Dinosaurs for the Digital Age: Democratic Party Organization in the Twenty-First Century

Aaron B. Shapiro

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DINOSAURS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE: DEMOCRATIC PARTY ORGANIZATION IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

AARON SHAPIRO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment for the
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Aaron Shapiro

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Dinosaurs for the Digital Age: Democratic Party Organization in the Twenty-First Century

by

Aaron Shapiro

Advisor: Frances Fox Piven

Abstract: This dissertation traces Democratic Party organization roughly over the Obama era. It conceptualizes the party at the national, state, and local level, with a particular focus on Ohio. This project seeks to reconcile changes in the political environment that incentivize strengthening party structures, with American electoral institutions that complicate party organizational development. I suggest that while demographic change, polarization, and big data are powerful incentives to focus Democratic electoral strategy on an Obama-like organizational model and campaign strategy, institutionalization remains hampered by significant structural impediments. These are institutional as well as coalitional. While party integration has been uneven, I find an evolving and shifting relationship between national, state, and local party organization. Variation in competition and resource levels create disparate intra-party logics. “Battleground” states are marked by ephemeral high resource presidential organization that deeply penetrates the local level in service of turning out a coherent party electorate. Yet such organization tends to be unrooted and unintegrated in local party structures. This is explained by the absence of organizational mechanisms that bridge the diverse and path-dependent campaign practices of these organizations. Struggles to institutionalize such an apparatus beyond the presidential year, contribute to the broader problem of Democratic off-year turnout.
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Acronyms

ACA (Patient Protection and) Affordable Care Act
ACORN Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
ACT America Coming Together
DFA Democracy for America
DGA Democratic Governors Association
DCCC Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee
DFD Deputy Field Director
DLC Democratic Leadership Council
DLCC Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee
DNC Democratic National Committee
DSCC Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee
FEC Federal Election Commission
FO Field Organizer
ED Executive Director
EDM Emerging Democratic Majority
GOP Grand Ole Party (Republican Party)
GOTV Get Out the Vote
IAF Industrial Areas Foundation
IE Independent Expenditure
NAE New American Electorate
NT Neighborhood Team
NTL Neighborhood Team Leader
ODP Ohio Democratic Party
OFA Obama for America
OFA 2.0 Organizing for America
OFA 4.0 Organizing for Action
ODCCA Ohio Democratic County Chair Association
PAC Political Action Committee
RFD Regional Field Director
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td>Responsible Party Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super PAC</td>
<td>Super Political Action Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>VAN</td>
<td>Voter Activation Network (NGP-VAN)</td>
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Chapter 1
Introduction

“I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat.”
-Will Rogers

Eight years is a long time in American politics. Barack Obama’s 2008 election was hailed as the dawn of a new progressive era, one in which a long-coming electoral majority was finally mobilized with the help of a charismatic standard-bearer and cutting edge campaign. Democrats had unified control of the federal government for the first time in nearly two decades. They would finally be able to govern without the help of a conservative southern wing that was the party’s historical linchpin. The future, cosmopolitan and liberal, was here. Or not.

Obama presided over two tumultuous terms characterized by landmark legislative victories, yet also nearly unparalleled partisanship and gridlock, exacerbated once his congressional majorities evaporated in 2010. While obstructionism and polarization was on the rise for decades, the single minded-fervor through which Republicans resisted Obama’s policies seemed unparalleled in modern history.

Despite such difficulties, it seemed a safe bet the Democratic coalition as a presidential majority would hold. On Election Day 2016, Obama’s approval rating was virtually parallel to his 2008 popular vote percentage. After eight years of stoking their base with reactionary fervor, the Republican Party had been unable to prevent an erratic
reality TV star from wresting the nomination from a bevy of candidates with far superior establishment credentials and assumed general election prospects. Hillary Clinton, Obama’s former rival and now would-be successor, was a perhaps uninspiring, however solid and safe choice, to hold the Democratic coalition against such a vulgar enemy.

Yet Donald Trump’s shocking victory overturned virtually all assumptions about contemporary American politics. The progressive future had given way to right-wing populism, oriented in restoring American greatness on behalf of a group often forgotten in the new Democratic coalition-- the white working class. True, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, yet the vaunted Democratic turnout apparatus fell short across highly resourced battleground states, where Clinton’s vote totals declined relative to Obama. What happened?

This dissertation attempts to offer a partial answer to this, at least concerning the Democratic Party’s troubles in maintaining the Obama organizational apparatus. To be clear, many factors well beyond the party’s turnout machine influenced Clinton’s loss. Significant defections among white rust belt voters could not have been stopped with a better Get Out the Vote operation. An inability to mobilize the Democratic base is not just due to a lack of door knocks. However, struggles to mobilize the Obama coalition, not just in 2016, but also in 2010 and 2014, were in part attributable to the challenges of building turnout infrastructure over this period. Central to this difficulty, is how mechanisms of fragmentation, both old and new, distort the internal dynamics of party organization. Campaigning has changed vastly over the last decade. Digitalization and polarization have altered the way elections are fought. Still constant however, is the American system remains harsh terrain for the would-be mass party organization.
Many, in the twenty-first century, view parties wearily, an outdated anachronism of Tammany Hall and the feudal south. Politics have changed since the heyday of the party machine. The public may well cheer the decline of the boss, yet not all recent developments are necessarily for the better. The last several decades have seen an explosion of money in politics: often filtered through new sorts of political institutions designed to outmaneuver America’s modest regime of electoral regulation--PACs, Super PACs, 527s, 501(c)4’s, and more. New strategies for evading electoral competition have taken hold. These include erecting new (and not so new) barriers to voting, as well as the development of increasingly sophisticated efforts to gerrymander districts, insulating politicians from competitive elections. ‘Big data’ has revolutionized the communicative structures and strategies of electoral politics, leading to concern for both its massive ‘big-brother like’ databases of citizen information, and creating demand for even more money to maintain such apparatus’.

Yet the implications of these trends are not all bad. The Obama presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012 implemented new electoral strategies and organizing techniques geared for the digital age to mobilize a majority electorate comprised largely of underrepresented groups (African-Americans, Latinos, youth, etc.), leading to higher electoral turnout than in decades. Marrying new forms of low-cost digital communication to traditional field organization strategies. The outcome was not simply an increase in voter turnout, but grassroots activist-based political participation: through volunteering, small donor fundraising, and social media communication, to build the infrastructure necessary to mobilize a difficult to reach electoral coalition.1 Yet, it is unclear whether

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1 Berman, Ari. Herding Donkeys: The Fight to Rebuild the Democratic Party and Reshape American Politics. Macmillan, 2010; McKenna, Elizabeth and Hahrie Han. Groundbreakers:
the mobilization of this electorate is largely the idiosyncratic effect of a particular
candidate, or an institutional response to an electoral environment that better incentivizes
mobilization on its further edges than it has in decades past.

If the latter is even partially the case, then what might this mean for the role of
parties in the American system? After all, while the public may be suspicious of parties,
political scientists tend to have a different view. For them, political parties are thought
traditionally to be the “socializer of political conflict.” Could a movement toward
electoral strategies based on mobilization suggest a possible resurgence of parties,
historically the dominant organizational instrument of voter mobilization? If so, how will
this affect how parties and politicians construct and deploy resources in the digital era?

The politics of 2008-2016 can be viewed through the emergence of two distinct
electorates. A presidential electorate successfully mobilized once every four years:
younger, poorer, ethnically diverse, and ideologically liberal leaning, and a non-
presidential electorate: that is older, richer, whiter, and more conservative. While it has
always been the case that variation in turnout between presidential and non-presidential
years is correlated with socioeconomic status and resources, the Obama coalition’s
electoral success has been particularly dependent on the mobilization of irregular voters.
Yet as 2016 illustrates, one should not assume that this picture of two electorates remains
fixed. Mobilization of the Obama coalition has only been successful with Barack

How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America. Oxford University
2 Schattschneider, Elmer E. The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in
Press, 1996.
Obama’s name at the top of ticket, an occurrence no longer possible barring some rather sudden and unexpected constitutional changes. If this coalition were to be preserved beyond the personalistic attraction to Obama and turned into the ‘regular’ American electorate, it would likely have a seismic impact on American politics and representation. Its failure however, provides grist for a reactionary counter-coalition, based in the ethnocultural identity of a shrinking, if geographically well situated, minority.

Responsibility for the institutionalization of this progressive coalition rests in the hands of the Democratic Party, as its electoral competitiveness is tied to the ability to mobilize its 2008 and 2012 presidential coalition consistently. Like it or not, the party now seems married to both the Obama ‘brand’ and the coalition it represents.\(^4\) Mobilization of this sporadic electorate is dependent upon the institutionalization of a sophisticated resource-heavy voter turnout apparatus. An array of challenges stands in the way of this: including a skepticism of the Obama coalition among various Democratic political actors, skepticism of the Democratic Party among many members of the Obama coalition, and a regulatory regime in American electoral politics that places significantly more rigorous restrictions on party and candidate-campaign organizations than

‘independent expenditure’ (IE) campaigns that run outside the purview of the party. Yet beyond the surface, these challenges are reflective more broadly of American political institutions designed to fracture parties as the durable organizational expression of a majority coalition.

This dissertation seeks to assess how this recent shift toward electoral strategies centered on the mobilization of an irregular electorate has affected the party organizationally. It asks how does the peculiar logic of an American political system hostile to parties, impede strong contemporary incentives toward party building? To do this, I look at the contemporary history of the national, Ohio state and local Democratic Parties as electoral organizations. As V.O. Key asserted: a party is best conceived as having three ‘faces’: the party organization, the party in the electorate, and the party in government, what is called the ‘trinity model’ of political parties. While this project’s primary focus is the tracing of Democratic Party organization, the other two faces of the party are not far in the background. The primary practical question of this project is to what extent the Democratic Party can (and wants to) turn the ‘Obama electorate’ into a durable ‘Democratic electorate.’ Following, an integral part of the answer to this question is informed by whether individual Democratic politicians value the construction of a long-term Democratic majority in government, perhaps at the expense of sacrificing a degree of individual autonomy.

6 Alan Ware in his earlier study of American party organization notes that these lines are often analytically problematic as office-seekers organizational strategies are contingent on the other two party faces. See: Ware, Alan. The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization: 1940-1980. Oxford University Press, 1988. pp. 8-10.
I choose to evaluate this with a focus at the state-level because of the unique character of American electoral institutions. In the United States, there are of course no ‘national’ elections. Even presidential elections are fifty different contests, subject to the electoral rules of each state. I have chosen to investigate Ohio for its importance to presidential campaigning. Ohio, which even among ‘battleground’ states has been a top priority of the national party for its coordinated presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012, could be argued represents an outlier based on the resources generated on its behalf.

I would offer however that a close inspection of any state party, subject to its own peculiar mix of electoral rules, civil society structure, and strategic significance to national priorities, would yield similar idiosyncrasies. In other words, *state parties are like snowflakes, no two are exactly alike.* Yet the features that give Ohio its character may suggest some generalizable propositions about the future of the Democratic Party and party politics in general. Ohio’s largesse of resources may help go further in suggesting what a ‘mature’ model of a contemporary resource-heavy party might look like, as well as highlight mechanisms of fragmentation generally present across the nation, if perhaps at lower intensity.

One may also question what that is generalizable about parties and the American party system could be said by exclusively focusing on just one of the major parties. Yet the dynamics that appear to be leading to change within the Democratic Party are also valid for Republicans, even if their coalition has made them less sensitive in the short-term. Democrats pioneering of new ‘digitally-driven’ electoral techniques are a result of their need to mobilize new and sporadic voters to achieve a majority coalition. Democratic success would mean Republican viability in the long-term will be based in
either mobilizing the latent segments of their own coalition or peeling off segments of the Democratic coalition. This includes more ‘difficult’ constituencies whose electoral participation is less consistent (i.e. Latinos and young people- two groups that at least certain Republican strategists believe it is necessary that the party appeal to\(^7\)). Indeed, even outside U.S. borders, technological change makes it seemingly more cost effective to communicate with and bring in traditionally difficult to reach groups. What the role of the party in democratic settings will be in institutionalizing these dynamic and fluid coalitions will likely transcend the American political system.

I approach this question with a number of different strategies to paint a causal picture. First, I look at the academic and journalistic literature regarding this era and synthesize it within my model of party organization. Secondly, I will analyze pertinent trends in campaign finance and voter data. Finally, is my field research, based on participant observation and subsequent interviews and the surveying of relevant political actors.

This dissertation seeks to take a historical institutionalist approach to very contemporary events. Central to this project is an argument that macro-level challenges are explained by understudied micro-level tensions. Further, these micro-level tensions are not chiefly the result of interpersonal tensions or idiosyncrasies, but the historical development of institutions that structure the incentives of political actors.

I have conducted participant-observation with the Ohio Democratic Party in the run up to the 2014 election. Previously, I have worked with the national organization of Organizing for Action (the 501(c)4 offshoot of the Obama 2012 electoral campaign) and

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worked as field staff for the Obama presidential campaign of 2008 in Ohio. In addition to providing me with a wealth of background information on the topic, these experiences have helped me select the set of relevant actors for systematic surveying and interviewing. The intent is to analyze the attitudes of these actors with respect to the Democratic Party (both nationally and locally) and their perception of their own coalition and the electoral resources necessary to mobilize it.

The contemporary nature of this project does not offer it the sobriety of settled history, as does much of the American Political Development literature that it attempts to settle itself within. It also eludes attempts to gain more rigor over effects and attitudes that it spends much time discussing, with quantitative analysis. With its reliance on contemporary events and anecdotal data, there are reasonable qualms over the generalizability of the processes discussed. Yet with much of the discipline, and especially the study of Americans elections, focused on such quantitative measurement, this project attempts to fill in gaps by connecting thick description of campaign processes understudied in the field. It further situates these events within the tradition of party theory, and uses this theory to offer explanatory leverage over the empirics presented.

**The Mass Party and Fragmentation**

Obstructing party development in the United States are multiple mechanisms of institutional fragmentation. These affect the party as both a coalition and organization. Even developments that incentivize electoral logics of mobilization of a coherent party electorate will run into these hurdles across multiple dimensions. At its essence, this project is an attempt to situate the struggle to institutionalize the Democratic majority
coalition and strategic innovations that support its cultivation, with the internal tensions that result from historical processes of fragmentation in the American system. Party building in the United States is inevitably constructed on an uneven foundation. Further chapters will analyze how at the national, state, and local level, what might appear at the surface level to be endogenous failures of effective organizational development, are products of deeply embedded structures.

