

The State and the Emergence of the First American Party System: Roll Call Voting in the New York State Assembly during the Early Republic

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Abstract

Prevailing theories about the nature and development of the democratic party system fail to account for the important case of the United States. Using a novel dataset on legislators and roll call votes in the New York State Assembly after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, we show that, contrary to existing accounts, legislative parties had already formed at this early stage. Yet these parties did not arise from the translation of social cleavages such as economic or social class into political oppositions, as sociologists might expect, nor were they merely networks of powerful elites disconnected from the polity, as political scientists and historians have suggested. Instead, these parties coalesced around formal issues—structural questions like the procedures for election and appointment, questions whose answer would determine the rules of the game for future contests. Parties emerged, we argue, not because of an inherent need to adjudicate conflicts between sectors of the polity, but because of the organizational affordances of the modern democratic state. Our findings suggest the formation of party systems is an integral part of the formation of the modern state.

Keywords

party formation, state formation, American politics, political parties, roll calls

Although political parties were central to early political sociology, in the late twentieth century, sociologists largely ceded theorizing about parties to political scientists (Mudge and Chen 2014). Recent scholarship, however, has increasingly recognized the need for a coherent understanding of parties and party systems, including their origins and development (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015; Desai 2002; Eidlin 2016; Mudge 2018; Parigi and Bearman 2008; Parigi and Sartori 2014). This growing body of work has examined the development of personalistic factions (e.g., Padgett and Ansell 1993), the emergence of

political order from factional politics (e.g., McLean 2011), the formation of new political parties in already established party systems (e.g., Ackerman 2020; Hug 2001), and even early political parties themselves (e.g., De Leon 2010; Hoffman 2019). Yet the question

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of how and why party systems emerged in the first place has garnered insufficient attention.

Despite productive exchanges, sociologists and political scientists retain disciplinary differences in their approach to parties. Sociologists typically see parties as *exogenous* to politics—that is, as rooted in social divisions that originate outside the political sphere, such as class, religion, or ethnicity—and focus on the *substance* of political conflict in the polity (De Leon et al. 2015; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In contrast, political scientists emphasize that parties are *endogenous* to the political process itself and have identified *formal* (procedural) issues as the core of at least contemporary partisan organization (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 2007). Of course, both these approaches could have validity, but for different stages in the development of party systems. Such historical variability is increasingly emphasized in theories of parties. Mudge and Chen (2014:322), for example, end their seminal review of the party literature by calling for “the specification of historical and contextual scope conditions in order to avoid false universals.”

When it comes to the theoretically weighty case of the United States, perhaps the oldest democratic party system, scholars examining *contemporary* legislative behavior find partisanship is especially strong on procedural issues (Cox and Poole 2002), with little sign of a class cleavage explaining votes. Such a social opposition based on class, however, was clearly present earlier (Katz and Mair 2018:86). The earliest configuration of the U.S. party system, right after the ratification of the federal constitution, is widely understood to have differed from both these forms, as most scholars believe that parties were still merely loose collections of notable persons. Any potential groups of political actors hoping to cooperate had neither the formal organization (e.g., party whips) that political scientists see as crucial for party discipline, nor the connection to well theorized cleavages in the population. Hence, neither political scientists nor sociologists would expect to see high partisan coordination at this time. Yet, this is exactly what we will demonstrate.

Using a novel dataset of roll call votes in the New York State Assembly between 1788 and 1803, and individual-level data on 600 legislators involved in those votes, we show that, despite the absence of formal organization, party coordination crystallized immediately after ratification of the U.S. Constitution. This coordination did not arise from the simple mapping of preexisting cleavages onto the party structure, as sociologists might expect, nor was it merely a system of a small number of elite actors disconnected from the polity, as political scientists and historians have suggested. Instead, New York politics exhibited characteristics of a mature party system, in which political parties unified around fights over rules and structure and fought over elected and appointed positions. Parties emerged as a result of the organizational affordances of the modern state—the organizational resources it possesses and the opportunities these create. Indeed, it is not too much to say that politics became a game in a field in which the goal was to be in a position to reward one’s allies with positions. Legislators were skilled strategists, and parties came together not when their *exogenous* interests were at stake, but when their *endogenous* interests were threatened. Existing accounts of party system formation (PSF¹), we argue, thus appear insufficient if applied to the United States.

These specifically structural issues, however, in no way stunted ideological development. Indeed, the elaboration of coherent ideologies may emerge precisely where actors cannot theorize their action by making recourse to their position in exogenously defined groups, such as religious bodies or economic classes. This implies that we cannot divorce patronage parties from ideological parties, nor PSF from the state-building processes in the United States that involved expanding the administrative capacity at the federal and state levels.

THEORIES OF PARTIES

Sociology on Cleavages

While there are exceptions and instances of fruitful cross-fertilization, the theorization of

parties has tended to fall along a disciplinary divide, with sociologists looking toward the broader social oppositions that might support mass partisanship, and political scientists more oriented to the pressures placed on, and opportunities opened up for, professional politicians. Sociologists have been especially attentive to the relation of party systems to underlying cleavages in the polity like class, religion, and ethnicity. Whereas earlier work in the Marxist tradition saw parties as little more than the “democratic translation of the class struggle” (Lipset 1960:230)—a hypothesis of an overarching *class cleavage* structuring the party system—Lipset and Rokkan (1967) famously argued that the European party systems were the result of four critical social cleavages: not only owner/worker, but also land/industry, center/periphery, and state/church. The degree to which these cleavages developed in different European societies shaped the structure of their party systems in the early twentieth century—what we call a *multiple cleavage* hypothesis. The party system may serve a function of allowing a peaceful resolution of certain conflicts in a divided society, or it simply may be that social divides have a tendency to colonize any democratic arena, as antagonists find this a fitting place to stage their struggles. In either case, the logic of PSF is driven by the substantive organization of the polity.

One important cleavage Lipset and Rokkan did not discuss, and for eminently sensible reasons, is region. Although distinctly regional parties (e.g., Weimar Germany’s Bavarian People’s Party) are sometimes present in modern party systems, a party system that, as a whole, maps onto a regional cleavage will likely provoke the dissolution of the nation. Yet, if we consider the historical processes of PSF, it is possible that the earliest proto-party structures were based on geography—what we shall call a *regional cleavage* hypothesis. Where region maps onto party, actual electoral competition often takes place inside parties, as elections between parties are relatively non-competitive (Key 1984).

Even the most flexible cleavage approach, however, has empirical limitations. Although the decline of class voting in most democracies

has led some scholars to suggest this approach is no longer relevant, or relevant only in an adapted, multidimensional way (Manza and Brooks 1999), recent sociological work has made a more fundamental critique, namely that such social cleavages cannot uniformly be treated as objective divisions, latent in the polity, and only awaiting a political entrepreneur to breathe life into them. Rather, much of what skilled political actors do is to foster, theorize, even generate or “articulate” cleavages that were not understood as political dividing lines before (De Leon et al. 2015; Eidlin 2016). This articulation approach focuses on the role of political agents, while also recognizing the importance of an alignment of partisan divisions with social divisions, whether pre-existing or not. Further, it advances a conceptualization of social cleavages as at least partly endogenous to the political process, including that of party formation itself (e.g., Ackerman 2020).

Starting from a generally Marxist orientation (De Leon 2014:148), the early articulation approach tended to see “integral” parties—parties that articulated fundamental social divisions and that proffered far-reaching visions of change—as the most interesting and worthy objects of study (De Leon et al. 2015:28–31). But later work also recognized that parties may attempt to *decrease* the salience of certain divides: “Party systems typically want to debate some things but not others” (De Leon 2019:5). For this reason, parties may be actively engaged in the suppression of certain issues (Mische 2008), and failure at this suppression may spell the end of the party system (think of the sectional crisis that led to the American Civil War).

The emphasis on articulation and suppression has turned out to require attention to issues of strategy that have long been the focus of political scientists. However, sociologists still assume that politicians attempt to manipulate *social* divides, even if these are endogenous to party competition. Some political scientists, however, have suggested that party systems may turn on even more endogenous issues—the very procedures regulating the political process itself.

Political Science on Formal Issues

In contrast to sociologists, political scientists are more likely to focus on the factors facilitating the coordination of political actors (Cox and McCubbins 2007). Starting from institutional arguments about the importance of strong parliaments and broad franchise (Duverger 1963; Sartori 1976), Aldrich (1995) develops a theory of parties as endogenous organizations that form as ambitious political entrepreneurs create coalitions to accomplish two main goals: office-seeking and policy-seeking.² In this light, PSF may not have much to do with underlying cleavages.

Rather than particular *substantive* issues being the core of party coordination, parties are viewed as uniquely organized around *formal* issues of procedure—what we shall call the *formal hypothesis*. Most important, Cox and McCubbins (2007), using the U.S. Congress as their case, see parties as “legislative cartels” oriented to procedural matters. This focus on procedural issues stems from examinations of contemporary parliaments, but there are good reasons to suspect formal considerations may be central to the process of PSF more generally. The development of a strong state may always incentivize parties to focus on procedural matters, or the *structural* matters of developing the rules of procedure. (Henceforth, we will use the term “procedural” to refer to short-term decisions regarding particularities of functioning, “structural” to denote longer-term issues of shaping government forms more generally, and “formal” as an umbrella term encompassing both types of issues.)

Robert Dahl (1961:53) distinguished between two types of goods over which political actors might struggle—divisible and indivisible. The most important indivisible good is control over the state (or a portion of it, such as Congress). Such indivisible goods become important in a modern party system in which partisans are not merely notables seeking to further their own particular interests (e.g., to ensure that disputes over land titles are resolved in a way satisfactory to them),

but dedicated politicians attempting to reach specifically political, endogenous, goals. In such a complex and turbulent environment, as Simon (1996) emphasizes, it makes sense for actors to focus less on immediate payoffs, and more on achieving a position that allows them the greatest range of movement in the future. Structural battles involve precisely those sorts of moves. As Stanley Lieberman (1987:167) put it, “Those who write the rules, write rules that enable them to continue to write the rules.” Thus, the formal hypothesis shares with the articulation theorists an emphasis on the endogeneity of partisan concerns.

