

Political Parties and Political Change

Thomas R. Marshall, Editor

Understanding the role of political parties is critical to understanding political change in the world today. Political parties often help to translate mass public opinion into government policy-making. Parties also are themselves rapidly changing. During the last decade many once-dominant parties fell into decline in many parts of the world, while other parties rapidly gained in strength. In short, political parties both shape political change and themselves are affected by social changes.

If political parties are both agents of change and are influenced by change, the relationship can be complex. The four articles in this special issue all focus on political parties and change. The first article by Steven D. Roper and Christopher Andrews examines political party success as influenced by election dates. Political scientists have seldom considered the timing of elections as it affects party success. Yet in many political systems the governing party (or party coalition) has discretion in timing elections. Do early-called elections typically benefit the governing party or coalition? The Roper and Andrews' article suggest that in some circumstances early-called elections can help governing parties hold their majorities.

Few political parties have recently faced a crisis as great as that of post-communist political parties during the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War forced many communist parties around the world to refocus their electoral appeal, some more successfully than others. When shocks of this magnitude occur, how do parties react? The article by John Ishiyama shows that some communist parties made the transition more successfully than others. Parties that reacted quickly to the collapse of communism better weathered the storm.

The third article by L. Marvin Overby and Robert Brown considers the impact of an electoral "shock" within the United States. In 1994 a great electoral tidal wave ended the long-standing Democrat Party dominance in the U.S. Congress. Particularly in Southern states did Republicans fare much better than expected. Some pundits argued that the increase in minority-majority districts led to this great change. Overby and Brown reevaluate the relationship and find this popular view largely lacking.

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The fourth article by Miki Caul Kittilson considers the impact of party convergence on voter turnout. Over recent decades many political observers have noted that political parties seem to converge toward the political center. Does this convergence reduce voter turnout by obscuring political differences between parties? Kittilson's article uses a pooled cross-sectional analysis to argue that declining voter turnout cannot be tied to converging party profiles.

The final article by Jill Clark and Tom Little considers the impact of American political parties on the 1990s welfare reform movement. State-level welfare reform changes were closely tied to Republican Party efforts to reduce long-term welfare dependency. Did Republican-dominated states adopt more stringent welfare reform requirements? Their results indicate that ties between Republican Party influence in state politics and welfare reform stringency are complex, and are also affected by leading politicians' electoral context.