

The Decline of Collective Responsibility in American Politics

by MORRIS P. FIORINA

As political parties have weakened, it has become easy
for politicians to give us public relations
rather than government.

Though the *Founding Fathers* believed in the necessity of establishing a genuinely national government, they took great pains to design one that could not lightly do things *to* its citizens; what government might do *for* its citizens was to be limited to the functions of what we know now as the “watchman state.” Thus, the Founders constructed the constitutional system familiar to every schoolchild — federalism, separation of powers, and numerous points of check and balance. The institutional arrangements bequeathed to us hamper efforts to undertake major initiatives and favor maintenance of the status quo.

Given the historical record faced by the Founders, their emphasis on constraining government is understandable. But we face a later historical record, one that shows 200 years of increasing demands for government to act positively. Regrettably, however, the increasing irresponsibility of American politics makes it more difficult than ever to use government for positive purposes.

To say that some person or group is responsible for a

state of affairs is to assert that he/they have the ability to take legitimate actions that have a major impact on that state of affairs. More colloquially, when someone is responsible we know whom to blame. Human beings have asymmetric attitudes toward responsibility, as captured by John Kennedy’s comment that “success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan.” This general observation certainly applies to politicians, which creates a problem for democratic theory, because clear location of responsibility is vitally important to the operation of democratic governments. Without responsibility citizens can only guess at who deserves their support; the act of voting loses much of its meaning. Moreover, as the Founders clearly (and pessimistically) foresaw, only if elected representatives know that they will be held accountable for the results of their decisions (or nondecisions as the case may be) do they have a compelling personal incentive to govern in our interest.

In an autocracy, the location of power in a single indi-

vidual locates responsibility in that individual as well. But individual responsibility is insufficient whenever more than one person shares governmental authority. We can hold a particular congressman individually responsible for a personal transgression such as bribe-taking. We can even hold a president individually responsible for military moves where he presents Congress and the citizenry with a *fait accompli*. But on most national issues individual responsibility is difficult to assess. If one were to go to Washington, randomly accost a Democratic congressman, and berate him about a 20 percent rate of inflation, imagine the response. More than likely it would run, "Don't blame me, if 'they' had done what I've advocated for ____ years, things would be fine today." And if one were to walk over to the White House and similarly confront Carter, he would respond as he already has, by blaming Arabs, free-spending congressmen, special interests, and of course, us.

American institutional structure makes this kind of buck-passing all too easy. In order to overcome it we must lay the credit or blame for national conditions on all those who had any hand in bringing them about: Some form of *collective responsibility* is essential.

The only way collective responsibility has ever existed and can exist, given American institutional arrangements, is through the agency of the political party. According to the textbook argument, a strong party can generate collective responsibility by creating incentives for leaders, followers, and popular supporters to think and act in collective terms. First, by providing party leaders with the capability (for example, control of institutional patronage and nominations) to discipline party members, genuine leadership becomes possible. Second, the subordination of individual officeholders to the party lessens their ability to separate themselves from party actions. Like it or not, their performance becomes identified with the performance of the collectivity to which they belong. Third, with individual candidate variation greatly reduced, voters have less incentive to support individuals and more to support or oppose the party as a whole. And fourth, party line voting in the electorate provides party leaders with the incentive to propose policies that will earn the support of a national majority, and party back-benchers with the personal incentive to cooperate with leaders in the attempt to compile a good record for the party as a whole.

There is considerable slippage between textbook and reality, but in the American context strong parties have traditionally unified politics by enabling citizens to direct their gratitude or ire to a clear target — the governing party. And when citizens assess responsibility on the party as a whole, party members have a personal stake in their collective performance. They have little to gain from gutting their president's program one day, then attacking him for lack of leadership the next, since they share in the president's fate when voters do not differentiate within the party.

Admittedly, party responsibility is a blunt instrument. The objection immediately arises that party responsibility condemns junior Democratic representatives to suffer electorally for an inflation that they could do little to affect. An unhappy situation, true, but unless we accept it, Congress as a whole escapes electoral retribution for an inflation they *could* have done something to affect. The choice is between a blunt instrument or none at all.

