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GUIDE TO

# U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES

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## chapter 13

# From Machines to Service Centers

## The Evolution of State and Local Political Parties

Vladimir Kogan

**W**hen most American voters think about political parties, the images that often come to mind are high-profile national political figures such as sitting presidents, congressional leaders, and perhaps a few notable governors and big-city mayors. Horse-race media coverage of elections tends to emphasize the activities of individual candidates, their changing standing in the polls, and the backroom strategizing by their campaign tacticians. Yet behind almost every successful campaign, whether for a local school board seat or for a major national political office, stand armies of volunteers who carry out essential campaign activities such as voter registration, the distribution of campaign literature, the mobilization of voters on election day, and even the initial candidate recruitment.

This chapter focuses on a critical subset of these volunteers (and a small number of paid professionals) who make up the organizational backbone of U.S. political parties. Certainly not all—and perhaps not even most—people who volunteer their time and effort in the hope of helping their favored candidates get elected are affiliated with the Democratic Party and Republican Party organizations. However, there are three important reasons to examine in particular the activities of state and local parties and their leaders. First, unlike irregular campaign workers who become involved in political contests through their personal relationships with the candidates or who are motivated by the excitement created by approaching elections, party organizations represent stable, well-established, and largely permanent institutions. Although the types and levels of activities performed by these groups ebb and flow with election cycles and leadership turnover may be frequent, the institutions themselves have existed in most areas for many decades.

Second, party organizations enjoy legal privileges that are simply not available to other political actors. In Ohio, for example, state law requires county election administrators, who are responsible for printing ballots and tabulating votes, to be appointed on the basis of recommendations

made by local party leaders. In many states, party committees are empowered to make appointments to fill political offices when vacancies occur between elections. Most critically, party organizations have historically enjoyed special status in state and federal campaign finance laws that have allowed them to raise and spend substantial amounts of money to influence elections.

Finally, their ubiquity in every stage of the political process, from nominations and elections to actual policymaking, makes political parties particularly powerful and important players in the American political system. Surveys of state and county party leaders document a wide range of activities in which these organizations take part to support copartisan candidates and influence voters. These surveys suggest that state and local parties have, if anything, become more directly active in electoral politics in recent decades.

This chapter offers a comprehensive, although necessarily general, account of state and local parties and their influence. In particular, it tracks the evolution of state and local parties over the course of the twentieth century, describing how political reforms have transformed what were once rigidly hierarchical organizations that directly parlayed government jobs, social benefits, and other forms of patronage into votes for loyal candidates into much more dispersed collections of activists that compete with other actors to influence elections by serving as brokers of essential campaign services. It concludes by taking stock of the challenges and opportunities that face party organizations at the beginning of the twenty-first century, set in motion by the social, political, legal, and demographic changes overtaking American society.

### THE ANATOMY OF THE PARTY

Scholars often describe American political parties as *cadre* organizations, meaning they are organized around and run by a small number of political elites. Although many voters may view themselves as loyal Democrats or Republicans, and may consistently support their party's candidates, few of

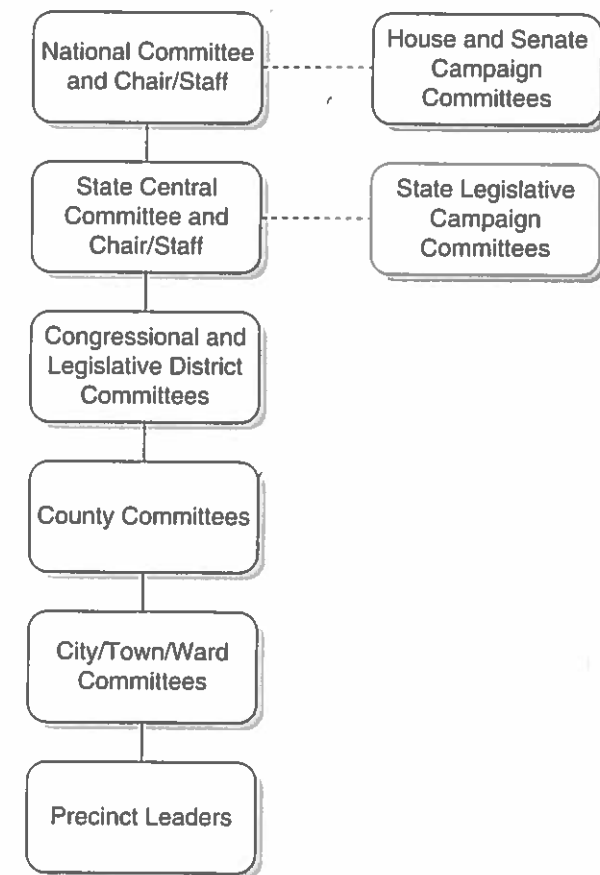
them hold formal party positions or take an active part in party activities such as conventions, where many decisions about the endorsement of candidates and the formulation of party platforms are made. Authority and responsibility within the party is further divided among this group of activists across various formal party organs.

Figure 13.1 depicts the most common structure of the party organization, although it is important to note tremendous variation across states due to differences in laws, party bylaws, and historical practices. Because the winning of political office is the primary preoccupation of party officials, it is hardly surprising that party structures are designed to map closely onto existing political subdivisions. The smallest unit of the party is typically organized around electoral precincts, the administrative boundaries used by state and local governments to establish voting facilities and tabulate votes, with precinct chairs overseeing the parties' activities in each of these areas. Parties in some states do not have a precinct organization, and it is common for a number of precinct positions to remain vacant in many of the states that do. A collection of precincts may make up the ward organization, corresponding to city council or aldermanic districts where these positions are contested on a geographic basis.

In most states, county committees represent the basic policymaking bodies in which collective party decisions about strategy, recruitment, and resource allocation are made.<sup>1</sup> Depending on state laws, county committees may be made up of lower-level party officials or chosen directly by party members through party elections or conventions. Few county committees maintain permanent headquarters or hire paid staff, and most committee members serve in a volunteer capacity, with county chairs taking on most of the administrative burden and responsibility. While the evidence is far from conclusive, it appears that counties became the focal point for local partisan activities due to the large number of officials elected at this level of government, the historically large amount of patronage available in courthouses and other county agencies, and counties' critical role in the assessment and collection of local property taxes, the largest source of revenue for local governments for much of U.S. history.<sup>2</sup>

States may also have separate party committees corresponding to each congressional or state legislative district. Both major parties in every state operate a statewide organization made up of a central committee, a state chairperson, and, in many states, an executive director and other paid party staff. In each state, statutes or party bylaws determine the makeup of the party central committee—whether through election, conventions, or the appointment of lower-level party officials—and the selection process for choosing state chairs.<sup>3</sup> These chairpersons oversee their party's statewide activities, helping draft the party's platform, recruiting

FIGURE 13.1 Party Organizational Structure



SOURCE: Adapted from Brian F. Schaffner, *Politics, Parties, and Elections in America*, 7th ed., Boston: Wadsworth, 2012.

candidates for major state offices, and raising money for various party efforts and candidates. Some state leaders collaborate with local organizations on joint tasks including voter mobilization and get-out-the-vote operations. Since the 1970s, state chairs have also served as members of the national party committees.

In many instances, state central committees share their influence with legislative campaign committees. Mirroring similar organizations in the U.S. Congress, the legislative committees are operated by incumbent legislators and raise money to support each party's slate of candidates running for seats in the lower and upper houses of the state legislature.

