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How America's Political Parties Change (And How They Don't) (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEW

How America's Political Parties Change (And How They Don't). Michael Barone, New York and London: Encounter Books, 2019, 130 pp. ISBN 9781641770781. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies and Public Affairs *emeritus*, University of Illinois Springfield.

Michael Barone is a veteran scholar and commentator on American national politics. He is best known as an acknowledged expert on Congress, its members, and their constituencies. He has been a major author and contributor to *The Almanac of American Politics*, published biennially since 1972, a reference volume of nearly 2000 pages. Since 2001, Barone has been a contributor to the Fox News Channel and, since 2009, a senior political analyst for the *Washington Examiner*. The *Examiner*, with help from Barone, offers a more rightwing perspective on the news of the day than its more widely read liberal competitor, the *Washington Post*.

Previewing this book in his "Introduction," Barone makes the point that the dynamics of American presidential elections are occasionally cataclysmic, as in 1860, 1920, and 1932. However, he notes, "the change in party percentages [by voters] between 2012 and 2016—or between any presidential election since 1996 and that of 2016—was minimal by historic patterns" (1). He goes on to say that what is notable about 2016 is that "The most recent generation of our politics has been characterized by what I have called *polarized partisan parity* to an extent that is arguably unprecedented in American history" (italics added). Barone celebrates the "yin-and-yang" of American diversity, "regionally, economically, religiously, racially and ethnically, culturally—from its colonial beginnings."

To understand the partisanship of American politics is to appreciate both the fixedness and the adaptability of the two parties locked into a governmental structure with enduring boundaries. Our states elect presidents with votes in an Electoral College, apportioned by the numbers of House and Senate members each state has, based mostly upon population. Our system is largely impervious to third-party intrusions. Barone characterizes the parties as follows: Democrats have "always been a collection of

out-groups...not...regarded by themselves or others as typically American but which...make up a majority of the nation. The Republican party has always been formed around a core group considered to be typical Americans, but which by itself has never been a majority of the electorate and must attract others to the party's banner in order to win" (9).

Each party has had its streaks of success electing presidents. From 1897 to 1933, Republicans had six presidents (McKinley, T. Roosevelt, Taft, Harding, Coolidge and Hoover). That streak was interrupted only by Wilson, a Democrat, who won in a three-way race with 42 percent of the vote in 1912. In a Republican party disruption that year, Teddy Roosevelt tried to displace his Republican successor, Taft, but both went down to defeat. Reelected in 1916 with 49 percent of the vote, Wilson won the war but lost the peace at Versailles, after which the Republicans reclaimed the presidency for another dozen years.

In 1932, Franklin Roosevelt put together an awkward electoral majority. Opponents of the party of Lincoln, Democrats who held hegemony in the previously confederate states, joined with discontented northern voters injured by the Great Depression under a hapless Herbert Hoover. They formed a Democratic electoral majority that held sway for twenty years under only two presidents, Roosevelt and Harry Truman. The Democratic streak was interrupted for two terms by a war hero, Dwight Eisenhower, who was courted by both parties to be its presidential nominee. He chose to run as a Republican, twice defeating Democrat Adlai Stevenson. After that interregnum, the Democrats were restored to the presidency in a close contest in 1960 (John Kennedy) and a blowout in 1964 (Lyndon Johnson).

Deeply disaffected by the Civil Rights Movement and disappointed in the Vietnam debacle, south-

ern Democrats swung to the Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, in 1968. Nixon prevailed with a vote-margin of less than one percent of the votes cast. Nixon won handily in 1972 but was undone by Watergate. That resulted in his midterm resignation. His appointed Vice President, Gerald Ford, fell to Jimmy Carter in 1976 by a margin of only two percent. Carter managed to win just a one-term interruption. In the 1980s, Republicans regained the presidency for three terms. Ronald Reagan surged to victory by 9.7 percent in 1980 and 18.2 percent in 1984.

In the eight presidential contests since Reagan, the margins of victory never reached ten percent. There has been, as Barone called it, “polarized partisan parity.” Republican George H.W. Bush succeeded Reagan in 1988 with a 5.6 percent voter margin. Democrat Bill Clinton defeated Bush in 1992 by 5.6 percent and won again in 1996 by 8.5 percent. But with third-party candidates in the races, Clinton received less than a majority of the popular votes in both years. Republicans regained the presidency in 2000, scoring an Electoral College win.

George W. Bush trailed his Democratic rival, Al Gore, by 0.5 percent of the total popular vote. In 2004, Bush was reelected with a 2.5 percent vote margin. Control of the presidency reverted to the Democrats in 2008 by a 7.3 percent margin for Obama, and he was reelected in 2012 with a 3.9 percent voter edge.

In 2016, to the surprise of many commentators, Donald Trump prevailed by wearing the Republican label. Democrat Hillary Clinton went down to electoral defeat, despite a 2.9 million popular vote margin over Trump. His portion of the electorate was 2.1 percent less than that of his opponent, the highest percentage deficit to prevail in presidential electoral history since the disputed Tilden-Hayes contest in 1876. The Electoral College results were clear, with 304 votes for Trump out of the 538 in play.

Barone identifies the keys to victory this way: “Of the 100 electoral votes that switched from

Democratic in 2012 to Republican in 2016, 50 were in the Midwest—Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa—and 20 were in Pennsylvania.... An additional 29...were in Florida.... One more Democratic to Republican vote was that of the 2nd congressional district of Maine...” (105).

Barone accounts for the margin of Trump’s electoral vote success by distinguishing between key differences in the political constituencies of these key states where his electoral votes were achieved. In the metropolitan areas, most voters supported Clinton, but in the “outstate” areas Trump prevailed handily. It was the voters in “counties outside those million plus metro areas.... Donald Trump carried the outstate Midwest by 57 to 37 percent.... To be sure, Trump’s victory margins in Michigan and Wisconsin were exceedingly narrow, as they were in Pennsylvania, and without the electoral votes of those three states he would have been defeated. But he won them and won the Midwest’s electoral votes by an 88 to 30 margin, the best Republican showing since the Ronald Reagan landslide of 1984” (115).

Barone’s acute analysis in this book is both intuitive and entertaining. The book recounts telling details of numerous presidential contests and deserves attention from a wide readership. Bringing his account to a conclusion, he resists making a prediction on the 2020 election outcome. But of that election he asserts that “the outstate Midwest could go back to providing crucial votes in electing Democratic presidents, as it did for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012,” thereby resolving the presidential outcome (118).

With Barone, I will forbear from forecasting a winner, but I concur with Barone that the voting results in the Midwest are clearly tractable and may well be determinative for the coming—and likely close—presidential election. Judging from Barone’s insights and analysis, most of the voters who read *Pro Rege* reside at the cutting-edge where the next presidential outcome will become a settled matter.