

*From the Foreword to the paperbound edition
by Professor Stanley Kelley, Jr., of Princeton University*

This book seeks to elucidate its subject — the governing of democratic states — by making intelligible the party politics of democracies. . . .

Having given party politics a central place in his thought about democracy, Downs treats it very differently than do other students of politics. His entire effort is to *account for* what parties and voters do. His explanations are systematically related to, and deducible from, precisely stated assumptions about the motivations that attend the decisions of voters and parties and the environment in which they act. He is consciously concerned with economy in explanation, that is, with attempting to account for phenomena in terms of a very limited number of facts and postulates. He is concerned also with the central features of party politics in *any* democratic state, not with that in the United States or any other single country. . . .

Downs assumes that political parties and voters act rationally in the pursuit of certain clearly specified goals — it is this assumption, in fact, that gives his theory its explanatory power. Most of us are such uncritical children of Freud that to say, “He did that because he decided it was the best way to get what he wanted,” is apt to strike us as not very profound. Yet, just as firms that do not engage in the rational pursuit of profit are apt to cease to be firms, so politicians who do not pursue votes in a rational manner are apt to cease to be politicians.

. . . I can say quite sincerely that there are few books that have had so great an impact on my thinking, or that I would like so much to have written.

AN ECONOMIC THEORY
OF DEMOCRACY

Downs

HARPER
&
ROW

AN
ECONOMIC
THEORY
OF
DEMOCRACY

Anthony Downs

2. Parties in a two-party system deliberately change their platforms so that they resemble one another; whereas parties in a multi-party system try to remain as ideologically distinct from each other as possible.
3. If the distribution of ideologies in a society's citizenry remains constant, its political system will move toward a position of equilibrium in which the number of parties and their ideological positions are stable over time.
4. New parties can be most successfully launched immediately after some significant change in the distribution of ideological views among eligible voters.
5. In a two-party system, it is rational for each party to encourage voters to be irrational by making its platform vague and ambiguous.

I. THE SPATIAL ANALOGY AND ITS EARLY USE

To carry out this analysis, we borrow and elaborate upon an apparatus invented by Harold Hotelling. It first appeared in a famous article on spatial competition published in 1929, and was later refined by Arthur Smithies.¹ Our version of Hotelling's spatial market consists of a linear scale running from zero to 100 in the usual left-to-right fashion. To make this politically meaningful, we assume that political preferences can be ordered from left to right in a manner agreed upon by all voters. They need not agree on which point they personally prefer, only on the ordering of parties from one extreme to the other.

In addition, we assume that every voter's preferences are single-peaked and slope downward monotonically on either side of the peak

¹ Harold Hotelling, "Stability in Competition," *The Economic Journal*, XXXIX (1929), 41-57, and Arthur Smithies, "Optimum Location in Spatial Competition," *The Journal of Political Economy*, XLIX (1941), 423-439. For other aspects of the spatial-competition problem, see F. Zeuthen, "Theoretical Remarks on Price Policy: Hotelling's Case with Variations," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XLVII (1933), 231-253; Erich Schneider, "Bemerkungen zu Einer Theorie der Raumwirtschaft," *Econometrica*, III (1935), 79-105; A. P. Lerner and H. W. Singer, "Some Notes on Duopoly and Spatial Competition," *Journal of Political Economy*, XLV (1937), 145-186; and August Lösch, *The Economics of Location* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

8

The Statics and Dynamics of Party Ideologies

Introduction

IF POLITICAL ideologies are truly means to the end of obtaining votes, and if we know something about the distribution of voters' preferences, we can make specific predictions about how ideologies change in content as parties maneuver to gain power. Or, conversely, we can state the conditions under which ideologies come to resemble each other, diverge from each other, or remain in some fixed relationship.

Objectives

In this chapter we attempt to prove the following propositions:

1. A two-party democracy cannot provide stable and effective government unless there is a large measure of ideological consensus among its citizens.

(unless his peak lies at one extreme on the scale). For example, if a voter likes position 35 best, we can immediately deduce that he prefers 30 to 25 and 40 to 45. He always prefers some point X to another point Y if X is closer to 35 than Y and both are on the same side of 35. The slope downward from the apex need not be identical on both sides, but we do presume no sharp asymmetry exists.

These assumptions can perhaps be made more plausible if we reduce all political questions to their bearing upon one crucial issue: how much government intervention in the economy should there be? If we assume that the left end of the scale represents full government control, and the right end means a completely free market, we can rank parties by their views on this issue in a way that might be nearly universally recognized as accurate. In order to coördinate this left-right orientation with our numerical scale, we will arbitrarily assume that the number denoting any party's position indicates the percentage of the economy it wants left in private hands (excluding those minimal state operations which even the most Hayekian economists favor). Thus the extreme left position is zero, and the extreme right is 100. Admittedly, this apparatus is unrealistic for the following two reasons: (1) actually each party is leftish on some issues and rightish on others, and (2) the parties designated as right wing extremists in the real world are for fascist control of the economy rather than free markets. However, we will ignore these limitations temporarily and see what conclusions of interest we can draw from this spatial analogy.

Both Hotelling and Smithies have already applied their versions of this model to politics. Hotelling assumed that people were evenly spaced along the straight-line scale, and reasoned that competition in a two-party system would cause each party to move towards its opponent ideologically. Such convergence would occur because each party knows that extremists at its end of the scale prefer it to the opposition position, since it is necessarily closer to them than the opposition party is. Therefore the best way for it to gain more support is to move toward the other extreme, so as to get more voters outside of it—i.e., to come between them and its opponent. As the two parties

move closer together, they become more moderate and less extreme in policy in an effort to win the crucial middle-of-the-road voters, i.e., those whose views place them between the two parties. This center area becomes smaller and smaller as both parties strive to capture moderate votes; finally the two parties become nearly identical in platforms and actions. For example, if there is one voter at every point on the scale, and parties A and B start at points 25 and 75 respectively, they will move towards each other and meet at 50, assuming they move at the same speed (Fig. 1). Like the two grocery

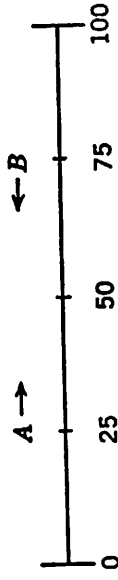


Figure 1

Note for Figures 1-10: Horizontal scale represents political orientation (see pp. 115-116). Vertical scale represents number of citizens.

stores in Hotelling's famous example, they will converge on the same location until practically all voters are indifferent between them.