Although tempting, it would be incorrect to interpret the party structure in Figure 13.1 as a conventional hierarchical organization chart, in which information flows up and authority is delegated down. Rather, the party organization has been described as a "stratarchy," in which separate layers, or strata, exercise independent power.<sup>4</sup> Although some party officials may attempt to wield influence over other parts of the organization, their ability to do so depends

on the efficacy of their personal persuasion and the availability of sticks and carrots that can induce cooperation. Reflecting on the relationship between the state central committees and local party leaders, one scholar has noted, "In most states, the chairman does not have the power to order lower party units to carry out his wishes, but he always has the capability of attempting to influence those in the understructure."<sup>5</sup>

## MACHINE POLITICS IN THE CITY

The history of American political parties illustrates these organizational complexities. During the second half of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century, local leaders exercised the greatest influence and wielded the most authority in the party system. From 1870 to 1945, more than half of America's largest cities were governed for some period by strong party organizations known as political machines.<sup>6</sup> The machine label proved to be apt because of the efficiency and discipline that characterized these organizations. Each machine employed a number of officials—from precinct captains to ward heelers—whose

FIGURE 13.2 Editorial Cartoon of Boss Tweed (circa 1870)



"THAT'S WHAT'S THE MATTER."

BOSS TWEED. "As long as I count the Votes, what are you going to do about it? say?"

SOURCE: Wikimedia Commons

primary responsibility was to secure political support for the machine's preferred candidates. Each machine was headed by a powerful, authoritarian boss. While many bosses, including Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley and Boston mayor James Curley, were themselves elected officials, others operated from behind the scenes. Some of the most notable and memorable machine bosses, including Kansas City's Tom Pendergast and New York's William Tweed, ran their machine without occupying a public office.

## Strategies of Successful Boss Rule

Modern observers tend to associate the period of machine and boss rule with electoral fraud and vast public corruption. There is no doubt that both practices took place in some machine cities. In both 1868 and 1872, for example, the number of ballots cast in New York elections exceeded the total number of registered voters, and nearly half of the votes cast in New York City in 1910 were thought to have been fraudulent.<sup>7</sup> An editorial cartoon from the era, reprinted in Figure 13.2, underscores the popular perception about the extent of voter fraud by New York's famed Tammany Hall machine. In the cartoon, Boss Tweed stands leaning over a ballot box, with the caption, "As long as I count the votes, what are you going to do about it?" In 1871, Tweed was arrested and eventually found guilty of misappropriating approximately \$25 million to \$45 million in public funds—from \$1 billion to \$2 billion in 2010 dollars.

In most cases, however, political machines maintained their power through legitimate means by cultivating loyalty and popular political support among voters. Successful machines established broad-based electoral coalitions through the distribution of selective, material inducements. In exchange for their pledge to support machine-backed candidates at the polls, voters could secure public jobs, government contracts, business licenses, and necessary permits from the boss or his underlings. Many poor immigrants, whose numbers swelled in major cities during this period, found few publicly funded welfare services and instead turned to handouts and other benefits distributed by the political parties, rewarding this generosity with their votes. Machine-backed candidates, who relied on the party's voter base for their elections, were expected to supply the boss with plentiful patronage opportunities once in office. The rigid hierarchy of the machine organization, the

complete loyalty that machine candidates owed to the boss, and the systematic reliance on material inducements to maintain the party's base of electoral support represent the three key defining characteristics of machine politics in major American cities during this period.

## The Puzzle of Machine Dominance

Bosses and machines represented unique American phenomena during their time, so it is perhaps surprising that this form of political and partisan organization became a lasting presence in so many major American cities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> One explanation for the machines' success is that their organizational structure and political strategies used by their bosses were especially suited to address the new political demands created by four interconnected social and economic changes that swept many parts of the country during this period: mass (male) suffrage, urbanization, industrialization, and large-scale immigration.

Although many U.S. states restricted voting to property owners at the founding of the republic, these property-holding requirements were largely swept away by the middle of the 1800s. The expansion of the electorate coincided with the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the manufacturing economy. Factories located around major port cities and transportation hubs, including cities like New York, Cleveland, and Boston, and the growth in employment opportunities for low-skilled workers swelled the cities. Many of these new residents came from Ireland, Germany, Poland, Italy, and parts of eastern Europe, escaping harsh economic times and social turmoil back home. Growing populations quickly outstripped existing infrastructure and stretched traditional forms of municipal service provision—based on volunteers or charity from major businessmen—to the breaking point.

Party bosses thus emerged as political entrepreneurs who capitalized on the needs of lower-class workers in the new industrial economy, now empowered with the vote, by using political parties to deliver the services their clients desperately desired. Machines' hierarchical structures allowed party machines to function as bureaucracies that could efficiently target various public services to those who needed them. The machines also served as vital sources of welfare for impoverished families, and patronage jobs in the public sector provided an invaluable mechanism of social mobility for recently arriving immigrants and other unemployed individuals. Observers estimated that the ranks of Boss Tweed's "Shiny Hat Brigade," the holders of newly created municipal patronage jobs, approached 15,000.<sup>9</sup>

Political parties also proved adept at overcoming two serious institutional weaknesses that plagued local governments in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first was widely dispersed authority, with government powers

divided among multiple political jurisdictions and, within cities, among numerous aldermen elected from small geographic districts. Differences in their electoral bases and problems of collective action created serious challenges to coordinating the activities of these public officials to address festering social problems and public needs. As organizations that cut across political boundaries and individual political offices, party machines successfully centralized political authority in the hands of the boss, who could exercise it to address the demands of the electorate.

Second, reliance on the taxation of personal property as their primary source of revenue left many local governments woefully underfunded. Although it was relatively easy for tax assessors to identify and tax real property such as houses, farms, and factories, taxes on easily concealed personal possessions were much more difficult to assess, and tax evasion was rife during this period. Political machines, however, could supplement available public dollars by requiring holders of patronage positions to contribute a portion of their wages to the party, creating a precursor to the modern income tax. Because these individuals held their positions at the pleasure of their boss, who knew the exact amounts of their paychecks, parties were much more successful than local governments in raising money to support their operation and fund various party-provided social services.<sup>10</sup> In Jefferson County, Kentucky, home of Louisville, both the local Democratic and Republican machines required holders of the more than 2,200 city and county patronage jobs to contribute 2 percent of their salaries to party coffers.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note, however, that party machines established few strongholds outside of major industrial urban centers. In his analysis in *Placing Parties in American Politics*, political scholar David Mayhew reviewed a wide-ranging number of primary and secondary sources to identify which U.S. states have historically hosted "traditional party organizations" at the local level. Defining these organizations as having substantial autonomy, internal hierarchy, control over nominations to public offices, and long periods of organizational stability and activity, Mayhew found evidence of such city and county organizations only in a small minority of the states. Outside of the Northeast, the mid-Atlantic, and the Great Lakes regions, he uncovered few institutionalized local party organizations.<sup>12</sup>

## Status of State Parties

Although the historical research on machine politics has focused primarily on local organizations operating in and around big cities, Mayhew also noted the presence of effective statewide party organizations in some parts of the country. These too were found in only nine states, following the same general regional pattern as local machine organizations. In all but one case, these statewide organizations

were organized and run by their U.S. senators: New York (Thomas C. Platt, Republican); Maryland (Arthur P. Gorman, Democrat, who shared power with I. Freeman Rasin, the head of the Baltimore machine); Pennsylvania (Simon Cameron, Matthew S. Quay, and Boies Penrose, Republicans); Rhode Island (Nelson W. Aldrich, Republican, working with General Charles R. Brayton); Virginia (Thomas S. Martin, Democrat); West Virginia (Stephen B. Elkin, Republican); Michigan (James McMillan, Republican); and Wisconsin (Philetus Sawyer, Republican). Only North Dakota's Republican machine, which was operated by corporate agent Alexander McKenzie, did not fit the broader pattern of senatorial control.<sup>13</sup>