It is important to emphasize that these structural issues are not necessarily minor or non-ideological ones (“mere technicalities”). On the contrary, in democracies, these issues are often the most hotly and bitterly contested points of political controversy (think of the question of mail ballots in recent U.S. history). Indeed, many issues at the heart of ideological struggles over democracy and aristocracy were about such formal considerations—who could vote, how positions would be filled—and losing here could be tantamount to being consigned to fighting with a disadvantage for the foreseeable future.

Party Systems and History

This logic is strong, but we must, as Mudge and Chen (2014) emphasize, beware of ahistoric claims about the nature of parties. This means we must consider historically specific arguments about PFS. Recent work describes a succession of ideal-typical stages in the development of parties. Katz and Mair (2018), for example, propose that parties begin as collections of notables and then progress to mass parties that map onto underlying cleavages in the polity, especially class, before developing into “catch-all” parties and ultimately “cartel parties” that use the state’s resources to support partisan activity. Although the primary concern of cartel parties is maintaining insiders’ positions, and not directly furthering an agenda tied to specific groups in the electorate, and politicians in

such parties increasingly focus on matters of procedure, it might be anachronistic to expect the same in our case of eighteenth-century parties.

Historical specificity is especially relevant for the United States, where, in contrast to later democracies, partisan organization was not anticipated and deliberately shaped by constitutional arrangement. Moreover, such partisan organization was morally suspect in the eyes of political elites at the time (De Leon 2019; Hofstadter 1969), who feared that parties would divide the country. Indeed, it is not impossible that, for some time and in some places, there was sufficient consensus among elites to outweigh any tendencies toward division—a hypothesis of an *elite cartel*. Even if division among elites did rise in importance, it might be restricted to a small group and not involve the mobilization of more run-of-the-mill actors—a hypothesis of *limited mobilization*.

The extension of these divisions outside the echelons of the elite could lead to Katz and Mair's first stage of PSF: instead of a true party system, there is a system of multiple factions, each organized around a leading figure or family—a hypothesis of *clusters around notables*. This view was long dominant among scholars of the American case (including Lipset [1963]). "The early 'parties,'" Skowronek (1982:24) writes, "were largely collections of local notables." A few elites might forge alliances, but they tended to be oriented to their personal interests, not issues that would engage commoners (Chambers 1963:106; Eldersveld 1982:32; Shefter 1994:66).

The most common understanding is that PSF began at the national level. Embryonic partisan organization took the form of alliances between elites possessing national-level influence (whether in Washington's cabinet or in Congress) and "the formation of these congressional factions [then] encouraged the building of parties in the states" (McCormick 1973:21; see also Eldersveld 1982:24–26). Similarly, Aldrich (1995) argues that proto-parties first formed in Congress as coalitions

to reach policy goals and only later developed organizational structures in the states to mobilize voters. Consequently, "the first political parties with influence on national government policy had top-down organizational structures" (Chhibber and Kollman 2004:83). This *top-down* hypothesis does not necessarily answer all our questions about the nature of the party system, but it suggests the logic of organization may only be explicable by attention to national-level configurations.

Not everyone accepts this top-down view (Formisano 1981). Indeed, scholars of state-level politics have emphasized the local origins of parties. Hillmann (2008), for instance, shows that local factions in Vermont, which during the 1790s aligned with the emerging partisan divide at the national level, predated these federal structures. And Young (1967:578) concludes his study of New York with the claim that "the national party appears to have been no more than a loose amalgam of the state groups." This bottom-up understanding is quite plausible: around 1776 many states wrote new and more democratic constitutions that dispensed with the role of royal governors and established elective legislatures. These states thus had opportunities for democratic contestation long before the federal government did (Main 1974).

If this is the case, interpretations of PSF in the United States, and their relevance for theories of parties more generally, may be systematically biased against the bottom-up account. For example, the "UCLA school," which emphasizes the central role of "policy demanders," supports its argument by pointing to the lack of evidence of parties in the legislature: "We have sought evidence that ambitious office holders in Congress or elsewhere led formation of the Democratic-Republican party and found little" (Bawn et al. 2012:580). Hence, these scholars conclude it was the policy demanders of the Democratic clubs of the 1790s that drove PSF. But perhaps these researchers were simply looking in the wrong place—more specifically, at the wrong level.

Long ago, Tocqueville ([1835] 2004:66) recognized the importance of the states for understanding American politics: “The great political principles that govern American society today originated and developed in the *states*. . . . Hence one must know the states if one would possess the key to the rest.” Given the importance of political organization at the state level, and the comparative poverty of previous research, we examine the theories of party systems discussed above (summarized in the first two columns of Table 1) at the state level. Here we turn to a state that proved pivotal for the emergence of the first American party system, a state in which there were Republicans before Jefferson and Madison were Republicans—New York.

THE CASE: NEW YORK STATE

We investigate the party system in New York from the time of the new federal constitution to the middle of the first Jefferson administration, around when many historians and political scientists imagine that the first national-level party system came into being (Chambers 1963; Reichley 1992). New York had a pivotal position in this system. As the new nation developed, a regional divide emerged, with the North leaning Federalist, and the South leaning Republican. Situated along the fault line of this division, New York was one of the most evenly split and hence competitive states. New York’s party system, however, had a special impetus—it not only had a disproportionate number of leading Federalist elites, like Alexander Hamilton and Philip Schuyler, but until the mid-1790s its state government was firmly in the hands of a deliberate antagonist of these elites, the Antifederalist and then Republican George Clinton.

Political historians of this case have long understood that the existence of partisan activity in New York was obvious and unquestioned, even if the stigma on explicit partisanship led actors to downplay, and sometimes disguise, the degree of their coordination. (The very stigma of partisan

activity could indeed be used to justify coordination—only one’s own coordination, done defensively and, of course, for the common good, could defeat the coordination of the *other* side, which was, obviously, done for narrow and partisan purposes.) Indeed, it was here, among New York’s Antifederalists, that the term “Republican” was first reliably used to refer to a coherent opposition to the Federalists (Kaminski 1993:125). As a result, New York developed party organization relatively early. Party tickets were used by both parties (Dinkin 1982:68, 83), electoral committees appeared as early as 1792, and by 1801 both parties had created hierarchies of committees, ranging from a state central committee to district committees to county and town committees (Cunningham 1957:135–38; Fischer 1965:52, 61). In addition, Hoffman (2019) shows that New York’s political elite was far more ideologically oriented than previously suspected.

Yet the fact that there were, compared to other states, a number of well-organized partisans, and that some of these were ideologically oriented, does not mean there was actually a party *system* present in New York during the 1790s. To say there is a party system implies, for one, that most political actors are involved (as opposed to remaining unaligned). While we know about certain ties between leading political figures, often based in their (rather personalistic) pre-1789 alignments, this by no means implies a general partisan coordination among rank-and-file members. Thus the question of when such a party system developed, and its role in the formation of the national-level party system, is still an open one. Given that many leaders of the New York parties were also leaders at the federal level (e.g., Hamilton, Burr, Clinton), our determination of the basis on which the New York system arose has strong implications for our understanding of the formation of the national party system. Yet relatively little is known about the timing of partisan development in this, or any other, U.S. state.

One reason for the insufficient attention to state-level parties has to do with the *types* of

Table 1. Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Theory	Empirical Indicators
Class Cleavage	Parties are the political expression of class struggle	Tendency toward two stable voting blocs despite member turnover; Partisanship predicted by legislators' class positions; Partisan issues are related to class.
Multiple Cleavages	Parties draw on one of a set of potential social cleavages	Tendency toward two stable voting blocs despite member turnover; Partisanship predicted by legislators' position on the relevant cleavage; Partisan issues are related to this cleavage.
Regional Cleavage	Parties map onto regional differences	Tendency toward two stable voting blocs despite member turnover; Partisanship predicted by legislators' place of election; Partisan issues are related to region; Electoral competition relatively strong within, not between, parties.
Formal	Parties unite on issues of procedure	Tendency toward two stable voting blocs despite member turnover; Partisan organization is highest on formal, not substantive, issues.
Elite Cartel	No division between leading individuals and families	Substantial inter-legislator organization is not apparent, or partisan labels cannot be consistently applied in such a way as to predict voting.
Limited Mobilization	There are conflicts between elites, but they do not mobilize others	Substantial inter-legislator organization is not apparent, or partisan labels cannot be consistently applied in such a way as to predict voting.
Clusters around Notables	Rather than parties, multiple leading individuals or families mobilize some non-elites	Rather than two clusters, there are multiple islands of agreement; Even within clusters, agreement will tend to be low, as it is focused on the interests of particular persons.
Top-Down	Party organization is gradually imported from the federal to the state level	Partisan organization is apparent in the federal legislature before it is seen in the state legislature; Partisan organization is highest on federal-level issues.

evidence available. American parties existed as informal structures before they were formal organizations (Formisano 1974). Formal organizations are to historical sociology what vertebrates are to paleontology: they make everything comparatively easy, as their records of incorporation, their minutes, their membership rolls, and so on, frequently sit patiently in library archives waiting to be

studied. Informal organizations, in contrast, like jellyfish, lack the hard parts that leave a clear trace in the historical record. It is thus easy for researchers to dismiss their significance—to illogically interpret an absence of evidence as evidence of absence.

