrial combinations to the point of "uncontrolled" and "irresponsible" units within the state signaled the turning of the tide by the end of the nineteenth century. The Depression of the 1930's, argued Roosevelt, indicated all too clearly that government action on behalf of the people was long overdue:

Our task now is not discovery or exploitation of national resources, or necessarily producing new goods. It is the soberer, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production, of meeting the problem of under consumption, of adjusting production to consumption, of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has come.¹⁹

Roosevelt indicated that the solution to America's problems would require, at minimum, the development of "an economic declaration of rights, an economic constitutional order." This new constitutional order required that there be a change in the liberalism of the Democratic party. And this change could occur only with the extension of presidential power over the party. The New Dealers' attempt to make the party into a more national organization focused not only on the national committee, which was dominated by state and local party leaders, but also on Congress, which registered state and local interests at the national level. In the last analysis, Roosevelt believed that a more principled party politics could only come through the subordination of Congress's position in the development of party policy. Measures of such scope and complexity that he had in view could only be implemented if they were drawn under the strong hand of centralized control; the New Deal could not be planned and built by debate within the legislature and traditional party councils. For this reason, unlike Wilson, Roosevelt made little use of the congressional party caucus. He politely rejected Congressman Alfred Phillips, Jr.'s suggestion in 1937 "that those sharing the burden of responsibility of party government should regularly and often be called into caucus and that such caucuses should evolve party policy and choice of party leaders."²⁰ A more principled party politics required the development of not so much a personal party as a presidential party.

¹⁷ James Farley, *Jim Farley's Story* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1948), 120.

¹⁸ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 1, 756.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 751-752.

²⁰ Alfred Phillips, Jr. to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 9 June 1937; Roosevelt to Phillips, 16 June 1937,

NEW DEAL PARTY POLITICS AND PRESIDENTIAL APPEAL:
THE DRIVE FOR NATIONALIZATION

Even though Roosevelt thought he saw in his 1936 landslide victory for a second term an impressive mandate to carry out reforms, his actions would be frustrated unless the fragmentation of constitutional democracy was modified. He expressed hope in his 1934 State of the Union annual message to Congress that the early political successes of his administration indicated that “a strong and permanent tie between the legislative and executive branches of government” was being constructed.²¹ Yet as soon as the economic emergency of the early 1930s eased somewhat, the more traditional adversary relationship between the president and the Congress reemerged. Roosevelt’s Supreme Court “packing” bill and his more consistent leftist orientation after 1935 contributed to the weakening of executive-legislative relations. When it became apparent that unity within the traditional American party system would not outlast the feeling of panic in the country in the early 1930s, Roosevelt attempted to influence the development of party politics that would allow for a more sustained period of coordinated party government. Without such a development, even the electoral mandate of 1936 would be insufficient to bring about a departure from traditional political practices in the United States.

The Purge Campaign of 1938

The most dramatic aspect of Roosevelt’s effort to depart from traditional party politics was his intervention in several congressional primary campaigns in 1938. Roosevelt interceded in a dozen states in an effort to unseat entrenched conservative incumbents within his own party by denying them the Democratic nomination. Such intervention was not unprecedented; William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson had made limited efforts to cleanse their parties of recalcitrant members in this way. Yet Roosevelt’s campaign against those who did not support his program took place on an unprecedentedly large scale and, unlike previous efforts, made no attempt to work through the regular party organization.²²

The degree to which this action was viewed as a shocking departure from precedents in American politics is indicated by the fact that the press soon labeled Roosevelt’s 1938 primary campaign as “the purge,” a term which became

President’s Personal File, 2666, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. Roosevelt admitted that he was irked by the slowness of the American democratic process. See Anne O’Hare McCormick, “As He sees Himself,” *New York Times Magazine*, 16 October 1938; *Fortune*, February 1937, 70.

²¹ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 3, 14.

²² For a discussion of presidential efforts to further party discipline by intervening in primary elections, see Sidney M. Milkis, “Presidents and Party Purges: With Special Emphasis on the Lessons of 1938,” in Harmel, ed., *Presidents and Their Parties*, 151–178.

notorious with Adolph Hitler's attempt to weed out dissension in the German Nazi party and Josef Stalin's elimination of "disloyal" party members in the Soviet Communist party. Roosevelt considered this label a slur on his actions as party leader. Nevertheless, as Morton Frisch points out, since Roosevelt was attempting a "cleansing" of his party, a separating out of those with conservative political orientations, this term was, in a sense, an appropriate description of his actions.²³

For a long time after he became president, Roosevelt made no substantial effort to modify party politics or to affect the outcome of primary contests. When Senator Key Pittman, who up to this time had loyally supported the administration, asked Roosevelt for support in his 1934 Democratic primary fight, Roosevelt replied:

I wish to goodness I could speak out loud in meetings and tell Nevada that I am one thousand percent for you! An imposed silence in things like primaries is one of the many penalties of my job.²⁴

Roosevelt maintained this "imposed silence" until the summer of 1938 when he finally initiated the purge. In 1936 he had refused to fight the renomination of the Democratic incumbent Senator from Virginia, Carter Glass, who was the only congressional member of the majority party to oppose consistently the New Deal from the start. Even as late as January 1938, Roosevelt declared a "hands off" policy when liberal Democrats in Missouri asked for his help in the primary campaign against the conservative incumbent, Senator Bennet Clark.²⁵

Roosevelt had long expressed interest in strengthening the National Committee and establishing a firmer commitment to progressive principles among party members elected to national office. The great question was when and how to start working for it. The pressure of events deferred any action until 1938 when New Deal partisan efforts focused on disciplining the congressional party.²⁶

It was really the conservatives within the Democratic party who finally influenced Roosevelt to intensify his partisan activity; they struck the first blow when they began to organize aggressively against the New Deal in 1937. In December a coalition of conservative Democratic and Republican senators issued

²³ Morton J. Frisch, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Contribution of the New Deal to American Political Thought and Practices* (Boston: S. T. Wayne, 1975), 81–82.

²⁴ Roosevelt to Key Pittman, 25 August 1934, *President's Personal File*, 65.

²⁵ A. L. Meier to Roosevelt, 22 January 1938, *President's Personal File*, 2.