Smithies improved this model by introducing elastic demand at each point on the scale. Thus as the grocery stores moved away from the extremes, they lost customers there because of the increased cost of transportation; this checked them from coming together at the center. In our model, this is analogous to political extremists becoming disgusted at the identity of the parties, and refusing to vote for either if they become too much alike. At exactly what point this leakage checks the convergence of A and B depends upon how many extremists each loses by moving towards the center compared with how many moderates it gains thereby.

II. THE EFFECTS OF VARIOUS DISTRIBUTIONS OF VOTERS

A. IN TWO-PARTY SYSTEMS

An important addition we can make to this model is a variable distribution of voters along the scale. Instead of assuming there is

one voter at each point on the scale, let us assume there are 100,000 voters whose preferences cause them to be normally distributed with a mean of 50 (Fig. 2). Again, if we place parties A and B initially at 25 and 75, they will converge rapidly upon the center. The possible loss of extremists will not deter their movement toward each other, because there are so few voters to be lost at the margins

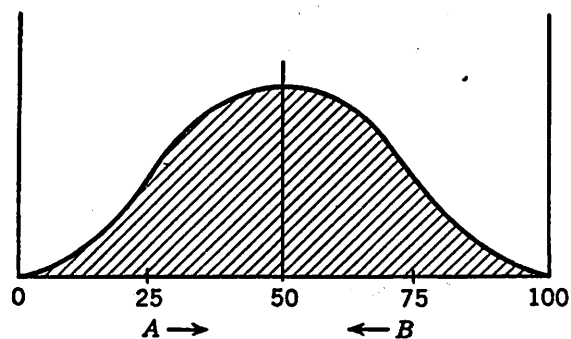


Figure 2

compared with the number to be gained in the middle. However, if we alter the distribution to that shown in Figure 3, the two parties will not move away from their initial positions at 25 and 75 at all; if they did, they would lose far more voters at the extremes than they could possibly gain in the center. Therefore a two-party system need not lead to the convergence on moderation that Hotelling and Smithies predicted. If voters' preferences are distributed so that voters are massed bimodally near the extremes, the parties will remain poles apart in ideology.

The possibility that parties will be kept from converging ideologically in a two-party system depends upon the refusal of extremist voters to support either party if both become alike—not identical, but merely similar. In a certain world—where information is complete and costless, there is no future-oriented voting, and the act of voting uses up no scarce resources—such abstention by extremists would be irrational. As long as there is even the most infinitesimal difference between A and B, extremist voters would be forced to

vote for the one closest to them, no matter how distasteful its policies seemed in comparison with those of their ideal government. It is always rational *ex definitione* to select a greater good before a lesser, or a lesser evil before a greater; consequently abstention would be irrational because it increases the chances of the worse party for victory.

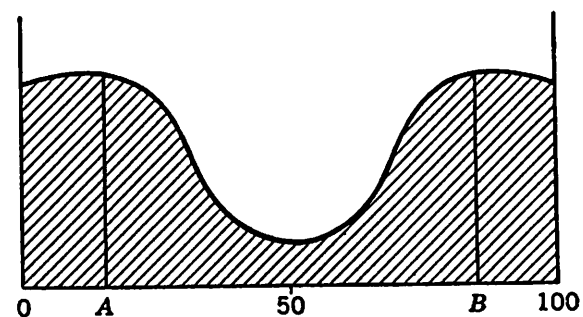


Figure 3

Even in a certain world, however, abstention is rational for extremist voters who are future oriented. They are willing to let the worse party win today in order to keep the better party from moving towards the center, so that in future elections it will be closer to them. Then when it does win, its victory is more valuable in their eyes. Abstention thus becomes a threat to use against the party nearest one's own extreme position so as to keep it away from the center.²

Uncertainty increases the possibility that rational extremist voters will abstain if the party nearest them moves toward its opponent, even if it does not become ideologically identical with the latter. When information is limited and costly, it is difficult to detect infinitesimal differences between parties. Perhaps even relatively significant differences will pass unnoticed by the radical whose own

² In reality, since so many ballots are cast, each individual voter has so little influence upon the election that his acts cannot be realistically appraised as a threat to any party, assuming the actions of all other citizens are given. Since we deal with this atomistic problem fully in Chapter 13, we evade it here by assuming each man behaves as though his vote has a high probability of being decisive.

views are so immoderate that all moderates look alike. This means that the differential threshold of such extremists is likely to be very high—they will regard all small differences between moderate parties as irrelevant to their voting decision, i.e., as unreal distinctions.

Having established the rationality of abstention by extremist voters, let us again consider a bimodal distribution of voters with modes near each extreme (Fig. 3). In a two-party system, whichever party wins will attempt to implement policies radically opposed to the other party's ideology, since the two are at opposite extremes. This means that government policy will be highly unstable, and that democracy is likely to produce chaos. Unfortunately, the growth of balancing center parties is unlikely. Any party which forms in the center will eventually move toward one extreme or the other to increase its votes, since there are so few moderate voters. Furthermore, any center party could govern only in coalition with one of the extremist parties, which would alienate the other, and thus not eliminate the basic problem. In such a situation, unless voters can somehow be moved to the center of the scale to eliminate their polar split, democratic government is not going to function at all well. In fact, no government can operate so as to please most of the people; hence this situation may lead to revolution.

