Changes in Local Party Structure and Activity, 1980-2008

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of local political parties exist in the United States, but little is known about these abundant organizations. Wide-spread, robust local parties emerged with the advent of mass suffrage in the early 1800s and still persist to this day, but we do not really understand how these organizations have adapted to extensive changes in the political environment in recent years. This study examines the party structure, activity and integration of local party organizations in the US over a nearly 30-year period. The study uncovers evidence of increasing structural maturity and rising levels of activity, and a shift away from activities involving the purchase of services and toward activities that require labor. In addition, integration between the state parties and local parties has been on the decline—especially for Republicans—even while local parties have become more organizationally mature and increasingly active. These changes are viewed as examples of a more general process of institutional adaptation, as local parties attempt to remain useful in a changing political environment.
Local Party Structure and Activity

Political parties have proven to be one of the hardiest species of political organization in the American context. Their genesis occurred in an environment that was openly hostile to their formation, and they thrived despite having no formal role within governmental structures or processes. Moreover, during the course of American history, key changes in the legal, social and technological environments have threatened them repeatedly. Remarkably, parties have continually adapted and remained a critical component of the American democratic process.

Parties emerged in the early years of the Republic as elite-level cadres because members of Congress needed a vehicle to solve collective action problems in the legislative setting (Aldrich, 1995). As mass suffrage advanced in the early 19th Century, mass-based parties with dispersed local organizations arose to aid candidates in the mobilization of voters. When the Progressive reforms of the 19th Century made radical changes to the electoral environment—changes that were not fully realized until the McGovern-Fraser reforms in the 1970s—local parties again adapted by developing a service-oriented role in support of the emerging candidate-centered campaigns and by increasingly engaging in resource brokerage among elite actors. Yet, despite the fact that the political environment has continued to change, little is known about the adaptation of local political parties to more recent, but just as significant, changes in the political environment, such as the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act. Understanding how and why local political parties adapt to changes in the political environment is important given the critical role parties play in the US political system. Moreover, this story of adaptation is an important one, because it emphasizes the fact that institutions arise and persist because they are useful. The particular forms these institutions take and the way they adapt to their environment are attempts to remain useful in these environments.

Despite the fact that parties play an important role in the US political system, there is little research examining how local parties have adapted to the changing political environment of recent years. While there have been several studies on the structure and activity of local party organizations from the 1970s through 1990s (Beck 1974; Cotter et al. 1984; Frendreis, Gibson and Vertz 1990; Frendreis and Gitelson 1999; Gibson et al. 1983; Gibson et al. 1985; Gibson, Frendreis and Vertz 1989), there has been no examination of local party organizations in recent years, so it is not clear how party organizations have adapted in response to broad changes in the political environment in the intervening period.
In this study, we assess changes in local party organizations over a nearly 30-year period and attempt to understand these changes as adaptations to developments in the larger environment. Our analysis encompasses three waves of data collection on the structure and activities of local parties. We combine data from the 1980 and 1984 Party Transformation Study (PTS), the 1992-1996 Election Dynamics Project (EDP) and data from a new 2008 study conducted by the authors. Using identical measures of the structural attributes of party organizations, the electoral activities of local parties, and state-local party integration, the analysis considers the extent to which parties have changed over the past three decades. The findings allow an assessment of the nature and rate of change in party organizations and how these changes relate to the broader environment. Of particular importance, the data illuminate the impact of recent changes to the electoral environment, such as the rise of the internet, the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) and a renewed focus on grass roots canvassing and voter mobilization.

LOCAL PARTY ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTH AND ACTIVITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the 20th Century, concern over the demise of political parties emerged in the wake of Progressive Era reforms that replaced patronage with merit hiring systems and caucuses with direct primaries in most states. In the 1960s and 1970s, these concerns mounted as many argued the rise of mass media and the decline of party identification would further weaken political parties by allowing candidates to bypass parties and contact voters directly. This move toward candidate-centered campaigns was predicted to precipitate the decline or demise of local party organizations (for a good summary of this literature see Frendreis and Gitelson 1999). As Broder suggested in his 1971 book, The Party’s Over, these changes seemed to imply the parties had been sidelined in American politics.

