

THE ROLE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE UNITED STATES: ARE THEY BECOMING OBSOLETE?

Cenap ÇAKMAK

PhD Candidate, Center for Global Change and Governance

Rutgers University, New Jersey, United States

Expert on US Politics, Turkish-Asia Strategic Center for Strategic Research

Istanbul, Turkey

E-mail: cenapc@pegasus.rutgers.edu

ABSTRACT

It has been a fashion over the last two or three decades to claim that political party is in decline in the US politics, as ample evidence, the aforesaid argument goes, suggests believing so. According to the claimants in favor of party decline, political party's role has been diminishing in the political processes, including the presidential and congressional elections. Some even goes further, asserting that political party is over in the US. This extreme view suggests that political party is not a useful tool in the US politics anymore. In this regard, it is asserted that the Political Action Committees (PACs) have successfully supplanted the political parties, making them outdated and unnecessary. Since candidates are not dependent on political parties in order to get elected, parties have become less and less significant and relevant. It is, however, the objective of this study to demonstrate that political party still plays a significant role in many processes of American politics. The evidence that is presented as the sign of party decline in fact suggests that political party in the US is transforming, rather than declining. Therefore, political parties are well and alive in the US. It is further argued that although the new political environment is more candidate-centered than it used to be, this does not necessarily mean that political parties are declining in the US.

Key words: Political party, Political action committee (PAC), US politics, Party decline, the effectiveness of political party, candidate-centered elections.

ÖZET

Son yirmi-otuz yıldır, Amerikan siyasetinde siyasi partinin rolünün öneminin azaldığı yaygın bir şekilde iddia edilmektedir. Bu iddiaya göre, böyle bir sonuca varmak için çok sayıda delil vardır. Partinin düşüşte olduğunu iddia edenlere göre, siyasi partinin rolü, başkanlık ve yasama meclisleri seçimleri de dahil olmak üzere siyasi süreçlerde gitgide azalmaktadır. Bazıları daha da ileri gidip siyasi partinin artık Amerikan siyasetinde fonksiyonunu yitirdiğini bile iddia etmektedirler. Bu aşırı görüşe göre siyasi parti artık Amerikan siyasetinde kullanışlı bir araç olmaktan çıkmıştır. Bu çerçevede, Siyasi Eylem Komiteleri (Political Action Committees), partileri demode ve gereksiz hale getirdiği ve partilerin yerine başarıyla geçtikleri iddia edilmektedir. Artık adaylar seçilebilmek için siyasi partilere bağımlı olmadıklarından siyasi partiler daha önemsiz hale gelmektedir. Ancak nu çalışmanın amacı, siyasi partinin hala Amerikan siyasetinin birçok sürecinde çok önemli roller üstlendiğini göstermektir. Partinin düşüşte olduğuna işaret olarak gösterilen deliller aslında ABD'de partinin düşüşte olduğunu değil dönüştüğü anlamına gelmektedir. Dolayısıyla siyasi partiler ABD'de hala etkili ve fonksiyoneldirler. Ayrıca,

yeni siyasi ortam, eskisine göre daha aday merkezli olsa da bunun siyasi partilerin düşüşte olduğu anlamına gelmediği iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar terimler: Siyasi parti, siyasi eylem komitesi, Amerikan siyaseti, partinin düşüşü, siyasi partinin etkinliği, aday-odaklı seçimler.

INTRODUCTION:

The issue of whether the political parties in the United States are declining and becoming more and more irrelevant in the politics has been one of the most controversial one for a long time. Some have adopted an extreme line of argument, asserting that the political party as an entity is useless in the election processes. They argue that voters are now refraining from identifying themselves with partisan identities. Conversely, some others stress that party identification is becoming stronger. For instance, Bartels (2000) argues that there has been a significant increase in partisan voting beginning in the 1970s. Bartels (2000: 35) also contends that “the conventional wisdom among scholars and commentators regarding the ‘decline of parties’ in American politics is badly outdated.”

In an effort to prove that the role of political parties in the US political system is being confined, some also refer to the de-alignment among the voters, and to the low-rate turnout in the elections. The US, the world’s leading democracy ranks 140th in voter turnout among democratically elected governments. What is more alarming is that the largest bloc of non-voters is 18-to-24-year olds (Cooper, 2000: 833). In this regard, contemporary American political parties are being compared to those in Europe or elsewhere. Such a comparison would lead to the conclusion that American political parties are far less significant than those in Europe or in advanced democracies.

The decline of political parties is mainly attributed to the rise of political action committees (PACs) in the elections in particular. A unique entity that is not likely to be found in the political systems other than that of the United States, the PAC primarily perform roles mostly pertinent to financial issues. Unlike in many other political systems, in the US political parties do not receive financial aids and contributions from state treasury. Most democratic countries, while having enacted laws that restrict financial contributions from outside sources, such as corporations and unions, make the usage of government funds possible and subsidize political parties in proportion to each party’s electoral representation. In the US, a similar path was followed and the US Congress in 1974 passed a plan called the Presidential Campaign Fund, which allowed taxpayers to authorize the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to donate a symbolic amount of their income tax to the fund that was to be used to subsidize presidential incumbents. However, only one taxpayer in four made such an authorization. As a consequence, the Congress repelled this fund in 1995 (Roskin et al., 2000: 199). That is to say, the public authority does not subsidize the activities of political parties. Therefore, those who would like to get elected are expected to find out their own financial resources in order to carry on their political campaigns.

The need to get financial support for their campaigns leads the political figures who are ambitious to get elected to rely on external resources. Conventionally, the political parties, aside from other functions, have performed this task. They have been the focal points for those who wish to make contributions to particular candidates. That

is to say, one of the reasons for that candidates for political posts align themselves with a political party has been the fact that political parties have been successful in attracting monies coming from external resources.

