Young Voters, the Obama Net-roots Campaign, and the Future of Local Party Organizations

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Introduction

Nearly 20 years ago, when the first State of the Parties Conference was held, the fate of party politics in the United States was uncertain. In-government structures seemed feeble and levels of party identification were at historic lows. In 1992, Ross Perot, a political neophyte and certainly non-traditional candidate, was able to pull a stunning 19 percent of the popular vote from the major party candidates. As noted by the editors of the proceedings from the conference, "The rise of Ross Perot, deep divisions within the governing coalitions, and the continued decline of voter partisanship all point to a weakened state of the parties" (Shea and Green 1994, 1).

And yet, party *organizations* seemed to be headed in a different direction. Those same editors noted, "The patters are confused, however, by countertrends, [primarily] continued expansion of party organizations" (Ibid.). Mounting evidence suggested that national, state and to some degree local party committees were not only surviving, but perhaps thriving in the new environment. The editors concluded that the party system was "in a state of flux" (Ibid).

Today, few would suggest the parties in America are in flux. Political parties have recaptured their prominent place in American politics. The movement away from party identification--which began in earnest in the 1970s--has turned rather dramatically in another direction. Several indicators imply that both 2004 and 2008 were two of the most partisan elections on record. In 2004, for instance, some 93 percent of Republicans and 89 percent of Democrats voted for candidates of their respective parties; unprecedented figures since the use of polling (Reichely 2007, 16). Measures of party unity in Congress and in state legislatures have also increased. In recent years, party unity scores have generally been higher in both the House and Senate than at any other period since World War II.

Some scholars have suggested that our current system mirrors other robust party periods in American history. A. James Reichley, a lead scholar of party history and key participant at each of the State of the Parties conferences, suggested, "[C]ontemporary political parties appear to come close, at least structurally, to the model proposed by the famous 1950 APSR report…" (2007, 16). While others might be a bit less upbeat, there is little doubt that parties infuse most aspects of contemporary American politics.

The Obama "net-root" phenomenon seems to have added fuel to the resurgence fire. One of the glaring paradoxes of the organizational growth period of the 1980s and 1990s was alienation of voters. John Coleman wrote of this issue at the first SOP conference: "Though today many political scientists do indeed scoff at the public's discontent, suggesting that the public is either spoiled, ignorant, manipulated by demagogues, or all three, the negative mood is reflected in turnout, voting behavior and attitudes toward parties" (1994, 314). In short, organizational expansion seemed to be occurring at the same time that growing numbers of voters shunned partisan labels and the entire election process. Bushels of survey data and turnout figures hinted at deep problems in the electorate. But recent evidence suggests a growing, intense allegiance to party labels and deep engagement in the electoral process..

The issue of young voters was also a major concern during the organizational resurgence period. Their distance from--and often disdain for-- politics has been one of the most worrisome aspects of American politics in the last few decades. In 2000, the American Political Science Association Taskforce on Civic Education highlighted the gravity of this issue when it noted, "Current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States" (2000). Yet, the change in young voter engagement, discussed in detail below, has been stunning. Many

scholars and pundits have suggested that the efforts by the Obama team, in particular, have reinvigorated localized politics, as well as a passion for engagement among America's youth.

But is it really the case that the contemporary party system mirrors other periods in American history? Because parties seem increasingly active and influential, does that imply strengthening of the party *system* when it comes to local structures and individual-level involvement? The Obama net-root campaign propelled localized activism, but will this translate into more vibrant local parties? Will youth political involvement be sustained beyond the dynamic candidacy of Barack Obama?

This paper will argue that recent elections have triggered a dramatic change in the electoral system, affording party organizations a unique opportunity to draw all citizens, but especially young citizens, into the party rubric in meaningful ways for decades to come. National, state, and local party committees have a rare opportunity to swell their ranks with dedicated, informed, active participants, but they will only be able to do so if they shift their approach from a rational, candidate-service pole to a more responsible, policy-based model. How party leaders respond to these new conditions will define the nature of the American party system for decades to come.

Party Identification and Party Unity in Government

One of the most pronounced changes in party politics has been the recent resurgence of party identification. There is scant room in this paper to recount the turbulent love affair that Americans have had with party identification. It might suffice to say that not long after a generation of scholars cut their teeth on *The American Voter* (Campbell, et. al 1960), which placed party identification at the heart of one's vote choice (indeed, one's electoral being), did things begin to change. About a decade later the authors of *The Changing American Voter* (Nie,

Verba and Petrocik 1976) drew our attention to a growing uneasiness towards party labels and to the entire electoral process. They wrote that voters in the mid-1970s were "more detached from political parties than at any time in the past forty years, and deeply dissatisfied with the political process" (1976, 1). A few years later, Ladd and Hadley suggested much the same: "Evidence of a weakening of party loyalties is abundant….We are becoming a nation of electoral transients" (1978, 312). Survey data from the American National Election Study captures this transformation: Whereas in the 1950s, only about seven percent of Americans considered themselves "independent," by the late 1970s that figure had jumped to 15 percent. Similarly, in the 1950s roughly 36 percent of Americans were labeled "strong partisans," but by the late 1970s this was down to just over 20 percent. Corresponding increases in split ticket voting were evident —well illustrated by the robust number of so-called Reagan Democrats in the early 1980s. Simply stated, steadfast allegiance was out of vogue in the 1980s.

Scores of works during the last two decades have sought to fine-tune our understanding of partisanship. Warren Miller, one of the authors of *The American Voter*, teamed up with J. Merrill Shanks to write, *The New American Voter* (1996). This careful, impressive body of work suggested, among other things, that party identification outside the South was likely a bit more robust than had been previously believed. It also highlighted an important trend – the non-alignment and non-engagement of young voters. Again, a quick look at ANES data is revealing. Whereas in the 1950s the only about seven percent of the youngest voters were "pure" independents, by the 1990s that figure had jumped to 19 percent. Nearly two-thirds of young voters in the 1950s and 1960s regularly read news stories about elections. By the 1990s that figure had shrunk to less than one-half.

