Culture versus Economics: An American Dilemma

“There are billions of potential conflicts in any modern society, but only a few become significant,” E. E. Schattschneider (1960: 66) pointed out many years ago. Accordingly, the most important political struggles are not issue conflicts but issue-cleavage conflicts, “arguments about what the argument is about” (ibid.: 70–71). The definition of alternatives, from a Schattschneiderian perspective, is the primal act of politics. If the sine qua non of a political party is the selection of leaders, then the quintessential act
of a political system is the selection and framing of issues, which is to say, "the domination and subordination of conflicts" (ibid.: 66).

Yet four decades after the publication of Schattschneider’s *Semisovereign People*, we still know relatively little about how issue cleavages are structured. Institutionalist modes of political analysis (e.g., March and Olsen 1989; Steinmo et al. 1992) have come to the fore, but without much attention to the process that, perhaps more than any other, defines winners and losers in the game of politics. How does conflict selection occur, and what role do political-system variables play? If "all forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others" (Schattschneider 1960: 71), what is the bias of American political institutions? Which issues are "organized in," and which are organized out? These are the central questions of issue-cleavage structuration that this study attempts to address.¹

According to standard wisdom, American politics has been more responsive to cultural than economic cues. Fights over slavery, Prohibition, parochial schooling, sumptuary laws, and Americanism seem to have dominated politics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently, according to one author, "the really bitter divisions within and between the parties... have been on issues with pronounced cultural overtones: domestic communism, the Vietnam war, the ‘counterculture,’ civil rights, law and order, patriotism, obscenity and the permissive society, abortion, feminism, sexual preferences, and church/state issues" (Rae 1992: 638). Thus, in most eras of American history—the New Deal being the most obvious exception—issues surrounding race, ethnicity, religion, section, and gender seem to have been more salient to the public than redistributive issues.²

It is easy to conclude from this familiar narrative that "culture" has trumped "economics" in the American context. And to be sure, cultural impulses have been extraordinarily strong in the United States. But how has the political system responded to these cultural pressures? To what extent has politics at national levels reflected these struggles of pride and place?

I shall argue that certain elements of the American political system—namely, the national parties—have systematically privileged socioeconomic issues and identities over cultural ones. Major-party politics—in contrast, that is, to "grassroots" politics, social-movement politics, and minor-party politics—has usually been defined in socioeconomic terms. While the call
has been cultural, the political system's response has been predominantly socioeconomic. As a result, American politics has been characterized by a critical disjuncture between popular demands and systemwide outputs. (To clarify: the argument is not that American politics has been exceptionally "cultural" in character—for other democratic polities can be found in which cultural impulses have been equally strong—e.g., Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, India, and most of Africa [see Lijphart 1977]. Rather, what makes the U.S. case exceptional—or at least relatively so—is the *disjuncture* between cultural inputs and party-system outputs.)

A thesis of this scale admits of no single, definitive test. Rather, one is compelled to examine a wide range of evidence pertaining to popular impulses and major-party responses (the "demand" and "supply" sides of our equation). The argument proceeds from the general to the specific. I begin with a brief discussion of available cross-national indicators and then turn to two indicators of organization activity in American history—voluntary associations and political parties. Next, I examine the temperance/Prohibition movement as a case study of how cultural impulses have interacted with the party system. Brief consideration is given to other cultural issues (particularly race) in American history.

The final sections are concerned with the task of *explaining* the persistent pattern of cultural demand and socioeconomic response. I argue, briefly, that the cause of this disjuncture can be found in the interaction between the American electorate and the American party system. With one of the world's most diverse populations and, at the same time, one of the world's purest two-party monopolies, American politics is structured in the form of a riptide. Cultural allegiances divide constituencies, but because these cleavages are *multiple*—and generally overlapping, rather than reinforcing—and because they provoke distinctions that are invidious to other members of the electorate, cultural allegiances have rarely been serviceable for aggregating majorities at the national level. Consequently, over the course of American history, cultural issues have been systematically downplayed by the highly adept leadership of the Democratic, Whig, and Republican Parties.

One important qualification must be made before we begin. While cultural issues were generally absent from debates between the major parties, they have certainly not been absent from debates *within* the parties. It was here, in intraparty contests, that these issues thrived. In the penultimate
section of the article I discuss why cultural issues seem to be characteristic of faction politics and economic issues characteristic of competitive party politics.

The persistent issue-cleavage struggle between “culture” and “economics” has wide-ranging implications for our understanding of American politics. It may, for example, help to explain the rather schizophrenic quality of American politics, in which passion and pragmatism curiously intermix; the patterned dynamic of political conflict, in which culturally based movements vie for political recognition from bemused party leaders; and the ongoing drama of hope and betrayal spurred by the failure of the major parties to respond adequately to citizen demands. The much-noted “culture war” that seems to pervade American politics in the present era can also be understood within the context of a subterranean war over cleavages. The final section of the article speculates on these and other implications.

Cross-National Indicators

At the grass roots, the conventional picture of American politics is probably correct. Relative to publics in most other advanced-industrial democracies, Americans are apt to view politics through cultural (ethnic, religious, racial, sectional) lenses. The strongest piece of evidence for this argument comes in the form of cross-national surveys of class voting, which generally conclude that class-based political behavior in the United States is weak. The largest study of this kind (Nieuwbeerta 1995) places the United States second from the bottom (behind Canada) among 20 countries surveyed (column 1, Table 1). Since this sort of study depends on recent cross-national survey research, it is not possible to extend these results back in time. However, historical work based on precinct- and district-level voting returns reiterates the same general picture.

Additional evidence of a more inferential sort may be gleaned from other cross-national statistics—showing, for example, that the United States is less unionized, more ethnically and religiously fragmented, and more religious than other advanced-industrial nations in the latter twentieth century (columns 2–5, Table 1). Again, the historical picture is impossible to gauge with these quantitative indicators; however, there is good reason to assume
that on most of these indicators, the position of the United States relative to other countries has not changed appreciably over the past two centuries. In short, both the opinions and the organizational attributes of the American public seem to demonstrate that preindustrial cleavages have been more salient in the United States than elsewhere.

However, as I have argued, it is not merely the strength of the cultural impulse that sets the United States apart from other nations, but the disjuncture between voter "demand" and party "supply." One way of measuring this disjuncture is to look at the relationship between class voting—a proxy for demand—and party system character, a proxy for supply (columns 1 and 7, Table 1). For the latter, I rely on John Huber and Ronald Inglehart's (1995) survey of experts, which ranks the salience of socioeconomic (economic and class) conflict in various party systems. The results are presented in graphed form in Figure 1.7 It seems clear that the United States is virtually unique among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, combining extremely low class-voting and fairly high socioeconomic conflict at elite levels within the party system.