However, with the rise of PACs, the political parties have been weakened in attracting financial contributions. This has been interpreted as the decline of political party in the American political landscape. It is quiet obvious that this kind of approach is missing the other roles and functions that political parties had been playing. Limiting the political party's sphere of influence to financial matters only would lead to the conclusion that it is gradually declining. However, given its prominence in many respects, it could be asserted that the party is not a political tool that could be easily abandoned.

The present study seeks to unveil the current role that political parties play in the US political landscape and find a plausible answer to the question as to whether they are in decline as some prominent political scientists and pundits assert. The analysis first starts with a discussion on the place of political party in political theory and then deals with the core question by examining the validity of the assertions referring to party decline.

Political Party and Its Place in a Democratic Society:

Definition:

Central to the debate on the effectiveness and the future direction of the political party is the definition of the concept itself. The definition would suggest that the political party is the most significant invented mean for effective and fair political representation, and for a functional and legitimate electoral system. Even non-democratic regimes wield the magic of political party in order to maintain the legitimacy of the regime concerned. It has been a long-standing and widely used practice to use political parties, whether in a political competition or not, in order to ensure the viability of the political system in a particular country.

Political party can be defined as a social group which seeks to “wholly or partially take over the government of a country, usually by contesting elections” (Tansey, 1995: 174). While providing almost the same as the above definition, Daver (1994: 223) also adds another element. He emphasizes that political party is an organized group aiming at implementing its policy plans when acquiring the power.¹ In another definition made by Schlesinger (1985: 115), a political party is to be seen as the indication of “efforts to capture the offices of the state by the rules laid down by the state”. Therefore, a party is composed of office-seekers, and not of voters. Schlesinger asserts that the political party focuses on office-seekers, excluding “all those who see themselves primarily as choosers among parties, that is voters” from the party. This strongly implies that office seeking rather than representing the public has a dominant place in the direction of a political party.²

¹ For Kapani (1995: 160), to be considered as a political party, the concerned social group should have a permanent organizational structure.

² Nonetheless, in a way, political parties represent the masses. Political parties and pressure groups are “the agents of political mobilization. They are organizations through

Functions of political parties and democracy:

It is almost impossible to imagine a modern political life without political parties operating within it (Daver, 1994: 223). They are playing significant roles in all contemporary societies. Today, there are only a few traditional societies with non-party regimes. As such, it is essential to regard political parties as the necessary component of modern state (Kapani, 1995: 59).³

They are the most prominent institutions “linking citizens to the machinery of government” (Brown, 1995: 23). It is often asserted that “political parties transmit popular preferences into policy” (Stokes, 1999: 250). In addition, it has been proven that parties are important “in shaping how the electorate thinks and feels about those individuals who campaign under their banners” (Rahn, 1993: 493). Then, if they convey the preferences, opinions, and interests of the public to government, “the expression of societal interests or their suppression via the party system will critically influence the quality of democracy” (Stokes, 1999: 246).

The existence of political parties in modern democracies helps to “reduce the transaction costs in the electoral, parliamentary and governmental arenas” and “overcome the dilemma of collective action” (Muller, 2000: 309). They are also “reported to give order to legislative processes, reduce problems of multidimensionality of the issue space, and permit voters an object to hold to account” (Stokes, 1999: 244).

A political party performs several outstanding functions. It combines interests and demands, and transmits them into the appropriate channels. It also approximates masses to the government. Political leaders and personnel are elected through political parties. In the elections, party candidates “take advantage of their party’s ‘brand name’ for reasons of information economization and strategic voting. The candidates’ party label allows voters to make more informed judgments about how they will behave once elected. Once national parties have become the vehicles of political competition there is hardly a market left for individual candidates. Then voters vote for parties, rather than

which individual members of society may participate in certain types of political activity involving the defense or promotion of particular ideas, positions, situations, persons or groups through the political system” (Rush, 1992:113). It should also be noted that the scope of pressure groups as the agents of political mobilization is narrower than that of political parties. While the objectives of a pressure group are limited, a political party is normally created to focus on major problems of the society (Rush, 1992:113-114).

³ Their significance is also associated with the fact that they are essential for an operational democracy. “[True democracies] have a parliamentary form of government and two or more parties competing in free elections” (Cockerham, 1995: 523). Over the time, “the idea that political parties are essential for practicing democracy in the modern state has become dominant” (Muller, 2000: 309). As such, today “political parties are endemic to democracy” (Stokes, 1999: 245). In this regard, a one-party political system cannot be regarded as truly democratic.

individual candidates, because they do not want to waste their votes” (Muller, 2000: 313).⁴

In a democratic society, political parties recruit incumbents seeking office, help the formation of public opinion, invites the public to voting, control and criticize the government, assume the task of governing, and appoint and check the executives and officers (Daver, 1994: 229-230). Political parties make a strong and coherent collective action possible.⁵ The parties overcome the dilemma of collective action by leaders who internalize the collective interest of the party, and monitor the fellow partisans (Muller, 2000: 316).⁶

Political parties are essential for a political system; in order to make the government accountable. Democracy requires the elected leaders to be held responsible and accountable to the electorate, for the actions they are taking during their office terms. “Government policy is determined by the collective actions of many individual office-holders. No one person either can or should be held accountable for actions taken by the House, Senate and president together. The political party as a collective enterprise, organizing competition for the full range of offices, provides the only means for holding elected officials responsible for what they do collectively” (Aldrich, 1995: 3). Probably, the most important function of a political party is to govern when acquiring the power, and to check and control the government when in opposition (Kapani, 1995: 165-168).⁷

⁴ This is exactly what has been witnessed in the US since the inception of democratic political system. Voters have never significantly changed their preferences with regard to party choice. They have consistently adhered to the *de facto* two-party system. Although there have been some occasional attempts to integrate a third party to the political system, except a few examples, those attempts have failed. Notwithstanding the fact that parties themselves as organizations have changed dramatically, the system they had formed at the inception have not. Voters still continue voting for the two major parties, an indication for that party system of the US still works very well. Although it is often claimed that there remains a little trust and support for politicians and political institutions, including parties, voters seek no way other than voting for those two parties to indicate their preferences. Therefore, although they have “a less central role in the delegation process than 20 years ago both in their legitimacy and effectiveness”, “the party-based mechanisms still work, while far from perfect, political parties can still be considered the most important means to make delegation and accountability work” (Muller, 2000: 330-331).

