

Partisan Regimes in American Politics

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Some scholars of American political development have used the phrase “partisan regimes” to refer to an important recurring pattern in American politics: a short, tumultuous period of partisan upheaval and political and policy change followed by extended stability. This article develops the concept of a partisan regime as an ideal type that can help scholars not only explain variations among historical cases, but identify the different elements that contribute to the rise of regimes and understand what these potent coalitions do once they secure power. The ideal type points to entrepreneurial leadership, political crises, and partisan narratives as the key contributors to the emergence of new governing orders. Furthermore, once a partisan regime achieves control, it only temporarily disrupts and remakes national policy, politics, and political debate. After achieving its core priorities, the regime primarily operates to preserve its gains. The concept of a partisan regime therefore offers only a limited explanation for many policy changes that occur during the long periods between regime upheavals.

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By many accounts, American political development has been informed and shaped by two temporal logics. Some scholars stress the weight of historical constants, notably the Constitution: the durability of the founding constitutional arrangements explains many aspects of American political life.¹ Other scholars, though, discern broad changes over time—often viewed as secular “modernizing” processes—that apparently have altered many aspects of politics,

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1. Peter Nardulli, *The Constitution and American Political Development: An Institutional Approach* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

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ranging from the extent of the franchise to the presidency. As an analytical convenience, the modernizing trends are often grouped in ways that allow us to speak broadly of eras (for example, a patrician period from the founding to the 1820s, and the modern presidency dating from either Roosevelt to the present).² Together, the two temporal logics provide the context for what we usually think of as the substance of politics—the interplay of interests, the rise and decline of popular movements, swings in public opinion, the unsettling effects of wars and natural disasters, scandals, and more. Occasionally, historical circumstances, events, and political forces combine to produce enormous political upheavals and waves of change. From the continuity-modernization developmental perspective, each such episode is *sui generis*, expressing no “big story” with broader theoretical implications.

Another coterie of scholars has identified a third temporal pattern, a recurring one, in American political development. This group focuses on the pivotal role of party coalitions: newly dominant parties propel bursts of broad political change and then preside over longer interludes of relative stability. From a party-centered perspective, significant turning points in American politics include the Democratic-Republican triumph in the election of 1800, the emergence of the Jacksonian Democrats in the 1830s, the Republican victory in 1860, the Democratic ascendance during the Great Depression, and the conservative era ushered in by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. (Often accounts also include the 1896 Republican landslide among the pivotal partisan transitions.) Each episode begins with the advent of a strong party coalition and its policy innovations. Then a period of calm follows, during which the dominant party attempts to preserve its major policy achievements.

Party-oriented approaches to American political development have assumed two forms. The most familiar is the electoral-realignment synthesis.³ More recently, some scholars, building upon the realignment approach, have posited the concept of “partisan regime” as an alternative framework for understanding the pattern of partisan upheaval followed by extended stability.⁴

2. Attempts to periodize have proven to be problematic and are often contested. Each proposed schema seems to capture some features of an era although obscuring others. This has led some to warn against such efforts. David R. Mayhew, “Suggested Guidelines for Periodization,” *Polity* 37 (2005): 531–35.

3. Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970); Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale, *Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties, and Government in American History* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980); James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983).

4. Stephen Skowronek, “Notes on the Presidency in the Political Order,” *Studies in American Political Development* 1 (1986): 286–302; Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1993); Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “Regimes and Regime Building in American Government: A Review of the Literature on the 1940s,” *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (1999): 689–701; David Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political*

Although different in key respects, the two party-based frameworks concur that partisan coalitions have been both the primary vehicle of broad-scale political change in the United States and a key instrument for preserving the *status quo*.

Notwithstanding the popularity of party-centered historical analysis, several factors call into doubt its continued utility. The electoral-realignment synthesis has been subjected to many telling critiques and now seems indefensible as a general framework for explaining American political development. Although the partisan-regime approach rests upon different premises, it still may be vulnerable along the same lines as its intellectual ancestor. Further, some empirical cases defy party-based periodization. Major policy changes occurred in the 1960s absent the rise of a new dominant partisan coalition; likewise, far-reaching reforms cut across party lines during the Progressive era. If political upheavals are possible in an extra-partisan context, then we have to question the added value of a theory that focuses specifically on *partisan* regimes. Finally, the partisan-regime framework has evolved haphazardly. As a result, some of the early theoretical formulations, in which key assumptions were left implicit, collide with subsequent theoretical contributions.

Responding to the vulnerabilities of the partisan-regime framework, I clarify its explanatory power by offering a descriptive theory of American partisan regimes. The theory addresses the challenges to a partisan-regime approach that arise from its association with realignment theory, accounts for important anomalies across regimes, and mediates the differences among regime scholars. In addition, the descriptive theory clarifies what dominant partisan coalitions do that differentiates them from other forces that scholars have identified as significant in shaping political outcomes and public discourse. Finally, the theory situates the recurrent pattern of partisan regimes vis-à-vis other historical logics of constitutional continuity and modernization. I construct a theory of partisan regimes by formulating an ideal type that can serve as a basis for empirical investigation and comparison. Because this is primarily a heuristic exercise, historical examples will serve to illustrate claims rather than to provide conclusive proofs.

The descriptive theory of partisan regimes has two components. First, I approach a partisan regime as an outcome or dependent variable. To clarify how regime formation differs from the phenomenon of electoral realignment, I lay out the processes by which a regime is *constructed*. I use that term deliberately to

Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Andrew J. Polsky, "When Business Speaks: Political Entrepreneurship, Discourse, and Mobilization in American Partisan Regimes," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 12 (2000): 451–72; Howard Gillman, "How Political Parties Can Use the Courts to Advance Their Agendas: Federal Courts in the United States, 1875–1891," *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002): 511–24.

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highlight the role of political agency in regime formation, for it rests upon creative and entrepreneurial political leadership.⁵ Partisan regimes emerge amid crises that erode the foundation of the old political order. At these fluid moments, party leaders, seeking to broaden support for their party's program, tell stories about the problems confronting the nation. The narratives unite the diverse elements of the emerging regime party and define a clear agenda for governing. Leadership thus solves key collective-action problems.

Second, after the partisan coalition secures control of national policymaking institutions, the regime becomes a causal force or independent variable.⁶ The triumphant party pursues policy, institutional, and political innovations designed to achieve its goals. Every partisan regime will aggregate sufficient power to accomplish its primary tasks, but regime ambition and capacity vary. Several factors interact to determine how much a regime can accomplish: the sweep and boldness of the regime's core narrative, the breadth of its main policy goals, the margin of its control over policymaking institutions, and the degree to which the crisis that led to the advent of the new dominant coalition delegitimizes the previous order and its supporters. The period of innovation and upheaval is short-lived. After the initial political earthquake, the regime remains significant primarily as a vehicle for preserving policy gains and for sustaining ideological orthodoxy. Once the early heyday of a regime passes, other political forces find ample space to express themselves.

Carefully framed, the partisan regime ideal type can offer scholars a valuable tool for understanding a key dynamic in American political development. The model lets us unpack a recurring political process, so we can assess the relative importance of various factors that lead to regime formation and that shape a regime's impact. Further, it becomes clear that partisan regimes should be grouped not with electoral realignments, but with other episodes of epic political change, the Progressive Era of the early 1900s and the Great Society period of the 1960s–1970s. The notion of a partisan regime also raises questions about the interaction between this specific recurrent pattern and the constitutional and modernization logics that students of American political development often

5. For a broader discussion of political entrepreneurship, see Adam D. Sheingate, "Political Entrepreneurship, Institutional Change, and American Political Development," *Studies in American Political Development* 17 (2003): 185–203. Bruce Miroff argues for separating the concept of entrepreneurship from that of leadership, yet recognizes that elements of both may be present in many political situations. See Bruce Miroff, "Leadership and American Political Development," in *Formative Acts: American Politics in the Making*, ed. Stephen Skowronek and Matthew Glassman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). The ideal type in this article presumes that both are at work. I believe the term entrepreneurial leadership best captures the different dimensions that Miroff separates.

6. Paul Pierson offers a more general argument about the utility of treating outcomes as causes when explaining historical processes. See Paul Pierson, "When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change," *World Politics* 45 (1993): 595–628.

emphasize. Finally, partisan-regime theory complicates our historical vision. It illuminates a broad force that has defined historical periods by shaping what politics means, even as the theory makes plain that much of the time political outcomes reflect the “little story” of random events, short-term influences, and routine politics.