However, research examining the role of local party organizations has shown that party organizations have not declined as some scholars worried; instead, party organizations remained strong and active in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, while party identification in the electorate declined in the 1960s and 1970s, party organizational strength remained robust into the 1980s (Cotter et al. 1984; Gibson et al. 1983; Gibson et al. 1985). In fact, local party organizations maintained a high level of

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1 The PTS was conducted by Cornelius Cotter, James L. Gibson, John F. Bibby and Robert J. Huckshorn. The EDP surveys were directed by John Frendreis and Alan R. Gitelson.
programmatic activity during this period, and there were signs that state and local parties were increasingly working together (Gibson et al. 1989).

All of these studies concluded there was little evidence for the deterioration of local party organizations; instead, they pointed to the strengthening of local party organizations. But, perhaps more importantly, their increasing vitality was accompanied by a shift in the nature of their activity, which increasingly involved the provision of services to candidates who were more independent from the party (Frendreis 1996). Thus, rather than being threatened by changes in the political environment, local parties adapted to this new environment and maintained their critical role in the electoral arena.

Research in the 1990s verified that local party organizations were still strong and active in the electoral arena. Frendreis and Gitelson (1999) found that local party organizations were as structurally developed and were more active programmatically in the 1990s when compared to the 1980s.\(^2\) In addition, the authors recognized the changing role of parties, labeling it “adaptive brokerage.” They noted that “party organizations often serve as brokers, facilitating the connections between candidate organizations and pools of necessary resources, such as money, expertise, and volunteers” (Frendreis and Gitelson 1999: 152). La Raja (2003) notes that during this period, substantial amounts of soft money were invested in strengthening state party organizations and building traditional party functions, such as voter mobilization and grass roots organization.

However, recent changes in the electoral environment warrant a return to questions about the structural vitality and programmatic activity of local party organizations and the integration of state and local organizations. First, as Frendreis and Gitelson (1999) note, local party organizations in the past have focused on fostering connections between candidates and resources, with money being one such critical resource. The passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act in 2002, however, eliminated the flow of soft money from national to state and local party organizations, upon which state and local organizations were heavily dependent (Bibby and Holbrook 1996; La Raja 2003). There was disagreement over what impact BCRA would have on state and local parties, but there was consensus that the law’s passage would alter the functioning of party organizations and the relationships amongst

\(^2\) While Frendreis and Gitelson compare party structure and activity between 1980 and 1990, they devote less than one page of their analysis to an examination of changes over time. Nor do they examine levels of local party and state party integration. Thus, almost no research has examined the evolution of local parties over time and what might be driving party adaptations.
them (La Raja et al. 2007). The elimination of soft money meant parties had to work harder to raise more hard money to maintain previous levels of fundraising, so this environment created more incentives for entrepreneurial thinking (Dwyre et al. 2007). Ultimately, as La Raja et al. (2007) show, the effect of the BCRA on state parties was to increase voter mobilization efforts and to decrease issue ad activity. Little is known, however, about how the activities of local party organizations have changed in the aftermath of the BCRA.

In addition, the rise of the internet has changed the electoral environment. Candidates increasingly use the internet to connect with voters and also to raise money, and voters are increasingly turning to the internet as a source of campaign information (Farnsworth and Owen 2004; Williams et al. 2005). While candidates may look to the party to connect them with expertise in developing their internet capabilities, it may be the case that they can do so without the aid of party organizations, given the availability of easy-to-use software. Moreover, the rise of activist groups on the internet, such as MoveOn.org, and other political organizations may serve to undermine the vitality of local party organizations, as politically active and like-minded people have alternative means to connect and work to influence the political process (Masket 2009). These changes suggest the possibility that the adaptive brokerage role may not be as appropriate as it had been in recent years. However, technology may also have buttressed local parties in ways that counteract these forces. To the extent that many local party organizations maintain their own website, email address and can engage in internet campaigning themselves, they can establish a more prominent organizational presence. It may also mean that local party organizations are more independent and therefore less likely to coordinate their activities with state parties.

Finally, recent election cycles have seen the reemergence of sophisticated canvassing and voter mobilization operations, particularly among the presidential candidates (Bergan et al. 2005). Hogan notes that during the 1990s many of the local parties’ traditional grass roots functions gave way to service-oriented candidate assistance (Hogan 2002). During this period, party efforts were directed more towards candidates than voters (Frendreis and Gitelson 1999). However, in the last several elections, there has been a renewed emphasis on grass roots efforts. The Bush political operatives, under the direction of Karl Rove, developed the 72-Hour Strategy in the 2002 midterm election as a way of piloting a major grass roots operation that would be used again in 2004. Democrats, while traditionally more committed to mobilization activity, also developed particularly extensive operations in 2004. And, of course, these trends continued in 2008 and 2012, particularly on the Democratic side,
where the Obama campaign developed a remarkable grass roots operation. Evidence of these efforts is clear from the National Election Study data, which show dramatic increases in party contact with voters in the 2000s. In 1992, only 20% of respondents reported being contacted by either party, a low point in a downward trend stretching back 20 years. By 2004, this figure had more than doubled, to 43%, and remained high in 2008 (at 42%).

