

Introduction

Party in History and Politics

The influence of races in our early ages, of the church in our middle, and of parties in our modern history, are three great moving and modifying powers, that must be pursued and analysed with an untiring, profound, and unimpassioned spirit, before a guiding ray can be secured.

Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil; or the Two Nations* (1845)

What is called union in a body politic is a very equivocal thing. The true kind is a union of harmony, whereby all parts [*les parties*], however opposed they may appear, cooperate for the general good of society – as dissonances in music cooperate in producing overall concord.

Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734)

While there are no timeless arguments in the history of political thought, there may indeed be perennial questions. If anything is recurrent throughout Western thought, it is likely to be the abhorrence of conflict and the quest for stability and peace. Political societies require a degree of internal peace to function. Since they imply division, political parties thus pose a problem for political theory. Extreme partisan divisions threaten to undermine trust among citizens, tear societies apart and constitutions asunder, and degenerate into violent strife and even civil war. Yet parties can also help to pacify and domesticate conflict. Party is an instrument for organising competition and adjudicating between interests and opinions. Any politics worthy of the name entails competition between ‘ins’ and ‘outs’, involving a mixture of interest and principle. Politics is not *just* about competition, but this is a crucial aspect of any politics that would be recognisable to us in the twenty-first-century Western world, as in many other parts of the world. In modern large-scale societies, effective political action requires numbers and organisation. Moreover, parties and partisanship are natural concomitants of modern understandings of liberty: in

liberal regimes we have the right to form opinions and associate with others of similar views. Securing political stability has been a concern for political thinkers since at least Thucydides, but the role played by parties in channelling or augmenting division is a more recent concern – one on which this book is focused.

First and foremost, this book is intended as a contribution to the still limited literature on the notion of party in the history of political thought, with a focus on the eighteenth century, when parliamentary parties emerged as stable features of politics.¹ In the eighteenth century, the question of whether party was beneficial or pernicious to political life dominated political discourse. Second, this book engages with political history, a field in which studies of party once dominated, but where they have since fallen out of fashion together with parliamentary history more broadly. We will additionally need cultural and social histories of party,² but this book concentrates on politics and political thought. Few attempts are now likely to be made to write about politics in the eighteenth century without reference to party, as Lewis Namier prescribed but did not practice.³ However, a question as complex as that of party in this period needs to be revisited because there is no consensus about its importance or even what it meant.

While we take party for granted – for us politics simply is *party* politics – party was not taken for granted by the men and women of the eighteenth

¹ Ihalainen, *The Discourse on Political Pluralism in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Helsinki, 1999); Ball, 'Party', in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989), 155–76; Klaus von Beyme, 'Partei, Faktion', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (7 vols., Stuttgart, 1972–92), IV (1978), 689–90; Gunn, 'Introduction', in *Factions No More* (London, 1971); Gunn, 'Party before Burke', *Government and Opposition*, 3 (1968), 223–42; Harvey Mansfield, *Statesmanship and Party Government* (Chicago, 1965); Robbins, 'Discordant Parties', *Political Science Quarterly*, 73 (1958), 505–29; Thomson, *The Conception of Party in England, in the Period 1740 to 1783* (D. Phil. thesis, Cambridge, 1938). There are more recent works in political theory; see Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels* (Princeton, 2008); Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); White and Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship* (Oxford, 2016).

² For such contributions, see esp. Wilson, *The Sense of the People* (Cambridge, 1995); Rogers, *Whigs and Cities* (Oxford, 1989); De Krey, *A Fractured Society* (Oxford, 1985); Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976).

³ Namier, *The Structure of Politics and the Accession of George III* (2 vols., London, 1929), I, vii. See also Namier, 'Monarchy and the Party System', *Personalities and Powers* (London, 1955), 13–38. The vocabulary of Tory and Whig is not absent from his writings, however; importantly, see Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930), 206–33, which *inter alia* includes the statement: 'The division between Whigs and Tories existed in 1761, as before, and as it still exists in the body politic of England; it was latent in temperament and outlook, in social types, in old connexions and traditions' (207). This statement is quickly qualified by the observation that personal factionalism had increasingly replaced party as the relevant division in politics. This is discussed at length in Chapters 8–11.