The story of in-government structures during the past generation has been a bit different.

A rather dramatic decline in party unity in Congress stretches back to about 1944 (Brady, Cooper and Hurley, 1979, 385). Party unity scores in Congress were quite modest in the 1960s. For example, by 1969, only about one-third of roll call votes resulted in a majority of one party opposing a majority of the other. Brady, Cooper and Hurley (1979) suggest that party unity increases when the number of first- and second-year legislators is high. The logic is that newly arrived members of Congress are more susceptible to party cue than are seasoned members. And given that the number of long-term legislators skyrocketed during this period, a corresponding dip in party unity seemed to make sense. A second view is that members simply reflect the policy preference of constituents. Simply stated, southern Democratic legislators – the so called Boweevils, reflected the concerns of conservative constituents, especially in matters related to civil rights. Other scholars point to the relationship between party leadership on party unity. Ronald Peters, Jr. writes of this period, "The Democrats [,who were in charge during most of this time,] were dedicated to egalitarian principles of internal governance and the party's internal divisions discouraged the centralization of legislative control…" (1990, 93).

Party unity scores began to increase at nearly precisely the same time party identification began to plummet. By the 1980s, that same measure of party unity had reached 70 percent of congressional roll call votes for both parties, and by 1994 it had topped 80 percent of votes. By 1996, GOP party unity had reached a stunning 87 percent. In recent years, levels have somewhat dipped, but Pomper's claim that the "congressional parties now are ideologically cohesive bodies" (2003, 276) remains valid. There is even evidence to suggest members of Congress are more willing than in the past to help other party members win election: "Members of Congress are increasingly cooperating to elect fellow partisans by providing financial assistance to candidates and party committees" (Dwyer,et. al. 2007, 110).

How could party unity scores increase while party identification declined? A core finding in the Miller and Shanks volume is likely at the root of this paradox. As voters moved away from partisan labels, and as young voters stayed on the sidelines, the composition of the primary election electorate changed. This small group of hard-core partisans selected like-minded congressional candidates, who felt obliged to toe the ideological line. And of course sitting legislators became increasingly worried about the wrath of primary voters – and they shifted their voting accordingly. Arlen Specter was quite candid in his explanation of why he would switch to the Democratic Party in 2009, after four decades as a Republican: "I am unwilling to have my twenty-nine year Senate record judged by the Pennsylvania Republican primary electorate."

The Third Leg: Party Organizations

Party organizational resurgence can be aptly dubbed one of the great comeback stories of American politics. Following the disruptions of the 1960s and 1970s, most scholars had assumed that party committees were headed for extinction; interest groups were poised to dominate the policy process, and PACs and campaign consultants ruled the roost during elections. Broder's oft-cited line "the party's over" became the traditional wisdom.

By the 1980s, however, it was clear that American parties were "resilient creatures" (Bibby 1990, 27). Both parties were developing campaign-centered branch organizations, revamping their internal operations, and devising innovative ways to raise huge sums of cash. Additionally, the number of full-time party employees, the size of their operating budgets, their average financial contribution to individual candidates, and the range of services provided had vastly increased (Cotter, et al. 1984, Frendries et al., 1994, Aldrich 1999, to note just a few).

At the national level, the data could not have been clearer. There were numerous

indicators, including the growing list of services parties were providing candidates (see, for example, Herrnson 1988, 1994). Perhaps the best indicator of party vitality was party finance. Resurgent parties should have more money and by the late 1980s they surely did. The pace of growth was staggering, even when considering inflation.. As noted by one observer a few years ago, "the growth chart for this political 'industry' exhibits an ebullience more familiar in Silicon Valley" (Putnam 2000, 37).

This transformation brought with it a collective sigh of relief because it was assumed the new focus would resonate throughout the political system. Herrnson's book, *Party Campaigning in the 1980s* (1988), was quite sanguine about the new party model. Among other things, the institutionalized party system would foster a stronger, more nationally oriented sense of party identification among voters; lead to party-centered television commercials, radio advertisements and press releases; strengthen the party's policy-based image; create a large group of new-style partisans–ones who were more committed to support a party than are traditional party identifiers; and make elections more competitive (1988, 126-7).

A number of scholars, including the author of this paper, were skeptical that by-products of this sort were possible. One of the first scholars to call attention to the limits of what he dubbed the "new orthodoxy of party resurgence" was John Coleman (1994). A striking anomaly was the growth of organizations while the public had become increasingly skeptical about the relevance of political parties to governing. A particularly troublesome issue was anemic voter turnout. A party system dubbed resurgent or revitalized would *not* witness sustained declining participation, Coleman argued.

A few years later, in a piece dubbed "Schattschneider's Dismay; Strong Parties and Alienated Voters," the author of this paper (Shea 2003), explored individual-level data and

suggested average citizens had been left out of the organizational revival process. If party organizations were more active than in the past, why were average citizens *less* likely to be involved in party activities? Measures of split-ticket voting, electoral participation, trust and efficacy all seemed to underscore the limits of the resurgence perspective. Many forces had pushed citizens away from the process, but the "reinvigorated" parties seemed incapable of reversing this trend. "Party scorecards tally only wins and losses after election day, rather than any long-term cultivation of voters" (Shea 2003, 229).

