


AMERICAN POLITICS

The Hollow Parties: The Many Pasts and Disordered Present of American Party Politics. By Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024. 448p. \$35.00 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592724002159

— John McGowan , University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill
jpm@email.unc.edu

Democracy, Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld declare, is “best served by being largely organized and enacted” by strong, well-functioning political parties (22). Neither the present-day Democratic or Republican parties are up to the task. Albeit in different ways, each party has been “hollowed” out — and American democracy is imperiled by that development.

Schlozman and Rosenfeld aspire to do many things: offer a description of well-functioning political parties; explain the connection between parties and democracy; trace the history of political party formation over the entire course of American history; and diagnose the current failures of the two American parties. Along the way we get six “strands” of party activity that “recur and endure over time” (13); eight “facets” that all parties must address; the invocation of the Tocquevillian distinction between “great” and “small” parties; and attention to the asymmetry between the left and the right in their reverence for democracy.

If that all seems like too much, it is. A dizzying, disorienting read, *The Hollow Parties* is chock full of interesting tidbits and arresting insights. But they all whirl by so quickly that it is hard to take anything in. No generalized argument or specific historical incident is ever explored in depth. Everything gets two or three pages— and then it is on to the next thing.

Which is a pity because Schlozman and Rosenfeld do have an important story to tell. Politics, after all, are complex and their resistance to mono-causal explanations or an essentialist definition of a “party” is laudable. But I suspect the way to render complexity is by embarking on a deep dive into two or three representative examples, not through their more scattershot approach.

Enough complaining. What can be gleaned from the massive amount of theorizing, opining, and informing that Schlozman and Rosenfeld do offer? For starters, their understanding of a “party” is compelling. They “follow E. E. Schattschneider,” whom they quote, in arguing that “A political party is an organized attempt to get control of government” (11). The key term here is “organized.” Parties are the mediators between citizens and government; they offer citizens access to power, and they set the agenda for what power once gained will be used to do. “[V]igorous and civically rooted parties link the governed with their government... They bring blocs of voters

together under a common banner, negotiating priorities among competing interests to construct agendas,” they note (3). Parties develop policies so that they can actually govern when they do win power — and they take stands to make their commitments legible.

Most importantly for Schlozman and Rosenfeld, parties provide a field of activity that gives citizens a political role to play and develops associational bonds. Providing “lessons in the unending give-and-take of political engagement, they give legitimacy to democratic rule” (3). Today’s hollowed out parties, however, have dwindled into service operations: they provide a “brand” for candidates and some ancillary support to those candidates’ campaigns. They are not very active outside of election seasons.

Crucially, one traditional source of parties’ power—the ability to raise money to fund their organizing work—has been undercut by political financing laws that limit contributions to political parties while undoing contribution limits to non-party PACs (and the like), with the addition of tax benefits to non-party organizations that can register as non-profits. Political advocacy has been outsourced away from the parties, even as today’s media environment enables (and encourages) politicians to operate as independent agents. Schlozman and Rosenfeld look back nostalgically to a time when candidates were subordinate to party, not the other way around.

In a similar vein, they wish parties could still dominate the nomination process, vetting candidates and reining in extremists. “We believe that party officials should control nomination of candidates, provided that access to participation in party work is permeable and nondiscriminatory... [W]e oppose calls to ‘democratize’ presidential nomination still further and endorse closed primaries, caucus-convention systems with opportunities for deliberation, institutions like superdelegates ... and rejuvenation of national conventions as deciders of platforms and priorities” (266). In short, they want to see more of what sometimes get called “retail politics,” where “face-to-face interactions” replace the messaging that comes through the media—and renders citizens passive receptors of political messages instead of active agents in shaping those messages.

More dubiously, Schlozman and Rosenfeld believe parties function as bulwarks against extremism. “They render politics into ordered conflict, playing by the electoral rules of the game and gatekeeping against forces that might undermine such shared commitments” (3). The problem, of course, as they eventually acknowledge, is that the current-day Republican Party has prospered by giving extremists their head. One of America’s major parties is no longer committed to “playing by the rules of the game.” Only the electoral defeat of the Republican Party, they conclude, will force a recalibration that would bring the party to “accept the rules of the game, shun all who

advocate political violence, and treat their opponents as legitimate political adversaries” (275). This statement indicates that the ills of American democracy are not something robust, non-hollow political parties could overcome on their own. But to acknowledge that fact is not to deny that the parties are, as the authors claim, hollowed out—and that this hollowing, with its attendant shrinkage of the space in civil society for collective action, undermines the democratic project.

Never quite articulated, but lurking in the shadows of their analysis of the Democratic Party’s “listlessness” since the end of the New Deal Order and the ascent of Reagan, is Shlozman and Rosenfeld’s desire for a “great” (not “small”) party of the center-left. A “great” party has a “capacious party project” (275), an ambitious and transformative vision of where it wants society to go, and that vision unifies its more specific policy initiatives and inspires citizens. In their view, only the Free Soil Party and then the Radical Republicans of the Civil War era were “great” in the requisite sense—and only for a brief time, arguably over by 1868 and definitely over by 1877. Perhaps surprisingly, they think the New Deal

Democratic Party was “small,” in that it was too focused on different experimental expedients that didn’t really cohere and much too driven by a top-down cult of expertise.

I think that reading undersells both the movement toward social democracy effected by the New Deal party and the deep emotional ties between FDR and those communities the Depression had savaged. Here, however, we touch another of the multiple strands in Schlozman and Rosenfeld’s argument. They want to elevate the party over the person, seeing in “personalism” and the ever-increasing focus on presidential politics another symptom of the parties’ growing disengagement with citizens where they live. When the party simply enables “the linked pathologies of rule by donors and demagogues,” instead of “a civic force rooted in local communities” (272), the kind of associational, participatory democracy they consider healthy is unavailable.

Most of us can agree that U.S. democracy is ill. Schlozman and Rosenfeld give us plenty to think about as we try to understand the disease and imagine remedies. I only wish their book was easier to process.