Though the United States has neither the institutions nor the traditions to support a British brand of party government, in the past we have experienced eras in which party was a much stronger force than today. And until recently — a generation roughly — parties have provided an "adequate" degree of collective responsibility. They have done so by connecting the electoral fates of party members, via presidential coattails, for example, and by transforming elections into referenda on party performance, as with congressional off-year elections.

To elaborate, in earlier times, when citizens voted for the party, not the person, parties had incentives to nominate good candidates because poor ones could have harmful fallout on the ticket as a whole. In particular, the existence of presidential coattails provided an inducement to avoid the nomination of narrowly based candidates, no matter how committed their supporters. And once in office, the existence of party voting in the electorate provided party members with the incentive to compile a good party record.

In the contemporary period, however, even the preceding tendencies toward collective responsibility have largely dissipated. As background for a discussion of this contemporary weakening of collective responsibility and its deleterious consequences, let us briefly review the evidence for the decline of party in America.

THE CONTINUING DECLINE OF PARTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Party is a simple term that covers a multitude of complicated organizations and processes. Party manifests itself most concretely as the set of party organizations that exist principally at the state and local levels. Party manifests itself most elusively as a psychological presence in the mind of the citizen. Somewhere in between and partly a function of the first two is the manifestation of party as a force in government.

Party Organizations: In the United States party organization has traditionally meant state and local party organization. The national party generally has been a loose confederacy of subnational units that swings into action for a brief period every four years. Though such things are difficult to measure precisely, there is general agreement that the formal party organizations have undergone a secular decline since their peak at the end of the 19th century. The prototype of the old-style organization was the urban machine, a form approximated today only in Chicago.

Several long-term trends have served to undercut old-style party organizations. Briefly, the organizations' resources have withered in the face of continued attacks on the patronage system and on party control of nominations. The social welfare functions of the parties have passed to the government as the modern welfare state developed. And less concretely, the entire ethos of the old-style party organization has been increasingly at odds with modern ideas of government based on rational expertise.

In the 1970s two series of reforms further weakened the influence of organized parties in American national politics. The first was a series of legal changes deliberately intended to lessen organized party influence in the presidential nominating process. In the Democratic party "New Politics" activists captured the national party apparatus, and imposed a series of rules changes designed to "open up" the politics of presidential nominations. The Republican party — long more amateur and open than the Democratic — adopted weaker versions of many of the Democratic rules changes. Table 1 shows that the presidential nomination process has indeed been opened up. In little more than a decade after the disastrous 1968 Democratic conclave, the number of primary states has more than doubled and the number of delegates chosen in primaries has increased from little more than a third to three-quarters. Moreover, the remaining delegates emerge from caucuses far more open to mass citizen participation than previously, and the delegates themselves are more likely to be amateurs than previously. For example, in the four conventions from 1956 to 1968 more than 70 percent of the Democratic party's senators, 40 percent of its representatives, and 80 percent of its governors attended. In 1976 the figures were 18 percent, 15 percent, and 47 percent respectively.

A second series of 1970s reforms lessened the role of formal party organizations in the conduct of political campaigns. These are financing regulations growing out of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 as amended in 1974 and 1976. In this case the reforms were aimed at cleaning up corruption in the financing of campaigns; their effects on the parties were a by-product, though a predictable one. Serious presidential candidates are now publicly financed. Though the law permits the national party to

spend two cents per eligible voter on behalf of the nominee, it virtually requires the candidate to set up a finance committee separate from the national party.