century. This meant that political writers devoted many pages to trying to comprehend this ‘modern’ aspect of politics. This book focuses on the case study of eighteenth-century Britain, a composite monarchy and imperial state which came into being after the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707. It will thus contribute to the field of British history, roughly as defined by J.G.A. Pocock.⁴ This approach acknowledges that there is a political system (and community of sorts) known as Britain to be studied – existing institutionally and in the imagination – not in isolation from European and world history, but as a unit suitable for independent historical study nevertheless. It also recognises the disproportionate weight of the English component in this composite monarchy and imperial state. The eighteenth century is generally held to be a crucial period for the birth of modern politics. This is largely – if to an exaggerated degree – regarded as the product of the transatlantic revolutions at the end of the century rather than Britain’s parliamentary system. For histories of party, however, the British case study has always and rightly been central. For good or ill, Britain was the parliamentary system par excellence for most of the eighteenth century, and was known as such by foreign commentators such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Jean-Louis de Lolme, and Anders Nordenfraz. Only excessive fear of British exceptionalism and Whig history could lead to the absurdity of denying or depreciating this obvious fact.⁵

My own home country, Sweden, had a different and more short-lived experience of parliamentary sovereignty and party politics in the eighteenth century during its ‘Age of Liberty’ (1718–72). This experiment is likely to have been inspired by the Anglo-British example to an extent that Swedish historiography has yet to appreciate. As the example of Sweden illustrates, the history of party in Britain is not only of concern to the British but to everyone interested in modern, parliamentary politics. Variants of the Westminster model and other representative assembly-based systems, and along with them party politics, have spread around the world, because of empire – British, French, and American, formal as well as informal – and imitation.

From a historical perspective, the main reason to study eighteenth-century attitudes towards party is because the topic was considered by political writers and actors at the time to be profoundly important. Political life in the period simply cannot be understood without reference

⁴ Pocock, *Discovery of Islands* (Cambridge, 2005).

⁵ For the importance of the British political system in French liberal political thought, see Selinger, *Parliamentarism* (Cambridge, 2019).

to party, at least not in a way that eighteenth-century men and women would have recognised. An additional reason for undertaking a study of this kind is that the question of party is still relevant. Party conflict and partisanship remain the stuff of political theory today. Parties are a fundamental part of representative governments, and they feature in any state that calls itself democratic.⁶ Despite this, political philosophers – past and present – have generally been reluctant to embrace parties, both as normatively desirable in politics and as a subject worthy of study.⁷ The eighteenth century is thus a crucial period because of the ubiquity of focus on the topic, as well as Edmund Burke's famous embrace of parties.

This book does *not* argue that there were stable Whig and Tory parties throughout the eighteenth century. Although these terms were almost continuously in use, their meanings were contested, and the Whig–Tory polarity in parliament was sometimes dwarfed by so-called Court and Country alignments, as well as factionalism within the Whig family. During the age of Whig Supremacy (c.1714–60), there were both Tory and Whig groupings in opposition, which occasionally cooperated. By around 1760, moreover, both parties had lost most traces of parliamentary unity, although the party names survived, as did party organisations in localities. Such significant changes will be considered along with important continuities. They belie any notion of a two-party *system*, which is why I prefer to speak of a party *framework*. But the basic insight is that the idea of party dominated political discourse in eighteenth-century Britain. This will lead us to reject claims that party-based politics was ‘unanticipated’ when it ‘emerged’ in the nineteenth century.⁸ Indeed, any stark contrast between the eighteenth century as a period without meaningful party politics and the nineteenth century as a time with a stable two-party system is misleading, since historians have long recognised that parties, especially in the beginning of the nineteenth century, were still ‘loosely cast confederations’ and a far cry from twentieth-century organisations.⁹ Indeed, it has been argued that the ‘modern party system’, whereby parties

⁶ Undemocratic and quasi-democratic states often involve one party in permanent government and a handful of affiliated sister parties – which is a rather different phenomenon than party competition – but is nevertheless testimony to how important the vocabulary of party has become in the modern world, and not exclusively in the West.

⁷ Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels*, introduction.

⁸ Cf. Scarrow, ‘The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Modern Political Parties’, in *Handbook of Party Politics* (London, 2006), 22.

⁹ Bentley, *Politics without Democracy* (Oxford, 1984), 26. On the problem of interpreting the middle decades of the nineteenth century as a two-party system, see Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People* (Oxford, 2006), 517–24.

are supported by central bureaucracies and mass membership, aspire to ideological homogeneity and have MPs who are expected to speak and vote as a bloc in parliament has only become dominant since the 1880s.¹⁰ Accordingly, when linking this study of the past with the present we must remember that eighteenth-century parties were different from the parties of today. In terms of leadership and organisation, they were much looser than present-day political parties, without parliamentary whips, mass membership, or official manifestos. However, even though parties have changed and developed more sophisticated organisations, the question of internal division has independent merit on a theoretical plane, as Nancy Rosenblum has argued.¹¹ For this reason we should not be too quick to dismiss the ‘aristocratic’ parties of the eighteenth century as irrelevant for modern politics, as Moisey Ostrogorsky and Max Weber did in an earlier era.¹²