²⁶ It was suggested in the press that the President and his close advisers had been talking about facilitating a more fundamental party realignment from the beginning of his first term. Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner, "We Shall Make America Over," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 1938, 91. In fact, Roosevelt expressed a commitment to reforming the Democratic party as early as 1924. Responding to the dreary convention fight and dismal election of that year, he suggested in correspondence with representative Democrats throughout the country that something should be done to make the Democratic party a "stronger and more militant organization nationally." For example, see Franklin D. Roosevelt to Key Pittman, 4 December 1924, *Key Pittman Papers*, Box 15, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

a public statement proclaiming their opposition to any further government encroachment on “the American system of private enterprise and initiative.”²⁷ This press release, which also called for an end to congressional weakness in the face of burgeoning presidential power, signaled the birth of the conservative coalition in Congress, which to this day remains a thorn in the side of liberal Democrats. This group of conservative statesman blocked several important New Deal measures during the Seventy-fifth Congress of 1937–1938, such as the Court Reform Bill, the Wages and Hours Bill, and the Government Reorganization Act. In part, the purge had its birth in Roosevelt’s desire to retaliate against those who opposed this part of his program.²⁸ But, more fundamentally, the struggle over this legislation involved a conflict over control of the Democratic party. Roosevelt’s Attorney General, Homer Cummings, wrote in his diary on 8 August 1937:

It is generally felt that back of all these various fights, including the Supreme Court fight, there lies the question of the nomination of 1940, and the incidental control of party destinies.²⁹

The President’s reluctance to undertake aggressive partisan leadership was not simply a matter of waiting for the right time to proceed. His cautiousness was partly connected to something more fundamental than such pragmatism. Given the ambiguity built into the historical role of the presidency, Roosevelt considered it neither desirable nor practical to immerse himself too extensively in party politics. He recognized that the authority of the presidency depended on his being the leader of the whole body of the people. In a radio address to the Young Democratic Clubs of America on 24 August 1934, Roosevelt expressed his understanding of the nonpartisan nature of the presidency:

Whatever his party affiliation might be, the President of the United States, in addressing the youth of the country—even when speaking to the young citizens of his own party—should speak as President of the whole people. It is true that the Presidency carries with it, for the time being, the leadership of the political party as well. But the Presidency carries with it a far higher obligation than this—the duty of analyzing and setting forth national needs and ideals which transcend and cut across all of party affiliation.³⁰

²⁷ *New York Times*, 16 December 1937.

²⁸ Samuel Rosenman, *Working with Roosevelt* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 176. Roosevelt formally initiated the purge on 24 June 1938 in a national radio address wherein he called for the selection of “liberal” candidates in the primary elections. Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 7, 391–400.

²⁹ Personal and Political Diary of Homer Cummings, 1 August 1937, Box 235, no. 9, 119. *Homer Cummings Papers* (#9973), Manuscripts Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³⁰ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 4, 337. Statements such as this were directed to nurturing a national consensus, which would establish a direct link between the President and a constituency based less on partisan loyalty than government services. The basic thesis of this article, which suggests that New Deal partisan politics, though fervent, looked to a nonpartisan future, may explain why Roosevelt’s statement that the presidency requires party leadership is qualified by the phrase, “for the time being.”

Although after 1800 the president became party leader as well as leader of all the people, the broad commitment in the United States to the separation of powers and federalism has disinclined the chief executive from connecting his ambition too centrally to his party in Congress. The traditional role of the presidency helps to explain Roosevelt's initial hesitancy to attempt to influence congressional contests, as well as the shock that greeted Roosevelt's eventual attempt to transform the Democratic party into a more liberal party. A close look at his actions against conservative Democrats reveals that these actions could achieve only an ephemeral strengthening of party government. This strategy reveals the short-sightedness of the Roosevelt administration and reflects the limited partisan purposes of the New Dealers in the first place. These purposes were most centrally focused on the South and local party organizations.

The Democratic Party and the Campaign for a New South

Not surprisingly, Roosevelt considered the southern bloc to be the greatest obstacle to the transformation of the Democratic party into a purposeful liberal organization. As Thomas Stokes wrote after analyzing the important role played by southern congressmen in scuttling the Wage-Hour Bill: "Southern Democracy was the ball and chain which hobbled the Party's forward march."³¹ If the Democratic party was eventually to become a national liberal party, conservative southern Democracy would have to be defeated.

Roosevelt did not confine his efforts to the South during the 1938 purge attempt, but his most outspoken and unequivocal opposition was directed against traditional southern Democracy. He most actively sought to unseat incumbent Senators Walter George from Georgia, "Cotton Ed" Smith from South Carolina, and Millard Tydings of Maryland. Although Tydings represented a border state, his political values and practices identified him with the cause of his conservative colleagues from the South. Roosevelt made an especially determined appeal for administration candidates Lawrence Camp and David Lewis of Georgia and Maryland respectively.

Many northern New Deal supporters expressed great disappointment during and after the 1938 elections at Roosevelt's emphasis on attempting to purge candidates from traditionally more conservative states. For example, Congressman Herman Kopplemann of Connecticut sought White House support in an effort to unseat conservative incumbent Senator Augustine Lonergan. At the advice of Connecticut native Homer Cummings, however, the administration did not intervene, receiving instead a public pledge from the incumbent to support the New Deal and the President in the future.³² Lonergan was renominated but lost the

³¹ Thomas Stokes, *Chip off My Shoulder* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1940), 503.

³² For a report on the Connecticut situation, see Cummings to Roosevelt, 20 September 1938, *Homer Cummings Papers*, Box 170; and Arch McNeil to Roosevelt, 12 August 1938, *President's Official File*, 300, Democratic National Committee, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

general election, partly, Kopplemann suggests, because the public resented his repudiation of the President during the Seventy-fifth Congress. Kopplemann wrote James Farley in November 1938, after the general election:

I don't know how you personally feel about the attempt of the so-called purge but, naturally, that attempt could not have been expected to succeed in traditionally conservative Democratic states. For instance, in Maryland and in Georgia, the people vote the Democratic ticket, but not necessarily the New Deal ticket. Here in Connecticut, for the past seven years, former Republicans have been voting the Democratic ticket because it was the New Deal ticket.