A Problematic Framework

The notion of a partisan regime dates back some two decades to an essay by Stephen Skowronek that connects variations in presidential power to the rise and fall of partisan governing coalitions.⁷ In his subsequent book on the presidency, he delineates a relationship among the recurrent regime pattern (political time), the ongoing constitutional order, and secular trends in American politics.⁸ Building upon his work, other scholars have explored the relationship between the presidency and partisan coalitions,⁹ and have extended the regime approach to other phenomena and topics, notably the judiciary,¹⁰ intra-regime factions,¹¹ shifts in foreign policy,¹² and the role that policy seekers, such as business interests, play within a regime formation.¹³ A central concern of regime scholars has been to understand where partisan regimes fit in American politics at any given moment. Many contributors to the literature recognize that partisan regimes coexist with other political orderings (that is, other kinds of regimes), making the

7. Skowronek, “Notes on the Presidency in the Political Order.”

8. Skowronek, *Politics Presidents Make*.

9. Robert C. Lieberman, “Political Time and Policy Coalitions: Structure and Agency in Presidential Power,” in *Presidential Power: Forging the Presidency for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Robert Y. Shapiro, Martha Joynt Kumar, and Lawrence R. Jacobs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Daniel M. Cook and Andrew J. Polsky, “Political Time Reconsidered: Unbuilding and Rebuilding the State under the Reagan Administration,” *American Politics Research* 33 (2005): 577–605; Steven E. Schier, “Introduction,” in *Ambition and Division: Legacies of the George W. Bush Presidency*, ed. Steven E. Schier (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Curt Nichols and Adam S. Myers, “New Insights about Critical Junctures: Lessons from the Study of Governing Majority Formation in the United States,” paper presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, Canada; Curt Nichols and Adam S. Myers, “Exploiting the Opportunity for Reconstructive Leadership: Presidential Responses to Enervated Political Regimes,” *American Politics Research* 38 (2010): 806–41.

10. Mark A. Graber, “The Nonmajoritarian Difficulty: Legislative Deference to the Judiciary,” *Studies in American Political Development* 7 (1993): 35–73; Gillman, “How Political Parties Can Use the Courts to Advance Their Agendas”; Keith E. Whittington, “Presidential Challenges to Judicial Supremacy and the Politics of Constitutional Meaning,” *Polity* 31 (2001): 365–95.

11. Andrew J. Polsky, “‘Mr. Lincoln’s Army’ Revisited: Partisanship, Institutional Position, and Union Army Command, 1861–1865,” *Studies in American Political Development* 16 (2002): 176–207.

12. Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

13. James Shoch, “Party Politics and International Economic Activism: The Reagan-Bush Years,” *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (1998): 113–31; Polsky, “When Business Speaks.”

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relationship between the former and the latter a potential source of ongoing political friction.¹⁴

As regime scholarship evolved, differences of opinion emerged over core concepts and claims. For example, Skowronek sees regimes as recurring formations across American history, while David Plotke compares the New Deal order to other governing systems in advanced industrial democracies.¹⁵ This raises the possibility that in the context of American politics, the New Deal coalition is best understood as a unique governing formation. By extension, other dominant partisan coalitions likewise should be treated as non-recurring phenomena, revealing only for what they may tell us about a single period. Thus Richard Bensel has crafted rich accounts of how the Republican Party pursued its agenda during the Civil War and then preserved its major policies after Reconstruction.¹⁶ Moreover, where Skowronek finds that successive regimes have grown weaker over time, others counter that the instruments by which regimes govern have changed to capitalize on shifts in the relative power of institutions.¹⁷ If partisan regimes do not reflect what Skowronek calls the “waning of political time,” however, then the regime approach lacks a theoretical explanation for the apparent variations in the power of partisan regimes across the span of American history.

Beyond the disagreements among regime scholars themselves, problems arise indirectly from the ancestry of the regime framework. The concept of partisan regimes emerged from earlier literature on critical elections and electoral realignments, and some proponents of a regime approach insist on retaining the linkage.¹⁸ But the “realignment synthesis” itself has been challenged,¹⁹ and several criticisms seem pertinent to regime theory. First and most obvious, realignment theory offers no explanation for recent patterns in American mass electoral behavior, such as voter dealignment, which dates back at least to the late 1960s.²⁰ If partisan regimes can arise only from electoral realignments, then no regime would seem possible in modern American politics. Second, by connecting episodes of electoral instability to far-reaching changes in govern-

14. Orren and Skowronek, “Regimes and Regime Building in American Government.”

15. Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*.

16. See, respectively, Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Richard Franklin Bensel, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877–1900* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

17. Cook and Polsky, “Political Time Reconsidered.”

18. Nichols and Myers, “Exploiting the Opportunity for Reconstructive Leadership.”

19. See especially David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

20. John J. Coleman, *Party Decline in America: Policy, Politics, and the Fiscal State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

ance, the realignment perspective begs the question of why changing social conditions and widening political discontent result in specific policy responses. Voters lack the incentives or means to shape new party programs,²¹ so they cannot be the driving force behind a new party agenda. Partisan-regime theory needs to identify actors other than the mass electorate to account for the policy directions of governing coalitions. Third, as critics of realignment have observed, major policy transitions may not correspond to realignment episodes, although such episodes do not necessarily generate broad change. The 1896 realignment stands out for the lack of major policy innovation that followed the dramatic Republican electoral gains.²² If partisan regimes emerge according to the realignment timetable, then it would appear that they are not necessarily powerful engines of policy and political change, and that other factors may trigger policy innovation on the same, or perhaps a greater, scale.

The Partisan Regime as an Ideal Type

Perhaps it is wise to think about partisan regimes in a new way, given the difficulties mentioned above. A *partisan regime* may be understood as a political coalition organized under a common party label that challenges core tenets of the established political order, secures effective national governing power, defines broadly the terms of political debate, and maintains sufficient power to thwart opposition efforts to undo its principal policy, institutional, and ideological achievements.²³ Partisan regimes draw together not just politicians but clusters of policy seekers and segments of the electorate, all of whom contribute political resources essential to partisan success. A partisan regime, then, does not correspond directly to V.O. Key's familiar tripartite model of a political party.²⁴ Although both party and regime incorporate office holders and the party organization, the regime also encompasses policy seekers such as organized interests (including elements of the state), social movements, and policy intellectuals who ally themselves with the party coalition. Further, following John H. Aldrich²⁵ and in contrast to Key, I do not treat the mass electorate as part of the regime, except for those groups of voters who are mobilized by policy seekers and citizen activists whose participation extends beyond voting in general elections.

21. Aldrich, *Why Parties?*

22. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments*; David R. Mayhew, "Wars and American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 473–93.

23. This definition makes it highly unlikely but not impossible that a party that has enjoyed majority status could serve as the platform for a new regime. For that to happen, the party would have to be captured by an insurgent faction at odds with some of the party's longstanding commitments.

24. V.O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, 5th ed. (New York: Crowell, 1964). See also Paul Allen Beck and Frank J. Sorauf, *Party Politics in America*, 7th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

25. Aldrich, *Why Parties?*

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To establish a partisan regime in the United States, political actors must overcome formidable challenges. The American constitutional system was designed to forestall the very accumulation of power resources that a partisan coalition finds useful in the pursuit of its agenda and the preservation of its control. Parties themselves, of course, figure nowhere in the constitutional scheme, in contrast to parliamentary systems. Under the American structure, the exercise of power by a party at the national level requires control over the two leading policy-making institutions, Congress and the presidency. Once this is achieved, the partisan coalition can extend its reach to the bureaucracy and, in time, to the federal courts. Because of the different selection mechanisms used to fill national offices, however, nothing assures unified party control of both chambers of Congress and the presidency. As a further complication, constitutional electoral arrangements—the system of geographically apportioned congressional seats—make it necessary that coalitions reach across sections to attain majority status. The diversity of a continental republic, as Madison famously observes in *Federalist* 10, means that common ground will be elusive and limited. It follows that the fewer issues placed on the table, the more likely a governing coalition can be forged and maintained. Core institutional arrangements in the American system thus give American partisan regimes certain distinctive characteristics: they must secure cross-institutional control, they must incorporate members from different sections or regions,²⁶ and they must restrict their policy scope.

A dominant partisan coalition that can induce broad cross-sectional support for a bold program of policy change, that can simultaneously control Congress and the presidency, and that can define the terms of political discourse (so that debate is conducted on the coalition's terms) would be enormously powerful. With such institutional, political, and ideological resources, a regime would be irresistible. But such a claim is tautological—give a partisan formation disproportionate power resources and it will exercise disproportionate power—and not particularly interesting or useful.