This renewed emphasis on mobilization may reflect a growing sense that, as the country polarizes, the portion of the electorate amenable to persuasion may be shrinking and so campaigns must focus on mobilizing their bases (Bergan et al. 2005; Mesrobian 2004). Moreover, the changes discussed above—the BCRA and the rise of internet technology—may have also contributed. The DNC, for example, under Terry McAuliffe’s leadership, took up voter contact as its major focus when the soft money machine was shut down (Mesrobian 2004). This pivot was facilitated by the emergence of computer- and web-based voter databases, which the DNC shared with state parties. Presumably, these efforts bounced down again to the local parties, where people are available to knock on doors and make phone calls. Thus, the renewed focus on voter mobilization efforts in recent elections may mean the resources local party organizations have the most access to, namely motivated volunteers, are increasingly important.

Given these environmental changes—in campaign finance law, internet technology and mobilization activity—we hypothesize that parties will continue to be structurally and programmatically strong, but that the pattern of activities will have changed. Because of the BCRA and broader shifts toward candidate-centered campaigns, we expect that party activity in those areas that require access to money, such as contributing money to candidates or purchasing media time, will have stayed the same or declined. However, due to the renewed emphasis on grass roots efforts, we believe party activity in those areas that require access to volunteers, such as distributing campaign literature or conducting get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, will have increased. Because the demand for party activity has shifted but not diminished, we expect parties will remain structurally mature. Furthermore, we expect that state and local party integration will have declined in this time period because the internet has given local party organizations the means to act in an increasingly independent manner and because the state parties have a greatly-diminished ability to fund cooperative efforts with soft money.
DATA ON LOCAL PARTY STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITY

The need to assess institutional change over an extended period can only be met with data that provide consistent measures at multiple points in time. This study meets that criterion by relying on data drawn from three separate studies. These studies involved surveys of local party chairs and, importantly for this analysis, the surveys in all three periods contained the same measures of local party structural attributes, programmatic activity and state-local party integration. The first study was the Party Transformation Study (PTS), which involved a survey of local party chairs in all 50 states in 1979-1980 (Cotter et al. 1984). For the PTS survey, there was a 53% response rate, yielding 2021 Democratic cases and 1980 Republican cases drawn from the population of all local party committees. The second study, the Election Dynamics Project, surveyed local party chairs in 1992, 1994 and 1996 in 8-9 states—Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, South Carolina, Washington, Wisconsin (and Ohio in 1996 only; see Frendreis and Gitelson 1999 for full explanation of the study). States were chosen to be representative in terms of party organizational strength and electoral competitiveness. The response rates were very high: about 65% in 1992 and 1994 and 60% in 1996. The survey yielded samples sizes of 650 in 1992 (312 Republicans, 338 Democrats), 727 in 1994 (376 Republicans, 351 Democrats) and 673 in 1996 (333 Republicans, 340 Democrats).

The third study was conducted by the authors as part of a broader investigation into local political parties in the US. The key data for this study come from a web survey of local party chairs across the US conducted during 2010; the survey asked chairs to reflect on the 2008 election cycle. Efforts were made to secure email addresses for all local party chairs in all states. Most parties provided lists of email addresses for the local parties on the state party website. In other states, state party officials were willing to share a list directly. Not all parties posted or shared their local party email addresses, and even when they did there were frequently some addresses that were unavailable. Many addresses turned out to be nonworking and, of course, there were many officials who refused or simply chose not to take the survey online.

In the end, invitations to participate were sent to 4,342 party officials. Email addresses for Democratic officials were located in 47 states and for Republican officials in 41 states (in only one state, Missouri, were no addresses obtained for either party). Of course, in some states only a handful of addresses could be ascertained, while in others addresses were numerous and available. This variation
reflects both the willingness of the state party to share the email addresses as well as the number of counties, towns or districts within the state that are the seat for local party organizations.

Three waves of survey invitations were sent during April-August, 2010. There were 1,187 usable responses, 511 from Republicans and 676 from Democrats. The number of responses varies considerably from state to state, reflecting the variation in email addresses available as well as response rates. Overall, the response rate was 27%.

