Activists *Versus* Voters:
Intra-Party Warfare in the Modern World

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One of the longest-running struggles in American politics, a struggle that has occupied both theorists and practitioners, involves the proper internal structure of its political parties. On the theoretical level, this structure is what facilitates--or impedes--democratic representation. On the practical level, the same structure is central to determining who gets what from elections and legislation. In a sense, contestation over party structure runs all the way back to adoption of the Constitution itself, many of whose framers hoped that it would effectively forestall the very appearance of parties. That proved to be a forlorn hope: the creation of a working government produced contending partisan coalitions in remarkably short order.[1]

A new incarnation of this struggle emerged in the 1820s, with the creation by Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren of the mass political party, specifically in their case the Democratic Party. A short-lived conflict between old and new organizational forms ended in total victory for the new mass-based model over the old elite coalitions, a result that was more or less unchallenged--new parties appeared, but no new party models--for on toward sixty years.[2] Yet the war over party structure would be rejoined and recast a generation after the Civil War when party reformers, gathered as

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[1] For the original partisan aversion, see the Farewell Address of George Washington. For the partisan world already emerging by the time he delivered it, Jeffrey L. Pasley, *The First Presidential Contest: The Election of 1796 and the Founding of American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

[2] Richard P. McCormack, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill:" University of North Carolina Press, 1966), and (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Progressives, brought forward a new notion of what a proper political party should be. Their version valorized independent activists--the better elements of society, with an innate concern for the public interest--attempting to wrest politics away from those who pursued it mainly for private gain, along with the unenlightened masses who supported them.[3]

That was to be a very long war, though the institutional arguments at its core would be remarkably stable. On one side were the champions of what became known as 'organized parties', eliciting labor on behalf of these parties through concrete rewards, that is, direct personal rewards for party workers but also public policies based on divisible goods. On the other side were what became known as 'volunteer parties', eliciting labor on behalf of these parties from independent activists through policy goals and ideological causes, intended to instantiate the public interest. From the time of the Progressives onward, the most common expectation was that economic development and social modernization would ultimately drive the balance between organized and volunteer parties toward the volunteer model, in fits and starts but ineluctably.

Yet when empirical political scientists began to inquire into the situation after the Second World War, they discovered that organized parties were alive, well, and widely present, especially in the largest and most politically influential states. The share of the American population that did its political business by way of organized rather than volunteer parties had declined, but not nearly to the degree that casual observers suggested. On the other hand--a wonderful social-science irony--this refocus by scholarly analysts on party structure, really the first serious social science of the matter,

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[3] For the Progressives as a political movement, Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormack, *The Progressives* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1983*)*. For a view from the opposition, Henry Jones Ford, *The Rise and Growth of American Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1898).

was followed in short order by the long-awaited aggregate shift, altering the balance between organized and volunteer political parties decisively. The apparent critical moment of change was 1970, so that is where this article must begin.

Our approach is to isolate the key structural differences that distinguished proponents of 'reform' from supporters of the 'regular' party. This will allow us to create measurable indicators, and that is the focus of the next section of the paper. We then turn to the question of what happened to the distribution of the two resulting structural types, with a focus on an alleged break-point around 1970. That is the topic of the next section. The heart of the paper--and the far more challenging section--follows, with questions about the way this change affected democratic transmissions and representational impacts. What emerges is an important contribution to partisan polarization in American politics. This is followed by a final substantive section asking how far this contribution has gone, and how it works in the modern day. The presidential nominating contests of 2012, 2016, and 2020 provide the evidence here, pitting party activists and their policy desires *against* the general public and its programmatic wishes.

Two Structural Models

The great initial postwar student of party structure was James Q. Wilson, who theorized ideal types of political parties by means of their incentive systems: what was it each required in order to attract the individual actors who would sustain the institutional party? In a crucial early article with Peter B. Clark,[4] Wilson and Clark argued that the crucial maintenance activity of any organization was to mobilize and distribute incentives; that all such incentives had consequences for individual behavior; and that

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[4]Peter B. Clark and James Q. Wilson, "Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organizations", *Administrative Science Quarterly* 6(1961), 129-166.

changing the nature of that behavior would alter institutional and not just individual activity. They then parsed their incentives into three general categories: *material*, the most tangible and fungible; *solidary*, the most social and associational; and *purposive*, the most substantive and ends-related.

A dozen years later, Wilson took the theory onward, to the full range of organizations regularly involved in American politics.[5] For our purposes, this crucial elaboration focused on political parties in Chapter Six, where Wilson tied his three categories of incentives to three types of party structure, "The Machine", "The Purposive Party", and "Solidary Parties". Each came with different patterns of recruitment, different operating priorities, and different contributions to policy outputs. Yet while the analytic scheme had room for all three types, there was an underlying dichotomy to Wilson's further argument, in a world where solidary parties were already merging into one or the other of the polar opposite alternatives:

> The chief consequences of these trends have been a change in the process of candidate selection and in the nature of electoral appeals. Party organizations composed of persons motivated by material rewards have a strong interest in winning an election, for only then will their rewards be secured. Provided there are competitive parties, candidates, at least at the top of the ticket, will be selected and electoral appeals fashioned so as to attract votes from the largest possible number of citizens. When the organization consists of members motivated by purposive rewards, the candidate selected must be one that can attract their enthusiasm, even if he cannot attract voter support, and the appeals issued must be consistent with their preferences, even if voters find them repugnant.[6]

The great empirical application of this framework then came from David R. Mayhew, using journalistic accounts of the actual operation of political parties in each of

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[5]James Q. Wilson, *Political Organizations* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[6]Ibid., 115.

the fifty states[7] Accumulating any and all available reports on party politics, Mayhew fashioned a 'dataset' that was encyclopedic if still inevitably impressionistic. Asking "What if the more fundamental policy-related distinction in the American party sphere of the last century or so has indeed had to do with structure rather than competition?",[8] he turned to imposing a comparative framework, calibrated to distinguish among state party systems. For this, it was the notion of a *traditional party organization* (TPO) that was specified, elaborated, and mobilized.

These TPOs had substantial autonomy; they lasted a long time; their internal structure had an important element of hierarchy; they regularly tried to bring about the nomination of candidates for a wide range of public offices; and they relied on material incentives, and not much on purposive counterparts, for engaging people to do organizational work or supply organizational support. In search of the distribution and evolution of these TPOs, Mayhew came to much the same conclusion as the more theoretically oriented Wilson, that the many previous reports of the death of organized parties had been grossly overstated. On the other hand, Mayhew too concluded that the era of his TPOs was coming to a close as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s:

> The late 1960s is a good time to inspect because it both closes and samples fairly well a long twentieth-century span between the second and third of three major periods of structural change in American parties—the first being the Jacksonian period, the source of the nineteenth century's characteristic system; the second, the Progressive period, during which national, state, and local parties were substantially overhauled with the effect of producing a hybrid twentieth-century system; and the third, the last decade and a half or so, during which local party organizations have decisively declined and telecommunications processes, candidate organizations, and

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[7] David R. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics: Organization, Electoral Settings, and Government Activity in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[8] Ibid., 5.

capital-intensive party organizations have become central features of distinctive new electoral politics.[9]

Yet while Mayhew was finishing his impressionistic tour of party structures in the 1960s, he was more or less overlapping with Alan Ware, the third of the scholars who reinvigorated the social science of party structure. Ware was in the field with a detailed examination of party systems in three major but distinctive geographic places: New York City, the Denver metropolis, and the San Francisco Bay Area.[10] What he discovered was that the picture theorized by Wilson and empiricized by Mayhew was indeed being rapidly rebalanced, with a triumph for the volunteer model. Summarizing the result as the 'breakdown' of organized Democratic parties, Ware described an "Indian Summer" for organized parties, but one that was finally coming to an end.