Party scholars were confronted with yet another paradox: party *organizations* were experiencing a period of dramatic resurgence, while *citizens* shunned party and electoral politics. Joseph Schlesinger argued that changes in party-in-the-electorate helped explain the growth of party organizations. "It is the very weakness of partisan identification among the voters which is a stimulus for the growth of partisan organizations." (1985, 1167) Given that split- ticket voting, a good measure of electoral volatility, hit its peak immediately prior to the organizational buildup of the 1980s, this argument seemed logical. Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, made a similar claim: "Since their 'consumers' are tuning out from politics, parties have to work harder and spend much more, competing furiously to woo voters, workers, and donations, and to do that they need a (paid) organizational infrastructure" (2000, 40). John Aldrich (2000) argued that the growth of electoral competition in the South (declining Democratic loyalties) during the last two decades has led to the creation of aggressive, vibrant party structures.

Another closely related supposition was dubbed the "counteracting model." From this vantage, organizational resurgence has been so successful that the parties have pulled voters away from their partisan predisposition (Cotter et al. 1984, 103). The causality is inverted from the Schlesinger model. While declining party loyalties are not a positive sign, it was more than

counteracted by renewed party organizations. As noted by Frendreis, Gibson and Vertz, "[f]urther analysis should be mindful of the role that party organizations can play in counteracting declines in areas like mass attitudinal attachments" (1990, 233).

Parties and Young Voters

Another perspective that may help explain the paradox merges trends highlighted by Miller and Shanks (1996) with some of the work of Shea (2003) and Shea and Green (2007). Perhaps "revitalized" party organizations have turned young voters away from party politics. That is, conceivably the new and revived party committees were pushing a generation out of the electoral process

First, let us consider some additional data regarding youth political engagement. When 18-year-olds were first guaranteed the right to vote, in 1972, about 50 percent did so. By the 2000 election that figure had dropped to just 35 percent. In midterm elections, the figure for those under 25 in the 1970s was about 40 percent, but by the end of the century it was hovering around 20 percent. Clearly, young Americans were staying away from the voting booths.

The problem ran much deeper than nonvoting, however. According to the American National Election Study, the number of young Americans (younger than 25) who were "very much" interested in campaigns stood at roughly 30 percent from the 1950s through the 1980s. By 2000, the figure had dropped to just 6 percent. In 2002, 67 percent of all Americans cared "very much" or "pretty much" about the outcome of congressional elections in their area, but just 47 percent of those younger than 25 felt the same way.

A poll of Americans in their late teens and early twenties conducted by the Pew Research Center found that less than 50 percent were thinking "a great deal about" elections in 2000. This compared to about two-thirds in 1992. Roughly 40 percent suggested that it did not matter who

was elected president in 2000, twice as many as in 1992 (as cited in Boyte 2003, 86). The UCLA study, "Most of the Nation's College Freshman Embrace the Internet as an Educational Tool," drew attention to lackluster political participation. In 1966, some 58 percent agreed that "keeping up to date with political affairs" is very important, but by 1999 that figure had dropped to 26 percent. Only 14 percent of freshmen said they frequently discussed politics, compared with the high of 30 percent in 1968.

Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* summed up the issue this way:

> Very little of the net decline in voting is attributable to individual change, and virtually all of it is generational…[Moreover,] declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life. Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself. It is not just from the voting booth that Americans are increasingly AWOL (2000, 35).

It is important to point out, however, that other data revealed that the same young Americans who were abstaining from politics were giving generously of their energy, time and money to their schools, communities, and nation. A report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), for example, suggested young Americans were volunteering at significantly *higher* rates than were older Americans. Moreover, the frequency of pitching-in had increased: In 1990, some 65 percent of college freshmen reported volunteering in high school, and by 2003 that figure had risen to 83 percent. Rates of volunteer work for those under 25 were twice as high as for those over 55. A turned-off generation?

This leads to the question why a generation so eager to be involved in their community would refrain from politics? Scholar Bill Galston suggested a plausible answer: "Most young people characterize their volunteering as an alternative to official politics, which they see as corrupt, ineffective, and unrelated to their deeper ideals. They have confidence in personalized acts with consequences they can see for themselves; they have no confidence in collective acts, especially those undertaken through public institutions whose operations they regard as remote, opaque, and virtually impossible to control" (2001, 224). In other words, young Americans were disengaged from the policy process because they felt marginalized within the political process. Might they have felt marginalized from *party* politics?

But is there any evidence to suggest revitalized parties have acted in ways that might have turned off young voters? Consider the following possibilities (Shea 2009):

* *Campaign Finance Shenanigans*: Given the public's uneasiness about excessive money in the political process, and also given that money was jet fuel for revitalized party organizations, perhaps many young Americans equated "party politics" with corrupt politics. To be sure, parties in the 1980s and 1990s bent the limits of finance regulations and trunk loads of survey evidence suggested the public's cynicism (Lehmann May 12, 1997).

***** *Going Negative, Often*: While we know that negative campaigning does not demobilize the electorate, it might have a lasting negative impact on young andlikely less partisan voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). Party organizations have shown an increased receptiveness to negative, attack-style electioneering in the 1980s and 1990s (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990). During the waning days of the 1998 election, for example, both parties

spent record breaking amounts on “issue advocacy,” ads, nearly all of which were negative. This led one observer to call them “issue attacks” (Abramson, Oct. 14, 1998).

* *Scandal Politics*: Theodore Lowi has argued that “party leaders have responded to gridlock not with renewed efforts to mobilize the electorate but with a strategy of scandal” (1996, 176). The list of examples in the 1990s of where parties responded to opposition with personal attacks, rather than policy alternatives is hefty (see also Ginsberg and Shefter 1990). Might “politics by other means” turn off young voters?