Like urban machine bosses, senators who organized statewide party organizations were political entrepreneurs with clear electoral goals. Until the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment, which brought about the direct election of senators in 1917, senators were appointed by the legislature of their state. Senators who hoped to secure their reelection thus had strong incentives to assemble permanent, durable statewide legislative majorities. Their offices also gave senators access to important sources of patronage—including federal post offices and customs houses—which they could distribute in exchange for support from county-level partisan officials, relying on such goodies to stitch together their statewide network of supporters.<sup>14</sup>

Two factors may explain why strong partisan organizations did not take root outside of these nine states. First, state governments directly employed far fewer workers than local governments, making them less attractive sources of patronage needed to fuel the electoral coalition that sustained strong party machines.<sup>15</sup> Second, assembling a durable statewide organization required party leaders to successfully induce cooperation among competing party factions and local organizations in various parts of the state. In their 1982 study of state political parties, for example, Malcolm Jewell and David Olson found that most state parties faced serious challenges of factionalism, with the local units divided internally between big-city and rural dwellers, competing big-city organizations (e.g., Philadelphia and Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania), and by racial, ethnic, and religious animosities.<sup>16</sup>

## ERA OF POLITICAL REFORM

By the turn of the twentieth century, the practices and institutions associated with party machines attracted increasing criticism from the growing ranks of reformers. Known as the Progressives, the movement drew its support primarily from middle- and upper-class voters, professional classes including lawyers, doctors, and university professors, and business owners. Pointing to a series of scandals and controversies involving urban and state machines and their bosses, the Progressives advocated for political reforms designed to

eliminate waste, fraud, corruption, and inefficiency from government and make public agencies function more like their private-sector counterparts.

Realizing that bosses derived their political power from the absolute loyalty of elected officials they supported and the gratitude of the constituents who benefited from machine largesse, the reformers sought to weaken the relationship between party leaders, candidates, and voters. To eliminate party control over access to political offices, Progressives advocated for the adoption of party primary elections, the replacement of elected mayors with appointed city managers, and the direct election of senators. To limit access to patronage opportunities, reformers also pushed through competitive bidding requirements for public contracts and civil service reforms that made merit, rather than political connections, the basis for public-sector hiring decisions and protected civil servants from political retribution.

In addition, reformers sought to overhaul electoral institutions, introducing voter registration requirements, designed to limit fraud and ballot box stuffing, and replacing party tickets with the secret ballot. The latter change was particularly important: if party leaders could not observe how individual voters cast their ballots, they could not credibly threaten those who supported the opposition with the loss of jobs and other party-provided benefits. The introduction of the Australian ballot thus eliminated opportunities for party workers to monitor voters as they cast their ballot, weakening the patron-client relationship connecting constituents to their party leaders.<sup>17</sup>

### Reform Rule: A Different Type of Political Monopoly?

Reformers recorded their biggest political successes outside of big urban centers, particularly in the American West, an area without large numbers of immigrants or existing strong party organizations. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Progressives established durable regimes in cities including San Jose and San Diego in California; Phoenix, Arizona; and Dallas, Texas. Although reformers' rhetoric stressed their commitment to nonpartisanship and emphasized a model of government in which policy would be made by trained professionals, insulated from direct political influence, the historical record points to many important similarities between Progressive reformers and the party machines they fought so hard to defeat.

In many cities, for example, leading Progressive figures owned the local newspaper and used its pages to support political allies and browbeat opponents. Business and good-government groups also established nonpartisan "slating" organizations to back their preferred candidates in an effort to influence nominations.<sup>18</sup> Although nominally nonpartisan, slating organizations such as the Detroit Citizens League, the Dallas Citizens' Council Association, and the

Good Government League in San Antonio, Texas, mimicked the activities of party organizations in seeking to regulate access to political office and ensure the election of supportive candidates.

Although Progressive leaders eschewed voter fraud, many of their electoral reforms produced equally disruptive impacts on political competition. Various changes to electoral rules—such as the adoption of the secret ballot, the shift to off-cycle elections, the removal of party labels from the ballot, and the adoption of literacy tests in many reform cities—had both the intent and effect of limiting political participation among poor, illiterate, minority, and immigrant voters, who were thought to be the most vulnerable to the influence of and the most loyal to party machines.<sup>19</sup> The replacement of district and ward city council seats with at-large elections similarly disenfranchised black and Latino voters, whose numerical minority deprived them of effective political power in citywide contests. It would take the passage of the Voting Rights Act in the 1960s to provide minority groups with legal tools to overturn at-large elections and reverse their deleterious impact on political representation. When their opponents came close to securing sufficient political support in the electorate, reformers turned to selective annexation of nearby territory to dilute the opposition's political voice.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, political scientist Jessica Trounstein has argued that machine and reform regimes represented two sides of the same coin: both were cohesive political organizations that won and cemented their power by manipulating the rules of the political game and exploiting the resources at their disposal to thwart political opponents. Although Progressives assailed machines for wasteful political patronage and public spending, there is little evidence that reformed cities spent substantially less. Both types of regimes tended to target public spending and services to their core supporters, providing few spillover benefits for the broader population.<sup>21</sup>

### Who Killed the Machine?

Outside of the West, however, the reform movement did not record many successful challenges against incumbent political machines. Although Mayhew found that state political party organizations reached their peak influence by 1900, many local machines flourished well into the twentieth century. Despite widespread adoption of direct primaries and secret ballots, party organizations successfully adapted to the changing institutional environment, using new tactics like preprimary endorsements to maintain political power. George Washington Plunkitt, the famed boss of New York's Tammany Hall, compared reformers to morning glories, a flower that blooms beautifully at sunrise only to close again at night:

I can't tell just how many of these [reform] movements I've seen started in New York during my forty years in

politics, but I can tell you how many have lasted more than a few years—none. There have been reform committees of fifty, of sixty, of seventy, of one hundred and all sorts of numbers that started out to do up the regular political organizations. They were mornin' glories—looked lovely in the mornin' and withered up in a short time, while the regular machines went on flourishin' forever, like fine old oaks.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, by the 1970s, party machines in nearly every major city and county had lost their monopoly over local government. If not the reformers, who killed the political machine?

There is no doubt that the widespread adoption of civil service reforms undermined political parties by depriving them of patronage resources available for maintaining voter loyalty. By the 1960s, all but a few states adopted civil service laws, and these new protections greatly reduced the electoral advantages of incumbent politicians.<sup>23</sup> Several legal decisions—*Elrod v. Burns* (1976) and *Rutan v. Republican Party of Illinois* (1990)—further limited political control over public-sector jobs, with the Supreme Court ruling that partisan affiliation could not be the basis for firing public employees or filling most posts.<sup>24</sup>

A second series of important court rulings in the 1960s also found that existing state practices for drawing political districts, which resulted in substantial overrepresentation for rural areas and malapportionment in state and federal legislatures, violated the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. The Supreme Court ordered many states to change their districting laws, forbidding the drawing of political boundaries on the basis of existing city and county lines without taking account of population differences.<sup>25</sup> The Court also required that the political lines be adjusted after every decennial census to account for unequal population growth. Ushering in the modern era of redistricting, these one-man, one-vote decisions had the lasting impact of divorcing state and federal legislative districts from county boundaries, undermining the influence of county-based party organizations and their electoral utility for political candidates.<sup>26</sup>

The final, and perhaps most important, nail in the coffin of party machines was the fundamental transformation of political campaigns in the second half of the twentieth century. Widespread adoption of television advertising and the emergence of a new class of campaign professionals skilled in modern polling technology and other techniques greatly reduced the importance of the ground game (door-to-door contact) for political campaigns. In the new era of candidate-centered campaigns, individual candidates could build their own campaign organization and substitute advertising dollars for labor-intensive door-to-door canvassing that could only be carried out by large armies of volunteers. Using modern techniques, candidates found that



they could control their own electoral fates, freeing them from the need to win support of local party leaders to achieve political success.