The late 1960s and 1970s had thrown up a set of intensified challenges to these continuing structures, challenges that would ultimately bring about the demise of many old structural arrangements. The leading stressors on this old order still varied from place to place: fratricide in New York, reform in Denver, extremism in the East Bay. But despite idiosyncratic starting points and regardless of the particular mix of stresses, the result was generalized, sweeping, and qualitatively different, a result shaped in important ways by the explicitly anti-party themes of the time:

> There can be little doubt that what happened to the Democratic Parties in America between the early 1960s and the late 1970s was truly extraordinary. Within a few years, most of them were transformed. . . there are two important respects in which issue conflicts did harm the Democratic parties. First, they helped to make issue-oriented activists much more skeptical about the value of party; what emerged in the 1960s was issue-activism which was not party-oriented, as it was in the 1950s, but

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[9]Ibid., 7.

[10] Alan Ware, *The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization, 1940-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

which was prepared to use party institutions for realizing objectives as, and when, they seemed useful. . . Secondly, the issue conflicts actually revived long-standing anti-party sentiments in America, sentiments which were minority ones in the amateur Democratic movement of the 1950s, but which became more apparent in the late 1960s.[11]

In all these views, the year 1970 appeared to be both the theoretical and the practical pivot in the balance between two ideal party types, and that is where we enter the picture. Classifying party structures according to the taxonomy developed by Wilson, Mayhew, and Ware was hardly a conscious activity of party operatives in either organized or volunteer states. Yet very practical operatives did argue consistently and perennially about how to handle the variety of activities that fall to a political party in democratic systems. Moreover, these arguments have assumed common elements and a common pattern over time. So one can certainly use their opposing substances to create specific indicators of party structure.

The Crucial Change?

The search for relevant indicators of party structure, organized versus volunteer, begins with three evident touchstones. First is that well-developed theoretical framework from Wilson coupled with those rich impressionistic applications from Mayhew and Ware. Next are various histories of intraparty warfare, some focused on the battle over specific reforms, others where this battle was an aspect of some larger story.[12] Either way, the structural preferences of the two sides, reform versus regular, tend to be clear.[13]

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[11]Ibid., 241, 246-247.

[12] For the roots of the battle, Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). For the evolution of one major aspect of reform politics, Alan Ware, *The American Direct Primary,* which spreads its reform net much more widely than its title might indicate.

[13]. On the municipal level, Edward C. Banfield & James Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (New York: Vintage, Books, 1963, pulls a variety of reform proposals together, most especially at Chapter 11, "Reform", again in a manner where it is not difficult to distinguish the organized from the volunteer position.

Finally, there have been what were essentially major grocery lists for party reform, assembled by organizations dedicated to the volunteer perspective.[14] All of which meant that diverse battles in the long war over party structure tended to be pitched on a small set of recurrent battlefields, including appointment powers, financial regulations, voting strictures, institutional mechanics, and partisan limitations. (Table 1)[15]

Table 1

Organized versus Volunteer Parties:
The Indicators

A. Appointment Powers

- ***Merit Systems*: The ability to make personnel appointments was central to organized parties. The first direct and most fundamental challenge to this ability was the coming of civil service, that is, of generalized merit systems.**

- ***Unionization*: The other great constraint on the ability to make personnel appointments came later, from the rise of labor unions specializing in public employees, which became the great institutionalized competitor to the official party in this regard.**

B. Financial Regulations

- ***Transparency of Party Finance*: Organized parties reliably took the view that management of their resources was an internal matter—they should be judged on their performance—while public openness about political finance was often central to the reform drive.**

- ***Regulation of Campaign Contributions*: Organized parties took the view that the raising of funds was likewise an internal matter—a natural part of coalition-building—while limitations on contributions from organized interests were often central to the reform ethos.**

C. Voting Strictures

- ***Ballot Forms*: The traditional party-column ballot was a central product of the strong-party era. The office-block alternative sought to shift public attention away from party attachments and toward candidate qualifications.**

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[14]As with the program of the National Municipal League, addressed comprehensively in Frank Mann Steward, *A Half-Century of Municipal Reform: The History of the National Municipal League* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950).

[15] As assembled in Byron E. Shafer and Regina L. Wagner, *The Long War Over Party Structure: Democratic Representation and Policy Responsiveness in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) pp.11-12.

- *Ticket Provisions*: If parties could make nominations internally, they naturally wished to follow with a straight ticket—encouraging voters to accept the total product while accepting collective responsibility for it—while the reform approach favored disaggregating offices and encouraging individualized attention to them.

D. Institutional Mechanics

- *Institutions of Nomination*: The classic arrangement for nominations to public office under organized parties involved making those nominations *through* the official party structure, most often in convention. The reform alternative was nomination by public primary election.

- *Institutions of Policy-Making*: Afterward, organized parties wanted it to be (their) elected officials who made the resultant public policy. Reformers continued to want an augmented public role, to the point of permitting citizens to legislate directly by way of the referendum.

E. Partisan Limitations

- *Partisan Endorsements*: The endorsement of candidates was a central activity of organized parties—why else would a party exist?—while a ban on such endorsements was often part and parcel of the drive for party reform, a conflict at its most intense with judicial elections.

- *Participatory Structures*: For organized parties, a concomitant to the fact that nominations should be internal and policy made by their nominees was that political participation should belong to party members. Conversely, volunteer parties wished to use open and participatory processes to recruit both activists and voters.

For all of these, the preferences of supporters of organized versus volunteer parties are immediately clear. Moreover, all ten measures possess simple indicators that are available over a long period. Most of these can be taken directly from the *Book of the States*, first published by the Council of State Governments in 1935 and produced annually since that time,[16] as supplemented and cross-checked through materials from the

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[16]The first edition was *The Book of the States* (Chicago: Council of State Governments and American Legislators, 1935). A recent version is *The Book of the States*: 2016 Edition (Lexington, KY: Council of State Governments, 2017).

National Conference of State Legislatures.[17]   As it turns out, all ten are positively correlated, while there is no theoretical reason for using them through anything other than a directly additive measure. So the resulting scale becomes the principal measure of party structure used here.

For other purposes, it could be valuable to follow any given individual state and its placement within the full collective scale. But for purposes of looking for a major break in the flow of organized versus volunteer parties, a simple dichotomy will sharpen subsequent analysis, *if* this dichotomy accords with three widely recognized alternative versions.   These three previous attempts to stratify state politics again begin with Mayhew's TOPS. They are reinforced on the macro side by the classic taxonomy for state political cultures produced by Daniel J. Elazar.[18] And they are reinforced on the micro side by the detailed picture of state party operations produced by the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection between 1968 and 1972.[19]

As it turns out, there is a huge overlap between lists of organized versus volunteer states derived from these prior classifications. Even more importantly, this consensus tracks neatly on our new, transparent, and comprehensive scale. So it is not difficult to ask how the distribution of two party types evolved. Ware and Mayhew suggested explicitly that the year 1970 was a pivot point in the long war between dueling party structures. So the first of two critical questions becomes whether this hypothetical sea-change in the distribution of party types actually came off as scheduled? Only after that

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[17] Accessed through their website at www.ncls.org.

[18] Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966).

[19] Byron E. Shafer, *Quiet Revolution: The Struggle for the Democratic Party and the Shaping of Post-Reform Politics* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983).

is it possible to address the larger question of how their changing comparative balance shaped democratic representation.

In that light, the first task for this new measure is to confirm (or not) the hypothesis of a major change in the balance between organized and volunteer parties around 1970. If there was indeed a 'great break' at that point, then this break was implicitly magnifying the impact of the change for all subsequent electoral contests. In principle, the shift from collected case studies to scaled party indicators allows plenty of room to discover that this grand breakdown was overstated. Yet that is not at all what an aggregate translation shows. Rather, just such a transformation did indeed occur on a very substantial scale in the years around the hypothesized pivot-point, a transformation perhaps even larger than earlier observational accounts would suggest.

