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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I'm pleased to be here this morning to discuss one the central issues in democratic theory: the role of parties. One of the reasons it is such a pleasure to be invited is that I have been impressed with how easy it is to make plausible sounding claims about parties that turn out to be really foolish. A less superficial consideration of these issues, from the point of view of political science, gives one a bit different impression.

My role here, as I see it, is to give a little perspective on the question of parties. Constitutional scholars and lawyers tend to make arguments of the form, "It violates the Constitution if we (blank)," or "Clearly, it is allowable to regulate (blank)." They are like building inspectors, who offer judgments about whether structures comply with the rules, but don't really understand engineering.

Political scientists do something different. We don't study building codes; we study architecture. We try to discover the engineering principles that make for good governments or for bad governments, for effective representation or for corruption and domination by special interests. I'm not saying that the constitutional building inspectors aren't important, but sometimes a political engineering problem arises that requires science, not law, to understand. You are here to try to understand the effects of parties in a political system. That's why I'm here; that's what I do.

Let me finish with my conclusions, so we all know where I am headed.

- Parties are the most fundamental of all democratic institutions
- Parties today are more important than ever before
- We need to enable parties to attract *more* private "soft" money, not less

Parties: The Most Fundamental Institution

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. What this means is that organized interests, many with narrow, particularistic goals, will always try to focus their power on the policy process. James Madison, in Federalist #10, famously observed that there is no means of controlling the "evils of faction" that is consistent with liberty:

It could never be more truly said than of the first remedy that it was worse than the disease. Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be a less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes

faction than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.

Madison's celebrated solution to the problem of faction, or specialized interests, was the design of a system where debate is *enlarged* and *refined*. Enlargement was to be achieved in a federal republic, in which regional factions could be checked by other regions, and no one faction is likely to be encompassing enough to dominate the nation unless it also represents the interests of the nation. Refinement of the desires of the public was to be achieved by "passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country."

In retrospect, Madison and the other framers of the U.S. Constitution were quite right about the advantages of enlargement for the control of faction, but they missed something important in their view of refinement. There is little to prevent narrowly focused organized interests from using their money and influence to fill the vacuum of power in a legislative assembly if each member must act on his own. Another institution, which we now refer to by the name of party, was required to achievement the refinement and coherence of policy that Madison and his colleagues had in mind. For this reason, it is no exaggeration to say that there is an emerging consensus among professional political scientists that party is the most fundamental of all democratic institutions.

One early proponent of this perspective is E.E. Schattschneider, who argued that power would inevitably be exercised by some group in society, and the only question is whether that power will be exercised by organized interests or political parties. Organized interests, for Schattschneider, are to be feared because they are do not seek to win elections, to advance a platform for coherent policy, and are not obliged to persuade the public of the value of their position. Organized interests, in sum, short circuit democratic processes and subvert the will of the people, *if they are left to fill a vacuum of power in a republic*.

The answer to the corrupting power of organized interests, in Schattschneider's view, was parties. Parties must lay public claim to a policy platform and to candidates who use the party label to identify themselves. Parties are accountable to the people, and must offer a broad and encompassing vision of governance. Parties also mobilize and energize the public, and increase their identification with, and their sense of legitimacy of, democratic processes.

In short, it was Schattschneider's view that there are but two choices, mutually exclusive and exhaustive, for democracy: government by *special interests* or government by *parties*. Government by special interests will be narrow, corrupt, and anti-majoritarian. Party government, by contrast, will focus on the nation rather than on particular interests. Schattschneider says: "Party government is good democratic doctrine because the parties are the special for of political organization adapted to the mobilization of majorities."

But Schattschneider was concerned that parties in the American democratic process were too weak. He named his famous book The

Semisovereign People, because he believe that American citizens were only “semisovereign.” The reason is that the parties were too weak to offer real alternatives, and too focused on straining for financing to be able to mobilize majorities effectively.