### ADAPTATION AND RESURGENCE: PARTY ACTIVITIES IN THE MODERN ERA

The extinction of machine organizations, emergence of candidate-centered political campaigns, and the growing—but as it turned out fleeting—number of unaffiliated independent voters led many political observers to begin writing the obituary for political parties in the second half of the twentieth century. However, a series of interviews and surveys of state and local party leaders carried out by a team of political scientists in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that this new conventional wisdom was misplaced. Although the era of old-style, hierarchical parties that controlled candidate nominations and purchased voter loyalty was clearly over, the party organizations had begun to reinvent themselves by expanding their campaign-related activities.

#### Parties as Candidate Service Centers

The most striking pattern documented in surveys of party leaders was the growing professionalization of their organizations. By 1980, nearly every state organization had established a physical headquarters, and many hired professional staff skilled in political communication, public opinion research, and campaigns. From 1960 to 1980, the number of state parties with either a full-time chair or an executive director grew from 63 percent to 90 percent, driven primarily by the hiring of professional directors.<sup>27</sup>

State party leaders reported engaging in two types of party-building activities. The first focused on increasing institutional support for the organization. Many parties engaged in new fund-raising efforts, including direct-mail

campaigns. State organizations also increased financial assistance to local parties and collaborated with them on new voter mobilization programs. Second, parties sought to act as service bureaus for candidates, providing them with access to skilled staff and cutting-edge public opinion research. Party leaders also engaged in the recruitment of candidates, and many state organizations made direct financial contributions to favored candidates. Half of the parties reported making preprimary endorsements.<sup>28</sup>

The growth in the ranks of professional party staff did not extend to the local level, where most organizations continued to lack permanent party offices and were run largely by volunteers. However, county chairs also reported that their organizations had taken an active role in electoral contests, carrying out a number of various direct campaign activities. The responses from surveys of county party chairs are reproduced in Table 13.1, which documents the large variety of activities in which county parties remained engaged. Most organizations actively distributed candidate and campaign literature, and many supported candidates directly through campaign contributions and the purchase of advertising in print and broadcast media. Approximately half of county organizations also reported being active in voter registration efforts and get-out-the-vote mobilization campaigns. A series of follow-up interviews, carried out in the early and mid-1990s, showed that the local party organizations remained active players in political campaigns.

Although the investment in campaign services helped make political parties valuable partners for candidates, the evidence suggests that it has not fully restored their influence to the heights seen during the machine era. Interviews with candidates, for example, have found that they view state and local party organizations as distant seconds to family and close friends as sources of campaign guidance. Although parties remain influential, they also now compete

TABLE 13.1 Direct Campaign Activities of Local Party Organizations

	Republicans (1980)	Democrats (1980)	Republicans (1990)	Democrats (1990)	Republicans (1996)	Democrats (1996)
Buy newspaper ads for party and candidates	62%	62%	60%	65%	68%	63%
Buy radio/TV time for party or candidates	33%	33%	24%	31%	28%	25%
Distribute posters or lawn signs	62%	59%	90%	89%	93%	93%
Coordinate county-level campaign	56%	57%	57%	59%	54%	58%
Send mailings to voters	59%	47%	58%	51%	60%	58%
Conduct registration drives	45%	56%	39%	50%	34%	45%
Organize door-to-door canvassing	48%	49%	52%	55%	57%	55%
Use public opinion surveys	16%	11%	15%	15%	15%	13%

SOURCE: Cornelius P. Cotter, James L. Gibson, John F. Bibby, and Robert J. Huckshorn, *Party Organizations in American Politics* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984); John Frensdreis and Alan R. Gitelson, "Local Parties in the 1990s: Spokes in a Candidate-Centered Wheel," in *The State of the Parties*, 3rd ed., ed. John C. Green and Daniel M. Shea (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 135–153.

with a number of other political actors, including labor unions and political action committees (PACs), who specialize in delivering access to many of the same electoral resources.<sup>29</sup>

#### Electoral Impacts of Party Activity

Is there evidence that increased investment in campaign-related efforts by state and local party organizations have borne electoral fruit? Although several studies have found a correlation between the strength of the party organization and candidate performance in elections, it is unclear that the relationship is causal. While active parties may indeed help candidates win political office, it is also probably the case that the nature of political competition affects the resources available to the party organizations. This is especially true in the modern era, with parties reliant on activists and volunteers rather than paid lieutenants to carry out their agendas.

There is consensus, however, that party-building activities have at least contributed to creating a much more competitive system of two-party competition in most states, particularly in the American South. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the South remained deeply Democratic for much of the twentieth century, with many contests decided in the Democratic primaries rather than the general elections. The Republicans had no organization to speak of. This began to change in the 1970s when the Republican National Committee invested substantial effort and resources in establishing a stronger base of support in the region, as part of the party's "Southern Strategy" (see Chapter 10). By 1980, the Republican parties in the South were some of the strongest and most active in the country, something that helped explain the growing political success of Republican candidates in these states.<sup>30</sup>

#### Do Parties Shape Policies?

Although much of this chapter has focused on the parties' activities in the electoral arena, it is also important to consider the extent to which partisanship influences policy processes and outcomes. Drawing primarily on the lessons from the era of party machines—when a party boss's overarching goal was to win and retain political office rather than implementing a coherent policy agenda—many scholars have argued that political parties have few, if any, lasting policy impacts. One classic textbook on city politics, for example, concluded that "in local elections, the party as



George Matijow hands out Republican Party campaign information at the Bayleaf Volunteer Fire Department on November 6, 2012, in Raleigh, North Carolina. Political parties in the current era provide various party-building and campaign services for candidates, including voter mobilization, at all levels of government.

SOURCE: Photo by Sara D. Davis/Getty Images

such seldom has any concrete program or platform."<sup>31</sup> Another text noted the following:

The American machine has no membership base, and it has few, if any, ideological concerns. Its focus on the immediate needs of its constituents has driven the urban machine to look almost completely inward and to ignore the issues and ideologies of the political world beyond. It is provincially concerned with the city, and its politics are almost completely divorced from the issues that agitate our national politics.<sup>32</sup>

Proponents of this view often quote New York's famed reform mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who is claimed to have said that there is no Democratic or Republican way to pick up the trash.

A second group of scholars has argued that, although parties may have some concrete policy goals, state and local parties may lack the necessary scope and discretion to put them into practice. Both types of governments are constrained by competition with other nearby jurisdictions, forcing them to compete for mobile capital and skilled workers who might simply move elsewhere if they find the policy environment not to their liking.<sup>33</sup>

Three types of evidence appear to contradict these claims. First, voter partisanship serves as an important determinant of voter behavior in state and local elections just as it does in federal contests. In gubernatorial elections, for example, about 80 percent of voters consistently support candidates from their own party.<sup>34</sup> Although there are few large comparative studies of local elections, one analysis of city council contests in thirty suburban cities has similarly found that partisanship serves as an important predictor of voting behavior.<sup>35</sup> Second, as discussed at greater length in the following section, partisanship also explains differences in the behavior of elected officials in office. In one survey of city councilmen, the majority reported the presence of moderate or substantial partisan divides on their councils.<sup>36</sup> When asked about the most important problems facing their cities, Democratic and Republican lawmakers tend to point to different types of issues.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the partisanship of elected officials in state and local offices tends to predict the kinds of policies their governments adopt, even on controversial redistributive questions likely to affect business locational decisions and individual migration patterns.<sup>38</sup>

### SURVIVAL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: EMERGING CHALLENGES

Over the course of the last century, state and local political parties have survived tremendous upheaval in the institutions and practices of American politics by adapting to their new electoral environment. At the dawn of the new millennium, party organizations are once again likely to face a