Historical Indicators: Voluntary Associations

The cross-national evidence reviewed above pertains only to the postwar era. Since the thesis of this study pertains to American politics at large, rather than simply to one epoch of this country's extraordinarily long electoral history, we turn now to a variety of historical indicators that might shed light on demand/supply disjunctions. My focus here will be on the organizational aspects of American politics—on voluntary associations, minor parties, and major parties.8

Associational life in American history has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years (e.g., Gamm and Putnam 1996; Skocpol 1997). Since associational activity bears directly on the political proclivities of the American public, it is worthwhile surveying this research for clues into the culture-versus-economics debate. As part of the Civic Engagement Project at Harvard University, Theda Skocpol and colleagues have gathered a comprehensive list of all voluntary associations—excluding churches, businesses, and parties—that attained membership rates of at least 1% of the American
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Classv: Levels of class voting, 1981–90, as measured by the Thomsen index. Drawn from Nieuwbeerta 1995: 45.
Ra: Rank order (1 = low; N = high).
Unioniz: Workforce unionization rates for 1980 (or nearest year), according to Therborn 1984 or—in the case of Greece, Portugal, and Spain—according to Mielke 1983. Both are reported in Lane et al. 1991: 26.
Ethfrag: The probability that two randomly sampled people will belong to different ethnolinguistic groups. Index ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 the most heterogeneous. Data, covering the 1970s, are based on Barrett 1982 and reported in Lane et al. 1991: 20.
Relfrag: The probability that two randomly sampled people will belong to different religions. Index ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 the most heterogeneous. Data, covering the 1970s, are based on Barrett 1982 and reported in Lane et al. 1991: 21.
Religio: Religiosity. Percent of respondents who classify themselves as “a religious person.” (Other possible responses are “not a religious person,” “a convinced atheist,” and “don’t know.”) Polls taken in 1981 (Australia) and 1990–91 (all other countries) as part of the World Values Survey. Data obtained from Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR 6160).
Socio: The strength of class or economic conflict articulated by a party system, as determined by a poll of country experts conducted by Huber and Inglehart (1995).
Parties: The effective number of parties (degree of fragmentation in the party system), 1990–94, as measured by the Laakso and Taagepera index (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) and calculated by Lane et al. (1991: 163).
population at any time in American history. These associations \((n = 65)\) include advocacy groups; fraternals and sororals; labor unions; and sports, veterans, youth, and general service associations.\(^9\)

The purely associational activities pursued by these groups—whether recreational, fraternal/sororal, social insurance, or religious—are of little concern to this study. I am concerned, however, with any broader social or political goals that a group embraced—goals, that is, extending beyond the immediate membership of the organization. To be sure, not all groups had broader social-political goals of any obvious sort (e.g., the Royal Arcanum, the Maccabees, the American Bowling Congress, and the Women’s International Bowling Congress), and for those that did, these goals were apt to change over time. Nonetheless, most of these large organizations had a fairly well defined mission in the world,\(^10\) and in most cases it was possible to code the nature of this agenda as predominantly “economic” or “cultural” in character.\(^11\)

Not surprisingly (in light of the historical literature on these groups), cultural agendas far outstrip socioeconomic agendas among America’s voluntary associations. Among those 65 associations breaking the 1% threshold
at some point in American history, only 16 (25%) pursued socioeconomic agendas—primarily, associations organized for the protection of laborers, farmers, veterans, and the aged. Nearly 70%, by contrast, pursued cultural agendas \( n = 45 \). (The remaining 5% had no broader social-political goals.) Groups were concerned—pro or con—about alcohol consumption, slavery, the observance of the Sabbath, parochial education, Catholicism, Christianity (generally), immigration, and the eradication of the vices associated with poverty and slum living. Most of these broader social concerns were motivated by racial, religious, ethnic, and/or gender identifications. Social class, by contrast, seems to have been a negligible factor in motivating associational activity in the United States. Indeed, voluntary associations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were usually cross-class organizations, as Skocpol (1997: 474) has pointed out. It is worth noting, finally, that if one were to add churches to this compendium of associational life, the cultural accent of American associational life would be even more pronounced.

**Historical Indicators: Political Parties**

A second longitudinal indicator—this one explicitly political—is provided by minor parties in American history. “Third” parties are useful for present purposes because they offer a historical record of issues and attitudes that were largely ignored by the major parties but were, at the same time, compelling to significant portions of the electorate. They are perhaps the best gauge of political pressure at the grass roots for periods before the introduction of national polling.

The analysis begins with the inauguration of enduring party organization, in 1832, and continues through 1992. (Before 1832, the designation “minor party” is not meaningful.) All parties or independent candidacies that gained at least 1% of the vote nationwide are included. Our interest, of course, is in the general agendas—cultural or economic—that each party presented to the electorate. Since many parties do not fall neatly into either of these categories, it was necessary to create a third coding category—“nonspecific”—to account for unclassifiable cases.

When we observe the broad picture of minor-party activity through American history, the results vindicate the Culture-First argument (see
Table 2). Cultural parties—Anti-Masonic, Liberty, Free Soil, American (Know-Nothing), Southern Democratic, Prohibition, States’ Rights, American Independent, and American—accounted for nearly half (47%) of the minor-party races tracked in this analysis and won almost as many total votes (43%). It is worth noting that many of these parties were driven by racial agendas—slavery (pro and con), civil rights (pro and con). But nativist agendas, often cloaked in the guise of moral reform, were also common.

Some attenuation of these cultural movements seems to have occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (judging by vote totals, not by number of campaigns). However, it would be premature to conclude that preindustrial social cleavages are weakening in the current period—particularly given recent developments in the Republican Party and the ongoing significance of religion to the American citizenry.

Naturally, the 1% cut employed in the foregoing analysis excludes thousands of smaller third-party contenders. However, there is no reason to believe that a broader cut at the evidence would substantially alter the result. If anything, smaller parties seem even more likely to back cultural agendas. Consider the following examples (all drawn from Kruschke 1991): the Afro-American Party (from 1960; civil rights), the Black Panther Party (from 1966; black nationalism), the Christian Party (from 1936; “Christian economics”), the Christian Nationalist Party (from 1947; racism, Christian fundamentalism), the Equal Rights Party (from 1884; women’s suffrage, feminism, civil rights), the Freedom and Peace Party (from 1968; Vietnam War, civil rights), the Freedom Now Party (from 1963; civil rights), the Green Party (from 1986; environmentalism), La Raza Unida (from 1970; Chicano rights), the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (from 1964; civil rights), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (from 1964; civil rights), the National Democratic Party of Alabama (from 1968; civil rights), the National Liberty Party (from 1904; civil rights), the National Party (from 1896; Prohibition, women’s suffrage, antimonopoly, sectarian education, anti-immigration), the National Socialist White People’s Party (from 1959; nazism), the National States’ Rights Party (from 1958; white supremacy), the National Woman’s Party (from 1916; women’s suffrage), the Right to Life Party (from 1970; anti-abortion), the South Carolina Progressive Democratic Party (from 1944; civil rights), and the United Citizens’ Party (from 1969; civil rights).
If minor parties have tilted toward cultural issues, what has been the predominant issue focus of the major American parties? As a historical indicator to this question, it is difficult to improve upon the national party platform. Platforms have been drawn up by the national conventions of the major parties every four years since the early nineteenth century. Moreover, the platform is generally viewed—by partisans and academics alike—as the national parties’ most authoritative statement of principles and policies. Numerous studies have attested to the importance of party platforms in establishing the substance and tone of presidential campaigns and in guiding the direction of subsequent legislative action. Thus, the platform seems ideally suited as an indicator of the content of national party politics.12

In order to gauge the relative weight of different types of policies, platform paragraphs were coded into four broad categories: economics (agriculture, business, consumers, the economy, financial policy, fiscal policy, infrastructure, labor unions, labor market policies, monetary policy, social policy, tariffs, taxation, trade, veterans affairs), government (election laws, constitutional issues, the rights of citizens vis-à-vis the state, the civil service, political corruption, the size of government), culture (abortion, art, civil rights, crime, drugs, education, the environment, the flag, immigration, the family, minorities, neighborhoods, pornography, religion, sexual preferences, temperance/Prohibition, women’s rights), and foreign affairs (foreign policy, defense policy, U.S. territories). The results of this extensive content analysis are shown in historical and aggregate form in Figure 2.