Table 2[20] confirms the scope of this change around 1970 in two key regards. First, Table 2.A shows a major shift toward the volunteer model during the previous generation, where the aggregate index of party structures confirms that this broader thrust had reached into the vast majority of American states. There were exceptions: seven of the now-fifty states actually moved toward organized party structure rather than toward its volunteer opposite. Another eight essentially stayed where they had long been, though for most, this was because they could go no farther in the volunteer direction. Yet the diagnostic point remains that thirty-five of the fifty states—now counting Alaska and Hawaii which arrived with volunteer parties fully in place—had moved in the direction of the volunteer model between 1950 and 1970.

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[20] Derived originally as Table 1.4 in Shafer and Wagner, *The Long War, Over Party Structure*, p.24.

Table 2

The Great Change?
Reform Progress, 1952- 1972

A. Movements Toward—and Away From—
Volunteer Party Structure, 1952-1972

	Toward Organization	No Change	Toward Voluntarism
States	7	8	35*
Population	8%	14%	78%

B. The Aggregate Fortunes
of Organized and Volunteer Parties

		1952	1972
States	Organized	20	11
	Volunteer	28	39*
Population	Organized	53%	23%
	Volunteer	47%	77%

*Alaska and Hawaii became states in 1959, both with
clear-cut volunteer structures for internal party politics.

So the triumph of a long-running reform drift, beginning all the way back in the 1880s, could finally be confirmed around 1970. Few states managed to resist this drift categorically, a result that becomes even more striking if it is considered not just by raw tallies of states, but instead by the share of the American public that lived in states on one side or the other of this organized/volunteer divide. Table 2.B tells this counterpart story. It was already clear by the time Mayhew began surveying the fifty states that a solid majority had internal party structures that should be classified as volunteer rather than organized. Scale scores now tell the same story. Yet those states that continued to hew to an older organizational model remained on average the larger ones—California was

the striking exception—with the result that the American public as a whole in 1950 was still doing a great deal of its practical politics through organized political parties.

Flash forward to 1970, by which time the roster of states with organized parties had been decimated. Only eleven of the fifty retained the old arrangements for intermediary structure, where twenty of forty-eight had featured those arrangements in the predecessor period. Even further to this distributional point, less than one in four Americans now lived in states with organized party structures, where more than one in two previously did. So an old organizational model for shaping practical politics appeared to be passing, and with it an old world whose demise had long been anticipated but whose resilience had defied expectations, until the 1970s.

Representational Differences and Representational Impacts

An effort to tease out the democratic impact of this change is the analytic heart but also the major analytic challenge in interpreting the impact of the great rebalancing between organized and volunteer parties. Such an effort begins with its own list of requirements. It requires a dataset that stretches from the opening postwar years to the modern era. This dataset must tap public preferences on the major domains of postwar policy conflict, namely social welfare, civil rights, cultural values, and national security. Within the results, it must be possible to distinguish not just Democrats from Republicans, but also activists, those who do the actual work of the political parties, from the rank and file, whose participation is limited to responding to party programs at the polls.

A dataset capable of meeting these demands was generated for quite other purposes by William Claggett and Byron Shafer, subsequently extended and managed by

Regina Wagner.[21]   Derived from the American National Election Study (ANES), its measures were a product of comprehensive exploratory and then confirmatory factor analyses, yielding scales for all four major policy domains.[22]   In the central summary table that follows, the results are presented as standard scores, that is, standardized but not normalized. Party attachment is registered by the canonical two-question format, introduced by the authors of *The American Voter.*[23] Activists are distinguished from the rank and file by the battery of questions about political activity long carried by ANES.[24]

In order to study change over time while retaining statistical reliability, the postwar years are divided into three aggregate periods with five elections each: an opening period, 1950-1970, which represents the old world of party balance; a successor period, 1970-1990, reflecting the great break-point in that balance and the simultaneous triumph of the volunteer model; and a third period, 1990-2010, which is effectively our modern world. Many aspects of the changing structure of American politics could be addressed through this dataset and this arrangement. (Table 3) But for purposes here, four simple measures can capture democratic representation in summary form:

- "Activist Range" is the ideological distance between active parties, that is, the distance from activist Democrats to activist Republicans as collectivities.

- "Democratic Gap" is then the distance inside the Democratic Party from party activists to their own rank and file.

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[21] Originally, William J.M. Claggett and Byron E. Shafer, *The American Public Mind: The Issue Structure of Mass Politics in the Postwar United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[22] The domains are defined in Part I, then derived and exemplified through marker items in Chapters 1-4.

[23] Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter: An Abridgement* (New York: Wiley, 1964).

[24] In the manner of William J.M. Claggett and Philip H. Pollock, III, "The Modes of Participation Revisited, 1980-2004:", *Political Research Quarterly* 59(2006), 593-600.

- "Republican Gap" is the distance inside the Republican Party between Republican activists and their rank and file.

- "Dual Gap" merely sums these Democratic and Republican gaps, in effect the joint distance between activists and their rank and files for the two parties together.

- Beyond all that, those four ideological distances can be broken down by organized versus volunteer parties, offering an explicit measure of the difference in their representational performance.

The best measure of *partisan polarization* among these four is the first, the ideological distance between the active Democratic and active Republican parties. Two major points stand out when these activist ranges are arrayed at Table 3.A.1.[25] First, volunteer parties are *always* more polarized than organized parties, and in every policy domain. The size of the gap does vary, being smallest with social welfare and largest with national security. But the first key point remains that the direction of polarization between party types—and hence the additionally polarizing contribution of a changed balance between them—is omnipresent and consistent. Volunteer parties augment partisan polarization; organized parties constrain it. Those who decry partisan polarization should cherish the remaining organized parties; those who valorize polarization should seek a further shift toward volunteer structures.

Within that impact, the second main finding is that the propensity of organized parties to seek concrete benefits and extend party programs, in contrast to the desire of volunteer parties to discover fresh policy divisions and harvest an associated set of fresh volunteers, is shaped further by policy substance. If the *direction* of the contribution from party types is consistent across domains, the policy substance of those domains goes on to influence the s*cale* of this effect. In the opening years of the postwar period, by the

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[25] Drawn from Table 4.7 in Shafer and Wagner, *The Long War Over Party Structure,* p. 155.

first ANES survey, the dominant policy realm in American party politics was social

welfare, driven to the center of that politics by the Great Depression and the coming of a

welfare state. Both party types were already focused on this domain, and this focus

would be both sustained and constrained across all the years to follow.

Table 3

Partisan Polarization and Party Structure:
The Modern World, 1990-2008

A. Ideological Range

	1.Activist Range		2.Democratic Gap		3.Republican Gap		4.Dual Gap	
	Vol	**Org**	**Vol**	**Org**	**Vol**	**Org**	**Vol**	**Org**
National Security	.82	.59	.23	.12	.14	-.02	.37	.10
Cultural Values	.65	.50	.22	.13	.09	.04	.31	.17
Civil Rights	.87	.84	.13	.07	.24	.14	.32	.21
Social Welfare	.85	.81	.11	.07	.23	.15	.34	.22

B. Ideological Increment

	1.Activist Range	2.Democratic Gap	3. Republican Gap	4.Dual Gap
National Security	+.23 Vol	+.11 Vol	+.12 Vol	+.27 Vol
Cultural Values	+.15 Vol	+.09 Vol	+.05 Vol	+.14 Vol
Civil Rights	+.03 Vol	+.04 Vol	+.10 Vol	+.11 Vol
Social Welfare	+.04 Vol	+.04 Vol	+.08 Vol	+.12 Vol

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C. Real Impact

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	1. Absolute Impact				2. Proportionate Impact			
	Activist Range		Dual Gap		Activist Range		Dual Gap	
	Vol	**Org**	**Vol**	**Org**	**Vol**	**Org**	**Vol**	**Org**
National Security	.82	.59	.37	.10	2.46	.59	1.11	.10
Cultural Values	.65	.50	.31	.17	1.95	.50	.93	.17
Civil Rights	.87	.84	.32	.21	2.68	.84	.96	.21
Social Welfare	.85	.81	.34	.22	2.55	.81	1.02	.22

Civil rights was a secondary domain for party politics at the start of the postwar period. But by the time of the great break between organized and volunteer parties, rights policy too had become integral to partisanship. So it joined social welfare as domains where differences between party types were visible and consistent but restrained.[26] Why should this be? Established policy domains must automatically encourage some convergence between party types, as the party program becomes indisputable for both. Social welfare had the advantage of delivering concrete and divisible benefits from the start, the main desideratum of organized parties. Civil rights had less immediate attraction, but when volunteer parties began pushing it forward, organized parties quickly discovered material benefits that could be extracted from this domain too.