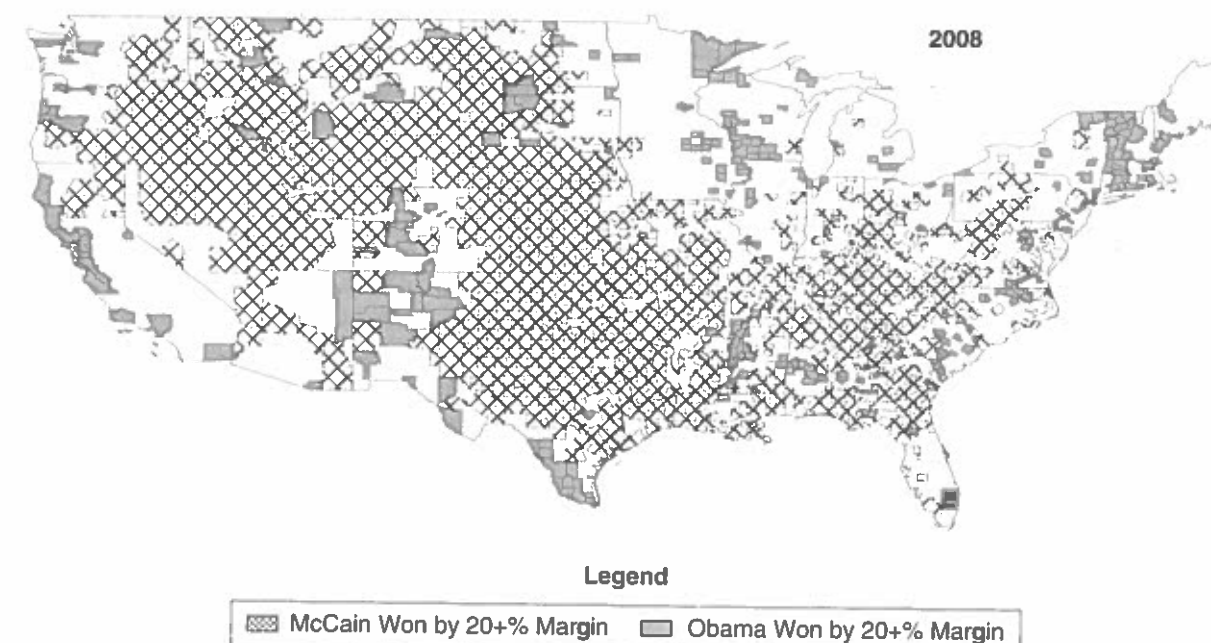
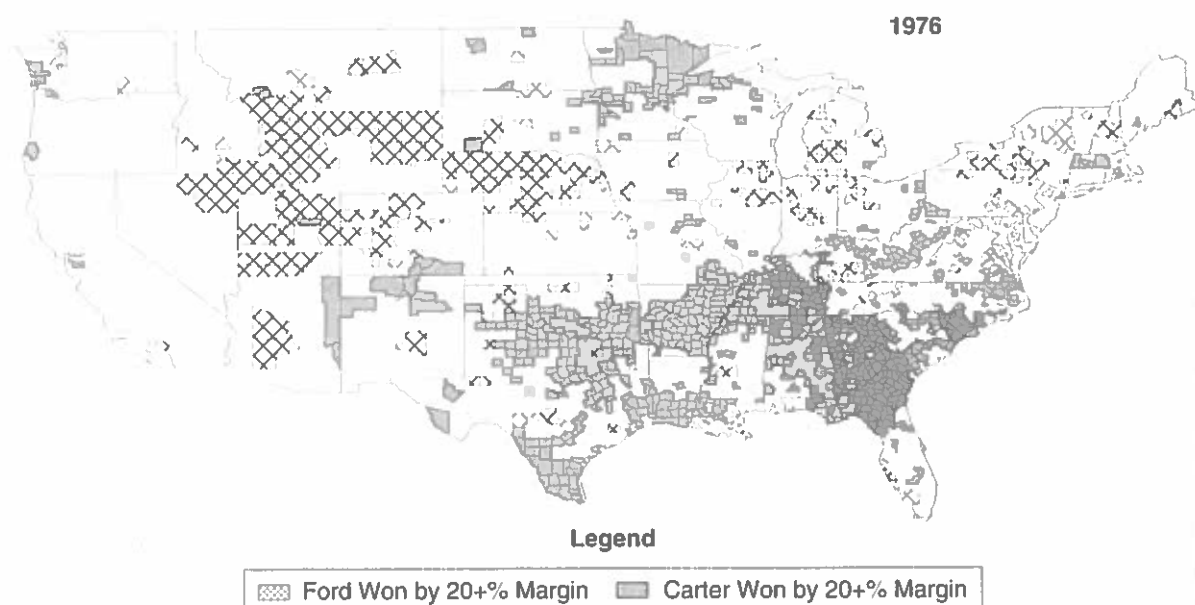
number of new challenges that promise to transform their way of doing business. This concluding section provides a brief overview of four recent developments that will likely shape the future of state and local parties.

#### Residential Sorting

Americans are increasingly choosing to live among people like themselves. This trend is most striking in statistics tracking racial and income-based housing segregation, but the tendency has also spilled over into the political world. Voters are much more likely today to live around people who share their political views than was the case a generation ago.<sup>39</sup>

This transition is strikingly evident by comparing two presidential elections that took place forty years apart. In 1976, Democrat Jimmy Carter defeated incumbent Republican president Gerald Ford by a narrow 50 percent to 48 percent margin in the national vote. As the first panel of Figure 13.3 shows, the election was competitive in most parts of the country outside of the South, which was still heavily Democratic territory at the time. “Landslide” counties, where one candidate won by more than 20 percentage points, were relatively rare. By this standard nearly two-thirds of America’s three thousand counties were politically competitive in the election. The map for the 2008 election, the second panel of Figure 13.3 (page 179), looks strikingly different. In 2008, Democrat Barack Obama beat his Republican opponent John McCain by a slightly larger 53 percent to 46 percent margin, yet in more than half of U.S. counties, the election looked like a landslide for either one of the candidates.

FIGURE 13.3 Comparing “Landslide” Counties in 1976 and 2008

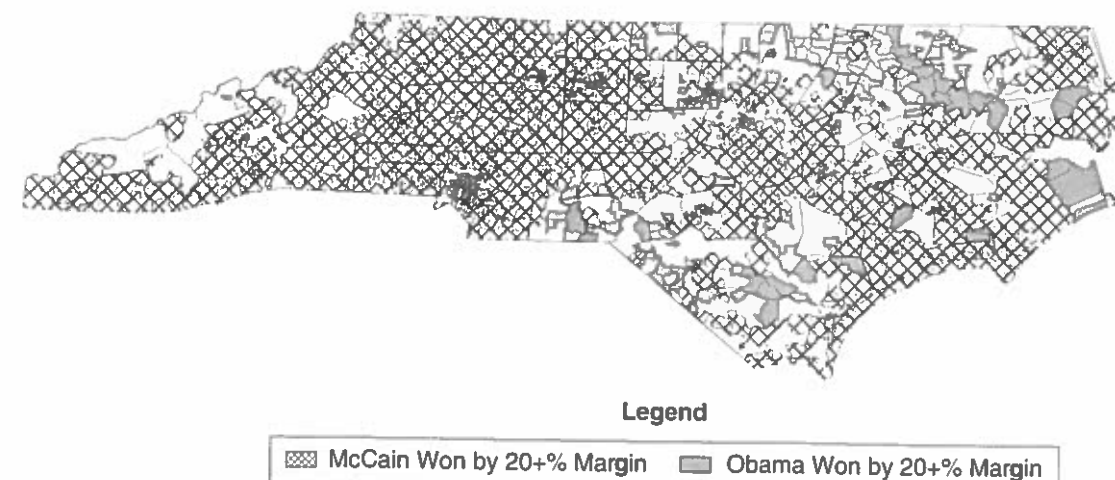


SOURCE: 1976 data is from Brad T. Gomez, Thomas G. Hansford, and George A. Krause, “The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections,” *Journal of Politics* 69 (2007): 649–663; 2008 data is from U.S. Census Bureau.