Things are even more difficult for the case of partisan organization in the early United States, for at the time, partisanship

was morally suspect (De Leon 2010; Hofstadter 1969). Even where actors explicitly coordinated, for example, by holding nominating caucuses, they might deny the partisan nature of such meetings (Young 1967:46) or even the existence of the caucus (Banner 1970:250). Furthermore, actors had an incentive to cover up evidence of partisan coordination, likely even to the extent of destroying documents. Although the personal correspondence of certain leading political actors contains ample evidence of partisan rhetoric and even partisan coordination, such materials are rarely preserved for less prominent figures. Thus, even a dedicated combing through the personal records of most political actors may come up empty. Consequently, we know little about the degree to which run-of-the-mill political actors were incorporated into partisan coordination, and we have a source of bias in the documents pushing our interpretations to give disproportionate weight to coordination at higher levels than at lower ones.

In some places, and at some times, observers made reference to party sides when discussing election results, and local papers often reported results in these terms, but this sort of evidence is rarely conclusive, and, indeed, tends to bias us toward over-estimating the importance of party (as we study only positive cases). Furthermore, editors tended to be unusually partisan; we do not know to what extent voters, or even all candidates, were committed to party labels and, even more important, whether they accepted any coordinative direction from party leaders (it is not uncommon for various cliques to seize upon partisan names to facilitate their struggle without actually having any allegiance to party leaders).

Perhaps most important, we do not know whether elected politicians coordinated their partisanship in a way that suggests a “party in the legislature.” That would suggest a degree of organization and coordination that substantially exceeds what previous scholars have posited. One way to determine whether there is evidence of partisan coordination in the legislature is by analyzing the structure of roll

call voting—a central analytic tool of political scientists (Poole and Rosenthal 1997) that has been successfully used to study PSF at the national level (Hoadley 1986). Although no one type of analysis can be determinative, and we recognize that parties are more than legislative organizations (Key 1964), the various hypotheses we discussed have implications for the patterning of voting in the legislature (summarized in the last column of Table 1) that can be examined via formal analysis.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

We examine the New York State Assembly between sessions 12 and 25, inclusive. When session 12 convened in December 1788, New York had just ratified the U.S. Constitution. Terms were one year, and the Assembly only met for around two to three months a year. Session 25, which met in the early months of 1802, is the first session whose members were elected after the presidential election of 1800, when at the national level the Federalists had to hand over the government to the Republicans. Our analyses draw on two kinds of data: individual-level information about the legislators who were elected to the New York State Assembly during this time, and the roll call votes taken by the Assembly. We describe each of these in turn. Further information on the coding of data and use of different sources is provided in Part A of the online supplement.

Legislators. Between session 12 and session 25, 601 unique legislators were elected to the Assembly. Of those 601 legislators, 313 were elected only once, 137 were elected twice, 73 were elected three times, 43 were elected four times, and 35 were elected more than four times. These numbers suggest high turnover. In fact, around 60 percent of the legislators in any session did not serve in the previous session, and around 40 percent had never served before. Such high turnover would obviously militate against the observation of stable partisan coordination. Since many historical

studies of early American legislatures suggest it took some time for “green” legislators to be socialized into house procedures, a capacity for partisan organization given such short terms would suggest parties were not spontaneous alliances that formed in the Assembly but had a life outside the legislature, one that involved lower-level political actors, and not merely a small set of notables.

For each legislator, we obtained information on the county he was elected in and the district to which the county belonged, taking into account that counties were occasionally reassigned to different districts. During the period investigated here, New York was divided into four districts for the purpose of choosing state senators. These districts were also used for the selection of individuals to serve on the Council of Appointment, the body responsible for allocating appointive offices, a highly consequential decision made by the Assembly. We will use these districts as a way to operationalize region.

In addition, we collected the following data for each legislator, which we here mention briefly; a fuller discussion is found in Part A of the online supplement. At the time of our study, *party affiliation* was wholly informal. Absent membership lists or other ways to systematically link political elites to parties, historians have relied on party tickets, often published in newspapers, attendance at nominating meetings, and personal correspondence to identify the party with which an assemblyman was affiliated. Our data on party come from a combination of sources: the “A New Nation Votes” database (American Antiquarian Society 2007), biographical sources, and historians’ accounts. It is important to note that we do *not* use votes on the bills here analyzed for imputation of partisan affiliation.

Legislators’ *age* comes from genealogy websites such as ancestry.com, geni.com, and findagrave.com, other genealogical sources, and biographies. Data on *occupation* come from a range of biographical sources, county and town studies, and secondary literature. We grouped job titles into the following nine categories: landowner, merchant, lawyer, other

professional, capitalist, farmer, mechanic, storekeeper, and tavern-keeper. A person can fall into more than one category (e.g., be both a landowner and a lawyer). We obtained data on *wealth* from the “Tax Assessment Rolls of Real and Personal Estates, 1799–1804” held by the New York State Archives. Data on *college* attendance come from biographical sources and lists of graduates published by some colleges. Data on *slave ownership* are from the “New York Slavery Records Index” (Benton and Peters 2018). Finally, we determined membership in the Society of the Cincinnati, a fraternal society founded in 1783 by officers who had served in the Continental Army (and Navy), using the website of the New York State Society of the Cincinnati.

Roll call votes. Roll call votes are recorded in the journals of the New York State Assembly. (We add sessions 11 and 26 to facilitate comparisons to the pre-constitution and the post-1800 election Assembly.) Not all votes in the Assembly were taken by roll call, only those where one legislator so moved and another seconded the motion. From these votes, we created separate legislator-vote matrices for each session, where each cell indicates a legislator’s choice (yea or nay) on a particular vote. Following standard practice, we deleted legislators with very few votes (fewer than 20) as well as highly lopsided roll calls (less than 2.5 percent voted with the minority), as neither contain much information regarding legislators’ positions. This procedure never deleted more than four legislators and never more than one vote per session. Table 2 shows the number of legislators and roll calls for each session. To make comparisons to party development at the national level, we supplement these data with data on congressional votes obtained from the Voteview database (Lewis et al. 2023).

Methods

With these voting data, we conducted three types of analyses (in addition to descriptive tabulation of legislators’ characteristics).

Table 2. Number of Legislators and Roll Calls for Each Session

Session	Number of Legislators			Number of Roll Calls	
	Elected	≥ 1 Vote	≥ 20 Votes	All	Minority ≥ 2.5%
11 (Jan 1788 – Mar 1788)	63	60	56	59	59
12 (Dec 1788 – Mar 1789)	64	62	62	117	116
13 (Jul 1789 – Apr 1790)	65	63	63	127	126
14 (Jan 1791 – Mar 1791)	65	62	60	45	45
15 (Jan 1792 – Apr 1792)	70	68	67	58	58
16 (Nov 1792 – Mar 1793)	69	68	65	87	87
17 (Jan 1794 – Mar 1794)	71	70	69	72	71
18 (Jan 1795 – Apr 1795)	70	68	66	100	100
19 (Jan 1796 – Apr 1796)	70	69	65	62	62
20 (Nov 1796 – Apr 1797)	108	107	105	77	76
21 (Jan 1798 – Apr 1798)	108	107	105	182	182
22 (Aug 1798 – Apr 1799)	108	107	106	193	193
23 (Jan 1800 – Apr 1800)	108	107	106	108	108
24 (Nov 1800 – Apr 1801)	107	107	103	104	104
25 (Jan 1802 – Apr 1802)	106	102	101	99	99
26 (Jan 1803 – Apr 1803)	99	97	94	87	87

Further details on these analyses are in the online supplement. First, we used an inductive clustering method to search for small clusters of agreement that might indicate sub-party factions. We first turned each legislator-vote matrix into a legislator-legislator agreement matrix using the simple matching coefficient and then used a common approach that identifies the partition of the agreement matrix that maximizes modularity (Brandes et al. 2008). Modularity is a widely used and interpretable way of partitioning our matrix into sets so that agreement is high within the sets and low between. A modularity of 1 indicates all agreement is within sets, and a modularity of -1 that all agreement is between sets. Because of its intuitive interpretability, and the existence of good algorithms, this method is increasingly dominant in network sciences. In Part B of the online supplement, we present results from two other methods, k-medoids clustering and hierarchical (Ward) clustering.

Second, we estimated W-NOMINATE models of voting using the R package *wnominate* (Poole et al. 2011).³ These spatial models assume all legislators occupy a particular point in a latent two-dimensional space; that

each vote is represented by two points in the same space, one for yea and one for nay; and that the chance of a legislator voting yea (or nay) on any issue is a decreasing probabilistic function of the distance between the yea (or nay) option and the legislator's own position. The result is placement of all legislators in a two-dimensional space such that two legislators who vote similarly are situated close to one another and two legislators who vote differently are further apart. This allows us to determine whether position in this space correlates with party affiliation. We use the NOMINATE model as this has become the standard approach to the analysis of legislative voting data. In practice, results may be similar to those reached by other forms of spatial reduction, but the NOMINATE model is preferred because it has a rigorous behavioral interpretation grounded in a plausible choice process. Moreover, because the NOMINATE model is now widely used, our results are more easily comparable to existing work on modern legislatures (e.g., Liu and Srivastava 2015). Details about the functional form and the algorithm that estimates the model parameters can be found in Poole (2005).

Third, to examine the relationship between legislative behavior and attributes such as party and region, we used analyses of variance. These ANOVAs allow us to quantify the amount of variance in the W-NOMINATE coordinates and in the actual vote choices that is explained by party and region.

ANALYSES

Parties and Voting Blocs

We begin with the most fundamental questions: are there voting blocs, and if so, how many? The common view that politics was organized as *clusters around notables* would suggest there is either no significant coordination in legislative voting at all (either these notables have no extensive followings, or those followings do not sit in the Assembly), or that voting is structured by small factions held together only by a loose membrane. In the latter case, the differences *between* parties would not be substantially greater than those between various factions *within* parties. Substantial factionalism often exists within even the strongest of parties in a modern system; and such factionalism might be even stronger if parties had emerged as coalitions of smaller clusters centered on powerful elites or their families. This would make a great deal of sense, as early New York politics were based around a few powerful families and their dependents, and many of these families maintained their importance well into the post-independence period (Brooke 2010). A true party system might then slowly assemble itself as such factions align with overarching distinctions at the federal level, a dynamic noted in other circumstances, such as civil wars (Kalyvas 2006).