At the aggregate level, economic issues have clearly dominated American national politics, constituting over 40% of the rhetorical/issue space of party platforms from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth. If one excludes foreign affairs, the hegemony of money matters appears even greater. By contrast, the culture category appears to be the least significant area of concern for the major parties, garnering only 15% of the total rhetorical/issue space. Thus, if one examines what national party leaders were saying, one finds a studied avoidance of things cultural and a corresponding devotion to economic, governmental, and foreign policy affairs—a striking contrast to third-party efforts.13
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<td>1848</td>
<td>Free Soil</td>
<td>Martin Van Buren</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>1852</td>
<td>Free Soil</td>
<td>John Hale</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1856</td>
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<td>Millard Fillmore</td>
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<td>anti-immigration, anti-Catholicism</td>
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<td>1860</td>
<td>Constitutional Union</td>
<td>John Bell</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>preservation of the Union</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>John Breckinridge</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>proslavery, states' rights</td>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>Greenback</td>
<td>James Weaver</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>currency reform</td>
<td>E</td>
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<td>1884</td>
<td>Greenback</td>
<td>Benjamin Butler</td>
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<td>John St. John</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Prohibition</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Prohibition</td>
<td>Clinton Fisk</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>populism (particularly currency reform)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Prohibition</td>
<td>John Bidwell</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Prohibition</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Prohibition</td>
<td>John Wooley</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prohibition</td>
<td>Silas Swallow</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Eugene Chafin</td>
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<td>Theodore Roosevelt</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>J. Frank Hanly</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>Agenda</td>
<td>Votes (%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Socialist</td>
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<td>Union</td>
<td>William Lemke</td>
<td>populism, nativism</td>
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<td>1948</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>Henry Wallace</td>
<td>Left–New Deal, dovish foreign policy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>States’ Rights</td>
<td>Strom Thurmond</td>
<td>states’ rights, anti–civil rights</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>American Independent</td>
<td>George Wallace</td>
<td>states’ rights, anti–civil rights</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>John Schmitz</td>
<td>segregation</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>Libertarian</td>
<td>Ed Clark</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>John Anderson</td>
<td>liberalism plus economic centrisim</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Ross Perot</td>
<td>fiscal conservatism, political reform</td>
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Cumulative totals

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<th>Votes (%)</th>
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<td>94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic (E)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonspecific (N)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>217</td>
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Figure 2  Issue areas in national party platforms

Note: Excluded from this analysis were paragraphs that could not be classified into the foregoing categories, such as the general vilification of the other party’s record, ad hominem attacks and defenses, general statements of party creed, long lists of issue positions or accomplishments without a single general theme (and hence not classifiable into any specific category), waving the bloody shirt, general appeals to the electorate, and extremely abstract statements about the nature and purpose of popular government.

Economics: Agriculture, business, consumers, the economy, financial policy, fiscal policy, infrastructure, labor unions, labor market policies, monetary policy, social policy (including welfare, urban policy, poverty, and related issues), tariffs, taxation, trade, veterans’ affairs (including soldiers’ pensions).

Government: Election laws, constitutional issues, the rights of citizens vis-à-vis the state, the civil service, political corruption, the general size of government.

Culture: Abortion, art, crime, drugs (temperance, Prohibition, etc.), education (unless framed within the context of economic development), the environment (unless the discussion of “natural resources” is primarily to promote development), the flag, immigration, the family, minorities (ethnic or racial), neighborhoods, pornography, religion (school prayer, etc.), women (women’s suffrage, the rights of women, etc.).

Foreign: Foreign affairs, foreign policy, defense policy, U.S. territories.
Case Study: Prohibition

Having looked at a variety of cross-national and historical indicators, let us turn to a more detailed consideration of a single cultural issue: Prohibition. Heretofore, our analysis has been highly inferential; we have drawn conclusions based on aggregate measures of popular demand and system supply. In tracking the course of a single issue, it should be possible to look more closely at the interaction between cultural impulses and major-party responses as those impulses were processed by political system.14

From the 1830s to the 1930s, Richard Jensen (1971: xii) suggests, "no debate at the local level agitated this country more, year in and year out, than the question of controlling alcohol." During this period, most states passed Prohibition or "local option" laws, and all but two states (Connecticut and Rhode Island) endorsed the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution (Clark 1976: 129). The point, of course, is not simply that a strong majority of the American public supported Prohibition but that even those who did not favor liquor restrictions of any sort cared deeply about the political principles at stake in the debate—for example, individual liberty versus government control—as well as the tacit cultural conflicts that temperance regulation aroused (Catholic versus Protestant, immigrant versus native-born, East versus West). If this was not the biggest cultural war in American history, it was surely one of the most visceral.

Yet during the entire history of the debate, both major parties stolidly refused to place Prohibition at the center of their presidential campaigns. To be sure, Democratic Party platforms voiced opposition to "sumptuary laws" in 1880, 1884, 1888, and 1904. But their treatment of this issue was limited to a single sentence, and platform writers declined to mention "liquor" or "Prohibition" by name. In 1924, the issue finally received more prominent notice, but the party's position was, to say the least, ambiguous. The platform accused the Republican administration of failing "to enforce the prohibition law; . . . of trafficking in liquor permits, and [of protecting] violators of this law." The Democratic Party pledged simply "to respect and enforce the constitution and all laws" (Johnson 1978: 249).

In 1928, with the Volstead Act apparently failing, the Democratic Party's platform stated merely that its nominees would make "an honest effort to enforce the eighteenth amendment and all other provisions of the federal
constitution and all laws enacted pursuant thereto" (ibid.: 277). The party's nominee went further in his campaign speeches, but not much further. After reiterating his support for temperance, Al Smith recommended that the Eighteenth Amendment be amended to permit states to fix their own laws with respect to the production and sale of alcoholic beverages. There is no evidence to support the contention (Clark 1976: 185) that Prohibition repeal was the major issue of the Democratic Party's campaign in 1928. Smith articulated his position in several speeches but made it the centerpiece of only one address (in Milwaukee, predictably enough). Far more important to Smith and to the convention that drafted the party's platform were water power, agricultural subsidies, Republican malfeasance, public economy, the tariff, foreign policy, and the power of monopolies (Johnson 1978: 270–78; Smith 1929). John Hicks's (1960: 204) analysis of the campaign is interesting in this regard. As he observes, "Both Hoover and Smith in their acceptance speeches devoted more attention to the farm issue than to any other." However, "the debate on the farmer's ills ultimately became secondary to subjects that in the eyes of the public were far more important, principally 1) Smith's urban background, 2) his religion, and 3) his stand on prohibition. These, and not the farmer problem, proved to be the 'paramount' issues of the campaign" (ibid.). Here, as elsewhere, cultural issues seem to intrude on the political agenda only to the extent that party leaders lose control of the issue agenda. Not until 1932, when the country's experiment with Prohibition had been thoroughly discredited by events and when concern for cultural issues was temporarily overcome by the advent of the Great Depression, did the party muster the courage to advocate repeal (Johnson 1978: 332). Dead dogs could be safely kicked.

Temperance reforms were generally more popular among Republican constituents, so one might expect a greater percentage of this party's rhetoric to be devoted to the evils of the liquor traffic. Yet this party—the majority party through most of the period under consideration—handled the issue with reticence. In 1888, at the height of nineteenth-century Prohibition sentiment, Republicans drafted something they called a "Resolution Relating to Prohibition, offered by Mr. Boutelle, of Maine." The status of this curious plank, included at the end of the party's regular platform, was never clear. It read as follows: "The first concern of all good government is the virtue and sobriety of the people and the purity of their homes. The Republican
party cordially sympathizes with all wise and well-directed efforts for the promotion of temperance and morality” (ibid.: 82–83).

In 1892 the party retreated to a general expression of sympathy (“We sympathize with all wise and legitimate efforts to lessen and prevent the evils of intemperance and promote morality” [ibid.: 94]). The party’s 1896 platform repeated this formula almost verbatim (ibid.: 109), and in following years platforms met the Prohibition issue with stony silence. Finally, in 1932, with Prohibition all but dead, Republicans advocated devolving the issue to state levels. Prohibition “was not then [at enactment] and is not now a partisan political question. Members of the Republican party hold different opinions with respect to it and no public official or member of the party should be pledged or forced to choose between his party affiliations and his honest convictions upon this question” (ibid.: 348).

