

Politicians & the Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics

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Author: Sean Wilentz

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Sean Wilentz has become our generation's foremost historian as public intellectual, positioning himself as a blend of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Richard Hofstadter, the historical giants of the mid-20th-century era of consensus. Wilentz, however, lives in what another thoughtful historian, Daniel T. Rodgers, has called an 'age of fracture'. Perhaps with that fact in his mind, Wilentz's latest book, *The Politicians and the Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics*, argues that consensus building and political action occur within the framework of the traditional American party structure and not from those who choose to stand outside the arena shouting platitudes in protest. In recent years, he argues, too many Americans have failed to recognize 'both the permanent reality and effectiveness of partisanship and party politics' (p. xiii). Instead, they have latched on to dreams of transcending the two-party system, a scheme that they argue stifles reform. Wilentz certainly sympathizes with the complaints of many political reformers who see troubling signs of economic inequality in modern America, but he regards their efforts to work outside the system as a fool's errand. Antagonism to political parties and politics prevents change because, as Wilentz argues, the history of American partisanship shows that, quite simply, parties work.

Wilentz's frustration with party antipathy became clear during the 2008 presidential election, when the Princeton historian criticized then-presidential candidate Barack Obama for his post-partisanship. Obama delivered soaring rhetoric rejecting traditional modes of politics in favor of building common ground across parties, groups, and classes. Many Americans became enamored with Obama's new message, but Wilentz criticized it prominently in a series of essays in *The New Republic* and other journals that became the seedbed for this volume. Explained in the terms of Wilentz's title, Obama was a naive egalitarian and his opponent Hillary Rodham Clinton was a seasoned politician, a master of the art of the possible. Wilentz did not reject consensus, but he objected to the means by which candidate Obama proposed to build harmony. As Wilentz argues vigorously in this book, egalitarians rarely effect lasting political change because they lack the skills of a politician to identify problems, seek solutions, and build consensus through the measured use of power. Modern-day post-partisans, a throwback to the liberal Republican Mugwumps of the late-19th century who held themselves aloof from partisanship, too often fail where hard-nosed politicians succeed. Compare, as Wilentz does, Lyndon B. Johnson's hands-on approach to the Great Society legislation with Obama's work on the Affordable Care Act, which he delegated to a group of senators who shied away from

the bolder elements of the president's reforms. No one could possibly imagine President Obama giving the 'Johnson treatment' to those who attempted to stonewall reform.

In 14 essays, *The Politicians and the Egalitarians* offers a history of partisanship in America that seek to explain why the two-party system has endured and should persist. In each essay, Wilentz revisits the tension between politicians and egalitarians, attempting to show how expert political practitioners have achieved change through the system. The first part of his book consists of two chapters that study the post-partisan style in American politics and the egalitarian impulse in American political history. Both essays cover the entire scope of political history. Wilentz identifies the post-partisan tradition in the founding generation as espoused by the founding fathers and enshrined in the Constitution's peculiar arrangement of the Electoral College, whereby in 1796, the Federalist John Adams won the presidency and his arch-rival Thomas Jefferson took the vice-presidency. The 12th Amendment remedied what had become perceived as a flaw, but in actuality the original provision reflected the American antipathy toward political parties as harbingers of corruption.

During the 19th century, Americans came to embrace political parties, but the post-partisan (or anti-partisan) spirit manifested itself frequently. James Monroe hoped to end party strife during the Era of Good Feelings; John Quincy Adams likewise deprecated the 'baneful weed of party strife' as destructive to American interests (p. 9). Wilentz notes the 'postpartisan purification' of the Confederate States of America as one of the most unique examples of eliminating political parties (p. 15). The Mugwumps of the 1870s and 1880s emerged as high-minded reformers who sought to transcend partisanship in the name of reform. The Progressives of the early 20th century carried on the reformist tradition against the influence of party operations. Yet, as Wilentz argues, each movement failed, to varying degrees, precisely because the egalitarians behind them refused to play the political game. The Era of Good Feelings has become a celebrated misnomer among historians who focus on the nation's slide into factionalism during the absence of party strife. The Confederacy suffered from political inertia in the absence of functioning party politics. The Mugwumps squandered opportunities to achieve reform within the system. The Progressives fared somewhat better, if only because on the national level Theodore Roosevelt incorporated their strategies within Republican politics. When he bolted the party in 1912 for a third-party candidacy for the presidency, the movement floundered.

