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Persuasive Research Essay

Phasing Out Political Parties in the United States: The Path Toward a Lasting Republic

Paying even the most cursory glance at politics over the last few years, you have likely seen a lot of buzzwords in the news and on social media. In 2024, Meriam-Webster listed some of the words that defined the year: Polarization, pander, and democracy were in the top ten. Politics began to pique my interest around the final stretch of the Bush v. Gore campaigns in 2000. I was nine years old, so it's possible my only interest was in how my parents, and friends' parents, reacted to it, though they didn't really speak much about what happened around me. I watched the news with them. I was fortunate enough to have satellite television at the time, so CNN, Fox, MSNBC, even CSPAN were among the mix of sources that would be on. I remember the excitement and the turmoil around the event, that I would only really come to understand later. I became active in politics at another historical event—the Obama v. McCain campaign. Barack Obama won the race, and the citizens of the United States democratically elected him to be our president, which was a turning point in US history in a myriad of ways, though this is not my focus in this essay. For me, this was where I decided I would do something with my life where I could facilitate change in a balanced way. I wasn't always going to be a political scientist, but I always strived to make a positive difference.

Over the decades I have been making a list of things that appeared to be logical changes to various aspects of politics and society. Behavioral psychology and anthropology

were major resources that I looked at, and how they related to political decisions. These resources were especially useful after Obama's second election, where once again, for the followers of the losing party, it was like the world was ending. A curious thing to behold. It was prevalent enough that *South Park*—an animated TV show for adults that focuses on satire involving the latest events and trends—featured a couple episodes, in its typical dramatic and sarcastic predilection, that I thought rather fittingly portrayed the reaction that people had. Of course it was an exaggeration, to an extent, but it was a fitting appraisal of both human nature and the effect politics as we know them has on humans. It was about four years later when I really started to understand the potential root causes of these effects, and I came to a potential solution. It may not be a solution by itself, as its ability to be effective could require other changes we might need to make first, but it seemed to check the boxes as the antipode of what was happening. What was happening? Polarization, tribalism, faction.

Phasing out political parties in the United States, inspired by systems like Utah's nonpartisan municipal elections and Nebraska's unicameral legislature, can reduce political polarization, enhance proportional representation, and encourage greater civic engagement. By revisiting the prophetic warnings of America's founding fathers against the dangers of partisanship, and utilizing the mechanisms built into our constitution, "we the people" (U.S. Constitution), can create a pathway to more effective governance, a revitalized democratic system, and a return to the visionary and revolutionary words in the preamble of our constitution. Namely, "...[forming] a more perfect union, the [establishment] of justice, [ensuring] domestic tranquility, [providing] for the common defense, [promoting] the general welfare, and [securing] the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

Your initial reaction may be what I've seen time and again. Most people seem to think parties are the only way forward, just as they've always been the only way. But that's not exactly true. George Washington was not only our first elected president, but he was also the

only president to enjoy the fruits of not being beholden to factions—another word for political parties. Or, at least, they didn't really have any bearing on his election. So, you may say, well, yeah, because we needed parties. The evidence of that is how quickly parties formed after Washington, to which I would say, you're right. At the time, parties were the most efficient and effective vehicle for disseminating and acquiring knowledge of who and what you were voting for. So, you may also say, it's still the most efficient and effective way to do that. I don't have time to research every candidate I vote for. Sometimes I just need to know if they stand for what I stand for, in any way, to which I would say, you're right again. The fact that I must get a degree in political science in order to know and understand it is evidence that not just anyone can spend the time necessary to do so. And I don't expect you to.

There are many possible first steps we could take to change the incentive structures for power in the United States, like getting rid of corporate lobbying and finding a way to reverse *Citizens United v. FEC*, which allowed corporations levels of influence that are only afforded by the ultra-wealthy, who only make up a little more than 1% of the population. We could remove the ability to utilize psychographic models of citizens in marketing and politics, which can know you as well as a spouse would know you, and that was before AI.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list. And while I do think those changes would be substantial, I think the removal of political parties from politics is one of the more important potentials to look at right now.

