



Why Parties?: The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America (American Politics and Political Economy Series)

By John H. Aldrich

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Why did the United States develop political parties? How and why do party alignments change? Are the party-centered elections of the past better for democratic politics than the candidate-centered elections of the present? In this landmark book, John Aldrich goes beyond the clamor of arguments over whether American political parties are in resurgence or decline and undertakes a wholesale reexamination of the foundations of the American party system.

Surveying three critical episodes in the development of American political parties--from their formation in the 1790s to the Civil War--Aldrich shows how parties serve to combat three fundamental problems of democracy: how to regulate the number of people seeking public office; how to mobilize voters; and how to achieve and maintain the majorities needed to accomplish goals once in office. Overcoming these obstacles, argues Aldrich, is possible only with political parties.

Aldrich brings this innovative account up to date by looking at the profound changes in the character of political parties since World War II. In the 1960s, he shows, parties started to become candidate-centered organizations that are servants to their office seekers and officeholders. Aldrich argues that this development has revitalized parties, making them stronger, and more vital, with well-defined cleavages and highly effective governing ability.

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Editorial Review

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"Doing something" about U.S. political parties--making them stronger or weaker, adding a third party, replacing the Democrats and Republicans with new, more cohesive alignments--is a central recommendation of dozens of recent books and articles. Readers interested enough in this subject to plow through academic political science's statistical and linguistic impediments will find complex, nuanced history and thoughtful analysis here. Aldrich views any major political party as inevitably "the creature of the politicians, the ambitious office seeker and officeholder." To achieve their own goals, ambitious politicians participate in and shape specific institutional arrangements (in this case, political parties) within the historical context of their own times. Where other theorists see the past 30 years as "the decline (dealignment, decay, even decomposition) of parties," Aldrich takes a somewhat different tack. "Events in the 1960s," he maintains, represent "the final demise of the form of parties created by Van Buren," giving ambitious politicians a good deal of independence. As a result, the parties that once *controlled* ambitious office seekers are now defined by their need to *serve* them. *Mary Carroll*

About the Author

John H. Aldrich is the Pfizer-Pratt University Professor of Political Science at Duke University. He is the author or coauthor of numerous books and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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