**Book Prospectus**

***First to the Party:***

***The Group Origins of Party Transformation***

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**Overview**

The United States has scores of potential issues but only two major political parties. How they respond to competing demands for their attention is therefore a central problem in

the study of American democracy. The main argument of this book is that potential issues become actual issues when organized groups invade party nomination processes to select candidates committed to their issues and interests. Where the nominees go, the parties

also go. This argument is applied to the two most important party transformations of the

20thcentury ­­ the Democratic Party’s embrace of civil rights in the 1940s and 50s, and the Republican Party’s embrace of cultural conservatism in the 1980s. In the first case, civil rights and labor activists sent delegates to their party’s national nominating conventions with the purpose of forcing presidential nominees to stand against Jim Crow laws. In the second, religious activists entered state­level presidential primaries to mobilize support for culturally conservative candidates. The basic mechanism of controlling party agendas was the same: control nominations in order to control what parties stand for. Only the means of making nominations, controlling conventions or controlling primaries, differed across the two cases. The key idea is, as E. E. Schattschneider (1942) put it, “He who makes nominations owns the party.”

This argument challenges several standard notions of how democracy works. In the

classic work of Joseph Schumpeter (1942), parties take positions on issues in order to win elections, thereby giving voice and agency to what majorities want. In contrast, I argue that parties mainly represent the groups that control their nominations. Representing

group interests is not the same as representing popular majorities. If civil rights groups and cultural conservatives had needed to wait until popular majorities supported their demands, their path to representation would have been longer and more difficult than it was. Voters are far more important for deciding between party agendas more than for determining the agendas, as other scholars have recently argued (Bawn et al. 2012).

At the same time, my research traces the role of groups in parties further back than other group­centered theories of parties. Cohen et al. (2008) admit they examine the activist origins of party change but not where "new activist agendas came from." I argue that groups construct these new agendas on their own with allies. Groups need help from other groups to transform a party, and with them, stitch together the issues that come to form a party agenda in order to defeat in­party opponents. To ask why parties take the positions, one must ask which positions groups in the coalition introduce, emphasize, or drop to work with allies. Many factors determine whether a coalition is viable, including issue overlap, the approval of their own members and staff, and the ability to reach new audiences. Whether they succeed in transforming parties depends largely on choosing the right allies and adjusting accordingly to meet their allies' needs.

This study is based on an unusually broad mix of evidence. Altogether, I sifted through tens of thousands of documents from a dozen different archives in ten states. For the

Republican Party's transformation on cultural issues, I supplemented archival research with interviews with more than 50 individuals from 30 different organizations. The result is a deeper and more credible account of the dynamics of party change than could be obtained by other means.

In moments of profound change, the deepest political forces often come to light. With its fine­grained analysis of two cases of major party change, *First to the Party* seeks to leverage this observation into a clearer understanding of how groups change parties and why groups pursue the agendas they do.

**Chapter Overview**

Chapter One outlines the claims of the book and situates it in political science literature on political parties. The book is based on the idea that groups are, in the common phrase, the life of the parties – not only the building blocks of party coalitions, but their most important moving parts. When a group sets out to change a party against other factions, it needs to find allies committed to party change. Since one group is seldom powerful enough to change a party on its own, it needs to adapt to the needs of its allies. Groups choose allies not only on the basis of ideology, but organizational considerations like membership and funding. Coalitions of such groups mobilize their members so that politicians need to win their support in nominations before they can compete in general elections. They enjoy several advantages over dispersed voters, utilizing both passionate followers and captive audiences. Voters are then left to choose between two parties they had little say in constructing.

The first half of the book delves into the civil rights transformation of the Democratic Party. African Americans, long neglected by both parties, became part of a coalition that forced the Democratic Party to favor civil rights. Chapter Two documents the transformation of the prestigious NAACP into a supporter of labor unions and liberal causes more broadly. Internal changes allowed the NAACP to accommodate allies who could bring about the party change it wanted. It rejected an alliance with labor unions in the 1930s and reversed this strategy when its organizational needs changed in the 1940s. Chapter Three explains the CIO's interest in working with the NAACP to promote civil rights. The politically ambitious CIO thought black voters could help defeat an opposing party faction – conservative southern Democrats. Both organizations developed constructive ways of improving relations with each other to effect a formidable alliance. Chapter Four shows that this alliance bore fruit at the 1948 Democratic Convention, which marked the transformation of racial equality from party taboo to a litmus test. The CIO and its allies passed a civil rights plank at the 1948 Democratic convention against the wishes of most party leaders. As I demonstrate in Chapter Five, Democratic Party nominees did not retreat from the positions taken in 1948. Reflecting the new party

equilibrium, serious presidential contenders distanced themselves from whatever ties they had to the southern wing of the party. Although Adlai Stevenson is often viewed as a conciliator, he was more liberal on civil rights than Truman. Future candidates improved upon the 1948 nomination

A new set of cultural issues confronted parties by the 1970s, including abortion, school prayer, and gay rights. They were slow to grab the attention of the religious conservatives now thought to be a natural constituency for these issues. As Chapter Six describes, conservative religious sects were neither united nor uniformly culturally conservative. Religious leaders and denominations, like civil rights and labor, were groups that

operated according to their own institutional incentives that militated against cooperation. Chapter Seven explains how these sects underwent a transformation themselves before they could bring a cultural conservative transformation in the Republican Party. Conservative critics of the Republican Party formed institutional outlets for their new grievances and helped socialize them into a set of coalition norms. The primary election system that the Christian Right sought to influence in the late 1970s was different than

the convention system faced by unions and civil rights groups in the 1940s. Chapter Eight describes the Christian Right’s first attempts to infiltrate it. In this system, Republican politicians were about as willing to prioritize cultural conservatism in the 1970s as Democrats were willing to prioritize civil rights in the 1940s. Even President Reagan,

who viewed the Christian Right as an ally, straddled its demands with their opponents in the party and the general public. Chapter Nine explains the origins and tactics of a second wave of conservative Christians, which focused on capturing state parties. Since momentum in early states became important for party nominations, activists in Iowa and South Carolina provided a powerful asset to culturally conservative candidates. Chapter Ten shows that following Reagan’s presidency, all viable candidates for the Republican presidential nomination presented themselves as allies of the Christian Right and needed to take them seriously in office.

Chapter Eleven looks beyond the two major transformations of the book to investigate party change in other situations. First, it explores the ill­fated attempts of nineteenth century Populists to change both the two­party system and then the Democratic Party. The Populist revolt was perhaps the most notable failed transformation in the country's history. Moreover, it casts doubt on the inevitability of a CIO­NAACP alliance by showing that race can trump class interests in politics. Since the absence of effective coalition formation led to its failure, it strengthens the case for my claims that coalition formation is the first step of party change. The penultimate chapter also examines the addition of gay rights to the Democratic agenda as an example of contemporary party change, using fresh primary sources.

Chapter Twelve concludes the book, summarizing the successful transformations and the case for treating them as parallel. As such, we can draw the same conclusion in spite of some interesting differences. While most of the book considers how parties work, the conclusion evaluates the role of parties in a democracy. Parties are often treated as bulwarks of democracy, but the process of party transformation should temper our judgments. Well­organized groups can change parties independently of ideology or politicians, who presumably would cater to voters if unimpeded by groups. Groups continued to do so even after the passage of reforms designed to broaden voter participation in party nominations.