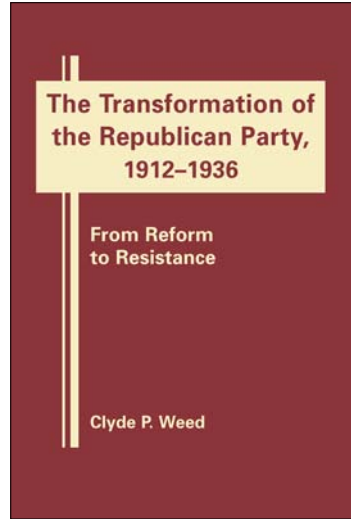


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# The Transformation of the Republican Party, 1912–1936: From Reform to Resistance

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# Introduction: What Happened to the Republicans?

The underlying fragility of the liberal coalition in American politics has been apparent for some time. For example, if one examines the balance between the parties over the entire twentieth century, the Republican Party emerges as the dominant party at the presidential level. If one moves beyond the party battles, center-right coalitions have been even more important if not dominant in most periods of national governance since 1896. Analysis shows that structural barriers, limited state capacity, congressional-presidential deadlock, and the persistence of anti-statist ideologies all point to the continual importance of such forces.

Despite the significance of such factors to twentieth-century political history, they have received nothing like the scrutiny their sustained presence should warrant. Much academic attention has remained focused on the Progressive or New Deal periods. The opposition in such periods often serves as little more than a backdrop that reemerges only after the highwater mark of reform efforts has waned.

The academic study of the Republican Party offers striking confirmation of this disinterest, for the serious studies of the twentieth-century Republican Party outside of the Progressive era can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Since 1920, for example, the party has been consistently viewed as “The Nemesis of Reform,” an assessment it has had difficulty shedding. This was not always the case. The party entered the 1920s as heir to a vigorous reform tradition that underscored its earlier role as the modernizing national party. By 1936, however, this role was in complete eclipse and the party could no longer lay claim to the mantle of the “party of ideas” and the political embodiment of the national destiny. Even today the academic view of the Republican Party remains strikingly imbued with images conjured up during the campaign of 1936.

Despite this decline in the Republican Party’s academic reputation, this book will maintain that its influence on twentieth-century state

development has been far more critical than once recognized. Explaining why this is so and what the party's resultant impact on national governance has been are the aims of this book. Our consideration of the GOP will prove surprisingly rich, comprising many sources and impulses, for its factional conflicts are misunderstood and frequently important. This book, therefore, attempts a reconsideration of the party's collective role in twentieth-century politics with an emphasis on the period from 1920 through 1940. However, the study of this one period will underscore the need for renewed reconsideration of the party in a number of ways if we are to understand contemporary national politics. The understanding of Republican politics remains very important and more complex than is usually recognized. During the 1930s, for example, the Republicans played a far more important role than well-established interpretations have recognized. These are essential and consequential matters that require amendments to our previous view of twentieth-century politics.

The ideological and interest-group structure of the GOP has undergone profound transformation in the twentieth century, with largely unappreciated but important consequences. How many close observers of the American party system are aware, for example, that the period from 1920 to 1940 saw the GOP's regional and ideological poles virtually reverse positions? In 1920 the party's industrial eastern core comprised the party's conservative "old guard" wing reflecting the legacy of the "system of 1896." The party's western wing was identified with insurgency, the "sons of the wild jackass" in the words of one eastern spokesman. By 1940 the liberal, internationalist Willkie–Dewey wing ascendant in the eastern United States was confronted by the more conservative Taft stalwarts in the West. This transformation, but one of many underchronicled in previous studies, has had vital, under-considered effects on the modern American party system.

This is not a comprehensive historical narrative. While it draws on the work of historians, it will leave many events unchronicled. The study is primarily focused on the GOP's role in domestic politics. With the exception of issues such as the tariff and foreign trade, most questions of international politics are beyond the scope of this book. The effort instead is to use historical material primarily to identify changing patterns of Republican response.