Here's a small sample of the happenings on Capitol Hill over the last few years. We have seen Congress spend millions of taxpayer dollars to settle sexual misconduct and discrimination claims (Vavra). We saw Kevin McCarthy, in an unprecedented moment, ousted as Speaker of the House for attempting bipartisan cooperation (Freking et al.). We saw Matt Gaetz allegedly trying to pressure McCarthy to halt an Ethics Committee investigation

into himself (Marquez). The Committee later found substantial evidence of Gaetz violating House Rules, including allegations of prostitution, the rape of an underage girl, obstruction of Congress, and illicit drug use, all during his service as a congressman (Amiri et al.). We saw a union leader threatening to fight a representative, who happened to be an undefeated MMA fighter (Popli). A representative from Colorado was seen groping and being groped in a public, family setting (Fortinsky). We read a Texas representative's post mocking the wheelchair-bound governor of Texas, calling him, "Governor Hot Wheels" (Daniels).

With a couple of exceptions, the representatives' attitudes have been to double-down on their bad behavior rather than owning up to it. These behaviors are becoming more and more accepted in popular culture. Yet, studies show most of the population is sick of it (Nadeem). So, why do we continue to allow it, or even vote them back into office? Do these actions reflect the maturity of adults, or are they just playground antics dressed in suits and ties? Have the schoolyard bullies simply traded control over the swings and slides for power and influence? Are the Democratic and Republican parties nothing more than the 'mean girls' of Capitol Hill, cliques vying for dominance? Have the political elites turned the halls of Congress into a glorified high school, complete with gossip, exclusion, and petty rivalries? Are these individuals who experienced bullying in their youth and later turned the tables as they matured? Or could it be a mix of all those scenarios? What lessons are younger generations learning from this conduct?

So Many Questions

I've had the good fortune of being able to interview some professionals from several fields about this topic. Before I delve into the substance of the paper, I'd like you to think about some questions I've had that have helped to shape my research.

- What if politicians were no longer able to rely on party affiliation as a shield, or an obstruction?
- How would politics change if leaders had to justify their decisions to their constituents without defaulting to a party platform, or worse, denigrating someone else's party platform?
- Have parties become a crutch for politicians who can't defend their actions?
- Is the modern party system weakening political leadership rather than strengthening it?
- Is this system also producing weaker candidates to vote for?
- Have parties become a scapegoat or fall guy for the voters to not do their due diligence?
- Who holds the most power to instigate change—past, present, and future?
- How do factors like wealth, relationships, and influence shape power, and why?
- Do you see those factors at play in politics and government right now?
- How does the current political landscape and power structures of the United States effect you, your family, and your friends?

The Dangers of Faction

George Washington, our first president elected under the constitution of the United States, was the first and only president to have had a mandate to lead the country. He had unanimous support from the electors, whereas every president since then merely received a majority of votes. He did so with 69 electoral votes, from all 69 electors, each having two votes to cast. At that point in history, the vice president was elected with the second-most votes from the electorate, in this case John Adams with 34 votes. Washington spoke about factions and division in his Farewell Address in 1789 and warned of the dangers of hyper-factionalization. Washington thought that the division these factions would bring could be the undoing of the country. That those factions would allow foreign countries to influence our

political campaigns. That the ultimate danger would come from the people in those factions trying to control things their way. It appears to me that Washington was able to intuit very well the behaviors of people. He used different words, but was describing in-groups and out-groups, groupthink, and polarization due to political parties.

Washington believed that we could not protect against the emotions wrought through misrepresentations from political parties. He said, “They tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection” (Washington). In other words, they often divide us when we should be united as citizens of the United States. He believed the very core principle of our political system was our right to modify our constitution for our needs, and it was our obligation to do so. And any obstructions to this and other principles of our governance were destructive and,

“They serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force—to put in the place of the delegated will of the Nation, the will of a party; often a small but artful and enterprising [sic] minority of the Community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the Mirror of the ill concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the Organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common councils and modified [sic] by mutual interests. However combinations or Associations of the above description may now & then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the Power of the People, & to usurp for themselves the reins of Government; destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.”