At the present time only presidential candidates enjoy public financing. But a series of new limits on contributions and expenditures affects other national races. Prior to the implementation of the new law, data on congressional campaign financing was highly unreliable, but even in the short time the law has been in effect, some disturbing trends have emerged. Party financing of congressional races has dropped from about one-sixth of the total in 1972 to about one-fifteenth of the total in 1978. Political action committees (PACs) and individually wealthy candidates have made up the difference. The limits in the new law restrict the House candidates to no more than \$15,000 in funding from each of the national and relevant state parties (the average campaign expenditure of an incumbent in 1978 was about \$121,000; of a challenger, about \$54,000). A senator is permitted to receive a maximum of \$17,500 from his senatorial campaign committee, plus two cents per eligible voter from the national committee and a like amount from the relevant state committee (21 senatorial candidates spent over a million dollars in 1978).

Yet there is less here than meets the eye. If the national party were to contribute \$15,000 to each of its congressional candidates, and a flat \$17,500 to each of its senatorial candidates, that would be more than \$8 million. *All* levels of the parties contributed only \$10.5 million of the \$157 million spent in 1978 congressional races. Probably more constraining than limits on what the parties can contribute to the candidates are limits on what citizens and groups can contribute to the parties. Under current law individual contributors may give \$1,000 per election to a candidate (primary, runoff, general election), \$5,000 per year to a political action committee, and \$20,000 per year to a party. From the standpoint of the law, each of the two great national parties is the equivalent of four political action committees.

The ultimate results of such reforms are easy to predict. A lesser party role in the nominating and financing of candidates encourages candidates to organize independent campaigns. And independent conduct of campaigns only further weakens the role of parties. Of course, party reform is not the entire story. Other modern-day changes contribute to the diminished party role in campaign politics. For one thing, party foot soldiers are no longer so important, given the existence of a large leisured middle class, which participates out of duty, enjoyment, or whatever, but which participates on behalf of candidates and issues rather than parties. Similarly, contemporary campaigns rely heavily on modern technology — survey research, the mass media, and modern advertising methods — which is provided by independent consultants outside the formal party apparatus. Although these developments are not directly related to the contemporary reforms, their effect is the same: The diminution of the role of parties in

Table 1: Recent Changes in Presidential Nomination Process

	Number of States Holding Primaries	Percentage of Delegates Selected in Primaries	
		Democratic	Republican
1968	17	38	34
1972	23	61	53
1976	30	73	68
1980	36	76	76

Source: 1968-1976, figures from Austin Ranney, "The Political Parties: Reform and Decline," in Anthony King (ed.), *The New American Political System* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), Table 6—1. 1980 figures from *National Journal*, October 20, 1979, 1738-1739.

conducting political campaigns. And if parties do not grant nominations, fund their choices, and work for them, why should those choices feel any commitment to their party?

Party in the Electorate: In the citizenry at large, party takes the form of a psychological attachment. The typical American traditionally has been likely to identify with one or the other of the two major parties. Such identifications are transmitted across generations to some degree, and until recently they tended to be fairly stable. Prevailing party attachments, of course, are based on the dislocations of the Depression period and the New Deal attempts to alleviate them. Though only a small proportion of those who experienced the Depression directly are active voters today, the general outlines of citizen party identifications much resemble those established at that time.

The times are changing, however. In Table 2 we can see that, as the 1960s wore on, the heretofore stable distribution of citizen party identifications began to change in the general direction of weakened attachments to the parties. And as the strength and extent of citizen attachments to the parties declined, the influence of party on the voting decisions of the citizenry similarly declined. The percent of the voting-age population that reports consistent support of the same party's presidential candidate drops from more than two-thirds in 1952 to less than half in 1976. The percent of voters who report a congressional vote consistent with their party identification has declined from over 80 percent in the late 1950s to under 70 percent today. And ticket splitting, both at the national and subnational levels, has doubled since the time of the first Eisenhower election.

Why has party in the electorate declined? To some extent the decline results from the organizational decline. Few party organizations any longer have the tangible incentives to turn out the faithful and assure their loyalty. Candidates run independent campaigns and deemphasize their partisan ties whenever they see any short-term gain in doing so.

