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978-0-521-42059-4 - Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s

David Plotke

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## *Introduction: The Democratic order as a political project*

The Democratic order in the United States defined the main themes, policies, and organized forms of national politics from the 1930s through the 1960s. Contemporary American politics remains deeply influenced by the accomplishments of the Democratic order and by its limits. Key features of that regime remain the focus of fierce political debate. Thus conflicts about the appropriate role of the state in social welfare provision and economic regulation intensified in the mid-1990s, while stringently antistatist positions gained a growing public role.

This book is about the creation and renewal of the Democratic political order in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>1</sup> By political order I mean a durable mode of organizing and exercising political power at the national level, with distinct institutions, policies, and discourses.<sup>2</sup> The Democratic political order in the 1930s defined new relations among the Democratic Party, the national state, and political interest groups and social movements, notably the labor movement. It fused democratic and modernizing themes in a progressive liberalism that advocated government action to achieve economic stability, enhance social security, and expand political representation. Its eventual decline several decades later was largely the unintended result of reliance on the state for political support. This

1. A related book, David Plotke, *Democratic Breakup* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), analyzes the successes and dramatic demise of the Democratic order in the 1960s.
2. I often use the term discourse to refer to the thematic content of political views and to the practical side of those themes, as they appear in party programs, speeches by presidents and other leaders, judicial decisions, legislative acts, and guidelines for state agencies. A discourse is a set of claims (descriptive and prescriptive) connected through reference to shared meanings and symbols; all politics has a discursive dimension. A political discourse depicts how social relations are and should be organized. I prefer “discourse” to “ideology,” to avoid long debates about whether ideology should be counterposed to true knowledge. I prefer discourse to idea as a way to signal the practical side of political arguments, and their imbeddedness in institutions and policies.

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dynamic eroded nonstate Democratic forces and made it difficult to respond politically to deep social and economic change.

**The Democratic order as a political project**

My account of the construction and renewal of the Democratic regime in the 1930s and 1940s makes several arguments about political development in the United States. These concern the importance of the concept of political order (or regime); the centrality of political action in building the Democratic order; and the distinctive character of that order's progressive liberalism. Here I provide an overview of these arguments and locate my perspective with respect to other views.

Understanding American political development requires giving a central place to the processes through which political orders are formed and sustained. Political orders frame the conflicts and achievements of routine politics. In analyzing the Democratic order I distinguish between normal political times and times of crisis, uncertainty, and transition. This does not equate normal times with the absence of conflict; stability always has to be attained. Yet there are phases when a solid framework defines the issues contested – and others when political conflict focuses on defining such a framework. To identify periods, in these terms, is to designate a characteristic political terrain on which actors declare and pursue their aims. Claims about a political period are claims about durable basic features of politics and the likely distribution of outcomes in important conflicts. Thus periods are constituted by the development of political orders.

It is not conventional to apply the concept of regime to American political development. American social scientists often use “regime” to name configurations of power in other countries, as in regimes with a single dominant figure – the Castro regime, the Pinochet regime – or a lasting form of rule, such as the Soviet regime.

The connotations of “regime” most often stigmatize a government as undemocratic; we in the United States control our government, while less fortunate nations are burdened with regimes. Yet many who are reluctant to apply any concept of regime to the United States acknowledge a post-World War II regime in Italy (Christian Democracy) or Japan, or perhaps in Thatcher's Britain. Do differences between the latter countries and the United States warrant two different vocabularies, one concerned with regime formation and change, the other with the dynamics of routine political competition?

American government is not so diffuse and episodic – or so transpar-

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ently democratic – that we can dispense with efforts to define coherent ensembles of power relations. Efforts to periodize political development might be futile if a fluid process of self-determination always made political choices open and allowed sharp changes in overall direction to occur easily and often. But this image is not true to political life in the United States, which has been marked by durable forms of power that were hard to construct and did not fade quietly away.

Resistance to using a regime concept to examine modern American politics also stems from viewing American institutions and their power as distinctively separated, even fragmented and dispersed. There is no denying the complexity of American political institutions. A constitutional and legal framework that defines and distinguishes federal institutions is not a mask but a real political force. Nonetheless, in the twentieth century, political power operates effectively at the national level. To make sense of the organization of national power requires concepts beyond the conventional and official names of American political institutions (parties, Congress, courts, executive).