Thus, with the exception of a few very brief and ambiguous comments issued from party platforms near the turn of the century (a total of four mentions in Democratic platforms and three in Republican platforms), the major parties were mute on the greatest cultural issue of the day. Only one candidate in one election in the history of American presidential politics granted the issue of Prohibition a significant place on his issue agenda, and here it must be noted that despite the attention drawn by this issue in press coverage of the 1928 campaign, it was decidedly not the major issue of Al Smith’s campaign.

The apparent disjunction between the grass roots and the halls of power has been noted by many historians (as well as by contemporary advocates of Prohibition) and will be the central theme in the following account. Reviewing the Prohibition campaign in Iowa in the 1880s, Jensen (1971: 114) offers the following analysis: “Professional Republican politicians had sensed the disaster inherent in a party endorsement of absolute prohibition. The leaders themselves generally were moderate drinkers; no GOP presidential candidate had been an abstainer; few of the men of Congress or other high offices were unfamiliar with strong liquor. Only the fervent moral demands of the politically less experienced dry element—or, more likely, their threat of retribution at the conventions and the polls—forced the party leadership to go along with the prohibition planks. Throughout the 1880s the conflict between wets and drys and moderates raged within the Iowa GOP.” At the Republican Party’s 1888 national convention—probably the high point
of temperance support prior to the 1920s—numerous temperance planks were proposed by the temperance factions. Anti-Saloon Leaguers begged the platform committee to assert the obvious—that “the saloon has become a vicious and potent factor in American politics in open alliance with the Democratic party”—and to advocate that “the people should have the opportunity to deal with this question through the ballot by the adoption of such measures as public sentiment will make most effective” (Colvin 1926: 195). This plank, along with a number of weaker ones, was decisively rejected by the committee. Indeed, it seems that even leaders from Prohibition states like Kansas recognized the problem that a strong temperance plank would cause the party in doubtful states during the upcoming presidential contest. The general lesson was clear: “In order to win liquor votes in doubtful states anti-saloon men from prohibition states were compelled to subordinate their principles” (ibid.; see also 224).

New York, a “must-win” state in any nineteenth-century presidential contest, appears to have played a particularly important part in party calculations. In 1880, David Colvin notes (1926: 198), a switch of 11,000 votes in New York would have defeated James Garfield. New York, with its large Catholic population, lacked a clear Prohibition/“liberty” majority. Neither side, in short, could afford to alienate the “slum liquor element” of New York City (ibid.: 199; see also Clark 1976: 76). Republican Party leaders “were driven almost to desperation in order to hold both the temperance vote and the liquor vote” (Colvin 1926: 196).

Republican leaders were convinced that, as General Critchfield (an Ohio party leader) put it, “the Republican party never lost in Ohio except as a result of passing some measure looking to the regulation or curtailment of the evils of the liquor traffic” (quoted in Sinclair 1962: 89). Historians, by and large, have concurred. The classic example—illustrating, for generations of Republicans, the danger of Prohibition politics—was provided by the 1884 presidential campaign. Here, an obscure Protestant clergyman (Rev. Dr. Burchard), standing before an audience of Irish Catholics, declared that he and other Protestant ministers of New York City “are Republicans and don’t propose to leave our party and identify ourselves with the party whose antecedents have been Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion” (quoted in Clark 1976: 75–76). Whether or not this phrase threw the election from Blaine to Cleveland will never be determined. What seems undeniable is
that the infamous "Burchard alliteration" became good election fodder for Democratic Party organs in that election.

In view of this interpretation, Republican (and, for that matter, Democratic) strategy became one of concentrated prevarication. This involved three basic strategies. First, party leaders could pass state legislation without a serious attempt at enforcement. This was known as "letting the drys have their law but the wets their liquor" (Colvin 1926: 226; Sinclair 1962: 86). Second, there was the referendum expedient. "Submission to a vote of the people was acquiesced in by the politicians as a means of getting the question out of politics," notes Colvin ruefully (1926: 177–78; see also Kerr 1985: 53). Finally, distraught party leaders could fall back on "local option," by which communities at the city or county level would decide their own laws—a strategy opposed by most Prohibitionists, as it severely limited the reach and effectiveness of their campaign (much in the way that "local option" for gun control does little to stem the influx of out-of-state guns). The party, in the words of one party leader, would "compel the great temperance agitation to crystallize around high license and local option and thus eliminate it as a disturbing question from politics" (quoted in Colvin 1926: 208; see also Tyrrell 1979: 263).

Purley Baker, the leader of the Anti-Saloon League, once said to Senator (soon to be President) Warren Harding, "Senator . . . , you can talk wetter and vote dryer than any man I have ever known" (quoted in Sinclair 1962: 90). Indeed, it was quite clear to most of those who gazed longingly at the White House that their aspirations could be met only if they put distance between themselves and Prohibition enthusiasts (Sinclair 1962: 128). In the fall of 1884, as James Blaine campaigned for the nation's highest office, his home state (Maine) passed a constitutional Prohibition amendment by a three-to-one margin. Yet Blaine himself refused to declare himself for or against the amendment, declaring that it was strictly a state question (Colvin 1926: 223).

Prohibition (or anti-Prohibition) could occasionally garner majorities at state and local levels. It was at national levels, and specifically in the presidential election, that such cultural issues were most troublesome to the parties. One may infer from Colvin's detailed account that references to this issue among major-party organs were less likely to appear in presidential years—when the fates of the state parties were most likely to be tied to
national swings in voter opinion (1926: 176). Of the defeat of the Platt Bill (for Prohibition in the District of Columbia), a spokesperson for the United States Brewers’ Association reported: “‘Though Miss Willard and a whole battalion of female prohibitionists made fervent appeals before the Senate’s District of Columbia committee, the simple reminder that there was a presidential election pending sufficed to induce even the republican members of the committee (with one exception) to vote the bill down unanimously. No prohibition bill will pass this Congress’” (quoted in ibid.: 180).

Democratic presidential hopefuls followed the same general strategies of silence, sidestepping, and substitution. Sinclair (1962: 131) points out that William Jennings Bryan, the country’s most fervid prohibitionist in the 1920s, “did not adopt the cause of national prohibition until he was fairly certain he would never be able to run for President again.” As governor of New York, Al Smith faced a pickle of a situation in 1922. The legislature had just approved a bill (introduced by Tammany Hall spokesman Louis Cuvillier) that would have relaxed the enforcement of Prohibition. According to David Kyvig (1979: 56),

[anti-Prohibitionists] pressed him to follow his personal wet sentiments and sign the Cuvillier bill. Drys, meanwhile, insisted he veto the measure in order to uphold the laws and Constitution of the United States. Smith, who following his 1922 reelection was being seriously discussed as a 1924 Democratic presidential candidate, hesitated for nearly a month. He realized that either choice would antagonize large groups and damage his chances for the nomination. Earlier that spring Smith had been widely criticized after publication of a supposedly off-the-record remark he had made to a group of reporters: ‘Wouldn’t you like to have your foot on the rail and blow the foam off some soda?’ The Governor realized that the stir would be nothing compared to the uproar which would follow approval of the repeal. Yet many of his faithful supporters expected nothing less.