Wilentz celebrates politicians like Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, T. R.'s cousin Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson as skilled masters of the political craft who achieved lasting legacies by practicing partisan politics and steering clear of the beguiling post-partisan tradition that plagued other leaders like Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama, both of whom endorsed a new way of politics that drew from the post-partisan style. 'Whenever political leaders have presumed that their expertise and their background make them special repositories of wisdom above the wheeling and dealing and 'spoilsmanship' of democratic politics', Wilentz observes, 'the result has been a fatal disconnection between themselves and the citizenry' (p. 29). Wilentz suggests that post-partisan politics leads to a sort of political elitism, where the experts lose touch with the people, and even with the congressional leadership that they must depend upon as collaborators in political action.

In a second introductory essay on the egalitarian tradition in American politics, Wilentz focuses on economic and racial inequalities as the central battle of democratic politics in the United States. Wilentz admires the egalitarians inasmuch as they have sought throughout American history to eradicate economic inequalities and the exclusion of political minorities. Their noble cause serves to keep the nation rooted in its basic principles of liberty and equality, allowing no single class or interest to overwhelm the diverse collection of minorities who call the nation home. Some egalitarian movements succeeded, some failed, some remain works in progress. Indeed, Wilentz longs for a 21st-century egalitarian movement that will correct the inequalities that Americans seemingly have resigned themselves to accept. In the sweeping second chapter of his book, Wilentz chronicles the egalitarian tradition, complete with its successes and failures. From the anti-monarchical politics of the Revolutionary era until the 1970s, he argues, Americans formed a consensus that their nation should seek to temper, if not eradicate, economic inequalities, many of

which stemmed from the nation's sordid record on racial equality. Egalitarian politics in America drew from the anti-monarchical tradition that emerged in the British Empire and became a driving force behind the Revolution. Americans came to believe in 'something like an equality of estate and property' as Wilentz quotes from a New Jersey observer (p. 33). When combined with a version of John Locke's labor theory of value, Americans had formed a distinctive notion of equality that at once celebrated free labor and what it produced and at the same time legitimized the labor of enslaved and bonded people. Throughout the remainder of the 18th and the 19th centuries, American politicians pursued the eradication of inequality, though in different ways. The Federalists and Jeffersonians both sought to stamp out inequality of wealth, though they proposed to accomplish the task through different means.

Eventually, as political parties developed, the debate over equality became filtered through the prism of partisanship. With the idea of two parties entrenched in the American mind, effective change could come only through the system. Political power found its most enduring expression through organization, so much so, according to Wilentz, that efforts to achieve reform outside the system usually ended in failure. At the same time, politicians paid homage to the egalitarian tradition by attempting to mold their agendas around the concept. By the 1830s, for example, Whigs and Democrats differed significantly on the source of economic inequality, but each party tried to portray itself as the bulwark of the common man. Gone were the Hamiltonian notions of enlightened leaders presiding from above over the citizenry. In the new era of expanded, though imperfect, democracy, Whigs and Democrats criticized each other for promoting ideas that perpetuated inequality. The slavery issue complicated matters, though the Republican Party assumed egalitarianism by promoting the concept of free labor.

By the end of the 19th century, modern capitalism had transformed egalitarian politics to the point that politicians of all stripes accepted the capitalist system. The Progressives and New Dealers, though, sought ways to use federal authority to curb the excesses of corporations. Both movements succeeded, Wilentz argues, with strong political leadership and a will to work within the system. But in 1912, Theodore Roosevelt's break with the Republican Party fractured the Progressive movement with disastrous results. Likewise, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society of the 1960s seemed to herald the completion of the New Deal transformation of American society, ushered in by the politically astute Franklin Roosevelt. Johnson's plan promised economic and racial reform, but a conservative backlash fueled by civil rights legislation and the Vietnam War threatened the future of Democratic egalitarian reform. The political and economic problems of the 1970s led to a conservative reformulation of egalitarianism, which suggested that liberal reformers had themselves become an aristocracy that threatened equality by redistribution of wealth and the exercise of vigorous federal authority. From thereafter, Wilentz maintains, egalitarianism has been in trouble in the United States. Bill Clinton seemed to promise a resurgence, but the return of conservative politics with George W. Bush and the post-partisan style of Barack Obama have once again threatened the venerable egalitarian tradition.

The second part of the book reprints a dozen book reviews that Wilentz wrote for several journals, all of which to some degree focus on the themes that he develops in the first two essays. Each essay focuses on a particular politician and shows how that person either embodied or eschewed partisanship. They relentlessly repeat the thesis that Wilentz explains in the book's first part. Because the essays originated as book reviews, however, the interpretive theme behind the book becomes somewhat disjointed. Some essays work better than others. The essay on Abraham Lincoln, the best character portrait in the book, paints a clear and compelling depiction of Lincoln as an egalitarian politician; a man who bridged the American impulse for egalitarian reform with the skills of a master politician. Wilentz rightfully reproves historians for ignoring, or at least downplaying, Lincoln's partisanship. Of course, Wilentz sees Lincoln's skill as a party politician as one of the keys to his success.

