The Two-Party System

The party system was one of this country’s most important contributions to political science. Strong rival parties, acting as a check upon each other, have constituted an effective guarantor of our democracy. For the experience of other countries has shown that when there is only one party, as in Russia, Germany and Italy today, democracy perishes; and when there are too many parties, as was the case in France, democracy ceases to be effective. Yet events in recent years have clearly shown a weakening of the two-party system. We are compelled to ask ourselves, as Senator Frederic R. Coudert Jr. pointed out in a speech yesterday, “What is going to become of our traditional party system?”

Tuesday’s municipal election was a case in point. Party lines were broken right and left, both in the nominations and in the balloting. Mayor La Guardia appeared on the voting machine as the candidate of four separate parties. Although the Mayor received by far the largest part of his vote under the Republican emblem, it was the American Labor party which at once claimed credit for his election. As the secretary of the ALP pointed out, the results spotlighted the balance-of-power policy of that party which has enabled it, although numerically far smaller than either of the two major parties, to obtain a decisive influence in city and State government. In national affairs the breakdown of party regularity has become pronounced. The President, as Senator Coudert said, is far larger than his party. The titular head of the Republican party, Wendell Willkie, is highly independent of his party organization and in violent disagreement with many of its regular leaders.

This growth of political insurgency has its virtues and its dangers. It is nothing new in American political history for third parties to emerge. In the past they have either subsided or eventually become consolidated as one of the two dominant parties. It may well be that the present is a period of realignment from which will come a reinvigorated party system more closely representing the real political philosophies of the people than have the two major parties as lately constituted. But the prevailing popular contempt for party organization is something to be mistrusted. The alternatives to our traditional two-party system are a single party or a multiplicity of parties. Neither is attractive.