The political cycle typical of revolutions can be viewed as a series of movements of men along the political scale.³ Preliminary to the upheaval, the once centralized distribution begins to polarize into two extremes as the incumbents increasingly antagonize those who feel themselves oppressed. When the distribution has become so split that one extreme is imposing by force policies abhorred by the other extreme, open warfare breaks out, and a clique of underdogs seizes power. This radical switch from one extreme to the other is partly responsible for the reign of terror which marks most revolutions; the new governors want to eliminate their predecessors, who have

³ The following description should not be construed as a causal explanation of revolutions; it is rather a translation of the events that occur in them into movements along the scale we have developed. Hence we make no attempt to discuss why revolutions follow the cycle portrayed. For an analysis of this problem, see Lyford P. Edwards, *The Natural History of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927).

bitterly opposed them. Finally violence exhausts itself, a new census is reached on the principles of the revolution, and the distribution becomes centralized again—often under a new dictatorship as rigid as the old, but not faced with a polarized distribution of opinions.⁴

Under more normal circumstances, in countries where there are two opposite social classes and no sizeable middle class, the numerical distribution is more likely to be skewed to the left, with a small mode at the right extreme (Fig. 4). The large mode at the left rep-

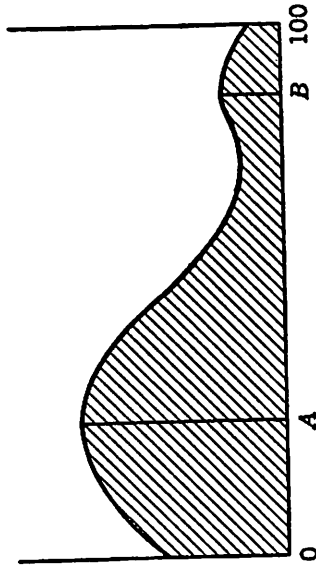


Figure 4

resents the lower or working class; on the right is the upper class. Here democracy, if effective, will bring about the installation of a leftist government because of the numerical preponderance of the lower classes. Fear of this result is precisely what caused many European aristocrats to fight the introduction of universal suffrage. Of course, our schema oversimplifies the situation considerably. On our political scale, every voter has equal weight with every other, whereas in fact the unequal distribution of income allows a numerically small group to control political power quite disproportionate to its size, as we saw in Chapter 6.

In spite of this oversimplification, it is clear that the numerical distribution of voters along the political scale determines to a great extent what kind of democracy will develop. For example, a distribu-

⁴ The application of this model to revolutions was suggested by Robert A. Dahl and Kenneth Arrow. Professor Dahl develops a similar model in *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 90-102.

tion like that of Figure 2 encourages a two-party system with both parties located near the center in relatively moderate positions. This type of government is likely to have stable policies, and whichever party is in power, its policies will not be far from the views of the vast majority of people. On the other hand, if a nation's voters are distributed as shown in Figure 5, a multiparty system will almost inevitably result.

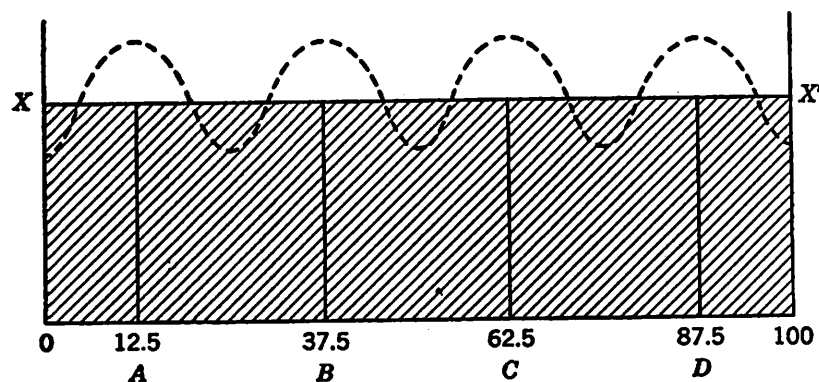


Figure 5

B. THE NUMBER OF PARTIES IN EQUILIBRIUM

Before examining the dynamics of multiparty systems, we should point out that our political version of Hotelling's model does not suffer from the outstanding limitation of the economic version he used. In Hotelling's spatial market, it was impossible to reach stable equilibrium with more than two grocery stores. The ones in the middle would always become the target of convergence from either side; consequently they would leap to the outside to keep from being squeezed. There was no device to restrict the perfect mobility that caused this disequilibrium.

But political parties cannot move ideologically past each other. As we saw in the last chapter, integrity and responsibility create relative immobility, which prevents a party from making ideological leaps over the heads of its neighbors. Thus ideological movement is restricted to horizontal progress at most up to—and never beyond—

the nearest party on either side. Coupled with our device of variable distribution, this attribute of the model nearly always insures stable equilibrium.

It is true that new parties can be introduced between two formerly adjacent ones or outside one of them. Nevertheless, this possibility cannot upset stable equilibrium in the long run for two reasons. First, once a party has come into being, it cannot leap over the heads of its neighbors, as explained. Second, there is a limit to the number of parties which can be supported by any one distribution. When that limit is reached, no more new parties can be successfully introduced. The parties extant at that point arrange themselves through competition so that no party can gain more votes by moving to the right than it loses on the left by doing so, and vice versa. The political system thus reaches a state of long-run equilibrium in so far as the number and positions of its parties are concerned, assuming no change in the distribution of voters along the scale.

Whether the political system contains two or many parties in this state of equilibrium depends upon (1) the nature of the limit upon the introduction of new parties and (2) the shape of the distribution of voters. We will examine these factors in order.

In our model, every party is a team of men who seek to attain office—a party cannot survive in the long run if none of its members get elected.⁵ But in order to get at least some of its members elected, the party must gain the support of a certain minimum number of voters. The size of this minimum depends upon the type of electoral system in operation.

To get any of its members in office at all, a party in our model must win more votes than any other party running. This arrangement encourages parties which repeatedly lose to merge with each other so as to capture a combined total of votes larger than the total

⁵ This definition of party does not cover many actual parties that continue to exist even though their chances for election are practically zero; e.g., the Vegetarians and Socialists in the United States. These parties are politically irrational from the point of view of our hypothesis; i.e., the motives we posit as politically rational are not the ones impelling their members. Even future-oriented rationality does not cover them, since past experience demonstrates that their future chances of election are also nearly nonexistent unless some highly unlikely catastrophe occurs.

received by the party which repeatedly wins. Such amalgamation continues until each of the survivors has a reasonable chance of winning a majority of the votes cast, which is the only way it can be sure of gaining office. Thus the winner-take-all outcome of a plurality electoral structure tends to narrow the field to two competing parties.⁶

Where proportional representation exists, a party which wins only a small percentage of the total vote may place some of its members in the government, since coalition governments often rule.⁷ Thus the minimum amount of support necessary to keep a party going is much smaller than in a plurality system; so a multiparty system is encouraged. Nevertheless, each party must still obtain a certain minimum number of votes in order to elect members of the legislature who might possibly enter a coalition. For this reason, a given distribution of voters can support only a limited number of parties even under proportional representation.⁸ Therefore the conditions for equilibrium exist in both two- and multiparty systems.