Certain long-term sociological and technological trends also appear to work against party in the electorate. The population is younger, and younger citizens traditionally are less attached to the parties than their elders. The population is more highly educated; fewer voters need

some means of simplifying the choices they face in the political arena, and party has been the principal means of simplification. The media revolution has vastly expanded the amount of information easily available to the citizenry. Candidates would have little incentive to operate campaigns independent of the parties if there were no means to apprise the citizenry of their independence. The media provide the means.

And finally, our present party system is an old one. For increasing numbers of citizens, party attachments based on the Great Depression seem lacking in relevance to the problems of the late 20th century. Beginning with the racial issue in the 1960s, proceeding to the social issue of the 1970s, and to the energy, environment, and inflation issues of today, the parties have been rent by internal dissension. Sometimes they failed to take stands, at other times they took the wrong ones from the standpoint of the rank and file, and at most times they have failed to solve the new problems in any genuine sense. Since 1965 the parties have done little or nothing to earn the loyalties of modern Americans.

Party in Government: If the organizational capabilities of the parties have weakened, and their psychological ties to the voters have loosened, one would expect predictable consequences for the party in government. In particular, one would expect to see an increasing degree of split party control within and across the levels of American government. The evidence on this point is overwhelming.

At the state level 27 of the 50 governments were under divided party control after the 1978 election (compared to 16, 20 years ago). At the federal level the trend is similar. In 1953 only 12 states sent a U.S. senator of each party to Washington. The number increased to 16 by 1961, to 21 by 1972, and stands at 27 today. The tendency for congressional districts to support a congressman of one party and the presidential candidate of the other steadily increased from 3 percent in 1900 to 42 percent in 1972.

Seemingly unsatisfied with the increasing tendencies of the voters to engage in ticket-splitting, we have added to the split of party in government by changing electoral rules in a manner that lessens the impact of national forces. For example, in 1920, 35 states elected their legislators, governors and other state officials in presidential election years. In 1944, 32 states still did so. But in the past generations the trend has been toward isolation of state elections from national currents: As of 1970 only 20 states still held their elections concurrently with the national ones.

The increased fragmentation of the party in government makes it more difficult for government officeholders to work together than in times past (not that it has ever been terribly easy). Voters, in turn, have a more difficult time attributing responsibility for government performance, and this only further fragments party control. The result is lessened collective responsibility in the system.

In recent years it has become a commonplace to bemoan

Table 2: Subjective Party Identification, 1960-76

Party ID	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976
Strong Democrat	21%	27%	20%	15%	15%
Weak Democrat	25	25	25	26	25
Independent Democrat	8	8	9	10	12
Independent	8	8	11	13	14
Independent Republican	7	6	9	11	10
Weak Republican	13	13	14	13	14
Strong Republican	14	11	10	10	9

Source: National Election Studies made available by the InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.

the decline of party in government. National commentators nostalgically contrast the Senate under Lyndon Johnson with that under Robert Byrd. They deplore the cowardice and paralysis of a House of Representatives supposedly controlled by a two-thirds Democratic majority under the most activist, partisan speaker since Sam Rayburn. And, of course there are the unfavorable comparisons of Jimmy Carter to previous presidents — not only FDR and LBJ, but even Kennedy. But it is not enough to call for more inspiring presidential leadership and to demand that the majority party in Congress show more readiness to bite the bullet. Our present national problems should be recognized as the outgrowths of the increasing separation of the presidential and congressional electoral arenas.

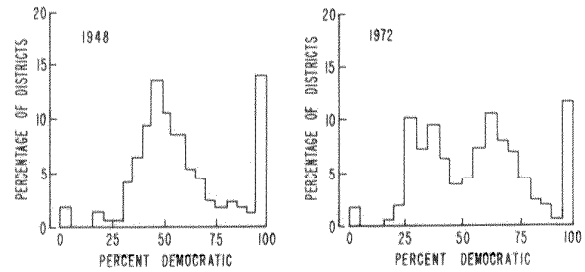
By now it is widely understood that senatorial races are in a class by themselves. The visibility of the office attracts the attention of the media as well as that of organized interest groups. Celebrities and plutocrats find the office attractive. And so, massive media campaigns and the politics of personality increasingly affect the senatorial voting. Senate elections now are most notable for their idiosyncrasy, and consequentially for their growing volatility; correspondingly, such general forces as the president and the party are less influential in the senatorial voting today than previously.