It is worth considering the validity of the samples and, particularly, their comparability over time. Though the sampling frames at each of these three time periods are not identical, each of the frames was chosen so that the samples would be broadly representative of the full range of party organizations in the states. That said, two problems might arise. First, all of the samples might contain some bias and, second, the bias may vary over time, making longitudinal comparisons difficult. An analysis of the 2008 data reveals the sample covers populations that are more urbanized, wealthier, more educated and more supportive of Democratic presidential candidates than the average county in the US.\(^3\) Because the first three of these variables correlate positively with both structure and activity, this bias suggests structure and activity levels in the sample will be higher than the full population. This is not surprising: moribund parties are less likely have a chair engaged enough to respond to a survey request. That said, the socioeconomic bias is not likely to have large effects on sampled structure and activity levels, for the simple reason that socioeconomics are not that strongly predictive of structure and activity. As a set, the three socioeconomic variables explain only 17% of the variation in overall structural maturity and only 6% of overall activity levels. However, some degree of caution is in order, and so structure and activity levels in the data must be considered high-end estimates.

Of course, a very similar bias is likely to have existed during all of the earlier survey attempts, and so the comparisons over time should be meaningful. In particular, the 1980 and 2008 surveys were national in scope and, although there were more responses overall in 1980 than in 2008, there is no reason to expect differential bias, to the extent it exists. The 1990s’ data draw from a population of 8-9

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\(^3\) The comparisons of the sample averages vs. the full population averages are as follows: % urbanized, 52% vs. 40%; median household income, $52,000 vs. $44,000; % with bachelor’s or higher, 24% vs. 19%; % voting for Obama, 45% vs. 42%.
states, and so more care must be exercised in making longitudinal comparisons with this data, although those states were chosen to be representative of all states.

In presenting our results, we provide line graphs showing levels and trends in each variable over all five time points: 1980, 1992, 1994, 1996 and 2008 (the data are presented in tabular form in the Appendix). Additionally, we examine whether there are statistically significant differences between 1980 and 2008, by looking at z-tests based on the difference in proportions reporting each structure/activity.

**CHANGES IN LOCAL PARTY STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITY, 1980-2008**

**Local Party Organizational Structure**

We begin by examining the structural attributes of local party committees across the time period. Figure 1 presents the data in graphical form. First, it is clearly evident that across all time periods there are certain structural traits that are very common and some that are not. Most local parties have a constitution and complete set of officers. Roughly half have campaign headquarters. Beyond that, the indicators of organizational maturity can be applied to far fewer party committees. Only about a quarter have a formal budget or telephone listing. The marks of a fully mature organization—a year-round office and paid staff—are relatively rare. These patterns suggest that local parties, while moderately institutionalized, still do not engage in a level of ongoing activity that demands a permanent physical location and regular working staff. Whether this demand will arise in the future is an interesting question. While such a structural maturation seems unlikely, it was not that long ago that the national and state party committees lacked such structural attributes.

And, indeed, local parties seem to be moving toward greater levels of institutionalization. None of the indicators display a statistically significant decline over the 1980-2008 period. Rather, there are many signs of increased structural maturity. With the exception of establishing campaign headquarters, there have been increases in each indicator among the Republicans, the Democrats or both. Many of these increases have been substantial. The percentage of Republican committees with a formal constitution went up 18% points, from 68% to 86%. The percentage of Democratic committees with a telephone listing tripled, from 11% to 33%. Similar gains appear for many of the items. The data paint a picture of increasingly mature local parties in the US over the past thirty years.
Have these changes altered the relative maturity of Republican and Democratic committees? The trends are balanced for some items, whereas some trends benefit the Democrats and some the Republicans. In 1980, the Republicans had higher rates, at statistically significant levels, among five indicators, while the Democrats had an edge on only one. By 2008, the Republicans were ahead on only three indicators, the Democrats again on one. In 2008, none of the differences between the parties was greater than 9% points. So, on balance, the changes over this period have brought greater parity.

**Local Party Activity**

Structural maturity is important for any organization, because it creates the capacity for action. Has increasing institutionalization among local parties led to increasing activity? The answer is complicated, and reveals important facets of the changing role of local parties. Figure 2a and 2b present the data on the 15 activity items included in all three waves, as well as the item on get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, which were included only in the 1990s and 2008 surveys.