Even this stark county-level comparison hides greater partisan self-sorting within counties. As wealthy white voters have increasingly left big central cities for distant suburbs, political segregation has reshaped American political geography. This trend is apparent even in North Carolina, one of the most competitive states in the 2008 presidential election. Obama carried the state by less than half of a percentage point—yet Figure 13.4 shows that one of the candidates led the race by more than 20 percentage points in more than 70 percent of North Carolina’s electoral precincts.

Growing partisan self-sorting promises to present important hurdles for local political parties, which continue to base their organizational structure around existing political subdivisions. In 1949, political scientist V. O. Key famously argued that robust two-party competition was a necessary condition for strong political parties.<sup>40</sup> Active competition from political opponents encourages party leaders to set aside their personal differences to focus on defeating a common enemy. Yet today, this key ingredient is present in only a minority of counties and even fewer

FIGURE 13.4 Precinct Breakdown of 2008 Election Results in North Carolina



SOURCE: Stephen Ansolabehere and Jonathan Rodden, “North Carolina Data Files,” <http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/15965>.

precincts. For the minority party, recruiting precinct leaders will likely prove difficult if the precincts contain only a handful of the party's supporters. For the majority party, diminishing electoral threats at the local level may open the door to toxic factionalization and infighting. At the very least, residential sorting will create serious pressure to reform the geographic basis for organizing America's political parties.

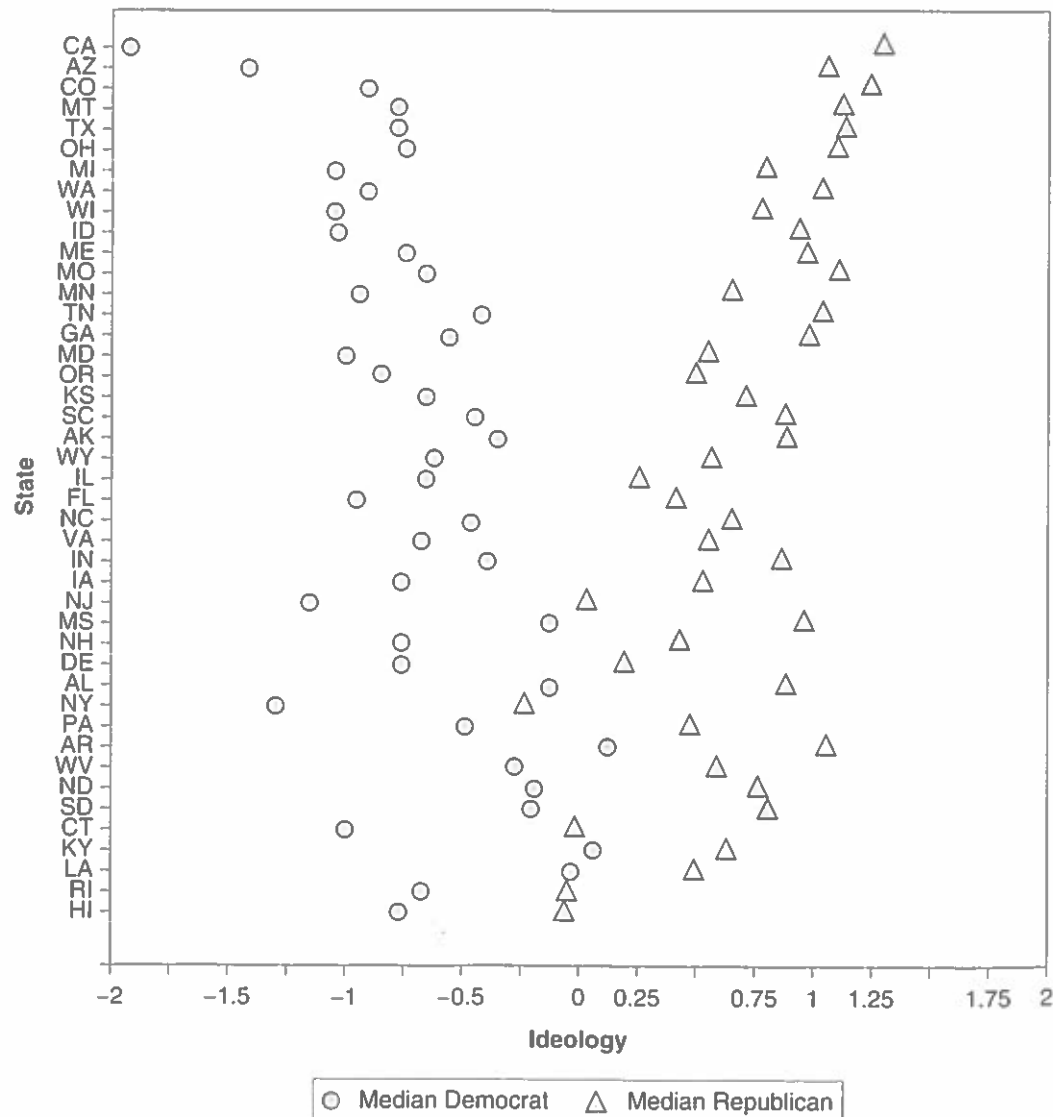
**Partisan Polarization**

In most parts of the country, geographic polarization has also been accompanied by increasing partisan polarization. Yet, as can be seen in Figure 13.5, which plots the ideology of the typical Democrat and Republican serving in the lower

house of state legislatures in 2008, there is still tremendous cross-state variation. The average Republican legislator in Rhode Island was slightly more liberal than the median Democrat serving in the Kentucky statehouse that year, for example. In every state, however, the Democratic Party is substantially to the left of Republican lawmakers.