The type of electoral structure extant in a political system may be either a cause or a result of the original distribution of voters along the scale. Thus if the distribution has a single mode around which nearly all voters are clustered, the framers of the electoral structure may believe that plurality rule will not cause any large group to be ignored politically. Or if the distribution has many small modes, the law-makers may choose proportional representation in order to allow sizeable extremist groups to have a voice in government.

Causality can also be reversed because the number of parties in

⁶ For a more extensive discussion of this assertion, see V. O. Key Jr., *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1955), pp. 224-231.

⁷ A detailed analysis of the problems raised by coalition governments is presented in the next chapter.

⁸ Another reason why new parties cannot form *ad infinitum* is that political parties are specialized agencies in the division of labor, as explained in Chapter 2. Therefore not everyone can be in a political party; in fact, in a given society, there is probably a definite limit imposed by efficiency on the number of persons who can specialize in being party members. The size of this limit depends upon such factors as the importance of government action in that society, the need for differing representation (i.e., the scattering of voters on the scale), the social prestige and economic income attached to being in politics, and the general standard of living produced by the division of labor.

existence molds the political views of rising generations, thereby influencing their positions on the scale. In a plurality structure, since a two-party system is encouraged and the two parties usually converge, voters' tastes may become relatively homogeneous in the long run; whereas the opposite effect may occur in a proportional representation structure.

From this analysis it is clear that both the electoral structure and the distribution of voters are important in determining how many parties a given democracy will contain when it reaches equilibrium. Each factor influences the other indirectly, but it also has some impact independent of the other. For example, if a proportional representation system is established in a society where the distribution of voters has a single mode and a small variance, it is possible that only two parties will exist in equilibrium because there is not enough political room on the scale for more than two significantly different positions to gain measurable support.⁹

Having explored the impact of the two major types of electoral structure upon the number of parties in a political system, we will concentrate our attention from now on upon the impact of the distribution of voters along the scale. In order to do so, we assume that this distribution is the only factor in determining how many parties there are.¹⁰

C. IN MULTIPARTY SYSTEMS

Multiparty systems—those with three or more major parties—are likely to occur whenever the distribution of voters is polymodal. The

⁹ This example ignores the possibility of a tiny third party occupying a crucial balancing position between two other large parties. Actually such an outcome is also possible in a plurality system if the government is chosen by a series of district elections rather than a single national election. As in Great Britain, a small party may gain only a few seats in the legislature, but if the two large parties are equally powerful, its decisive role in the balance of power may keep it alive even though it never gains office in the government directly. Our plurality model precludes this outcome because we posit election on a strictly national basis. In the next chapter we present a proportional representation model in which such small but powerful parties can exist.

¹⁰ Of course there are many factors influencing the number of parties in a given system, but most of them can be subsumed under the electoral structure (which we just discussed) or the distribution of voters (which we are about to discuss).

existence of two or more outstanding modes creates conditions favorable to one party at each mode, and perhaps balancing parties between them. Figure 5 represents an extreme example of this structure, since voters are equally distributed along the scale (on XX'); i.e., each point on the scale is a mode (or the distribution can be seen as having no modes). However, not every point can support a party if we assume that the electoral structure allows only a certain number of parties to compete for power with reasonable chances of success. Therefore a definite number of parties will spring up along the scale and maneuver until the distance between each party and its immediately adjacent neighbors is the same for all parties. In Figure 5 we have assumed that the total number of parties is limited to four; hence in equilibrium they will space themselves as shown (assuming extremists abstain if parties A and D move toward the center).¹¹

An important difference between a distribution like that in Figure 5 and one like that in Figure 2 is that the former provides no incentive for parties to move toward each other ideologically. Party B in Figure 5, for example, cannot gain more votes by moving toward A or towards C. If it started toward C, it would win votes away from C, but it would lose just as many to A; the reverse happens if it moves toward A. Therefore it will stay at 37.5 and maintain its ideological purity—unlike party B in Figure 2.¹² The latter party is pulled toward the center because, by moving toward A, it wins more votes among the moderates than it loses among the extremists, as mentioned before.

Thus it is likely that in multiparty systems, parties will strive to distinguish themselves ideologically from each other and maintain

¹¹ As new voters appear on the scene, they may cluster around the four locations where parties exist and thus form a tetramodal distribution like that shown by the dotted line in Figure 5. In other words, a perfectly even distribution is probably not stable over time but tends to become a distribution with definite modes and less populated areas between them. Such a development further restricts the manner in which new parties may enter the system, since it makes some locations much more desirable than others but also concentrates extant parties at the most favorable spots.

¹² At this point we are ignoring the possibility of B's gaining power by forming a coalition with either A or C or both. The forces influencing B's movement when it is in such a coalition are described in Section III of the next chapter.

the purity of their positions; whereas in two-party systems, each party will try to resemble its opponent as closely as possible.¹³

This phenomenon helps to explain certain peculiarities of the two political systems. If our reasoning is correct, voters in multiparty systems are much more likely to be swayed by doctrinal considerations—matters of ideology and policy—than are voters in two-party systems. The latter voters are massed in the moderate range where both ideologies lie; hence they are likely to view personality, or technical competence, or some other nonideological factor as decisive. Because they are not really offered much choice between policies, they may need other factors to discriminate between parties.

Voters in multiparty systems, however, are given a wide range of ideological choice, with parties emphasizing rather than soft-peddalling their doctrinal differences. Hence regarding ideologies as a decisive factor in one's voting decision is usually more rational in a multiparty system than in a two-party system. In spite of this fact, the ideology of the government in a multiparty system (as opposed to the parties) is often less cohesive than its counterpart in a two-party system, as we shall see in the next chapter.