The story of building the Democratic order is significantly a story of national political integration, which was augmented and given new thematic and institutional forms through Democratic efforts. Politics in the modern United States has been increasingly state-centered, executive-centered, and president-centered. The Democratic order made a powerful contribution to this process. While Congress and the courts were and are important in national political life, they are not equivalent to the presidency in their capacities or in public perceptions of their significance, notwithstanding moments when a relatively strong Congress confronts a weak president, such as that following the Republican electoral victories in 1994.

National political power can be organized in a relatively coherent and purposeful way by those who build and sustain a political order. If political orders tend to be president-centered, they also cut across and reconnect institutions.<sup>3</sup> The Democratic order was constituted by a tri-

3. However named, the state- or executive- or president-centered character of modern American politics is rarely denied by contemporary political scientists. Yet significant work often proceeds without taking this reality much into account. One example is the discussion of a frequent pattern of the 1980s and 1990s in which the president is of a different party than the majority in one or both houses of Congress. Much of this discussion seems to presume a rough equality of importance between Congress and the presidency, so that “divided party control” of national government makes sense as a way to name the problem. But this dubious premise is not much examined. See Morris P. Fiorina, *Divided Government* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992).

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*Building a Democratic political order*Table Intro.1. *How political outcomes are shaped*

		Source of causal influence	
		<i>Political</i>	<i>Economic</i>
<b>Form of causal influence</b>	<i>Action</i>	Political action (the present work)	Rational choice
	<i>Institutions</i>	Neo-Weberian institutionalism	Neo-Marxist political economy

angle of relations among the national state, a leading party, and major nonparty interest groups and movements. The features of this triangle are a central topic of subsequent chapters.

A related theme of this book stresses political action in building and sustaining the Democratic order. This theme is developed with regard to key events in the 1930s and 1940s, notably the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 and Truman's surprising election in 1948. It is also a theoretical claim, at the intersection of two long debates in the social sciences. Analysts differ about the relative weight they accord to political and economic forces in causing important political results. They also differ about whether such forces should be conceived mainly in structural (institutional) terms, or in terms of agents' actions. This book argues for the casual importance of political action.

The main theoretical choices are presented in Table Intro. 1. All these perspectives have long and accomplished histories. Explaining politics as the result of economic action has had several phases of wide popularity. A recent version, called a new political economy by some proponents, is mainly an applied neoclassical economics.<sup>4</sup> The most influential combination of economic and institutional emphases in explaining politics has been Marxism, whose proponents have produced valuable studies of twentieth-century American political development.<sup>5</sup> Institutional-

4. Among the most insightful practitioners of this approach is Douglass North, whose work along with that of like-minded colleagues is represented in James E. Alt and Kenneth A. Shepsle, eds., *Perspectives on Positive Political Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

5. See, for example, Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890–1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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political approaches have achieved major results in analyzing twentieth-century American politics, mainly regarding the national state and social policies.<sup>6</sup>

My argument emphasizes the causal role of political forces and political action. First, I show how political projects help define the meaning of social and economic processes, rather than being only subject to their exogenous effects. Second, I outline political dynamics that can yield strong (and often unintended) outcomes, in which political themes (or ideas, or discourses) matter a great deal in shaping agents' choices and defining the practical meaning of self-interest. On the basis of this argument I stress the distinctive character of the reformist progressive liberalism of the Democratic order. I underline its break both with Republican themes and policies from the 1920s and with prior Democratic conceptions. And I emphasize the deep differences between Democratic liberalism and political currents on the left that gained significant strength in the 1930s and 1940s – Popular Front Communism, radical populism, and social democracy. To understand the main political battles requires distinguishing progressive liberal from social democratic views, in terms of both substantive aims and strategic approaches.