First, note there are statistically significant declines for both parties in four activity areas: contributing money to candidates, buying newspaper ads, buying radio/TV time and purchasing billboard space. Importantly, all four activities revolve around the expenditure of money by the local committee. Some of the declines are quite large. Among Republican committees, radio/TV advertising declined 14% points; the number of committees contributing to candidates went down 11% points. Similarly, newspaper advertising among Democratic local parties decreased 18% points and radio/TV advertising dropped 15% points.

For two of these activity areas—radio/TV ads and billboards—the declines were relatively consistent across the time period. However, the decreases in contribution activity and newspaper advertising appear to be concentrated in the period after the 1990s. This timing is likely related to changes in the broader environment. The steep drop in newspaper circulation did not begin until the early 1990s. And the fading role of local parties in campaign finance may be related to the BCRA, which turned off the soft money spigot in 2002. Although soft money flowed primarily from national party committees to state committees, which spent the money mainly on issue advocacy, the elimination of soft money may nonetheless have had important effects on local parties. After 2002, the national party committees made up for most of the lost soft money with increased levels of hard money (Dwyre et al. 2007). It may have simply been the case that the national committees began vacuuming up much more
of the available hard money among their respective donor networks, leaving less available to flow through local committee coffers. Indeed, few local party committees are sufficiently organized to run serious fundraising operations, especially compared to state or national committees, legislative campaign committees or even candidate campaign committees. Recent news accounts report that members of Congress now spend up to four hours per day fundraising; it is hard to imagine how local parties lacking permanent staff could compete with this (Sullivan 2013; Yglesias 2013).

While there were areas of decline, there were more activities that increased in usage. Six activities became more common among both Republican and Democratic local parties: organizing campaign events, organizing fundraising events, distributing posters and lawn signs, conducting registration drives, organizing door-to-door canvassing and distributing campaign literature. In addition, there was a statistically significant increase in the number of Democratic committees that ran GOTV drives in 2008 compared to the 1990s (taking the average of the 1990 surveys). The timing of these gains are somewhat varied. Some show steady increases (campaign events), some increased mainly prior to the 1990s (posters and lawn signs) and some dipped and then gained after the 1990s (registration drives).

Whereas the areas of decline all involve spending money, the areas of increased activity generally require the party committee to engage in coordination, underwriting some of the transaction costs of collective action (e.g., organizing events or canvassing operations). They also involve unmediated communication with voters.

Perhaps more notably, many also involve the use of local volunteers and activists. Indeed, some of the biggest increases include these kinds of grass roots activities. Between 1980 and 2008, the number of Republican local parties running registration drives went up 11% points, while canvassing went up 12% points and distribution of posters and lawn signs went up 20% points. Similarly, among Democratic local parties there was a 7% point increase in registration drives, a 24% point increase in canvassing and a 25% point increase in placing posters/lawn signs.

Indeed, it is accurate to say that local parties have shifted away from a financial service role and toward a grass roots role. It takes large groups of people to effectively distribute campaign posters and signs, conduct registration drives, canvass door-to-door, run phone campaigns or hold GOTV drives.
Sticking yard signs into the turf or ringing doorbells to promote a candidate are bread-and-butter campaign activities that in many ways typify campaign “labor.”

The increased use of this grass roots labor is notable because it occurs during the time period that scholars began to describe the emergence of candidate-centered campaigns. Candidates certainly can raise money and purchase TV ads on their own, but finding a large corps of volunteer labor is more difficult. Parties represent a place where committed activists and volunteers can be connected with candidates who have a need for campaign labor. In this way, local parties are increasingly brokering people, not money, and thereby remaining important to candidates’ efforts.

As it was with organizational structure, the Republican activity advantage in 1980 declined over the following thirty years—so much so that the advantage now lies with the Democrats. In 1980, the Republicans engaged in six activities at statistically significant higher rates than Democrats; the Democrats were more active in three areas, for a net Republican advantage. By 2008, the Republicans were more active on only one item—buying newspaper ads—while Democrats engaged in three activities at higher rates. One particularly notable change involved local parties’ involvement in canvassing. In 1980, the parties canvassed at the same rate. In 2008, Democrats were 13% points more likely to organize canvassing efforts.

State-Local Party Integration

So far, we have seen increasingly mature local party organizations that have shifted their focus away from expenditure-related functions and toward coordination and grass-roots activities. Local parties, of course, operate within a larger party structure, and their relationships with the other committees in this structure, particularly the state party committees, are an important characteristic to describe. Generally, the data here suggest an overall disintegration for Republicans, with a more mixed pattern of change for Democrats.