* *Electoral Demobilization*: Given that party operatives in the 1990s were some of the best-trained new-style campaign consultants, we can imagine that they would pursue new-style tactics and strategies. One such approach is to reduce the size of the electorate to highlight the importance of targeting schemes. A smaller electorate is more manageable, and this would not be the first time in American history that party leaders sanctioned, if not endorsed, strategies to shrink the size of the electorate (Piven and Cloward 2000).

***** *The Breakdown of Party Tickets*: In the waning weeks of the 1996 presidential race, for instance, the National Republican Campaign Committee ran a series of television advertisements that suggested to voters they might feel better about supporting Bill Clinton if they also voted for a Republican for the House. Bob Dole was furious about the commercials, but notions of tickets seemed out of fashion–even for party operatives. Two years later, Charles Rengel, chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, berated Roy Romer, then the General Chair of the DNC, for hoarding money for Al Gore’s 2000 race. George W. Bush, the GOP establishment candidate from the beginning, refused to campaign with other members of his ticket in 2000.

* *Sacrificing Local Party Structures*: Finally, the locus of party rejuvenation has been primarily at the national and state levels. As the party system moved from the local structures, it is conceivable that voters found less of a connection to the entire electoral system. Putnam suggests this shift may have wide repercussions. "There may be nearly as many fans in the political stadium nowadays, but they are not watching an amateur or even a semipro match. Whether the slick professional game they have become accustomed to watching is worth the increasingly high admission is another matter" (2000, 40).

Another part of the puzzle would be how *party leaders* perceive the problem of youth disengagement, and if they are doing anything about it. In the fall of 2003, Shea and Green conducted a telephone survey of 805 local party leaders with the hope of better understanding the relationship between local party committees and young voters. Their findings, published in *The Fountain of* Youth (2007) reveal that party leaders of both parties overwhelmingly agree with the statement, "The lack of political engagement by young people is a serious problem." (Only 60 party leaders – some 7.5 percent -- disagreed with the statement.) The chairs were also optimistic that local parties can make a difference: 39 percent of respondents strongly agreed and 54 percent agreed (93 percent overall) with the statement, "local parties can make a big difference getting young people involved in politics."

But were the respondents' party committees working to attract young voters? An open-ended question asked, "Are there demographic groups of voters that are currently important to the *long-term* success of your local party." "Young voters" (defined as 18 to 25 years of age) were mentioned by just eight percent of party leaders. Senior citizens were mentioned nearly three times as often, even though the question addresses the "long-term success of the party." Respondents were asked to think of a second group and "young voters" were mentioned by only

12 percent of the respondents. Finally, respondents were asked a third time to mention an important demographic group for the long-term success of the party, at which point18 percent mentioned younger voters. In all, local party leaders were given three opportunities to suggest younger voters are important to the long-term success of their party, but barely one-third did so.

Why would so many party chairs suggest that youth disengagement is a serious problem and that their efforts have the potential to make a difference, yet not consider this group's importance for the long-term success of the party? Clearly, a local party might consider numerous groups to be of critical importance to their efforts. Minority voters, union members, and women, for example, were frequently mentioned by Democratic leaders, and blue-collar workers and middle-class citizens were often noted by Republic leaders—just to mention a few. Yet, census estimates are that younger voters make up only 14 percent of the electorate, and given the importance of political socialization the lack of attention to young voters seemed puzzling.

One of the criticisms leveled against the revitalized, service-oriented parties has been that they are short-sighted; winning the election at hand has become more important than developing a long-term, broad-based following. This is precisely Coleman's line of attack (1993). Shea and Green speculate that party leaders perceive it to be less costly to switch the preferences of undecided existing voters than to mobilize non-voters (young voters). The survey asked which of the following should be given priority by local political parties, "helping candidates win elections or helping voters develop attachments to the parties." A sizable majority—some 63 percent—suggested helping candidates is more important than building loyal supporters. It queried the party chairs on how much effort they put into non-electoral activities—that is, programs that occur during off-election periods. A full 70 percent of respondents reported that their county committees spend less than 10 percent of their time on such activities. All this

would seem to suggest party leaders are focused on winning elections, but less attuned to long-term party development – and therefore less interested in drawing young voters into the party rubric. underscore a rational approach to local party activity.

* * *

In summary, for much of the past several decades the party system appeared to be in a state of flux. Party identification began a long steady decline by the1970s, while party unity in Congress began an equally impressive increase at the same time. Party organizations responded to the challenge of candidate-centered politics with impressive resources and a new approach, but many voters, especially young voters, seem to have been left on the sidelines.

Parties and the 2004 and 2008 Turnaround

And then things changed. The decline in partisanship and overall interest and faith in the electoral process took a dramatic turn. Our reservoir of voter survey data only extends back to the late 1940s, so it is risky making sweeping historical generalizations, but it is probably safe to say that the 2000 election triggered one of the most significant transformations in American electoral history.

Let us start with turnout. As Figure 1 notes, turnout for all Americans continued to sag throughout much of 1980s and 1990s (with the modest exception of 1992), but after the 2000 election there was a dramatic rebound. This was especially true for young Americans, as their turnout jumped 11 percent between 2000 and 2004.

Figure 1 – Turnout – About here

Now let us consider a sampling of data from the American National Election Study, as noted in the following seven graphs:

List of Figures 2 – 7 here. * Updated as the 2008 NES data is made available

As to why there has been such a dramatic turnaround, theories abound. Thomas Patterson, of Harvard's Vanishing Voter Project, points to the importance of issues and voter concerns. "Americans historically have voted in higher numbers when the nation confronts big issues. That was as true in the late 1800s and 1930s as it has been more recently. The meltdown in the financial markets [in the fall of 2008] likely confirmed Americans' belief that 2008 was a watershed election" (Nov. 6, 2008). Another possibility is that the competitiveness and importance of the 2000 election drew new participants into the process. David Hill writes, "National elections in the United States since 2000 have been very competitive and thus it is possible that the cohorts entering the electorate during this period will create a footprint…and turnout will increase in future elections" (2006, 5). Still another possibility may be changing attitudes toward government and the electoral process. According to NES data, the percentage of Americans suggesting that the outcome of elections do *not* make public officials listen to the voters shrank from a high of 20 percent in 1984, to just seven percent in 2004. In fact, the 2004 figure matches the lowest level in the survey's history.