III. THE ORIGIN OF NEW PARTIES

In analyzing the birth of new parties, we must distinguish between two types of new parties. The first is designed to win elections. Its originators feel that it can locate itself so as to represent a large number of voters whose views are not being expressed by any extant party. The second type is designed to influence already existing parties to change their policies, or not to change them; it is not primarily aimed at winning elections.

Of course, no party is ever begun by people who think it will never get any votes, or win any offices, especially if our hypothesis about party motivation is true. Nevertheless, some parties—founded by perfectly rational men—are meant to be threats to other parties and

¹³ A two-party system like that shown in Figure 3 will not exhibit ideological convergence. However, as we have pointed out, it is doubtful whether such a distribution can function as a democracy, since internal conflict will be intense no matter which party wins.

not means of gaining immediate power or prestige. An example is the States' Rights Party of 1948, intended to threaten the Democrats because of their policy on civil rights. Such blackmail parties are future oriented, since their purpose is to alter the choices offered to voters by the extant parties at some future date.

To distinguish between these two kinds of parties is often difficult, because many parties founded primarily to gain office actually perform the function of influencing the policies of previously existing parties. This impact has been typical of third parties in United States history, none of which ever won a national election, though many had great influence upon the platforms of parties that did win. Thus if we classify new parties by intention, nearly all of them are of the "real" type; whereas if we classify them by results, most of them, at least in American history, are of the "influence" type. However, we will assume that the new parties we discuss are designed to win elections, unless otherwise specified.

No party, new or old, can survive without gaining the support of a sizeable fraction of the electorate—a support active enough to be expressed by votes in elections. This does not mean that a party must locate right in the midst of a big lump of voters on our political scale; rather it must be nearer a large number of voters than any other parties are. Its location is as dependent upon where other parties are as it is upon where voters are.

New parties are most likely to appear and survive when there is an opportunity for them to cut off a large part of the support of an older party by sprouting up between it and its former voters. An outstanding case in point is the birth of the Labour Party in England, which can be illustrated very roughly by Figure 6. Before 1900, there were two major British parties, the Liberals (A) and the Tories (B). They were under the usual two-party pressure to converge. However, the enfranchisement of the working class in the late nineteenth century had shifted the center of voter distribution far to the left of its old position. And the Liberal Party, even after it moved to the left, was to the right of the new center of gravity, although it was the more left of the two parties. The founders of the Labour Party correctly guessed that they could out-flank the Liberals by forming a new

party (C) to the left of the latter, which they did. This trapped the Liberals between the two modes of the electorate, and their support rapidly diminished to insignificant size.¹⁴

The crucial factor in this case was the shift of the electorate's distribution along the political scale as a result of the extension of suf-

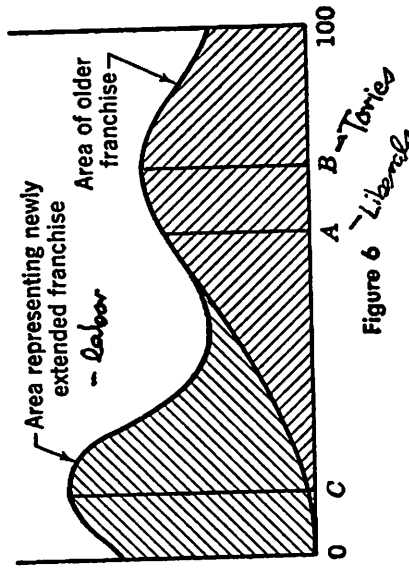


Figure 6

frage to a vast number of new voters, many of whom were near the extreme left. Whenever such a radical change in the distribution of voters occurs, existing parties will probably be unable to adjust rapidly because they are ideologically immobile. New parties, however, are not weighed down by this impediment. Unencumbered by ideological commitments, they can select the most opportune point on the scale at which to locate, and structure their ideologies accordingly. Opportunities to do so will be especially tempting if the old parties have converged toward the previous center of gravity as a result of the normal two-party process, and the new distribution is heavily skewed to one or both extremes. This is roughly what happened in the case of the Labour Party.

Another situation which may be productive of new parties is a social stalemate caused by a voter distribution like that in Figure 3. Where voters are massed bimodally at opposite ends of the scale,

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, now that the Liberal Party has dwindled in support, the British electoral system has reverted to its former two-party pattern. Since the n-w center of gravity is far left of the old, the Conservative Party has moved farther leftward than the Labour Party has moved rightward. Nevertheless, a tendency toward convergence clearly exists.

revolution like that following upon industrialization—any such disturbing occurrence may move the modes on the political scale. A change in the number of voters *per se* is irrelevant; it is the distribution which counts. Hence women's suffrage does not create any new parties, although it raises the total vote enormously.

There is one situation in which a new party is likely to appear without any change in voter distribution, but this will be the influence of type of party, not the kind that aims at getting itself elected. When one of the parties in a two-party system has drifted away from the extreme nearest it toward the moderate center, its extremist supporters may form a new party to pull the policies of the old one back toward them. In Figure 9, party B has moved away to the left of its

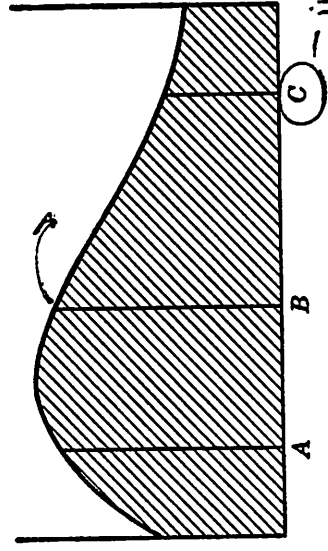


Figure 9

right-wing members because it wants to gain votes from the large mass of voters near the leftish mode. In order to threaten party B with defeat unless it moves back toward the right, the right-wing extremists found party C. This party cannot possibly win itself, but it can throw the election to A by diverting extremist votes from B.

To get rid of this menace, party B must adopt some of C's policies, thus moving back to the right and taking the wind out of C's sails. This will cause party C to collapse, but it will have accomplished its purpose of improving the platform of one of the real contenders, B, in the eyes of its extremist supporters. As mentioned previously, the States' Rights Party formed in 1948 had just such an aim.