By contrast, both cultural values and national security showed no overall partisan attachment in the immediate postwar years, with cultural policy effectively dormant as a

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[26] Edward D. Berkowitz, *America's Welfare State: From Roosevelt to Reagan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

public concern while foreign policy was consequential but largely consensual. Both domains began attracting activist attention in the successor period, especially within volunteer parties, where the rise of an ostensible 'counter-culture' and the appearance of widespread anti-war protests were available as obvious stimuli--and as a source of fresh streams of new volunteers.[27] By the modern world, there were clear policy differences between the two parties in both policy domains, while the difference between party types inside these parties stood out additionally.

Said the other way around, cultural values and national security were the policy domains that *interfered* with the desired focus of organized parties but serviced the operational needs of volunteer parties. In response, the gap between the two party types widened. Table 3.B.1 reinforces the same points, showing parallel impacts by way of a composite difference rather than two absolute scores. Seen this way, the preference of operative workers from volunteer parties and the indifference of operative counterparts from organized parties on cultural values and national security--the desire of the former to make politics 'about' cultural and foreign policy--do stand out.

So those who are dismayed by the rise of cultural and security issues should cherish their organized parties, while those who would privilege cultural values and national security and diminish social welfare and civil rights should seek even more volunteer parties. When the focus shifts to the representational gap *inside* the parties, between rank and files and their own ostensible agents, the best comparative measure for the impact of organized versus volunteer parties shifts to the fourth of these four, the *dual*

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[27] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1993); Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

gap between party activists and their rank and files, that is, the Democratic and the Republican gaps added together. (Tables 3.A.4 & 3.B.4)

In principle, activist polarization might derive largely from polarization in their rank and files. But in practice, activists diverge from--resist or even countervail--the preferences of those rank and files. Seen the other way around, these representational gaps become a direct measure of how much (or how little) party operatives cater to themselves rather than to their putative constituents in organized versus volunteer parties. And to cut to the chase again: operatives in organized parties, while hardly ignoring the major issues of their day, preferred to stay within reach of their rank and files, while operatives in volunteer parties wished instead to pursue their *own* policy concerns and escape the desires of rank and file identifiers.

The two gaps are put back together at Table 3.A.4, where an effect from party structure on internal party representation is immediately evident in all four domains. Workers in volunteer parties are half again as far away from their rank and files as workers in organized parties, even in the domain of social welfare, a situation that reaches its extreme with national security, where volunteer operatives are on their way to being four times as far away from their respective rank and files as organized counterparts. Table 3.B.4 then derives what is essentially the same result by subtracting the smaller gap inside organized parties from the larger one inside volunteer counterparts. Once more, there are bigger gaps within volunteer as opposed to organized parties, once again with a further shaping influence from particular policy substance.

The coefficients measuring representational conformity or deviance in Tables 3.A and 3.B tell a clear story: for each of the two parties, between the two parties, and inside

each. Yet they underestimate the overall impact of these representational gaps in one important way. If these were the coefficients circa 1970, there would be nothing further to say: about half the country lived under organized parties and half lived under the volunteer alternative. But a generation later--and this is the generation captured in Table 3--the balance was no longer one to one but rather three to one, volunteer over organized. So the coefficients capturing representation inside volunteer as opposed to organized parties, striking enough in absolute terms, were now three times more consequential than those for organized party counterparts.

Table 3.C attempts to suggest this by tripling the coefficients for volunteer parties. On the one hand, by comparison to Tables 3.A and 3.B, this implies a greater representational gap than would be true for any given pair of parties that exemplify the two party types. But it does serve as a reminder of how strongly the move toward volunteer parties has driven partisan polarization in society as a whole. One final time, then, fans of a polarized politics know how to drive it forward, and Table 3.C suggests that even more polarization can be achieved through further reform. Just as those who find growing polarization to be a curse of modern politics know what to protect, or even what to reverse.

Locking in This Result

The battle between organized versus volunteer party structures had been a kind of trench warfare from the 1880s into the 1960s, capturing one or another state here, losing an occasional state there. Until a much bigger and more focused change shifted the balance in a decisive fashion around 1970. Yet the impact of this shift still obeyed a long-standing--and well-understood--institutional logic. Organized parties remained more

focused on direct rewards for their active members, divisible benefits for their rank and files, and extension of existing policy initiatives. Volunteer parties were more focused on fresh lures for active participants, by way policy promises that were comprehensive or dissident, while yielding a constantly changing flow of both proposals and volunteers. What was different was initially just the balance between the two party types, a balance now loaded heavily toward volunteer parties.

Fifty years on, however, the same generic situation has begun to look different in practice. The very scale of the triumph of volunteer parties and their issue activists appears to have altered the operational dynamics of party politics. When Wilson was theorizing the basic differences between party models, reform partisans argued that their triumph would spread policy influence among a broader and more diverse public, while leading to a more rapid turn-over--a constant churn--of policy positions. Yet by the 2010s, internal party politics had increasingly morphed in the opposite fashion, one not obviously anticipated by the old arguments. Now, the volunteer triumph had come to imply sharply increased partisan polarization, catering to party workers on both sides of the partisan divide while necessitating an escape from--and sometimes explicit rejecting-- a broader, more moderate, more changeable, and more diverse rank and file.

Yet there was more. In an effect not envisioned originally by either side, the newly empowered issue-based activists became increasingly aware of themselves as a specialized elite, one able to institutionalize its own control of volunteer parties and drive away those with differing or more moderate preferences. It was easy to miss (or deny!) this development, since twenty-first-century parties did not look like their predecessors from the nineteenth or even mid-twentieth centuries. But these new parties had actually

re-secured the critical resources and re-solidified the operational arrangements that had long allowed an active minority to control internal party politics. In doing so, they had restored a modern equivalent of the machine-type structure that allowed historical predecessors to shape the process of electoral politics and influence the rewards of public policy, often to the exclusion of their own rank and files.

The opening shot in an alternate narrative capturing this impact of party reform was fired by Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller in *The Party Decides*:[28] For them, the changes which had been the focus of Wilson, Ware, and Mayhew had indeed occurred. Moreover, those changes had achieved the operational impacts previously expected of them, valorizing activists and emphasizing program over product Yet in this modern view, what had looked like a terminal disruption of the filtering power of political parties had been merely an anarchic interregnum, before active party workers--now in the form of a network of issue activists--adjusted their resources and their behavior so as to reassert coordinating power over the official party.