Still another possibility relates to the number of persuadable voters. Throughout much of the last three decades about one-fifth of the electorate "knew all along" who they would vote for. That figure jumped to 33 percent in 2004 (again, using ANES data). Similarly, about seven percent of voters made up their minds on Election Day during the revival period. In 2004, this figure had shrunk to just two percent. This effects voter mobilization in two ways. First, as more and more voters establish voting preference early in the process, the number of voters who struggle with the "costs" of casting an informed vote declines. Second, and more importantly, as election activists confront a predisposed electorate resources are shifted from persuasion to mobilization. If most voters make up their minds well before the election, then it makes sense to

focus on getting the faithful to turn out. This might have been especially important for the mobilization of young voters.

Did party organizations have a hand in this turnaround? One cannot discount the possibility that the activities of the revitalized party organizations finally yielded electorate-centered dividends. Conceivably, the counter acting model, where organizational renewal, spurred by declines in partisanship and voter interest, has swung in the other direction. Perhaps Herrnson's supposition that revitalized parties would create a large group of new-style partisan--voters even more committed to support a party than traditional party identifiers--has been realized.

There is evidence to suggest this might be the case. One of the figures above suggests nearly twice as many voters were contacted by either of the major parties in the 2004 election, than were contacted at any point since NES began measuring this issue (since 1956). Roughly the same finding emerges when respondents are asked about whether anyone contacted them to register to vote.

The Obama Net-Root Effect

What should we make of Barack Obama's historic "ground game?" A reasonable guess is that Obama had four times as many ground troops as did John Kerry or Al Gore. This was especially true in swing states. For example, John Kerry had ten field offices in New Mexico, while Obama had 39. As noted by one observer, "The architects and builders of the Obama field campaign have undogmatically mixed timeless traditions and discipline of good organizing with new technologies of decentralization and self-organization" (Exley, Oct. 8, 2008). Marshall Ganz, a labor organizer who has led training sessions for Obama staff members and volunteers, noted much the same: "They've invested in a civic infrastructure on a scale that has never happened. It's been an investment in the development of thousands of young people

equipped with the skills and leadership ability to mobilize people and in the development of leadership at the local level. It's profound." (UPI.Com, Oct. 12, 2008). Indeed, the reach of the Obama net-root effort was massive. Consider the following (Vargas November 20, 2008) :

- The Obama team e-mail list boasted some 13 million addresses.
- During the course of the campaign they sent some 7,000 different e-mail messages.
- In total, one billion e-mails were sent.
- Over one million people, mostly young, signed up for Obama's text messaging program.
- Supporters received no less than 20 texts per month during the campaign.
- On election day, everyone who signed up for alerts in battleground states received three text reminders to vote.
- Some three million calls were made during the final days of the race using MyBo's virtual phone-banking system.
- Over 5 million people, again mostly young folks, signed up as supporters of Obama on social network sites.
- Over 5 million clicked the "I Voted!" button on Facebook.
- The campaign raised over .5 billion over the internet.

And of course the efforts seem to have paid off. According to a CIRCLE report (November 24, 2008), 64 percent of 18-24 year-olds and 43 percent of 18-29 year-olds were first time voters. This compares to just 11percent of all voters. Also, young voters were most likely to engage in on-line campaign activities supporting Obama on election day. In fact, the margin of victory for Obama from those under 30 was 68 to 32 percent. John McCain actually

received a majority of votes from those over 45. Few were surprised to hear John McCain's daughter, Meghan, remark a few months after the election that the Republican Party was "on the precipice of becoming irrelevant to young people."

Democrat Bill Bradley wrote an insightful op-ed in the *New York Times* a few months after John Kerry lost his bid for the White House (March 30, 2005). He argued that while the Republican Party had focused efforts on structural enhancements, the Democrats had neglected organization with the hopes that a strong leader would resurrect the party. The Democrats have been, he argued, "hypnotized by Jack Kennedy, and the promise of a charismatic leader." The Republicans, on the other hand, "consciously, carefully and single mindedly built an organization based on money, ideas, and action." Did the Obama campaign change this dynamic? Galvin (2008) has argued that while Obama represents that sort of charismatic leader, his team *also* focused extensively on building grassroots organizations in every state. "Indeed, his commitment to rebuilding the Democratic Party [was] not incidental to his candidacy. It [was] seen as a major selling point, something that attract[ed] Democrats to his campaign."

It is a bit early to say with certainty, but most observers suggest the top-down, micro-targeted, television-based model that has dominated American politics since the early 1960s has been transformed—and perhaps even displaced—by the Obama net-root approach. "They have taken the bottom-up campaign and absolutely perfected it," noted Joe Trippi.

While this may all be true, the extent to which these new organizations connected with *existing* party committees is unclear. Obama's ground troops were, for the most part, young, new activists, likely less inclined to merge their efforts with the "establishment." Howard Dean, then Chair of the DNC, noted as much to a gathering of liberal activists in July of 2008: "In my generation, we would have started a political group. The Netroots generation simply goes online to find an affinity group, and if it can't find one, simply starts its own to get things done"

(Trygstad 2008). Many (perhaps most) local party leaders endorsed Hillary Clinton during the nomination contest, and there was lingering animosity between the two camps.