For political historians, the first age of party in England and Britain – the ‘Rage of Party’ – has attracted a great deal of interest.¹³ This is the period from the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9 to the death of Queen Anne in 1714. During this period, British political culture was divided into a fairly neat two-party framework, with the Whigs and Tories alternating in holding the key positions in government.¹⁴ By contrast, for political theorists, the writings of Edmund Burke (1729/30–97) from the second half of the century have usually been the starting point. Partly as a counterweight to the current literature, this book places plenty of emphasis on the intermediate period from the Hanoverian succession in 1714 until the accession of George III before finishing with four chapters on Burke.

I was initially drawn to the subject of party via the writings of David Hume, when I observed that Hume’s essays on party from 1741 had been left comparatively neglected by scholars. To argue that Burke was the first to have had anything interesting to say about party would be to overlook the apparent fact that such a notable political analyst as Hume had earlier spent so much time and effort on the topic. My main focus is on specific thinkers, principally Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, Bolingbroke, Hume, John

¹⁰ Hawkins, *British Party Politics, 1852–86* (Basingstoke, 1998). This was a gradual process, as party organisations, both local and central, had become more sophisticated earlier in the nineteenth century; see Gash, ‘The Organisation of the Conservative Party, 1832–46’, *PH*, 2 (1983), 131–52.

¹¹ Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels*, 13.

¹² Ostrogorsky, *La Démocratie et l’organisation des partis politiques* (2 vols., Paris, 1903), I, viii–x; Weber, *Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1994), 336–8.

¹³ Following Holmes’s pathbreaking *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London, 1967). For its impact, see Jones (ed.), *Special Issue: British Politics in the Age of Holmes*, *PH*, 28 (2009), vii, 1–208.

¹⁴ For qualification see Chapter 2.

Brown, and Burke. To identify authorial intentions, I have considered the contributions of these writers in their intellectual and political contexts. As the question of party concerns how people were analysing a phenomenon they saw at work, context has been understood in expansive terms. This book is not exclusively meant as a study of how political thinkers responded to others' arguments – although it is that too – it is also about how they understood their practical politics and how they thought it had come into being. For this reason, in this book we will encounter understudied political writers such as Thomas Carte, John Perceval, and Catharine Macaulay, along with key political actors, including not only Walpole, the Foxes, and the Pitts, but also Harley, Pulteney, and Portland.

My starting point is the deliberately Whiggish question of how party, initially seen as pernicious and wholly negative, could become something tolerable and even advantageous, as viewed in the writings of Burke. Since history is about tracing both continuities and discontinuities between past and present, I agree with John Dunn that the history of political thought is best when it is Whig regarding subject matter and Tory regarding truth.¹⁵ While my question may be Whiggish, this history is not a straightforward narrative of intellectual progress. The question of party was never really settled in the eighteenth century. Arguments in favour of party competition were put forward at the start of the period and arguments against were still heard towards the end of the century. The American Founders, who inherited the British debate about party, were deeply ambivalent, as were Francophone liberals such as Germaine de Staël.¹⁶ In their own specific circumstances, James Madison and de Staël both shared many of Hume's anxieties about factionalism, as well as some of the solutions he proposed, which revolved around how political systems could accommodate rather than eradicate party division.

If we were to read only Burke, the question of party might appear settled. It would be unduly anti-Whiggish, however, to suggest that attitudes did not change during the course of the eighteenth century. On 10 February 1780, more than 600 men and women from all walks of life gathered for a meeting of a debating society, the School of Eloquence, in Soho Square, London, to discuss 'whether parties were beneficial in a free state'. After a 'curious' two-hour debate, the majority

¹⁵ Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', *Philosophy*, 43 (1968), 98.

¹⁶ Spencer, 'Hume and Madison on Faction', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (2002), 869–96; Fontana, *Germaine de Staël* (Princeton, 2016), 75.

decided that parties were indeed beneficial.¹⁷ Such an outcome would have been unlikely a hundred years earlier, when the party names of Whig and Tory emerged in England during the Exclusion Crisis (1679–81), initially as terms of abuse, and borrowed from earlier usages in Scotland and Ireland.¹⁸ From then on, discussions of party would be partisan in a strong sense. The press that developed in the wake of the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 was a party press, and it is difficult to find non-partisan political writings before Hume. During the ‘Rage of Party’ in the reign of Anne (1702–14), most printed statements about party were routinely denunciations of the other side and frequently of party as such.