Schattschneider is famous for having said something else interesting, too. He said that the key battle in any democracy is over limiting, or expanding, the scope of conflict. *Special interest government* restricts the scope of conflict, and debates small, particularistic questions. Elected officials in such governments who want to act badly in such a system are insulated from accountability; officials who want to act in the public interest are isolated, and unable to mobilize majorities. *Party government*, in contrast, expands the scope of conflict and provides accountable and responsible leadership.

Many other political scientists have echoed this basic point. John Aldrich, Paul Beck, Dean Burnham, Maurice Duverger, Morris Fiorina, V.O. Key, David Rohde, Giovanni Sartori, James Sundquist, and James Q. Wilson have each, in more or less the same terms, agreed with Schattschneider that “political parties created democracy, and ... democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties.” Aldrich, in particular, notes that while “Schattschneider may have overstated the case...it is fair to paraphrase him by saying that democracy is unworkable save in terms of parties.” Burnham asserts that parties “are the only devices thus far invented by the wit of Western man which with some effectiveness can generate countervailing collective power on behalf of the many individually powerless against the relatively few who are individually -- or organizationally-- powerful.”

Let me consider a mythical example that will help to illustrate my point that politics abhors a vacuum. Ms. Jones dislikes the policies of the incumbent from her Congressional district, Mr. Smith. Ms. Jones decides to run against Mr. Smith, and immediately realizes she needs some significant backing to have a chance in the election. When some of the powerful local interests hear of her interest in running, they begin to court her.

But their goals and aims are very narrow: one company wants some new defense contracts, another wants help in dealing with the EPA on a “brownfields” site, and a third needs some tax credits written into the tax code. They ask her if she supports these “initiatives,” and when she answers no they begin to look for someone else. They don’t try to bribe her, but they quite reasonably don’t want to make contributions to someone that doesn’t share their interests. Furthermore, even if they had maxed out on contributions, the three of them could only have contributed a total of \$30,000 to her primary and general election campaigns combined. Too narrow, too little: no help here.

She approaches the local party organization. But they have no funds to share, having been hamstrung by campaign finance “reforms” designed to limit the influence of special interests. What should she do? What *must* she do? There are only two alternatives: (1) give up, and accept the entrenched power of the incumbent, Mr. Smith; or (2) find several more special interests, and collect enough funds from all these different interests that she can cobble together a campaign.

One can immediately see the problem, of course: the desire to limit the power of special interests by regulating “soft” money expenditures has had precisely the *opposite* effect! No other system of private financing could have more room for domination by organized interests, because the narrow interests have moved in to occupy the vacuum created by crippling party organization. This is exactly the conclusion reached by Thomas Gais, in his ironically titled book, Improper Influence.

The laws that some reformers hoped would give the public greater control over their representatives may have only served to increase the safety of incumbents, by removing the means by which the private campaign finance system would have been able to establish its own autonomy.

What might lead scholars to this conclusion? It turns out to be one of those plausible sounding, but ultimately foolish, ideas about politics that I mentioned earlier. This one has been sounding plausible to people for a long time, as it dates from the era of Progressive reform era of the end of the 19th century. Here is the idea: “Pure” democracy, with no mediating institutions or groups, is a better system for policy making than one where there are organizations that mediate, filter, and refine the views and actions of the mass public.

It is useful to consider this idea, and its subtle foolishness, at length. To do this, I turn now to a consideration of the reasons for the importance of parties in modern politics.

Parties: More Important Than Ever

The word “party” derives from the Latin verb *partire*, which means to divide. If we equate “party” with Madison’s “faction,” the reason for the distrust of parties is clear: parties divide the public into warring camps, when the goal should be to unify the public and reach consensus. To understand why this is a misreading of the meaning of party, and a misunderstanding of politics, I will paraphrase an argument made by Duverger, Sartori, Schattschneider, and others, but most recently and most clearly by John Aldrich, in his landmark book Why Parties?

Aldrich argues (I am simplifying and summarizing considerably!) that there are two very different reasons for the existence, and value, of parties.