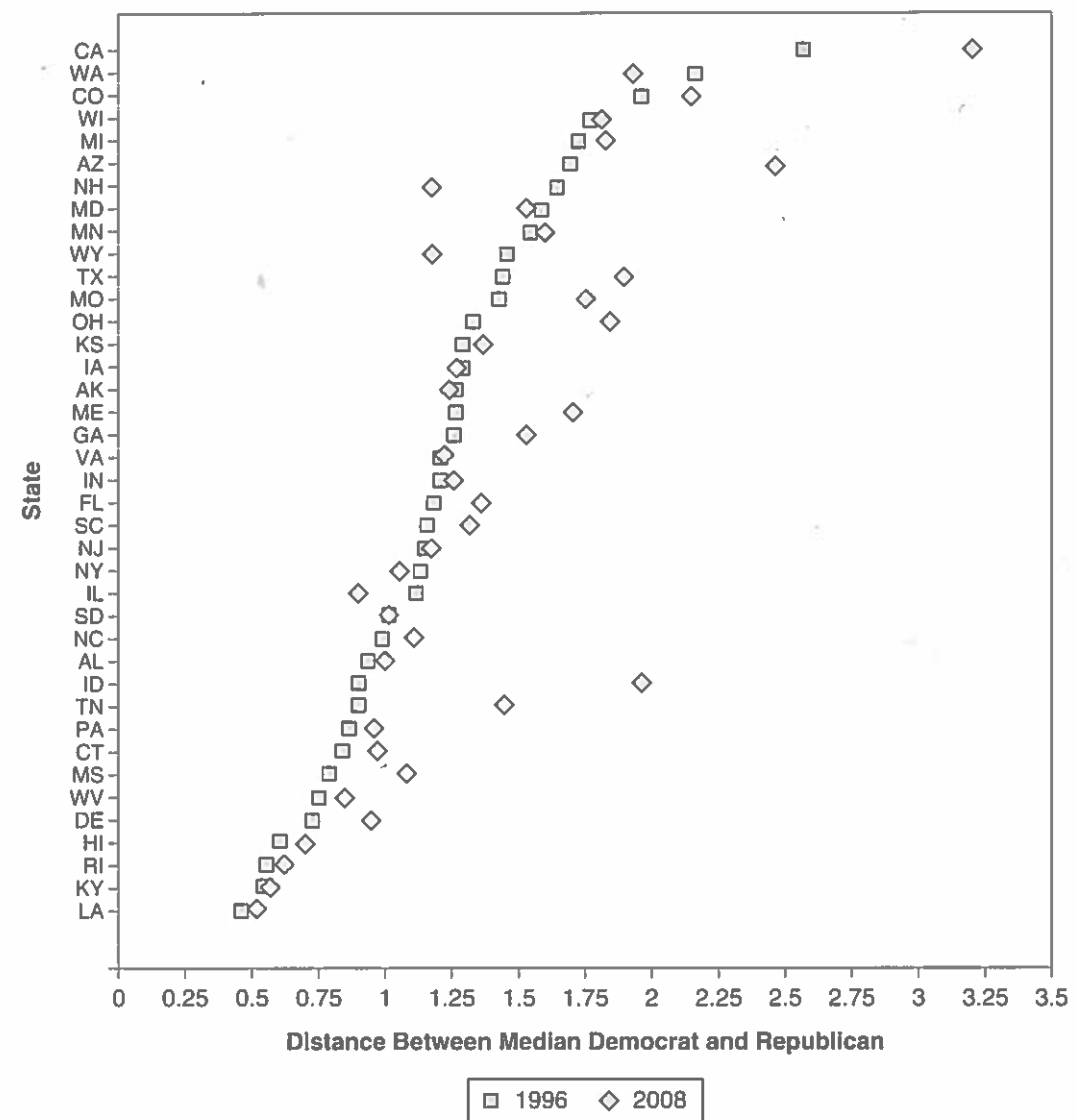
Moreover, the gap between the parties has grown larger in most states in recent years. As can be seen in Figure 13.6, the typical Democratic legislator grew ideologically more distant from the typical Republican legislator in nearly every state for which data are available from 1996 to 2008. Rising partisan polarization has even been detected in Nebraska, the only state in the union that elects its legislators through nonpartisan elections.<sup>11</sup>

FIGURE 13.5 Legislator Ideology in State Lower Houses (2008)



SOURCE: Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty, "Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures," *American Political Science Review* 105 (2011): 530-551.

FIGURE 13.6 Partisan Polarization in State Lower Houses



SOURCE: Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty, "Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures," *American Political Science Review* 105 (2011): 530-551.

In some ways, ideological polarization is a natural consequence of the changes that have taken place in the American political system during the twentieth century. The spread of civil service protection has limited patronage opportunities, eliminating many of the instrumental reasons for why people used to volunteer their time to take part in party organizations. Today, the only people who find party service worth their time are motivated by intrinsic or expressive reasons, so party organizations are increasingly staffed by activists with strong political convictions.

The problem is that the growing polarization at the elite level has not been matched by similar changes among the broader electorate (see Chapter 23). Surveys of party convention goers, for example, consistently find that

delegates take significantly more extreme positions on a wide range of policies, from abortion and the death penalty to government-funded health services, than do rank-and-file party supporters.

Many political reformers have drawn attention to the growing disconnect between party elites and ordinary voters. In California, for example, arguments about growing partisan polarization in the state legislature were central to the campaign for the successful passage of Proposition 14, a constitutional amendment replacing the state's previous system of partisan primaries with a nonpartisan top-two primary. By allowing independent voters to participate in primary elections and choose among candidates of different parties, Proposition 14, its backers hoped, would reduce the

influence of party activists in the nominations process. Observers in other states have also expressed interest in similar reforms.

Although available evidence cautions against concluding that the top-two primary will lead to dramatic changes in the level of partisan polarization—research on California elections has found that activists operating outside of the traditional party organization have been the most important forces driving the growing gap between the two parties<sup>42</sup>—such electoral reforms will likely impact state party organizations in important and unexpected ways.

### Transformation of Campaign Finance

Historically, the ability of parties to supply candidates with campaign funds has been one important source of their influence and, indeed, a critical comparative advantage over



In the twenty-first century, the major parties have recognized that their future political survival depends on developing partisan ties with new immigrant groups. In this photograph, a new voter registers at a Democratic Party booth at a celebration marking Mexican Independence Day, September 14, 2008, in Denver, Colorado. Colorado was an important swing state in the 2008 presidential election.

SOURCE: Photo by John Moore/Getty Images

other political actors seeking to sway elections. Since the early twentieth century, federal law prohibited both corporations and labor unions from spending their general treasury funds on political campaigns. (During the modern era, both have been free to use some of their own money to set up PACs to solicit contributions from their employees and members.) This comparative advantage was eliminated in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), when the Supreme Court freed corporate entities to directly spend their money on electoral activities.<sup>43</sup> While it is too early to discern the full impact of *Citizens United* on national politics, the decision appears unlikely to create an existential crisis for state and local parties. This is because roughly half of all states already allowed corporations and labor unions to play some role in their electoral processes prior to the decision.

Other recent changes in campaign finance laws, however, will likely impact state and local party organizations in much more direct ways. Passed in 1974, the Federal Election Campaign Act enacted strict limits on how much money political parties could contribute to candidates running for national political office. But the law included an important exception: national parties could raise unlimited money if they transferred these funds to their state and local affiliates to be used on general party-building activities, such as voter registration and mobilization efforts, that did not target specific candidates. Over the course of the next three decades, national parties raised hundreds of millions of dollars in this form of unregulated “soft money,” much of it flowing to state and local organizations and strengthening them in the process.

This downward flow was reduced dramatically through the passage of the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), which eliminated the soft-money loophole. The substantial decline in the amount of subventions in the post-BCRA era has had an important impact on state parties, which have dramatically cut back on their advertising spending. It appears, however, that BCRA has so far had a much smaller impact on state and local parties’ grassroots political activities and get-out-the-vote efforts.<sup>44</sup>

### Demographic Revolution

Perhaps the greatest unknown facing party leaders is the coming demographic transition in American politics. The Pew Research Center has estimated that by 2020, nonwhite voters will account for more than a third of the electorate; by 2060, minorities will represent six out of every ten voters. Most of this growth will be driven by immigration and the increasing number of Latino and Asian voters.<sup>45</sup>

The growing diversity of the American electorate may, at first, appear to be a boon for party leaders. After all, America’s big-city machines were built primarily on the support of Irish immigrants and survived on the basis of votes

from a number of other immigrant groups. Besides the Irish, however, many machines struggled to establish lasting ties with other minority groups. In New York, Mayor La Guardia came to power by defeating his Tammany Hall-backed opponent in large part due to electoral support from the city’s Jewish and Italian voters.<sup>46</sup> The defection of African American voters also helped precipitate the collapse of the Chicago Daley machine.<sup>47</sup>

In more recent years, both the Democratic and Republican parties have struggled to establish lasting bonds with new immigrant groups. Public opinion surveys of

Latinos and Asians suggest that these groups have not adopted the same kinds of strong partisan identities that characterize most white and African American voters.<sup>48</sup> In some major cities, party leaders and incumbent elected officials have actively fought the political incorporation of these and other newcomers, seeing them as a threat to their political dominance.<sup>49</sup> Whether party leaders can successfully adapt their strategies to respond to the changing composition of the American electorate will largely determine how relevant political parties will remain for state and local politics in the twenty-first century.

