A Short History of New York's Two Major Parties

by

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EDITORS' NOTE: Often the best way to understand the present is to study the past. In this essay, the author describes the three historical party systems of New York and the events and people that have shaped the Republican and Democratic Parties of today.
Although minor parties often have existed in New York State as they do today, a vital two-party political system has been the dominant characteristic of state government for nearly two hundred years. Like their national counterparts, New York State's two major parties have been spreading umbrellas under which assorted political viewpoints have sought shelter. Despite the absence of clear ideological differences (there is no consistent conservative versus liberal split), Federalists, Whigs and modern Republicans have leaned toward conservative, business politics. The opposition Democrats, earlier called Democratic-Republicans or just plain Republicans, have been more attentive to downstate immigrants and working people throughout the state.

Reform has been a strong feature of the parties during various stages of their evolution, manifesting itself in different ways. Republican reform, and Federalist and Whig reform before it, have come with a strong dose of noblesse oblige, as in the state career of Theodore Roosevelt. Democratic reform, and certainly Democratic rhetoric, have had more proletarian roots. The forward looking governorship of Al Smith is an example. Bear in mind that these are generalizations which break down under close scrutiny. Thus, Franklin Roosevelt fulfilled Hamilton's criteria of being both "rich and well born." Yet Franklin Roosevelt was a Democrat. Nevertheless, broad generalizations are useful in making sense of the muddy political waters of New York State's two party systems.

Another generalization is the strong influence of New York's political leaders in the national arena. In this century alone, New York State governors have played an extraordinary role in United States politics. These include Theodore Roosevelt, Charles Evans Hughes, Alfred E. Smith, Franklin Roosevelt, Herbert Lehman, Thomas Dewey, and Nelson Rockefeller.

Both parties have contributed to the talent pool, but not equally in each period of history. For despite the persistence of a two-party system, seldom have the two parties alternated holding power every two or four years. Instead, one party dominated an entire era to be succeeded, sometimes decades later, by the party waiting in the wings.¹ From the end of World War I to the middle of World War II, the governorship was in Democratic hands for all but two years. From 1944 to 1975, the State House was controlled by Republican governors, except for four years.² It appears that currently the governorship is again in a Demo-

Often the New York State legislature has worked against the governor, miring the state in political stalemate. Early in the nineteenth century, for example, Federalist legislatures often ruled with Democratic-Republican governors³ and in this century even extremely popular Democratic governors—Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Lehman are two—have been forced to share power with Republican controlled legislatures. But this state of affairs is less disruptive to the political process than it might appear, especially when the state is led by a strong executive; and the state has been blessed with a great number of forceful and visionary governors.

The Emergence of Political Parties

Although something resembling parties was in existence in colonial New York, these entities were simply factions that coalesced around political families such as the Livingstons, Schuyler and DeLanceys. They were not parties in the modern sense of the word. It is to George Washington's first term in office that we must look for the beginning of the two-party system both in the state as well as the nation.⁴

The first two parties were the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. The recognized head and ideological leader of the Federalists was an adopted son of New York, Alexander Hamilton. As Washington's trusted Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton supported measures to strengthen the national government at the expense of the states. John Jay, the first chief justice of the United States, was the only Federalist governor of the state. Other leading Federalists included Philip Schuyler and Robert Livingston. While there were simply too many Federalists for them all to be "rich and well born," it is true that most of the large property holders in New York were Federalists. Federalists, often accused of aristocratic leanings, did, in fact, distrust democratic principles.

The opposition Democratic-Republicans supported the states rights, agrarian views of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. George Clinton,

### EVOLUTION OF THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES IN NEW YORK STATE

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New York's first governor, was a devout Jeffersonian, and extremely popular among the state's lower classes.

The differences in outlook between the two parties were exacerbated by foreign policy issues. Hamilton's financial program necessitated a British connection, while Democratic-Republicans led by Jefferson, were "well-wishers" of the French Revolution. The well-publicized marriage of George Clinton's daughter to "Citizen" Genet, representative of the French revolutionary government in the United States, accentuated party differences, even within the confines of state politics.