He did, and said, as little as possible. FDR, another New York politician with similar personal proclivities on the liquor issue, successfully fought off pressure from John Raskob and the AAPA (Association against the Prohibition Amendment) to define his party along “personal liberty” lines during the 1920s. His rebuttal went as follows: “I have always insisted that prohibi-
tion was not a party issue in the right sense of the word, in either party. It seems to me that we should not label anything a party principle unless it is a principle of the great majority of our party” (quoted in Craig 1992: 215). Indeed, Douglas Craig (ibid.: 301) concludes that it was only by remaining neutral in these intraparty cultural conflicts, and insisting on an economic agenda, that Roosevelt was able to claim national leadership of the party in 1932.16

Of course, there were differences between the major parties on the Prohibition issue (see Gerring 1998). The point is, these differences were considerably more muted than on economic issues. When it came to the tariff, internal improvements, or currency policy, party leaders trumpeted their differences. (Tariff reform, said Grover Cleveland, was the “shibboleth of true Democracy.” Republicans, equally devout, linked “Protection” to high wages, equal opportunity, and the American way [ibid.].) When it came to cultural issues, by contrast, party leaders played deaf and dumb. What one observes, then, is a fairly self-conscious attempt by American politicians at the apex of the political system to substitute one type of cleavage for another.

**Other Issues Briefly Considered**

To the extent that cultural issues have entered the discourse of national party politics, they did so under deep cover. John Kennedy’s celebrated speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association during the 1960 campaign is a case in point. Consider the following text and subtext.

While the so-called religious issue is necessarily and properly the chief topic here tonight, I want to emphasize from the outset that I believe that we have far more critical issues in the 1960 election: the spread of Communist influence, until it now festers only ninety miles off the coast of Florida—the humiliating treatment of our President and Vice President by those who no longer respect our power—the hungry children I saw in West Virginia, the old people who cannot pay their doctor’s bills, the families forced to give up their farms—an America with too many slums, with too few schools, and too late to the moon and outer space.

These are the real issues which should decide this campaign. And
they are not religious issues—for war and hunger and ignorance and despair know no religious barrier.

But because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected President, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured—perhaps deliberately. In some quarters less responsible than this. So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again—not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me, but what kind of America I believe in.

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote—where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference—and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him. (Reprinted in Reid 1988: 706)

It has since been demonstrated that this speech was used for the purpose of mobilizing Catholic voters (Jamieson 1984). What is interesting, from the present perspective, is that religious mobilization was carried out through the insistence that religion had nothing to do with the campaign. “Religion does not matter” becomes “Vote for me, I’m Catholic.” Similar strategies have been employed in order to mobilize voters along racial lines (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989: 107).

To be sure, party leaders were not always successful in sidestepping divisive cultural issues. The case of slavery represents the greatest failure of the party system’s inability to contain the primal force of cultural politics. But even here, it is striking that both sides—Whigs and Democrats—tried so long and so diligently to depoliticize the “Negro question.” Rather than defending slavery openly, antebellum Democratic orators supported “states’ rights” and “popular sovereignty.” Rather than proposing abolition, Whig and Republican leaders called for the preservation of the Union and the Constitution. In Congress, party leaders conspired to suppress the Negro question in Congress by issuing a gag order in 1837 that prevented the issue from appearing in congressional debate for two decades. Although the slavery issue did come to dominate the political agenda of both parties
during the 1860s, this upsurge of cultural politics was relatively brief. Even at this point, resistance on the part of mainstream politicos remained strong. (And as Figure 2 shows, this was the only period of modern American history where a cultural issue dominated the issue agenda of presidential politics.) Once the Civil War ended and the question of slavery was resolved, both parties hurriedly swept the civil rights agenda back under the rug, where it festered in relative obscurity for the next century (Gerring 1998).

There were, of course, a few cultural issues around which even the most risk-averse presidential candidates could rally. The two major parties took vehement positions against polygamy (Mormonism) and the "Mongolian threat" (Chinese immigration), for example. But there was a limit to the quantity of hay that could be threshed from issues so marginal to the lives of most Americans. (Neither issue merited more than a single mention in any national party platform.) On balance, the parties' responses to Prohibition, reviewed above, were much more typical of the general treatment granted cultural issues than that evoked by Mormons and Mongolians, a general pattern charted in Figure 2.

Explanations

When American presidential candidates (or their surrogates) have serenaded the American public, they have tread softly on cultural issues. They have, by contrast, tread firmly and self-confidently on economic issues. These have been the issues of choice in national political rhetoric. References to economic policy—to tariffs, banks, currency and monetary policy, inflation and unemployment—provide the stuff of partisan debate at national levels in the United States. While ethnoculturalists are probably correct in assigning great importance to ethnic and religious cues among voters, each party's national agenda has been carefully cleansed of such agonizing concerns. In the preceding pages, I have tried to show how this disjunction between cultural and economic agendas lies at the heart of American politics. What, then, might account for this peculiar pattern of challenge and (non)response?

It would be simple to interpret the tug-of-war between economic and cultural forces as one that pits elites (party leaders) against masses (rank-and-file voters)—in the fashion of writers in the "mass society" paradigm
of the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Bell 1963; Davis 1971; Gusfield 1963; Hofstadter 1967; Lipset and Raab 1978). The mass/elite interpretation of events appears only partly warranted, however. To begin with, leaders of the culture wars were themselves often highly placed within the social order. The AAPA, for example, was founded, funded, and staffed by captains of industry. Forces mobilizing for and against slavery often came from the upper echelons of society, as did those agitating on various Catholic and anti-Catholic issues. Indeed, the Christian Right may be one of the few cultural movements since anti-Masonry to be populist from the top down (although this, too, may be changing as the movement matures). Most of the leaders of cultural reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were well-off, well educated, and well lineaged, and many were motivated by distinctly antipopulist sentiments. My argument, therefore, concerns how certain political elites—those holding leadership positions within the major political parties—interact with other political interests, values, and organizations. Generally speaking, we can assume that sociocultural elites were at the helm of major-party and non-major-party political action.

Although elite/mass differences explain rather little about the struggle between cultural and economic agendas, this struggle surely has something to do with the structure of public opinion. Several features of public opinion on cultural issues (at elite and mass levels) made them inappropriate fodder for national politics. First, cultural issues were “sensitive,” and cultural activists adamant. Dr. Leonard, an early temperance leader, proclaimed, “The liquor traffic cannot be legalized without sin.” To this he drew the logical conclusion, “If to license sin is sin, then to vote to license sin is sin” (Colvin 1926: 196). These were fighting words—appropriate, perhaps, for a social movement, but incommensurate with the give-and-take of party politics. It did not profit party leaders to parade their devotion to cultural causes when campaigning before the general electorate, because certain segments of the American public cared too much about questions of race, ethnicity, and personal behavior. These were not matters of compromise; they were matters of right and wrong. A moderate statement on parochial schools, immigration, or temperance might turn out to be worse than no statement at all.17

By contrast, government and the economy were safer topics. Politicians did not earn the undying enmity of significant segments of the electorate
by their position on internal improvements. Economic policies were rarely "personal." Precisely because group identity did not hinge on the current valuation of the tariff, it was politically feasible to debate it. One could compromise on economic matters, whereas it would be humiliating for a group to compromise on matters pertaining to social status or morality. Economic policy is quintessentially a matter of degree (there is plenty of middle ground on a tax code), offering room for groups to settle their differences with one another. Few debated the existence of tariffs; the relevant questions concerned what rate, which goods, and for what periods import duties would be levied. Here was an issue that fit handily into a who-gets-what-when-how framework of politics (Lasswell 1958 [1936]).

Second, cultural issues tended to crosscut existing partisan cleavages (see Shafer and Claggett 1995: chap. 3). For party leaders this meant that in raising such issues they would offend important constituencies within their own party. Since a divided party stood little chance of winning a general election, this eventualty was carefully avoided. Of course, there was always the prospect that by stressing a crosscutting issue, the party might form a new majority; this was the tactic eventually—and one must say reluctantly—followed by the Republican Party in the 1850s. But slavery was a rarity in American political history, as we have observed. In no other period have cultural issues managed to define the dominant issue/rhetorical cleavage between the two parties. The reason for this, I think, is that while cultural issues in general were strongly held, the same issues were not strongly held by the same people. To put it another way, culture mattered, but it mattered in different ways to different groups. Thus, no single cultural issue was likely to aggregate a majority of the general electorate.