Rather, we should treat the notion of a perfect partisan regime as an “ideal type” in the Weberian sense. It can serve as a standard against which to compare actual partisan regimes, all of which fall short of completeness. In reality, partisan regimes differ in their success. Some have initiated profound changes that altered many (but never all) aspects of national political life, whereas others recorded modest gains. By examining how partisan coalitions have fallen short of the ideal, we can identify those properties that are most significant—or, to put it another

26. The one historical exception occurred during the Civil War, when secession let the Republicans govern with a narrow sectional base. This contributed significantly to the vigor with which the party legislated its program of national economic development.

way, we can clarify the features of a regime that do particular kinds of work for the regime as a whole.

The Regime as Outcome: Ambition, Crisis, Narratives, and Chance

Efforts to overturn an established order and to challenge conventional thought about state–society relations require boldness not common in politics. Such assaults entail risks, because advocates of radical change may misread the depth of public disenchantment. Consider William Jennings Bryan in 1896, who, in the midst of a severe economic depression, advocated a radical redirection of American industrial development. He was soundly trounced by the conservative William McKinley. Potential agents of change also may face rivals, as the vulnerability of an aging partisan order often invites multiple political challengers. The willingness to accept the risks and brave the competition for the sake of decisive political gain suggests that regime builders have an entrepreneurial character. It also suggests parallels to moral crusades, in which the crusader's passionate commitment to a cause may alter or even overwhelm short-run calculations of cost and benefit.²⁷

Of the potential actors who might take on the old order, the most likely are politicians. Policy seekers (including conventional interest groups, citizen activists, and social movements) have little incentive to do so. Their policy concerns are too limited to justify the enormous investment needed to secure national governing authority. Even leading economic sectors will receive a limited share of the gain from the triumph of their preferred party.²⁸ By contrast, at least some office-holding and office-seeking politicians are likely to regard the transaction costs of regime building as a necessary means to fulfill their ambition. Ambition here may reflect various motives—a desire to win a higher national office, to gain greater influence within an institution, or to realize a bold policy agenda about which a leader cares deeply.²⁹ It is reasonable to assume that at every regime founding a mix of these purposes will be at work, often evident in

27. Sheingate defines entrepreneurs as “individuals whose creative acts have transformative effects on politics, policies, or institutions.” Sheingate, “Political Entrepreneurship, Institutional Change, and American Political Development.” On the crusading character of political leadership, see James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

28. Scholars who have examined the relationship between business and party coalitions disagree over whether business plays the leading role. Compare Thomas Ferguson, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Polsky, “When Business Speaks.”

29. Ambition here assumes a broader meaning than that found in some of the leading party literature, such as Joseph A. Schlesinger, *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966), and is closer to the meaning suggested by Aldrich, *Why Parties?* 54–55.

the same politician. Ronald Reagan, for example, both sought the ultimate political prize, the presidency, and spoke as a passionate ideologue in defense of his particular free-market vision of America.³⁰ Whatever the motives, the decisive point is that some ambitious politicians must conclude that they cannot achieve their goals unless they can construct a new governing coalition. That realization induces them to incur the heavy costs and significant hazards that a frontal challenge to the *status quo* involves.

Although most politicians will shun the risks associated with the creation of a new partisan regime, there are enough exceptions to make it likely that some will pursue this objective. Office holders allied with an established regime party could jeopardize the standing, power, and rewards that their position has yielded them. Their ideological affinity with the dominant party, even if equivocal, may make a direct attack on its record and ideas appear hypocritical. A new partisan order, in short, cannot be created from within what remains of the existing one. Those entrepreneurial politicians who are aligned with the regime party yet desire far-reaching reform agenda must choose one of two paths: either they must declare they are renewing or completing their party's mission, which keeps them within the party circle, or they must frame their policy goals as a project that transcends parties. The former course was chosen by liberal Democrats in the 1960s, the latter by Republicans in the Progressive Era.

Regime-creating entrepreneurship emerges within an opposition party. Ambitious opposition leaders, largely thwarted in their desire to reshape policy because the current regime's defense mechanisms are too strong, have more reason to cast about for strategies that can alter an unfavorable balance of forces. Opposition party dogma also allows more discursive space for fundamental critiques of "business-as-usual" politics and conventional policy prescriptions.

The intellectual and political groundwork for a new partisan order is laid while the old regime is still resilient, still capable of defending its policy and institutional legacy. Various political actors—journalists, policy intellectuals and ideologues, policy seekers, and some politicians—participate in this process by pushing policy agendas and prescriptions that fall outside the mainstream discourse articulated by the current regime. Initially the ideas may appear extreme, but their reiteration over an extended period helps to legitimize them. Abolitionism, for instance, began as a fringe movement but in time gained a measure of respectability. Likewise, Reagan's defense of free-market doctrine and his attack on "big government," which were marginal nostrums in the mid 1960s, became respectable by the late 1970s. The adoption of new ideas by highly regarded and widely known political leaders marks a key step in the emergence

30. Robert Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

of a new regime. Such leaders, however, will rarely be intellectual innovators in their own right.

A crisis generates interest among opposition party elites and grassroots movements in replacing an established political order.³¹ “Crisis” is a loose concept. Contrast, for example, the Great Depression, which paved the way for the New Deal, with the far milder economic stagflation of the 1970s that helped open the door for the Reagan Republicans. Although the magnitude of crises varies, all share a common feature: they give rise to the perception (often stoked by interested political actors) that the old order cannot cope with new challenges, that its policy responses have been exhausted. Crises also provoke widespread uncertainty. Old policies that once sufficed now appear ineffective, and some policy seekers begin to doubt that standard solutions still serve their interests. Other political actors, as the old order stumbles, may question where their true interests lie. An upsurge in popular protests and social movements may signal to ambitious partisan leaders that there is an opportunity to transcend established politics.³²

The extent to which a crisis actually unhinges established beliefs and damages the incumbent regime party will vary. Even in troubled times, most policy seekers and ordinary citizens do not shed their core beliefs and commitments. Still, by fostering uncertainty, which in turn encourages greater openness to new interpretations and new solutions, a crisis alters the opportunity structure for system-transforming entrepreneurship.³³

The point in an election cycle when a crisis is perceived also influences whether politicians seriously consider regime-creating possibilities. Blame for failure must fall on or be attached to the party in power, and that process takes time. Events in 2008 suggest that when a crisis emerges on the brink of an election, political challengers cannot fully exploit popular dismay with worsening conditions. The collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market and its spillover

31. On this point, I disagree with Nichols and Myers, who contend instead that the political system becomes vulnerable when an established order can no longer overcome the inherent mechanisms in the constitutional system that inhibit change, resulting in a condition they call entropy. As I argue below, even when partisan coalitions weaken, other political forces can continue to generate policy changes, if usually on a more modest scale. Nichols and Myers, “Exploiting the Opportunity for Reconstructive Leadership.”

32. Social movements may play a significant role in regime formation by providing cues about popular disaffection to partisan leaders, but it does not follow that the partisan-regime framework represents a bottom-up account of political change. Grassroots protests are neither necessary nor sufficient to propel regime formation. Entrepreneurial politicians provide the essential connection between crises, popular disillusion with the old order, and the development of a political vehicle capable of displacing it.

33. On the relationship between uncertainty and interests, see especially Robert C. Lieberman, “Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order: Explaining Political Change,” *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002): 697–712, at 703–04; Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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effects began to roil the financial sector only in early 2008, and the clearest signs of a banking collapse became visible in September, less than 2 months before the presidential election. With so little time to make the crisis a Republican responsibility, Barack Obama and the Democrats had little chance to convert the financial collapse into an opening through which to establish a new regime.³⁴

To capitalize upon the opportunity that a crisis presents, prospective regime creators engage in a discursive project. Gaining control of political institutions requires that partisan entrepreneurs bring together disparate policy seekers and voting blocs in different regions;³⁵ using that control depends upon uniting the emergent coalition around a set of goals. Both tasks are greatly facilitated by a compelling narrative. The regime creators must craft a story about American conditions that makes coherent what has become, by the discourse of the old order, unintelligible. Prospective regime builders test various narratives, each of which proposes a new analysis of the problems facing the nation and points toward policy solutions. The most potent stories draw on familiar symbols,³⁶ invoke an idealized version of the past, promise a brighter tomorrow, and identify villains responsible for the country's current predicament. References to a lost time of innocence, virtue, or prosperity let politician-storytellers connect themselves to a legacy of success that they promise to restore.³⁷ And naming culprits, who are usually associated with the old partisan order, lets audiences pinpoint those responsible where more abstract explanations fail.