Because of the administration's relative indifference to the slate of Democratic candidates in Connecticut, Kopplemann argued, the party fared poorly in the 1938 elections.³³

This observation would seem to be supported by the fact that Roosevelt's one successful purge effort in congressional elections was accomplished against conservative Rules Committee Chairman John J. O'Connor from New York City—Roosevelt's only effort in the urban North.³⁴ There were other factors that contributed to this victory besides the fact that it was carried out in a northern metropolitan area. Since Roosevelt received the support of the local party organization in this contest and New York was his home state, the charge of outside interference that was lodged against him in other primary contests was not effective in this race.³⁵ Nevertheless, Roosevelt's effort to transform the Democratic party into a liberal party might have garnered more support had it been directed more aggressively at some of the more recalcitrant northern candidates. Successes in such an attempt might have sufficiently backed conservative southern Democrats into a corner where they either would have acquiesced to Roosevelt's liberal views or abandoned the Democratic party.

This northern strategy, however, would have relegated the Democratic party to being a sectional organization. Roosevelt probably recognized that writing off the South would lead to the development of a doctrinaire liberal party in the North. This would cause a sectional split that Roosevelt wanted to avoid. Heretofore the party had been a national party but at a price to its ability to coordinate policy action. The New Dealers wanted to nationalize the party system in a more

³³ Herman Kopplemann to James Farley, 29 November 1938, *President's Official File*, 300.

³⁴ Charles M. Price and Joseph Boskin, "The Roosevelt Purge: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Politics* 28 (August 1966): 660–670.

³⁵ When this contest was going badly, Roosevelt urged the Bronx party leader Ed Flynn to work against the nomination of O'Connor. Flynn reluctantly agreed but insisted that the local party organization be allowed to run the show without interference from the White House. Edward J. Flynn, *You're the Boss* (New York: The Viking Press, 1947), 150. Flynn's account, however, contradicts that of Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes, who worked closely with the White House "elimination committee," the group of close presidential advisors responsible for planning the purge campaigns. Ickes writes in his diary that the White House continued to be involved in the O'Connor campaign after Flynn agreed to help. Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 466, 476.

fundamental way; they sought to transform a decentralized party, responsible only to a local electorate, into an organization responsive to the will of the national party leader—the President—and the interests of a national electorate.³⁶ Roosevelt's appeal to the nation during the 1938 primary was an initial attempt to displace the local and sectional conflicts that were such an important part of the complex American political process in favor of a more nationalized political agenda based upon economic issues.³⁷

With such a task in mind, the President initiated his southern campaign by visiting his “other home” in Warm Springs, Georgia in August 1938. Roosevelt endorsed United States Attorney Lawrence Camp in a speech at Barnsville, as Walter George listened from the same podium. The President began his talk by arguing that a positive national program of social welfare legislation would be of special benefit to the South, a region that was disproportionately plagued by economic and social problems. Yet effective action by the federal government, Roosevelt told Georgians, could only be achieved by a party of men who shared a truly “liberal” political philosophy, who were willing to engage the federal government in attending to the southern social and economic needs. This meant, said Roosevelt:

. . . that if the people of the State of Georgia want definite action in the Congress of the United States, they must send to that Congress Senators and Representatives who are willing to stand up and fight night and day for federal statutes drawn to meet actual needs—not something that serves merely to gloss over the evils of the moment for the time being—but laws with teeth in them which go to the root of the problems, which remove the inequities, raise the standards and, over a period of years, give constant improvement to the conditions of human life in this state.³⁸

Roosevelt felt that the deep South would not have to be conceded by a liberalized Democratic party. Conservatism in the South was not really an economic conservatism. Conservative Democracy in this section of the country was firmly established in reaction to the populist movement at the end of the nineteenth century by the exploitation of the race issue. He believed that the people in the South could be persuaded of the advantages of a liberal Democratic party if the race issue and the reconstruction era could be forgotten amid a chorus of demands for economic justice—demands that would be important to the majority of whites as well as blacks. With this in mind, when Roosevelt was asked at a press conference in April 1938—at a time when the New Deal was besieged by the conservative coalition under the leadership of southern Democrats—whether he thought the solid South would stay Democratic very long, he replied:

³⁶ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932–1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 268–269.

³⁷ E. E. Schattschneider discusses the “displacement of conflict” in his *The Semi-sovereign People* (Hindsdale, Ill.: Dryden Press, 1945). See chap. v for his application of this concept to the New Deal and the Democratic party.

³⁸ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 7, 466–467.

Let me put it this way. I think the South is going to remain Democratic but I think it is going to be a more intelligent form of democracy than has kept the South, for other reasons, in the democratic column all these years. It will be intelligent thinking and, in my judgment, because the South is learning, it is going to be a liberal democracy.³⁹

The desire of the administration to focus on economic legislation probably contributed to Roosevelt's lukewarm support of the Antilynching Bill, which would have held local law enforcement authorities responsible for the lynching of prisoners "escaping" their custody. Frederick Delano, Roosevelt's uncle and close political adviser, wrote the President's son, James, in January 1938:

I personally would like to see the Antilynching Bill dropped on the ground that it would not work well in a hostile atmosphere—and if the Federal government tries to enforce so unpopular a law against local and state opposition it will make matters as bad as they were in *Reconstruction Days* (emphasis Delano's).⁴⁰

This disinclination to attack the race issue did little to assuage the concerns of southern conservatives. Roosevelt's strong attack on traditional southern politics—an attack which coincided, not coincidentally, with a report of the National Emergency Council on economic conditions in the South—convinced southern conservatives that the New Deal would eventually lead to broader black participation. Southerners were concerned about the solicitation of the black vote in the North by the Democratic party. At the urging of Pennsylvania Senator Joseph Guffey, who recognized the attraction of New Deal economic programs for blacks, the Democratic National Committee during Roosevelt's first term established the first effective Negro division a Democratic campaign committee ever had.⁴¹ Southern political leaders were astute enough to see the possible long-run consequences of this campaign strategy for politics below the Mason-Dixon line. When combined with Roosevelt's attack on the economic conditions of their region, such a strategy portended a class-oriented alignment which would remake southern democracy. Moreover, Roosevelt characterized conservative Democrats as "Copperheads" in his fireside chat initiating the purge, an allusion which conjured up images of a renewed northern assault on the South.⁴²

Roosevelt's purge campaign in the South was part of a larger plan to strengthen his hand as majority leader throughout the nation at the expense of state and local party leaders. If successful, such a plan would significantly affect the political process and the nation; most of all, however, it promised to remake southern politics. The abolition of the two-thirds rule for national conventions,

³⁹ *Complete Presidential Press Conferences of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 21 April 1938, vol. II (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 338–340.