Internal divisions within the parties on the alcohol question were as characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century (Tyrrell 1979: 261) as of the twentieth century. Consider, for example, the following report of state party positions in 1913 (a key year in the third wave of Prohibition sentiment): "In California, Nevada, Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin, both parties opposed prohibition; in the states of the Deep South, however, both parties supported prohibition. In Colorado, the Republicans were dry and the Democrats wet, while in Oklahoma, the Democrats were dry and the Republicans wet. In Indiana, the Republicans supported county option, while the Democrats supported local
option; in Pennsylvania, both parties supported license” (Sinclair 1962: 90). Splits were at least as severe within the Democratic Party as within the majority party. Indeed, polls conducted over the course of the 1920s showed that the South was the area of the country most strongly in support of Prohibition in its waning years (Burner 1967: 99). The party’s other solid constituency, in the largely Catholic urban centers of the North, were the most vehement opponents of Prohibition. This issue, perhaps more than any other, divided the party into antagonistic wings—the urban Al Smith/John Davis/John Raskob wing and the rural William Jennings Bryan/William McAdoo wing—over the course of the 1910s and 1920s (see Burner 1967: 183; Craig 1992). Prior to 1928, concludes Kyvig (1979: 98–99),

the Prohibition issue had cut across party lines. Both parties counted convinced drays and ardent wets among their ranks. Almost equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats had voted for the Eighteenth Amendment when it won congressional approval in 1917. The Republicans, as the party in power after 1920, and therefore responsible for law enforcement, had gradually been taking on more of a prohibitionist cast, although not without objections from many of its most illustrious supporters. Meanwhile, the northern urban wing of the Democratic party opposed prohibition, while the southern and western element of the party favored it. The two branches had fought to a standstill in 1924. The AAPA, steadfastly nonpartisan, drew from both sides. Among its leaders, for instance, William Stayton, Charles Sabin, and Grayson Murphy were lifelong Democrats, while Henry Curran, Irene and Pierre du Pont, James Wadsworth, and Henry Joy were equally devout Republicans. So long as the platforms and national candidates of both parties continued to skirt the prohibition question, as they had in 1920 and 1924, with pious statements about the need for law enforcement, no connection could be made between victory or defeat and a position on the alcohol ban.

Admittedly, no single economic issue could be said to organize the electorate (though the tariff came close in the Gilded Age). However, economic issues have tended to group together in semi-logical fashion, coalescing into distinct “schools.” For most of this country’s history, party combat on socioeconomic issues could be understood as part of a larger argument about
the proper role of government in American society. If there was some disagreement among Whigs and early Republicans on the tariff, at least they shared the party's neomercantilist perspective on economic policy. Though not all Democrats backed "tariff reform," they were likely to support other antistatist initiatives. Although the parties changed sides in this debate (the Democrats assumed a more statist guise in the 1890s, and the Republicans adopted an antistatist posture in the 1920s), they did so only once. Thus, during most periods of American history, each party's socioeconomic views evidenced a high degree of "internal constraint" (Converse 1964).

The same could not be said for each party's positions on cultural issues, which wandered over the map in a highly unpredictable fashion and did not necessarily reflect the party's general view of government. (Republicans in the present era, for example, are likely to advocate government control over matters of personal morality, even though they are distrustful of government in general.) Cultural issues tended to define niche politics; they appealed strongly to a particular group but held minimal attractions—or were downright offensive—to others. Mixing cultural issues together tended to upset the delicate taste of the broth. If one cultural issue managed to gain the attention of the major parties, it was not likely to bring in its train a host of allied issues on the cultural front. The role of antislavery in squeezing out Prohibition within the antebellum Republican Party is illustrative (Kerr 1985: 37). It seems that cultural issues not only clashed with existing economic issues; they also tended to clash with each other. Supporters of Prohibition were not necessarily supportive of women's suffrage, abolition, public schooling, sabbatarianism, or immigration restrictions.18

The United States is a heterogeneous polity, as we have observed (see Table 1). It is worth noting, in addition, that the United States is heterogeneous in a different way than most other diverse polities because ethnic, racial, and religious identities do not line up neatly on either sides of a central cultural divide (as they do, for example, in Belgium). Catholics, for example, have never approached majority status. Thus, for a national political party to form around Catholic adherents would be suicidal. Similarly, although technically in the majority, American Protestants have been so internally divided that to call oneself Protestant means next to nothing in the American context. Finally, the racial divide in America crosses, rather than reinforces, the (already weak) Protestant/Catholic divide.
The answer to our causal question is by now perhaps apparent. The most parsimonious explanation for the patterned dislocation between cultural and economic issues in American political life can be found in two variables—demographics and the party system. Great cultural diversity combined with a two-party monopoly meant that party leaders were forced to rely on economic (and governmental) issues in order to define themselves before the general electorate. Cultural issues were divisive to an extent that these issues were not, and they were divisive in the wrong way—creating multiple lines of cleavage that the party system was ill prepared to handle. Issue substitution on the cultural front was likely to beget further issue substitution (issue "cycling"). Stable coalitions could be built only on the relatively tractable ground provided by economic interests and socioeconomic philosophies.19

The peculiar ideological filter that suppressed cultural issues in favor of socioeconomic (and "governmental") issues through most of American history was thus the product of one of the purest two-party systems in the world (Gerring forthcoming) interacting with one of the most diverse human populations in the world. A multiparty system, by contrast, would have built much more directly and explicitly upon ethnic, religious, territorial, and racial cleavages. (Here, Belgium and Switzerland are relevant comparison cases.) As it was, such matters were muted by a two-party dynamic that gave preference to issues that were "healing," "national," or "American" (all these terms were frequently invoked). To advance from state, local, or congressional levels into the rarified atmosphere of presidential politics has generally meant, in the American context, jettisoning local concerns for "a platform that all members of the party can unite upon"—that is, the swapping of status politics for economic politics. The common ground of each party, in the present period as in the past, has generally been economic ground.

The combination of these two variables—demographic heterogeneity and two-party competition—has created a persistent, and essentially irresolvable, conflict between cleavage structures that has no close parallel in the advanced-industrial world. No other polity among our comparative cases combines these two attributes with such extremity, as demonstrated in Figure 3.
Party Politics and Faction Politics

I have argued that socioeconomic themes have generally sidelined cultural themes in national party politics. But clearly, cultural issues have had a great deal to do with politics internal to each of the major American parties. We have observed how each party experienced wrenching debates over Prohibition. Similar levels of strife could be found on most other cultural issues—abortion, art, crime, drugs, the environment, the flag, gender, ethnicity, pornography, race, religion, sexual preferences, and so forth. For the entire history of the Democratic Party, internal wars have simmered over the question of race, an issue that has been only slightly less salient among Whigs and Republicans. Thus, if cultural issues have been purged from interparty conflict, they have been the meat and gristle of intraparty conflict.20

To put it another way, socioeconomic themes have tended to define party politics, while cultural themes have tended to define faction politics. The make-or-break issues for presidential contenders, as they faced the
gauntlet of state party leaders (or, in the present era, state primaries and caucuses), were often cultural ones. It was necessary, for example, for all Democratic hopefuls to demonstrate that they were “safe” on slavery/civil rights issues in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, just as it is now necessary for candidates to prove their devotion to civil rights. Republican candidates were often subjected to a temperance litmus test (they were obliged, at the very least, to be cold-water men). Less often noted, Prohibition also played a key role in internal Democratic politics throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Craig (1992: 299–300) explains:

The campaign to modify or repeal national prohibition was . . . an important part of the conservatives’ attempt to redefine the Democratic party’s philosophical direction. Antiprohibition was an increasingly popular issue throughout the industrialized Northeast, and the Raskob wing hoped to use it to serve their purposes of redefining Democratic ideology and creating a partisan realignment in the East. By attracting the votes of the industrial rank and file thirsty for a legal drink, the conservatives hoped that the rest of their agenda—which was considerably less attractive to the average voter—would also be implemented. . . . “Booze before bread” therefore was an attempt to harness the electoral attractiveness of antiprohibitionism to the coalition’s wider political concern to prevent the party from being tainted with economic radicalism as it had been during Bryan’s campaigns.