On the micropolitical level, partisan narratives affect their audiences in multiple ways. At the very least, the stories lower information costs in a climate of widespread uncertainty. They may also have a more constitutive impact and become instruments by which entrepreneurial political leaders redefine the interests of some policy seekers and voters.³⁸

I refer to "narratives" in the plural because in the same crisis period competing entrepreneurial politicians will advance different stories. The decade before the Civil War is a case in point. After the Whigs' election debacle in 1852, a number of

34. I do not mean to imply that the crisis was a Republican responsibility, because Democrats in the 1990s helped weaken regulatory controls over the financial sector. The process of affixing blame, however, involves a partisan propaganda campaign that makes selective use of facts to achieve a political result.

35. Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest*, 7, 20.

36. Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

37. Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 12–13.

38. On the constitutive effects of politics, see especially Gerald Berk, *Alternative Tracks: The Constitution of American Industrial Order, 1865–1917* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). On the role of ideas in shaping the content of politics, see Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order." Plotke specifically connects political discourses to the "practical meaning of self-interest." Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, 5.

opposition parties vied to become the principal challenger to the Democrats. Each presented its own particular account of the core political questions facing the polity. Some of the fledgling parties stressed ethno-cultural issues, including temperance and immigration; others focused on halting the expansion of slavery.³⁹ Even within the party that ultimately emerged as the primary opposition, the Republicans, leaders offered different stories. Salmon Chase recounted what he portrayed as the Framers' vision of a Constitution hostile to slavery, one that had been subverted by a Slave Power conspiracy. His story implied that the full authority of the federal government should be directed against slavery where it currently stood. William Seward insisted the Southern plantation aristocracy endangered the future of free labor in all regions and so threatened an "irrepressible conflict." Abraham Lincoln also looked back to the Founding: he claimed the authors of the Declaration of Independence hoped to see slavery become extinct over time. For him, the next step was to block the expansion of slavery so it might wither in place.⁴⁰

Although the narrative exercise calls for vision and creativity,⁴¹ politicians face several important constraints on the stories that they can craft. First and foremost, their story must be anchored in their party base, which they need to preserve as the foundation upon which to build a larger coalition. Moreover, the party has embraced a set of commitments and thus risks being portrayed as feckless if it attempts to abruptly shed old constituencies, even where these may appear to be a liability. It is not surprising, then, that party programs display continuity across different regimes,⁴² and that partisan narrators weave together standing partisan commitments and new appeals to potential supporters. There is an additional fundamental property of all partisan discourses: they exclude ideas closely associated with the opposition. So, a party's leaders may draw on only a limited repertoire of legitimate intellectual possibilities. Lastly, while American political culture affords enterprising partisan leaders considerable ideological leeway in framing their stories, it still channels these within the generous parameters of liberalism.⁴³

39. William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

40. Eric FONER, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

41. Rosenblum stresses the creative dimension of partisan politics. Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

42. John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

43. The literature on American political culture is vast. Of particular interest here is the notion of political culture as a boundary condition. J. David Greenstone, "Political Culture and American Political Development: Liberty, Union, and the Liberal Bipolarity," *Studies in American Political Development* 1 (1986): 1–49.

This depiction of would-be regime founders as clever political agents, however, overstates the degree to which their success rests in their own hands. Unpredictable events determine which actors and which story will prevail.⁴⁴ Still, these events connect powerfully to the politicians' narrative projects. As entrepreneurial politicians advance their competing accounts of what ails the nation, audiences face a number of plausible stories, none of which is self-evidently truer or more compelling than the others. A narrative, however, gains credibility and impact when events seem to reinforce that story's interpretation of the political world. These allow a leader, faction, or party (where there is more than one contending opposition party) to proclaim, in effect, "So you see, it's just as we said!" Simply put, events empower stories.

One historical example illustrates the influence of events. During the early and mid-1850s the Republican Party struggled to establish itself as the primary opposition to the dominant Jacksonian Democratic coalition. William Gienapp recounts that, before early 1856, the Republicans had made limited headway in part because they could not keep the question of the expansion of slavery consistently before the Northern public. Then, with a key presidential election approaching that year, public attention was captured by the caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Preston "Bully" Brooks on the floor of the United States Senate and by the sacking of Lawrence, Kansas, by pro-slavery settlers. The party and its newspapers exploited the twin episodes—"Bleeding Sumner" and "Bleeding Kansas"—and cited them as evidence of an aggressive Slave Power that was preying upon the nation. This helped the Republicans eclipse the Know-Nothings and Whigs and become the leading opposition party.⁴⁵

If many events lie beyond the control of entrepreneurial regime builders, they can improve the odds of success through political action, conventional or otherwise. Republicans in 1856 faced a strong challenge from the American (Know Nothing) Party. The two parties, with significant membership overlap, had been busy subverting each other over the previous two years. When the American Party convention met that spring, Republican operatives in attendance worked behind the scenes to introduce anti-slavery platforms designed to split the Know Nothings on sectional lines. The Republican manipulation proved successful, and the divided American Party ran a distant third in the fall elections and found itself on the path to oblivion.⁴⁶ Politics may also contribute to the triumph of particular

44. Lieberman expresses a similar point: "An idea's time arrives not simply because the idea is compelling on its own terms, but because opportune political circumstances favor it." Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order," 709. The pivotal role of events in American politics is emphasized by David R. Mayhew, "Events as Causes: The Case of American Politics," in *Political Contingency: Studying the Unexpected, the Accidental, and the Unforeseen*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Sonu Bedi (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

45. Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, chap. 9.

46. *Ibid.*

leaders within a party, which in turn gives them a chance to make their narrative the party's message. For example, Ronald Reagan used superior grassroots organization to beat George H. W. Bush, who enjoyed the backing of the moderate Republican establishment, in the 1980 presidential primaries. Finally, entrepreneurial leaders from a long-term opposition party may enjoy important advantages: its chronic electoral weaknesses provide the party with incentives to invest more heavily in organization and take advantage of new technology.⁴⁷

Identification of the factors that contribute to the emergence of a new party regime makes it possible to distinguish this process from that suggested by electoral-realignment theory. According to that approach, mass electoral discontent yields the dramatic shift in party electoral fortunes that in turn gives the successful party a huge edge in control over policymaking institutions. By contrast, the partisan-regimes approach emphasizes entrepreneurial leadership, crises, and narratives. Entrepreneurial leaders solve key collective-action problems; crises perform the important task of undermining the legitimacy of the old order; and narratives yield a shared understanding of the crisis that unites all elements of the emerging regime party, including newly mobilizing social groups. The triumph of a particular narrative reflects the confluence of creative leadership, chance, and politics. Unlike the bottom-up orientation of electoral-realignment theory, partisan-regime theory stresses the role of political elites. But it is not strictly a top-down model, either: regime-building leaders borrow ideas from many quarters and respond to signals from policy seekers and mobilized citizens.⁴⁸ The partisan-regime ideal type does not presume a broad change in electoral behavior, even though this would facilitate institutional control.

Reviewing the key factors that contribute to the formation of a partisan regime, we can appreciate why no effective regime emerged during the mid-1890s. Both parties featured entrepreneurial leadership, but it took different forms. In the case of the Democrats, leaders such as Bryan reached out to new constituencies and pursued an alliance with agrarian populists. Top Republican politicians focused instead on new methods for raising large sums of money and on increasing candidate visibility (such as encouraging large numbers of citizens to visit McKinley's front porch). Although there was a severe economic crisis, it occurred in 1893 when the regime party was out of power. As a result, opposition politicians could not affix blame to the established order. Most importantly,

47. Daniel C. Galvin, "Parties as Political Institutions in American Political Development: Organizational Asymmetry in the Democratic and Republican Parties," paper presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, Canada.