What is less often recognized is that House elections have grown increasingly idiosyncratic as well. I have already discussed the declining importance of party identification in House voting, and the increasing number of split results at the district level. These trends are both cause and consequence of incumbent efforts to insulate themselves from the electoral effects of national conditions.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the vote garnered by the Democratic candidate in incumbent-contested districts in 1948 and 1972. Evidently a massive change took place in the past generation. Whereas in 1948 most congressional districts were clustered around the 50 percent mark (an even split between parties), most districts now are clustered away from the point of equal division. Two obvious questions arise: Does this change matter, and why has it occurred?

Taking the second question first, the figure suggests a bleak future for such electoral phenomena as presidential coattails and midterm referenda on presidential performance. In the world represented by the 1948 diagram, a swing of 5 percent in the congressional vote due to a particularly attractive or repulsive presidential candidate, or an especially poor performance by a president, has major consequences: It shifts a large proportion of districts across the 50 percent mark. The shift provides a new president with a "mandate" in an on-year election and constitutes a strong "message" to the president in an off-year election. In the world represented by the 1972 diagram, however, the hypothesized 5 percent shift has little effect: Few seats are close enough to the tipping point to shift parties under

Figure 1: Congressional Vote in Districts with Incumbents Running



the hypothesized swing. The president's victory is termed a "personal" victory by the media, or the midterm result is interpreted as a reflection of personal and local concerns rather than national ones.

Why has the distribution of the congressional voting results changed form over time? Recent research indicates that a variety of personal and local influences exert an increasingly important influence on citizen evaluations of their representatives. Along with the expansion of the federal presence in American life the traditional role of the congressman as an all-purpose ombudsman has greatly expanded. Tens of millions of citizens now are directly affected by federal decisions. Myriad programs provide opportunities to profit from government largesse, and myriad regulations impose costs and/or constraints on citizen activities. And whether seeking to gain profit or avoid costs, citizens seek the aid of their congressman. To many citizens the contribution of the congressman in the realm of district service appears considerably greater than the impact of his or her single vote on major national issues, and they respond rationally to this modern state of affairs by weighing nonprogrammatic constituency service heavily when casting their congressional votes. This emphasis on the part of constituents provides the means for incumbents to solidify their hold on the office. Even if elected by a narrow margin, diligent service activities enable a congressman to neutralize or even convert a portion of those who would otherwise oppose him on policy or ideological grounds. Emphasis on local, nonpartisan factors in congressional voting enables the modern congressman to withstand national swings whereas yesteryear's un-insulated congressmen were more dependent on preventing the occurrence of the swings.

Actually, the insulation of the modern congressman from national forces is even more complete than the preceding discussion suggests. Not only are few representatives so vulnerable that a reaction to a presidential candidate or his performance would turn them out of office, but such reactions themselves are less likely to find a reflection in the congressional voting. As congressmen increasingly build personal organizations and base their campaigns on local issues and their personal record of service

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to the district, national conditions and the performance of the party leader have less of an impact on House races.

The effects of the insulation of congressional incumbents have begun to show up in a systematic way in the governmental arena. Table 3 presents data on presidential success and presidential support in Congress for the first two years of the administrations of our last five elected presidents. Evidently, Carter was less successful than earlier presidents who enjoyed a Congress controlled by their own party; he was only as successful as Nixon who faced an opposition Congress. Moreover, in the House, Carter has done relatively poorly in gaining the support of his own party colleagues. It is noteworthy that Kennedy earned a significantly higher level of support from a congressional party that was nearly half Southern, whereas Carter enjoyed a majority in which the regional split was much less severe.