Figure 3 presents the data on joint activities between state and local party committees. There were declines among Republicans in three of the five areas. Some of these declines were quite steep. Joint fundraising fell 27% points; cooperation on patronage appointments plummeted 32% points. At the same time, state Republican parties became much less likely to provide assistance to local committees in a variety of areas. Figure 4a and 4b show declines in seven of the ten areas, and
increases in only one. Again, some of the declines are large. Assistance with computer services and research both went down 19% points.

Democratic joint activity also fell in three areas, but did go up in one (shared mailing lists). As with the Republicans, some joint activities became much less likely over the time period—joint fundraising and patronage cooperation both fell 24% points. But, when it came to state assistance, the Democrats shows signs of increasing integration. Assistance went up in five areas, although the increases were not particularly large for most items. It also is important to note there were small declines in assistance in two areas, operating expenses and campaign assistance. But, the picture for Democrats is clearly different than that for Republicans, where assistance has dropped off almost across the board.

It is also interesting to note that the one of the biggest areas of decline for both parties was joint fundraising, while the one area that showed no decline for either party was joint GOTV efforts. These patterns align with those reported earlier on local activity.

Structure and Activity on the Internet

The internet, of course, has changed electoral politics in many important ways. While there can be no comparison to earlier time frames, it is important to assess in 2008 the extent to which local party committees embraced the internet. Our data suggest they have quite vigorously.

Most local parties have a website and email addresses, as Figure 5 reveals—around 70% of both Democratic and Republican committees. These structural features are as common as campaign headquarters (and much more common than telephone listings ever were). Almost half of local committees have social media accounts. These structural features have given local parties an accessible public face—a place where citizens can learn about and reach out to their local parties. As recently as the 1990s, this kind of accessibility did not exist—in the 1990s, less than 30% of local parties had telephone listings, so for most voters interested in getting involved, the first step often meant showing up at a meeting. The internet has given parties a much bigger welcome mat. It may be that this accessibility has made possible the pivot toward grass roots activity.

Local parties are also using the internet for campaign activity. They are just as likely to engage in internet publicity as to send mailings or purchase newspaper ads. And they are almost twice as likely
to publicize the party or its candidates through the web or email than to buy radio or TV ads. That said, online fundraising is still somewhat limited, though this may reflect the diminished role of parties in the campaign finance game more so than an orientation toward the use of the internet.

A comparison of Republican and Democratic committees suggests that, in this area, Republicans have the edge. They are more likely (at statistically significant levels) to have a social media account, to fundraise online and to publicize through email. Perhaps relatedly, Democratic local parties are more likely to get assistance with website and social media from their state parties, as Figure 6 shows.

PARTIES AS ADAPTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

From these findings, five major themes emerge. First, local parties have continued to mature structurally, advancing toward a greater degree of institutionalization. Second, despite this maturation, they remain intermittent work organizations without the enduring features of permanent organizations. Third, there has been a shift away from activities that involve monetary resources and toward activities that require labor. Fourth, while Republicans maintain an edge in the structural maturity of their organizations, the Democratic parties are more active in the labor-related activities that are becoming more common. Finally, there has been a decline in cooperation and integration between the local parties and the state party organizations, particularly among Republicans.

To understand these recent changes in the roles and functions of local political parties, it is useful to draw from the organizational ecology perspective on institutionalism (Carrol 1984; Gray and Lowery 1996; Hannan and Freeman 1989; Singh 1990), which emphasizes the ways in which institutions fulfill social functions, the ways they are useful to those who sustain them, and how the structures of institutions reflect their environment. Persistent organizations are often those that have found a successful social niche. Institutional change reflects an adaptation to alterations in the environment; to understand this institutional change, it is critical to examine the environment to ascertain what factors are pressuring organizations toward adaptations. From this perspective, it is important to see that these changes in the structure, activity and integration of parties reflect key changes in the broader electoral and political environment. As with prior periods of party adaptation, party organizations have changed in ways that sustain their usefulness to those involved in their maintenance, particularly candidates. We consider each of the major findings in this study in the light of this perspective on institutional change.
Structural Maturity and Institutionalization