Two central factors had always been (and in this view continued to be) obvious indicators of this mediating power, namely the amassing of internal party resources and the control of nominations to public office. Those recurred under the new institutional arrangements, as they had once recurred under the old. The revisionist examples from Cohen et al. were drawn from the mechanics of presidential selection, the most easily accessible window on party structure but never more than a derivative of overall party structure. Yet shortly thereafter, a serious attempt to put operational detail into this argument more generically, and more importantly to drive it through the entire party

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[28]Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, *THE PARTY DECIDES: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

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system, came from Seth Masket in a series of analyses, beginning most crucially with *No Middle Ground*.[29]

Taking off from the ideological polarization of the modern political world, Masket attempted to work backward, both empirically and theoretically, to the new but recurrent elements of party politics that had produced it. In his interpretation, the traditional party organizations (TPOs) of the Mayhew analysis, widespread and vigorous into the 1960s but shrinking and withering in the 1970s, had indeed declined on their own terms. Yet along the way, they had morphed into a modern incarnation of the old centrality of party machinery. Masket referred to this modern variant as IPOs, informal party organizations, which had implicitly acquired a modern incarnation every bit as behaviorally muscular, every bit as effectively closed to random participants, and every bit as directive—probably even more directive—in shaping public policy.

In pursuit of his demonstration of a renewed intermediary role for parties that were now built around purposive incentives, Masket found its critical element in the modern incarnation of an even older classical notion, namely political ideology. Nothing in our analysis would gainsay his summary:

> Although the shape of the modern party is more of a network than a machine hierarchy, the function is essentially the same: a small group of people operating only barely within the law manages to control elections and thereby the government. The major difference between these modern informal party organizations (IPOs) and their machine forebears is the existence of ideological activists. Machines distrusted ideologues; IPOs rely on them. The result is extreme candidates and highly polarized politics.[30]

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[29]Seth E. Masket *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[30]Ibid., 19.

On the other hand, reinforced by such a summary, we are driven to ask how activists, once introduced as the structural saviors of a general public, had been able to please themselves and reduce the influence of that very public. And there, a set of institutional reforms, accompanied as ever by the behaviors that they advantaged, became critical. The first tranche of these involved the institutions associated with the great change between organized and volunteer parties around 1970. But a second set was introduced by rising issue activists as they became the dominant force inside political parties, and these helped to move the initial impacts onward. Once more, the easiest window on this sequence of institutional reforms (and its behavioral changes) can be provided by the politics of presidential selection.

The institutional changes alerting the broadest section of an attentive public to this second triumph of party reform did not directly involve the balance between organized and volunteer parties. Rather, they involved the balance among institutions of delegate selection and presidential nomination. That particular balance had swung immediately, sharply, and strikingly away from party conventions and toward presidential primaries.. Ironically, many of the reformers, especially from volunteer states, did not really want to multiply the number of primaries at all. Rather, what they hoped was to convert existing state conventions into reformed participatory caucuses, an institutional lure (as well as lightning rod) for issue activists[31]

So by the logic that James Q. Wilson had decoded more than a decade before, they favored the 'quality' of caucus participation over the 'quantity' of primary voting. In the process, they favored themselves over a general public which they already knew to

[31] Byron E. Shafer, *Quiet Revolution: The Struggle for the Democratic Party and the Shaping of Post-Reform Politics* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983), Part II, The Politics of Implementation.

be less ideological and more focused on the fabric of daily life. But what they got, largely courtesy of the states with remaining organized parties, was a proliferation of presidential primaries. Many of these parties would have preferred to stay with old-fashioned party conventions, but they quickly came to see that they could hope to keep newly mobilized activists out of state party business by separating that business from delegate selection and presidential nomination, while coming into conformity with an ostensible party-wide mandate.

So a presidential primary was the obvious compromise: what could be more democratic than that? In fact, the surviving convention systems--now participatory caucuses--would function much as reformers expected. Privileging activists and isolating them within a wider public, these caucuses would go on to advantage the candidates preferred by issue activists rather than the voting public. That effect was clear enough, but since only a minority of states stayed with this institutional arrangement, these participatory systems were never enough by themselves to push an insurgent nominee over the top. Yet the search for further institutional devices to help accomplish that goal was hardly over.

Rather, activists within both parties moved on to a very different institutional arrangement, with the same attraction for fellow activists and the same isolation from a general pubic. This involved a burgeoning sequence of candidate debates among aspiring presidential nominees, most held before any actual convention delegates had been selected, though a few bled over into the real selection period. These debates would prove irresistible to a news media hungry for political events during the period when

politics reliably shifted away from legislative maneuvering but had not yet reached presidential selection.

In response, more or less immediately and completing this chain of impacts, the new nationally televised debates proved to be a powerful attraction for a burgeoning array of aspiring presidential contenders. If most of them started with no national profile --and these profiles would get only smaller as time passed--such candidates also had little to lose. If they could move their initial polling lines by appealing to a small but attentive public, they might hope to expand this support when the real contest arrived. Within three iterations--2012, 2016, and 2020--the result would be a stereotypical (if superficial) triumph of the active parties. By 2020, the direct fallout from creation of this further institutional twist would reach everywhere.

The fields of ostensible candidates would grow so large that there had to be two complete sets of candidate debates for the opening rounds. The composition of these fields would accomplish the dual purposes of privileging politicians whose tiny levels of national support more or less guaranteed their irrelevance to the ultimate outcome, plus donors wealthy enough to *purchase* sufficient poll support to get past minimal--and derisory-- requirements for poll standing. Issue activists were delighted with their new-found ability to split hairs among numerous presidential aspirants--23 at the first Democratic pre-debate of 2020--a delight richly shared with a political press that was itself increasingly a mechanism of activist opinion and not of communication with the general public.

The Fruits of Reform--and the Revenge of the Voters

The Republicans, 2012

The sequence of Republican nominating debates in 2011, leading up to the presidential nominations of 2012, provided an early and dramatic testimonial to the temporary power of these pre-presidential encounters, while underlining the way that this institutional theater was dedicated to activists rather than the general public. Figure 1 tracks the poll standing of the six candidates who crossed a five-percent national threshold for some extended period.[32] This field produced a series of apparent bandwagons in public preference for the Republican nomination, first for Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann of Minnesota, then for Governor Rick Perry of Texas, then for businessman Herman Cain, then for former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and finally for Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum.

Figure 1

Figure 1 could tell many stories, but the one most relevant to the stimulation provided to party activists and to the tension between these activists and an eventual voting public turns on their ultimate irrelevance. For in fact, there was always a serious, stable contender, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. Moreover, Romney did not simply survive the onslaught of aspiring challengers and chimerical bandwagons. His victory in the actual contest, while a testament to personal tenacity and campaign quality, was also a remarkable reflection on the shadow-boxing character of the preceding series of pre-presidential debates. As expanded, the debates had drawn activist attention at a time when the general public was ignoring a contest that, after all, had not yet begun. These activists, generating one champion after another, had been at best irrelevant, at

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[32]Tho9ugh this threshold is solely our creation. Dropped from the analysis through an inability to draw five percent on a regular basis are former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman, New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson, Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, former Louisiana Governor Buddy Roemer, and Texas Congressman Ron Paul. In order to be fully accurate, Figure 1 would add those five roughly flat lines along the bottom of the graph.

worst a distraction and a side-show--an obvious impediment that ultimately had to be overcome by an awakened public.