48. Some realignment scholars have suggested that leaders play a significant role in giving direction to mass discontent and translating it into an active policy program. See Paul Allen Beck, "The Electoral Cycle and Patterns of American Politics," *British Journal of Political Science* 9 (1979): 129–56; Clubb, Flanagan, and Zingale, *Partisan Realignment*, 14. However, the emphasis in the realignment corpus remains electoral behavior.

narrative innovation occurred on the losing side in 1896. Yes, the Democrats marched boldly in a new direction—indeed, John Gerring identifies a rare shift in core party ideology in this period⁴⁹—but the move led them to a crushing defeat at the polls. As the regime party, the victorious Republicans were not able to disavow longstanding government commitments. McKinley and his fellow partisans stood for preservation of the Republican political economy that dated back to the Civil War, and they only modestly updated their political-economic ideas to meet the challenges of the emerging industrial and corporate economy. Electoral victory, even one of dramatic proportions that broke the 20-year deadlock of national politics, bestowed on the winners the authority to stand still.

Of note, each factor that contributes to the emergence of a new partisan regime may appear in other movements for political change. Scholars long have recognized entrepreneurship as a frequent generator of policy initiative.⁵⁰ Crises and effective story-telling are also familiar elements in accounts of policy upheaval. The Progressive period of the early 1900s, for example, exhibited several characteristics and conditions that typically are involved in the creation of a partisan regime. After reclaiming power in 1896, the Republicans failed to address the widening disarray of the urban-industrial order, which encouraged the perception of a mounting social crisis. Enter the Progressives: reformers, journalists, and politicians who framed new stories about the inability of old institutions to deal with alarming challenges, ranging from urban poverty to corporate monopolies. Because the reformers' new agenda would split either party and because the Progressive movement drew politicians from both, the Progressives opted to piece together support across party lines and to make use of the emerging universe of interest groups (in my terms, extra-partisan policy seekers) that were prepared to act outside party structures.⁵¹

What distinguishes an emerging partisan regime from other coalitions for broad policy innovation is the former's partisan character. Ambitious politicians recognize that parties offer important advantages in the quest for power, even though parties also constrain flexibility. They command important resources (personnel, money, widely-established organization, and more) that would otherwise have to be amassed from scratch. Unless an established party greatly inhibits prospects for remaking the political system—the byproduct of the party's outdated ideas and sclerotic interests—partisan entrepreneurship represents the most efficient path both to power and to the policy innovations that power makes possible. Certainly, political actors can ignore parties as they collect the resources

49. Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America*, chap. 6.

50. Sheingate, "Political Entrepreneurship, Institutional Change, and American Political Development."

51. Daniel Tichenor and Richard Harris, "Organized Interests and American Political Development," *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (2002–2003): 587–612, at 595ff.

needed to displace an ineffective governing order. But that task is considerably more difficult and, accordingly, attempted even less often.

The Regime as Causal Force: Policy Change, Institution Building, and Narrative Hegemony

When a partisan coalition seeking far-reaching political and policy change obtains effective governing power, shock waves reverberate throughout the political system. Leaders of the new regime seek to refashion core political understandings and key state-society linkages. The leaders initiate policy, build institutions, and alter public discourse. The new partisan coalition thus generates political effects that exceed those resulting from other disruptive forces, such as wars. Like war, the advent of a partisan governing coalition shocks the broader political order; but the regime also embodies purpose and direction that events alone lack.⁵²

The transfer of power to a nascent partisan order is accompanied by an acute sense of excitement among political actors and audiences alike. This stems in part from the atmosphere of crisis under which the new coalition assumes power. The leaders of the coalition reinforce the sense of crisis through their alarmist accounts. Because all crises are not alike, the political tremors preceding the advent of a new partisan governing coalition vary in magnitude and type. Consider the differences between the secession crisis of 1860–1861 and the set of issues that the Reagan administration faced in 1981 (primarily a sluggish economy afflicted with both high inflation and high unemployment). Sensitivity to the uniqueness of each regime transition, however, should not blind us to an important parallel. In every instance of partisan-regime change, the ousted party is temporarily prostrate, a result of its actual policy failures and its political repudiation. Moreover, politicians, policy seekers, and mass publics all anticipate dramatic shifts because they have found the old order fundamentally wanting.

Other factors make major policy departures likely. Whenever an electoral upheaval is associated with a regime transition, the large voting margins in favor of the new regime party may translate into substantial congressional majorities to accompany its control of the White House. The Democrats enjoyed such an advantage at the start of the New Deal in 1933, and they used it immediately to push through a wave of legislation during Roosevelt's famous first 100 days. But an enormous congressional majority is not always necessary for far-reaching policy innovation. In 1981, the Reaganite Republican regime formally controlled

52. Mayhew argues for the agenda-transforming impact of wars, but they do not create narratives that point to a clear program of action. David R. Mayhew, "Wars and American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 473–93.

only the presidency and the Senate. This initially seemed insufficient to secure passage of major policy legislation. Demoralization among the Democrats, however, contributed to major Republican legislative successes (such as substantial tax cuts, reductions in domestic discretionary spending, and increased military appropriations) during the first months of the new administration.⁵³

More important than the margin of electoral victory or the size of the congressional majority is the unity of purpose within an incoming regime. That unity has both discursive and political roots. When a rising governing coalition triumphs under a clear narrative, regime office holders will assume that their mass and elite constituents endorse the goals in the narrative as first-order priorities. The Civil War Republicans, the New Deal Democrats, and the Reagan Republicans all surged into office behind a powerful political story that gave each regime a clear direction. Further, factions within the new regime agree that something must be done about the core questions around which the nascent regime mounted its challenge to the old order, even if they do not necessarily agree on what to do. That basic consensus helps regime leaders (the president and congressional party leaders) find common ground on the key issues the party confronts upon assuming power. New regimes thus act, and they act quickly.⁵⁴

Regime transitions cause radical dislocations—changes that Skowronek aptly terms “order shattering”⁵⁵—yet regimes also preserve. Regimes always accomplish the principal tasks their narratives have defined. In their first years in power, partisan regimes enjoy remarkable success with first-order policy initiatives, although this does not necessarily solve the crisis that precipitated the new regime. The obvious historical example is the New Deal Democratic order, which did not overcome the Great Depression. At the same time, some aspects of the

53. Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

54. In their interesting recent reformulation of the reconstructive presidency/regime framework, Nichols and Myers argue that presidents may struggle to establish a new regime, such that the process extends over several administrations. For them, the period from Cleveland through McKinley to Theodore Roosevelt represents such an episode. See Nichols and Myers, “Exploiting the Opportunity for Reconstructive Leadership.” I am not persuaded by their analysis of the 1890s and 1900s. As Richard Benseal has shown, Cleveland presided over a badly divided Democratic party in which the area of commonality—reduced tariffs—was too narrow to establish a new order. Once the Democrats repudiated Cleveland’s hard money stance with the Bryan nomination in 1896, the party could no longer command an electoral majority. See Benseal, *Political Economy of American Industrialization*. Further, as I explain below, I do not agree that the Roosevelt Progressive agenda represents a continuation of McKinley’s policies. It makes more sense to see Roosevelt’s response to industrialization and economic concentration as a departure from Republican dogma, evidenced by the fact that he drew significant support from Progressives in both major parties and eventually saw fit to run a third-party campaign for the presidency in 1912 against the orthodox Republican, William Howard Taft, and Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

55. Skowronek, *Politics Presidents Make*.

American political system continue undisturbed.⁵⁶ “Order-shattering” implies selected confrontations with institutions and interests associated with the vanquished partisan enemy.

Emergent partisan regimes leverage crisis-magnified discontent to delegitimize important bastions of the old regime. History offers a number of dramatic illustrations: the Jacksonians took on the Second Bank of the United States, bulwark of the Eastern commercial and industrial elite; the Civil War Republicans brought down chattel slavery, the cornerstone of the Democratic South; the Reagan Administration redirected federal agencies toward conservative purposes, a project that involved personnel displacement, revamped procedures, reduced funding, and more.⁵⁷

Because an incoming regime picks its targets, institutional dismantling is partial. Several factors combine to contain the urge to disrupt and overturn. For one thing, the limited agreement that binds regime participants does not extend to all institutions. Regime leaders also may hope to induce key actors to support the emergent order, as Roosevelt sought to do with American business in the first phase of the New Deal. In addition, some institutions were never implicated in the leaders’ narratives, depriving leaders of grounds for claiming a mandate to dismantle them. Thus Ronald Reagan found much to condemn when he indicted the federal government of excessive interference with the economy, but he had never denounced Social Security and other middle-class entitlements and therefore scarcely touched these legacies of the New Deal and Great Society.