⁴⁰ Frederick Delano to James Roosevelt, 22 January 1938, *James Roosevelt Papers*, Box 7, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

⁴¹ For a report on the Democratic party and the black vote, see Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner, "The Guffy-Biography of a Boss, New Style," *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 March 1939, 5–7, 98–102.

⁴² Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 7, 395.

which required support from two-thirds of the delegates for the nomination of president and vice president, was another aspect of this attempt. Although this rule gave a united minority the power to prevent a decision, it had been defended in the past on the ground that it guarded the most loyal Democratic section—the South—against the imposition of an unwanted ticket by the less habitually Democratic North, East, and West. Many Southerners, anticipating what was to come in 1938, unsuccessfully fought to retain this rule at the 1936 Democratic Convention. Senator Josiah Bailey of North Carolina, one of the leaders of the conservative Democrats in the Congress, wrote after the 1936 convention:

The abolition of the two-thirds rule will enable the Northern and Western Democrats to control the party, nominate its candidates and write its platforms. All of this will come out in 1940. Meantime, we cannot help ourselves. No party can resist its President when he is running for a second term. There was no possibility of arresting the abrogation of the rule.⁴³

To southern Democrats, it appeared that Roosevelt was intent upon building a new party organization. Senator George was able to excite the fear in many old-time southerners in Georgia that the purge against him indicated that the advisers around the President—the Corcorans, the Cohens, the Hopkinses, who had no relationship to the regular Democratic organization—were influencing him toward the remodeling of their ancient and honorable party.⁴⁴ The New Dealers, however, were less concerned with reforming traditional party politics than they were with overcoming obstacles to the development of a modern welfare state.

Party Organization—A Modern Tammany?

With the exception of the purge in New York City of John O'Connor, the administration eschewed working through traditional party machines in order to influence the election of a more tractable Congress. All of the members of the “elimination committee,” which planned the purge campaign, came from outside the Democratic organization. Democratic Chairman James Farley, who was bitterly opposed to the primary campaign, became less influential once it was finally decided to attack the conservative wing of the party.

Roosevelt did attempt to work “quietly” with local party organizations in such states as Connecticut and Indiana that did not have direct primaries. Roosevelt, at the suggestion of Homer Cummings, did not oppose the nomination of incumbent Lonergan in Connecticut. In “exchange” Lonergan promised to support liberal policies in the future. And in Indiana the administration tried unsuccess-

⁴³ Josiah Bailey to R. R. King, 10 August 1936, *Josiah Bailey Papers*, Senatorial Series, Political National Papers, Box 475, Manuscripts Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, 16 September 1938.

fully to influence the state Democratic machine to dump the incumbent, Senator Frederick Van Nuys.

Generally, however, the effort to purge the Democratic party stressed a direct appeal to public opinion. In retrospect this strategy might have been an unfortunate one to follow. Edward Flynn, Democratic leader of the Bronx, noted with interest that the most important victory Roosevelt obtained in the purge was the one which Flynn engineered in New York against House Rules Committee Chairman John J. O'Connor.⁴⁵ But given Roosevelt's interest in strengthening the national government and the presidency, his attempt to go over the heads of the local party leaders in an effort to influence the people directly is not surprising. Roosevelt was not adverse, in the short-run, to working with local leaders who were amenable to liberal political policies; at times he cooperated with the likes of Ed Flynn, Frank Hague, and Ed Kelly. Yet, clearly his speeches and other political actions were geared toward loosening the grip of local hands on the Democratic organization. In his 1934 book, *On Our Way*, Roosevelt expressed approval of the decline of patronage politics in the United States and "the elimination of more and more local political machines and bosses" whose chief aim in life had been to "feather their own nests."⁴⁶

Roosevelt expressed hope that the American party system was changing from an institution based upon self-interest and pragmatism into one organized on the basis of principle. The lack of integrity of traditional party politics was not his only concern. His vision of a government more extensively committed to equality, redistribution, and the welfare state required more efficient administration. He expressed such a view in his 1935 speech to the Young Democratic Clubs:

Mere party membership and loyalty can no longer be the exclusive test. We must be loyal not merely to persons or parties, but we must be loyal also to the higher conceptions of ability and devotion that modern government requires.⁴⁷

But the New Dealers, their rhetoric notwithstanding, were quite willing to politicize federal administration. Oftentimes their strategy seemed to involve not so much a drive for the end of patronage as it did an attempt to centralize control of patronage within the presidency. As the President-elect, Roosevelt spoke of modifying rather than eliminating patronage practices. Feeling Wilson's adherence to traditional patronage practices was unfortunate, Roosevelt expressed to Homer Cummings in January 1933 his desire to proceed on somewhat different lines, primarily with the view, according to the latter's diary, "to building up a national organization rather than allowing patronage to be used merely to build Senatorial and Congressional machines."⁴⁸ During his first term,

⁴⁵ Flynn, *You're the Boss*, 151.

⁴⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *On Our Way* (New York: The John Day Company, 1934), 248–249.

⁴⁷ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 4, 234.

⁴⁸ Diary of Homer Cummings, 15 January 1933, Box 234, No. 2, 90.

however, Roosevelt followed traditional patronage practices. James Farley, a strong organization man, handled patronage, and in most cases appointees were recommended by local organizations or by the Democratic United States senators. But after 1936 Roosevelt did not follow the recommendations of organization people so closely. Beginning in 1938, especially, when Roosevelt's partisan actions became more aggressive, patronage practices circumvented the traditional organization. According to Ed Flynn, who became Democratic chairman in 1940, "the President turned more and more frequently to the so-called New Dealers who were then surrounding him." Under the leadership of presidential aide Thomas Corcoran, these people managed increasingly during Roosevelt's second term to short circuit James Farley and the Democratic National Committee. As a result, many appointments in Washington went to individuals who were committed New Dealers but "who were not Democrats in many instances, and in all instances were not organization Democrats."⁴⁹

By pursuing such a patronage strategy, the Roosevelt administration established an incipient New Deal organization that worked independently of the regular Democratic machinery. This reorganization became linked with the 1938 primary campaigns and the reaction of Congress and regular Democrats against the purge. Until the passage in 1939 of the Hatch Act, which barred federal employees from participating in campaigns, the Roosevelt administration was making use of the growing army of federal workers in local and state political activity, including some of the purge campaigns.⁵⁰ In fact, as the *New York Times* reported after its passage, the Hatch Act was a "direct outgrowth of strong arm federal politics, of partisan use of the money appropriated and the powers delegated to the executive by Congress." In large part, "it was the child of 'the purge'."⁵¹

Before the Hatch Bill became a law, it was felt by many that Roosevelt was putting together a modern Tammany, one that would operate on a national scale independently of the state and local governments.⁵² After the Florida primary, in which the Roosevelt administration aided the successful effort of incumbent Senator Claude Pepper to fend off the anti-New Deal challenge of Congressman Mark Wilcox, the *New York Times* reported that the use of money and personnel from federal relief organizations, had given the administration the potential for superior influence in renominating and reelecting its favorites and in punishing independents. The use of relief funds and the Works Progress Administration

⁴⁹ Flynn, *You're the Boss*, 153.