Compared to most of its Western counterparts, party development followed a rather unique trajectory in the United States. In many western liberal democracies, universal franchise was a concession to the industrial labor movement, which formed socialist/labor parties as vessels to win government power through electoral institutions. Yet American parties predated industrialization and strongly articulated class cleavages. They were not products of movements, but rather caucus parties developed in the early years of the congress. Nonetheless, mechanisms of party competition quickly incentivized constructing an organizational apparatus to expand this contest into the electorate. Eventually such competition would enlarge the franchise over multiple critical junctures of American history. The modern Democratic Party has been the electoral vessel of choice for progressive American mass movements since at least the New Deal period: from labor to civil rights. Yet its party institutions predate these movements. These institutions are sticky and dominated by entrenched elites subject to peculiar

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logics. Movements, and their institutional residue of reform interests, must interact, often uneasily, with party elites.

Maurice Duverger, in his seminal study of political parties, distinguishes between the ‘cadre’ and ‘mass’ party. He asserts, “the distinction between cadre and mass party is not based upon their dimensions, upon their number of members: the difference is not one of size, but of structure.”\textsuperscript{12} This is largely a function of whether resources are provided by elites or mass membership. Duverger explains the mass party as linked to the development of universal suffrage. Cadre parties are tools of political professionals and elites, characteristic of systems with property qualifications for voting. Mass parties are the product of the expansion of the franchise to the working class. Whereas cadre parties could rely on elite financial support, mass parties, by necessity, needed to cultivate grassroots resources.\textsuperscript{13} Consequently, centralization was paramount for a mass party dependent upon ordinary people. The exclusivity of cadre parties on the other hand, afforded them the luxury of being “weakly knit.”\textsuperscript{14}

Duverger noted the exceptionalism of the American political experience.\textsuperscript{15}

Following, Alan Ware argues that the idiosyncrasies of the American system make Duverger’s terminology difficult to apply to it.\textsuperscript{16} Electoral rules particular to the federal system suggest, “in some circumstances it was appropriate to think of the Democratic parties and the Republican parties in America.”\textsuperscript{17} While early parties were still national,

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. pp. 63-66.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 67.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p. 66.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p. 2.
organization was decentralized. This was a function of electoral institutions based on the state-level, as well the sectional idiosyncrasies of American politics. Such variation made generalities about party-member relationships difficult.

The American mass party may only exist as an ideal type, yet E.E. Schattschneider and other party proponents believed that efforts toward stronger parties were integral for responsive democracy. In this vein, he and other political scientists drafted for the 1950 American Political Science Conference the influential report “Toward a More Responsible Two Party System...,” known since as elaborating the theory of “Responsible Party Government.” RPG called for a set of reforms designed to strengthen American political parties. For a robust party system, it was necessary to move toward nationalized, ideologically coherent political parties with the power to enact a clear, articulated agenda after winning office. Essentially, RPG’s ambition was to graft parliamentary parties on to the American political system. In the more than half a century since its inception, RPG has faced critiques about its desirability and feasibility. Yet parties have indeed become more ‘responsible’ since the mid-twentieth century. Contemporary party teams are in fact nationally and programmatically coherent, in ways not previously realized in American history.

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What this project illustrates is how the architecture of the American system allows new ways to fragment and distort party organization. American parties are not just a single national party, but countless state and local organizations. These are subject to their own peculiar logic. Path dependence arises from their institutional position and the punctuated equilibrium of American party development. The growth of national party organization does not eradicate other party vessels. The question is not just whether office-seekers turn to parties to solve collective action problems, but what party vessel do they turn to, and how do these differing organizations relate to each other? A city council candidate will not turn to the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Conversely, a presidential campaign might have little use for a municipal party organization. The original sin of an incoherent federal system designed to weaken parties, does not evaporate through the development of national party structures, nor will these structures necessarily serve the logics of state and local level parties. Graceful integration should not be presumed.

The logic of electoral campaigning can be reduced to two broad variables: competition and resources. The level of competition an individual office-seeker faces will dictate electoral strategy. A safe incumbent will engage the electoral process very differently than a challenger in a highly competitive seat. Even in competitive races, variation in resources has significant impact on campaign practices. Campaign strategies are chosen from a menu of tactics based on the resources available to build scale. A suburban county auditor whose district rests in a large media market cannot afford to run a campaign that relies on television advertising. Such disparities affect not just individual candidates, but the party vessels that service them. Party organizations can be understood
as an institutionalization of the electoral logic that governs their constituent politicians. A low competition/low resource party organization is unlikely to provide its office seekers with innovative campaign techniques to prime party turnout.

Ware’s notion of multiple Democratic parties is no longer just geographic, but also temporal. Data has made infrastructure construction and deconstruction more dynamic. High resource national level organization, focused on maximum strategic gain in a single election is channeled into a community, district, or state, implementing sophisticated campaign strategies focused on mobilization of straight-ticket Democratic voters. Yet the effect of this on local party institutions will be idiosyncratic. These institutions are not only constructed without national resources, but often very different competitive considerations than high resource federal campaigns. Simply put, a lack of competition over a long period at the local level will likely create divergent and perhaps incompatible structures with those ephemerally constructed for party mobilization over a single election. Therefore, a national injection to the ground level will not simply transfer incentives for long-term local party building there.

Necessary for the understanding of modern American parties as well as the practical challenges of efficiency is familiarity with the byzantine structure of party organization. Since the explosion of political spending associated with the rise of PACs, multiple fundraising and organizational vessels have been constructed to take advantage of rules that allow donors to overcome caps on giving, through spending on multiple party and campaign organizations. While integral for raising as much money as possible, this organizational patchwork has decentralized and further fragmented party

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campaigning. The contemporary ‘party-in-service,’ is not just one organization, but a myriad of party organizations in service to Democrats running for specific types of offices. The Democratic National Committee, the ostensible committee of all Democrats, is complemented, and even somewhat supplemented, by various ‘Hill’ and ‘Leadership’ committees controlled by congress members. While all working for the ostensible goal of electing Democrats, each of these committees have specific prerogatives and are competing among themselves for finite donor resources. These committees become valuable power centers for their leadership, often integral in legislative wrangling and increasing prominence for members looking to rise in congressional leadership or run for higher office. Priorities will therefore depart from simply using committees to efficiently cultivate and deploy resources for the general betterment of Democratic electoral fortunes.

Committee leadership can be an entry to national prominence, but comes with responsibilities. These mainly center on short-term electoral success. Leadership will often have a short leash and be expected deliver legislative majorities, or at least progress, within one election cycle. Resources are distributed with the purpose of having the maximum marginal effect on a small group of competitive races. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) for example, will usually not

22 The difference being Hill committees such as the DCCC and DSCC are ostensibly responsive to their particular caucus, while leadership committees are to individual members. In practice, these networks and their decision-making are often closely aligned. Grim, Ryan and Siddiqui, Sabrina. “Call Time Shows How Fundraising Dominates Bleak Work Life for Democrats.” Huffington Post-Online Only. Jan 8 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/08/call-time-congressional-fundraising_n_2427291.html. Accessed Feb 21 2017.

focus on permanent staffers or organizers on the ground, instead sending a check to supplement a finite number of races projected to be closely competitive. Money from Hill committees is not usually concentrated on behalf of supporting the Democratic slate through field. Instead, it is dispensed for paid media campaigning. Campaign finance rules further exacerbate this by incentivizing Hill committees to run their own non-coordinated IE campaigns to avoid hard money regulation. The result is a further fracturing of party campaigning on the ground.

This pattern in Washington D.C. replicates itself on the state level. State legislative caucuses will usually have their own dedicated committees. These committees are subject to state-level finance rules, and by raising state money are often unable to coordinate with federal level campaign organizations. The Democratic Governors Association (DGA) and Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (DLCC) are also national organizations responsible for helping Democrats in state races. Yet their contributions are also subject to numerous firewalls.

Party organizations are chiefly responsible for supporting lower salience races that cannot generate sufficient resources through individual candidate donor networks. Yet fragmentation means that help is usually in its most fungible form, money. Building field, a longer-term enterprise whose efficacy is through building economies of scale, is often viewed as inefficient. The system as it exists creates disincentives for joint party infrastructure building. Money is most effectively raised through fragmented organizational structures that can elude hard money donation limits. Yet, how money is best spent is another question. Individual prerogatives of party leaders and operatives are directed toward fortifying party vessels as power centers and demonstration of
competence for individual gain. Efficiency as a party can be universally agreed upon in the abstract, but is not a high salience priority for most actors within the party who must be responsive to their narrower logics, necessary to keep their job (whether as office-holder or operative). Only the DNC is truly institutionally aligned with broad national party electoral prerogatives. Yet, the DNC is just one organization, operating in an ecosystem of party vessels responsible for far more parochial interests.

State parties, patterned on a similar structure, are institutionally responsible for all levels of campaigning in their state. This means they can form relationships with various national committees that have races of interest in their state. Yet finance rules will create firewalls between different funding sources that must be navigated by state parties and restrict coherence and efficiency.

The consequences of this dizzying set of pathways to campaign funding mean that money cultivated on the national level in support of the party makes scaling lower-level campaigns challenging, especially in regard to field mobilization. Rather than building coherence locally, resources are subject to legal firewalls, in addition to the prerogatives of their national organizational sponsors. Put simply, the rules mean that individuals and factions pursue resource cultivation through means more efficient in raising money than attaining party voters. No entity is properly incentivized to pay the upfront costs in overcoming these structural barriers and creating efficient organization that provides party-wide collective goods.

25 Although even the DNC is criticized as being a tool of the more parochial interests of the president when the party holds the White House. For a thorough discussion of the relationship between national party organizations and presidents, see: Galvin, Daniel J. *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush*. Princeton University Press, 2009.
When considering Duverger’s conception of the mass party, American politics presents many challenges. The American system makes party structures not simply, or even centrally, a matter of bottom-up vs. top-down, but holistic vs. fragmented. Are resources constructed efficiently enough to build economies of scale that emphasize field organization on behalf of party mobilization? Money dedicated to this task, even if it comes from big donors, can have important democratic participatory effects: erecting structures for grassroots volunteer activism and marrying the party to an irregular and marginalized electorate. Conversely, grassroots money through fragmented structures is unlikely to be significant enough for grassroots mobilization efforts, at least on a national scale.

A Theory of Political Parties

Per John Aldrich, parties solve collective action problems amongst politicians: including the development of a (1) brand, and (2) organizational economies of scale.

The combination of office-seeking ambition and the very nature of electoral institutions generates incentives for candidates to solve two collective action problems affecting voters: becoming informed and turning out to vote. Candidates have two kinds of incentives to affiliate with a political party, ameliorating both of the public’s collective action problems. Party affiliation provides an initial reputation that reduces decision-making costs and provides a core of likely supporters. Party campaign efforts, whether conducted by the party organization itself or by its various candidates, provide economies of scale for all the party’s candidates as they seek to reduce the costs and increase the benefits for supporters to come to the polls.26

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In political environments where politicians are incentivized to form joint resources to solve these problems through party teams, we should expect to see ‘strong’ parties. Whereas when there is little incentive for politicians to sacrifice autonomy to a party, we should expect to find parties comparatively ‘weak.’ Exogenous shifts such as changes in technology and civil society patterns, as well as institutional variance in electoral rules, will affect the raw materials that structure electoral competition, and will therefore influence whether office seekers decide to amass resources individually or through joint party structures.

This ‘politician-centered’ view of parties has been challenged recently by the team of Bawn et al.\(^\text{27}\) Using network analysis, they suggest that contemporary parties are better conceived as coalitions of interest groups rather than politicians.

We argue that parties in the United States are best understood as coalitions of interest groups and activists seeking to capture and use government for their particular goals...The coalition of policy-demanding groups develops an agenda of mutually acceptable policies, insists on the nomination of candidates with a demonstrated commitment to its program...In our account parties are no great friend of popular sovereignty.

If correct, this interest group-centered conception of parties\(^\text{28}\) would undermine the central normative claim on their behalf. Proponents of parties have argued since the height of American behaviorism in the mid-twentieth century, that by driving politicians

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\(^{27}\) Bawn, Kathleen, et al. 2012.  
into two ‘teams,’ parties provide coherence to the average voter, faced with an unruly and incredibly complicated federal electoral system. Competition incentivizes party teams to bring new and marginalized groups into their electoral coalition, giving them meaningful representation within the political system.\(^{29}\) This stands in contrast and as a corrective to the interest group sphere, which privileges the resource rich, not a popular majority. Competitive parties are vehicles for the \textit{socialization} of conflict. Yet if the party as ‘interest group coalition’ theory is correct, parties are not representatives of a broad majority coalition, but simply a group of already-favored interests.

I confess I remain both intellectually sympathetic to the explanatory power of politicians as the ultimate structural aggregator of party politics, and lean normatively toward parties as at least a partial corrective to the inequality of the interest group sphere—and an integral institution to meaningful practice of popular democracy. This is especially the case in the context of fragmented institutional arrangements such as the United States, where popular government would otherwise seem hopeless under its anti-majoritarian constitution. Yet parties are no democratic panacea. They must—even at their best—negotiate both their institutional incentives to form a majority under (relatively) equalitarian American electoral institutions, and the need to procure the resources to engage in the electioneering necessary to do this, by appealing to elite-dominated interests.

This tension animates confusion over the institutional role of parties. Parties must aggregate both \textit{interests} that provide resources, and \textit{citizens} that provide votes. How these two responsibilities are reconciled will be contingent upon the ways in which

\(^{29}\) Schattschneider, 1975; Committee on Political Parties, 1950.
parties’ link to both interest organizations and citizens at any given moment in time. Where strong party-citizen linkage exists, the mediating role of interest groups as resource providers will be weak. Conversely, when these linkages are weak, politicians will make the decision to solicit the interest group sphere to amass resources necessary to attract voters from a de-aligned electorate.

It is fair to say that the interest group sphere’s power as electoral resource brokers has increased since the ‘PAC explosion’ of the 1970’s. Successful electoral campaigns must court interest group organizations to raise the funds necessary for federal and even most state-level offices. In federal elections, few, if any, party machines could currently procure the resources necessary to win a competitive election without the strong support of organized interests through PAC contributions, and increasingly Super PAC IE campaigns.

The movement from professionalized to amateur activists over the twentieth century has also weakened parties vis a vis interest groups. Professional activism of the machine era was induced through selective material benefits of party patronage. The party’s institutional control over the cadre necessary for an effective turnout apparatus made it the vital organizational vessel for those hoping to win office. Yet as machines have withered, activists are now motivated not by patronage, but by ideological and programmatic goals. Those chiefly motivated by policy ends will first seek alliance with

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sympathetic interest groups and associated donor networks, not a party organization. Because new style activism is not predicated on exclusionary rewards for participation, it is more generally vulnerable to collective action problems,\textsuperscript{33} as well as socioeconomic bias.\textsuperscript{34} This activism is not a vocation, but a civic endeavor for those who have the resources to bear its burden.

