Political Parties and the Maintenance of Liberal Democracy, by Kelly Patterson

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Political Parties and the Maintenance of Liberal Democracy

Review by Anna Nibley


Is democracy failing in the United States? Can its failures be blamed on the decline of political parties? Has there actually occurred a decline in political parties in the United States? Kelly Patterson, in his book, Political Parties and the Maintenance of Liberal Democracy, sets out to disprove the notion that the decline in political parties is the reason for the “failure” of democracy in the United States.

Patterson asserts that displeasure with democratic institutions is not necessarily bad and is in fact a necessary component of workable democracy. Patterson looks at the connections between democracy and political parties to prove the problem with democracy lies not in its institutions but in the fact that no one really knows what workable democracy is. In the end, Patterson rejects the decline-in-party thesis and proves democracy is alive and well and only seems ill because it has been misdefined.

In order to examine political parties and their relationship to democratic governance, Patterson looks at both the broad party system and the theory of democracy that sustains it. Patterson states that any judgment about democracy’s performance is largely a function of the way in which democracy is defined. Essentially, Patterson claims that our estimations about performance of democracy are largely shaped by our definition of democracy and that political parties have a special relationship, for good or ill, with democracy because they perform a number of visible and latent functions of democracy. He claims further that the performance of political parties cannot be evaluated until a workable definition of democracy is established.

Through the course of the book, Patterson chooses a definition of democracy that points toward the best area in which to study the intersection of democratic theory and political parties. Patterson looks to Giovanni Sartori’s ideas to fashion a definition of democracy. Patterson’s definition of democracy states that “power is limited by the ever-present possibility of converting minorities into majorities, which is exclusive to the electoral sphere” (xix). This area of study emphasizes decisions made in the electoral sphere and the competition that can reverse those decisions in upcoming elections.

To examine the connections between parties and governance, Patterson compares the policy positions of presidential candidates during the elections of 1952 through 1992 to the positions outlined in party platforms and to those of party leaders in Congress. To accomplish this task, Patterson divides the comparisons into the two different party eras represented in the eleven elections. The elections of 1952 to 1968 are from the period some have labeled the brokered convention era. The elections from 1972 to the present represent the system of popular appeal because of various reforms that have increased the public participation.

Patterson begins his book with a description of the Republican “revolution” of 1994. He cites this revolution as evidence of a general dissatisfaction with democracy. Patterson does not attempt to find a panacea for the discontentment with democracy. He does not try to twist the definition of democracy so that it could be viewed in a better light; instead, Patterson proves, through quantitative means, that this dissatisfaction is actually evidence of the vitality of American democracy. By showing this, Patterson accomplishes his goal of proving that democracy is not in decline. Patterson draws in the major theories of today and yesterday to create a workable definition of democracy. His method is thorough and sound and his sources are carefully documented.

Patterson’s dialogue is interesting and readable. His theory, method, and evidence shed light on the muddy discussion of political parties and the degree to which their operation helps to sustain American democracy. Patterson’s study is relevant today because it lends clarity to the question of democracy and the importance of political parties. Without a
clear definition of democracy and a coherent discussion of its relationship to political parties, we end up with a slew of unproductive efforts to reform what may not need to be reformed.