George Clinton nurtured the political ambitions of Aaron Burr, who had a promising career before running for vice-president on Jefferson's ticket in 1800. Due to an omission in the Constitution (later corrected by the twelfth amendment which prescribed separate ballots for president and vice-president), and a display of perfect party discipline by Democratic-Republican electors, Burr tied with Jefferson for president in the electoral college. Hamilton's was the leading voice in the selection of Jefferson over Burr for President in 1800. The long standing personal and political enmity between Hamilton and Burr resulted in Jefferson's election, and the subsequent death of Hamilton, New York's greatest Federalist, as a result of a duel with Burr in 1804. Thereafter, Burr's strange career as an adventurer, and his trial for treason (although he was found not guilty) short-circuited the political ambitions of one of the state's most colorful figures.

These leadership losses notwithstanding, New York politics, in the early nineteenth century was filled with men of extraordinary talent. The most influential was De Witt Clinton, nephew of the state's first governor. He served as mayor of New York City in the early part of the century, while simultaneously holding state office, first as a member of the senate and then as lieutenant-governor. In 1817, he was elected governor for the first time, polling better than 95 percent of the vote. His administrations had an enormous impact upon the state. Clinton was largely responsible for introducing the spoils system into New York politics, and particularly for making the Tammany Society a powerful political machine of the Democratic-Republicans. The state's public school system took its first tentative steps under the watchful eye of De Witt Clinton. But he is best known for his vigorous support of the project linking the Great Lakes to the Hudson River and New York City, the Erie Canal. Despite strong opposition from within Tammany, and Martin Van Buren's upstate followers, Clinton and his canal remained exceedingly popular.

Meanwhile, following the War of 1812, the Federalist Party, which had been hostile to the war with England, was viewed by the country at large as vaguely treasonous. The Federalists soon disappeared from the national scene. However, in New York, the Federalists held on longer than elsewhere, keeping up the semblance of opposition to the Democratic-Republicans until 1820. But Democratic-Republicans found little joy in their dominance of state politics. The party became increasingly factionalized in the two decades following the War of 1812. Each faction was united less by issues than by devotion to a leader and the spoils that success at the polls would bring.

The major anti-Clinton faction was led by New York's master politician of the early nineteenth century, Martin Van Buren, whose supporters were known as Bucktails because they sported the tails of deer in their hats. Van Buren was a strong advocate of the spoils system as a means of promoting party discipline. Bucktail leaders, collectively known as the Albany Regency, merged into the radical wing of the Democratic party (later known as Barnburners). Radical leaders such as Van Buren, Silas Wright and William Marcy, with a strong following of farmers and laborers, were parsimonious in spending for public improvements and slow to grant charters for banks. They stood against the extension of slavery into the territories. The radicals were opposed by the conservative Hunkers (accused of "hunkering" after office), like Horatio Seymour, who, eager to retain a national outlook, were cautious on the emerging slavery issue and earnestly promoted canal building and bank charters.

Two Major Parties

The Whig Party Challenges Andrew Jackson

During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, full-fledged national and state parties arose to counter the strong leadership of "King Andrew." Taking their name from the historic opposition party to the King of England, the anti-Jacksonians called themselves Whigs. In New York State, led by the brilliant editor, Thurlow Weed, the Whigs built upon the political opposition to the secretive Masonic Order, the Anti-Masons. Whigs were usually "haves," in favor of internal improvements, protective tariffs and a strong banking system. On the national level, Henry Clay's American System was the clearest expression of Whig belief. Meanwhile, Van Buren became the leader of the Jacksonians who soon dropped Republican from their name in favor of the simpler Democrat. Both nationally and in New York State, the second American party system was born.

In 1838, Weed engineered the election of his protege, William Seward, to the governorship. The Whig triumph, however, was short-lived. Widespread opposition to the Whigs' penchant for spending huge sums for canals and railroads soon returned the Democrats to power. By the late 1840s, the political division between Whig and Democrat had grown

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murky. Both parties contained dissident factions, and large groups of voters joined third-party movements, especially the anti-immigrant American or Know-Nothing Party. A particular New York political issue involved large numbers of tenant farmers who worked their lands under archaic lease-holds. These farmers voted for candidates running under anti-rent banners.

