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Review of *American Politics in the Gilded Age, 1868-1900* By Robert W. Cherny

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American Politics in the Gilded Age, 1868-1900.
By Robert W. Cherny. Wheaton, Illinois:
Harlan Davidson, 1997. Illustrations, maps,
tables, appendix, bibliographical essay, index.
vi + 167 pp. \$11.95 paper.

Robert W. Cherny's lively and economical survey of Gilded Age politics is a welcome addition to Harlan Davidson's American History series. *American Politics in the Gilded Age* will be especially valuable to undergraduate and graduate students and will also be of interest to general readers and to scholars. Cherny provides a very readable narrative of key political events and personalities, and he employs an array of useful concepts that are based on the most current scholarship.

American Politics in the Gilded Age is neatly divided into three chapters. In the first, "The Domain and Power of Party," Cherny begins by explaining that the Gilded Age political system was one in which political *parties* were crucial. Cherny explains how elections worked and how parties mobilized an almost entirely male electorate. He then provides a succinct and nuanced account of the differences between the Republicans and Democrats. This chapter concludes with a discussion of groups

on the periphery of party politics: Mugwumps, advocates of woman suffrage, Prohibitionists, Grangers, Greenbackers, and labor reformers.

In chapter two, "The Deadlock of National Politics," Cherny turns to a narrative of national political events. These events, he explains, were structured by a party system that was very closely contested. This fact contributed to "the freezing of most federal policies during the Gilded Age." Still, it was not as though nothing ever happened. Cherny offers admirably clear and sophisticated explanations of the passage of legislation (such as the Bland-Allison Act and the Interstate Commerce Act) and of stalemate, but compromises occasionally broke through.

The final chapter of the book describes and analyzes the "political upheaval" of the 1890s. With a light but sure hand, Cherny introduces the concepts of party systems and critical realignments and explains how the crisis of the 1890s and the Populist Party produced a particular kind of realignment. The realignment that culminated in the 1896 election when William McKinley defeated William Jennings Bryan did not result in a complete revolution of the party system, as in the 1850s. But as Cherny explains in a brief conclusion, there were several significant changes in the party system after 1896. A bibliographic essay offers an excellent survey of the relevant literature.

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