While the argument of this book owes a considerable debt to Marxian modes of analysis, it is post-Marxist. I intend this term in both a normative and analytical sense. Normatively the Marxist tradition does not provide a very useful standpoint from which to evaluate Democratic practices, which can readily be criticized in other terms as well. Nor does it much raise the level of historical understanding or contemporary political argument to criticize progressive liberals who were self-conscious about their perspective for failing to recognize the virtues of alleged socialist (or even social democratic) alternatives. Analytically, my account places considerable weight on economic and social factors in shaping political outcomes, but usually as secondary elements, or as factors that gained their full meaning through political interpretation. This approach cannot readily be developed in Marxist terms. On that terrain, a polarization of analytical choices is strongly encouraged when any significant economic influence is taken to reveal the subtle workings

6. See Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), as well as the studies of social policy in Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988). Skocpol's reluctance to allow factors other than the shape of political institutions to qualify as major causal forces is qualified in her later book on American social policy, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

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of an ultimately determining economic mechanism. I aim to give the economy and class relations their due within a political framework.

**Analyzing the Democratic order**

This book is about building and renewing a dominant political force. The first two chapters provide a framework for this analysis. Chapter 1 assesses approaches to change in terms of whether American political development should be regarded as containing one, two, or many distinct periods. The perspective developed in the 1950s and 1960s by Louis Hartz and others, which draws on Tocqueville and stresses “American exceptionalism,” considers all of American politics as one period unified by enduring political commitments. Though this view retains power it has trouble explaining political change or how stable political forms are sustained. A second view of American political development locates a basic division in the early twentieth century. Before that time politics revolved around elites, courts, and parties; demands for order and integration generated by social and economic change encouraged the emergence of a modern politics of large institutions. This view pays far too little attention to conflicts about distribution, cultural legitimacy, and principles of decision making.

Chapter 1 also considers the political realignment approach, which posits several periods framed by dramatic electoral shifts at roughly forty-year intervals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The political realignment perspective rightly insists that there have been more than two major periods in American political development. Yet political realignment studies do not adequately explain why or when realignments occur, and debates about the concept have often declined into narrow fights about precisely what aspects of which elections count as realigning. My focus on building an American regime returns to broad questions about political change that the realignment perspective initially addressed.

The limits of the best accounts of large-scale change in American politics direct attention to their theoretical premises. Chapter 2’s account of regime dynamics considers politics as an active, creative process of organizing and directing social relations. I focus on how the choices made by individuals seeking to support a regime generate long-term political costs, via statism and the results of socioeconomic modernization. I then sketch the development of the Democratic order in terms of two processes: the growing role of the Democratic state with respect to nonstate Democratic institutions and activities, and socioeconomic changes encouraged by Democratic policies. Both dynamics were rooted

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in reasonable choices by Democratic leaders and activists about how to sustain a regime to which they were politically committed. In the 1930s and 1940s these choices helped sustain the Democratic order; eventually they reduced the capacity of Democratic forces to support the regime and made it vulnerable.

**Democratic ascent and endurance**

Chapters 3 through 10 examine key moments in the history of the Democratic order in the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on electoral and legislative episodes that raise basic questions. Chapters 3 through 6 explain the construction of the Democratic order amid political turmoil, especially in 1935–7 – why was the Democratic order built at all, and against what alternatives? I start from the crisis of Republican domination in the late 1920s and early 1930s. I trace the emergence of new dominant political forces via the 1936 presidential election and the passage and implementation of the Wagner Act. The latter measure – and by extension the Democratic order – was a political project of progressive liberals, who, in alliance with new mass political forces, constructed a regime centered on an expanded state, a renovated party, and vigorous popular movements.

Chapters 7 through 10 assess the conflicts of 1947–9, centering on the 1948 election and the fights over the Taft-Hartley Act. An extension and renewal of the Democratic order occurred, despite widespread expectations that Democratic power would rapidly decline after the end of the Depression and the death of Franklin Roosevelt. The persistence of the Democratic order derived from the enduring political capacities of the Democratic triangle built in the previous decade. Progressive liberals in and around the state organized a defense of the regime against postwar adversaries. Important political changes after World War II – the anti-Communist campaign, Taft-Hartley, and the emphasis on growth in economic policy – are best understood as shifts within an enduring political framework.