To phrase this in a more modern way, these groups create divisions that give themselves undue power. Instead of the sovereign people deciding the direction of the country, a single party takes over, often driven by a small majority within. When another party takes control, it becomes a reflection of their poorly planned and conflicting ideas rather than well-thought-out policies that most citizens are interested in. While these groups,

these parties, these factions might occasionally achieve popular goals, they easily become the tools of those who would use them to manipulate us. Power-hungry individuals—supposed elites of society, marketers, politicians, corporations, lobbyists, anyone with vast amounts of influence—use those tools to usurp authority from the sovereign citizens, us, the people. This ultimately destroys the very groups that put them in their positions of power.

Washington believed the divisive, “common & continual mischiefs of the spirit of Party are sufficient to make it the...duty of a wise People to discourage and restrain it [parties]” (Washington). It’s a distraction and weakens public administration. Washington said,

“It agitates the Community with ill founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment[s] [provokes or incites] occasional riot & insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence & corruption, which find a facilitated [aided or eased] access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country, are subjected to the policy and will of another.”

I wonder, does any of what I have just cited sound familiar? Are we constantly dealing with the poor decisions of one party over another? Are we more divided as a nation than at any time, “since the Civil War,” in 1861, which is on the better side of almost 200 years ago (Hill)? Have the foundations of current political parties shifted dramatically away from how they started? Is the will of the people subverted by the will of parties? Are we worried about the amount of influence adversarial countries are having on our governments? Have, “...cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men...[subverted] the power of the people...[and usurped] for themselves the reins of government...” (Washington)? Have we had occasional riots and insurrections? I believe the answer to every one of those questions is an earsplitting and thunderous yes!

Why Parties Formed

James Madison is known as the “Father of the Constitution,” and was the fourth elected president of the United States. Madison was one of the three authors who wrote under the pseudonym Publius in *The Federalist Papers*—a collection of essays published in colonial newspapers advocating federalism. Conversely, the *Anti-Federalist Papers* were authored under the pseudonyms Cato, Brutus, Centinel, and the Federal Farmer. Eventually, the federalist papers won over the support the Federalists needed, and after a compromise that led to the construction of the Bill of Rights, our new constitution was born.

In *Federalist No. 10*, the problems associated with factions, including their potential for harm and violence, is addressed by Madison. He feared the liberty lost from banning political parties. He states the differences between a democracy and a republic, other than the fact that a republic elects a few to discern the needs of the many. One major difference is that a democracy only really works well on a small scale, whereas a republic can scale to ever larger sizes. In his view, this creates a more stable government and that this large size will allow more parties to exist, which will protect against the tyranny of factions. Madison started his conclusion with, “The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States” (Madison). In other words, due to the presence of multiple factions across various states, each catering to their own interests, it is unlikely that a single or a couple of dominant parties will control the Federal government in the Republic. Though he does imply a certain level of unification would be necessary to limit those factions. He writes about the corruption that the “...spirit of party...” (Madison) brings to government. But he says we can either, “get rid of the reasons why factions form in the first place,” or we can “limit the negative impacts that factions have on government and society,” (Madison). He felt the latter was best. I think many conservative-minded people would agree on the face of it. However, I’d suggest

that the position we currently find ourselves in is a result of just that. Polarization and two-party dominance, constantly vying to be the ruling party have, in fact, proven Madison was wrong about his assertion that party dominance would be unlikely in a Republic.

Eventually, Madison joined the Democratic-Republican party, which was led by Thomas Jefferson. Madison rightly knew that a vehicle—defined as, A general term for: anything by means of which people or goods may be conveyed, carried, or transported; a receptacle in which something is or may be placed in order to be moved (OED)—was needed to ensure that voting could occur as efficiently and accurately as possible. This is why parties formed so immediately after Washington. It would be difficult for citizens to learn all they needed to about candidates (and it still is) and of course, at this point in history, the news took days to reach the other colonies, if it would reach them at all.