To answer these questions, we begin with inductive exploration of the structure of agreement within every Assembly session, looking for clusters of high agreement that stand out like islands in a sea of disagreement. Part B of the online supplement contains technical definitions and more complete results of our investigations; Figure 1 presents the results in

an intuitive way. For every session, the figure shows the optimal number of clusters found as well as the proportion of assemblymen in each cluster. Thus, in the first session, the first cluster has almost half the members, and the first two clusters three-fourths; the remaining quarter belongs to the third cluster. Note that the clusters are not constrained to map onto parties.

Two main conclusions stand out. First, the clustering algorithm never finds more than five clusters. Second, in most cases, almost all members are in the two main clusters. However, in three sessions (11, 18, 19), the two largest clusters include less than three-fourths of the assemblymen, and a third cluster is similar in size to the second largest. But there is no evidence of multiple small voting blocs, as would be seen in a factional system. Replication using other methods (see Part B of the online supplement) confirms that these two large voting blocs are not alliances of strong and independent factions, allowing us to reject the hypothesis of *clusters around notables*. The existence of two voting blocs also suggests elites did not form a *cartel*. Finally, contrary to the *limited mobilization* hypothesis, these voting blocs are not restricted to a small number of elites but involve most legislators.

Given that there are, most of the time, two large clusters, the next question is whether these are best interpreted as parties. Contemporary analyses of roll call voting do not limit themselves to examining clusters, but assume that the same analysis that finds differences *between* parties can uncover meaningful distinctions *within* parties—that all legislators have a position on a continuous ideological dimension (although not necessarily only on this dimension). For the case of a two-party system, we expect the two parties are situated near opposite ends of this dimension.

Is this an anachronistic way of thinking for the late eighteenth-century United States? Figure 2, Panel A, presents the results of a W-NOMINATE model for the U.S. Congress

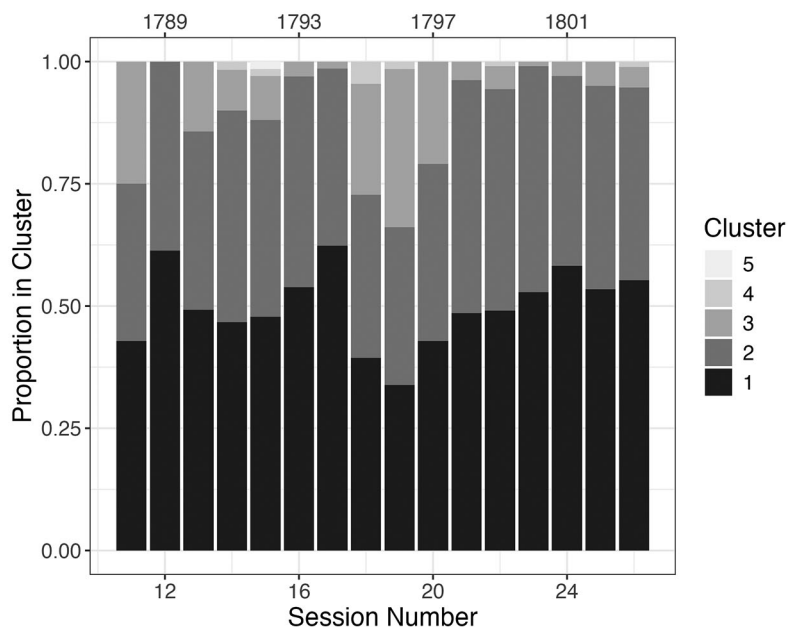


Figure 1. Cluster Sizes by Session

at the end of our period. Note that the diagram is drawn so that the horizontal dimension is that with the highest eigenvalue. A comparison to data from the New York State Assembly (Figure 2, Panel B) suggests that both houses had a high degree of partisan organization. This might suggest a parallel organization, or even a trickle down from the federal to the state level.

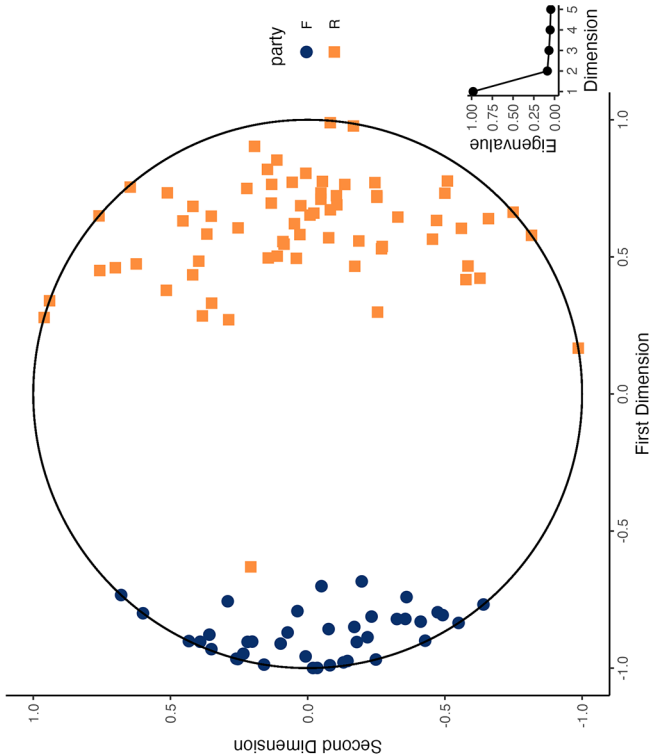
Our interpretations change, however, if we compare results for the *beginning* of our series (Figure 3). At this time, the New York Assembly was far more organized in a partisan space than was the U.S. House. True, there were people who affiliated with both parties during this period, and were we forced to assign them unambiguously to one party or the other, we might have more individuals who seem to be “behind enemy lines.” But we see a gulf of no-man’s-land separating the two parties in New York, as well as a strong tendency toward single-dimensionality that would generally be interpreted as a sign of a highly partisan organization of votes. Thus, we find no evidence for the *top-down*

hypothesis, according to which organization is found first at the federal level and only later trickles down to the states.

Although we see a strong tendency toward one-dimensionality in the data (a one-dimensional model correctly classifies, on average, 77 percent of votes, and a second dimension improves classification by only 4 percent⁴), this is not *always* true. Sometimes the second dimension becomes important, and sometimes the first dimension is not simply partisanship. The degree to which the two dimensions track partisanship can be parsimoniously expressed as the percentage of the total variance in the W-NOMINATE scores *between* (explained variance) as opposed to *within* (unexplained variance) parties. Figure 4 presents results from two sets of one-way ANOVAs, one for each dimension. Although party always gives us some traction in explaining the coordinates of the first dimension, its importance changes: we see a W-shape in which partisan affiliation explains a large percentage of the variance at the beginning of our time series, again in the middle, and once again at the end.

A: US House, Session 7 (Mar 1801 - Mar 1803)

Correct Classification: 88.5%, 90.1% | APRE: 0.68, 0.73 | GMP: 0.78, 0.81



B: NY Assembly, Session 24 (Nov 1800 - Apr 1801)

Correct Classification: 78.6%, 81.5% | APRE: 0.42, 0.5 | GMP: 0.64, 0.68

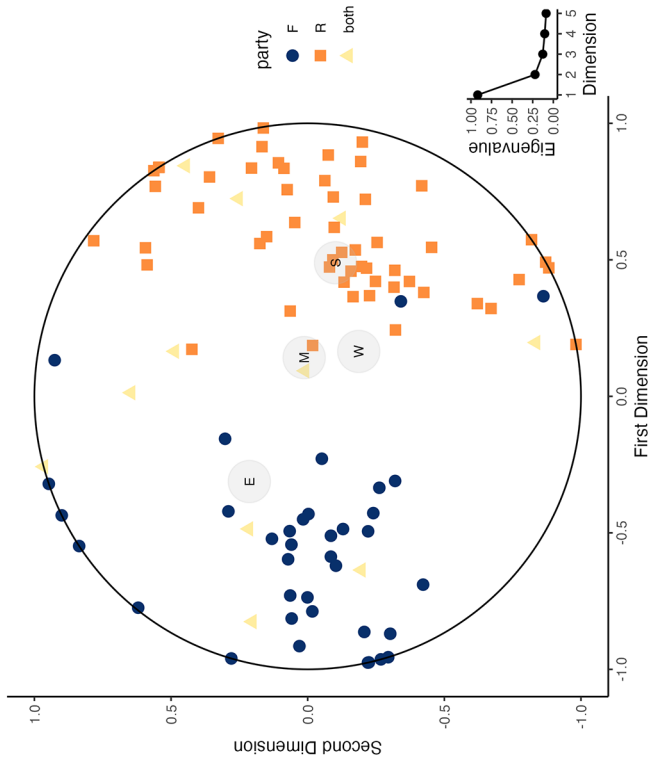
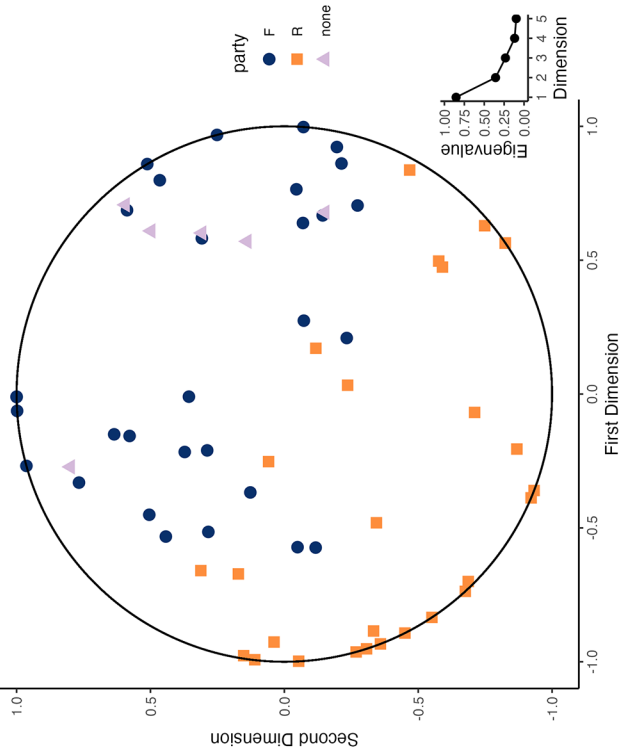


Figure 2. W-NOMINATE Coordinate Plots, U.S. House and NY State Assembly around 1801

Note: Each dot represents a legislator, with the shape and color of the dot indicating the legislator's party. Embedded is the scree plot of eigenvalues showing the relative contribution of the first five dimensions. The plot for the State Assembly also shows the centroids of the positions of the legislators from New York's four senatorial districts (south, middle, west, east). Standard measures of fit for the first and second dimension are provided above each graph.