⁵⁰ On the use of federal employees in the 1938 primaries, see Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures and the Use of Government Funds of 1938, *Investigation of Senatorial Campaign Expenditures*, Senate Report, 76th Congress, 1st Session, Number 10288; also, John Edward Hopper, *The Purge: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the 1938 Democratic Nominations*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1966, 107.

⁵¹ *New York Times*, 6 August 1939.

⁵² Albert Jay Nook, "WPA, the Modern Tammany," *American Mercury* 45 (October 1938): 215-19.

was especially salient in the Kentucky primary where Roosevelt sought to help Majority Leader Alben Barkley against a strong challenge from Governor A. B. (Happy) Chandler. Roosevelt's endorsement of Barkley was significant, but equally important was the "federal machine" which worked feverishly on behalf of the incumbent Senator. After Barkley's victory *Newsweek* reported:

Once the New Deal issue and the President's personality had been injected into the fight, the Barkley-Chandler race resolved into a titanic test between the vote getting power of Federal funds—WPA and farm benefits—against the strength of a well-disciplined state machine. . . . The New Deal won: with reports in from most precincts, Barkley lumbered across the finish line 50,000 votes ahead of his rival. . . .⁵³

This federal machine was much more successful in aiding the renomination of pro-New Deal incumbents than it was in "purging" New Deal opponents from the party. With the exception of the congressional primary in New York, which was fought on Roosevelt's home territory, every incumbent that was a target of the purge was able to fight off the challenge of Roosevelt's personality and federal pap. Nevertheless, the development of a New Deal machine was a frightening prospect even for rather well entrenched incumbents, since "purge" campaigns forced them to engage in long and costly campaigns which otherwise might be foregone conclusions.

The Hatch Act, however, made the full development of a national party machine based on federal government spending and organization less likely. It removed the influence of virtually all federal administrative officials from nominating or electioneering efforts for president, vice-president, or members of Congress.⁵⁴ It also had strong legal measures that sought to prevent federal job holders from using their influence to coerce votes or money in national elections. Besides serving to further insulate congressional and Senate elections from presidential control, the Hatch Act also gave members of Congress a greater measure of control over the nomination conventions by precluding the participation of federal administrative officers. At the 1936 Democratic Convention, about half of the 1,100 delegates were federal job holders. With passage of the Hatch Act, only cabinet officers, members of Congress, and a few top-ranking policy officers of the Roosevelt regime could be delegates in 1940. In effect the Hatch Act demolished the national Roosevelt political machine as distinct from the regular Democratic organization.⁵⁵ Although Roosevelt did manage to control the 1940 convention, his chances of doing so would have been questionable had it not been for the critical foreign situation and his immense personal popularity.

⁵³ *Newsweek*, 14 August 1938, 9–10.

⁵⁴ The act excludes from its provisions the president and vice president, aides paid from appropriations for the president's office, heads and assistant heads of executive departments, and officers who are appointed by the president, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, and who determine policies to be pursued by the United States. For a summary of the Hatch Act's provisions and development, see James W. Fesler, *Public Administration: Theory and Practice* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980), 120–124.

⁵⁵ *New York Times*, 30 July 1939; *Time*, 31 July 1939, 10.

In spite of these efforts to develop a federal political organization, it is not likely that Roosevelt aimed to develop a national Tammany Hall. He was more interested in orienting the executive department for the formation of liberal public policy than he was in developing a national political machine. He recognized that to carry out his program the party organization would have to be based on principles as well as pap, and that the executive department needed to be professional as well as liberal. As E. E. Schattschneider wrote in reference to the Hatch Act, "a powerful national party organization is not merely a magnified local machine consuming a greater quantity of spoils."⁵⁶ This probably explains why after much consideration the President, though he fought passage of this legislation, chose not to veto the Hatch Act.⁵⁷ Not only would such a veto most likely have split his party irretrievably and cost the Democrats votes in 1940, but it also would have worked against the achievement of Roosevelt's reform program. The creation of the modern welfare state required effective administration. The New Dealers did not seek to build an executive department which would be independent of political control; they wanted a bureaucracy that would be committed to the perpetuation of the New Deal. But the insulation of federal officials from patronage politics was not incompatible with such a task. The Hatch Act, though it might have weakened the attempt to "cleanse" the Democratic party, may have furthered the cause of the New Dealers to establish a modern welfare state.

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF PARTISAN POLITICS

Roosevelt's purge campaign galvanized opposition throughout the nation. Roosevelt and the New Deal were very popular in the South in the 1930s, especially in Georgia; nevertheless, the attack on the southern incumbents was rejected as overzealous nationalism and partisanship. The major reason given for the failure of the purge campaigns was resentment at the President's interference in matters that were considered to be state and local. In the end, the President's attempt to affect state and local primary contests was viewed as an irresponsible effort to fashion a rubber stamp Congress. His failure demonstrated the strong resistance built into the American political culture against fervent national partisanship. The decentralized nature of the American party system has become attached to such constitutional mechanisms in American politics as the separation of powers and federalism, thereby making any direct attack on this system difficult. *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock wrote after the failed primary campaign:

⁵⁶ Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 164.

