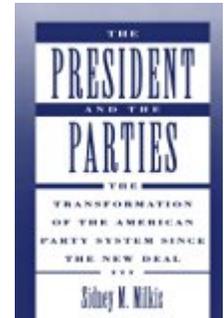


**Sidney M. Milkis.** *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System since the New Deal.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. xi + 404 pp. \$19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-508425-2.



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Analysis of the presidency probes the heart of the modern American polity. Proceeding from this axiom, Sidney Milkis argues in *The President and the Parties* that modern presidents expanded their influence by deliberately undercutting the role of political parties. Milkis traced the evolution of this relationship in a narrative synthesis based on a wide reading of scholarship and primary writings about the presidency and national party organization since the 1930s. More than a history, the work is also a commentary on the state of American politics. In light of its modern history, Milkis sees trouble ahead for the present system.

The central thread in Milkis' argument is that the rise of presidential predominance in the American polity was functionally related to the demise of traditional parties. With roots in the yprogressive era, this process started in earnest during the New Deal and reached a critical threshold during the Great Society. Franklin Roosevelt and like-minded New Dealers deliberately worked to diminish the influence of parties, which reformers saw as obstacles to the forma-

tion of the modern liberal state. During the era of "courts and parties," as Stephen Skowronek characterized nineteenth governance, traditional politics had been linked to local partisan organizations and the preservation of individual rights. Modern governance, by contrast, became oriented around economic benefits and individual entitlements ("programmatic rights"), centralized administration, and active presidential leadership. These developments were the legacy of the liberal agenda pursued between the New Deal and the Great Society. Each president during this period contributed to the growth of centralized power by fusing enhanced executive authority with the elaboration of an "administrative constitution" that embodied the programmatic rights extended by the modern state.

This new political paradigm took a rightward turn after the Great Society, as resentment toward the enlarged Federal establishment blossomed. Presidents Nixon through Bush turned to the enlarged prerogatives of executive power to abet this reaction and devolve national programs to the states. They were only partially successful, be-

cause reconstituted sources of political power after the 1960s posed effective counterweights to presidential aspirations. The conservative presidents faced a resurgent Congress, whose revived independence was reinforced by alliances with administrators, jurists, and liberal interest groups. Post-Great Society presidents were further handicapped by the absence of reliable partisan support. Political conflicts after 1970s, when divided partisan control of the national government prevailed, settled into institutional combat between the executive and the legislature. Herein lies the rudiments of the contemporary political dilemma. In place of a party realignment, which would have clarified connections between constituents and leadership of the modern polity, the political system had gravitated into competition among elites, who were largely detached from the popular base of American democracy.

Milkis developed these ideas in a review of political history that falls into three parts: the later New Deal when FDR laid the institutional basis for the modern presidency, a period of consolidation and incremental expansion between Truman and Johnson, and the era of the conservative presidents since 1968. Half of the book focuses on FDR, who combined partisan reform, the enhancement of executive capacity, and the adoption of liberal programs into a new, centralized version of the state in America. Inspired by progressive reformers who saw the expansion of presidential power as a prerequisite for building a modern policy regime, FDR worked to centralize policy leadership in the White House. He purposefully supported ideological over partisan criteria in patronage decisions, and opened up the Democratic party to blacks, women, and union members, while attempting (unsuccessfully) to purge it of conservative southerners. And of critical importance, he initiated the process that resulted in the Executive Reorganization Act of 1939. This "Third New Deal" (Barry Karl's phrase) produced the White House Staff, the Executive Office of the President, and the National Resources Planning

Board, all of which enhanced the president's ability to nurture the emergent "administrative constitution." (1) FDR consolidated his hold over the national party in the "purge of 1940," when he ran a reelection campaign that was only tenuously linked to party. These developments constituted a transformation of the political system rather than a realignment of parties and policy. The reconfiguration of the presidency into the nerve-center of American politics eclipsed many of the functions formerly assumed by parties.

Successive presidents build on the Roosevelt edifice. Truman created his own electoral organization for the campaign of 1948, and turned to new bodies such as the Council of Economic Advisers for policy recommendations. Eisenhower refined Truman's candidate-centered electoral machinery, and created additional institutional support systems in the White House. Johnson supported civil rights over accommodation with southern Democrats, formed presidentially-appointed task forces to generate policy initiatives, and disregarded the atrophy of the Democratic party organization. The latter neglect proved disastrous when criticism from the left over Vietnam and from the right over civil rights and other Great Society policy unraveled his base of support. Coupled with the disaffections of local party officials over the implementation of the War on Poverty, Johnson found himself politically isolated. The exaltation of the presidency, Milkis observes, was a two-edged sword that could cut down an incumbent.