In addition, electoral reforms that have put party nominations in the hands of primary voters have weakened the influence of party leaders and created new demands for interest-centered electoral resources. While primaries ostensibly made party nominations more ‘democratic,’ they are, as Sarah Anzia illustrates, low-salience elections in which low-turnout is likely to increase the influence of organized and entrenched actors.\textsuperscript{35}

Yet despite the increasing necessity of office-seekers reaching out to organized interests over the internal party hierarchy for electoral resources, party politicians—still in my view—remain at the center of solving the social choice problems that are the main challenge of electoral coalition-building. They have both the final call in articulating the campaign program of aggregated interests, as well as brokering this program through government policy while in office. Politicians (and the electoral staffers that serve at their pleasure) also, are still the ultimate decision makers regarding electoral strategy. While the increasing influence of interest groups may decrease politicians’ autonomy in the

simple brokering of the preferences of a majority coalition, it does not obviate the continuing reality that politicians—and their joint party structures—remain the principal as the broker of popular and organized preferences through the electoral system. The party remains the vessel through which these politicians act collectively and build organization that centrally serves their electoral goals: the building of a majority electoral coalition. It remains their collective agent in negotiating an electoral majority and the electoral resources necessary to mobilize it.

Of central focus to my analysis is illustrating a dynamic model of how electoral resources move through party organization over time. One weakness in the study of parties is a tendency to describe their internal dynamics in the abstract or unsystematically. Much party organizational analysis holds singular focus on the relationships of politicians, resources, or perhaps voters. Insulating one of these variables is perhaps most conducive for cross-sectional analysis. Yet party organization is an integrated apparatus designed to aggregate all of these variables in a coherent organism. Similarly, most attempts to map parties hold relationships as static, mapping a particular event or point in history. Yet parties and electoral resource construction are inherently dynamic: switching modes and goals in accordance with the moment in the electoral cycle, and a reflection of the constant fluidity in both strategy and resources. What is needed then, and what this dissertation hopes to advance is a model of, is how party organization changes over the course of the quadrennial election cycle. This includes both how resources flow and who makes the decision to cultivate and deploy them. This dynamism is especially true in our current era, where rapid technological advance leads to ever changing and evolving campaigning techniques.
Despite the rise of interest groups and decline of traditionally conceived party resources, parties have, a number of unique strengthens as political institutions. This includes perhaps most importantly, that they are indeed institutions. Individual politicians and campaigns, and the resource networks they construct, come and go, but parties remain as durable mechanisms for electioneering. Secondly, parties by building a vessel through which all members of the party team can combine resources for their collective good, can build economies of scale to promote efficient campaigning.

Yet caveats also emerge from these strengths. As Aldrich notes, economies of scale are only beneficial if they construct resources that promote the electoral fortunes of the entire party team.36 If voters are not straight ticket party-line voters, or members of the party want to make vastly different appeals, constructing resources jointly through a party makes little sense. A related second concern is that certain forms of campaigning may have greater benefits through building economies of scale than others. For example, the mobilization of party voters (presuming they will be loyal party-line voters if they make it to the polls) yields great efficiencies when done collectively through a party organization. Yet television advertising, predicated on more charismatic and personalistic appeals to undecided and often-low information voters, is more effective if focused on an individual candidate,37 not the abstract and/or transactional appeal of the party vote.

As a result, under circumstances in which mobilizing clearly delineated party loyalists are a priority of electoral strategy, we should expect to see increasingly robust party organization. Whereas when goals are focused on using strategies to persuade

36 See: Aldrich, 1996, ch. 2.
voters with few or unpredictable party allegiances, especially through the more emotional
appeals of mass advertising, politicians will be more apt to construct resources
individually. This in part helps explain party weakness of the late twentieth century, as
campaigning had become increasing focused on television advertising.

The line between party and interest group organization is also increasingly
difficult to untangle. Historically, campaigning was the purview of parties and individual
candidates’ campaigns. Yet interest-based associations act not only as financial
intermediaries between their constituents and candidates/parties, but often autonomously
participate in electioneering on behalf of their preferred candidates through independent
expenditure (IE) campaigns. Therefore, interest groups can develop organizational scale
themselves, exerting more strategic (and perhaps policy) leverage over individual
politicians as well parties. However, as these organizations have grown increasingly
sophisticated, and parties have resorted along coherent ideological lines, IEs have begun
to take up party-like functions of advocacy for an entire slate of party candidates. While
there are coordination firewalls between parties and IEs, they still may be complementing
coherent party mobilization strategies, making them— while legally distinct from
parties—conceptually muddled.

If IE campaigns and their more durable organizational sponsors, are devoting
resources to the mobilization of dependable party-line voters, they may while operating
outside of formal party channels, be acting to in consequence ‘strengthen’ the party.’ For
this to be the case however, it must have a clearly partisan effect. This means, if the IE is
mobilizing based on an issue and supports candidates of both parties or mobilized

38 La Raja, Raymond J. "Why Super PACs: How the American Party System Outgrew the
supporters who may be loyal only to a specific issue; this may not be helping party mobilization. Because coordination firewalls exist, mobilization efforts may not be efficient. Interest groups competing for resources may engage in mobilization credit claiming, but in practice be engaging in superficial and/or redundant tasks when it comes to mobilization. Recognizing this, Herrnson reimagines parties through a set of concentric circles of multi-layered coalitions.\textsuperscript{39} Yet this model misses both qualitative differences in party and interest group-based IE campaigning, and how coordination boundaries between these different groups affects the decision-making and the organizational form of a party electoral apparatus.

I seek to evaluate party strength as resources devoted to the electoral mobilization of loyal party voters. This may be through explicit party organizations, but also through ancillary organizations and networks that serve this function. The fundamental metric is to what extent politicians perceive their electoral fortunes as tied to a dependable and loyal party electorate and an effective apparatus to mobilize this electorate.

**A Model of Party/Electoral Resource Construction Over Time**

Resource construction is a function of the short term calculations of politicians aggregating electoral majorities. Environmental factors exogenous to a campaign or party organization set the context for internal decision-making. Strategy is path dependent. Practices that have been successful in the past are likely to be replicated, especially when lacking robust competition that could force innovation.

Figure 1.1: Temporal Model of Resource Construction

The chart above illustrates a temporally based general model of resource construction for electoral campaigning in the United States. This is a cyclical process. Institutional factors (electoral rules) will combine with more fluid civil society resources. This process patterns the political environment for electoral campaigning, and the strategies and organizational forms used by office holders and seekers. The perceived success of these strategies will influence long-term modes of resource construction, including whether politicians decide to construct individual candidate–centered resources, or to work jointly though party organization.
Independent Variables: The electoral regulatory regime is the set of legal rules that structure electoral campaigning. These include laws on fundraising as well what sorts of activities parties, campaigns, and other organizations who do electoral work can participate in. This also encompasses the firewalls that exist between these organizations. Parties are subject to both federal and state-based electoral laws. The civil society configuration is what Schattschneider calls the ‘raw materials’\(^40\) of politics: this includes the people, networks, expertise, financial resources, as well as the communicative apparatus that facilitates their relationships. This exists primarily outside of the political sphere, but is the primordial material of electoral resources. As these materials and resources change, parties must modify strategies to capitalize on these shifts.

Intervening Variables (t1): This is the set of resources and organizational structure used for electoral campaigning. Practically speaking, these are the electoral campaigns themselves. Structure is a function of the materials that exist within civil society, and how the electoral regulatory regime institutionally patterns these resources into electoral activity. As a result, campaigns will use a diverse set of strategies to assemble a majority coalition, and configure a certain set of resources—what Nielsen refers to as “campaign assemblages”—to facilitate this strategy.\(^41\) These can be through individual electoral campaigns or organizational forms that campaign on behalf of an entire party slate of candidates.


**Intervening Variables (t2):** These are the outcomes of the campaign assemblage. They include both the general success of voter mobilization, as well the degree that mobilization has benefitted the party ticket. This is not just the substantive causal relationship between the assemblage and electoral outcomes, but its perceived strategic impact. In addition to electoral outcomes, another vital consequence is whether the resources generated on behalf of the assemblage (activists, networks, data, *voters*, etc.) are durable beyond a particular campaign, or the idiosyncratic effect of a particular candidate and/or election. The networks forged during electoral campaigning also affect civil society configuration beyond the explicitly political sphere.

**Dependent Variable:** This is the strategic decision-making of politicians to construct organization either individually or jointly through a party team. This is a result of politicians’ perception of electoral success and the generation of resources necessary for future electoral success. Where mobilization strategies have successfully produced a majority coalition on behalf of a party slate of candidates, and the resources used to build this apparatus appear to be durable or at least replicable, it politicians should construct resources through party organization on behalf of continued mobilization of this coalition. Politicians may decide to construct party resources even without both conditions being satisfied. If an electoral strategy is successful, it may be reproduced even if there is little demonstrable value-added by particular aspects of the strategy, such as the tactics used to build the field apparatus.

There is also the possibility that even without immediate electoral success, if the resources generated by strategies are ample, politicians may continue to focus on building
these resources in the hopes of constructing a long-term successful electoral strategy. Because of the cyclical nature of electoral campaigning and party organization building on behalf of it, strategic incentives of politicians are an intervening variable in the cultivation and construction of electoral campaigning resources.

Variables that Impact Contemporary Party Building

A number of particularly salient variables effect campaign strategies, creating both incentives and challenges to building electoral resources through party structures. An evaluation of party strength should be analytically focused on the impact of these variables:

-Costs and capacity for party mobilization: Technological change has lowered costs of identifying potential party voters and constructing the mobilization apparatus to activate them. Yet both these tasks still involve capital-intensive (and largely long-term) economies of scale to be effective. Although mobilization requires economies of scale, there is the possibility that costs may decrease over time with the depreciation of the price of digital ‘tools,’ and the information/resources that these tools have previously procured (e.g. robust state voter/volunteer files will cost less to activate than ones that are not thoroughly developed).

-Electoral Competitiveness: The level of electoral competitiveness-especially at the ‘top of the ticket’- has two important consequences for party building: (1) incentives for adopting and experimenting with new and more efficacious electoral strategies: including
in regard to mobilization, and (2) the ability to capture resources necessary for mobilization through organizational economies of scale (as mentioned above). State party resources will be effected by the dynamics electoral competiveness (both federal and state elections) within its boundaries.

-Coalitional Congruity: The degree to which across the various levels of government there is minimal conflict between the voter in the party coalition and voters that party politicians want to mobilize. Where there is incongruity in the coalition of party politicians, politicians will be reticent to focus on building an apparatus on behalf of party mobilization. Another important area for study in this project is the reciprocal causal process: meaning to what extent (if any) do strategies that focus on party building impact overall peaceable coexistence in the party coalition.

Strong Networked Party Characteristics

Because of the difficulty in conceptualizing the party as a structure, challenges arise in analytically evaluating shifts in party strength. Yet, here I suggest a set of metrics that measure the construction of party resources and tendency of politicians to use a party apparatus to construct resources. This includes both how politicians conceive of the party as an apparatus to effectively mobilize a majority coalition, and a party voter universe that can be depended upon to be ‘coherent’ in support of a party ticket. Beyond office-seekers propensity to use party organization, analysis should also focus on the development and durability of the resources necessary for effective party mobilization: activists, data, and voters.
Specifically, there are a number of characteristics that would indicate a ‘strong’\textsuperscript{42} party under contemporary electoral conditions:

\textbf{Politicians}
- Construct Resources through joint party structures
- Have a coherent and uniform voter universe

\textbf{Volunteers}
- Networks are durable beyond single election candidate and loyal to the party
- Networks retain leadership allowing for long term organizational sophistication

\textbf{Data}
- Voter and Volunteer files are accurate and up to date with adequate capital and professional development.
- Access is available to all party politicians

\textbf{Voters}
- Registered
- Vote Consistently
- Vote down the party line

\textbf{Figure 1.2: Strong Party Criteria.}

\textsuperscript{42}While broadly generalizable to party resource construction in an era of digitalization and polarization, practically speaking there may be a number of modal differences between the Democrats and Republicans. Because the Democratic electorate tends to be more irregular, effective strategies will center on mobilization. As discussed in proceeding chapters, anti-competitive techniques focused less on the construction of their own turnout apparatus and more of weakening the logic of the Democrats organization has been an effective Republican strategy. Nonetheless, ‘strength’ in a Republican Party turnout apparatus should also follow this criterion.
-Resources are concentrated in formal party organizational structure. Party organization is focused on building an effective coherent apparatus to mobilize party voters. Organization is capital intensive and builds voter file and activist databases.

Organizationally, we should hope to see electoral campaign resources concentrated in explicit party structures that are supported broadly by party politicians. This organization should be focused on building durable linkages between the party and a loyal coalition.

-Party targeted voter universe is clear and coherent based on identifiable party-line voters who vote consistently. Universe is predictable and durable.

In order to create this durable coalition, the party must know where its voters are and should have confidence that this coalition can be consistently mobilized come election season. This means both having an effective apparatus to mobilize voters and the confidence that issue-based preferences can be successfully aggregated to keep voters within the party ‘tent.’

–Activist networks are durable and can be channeled broadly into party mobilization activity. Activists who participate are integrated into party organization that serves the ticket.

As the voter universe must be durable and identifiable, so too must the activist networks charged with mobilizing them. Activists must be committed to participation on behalf of the slate of party candidates. Practically this may not necessarily mean a strong commitment to every ‘down-ticket’ race, but at the least a consistent dedication to serve the mobilization needs of the ‘top’ of the party ticket.
- Politicians are committed to pooling resources through the party organization and pursuing electoral strategies based on a coherent party universe.

Politicians must see their electoral path as existing primarily through the mobilization of the party electorate and sacrifice building robust individual campaign organization to construct joint resources on behalf of the party team.

- Resource construction is focused on formal party structure. Other electoral activity outside formal organization, such as Super PACS/Independent Expenditure campaigns form a concentric circle outside of party also engaging in electoral strategies based on mobilizing a coherent party coalition, with efficient division of labor (even without coordination).

To whatever extent possible, electoral resources should be constructed through formal party vessels. While electoral rules may limit this, and the IE sphere may be a major conduit of electoral resources, it should do so on behalf of the mobilization of a party electorate.

The Historical Development of Party Organization and Electoral Resources

Electoral organization has varied historically depending on how civil society resources have interacted with electoral political institutions. Electoral strategies are a function of how broader social forces--from political cleavages to technological change -- are mediated through the campaign environment to promote office-seekers electoral fortunes. The birth of mass campaigning was a product of the Jacksonian era, through
the development of Van Buren’s ‘party machine.’ The nineteenth century political machine followed a conventional logic of clientelist politics. A party apparatus, maintained by activists seeking selective benefits through government spoils, linked a mass electorate with little in the way of conventional class-based political identification, or independent civil organization, to a highly coherent party. The populace was placated by regional and ethno-cultural claims, easing the brokerage relationship between the electorate and the party. Material goods facilitated this apparatus, being dispersed to activists and other political elites, yet not as a transactional demand of the broad electorate. Party allegiances were durable and predictable as there was little in the way of extra-partisan political association or dynamic issue uptake that would jeopardize loyalty.