⁵⁷ This was not an easy decision for Roosevelt. After closely consulting with his attorney general concerning the constitutional and political viability of this bill, he signed it on the final day before it would become a law without his signature. See *New York Times*, 3 August 1939; and memorandum, Frank Murphy to Franklin Roosevelt, 26 July 1939, *President's Secretary's File*, 152, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

He [Roosevelt] has demonstrated in the most public way that the American system and tradition are still stronger than he is. For instance, it is admitted on all sides in Maryland that Representative [David] Lewis, an excellent man and not at all the rubber stamp he professed himself to be, would have run a much better race against Senator Tydings if the President had not forcibly intervened.⁵⁸

Roosevelt was always aware of the limitations of the extent to which his purposes could be achieved by party government in the American context. He realized that while political exigency demanded that the president assume the leadership of his party, the full power and splendor of the office necessitated rising above partisan politics. This realization probably helps to explain why the purge campaign was limited to a few Senate and congressional contests, for the most part in the South, rather than a more systematic nationwide attempt to elect New Dealers.

A Party to End All Parties?

It is not clear to what extent the lack of success of the purge campaign reinforced Roosevelt's notion of the limited significance of political parties. To some degree, Roosevelt's interest in reshaping the Democratic party was sustained well beyond 1938. In fact, Roosevelt made overtures to Wendell Willkie, the liberal Republican who ran for president on the GOP ticket in 1940 and was rejected by his own party in favor of Thomas Dewey in 1944, about the possibility of forming a new liberal party. The project was never pursued very far, however, since by election day Willkie was dead, and five months after election day Roosevelt was dead also. But with the exception of the vague overtures directed at Willkie, Roosevelt's aggressive partisan efforts were insignificant after 1938.⁵⁹ He told Homer Cummings in December 1938, that his attitude toward recalcitrant Democrats had become "all milk and honey."⁶⁰ Apparently, Roosevelt came to the conclusion that the decentralized character of American politics recommended against strong partisan action as a means to achieve desired policy.

It is interesting to note that Roosevelt's most unequivocal statement on the limited importance of parties came about a year and a half after the purge campaigns. In his Jackson Day speech of 8 January 1940, Roosevelt pointed to both the limited and declining significance of political parties in the United States.

. . . I do believe in party organization, but only in proportion to its proper place in government. I believe party organization is a sound and necessary part of our Amer-

⁵⁸ Arthur Krock, "Roosevelt Reversals Mystify 'Purge' Aims," *New York Times*, 18 September 1938.

⁵⁹ For an account of the collaboration between Roosevelt and Willkie, see Rosenman, *Working with Roosevelt*, 463–470. Mary Hinchey argues that Roosevelt never followed through on this expressed interest in realignment. Mary Hedge Hinchey, "The Frustration of New Deal Revival, 1944–1946." Unpublished dissertation, University of Missouri, 1965, 41.

⁶⁰ Personal and Political Diary of Homer Cummings, 30 December 1938, Box 235, no. 8, 270.

ican system, and that, effectively organized nationally and by States and by localities, parties are good instruments for the purpose of presenting and explaining issues, of drumming up interests in elections, and, incidentally, of improving the breed of candidates for public office.

But the future lies with those wise political leaders who realize the great public is interested more in government than in politics, that the independent vote in this country has been steadily on the increase, at least for the past generation, that vast numbers of people consider themselves normally adherents of one party and still feel perfectly free to vote for one or more candidates of another party, come election day, and on the other hand, sometimes uphold party principles even when precinct captains decide "to take a walk."⁶¹

Roosevelt recognized during the 1930s realignment period that party influence might be waning, thereby anticipating the "decline of party" literature that began to appear during the 1960s. He perhaps believed that the resurgence of party politics during the New Deal was temporary. In part his realization may be attributable to the disappointing purge campaign, but apparently Roosevelt saw the handwriting on the wall prior to the partisan efforts of 1938. Beginning in 1937, Roosevelt sought administrative reforms that were intended to help him govern in the *absence* of party government.

Party responsibility and the development of the modern presidency became intermingled during the Roosevelt administration. Most obviously, the liberalization of the Democratic party under Roosevelt and the New Deal realignment led to the development of a modern welfare state and a transition from legislative to executive-oriented government. In addition, however, the Democratic party was to be used as a means to provide the president greater control over the welfare state so that the executive department would be a more independent policy maker than was hitherto possible. Roosevelt believed that liberalism could best be promoted in the long run through a revamping of the executive department which would eventually make traditional party politics less important. In a sense, this would also make the development of responsible party government less necessary. As the *Report of the President's Committee on Administrative Management* suggested, with administrative reform the "brief exultant commitment" to progressive government as expressed in the elections of 1932 and, especially, 1936 now would be more firmly established in "persistent, determined, competent, day-by-day administration."⁶²

⁶¹ Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 9, 28.

⁶² *Report of the President's Committee on Administrative Management* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 53. The President's Committee on Administrative Management, headed by Louis Brownlow, played a central role in the planning and politics of executive reorganization from 1936–1940. For a full analysis of the background and impact of this commission, see Barry Dean Karl, *Executive Reorganization and Reform in the New Deal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963). For further evidence of Roosevelt's commitment to executive administration, see his veto message for the Walter-Logan Bill, which would have severely restricted the discretion of executive agencies, where he praises "administrative tribunals" as "the only means of obtaining

In the last analysis, New Deal reformers viewed the strengthening of presidential administration as better suited to obviating the obstacle of separation of powers than a revamped party system: whereas party government required the constant cooperation of party members in Congress, presidential administration would “only” require the passive acceptance of executive-initiated programs. As Luther Gulick, who played a pivotal role in new Deal administrative reform, put it, the legislature would merely respond positively or negatively to the master plan of policy worked out by the executive, a plan that, in effect would be little more than “a declaration of war, so that the essence of the program is in reality in the gradual unfolding of the plan in actual administration.”⁶³ Legislative acquiescence would certainly not be easy to achieve, yet administrative reform might so strengthen the presidency that executive domination of public policy would be difficult to resist.

Consequently, administrative reform was given a very high priority by the Roosevelt administration. The Executive Reorganization Bill, first proposed in 1937, became a major focus of party responsibility.⁶⁴ This bill, suggests Morton Frisch:

. . . with the power given to the President to rearrange executive agencies and bureaus, would tighten the loosely organized structure of the national government and thus enable him to make more use of his position as head of the *whole nation* rather than as merely head of the *party* governing the nation.⁶⁵

The development of administrative reform into a party program was frustrating to many members of the Democratic party. Such reform incited intense controversy, threatening as it did Congress’s influence over the bureaucracy without promising the political reward of seemingly more tangible welfare programs such as Social Security, collective bargaining, minimum wage, and agricultural adjustment.⁶⁶

Yet, Roosevelt considered the overhauling of the executive department an essential ingredient of his liberal program. In fact, the defeat of the Executive Reorganization Bill in April 1938 had an important influence on Roosevelt’s decision to undertake his campaign to purge the Democratic party.⁶⁷ And he

equality before law . . . wherever a continuing series of controversies exist between a powerful and concerted interest on the one side and a diversified mass of individuals . . . on the other.” Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 9, 618.