One of the key indicators of how the efforts of the Obama campaign might spill over into party dynamics concerns the lists garnered by the Obama team in 2007 and 2008. The fact that the Obama campaign compiled an email inventory of over 13 million aggressive, active supporters was not lost on the DNC. Would they hold these contacts close to their vest, drawing them out when they believed important, or would they turn them over to the DNC, and to state and local party committees? Put a bit differently, would the Obama net-root campaign be coupled with party building efforts—or would it remain a separate entity, to be used by the President when needed?

We know that shortly after the election Obama lead strategist David Plauffe sent an email to10 million activists soliciting funds to help the DNC retire its 2008 debt. His note stated, "The DNC went into considerable debt to secure victory for Barack and Joe. It took unprecedented resources to staff up all 50 states, train field organizers, and build the technology to reach as many swing voters as possible. It worked. But it also left the DNC in debt. So before we do anything else, we need to help pay for this winning strategy." The success of the note remains unclear. Activities of this kind run a risk, as noted by one commentator on the frequent use of text messaging during the campaign: "By becoming a ubiquitous presence in the digital lives of its supporters, the Obama [team] could become like that friend who I.M's a little too often" (Carr, August 25, 2008).

We also know that Obama's pick for DNC Chair, Governor Tim Kaine of Virginia, has publically stated that he expects the lists to "rolled into the party" for permanent use. Moreover, he intends to use the list to motivate supporters to engage in numerous policy battles. ""We're very focused on the notion that engagement should not just be around contributing or being part

of election cycles. It should be around governance and social change" (Brown, Jan. 22, 2009). It would seem, then, that not only will Obama's efforts aid party coffers, but they may also bolster the party's policy activities. The extent to which these efforts will aid state and local party efforts remains unclear.

And what about GOP outreach efforts? According to ANES data, in 13 of 16 presidential and midterm elections between 1970 and 2004, Republican identifiers were more likely to report being contacted by a political party than were Democratic identifiers. In every one of these elections GOP followers were contacted more often than were independents. This would suggest that Republican outreach efforts were quite robust. Comparable survey data from the 2008 election will not be available for some time, but by most accounts community-based Republican efforts were rare. Not surprisingly, turnout in heavy Republican areas was actually down in 2008. As they regroup to win back some of the local, state, and federal office seats they have lost in recent elections, will Republican organizations shift resources from grassroots mobilization to direct candidate services?

In sum, the precise weight of party mobilization efforts—juxtaposed the Obama net-root campaign-- is unclear. Did intensifying party identification, due to cross-cutting issues, as Patterson suggests, do more to mobilize voters than did party operatives? Did local party organizations have lead roles in recent elections? Or were these new, energized citizens simply part of the Obama chorus?

Conclusion

Regardless of the precise root of the dramatic turnaround, two essential features emerge. First, recent elections demonstrate that young Americans can channel their interests into political action. We have known for some time that they are willing to become engaged in civic matters, and now we understand that their energy *can* extend to politics. Even though levels of youth

participation increased from the low point in 2000, they still lag behind levels from previous years, however. As noted by a team of scholars, "Although rates of political interest and involvement have increased since 2000, they have not reached the levels shown in the 1960s and 1970s, even taking into account the full range of activities defined as political…"(Colby et. al., 2008). Still, the increased level of overall engagement has been impressive. At the very least, things seem to be moving in the right direction.

Second, because many young Americans discovered their potential in electoral politics does not mean that the momentum will be sustained for future elections--nor that it will spread to non-electoral political engagement. There is simply no guarantee that the net-based expression of involvement will endure in the rough and tumble world of policy making. In fact, there is mounting evidence to suggest young people may be tuning out. A recent study by Pew People and the Press (September 9, 2009) found that the proportion of young people getting no news on a typical day has increased substantially over the past decade. Some 34 percent say they get *no* news on an average day, up from 25 percent in 1998. One of the frustrations of the Obama team has been the lackluster response of young citizens to the ongoing policy fracas – especially over health care reform. Another Pew Poll (March 19, 2009) tells us that young citizens are the most concerned about healthcare reform, but the least likely to become engaged in the policy dispute.

For those unaccustomed to the difficulties of policy making in a polarized political climate, the value of an electoral win might seem trivial. A young voter might exclaim, "I busted a gut and my guy won! Now wheres all that change that I worked for? Why are we still in Iraq, why are there so many unemployed, why are we dragging our feet on renewable energy and why haven't we reformed health care?" Discussion of our nation's history of incremental change or the theoretical values of constitutional obstruction would fall on deaf ears. Explaining that party divisions have been common might help young folks understand the Blue Dog Democrats, but it

would do little to ease their frustration. Even the most seasoned activists can get annoyed with the pace of change. For political neophytes, these realities could be crippling.

One should also bear in mind the rationale for youth civic engagement. Columnist Jane Eisner summarized it this way, in her book, *Taking Back the Vote: Getting American Youth Involved in Our Democracy*:

> [T]he attraction of service for young people is undeniable, and growing. It is propelled by the characteristics of this generation—their tendency toward compassion and their nonjudgmental concern for others, and away from what they see as a political system driven by conflict and ego (2004, 80).

If anything, the last few months have suggested Americans politics is very much mired in "judgmental concerns." The prominence of abrasive radio and television talk show hosts, and the proliferation of antagonistic blogs and web sites—which surely seem driven by "conflict and ego"-- may push young citizens back to community service. Moreover, many young citizens do community work because there is a tangible payoff . A day's work cleaning a stream leads to a noticeably cleaner waterway. Where's the payoff for political work? Why endure overheated, hostile political battles when real change can be seen down at the hospital, literacy program or the soup kitchen?