- **Collective action:** difficulties in mobilizing large groups who each face (as individuals) the “free rider” problem. As Aldrich sees it: To win office, candidates need more than a party’s nomination. Election requires persuading members of the public to support that candidacy and mobilizing as many of those supporters as possible. That is a problem of collective action. How do candidates get supporters to vote for them--at least in greater numbers than vote for the opposition--as well as get them to provide the cadre of workers and contribute the resources needed to win election. The political party has long been the answer.

- *Collective choice*: difficulties in imparting coherence and predictability to group decisions. As Aldrich points out, regarding the problem Madison raised of tyranny by a majority “faction”:

In a truly diverse republic, the problem is the opposite of majority tyranny. The problem is how to form any majority capable of taking action to solve pressing problems. A major political party, then, aggregates these many and varied interests sufficiently to appeal to enough voters to form a majority in elections and to forge partisan-based, majority coalitions in government. In this view, parties are intermediaries that connect the public and the government. Parties also aggregate these diverse interests into a relatively cohesive, if typically compromise, platform, and they articulate these varied interests by representing them in government. The result, in this view, is that parties parlay those compromise positions into policy outcomes, and so they--a ruling, if nonhomogeneous and shifting, government majority--can be held accountable to the public in subsequent elections.

The reforms of the Progressive era had hurt parties, and the mistaken view of parties and other mediating groups as impediments to democracy is threatening today to kill them. Let's see why. Richard Hofstadter, in his 1955 book *The Age of Reform*, claimed that the goal of the Progressives was to empower the “Man of Good Will,” who should be “abstracted from association with positive interests,” and whose “chief interests were negative.” More broadly, the Man of Good Will

was disassociated from all special interests and biases and had nothing but the common weal at heart...He would act and think as a public-spirited individual, unlike all the groups of vested interests that were ready to prey on him. Bad people had pressure groups; the Man of Good Will had only his civic organizations. Far from joining organizations to advance his own interests, he would disassociate himself from such combinations and address himself directly and high-mindedly to the problems of government.

The problem is that the Man of Good Will (and his smarter friend, the Woman of Good Will!) cannot, on their own and acting as individuals, solve the twin problems of collective action and collective choice. The Man of Good Will is likely to become the Man of Bitter and Despairing Mien, because if parties are prevented from mobilizing people to solve the problems of collective action and collective choice, organized interests will fill the vacuum. Consider Thomas Gais's assessment, in his excellent book, *Improper Influence*:

Several elements of the Progressive tradition stood in the way of any realistic recognition of the problems of collective action. The movement's individualism and distrust of organization--whether party machines or large corporations--made it unlikely to admit the legitimacy or even the existence of organizational problems in politics. Progressive reformers

typically tried to purge politics of organizations by strengthening various forms of direct, immediate connections between citizens and government--such as direct primaries, initiative and referendum, and recall--and by restricting or prohibiting the involvement of corporations, government agencies, parties, and other institutions in elections and campaigns. That certain interests confronted considerable barriers in organizing themselves for the purpose of pressing their demands on government was more likely to be viewed as a symptom of a more general problem--a politics based on competing organizations. The real solution was not to facilitate further organization, or “countervailing power,” but rather to establish a new political system based on the judgment and actions of independent, individual citizens.

The Progressive reforms, and the wrong-headed, party-killing reforms being discussed here today, are based on a mistaken conceit: that individual citizens, if they just tried, can and should be able to make decisions and implement policies entirely on their own, with no mediating institutions to serve Madison's functions of enlarging and refining those ideas and those policies. This conceit is older than the Progressives, however. It dates back most clearly to Rousseau, who said in *The Social Contract* that:

As long as several men in assembly regard themselves as a single body, they have only a single will which is concerned with their common preservation and general well-being. In this case, all the springs of the State are vigorous and simple and its rules clear and luminous; there are no embroilments or conflicts of interests; the common good is everywhere clearly apparent, and only good sense is needed to perceive it. Peace, unity and equality are the enemies of political subtleties. Men who are upright and simple are difficult to deceive because of their simplicity; lures and ingenious pretexts fail to impose upon them, and they are not even subtle enough to be dupes. When, among the happiest people in the world, bands of peasants are seen regulating affairs of State under an oak, and always acting wisely, can we help scorning the ingenious methods of other nations, which make themselves illustrious and wretched with so much art and mystery?