⁶³ Luther Gulick, “Politics, Administration and the New Deal,” *The Annals* 169 (September 1933): 64.

⁶⁴ House Majority Leader Sam Rayburn appealed for party loyalty in regard to the Executive Reorganization Bill, arguing that the defeat of this legislation would indicate a “vote of no confidence” in President Roosevelt. *Congressional Record*, 75th Congress, 3rd Session, 8 April 1938, 5121.

⁶⁵ Frisch, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 79. (Emphasis added.)

⁶⁶ To the applause of the House, John O’Connor expressed dismay that such a sensitive, albeit politically unrewarding, reform program was being pushed so hard by the administration. *Congressional Record*, 75th Congress, 3rd Session, 31 May 1938, 4609–4611.

⁶⁷ In June, Senator Josh Lee of Oklahoma urged Roosevelt to take action against those who opposed the reorganization program and were running for reelection; two days later, interestingly

continued to push for administrative reform in the Seventy-sixth Congress, even though this effort required a tremendous expenditure of political capital. The *New York Times* reported in August 1938 that this reform took precedence over several measures such as tax and labor reform: no measure was “closer to the President’s heart” and none aroused “more determination to force it through Congress than the Reorganization Bill.”⁶⁸

A compromise administrative reform bill eventually passed the Seventy-sixth Congress in 1939. In effect, the Executive Reorganization Act of 1939, which first established the executive office of the president, cleared the path for the development of a strengthened and centralized executive office that provided the president with the ability to respond to the expectations for greater direction of social and economic processes even in the absence of party government.

Of course Roosevelt did not eschew party politics. He recognized that some sort of political organization would be necessary to sustain popular support for his programs. Roosevelt’s partisan views and actions indicate that he considered party organizations to have an important, albeit limited, role in the political process. In part, this was a matter of pragmatism, but the Roosevelt administration’s limited commitment to party government also grew out of a principled commitment to achieving permanent progressive reform. New Dealers hoped that the expanded role of the national government would lead to the evolution of a professional welfare state largely insulated from the fluctuations of party politics. This view was given clear expression by Joseph Harris, the director of the research staff of the President’s Committee on Administrative Management, in an initial planning session in May 1936:

We may assume the nature of the problems of American life are such as not to permit any political party for any length of time to abandon most of the collectivist functions which are now being exercised. This is true even though the details of policy programs may differ and even though the old slogans of opposition to governmental activity will survive long after their meaning has been sucked out.⁶⁹

It might be suggested that the program Roosevelt pushed upon the Democratic party for administrative reform prepared his party to end all parties. Roosevelt’s party strategy in important respects developed a party of administration, which was established upon programs aimed at replacing party politics with executive administration. As the New Deal developed, it became apparent to many observers that the Roosevelt administration was intent upon rendering party politics and loyal opposition obsolete. *Fortune* magazine noted in 1937:

Whether or not he [Roosevelt] was right is not here important. What is important is enough, Roosevelt announced his intention to purge the Democratic party of conservatives. Richard Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt’s Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 183.

⁶⁸ *New York Times*, 16 August 1938.

⁶⁹ “Outline for the New York Conference,” 9–10 May 1936. *Papers of the President’s Committee on Administrative Management*, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

that the kind of government for which he asked the popular endorsement was government for the people in which policy was formulated not by the mass of people nor by the representatives of the masses of people but by the people's President.

Precisely where that . . . leaves the loyal opposition theory of Republican policy is all too clear. It leaves it nowhere. A useful opposition can function only in a country in which the vital decisions are made in the Legislature.⁷⁰

The Democratic party became, during the 1930s, a temporary way station on the road to administrative government. Such an administrative party would establish the conditions for the end of parties, unless an anti-administration challenging party would spring up. It is primarily in this capacity that the Republican party has provided "loyal opposition" since the New Deal.

The civil service reform carried out by the Roosevelt administration demonstrates particularly the effort to replace "politics" with "administration." Unlike most of the elements of administrative reform that would strengthen the President per se, the extension of the merit system "upward, outward and downward" cast an especially New Deal hue over government machinery. This entailed extending merit protection after 1938 over the personnel appointed by the Roosevelt administration during its first term; four-fifths of these had been brought into government outside of regular merit channels.⁷¹ Administrative reform, therefore, was pursued in a way to politicize, rather than simply professionalize, the bureaucracy, albeit in a nonpartisan way. This would especially strengthen the hand of presidents sympathetic to the political objectives of the New Deal.

The New Deal Realignment and the Decline of Parties

The creation of the modern presidency and the consequent de-emphasis on party leadership during the New Deal has had an important influence on the historical development of the party system. Roosevelt's party politics, which led to a significant transcendence of partisan politics, ultimately weakened the influence of the party system on public policy. This outcome of the New Deal is often overlooked. Although historical treatments of the party system usually relate the decline of political parties during the twentieth century, such treatments usually consider the important events surrounding the Depression as a dramatic but brief positive interlude in a long period of party decay. But the outcome of the New Deal realignment—the establishment of presidential government and the rejection of traditional partisan politics as archaic—suggests that the "end-of-party" literature has underestimated the "positive" contributions of the New Deal in accelerating party decomposition.

Presidential leadership during the New Deal set the tone for the post-1950

⁷⁰ *Fortune*, February 1937, 70–71.

⁷¹ Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government*, 23.

resumption of party decline by preparing the executive department to be a government unto itself. By depriving traditional party mechanisms of much of their influence over the development of policy, the development of presidential government has exalted the personal aspect of American politics. The expansion and centralization of the executive department has strengthened the president's ability to establish a constituency independent of Congress and traditional party politics. To some degree, this has established a more "responsible" political process without creating more fundamental linkages between the president and Congress. However, the New Deal established a link between politics and administration in such a way that public policy was further removed in important respects from popular representation.