As an example, let's look at travel between the colonies: to travel from Massachusetts to Georgia in modern times, with all our roadways and vehicles capable of sustaining speeds of 65+ MPH and only stopping for a couple minutes to fill our tanks with fuel, it can take about 17 hours to go the 1,050 miles it would require. Imagine what that would be like on horseback. The horse traveling anywhere from 4 MPH at a walk to 30 MPH at a full gallop and having to take many breaks to eat and rest. If we assume there were no stops involved, and a consistent speed, we're still looking at about 40 hours to make that trip, but that is not even remotely realistic. It's highly likely it would take 2-4 days to spread news (but specifically news about politicians and all the voting information needed) to a distant colony, and that assumes the news was something they wanted to share. They had boats as well, but even modern sailboats tend to cruise at about 4.5-7 MPH, maxing out around 17 MPH. There would be fewer breaks, though. Still, you can see the need for efficiency was necessary. Political parties were that vehicle. But do they still need to be?

John Adams, after being Vice President under President Washington, was the second president to be elected in the United States. A lawyer by profession, considered by many to be one of the most principled radicals in the movement for American independence, he too spoke against the role factions could play in future elections for this developing country. He too joined a political party as a Federalist in his presidency, ultimately becoming a Democratic-Republican till his death.

Unlike George Washington, who never capitulated to the rising threat he foresaw in political factions, Madison and Adams did. John Adams, in a letter to a friend while serving as a diplomat of the United States, said, “There is nothing I dread So much, as a Division of the Republick [sic] into two great Parties, each arranged under its Leader, and concerting Measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble Apprehension is to be dreaded as the greatest political Evil, under our Constitution” (Adams). At the time Adams was in Amsterdam dealing with the Dutch Republic’s hesitancy to go against Great Britain, for fear of retaliation, trying to negotiate receiving a loan for America to help fund the war against the British. He was eventually successful in securing a \$2 million dollar loan.

So, parties formed because of a mix of things. At its core, it is likely to be a human thing to do. And for the United States it was a necessary evil to allow the growth of parties. But I don’t think any of our Founding Fathers envisioned, as a fact of life, the reality we face today.

The Present Day

George Washington, James Madison, and John Adams were all great leaders of our past, among many others. All individuals living in the United States, whether immigrants who were adopted into the country or those born here, share this common history. But what do our modern leaders think? I’ve spoken with several such leaders, ranging from local

politicians to previous members of the judiciary, to professors in our community in fields like social psychology and political science. I will bring you some of their assessments about polarization and political parties, starting with Cache County's Executive, Mr. David Zook.

Mr. Zook has served more than 24 years in local politics and social work in California and Utah. Zook has a master's degree in public administration and is an elected executive in charge of managing more than \$100 million for the county. He has received awards for the implementation of the budgets for our county. When asked about whether or not we should get rid of political parties to limit polarization, Zook said that it didn't matter whether we have parties or not. "The issue is deeper than what tribe you are on...the root of the issue is contention, enmity, and pride..." (Zook). Basically, no matter what you do, just like the genetically engineered dinosaurs of Jurassic Park, polarization will find a way.

He's right. Polarization has existed long before we had politics and will probably continue to exist as long as we are fallible humans. Maybe, one day, things can become idealized like in Star Trek, where humans live in some sort of utopia, but that is not the life we live right now. Contention breeds contention. Pride insulates one's ability to compromise. If you look around, as far as we can see in the media, no one is willing to accept any consolations. Politics has become a zero-sum game. If 'Party A' doesn't do things exactly as 'Party B' says they should, they're wrong, and vice versa. That is pride. Things have gone even further than that, though. Now, 'Party A' is not simply wrong, they're morally bankrupt, evil, and possibly crazy if they see things a little bit differently as dictated by their individual life experiences. Mr. Zook is on to something with this.