⁵ They “solve the collective action problem by establishing” a party organization “which allows the monitoring of the other party members in order to ensure that they indeed contribute to the collective action” (Muller, 2000: 316).

⁶ Therefore, this suggests that although attractive, party leadership positions are elective, meaning that “there is internal competition for these positions and that incumbents can be held accountable if they fail to act in the collective interest” (Muller, 2000: 316).

⁷ Lastly, it should also be noted that ambition theory, which briefly explains the motivation of a politician to get elected, stipulates the existence of political parties. “No collection of ambitious politicians has long been able to think of a way to achieve their

Therefore, given the prominence of political parties, and their crucial place in a democratic society, Stokes (1999: 250) notes that “it is clear that parties are here to stay, an avoidable part of democracy”. As seen above, political party is the *sine qua non* component of a democratic system. Consequently, the removal of the political party from the political system cannot be suggested, as long as that system is claimed to be democratic and participatory.

If we turn to our particular case, we see that “[t]he world’s oldest continuous democracy is the United States” (Cockerham, 1995: 523). More strikingly, as Duverger reported, in 1850s, there were no political party, as we understand them today, except in the US (Saribay, 1996: 93). Moreover, many American political scientists think that “a competitive party system ensures the legitimacy of opposition to government, promotes public debate about policy options, and gets citizens involved in the public sphere. The [American] two-party system never does these things perfectly, but it does them well enough. Without it [American political] system would collapse overnight, leaving gridlock and hyperpluralism.” (Valelly, 2000: 48). Therefore, it does not seem possible to imagine “the oldest democracy” without competing political parties.

It should be noted that the founders of the American Republic were not in favor of party (Burke, 1998). They “tried to create institutions in which parties and ‘factions’ wither; yet parties appeared when American democracy was still in its infancy, just as they have reappeared in every democracy on earth” (Stokes, 1999: 244). The efforts of the founders could not have neither prevented nor delayed the emergence of political parties.⁸ The founders were against parties, but they were aware of their crucial place in the society. Although the founders of the US were “dead set against parties, they saw them as an inevitable by-product of the liberties associated with a republican community combined with the human propensity toward division and conflict” (Stokes, 1999: 245).⁹

Political parties have been so regarded in American political life that it is even argued that they “created American democracy out of a ‘small experiment in republicanism’ by drawing the masses into political life” (Stokes, 1999: 243). In particular the role the two major parties have played is worth noting in this regard: “Historically, the two dominant parties have been crucial instruments that elites have utilized to mobilize broad electoral coalitions. Competition between the parties and among groups within each party has helped elites arbitrate their differences. The parties also have worked as linking mechanisms between elites and the masses” (Hellinger and Brooks, 1991: 153). They have gained a more crucial place in the American political life over the time. For instance, postwar American political scientists have yearned for parties’ strengthening “that would allow party government” (Stokes, 1999: 244).

goals in this democracy save in terms of political parties” (Aldrich, 1995: 296). To meet their goals, politicians need political parties.

⁸ Despite their efforts “to design institutions to control parties and factions, within a decade of the birth of the American state they had begun to organize the new nation’s political life” (Stokes, 1999: 245).

⁹ For instance, Madison, while having strongly opposed political parties, and made five proposals to overcome the dangers they might pose, was of the opinion that political parties are unavoidable elements in every political society (Dahl, 2002: 33-34).

Political parties have existed and been active in the US political landscape since the establishment of American State, and the adoption of American Constitution. They were thought to be essential elements of domestic politics. As Duverger (1986: 279-280) points out, the American two-party system, while having transformed significantly, has never faced with an external or internal threat. Over the time, political parties have undergone remarkable changes; however, this has not negatively affected the existence of political parties. Indeed, the new environments created after the changes have often presented new opportunities. For instance, the new rules emerged after the dramatic changes since 1896 “created a structure of political opportunities that made easier for individual party members to go their own way within the parties at large” (Schlesinger, 1985: 1156). Moreover, American history has never witnessed a significant failure originated from party politics. This suggests that political parties have played their role very well and effectively. Therefore, it does not make any sense to claim that political party is not performing its role, and something else is replacing it. As Schlesinger (1985: 1152) states,

America’s political parties are alive and well. Despite more than a decade’s forebodings of decomposition, decline, and disappearance, the Republicans and Democrats continue to win all the elections and form all the governments. In such vital signs as the number and distribution of their candidates, in the amount of organized effort put into recruiting and campaigning for them, and in the degree to which they cooperate with their fellow partisans in government, the two parties show signs of strength as great, if not greater, than they have at any time in the past 50 years. It should be clear by now that the grab bag of assumptions, inferences, and half-truths that have fed the decline-of-party thesis is simply wrong.