The New Deal regime was effectively held together for some time by the powerful memory of the Depression, a broad commitment to the public philosophy of the New Deal, and presidential leadership. The cause of liberal reform was greatly extended by the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson. Unlike Roosevelt, Johnson pursued his reform program through a process that involved careful consultation with the party leadership in Congress. The Great Society involved not only a continuation but a significant departure from the New Deal, which involved an important revival of partisan politics. The passage of this ambitious program was made possible by the effective cooperation between the administration and the large Democratic majorities brought to Congress in 1964.

Nevertheless, there were important parallels between the Roosevelt and Johnson presidencies.⁷² Although Johnson avoided any sort of purge campaign, the presidency and executive department assumed additional responsibilities during his administration in policy development, staffing, and campaigns, which further eroded the influence of the congressional party and national committee. The Great Society, like the New Deal, was a partisan program that extended non-partisan administration.⁷³ Moreover, the Johnson administration carried out a ruthless attack on the Democratic National Committee beginning in 1965, slashing its budget to the bone and eliminating several important programs, such as the highly successful voter registration division. The President also humiliated Democratic chairman, John Bailey, refusing to replace him, while turning most of his responsibilities over to White House aide Marvin Watson.⁷⁴

As a result of the Johnson administrations' disregard of the traditional party apparatus, the Democratic triumph of 1964, like that of 1936, was short-lived. Journalist Meg Greenfield wrote in June 1966:

⁷² For an account of the impact of the New Deal on the Johnson presidency, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), rev. ed., chap. 4.

⁷³ For a more complete comparison of the Roosevelt and Johnson presidencies in terms of party politics, see Sidney M. Milkis, "Party Leadership, Policy Reform and the Development of the Modern Presidency: The Impact of the Roosevelt and Johnson Presidencies on the American Party System." Paper prepared for delivery at the 1984 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁴ Theodore White, *The Making of the President, 1968* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 107.

The President, whose critics have customarily portrayed him as a man obsessed with politics, is now being charged with indifference to the proper political concerns of a party leader. And the party that only eighteen months ago enjoyed electoral triumphs at every level of government is — according to many of its faithful — in a dangerous state of disrepair.⁷⁵

Johnson's neglect of party affairs represented the continuation of the conflict between the decentralized American party system and the centralization of political power which has become increasingly significant throughout the twentieth century. The demand for stronger national leadership has been stimulated especially by the pursuit of reform represented by the New Deal and the Great Society. Presidential leadership became increasingly salient with the rise of the welfare state, and the greater focus on the presidency has encouraged presidents to look beyond the party system toward a politics of, as Roosevelt put it in his 1933 Commonwealth Speech, "enlightened administration." Franklin Roosevelt's ill-fated efforts to guide the affairs of his party were well and often remembered by Lyndon Johnson,⁷⁶ and, therefore, his attempt to extend the national purpose of the New Deal focused on the politics of presidential administration.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE CONNECTION BETWEEN PRESIDENTS AND PARTIES

As the consensus for liberal programs has cooled during the last decade, the effective political direction once provided by the public philosophy of the New Deal and presidential leadership no longer seems possible. However, bureaucratic agencies set in place by the Roosevelt and Johnson administrations have continued to set policy along the line envisioned by New Deal liberalism, although this policy has lost its connection to a governing coalition. The political control once provided by political parties for facilitating consensus and redirecting policy is a thing of the past. And the modern presidency, which was developed to alleviate the need for parties and replace them in the political process, is now burdened by an overload of responsibilities and a lack of organizational support.

In the past the party system has been an important mechanism for redefining the American political system and redirecting public policy. It may be, as some have suggested, that partisan politics has reached such an advanced state of decay that it cannot be raised again as an effective instrument of government. This need not be so, however, if a renewed appreciation of traditional partisanship emerges from the ashes of the American party system. In fact, the

⁷⁵ Meg Greenfield, "LBJ and the Democrats," *The Reporter*, 22 May 1966, 9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 12. Johnson indicates in his memoirs that he expected the cohesion of the Democratic party and the support of the Congress after the 1964 election to be temporary. He makes explicit reference to Roosevelt's troubles with the Democratic party in the late 1930s as the best example of the ephemeral nature of party government in American politics. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 103-105.

weakening of the presidency since Watergate and a widespread recognition of the mischiefs of nonpartisanship have led to a revitalization of national party organizations in recent years. It has been suggested that this is not so much a revitalization as the reconstitution of political parties as institutionalized and nationalized organizations.⁷⁷

Perhaps, after all, the nationalization of politics during New Deal realignment paved the way for the transformation rather than the transcendence of the American party system. Such a possibility has been accentuated by the surge of the Republican party in recent years, which in important respects challenges the displacement of politics by administration during the New Deal and Great Society. Although the Reagan presidency fits in many respects the post-New Deal framework of enhancing the authority of the White House and executive department to the detriment to party politics, Reagan campaigned and initially governed as a party spokesman.⁷⁸

Yet the disparate character of political institutions in the United States provides a precarious context for the cultivation of comprehensive party programs. Indeed, the Reagan White House, intent upon a conservative revolution, has fought to impose a comprehensive program of policy "reform" that necessarily looks beyond the limited agreements that can be worked out in the fragmented processes that give shape to American party politics. The assault on the welfare state has not entailed so much a revival of partisan politics as it has the development of a conservative administrative presidency.⁷⁹

Perhaps, presidential leadership, which has greatly influenced party decline, will be directed in the future to party rejuvenation. But this will require extraordinary presidential leadership directed at lessening the influence of the White House in favor of collective responsibility. Moreover, since the rise of presidential government was connected to the achievement of policy reform, it would seem that the revival to party politics would also have to be connected to policy goals. If the Democratic coalition fashioned in the 1930s does prove to be, as the Roosevelt administration expected, the party to end all parties, then the future will not likely bring a new realignment and resurgence of partisanship. Ultimately, the future of the American political system may depend on whether or not the redefinition of the political process during the New Deal period leaves room for a new rendezvous with our political destiny.

⁷⁷ Cornelius P. Cotter and John F. Bibby, "Institutional Development of Parties," *Political Science Quarterly* 95 (Spring 1980): 1-27.

⁷⁸ Gerald Pomper, "The 1980 Presidential Election and Its Meaning," in Thomas Cronin, ed., *Rethinking the Presidency* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 24.

⁷⁹ Richard Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency* (New York: John Wiley, 1983).