### NOTES

1. In some big cities, the city committee serves this function. In some northeastern states, the township committees serve in place of the county organs.
2. Frank J. Sorauf, *Party Politics in America*, 4th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 74.
3. In some states, incumbent governors also exercise tremendous influence in party activities by virtue of their public office and high-profile position.
4. The stratarchy concept is introduced and discussed in Samuel J. Eldersveld and Hanes Walton, *Political Parties in American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).
5. Robert J. Huckshorn, *Party Leadership in the States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 202–203.
6. Dennis R. Judd and Todd Swanson, *City Politics*, 8th ed. (New York: Longman, 2011), 50.
7. Arthur T. Hadley, *The Empty Polling Booth* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978), 61.
8. At the end of the twentieth century, many emerging democracies took on many of the same organizational characteristics as American machines, something observers of comparative politics have called “clientelistic” politics. See Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
9. For a more in-depth discussion of how nineteenth-century social and economic conditions created an environment ideal for the emergence of machine politics, see Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1957).
10. See C. K. Yearley, *Money Machines: The Breakdown and Reform of Governmental and Party Finance* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1970).
11. David R. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 91.
12. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics*.
13. *Ibid.*
14. See Darin Dewitt, “Senators as Party Builders in Antebellum America,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2012.
15. This continues to be true even today. In 2011, the Census Bureau counted a total of 12 million full-time-equivalent workers

in the employ of local government, compared to 4.4 million at the state level.

16. Malcolm E. Jewell and David M. Olson, *American State Political Parties and Elections* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1982), chap. 3.

17. See Richard Franklin Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 2004; Erik J. Engstrom, “The Rise and Decline of Turnout in Congressional Elections: Electoral Institutions, Competition, and Strategic Mobilization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 2: 373–386.

18. See Chandler Davidson and Luis Ricardo Fraga, “Slating Groups as Parties in a ‘Nonpartisan’ Setting,” *Western Political Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1988): 373–390.

19. Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

20. See Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

21. Jessica Trounstine, *Political Monopolies in American Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

22. William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (New York: Penguin, 1963).

23. Olle Folke, Shigeo Hirano, and James M. Snyder Jr., “Patronage and Elections in U.S. States,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (2011): 567–585.

24. *Elrod v. Burns* 427 U.S. 347 (1976); *Rutan v. Republican Party of Illinois* 497 U.S. 62 (1990).

25. *Reynolds v. Sims*, 377 U.S. 533 (1964).

26. Gary W. Cox and Jonathan N. Katz, “Why Did the Incumbency Advantage in the U.S. House Elections Grow?” *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 2 (1996): 478–497.

27. Cornelius P. Cotter, James L. Gibson, John F. Bibby, and Robert J. Huckshorn, *Party Organizations in American Politics* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 22.

28. Cotter et al., *Party Organizations in American Politics*.

29. John Frensdreis and Alan R. Gitelson, “Local Parties in the 1990s: Spokes in a Candidate-Centered Wheel,” in *The State of the Parties*, 3rd ed., ed. John C. Green and Daniel M. Shea (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 135–153.

30. Cotter et al., *Party Organizations in American Politics*, 22.

31. Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 277.

32. Sorauf, *Party Politics in America*, 71.

33. Paul Peterson, *City Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Paul E. Peterson and Mark Rom, “American



Federalism, Welfare Policy, and Residential Choices," *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 3 (1989): 711–728.

34. Malcolm E. Jewell and Sarah M. Morehouse, *Political Parties and Elections in the American States*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 181.

35. J. Eric Oliver and Shang E. Ha, "Vote Choice in Suburban Elections," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (2007): 393–408.

36. Susan Welch and Timothy Bledsoe, *Urban Reform and Its Consequences: A Study in Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

37. Willis D. Hawley, *Nonpartisan Elections and the Case for Party Politics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), chap. 7.

38. Thad Kousser, "The Politics of Discretionary Medicaid Spending, 1980–1993," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 27, no. 4 (2002): 639–671; Chris Tausanovitch and Christopher Warshaw, "Measuring Constituent Policy Preferences in Congress, State Legislatures, and Cities," *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 330–342.

39. Political segregation is documented in Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

40. V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Knopf, 1949).

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42. See Seth Masket, *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

43. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

44. Raymond J. LaRaja, "State and Local Parties," in *Election After Reform: Money, Politics, and the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act*, ed. Michael J. Malbin (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

45. Paul Taylor, "Politics and Race: Looking Ahead to 2060," Pew Research Center, May 10, 2013, [www.pewresearch.org/2013/05/10/politics-and-race-looking-ahead-to-2060](http://www.pewresearch.org/2013/05/10/politics-and-race-looking-ahead-to-2060).

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48. Zoltan Hajnal and Taeku Lee, *Why Americans Don't Join the Party: Race, Immigration, and the Failure (of Political Parties) to Engage the Electorate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

49. For the case of the New York Democratic Party and Dominican immigrants, see Reuel R. Rogers, *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity, Exception, or Exit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For the case of Latinos in New York, see Michael Jones-Correa, *Between Two Nations: The Political Predicament of Latinos in New York City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

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# The Transformation of the National Party Committees

Daniel J. Galvin

One of the most conspicuous changes in U.S. party politics over the last hundred years has involved a major shift in the forms and functions of the two national party committees. Whereas both the Republican National Committee (RNC) and the Democratic National Committee (DNC) once consisted primarily of ad hoc networks of party notables who emerged every four years to issue calls for nominating conventions and conduct presidential campaigns, both parties' structures and activities have undergone a dramatic transformation over the past several decades. Structurally, they have become increasingly institutionalized, with continuously operating headquarters, permanent staff, organizational functional specification, and myriad rules and routines to structure internal party behavior. Operationally, they have developed significant fund-raising, data analysis, communications, research, and other election-oriented capacities that enable them to support party candidates in their electoral campaigns. Although each party committee changed on a different timetable—the RNC began to develop these new campaign support capacities in the 1930s, the DNC did not do the same until the 1980s—by the dawn of the twenty-first century, both could be described as veritable "parties in service" to their candidates and elected officeholders.<sup>1</sup>

This transformation has had important implications for the role national parties play in American politics. Although the national committees maintained a minimal institutional presence throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they played a central and significant role in structuring the presidential selection process and in running national campaigns. Those activities enabled them to ensure that party nominees would serve the party collectively and subordinate their individual ambitions to the needs of the whole. Today, the national committees are more bureaucratized and active (or "busy," to use John Coleman's memorable descriptor) than ever before, but their relationship to party candidates has been reversed.<sup>2</sup> Candidates no longer serve the party—the party serves the candidates.

Indeed, many candidates for public office do well without ever interacting with their national party committee, and the national committees have not run a presidential campaign since 1956. The contemporary DNC and RNC are best understood as playing the role of support staff or campaign vendors: they provide resources and services to those candidates who seek their help. Ironically, then, despite becoming more permanent institutions with enhanced organizational capacities, they have moved from the center to the periphery of national politics. Power has shifted toward the candidates themselves, as well as to interest groups, activists, political action committees (PACs), the media, and even consultants.

How should this major shift in the institutional forms and functions of the national committees be explained? As with most complex historical developments, many factors were at play, and many explanations are plausible. Political scientists often describe the transformation of the national party committees as a case of party adaptation. This is the notion that parties will internalize shifts in their broader political environment and alter their structures and operations accordingly. For example, according to party adaptation theory, parties will adopt new technologies as they emerge and use them in new ways; legal changes (e.g., new campaign finance rules) will be accommodated through new behaviors; and demographic changes, shifts in voting patterns, and new voter demands will prompt parties to develop more appropriate electoral strategies (e.g., when the median voter moves, the parties will follow her). Put somewhat differently, when party actors encounter new problems, they are expected to design new structures and strategies that help them to solve those problems.

Although adaptation may be a reasonable description of what happened, as an explanation it leaves much to be desired. At best, it is "functionalist"—it assumes that environmental pressures *select for* particular institutional arrangements without considering why those arrangements (rather than others) were chosen or whether they might have developed in ways that were unanticipated by their