A: US House, Session 1 (Mar 1789 - Mar 1791)

Correct Classification: 77.2%, 84.2% | APRE: 0.41, 0.59 | GMP: 0.64, 0.71



B: NY Assembly, Session 12 (Dec 1788 - Mar 1789)

Correct Classification: 81.7%, 85.6% | APRE: 0.5, 0.6 | GMP: 0.69, 0.74

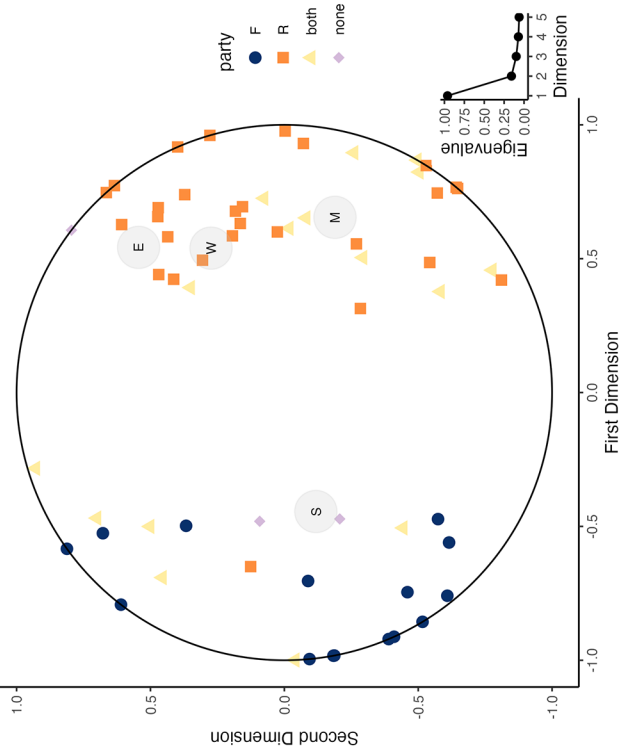


Figure 3. W-NOMINATE Coordinate Plots, U.S. House and NY State Assembly around 1789

Note: Each dot represents a legislator, with the shape and color of the dot indicating the legislator's party. Embedded is the scree plot of eigenvalues showing the relative contribution of the first five dimensions. The plot for the State Assembly also shows the centroids of the positions of the legislators from New York's four senatorial districts (south, middle, west, east). Standard measures of fit for the first and second dimension are provided above each graph.

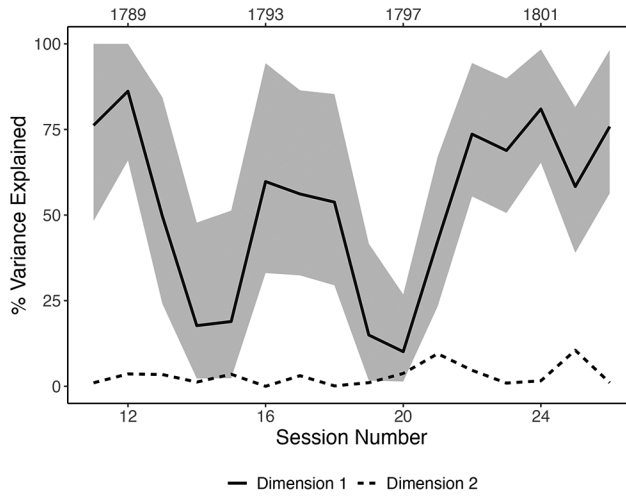


Figure 4. Percent of Variance in W-NOMINATE Scores Explained by Party

Note: Results come from two one-way ANOVAs, estimated separately for each session. The 95 percent confidence interval is that of the regression coefficient, rescaled to the metric of explained variance, given that in a bivariate regression, percent explained variance = $R^2 = b^2[\text{var}(x)/\text{var}(y)]$.

In contrast, the second dimension appears to be completely unrelated to party.

But could this appearance of disorganization be misleading? Might a different form of organization arise in the troughs, one that is not associated with partisan labels? Or could these periods be ones in which a third party is threatening to emerge? We found no evidence supporting either of these alternatives. Instead, partisan coordination seems to have waned and waxed. The basic organization of the legislature took the form of two clusters that aligned with the labels that participants and later scholars used to define the parties. But what, then, was the nature of the division between the parties?

Parties and Social Cleavages

We have seen that at least at certain points, the New York State Assembly demonstrated a degree of partisan organization comparable to contemporary U.S. legislatures. One might imagine that such coordination in legislative voting could arise without any particular effort because of a fundamental mapping of the partisan structure onto existing social

cleavages. Where parties disproportionately recruit from different social strata, they may function coherently simply as a result of members voting their own particular interests. Legislative blocs can form, and can be identified as such, without any attachment to a party identity, let alone an organizational component behind the scenes.

Of course, in a modern electorate, there can be a substantial divorce between the nature of the cleavages that define the party in the electorate and the characteristics of the *representatives* (e.g., both workers' parties and capitalists' parties may run elite lawyers for parliamentary seats). In such a setting, examination of legislator characteristics would not give insight into the party system's relation to social cleavages. But in eighteenth-century America, the position of assemblyman was poorly remunerated, part-time, and involved high turnover—not a world in which we can imagine the emergence of professional representatives. Thus, if a social cleavage defines the party system, we would expect it to be reflected in the profiles of partisan legislators. At least since Beard (1915), there is a long history of examining such a relation between

legislators' voting behavior and their pocket-book interests.

Such a *class cleavage* pattern might well be expected, given the widespread understanding that the Federalists were more tied to commerce, and the Antifederalists and then the Republicans were more likely to be of modest background and more tied to agriculture (Wood 2009:167–68; but see Fischer 1965). Furthermore, studies of roll call voting in the New York legislature in the period between independence in the late 1770s and the acceptance of the new constitution in the late 1780s have found the overriding cleavage structure to be one between, on the one hand, the old elite of large landholders and their urban merchant/professional allies and, on the other, challengers from below, that is, smaller farmers and others of moderate wealth (Countryman 1989; Main 1974). These groups crystallized around classic economic issues of the relative position of debtors and creditors, paper money, and land policy (Main 1974).

Was this still true after the new constitution? It was not. Table 3 shows that Republican and Federalist assemblymen look far more alike than different. Not only is there no evidence of a class divide here (in accordance with the *class cleavage* hypothesis), but there is no evidence of *any* cleavage separating the parties. This is true in terms of age, occupation, wealth (despite the presence of a few very rich Federalists), slave ownership, and membership in elite organizations such as colleges and the Society of the Cincinnati. The last of these is especially significant. Given that the Federalist/Republican split is often ascribed to a difference between the generation of war heroes who gathered around George Washington and used his aegis to push forward a plan of a strong federal government backed by military power, any view of the party system originating from these conflicts would imagine this is an extremely strong predictor. But in all cases, we see much diversity *within* parties, but little variation *between* them. Rather than supporting the *multiple cleavage* hypothesis,

it appears that both parties were based on important cross-cleavage alliances.

There may still, however, have been an exogenous basis to the partisan split, and the most obvious candidate would be geography. Not only is geographic region the primordial form of political division in electoral systems, but the national-level party system in the United States started as a largely regional split between the Federalists in the North and the Republicans in the South. Such a geographic division initially also occurred in New York State. Around the time of the Constitutional Convention, New York's Federalists controlled New York City and a few surrounding counties, and the rest of the state tended to lean toward the Antifederalists (Maier 2010:341). Might geographic divisions have remained the core of the party system, and the coordination we see in the votes was a simple byproduct of persons from different areas voting their regional interests (the *regional cleavage* hypothesis)?