More could be said. Yet we cannot do better for a summary than the analysis by John Sides and Lynn Vavreck on "The Anatomy of Media Boomlets: Discovery, Scrutiny, and Decline":

> The process of discovery began when a candidate who had previously attracted little news coverage did or said something that reporters and commentators judged to be novel, important, and therefore newsworthy. As a consequence, news coverage of that candidate increased sharply. . . .
> But this did not last very long. Once a candidate seemed "serious" enough to pay attention to, that candidate was then subject ted to increased scrutiny from both opponents and the news media. . . .
> This scrutiny took place regardless of what the candidate had done either in the past or in the campaign to that point. It reflected two things: opposing candidates' need to stop the surging candidate from solidifying his or her lead and journalistic norms about vetting candidates. . . .
> Having devoted time to writing about a particular candidate, the media had a natural incentive to move on and find a storyline that was novel and more exciting. Unless the candidate did something else that was considered newsworthy, his or her news coverage began to decline, which in turn further drove down the candidate's poll numbers. (43-45)[33]

The Democrats, 2016

Not every nominating contest could, even in principle, produce such a striking succession of bogus boomlets. Almost by definition, the fewer the contenders, the greater the limitation on possible outcomes, and the Democrats of 2016 were to generate one of the more constrained examples. Many commentators had envisioned this contest as being reduced to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as the champion of the regular party, with Governor Martin O'Malley of Maryland, keynote speaker at the 2012 Democratic Convention, as champion of the activists and thus her main rival. Yet

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[33] John Sides and Lynn Vavrck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

disastrous events in the city of Baltimore, where O'Malley had been Mayor before becoming Governor, sank his chances early.

Figure 2

That left room for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, a hesitant entrant and an apparent gadfly when he did enter, to become the champion of the activists instead, and Sanders found the pre-nomination debates to be an ideal vehicle for capturing activist attention. So after the practical demise of O'Malley, the 2015 debate series both confirmed the front-runner status of Clinton and conveyed the activist mantle to Sanders, where the preference gap between the two narrowed a bit as the activists came to recognize him as the un-Clinton. (Figure 2) The coming of an actual contest between Clinton and Sanders for convention delegates would see this gap narrow a bit more, with some initial indication that Sanders just might continue to rise, before it began to widen again consistently as Clinton began to pick off almost all the major contests.

At no point did Sanders appear likely to overtake her, a non-development that gave some curiosity value to the fact that their personal contest nevertheless continued all the way to the convention before Sanders conceded what had been a long-evident outcome. Yet this time, the key to an extended contest lay with another great institutional gift to party activists in presidential politics, namely the difference between presidential primaries and participatory caucuses. It was these caucuses that were to give Sanders a sufficient string of state-level 'wins' to allow him to continue mobilizing issue activists. In the consequential development, Clinton won an overwhelming share of the state contests of any size. But along the way, Sanders was even more successful with the smaller states. (Table 4.A)

Table 4

Activists versus Voters:
Nominating Institutions of Choice

A. Bias against Large Electorates: Voter Turnout			B. Bias against Primaries: Caucus Outcomes		
	Clinton	**Sanders**	**Clinton**	**Sanders**	
> 1,000,000	9	1	28	10	**Primaries**
> 500,000	8	2	2	11	**Caucuses**
> 200,000	10	4			
> 50,000	3	6			
< 50,000	0	8			

C. Voters Per Delegate

In Primaries	**8,534**
In Caucuses	**1,886**

Yet that still understates the advantages that came with small-state success. the states which had retained participatory caucuses were overwhelmingly the small ones. (Table 4.B) In that environment, Clinton was relentlessly victorious when a state selected its delegates through a presidential primary, while Sanders was even more successful when a state selected its delegates through a participatory caucus. But even more to the skewed advantage that these states offered to activists versus voters, was the huge *statistical* bonus conveyed by the caucus mechanism. It took more than four times as many public participants to convey a delegate in a primary as opposed to a caucus. (Table 4.C)

The Democrats, 2020

On the other hand, the 2012 Republican pattern could also surface among the Democrats, as with the 2020 Democratic nominating contest. A stable leader in the person of former Vice President Joe Biden would play the role of Mitt Romney this time.

But unlike Romney, Biden would not have to endure boomlets for an interminable stream of also-rans, while the few mild counterparts would not cause him to lose his lead in public polls at any point before the real contest began. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders would return as the heir apparent for the activists, a standing that would remain roughly stable throughout the fall, wobbling only during the lone alternative boomlet of the 2020 Democratic contest. Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren would be the reason for that lone wobble, as she challenged early for the mantle of activist spokesperson. Yet her boomlet would fade badly before the first real contest began.

Figure 3

There were some lesser developments--side-shows--to the story of one dominant performance. Modest rises for South Bend Mayor Peter Buttigieg and Minneseota Senator Amy Klobuchar were enough to enthuse personal supporters but did not translate into serious impacts on delegate numbers once the contest actually began. California Senator Kamala Harris showed a mini-boomlet, yet that always appeared to be primarily a media phenomenon, as both this attention and her poll showing dissipated early in the debate sequence. So the main role for Harris was to represent another truncated version of the discovery/scrutiny/decline dynamic pioneered by the Republicans in 2012. All that said, alternative press fantasies---comprising a kind of opinion poll among reporters--did continue through 2015 and well into 2016:

- <u>Harris and Warren on the rise</u>, New York Times, July 7, 2015: ". interviews with voters in the early primary and caucus states over the last week found that Ms. Harris and Ms. Warren had plainly broken through, drawing on a deep hunger within the Democratic electorate for big ideas and groundbreaking female leadership."

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- It is still within the realm of possibility that Elizabeth Warren can be stopped, New York Times, October 1, 2015, "How the Average Joe (and Jane) Could Wind up Stopping Warren."[34]

- As the debates near an end, Biden is crashing, CNN, October 31, 2015: "But Biden today is in a much weaker position than he was even a few months ago. And this is the time to be peaking, not losing your stride."

- The real politics of delegate selection makes a pre-convention majority unlikely: "The Democratic Race Is Now Sanders Versus the Field, And a Contested Convention Possibly Awaits", *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2020, and "Debate Shows Bernie Sanders Could Win Most Votes But Be Denied Nomination", *The Guardian*, February 20, 2020.

Table 5

The Actual Voters:
Primary Outcomes

	Biden	Sanders
February 11	0	1
February 29	1	0
March 3	9	4
March 10	5	0
March 17	4	0
April 7	1	0

Nevertheless, all the attention to support lines, opinion boomlets, media fancies, and respective crashes during the long unreality of pre-presidential debates became quickly beside the point. (Table 5) Activists and their press audience clearly did pay such attention; the general public just as clearly did not. But when the primaries finally arrived, the voting public dispatched both the activists and their press audience; Table 5 is just one of many ways to tell what was ultimately the same story. Biden, the front-runner, stumbled in the opening primary in New Hampshire; he righted himself in the second primary in South Caroline; and in the following round on "Super Tuesday, March

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[34] Though it had occurred to someone that the activists and the voters are sometimes not the same thing: "In primary after primary, the candidates of the party's left-liberal activists have failed to win the more typical members of the Democratic Party. These voters don't show up at rallies or post on Twitter. They are more moderate. They are disproportionately nonwhite; Southern; and less likely to have graduated from college. But in the modern era, they have usually had the votes to decide the nomination."

3, the contest came to an effective end. Bernie Sanders would stagger on, but he was not to win another primary before even he withdrew after the April 7 primary in Wisconsin.

