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American Parties in Context

Comparative and Historical Analysis
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Roughly 65 years ago, a group of political scientists operating as the “Committee on Political Parties” of the American Political Association thought long and hard about whether the American parties were adequately serving their democracy, and made specific recommendations for improvements. Comparing the parties of this country to those of Great Britain, the Committee found the American parties to be lacking in such fundamentals as clear policy differences, strong and effective organization, and unity of purpose among each party’s representatives in public offices.

Starting from that background, this book is intended to significantly enhance students’ understanding of the American parties today by putting them in broader context. How do the twenty-first-century Democrats and Republicans compare to the APSA Committee’s “responsible parties model” of the mid-twentieth? And how do the American parties compare to parties of other democracies around the world, including especially the British parties?

Harmel, Giebert, and Janda answer those questions and, in the process, demonstrate that the American parties have moved significantly in the direction of the responsible parties model, but while showing little inclination for implementing the greater discipline the Committee thought essential. Already having provided as much ideological choice as the British parties, the U.S. parties have now edged closer on the other critical requirement of legislative cohesion. The authors show that the latter has resulted “naturally” from the greater homogenization of the meaning of “Democrat” and “Republican” across the country, both within the electorate and now within Congress as well. The dramatic increase in cohesion is not the product of greater party discipline, but rather of sectoral realignments.

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