Yet by the turn of the twentieth-century, the logic of machine organization would begin to erode. Progressive-era reforms such as the advent of the Australian ballot and the professionalization of civil service, weakened the ability to assemble an apparatus that could successfully deliver a consistent party vote. Party ability to translate and broker citizen preferences was also greatly complicated by the New Deal era introduction of programmatic and material claims as an animating force in the American electorate. The New Deal also led to the flourishing of a number of public interest organizations. Labor unions, as well as mass constituent organizations such as the AARP, represented more distinct elements of the electorate, often playing the role of organizational intermediaries between activists and parties. The post-World War II era also saw a boom in non-explicitly political civic organizations that often provided the sorts of associational linkages that can be channeled into electoral organization, especially as machine-activism

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declined.\textsuperscript{44} Party activism was now less a product of the selective benefits of spoils, as much as comparatively weaker, yet more diffuse and dynamic programmatic motivations.

By mid-century, party organization persisted as an amalgamation of the remnants of urban machines that could still use patronage to ensure a functioning mobilization apparatus, and issue based activists and organizations more loyal to programmatic goals and the politicians who supported them, than to a particular party. At the fulcrum of these two distinct types of party resources in the Democratic Party was the labor movement. Unions’ long-standing relationship with local machines spurred a closeness to local party elites, and strong motivation to protect the status quo. Yet labor’s more progressive elements were also a major force for change and reform within the Democratic Party. J. David Greenstone suggests,\textsuperscript{45} that unions were in many ways the chief intermediaries between the traditional party machine and liberal activists.

By the 1970’s, interest group ascendance was beginning to alter parties’ unquestioned status as American politics chief institutional vessel of electioneering. The Federal Elections Campaign Act (FECA) led (however inadvertently) to the rise of the PAC as a form of major political organization.\textsuperscript{46} PACs revolutionized interest group politics by creating an organizational medium capable of providing resources for electoral politics that could be scaled in a strategically sophisticated manner, yet exist outside the organizational control of the party. Interest groups could-- directly as organizations-- now leverage and support individual candidates through targeted financial

contributions while eluding party structures. This was buttressed by the increasing dependence on campaign contributions to service an ever-expanding need for television advertising as the emerging primary communicative tool for campaigning.\footnote{Stratmann, Thomas. "Some Talk: Money in Politics. A (Partial) Review of the Literature." \textit{Policy Challenges and Political Responses}. Springer US, 2005. 135-156.}

The rise of television advertising dovetailed with the decline of the participatory grassroots resources necessary to run an effective field mobilization apparatus. Unions, as well as other sorts of civil organizations that could provide electoral resources, were on the decline. This was complemented by broader societal attitudinal and participatory erosion in regard to institutional political participation.\footnote{Putnam, Robert D. \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community}. Simon and Schuster, 2000.} Without patronage or robust civil society organization, party apparatuses were starved of the resources necessary to mobilize voters and therefore shifted strategy accordingly.

In addition to a lack of resources to mobilize irregular groups, the Great Society era left the Democratic Party coalition with a high degree of internal tension.\footnote{Edsall, Thomas Byrne. \textit{The New Politics of Inequality}. WW Norton & Company, 1985.} The party faced a struggle for power between the white working class that formed the backbone of the New Deal coalition, and urban non-white constituents, who were the (perceived) beneficiaries of the Great Society, and voted less consistently than their white counterparts. Because this ‘irregular’ electorate was viewed by many elites within the Democratic Party as a liability that could not be counted on to produce electoral majorities, this further disincentivized spending resources on its mobilization.

Instead, a campaign template arose in the 1980’s that eschewed field mobilization strategies for capital intensive mass advertising: with a primary focus of
returning working-class white ‘Reagan Democrats,’ who had become increasingly alienated from the Party to its fold. Rosenstone & Hansen suggest the apparent participatory effect of this was a demobilization of the electorate as the party canvass withered. Activists became further invested in ideologically based interest organizations, and the post-civil rights regional resorting of partisan allegiances appeared (at the time) to produce a confused and unstable electorate in matters of partisan loyalty. While unions maintained a role in both mobilizing their members and providing some of the financial resources necessary for campaigning, party candidates were under pressure to turn to the increasingly dominant sphere of business PACs to reach enough relative parity with Republicans to remain electorally competitive.

As further discussed in the next chapter, the decline of mobilization resources, the rise of PACs, and the internal tension between ideological, regional, and ethnic wings of the party, all weakened the Democratic Party as a coherent organization dedicated to constructing a collective apparatus focused on mobilizing a party electorate. As a result, the party modally transitioned from a vessel of locality-based electoral mobilization to a national infrastructure primarily focused on raising and distributing financial resources (and staff) to vulnerable member politicians. The party could no longer offer candidates an effective mobilization-focused organization, instead turning to constructing financial networks that could compete with their Republican counterparts. This is what is

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referred to as the party-in-service organizational model. Rather than party bosses asserting control over member politicians, the party had become as a passive organization acting as an intermediary between the ascendant interest group sphere and its increasingly fragmented member politicians.

Yet by the early twenty-first century, a shifting environment led to experimentation with a new set of electoral strategies. The rise of the Internet and social media challenged television as the dominant communicative mode: both in a broad social context, as well as specifically in the political arena. Where television’s capital-intensive top-down structure incentivized primarily vertical communication of elite actors making impersonal and charismatic appeals to the electorate; the Internet created the potential for low-cost horizontal collaboration and resource construction. Tools such as email and text messaging created the opportunity for specifically targeted, low cost appeals to voters and activists, cultivating resources that would have been unfeasible in the previous era. In addition, social media gave activists and supporters a place to collaborate and build community with each other, buttressed by tools like ‘Meetup,’ pioneering techniques moving digitally based communities into the ‘real-world.’ Whereas field organization required ‘too costly’ of an apparatus to build in the mass media era, these tools altered the calculus of pursuing electoral mobilization, as activist resources were more efficiently cultivated.

In addition, a re-sorted electorate with two ideologically and regionally coherent parties’ left fewer and fewer true ‘independent’ voters for candidates to target. Unaligned

Reagan Democrats appeared to finish a transition into the core of a Republican Party now firmly ensconced in the white south. The rise of big-data also contributed to more precise and effective voter-targeting techniques as political strategists began to incorporate consumer data into models, finding not just increasingly small and prized groups of unaligned voters, but also unmobilized potential partisans.\(^5\) Perhaps the effects of this were first seen on the Republican side in 2004, where George W. Bush, despite having sagging poll numbers (as well as other negative electoral indicators) used a strategy of mobilizing non-voting white evangelicals on the basis of social issues to successfully compensate for his poor performance among independents in battleground states and win reelection.

As important however, is the seemingly never-ending arms race of campaign funding was beginning to reach its ceiling of efficacy through mass advertising. Simply put, campaign advertising had become so ubiquitous (in national elections at the least) that it began to be perceived as delivering diminishing marginal returns. As a result, campaigns began to look for other, more effective ways to spend their ever-burgeoning war chests. Conventional forms of campaign funding have now been complimented by new vessels of campaign organization through IE campaigning: injecting even more financial resources into electioneering. The growth of financial resources and finite amount of productive mass media bandwidth, has incentivized campaign strategies that channel resources into newer digitally-based modes of social contact.

Apparent is a resulting campaign template that dedicates significant resources and strategic focus to the mobilization of a sporadic electorate comprised of would-be loyal

party voters. Digital media has created a new forum to cultivate activism through low cost digital communication, which complemented by the financial resources necessary to hire significant field staff, responsible for training and coordinating activist activity, begat opportunity to mobilize an irregular electorate in competitive electoral environments.

Noteworthy of this ‘new’ field apparatus, is the incorporation of organizational techniques traditionally associated with community organizing groups, into electoral politics. These strategies originate from long-standing experimentation by Marshall Ganz, historically focused on California politics. In 2004 however, the presidential the Democratic primary campaign of Howard Dean—one of the first ‘internet-driven’ campaigns—sought Ganz out to apply a community-organizing model to strengthen linkages among an activist community based largely in the digital realm, and channel this support into tradition campaign field prerogatives of voter contact.

While the results of this effort were mixed, they should be situated in the context of a first step in developing a model for cultivating grassroots participatory resources for electoral politics in the digital era. The ability to engage in low cost digital communication created new potential for activist mobilization. Techniques originated in the Dean campaign were quickly diffused within the Democratic Party, and eventually adapted and refined with far greater success in the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012.  

The Obama campaigns focused on mobilization through devoting unprecedented financial resources to their new media, analytics, and field departments. Field staff responsibilities diverged from traditional electoral campaigning. Focusing less on the

management and deployment of previously existing resources for voter contact, and instaed on organization building through community organizing strategies. Priority was given to developing activist leadership of locally based “neighborhood teams,” (NTs) and teaching activists both how to run logistically sophisticated voter turnout operations, as well as the basics of community organizing to build their NT organizations.

This model is a response to the particular electoral environment of the early twenty-first century. As we have seen, a diminishing pool of unaligned voters, and advances in data making newer and sporadic voters easier to target, has reincentivized strategies of field mobilization. Yet, without machine-based activism or the labor and civil society organizations of the previous eras, the challenge of building an apparatus to mobilize these potential voters remains. Campaigns now must cultivate their own activists, and build durable organizations through which their foot soldiers participate. Viewed in this light, community-organizing methods make sense as grassroots organization-building tools that strengthen networks and build organizational leadership over time.

While the Obama campaign successfully used this model, its generalizability remains questionable. Inducement to activist participation in the Obama campaign was the result—not just of technological change – but also of a charismatic and historically unique candidate, as well as the salience of a presidential election. Activist participation was predicated on the movement-like appeal of the campaign. Absent this, campaigns must fall back on the sort of programmatic appeals to activists that have been historically ineffective in building this apparatus. Further, the financial resources necessary to build this organization are unlikely to exist outside of presidential campaigns. Maintaining staff
levels necessary to facilitate this apparatus would appear unfeasible outside the height of the presidential election season.

Attempts to explicitly institutionalize the Obama apparatus within the Democratic Party have been to this point unsatisfactory. After the 2008 election, the campaign organization spun off into ‘Organizing for America,’ (OFA 2.0) which was housed under the umbrella of the Democratic National Committee. Yet maintaining even a shell of presidential electoral organization proved a steep challenge. In addition to resource and salience issues mentioned above, another impediment to institutionalization was evidence of a tendency of Obama activists to be skeptical of the Democratic Party brand, or of devoting their efforts broadly to its support. In part, this was a reflection of the remaining tension between the traditional institutional elite of the party, and a younger, diverse, and perhaps even more liberal, locus of activists.

Consequently, after the 2012 election the campaign apparatus was transformed into a 501(c)4 (OFA 4.0) moving out from under the party organizational tent, with the hope that simply maintaining activist networks would eventually translate into party electoral resources. Yet on a systematic basis, this strategy has also appeared to be unsuccessful. The root of these difficulties remains a bit puzzling. Obama activists tend to be ideologically committed to the articulated programmatic agenda of the Democratic Party. This group appears motivated by more than just a cult of personality, as they articulate a largely coherent set of policy preferences consistent with the Democratic Party as well as being demographically rooted in the Party’s emerging electoral coalition. Yet they remain largely skeptical of electoral politics and institutional actors independent of Obama.
Despite the failure of transferring explicitly the Obama activist base into durable Democratic Party electoral resources, the party still has the benefit of an expanded voter universe and robust data on these would-be voters. Campaign assemblages are contemporarily characterized (to the extent this is possible) as a collage of labor and progressive activists, along with floating fragments of Obama’s activist organization and networks, with digital tools used to cultivate activism and resources outside of the geographic location of an election.

**Preview of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 further orients the project to the challenges that have faced the Democratic Party nationally at the end of the twentieth century, and the response of the party in the early twenty-first century. It will seek to synthesize existing academic and journalistic literatures on Democratic campaigning from 2004-2014 and evaluate it within a theory of party organization and contemporary party building. I will begin with a discussion of the aftermath of the 2004 election and how the characteristics that have marked the current campaign environment-- digital media, field organization, IE campaigning --developed, and then discuss how the development of these techniques has influenced the renewed strategic focus on voter mobilization and the consequences of this on party organization through 2014. Central is the development of what I call horizontal and vertical dimensions of fragmentation. These are macro lines of fragmentation based upon coalitional divisions and the disjuncture between national electoral institutions and lower level party structures.
In Chapter 3, I trace this history within the context of the Ohio Democratic Party. I evaluate how these tensions have affected the party in a highly competitive presidential battleground state that is the beneficiary of quadrennial infusions of national resources. I trace the party’s attempt to meet the challenges of building federal, state, and local electoral majorities over this period. Has the party—as a holistic entity—moved toward a focus on the mobilization of the ‘Obama’ electorate, and what have the consequences been on its strength and coherence? Here, fragmentation is illustrated through different institutional actors all ostensibly committed to mobilizing a statewide Democratic majority. Yet still, divergent logics impeding party integration are observed.

Chapter 4 brings the scope of the analysis to the local level. It conceptualizes what these tensions mean on the ground, across the various campaign and party assemblages. Here, fragmentation is crystalized as various party actors responding to their own structural incentives struggle to integrate and institutionalize an efficient organizational apparatus. Here, most clearly and concretely, consequences of heterodox path dependent campaign cultures are laid bare.

Finally, I conclude by returning the themes drawn out in this introduction. I suggest how this project calls into question several concepts central to contemporary party studies. I assert that while it may be too soon to tell whether our current environment will lead to stronger party institutions, modal changes in party organization, and a broader lack of scholarly qualitative party study, have left contemporary party dynamics understudied in the field.
Chapter 2

The National Party

On November 25, 2014, Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York addressed the National Press Club in the wake of the Democratic Party’s disastrous recent midterm election performance. Schumer, who was the party’s Senate whip at the time,\textsuperscript{57} former chair of the DSCC,\textsuperscript{58} and a chief conduit to the donor class, is widely thought to be among the most influential forces on party strategy. The speech was conceived as an early attempt to frame a way forward in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Ostensibly introducing a new Democratic Party populism, what raised most eyebrows was what this meant in coalitional and policy terms:

“…The Affordable Care Act was aimed at the 36 million Americans who were not covered. It has been reported that only a third of the uninsured are even registered to vote. In 2010 only about 40% of those registered voted. So even if the uninsured kept with the rate, which they likely did not, we would still only be talking about only 5% of the electorate.

To aim a huge change in mandate at such a small percentage of the electorate made no political sense. So when Democrats focused on health care, the average middle-class person thought the Democrats are not paying enough attention to me…”\textsuperscript{59}

The idea that the Democratic Party’s focus on poorer, non-white, and younger voters is an electoral luxury that it cannot afford is far from a new trope. Yet, considering the previous two presidential elections its persistence might seem surprising. This chapter

\textsuperscript{57} He assumed the role of Senate ranking Democrat in 2017.
\textsuperscript{58} Democratic Senate Campaign Committee: the party’s senate candidate fundraising and recruitment arm.
seeks to situate the logic and consequences of dueling impulses in the contemporary Democratic Party as a national organization. Efforts to build a Democratic Party apparatus that links the party to a coherent electorate over the period in focus have been bolstered by a successful national mobilization strategy in two presidential elections. This success was facilitated by steady demographic shifts in favor of underrepresented yet strongly Democratic elements of the electorate. Further advancing these opportunities was the rapid development of new digital tools that made identifying and communicating with both potential voters, and the activists to mobilize them, exponentially more efficient. Yet despite these developments, the party remains constrained by fragmentation deeply embedded in the American party system.