This is just wrong; we cannot rely on groups to forego their self-interest for the common preservation and the general well-being. We require organizations that provide countervailing power, and allow groups of individual citizens to mobilize and make clear choices. We need parties, because politics abhors a vacuum. To do otherwise is to accept the idea that all of us have to accept the will of the “collective,” as Rousseau argues in this passage.

But it is asked how a man can be both free and forced to conform to wills that are not his own. How are the opponents at once free and subject to laws they have not agreed to?

I retort that the question is wrongly put. The citizen gives his consent to all the laws, including those which are passed in spite of his opposition,

and even those which punish him when he dares to break any of them. The constant will of all the members of the State is the general will; by virtue of it they are citizens and free. When in the popular assembly a law is proposed, what the people is asked is not exactly whether it approves or rejects the proposal, but whether it is in conformity with the general will, which is their will. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on that point; and the general will is found by counting votes. *When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was not so.* If my particular opinion had carried the day I should have achieved the opposite of what was my will; and it is in that case that I should not have been free.

Rousseau's point was that we don't need parties, or that we need at most one party, "the" party, the *publicly funded* party. At the end of this road lies Stalin, or Pol Pot. We cannot count on people to know what to do, or to be able to do it, as isolated individuals. Rousseau, and the Progressives, and the "reforms" being considered here today, all misunderstand the scientific principles of politics.

Functions of Parties

I have been a little vague about just what the functions of parties are. It is useful to summarize the conclusions of political scientists on those functions. There are three rough categories of key party functions:

- Simplify and present alternatives
- Organize and manage the legislature, and the business of making laws
- Organize campaigns, select, train and develop good candidates, and provide resources for grass-roots contacts with voters.

Simplify and Present Alternatives-- There is widespread agreement among political scientists that parties may provide a useful "heuristic device" that help to organize voters' beliefs about the political sphere. There are two competing views of the nature of voter behavior, but there is agreement that parties "matter" in the way voters choose. On the one hand, advocates of the "Michigan model" of voter behavior believe that partisan identification is used as an informational short-cut that allows them to make political decisions without taking the time to "start over" mentally every time there is a new election or new issue. Partisan affiliations are commonly viewed as an affective orientation ("I like Party A; I *don't* like Party B) towards political symbols. These scholars (starting with Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes' 1960 book, *The American Voter*, and followed by literally hundreds of articles and books since) have repeatedly demonstrated that those with strong partisan attachments tend to be *more politically involved* and are able to make *better informed decisions* about politics.

On the other hand, advocates of the "rational choice" school believe that party reputations, or what Anthony Downs described as partisan ideologies,

are cultivated so that voters can use the party label as an informational short-cut. Hinich and Munger (1994), who elaborate this view, suggest that political parties are represented in the public mind as "brand names" that simplify complicated decisions about public policy. I hesitate to compare the party of Lincoln or Kennedy to a MacDonald's, but the point is that when you pull into a brand name franchise store you have some idea of what you are going to get. You don't have to go look at the menu, and wonder what sort of food or service will be provided. Your memories of *past experiences* with the same "franchise" help you decide to do *this time*. Being a Republican, or a Democrat, tells the voters something about the content of that candidate's likely voting record.

Furthermore, the brand name owner (the national party, in my metaphor) has reasons to check and correct problems with the local franchises (local party organizations and individual candidates). The reputation of MacDonald's may not matter much to one local franchisee, but it matters a lot to the national organization, which advertises and invests in that brand name. A bad franchisee devalues that investment, and the whole chain is held accountable ("I went to a bad MacDonald's in Orlando; I don't think I'll stop at one when I'm in Sioux City"). In just the same way, strong and vigilant national parties can not only communicate, but can also commit to and enforce, a consistent platform. Such a platform, consistently and credibly articulated, makes the choices of voters both much easier and much more likely to lead to the policy outcomes they want.