Presidents after 1968 attempted to correct the purported excesses of national governance, and joined the counter-reaction to the modern state. Nixon tried to remake the bureaucracy in his own image, Carter sought to improve its efficiency, and Reagan endeavored to reduce its size and regulatory bite. Nixon, Reagan, and Bush were forced to rely on the resources of White House to implement these agendas because of formidable opposition, centered in the emergence of the "entrepre-

neurial Congress." Reagan also stimulated the renewal of the Republican party, which acquired a greater ideological coherence than in prior decades. But even Reagan's magnetism and Gingrich's Conservative Opportunity Society in the House, were unable to resuscitate the demise of traditional party organization. Power in the new polity no longer oriented around parties, whose roots required nourishment from America's non-centralized electoral structure. The new regime had settled into competition at the top between "a rhetorical" presidency, dependent on its own political resources, and a resurgence Congress, which formed strategic alliances with the leaders of interest groups, the courts, and bureaucrats. Citizens were seldom directly engaged in these fights.

Many of the constituent ideas in *The President and the Parties* already circulate in the scholarly domain. The specter of the "personalized" presidency at the center of the contemporary American polity is apparent to even the causal observer. Milkis' contribution lies in the integration of established generalizations and new insights into a creative synthesis that emphasizes the impact of presidential leadership on the management of modern politics. Besides identifying a pattern of deliberative presidential steps intent on centralizing power in the White House, Milkis' research illustrates the utility of historical methodology for tracking a sequence of changes that accumulated into a new but unstable government arrangement.

A tour of presidential history as panoramic as Milkis has provided inevitably stimulates questions of interpretation and approach. One such issue is whether the presidency offers an unbiased prism through which to trace changes in the polity. A good Skocpolian, Milkis argued that the diminution of partisan influence was largely the result of a purposeful presidential strategy to build the modern administrative state. An intriguing idea, its historical verification suffers from

Milkis' relative inattention to the places where parties are found: in state and local organizations, in Congress, and the state legislatures, and in the perceptions and behavior of the electorate. Two arguments can be made on this score. First, a variety of determinants, with television ranking high among them, have dampened the power of parties. Milkis acknowledges some of these influences, but like the radial limits of the electronic eye, his focus seldom wanders far from the presidents. Second, one wonders just how much parties have actually atrophied in America. If the Congress of 1995 tells us anything, party at the institutional level is far from dead. The resiliency of party in other segments of the polity is an open question.

This first musing blends into the second. To understand the presidency one must examine the occupants of the office. This Milkis did, tracing the rise and fall of liberalism from the perspective of the presidents, whose political actions were frequently attributed to Machiavellian instincts. The image that results from this paradigm is a polity whose cues emanate from the center. Without question, presidential leadership counts for a lot, but it does not count for everything. Society may influence the polity as much - or more - than the president. A reasonable supposition argues that fundamental social and economic changes have contributed to the turn to the right since 1968. The transformation of party may have more to do with this constellation of environmental factors than with presidential actions. Weighing the comparative influence of society and politics, however, requires a research design that speaks to the empirical requirements of this issue.

The third reflections concerns Milkis' comparison of the modern presidency with its nineteenth-century antecedent. Milkis' portrait of the evolving linkage between the administrative presidency, the centralization of the federal system, and the atrophy of partisan electoral organizations is useful and important. But his reliance on

Skowronek's aphorism of "courts and parties" to characterize the nineteenth-century polity raises questions about uses of historical evidence. Skowronek's thesis, which is approaching the status of historical orthodoxy, has not been subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Such analysis will probably disclose more policy innovation and administrative activity and less judicial interference and partisan control between 1870 and 1900 than Skowronek allowed. By relying on *Building the New American State* (Cambridge, 1982) to establish the baseline against which to measure subsequent changes, Milkis may have overdetermined presidential influence on the development the modern liberal state. An equally persuasive scenario posits that waves of state-building have occurred over the years since the Civil War at several levels of the polity, analogous to David Mayhew's conception of reform eras.<sup>(2)</sup> The policy outputs of these cycles of activism have accumulated over time into the centralized national state, which reached its modern apex in the middle 1970s. Thereafter a collection of factors fueled a backlash against big government. Presidents may have been as much captives as captains of these oscillating dynamics.

#### Notes

(1) *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* (Chicago, 1983). (2) "Parties, Elections, Moods, and Lawmaking Surges," in Joel H. Silbey, ed., *Encyclopedia of the American Legislative System* (New York, 1994), 2: 885-98.

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