On a national level, incongruity remains a function of a presidential majority coalition never fully transitioned into a party-wide resource. An analysis of Obama as a “party builder” can point to the success of a coherent two-time presidential electorate. Yet this coalition could not be sustained for midterms or policy advocacy over this period. While the Obama campaigns did seem to identify, and mobilize, a long anticipated Democratic majority electorate, its failure at institutionalization can be traced to an inability to mediate party tensions and build strategic coherence through national organizations. Neither the Obama brand, nor organizational infrastructure, was a powerful enough force to mobilize such a coalition outside of presidential election years.
Table 2.1: 2004-2014 Federal election results. Presidential Electoral votes, House of Representatives totals, Senate totals (whole senate make up after each election)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Dem EV</th>
<th>Rep EV</th>
<th>Dem House</th>
<th>Rep House</th>
<th>Dem Senate*</th>
<th>Rep Senate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>202</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
<td>242</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes Independents who caucus as Democrats

This chapter will describe the development of the organizational strategy of the Obama presidential campaigns, and the efforts to institutionalize an apparatus that could mobilize the Obama electorate on a durable basis. Further, it will situate this within the broader framework of systematic party fragmentation and attempts to overcome it. This can be analyzed, to borrow from the American Political Development literature, as an intercurrent relationship between newer forces that suggest a stronger, more coherent party, and deeply embedded structural hurdles that have so far inhibited these forces from reaching maturation. In the American system, even in moments in which incentives toward party building seem apparent, party organizations must deal with centrifugal fragmenting forces. These reflect complicated multi-dimensional mechanisms, difficult to untangle.

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A Structural Explanation for Party Fragmentation

In the American system, parties are weak as brokers of coherent majoritarian preferences. This is not an accident, but a reflection of an institutional design that uses elections and government to fragment national coalitions by creating a set of hurdles to their rule. One might conceive of this fragmentation as existing across two dimensions: (1) horizontal- representing coalitional/factional tensions inherent in a ‘big tent’ major party of a large and diffuse republic, and (2) vertical- the disjuncture of institutional logics within the party in a system characterized by separation of powers and federalism. Specifically: the imperatives of state (and local) parties, national ones, and constituent politicians, may differ as they operate under different regulatory regimes and often over different election cycles.
Horizontal fragmentation is a result of the diverse interests accommodated in a majority political coalition. In a winner-take-all system such as the United States, major political parties must aggregate the interests of broad coalitions, both programmatically and though the political identity associated with the party brand. Crosscutting material, ethno-cultural, and sectional tensions must be reconciled within a national political coalition. The difficulty of achieving this in a long-term equilibrium position has

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historically weakened party coherence, and consequently the incentive to create a national apparatus focused on mobilizing such an electorate. Politicians will not want to put resources into the hands of a national party, if there is not broad coherence in the party coalition. Therefore, historically the locus of strong party organizations such as urban machines, have been at the local level, where electorates tend to be somewhat less unruly.  

Figure 2.2: Democratic Intra-Party Cleavages

62 Ranney, 1951.
63 Schattschneider, 1942.
Even at the height of New Deal Democratic Party dominance, the party necessarily had to assimilate its northern urban liberal wing with its Dixiecrat southern faction. FDR tried—and failed—to nationalize the party by attempting to primary and pressure undependable southern Democrats.\textsuperscript{64} While the partisan realignment of the south\textsuperscript{65} has created a more rationally (and responsibly) sorted party, a majority party in a nation so large and diverse is likely to be burdened with factional tension. Championing a party apparatus that can give a party power to govern, rather than simple protection of member politicians’ idiosyncratic coalitions, would be dependent on broad agreement within the various party factions that their interests are served by sacrificing autonomy for the possibility of programmatic control of government.

The vertical axis is a function of fragmentation of government and electoral representative institutions themselves. Even if a party is ideologically and programmatically coherent, staggered election cycles and differing campaign finance laws surround each level of government, creating different strategic priorities for party politicians. For example: a party organization structured to prime turnout for quadrennial presidential elections does little to suit the needs of vulnerable congressional members who face midterm elections, as well as the overwhelming number of state and local officials not on the presidential clock. The federal patchwork of electioneering laws creates firewalls between coordination and resources of federal and state candidates.

Expenses such as palm cards paid for with state party money cannot legally feature federal candidates.

These crosscutting dimensions of fragmentation create a powerful bulwark against national organization: as party politicians, both as factions and individuals, will be hesitant to focus on resource construction through a singular apparatus. Even in a political environment where high turnout elections appear both feasible and to heavily advantage the Democratic Party, as the period of the Obama presidency demonstrates, significant challenges remain to aligning the priorities of Democratic politicians operating under divergent institutional logics.

Background: The Fall of the New Deal Coalition and the Rise of the Two Electorates

From a bird’s eye view, the federal elections of 2008-2014 represent the crystallization of the “two electorates” thesis in American politics. Indeed, binaries do, and always have, permeated American politics. We have two parties as a response to institutional conditions. Progressive politicians have often referred to “two America’s” as a reflection of economic inequality. One could perhaps even view the two electorates as mediating these other binaries. Those disadvantaged remain only partially included in the polity. They are more difficult for political actors to mobilize, and are therefore left with less influence on government.

The idea of two consolidated coherent electorates occupying the same moment, but coming to the fore at different junctures of the electoral cycle, puts a twist on traditional conceptions of parties as democratizing mechanisms. Schattschneider’s

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classical allegory of the political “street fight,” presents the crowd’s behavior and willingness to enter this fight as determinative of political outcomes:

The spectators are an integral part of the situation, for, as likely as not, the audience determines the outcome of the fight. The crowd is loaded with portentousness because it is apt to be a hundred times as large as the fighting minority, and the relations between the audience and combatants are highly unstable. Like all other chain reactions a fight is contained. To understand any conflict it is necessary therefore, to keep constantly in mind the relations between the combatants and the audience because the audience is likely to do all types of things that determine the outcome of the fight.

…the outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it.  

We might however imagine this phenomenon as leading to an equilibrium with a critical percentage of the citizenry with ‘one foot in and one foot out’ of this street fight. For party leadership, the central question persists as to whether efforts should be spent attempting to bring both feet in or disassociating from this group in search of more dependable brawlers. Systematic fragmentation does not just operate exogenously acting as a bulwark against majoritarian rule, but though creating disparate institutional logics internally among party actors, frustrating the development of party infrastructure as a mobilization tool. It’s not just that our system prevents a majority coalition from easily controlling government, but that the system’s incentives dissuade an internally coherent and consistent view of who is in the majority and the mechanisms necessary to maintain it.

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Table 2.2: Turnout and vote share of overall turnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Black Share</th>
<th>Latino Share</th>
<th>18-29 Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If heightened attention to the two electorates is new, the outlines of this dynamic are not. Underrepresentation of groups on the low end of the socio-economic spectrum has been a persistent characteristic of American electoral politics, as is the exacerbation of this tendency in lower salience elections.68 Yet what is striking about the period under discussion is the sharpness of the correction during presidential years, contrasted with its apparent minimal residual effect during midterm elections. Of further concern for Democrats is evidence of a counter-reaction of more “moderate,” yet stable blocs of voters, now increasingly aligned with Republicans.69 The consequence of this is the consolidation of a presidential majority coalition rooted in poorer, non-white, and younger subsections of the American populace: where aggregate levels of electoral participation remain tenuous and unreplicated outside of presidential years.

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Table 2.3: Democratic share of the vote. Source: Kilgore (2014), CNN Exit Polls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Latinos</th>
<th>18-29</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The coming of this electorate, now often referred to as the ‘Obama coalition,’ embodies the hopes of some and fears of others going back several decades. Anxieties among Democrats have been prevalent since at least the civil rights and Great Society reforms of the 1960’s. What would happen to the party that to paraphrase Lyndon Johnson had “lost the south for a generation”? In place of this solid south, was a northern party increasingly anchored programmatically in what was often euphemistically described at the time as an “underclass”70 of undependable voters, and ideologically in a “left” thought too far removed from the moderate center of American politics. Much of intra-party contention in the 1980’s was a function of battles between those championing these lower resourced constituent groups, and those who believed they were a liability that would turn the Democrats into a permanent minority party. Tensions were a result of multi-dimensional yet overlapping cleavages within the party involving race, class, and region. Indeed, by this period, the New Deal coalition, based upon an American public broadly supportive of the party as broker of an interventionist state, was falling apart.71

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70 By the 1980’s this term transitioned from a precise socio-economic category first articulated by Myrdal (1963), to a comparatively porous category adopted in the popular press describing those stigmatized as the ‘undeserving poor’ suffering from a ‘culture of poverty.’ (Gans 1996)

Yet while these racial and ideological vulnerabilities affected the party’s national hopes, the nature of American party fragmentation meant that individual Democratic politicians would feel these pressures differently. Many Democrats anchored not just in the south, but also the Sunbelt and mountain west regions, began to feel the party’s national brand was toxic, yet Democrats in urban northern areas remained insulated from such shifts in public opinion.72 These vulnerabilities were further exaggerated by the newly emboldened role of interest groups, particularly business interests, through Political Action Committees (PACs).73 One might expect business organization to view the southern and more conservative wing of the party in relatively more favorable light than northern liberals. Yet, business was less concerned with the politics of individual members than with strategically leveraging resources to help Republicans win congressional majorities, while currying at least relative favor with ‘safe’ Democrats who they had little chance of upending. Business would therefore, often give perfunctory financial support to safe Democratic liberals, while focusing their resources on the eradication of the Democratic Party in the newly competitive south. This led to further friction between an insulated liberal wing of the party, which had little to fear electorally in representing the Democratic Great Society coalition, and a panicked conservative wing whose constituents were turning away from the party’s national brand and facing the full brunt of organized business interests’ political force.74

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74 Hale, 1995.
By the 1980’s, the party experienced decline as a presidential coalition, yet still maintained congressional majorities through an amalgamation of its safe northern wing and durable (yet fading) bloc of southern incumbents. On a national level, the party was linked to a coalition of underrepresented (poorer, non-white) and declining (unions) segments of the electorate that neither had the votes nor resources to keep the party competitive. Strategically, there was little consensus on how to return to a majority, and who to blame for its failure. Some believed that the party had to regain working class white “Reagan Democrats,” which could only occur by distancing the party from its African-American base. Others, suggested a more business friendly party, a response to the increased importance of big donor fundraising (and decline of unions) to electoral campaigning. These factions looking to reinvent the party found an organizational outlet in the burgeoning Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). In an influential paper published by DLC-associated think tank, the Progressive Policy Institute, Elaine Kamarck and William Galston accused traditional liberals of ‘evading’ the electoral reality of the Democratic coalition as constructed:

Liberal fundamentalism refuses to adjust to changing circumstances by adopting new means to achieve traditional ends. Instead it enshrines the policies of the past two decades as sacrosanct and greets proposals for change with moral outrage. Whether the issue is the working poor, racial justice, educational excellence, our national defense, the liberal fundamentalist position is always the same; pursue the policies of the past. During its heyday, the liberal governing coalition brought together white working-class voters and minorities with a smattering of professionals and reformers. Over the past two decades however, liberal fundamentalism has meant a coalition increasing dominated by minority groups and (white) elites—a coalition viewed by the middle class as unsympathetic to its
interests and its values. The inescapable fact is that the national Democratic
Party is losing touch with the middle class, without whose solid support it
cannot hope to rebuild a presidential majority. Jimmy Carter forged his
1976 victory with the help of a majority of middle income voters, while
Michael Dukakis was able to win only 43 percent of this vital group.\footnote{75}

During this period the party experienced a related modal shift organizationally.\footnote{76}
Under the chairmanship of Ron Kirk, the DNC as a bricks and mortar organization
expanded as cultivation of business resources helped fill the party’s coffers.\footnote{77} Yet this
new groundswell of funds did not bolster a centralized apparatus to mobilize base voters,
but was typically funneled to individual candidate campaigns for the purposes of
television advertising. Efforts concentrated on enlarging the party’s remaining base as a
share of the electorate through greater mobilization were most closely associated with
Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988, and the associated growth of
the Rainbow coalition as a nexus of black and progressive forces within the party looking
to consolidate left-wing influence within it.\footnote{78} Contrasted with Kamarck and Galston’s
calculus, was Jackson’s, seeing the party’s increasing diversity as a strength:

\begin{quote}
America is not like a blanket -- one piece of unbroken cloth, the same
color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt: many
patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held
together by a common thread. The white, the Hispanic, the black, the
Arab, the Jew, the woman, the native American, the small farmer, the
\end{quote}

\footnote{76} This is the party-in-service.
businessperson, the environmentalist, the peace activist, the young, the old, the lesbian, the gay, and the disabled make up the American quilt.79

While this tension has never fully abated, it has been mediated by demographic shifts that would appear to advantage those that comprised the Democratic base in the coming decades. Most influential in arguing this was John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, with claiming an “Emerging Democratic Majority”80 (EDM) also known as the “New American Electorate,”81 (NAE) based on consolidating a coalition of non-whites and upper-middle class social liberals (especially women), with segments of the party’s traditional white working class base. While party’s national coalition was a losing one in the 1980’s, long-term demographic drift would soon start to advantage Democrats if such a coalition could be maintained:

As a result of the transition to postindustrial society, each of the McGovern constituencies (women, professionals, and minorities) will continue to grow as a percent of the electorate. And barring a sea change in Republican politics, these constituencies will continue to vote Democratic. Second of all, as post-industrial areas continue to grow, white working-class and professional voters in these areas are likely to converge on a worldview that is more compatible with Democrats than Republicans…it is fair assume that if Democrats can consistently take professional by 10 percent, keep 75 percent of the minority vote, and get close to an even split of white working-class voters, they will have achieved a new Democratic majority.82

81 I will use these terms interchangeably.
82 Ibid. pp. 34-35.
Yet how soon this would take hold, and how strong this would be, would depend on the party’s ability to bring these groups percentage of the electorate in line with their percentage of the voting age population. Questions remained about whether a party anchored in the Democratic ‘base’ coalition could be depended on to turn out come election time. From a mechanical perspective, the party’s shifts in the 1980’s left it unequipped as an apparatus to pursue mobilization. The party was focused on the nationalization of networks to move financial resources and staff in pursuit of campaign strategies centered on mass media communication.83 Urban machines that used unions and patronage to turnout the masses were shells of their former selves.84

Who would be the foot soldiers of this new mobilization effort? Political activism in the United States had declined (at least in the institutional context), with remaining activists loyal to specific issues rather than party.85 Effective mobilization efforts do not come about overnight through a finger snap, but are a years-long process of identifying voters on a precinct by precinct basis, building an activist infrastructure (volunteer or otherwise) that can be depended on to efficiently and effectively assure voter turnout. Even if a majority coalition did exist for Democrats somewhere in the farthest reaches of the polity, it would still take years for the party built the capacity to locate it.86

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84 Ware, 1988; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993. p. 166.
86 This section skips over the years of the Clinton presidency. While an important moment in American political history, it is not particularly notable for its effects on party organization or coalitional structure. Clinton crested on these tensions, putting together a plurality, yet not a
Dean as Prelude

The turn from vague exhortation in some corners of the party, to the actual realization of such an apparatus finds its modern genesis in the 2004 election and the primary candidacy of Howard Dean. In fact, the defeated presidential hopeful’s influence on the story is far broader. While Dean’s presidential campaign failed, he and his staff would play an integral role in diffusing his campaign’s innovations throughout the party. Most directly he would continue to shape the Democratic Party’s response to this changing political environment through his subsequent role as Democratic Party chairman and the development and implementation of a “50 state strategy” of party building over his tenure.