Of course, it is possible to discount the preceding argument as an unjustified generalization of a unique situation — a particularly inept president, a Congress full of prima donnas still flexing their post-Watergate muscles, etc. But I think not. The withering away of the party organizations and the weakening of party in the electorate have begun to show up as disarray in the party in government. As the electoral fates of congressmen and the president have diverged, their incentives to cooperate have diverged as well. Congressmen have little personal incentive to bear risks in their president's behalf since they no longer expect to gain much from his successes or suffer much from his failures. By holding only the president responsible for national conditions, the electorate enables officialdom as a whole to escape responsibility. This situation lies at the root of many of the problems that now plague American public life.

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF THE DECLINE OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The weakening of the parties has contributed directly to the severity of several of the important problems the nation faces. For some of these the connections are obvious; for others the links are more subtle.

Immobilism: As the electoral interdependence of the party in government declines, its capacity to act also declines. Consider the two critical problems facing the country today — energy and inflation. The failures of policymaking in these areas are easy to identify and explain. The problem lies in the future, while the solutions impose costs in the present. So politicians dismiss the solutions as infeasible

Table 3: Recent Trends in Congressional Support of the Executive

Congress	Year	Presidential Success	Presidential Support Within His Party	
			House	Senate
83rd	'53-54	83%	72%	72%
87th	'61-62	83	73	64
89th	'65-66	87	69	61
91st	'69-70	76	62	63
95th	'77-78	77	61	67

Source: Congressional Quarterly Almanacs

and act as though the problem will go away. When it doesn't, popular concern increases. The president, in particular, feels compelled to act — he will be held responsible, both at election time and in the judgment of history. But congressmen expect to bear much less responsibility, and feel less compelled to act. At first, no policy will be adopted; later, as pressure builds, Congress adopts a weak and ineffectual policy for symbolic purposes. Then, as the problem continues to worsen, congressmen join with the press and the public and attack the president for failures of leadership. What makes this charade possible is the realization by members of Congress that national problems arising from inaction will have little political impact on them, and that the president's failures in dealing with those problems will have similarly little impact.

Political inability to take actions which entail short-run costs ordinarily will result in much higher costs in the long run; we cannot continually depend on the technological fix. So the present American immobilism should not be dismissed lightly. The sad thing is that the American people appear to understand the depth of our present problems and appear prepared to sacrifice in furtherance of the long-run good. But they will not have an opportunity to choose between two or more such long-term plans. For although both parties promise tough, equitable policies, in the present state of our politics neither can deliver.

Single Issue Politics: In recent years political analysts and politicians have decried the increased importance of single issue groups in American politics. But such groups are by no means a recent phenomenon. The gun lobby already was a classic example at the time of President Kennedy's assassination. And however impressive the anti-abortionists appear today, remember the Temperance movement, which succeeded in getting its constitutional amendment. American history contains numerous forerunners of today's groups, from anti-Masons to abolitionists to the Klan. Why then do we hear all the contemporary hoopla about single issue groups? Probably because politicians fear them now more than before, and a principal reason for their fears is that the parties are now too weak to protect their members and thus to contain single issue politics.

When a contemporary single issue group threatens to "get" an officeholder, the threat must be taken seriously. The group can go into his district, recruit a primary or

general election challenger, or both; and bankroll that candidate. In earlier times single issue groups were under greater pressures to reach accommodations with the parties. After all, the parties nominated candidates, financed candidates, worked for candidates, and perhaps most importantly, party voting protected candidates. Only if a single issue group represented the dominant sentiment in a given area could it count on controlling the party organization itself, and thereby electoral politics in that area.