The ability of parties to simplify alternatives has been empirically demonstrated to be dependent on the adoption of a standing partisan identification by voters. Research by Philip Converse (1964; Markus and Converse 1979) demonstrates that voters' preferences as expressed in survey data were not necessarily logically consistent. For example, the same individual might answer one survey question as being strongly opposed to "big government," and still support large subsidies for agriculture or rural electric utilities. It is common for voters to say that they want smaller deficits, yet oppose both cuts in spending and increases in taxes.

Fortunately, however, while voters' attitudes towards particular public policy items were not stable, partisan attitudes and affiliations, reflecting broader conceptions of the policy process and focusing on principles, not particulars, are remarkably stable. The conclusion that Converse and other scholars have drawn, when these findings are linked with the earlier research on party reputation, is that partisan affiliation is an irreplaceable instrument of decision-making by the electorate. In an interesting way, then, this confirms Aldrich's paraphrasing of Schattschneider: democracy is unworkable without parties.

In light of the centrality of party affiliation in the public's voting behavior, declines since the late-1950's and early-1960's in party identification have been taken by many scholars as indicative of the declining importance of parties. Beginning around 1964, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976) found that the number of individuals who strongly identified with the party was beginning to decline while the number of independents was rising. Further, party

identification was becoming less correlated with vote choice in elections at all levels of government and split-ticket voting was on the rise.

Martin Wattenberg (1981; Miller and Wattenberg 1983), in another set of studies found that since 1968 there has been a sharp increase in the number of people who evaluate both parties neutrally and a sharp decrease in the number of people with polarized opinions about parties. Consequently, it appears that partisan identification was declining at the same time that voters were finding that parties provided a less informative signal through their party reputation. It has only been in the last several years that this trend has begun to reverse itself, perhaps as the Republican and Democratic parties have staked more sharply opposed positions in Congress since the early-1990's.

Organize and manage the legislature--The second function that parties perform involves the organization of the legislature. Congressional parties are responsible for the selection of leadership in the House and Senate and for committee assignments. Barbara Sinclair (1983) suggests that party leaders are expected to perform two roles. The party leadership is expected to build winning coalitions on legislation that is important to party members and other actors outside the chamber. Leaders are confronted with the often conflicting incentive of "keeping peace in the family" or party maintenance.

To achieve both these goals simultaneously, Sinclair suggests that parties provide services to pivotal members such as attending fund-raisers or facilitating the approval of projects in the members' district, using their formal agenda control power to structure choice situations (especially in the House), and getting as many people involved in the coalition-building as possible. The committee assignments themselves appear to be strongly related to member support for the party. A study by Cox and McCubbins (1993) of the House suggests that party loyalists are more likely to request and be granted transfers to new committees. Moreover, those who later turn out to be more loyal are more likely to receive their requested committee when they are assigned as freshmen. Political parties thus play an important, but not dominant role, in the passage of legislation in congress.

Organize Campaigns and Run Elections-- The third function performed by political parties involves their ability to influence the conduct of campaigns. In order to perform this function effectively, parties *must* have *strong organizations* that enable them to provide services to candidates. Gibson, Cotter, Bibby, and Huckshorn (1983) suggest that organizationally strong parties must have both *organizational complexity* and *programmatic capacity*. Organizational complexity refers to the existence of a party headquarters and an adequate budget and staff.

Programmatic capacity, on the other hand, refers to the ability to develop a constituency, create expectations about the party's stances, and endure when confronted with forces that would undermine party unity. In order to have programmatic capacity, party organizations must engage in institutional support activities such as fundraising, polling, and get out the vote drives that benefit all candidates within the party in a given area and candidate-directed

activities such as candidate recruitment or financial contributions that only help in the conduct of a single candidate's campaign.