Dean’s campaign of 2004 was marked by his strong anti-war stance, making him a darling of the party’s liberal activists. In a sense, his campaign could be viewed dismissively, as another in a long line of insurgent flavor-of-the-month candidates, characteristic of the long primary season, inevitably destined to fail once actual primary voting began. Yet, even if this were the case, Dean’s run took place at a critical historical moment that precipitated the invention of a swath of new campaign tactics ideal for a candidate of his particular appeal. Dean’s, was the first campaign to use digital tools to transition amorphous grassroots enthusiasm into concrete campaign resources. These included using early social networking technology such as ‘Meetup’ to facilitate organizational meetings of campaign supporters, as well and using the campaign’s email “listserv” to solicit small donor contributions from its grassroots supporters. This was not

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majority coalition in his two victories. The party-in-service model continued to flourish under his tenure, as did the mercurial nature of the Democratic Party coalition. See: Galvin, 2009, ch. 11.
just evident in the campaign’s innovations in communication, but in the understanding of a potential voter universe, through the development of a dynamic digital voter file.\textsuperscript{87}

Fundamental to this was a change in the communication environment of campaigns that virtually eradicated costs of dynamic interaction with campaign supporters, incentivizing their cultivation. That these techniques would be forged in a Democratic primary campaign should not be a surprise. Policy differences between primary candidates are often negligible. Elections will often be won or lost not so much on programmatic differences, but campaigning: incentivizing experimenting with new campaign tactics to produce marginal gains in efficiency.\textsuperscript{88}

Dean spent much of early campaign season in the lead among Democratic candidates in fundraising (thanks largely small donors\textsuperscript{89}), media attention, and national polling. However, his campaign faltered once the actual voting started, evident in his poor showing in the Iowa caucus, from which the campaign never recovered. John Kerry, the eventual nominee, who spent months before actual voting as a middle-of-the-pack candidate in a crowded field, wound up quickly and easily wrapping up the nomination. Veterans’ of Dean’s campaign believed that this was due to the campaign’s misapplication of its digital tools. This technological focus came at the expense of more traditional campaign fundamentals. According to Jeremy Bird, a Dean Field staffer who would become a critical architect of OFA:

The technology is the net…but not necessarily the engine…when we try to fit the strategy into the technology, I think we’ve also done a disservice to

\textsuperscript{87} See: Kreiss, 2012.
the work we’re trying to do. When we come up with a strategy and a program and then we say what resources do we have to do this, I think we’ve been more successful.\(^{90}\)

There was an incongruity between simply amassing resources made possible by digital campaigning, and transitioning these resources into effective campaign communication. During the Iowa Caucuses Get out the Vote (GOTV) effort, Dean’s “orange hat brigades” of young liberal volunteers who would descend on the farms of Iowa, were particularly indicative of the campaign’s flawed approach. Despite their enthusiasm, the cultural divide between these activists and Iowa caucus goers made them poor campaign surrogates. As put by a journalist at the time:

> Maybe it’s unfair to blame the hats, but put yourself in the boots of an average Iowa Democrat a few days before the caucus. The campaign is so intense that it has become a form of political harassment. Your phone rings every 10 minutes with an automated robo-call on behalf of one candidate or another. Your mailbox is jammed with political junk mail. Then comes a knock on your door and there you find a couple of committed campaigners from Park Slope or Noe Valley or Wicker Park telling you that Howard Dean is your man. And they’re wearing these really loud orange caps.\(^{91}\)

This was exacerbated by haphazard voter data produced by these canvassing efforts. Activists’ combination of enthusiasm and lack of training led to the reporting of


overly optimistic measures of candidate support, distorting mobilization-targeting efforts.\textsuperscript{92}

Dean’s story did not end however in the snowy beginnings of 2004. The first notable indicator of an important shift occurring was the transitioning of his electoral campaign apparatus into a permanent organization, “Democracy for America” (DFA). This organization was the first digitally facilitated post-campaign “bridge” organization: attempting to take an ephemerally based campaign apparatus and transition it into a permanent political force. While in some sense presaged by Camp Wellstone, an outgrowth of Paul Wellstone’s senate campaign,\textsuperscript{93} that effort focused on the diffusion of campaign techniques on behalf of advocacy.\textsuperscript{94} DFA however, represented a pioneering attempt to institutionalize a campaign activist network in a digital space. Before email, the costs of keeping an activist base mobilized without a resource heavy, staff centered, organization would seem nearly impossible. Yet once a campaign listserv is established, maintaining communication with its cadre has almost no financial cost and with little labor, allowing the potential to maintain organizational coherence and capacity.

Dean’s legacy on the party might be most pronounced in his tenure as chairman of the DNC. In this role, he attempted to integrate the ethos of his campaign with the


\textsuperscript{93} Wellstone, a hero to the national activist base in the party during the 1990’s, emphasized grassroots organization building uncommon in the party at time and predating the digital communication structures that would facilitate its broader adoption. If not for his death in a 2002 aircraft accident, he may have very well been better positioned than Dean to lead this movement.

party’s national infrastructure. Dean ran his primary campaign stressing his insurgent brand, positioning himself as a candidate taking on the party establishment. Yet becoming DNC chair (when the party does not hold the presidency) is dependent upon winning the support of state party chairs. These were the sorts of party insiders that Dean spent his campaign railing against. Yet after another poor performance by Democrats in 2004, many in the establishment were open to organizational change. Dean consequently, sold the state party leadership on a vision focused on building state party infrastructure. He made his pitch as a fundamental shift away from the previous chairmanship of Clinton era stalwart Terry McAuliffe. McAuliffe, who following and expanding on the organizational model of Kirk, was a prodigious fundraiser, successful in keeping Democratic campaign accounts competitive with their Republicans counterparts, fostering even closer relationships to business donors. Yet, he spent little time on building party infrastructure, especially in assisting struggling state party organizations. Dean, however promised a ‘50 state strategy’ based upon funding state party hiring of field and digital staff across every state in the nation. Dean made his case that party fortunes are tied to assisting state parties in cultivating grassroots resources over the long term by building durable activist leadership and networks. This should not just be temporal organization based on short-term national electoral imperatives, but scaling infrastructure across the country that will make the party regularly competitive from local

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95 The chair is selected by majority vote of the approximately 450 member Democratic National Committee. Around 75% of these members are state party chairs, vice chairs or members appointed by the state parties that serve at their pleasure. While holding the presidency, tradition holds that membership defers to the presidential selection. As an out-party, substantive campaigning takes place. See: Prokop, Andrew. “How the DNC Election Works.” Vox-Online Only. Feb 22 2017 http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/23/13703720/dnc-chair-election-rules-members. Accessed Feb 23 2017.
elections on up. This marked the first deliberate contemporary attempt to move away from a party-in-service model, to reinvigorate a more traditional party organizational apparatus focused on a joint structure to serve the needs of the party team. Yet if this marked an important shift in party architecture, it would be another presidential campaign that would take the next step in scaling such an organization.

The Development of OFA

The organizational strategies deployed by Obama for America (OFA) built on those developed by Dean and the party in 2004. Central was combining new digital technologies with field methods based on relational organizing, traditionally associated with community organizing groups such as Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). IAF characterizes this strategy as based on the “golden rule”:

Never do for people what they can do for themselves. Applied to organizing it means professional organizers should train leaders on how to run action campaigns, not do it themselves. In practice organizers often assist leaders. This way they help leaders grow, and avoid the risks of costly mistakes.

The staff of most community organizations conduct campaigns themselves, and give little time to developing new leaders. As a result their member base gets smaller and smaller. By making the focus of staff recruitment and training of leaders the IAF continually expands its member base.96

The large-scale adoption of such methods by electoral campaigns is a direct response to a changing political environment. OFA’s implementation of relational organizing techniques represents a strategic response to the need for building durable activist-based resources where the traditional pathways for this have declined. Without patronage or strong civic society organization to channel into political activism, the campaign’s central challenge was to harness its groundswell of grassroots interest and create durable bonds over the course of the election. Its fundraising prowess and dependence on the mobilization of a non-traditional electorate, gave both the capacity and necessity to construct such an apparatus. This strategy was based on upfront investment in field staff, trained at not just managing voter contact operations, but using relational organizing techniques to build the social bonds necessary to construct a durable volunteer-based apparatus.\footnote{McKenna & Han, 2014. pp. 93-96.}

This model was a response to intra-party competition in the 2008 Democratic Party primary. The Hillary Clinton campaign had the loyalty of the Democratic Party establishment, including party politicians and operatives, as well as an electorate grounded demographically in groups likely to vote in a primary election.\footnote{Berman, 2010.} OFA then, was incentivized to focus on mobilization among youth and African-Americans. These were groups that Obama’s narrative generated tremendous enthusiasm amongst, yet were traditionally underrepresented in the overall electorate, and even more so in primaries. Such a fight had echoes of the intra-party coalitional wars of the 1980’s. Yet, Obama’s campaign consequentially melded two insurgent factions within the party: The African-American and left base associated with Jesse Jackson’s presidential runs, with the
reformer wing of the primary associated with Gary Hart, Bill Bradley, and more recently Howard Dean. Dean and his forbearers did not have the capacity, or any particular incentive to move beyond the traditional primary electorate. By uniting these groups into Obama’s primary coalition, Clinton’s advantages with a more stable primary electorate could be overcome.

OFA had the financial resources to make early and robust investments in field and the participatory resources of its millions of supporters, most of whom had never been political activists before. Having staff not just throw volunteers out on the streets with clipboards, but develop social bonds within the campaign that could lead to durable participation, as well volunteer based leadership capable of organizing sophisticated campaign events themselves, could add exponential value, even over the course of a single election.

Fundamental to this OFA template was an early and capital-intensive devotion to field organization, eventually developing a sophisticated organizing model. The role of

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99 These were what Ron Brownstein popularly and pejoratively dubbed “wine track” candidates, who appealed to primarily white, educated upper middle class liberal activists. These voters, while loud and well organized, were not indicative enough of the broader primary electorate to win the nomination. Yet as limited, blinded, or constrained by their activist support, were unable to broaden their appeal to other important segments of the Democratic primary electorate: such as non-whites, unions households, etc. See Brownstein, Ronald. “The Warrior and the Priest.” Los Angeles Times, Mar 25 2007. http://articles.latimes.com/2007/mar/25/opinion/op-brownstein25
100 Both of these wings had their own particular, yet complimentary, resources. The reformer wing, made up largely of the middle class activist base, could be used similarly to the Dean campaign, integral for small-donor fundraising. While African-Americans made up a large share of the Democratic coalition, they were underrepresented in the primary electorate. Mobilization could change the landscape of the primary electorate, especially in the south where the overwhelmingly black. Youth’s enthusiasm for Obama presented opportunities in both these regards: soliciting volunteers through the movement like campaign environment as well having the potential to change the party’s primary universe.
101 By the end of third quarter 2003, Dean has raised in historical context an impressive $25.4 million dollars. Yet by the end of the third quarter 2007, Obama had raised over $80 million dollars (FEC).
the field organizer was transitioned from simply a recruiter and manager of voter contact activities to the implementer of community organizations known as neighborhood teams based on organizational modes (one on ones, house meetings, etc.) traditionally used by IAF-style community organizers, not electoral campaigns. This template, prefigured by Dean’s 2004 campaign, the further development of technology,\(^{103}\) as well as the tactical evolution prompted by having experienced Dean’s mistakes, helped make these efforts more effective. Why neighborhood teams? Community organizing after all is based on long-term goals of organization building, whereas electoral politics is grounded in short term imperatives, and the construction of transient and haphazard organization that services the immediate election. Building durable social bonds would seem to be a poor use of activist time in the short period of an electoral campaign, where there are always doors to be knocked and phone calls to be made. One important lesson of the Dean campaign however, was the importance of precision of volunteer voter contact as a linkage between the campaign and voters. For campaigns to effectively use the data produced to model their electoral universe, volunteers had to be trained to record accurate results. Building effective mechanisms to diffuse such skills through durable volunteer leadership was paramount.

Such strategies had a history in Democratic politics. Harvard professor Marshall Ganz, a consultant to Dean and Obama campaigns, and a teacher and mentor to many who played integral roles in developing the field organizations for both, has been experimenting with using community organizing for grassroots electoral politics since

\(^{103}\) Since 2004, digital technologies had advanced into what is known as “web 2.0.” With platforms such as facebook, youtube, and the advent of SMS (text) messaging. These tools made horizontal communication via digital forums both easier and ubiquitous.
Robert Kennedy’s California primary campaign in 1968. The neighborhood team model itself, had its origins in Ganz’s work with organization behavioral scholar Ruth Wageman and the Sierra Club between the 2004 and 2008 elections. A number of recent developments however, have incentivized its systematic adaptation. In addition to new forms of media, were the diminishing returns and bandwidth of traditional forms of political communication.

While money in electoral politics continued to increase, the amount of television advertising space and its utility could not continue to expand at a uniform pace. As a result, campaigns would look for new ways to use their funds. The Dean campaign advanced a model of cultivating activists, but OFA with its strategic necessity for mobilization, and fundraising and activist numbers that quickly dwarfed even Dean, believed that the most efficient path to mobilization was through channeling funds early in the campaign season into field organization. Staff deployed to use relational organizing techniques to build a formidable volunteer apparatus that could mobilize a non-traditional coalition on Election Day.