With the exception of an opening contextual chapter, this book is structured chronologically, covering a short eighteenth century from roughly 1714 to 1797. This chronological approach has been chosen to keep in mind changing political circumstances and to avoid giving statements the appearance of timelessness. As all chapters will reflect, the post-revolutionary period and the reign of Anne was indeed the moment when the terms of British political debate were shaped, but discussions of party only matured subsequently. Most of the thinkers in this study put forward different visions of what I call harmonious discord. This phrase is inspired by a passage from Montesquieu, which is the epigraph at the head of this introduction and is discussed in Chapter 1. As will be shown in Chapter 2, the French Huguenot Rapin broke new ground as he tried to understand British party mechanics in a more detached and analytical fashion than domestic writers had achieved during the ‘Rage of Party’. Rapin argued that the two parties in Britain, the Whigs and Tories, represented the two pillars of the mixed constitution – parliament on the one hand and monarchy on the other – and that both parties were necessary for equilibrium between these two parts of the constitution. Both parties were likewise necessary for balance in the religious sphere, which was as important as the secular in public life at the time. One party favoured the

¹⁷ *The Letters of Sir William Jones* (2 vols., Oxford, 1970), I, 346. With the American War going badly for Britain, and the North ministry facing fierce opposition in parliament, several debates on similar topics were held in London in 1779–80, e.g., 4 February 1779, Coachmaker’s Hall: ‘Has a British King more to fear from the flattery of his courtiers, or the opposition of parties?’; 20 January 1780, Coachmakers Hall: ‘Is it not a criminal indifference to be of no party in the present alarming and divided state of the nation?’; 22 February 1780, Old Theatre, Portugal Street, Lincolns Inn Fields: ‘Which has been the more prejudicial to Great Britain, the influence of the crown or the spirit of party?’; 23 March 1780, Coachmakers Hall Society: ‘Which is the most to be dreaded in this country, the influence of the Crown, or the spirit of party?’ For these debates, see Andrew (ed.), *London Debating Societies, 1776–1799* (London, 1994).

¹⁸ Willman, ‘The Origins of “Whig” and “Tory” in English Political Language’, *HJ*, 17 (1974), 247–64.

Church of England and the other toleration for Protestant Dissenters, and the only way to achieve a sustainable medium between two extreme positions, according to Rapin, was competition and mutual checking and balancing between Tory and Whig.

Bolingbroke (Chapter 3) and Hume (Chapters 4 and 6–8) followed Rapin's example, the former no doubt for partisan purposes but in a new analytical manner and depth compared with the partisan literature of Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and others during the reign of Anne. Against the grain of the literature on the subject, I argue that Bolingbroke made the case for organised partisan opposition to Walpole under the banner of a 'Country party'. In the context of Whig supremacy, Bolingbroke had to think hard about how to justify opposition in a political landscape where party names had become entrenched, but where systematic opposition was viewed as morally and legally dubious. In Chapter 5, I consider the pamphlet war and political changes prompted by the fall of Walpole, especially John Perceval's notorious *Faction Detected* (1743), which sought to define legitimate opposition along more restricted Whiggish lines. Perceval was answered by Tories and Country party writers, armed with a host of Bolingbrokean arguments. Bolingbroke, moreover, provoked Hume's early writings on party. Hume disliked party in many ways but treated it as an inevitable component of parliamentary politics. He believed that parties – or factions, terms he used interchangeably – based on 'principles' were especially pernicious and unaccountable. The danger was that religious principles had the potential of making people fanatical and ready both to proselytise and persecute dissidents. The parties which Hume viewed as more excusable were those based on 'interests', meaning different economic interests. In Chapter 8, Hume's last and highly significant essay on party is considered together with Burke's first, unpublished essay on the subject, which was written at about the same time. In this early essay, written before Burke began his political career, he distinguished faction from party and made a non-partisan case for the benefit of party conflict in a mixed system of government.

In Chapter 9, John Brown's influential anti-party writings are considered in the context of the Seven Years' War and the accession of George III. Few writers abhorred political division as much as Brown, and in his last political text – *Thoughts on Civil Liberty, on Licentiousness, and Faction* (1765) – he sought to demonstrate that a political society could be both free and united by pointing to the ancient republic of Sparta. This text was written against the Rockingham Whig administration, with the chief publicist of which, Edmund Burke, Chapters 10–13 are concerned. As

will be seen, Burke's main intention when writing his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770) and other famous texts was not so much to innovate as to revive the principles of party and Whiggism in a new political climate after the accession of George III. Burke later split with his party over the French Revolution, believing that this event rendered old party distinctions by and large irrelevant. However, Chapter 12 shows that he never really lost faith in party as such. In Chapter 13 – which considers Burke in the context of thinkers associated with the umbrella term the 'Scottish Enlightenment', especially Hume and Adam Smith – I demonstrate that Burke returned to his earlier, more sceptical appraisal of the benefits of party towards the end of his life, when he was himself liberated from partisanship. He now argued that the balance of Britain's mixed constitution had not been maintained by one party alone but by competition between Whig and Tory.