Not only did the party organization have greater ability to resist single issue pressures at the electoral level, but the party in government had greater ability to control the agenda and thereby contain single issue pressures at the policy-making level. Today we seem condemned to go through an annual agony over federal abortion funding. There is little doubt that politicians on both sides would prefer to reach some reasonable compromise at the committee level and settle the issue. But in today's decentralized Congress there is no way to put the lid on. In contrast, historians tell us that in the late 19th century a large portion of the Republican constituency was far less interested in the tariff and other questions of national economic development than in whether German immigrants should be permitted to teach their native language in their local schools, and whether Catholics and "liturgical Protestants" should be permitted to consume alcohol. Interestingly, however, the national agenda of the period is devoid of such issues. And when they do show up on the state level, the exceptions prove the rule: They produce party splits and striking defeats for the party that allowed them to surface. Of course, control of the agenda is a two-edged sword (a point we return to below), but present-day commentators on single issue groups clearly are concerned with too little control rather than too much.

A strong party that is held accountable for the government of a nation has both the ability and the incentive to contain particularistic pressures. It controls nominations, elections, and the agenda, and it collectively realizes that small minorities are small minorities no matter how intense they are. But as the parties decline, they lose control over nominations and campaigns, they lose the loyalty of the voters, and they lose control of the agenda. Party officeholders cease to be held collectively accountable for party performance, but they become individually exposed to the political pressure of myriad interest groups. The decline of party permits interest groups to wield greater influence, their success encourages the formation of still more interest groups, politics becomes increasingly fragmented and collective responsibility still more elusive.

Popular Alienation from Government: For at least a decade political analysts have pondered the significance of survey data indicative of a steady increase in the alienation of the American public from the political process. Table 4 presents some representative data. As seen, two-thirds of the American public feel that the government is run for the

Table 4: Recent Trends in Political Alienation and Distrust

	Government Run For Few Big Interests	Government Officials Waste "A Lot"	Government Officials Don't Know What They're Doing
1964	29%	46%	27%
1968	39	57	36
1972	45	56	34
1976	66	74	49
1978	68	77	50

Source: National Election Studies made available by the InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.

benefit of big interests rather than for the people as a whole, three-quarters believe that government officials waste a lot of tax money, and half flatly agree with the statement that government officials are basically incompetent. The American public is in a nasty mood, a cynical, distrusting, and resentful mood. The question is why.

Specific events and personalities clearly have some effect: We see pronounced "Watergate effects" between 1972 and 1976 in the table. But the trends clearly began much earlier. Indeed, the first academic studies analyzing the trends were based on data no later than 1972. Should we be at all surprised by the data? After all, if the same national problems not only persist but worsen while ever greater amounts of revenue are directed at them, why shouldn't the typical citizen conclude that most of the money must be wasted by incompetent officials? If narrowly based interest groups increasingly affect our politics, why shouldn't citizens increasingly conclude that the interests run the government? For 15 years the citizenry has listened to a steady stream of promises but has seen very little in the way of follow-through. An increasing proportion of the electorate does not believe that elections make a difference, a fact which largely explains the much-discussed post-1960 decline in voting turnout.

Continued public disillusionment with the political process poses several real dangers. For one thing, disillusionment begets further disillusionment. Leadership becomes more difficult if citizens do not trust their leaders and will not give them the benefit of a doubt. Policy failure becomes more likely if citizens expect the policy to fail. Waste increases and government competence decreases as citizen disrespect for politics encourages a lesser breed of person to make careers in government. And "government by a few big interests" becomes more than a cliché if citizens increasingly decide that the cliché is true, and cease participating for that reason.

Finally, there is the real danger that continued disappointment with particular government officials ultimately metamorphoses into disillusionment with government per se. Increasing numbers of citizens believe that government is not simply over-extended, but perhaps incapable of any further bettering of the world. Yes, government is over-extended, inefficiency is pervasive, and ineffectiveness is all too common. But government is one of the few instru-

ments of collective action we have: Even those committed to large-scale reduction in government programs will find it necessary to use government to achieve their aims.

CONCLUSION

Recent American political thought has emphasized government *of* the people and *by* the people. Attempts have been made to insure that all preferences receive a hearing, especially through direct expression of those preferences, but if not, at least through faithful representation. Citizen *participation* is the reigning value, and arrangements that foster widespread participation are much in favor.