Other essays prove less successful, however, in no small part because they originated as book reviews and appear here in what seems largely unaltered form. The essay on John Quincy Adams never completely squares the sixth president with the book's theme because the man does not seem to fit either of Wilentz's categories. Adams was neither a skillful party politician nor a committed egalitarian. His distaste for 'mere

partisanship' became a political liability when it became clear that Adams's managers, and not Adams himself, played the political game on his behalf. Adams's egalitarian credentials, too, seem suspect when one considers that he saw himself as a member of that elite class of natural leaders who had the responsibility of governing the less enlightened. True, his campaign against the gag rule suggests that the man did change to a degree in the era of party politics. The fight against the suppression of anti-slavery petitions in Congress became for Adams a crusade against a Slave Power conspiracy against anti-slavery free speech.

The republished book review collection has become a subgenre among prominent historians in recent years. Too many of the essays contain heated debates with other prominent historians that seem somewhat out of context in this format. The reader has to sort through a mass of historiographical debate to get at the essence of Wilentz's argument. Critiques of the books Wilentz has reviewed become unexplained digressions in the current volume. Wilentz might have found more success by following the model of Richard Hofstadter in his 1948 classic *The American Political Tradition* by transforming these reviews into character studies.

Wilentz writes as a historian and as an observer of current politics, so one naturally wonders how the election of 2016 impacts the book. Wilentz's argument about the post-partisan era in politics looks different now that Donald Trump has won election to the presidency. To use Wilentz's binary categories, Trump may be the strangest egalitarian in modern political history; indeed, he escapes simple categorization. The fact remains, however, that Trump won election in no small part because he appealed to a wide segment of Americans as the anti-establishment politician. During the interminable election season, Trump vacillated between remaining faithful to the Republican Party and threatening to bolt it should the establishment seek to thwart his candidacy. Trump rejected the Republican establishment and called for massive reform, but instead of bolting the party he co-opted its apparatus and secured its nomination. Clinton, meanwhile, worked within the system, amassing her formidable political talents and a strong coalition to fend off a Progressive challenger and win the Democratic nomination. The media predicted her victory, only to see it wither away on election night as returns from key states seemed to suggest a quasi-populist uprising in between the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Since the election, observers have attempted to explain the Democrats' loss. Had Americans yet again rejected the efficacy of party politics in favor of an outsider calling for reform? Or had the veteran politician faltered in her strategy? Wilentz will surely answer these questions and more as the dust settles from the election of 2016.

One can accept Wilentz's premise that partisanship has produced the best change at meaningful change and reform without believing that it must occur within a two-party system. True, third parties themselves have not shown great promise of achieving change within their own party structures, but their history does show how third-party movements have forced change within the established parties. The various anti-slavery parties of the antebellum era did not achieve change on their own, but the Republican Party coopted many of their reform elements into a strategy that worked. Wilentz barely covers the Populists, but their movement forced changes within the Democratic Party. The early 20th-century leftists may have proven themselves myopically inept at politics, but the New Dealers had to reckon with them and their ideas. Moreover, the origins of two-party politics after 1828 shows that the creation of the Whigs and the Democrats occurred amidst a bewildering reorganizing of local and regional political coalitions and personality-based political affiliations, all of which demanded some form of voice within the newly created political parties.

Undoubtedly, those parties channeled political action into workable strategy. Why, though, must change come exclusively through the existing two-party system? It seems that the two parties of the present day have become so deeply entrenched in the political system – by law and by custom – that their hold on electoral politics has become unbreakable. To pose a hypothetical (or perhaps a certainty, depending on one's political beliefs), if the two parties seem content to have abandoned economic egalitarianism what mechanism exists to bring forth reform? One might plausibly argue that modern partisanship itself has an unmistakable and perhaps baneful anti-egalitarian tendency. Then again, maybe America's politics escapes binary categorization in the present age of fracture.

Other reviews:

New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/books/review/the-politicians-and-the-egalitarians-by-sean-wilentz.html>
[2]

Kirkus Reviews

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sean-wilentz-2/the-politicians-and-the-egalitarians/> [3]

National Book Review

<http://www.thenationalbookreview.com/features/2016/5/26/review-american-history-is-a-battle-of-politicians-vs-egalitarians-and-sean-wilentz-reminds-us-why-we-need-politicans> [4]

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