To examine the role of region, we can use the fact that New York was divided into four electoral districts for State Senate elections—the southern, middle, western, and eastern districts—which we use as a proxy for region. To examine the relative importance of region and party, we conduct another analysis of variance. For every vote in every session, we perform a two-way ANOVA with vote choice (yea versus nay) as the dependent variable and district and party as independent variables. We fit the model so that district explains as much of the variance in voting as possible before party explains the remaining variance. We then average the resulting percentages of variance explained by session number. Figure 5 shows the results. The black band at the bottom of the figure indicates the proportion of variance accounted for by district; the dark gray on top of that the further variance accounted for by party; and the light gray the residual variance. Two conclusions are apparent. First, the proportion of variance explained by district goes down over time: region is becoming less important for structuring voting. Second, recalling the overall

Table 3. Social Characteristics by Party

	Republican (N = 191)	Federalist (N = 297)	Both (N = 63)	None (N = 50)
<i>Age</i>				
Mean birth year	1751.7	1754.2	1751.6	1748.9
Median birth year	1749.5	1755	1752	1750
Missing	33 (17%)	53 (18%)	9 (14%)	5 (10%)
<i>Occupation (% of legislators)</i>				
Merchant	18.8	19.5	20.6	14.0
Lawyer	12.6	15.2	25.4	2.0
Capitalist	9.4	8.1	6.3	10.0
Landowner	5.2	4.7	11.1	2.0
Farmer	12.0	9.1	6.3	12.0
Mechanic	6.3	5.4	3.2	4.0
Other professional	5.2	8.4	4.8	18.0
Storekeeper	3.1	5.5	1.6	2.0
Tavern keeper	2.6	4.7	0	4.0
Missing	84 (44%)	118 (40%)	27 (43%)	27 (54%)
<i>Wealth (in \$)</i>				
Mean real property (all)	6,145	5,363	9,333	
Median real property (all)	5,027	4,000	5,034	
Mean personal property (all)	974	705	1,307	
Median personal property (all)	603	575	761	
Mean real property (primary only)	3,741	3,264	5,920	
Median real property (primary only)	2,295	2,148	3,793	
Mean personal property (primary only)	697	544	955	
Median personal property (primary only)	393	340	514	
<i>Slave Ownership</i>				
Mean number of slaves	1.1	1.1	1.4	1.5
Percent with at least one slave	34.6	35.4	42.9	34.0
<i>College</i>				
Percent with college education	8.4	9.1	11.1	2.0
<i>Membership in the Society of the Cincinnati</i>				
Percent with membership	7.9	8.8	14.3	8.0
Percent with membership, incl. honorary	8.4	9.8	19.0	8.0

Note: Individuals sometimes appeared in tax records under the same name in multiple locations. “All” refers to the combined value of property across all such locations. “Primary only” refers to the property listed in the individual’s primary location—typically where he resided and where most personal property was recorded.

W-shape of the degree of partisan organization over time, we see that there has been a change in the *character* of partisan organization: partisan organization was indeed largely regional around the time of the 1788 Constitutional Convention (i.e., parties mapped onto region), but by the end of the 1790s, parties

had detached themselves from their regional bases.

Comparing Panel B in Figures 2 and 3, we see a similar pattern. In Figure 3, Panel B, party and region are closely related and map almost perfectly onto each other, with the Federalist southern district opposing the other

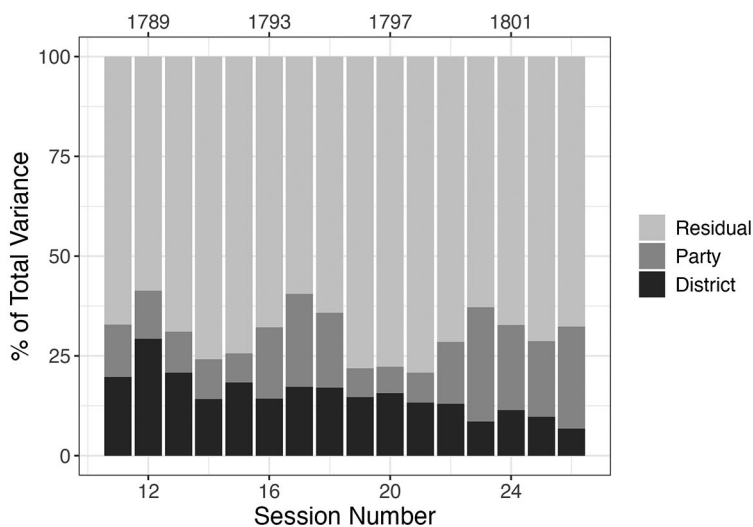


Figure 5. Decomposition of Variance

three districts that overwhelmingly elected Antifederalists. In contrast, in Figure 2, Panel B, the final period, we see some regional organization, but some districts are quite split and hence in the middle of the plot.

Closer inspection of all the W-NOMINATE solutions (see Part C of the online supplement) demonstrates it is not only that early partisan organization was regional, but after the second period of partisan organization, there was a destructuring of the field, and the little organization there *was*, was largely regional. This makes a great deal of sense, as the western part of the state emerged as a political force during this time (1796–98). The legislature underwent a tremendous expansion in session 20, with the number of assembly seats increasing from 70 to 108. Most of these new seats were captured by Federalists, leading to a very skewed Assembly, and the virtual irrelevance of the Republicans. As a result, a sectional division opened within the Federalists, placing the western district, often joined by the eastern district, on one side, and the middle and southern districts on the other. Yet starting in session 22 or 23 (1799 to 1800), partisan organization rebounded and replaced region as the only salient dimension.

Such a decrease in regional organization went along with an increase in the competitiveness of elections in the second half of the 1790s (see Part D of the online supplement). Such competitiveness is a predictable outcome of, and has predictable effects on, the existence of politically savvy actors. A strategic political partisan will try to identify areas held by the opponent that might be contestable and begin to organize there. The other side will do the same. Both parties attempt to tunnel into the regions associated with their rivals, leading to increasingly competitive elections and the undermining of a regional organization to politics. As a result, former Federalist bastions like New York City could turn Republican, and once secure Antifederalist citadels like Ulster County could become Federalist. Hence, even if region was initially a scaffold for the party system, it was one that could be dismantled, leaving the constructed party system intact.

Structural Issues and the Formation of Modern Parties

We have seen no evidence that the exogenous characteristics of legislators can explain the partisan organization that repeatedly arose

Table 4. Percentage Breakdown of Votes, Most and Least Partisan

	Most Partisan	Session 24	Least Partisan
Procedure	8.4%	3.9%	7.0%
Structure	72.7%	38.8%	17.6%
Improvements	.7%	9.7%	15.5%
Social	0%	8.7%	17.6%
Military	6.3%	0%	6.3%
Relief	1.4%	14.6%	16.2%
Land	2.1%	3.9%	7.7%
Regulation	6.3%	17.5%	7.7%
Tax/Finance	2.1%	2.9%	4.2%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%
Number of Votes	143	103	142

in New York. Of course, that does not in itself demonstrate that the parties were, like modern parties, fundamentally oriented to contests over the indivisible good of control over the state. We may have simply failed to uncover one of the many possible characteristics of legislators that could, conceivably, translate into voting behavior.

Rather than begin an endless search for data that might rule out one possibility over another, let us see if we can resolve this issue by examining the votes that produced a partisan division in the Assembly and comparing them to the least partisan votes. If the partisan votes have something distinct in common, that would be strong evidence as to the nature of the party system. To do this, we first quantify how much each vote separates the two parties using the Rice index of difference (RID). The RID is defined as $100|p_{y,F} - p_{y,R}|$, where $p_{y,F}$ is the proportion of Federalists voting yea and $p_{y,R}$ the proportion of Republicans voting yea (MacRae 1970). The index runs from 0 (both parties are similarly divided) to 100 (perfect party polarization). For each session, we then select the most partisan votes (those with an RID greater than 80) and the least partisan votes (those with an RID less than 6).⁵ For purposes of comparison, we also select all roll call votes from session 24, which was during the third period of high partisanship.

Table 4 summarizes the composition of these votes by issue domains. (Full results are presented in Part E of the online supplement, which discusses specific votes as well as the coding used for Table 4.) In our discussion, we refer to a vote by the session and page number where the call for the roll call first occurs in the minutes. If a session was split into two meetings, we index them with an uppercase letter. Where more than one vote occurs on a page, we index them with lowercase letters. Thus, vote 13A.12b means the second vote called for on page 12 of the first meeting of session 13.

Given that the New York Republicans were widely understood as continuous with the Antifederalists who had opposed the new constitution, it should not be surprising that in the early period, votes over the federal constitution were highly partisan. Even though New York's state convention had ratified the federal constitution, and antifederalism might seem a dead issue, in the first session after ratification the Assembly debated whether to push for a second constitutional convention, to clarify—and probably limit—the powers of the new government. Small changes of wording were taken to be pregnant with implications for later positions. In session 12, the Assembly voted on a bill simply declaring that New York's ratification was undertaken with confidence that certain federal powers

would not be used until there had been further revision by another national convention. The vote (12.102) divided the two parties perfectly, with Antifederalists/Republicans voting for and Federalists against.⁶

Other highly partisan votes also concerned constitutional issues. In session 12, 17 votes were related to procedures for electing members of Congress and presidential electors (12.13, 12.15b, 12.18, 12.37, 12.39, 12.77, 12.85, 12.86a-c, 12.96a-b, 12.97, 12.99, 12.103a-b, 12.110a; average RID = 96). The U.S. Constitution left many of these details to the individual states, so it was natural they were being debated in the first session after ratification. Another two votes regarding the election of U.S. Representatives appeared in the second period of partisanship (16.44, 16.46; average RID = 80), and in session 23 three votes about presidential electors were recorded (23.166, 23.175-176; average RID = 96).

That these seemingly technical issues were both partisan and ideological is no surprise, as a look at the debates leading up to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution shows (Maier 2010). Constitutional issues are paradigmatic examples of *structural* decisions—decisions about the form under which future contests will take place. It was regarding these questions that Americans' rhetoric so often soared, for what might seem a narrow technical issue regarding voting procedures could be a way of determining the effective franchise, and the degree to which commoners had more or less leverage over the political process. It was here, in arguments about franchise and details of procedure, that one could hear charges of *aristocracy* and *rabble* bandied about, alongside the mobilization of principled arguments. Yet for all that, these were no less proximate strategic issues—they concerned which party was more likely to be able to place its candidates in good positions, given the current lay of the land.