The Claim That Political Parties Are in Decline in the US:

As noted earlier, political parties are inseparable elements of a democratic system. Therefore, given that the US is the heaven of democracy, and the leading defender of pluralism and freedom, it is already evident that political parties will continue to be playing central roles in the US politics. In that sense, it does not seem possible to regard the titles like *The Party’s Over* (Broder, 1972), which argues that American parties are gradually disintegrating and their main functions are being replaced by special interest groups and media images, as appropriate analysis on the matter. Yet there is at least a reasonable ground to claim that there is some evidence that would lead us to conclude that political parties in the US are in decline. So, the debate should be on the level of importance of political parties, and not on whether they are completely useless.

The issue of whether the American political parties are in decline is so controversial that it is quite possible to find extremely different views on the matter. Debating the significance of the party in American politics, political pundits are mainly divided into three groups: opponents who assert the decline of party; proponents who

admit the radical change of party, but defend that it is still very strong as it used to be in the past; and those who do not give too much importance to party (Valelly, 2000: 48).¹⁰

It is asserted that this decline is closely tied to the rise of political action committees. Yet some also refer to the fact that candidates for political offices now frequently employ consultants in order to get elected. It is a usual practice in American politics that “presidential candidates do not depend solely upon the formal party machinery to conduct their campaigns. They gather round themselves groups of men dedicated to their support who will organize the fight from the primary stage to the general election” (Vile, 1976: 73). This trend, it is argued, brought the need for “political money” to the fore. Therefore, “after 1960s, an immense new demand grew for politicians and groups to engage in nonstop fund-raising” (Hecllo, 2000: 26).

However, Kolodny and Dulio (2003) find results that are contrary to the argument that use of political consultants by political parties and candidates undermines the effectiveness and influence of political parties. They argue that American political parties have deliberately chosen to employ political consultants for their candidates’ needs in order to ensure their election. Hence, consultant use by political parties does not necessarily mean party decline, but party adaptation.

Some scholars, while admitting that the political parties used to be in decline, stress that they are now very well alive. Therefore, for them, party decline was temporary. For instance, Fiorina (2002) argues that during 1960s and 1970s, the role of the political parties has been weakened. However, 1980s and 1990s witnessed the resurgence of American political parties. McKay (2005: 100) also contends that the 1990s has witnessed a revival of American political parties. He finds that the influence of parties in government has by some measures increased since the 1980s. Both Reagan and Bush administrations managed to display an unusual degree of ideological coherence in government (McKay, 2005: 97). Based on this, he concludes that “although most Americans continue to describe themselves as political ‘moderates’, opinion is increasingly led by politicians and activists who help polarize views on contentious issues” (McKay, 2005: 101).

Some others, while contending that there is a party decline, argue that this decline does not lead to the conclusion that party is useless in politics. For instance, DeSart (1995) finds support for the notion of party decline; yet he contends that those findings suggest that such a decline does not necessarily entail the perceived irrelevance of parties as accountability mechanisms. As a similar conclusion, contributors to the volume edited by Cohen, Fleisher and Kantor (2001) offer a balanced portrait and a wide variety of views about the weakening of the parties and their signs of resurgence.¹¹

¹⁰ Herrnson (1986: 590-591) introduces some proponents and opponents of political party, along with their opinions pertinent to the decline of party. Opponents argue that the influence of political parties has decreased, and their role has been limited in the recruitment and nomination processes. There is a vast literature on party decline in the US (i.e., Wattenberg, 1981; Wattenberg, 1991; Wattenberg, 1998; Crotty, 1984).

¹¹ A quite different view was presented by John J. Coleman, probably the most ardent supporter of party decline thesis. Contrary to the other defenders of party decline thesis, Coleman (1996a) associates the decline of political party with the removal of ideological differences between the Democrats and the Republicans. However, what

Those who refuse the argument that party is in decline tend to regard the change that political parties have been undergoing for several decades as a transition rather than a decline. Some even claim that political parties are still alive and very strong in American politics (i.e., Pomper, 1996). It should also be noted that the debate over whether the political party is in decline is not peculiar to the American political system.

Some scholars argue that political parties are losing power and strength in Western European political systems. Webb (1995: 292) argues that even though “the theme probably figured initially in the American literature in the mid-1960s and has continued to develop since that time... in a number of western democracies examples can be found of observers who perceive parties to be 'in decline', or at least under severe pressure in these or other senses.” Dalton (2002), in his study where he examines the decline in party identification across nineteen advanced democracies, finds that there is a substantial decline in the number of individuals who identify themselves as partisans. Dalton (2002) finds that class-based voting has declined in the US as well as Great Britain, Germany and France. Based on his findings, he concludes that political parties that have relied on social classes and religious considerations are likely to be in decline.¹²

Those who deny the party decline thesis assert that political parties in the present political environment are perfectly adapting themselves to the contemporary needs and taking new functions and responsibilities. As Herrnson (1986: 594) points out, the developments occurring at various party committees provide support for the argument that “parties are capable of adapting to the changing political environment”. Another support for the argument that parties are adapting to major transformations comes from Dodson (1990: 119):

Americans mobilized by political causes have often found partisan campaigns attractive arenas in which to pursue their goals, for political parties and the public officials elected under their banners have considerable influence over governmental agenda setting and public policy. The attraction of new activists to partisan politics may be a sign that parties are responsive to societal change.

makes his argument unique and different is that he bases the lack of ideological differences between the two major parties on their convergence on economic policies. Coleman asserted that before the introduction of the New Deal package by the Democrats in 1930s, trade policy was the major, if not the only, issue that differentiated the Democratic and the Republican parties. However, Coleman argues that the acceptance of Keynesian tenets in macroeconomic issues by both the Democrats and the Republicans led to the weakening of the parties. The use of basic tenets of Keynesian economic approach led both parties to adopt similar policies during periods of economic stress and depression. He continues saying that the removal of the primary distinguishing characteristics between the two major political parties eventually weakened both.