Besides attacking some existing institutions, a new partisan regime also attempts to found new ones. Policies matter to the architects of the regime and their backers, but policy initiatives alone do not satiate their desire for change. Members of an emergent order hope to “lock in” their policy preferences, and this goal is best accomplished through institution-building. Institutions help to consolidate the state-society linkages that dominant partisan coalitions intend to privilege. A couple of familiar examples illustrate this point. Jackson and his political allies, after dismantling the old Second Bank, set out to create an alternative decentralized banking system that would ease the availability of credit in regions vital to the rising Democratic Party. And the New Deal Democrats were champion institution builders: the famous “alphabet-soup agencies” represented a series of institutional experiments, some of which became permanent features of American politics; the National Labor Relations Act created a long-term framework for normalizing and pacifying the contentious realm

56. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “Beyond the Iconography of Order: Notes for a ‘New Institutionalism,’” in *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches and Interpretations*, ed. Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).; Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

57. Cook and Polsky, “Political Time Reconsidered.”

of labor-management relations and incorporated organized labor into the Democratic coalition; and the Social Security Act paved the way for a permanent national social-insurance apparatus that cloaked a quintessential Democratic program in an aura of bureaucratic impartiality.

Impressive as the initial record of partisan regimes has been, we should not overstate their programmatic coherence or minimize the degree of internal strife that characterizes founding moments. Factional differences and disagreements within the regime party will limit its scope for action and have consequences for what might be termed second-order choices, such as the selection of means for reaching major coalition objectives, the sequencing and timing of specific initiatives, and the personnel choices for implementing regime policies.⁵⁸ When second-order questions arise, the regime narrative does not bind partisan officeholders, and they may spar over the timing of particular measures or the staffing of new agencies. Even though a regime transition empowers the governing coalition collectively, space remains within it for political agency.⁵⁹ Intra-coalition divisions magnify the importance of the policymaking positions held by contending regime factions and even particular individuals. The branches of the national government, designed to operate independently of (and indeed at odds with) each other, become the instruments that leading regime actors use as they struggle to shape the course the regime will follow. A full explanation of political outcomes in a regime framework will require that an analyst move from partisan commitment and agenda-setting through intraparty factional dynamics and, ultimately, to individual choice.⁶⁰

Some regime efforts to refashion institutions and their outputs require patience. Unlike Congress and the presidency, the judiciary is designed to withstand transient political currents. Even so, a new regime over time may imprint its values on the federal courts. Consider Roosevelt's efforts to remake the Supreme Court after it had voided early New Deal measures. He failed in spectacular fashion in 1937, of course. But soon thereafter the Court accommodated itself to the Democratic order; and later judicial appointments ultimately made the courts a bastion of New Deal values. Similarly, since the advent of Reaganism more than three decades ago, the Republicans have repopulated the federal bench and thus altered the institution's values.⁶¹

Beyond policy change, partisan regimes alter national politics in several ways. First, they attract support from policy seekers who benefit from the new policies. Skowronek points out that the regime party may gain a loyal following

58. Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*; Polsky, "Mr. Lincoln's Army' Revisited."

59. On the importance of agency, see Nichols and Myers, "New Insights about Critical Junctures."

60. Polsky, "Mr. Lincoln's Army' Revisited."

61. On regime effects on the judiciary, see Graber, "The Nonmajoritarian Difficulty"; Gillman, "How Political Parties Can Use the Courts to Advance Their Agendas."

even when its policies do not work as expected.⁶² Moreover, once the crisis passes (though not necessarily because of the regime's policies), the regime is well-positioned to claim credit.

An emergent partisan regime also recasts the terms of public discourse. Its triumph shatters political conventions and leaves foes stunned and divided. Initially, the new regime dominates the flow of information to the public, and only a few countervailing messages appear.⁶³ The leaders of the regime party exploit their edge in political communications to establish not just what issues will be debated but the terms around which the issues will be framed. So pervasive is the new rhetoric that Plotke aptly refers to it as a "new common sense."⁶⁴ As the regime amasses a record of policy accomplishments, moreover, the achievements add further credibility to the story the leaders tell. Better conditions, even if they are not the results of regime policies, also help to entrench the hegemony of the regime narrative for years, perhaps decades. Stories persist not so much because they are true but because they have been associated with recovery. Events first empowered stories; success sustains them.

The ideal type outlined here assumes that partisan regions will differ in their effects on policy, politics, and discourse, but it does not assume a weakening of overall regime capacity over the course of American history. Numerous factors—including a meager narrative foundation, slender governing majorities in Congress, and agreement on only a small number of first-order priorities—can limit the impact of a new regime. These factors might appear at any historical juncture; they are neither more nor less likely today than in the past. Skowronek discerns a decline in regime capacity that he attributes to the "institutional thickening" of American political life.⁶⁵ Regime coalitions in the modern era, however, can make use of the more numerous and potent tools at the disposal of national institutions, particularly the presidency, to reach first-order goals.⁶⁶ Partisan-regime theory points not to what he terms the "waning of political time," but to its variability.

If regimes differ in what they can do, it follows that they may be either more or less potent than other forces that generate epic political change. That is, we cannot presume that partisan governing coalitions necessarily aggregate greater resources than do other coalitions for shaping policy outcomes, disrupting and creating institutions, and refashioning the terms of political debate. The political and social forces that came together in the mid-1960s to broaden civil rights and

62. Skowronek, "Notes on the Presidency in the Political Order."

63. The impact of a one-sided information flow on public opinion is discussed in John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

64. Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, 184.

65. Skowronek, *Politics Presidents Make*.

66. Cook and Polsky, "Political Time Reconsidered."

expand the modern welfare state compiled a record of policy accomplishment to rival that of any partisan regime. (In fact, the ability of political actors in the Great Society era to align all three branches of the national government behind the civil rights agenda substantially exceeded that of the Republican Civil War regime a century earlier, which accounts for the former's more pronounced success.⁶⁷) That dominant partisan coalitions during their initial exercise of power accomplish results similar in scope to what certain other ambitious political coalitions have achieved should not surprise us. Both types of coalitions have been constructed from many of the same elements and should be treated as related political phenomena.

After the Upheaval: Post-Regime Politics

The whirlwind of policy innovation typical of the first years of a new partisan governing coalition quickly subsides. Once the regime has achieved its primary policy goals, it faces serious obstacles to further wide-ranging reform. The coalition's factions may not find additional common ground on proposals for new policy challenges; policies enacted at the start of the regime may generate consequences that drive apart coalition participants,⁶⁸ and regime-party politicians may find they can better satisfy their ambitions by responding to the particularistic demands of local constituencies and to factions within the regime party rather than by advancing a broad national program. The regime narrative now inhibits audacious departures—calls for further innovation prompt condemnation from party ideologues who demand fidelity to regime doctrine. If an entrepreneurial politician seeks to modernize the dominant coalition by incorporating new policy seekers, other regime elements will either cry betrayal or resist sharing the spoils of power.⁶⁹ An established regime tends to be conservative, even complacent.

During this phase of regime evolution, party leaders often find themselves at odds with some of their more passionate supporters. Politicians who have secured commanding positions tend to become risk averse, while some of the social movements, activists, and ideologues that regime entrepreneurs harnessed to their partisan cause will continually demand a more complete realization of the cause's transformative aspirations. The radical energy that originally animated the partisan project now threatens its survival, for the regime's extreme factions want the party to pursue more than the broader public is prepared to countenance. Leaders of the partisan regime manage the tension by both

67. Richard M. Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

68. Bense, *Yankee Leviathan*.

69. Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, 64–65.

dividing and placating their radical allies. Symbolic gestures help, as when Ronald Reagan paid lip service to such right-wing panaceas as a balanced budget constitutional amendment and school prayer. Giving movement activists a role in implementing programs also helps buy peace within the regime coalition. Still, politicians can never fully contain the pressure from their supporters to push on, which is the inherent risk of stoking the crusaders' passion. Their restiveness sometimes erupts in intra-regime insurgencies.

In addition, external factors inhibit further innovation. The partisan opposition revives with surprising speed. A recurrent feature of American politics is the capacity of a party that has been routed at the polls to become competitive again. Even parties discredited by political catastrophe pick themselves up and contest for power within two or three electoral cycles. Democrats survived accusations of disloyalty during the Civil War and recaptured the House in 1874. Equally impressive, after being exiled to the political wilderness by the New Deal, Republicans effectively blocked its expansion by forming a conservative bloc with southern Democrats after 1938. As the latter example illustrates, opposition politicians identify and exploit fissures within the regime party. Just as important, the regime's triggering crisis recedes into the past, so that invoking the crisis yields diminishing returns for regime politicians. Other issues capture public attention, issues that do not necessarily map onto the discursive terrain established by the regime with its now time-worn cast of heroes and villains.