Predictably, the most divisive issues at national conventions have usually been cultural ones (David et al. 1960). Reinforcing these issue cleavages were deep regional divisions within the parties—between the Northeast, the West, and the South in the case of the Democrats, and between the East and West in the case of the Republicans (Rae 1994: 10). Although these sectional battles are sometimes defined in economic terms, they also express historic regional identities and, as such, must be considered an integral component of cultural politics.

The correlation between faction politics and cultural issues seems to explain a good deal about politics at state levels as well. Prohibition was most likely to appear in state politics where the Republican Party was firmly in control—in Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, and other New England and midwestern party redoubts. It was most likely to be suppressed
(or downplayed) in competitive states like New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio (see the foregoing discussion). Racial issues, similarly, were most likely to dominate politics in one-party fiefdoms in the South and New England throughout the nineteenth century. With the exception of the 1850s (a truly exceptional decade in American party history), one heard little about slavery or civil rights in doubtful states. Moreover, it was the melange of cultural issues that appeared in the 1850s—race, temperance, nativism—that created the “solid” South and “solid” New England. The continuance of race as a vital issue in the South—battling and defeating the rival issue cleavage represented by the Populists (class)—assured the continuance of one-party politics. Indeed, issue-cleavage selection in the pre-1964 South (as described, for example, in Key 1949) was the symmetrical reverse of issue-cleavage selection at national levels: here, faction leaders successfully suppressed economic themes in favor of the race issue. Culture trumped economics.

Wherever one-party systems establish themselves, such systems are likely to have been built on cultural antipathies. Bastions of Republicanism in New England and the Midwest were not based primarily on distinct material needs or socioeconomic circumstances. These agricultural communities were much like agricultural communities in the West and South. Insofar as socioeconomic issues defined party politics in these regions, these local party systems were likely to be competitive. It was because these regions saw themselves as culturally linked to the Republican Party—as the expression of all that was good and honest and Protestant in American life—that they became solidly “Republican.”22 The point is not that cultural issues never assemble winning coalitions—clearly, at state and local levels, they often did—but that they seem unable to sustain competitive party politics. Indeed, the case of national politics in the mid-nineteenth century might be seen as another example of this central point, for the increasing dominance of cultural issues led rapidly to regional divisions and, hence, to noncompetitive party politics.

Socioeconomic divisions cannot help but divide, for there are always conflicts of interest between different groups in society, and these conflicts will be adjusted by party leaders engaged in a two-party game so as to define a central cleavage. (It shouldn’t matter, that is, how many or how few differences separate the upper and lower classes; party leaders will find these
divisions and exploit them for political profit, thereby defining a “class” cleavage.) Thus, it may truly be said that cultural politics is both the effect and, in many cases the cause, of noncompetitive (factional) politics. Cultural issues define factions within the major American parties but are rarely able to provide a central cleavage that might maintain interparty competition over the long haul. Cultural issue cleavages at national levels are inherently unstable in the United States.

Implications

Perhaps the most unexpected implication of this finding is that American party politics has possessed an economic—and occasionally a class—character at national party levels that was only weakly echoed by the electorate. Madison, followed by the Progressive historians, was right, but about the wrong things. It was not that a party of the common people faced off against a party of the well-to-do but rather that a party calling itself a party of commoners faced off against a party calling itself a party of prosperity. This interest-based vision of partisan politics persists, in part, because party leaders have continued to portray politics as a relatively pragmatic conflict over the distribution of resources and because it was (and remains) the only rhetorical strategy by which they can hope to unify their fractious racial, ethnic, religious, and territorial coalitions. Ironically, then, the relatively privileged members of the political stratum have been more consistent devotees of the “economic” view of politics—either as advocates or opponents of redistribution—than the mass of the American public.23

Thus, whatever the causes of the much-noted absence of socialism in America, one might rethink the influence of the party system on this absence. To be sure, a multiparty system would likely have fostered a socialist, or social-democratic, party of some small magnitude (perhaps on the order of the Canadian Cooperative Commonwealth Federation/New Democratic Party). However, if the major parties were in fact favorably disposed toward an economic definition of political conflict, then surely they cannot be held responsible for the low levels of class consciousness found among American electors.

A second major implication of the cultural/economic divide concerns citizen attitudes toward parties and “establishment” politics in the United
States. I return to our familiar example. When the leading parties refused to take positions on the Prohibition issue—or, worse yet, took positions but refused to enforce the laws—the wrath of Prohibition activists was quite naturally aroused. Horace Mann, a leading Prohibitionist and reformer of the mid-nineteenth century, saw partisan politics as a “black and sulphurous lake.” Gerrit Smith, a fellow Prohibitionist, complained that politicians “had become so party-ized, as to be far more concerned for their party than for Temperance or Freedom.” The Worcester County Temperance Convention declared, in 1849, that “men elected to the legislature on political grounds, without reference to their temperance character or principles, cannot be relied upon.”

It may not be too great an oversimplification to say that cultural politicians have been at war with the two-party system. Indeed, they cannot help but fight, and resent, the political institutions that regularly reject their causes. The most extreme incident in this ongoing battle occurred during the mid-nineteenth century, precipitating the only case of major-party failure in the history of the American party system. Nonetheless, similar pressures seem to have been at work in movements agitating for reform on a broad range of cultural issues and over the course of most periods in the history of the republic.

Parties that are unable to articulate clear positions on issues of great importance to those most active in politics will, perforce, be viewed as lacking in “principles.” They will also invite contempt from those who see their good-faith efforts met with silence and prevarication. This is the sad but perhaps inevitable consequence of a two-dimensional party system operating within a multidimensional polity.

Notes

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1 Work on these questions is rather meager and generally focuses on European cases. See Lijphart 1971, 1979, 1981, 1984; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; and Rokkan 1970.


To be sure, Progressive-inclined historians once emphasized the role of social classes, and some (e.g., Sellers 1991) still do. Most contemporary historians, however—if they employ this category at all—tend to regard class as a local, site-specific category, and one with few party-political implications (more on this below). More problematic is the category “section” (a.k.a. regionalism), which evidently combines cultural and economic cues. No easy resolution of this debate is in sight, but it is worth noting that as a general principle, sectional identity is likely to weaken economically based demands. (For further discussion, see sources listed in the preceding paragraph.)

3 To be sure, there is no hard, fast, and obvious way of sorting issues and rhetoric into these two highly abstract categories (culture and economics). All issues, one might say, partake of both worlds—a world of ascription, of “identity politics,” and a materialistic world of “interest politics.” Blacks, white ethnics, Catholics, southerners, women, homosexuals, and various other out-groups have struggled not only for respect but also for a piece of the pie. However, it is important to remember that charges of conceptual fuzziness can be leveled against most typologies common to the social sciences (democracy/authoritarianism, mass/elite, culture/structure, etc.). All categories blur at the boundaries. Nonetheless, we continue to employ them—often, for good reason.

Difficulties of coding notwithstanding, most movements, parties, and issues can be lumped into one of these two categories without too much damage to the historical record. Consider, for example, the Prohibition Party. In addition to the
prohibition of alcohol, the party also proposed (in 1888) the prohibition of “all combinations of capital” (Colvin 1926: 191). However, if one considers the relative weight of cultural and economic issues, it becomes fairly clear where the center of gravity lay, for 9 of 12 platform planks in that year dealt with subjects of a predominantly cultural character—liquor (6), preservation of the Sabbath (1), polygamy/marriage (1), and immigration (1). To be sure, one can always abjure gross generalizations of this sort, but one does so at a high cost. Without such generalizations one is unable to conceptualize wide-angle relationships.