¹² Likewise, Scarrow (2002) finds out that party legitimacy and party attachment have declined in Germany during 1990s.

In their study where they conduct a survey research among voters, Cotter and Bibby (1980) conclude that while party identification is declining, the national party committees are becoming more and more important and stronger. Furthermore, it is asserted that “increasing numbers of voters are declaring themselves political independents and splitting their tickets” (Wattenberg, 1981: 941). As a supporting argument, Hetherington (1999: 311) notes that “partisanship is increasingly less useful to voters in a candidate-centered era”. In the current state of affair, political campaigns are candidate-centered; thus, “the link between parties and candidates is substantially weakened, and that political parties are meaningless to the electorate” (Wattenberg, 1981: 941). In their study on partisanship in the US Clarke and Stewart (1998: 358) state that “the most salient characteristic of partisanship since it was first measured in national election surveys in the 1950s has been its long-term erosion in what has become a protracted era of de-alignment in the United States”. As a consequence, “voters increasingly see fewer important differences between the Democrats and the Republicans” (Wattenberg, 1981: 942).¹³

Wattenberg (1981: 944-945) attributes the emergence of candidates as the focus of voters, and political parties’ decline in importance in the elections to the growth of mass media and candidate-centered campaigns. In the presidential selection process, he argues, the importance of parties has been severely weakened. He asserts that while parties identify themselves by different ideological preferences and tendencies, “on the crucial short-run policy issues of the day it is the candidates which now matter most”.

As seen above, the argument that political party is in decline in the US is also largely based on the assumption that candidates themselves, and not the political party they are nominated by, are selected by the voters. In other words, the votes a political party gets in the elections in fact belong to the party candidate. The fact that partisanship, “as measured by responses to standard questions on party identifications, appear to have weakened apparently in the US” (Clarke and Stewart, 1998: 373) supports the aforesaid argument. While party has become less important, candidates have gained prominence. Wattenberg (1981:947) states on this matter that voting research has shown that “the effect of candidate images on the vote has increased over the years, while the effect of party images has declined”.

According to the argument, this created a political environment in which “candidates no longer need the parties in order to win elections” (Wattenberg, 1981: 947). Consequently, these trends are read as “the end of parties, as we know them” (Wattenberg, 1981: 941). In *The American Prospect*, an influential liberal publication, Amy Burke (1998) adopts the same path asserting that “parties have long been in decline, supplanted by media, money, interest groups, and candidate-centered politics. The party platform, once the fulcrum of great national debates, scarcely matters today.

¹³ Although it is generally held among scholars that voters refrain from identifying themselves with a political party, this view should be critically evaluated. Surveys conducted among the voters suggest that most Americans align themselves with one of the two major American political parties. For instance, in 2003, nearly 31 percent of Americans identified themselves with the Democrats and 30 percent with the Republicans (Greenblatt, 2004: 376).

And, paradoxically, some of the very reforms that progressives designed—to clean up politics, empower ordinary people, and buffer the excesses of a market economy—have weakened parties, thus making it harder to elect durable progressive governing coalitions.”

Assessing the Validity of the Argument:

Those who claim that political party is declining frequently refer to the proliferation of political action committees (PACs) over the last three and so decades. According to the claim, PACs are now more important than political parties in presidential campaigns. In that sense, PACs are replacing political parties. However, a detailed examination will reveal that PACs are performing new roles other than political parties have been playing. Therefore, political parties are not declining, rather; they are transforming. PACs, as the new actors in American politics, are playing their own roles, not those of the parties.

It is argued that political reform in the United States in the 1970s reduced the importance of political parties in presidential campaigns. Laws enacted at that time, required candidates to disclose the amount of money they received for their campaigns, limited the amount of money that citizens and political organizations can contribute to them. This reinforced the candidates to launch their campaigns very early, and made political parties less significant. Moreover, from that date on, most of the money contributed has started to go to the candidate’s campaign organization, not to parties. Therefore, candidates have become to feel themselves less dependent to the parties. The situation stated above led an enormous increase in the number of political action committees. In 1974, there were 600 PACs. In four years, the number reached to 1900. In 1978, PACs contributed eight times as much money to the candidates as the parties did combined. So, the candidates no longer needed the parties in order to get elected (Rodee et. al., 1983: 364-365). At the first sight, it seems that increasing number of political action committees poses a threat for party organizations in influencing candidates and voters. However, “[d]ata collected from nearly 400 House candidates reveal that party organizations continue to play an important role in congressional elections.” (Herrnson, 1986: 599).¹⁴

The emergence of PACs as new actors in the US internal politics could largely be attributed to the changing environment, and its subsequent implications. The 1960s are of interest in the sense that since then the candidate-centered campaigns have started to emerge. Martin Wattenberg (1991) points out that since the presidential elections in 1964, the candidates have come to the fore. It is asserted that in the new political

¹⁴ Moreover, some argue that the party decline in the US is not a recent phenomenon, which indirectly suggests that it cannot be directly attributed to the emergence of PACs. For instance, in the study where he examines the decline of political parties in post-Civil War America and analyzes the impact of this decline on the presidency and presidential leadership, based on the primary documents from 19th century presidential elections, Korzi (2004) argues that parties began to decline significantly in the late 19th century. His research also suggests that post-Civil War America was, contrary to the common belief, not a "Golden Age" for the political parties and that they began to lose power during this period.

landscape, “the parties have largely been supplanted by professional campaign staffs, media specialists, fundraisers, pollsters, political action committees, and other players as ‘gatekeepers’ in the election process.” This replacement has been due to the fact that the possessors of the technology have gained prominence. However, for Hellinger and Brooks (1991: 153), the entrance of the actors possessing the technology into the political processes has been predatory:

Elections managed by a professional campaign industry possessing the technology to frame issues and candidates' images cannot fulfill the same function as elections conducted through a party system. Media-based elections do not provide an opportunity for mediation and bargaining among elites, and they do not forge a link between the electorate and the elites that win government power. Failing to fulfill their historic political functions, elections in the United States have become increasingly marginal to the governmental apparatus. They have become a part of America's television culture, peopled with media stars and contrived soap opera drama.