In situations like this, it is a movement of party ideology, not of voter distribution, which gives rise to a new party. Party ideologies

peaceful democratic government is difficult, as mentioned previously. A faction desirous of compromise may grow up, thus altering the distribution so it resembles the one shown in Figure 7. Here an opportunity exists for a new party to be formed at C. If this party grows as a result of continuous shifts of voters to the center, eventually a

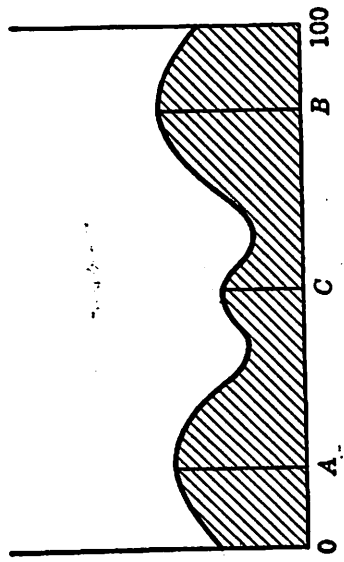


Figure 7

new situation like that in Figure 8 may appear. The center has become preponderant, but has split into three parts because new parties have arisen to exploit the large moderate voting mass.

It is clear that a major prerequisite for the appearance of new parties is a change in the distribution of voters along the political scale. A shift in the universality of franchise, a weakening of traditional views by some cataclysmic event like World War II, a social

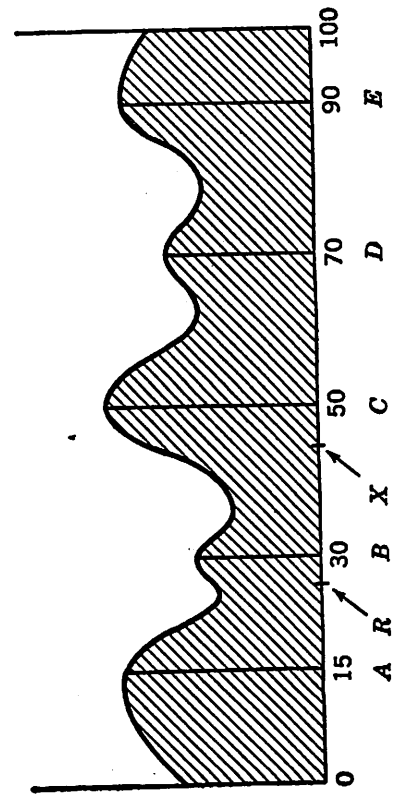


Figure 8

are relatively immobile in multiparty systems; so this type of new party will appear almost exclusively in two-party systems. Fear of these blackmail parties may strongly counteract the centripetal pull normal to such systems.

IV. IDEOLOGICAL COHERENCE AND INTEGRATION

A. ALTERATION OF OUR MODEL TO INCLUDE MULTIPOLICY PARTIES

In Chapter 7 we showed that each party's ideology will be coherent but not integrated. That is, it will not contain internal contradictions, but neither will it be too closely tied to any one philosophic *Weltanschauung*. This outcome results from the conflicting desires each party feels when forming its ideology. On the one hand, it wishes to appeal to as many voters as possible; on the other hand, it wishes to have a strong appeal for each individual voter. The first desire implies a platform containing a wide range of policies representing many different ideological outlooks. The second desire implies a close integration of policies around the philosophic viewpoint of whichever voter is being wooed. Obviously, the more either desire is achieved, the less will the other be satisfied.

This dualism can be depicted on our graph of political space. First we must remove the assumption that each party's platform contains only its stand on the proper degree of government intervention in the economy. Let us assume instead that each party takes stands on many issues, and that each stand can be assigned a position on our left-right scale.¹⁵ Then the party's net position on this scale is a weighted average of the positions of all the particular policies it upholds.

¹⁵ We can state this assumption formally as follows: all citizens agree on a left-right ordering of the stands taken by the various parties on any given issue. Thus it is not necessary for every citizen to have the same cardinal ordering of stands on the left-right scale as every other; i.e., citizen A may feel that party X's stand on some issue is at point 35, while citizen B may believe the same stand is at point 30, but both must agree it is on the same side of party Y's stand on that issue and bears the same ordinal relation to the stands of parties W, Y and Z. Although in the text we implicitly assume agreement on the exact location of each party stand in order to simplify the argument, our conclusions also follow from purely ordinal premises.

Furthermore, each citizen may apply different weights to the individual policies, since each policy affects some citizens more than others. Therefore the party has no unique, universally recognized net position. Some voters may feel it is more right-wing than others, and no one view can be proved correct. However, there will be some consensus as to the range in which the party's net position lies; so we can still distinguish right-wing parties from center and left-wing ones.

Under these conditions, the rational party strategy is to adopt a spread of policies which covers a whole range of the left-right scale. The wider this spread is, the more viewpoints the party's ideology and platform will appeal to. But a wider spread also weakens the strength of the appeal to any one viewpoint, because each citizen sees the party upholding policies he does not approve of.

Thus a voter's judgment of each party becomes two-dimensional: he must balance its net position (the mean of its policies) against its spread (their variance) in deciding whether he wants to support it. If some party has a mean identical with his own position (which we assume single-valued) but an enormous variance, he may reject it in favor of another party with a mean not as close to him but with a much smaller variance. In short, voters choose policy vectors rather than policy scalars, and each vector is really a weighted frequency distribution of policies on the left-right scale.

B. INTEGRATION STRATEGIES IN TWO-PARTY AND MULTIPARTY SYSTEMS

If we assume that each point on the political scale represents a definite *Weltanschauung*, the width of the spread formed by a party's policies varies inversely with their integration around a single such *Weltanschauung*. Therefore, the degree of integration in a party's ideology depends upon what fraction of the scale it is trying to cover with its policy spread. We have already seen that this fraction will be smaller in a multiparty system than in a two-party system, simply because dividing a constant in half yields larger parts than dividing it into any greater number of equal pieces. If we rule out any overlapping of policy spreads, we may conclude that ideologies will be

more integrated in multiparty systems than in two-party systems. Each party's platform will more clearly reflect some one philosophic viewpoint, around which its policies will be more closely grouped. This accords with our previous conclusion that each party in a multiparty system will try to differentiate its product sharply from the products of all other parties, whereas each party in a two-party system will try to resemble its rival.