The Republicans, 2016

There have been even shorter contests since the explosion of presidential primaries, though mostly just when a sitting president was seeking re-nomination. The Republican contest of 2020 would add one such. Otherwise, the Democratic nominating contest of 2020 was about as short--and about as lacking in serious challenges--as it is possible to generate in the post-reform world.[35] Yet there was on recent nominating contest that was different. from all these others, the one recent nominating contest that, while actively and widely contested, was actually not much affected by the difference between primaries and caucuses or even, more impressively, by any serious difference between the world of pre-nomination debates and the electoral contests that would produce an actual nomination. (Figure 4)

Figure 4

Instead, for this contest too, the story ended surprisingly early. Businessman Donald Trump entered only after former Governors Jeb Bush of Florida and John Kasich of Ohio had already joined the field, along with current Senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Marco Rubio of Florida plus neurosurgeon Ben Carson, though Trump's entry would hardly have seemed late in previous years. Regardless, the pre-presidential debates provided Trump with a forum (and an audience) that he had never previously possessed, He enjoyed it, and he began to climb in public support. By the end of the calendar year, he had become the (hypothetical) front-runner. And from the time of the first actual

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[35] Elizabeth M. Sawyer, Byron E. Shafer, and Regina L. Wagner, "Misreporting: Social Scientists, Political Commentators, and the Politics of Presidential Selection", *The Forum* 19(2021), Issue 1.

delegate contest, he would demonstrate that he could translate poll standing into real public support--that is, actual turnout in delegate contests. (Figure 4)

Moreover, when the real contest appeared, there was no latent challenger waiting to emerge. The closest thing to a challenging boomlet had been for Ben Carson in the fall, and he was in precipitous decline by the end of the year. There were lesser associated stories. Jeb Bush, the original champion of the regular party, managed only a long slow collapse. Marco Rubio, argued by many to be the emergent face of the official party, did not fall away but neither did he enjoy much of a rise. At a distance was Ted Cruz, who began to rise toward the end of the year and continued to do so when the real contest arrived, but never enough even to close the existing gap with Trump. And John Kasich would enjoy an idiosyncratic bump, though the contest was effectively over before he managed to deny his home state of Ohio to the obvious nominee.

The Activists' Revenge

The state of contemporary American politics is easily summarized. The general public is closely balanced as between the two parties, perhaps as balanced as it has ever been for an extended period. The activists in those two parties are far apart ideologically and galloping away from each other, on a scale seen occasionally--at the very beginning, right before the Civil War, or in the late nineteenth century--but not on a regular basis. The general public, despite activist efforts as abetted by a news media that is increasingly indistinguishable from these activists, finds itself sitting in-between. A majority of this public is always more liberal, much more liberal, than the active Republican Party. A majority of this public is always more conservative, much more conservative, than the active Democratic Party.

Despite being faced with polarized activists inside both parties, the members of this voting public ordinarily have no trouble making a choice between candidate options. One presidential candidate or the other will reliably be closer to any given member of this public. It is just that the public quickly becomes disillusion by either Democratic or Republican winners, who can increasingly be counted on to cater to the activists and misrepresent the voters. Fortunately, American politics offers a simple corrective: respond to programmatic initiatives that you do not like by going with the opposite party next time, thereby re-dividing control of the institutions of American national government. Given the state of modern American politics, that quickly becomes preferable to allowing unified Democratic or unified Republican government.

Yet it is the state of American *parties* that offers a simple explanation for why this recurrent dynamic surfaces and persists. Though at this point, the analytic story all too often veers off into strange territory. Many analysts decry the state of American politics, often on grounds that are shared across ideological lines: parties are too polarized to reflect public wishes; politics is too unstable to deliver policy programs. Yet many of these same analysts then go off in search of remedies that can only help exaggerate those problems. Maybe *gerrymandering* caused all this? Something or someone should make the activists behave in a nonpartisan fashion. Maybe the *filibuster* is at fault? We should find a way to allow narrow majorities of these increasingly unrepresentative parties to implement sweeping programs. And all the while, what somehow never re-enters the story is its bedrock, 'the state of the parties'.

As a nation, we have sought incentives for political activity that give us parties focused not on distributing benefits and encouraging candidates to emphasize a record of

policy delivery but instead on abstract programs that allow candidates to emphasize the sweep of their promises and the purity of their positions. This is the huge shaping influence in American politics that somehow remains hidden in plain view. Even as the most widely repeated criticisms of that politics--it grows only more polarized; it favors staking out positions over delivering programs--follow more or less directly from these 'hidden' structural influences.