In 1848, a national issue split the Democratic Party. The subject was the Wilmot Proviso, which was designed to exclude slavery from any lands acquired from Mexico. The Hunkers opposed the Proviso; the Barnburners supported it. Barnburners, responding to a call from a rising star in the New York organization, Samuel Tilden, met at Utica in June, 1848, to form their own party. They nominated Martin Van Buren for president and John A. Dix for governor. Later that summer they joined forces with delegates from eighteen states to form the Free Soil Party. The Free Soilers of 1848 in both membership and ideology foreshadowed the Republican Party of the next decade.

Meanwhile, the split in Democratic ranks resulted in a Whig victory in the state and the nation in 1848. In 1849, William Seward became a U.S. Senator from New York. When President Zachary Taylor died the following year, Vice-President Millard Fillmore, a New York Whig from Cayuga County, became president. His support of the 1850 Compromise, and particularly the hated Fugitive Slave Law, caused a schism in the state party. Weed and Fillmore went their separate ways. Pro-Fillmore conservatives, known as Silver Grays, the color of the hair of their leader, Francis Granger, walked out of the Whig Party rather than be dominated by “Woolly Heads,” as Weed and Seward men were called.

Because of the lack of Whig cohesion in 1852, Democrat Horatio Seymour was elected governor. Herald Tribune editor Horace Greeley proclaimed the death of the Whig organization. However, in the state, the Whigs managed to stay alive for another two and a half years. The decision to keep the party going while it was being abandoned all over the nation proved to be enormously significant. As late-comers to the ranks of the new Republican Party, the New York leaders temporarily forfeited much of the influence that they had been used to wielding in national political councils.

The Establishment of the Current Two-Party System

Although the issue of slavery was decisive in determining new party alignments, other issues also stirred strong emotions in the 1850’s. One was nativism, brought on by the influx of a large number of immigrants, particularly Irish Catholics, to New York City. Another was temperance reform, encouraged by the 1851 Maine prohibition law. Party lines, however, were redrawn permanently over the issue of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This act repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which had prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Territory above 36° 30’. The imbroglio over Kansas-Nebraska destroyed the Whigs and created the free soil Republicans. Within the state, the new Republican Party was dominated by Seward and Weed. Free soil Democrats joined the party in large numbers.

Despite strong misgivings among Democrats, especially among the Soft-shell faction, the remaining New York Democratic Party acquiesced to the expansion of slavery in the territories. In 1856, the voters decided in favor of the Republicans and Preston King became New York’s first Republican governor. However, Weed was unable to prevent Seward’s loss to Lincoln as the party’s standard bearer at Chicago in 1860. Still the Republicans began their political life in the state with high hopes and the talents of extraordinary men including the editorial triumvirate Horace Greeley (Tribune), Henry Raymond (Times), and William Cullen Bryant (Post).

The state’s current two-party system, Democratic and Republican, was firmly in place by the Civil War. Although both parties have evolved to accommodate themselves to changing state issues, there is a strong element of consistency in each party’s base of support. Republicans benefited from their identification with a big business economy. Democratic voting rolls were expanded by immigrants, especially downstate, whose needs the party faithfully represented.

Following the Civil War, the industrial revolution nourished political corruption and bossism in state governments everywhere. New York was no exception. Special interest politics rather than genuine democratic rule defined the Gilded Age. Publicly both parties loudly condemned corruption, while both were manifestly corrupt. Tammany boss William Marcy Tweed and Republican boss Roscoe Conkling were firmly in control. Tweed’s scandalous rule, even in an age of excess, was too blatant to ignore. The Harpers Weekly cartoons of Thomas Nast and the disclosures of reformer Samuel Tilden helped put Tweed in prison.

Tweed’s downfall was followed by two decades of able Democratic governors, but Republicans led by spoilsman Conkling generally controlled both the state senate and the assembly. While Grant was president, Conkling dispensed thousands of federal jobs to state Republicans. Nationally, Conkling headed the Republican faction known as the Stalwarts, whose chief rivals were the Half-Breeds led by James G. Blaine. Stalwart Collector of the New York Customs House, Chester A. Arthur, was given second place on the national ticket in the 1880
The Twentieth Century

The Progressive era did not leave New York behind. Progressives were to be found in both parties: Republican Theodore Roosevelt and Democrat Robert Wagner are clear examples. Indeed, New York was a leading Progressive state, despite the existence of anti-reform politicians such as Boss Thomas C. Platt, who dominated the state's Republican Party in the waning years of the nineteenth century. Platt engineered passage of the Greater New York bill, which joined Brooklyn to New York City in one huge metropolis. He allowed Roosevelt the gubernatorial nomination in 1898, despite Roosevelt's maverick tendencies. Two years later Platt was instrumental in kicking Teddy “upstairs” to the vice-presidency. From that position, Roosevelt became president when William McKinley was assassinated.