There were, of course, other issues that were highly partisan but not about the constitution or federal-state relations. What they shared with the previously discussed votes was that they were *structural* issues—issues

about changing the rules of the game. More specifically, they were almost all related, directly or indirectly, to control over offices. Many had to do with procedures for the composition of or rules for the Council of Appointment (COA)—the special body that allocated appointed positions, controlling not only all state-level offices, but also most county-level and municipal offices (e.g., 24B.129, 24B.317-321; average RID = 97). Other highly partisan issues involved redistricting (e.g., 23.243a-244b; average RID = 93), procedures for choosing office-holders (e.g., 17.110a-175; average RID = 89), and the choice of specific individuals for existing positions (e.g., 11.36, 18.8a-32; average RID = 90). Indeed, fully 72 percent of the most partisan votes had to do with constitutional or structural issues, compared to only 18 percent of the least partisan votes (see Table 4). Of the 18 percent of nonpartisan structural votes, most involved the single issue of setting officers' salaries (including assemblymen's salaries). Without this issue, the percentages of the most and least partisan votes being structural would be 71 versus 8 percent.

Above we discussed the *formal* hypothesis, which was based on the finding that contemporary parties in the legislature are organized around collective action on *procedural* votes even more than they are on substantive ones (Cox and McCubbins 2007). Although it is possible that legislators move in concert not because of actual partisan coordination, but because of shared interests or ideals, it is hard to imagine legislators having exogenous preferences on matters like the order of business. Moreover, while party leaders understand that members may on occasion need to defect from the party line to satisfy their particular constituencies, no such excuse is available for defection on procedural votes (Jenkins, Crespín, and Carson 2005). Hence, agreement on procedural issues is taken as a good indication of party coordination, if not party discipline (Cox and Poole 2002).

If, however, we distinguish the narrower, short-term, *procedural* issues (e.g., whether

to commit a bill to a subcommittee) from the broader, long-term, *structural* issues of changing the rules of the game (see Table 4), we find that here the latter, not the former, are partisan. The focus on formality comes not because of party leaders' capacity to discipline members and *force* them to support the party (there were no party whips or centralized sources of campaign funding in the early American republic), but because these formal structural issues are precisely those on which the actors *wanted* to unite—issues that involved struggle over the organizational rules that would determine the outcomes of future conflicts. Like members of modern parties, legislators were—in accord with recent theoretical development by the articulation school (e.g., De Leon et al. 2015)—driven by *endogenous* concerns.

What sorts of votes stood out as *nonpartisan*? Many involved precisely the sorts of issues that have often been bandied about as explanations for the division between the parties, including what we might think of as the “social question” (issues focusing on the poor, morality, and slavery), treatment of loyalists, land concerns, and “internal improvements” (developing infrastructure). Other nonpartisan issues involved salaries for office-holders, treatment of debtors, and taxes—three issues that structured voting in the New York State Assembly before 1788 (see Part E of the online supplement).

This now gives us a somewhat better understanding of the W-shape of partisan coordination over time. It seems less that the underlying *capacity* for partisan organization disappeared, and more that legislative *attention* was drawn to other issues, such as issues of administration that might lead to many different types of splits or to unanimity. The three periods of partisanship correspond to times of what we might understand as *endogenous* politicization—times when the political process zeroed in on just those structural issues that provoked partisan coordination. (We here give a historical thumbnail; more information is in Part E of the online supplement.)

The first issue was the response to the new federal constitution, the question that defined the sides and gave them their initial names (Federalists versus Antifederalists). The second involved a highly charged fight over a disputed gubernatorial election that was decided by a razor-thin margin (think *Bush v. Gore*). The third involved a similar structural crisis regarding the COA, an issue that first arose in the second period of partisanship. The COA consisted of the Governor and four members chosen by the Assembly. When these were controlled by different parties, there were tensions as to precisely who had the power to make nominations. This provoked a constitutional crisis that eventually was resolved by a constitutional convention in 1801. In all cases, parties coordinated around issues that pertained to the rules of the game, and, in particular, issues involving the regulation of office-holding. Partisans were carrying out Simon's (1996) strategy: to strive to occupy a position from which one can get to *other* good positions. In the case at hand, this meant fighting over the rules by which their future positions would be determined.

This makes eminent sense but raises a further question. Given how short representatives' tenure in the Assembly was, it cannot be that many of these actors were (unlike current congresspeople) striving to move up an internal hierarchy (e.g., to dominate crucial committees). Why strive for organizational power at all? As noted above, many of the most bitter constitutional questions revolved around the COA, the committee that, by filling the burgeoning set of state- and county-level jobs, in effect carried out the expansion that, to historical sociologists, is fundamental to the process of state-building. Indeed, it is not merely that the parties came together to fight over the *rules* of positions, they also united to fight over *particular* positions. For example, in the highly partisan session 24, the Assembly passed a relatively nonpartisan infrastructure bill pertaining to building a courthouse and jail in Oneida County. This involved naming the commissioners who

would do the planning (24B.172; RID = 5.4). The bill then went to the State Senate. When the Federalist majority in the Senate noticed the Republican-controlled Assembly had named Republicans to these positions, even though Oneida was a Federalist stronghold, they amended the bill to give the commissions to Federalists, and returned it to the Assembly. At this point, the vote on the previously nonpartisan bill became extremely partisan (24B.230-231; average RID = 93).

This might lead one to conclude that, despite the apparent similarity of the New York case to a modern party system, it was, in fact, merely a set of patronage parties, two sets of interchangeable hacks only looking to line their own pockets. This would, we think, be a grave misinterpretation. The politicized issues fall on a continuum running from the most particularistic grants of positions to structural rules over control of position-granting bodies to questions of constitutional reform to the most fundamental ideological question—the strength of the new federal government and the associated elites—that had rocked the new nation. One cannot establish a cut point with “patronage” on one side and “principle” on the other. What all these votes had in common was that they were struggles over the newly born government structures that were likely to grow in importance, and to affect the lives and projects of all citizens, especially the ambitious. Indeed, in retrospect, it is hardly obvious there should be an analytic, let alone a moral, distinction between partisan organization to fill *elected* positions and partisan organization to fill *appointed* positions. Both linked the population to the expanding state, aligning personal and collective projects, and creating a coherent party system.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We conclude by discussing the theoretical purchase afforded by these results: (1) the first American party system resulted not from the mapping of politics onto cleavages, but

from the organizational affordances of the modern state, and it did not proceed from the top down; (2) patronage parties cannot be assumed to be inherently anti-ideological, or some sort of degeneration of “true” politics; and (3) while incipient state-formation first galvanized PSF by creating the resources political actors competed for, the party system then played a key role in the further expansion and stabilization of the state.

Party Formation in the United States

We have seen that partisan coordination emerged earlier in New York State than in the U.S. Congress, despite the lack of features usually proposed as precipitating factors: social cleavages, reelection pressures, and the like. In retrospect, this makes perfect sense. There were more elections, and more jobs, at the state than at the federal level. This was particularly true in New York, where elites supported massive internal improvement projects that required an expansive administration (Murphy 2015). This was where the action was—where there were enough things to fight over. The interdependence of the national and state levels, then, did not come in a top-down fashion, in which national-level elites gave state-level actors their marching orders, or in which delegates returning from Congress spread the organizational template of the emerging party system.

But although the New York parties were not derivative of national-level parties, neither was New York’s party system independent of the new federal structure. Instead, the new concentration of organizational, material, and symbolic resources that was partially accomplished, and even more importantly forecast, as a result of the new constitution, formed a new prize for preexisting factional structures to compete over (Chhibber and Kollman 2004). As Gould (1996) and others have found, trans-local political structures have fundamental implications for the balance of power between competing groups in different localities. This importance of the new federal level not only sharpened the

boundaries between parties, but it allowed the alignment across states and across levels to be conducted in a more effective, but still creative, manner. In this sense, the party system in New York depended on national-level issues, but these same issues can with equal justness be termed state-level issues, as they largely turned on the relative power of federal and state levels.

This has, we argue, an important negative implication: political partisans may indeed seek to latch onto, or open up, social cleavages as a tactic of party formation, but this is in no way necessary. And this is not restricted to either “early” cases like our own, or the “late” cases of the “catch-all” party. In hindsight, we see that this idea that the drivers of PSF are the organizational affordances of the modern state lies behind Michels’s (1949:389, 394) vigorous critique of the German Social Democratic Party, the classic example of a cleavage-based mass party: “The party . . . is not necessarily identifiable with the totality of its members, and still less so with the class to which these belong,” as the delegates’ interest in preserving the privileges of office displaces their commitment to revolutionary change, and the party “becomes an end-in-itself.”

Rather than turning on cleavages, the logic of PSF in New York was oriented to issues of structure. The two parties were shockingly similar in class background, and even initially important regional differences faded as the parties soon tunneled through the geographic boundaries that had first seemed to define them. What brought members of the parties together in the Assembly were not individuals’ exogenous, distal interests, but their endogenous, proximate, specifically *political* interests (for similar arguments, see Slez and Martin 2007; Walder 2006; Zhang 2021), and the structural contests whereby they attempted to change the rules of the game in their favor.

Central here were not only rules that would affect elections, and hence, indirectly, who won *elected* positions, but also rules that would determine *appointed* positions. Of

course, the orientation of American parties to patronage has long been excoriated by analysts. But this is often held to be a *later* form, a devolution in the nineteenth century from the “great political parties” that, according to Tocqueville ([1835] 2004:201), the United States had at its birth: “The parties that [now] threaten the Union,” he wrote sadly, “are based not on principles but on material interests.” We have found that, at least in New York, those “great political parties” did not disdain to fight over material interests.

Some of these fights were indeed about the allocation of offices—sometimes direct fights over particular persons, but more importantly, conflict for control over the *capacity* to make such allocations. Where the government structure led to a “winner-take-all” contest (despite partisans never attempting to “take all” offices for their own party), politicians had to organize in the same way they did to capture vital positions like the presidency. There was, in other words, more continuity between fights for control over appointed positions (e.g., by struggling over the rules of how the COA was selected) and over control of elected positions (e.g., by fighting over rules of the franchise) than has been previously appreciated.

