
THEME

NOTE

When the Democratic party succumbed to Ronald Reagan's first budget, one popular view held that the Democrats' only hope was for the President's program to fail on its own merits—after the “mandate” Reagan allegedly received from the voters, no other form of opposition was possible. But the Democrats went beyond passive resistance to active collaboration, in some cases trying to outdo the President on generous corporate tax breaks and increases for defense. This year, with unemployment and small-business closings on the rise and an enormous budget deficit looming, Congressional Democrats have appeared to be in a more feisty mood, demanding concessions on tax cuts and Social Security cost-of-living adjustments, and forcing the budget-producing process into Congressional committees. Media savants blamed the absence of an immediate compromise on partisanship, as if both parties had established resolute positions from which they would not budge—the President clinging to his three-year tax cuts for the rich and increases in defense spending; the Democrats standing on their New Deal and Great Society heritage.

The reality is a good deal less noble. While the President's men do indeed seem to know what they want without necessarily knowing how to get it—as David Stockman's almost-forgotten *Atlantic* confessions made clear—the Democrats have balked only at Reagan's brazenness. Clearly trying to avoid an open conflict, Congressional Democrats met, in secret, with their Republican counterparts and White House representatives in an effort to reach an agreement. Finally it came down to a meeting with Reagan himself, where, looking at the proposed alternative figures for budget cuts, the President “swallowed hard and volunteered to split the difference between our 60 and their 35 and settle for 48,” billion dollars, that is. With a Congressional election just six months away, the Democratic stalwarts, fearful of the impact of a \$140 billion deficit on incumbency, rejected Reagan's glib offer. Having given away the store last year, the Democrats now had only smaller cuts and higher taxes to offer as a substitute for a coherent program of any substantive kind, or as an alternative to Reagan's get-rich-quick scheme. Without clear signals from opinion polls telling them what to do, the Democrats can only hope to return to their former Congressional strength the same way they lost it: by a negative vote in reaction to the blunders of the current administration.

The inability of the Democrats to formulate an alternative from within their own party points to a new fact of American political life. Neither party is any

longer a party with a genuine constituency: for constituents they have substituted mailing lists; for local party organizations, national committees. The conventional wisdom claims that political parties are no longer where the action is, that if you want to accomplish anything you turn to the mechanisms of single-issue groups—political action committees (PACs) and direct-mail fundraising. For once, the conventional wisdom is correct. These groups have become the arbiters of political fashion, and Republicans and Democrats alike wait to hear from them before discovering what the issues are and which position to take on them. The nuclear freeze movement is the most recent example of the phenomenon. Begun as a grass-roots movement without benefit of national media coverage, the campaign has now emerged as a single-issue item, complete with direct-mail solicitations and its own PAC. Members of both parties are scrambling to catch up, hopeful that the nuclear freeze will be this year's answer to the Moral Majority. Meanwhile, the participation of ordinary people meeting together in their localities to discuss matters of national defense and the power structures that underlie them has given way to requests for money so someone else can lobby in Washington, D.C., for your personal, single-issue concern for survival.

Political parties can be institutions that shape and transmit popular sentiments and concerns, turning everyday matters into a vision and a program for the common good. When parties so constituted meet in political conflict, they present alternative visions and programs in an effort to persuade others of their value. But political parties can also be nothing more than vehicles for partial interests whose concern is to exclude alternatives and close off popular involvement. When that is the case, parties become barriers to democracy rather than institutional requirements of it. If the parties are unable to become political institutions in the fullest sense, then they will be incapable of reversing the nation's slide into computerized demagoguery and democrats will have to try to get on without them.

Walter Dean Burnham's lead article in this issue's symposium shows that the 1980 national election was "a landslide vote of no confidence in an incumbent administration" rather than evidence of an ideological shift to the right. But the decomposition of the Democratic party makes such a shift possible, and Burnham suggests that an alternative to the Democratic party programs of the past must be found if disaster is to be avoided in the future. The comments by William E. Connolly, Christopher Lasch, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, and Andrew J. Polsky that follow are meant to initiate a discussion of the critical issues Burnham has raised and to which we shall return in future issues.

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