A proper understanding of party organization must embrace the fact that different party organizations operate at different levels of government, with each of these levels performing different roles. Since the rules changes in nomination procedures for president during the early-1970s and changes in campaign finance procedures, the national party organization embodied in the national committees and congressional party committees has played an increasingly important role in national politics. Once believed to be virtually irrelevant in the campaign, a survey conducted by Paul HERNANSON (1996) revealed that candidates in the 1992 House campaign generally believed that party committees were *the most important source* for professional expertise and in-depth issue research.

National party committees, however, are hamstrung by current campaign finance laws. House candidates reported greater fundraising assistance from PACs and other interest groups (politics abhors a vacuum!). Senate candidates in HERNANSON's survey, on the other hand, rated national political party organizations more influential than either local parties or interest groups in all aspects of the campaign except the grassroots activities traditionally conducted by local party organizations. But this suggests that it is time to turn to the final point I want to make: the funding of party organizations.

Funding Parties: More Private Support, Not Less

It seems paradoxical that I would argue that parties need to be able to attract and direct more money and resources from private interests if, as Schattschneider claimed, in "the pluralist heaven... the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent." But remember that I claimed that there are but two feasible alternatives: interest group government or party government. Parties are the antidote to narrow, particular interests. If private interests are forced to accept a broad scope of conflict, in a public forum, in a contest between encompassing visions of governance, their power is sharply reduced.

But haven't I left out an obvious, and superior, third alternative: *public financing*? The truth is that I left it out on purpose. It won't work; public financing is worse than the current system. Let's see why. There are three issues to be concerned about in public financing of party organizations: the needlessness of government action, undue incumbency advantages and blocking of legitimate third party access. I will consider each of these in turn. *The Needlessness of Government Action*-- Private support for parties is certainly not pure charity. The fact is that contributions are made because the contributor believes that the party receiving the money will do a better job of governing. The framers of the Constitution could have written the First Amendment this way: "Congress shall make no law...restricting freedom of speech, *unless of course the speech is self-interested, in which case Congress can make any darned laws they feel like!*" They didn't write it that way, because there is nothing tainted, or evil, about self-interest. Trouble arises when, as all the many authors cited earlier claimed, privately funded and

supported parties are denied their crucial role as the *antidote* to narrow, particular interests.

The fact is that contributions to parties should be completely unregulated, except for strong and clear disclosure requirements. We should encourage party organization and creativity, not squelch it. Parties don't vote, and they don't directly determine policy. What they do is accept responsibility, and provide accountability, for the policies that people who wear the party label pursue. Since parties put their reputation on the line in every candidate nomination for office, parties are forced to police their members, and enforce responsibility and conformity with the party message. Parties make it much harder for special interests to dominate the policy process. Government restrictions on sources of party funding are worse than needless; such restrictions are harmful.

Undue Incumbency Advantage-- Any system of "public" funding is likely to make incumbents well nigh unassailable. There are several reasons, but the simplest derives from the nature of incumbency itself. Holding office gives an incumbent an institutional basis for claiming credit ("As a member of the committee that reported out this bill, I was protecting your interests!"), taking public positions ("As chair of the X subcommittee, I announce my opposition to this bill!"), or simple name recognition ("Come to the town hall meeting with Senator Y!", or "Here is your franked envelope, with a newsletter, Mr. Voter!"). As has been demonstrated in a sophisticated mathematical analysis by such authors as Aranson and Hinich (1979), any "equal" spending limits imposed on challengers and incumbents work to the strong advantage of the incumbents. The easiest way to summarize their argument is to consider the internal conflict over this question in the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976).

On the one hand, the justices appeared to accept the "equal is fair" argument. The appellants (Senator James Buckley, Senator Eugene McCarthy, and so on) had argued that contribution limits are *inherently* unfair because they invidiously discriminate against challengers. In one part of the decision, the Court disagrees.

In considering this contention it is important...to note that the Act applies the same limitations on contributions to all candidates, regardless of their present occupations, ideological views, or party affiliations. Absent record evidence of invidious discrimination against challengers as a class, a court should generally be hesitant to invalidate legislation which on its face imposes even-handed restrictions. (46 L Ed 2d 694-695).