Clearly, New York had one of the more developed party systems at the time, but other states, too, produced political structures that could be aggregated into national parties. Indeed, although it requires further study using approaches similar to ours, earlier work on the other key place of origin of the national party system, the Chesapeake region (Virginia and Maryland), suggests findings parallel to ours—a shift in the 1790s assemblies from partisan divides oriented around *economic* issues to a sophisticated unification around *formal* issues (Risjord 1978:472–78, 572). Even more, the one comparable systematic analysis of partisan splits in the nineteenth-century British parliament reaches a similar conclusion—it was on structural or constitutional issues, not the substantive issues that garner the most attention, that divisions were most consistently partisan (Fair

1986). This connection between structure, office, and party suggests we need to rethink our ideas about the role of patronage in PSF, and especially the Tocquevillian notion that “patronage” parties are inherently opposed to “ideological” parties.

Parties and Patronage

Let us first note that the term *patronage* can be used for three ideal-typical practices, with different implications for PSF. The first is the personal patronage of a notable with a set of clients attached to him or her personally, whose fates tend to rise or fall with that of the patron. Such personal patronage may exist within parties, but it tends to degrade partisan organization, as actors have their primary loyalties to persons, not to parties, let alone to principles. A second is that of the classic urban machine, in which various nonpolitical benefits (e.g., employment in nonpolitical jobs, like sanitation, or receipt of lucrative contracts, like construction) are dispensed to mass actors in return for support (usually votes).

It is the third form that is of interest to us, which is often called the spoils system. Here offices are used to reward fellow partisans, and the recipients are neither the mass voters nor the high-level political appointees who would never be at risk of civil service reform (e.g., the president’s cabinet). Instead, patronage is, to use Katz and Mair’s (2018:73) words, employed as an organizational resource.

This third form of patronage, we suggest, need not come at the expense of ideological development. The struggle for control over the state’s organizational resources provokes coordination and strong partisanship, and it can lead to deeply polarized party systems (Lee 2016). Although such hot political struggle can coincide with an absence of ideological elaboration, patronage might actually tend to generate relatively abstract ideological justifications. Why? If parties use the spoils system to grow their organization, we might expect them to take the form of

vertically integrated structures that compete with one another (see also Bearman 1993; Zhang 2021). These structures would not easily map onto class or regional cleavages, as they undermine horizontal relationships. Citizens of similar backgrounds and living in similar locations would be *rivals* for the same jobs, not natural allies on the basis of their social characteristics. The very suppression of concrete social divides, with their (seemingly) self-evident constellations of interest (e.g., “good for workers”), may provoke the development of abstract rhetorics of political justification. There is, after all, no *logical* incompatibility between principles and material interests. Indeed, such a distinction is often hotly disputed in political fights—*your* side’s principles appear to *our* side as (your) material interest.

Finally, it is important to recognize how far down the class ladder the American patronage system reached (Broxmeyer 2020). This was not simply a matter of granting a few rich bourgeois the right to farm taxes or to raise regiments and declare themselves officers, but involved the inclusion of large segments of society into the political process. In other words, the nature of a political party, and a party system, is fundamentally different for a *pre*-civil-service-reform state than it is for a *post*- (Shefter 1994). In the former, a patronage party may not signal degeneration and corruption, but rather the establishment of a key means of alignment of electorate and elites. True, positions were not necessarily filled according to neutral evaluations of fitness, but neither were they created to maximize short-term cash flow (simony) at the expense of long-term stability, nor left wholly in the hands of the executive. Instead, patronage parties linked the attainment of positions to electoral success, allowing the development of modern parties—those in which the sides were *named* (as opposed to personalistic), occupied reciprocal *positions* (and thus constituted a party *system*), continued to have *coherence* after election (as opposed to merely being a convenient way to mobilize voters), and *struggled* to maximize their

power. This has, we propose, clear implications for our understanding of state formation, not only in the American context, but more generally.

Parties and State Formation

The study of state formation in historical sociology was decisively stamped by a partial reading of Weber's work. Weber (1978) was particularly interested in the difficulties faced by centralizing powers attempting to transform a weak executive held hostage to a hereditary nobility into one able to discipline both state actors and the population (see also Reed and Adams 2024). To Weber and his followers, it was obvious that the state's strength would be seen in the development of an administrative bureaucracy under the control of the executive. The crucial locus of struggle between the executive and other elites pertained to the filling of offices: Would the prince (or minister) be able to select on the basis of competence and loyalty, or would they be forced to appoint nobles? Could they increase the number of offices by increasing the tax base, and would this require an extension of the state bureaucracy, thereby requiring further funds? Would this provoke revolts, and if so, would the size of the repressive forces need to be increased, requiring an even greater extension of the tax base? Success could be measured, if imperfectly, in the size of state bureaucratic and military structures. Indeed, much of the important work in historical sociology has concentrated on the development of state bureaucracies that proved able to tax, discipline, and survey their populations (Adams 2007; Hechter 2013; Lachmann 2010).

There is no doubt that many aspects of the fiscal-military-bureaucratic model of state formation hold in the American case. As Gould (1996) and Reed (2019, 2020) show, extension of taxation by the federal government provoked serious rebellion that called forth military suppression and the performance of sovereignty. But past a point, the stories to the west and east of the Atlantic

diverge. First, although the American case also involved the expansion of administrative capacity, this did not initially mean an increase in positions in the executive branch of the federal government. Although comparisons are difficult, most government in late-eighteenth-century America was at the state level (Mashaw 2006; Rao 2016); in 1800, the number of federal positions probably was no greater than that in New York State alone.

Second, contrary to the focus on administrative positions in the executive branch, in the late eighteenth century, *legislatures* did the bulk of administration, carrying out the detailed consideration of, say, where to build bridges or how to regulate commerce that we imagine only arose much later (Gunn 1980). In the case of New York, the legislature determined the proper length of wagon axles, built infrastructure, set up regulation of commodity quality, and protected oysters. Perhaps more important, it directly or indirectly created and filled public offices.

Third, in the United States, state formation occurred simultaneously with the incorporation of large parts of the citizenry into politics, which accompanied the growth associated with westward expansion and the displacement of Indians (Shi 2025; Slez 2020). European monarchs might be forced to print money to raise an army—a gamble that would pay off only if that army could rack up impressive victories quickly—but the United States could “print” land and “print” offices and do these without the “inflation” that came when multiple persons were given overlapping titles (as often happened where simony was used to fund a state).

The American party system determined the contours of the emerging administrative state, which affected the legitimacy and ease of state expansion. European rulers tended to provoke opposition whenever they attempted to extend their administrative power, either because of the increased burden on taxpayers, or because of the attempt to tame potentially recalcitrant officials. In the United States, in contrast, the party system channeled demands for office into an arena of regularized conflict.

This garnered consent for state expansion from a much wider stratum of the population than that envisaged by Hamilton's program, designed to give elites an economic interest in the federal government's strength and stability.⁷ Indeed, at the level of the several states, the growth of administration did not need to be forced on unhappy citizens; many positively clamored for it. Thus a party system can mobilize the enthusiastic support of those in the population who become a "client group" (Bensel 1990), calling for greater extension of administrative capacity. Even those who had—on the most principled of grounds—objected to the expansion of power at any particular level (whether local, state, or federal) could, once it was a *fait accompli*, strive to make a living in one of the new positions created.

In summary, in this world, the issue of the alignment of staff and state interests was quite different from that anticipated by Weber. One thing that many different, often mutually hostile, sets of citizens could agree on was the project of state expansion of *some* form—it was simply that each group wanted to expand the level of state they controlled and, to the extent that it was possible, to allocate the paychecks to their friends and the taxes to someone else. Moreover, the federal structure meant that both parties could be "in" at the same time, but at different levels or in different states. And even if one was "out," this status was temporary, as the party system provided a regulated way for competition and a pathway for political actors to become "ins." As a result, many constituencies could be invested in using the party system as a project of seeking positions—the fight for the right to serve the state as a means of serving oneself. While in the wilder West such alignment required creative performance (Reed 2019), in the milder East, it required close attention to the formal structure of government.

The sociological history of the development of the American national state, then, remains to be written, as it is actually one that occurred as much in the several states as at the federal level itself. Moreover, this story is

one in which precocious party systems figure heavily, both as ways of connecting voters to the new expanding centers of power and in regulating access to the myriad positions in the expanding state.

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Data Note

A replication package with the data and code used in the analyses can be found at <https://doi.org/doi:10.7910/DVN/JLUVYU>.

Notes

1. We use *party formation* to refer to processes of forming a particular party, and *PSF* to refer to processes that lead to the formation of a party system as a whole.
2. These political entrepreneurs might be relatively small groups of unusually vocal, persistent, or well-heeled members of the public. Bawn and colleagues (2012) call these individuals "policy demanders" and argue for their importance in the formation of the first U.S. party system.
3. As a robustness check, we repeated the analysis using non-metric multidimensional scaling and

- optimal classification, a non-parametric spatial model proposed by Poole (2000). The results are similar and inspire confidence in the robustness of the W-NOMINATE scores. For studies of the American Congress, the DW-NOMINATE model is more commonly used (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). DW-NOMINATE is a dynamic version of W-NOMINATE that combines all sessions into one global model (instead of treating them separately) and then assumes legislators can move along a linear or quadratic line between sessions. This model, however, only works well under the assumption of relatively stable voting patterns (McCarty 2016)—an assumption that is violated in our case, which is why we estimate separate models for each session.
4. In their study of the U.S. Congress, Poole and Rosenthal (1997) found that two dimensions suffice to accurately predict approximately 85 percent of voting decisions.
 5. Cutoffs were chosen so as to sample similar numbers of partisan and nonpartisan votes.
 6. It is important to remember that our assignment of legislators to parties does not use information on roll call votes, so this finding is not a tautology.
 7. It is somewhat ironic, but Hamilton's program *did* reach his intended goals partly through its failure. By provoking the Antifederalist counter that led to the first party system, Hamilton got not only the elites, but also the middling strata, to "have a portion" in the state and federal governments.
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