

SNG-Party's over-11-6-17

The party's over; what will replace it?

By Jim Nowlan

In 1972, the late political writer David Broder authored "The Party's Over," in which he chronicled the decline and pending demise of American political parties. [I think the demise has just about arrived.]

As Broder saw it, the two major parties long provided critical, understandable, helpful cues to American voters about party positions.

Roughly speaking, Democrats were for the working man and Republicans for Main Street businessmen. No longer. Candidates for office rarely even name their party in commercials.

In a recent column [that may have run] in this paper, I called for a third, moderate party, out of my frustration that, on the one hand, the GOP has been hijacked by an incoherent mix of the Far Right and now populist (at least in rhetoric) Trump-tweeted platform.

As for the Democrats, a number of readers were incensed with my admittedly clumsy, at best, characterization of their party leaders. I should have simply said the Democrat leadership is largely captive of urban minorities plus old-line liberals, often elitist, who think that is where most attention should be focused.

The Dems seem to have forgotten the hard-working, white middle and struggling classes that for decades made up the bulwark for Democrats' successes, from FDR to LBJ. For example, the Democratic Party is now irrelevant in my rural county. Indeed, there is no longer any formal Democratic Party there.

A very brief history of parties. George Washington decried factions (parties), yet they were inevitable in a new system that had to organize around like-minded men (at that time, indeed white and property owning) to contest elections.

From Jefferson and Hamilton, then Jackson, came what would be our Democratic and Republican parties. A Whig Party contested elections with some success in the 1830-50s, yet fell apart when the party couldn't resolve its differences over the issue of extension of slavery. This offered an opening for a new Republican Party, quite grassroots initially, that grew from nothing to the presidency between 1854 and 1860.

By the Gilded Age of the late 1800s, plutocrats dominated the GOP and urban bosses were often representing—and controlling the politics of—the working and immigrant classes.

There were also small-city political machines. Republican Len Small of Kankakee, twice governor (1921-28), ran his county and then the state with an iron hand. [Remnants of that political operation remained through the recent career of former governor George Ryan, also of Kankakee.]

Parties were held together by union or business philosophies, respectively, plus the glue of patronage jobs (jobs awarded by a political patron, such as an urban boss or governor) for precinct workers who linked themselves directly to voters. [For my master's thesis on the Illinois Republican Party of the 1950-60s, I found that at one time 82 of the state's 102 GOP county chairmen held state jobs courtesy of a Republican governor.]

The push by reformers for selection of state government employees on merit and court decisions that prohibited job largesse based on party affiliation have largely eliminated patronage jobs.

The resource that patronage provided parties has now been replaced, ever more expansively, by the money of mega-millionaires. So, today, party organizations are shells of their past importance, and big-money candidates use parties almost solely as labels by which to get onto the ballot.

This coming year in Illinois, for example, two billionaires are spending hundreds of millions—at current spending rates—to win the governorship a year from now. Incumbent governor Bruce Rauner is also funding the campaigns of favored legislators, a job traditionally left to the candidates themselves (in my era) and more recently by legislative leaders who raised money for their troops.

In the past, when party organizations helped win elections, a wannabe candidate was asked: How much work have you done for the party, and how loyal have you been? Now the question is: How much money do you have or can you raise?

Comparison to the Roman Republic of more than two millennia ago might appear a bit melodramatic. Yet I find it hard not to see similarities then with today. That is, the transition from the yeoman Roman farmer of about 500 BC, who reputedly volunteered to his tribe/nation's success, to the decadent final days of the Republic four centuries later.

By 100 BC or so, senators of massive wealth would buy their elections as consuls, and later hire their own armies. Goodbye Republic, hello Emperor.

So, what to do today? Can grassroots groups conceivably use the ubiquitous, inexpensive—and viral—Internet to organize, fund and advocate for, say, a new party on a basis competitive with that of big money?

And what would that party be? For example, moderates are notorious for failure to ignite passions the way advocates at polar extremes can.

These questions haunt me.