The technological transformation has had the greatest impact on this new state of affair. Financing the presidential campaigns has significantly changed due to the great technological advance. This has led to the rise of concern about the adaptability of the political parties to the changing environment (Herrnson, 1986: 602). The underlying reason for the rise of concerns is that “the transformation of a ‘high-tech’, cash-oriented system of campaign politics has meant that the candidates of today need to raise substantially more money than did their predecessors” (Herrnson, 1992: 866). As a consequence, “new technology in the 1960s allowed politicians to gain nomination and office without strong reliance on a political party. Politicians now accept assistance from the party but not control by the party. The mass party dissolved in bargain” (Coleman, 1996b: 1215).

It could be argued that the new conditions created an environment in which candidates might be at least partially independent of a political party. Those conditions brought the PACs into effect, as new actors specifically designed to alleviate the financial burden of the candidate in the presidential campaigns. This suggests that PACs are performing finance-related functions that reduce ‘transaction cost’. However, it should be noted that PACs are not the only financial contributors to the candidates. In addition to PACs, political parties and individuals as well can make monetary contributions to the candidates. Furthermore, the candidate needs to create attractive campaigns in order to ensure the maximum benefit from the contributors:

Contemporary congressional elections require a candidate to assemble an organization that can conduct technologically sophisticated campaign activities and raise large amounts of money from political parties, political action committees (PACs), and individuals” (Herrnson, 1992: 859).

This means that political parties are still playing –although limited in comparison to the past- their role in financing the campaigns. Besides, they do not go after every

candidate. Instead, given their dominance in the system, and their recognition and acceptance as the leading mean of representation by the public, it is the candidate who seeks to ensure the support of the party. Therefore, the party selects the best candidate, and the candidate is to prove that he/she will be successful in the elections.

Political parties, PACs, and individuals who make large contributions seek to invest their money where it will have the greatest impact. One of the factors they use to evaluate the competitiveness of congressional races is the quality of the campaign organizations that candidates assemble (Herrnson, 1992: 860).

Therefore, it is quite obvious that candidates have to still rely on political parties, even for monetary reasons. Political parties are still central to the success of the candidates for political posts in that the financial contribution from the party helps the candidates win the elections. Contrary to the long-standing assumption that financial contributions from political parties to the candidates have little or no influence over the voters' choices, Medvic (2001) concludes in his study that party's financial support can increase the candidate's share of the electorate.

One of the remarkable issues, which lead us to ponder over the role of party in the politics, is whether American political system is experiencing realignment. Sundquist (1973: 559-567) is examining several election results to determine whether there is a steady tendency towards one of two major parties of American politics. Eventually, he reached the conclusion that there is no precise shift, which can be interpreted as realignment.

The basic explanation for the situation described above can be based on the ideological identities of political parties, operating in American political system. Although ideology is somehow important in American politics, it does not constitute the difference between two major parties in the system. Yet they are believed to have some basic characteristics, which can be seen as distinguishing factors. For instance, Democratic Party is believed to pursue policies in favor of working class, and the Republican Party is seen as the party of big business.

According to Campbell (2002: 209), Democrats and Republicans are divided along religious lines. While Republicans identify themselves as religiously committed voters, Democrats are more likely to be secularly oriented voters. Alt and Lowry (1994: 811) provide another example. They state that "[a]ggregate state budget totals are driven by different factors under Democrats and Republicans, the net result being that Democrats target spending (and taxes) to higher shares of state-level personal income". Moreover, many in the US attach themselves to a political party, based on where he was born, or where he lives. Moreover, the parties' differentiation along ideological lines has recently been seen and perfectly sensed. McKay (2005: 97) argues that "the 2000 vote confirmed that the Republicans as the party of rural and Southern conservatives, older white males, and white nuclear families, while the Democrats became increasingly associated with metropolitan areas, working women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the less advantaged. This trend continued in 2004."

However, these so-called characteristics do not always come true. For instance, a survey conducted among white-collar workers in 1959 showed that thirty-four percent of the workers thought that the Republicans best represented their interest. However,

thirty-two percent were in favor of Democratic Party. Moreover, there is no absolute coherence within even each of the parties. It is always seen that there are party members, who feel sympathy towards the opponent one in particular issues (Vile, 1976: 87-88). This suggests that there is no significant difference between the two major parties. They are not strictly ideology-oriented; do not have precise and strongly binding procedures that their members feel obligated to follow. They are in fact designed as “election winning machines” (Kapani, 1995: 182).

Because American political parties do not have ideological or sociological bases, and do not adhere to guiding doctrines, they have become organizations aiming at gaining administrative and political offices, and most of the times, seeking to select the candidate in pre-elections (Duverger, 1986: 281). As Vile (1976: 58) notes on this matter, “the major function of American political parties is to provide candidates for office and to secure their election. The effective offices for which candidates have to be nominated are very numerous, particularly at State and local levels.” What this implies is that American political parties are quite different from their counterparts in Europe or elsewhere in the world. They are inherently weak, so to speak, and loosely structured. As a consequence, they are not highly centralized. This resulted in that “national party organizations have had a very restricted function to perform in the political system, concerning themselves mainly with the nomination and election of presidential candidates... Thus rather than a single party system we have fifty State party systems with the national political parties related to them in a complex pattern of alliances” (Vile, 1976: 59). This has to suggest that American political parties have always been decentralized and unique. Therefore, it does not seem meaningful to claim that American parties are in decline given their present decentralized structure.¹⁵

Political Action Committees (PACs) and Their Impact in the Elections:

What is a Political Action Committee?