So, what's the solution to contention, enmity, and pride? Mr. Zook had a solution. He said, "respect, and to preserve dignity..." (Zook). I agree with this, too. But I feel like, should that ever happen, it would work for a time, but would probably quickly degrade again, continuing a cycle that already exists in society. Right now, there are too many fundamental

and systemic incentives to be divisive and to perpetuate affective polarization to think we could just respect others and preserve dignity and call it good. The powers that be, whatever and whomever they are, are finding more power from tools like the media or fearmongering. Mr. Zook is right, though. It's especially important to have respect for people, even if their opinion is different than your own. And we should not resort to the denigration of our fellow human beings just because they feel you are wrong, or you feel they are wrong. We should preserve their dignity, which in turn preserves our dignity. But with the incentive structure of politics and society the way it is, is it even possible to take the time needed to try and implement such an ideal before a societal collapse? Only time will tell. I think there are changes we can make to get us to that place, but they will not be easy. I feel like we need some nudges in the form of institutional changes to foster an environment that allows, even promotes, respect and dignity. There has always been this vacillation that ebbs and flows with the political currents, but my fear is that we are at a solidifying moment. A trajectory that, if not altered, will lead to the prophetic declarations of leaders like George Washington, when he says it leads to destruction.

Where some would argue we need more parties to balance things out, I argue having no parties would be even more beneficial. Again, Mr. Zook is right about a piece of the puzzle, but we have more pieces to put together before we start to see the complete picture.

No Parties, Less Polarization

What I think is not so visible to the political community is the psychological aspects of why getting rid of political parties and their labels matter. From the political side of things, it doesn't really matter, as Mr. Zook said. But let's look a little deeper. In Psychology, there is the concept of in-groups and out-groups. In my conversation with Dr. Scott Bates, we parsed out instances of this in modern day politics.

Dr. Bates is the Department Head of the Utah State University Department of Psychology and a social psychologist by training. He received his MS in Psychology from Western Washington University and a PhD in Social Psychology from Colorado State University.

In-groups are an intuitive concept and a modern label for something people have understood for thousands of years. To define them simply, an in-group is any group we belong to. This can be a religious organization, or a friend group, etc. An out-group is the opposite, groups we don't belong to.

As an example, let's look at life before society through the eyes of a philosopher. Prior to the concept of the social contract as described by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, humans lived in what is referred to as the state of nature. In this state, there were no formal rules. Survival required brute strength and constantly being on edge. A key part of survival in the state of nature was forming in-groups, communities of like-minded people. These groups offered a level of security. However, the advent of the social contract marked a profound shift. The promise was simple: surrender the ability to harm others in exchange for security, stability, and the opportunity to dedicate energies to innovation, cooperation, and the betterment of civilization. This allowed governments to intervene and regulate specific behaviors, creating a climate where society can prosper. And it worked. From transportation networks to educational systems to healthcare infrastructures, much of what we take for granted today emerged because of the societal stability afforded by the social contract. And, as humans progressed, those in-groups didn't disappear. Instead, they evolved within the framework of the social contract, transforming into ideological affiliations and political factions.

The labels we assign—Democratic, Republican, even the Independent American Party—are modern echoes of the tribal associations and cliques of old. These factions offer

individuals the ability to identify with a group that shares their values, beliefs, and goals—on the surface. But, as we've seen lately, this can be shallow, as evidenced by mass exoduses from parties to Unaffiliated. They also perpetuate a divisiveness that feels eerily like the dynamics of the state of nature; the us versus them paradigm. This affects all of us whether you pay attention to politics or not.

Referring to what people can do when they feel they are part of a group, Dr. Bates said, “We have yet to come across, in human history, the bounds of...what people will do as a result of being identified in groups.”

What This Means

Political parties are a double-edged sword. At one time, they were essential for organizing collective action in complex societies, but not anymore. Now, their continuance risks reinforcing divisions and undermining the very unity that the social contract seeks to achieve, paving the way for our devolution into anarchy, which Hobbes viewed as: a “...war of all against all.”

Chief Justice Christine Durham retired from the Utah Supreme Court in 2017. In 1982, Justice Durham “...became the first woman to serve on the Utah Supreme Court. Four years earlier, she was the first woman appointed to the state’s district court. In 1993, [she] was on a shortlist of candidates for the U.S. Supreme Court, put forth by the Clinton administration to replace retiring Justice Harry Blackmun. In 2002, she achieved yet another milestone by being the first woman Chief Justice of the Utah Supreme Court...” (Wilson Sonsini).

