John Aldrich and John Coleman have brought us thoughtful and thought-provoking works on the nature of political parties in the USA. Each author comes to the topic with a different perspective, and each forces us to think about different sets of concerns.

Aldrich takes a 'new institutionalist' approach to the question of party formation in America. By bringing us back to the dawn of American party formation in the 1790s, he demonstrates the social choice and collective action problems faced by the founding fathers and shows how they ended up forming political parties despite their professed abhorrence for them. The founders needed political parties as a device to solve the 'great principle' of American politics at the time: how powerful the new federal government should be. The next critical step in American party development was the creation of the mass party which Aldrich (and others) credit to Martin Van Buren. Van Buren helped bring meaningful organization to the Democratic Party through the use of state party structures, and the strategic allocation of their resources. Organization was necessary to mobilize voters reliably and these mass appeals to a broad electorate were key to the Democratic Party's success in this era. Aldrich credits Van Buren with creating a party structure that became more important than the men in it.

All along, Aldrich makes the important point that for him, parties are composed of ambitious office-holders who chose to form them to solve personal ambition, social choice and collective action problems. Voters are not really elements of the party. They are in fact consumers of it. This is a critical departure from most treatments of American political parties, but such a suggestion has been a part of the comparative parties literature for some time. Still, Aldrich's conception of the party-in-elections rather than the party-in-the-electorate leads him to challenge the Downsian notion of party competition. Since ordinary people do not normally commit their time and resources to party causes, Aldrich posits that it is the most ideologically committed individuals who do so. Politicians need these people for their collective voter mobilization efforts to succeed. The issue concessions parties make to satisfy their activists thus constitute a countervailing weight to parties' natural Downsian tendencies.

Aldrich also demonstrates the importance of parties in the legislature (especially when the party is in a minimum winning position) and discusses the transformative changes of political parties in America from 1860 to 1960. After 1960, parties departed from the Van Burenite notion that the party was greater than
the people in it to the party being no more than the men and women in it. This shift, which leads to more candidate-centered campaigning, occurred because of the 'nationalization' of the rules and procedures of the party and the strengthening of the resource bases of party organizations at all levels.

Aldrich's analysis of political parties from a rational choice/new institutionalist perspective is clear, innovative, and will be widely cited by scholars. However, there are issues he cannot adequately address. First, the argument of political party formation in America from first principles is interesting, but it is given in a vacuum. Here, Aldrich would have strengthened his discussion by globalizing the first principles problem to parties in democracies. Are the founders' dilemmas typical of those contemplating party formation? Is the USA entirely different from other countries? Aldrich would have served us better with a discussion of political parties more generally, borrowing more extensively from comparative parties literature. Second, Aldrich does a very nice job of dealing with major historical developments in the party system until 1860. Then, he announces that not much changed in the party form until 100 years later. This baffles me. Surely Aldrich's argument about party activists would have been bolstered by a discussion of the rise and fall of party patronage, urban machines, and the effect of the progressive movement on political parties? Lastly, and most importantly, Aldrich himself concedes that: 'I could not make sense of the partisan actions analyzed... without thinking that more lofty, or at least less self-serving, goals were critical to understanding rational, ambitious politicians' behavior' (p. 278).

I wish Aldrich had gone down this road, because it is the most nagging concern of the book. Political parties are presented as instruments to fulfill the needs of ambitious politicians. But Aldrich does not factor ideological motivations into his equation. He does not, therefore, address adequately the reasons why politicians stay with a party despite the hopelessness of its winning situation (e.g. the Socialist, Green, Whig and Reform parties) or indeed, why politicians get together to start a new party in the first place (e.g. the Republicans, Greenbacks and Progressives). The early Republican Party is an excellent demonstration of this problem. Aldrich says politicians rationally calculated the chances of winning office and being in the majority, and sided with the Republicans. But the founders of that party could have no guarantees of this. They were in it because they were committed abolitionists or because they were fed up with the Whig Party. But they could not have known in the early 1850s that they would control the presidency in 1860. So, the lofty goals are the rub. Countless politicians 'irrationally' limit their options to realize personal ambitions by steadfastly adhering to policy positions.

Where Aldrich focuses on ambitious politicians and not the issues they champion, John Coleman does quite the opposite, emphasizing the centrality of policy to the coherence and viability of political parties. Taking a political development approach, Coleman argues that American political parties experienced decline mainly because the shift in American political economy from trade policy to a 'fiscal state' robbed the parties of much over which they could differ. For Coleman, positions on political economy have always framed the cleavages between American parties. When the basis for those cleavages disappeared (due to the embrace of Keynesianism in the 1930s and 1940s), political parties in America declined. Voter turnout fell, and voters had no choice but to turn to individual candidate characteristics when making their choices. Coleman
criticizes scholars embroiled in the decline/resurgence debate for not acknowledging the role state structure has on the party system. It is here that Coleman makes his greatest contribution. In describing the fiscal state, Coleman develops a list of constraints that resulted from proactive economic management by governments. Once both parties agreed that such management was needed, most of the responsibility for it left their immediate control. Monetary policy was made by an independent agency, and the executive branch became the central managing arm. This gave the parties in Congress, where Coleman sees the clearest illustration of party conflict, very little real decision-making room. The result: both parties took very similar positions on economic management issues until the 1980s.

Coleman spends several chapters analyzing congressional party behavior and assessing when the parties took similar or dissimilar positions on economic issues. He finds that the fiscal state placed substantial constraints on the parties. This only began to change with the realization that Keynesianism could not solve the economy’s ills, demonstrated by simultaneous high unemployment and high inflation. So, the 1980s launched a new discussion about economic management which we are currently still experiencing. Here, Coleman says, the parties may have an opportunity to begin distinguishing themselves and to become resurgent.

Coleman’s fiscal state argument is certainly compelling. But for all his insistence that the public’s indifference to political parties is directly related to fiscal state constraints, little evidence is given to support the assertion. In fact, in many places Coleman attributes a level of sophistication to the electorate that I think is quite undeserved. It is odd too that, although Coleman repeatedly says that economics was not the only arena of meaningful policy difference between the parties, other arenas are never addressed. Social issues, for instance, have consumed an enormous amount of the electorate’s attention since the 1970s (and are responsible for much of the organizational rebuilding Coleman cites as somehow related to distinctions in fiscal policy). I think that scholars can take Coleman’s interpretation as an important new framework, but not the entire story.

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In Representation From Above, Peter Esaiasson and Soren Holmberg have made a comprehensive contribution to our understanding of how MPs in Sweden represent their constituents. The authors have taken full advantage of the Swedish election studies programme in Gothenburg, which has been in operation since