¹⁵ The lax differentiation of parties can be tied to the historical background of the United States. It has not experienced a serious class effect over the societal combination, and thus, political outcomes. “It was a society without the heritage of feudalism and, therefore, without a need either to continue to pay tribute to an aristocracy with diminished capacity, as in Great Britain, or to purge itself through violence, as in France or Eastern Europe. This analytic tool was developed by Tocqueville (especially Chapter 3) who suggested that class and social position had a diluted influence in American society” (Krislov, 2001:10-11). Moreover, the United States has always had a middle-class, without extreme inclinations (Vile, 1976: 13). The lack of class effect created a society, which is not divided by ideological conflicts. Thus, cooperation became the main aspect of American politics. The ideologically closeness of political parties in the United States reflects this cooperation. Of course, this state created party non-alignment among both the public and party members. In this context, what we should take into consideration is that non-alignment does not mean that political parties are going to be obsolete in the near or far future, since the system has co-existed with political parties so far. Since social and political systems of the United States have not changed drastically so far, the decline of the party cannot be suggested.

Political Action Committee (PAC) is an organization that is unlikely to be found in a Western democracy other than the US. It is generally formed by a corporation, labor union, or association to raise money for political activities of the candidates for political offices at various levels. Funds can be gathered by voluntary contributions from members, employees, or shareholders. Many politicians also form “Leadership PACs” as a way of raising money to make contributions to other candidates’ campaigns. Although these kinds of PACs are not technically affiliated with the candidate, they are “often indicative of a politician’s aspirations for leadership positions in Congress or for higher office” (Center for Responsive Politics, 2005a).

PACs were first organized in the 1940s. It is generally contended that that PAC organized by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1943 was a model for later PACs. The limitations imposed on individual campaign contributions by the election reform of 1974 and the guidelines for PACs set by this reform caused a rapid increase in the number of PACs. Since then, their numbers grew rapidly from 600 in 1974 to more than 4,000 in 1988 and reached 5,000 in 2000 (Roskin et. al, 2000: 176). However, they now number about 3,800, an indication for the their relative decline in the electoral processes. According to the reports released by *The Federal Election Commission*, there has been a substantial increase in the number of PACs since 1977. However, this increase has slowed down beginning from 1988. Since then, the number of PACs started to decrease. It is also important to note that the only remarkable increase has been in the number of “corporate” and “non-connected” PACs. While the number of corporate PACs was just below 600 in 1977, it made a peak of 1800 in 1988 and then dropped to below 1600 in 1998 (Federal Election Commission, 2005a).

Although the initial PACs were in form of labor unions, over the time business PACs have proliferated in number and today their number is far more than labor PACs (Roskin et, al, 2000: 176). While many represent special-interest groups, others represent large conservative or liberal coalitions, a fact suggesting that they are divided parallel to two major political parties’ lines.

Most PACs have directed their contributions toward congressional elections, in which they can contribute up to \$5,000 to a candidate for each campaign. “Some, however, have conducted independent negative campaigns against candidates they oppose. Increased campaign contributions by PACs have raised fears that legislators may accede to pressure from these groups and become less responsive to their constituents. Federal legislation enacted in 2002 forbids attacks on candidates by name immediately before an election” (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2005).

Do PACs Pose a Threat to the Primacy of Political Parties in American Politics?

Although the PACs have dramatically gained prominence over the time and become influential to some extent, it does not seem possible to suggest that this prominence will erode the political party’s importance in the US political landscape. First of all, their contribution to the candidates for political offices is limited to financial matters. In other words, candidates need them in money matters only. However, as noted earlier, political parties are playing eminent roles that are unlikely to be performed by PACs.

Secondly, it seems that the role of PACs concerning monetary matters is extremely exaggerated. Although it is evident that PACs make financial contributions in huge amounts to the candidates they are in favor of, they are not the only financial

sources for the candidates. In fact, the proportion of the PACs' contributions in the whole campaign spending of the candidates is quite low. It is possible to claim that PACs are in a position to influence the decisions of the candidates they have made contributions to, given that their contribution is limited, it is also possible to say that PACs could not be determinative over the decisions taken by the politicians.

Statistics show that the candidates for political offices are increasingly spending more money. In each election period, American people witness a substantial increase in campaign spending in comparison to the prior one. As a consequence, the contributions made by PACs also increase, but so do the ones made by ordinary individuals. For instance, Democratic Party's presidential candidate Bill Clinton spent about \$43 million in his campaigns for 1996 presidential elections. The Democrat subtotal was nearly \$46 million in the same period. The total receipts of the Republicans neared \$187 million. The contributions of political action committees to Clinton's campaign was only \$42,441, 0.1 percent of the total. The PACs made a contribution of \$43,441 in total to all Democratic Party candidates. This figure was \$2.5 million for the Republicans; however this total contribution constituted only 1.5 percent of total Republican receipts. Overall, the contributions made by PACs amounted \$2,505,758 only, lower than 1 percent of the total receipts of \$244 million (Corrado, 1997: 138-139). This means a substantial increase in campaign spending when compared to the total spending of \$126 million in 1992 (Corrado, 1997: 137).