Having built what is in effect a self-perpetuating activist politics which is in chronic tension with its putative general public, we have permitted--and the political press has usually encouraged--these activists to attempt to go on and remake governmental institutions and the political process itself in their own image, privileging activism while exiling a public that is only condescendingly represented by these activists, a public that, not very long ago, privileged political brokerage and programmatic accomplishments. And in the end, having successfully done all that--the final irony--we lament not the state of political parties, but the state of American politics.
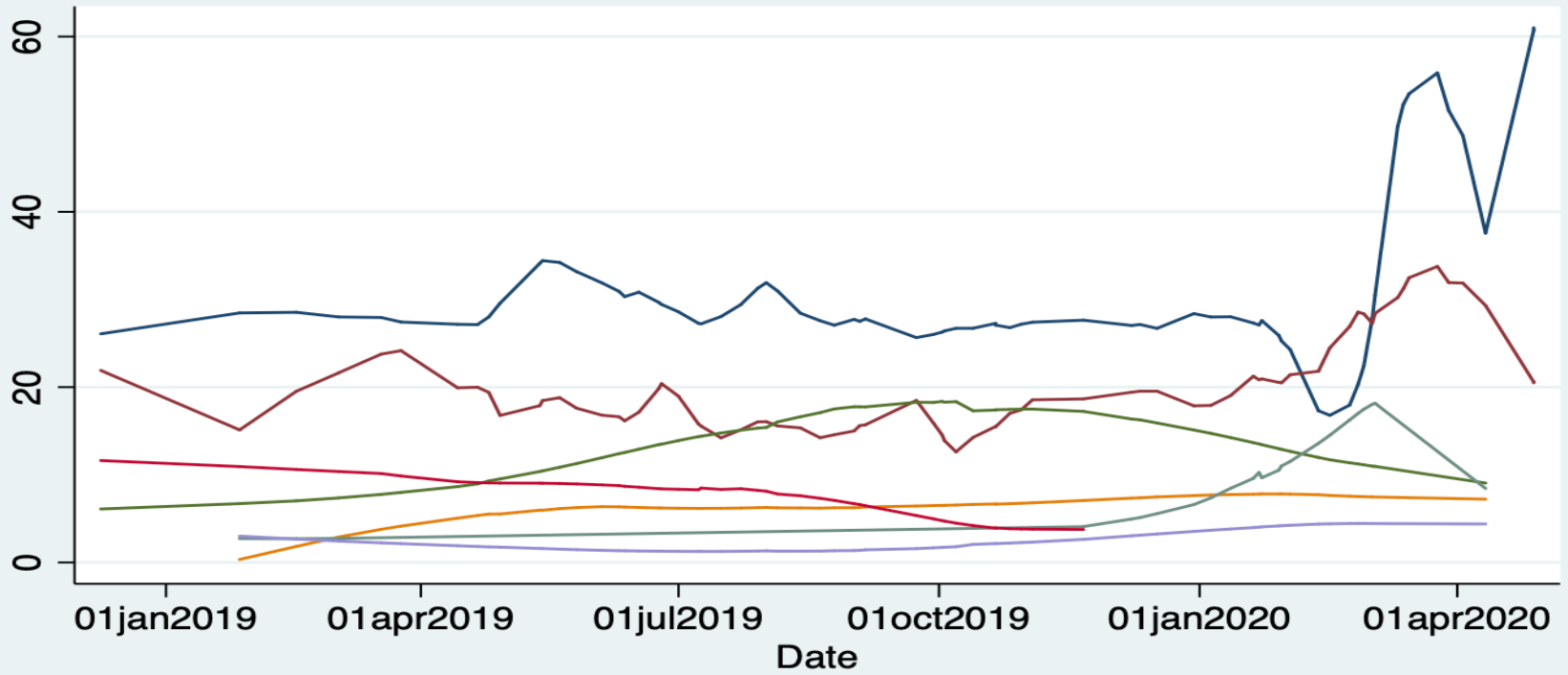
Figure 1
Activists versus Voters:
The Republicans, 2012
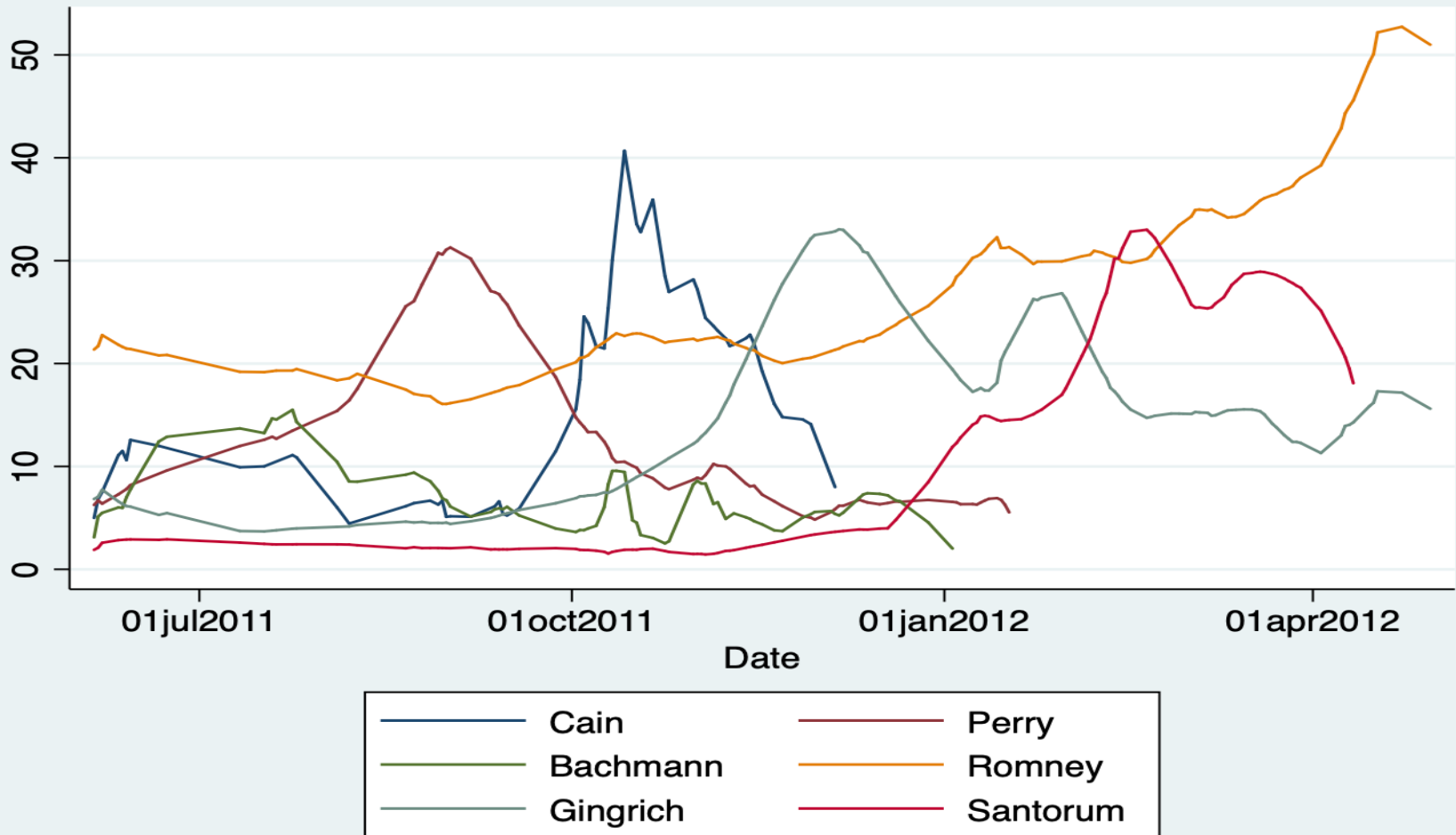
Figure 2
Activists versus Voters:
The Democrats, 2016
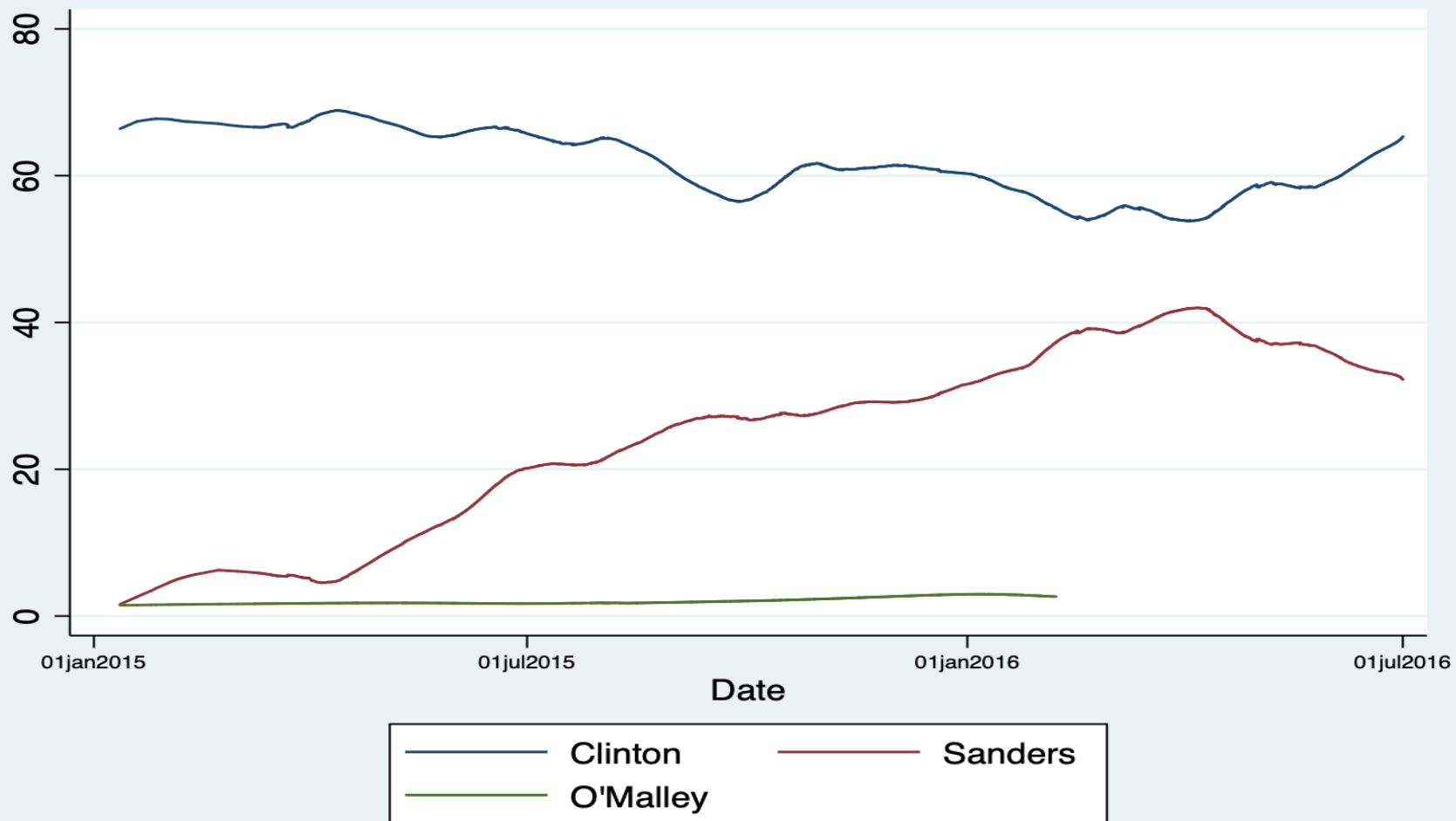
Figure 3
Activists versus Voters:
The Democrats, 2020

Figure 4
Activists versus Voters:
The Republicans, 2016