



Adam Hilton, True Blues: The Contentious Transformation of the Democratic Party

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Adam Hilton, *True Blues: The Contentious Transformation of the Democratic Party*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021, ISBN 978-0-8122-5299-6.



- 1 If the 2016 presidential election effectively represented a major watershed in the history of presidential elections, ushering into office one of the least experienced and most divisive candidates ever, it also raised fundamental questions regarding the nature of political parties. Most importantly, it asked the fundamental question of who governs political parties. As Adam Hilton argues in the introduction to his work, “assertions of either elite control or interest-group dominance both failed dramatically to explain the Trump victory and the surprise of the Sanders insurgency and their subsequent reverberations through the American political landscape” (2).
- 2 In *True Blues: The Contentious Transformation of the Democratic Party*, Adam Hilton primarily focuses on the institutional transformations that have affected the Democratic Party from the New Deal onwards. The central argument of his book holds that institutional reform within the Democratic Party has been driven principally “by the recurrent conflict between extra-party groups and officeholders to define and control party identity, program, and policy” (2) and that this protracted struggle led to the formation of a new kind of party – an *advocacy party* – characterized by both greater dependence on outside groups for legitimacy and organizational support and also by “greater dependency on the presidency for the satisfaction of [the constituencies’] demands” (3). The current Democratic Party, then, is characterized by a mutual dependence between advocacy groups and politicians.
- 3 To explain how party change is brought about, Hilton offers a three-pronged model of entrepreneurial party change. The first step in this process consists in the recognition of a party crisis, leading in return some party entrepreneurs to propose structural reforms in order to remedy the presumed crisis. In the second stage, party entrepreneurs either consolidate party reconstruction through political victory, or are defeated by incumbents who propose counter-reforms. Finally, in the last stage, reformers and counter-reformers engage in an on-going struggle over party structure –

“contentious party change” – which eventually produces mixed and layered institutional changes (9).

- 4 In the first chapter to his book, Adam Hilton offers a depiction of the Democratic Party’s confederal structure previous to party reform. The author explains that for most of the 19th and 20th centuries, the national Democratic Party was indeed “nothing more than a loose confederation of state Democratic parties, each unit sovereign and independent in its internal affairs and its external affiliations” (29). This decentralized party structure was, according to the author, the very condition undergirding the existence of the New Deal coalition, made up of a labor-liberal alliance, northern political machines, and southern party-states. The 1948 Democratic National Convention, which witnessed the Dixiecrat revolt and the formation of the alternative States’ Rights Democratic Party, threw into sharp relief the Democratic Party’s inability to discipline state party affiliates that defied the party platform or broke with the national ticket (26). The period following the 1948 convention saw the first attempts at party reform, initiated by both political entrepreneurs and by the grassroots politics of the southern civil rights movement, which, during the 1964 DNC, challenged the all-white Mississippi delegation by forming the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (45). This notably led to the Atlantic City Compromise, which set guidelines for the 1968 DNC, requiring that state parties guarantee all voters the “opportunity to participate fully in Party affairs” (46).
- 5 Chapter Two deals with the crisis unfolding during the 1968 DNC, which offered the starting point for the impending party reforms. Because of mounting pressure, notably from the followers of candidates Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, the report of the Rules Committee endorsed the need for party reform at future national conventions and called for the creation of an investigative commission to study the delegate selection processes. Hubert Humphrey’s eventual loss to Richard Nixon strengthened the reformers’ belief that reforms were needed to make the Democratic Party more representative of and answerable to its base.
- 6 The third chapter is devoted to party entrepreneurship in the McGovern-Fraser Commission. According to Hilton, the reformers’ project started as an “ambitious blueprint to radically redesign the Democratic Party” (67). In fact, the New Politics movement “sought to overcome the constraints of the New Deal by augmenting its coalition via reconstructing the party organization” (74). Entrepreneurs within the Party furthermore established a link between the Democratic Party’s lack of ideological clarity and the absence of institutional infrastructure. It was during the commission’s regional hearings that “a shared vision of a reformed Democratic Party” effectively began to take shape (77). In its final report, *Mandate for Reform*, released in April 1970, the commission approved a list of eighteen guidelines, including both some uncontroversial modernizing reforms as well as more contentious affirmative action guidelines. Together, these recommendations effectively led to a reformed nominating system, resulting in the “dramatic weakening of the capacity of state party officials to control the nomination process” (78). Reformers, however, were not content with changes to the nomination process and were eager to reform the very structure of the national party. Their blueprint was exposed in the “Charter for the Democratic Party of the United States,” whose plan was to “dismantle the decentralized power structure of the party” (87). As the charter threatened the power of the state parties and their leaders, it contributed to foment a large antireform backlash that first mobilized