Of late, however, some political commentators have begun to wonder whether contemporary thought places sufficient emphasis on government *for* the people. In placing so much stress on participation, have we lost sight of *accountability*? Surely we should be as concerned with what government produces as with how many participate. What good is participation if citizens are unable to determine who merits their support?

Participation and responsibility are not logically incompatible, but there is a degree of tension between the two, and the quest for either may be carried to extremes. The attempt to maximize participation may lead to quotas and virtual representation schemes, while the attempt to maximize responsibility may result in a closed shop under boss

rule. Moreover, both qualities can weaken the democracy they supposedly underpin. Unfettered participation produces Hyde Amendments and immobilism. Responsible parties can use agenda power to thwart democratic decision — for more than a century the Democratic party used what control it had to suppress the racial issue. Neither participation nor responsibility should be pursued at the expense of all other values, but that is what has happened with participation over the course of the past two decades, and we now reap the consequences in our politics.

The depressing thing is that no rays of light shine through the dark clouds. The trends that underlie the decline of parties continue unabated, and the kinds of structural reforms that might override those trends are too sweeping and/or outlandish to stand any chance of adoption. Through a complex mixture of accident and intention we have constructed for ourselves a system that articulates interests superbly but aggregates them poorly. We hold our politicians individually accountable for the proposals they advocate, but less so for the adoption of those proposals, and not at all for the implementation of those proposals and the evaluation of their results. By exalting political individuality and permitting, indeed encouraging, the decomposition of political parties, we have given ourselves officials who pander and posture rather than lead, officials who give us public relations rather than government. □

EPILOGUE

The results of the recent election might suggest to some that the preceding essay ends on an unduly pessimistic note. After all, over and above Mr. Reagan's handsome victory, the Republicans took control of the Senate and made seemingly impressive gains in the House. Did the American citizenry at long last impose responsibility on the governing party as a whole? Did national frustration lead to redress of the trends I have decried? Probably not. There is less to the recent elections than meets the eye of the beholder.

In the first place the loss of 12 Senate seats really provides scant evidence of massive rejection of the President, liberalism or Democrats. In three states (Alabama, Alaska, Florida), Democratic incumbents lost primaries; such internecine battles seldom leave a state party in good shape for the general election. One Senator (Talmadge of Georgia) was heavily touched with scandal. Another (Magnuson of Washington) is generally agreed to have suffered from age and health, not abortion, inflation, or liberalism. And what of the prominent liberals — Bayh, Church, Culver, Durkin, McGovern, Nelson — who were on various "hit lists"? Do not forget that the first five Senators listed received an average of 52 percent in their last election, and that was 1974, a very bad year for Republicans. It is arguable that all of the above, save Nelson, were serving on borrowed time; had 1974 been a more normal year, they probably would not have been around to lose in 1980.

Their defeat this time might be due to popular rejection of the Democratic administration or popular choice of a Republican future, but, given, their electoral vulnerability, a small amount of such sentiment could have produced the notable electoral results. In short, while the extent of Democratic losses is unarguable, the extent to which those losses reflect any great degree of Democratic collective responsibility is highly problematic.

And what of the House? Thirty-three seats seem like a lot, but only by very recent standards. The bottom line is that 90 percent of all Democratic incumbents who ran, won (as compared to 98 percent of Republican incumbents), and this in a year when a number of them were under indictment, and when Republican efforts to unseat senior members were the most vigorous in a generation. We can perhaps hope that congressional Democrats will interpret the election returns as evidence that they will be held collectively accountable, but the reality underlying that interpretation is open to question.

To their credit, Republicans emphasized common party membership in the recent campaign. But such group loyalty is easy when the scent of victory is in the air. One wonders whether Republican congressmen will be so party-minded if a 30 billion dollar tax cut and 20 billion dollar increase in defense spending leads to 20 percent inflation. Such a situation would provide a good test of whether the decline of collective responsibility really has halted. □