To do this, OFA concentrated on early investments in field organization in the all-important first set of primary states: Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina. Iowa, with its difficult to navigate caucuses was especially important: as a

105 Mckenna & Han 2012. p 58.
107 In the primary states, field organizing was still in its experimental stage. Relational models were used in Iowa and South Carolina: the two ’early’ states in which Obama was victorious. This success lead to the development and institutionalization of the model through the primaries, and resulted in its focus through the general election.
well-developed field organization was needed to expand the caucus universe in this traditionally low turnout process. Perhaps most striking when evaluating institutional barriers to participation and OFA’s approach during primary season was their focus on state caucuses. Traditionally, the complexities of the caucus process led campaigns, even ones with high levels of grassroots enthusiasm, to eschew pursuing mass mobilization in caucus states. OFA however, saw its combination of grassroots enthusiasm and organizational sophistication as an opportunity to vastly increase turnout in these caucuses and run up their lead in the delegate count. The higher the transaction costs of participation, the more motivation OFA had to use its superior organization, here, higher thresholds to participation were successfully navigated as a result of campaign enthusiasm and an effective apparatus to mobilize it. In the all-important Iowa caucus for example, Democratic turnout reached over 227,000, a near 50% increase from the record established previously in the 2004 election.

Table 2.4: Increase in youth (17-29) share of Democratic Primary/Caucus Turnout in early states. *Nevada did not have exit polls conducted in 2004. Sources: Pew Research, NBC Exit Polls, CNN Exit Polls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>Diff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The cumulative result of turnout efforts during the primaries was dramatic. In 2004, overall Democratic primary turnout was approximately 16.1 million; in 2008, it more than doubled to over 35 million. This included approximately 2% increases in the share of African-American and Latino proportions of the electorate, and an over 5% increase in the youth (17-29) share. Democratic primary turnout as a share of eligible voters in primary states rose to highest point on record in 2008 at 19.5%. This was nearly double the 9.5% who voted in 2004.\footnote{Desilver, Drew. “So Far Turnout in this Year’s Primaries Rivals 2008 Record.” Pew Research Center. March 8 2016. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/08/so-far-turnout-in-this-years-primaries-rivals-2008-record. Accessed Dec 11 2016.} While this was in part due to both Obama and Clinton campaigns waging battle through nearly all 50 states before Clinton conceded, the result of this was the mobilization of nearly half of the party’s projected vote totals in the general election. This was an extraordinarily valuable down payment on the data and GOTV apparatus necessary for the general election.

Table 2.5: 2008 Democratic Primary Early State Youth Vote (17-29) Preferences. Sources Pew Research, NBC Exit Polls, CNN Exit Polls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Obama</th>
<th>Clinton</th>
<th>Diff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Schattschneider would be impressed. Here was an instance where in fact competition does appear to overcome fragmentation, strengthening party resources and expanding participation. Perhaps ironically, competition was not between parties, but within a singular party. The horizontal domain of coalitional party fragmentation helped
to expand the scope of conflict through a competitive electoral system. A competitive primary gave two highly resourced campaigns the incentive to organize and mobilize their targeted coalitions across primary states. At the time, it was feared that this competition might depress general election turnout among Democrats. The rationale being that its fraught nature might lead to the losing side’s supporters staying home, if not defecting in large numbers come November. Yet, a highly competitive, high salience primary in fact greatly helped bolster the party’s general election apparatus. Party voter and activist files were strengthened through the primary season, as well as activist networks given an important jumpstart. Classical party theory points to the cue of binary competition between well-established party brands as essential mechanism of making political decision-making understandable to the average person. Yet, even intra-party competition, if robust, presents incentives and opportunity to expand the sphere.

After the primaries, Obama field staff spent several weeks at Chicago headquarters debriefing, discussing what worked and did not across the various states. Methods pioneered during the primary, were instituted on a larger and more systematic scale in the general election campaign. This included the neighborhood team model, digital tools, and using new media for grassroots communication. OFA was now tasked with increasing electoral turnout by tens of millions to win a general presidential election.

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113 While becoming more ‘responsible’ can create conditions for parties to eschew the median voter for a marginalized non-voter, high competition primaries may in fact be a necessary condition for coalitional shifts on this basis. Primaries can reach out to more idiosyncratic and high-risk electorates, and can be an important incubation period for new voters and groups, as for new issue uptake.

114 Berman 2009; 177.
Significant field staff focused on implementing neighborhood teams deployed to battleground states by the early summer of 2008. These organizers used their relational organizing model to build organizations that by November featured volunteer leadership that could be depended on to run sophisticated GOTV operations through locally grown teams, to mobilize among the Obama coalition at a much larger scale for the general election.

Campaigns in recent resource-heavy presidential battleground states have typically been run as coordinated campaigns (campaigns organized as joint ventures of OFA, the DNC, and the respective state party), ostensibly on behalf of the entire party slate of candidates. Coordinated efforts combined the presidential necessities of winning a statewide popular majority, with the specific imperatives of the particular campaigns. Neighborhood team boundaries were drawn around the needs of particular state parties (e.g. in instances where winning the state senate was the highest state priority, staff organizers were based in state senate regions). Yet, staff and strategy existed largely independently of the preexisting state party infrastructure. State OFA organizations ran through ‘Chicago,’ under the chain of command of OFA national. Implicit is the assumption that what was good for the top of the ticket would serve the electoral prerogatives of all Democratic candidates. Indeed, success in 2008 and 2012 would seem to support this point. Yet, this did not obviate tension on the vertical plane resulting from institutional party fragmentation. OFA’s methods were foreign to many party veterans and politicians. Organizational focus on a dynamic and precise set of voter targets facilitated by ground level organizers often deviated from traditional forms of local

115 The headquarters of OFA.
outreach.\textsuperscript{116} This aroused suspicion by among many in the party’s old guard. National presidential campaign resources were largely no-strings-attached patronage, not as handfuls of young out-of-state organizers with laptops and team building metrics.

While it would be hard to quantify the value added by neighborhood teams, it is difficult to argue with the overall electoral results. Obama’s victory was predicated on raising turnout to its highest percentage in decades. Exit polls suggest that turnout increased among traditionally underrepresented groups such as non-whites, youth, and economically downscale voters.\textsuperscript{117} Internal campaign records and independent polling further suggest that the numbers of voters contacted by campaigns was also significantly increased compared to recent elections.\textsuperscript{118}

Obama’s victory appeared to have strong coattails for the party, at least on a federal level. Democrats won seven seats in the Senate and twenty-one in the House. In no state that Obama carried did Democrats lose a Senate seat or race with a non-incumbent, or suffer a net loss in House representation.

\textbf{Democratic Victory, but Governance?}

After the 2008 election, as is common practice, the Obama constellation took control of the Democratic National Committee. Former Virginia governor Tim Kaine, an early supporter and friend of the president, replaced Howard Dean as committee chairman. Most organizationally consequential was the canceling of Dean’s 50 state

project. This was replaced with “Organizing for America” (OFA 2.0), led by two OFA field veterans Mitch Stewart and Jeremy Bird. The ostensible purpose of OFA 2.0 was to transition the grassroots campaign organization created for the presidential race, for the purposes of advocating for the president’s agenda, electoral mobilization, and broader civil society projects.\textsuperscript{119} The decision to house this project under the DNC reflected a commitment to connect the Obama organization to the durable institutions of the party. If the volunteer-based field apparatus of the presidential campaign could be institutionalized within the party, it would have enormous impact on party resources and subsequently electoral outcomes in campaign years to come, or so it was thought.

Decisions about OFA 2.0’s structure were acrimonious. In one of the few journalistic accounts of its inception period, such in-the-moment tensions were illustrated. Tim Dickenson described the centrality of campaign manager David Plouffe in the decision to move OFA 2.0 inside the DNC:

Steve Hildebrand, Obama’s deputy campaign manager, tried to dissuade Plouffe. "The DNC is a political entity," he says. "Senators who you are going to need to put significant pressure on to deliver change — like Ben Nelson of Nebraska, who was opposed to health care reform — are voting members of the DNC. It limited how aggressive you could be."

Hildebrand pushed Plouffe to make "Obama 2.0" an independent nonprofit, similar to FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, the right-wing instigators of the Tea Party uprising. Free from the party

\textsuperscript{119} Melber, Ari. "Year One of Organizing for America: The Permanent Field Campaign in a Digital Age (A Techpresident Special Report)." \textit{TechPresident}. Available at SSRN 1536351, 2010.
apparatus, Hildebrand argued, the group could raise unlimited funds and "put enough pressure on conservative Democrats to keep them in line."

But Plouffe was resolute. Obama was troubled by the prospect of big-dollar donors driving an independent nonprofit, and the DNC offered a ready infrastructure and fewer legal hurdles. "The president is a Democrat," says Stewart, a veteran of Obama's victory in Iowa who took over from Plouffe as OFA's director. "It would be very hard to explain why Obama's grass-roots field team is not housed with his party."

The move from the 50 state project to OFA 2.0 marked an important shift in national party infrastructure building. Ostensibly, both projects simultaneous operation would seem redundant, as OFA 2.0 planned to operate in every state (contingent on meeting projected fundraising goals) with levels higher than under Dean. The promise of OFA 2.0 was an attempt to institutionalize a much broader grassroots activist base within the party. While Dean gave state parties resources previously deprived, vast grassroots enthusiasm was not among them. OFA 2.0 presented the potential for party building in a hurry, if it could successfully transition the campaign infrastructure to the party.

Despite (or perhaps because of) Democratic victory, suspicions endured. Indeed, what could be viewed as the "shock therapy" of the OFA-party transition brought back to the fore both horizontal and vertical domains of party fragmentation. Coalitional and strategic tensions that endured caused unease among loyalists of both the president and

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121 This term coined by Jeffrey Sachs to describe the quick, but disruptive privatization of Eastern European economies in the 1990’s, which were supposedly justified by the long term good they would do. Here, this disjuncture could be seen as the sudden termination of the 50 state project replaced (or at least planned to be) with OFA 2.0.
the party. Unsurprisingly, Obama’s victory meant that when push comes to shove, it would be his coalition—on both horizontal and vertical planes—that took priority. Yet party coherence still required out of power factions to buy in, as their defection organizationally (and programmatically) could still weaken the party.

Even if the Obama coalition became the strategic driver of the party on a national level, this did not necessarily alleviate suspicions of the party brand and its institutional vessels among rank and file Obama supporters. These activists’ enthusiasm and continued participation was integral for OFA 2.0. Grievances persisted among the party establishment as well, as the president’s victory took power away from the state party chairs and their priorities. Party tensions seemed inevitable as in a world of finite resources, disparate party actors all operating under different institutional logics will be difficult to satisfy.

The electorate of 2008 ushered a coalition that was young and non-white to the center of the party, along with non-institutionally organized liberal activists. This coalition was linked to a new congressional class that successfully rode Obama’s coattails through OFA’s mobilization efforts. Outside of this were many established party actors aligned with Clinton’s primary coalition, along with state party leadership. These ‘losing’ factions overlap, yet were not the same. While many members of state party leadership cut their political teeth during the Clinton years, Dean’s instillation as DNC chair was in part a rejection of the McAuliffe/Clinton model of party organization. State party leadership wanted infrastructure (and control of it), not just money funneled to candidate campaigns. The aftermath of the 2008 elections presented a significant opportunity to take another major step toward the reemergence of state parties. Data cultivated across
the nation in a highly competitive 50 state primary cheered by party organizations finally showing some signs of life after Dean’s reign. Yet abstract commitment to party building is not necessarily enough to bring a disparate set of national factions, with histories of not always seeing eye to eye, together. As one state party operative put it:

The (incumbent Democratic) governors didn’t endorse [Obama in the primary], so the relationship wasn’t there, the trust wasn’t there to begin with. They [state parties] felt like they were on the outs and [the administration and OFA] wasn’t sensitive to their concerns…that was the perception, was there merit to it? There was probably blame to go around. Again though, it’s about relationships, communication. That wasn’t always there. You could argue over whose lap that falls into, but I don’t think in the early days (of Obama’s presidency) there was a sense of what the states need (from the DNC)\(^\text{122}\)

The 50-state plan hoped to win gradual consensus among divergent party actors. To show that the DNC was there to serve their needs in good faith, OFA 2.0 as an alternative structure presented a new dynamic in national-state party relationships. Its staff would fall under the chain of command of the DNC, with state party leadership having no formal control and little in the way of influence over strategic and staffing decisions within their states. Despite commitment to 50 state staffing, the pace and scale of this seemed to suggest a bias toward presidential battleground states, especially when compared to Dean’s tenure.

This felt like a lost opportunity for state parties. Even in non-battleground states, highly competitive primaries and the excitement around Obama’s general election

\(^{122}\) Personal Communication
campaign were a tremendous boon for state parties’ data files and organizational resources. Party databases benefitted from the flurry of new activists and voters. Even in non-competitive states, OFA had a presence. While they did not run the type of capital-intensive field program of neighborhood team building indicative of battleground states, staff and grassroots enthusiasm still had campaign offices overflowing with volunteers ready to call (and travel) into battleground areas. Yet for parties struggling financially, a lack of post-campaign funds made cultivating these new resources continually difficult. What effect the maintaining of 50 state organization would have had remains unclear, but its absence and the subsequent sense of a missed chance to build locally, increased friction between party stalwarts and the new national regime.

Presidential victory transferred control of the party from a proxy of the aggregated interests of the state parties and individual federal politicians to the presidential national standard-bearer, shifting institutional priorities along with it. Instead of the building of state infrastructure, prioritization went to efforts to consolidate the party’s new presidential majority coalition. Because OFA largely subverted the Clinton-leaning state based party infrastructure in the primary, this exacerbated still simmering tensions. Dean navigated the implementation of insurgent techniques by putting organizing efforts under the discretion of establishment party actors. OFA 2.0 however, appeared less as a complementary organization, and more as a potential colonizing force, with little in the way of formal linkage to state party organization.

Even from congressional Democrats’ perspective, the decision to house OFA 2.0 within the DNC--the chief organization nationally dedicated to the election of Democrats-- could be seen as a disturbing broadening of its organizational mission. If the
DNC morphed into a lobbying arm of the president, resources previously dedicated to electing candidates might now instead potentially bully members into supporting the president’s agenda. While the party’s legislative caucus was not a safe majority coalition, let alone a governing one, most of its members (including many of its most senior and powerful ones) had the benefit of safe seats. This would suggest little interest on their part in reinventing the traditional vessels of party organization.

Everyone had reason to be distrustful of the potential implications of building party coherence through an Obama-led DNC, especially when electoral victory gave all party factions seeming proximity to power and their goals. This trepidation was present among many Obama activists who were skeptical of the Democratic Party brand, and of devoting their efforts broadly to its support.123 The Obama campaign’s rhetoric of change portrayed itself against a political establishment that for many of its supporters included a Democratic Party that had grown stale. That was at best ambivalent, and at worst resistant, toward the Obama coalition. Memories of a Democratic organization that was largely hostile to Obama and his coalition in the primary, and at times lukewarm even during the general election were still fresh. Moving the organization within the party ran the risk of having it coopted by the ‘establishment’ it spent much of the campaign framing itself in opposition of.

Beyond broad unease over the possible ramifications of the OFA-DNC merger was the difficulty of getting OFA 2.0 off the ground. After announcing in January of 2009, the organization struggled with fundraising out of the gate. Campaign donors, already fatigued from the election, were asked first to contribute to the ornate first

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inaugural rather than funding OFA 2.0. With the campaign organization having gone largely ‘dark’ in the post-election period until after the inauguration, organizational momentum among campaign activists had come to a halt. Only skeleton staffs appeared in many states until well into the summer of 2009, by which time many activist networks were long dormant.