To illustrate this conclusion, let us compare Figure 2 with Figure 5. In Figure 2, after parties A and B have approached each other near the center of the scale, each is drawing votes from half the scale. Its supporters range in viewpoint from those at one extreme to those at dead center; hence it must design a policy spread which includes all of them. But there are more voters in the middle than at the extremes. Therefore each party structures its policies so that its net position is moderate, even though it makes a few concessions to the extremists. In this way, it hopes to keep the extremists from abstaining and yet woo the middle-of-the-roadsers massed around 50.

In contrast to the parties in Figure 2, those in Figure 5 do not have to appeal to a wide range of viewpoints. The policy span of each is much narrower, and any attempt to widen it soon causes a collision with another party. This restricts each party's spread even if we allow overlapping to occur.

For example, party B in Figure 5 cannot gain by trying to spread its policies so as to please voters at positions 10 and 60. If it wishes to retain its net position at 35, it can only cast a few policies out as far as 10 and 60. But parties A and C are massing most of their policies so as to please voters at 10 and 60 respectively; hence B cannot hope to compete with A and C in these locations. In fact, B is much better off concentrating its policies around 35, since this keeps it from spreading itself too thin and losing votes to A and C from its own bailiwick. Thus no party in a multiparty system has much incentive to spread out or to overlap another ideologically, and each will closely integrate its policies around some definite philosophic outlook.

C. OVERLAPPING AND AMBIGUITY IN TWO-PARTY SYSTEMS

If we allow overlapping in a two-party system, the results are radically different from those just described. Each party casts some policies into the other's territory in order to convince voters there that its net position is near them. In such maneuvering, there is much room for skill because different voters assign different weights to the same policies. For example, assume that there are two social groups, farmers and workers, whose positions are respectively right and left of 50. They have exactly opposite views on two laws, one on farm price supports and the other on labor practices. However, the farmers weigh the farm law heavily in their voting decisions and consider the labor law much less significant; whereas the workers' emphasis is just the reverse. Each group thus views any party's net position differently from the way the other views it. Realizing this, a clever party will take a stand favoring farmers on the farm law and workers on the labor law. By doing so, it can establish a net position simultaneously close to both groups, even though they are far apart from each other!

This possibility of having a net position in many different places at once makes overlapping policies a rational strategy in a two-party system. Therefore, in the middle of the scale where most voters are massed, each party scatters its policies on both sides of the mid point. It attempts to make each voter in this area feel that it is centered right at his position. Naturally, this causes an enormous overlapping of moderate policies.

However, each party will sprinkle these moderate policies with a few extreme stands in order to please its far-out voters. Obviously, each party is trying to please an extreme opposite to that being pleased by the other party. Therefore it is possible to detect on which side of the mid point each party is actually located by looking at the extremist policies it espouses. In fact, this may be the only way to tell the two parties apart ideologically, since most of their policies are conglomerated in an overlapping mass in the middle of the scale.

Clearly, both parties are trying to be as ambiguous as possible about their actual net position. Therefore why should they not accomplish the same end by being equally ambiguous about each policy? Then every policy stand can cover a spread of voters, too. Not only can voters differently weight individual policies, they can also interpret the meaning of each policy differently—each seeing it in a light which brings it as close as possible to his own position. This vastly widens the band on the political scale into which various interpretations of a party's net position may fall.

Ambiguity thus increases the number of voters to whom a party may appeal. This fact encourages parties in a two-party system to be as equivocal as possible about their stands on each controversial issue. And since both parties find it rational to be ambiguous, neither is forced by the other's clarity to take a more precise stand.

Thus political rationality leads parties in a two-party system to becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity. True, their tendency towards obscurity is limited by their desire to attract voters to the polls, since citizens abstain if all parties seem identical or no party makes testable promises. Nevertheless, competition forces both parties to be much less than perfectly clear about what they stand for. Naturally, this makes it more difficult for each citizen to vote rationally; he has a hard time finding out what his ballot supports when cast for either party. As a result, voters are encouraged to make decisions on some basis other than the issues, i.e., on the personalities of candidates, traditional family voting patterns, loyalty to past party heroes, etc. But only the parties' decisions on issues are relevant to voters' utility incomes from government, so making decisions on any other basis is irrational. We are forced to conclude that rational behavior by political parties tends to discourage rational behavior by voters.

This conclusion may seem startling, since it implies that there is a conflict between party rationality and voter rationality in a two-party system. But in fact this conflict has also been observed by students of political behavior, as the following quotation shows:

The tendency toward agreement between parties under a bipartisan system flows from the fact that party leaders must seek to build a majority

Ambiguous Positions ≠ Ambiguous Choices

of the electorate. In the nation as a whole a majority cannot be built upon the support of organized labor alone; the farmers cannot muster enough votes to form a majority; businessmen are decidedly in a minority. Given the traditional attachment to one party or another of large blocs of voters in all these classes, about the only way in which a party can form a majority is to draw further support from voters of all classes and interests. To succeed in this endeavor party leaders cannot afford to antagonize any major segment of the population. A convenient way to antagonize an element in the population is to take at an inopportune moment an unequivocal stand on an issue of importance. Similarities of composition, hence, contribute to two features of American parties: their similarity of view and their addiction to equivocation and ambiguity.¹⁶

Our model of "political space" has led us to exactly the same conclusion: parties will try to be similar and to equivocate. And the more they succeed, the more difficult it is for voters to behave rationally.

Does this mean that our assumption of rationality leads to a contradiction in a two-party system? Apparently the more rational political parties are, the less rational voters must be, and vice versa. How does this affect our model?

D. A FUNDAMENTAL TENSION IN OUR MODEL

To answer these questions, we must review briefly the basic structure of our mythical political system. In it are two sets of agents: voters and parties. Each set uses the other to achieve its own goal. Voters have as their goal the attainment of a government responsive to their wants; they make use of parties to run this government. Parties have as their goal the rewards of being in office; they make use of voters to get elected. Thus the interlocking of two different goal-pursuing processes forms the political system.