For the presidential elections of 2004, Democratic Party candidate Al Gore received \$133 million during the 1999-2000 cycle. While \$45 million came from individuals, PACs made no contribution (Federal Election Commission, 2005b). Patrick Buchanan of Reform Party, one of the leading third parties that had the potential the outcome of the elections, received \$57 million in total, of which only \$1,000 came from PACs (Federal Election Commission, 2005c). In the same period, George W. Bush, the presidential candidate of the Republican Party received \$193 million in total, of which only \$2,229,056 came from PACs (Federal Election Commission, 2005d). Ralph Nader, a popular political figure who had no party affiliation in the presidential elections of 2000 raised \$13,761,993, of which \$390 came from PACs (Federal Election Commission, 2005e).

John F. Kerry, the Democratic Party candidate for the presidential elections of 2004 received \$346 million in total, of which \$224 million came from individuals and only \$141,918 PACs (Federal Election Commission, 2005f). George W. Bush of the Republican Party received \$374,659,453 in the 2003-2004 cycle. PACs made a contribution of \$2,917,017 to Bush's presidential campaign (Federal Election Commission, 2005g).

The substantial rise in campaign spending is not limited to presidential election only. Candidates for both the US Senate and the House of Representatives had to face difficulties pertinent to monetary matters. The need for political money has recently become so severe that while in 1960s and 1970s the House and Senate candidates had to raise money in election times only, by the mid-1980s, "many members had begun raising money early in the off-election year or soon after arriving in Washington" (Corrado, 2000: 77). It is asserted that "rising campaign costs, changing political tactics, and shifting congressional mores have combined to enhance the significance of fund-raising and the role of money in the political process" (Corrado, 2000: 76). Whatever

the reason is for the tendency to raise more money than ever, what is worth noting is the outcome of this tendency. Now both candidates for the posts in the Congress and the members of Congress are engaged in permanent campaign in order to cover their financial needs. Hence, “the quest for campaign dollars has become so persistent and pervasive that members of Congress are commonly described as being entrenched in a ‘money chase’ or a ‘fund-raising arms race’ to which there is no end in sight” (Corrado, 2000: 75).

As just noted, the total spending made by the candidates for legislative branches of the US has dramatically increased over the time. While total expenditures in 1974 were \$88.2 million, it became \$194.8 million in next presidential election period. The increase rate slowed down later. Nevertheless, the absolute figure has continued to increase. For instance, candidates for the Senate and the House spent \$678.3 million in 1992 and \$759.1million in 1996. The increase in the average spending per candidate is even more dramatic. While the increase in the total spending has been eight-fold between 1974 and 1998, the average spending per candidate for the House has increased from \$56,539 in 1974 to 632,716 in 1998, more than ten-fold. This figure was \$555,714 per candidate for the Senate in 1974 and \$4,733,793 in 1998, marking an increase of more than nine-fold (Corrado, 2000: 78). In 2004, 1213 candidates for the political posts in the House raised an amount just below \$700 million, and 190 candidates for the Senate raised \$490 million. It is important to note that just \$300 million of the total amount of \$1,190 million came from PACs (Center for Responsive Politics, 2005b).

Conclusion: Political Party in the US: In Decline or In Transformation?

Even though parties are vital, they are weakening in current political environment, due to the effects of the ever-changing environment. But, this does not necessarily mean that parties are coming to an end. Instead, they are in transformation. Their roles have changed gradually, and now they are rapidly adapting themselves to the new conditions. “Instead of the traditional view of parties being more important than the candidate, parties are now in service to their candidates; they are structured to advance the needs and interests of ambitious politicians.” (Aldrich, 1995: 293). Now, candidates are at the center of the political process. Yet political parties are still the inseparable components of this process. Candidates still excessively need political parties in order to get elected. Therefore, although the traditional role the parties used to play is changing, they are successfully transforming.

It is true that political parties have changed remarkably since the inception of the American federalist system: “the parties are different from what they were” five or so decades ago (Schlesinger, 1985: 1152). Some even goes further, arguing that American political parties are constantly changing. McKay (2005: 80) is of the opinion that “in organization and function, the parties have changed quite dramatically over the past 230 years –and indeed have changed considerably over the past 30 years.” However, this could not be an evidence for arguing that political parties are in decline. To the quite contrary, they are assuming new roles. They “have departed the era of mass party and entered a new era of the service party. This new party provides electoral services that complement the candidate-centered campaigning of its members. Parties have not so much declined” as changed (Coleman, 1996b: 1216). What has happened is that the old mass parties simply did not survive the realignment that occurred in the late

1960s, and were replaced by new type of parties, which could be perfectly called as parties-in-service to candidates. Those new parties “have quite different activist cadres and supporters from the older ones” (Burnham, 1997: 10).

The US has a unique political system, in which political parties have been playing some different roles from those of the parties in anywhere else in the world. Due to some special features of American political system, and the special place of parties in it, concerns about the future of political party have been voiced in the US. It is occasionally even argued that political party is not necessary for a better representation of public in political processes.

However, in this study, it is claimed that imagining the absence of political parties in the system and political processes is impossible. There are mainly two reasons for this argument. First is theory-related: political theory suggests that a democratic regime is not sustainable and even unimaginable without contesting political parties. Second is that the transformation of American parties is not an evidence for its decline. In fact, American parties have been changing since the very beginning. Therefore, the transformation that has strongly been felt over the last three decades is actually not a recent case. American political parties have consistently demonstrated that they are perfectly capable of adapting themselves to the contemporary needs of the changing environment, and have succeeded to undergo appropriate transformations.

For this reason, the fact that the parties are now in transition does not necessarily mean that they are seen as useless by the candidates who are more central than ever in political processes. It could be said that it is the candidates that matter most now; but it is equally true that they strongly need the parties in order to get elected. In that sense, too, political parties are still alive. One more point is worth noting: American political system is so different and unique that it is not reasonable to compare American political parties to their counterparts in advanced democracies.

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