The results of this study show that trends toward increased structural maturity and institutionalization continue. From the perspective of office seekers, parties remain an important resource, and as a result party organizations have shown steady or increasing signs of organizational maturity. However, local party organizations are still not permanent work organizations in the manner of most business firms, non-profit organizations or even the national party organizations. This may reflect some of the basic ways in which parties are useful to political actors. Local party organizations mainly are useful in the period immediately preceding elections and are less critical to candidates—or anyone else—during the interim intervals. As a result, they have not matured as much as other political institutions. In contrast, the national party organizations, which are useful at most times to a broad set of party actors as a way of publicizing the party image, recruiting candidates, raising money and brokering diverse party interests, have developed into highly mature work organizations with permanent offices, permanent, paid full-time staff and regular work routines. Similarly, most interest groups have the features of permanent organizations, as they are useful not only during election periods but also in the interim for purposes of indirect and direct lobbying. State political parties, which used to resemble local party organizations, rest somewhere in between these two extremes, reflecting the intermediate scope of their functions.

It is possible that local party institutionalization will not advance much, given the intermittent nature of electoral activity. Alternatively, the environment might provide continual pressures on local parties to institutionalize, much the same way that an expanding workload and membership size pushed a process of institutionalization in the US House of Representatives (Polsby 1968). This would be the result if state legislative campaigns continued to become more professionalized, with longer campaign seasons and the need for more sustained assistance. Of course, more comprehensive institutionalization of the type experienced by the national parties could occur if local parties developed wholly new roles, defining a new niche, that required collective action on an ongoing basis. Though this seems unlikely, the decentralization and fragmentation of political information that has occurred in recent years with the emergence of the internet may create an opening for local parties as ongoing portals of political communication.
Functional Adaptation

Analysis of the electoral activity of local party organizations shows that while these organizations continue to be very active, there has been a shift toward activity in areas that require campaign-related labor. Local parties remain important to candidates during election periods, but changes in the needs of candidates’ campaigns have resulted in adaptations in the kinds of resources parties provide to office seekers. Because of a perceived need among candidates to engage in greater voter mobilization efforts, local party organizations have become more likely to provide support for these efforts. This kind of activity is not new to parties, of course, but in the recent past a focus on targeting swing voters—reasonable in an era of dealignment—meant a reduced need for mobilization and a reduced role for parties’ efforts in this arena. As politics have become more polarized and more partisan, candidates are increasingly coming to see the mobilization of their base as a critical component of a winning strategy. Not surprisingly, local parties have come to fill this role, at least in part. Indeed, local parties are perfectly positioned for this role, because their greatest resource is access to a network of local activists with the time and inclination to engage in grass roots efforts. In this regard, it is also worth noting that while the Republicans continue to have a structural advantage, the Democrats have the edge in labor-intensive activities. These patterns are not surprising, given traditional notions of the parties’ strengths.

These changes in party function also suggest the adaptive brokerage model of local party organizations remains accurate today, although the resources being brokered have changed. Party organizations are still a key pillar in brokering resources for candidates, but they are increasingly sourcing the manpower involved in critical campaign functions. This new brokerage role has not wholly displaced their role brokering money and other campaign services, but it does represent a shift in the mix of resources parties bring to the table and deliver to candidates.

(Dis)Integration

A long-term view of the coordination of state and local party activity shows signs of disintegration. State and local parties are less likely to engage in joint activities, such as joint registration drives and fundraising. Rather than reflecting a decline in organizational maturity, this may be due instead to the increasing institutionalization of local party organizations and the utility of the
internet, which may reduce the need to rely on state party resources, or to the passage of the BCRA and the decline of soft money flowing from state and national parties.

Parties have always been a part of campaign finance, moving into a brokerage role in recent years. At the same time, the structure of parties has been influenced by the patterns of campaign funding. The soft money of the 1990s, which flowed from the national organizations to the state and local organizations, was a centralizing and integrating force within the parties. When the BCRA turned off the soft money spigot, the parties again showed signs of adaptation to this key change in the legal environment. Cooperation and aid between state and local organizations fell, as might be expected, and local parties were left more to their own devices. Interestingly, local organizations during this latter period continued to mature structurally and became more active in a number of areas. Like an organism finding new food sources when an old one disappears, local parties were able to retain their vitality.

Future Adaptive Pressures

If parties are adaptive organizations that respond to changes in their environment, what are the likely key environmental changes over the next thirty years that may force further party adaptations? First, there is liable to be further polarization at both the elite and the mass level. At the very least, the next decade will be characterized by a highly polarized environment. This situation will certainly continue to provide an opportunity for parties to engage in more grass roots mobilization efforts. Not only does mobilization make strategic sense for campaigns in a polarized context where there is more base and fewer swing voters, but the polarization is likely to increase the supply of labor required to engage in it. Increasingly polarized activists will find greater purposive benefit in political activity, as the stakes appear to be higher and the elected faces of the parties promote alternative policy courses that are more objectionable to those on the opposite side of the spectrum.