The opposition can find opportunities in this new issue space. Although most issues capture the public's attention only briefly, occasionally a new issue cleavage emerges (possibly as an unintended consequence of regime policies) that the non-regime party can exploit to its long-term advantage. Carmines and Stimson trace how battles over civil rights, which were prominent only for a few years in the mid-1960s, "permanently rearranged the American party system," by initially reshaping politics at the elite level and then over time influencing the behavior of citizen activists and the mass public. If an issue reverberates strongly enough through the body politic, it can fatally wound a dominant coalition.⁷⁰ Moreover, with the emergence of new issues that might either divide the regime party or mobilize previously inactive constituencies, entrepreneurial leaders in the opposition find material for fashioning new stories that may someday form a platform for reclaiming political hegemony. Thus begins the first step in a possible successor regime cycle. After the initial regime upheaval subsides, politics is characterized not by stasis but by ferment.⁷¹

70. Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 7

71. On the dynamic character of party-issue positions, see David Karol, *Party Position Change in American Politics: Coalition Management* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The loss of the original zeal and the diminished capacity for innovation, however, do not mean the regime cannot defend its achievements. When the opposition mounts a serious challenge at core regime commitments, the regime coalition still retains enough resources to turn back the threat. The New Deal Democrats faced such a situation after they lost control of Congress in the 1946 election and the Republicans proclaimed their intention to undo some of the policy legacy of the prior decade, especially in the area of labor relations. The Taft-Hartley Act was passed over Truman's veto. Yet, as Plotke argues, the measure became a Democratic victory at the regime level: Republicans wounded organized labor, but the core principles of the Wagner Act survived the conservative-business assault. Probably he overstates what the Democrats achieved. After all, the percentage of the labor force in unions, especially in the private sector, soon went into a long-term decline that has never been arrested. Nevertheless, the Republicans eschewed further frontal assaults on the New Deal, and when the GOP regained the White House after 1952, President Dwight Eisenhower disavowed any intention to dismantle core New Deal programs, such as Social Security.⁷²

Partisan regimes can use institutions both to preserve policy achievements and to continue satisfying various interests within the regime coalition.⁷³ Power-sharing within institutions dampens intra-regime conflict among different factions and interests. To take one well-known example, committee power within Congress can be distributed among different regime factions. This allows each to exercise control over the policy domains that matter most to it. The New Deal Democratic coalition was especially effective in using the committee system to preserve harmony among the coalition's sectional wings.⁷⁴ Since Congress or the presidency may fall into the hands of the opposition at some point, partisan regimes often look to institutions insulated from electoral shifts to sustain regime gains. During the initial policy upheaval, the emergent coalition both creates and restructures government agencies to carry out its policies and staffs them with sympathetic personnel.⁷⁵ Especially in the modern era, the federal bureaucracy can be an important bastion of regime strength, and is seen by the regime party and the opposition alike as part of the regime itself. Finally, regimes recognize that they can entrench themselves within the judicial branch and thereby weather

72. Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order*, chap. 8. Taft-Hartley also weakened organized labor over the longer term, and thus wounded a core Democratic constituency. So perhaps it is best seen as a Pyrrhic triumph.

73. Graber, "The Nonmajoritarian Difficulty."

74. Richard Franklin Bensel, *Sectionalism and American Political Development: 1880–1980* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), chap. 7.

75. Shefter, "Party, Bureaucracy, and Political Change in the United States"; Cook and Polsky, "Political Time Reconsidered."

temporary electoral setbacks. Gillman details how the Republicans, after the Civil War, did so on at least two occasions.⁷⁶

After the initial impetus behind the regime is spent and the opposition has recovered, politics assumes a form that might best be termed “post-regime.” Other labels, such as “stable regime” or “regime decay,” are misleading in that they suggest the regime is still the driving force behind many political and policy outcomes. Nor is it apt to refer to the period as an interregnum, for that implies that the regime has no enduring effect. Rather, the regime persists primarily as a limiting factor that keeps certain issues off the table. Most policy outcomes during this phase can be explained without reference to the partisan regime. Amid post-regime politics, entrepreneurial leaders and policy seekers find many openings to pursue new issues and forge short-term coalitions. Some politicians associated with the regime party depict these initiatives as the completion of the regime project,⁷⁷ and use the party and its alliances as a means to reduce the transaction costs of policymaking.⁷⁸ At the same time, though, other regime-party politicians decide that either better policy results can be achieved or their ambitions can be satisfied more readily by eschewing regime ties. Meanwhile, opposition politicians exploit opportunities to peel away regime constituencies whose interests have been left unfulfilled.

The notion of post-regime politics also conveys the loss of formal power that every regime has experienced. Opposition forces not only recover; they win elections and recapture control of one or more branches of the national government. In terms of institutional control, the regime party can scarcely be called dominant. Its continuing influence manifests itself at the level of political discourse, where the opposition still avoids direct confrontation with central regime commitments, and in certain institutions, such as the judiciary, that are buffered from short-term swings in institutional control. Thus the brief interval of unified Democratic control that began with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 could not undo the effort that began with Ronald Reagan to remake the federal judiciary along conservative lines. On another level, Clinton’s famous 1995 State of the Union Address line, “The era of big government is over,” attests to the continuing power of Reaganite Republican ideology, as well as to the Republicans’ quick recovery in the 1994 mid-term contests.

76. Gillman, “How Political Parties Can Use the Courts to Advance Their Agendas.”

77. Thus George W. Bush and the Republicans portrayed the \$1.35 trillion 10-year tax cut they adopted in 2001 and their ongoing crusade against government regulation of the economy as the culmination of the agenda first established by Ronald Reagan to unshackle private enterprise from the stifling burden of federal government overreaching.

78. Skowronek identifies at least one “affiliated” president under each regime who has sought to turn his administration into the fulfillment of all remaining regime commitments. Skowronek, *Politics Presidents Make*. It is plausible to see George W. Bush as such a president. Schier, “Introduction.”

Post-regime politics may continue indefinitely. The confluence of circumstances that gives rise to a new regime does not occur on a regular schedule. Although the succession of partisan regimes across American history can be described as a recurrent pattern,⁷⁹ it is not, strictly speaking, cyclical. A true cyclical process would contain a self-renewing mechanism. That is not the case for partisan regimes: nothing in the regime developmental process necessarily triggers the rise of another dominant partisan coalition. Rather, one can assume that the set of conditions that contributes to regime formation will appear again sooner or later. That is, crises will erupt to which the political system responds poorly (with the old regime party likely held responsible because it is most often in power); entrepreneurial opposition politicians will see opportunities to satisfy their various ambitions by overturning the old order and will embrace their party as the suitable vehicle; these politicians will craft narratives that draw together a coalition in favor of bold reform; and chance and politics will provide the proponents of one narrative with an opening to remake American politics.

Perhaps because of the indeterminate character of partisan-regime formation, some scholars have tried to expand the regime “box” to include other partisan coalitions that were swept into power amid popular discontent. According to the ideal type I have elaborated here, no new partisan regime emerged between the Civil War and the New Deal. Examining patterns of electoral behavior, realignment theorists, such as Walter Dean Burnham, have situated 1896 within their framework. They speak of a “system of 1896.”⁸⁰ Some partisan-regime scholars have followed this lead and sought to identify a new regime during this period. Since there is little evidence of dramatic policy innovation in the immediate aftermath of 1896, the argument has been extended to the Theodore Roosevelt presidency and Progressivism.⁸¹ The Progressive movement, however, scarcely resembles the Republican agenda of the late 1890s.