By unearthing the sustained theoretical engagement with the concept of party during most of the eighteenth century, this book demonstrates that attitudes to party, although they could be damning, were more multifaceted and complicated than scholars have often thought. These findings will pose problems for those seeking to understand eighteenth-century politics solely on the basis of power politics, patronage, and family networks. Although 'Namierism' is today perhaps more often denigrated than emulated,¹⁹ many of its elements still recur in the most unexpected places.²⁰ This is all for the better, because my point is not that these aspects of politics were trivial, or that Namier's contribution to eighteenth-century historiography was insignificant. If anything, this study reflects the complexity of British politics before the age of mass suffrage. The eighteenth century was the time when the institutions of parliamentary democracy were trialled, but it was not a democratic age.

When political historians used to look for the origin of the 'modern' political party, they tended to focus on organisation rather than principles. In this respect, I disagree with the classic Namierite formulation that '[t]he durability of Parties depends less on the ideas they represent than on the

¹⁹ For the relative eclipse of Namier, see Hayton, *Conservative Revolutionary* (Manchester, 2019), 391–8.

²⁰ Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life* (Oxford, 2005), 4, 6–7, 10–11. To be sure, even though Namier understood his ambitions as 'sociological', Chalus's work is more concerned with political culture and society beyond parliament, and so should not be called neo-Namierite in a strong sense (12).

strength and coherence of party organizations'.²¹ As illustrated by the split between the Portland and Foxite Whigs in the 1790s, discussed in Chapter 12, even the most organised parties can become divided as a result of disagreement about ideas and policy. In recent British history, splits have occurred within the Labour and Conservative parties over questions such as 'Brexit', or the ideological direction under specific leaders. Most notably, disagreement caused by Labour's move to the left in the early 1980s led to several senior Labour politicians leaving the party and setting up the Social Democratic Party, which joined the Liberal Party in 1988 to form the Liberal Democrats. Economic and trade policy divided the Labour and Liberal parties during the Great Depression in the 1930s, when two National Governments were formed between 1931 and 1935. In the nineteenth century, Robert Peel's repeal of the Corn Laws caused divisions within the Tory-Conservatives, and William Gladstone's Irish Home Rule proposal split the Liberal Party. In all these cases, strategy and selfish calculations played their part, but the basic point that ideological and principled ruptures have changed the course of political history still stands.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of my study is that party in the eighteenth century was not only, and perhaps not even mainly, understood in terms of organisation. Rather, it was usually thought of as a set of flexible and evolving principles, associated with names and traditions, which categorised and managed political actors, voters, and commentators. In other words, the idea of party as ideological unity is not purely a nineteenth- or twentieth-century phenomenon but a way of thinking that can be traced to the eighteenth century. If we are to understand eighteenth-century politics, we need to understand the political arguments of the period. This is not to say that principles determine political behaviour *on their own*, but rather that they play a crucial role in circumscribing, prompting, and delaying action. For this reason, ideas matter even if power politics is the ultimate motivating factor – one of Quentin Skinner's most valuable insights.²² Historians can thus learn much from

²¹ *Commons, 1754–90*, I, 186. Having said that, eighteenth-century parties were often more organised than frequently assumed. For the beginning of the century, see Jones, 'The Parliamentary Organisation of the Whig Junto in the Reign of Queen Anne', *PH*, 10 (1991), 164–82; Jones, 'The Extra-Parliamentary Organisation of the Whig Junto in the Reign of William III', *PH*, 32 (2013), 522–30. For the later eighteenth century, see Ginter (ed.), *Whig Organisation in the General Election of 1790* (Berkeley, 1967).

²² Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (3 vols., Cambridge, 2002), I, 145–57. Namier's scepticism about the agency and importance of ideas and principles in politics and history is succinctly formulated in 'Human Nature in Politics', *Personalities and Powers*, 1–7.

Namier, including his still unmatched archival research, while taking political thought and principles seriously. Ideas may not cause historical change and events single-handedly, but they certainly influence when they happen and how they unfold. In the eighteenth century, historians and political commentators believed that party conflict and partisanship, principled as well as self-interested, had shaped their political environment, and this exerted a powerful grip on their imagination as to what they thought they could expect in the present and in the future(s).