Our discussion, while brief, touched on some prescient points. I described to her how I visualize polarization and partisanship. It's typical in political science to characterize polarization on a line. Starting in the center, you can go left or right and keep going until you

are at the extremist edge of the political spectrum. But I see it differently. I see the spectrum as a circle, like that of a compass. Imagine looking down at a compass, where the spindle of the needle is at the center. At the top or bottom (the cardinal points, North or South, respectively), you'll have either liberal or conservative ideologies. At the left and right sides of the compass (the cardinal points, West and East, respectively), you'll see the centers of each of those extremes, where they meet. The Democratic party, the Republican party, any party, will fall somewhere on the compass. They can shift as time moves on and are not necessarily going to match where conservatism or liberalism are. I think of the political spectrum as flowing circularly, where liberal extremism actually meets conservative extremism on either side of the spectrum. Now, the pragmatist and/or the centrist tend to be somewhere at intersecting points, starting at the spindle, moving outward toward the cardinal or intercardinal points on the compass, separated by an infinite number of degrees.

Chief Justice Durham gave me some insight into the degrees of separation on the spectrum and the social progression she has witnessed throughout her impressive and historic career.

She told me, she "...came of age in the law in a period which...very progressive changes in the law in the arena of civil rights and anti-racial laws..." took place (Durham).

She went on to say,

"...the 60s, which ushered a certain degree of that [progress] in...was boosted by what a great many Americans came to view as an immoral war in Vietnam that we were supporting, and that the government was lying to us about what we were doing over there...I was very, very happy to see the Warren Court doing the kind of decision making thing. And I saw it as a very young...student and then young lawyer. I saw it as progress. And...I saw it was changing our nation for the better and bringing themes and ideas and opportunities that had not been available in an older culture. So...it did create extremism. It did create...the war between people and what they thought America should be like...it was one of the things that drew me to the law...of course...then you...grow up and you get...the obligation to support a family...and find a job...I still had...a

pretty firm faith that our country was getting better. But...[with] all I'm reading about current history, I'm looking back for the last 20 years, I'm realizing that what we're seeing now has been a pretty long time in the making....there's been backlash and discontent and the extremism that comes with it, and the things that characterize our national culture, at least a large portion of it...is not where I thought we would have ended up now. Our morality comes out of essentially, capitalism and what we've adopted and...a lot of it came to us initially from Europe back in the day...so, it's...not that...we're doing things completely differently, but we have certainly chosen the path in this country where we are willing to be isolationist...”

To me, this illustrates the shift in party ideals, and where they fall on the compass at various times in our nation’s history. When political ideology is so vast, why should we limit them to a political party?

Conclusion

I want to conclude by looking back to the political compass. Politics itself can be one compass, while ideologies are another compass. Consider the effects on a regular compass when a magnet is brought into proximity with it. The opposing force changes direction of the spindle, spinning it where the holder of the magnet directs it. Many things have this kind of hold on parties. But as a sovereign citizen, your unity with other citizens can be the most effective control on it. This is what our Founding Fathers wanted for us. However, now we see oligarch-like corporations and their lobbyists, many of each of them with ties to foreign governments and cunning, power-hungry people, effecting change as only they can. Right now, it is corporations and their Lords that are holding the magnet to the compass that is politics, and the compass that are political ideologies. Sovereign citizens seem to have forgotten the power they wield. Powerful forces have entrenched themselves into positions of power to be able to take away our power, and the constitution’s authority. Take it back!

Like President Washington, I offer "...to you, my Countrymen, these counsels of an old and affectionate friend..." (Washington). I don't expect this paper to completely change the deeply engrained passions or the historical patterns of our nation. However, if it can even slightly help to tone down extreme partisanship, warn against harmful foreign meddling, and help you to think of ways to better our nation together, then the concern I have for your well-being, which prompted this paper, will feel worth it. Political parties are too much of a liability, and their removal is the path to a lasting republic.

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