Thus, the parties at the dawn of the 21st century are confronted with a rare opportunity. Recent elections have created a meaningful commitment to party labels, and a renewed interest in political activism. But the challenges of keeping this momentum are numerous. Several steps can be taken, including:

1. There must be close coordination between candidate efforts and party activities. Shortly after Barry Goldwater lost his bid for the presidency in 1964, his team of advisors turned over their list of several hundred thousand contributors to the RNC.

(One has to wonder if Ms. Hillary Rodham was on a list?) "Over the course of the next two decades, the RNC built it into a group of millions that became the lifeblood of the modern Republican Party" (Libit June 19, 2009). On the other hand, George McGovern turned over an even larger list to the DNC after his 1972 campaign, but little came of it. The Obama net-root campaign redefined the electoral process – and in doing so propelled a first term Senator to the Presidency. In order to translate this energy into a genuine movement for the Democratic Party, there must be close, recurrent collaboration. Simply sharing lists might not be enough.

2. There must be a focus on reinvigorating *local* party structures. In the past few decades organizational resurgence has primarily been at the state and national levels. In order to maintain the momentum– especially the engagement of young citizens – an emphasis must be on the base of the system—the "mom and pop shops of the party system" (White and Shea 2004). Much of the success of party rivals, such as MoveOn.Org has been due to their recognition that interpersonal connections matter. Local parties can provide that element.
3. Party organizations must shift their focus from merely helping candidates to a more purposive direction; to policy concerns during non-election periods. And they must work to rally supporters around these initiatives. Episodic participation is an old story in American politics, but the dangers are much greater for young citizens. Simply stated, if they tune out during non-election periods they may not return (especially if the party's candidates are less dynamic than Barack Obama). Parties should work to keep young citizens involved at every turn.
4. Much related, parties must work to integrate social events with party functions. There is no reason why party activities cannot be fun. Surely local party committees

can move beyond the pot luck dinners and 50-50 raffles. Young people are accustomed to merging entertainment with activism.

5. Finally, party organizations must continue to use innovative outreach technologies. Americans, especially young Americans, keep in touch with friends and family in ever-changing ways, and there is no reason why party committees are not following a similar path.

The route parties chart in the years ahead may affect their role in our political system--as well as the democratic character of that system. The most consequential outcome of contemporary activities will likely be what it does to the spirit of the electorate. While party organizations will surely continue to provide candidates with cutting-edge services, will their activities foster an affinity for politics among Americans? The revival of party organizations over the past few decades has been impressive. The electorate stands ready to embrace a more participatory, more ideological role. But will the service-oriented parties seize the opportunity?

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**** To the panelist. My apologies – I not yet completed the bib. Thanks. Dan**

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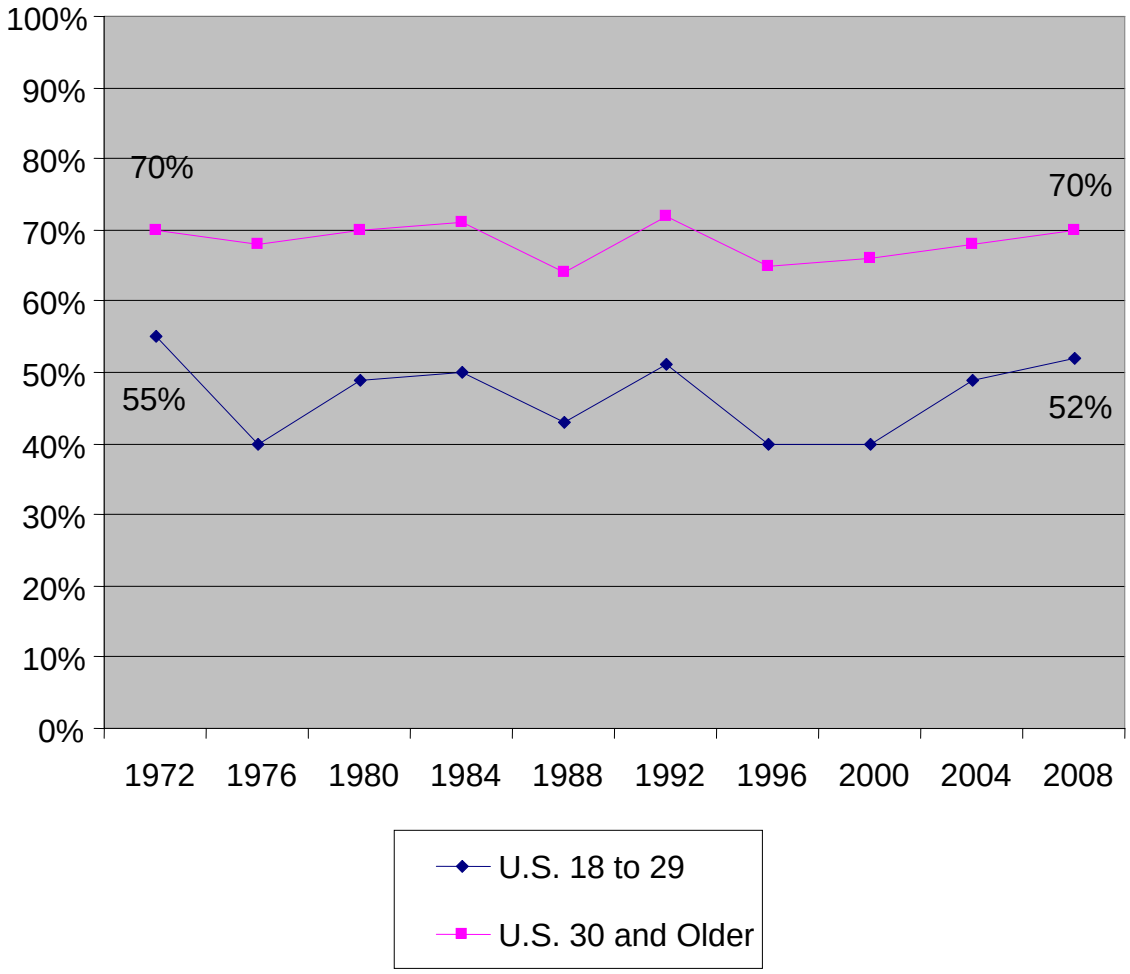
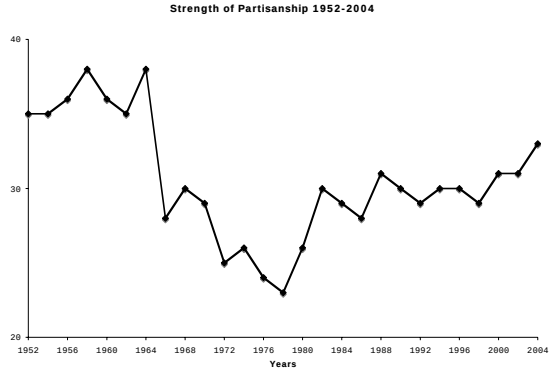
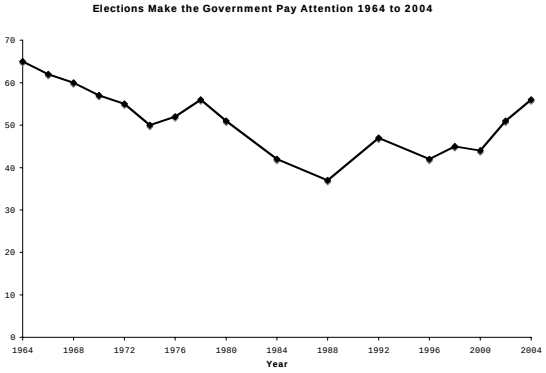
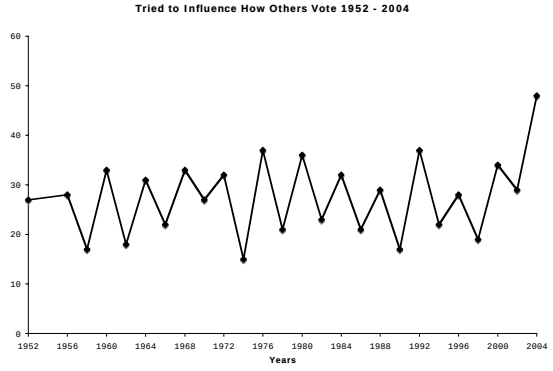
Figure 1: National Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1972-2008