against George McGovern's presidential campaign, and subsequently in the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (87).

- 7 Chapter Four zeroes in on the McGovern nomination process and the growth of the backlash movement against reform. During the 1972 DNC, a nascent Stop McGovern coalition challenged the nominee's legitimacy through an eventually unfruitful attempt at overturning the candidate's victory in the California primary, which still relied on winner-take-all to designate its nominee. The Platform Committee represented yet another area of friction between reformers and anti-reformers in 1972. While it did not amount to a sharp break from previous Democratic platforms (100), the 1972 platform represented an important departure in two respects: first, its formation involved an open, participatory process; second, its first plank defined "full employment – a guaranteed job for all" as "the primary economic objective of the Democratic Party" (102). What is more, the reformers' charter and its proposal to create "in-between-conventions-organization" met with fierce resistance from counter-reformers, notably from state party leaders and the newly formed Association of State Democratic Chairs (ASDC). The counter-reformers adopted a discourse of class struggle pitting against each other the "liberal, white-collar elites and the blue-collar 'common man'" (106) to voice their hostility toward both McGovern and the New Politics movement he embodied. Soon, "the Stop McGovern movement hardened into an anti-New Politics coalition committed to retaking the party from the reformers" (109).
- 8 Chapter Five, then, foregrounds the increasing influence of counter-reformers within the Democratic Party as well as the emergence of the advocacy party. Resistance to the New Politics took shape through the formation of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), founded in 1972, whose stated mission was to root out the New Politics from the Democratic Party. To do so, counter-reformers elaborated the "New Class" arguments, denouncing the New Politics as elitist while portraying themselves as "embattled insurgents fighting for influence in an undemocratic party," thus effectively turning the political entrepreneurialism of their opponents against them (114). Counter-reformers' influence was greatly enhanced by McGovern's crushing defeat, which comforted them in their belief that "McGovernism" threatened the Party's electoral viability. After effectively retaking the Party Chair, members of the CDM contributed to shape the report of the Mikulski Commission, which claimed that the McGovern-Fraser reforms represented a violation of basic principles of democratic process and equitable representation (117). That, the report stated, had resulted in the "over-representation of well-educated and relatively affluent activists of the 'so-called grassroots'" (117). In an attempt to temper the previous reforms, the Commission notably reinstated automatic delegate status. Counter-reformers also showcased their influence during the proceedings of the Charter Commission, that was tasked with working out a constitution for the Party as well as planning a 1974 midterm National Conference on Democratic Party Organization and Policy. In their attempt to oppose plans for a reconstructed party organization, the CDM launched the Charter Conference Clearing House, which greatly contributed to defeat reformers' ambitions.
- 9 In Chapter Six, Adam Hilton shows how the Jimmy Carter campaign and presidency underscore "the dependence of party-oriented groups on the independent action of the presidency" within the advocacy party (132), thus effectively foregrounding the limits to group pressure within the reformed Democratic Party. This is most clearly highlighted by President Carter's embrace of full employment for political gains during

his presidential campaign and his subsequent sidelining of the issues once in office. Fearing the effects of the midterm policy conference of December 1978, Carter and his administration effectively moved to co-opt the full employment issue by reworking Humphrey-Hawkins into an innocuous bill while also following an institutional strategy designed to subdue policy demanders at the Memphis conference (142). The episode exposed “the limited degree to which the New Politics reformers had been able to institutionalize the mechanisms for officeholder accountability they had envisioned and proposed after 1968” (144).