Another critical change that will only continue to advance is the revolution in communication technology. E-mail has become a standard way to disseminate campaign messages. And newer technologies such as text messaging and social media have pushed their way into the quiver of many campaigns. One key aspect of this revolution is the declining cost of getting one’s message to the public. E-mail is substantially less expensive than TV or regular mail, and it provides a richer set of tools, including video and direct links to contribute. It would be foolish to predict at this point what technologies will be utilized even five years down the road, let alone thirty. But, these advances,
whatever they may be, will certainly reduce the costs associated with communication. This may allow candidates to create, control and disseminate all of their communications with little help from the parties.

At the same time, however, this explosion in communication has created a cluttered landscape of messages in which it has become more difficult to get people’s attention. In the same way that television advertising has become less efficient, requiring more showings to reach the same number of people, so too may the new forms of electronic communication. Already, many younger Americans are eschewing e-mail for text messaging. As texting and microblogging technology such as Twitter become more widespread, they too may grow to be less useful as a way for campaigns to reach voters. Not only is the amount of communication becoming unwieldy, but it is increasingly opt-in by nature. Caller ID, cable TV, DVRs, the self-directed nature of internet surfing—these all make it more difficult to reach someone who chooses not to be reached. In this environment, it may be possible that personal, face-to-face communication becomes the optimal way to get campaign messages to people. If this were to occur, parties would be perfectly suited to provide the grass roots labor for such efforts. As a result, the communications revolution presents the possibility of a greater role for local parties; it remains to be seen how local parties adapt to the changing environment.

Considering a broader historical sweep, it is important to note that despite the numerous party adaptations over the decades, the essential utility of American parties has not changed fundamentally since mass-based parties emerged in the 1820s: they are a useful institution for those who seek public office. They may fulfill additional functions, such as facilitating policy making or disseminating information about policy alternatives. But, they have never developed the social and sociological importance among the public that they have in other countries. Nor have they been as central to solving collective action problems in the legislative setting. In the US, their form continues to be shaped primarily by their role in the electoral arena. Therefore, the basic parameters of their ecological niche have remained the same, even as the specifics of their activity evolve.
REFERENCES


Figure 1 – Local Party Organization Structural Attributes, 1980-2008

Note: Asterisks denote whether there is a statistically significant difference between the proportions in 1980 and 2008 at the *.10, **.05 or ***.01 level.
Figure 2a – Local Party Organization Activities, 1980-2008

Note: Asterisks denote whether there is a statistically significant difference between the proportions in 1980 and 2008 at the *.10, **.05 or ***.01 level.
Figure 2b – Local Party Organization Activities, 1980-2008

Note: Asterisks denote whether there is a statistically significant difference between the proportions in 1980 and 2008 at the *.10, **.05 or ***.01 level.
Figure 3 – Local Party-State Party Joint Activities, 1980-2008

Note: Asterisks denote whether there is a statistically significant difference between the proportions in 1980 and 2008 at the *.10, **.05 or ***.01 level.
Figure 4a – State Party Assistance to Local Party Organizations, 1980-2008

Note: Asterisks denote whether there is a statistically significant difference between the proportions in 1980 and 2008 at the *.10, **.05 or ***.01 level.
Figure 4b – State Party Assistance to Local Party Organizations, 1980-2008

**Note:** Asterisks denote whether there is a statistically significant difference between the proportions in 1980 and 2008 at the *.10, **.05 or ***.01 level.
Figure 5 – Local Party Organization Internet Structural Attributes and Activities, 2008

- Has a website
- Has email address(es)
- Has social media account(s)
- Publicized through email
- Publicized through party website
- Publicized through social media
- Conducted party fund raising online
- Assisted candidate with online fund raising
Figure 6 – State Party Assistance With Internet Tools, 2008

Graph showing the percentage of Republicans and Democrats receiving assistance with website and social media.
APPENDIX


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Note: Values represent percentage of local parties with given structural attribute.

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Note: Values represent percentage of local parties engaging in given activity.

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Note: Values represent percent of local parties engaging in joint activities with the state party or receiving the specific type of assistance from the state party.