Where in this story is the Democratic Party? In my account the Democratic Party is always present but rarely if ever at the center. This partly reflects difficulties in fixing the party as an object of inquiry, owing to its diversity, complex ties to other institutions, and relative weakness as a national organization.<sup>7</sup> Conventionally the Democratic label refers to

7. To focus on the Democratic Party per se might seem plausible – but the inadequacy of this conception is suggested by the great difficulty of finding even basic information about the structure and practices of national (or other) Democratic organizations. This is partly due to poor or nonexistent record-keeping. There was no permanent national



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party identification and to a weak party structure. Thus “Democratic Party” points to mass loyalties or to a specific but modest political agent. Yet it makes sense to retain the Democratic label to designate a political order whose initial leaders often downplayed their partisan identity. And as the Democratic order’s capacities emerged in practices that cut across conventional boundaries, it makes sense to say that a strong Democratic order was supported by a weak Democratic Party.<sup>8</sup>

**The international dimension**

In the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, political outcomes were shaped primarily by domestic dynamics, with international factors playing a secondary role. Yet the international dimension of the Democratic order requires attention because that regime shaped the entry of the United States into international politics on a larger scale and in a more sustained manner than had ever been the case. The Democratic order built a new and radically expanded international role for the United States from the mid-1930s to the end of the following decade. The leaders of the Democratic order drew on and elaborated prior internationalist currents in American politics in preparing the way for American entry into World War II. The war was fought in an alliance with the Soviet Union; its aims were defined as the unconditional surrender of the opposing states and the destruction of their fascist regimes. Major

Democratic office until the 1920s. Since then records have been kept casually, often leaving offices with the individuals involved. Relatively recent works about party structure and activities in the United States include: Cornelius Cotter, et al., *Party Organizations in American Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1984); Leon Epstein, *Political Parties in the American Mold* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); David Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Byron Shafer, *Quiet Revolution: The Struggle for the Democratic Party and the Shaping of Post-Reform Politics* (New York: Russell Sage, 1983).

8. In research for this book I used data from a variety of sources. The records of the national Democratic Party are mainly at the presidential libraries. I used records at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library for the 1935–7 period and at the Harry S. Truman Library for 1947–9. Relevant materials are sometimes filed under “Democratic Party” or “Democratic National Committee,” at other times included in the papers of presidents and their aides. I examined materials relevant for the elections and legislative contests on which I focused, and for national Democratic Party affairs in general. Where material was filed by state, I emphasized California, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, and New York, due to their political importance and their social and ideological diversity. The public record – congressional debates, presidential speeches and other statements by regime leaders, press conferences, and public papers – is a crucial source, along with memoirs and interviews at the presidential libraries.



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economic changes resulted in a new international economic order centered on the United States.

The dynamic of building and sustaining a leading international role for the United States resembled domestic political processes. There was an initial break with previous economic and political practices and the emergence of new internationalist discourses. The expansion of American international activity meant taking on more complex and extensive commitments, in political, economic, and military relations. Inability to curtail an expansionist logic eventually made growing commitments very hard to manage; the dangers of overexpansion were realized in the 1960s, notably in the Vietnam war.

In claiming that the Democratic order reshaped the world role of the United States I reject the idea that any American regime would necessarily have acted the same way. The international policies of the United States were selected by domestic political dynamics from among a range of feasible alternatives. Domestic politics significantly influenced all major aspects of American foreign policies. After World War II the Cold War was a central reality in relations between domestic and foreign policies in the United States. I will engage debates about the origins and meaning of that conflict, but with caution. It is difficult to analyze relations between American and international politics during the early Cold War at a time when the interlocked endings of the Cold War and the Soviet Union are so recent. A widespread account of the postwar international role of the United States claims that the combined effects of the Vietnam debacle, declining American international strength, and growing Soviet military power brought a brief “American century” to an end. Much of that story has been undermined by events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and arguments are underway on how these historic changes should influence our view of events in the 1940s.

**The pertinence of the Democratic order**

From the end of the Democratic order to the early 1990s few major political figures called for overturning the accomplishments of its first two decades. Even Ronald Reagan invoked Franklin Roosevelt as an honored symbol of a determination to use presidential power to achieve urgent national aims.

While the Democratic order has long been shattered, returning to its first two decades raises questions of continuing political importance. Some of these questions refer to specific Democratic policies, as in social welfare provision or labor relations. Others concern broad themes, such as the appropriate relation between state action and markets. Major

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questions also refer to the political processes through which the Democratic order was built. Contemporary political actors can return to the early Democratic order to see how a durable regime was built. Creative political actors, potentially capable of forging a political order, do not duplicate prior regime-building efforts but learn from them how to begin amid different and surprising conditions.