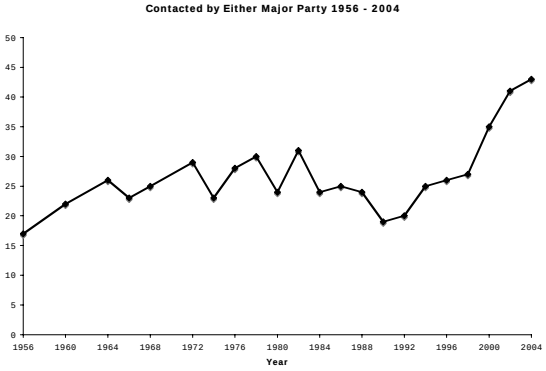


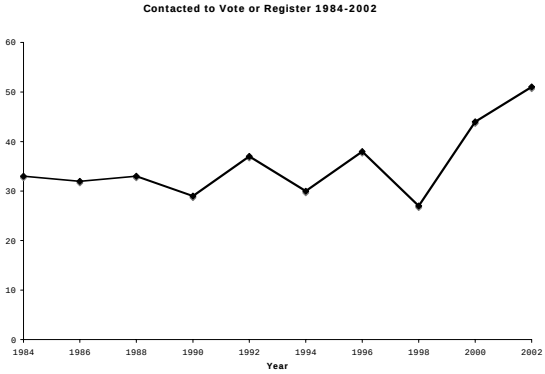
Figures 2 – 7 * Please note that these will be update as the 2008 NES data is added.

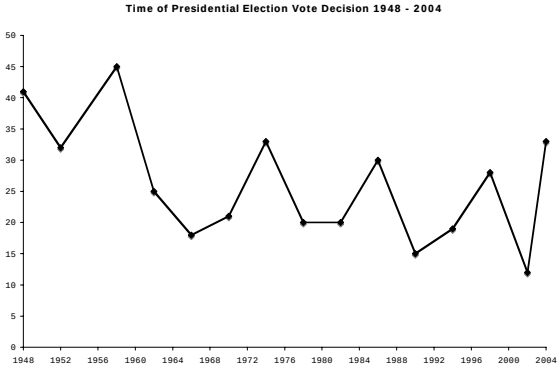


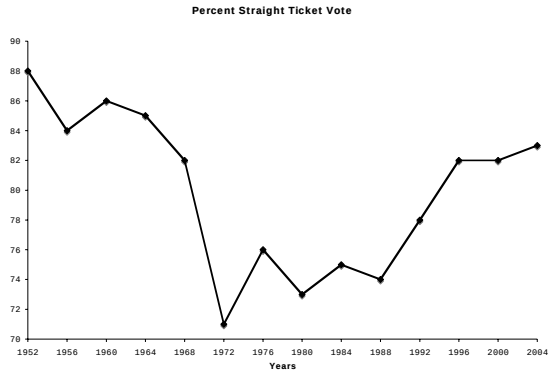











Percent Straight Ticket Vote
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