But can the Court really have believed that? No; the justices knew better. Consider footnote 33 in the *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) decision:

Since an incumbent is subject to these limitations to the same degree as his opponent, the Act, on its face, appears to be even-handed. The appearance of fairness, however, may not reflect political reality. Although some incumbents are defeated in every Congressional election,

it is axiomatic that an incumbent usually begins the race with significant advantages. In addition to holding federal office, the incumbent has access to substantial resources provided by the government. These include local and Washington offices, staff support, and franking privilege.

Any "fair" (i.e., equal public funding) system advantages incumbents, and entrenches the organized interests that support those incumbents because other groups are denied the opportunity to mobilize resources in opposition.

Blocking of Third Party Access-- The problem of "third parties," or competition from real political outsiders, is a vexing one. But we haven't handled it very well, and the result has been the insulation and institutionalization of parties in the American system. Several prominent political science authors have directly attributed this partisan sclerosis to our system of campaign finance, particularly in Presidential politics. In their outstanding book reviewing and critiquing third party politics, *Third Parties in America*, Steven Rosenstone, Roy Behr, and Edward Lazarus contrast the "public" system for established parties with brutal barriers faced by potential competitors.

- Established parties receive public funds to run primary and general election campaigns, in advance, in lump sums. "Other" parties receive money in November, after the election, and then *only* if they receive at least 5 percent of the total national vote. There is no way that third parties can solve this problem, unless they can appeal to wealthy individuals or special interests. Once again, our campaign finance system forces candidates to court special interests to be "competitive."
- "Minor" parties have to be certified as such by the Federal Election Commission. Eugene McCarthy's renegade campaign in 1976 was not so certified, and he was denied even the opportunity to qualify for public funds. The "major" parties can use this provision to punish rebellious party members who try to run on their own, and since the system is set up in such a way that one has to receive public funds to have a chance, the parties can effectively foreclose competition.

Rosenstone and colleagues sum up their argument this way:

The FECA is a major party protection act. Democrats and Republicans receive their funds before the election, minor parties after. During primaries, when name recognition is built and legitimacy established, contenders for a major party's nomination receive matching federal funds; minor parties, which do not hold primaries, receive none. During the general election, major party candidates are freed from time-consuming and costly fund-raising activities; minor parties are not. National party committees may accept individual contributions of up to \$20,000; independent candidates cannot. In short, this law ensures a large gap between the financial resources available to major and minor parties.

It seems tempting to think that there is some way to change the FECA guidelines, and solve this problem, but that would be one of those plausible-sounding but foolish ideas we keep running up against. Since public financing is an *entitlement* (a party meets the criteria, it receives the money), looser restrictions would mean many “parties” would form just to be able to run a campaign at public expense. Worse, the major parties are able to use the law to prevent competition, and restrict the scope of conflict, just as Schattschneider feared.

No, the only real long-term solution is complete deregulation (except disclosure requirements) of “soft money,” and the elimination of public financing of all kinds. Clearly, in the near term, any move to restrict soft money or make financing more “public” is a step, a big step, in a very wrong direction.

Final Words

If our campaign finance system should be “reformed,” it should be in the direction of making it easier, not harder, for parties to attract “soft” money and other resources required to strengthen national organizations and nurture grass roots participation. Parties are the only alternative to government dominated by special interests and narrowly focused influence groups.

The idea that there is a third alternative, with voters choosing among isolated candidates offering disparate, uncoordinated, and incomplete policy proposals was a conceit of the Progressive reformers. It has shown remarkable vitality as an idea, but it is a wrong idea, a dangerous idea. Politics abhors a vacuum. Only if strong parties are able to articulate coherent, and competitive visions of governance, and be held accountable for the performance of those visions, can democracy in the U.S. survive.

Finally, public financing combines most of the worst features of all the other proposals. Ultimately, voters and citizens must rely on parties to provide a counterbalance to the power of entrenched interests in government. If parties have to rely on the public purse for their funding, how can we rely on those same parties to serve their function of providing effective countervailing power?