It is also hoped that this work will lead to a renewed discussion of vocabulary, approaches, and periodization in American history. The New Deal effected massive changes not only in national governance but in vocabulary as well. Franklin Roosevelt transformed the GOP of the 1920s and 1930s into an effective foil to his programs, and these

patterns of analysis have proven enduring. New approaches are needed, for example, to understand the period of Republican ascendancy in the 1920s. Looking back at that period from the new century reveals the relevant policymaking efforts of that period as religious or morally based welfare efforts, individual provision for retirement, and privatized “associational” efforts in such areas as medical care and education, which are all again part of our national life. The Republican voluntary efforts of the 1920s are no longer as remote from our experience as they once were.

A rich and varied literature has sprung up around the New Deal and the degree to which social democratic transformations of the American system were stillborn during the 1930s. Some of these works stress the ideas of “opportunities lost” while others emphasize the immutable barriers to certain kinds of change that existed during the period.<sup>1</sup> All interpretations would agree, however, that the period after the 1936 election did not produce the dramatic consolidation of liberal power that the election results of that year first suggested. One of the key events leading to the eclipse of the New Deal was the emergence of the modern, conservative congressional coalition composed primarily of newly reconstituted Republicans elected in the off-year elections of 1938. Since this conservative coalition became increasingly effective by the early 1940s, it is fair to ask how it developed so rapidly in the wake of the 1936 election. Thus, although the period was hardly a success from the Republican point of view, the short-term survival and ultimate long-term recovery of the party suggest how important it is to look beneath the immediate electoral results of the period from 1930 through 1936. Once again, this period is vastly underchronicled from the Republican standpoint. While the period following creation of the *National Review* in 1955 and the Goldwater movement have now received some careful consideration, the scholarly treatment of Republican politics in the period from the 1920s to the 1940s remains almost a forgotten period in political history despite the party’s impact on events. As David Kennedy and others have recognized, explanations that centered on the “age of reform” have proved to be tantalizingly incomplete in the light of later experience.<sup>2</sup>

This book explores the party’s central, underconsidered role in American political life in the middle of the “American Century.” It reveals the need for renewed attention to political parties and party elites even in the light of recent work on state structures, mass voting behavior, and rational-choice theory.

Although there is now considerable research on political parties and the voter, there is far less written on party leaders, their strategies and

beliefs, and the ways in which their designs can frame choices in the political system. As the Republican leaders struggled with the tension between national economic planning and economic liberty, they began to formulate platforms and positions that had continuity with pre-Depression beliefs that would be restored as the twentieth century moved on.

How and why this came about in the dark days of the early 1930s is the focus of this book. This study provides a new perspective on the Republican Party, party elites, and American political culture that will enable us to better understand twentieth-century politics and the persistence of non-New Deal culture to this day.

A reconsideration of the world of 1935 as it appeared to the Republicans moves beyond the intellectual typologies established during the 1936 presidential campaign. Such thinkers as James Beck, Walter Lippmann, and Elihu Root, to name a few, offered critical and effective opposition to Administration proposals.

In 1934 the Republicans had mounted an ineffective, divided congressional campaign that had succeeded in losing yet more congressional seats in defiance of “out” party tradition. That year the nation had seemed on the verge of a kind of “directed” state with clear corporatist overtones. By 1935, however, the Republicans would move confidently to battle again, their ranks seemingly renewed by the return of old allies and new converts. A series of dialogues within and among party elites occurred that would have profound consequences for the Republicans and the possibility of a directed economy. The stillborn Republican revival of 1935–1936 so unappreciated and misunderstood in later years was now under way.

This period’s importance to the evolution of the American political system or the development of modern political economy is still widely misunderstood. The Republican contribution to national dialogue during the period was far more important than the final results of the 1936 election would suggest. One searches in vain through the realignment, state development, or earlier consensus literature for a careful explanation as to why strong opposition to the New Deal developed by the 1935–1936 period. Why were recovery efforts not seen as an extension of the Hoover associational efforts of 1929–1932? What was all the fuss about in conservative circles after 1934?

The behavioral revolution in the social sciences properly assigned enormous value to the collection of empirical data. The availability of electoral records extending well back into the nineteenth century became an important element of this. The study of mass electoral behavior

became the predominant focus of most historically based electoral studies as data sets and methodology became more sophisticated.