Stephen Skowronek has offered another way to subsume Theodore Roosevelt under a regime scheme and proposes that he be seen as “articulating” the regime commitments of the Lincoln-led Civil War Republicans.⁸² Although Skowronek’s interpretation recognizes the absence of a new regime after 1896, it offers limited analytical purchase. Whatever nods Roosevelt may have made to the Lincoln legacy, the Progressive program addressed a very different set of state-society linkages. Some Progressives also respected Alexander Hamilton and celebrated his achievements, but that hardly qualifies them as Federalists.⁸³ Better to treat

79. Skowronek, *Politics Presidents Make*.

80. For a thorough critique, see Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments*.

81. Nichols and Myers, “Exploiting the Opportunity for Reconstructive Leadership.”

82. Skowronek, *Politics Presidents Make*, 228ff.

83. See especially Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, [1909] reprint ed., 1989).

Progressivism as the rare instance when entrepreneurial politicians brought together the means to affect broad change outside a partisan framework.⁸⁴

The current political moment likewise appears to be best characterized as a post-regime phase. Since the early 1980s, we have witnessed no burst of wide-ranging policy innovation and radical ideological reframing. Reaganite discourse still dominates, with Democratic presidents Clinton and Obama unwilling to confront and contradict its core premises. As mentioned earlier, the financial collapse and economic tailspin that began in 2008 occurred too late in the election cycle to spur regime-building entrepreneurship by the Democratic contenders. Obama met the economic crisis he inherited with several bold and successful policy responses. Yet he has not parlayed these achievements into durable political gain for his party. Indeed, his post-partisan stance belies the very possibility of a partisan regime founding under a Democratic label. Public discourse continues to be driven by the Republican anti-tax mantra. Meanwhile, the GOP, like other regime parties, struggles to resist the pleadings of its radical elements (the Tea Party movement) to complete what they see as the Republicans' mission. Were the troubled economy to restore the Republicans to power, the partisan-regime ideal type leads us to anticipate that the Republican leaders would seek to contain their extremist wing rather than satisfy it.

Partisan Regimes and Secular Political Development

Although the incentives and opportunities for partisan regimes recur, they operate in very different social and political contexts. Would-be regime architects must negotiate terrains defined by historically specific systems of political communications, party-voter linkages, party organizational structures, popular attitudes toward parties, and more. Political challengers face different obstacles when party regulars control access to nominations than in open nominating systems. Calls to repudiate the old dominant party in favor of a new partisan formation resonate more effectively when parties are seen as the proper vehicles for pursuing political goals than when partisanship has acquired negative connotations. Political technology may encourage politicians to embrace discrete issue positions rather than articulate coherent narratives. Similarly, the means by which emergent partisan regimes pursue their key objectives will depend on the available instruments of governance. The Reaganite Republican regime relied heavily on the presidency, largely because of the long-term accretion of executive power in the political system. This trend itself is partly a by-product of choices by

84. Roosevelt himself appreciated how unusual and fragile the achievement was when he admitted the long-term prospects for the Progressive Party after 1912 were poor because it lacked the resources of the two established major parties. Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 3.

the earlier New Deal regime to expand the national bureaucracy and presidential authority in order to implement the regime's agenda.⁸⁵

At a theoretical level, the regime ideal type does not suggest general propositions about the relationship between regime formation and power, on the one hand, and social and political developments, on the other. Skowronek's early claim that regimes have weakened across time has been countered by scholarship that identifies new tools by which regimes can fulfill their first-order goals. Even as some developments deprive a dominant coalition of certain means exploited by its predecessors, concurrent changes in the political system offer regime architects and leaders new opportunities and resources. For example, at one time parties relied both on an army of local functionaries to mobilize supporters and on party-subsidized newspapers to convey partisan narratives. Both have disappeared. Yet party organizations have introduced new methods for reaching their potential supporters (direct mail and more recently the Internet) and have developed methods for communicating stories amid crises through ostensibly non-partisan media. Much as Abraham Lincoln and other Republicans in the 1850s could effectively disseminate a powerful image of an evil Slave Power rotting the soul of American democracy, Ronald Reagan in 1979–1980 could depict an America weakened by years of Democratic over-regulation and international timidity. Secular political context, then, should be treated as part of each regime's particular history.

Conclusion

The partisan-regime ideal type gives us a powerful tool for understanding American political development, provided we respect the concept's limitations. The ideal type helps us account for several episodes of wide-ranging political change founded on partisan transitions. Of particular importance to the rise of partisan regimes are the creative leadership of entrepreneurial partisan leaders, the disruptive effects of crises on how policy seekers and citizens understand their interests, the stories partisan leaders tell as devices for identifying first-order goals and delegitimizing the opposition, and the impact of events in validating these stories. Regime building is a risky and costly enterprise that makes sense only under certain circumstances, but the potential returns are enormous. Besides explaining the burst of change that sweeps across national politics with the advent of a new dominant party coalition, the partisan-regime ideal type can account for the subsequent persistence of certain themes in political discourse and for the durability of the core policies and institutions that a regime

85. Stephen Skowronek, "The Conservative Insurgency and Presidential Power: A Developmental Perspective on the Unitary Executive," *Harvard Law Review* 122 (June 2009): 2070–2103.

introduces. The concept does not serve well, however, to explain most political and policy outcomes after the initial wave of innovation. To understand post-regime politics, we usually should look elsewhere.

By describing the ideal type of a partisan regime, I have established a basis for exploring the strengths and weaknesses of particular regimes. Actual historical cases will approximate the ideal in some respects and will diverge in others. These variations can illuminate the relative importance of the different components that constitute a partisan governing coalition. To appreciate the analytical potential of this approach, consider again the Reaganite Republican regime. In terms of its formal authority, the regime came to power in unpromising circumstances—it lacked unified control over the national government. Yet the compelling Reaganite narrative foundation helped the coalition frame a unifying agenda, disarm the partisan opposition, and establish enduring terms for national political debate. Compare this to the restoration of Republican control after the 1896 election. With no enabling story, Republicans could not generate a new governing order. The party was ripe for displacement by the Progressive movement. The contrast between the Republicans in 1980 and in 1896 suggests that the discursive element of partisan regimes may be the single most important variable that explains their effectiveness, but such an assertion must be treated as tentative.

Identifying the key attributes of regime creation and action also make it possible to relate regime upheavals to other periods of broad policy innovation in American history. The advent of the Civil War Republicans, the New Deal Democrats, and the Reaganite Republicans share much in common with the Progressive Era or the 1960s. All resulted in epic change—policy, political, and ideological—and all yielded durable shifts in governing authority, to use the standard for measuring political development suggested by Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek.⁸⁶ Similar characteristics mark both the emergence of new partisan orders and other episodes of seismic political change. Political leaders take on the costs and risks of forging broad coalitions and offer powerful narratives; crises exhaust the capacity of the old order; and vigorous social movements appear. Shedding the electoral-realignment legacy and some of its baggage (like the need to perform gymnastics to make 1896 fit) frees partisan-regime scholars to reposition their subject in a more appropriate category of political phenomena.

A virtue of the partisan-regime ideal type is that it draws upon several analytical approaches and rejects the view that scholars must choose between them. Discourse and narrative analyses have become important in both policy literature and historical research,⁸⁷ and the partisan-regime ideal type likewise identifies a central role for political narratives in the shaping of interests and the

86. Orren and Skowronek, *Search for American Political Development*, 123.

forging of coalitions under certain conditions. Historical institutionalists have attended to the interplay between ideas and institutions, to attributes of governing institutions that shape policy outcomes, to the importance of actors' institutional positions in determining policy choices, and to the friction among institutions (often with different origins) that are layered atop each other.⁸⁸ All of these effects of institutions can be seen in the policy outcomes that partisan regimes achieve and in the strategies that regimes use to preserve their gains. Finally, from rational-choice and social-choice scholarship, the regime ideal type derives its emphasis on political ambition, entrepreneurship, transaction costs, and the problems of collective action.⁸⁹ That the ideal type spans the distance between the microfoundations of politics and systemic political, policy, and discursive developments is one of its virtues.

Many interesting questions about partisan regimes remain unanswered. Although the ideal type presumes that ambitious leaders will tell stories, it does not offer much guidance as to their content. The relationship between regime political power and economic power still needs to be investigated. The ideal type presumes that partisan entrepreneurs bid for the support of policy seekers, but it does not clarify whether some policy seekers occupy a "privileged position." To what degree is the quest by party leaders for support constrained by the structure of the economy? Does a challenging party's need for legitimacy either inhibit policy commitments to mass social movements or dictate that such commitments be abandoned once power has been secured? Finally, although regime transitions should be grouped together with the other (rare) cases of sweeping policy changes in American politics, we still need to attend to the differences between the two types of upheavals. Do regimes enjoy certain advantages in preserving their achievements, perhaps because parties are themselves entrenched institutions? Through the continuing study of specific historical cases, we should be better able to address these and other important lingering issues posed by the partisan-regime phenomenon in American politics.

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87. See, respectively, Stone, *Policy Paradox*; Rogers M. Smith, "If Politics Matters: Implications for a 'New Institutionalism,'" *Studies in American Political Development* 6 (1992): 1–36.

88. Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order"; Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

89. Aldrich, *Why Parties?*