Roosevelt's sometime Progressivism was outstripped by Charles Evans Hughes, an apolitical Republican governor who gained popular recognition as a result of his skillful investigations of the state's gas and insurance companies. For four years, Hughes, disregarding the protests of party leaders, secured labor legislation and appointed investigative commissions that were central to the programs of Progressive reformers. His ascension to the U.S. Supreme Court left a partial void, but reforms continued, guided through the legislature by two outstanding Tammany men, Robert F. Wagner in the senate and Alfred E. Smith in the assembly. Prior to U.S. entry into the First World War, these two Democrats made New York the leader in labor reform.

The state’s reform impetus continued despite the conservative reaction that the nation experienced in the 1920’s. Al Smith made New York a model of reform. Soon afterward, much of the New Deal was anticipated during Franklin Roosevelt's tenure as New York's governor in the early days of the Depression. When Roosevelt became president, he was succeeded as governor by another reformer, Herbert Lehman, who worked well with the new president. From New York City, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, a nominal Republican, whom Democrats voted for on a Fusion ticket, was a strong supporter of the New Deal.

Certain generalizations can be made about the two-party system in New York State in the quarter century following the end of World War II. For one, there were many more Democrats enrolled in the state than Republicans. That fact notwithstanding, elective offices usually went to Republicans. From 1956 to 1970, New York was the seventh most Republican state in the nation and the most Republican among the ten most important states measured according to their social and political influence. As in earlier eras of its history, postwar politics were dominated by nationally recognized political leaders. Foremost among them were Republicans Thomas Dewey and Nelson Rockefeller. Rockefeller was governor for fifteen years, longer than any other person except the state's first governor, George Clinton.

In the most recent past, Democrats have managed to keep control of the executive branch. This is in keeping with the state's proclivity to alternate long stretches of one party’s rule with long stretches of the other’s, at least in the governorship.

The state, of course, does not operate in a vacuum. The fortunes of the national parties, sometimes, but not always, are a determinant of state politics. However, strong state leaders of either party can and do overcome national trends.

It appears that the influence of party politics in this state and others is on the decline. Astute political observers cite several reasons for the decline including: government welfare in the place of the largesse that was once offered by the parties; television, which allows candidates to appeal directly to the voters without the intermediary of the party functionary; and in New York, a recent (1966) direct primary law which allows candidates who receive at least 25 percent of the party's convention vote to run in the primary.

Still, the two-party system is very much in place. The Democratic Party of Mario Cuomo is the lineal descendant of the party of George Clinton. It still retains its flavor as the people's party, although the states' rights orientation of the Jeffersonians did not survive the First World War. The Republican Party bears some resemblance to its two forebearers, the Federalists and the Whigs. Nelson Rockefeller's predilection for business interests and positive government had much in common with the philosophies of Federalist Alexander Hamilton and
Whig William Seward. Indeed, Seward was one of the founders of the modern Republican party.

The current two-party system has survived much longer than its predecessors and it continues to show great strength despite the declining influence of the political parties themselves. From this vantage point it appears that New York State in its third century of existence will continue its adherence to a two-party system, a system which has brought an extraordinary number of talented leaders to the service of the state and nation.

NOTES

1. This is the case primarily with the governorship. The state legislature has been more consistently Republican.

2. Beginning in 1938, New York governors were elected for a term of four years. The only Republican governor in the earlier period was Nathan L. Miller, who was elected in 1920. The only Democratic governor in the later period was Averell Harriman, who was elected in 1954.

3. Federalists won in 1809, 1812, 1813 and 1814.

4. Some historians refer to the division on the adoption of the Constitution between supporters (Federalists) and opponents (Anti-Federalists) as the first two party system. I have chosen to follow the lead of V.O. Key and others who have not. See, for example, William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, The American Party Systems, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 5.

5. Marcy is perhaps best remembered for a line in a speech that he delivered in the U.S. Senate: “To the victor belongs the spoils of the enemy.” The term “spoils system” derives from this.