The only end common to both sets of agents is the continuance of the system. Otherwise, neither set cares whether the other's goals are achieved unless that achievement is beneficial to itself. Therefore if a member of one set can gain by impairing the ability of all the members of the other set to attain their goals, he will do so. This

¹⁶ V. O. Key Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.

follows from our axiom that each man seeks his own good and to get it will sacrifice the good of others, if necessary.

To put it more concretely, if any party believes it can increase its chances of gaining office by discouraging voters from being rational, its own rational course is to do so. The only exception to this rule occurs when voter irrationality is likely to destroy the political system. Since parties have a stake in this system, they are irrational if they encourage anything which might wreck it.

However, it is not obvious that ambiguous policies and similar ideologies are likely to destroy democracy. What they might do is make voting less than perfectly rational as a mechanism for selecting governments. But rationality as we define it is not a dichotomous concept; i.e., the possible states of rationality are not limited to 100 percent and 0 percent. Therefore making voting less than perfectly rational does not render it absolutely useless but merely reduces its efficiency as a government-selection process. Knowing this, parties will not be deterred by fear of the end of democracy when they increase ambiguity and match each other's platforms.

Voters have two defenses against being forced into irrationality. The first is to limit the operations of parties by law. In the United States, parties have been forced to make financial reports, refrain from fraudulent statements, submit their primaries to public control, accept only limited contributions from any one source, and otherwise act in ways not likely to exploit the citizenry. Since it would be irrational for citizens to allow parties to exploit them, these laws indirectly protect voters from being forced into irrationality. But voters can hardly expect to induce government to pass laws against platform ambiguity and similarity, so this defense is not much help.

The second defense is to change the political system from a two-party one to a multiparty one. This will cause parties to narrow the spread of their policies, differentiate their platforms more sharply, and reduce ambiguity. However, such a conversion will also give rise to tremendous problems not present in two-party systems, as we shall see in the next chapter. Therefore it is doubtful whether the

change would improve prospects for rational voting; they might get worse.

After weighing all these considerations, we may conclude that our model is not necessarily contradictory. However, it does contain two sets of agents in tension with each other. If either of these is allowed to dominate the other fully, the model may become contradictory; i.e., one of the two sets of agents may cease to behave rationally. Thus if parties succeed in obscuring their policy decisions in a mist of generalities, and voters are unable to discover what their votes really mean, a *rationality crisis* develops. Since such a crisis is even more likely to occur in a multiparty system, we will defer our analysis of it until the next chapter.

V. A BASIC DETERMINANT OF A NATION'S POLITICS

From everything we have said, it is clear that a basic determinant of how a nation's political life develops is the distribution of voters along the political scale, assuming our oversimplified model has some application in the real world. In the first place, the number of modes in the distribution helps determine whether the political system will be two-party or multiparty in character. This in turn determines whether party ideologies will be similar and ambiguous or different and definite; hence it influences the difficulties voters face in behaving rationally. Second, whether democracy can lead to stable government depends upon whether the mass of voters is centrally conglomerated, or lumped at the extremes with low density in the center; only in the former case will democracy really work. Third, the distribution's stability determines whether new parties will constantly be replacing the old, or the old will dominate and new ones merely influence their policy.

Of course, the distribution of voters is not the only factor basic to a nation's policies. For example, some theorists argue that the use of single-member districts instead of proportional representation is the main cause of a two-party political system.¹⁷ Nevertheless,

¹⁷ We have already discussed this point in Section II of this chapter.

whether it is seen as a cause in itself or as a result of more fundamental factors, the distribution is a crucial political parameter.

What forces shape this important parameter? At the beginning of our study, we assumed that voters' tastes were fixed, which means that the voter distribution is given. Thus we dodged the question just posed, and have been evading it ever since. Even now we cannot answer, because the determinants are historic, cultural, and psychological, as well as economic; to attempt to analyze them would be to undertake a study vast beyond our scope.

All we can say is the following: (1) the distribution of voters is a crucial determinant molding a nation's political life, (2) major changes in it are among the most important political events possible, and (3) though parties will move ideologically to adjust to the distribution under some circumstances, they will also attempt to move voters toward their own locations, thus altering it.

VI. SUMMARY

We can turn Harold Hotelling's famous spatial market into a useful device for analyzing political ideologies by adding to it (1) variable distribution of population, (2) an unequivocal left-to-right ordering of parties, (3) relative ideological immobility, and (4) peaked political preferences for all voters.

This model confirms Hotelling's conclusion that the parties in a two-party system converge ideologically upon the center, and Smithies' addendum that fear of losing extremist voters keeps them from becoming identical. But we discover that such convergence depends upon a unimodal distribution of voters which has a low variance and most of its mass clustered around the mode.

If the distribution of voters along the scale remains constant in a society, its political system tends to move towards an equilibrium in which the number of parties and their ideological positions are fixed. Whether it will then have two or many parties depends upon (1) the shape of the distribution and (2) whether the electoral structure is based upon plurality or proportional representation.

No tendency toward imitation exists in a multiparty system; in

fact, parties strive to accentuate ideological "product differentiation" by maintaining purity of doctrine. This difference between the two systems helps explain why certain practices are peculiar to each.

New parties are usually intended to win elections, but they are often more important as means of influencing the policies of previously existent parties. Since old parties are ideologically immobile, they cannot adjust rapidly to changes in voter distribution, but new parties can enter wherever it is most advantageous. Influence parties may crop up in two-party systems whenever convergence has pulled one of the major parties away from the extreme, and its extremist supporters want to move it back towards them.

If we assume a party's position on the scale is a weighted average of the positions occupied by each of its policy decisions, we can account for the tendency of parties to spread their policies: they wish to appeal to many different viewpoints at once. Parties in a two-party system have a much wider spread of policies—hence a looser integration of them—than those in a multiparty system. In fact, in two-party systems there is a large area of overlapping policies near the middle of the scale, so that parties closely resemble each other.

This tendency towards similarity is reinforced by deliberate equivocation about each particular issue. Party policies may become so vague, and parties so alike, that voters find it difficult to make rational decisions. Nevertheless, fostering ambiguity is the rational course for each party in a two-party system.

A basic determinant of a nation's political development is the distribution of its voters along the political scale. Upon this factor, to a great extent, depend whether the nation will have two or many major parties, whether democracy will lead to stable or unstable government, and whether new parties will continually replace old or play only a minor role.