Exceptions to this dictum could be found in the mid-nineteenth century (Formisano 1971; Gienapp 1987; Holt 1978; Silbey 1985) and—perhaps—the 1960s and 1970s (Carmines and Stimson 1989). More on these topics below.

See Alford 1963; Clark and Lipset 1991; Manza et al. 1995; Weakliem and Heath forthcoming.


Country-specialists (political scientists from around the world) were asked to identify the key issues that divided the parties. These issues were then coded into 1 of 10 dimensions: socioeconomic conflict, centralization of power, authoritarianism vs. democracy, isolation vs. internationalism, traditional vs. new culture, xenophobia, conservatism vs. change, property rights, constitutional reform, and national defense. (Socioeconomic conflict, the category of present interest, included such issues as economy, private ownership, redistribution, competitiveness, inflation, consumption, economic growth, unions, taxation, statism, employment, social justice, equality, public spending, public debt, and economic reform.) The salience of each dimension of conflict could then be estimated by counting up the number of “mentions” falling into each of the 10 possible dimensions. See Huber and Inglehart 1995. The “socioe” variable in Table 1 is the ratio of the total mentions for socioeconomic conflict divided by the total mentions for the next most salient dimension.

Longitudinal indicators of a nonorganizational sort—e.g., newspapers, political writings, ceremonial addresses, and so forth—might also be helpful in establishing the demand side of the equation. (I see no reason to suppose that an analysis of these sorts of indicators would provide contradictory evidence.) One of the advantages to looking at organizations, however, is that these bodies represent interests that are no longer latent. Cultural impulses expressed in newspapers and magazines, on the other hand, may reflect the interests of particular editors. Even if they reflect the interests of a broader reading public, there are many reasons why such impulses might not be reflected in the political arena. It could be, for example, that people are entertained by stories about race, gender, and ethnicity (including various “newsworthy” events, like crime, that may be placed within a cultural frame) and that newspaper reporting carries a cultural bias for no other reason than that it drives
sales. Cultural reportage, in other words, may reflect purely private (nonpolitical) preoccupations—unless, of course, there are concrete political/organizational correlates to those private preoccupations.

9 A list of most of these voluntary associations can be found in Skocpol 1997. Nine additional groups that cleared the 1% hurdle have been added to the compendium since Skocpol 1997 appeared. These were generously shared with me by Theda Skocpol and Marshall Ganz (personal communication). It should be noted that groups that formally restricted their membership by sex were included in the compendium if they gained 1% of the male or female population at any point in time.

10 Indeed, “purposive” activity was one of the things that brought these groups together and helped maintain their associational activity over the course of time (Berry 1977; Luker 1985; Oldfield 1996; Teske 1997; Wilson 1995 [1973]).

11 It should be remembered that I am attempting to categorize the broader social-political goals embraced by these associations, not their member-oriented (solidaristic or material) activity. Thus, a fraternal that provided social insurance for its members was not coded as economic in character (unless, of course, it expressed a set of social-political goals that were socioeconomic in nature). Information used to code each group’s social-political mission was drawn from Romanofsky 1978, Schmidt 1980, and the Civic Engagement Project database.

12 For work on the presidential campaign, see Gerring 1998 and Jamieson 1984. For work on the promise-performance connection, see Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Fishel 1985: 38; Ginsberg 1976; Krukonis 1984; Monroe 1983; and Pomper 1967, 1980. One small drawback is that official national platforms were not issued until the 1840s (1840 for the Democrats and 1844 for the Whigs), thus excluding the critical period of party formation. In order to extend the analysis back to 1828, I reviewed the most widely distributed material issued by the party organizations, selecting the text that seems to have been the most authoritative statement of the party’s issue positions during these early campaigns. Preference was given to those open letters or declarations that were most comprehensive (addressing all issues of contemporary importance), most representative of that year’s campaign efforts, and most authoritative in source (preferably issuing from a national convention, or the convention of an influential state like New York or Virginia). I have also relied to some extent on secondary accounts of these campaigns, which are often a good guide to a party’s most influential campaign tract. These proto-platforms, in any case, constitute only a small fraction of the total number of platforms analyzed (7 out of 84), so any deviations thereby introduced should not be so great as to prejudice the overall results of the content analysis. A listing of the actual texts used in this analysis can be found at web.bu.edu/POLISCI/JGERING/PartyIdeol.html.

13 This avoidance of cultural issues, in preference for socioeconomic issues, has been noted in accounts of various eras of American history (e.g., Gerring 1998; Hays
1967; McCormick 1986) and in journalistic accounts of contemporary politics (e.g., Berke 1998; Nagourney 1996).

I rely, in this section, on the efforts of several generations of historians, including Jack Blocker, David Burner, Norman Clark, David Colvin, Douglas Craig, Joseph Gusfield, Richard Jensen, K. Austin Kerr, David Kyvig, Peter Odegard, John Rumbarger, Andrew Sinclair, and Ian Tyrrell. Many views on the subject of Prohibition are represented here. (Colvin, for example, was an enthusiast, Sinclair an open critic.) And many interpretations of the movement can be located in these works. Nonetheless, on the subject of how temperance/Prohibition came to be handled by the party system, I think there is something approaching unanimity among these diverse writers—though none (with the partial exception of Colvin) makes this a central argument of his work.

"The Prohibitionists became the heavy cross which the Republicans had to bear," concludes Paul Kleppner (1970: 15; see also Colvin 1926: 183, 226; Jensen 1971: 14; Tyrrell 1979: 263).

It seems incredible, in hindsight, that there were those within the high councils of the Democratic Party who insisted on privileging cultural over economic issues in the 1932 election. But such was very evidently the case. It is testament to Roosevelt and Howe’s political acumen, as well as their considerable political skills, that they were able to resist these pressures and thereby avoid the sad situation into which the previous governor of New York (Al Smith) had fallen. The “bread before booze” strategy ultimately prevailed, but not without considerable internal struggle (Craig 1992: 216–20).

On the sensitive subject of abortion, Congressman Henry Hyde has remarked, “When we talk compromise on this issue, what we are asked to compromise is a human life. . . . That is not much of a compromise” (quoted in Silverberg 1997: 311).

This, incidentally, also explains why the temperance movement was continually riven by “broad-gauge” and “narrow-gauge” factions—the former advocating a catch-all approach to reform, and the latter a niche strategy. The narrow-gaugers, we should note, were ultimately more successful.

For scattered evidence indicating that socioeconomic themes have been more productive for the major parties in national contests, see Colvin 1926: 183, 226; Gigot 1996; Jensen 1971: 14; Kleppner 1970: 15; Mayer 1996; and Tyrrell 1979: 263.


See Rae 1989: 12 for an account of party strength by state from 1856 to 1982.

cleavages were primarily economic), see Bensel 1984. N. C. Rae (1994: 10) takes an intermediate position in this debate.

23 This argument has also been suggested by J. F. Manley (1994).

24 All three of the foregoing quotations are cited in Tyrrell 1979: 263–64.

25 Recent scholarship accounts for the fall of the Whig Party by looking not simply at antislavery sentiment in the North but also at nativism, anti-Catholicism, and temperance. See, e.g., Anbinder 1992; Gienapp 1987; and Holt 1978, 1992. Michael Holt, in particular, has stressed the significance of antipartyism in the 1850s—a sentiment fueled by the Tweedledum/Tweedledee appearance of the major parties, neither of which saw fit to articulate differences on the major cultural questions of the day.

References