As a result, efforts to consider the linkages between party elites and mass electoral response have been very limited. Even a glance at the catalogues of leading political science graduate schools confirms the extent to which most political science theorizing on parties is ever intertwined with the consideration of electoral statistics. To analyze the role of party elites, electoral strategies, or contemporary perceptions of political conditions one must employ a series of research techniques more familiar to historians than political scientists. Happily, the boundaries between disciplinary perspectives and research techniques have become less rigid in recent years, and this study undertakes the consideration of historical political conditions as viewed at the time.

John Geering has pointed out the remarkable consistency in Republican electoral appeals from the 1860s through the 1920s. The notions of the moral value of labor and social harmony, neo-mercantilism, and support for the national government at the expense of sectional challenges were enduring elements of the Republican creed. As we shall see, the party had entered the 1930s seeing themselves as the true “national party,” the vehicle of a vital, forward-looking tradition that had served the unifying nationalist impulse in American politics since the late 1850s. Such a viewpoint stresses the imperative importance of enlightened opinion and a reverence for law and other institutions at the expense of an unreliable, often fickle mass opinion. Legislatures, courts, bureaucracies, and party leadership were the proper mechanism for a considered popular will. In the end, institutions should serve as deliberative bodies, not simply conduits of public opinion.

Hence, if one examines Republican electoral appeals from Lincoln through Coolidge, there is an enormous continuity of appeals along the line suggested by Gerring.<sup>3</sup> It is striking how little alteration there was, for example, in Republican electoral appeals from the 1860s through the 1910s; thus the 1896 electoral realignment, such a staple of political science analysis, really had little transformative effect on Republican electoral appeals. To understand the electoral struggles of the 1930s, therefore, we must look to the party leaders and their belief systems.

In order to help the reader appreciate the position Republicans found themselves in during the 1930s, the book begins with a descriptive account of the party from the Civil War through World War I.

The narrative is divided in the following fashion. Chapter 1 considers the Republican Party’s place in American thought prior to the redefinitions of the 1930s. Chapter 2 considers the difficult role of the Republican “national party” as it opposed the Wilson Administration in

World War I. Chapter 3 reconsiders the Republican presidents of the 1920s and the image of the era itself. The fourth chapter concerns the internal transformation of the Republicans themselves during the 1920s that would have important consequences throughout the Hoover period and thereafter. Chapter 5 considers the eclipse of the Republican Party in the early 1930s and the loss of its role as the national party. Chapter 6 focuses on the forgotten Republican presidential campaign of 1932 and the anticipated Republican resurgence that never came. Chapter 7 examines early efforts at party restoration, which proved no less difficult than such efforts undertaken by the Democrats in the 1980s. The party's aborted first efforts to roll back the New Deal in 1934 are also considered. Chapter 8 examines the stillborn Republican revival of 1935–1936, one of the most neglected yet important developments in American twentieth-century political life. Chapter 9 reconstructs the belief patterns and ideological positions of Republican thinkers in the 1930s to understand finally why so much opposition to FDR developed during the period. Chapters 10 and 11 point to a reconsideration of the GOP's experiences in the 1930s and why all of this remains important today. The book aims to show that the persistence of non-New Deal culture, largely unappreciated and ignored in academic settings, deserves more attention than it has hitherto received.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See “The Two World Wars in American Liberalism” and “The Late New Deal and the Idea of the State,” both in Alan Brinkley's *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37–62, 79–93. See also his “The New Deal and the Idea of the State” in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 85–121. See Barry D. Karl, *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) for a brisk discussion of barriers to the extension of national planning in the general political culture. See also David Plotke's *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77–91, for a treatment that assesses the New Deal's lasting strength in terms of organizational and institutional structures developed within the state after 1935.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Kennedy, “The Changing Image of the New Deal,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (Jan. 1985): 90–94.

<sup>3</sup> John Gerring, “Party Ideology in America: The National Republican Chapter, 1828–1924,” *Studies in American Political Development* 11/ 1 (Spring 1997): 44–108.