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The notion that American political parties are ideologically Tweedledum and Tweedledee has had amazing staying power, whether it is Woodrow Wilson bemoaning the lack of principled parties or Louis Hartz lamenting the liberal consensus or the frustrated radical bemoaning the absence of real alternatives. John Gerring offers a different view: American political parties, from the 1830s through today, have offered coherent, differentiated ideologies. His conclusion is based on an exhaustive survey of presidential election rhetoric—mainly campaign speeches and party platforms. Using content analysis as well as qualitative data, Gerring demonstrates that over a wide range of issues—including redistribution, antibusiness sentiment, statism, majority rule, social order, and civil rights—Democratic and Republican campaign rhetoric have been consistently and markedly different.

The data presented in the heart of this book (chaps. 3–7) are rich and warrant the attention of every student of American political parties and political ideology. But the chapter that stands out is the more analytic one (“Rethinking the Role of Ideology in American Party Life”) that precedes the historical chapters. Here Gerring uses his impressive knowledge of European and particularly British party history to devastating effect. Understanding that the consensus thesis is less about the fights that American parties have had than it is about the fights they haven’t had (and European parties have), Gerring begins by deflating the extravagant claims made about European ideological conflict. Having a strong social democratic party, Gerring points out, for instance, does not necessarily preclude consensual party politics. Witness Sweden. Similarly, the absence of socialism does not preclude pronounced ideological differentiation. As Gerring explains, “[P]arty conflict on redistributive matters in the United States has taken place further to the right on the ideological spectrum but with at least as much space separating the major parties as in most other systems” (39). The relative absence of socialism, then, is not the same as the relative absence of partisan differentiation.

If Democrats and Republicans have consistently articulated different values, beliefs and issue positions, those rival commitments, according to Gerring, have not been immutable. On the Republican side, he divines two distinct epochs: the first he labels National (1828–1924), in which the central dichotomy is order versus anarchy, and the second he identifies as Neo-Liberal (1924–96), where the central dichotomy is the state versus the individual. The Democrats meanwhile have passed through three political epochs: Jeffersonian (1828–92), where the defining dichotomy is liberty versus tyranny, Populist (1896–1948), where the dichotomy is the people versus the interests, and Universalist (1952–92), pitting inclusion versus exclusion. Gerring is largely persuasive in advancing this somewhat unorthodox periodization, but not as good at explaining how these shifts
occur. A disappointing final chapter on “What Drives Ideological Change?” concludes vaguely that “lots of things” drive ideological change. “Sometimes,” Gerring bravely admits, “it is important to conclude with what we do not know” (275). Gerring gets high marks for honesty, but not everyone will be satisfied to find ideology being used as the unexplained motor, useful as an independent variable but unfathomable as a dependent variable.

To expect a fully elaborated theory of ideological change is unfair, but one could perhaps reasonably hope that Gerring might have utilized his marvelous dataset to offer a systematic accounting of which periods in American political history have seen relatively high partisan differentiation and which relatively lower partisan differentiation. So intent is Gerring on discrediting the Tweedledum-Tweedledee thesis that he never even asks, let alone answers, a question like, “Were the ideological differences between the Whig and Democratic parties in the 1830s and 1840s greater than the ideological difference between Republicans and Democrats in the 1870s and 1880s?” Most historical scholarship is so bound by a particular decade or period that it is unable to answer such a question. It is one of the great virtues of the data that Gerring has so carefully gathered that it now appears possible to compare eras that had hitherto appeared incommensurable.

A final word of criticism is necessary for the book’s most glaring weakness: a pitiful three-page index. Many historical figures, not to mention concepts, are left out entirely. Tocqueville, for instance, though he is prominently quoted on several occasions, is nowhere to be found in the index. If Gerring paid the publisher to do this index, he should demand his money back; if he did the index himself he should bow his head in shame. But it’s the only major weakness in this very fine and important book.

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A study that takes seriously community organizations as different as homeowners’ associations and citizens’ militias is a refreshing antidote to the obligatory nod to Tocqueville so frequent in contemporary democratic theory. Nancy L. Rosenblum’s new book restates a significant problem in a new way: If liberal democracy depends on the education of citizens through their participation in voluntary associations, what are we to make of the fact that many of the groups in the United States are “incongruent with liberal democratic principles and practices” (4)? Her surprising answer is that some of the most important local organizations serve democratic purposes, not simply in spite of, but because of their antiliberal stances. While democratic thought has traditionally focused