- 10 Chapter Seven offers an account of the success and failure of the New Democrats. Following a string of electoral defeats in the 1980s, a new set of party entrepreneurs, spearheaded by the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), sought to rebuild a big-tent coalition of southern conservatives, moderate blue-collar voters, and white men by reempowering party professionals and breaking from the advocacy party’s dependence on group patronage (148). Yet another commission was created by the DNC to reconsider the party’s presidential nomination process (150). The Commission on Presidential Nominations, chaired by James Hunt, sought to elevate party leaders and elected officials within the nomination process and led to the creation of “superdelegates” (150). It furthermore recommended “to temper the influence of interest group leaders and party activists in the nominating process.” However, the New Democrats’ institutional strategy did not create the expected change, as unpledged delegates proved to do little to affect the outcome of the nomination process (152). In the aftermath of the 1984 defeat, Al From greatly contributed to enhance the influence of the New Democrats in the Party, notably through the DLC, and reoriented the New Democrats toward a programmatic approach. This effort was upheld by the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), which promoted the values of individual responsibility, hard work, and equal opportunity (156), and whose aim was to shift commonsense thinking among Democrats and rebrand the Party’s ideational foundations (157). This change was strikingly reflected in Bill Clinton’s rhetoric during his presidential campaign. While little of these rhetorical changes were matched by policy actions during the president’s first term, the 1994 midterms “cleared the path for the president to pursue the New Democratic agenda” (162). Even though, by the second half of the 1990s, the DLC realignment of the Democratic Party seemed well under way, Adam Hilton maintains that New Democratic ideals were eclipsed after the loss of the presidency as New Democrats’ influence within the Party began a downward slope. This was evidenced during the 2008 presidential campaign, as both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton distanced themselves from the New Democratic tradition (167).
- 11 In Chapter Eight, the author focuses on Barack Obama, arguing that the former president effectively harnessed the advocacy party, presenting himself as the “advocate-in-chief,” while failing to deliver substantively on his policy commitments (172). Candidate and President Obama effectively adopted a top-down approach to the politics of the advocacy party that he partly inherited from Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign. Through his own campaign organizations, Obama thus combined netroots outreach with face-to-face canvassing and “built himself a personal advocacy organization that circumvented normal political channels to connect him directly with the activist base of the Democratic Party” (177). His top-down actions furthermore led to mixed results for the core constituency groups at the center of the Democrats’ advocacy party. In fact, “deeply institutionalized party-group relationships,

such as with labor and women's organizations, gained less traction in their pressure campaigns than did newcomers, such as LGBTQ activists" as "dynamics of group capture reduce the leverage of even the most significant 'anchoring' alliances" (182), thus undergirding the claim that "while groups have become more central to the Democratic Party, this does not translate into group dominance" (190).

- 12 Adam Hilton concludes by foregrounding and detailing some of the consequences of the rise of the advocacy party on three major developments reshaping modern American politics, namely the rise of executive-centered partisanship, the asymmetrical quality of partisan polarization, and rising inequality.
- 13 In *True Blues*, Adam Hilton offers a comprehensive account of how party reform and counter-reforms have contributed to shape the Democratic Party and its relationship to various groups and organizations outside the party. His characterization of the Democratic Party as an "advocacy party" offers a novel and more complex way for comprehending the relationship between the establishment of the Democratic Party and the diverse groups outside the Party that departs from accounts of either elite control or interest-group dominance. By doing so, Adam Hilton sheds light on the intricate (strategic) dilemmas facing both politicians within the Democratic Party and interest groups outside the party.

INDEX

Keywords: Democratic Party, political parties, party reforms, counter-reforms, interest group

Mots-clés: parti démocrate, partis politiques, réformes institutionnelles, contre-réformes, groupes d'intérêt

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