Fragmentation was not limited to the organizational face of the party. It did not take very long for splits to emerge within the party caucus of the 111th congress. The Republican Party responded to their losses by becoming a disciplined opposition party singularly focused on obstructing the Democrats agenda. Even traditionally moderate Republicans, thought to be unlikely to engage in procedural gamesmanship or be overly hostile to the new agenda, quickly cowed to party leadership and the reemerging conservative activist base exemplified in the Tea Party movement. In the case of Arlen Specter, a long serving Pennsylvania moderate, this pressure led to his abandonment of the Republican Party, giving the Democrats a 60-vote “supermajority,” in the senate.124

With the parties polarized, even on procedural issues, Democrats would have to count on equivalent unity within their party. Any piece of significant legislation would be subject to forty de facto Republican votes against cloture. The consequences of this were effectively turning every Democratic senator into a veto player, as any singular defection before a bill reached the floor would lead to its doom. A number of the party’s more moderate to conservative senators signaled a willingness to defect from the party on

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necessary procedural votes if programmatic and/or patronage based concessions were not granted in the legislation.

These tensions culminated in the yearlong wrangling over the signature legislative accomplishment of the Obama presidency: The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (known commonly as the ACA). The battle over the ACA crystalized this new balance of power in the party caucus, where the party’s moderate outliers leveraged their individual veto power, curtailing both the scope of the bill and slowing down the legislative process. Glacial pace of legislative movement made the bill particularly vulnerable to media distortion. This not only affected the legislation’s public popularity, but became an important rallying point for the then burgeoning Tea Party movement.

From Aldrich’s conception of party strength, even with supermajority status, Democrats appeared weak as a caucus that could solve the social choice problems of its members. Rogue Democratic senators were neither beholden to the party brand, nor its organizational resources, and had little incentive to usher the bill through to protect the popularity of the president and generic Democratic brand. These senators instead chose to emphasize an image that stressed independence from the national party, and cultivated resources from as an idiosyncratic amalgamation of groups, many of which were ambivalent, if not outright hostile to the party and its constituency’s broad agenda.  

While the Tea Party emerged on the right, grassroots activism on the left was disappointing during this period. OFA 2.0 fell short of having the transformative effect

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125 Indeed Senators such as Max Baucus (MT), Kent Conrad (ND), and Joseph Lieberman (CT), all had both resource and electoral coalitions that deviated from the center of the party, and therefore little connection to party success through passing legislation. Unsurprisingly, each of these senators at various points during the process single handedly obstructed the movement of the bill and forced concessions from its architects.
on the legislative process that Democrats had hoped. Activists met the transition to issue-based campaigning with lukewarm support.\textsuperscript{126} Electoral work uses a clear objective with a defined date. Issue-based organization however, must react to a convoluted legislative process with many key decisions opaque to ordinary people. While OFA 2.0 attempted to use its still massive email list in support of the ACA and other high profile items on the president’s agenda, it did not distinguish itself within the patchwork of interest groups within their coalition, and fell short of the transformative political organization hoped for in the wake of the 2008 election. Strategic tensions between OFA activists, the White House, and the party came to the fore. It was reported that when activists approached white house Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel to pressure conservative Democrats, he retorted "We won't give you call lists. We can't go after Democrats — we're part of the DNC."\textsuperscript{127} When OFA 2.0 did run ads lobbying Democrats to support the ACA, it received quick rebuke from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid: "It's a waste of money to have Democrats running ads against Democrats."\textsuperscript{128}

OFA 2.0, as a proxy for the party, appeared to be in a difficult position. As a party organization, it was stuck between the white house and congress, grassroots activists and politicians, party building and legislative advocacy. Consistent Republican intransigence left no margin for defection among Democrats, putting intra-party tensions at the fore of the legislative process. Under such conditions, an organization institutionally tasked with representing all of these actors has a near impossible mission. Ultimately facing such challenges, it was unable to capture the sort of enthusiasm and

\textsuperscript{126}Melber, 2010
\textsuperscript{127}Dickenson, 2010
\textsuperscript{128}Ibid.
political resources of the campaign within the national organization of the Democratic
Party, even for its most pitched legislative battles.¹²⁹

Conditional party government scholars have claimed increasing coherence of
parties in the legislature since the 1970’s.¹³⁰ As polarization has increased, office-
holders’ goals are consequently more closely tied to the partisan composition of the
legislature. Indeed, over this period, legislative behavior increasingly patterned itself on
party blocs, with strategy emanating from party leadership. Yet legislative coherence
does not solve the incredibly complex coordination problems of electoral organization.
Whereas office-holders unified programmatically can have compatible strategies in the
legislative context, when constructing electoral organization, institutional fragmentation
still puts politicians on different planes. Resource construction is highly idiosyncratic and
uneven. Whereas parties-in-the legislature brings office-holders together, party electoral
organization is still subject to disparate actors, operatives, activists, and political cultures.
These are not easily bridged.

**The 2010 Midterms: A Return to Form**

The 2010 midterm elections saw the voter universe regressing to “normal”
levels, as the ascendant elements of the Obama coalition stayed home on Election Day. A
still sputtering economy and dissatisfaction with the legislative process, especially of the

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¹²⁹ Bump, Phillip. “Organizing for Action Wanted Us to Evaluate Them on Their Work, so we
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/07/30/organizing-for-action-wanted-us-
to-evaluate-them-on-their-work-so-we-did/?utm_term=.c03cc7ac01c6. Accessed Dec 16 2016.
¹³⁰ Aldrich, John H., and David W. Rohde. "The Consequences of Party Organization in the
Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era. 2000.
ACA, appeared to move independent voters into the Republican column, as an anti-incumbent mood prevailed. Yet evidence is not clear to what extent Republican victory was a result of independent voters breaking for Republicans as opposed to the consolidation of a Republican electorate based on older, whiter, richer voters that are more likely to turn out in midterm elections. Disconcerting for Democrats was how the negative political environment dampened enthusiasm among sporadic Democratic voters. From a social-psychological outlook on voting behavior, seeing Obama under fire and the party seemingly being ineffectual from a political and policy standpoint, altered perception of the efficacy of participation in electoral politics. Explanations of enthusiasm levels being weaker among the presidents’ party has historically at least partly explained the difficulties of a presidential party in midterm elections. It would follow that if that incumbent coalition is especially dependent on a non-consolidated electorate, the effects will be more pronounced.

Whereas Obama’s approval rating was overall mixed, he remained popular still with self-identified Democrats. Polling showed large discrepancies between approval rates of Obama among registered voters, and those who would vote in the 2010 midterms. Per the Pew survey taken in the lead up to the midterm: Republicans were favored 46-42 among registered voters, but 50-40 among likely voters. Obama’s approval also reflected

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this trend as his approval/disapproval was -4 (44-48) among registered voters, but -9 among likely voters. Further illustrating a still pronounced bias among those in the electorate compared to the unregistered, Obama’s approval was actually +1 (46-45) in the general public.134 Whereas for Republicans, the midterms stood as a referendum on Obama, sporadic Democrats did not view the election with similar salience. From a programmatic standpoint, the ACA, passed but not implemented, was a rallying cry for conservatives, and yet had not developed a coalition of stakeholders ready to defend it at the polls.135

Could these losses have been mitigated by the construction of an organizational apparatus on par with 2008? Social-psychological effects are not simply limited to voters. A negative climate is likely to have the same adverse effect on organizational resources as it does on base voter attitudes. Activists will be less likely to contribute money and time for the same reasons that sporadic voters will be less likely to show up at the polls. This vulnerability will only increase when resource networks are not consolidated. For example, an activist who turns out to canvass for Democrats habitually from election to election is less likely influenced by the idiosyncratic dynamics of a specific election year, than someone whose first effort in activism was in the previous election. If salience is consistently lower during non-presidential years, an organizational apparatus dependent on an irregular volunteer base will be more vulnerable to losses, than was true historically.


135 Whereas traditional conceptions of “interest group liberalism” (Lowi 1960) are based on a constituency group actively benefitting from a policy, delayed implementation of the ACA stalled the formation of such an entrenched constituency. Indeed, this may not be an exception, but a now regular aspect of the policy making process as implementation of policies become subject to further levels of bureaucratization before dispensing benefits See: Grunwald, Michael. The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era. Simon and Schuster, 2012.
when participation was motivated by patronage or union activism. Notably, two states that bucked national trends were Colorado and Nevada, which both celebrated statewide top of the ticket victories. Both states were presidential battlegrounds, which then had competitive 2010 races. As a result, these states had the resources to build on the infrastructure established in 2008.

Yet nationally, the party in 2010 was not able to reconstitute the apparatus of 2008. Financially Democrats lagged behind Republicans, even more so with Independent Expenditure (IE) money factored in. On the upside Democrats reported a near doubling of campaign contact form 2006, yet this still fell far short of OFA’s 2008 efforts. OFA 2.0’s volunteer apparatus was not a major factor, never reestablishing the scope of its 2008 operations and mobilization capacity. Party-wide mobilization efforts ran through the under-realized reconstruction of the OFA apparatus. By August, OFA 2.0 volunteers had knocked on 200,000 doors, one-tenth of the total at the same point in 2008.

Losses however exacerbated accusations within the party that OFA 2.0 was less concerned with transitioning the Obama organization to the party broadly, than subordinating party mechanisms to the narrow electoral prerogatives of the president. Over half the DNC budget for the 2010 campaign was under OFA 2.0. This was seen by some in the party less as an effort to mobilize voters in 2010, than as a backdoor abdication of efforts to stem midterm losses, to bolster infrastructure for the coming 2012

136 Republicans raised nearly $200 million dollars more in hard money (http://www.fec.gov/disclosurehs/hnational.do;jsessionid=AE9D7B8846AF8949107FFBBE61D1448F_worker3), and another $100 million more in when factoring in Super PAC and dark money efforts (https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/nonprof_summ.php?cycle=2016&type=viewpt)
137 Pew Research Center 2006
http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2017229,00.html
presidential race.\textsuperscript{139} The emergence of the Obama coalition seemed to arouse suspicions that those not on the right electoral clock could be abandoned by party organization now acting as a proxy of a quadrennial presidential coalition.

The 2008 and 2010 dichotomy illustrates the crystallization of the two-electorate’s theory. Causal impact can be broken down to two separate (yet far from mutually exclusive) variables. One social psychological, with organizational decline echoing voter turnout: lower salience and a negative political environment made activists less likely to build the apparatus, and voters less likely to vote, creating a mutually reinforcing dynamic that depressed Democratic turnout. The other is mechanical: based upon the institutional logics of vertical fragmentation. A presidentially-led party will prioritize the quadrennial presidential year over alternative party priorities-- including its midterm election year performance.

While congressional Democratic losses were the loudest cause of despair at the time, perhaps most far reaching was how down ticket Republican success altered the partisan composition of state governments. In 2010, Republicans gained full control of 11 new state legislatures, bringing their total to 25, their highest since 1952.\textsuperscript{140} Such losses would be especially costly for Democrats with post-census legislative redistricting immanent. As it would turn out, Republican success at the state level was not just the happy coincidence of a national wave election. Republicans embarked on a under the radar state legislative strategy known as REDMAP, attempting to maximize victories in

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{140} Storey, Tim.” GOP Makes Historic State Legislative Gains in 2010.” \textit{Rasmussen Reports-Online Only}. Dec 10 2010. \\
http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/political_commentary/commentary_by_tim_storey/gop_makes_historic_state_legislative_gains_in_2010
state government and increase advantage over redistricting. According to journalist David Daley, who has tracked REDMAP closely:

The idea was that you could take a state like Ohio, for example. In 2008, the Democrats held a majority in the statehouse of 53-46. What RedMap does is they identify and target six specific statehouse seats. They spend $1 million on these races, which is an unheard of amount of money coming into a statehouse race. Republicans win five of these. They take control of the Statehouse in Ohio - also, the state Senate that year. And it gives them, essentially, a veto-proof run of the entire re-districting in the state.

So in 2012, when Barack Obama wins again and he wins Ohio again, and Sherrod Brown is re-elected to the Senate by 325,000 votes, the Democrats get more votes in statehouse races than the Republicans. But the lines were drawn so perfectly that the Republicans held a 60-39 supermajority in the House of Representatives, despite having fewer votes.\(^{141}\)

Republican control of redistricting would lead to advantageous maps for the GOP, as well as reducing local competition through the drawing of more safe districts. This would have indirect but important consequences on party building, as later chapters will discuss. Most immediately pertinent however would be an increasingly uphill battle for Democrats to regain the House. There is evidence that the role of gerrymandering in the decline of competitive seats has been overstated. Most notable is Bill Bishop’s persuasive analysis of increasing voluntary self-clustering of socially and politically like-

minded people. Yet while it may be true that geographic clustering is the main driver of competitive decline, this does not suggest that political actors do not use the redistricting process to compound the effect of growing partisan geographic coherence. As REDMAP illustrates, strategies directed toward marginal shifts in districts can have outsized impact on representation, as well as party/candidate incentives.

2012: The Obama Coalition Remerges

After 2010, anxieties were high that the 2008 coalition was an aberration based upon the historic nature of Obama’s campaign to be the first black president, imperiling both his and the Democrats chances in 2012. Yet, the 2012 election would once again see Obama victorious successfully remobilizing his 2008 coalition. In some ways, this was an even more impressive organizational accomplishment. The enthusiasm level of the 2008 race was no longer apparent. Further evidence of this being an organizational victory is suggested in the disparity in turnout between battleground states and “safe” states: which did not get the benefit of resource intensive field campaigns.

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143 Bishop writing in 2009, before the last round of redistricting notes the clumsiness of some previous efforts to create safe seats (2009, p. 29). Yet Daley contends that the Republican Party made great strides in their sophistication and efficacy with REDMAP, using newer geo-modeling tools.
Table 2.6: 2008 and 2012 Turnout Disparity. Source: Obama for America.

Whereas overall electoral turnout declined from four years earlier, battleground states actually experienced a modest increase. Voter contact once again had reached an all-time high.\(^\text{144}\) OFA trumpeted that 2.2 million volunteers had been scheduled for GOTV—an 80% increase from 2008.\(^\text{145}\) Despite this, impressionistic evidence suggests that neighborhood teams were not as robust as they were in 2012. The increase in voter contact is a product of the development of more sophisticated and user-friendly digital technologies, specifically call tools that allowed out of state volunteers to call voters in battleground states easily through their computers without having to visit a campaign office.\(^\text{146}\)

\(^{144}\) OFA 2013
\(^{145}\) Ibid. 20.
\(^{146}\) This runs against notions that phone banking is (especially in high salience elections) an ineffective form of voter contact. Yet these out of state calls were not used so much for persuasion of potential voters as to keep sporadic voters abreast of changes in election procedures in states where new voter ID laws were being met with late season judicial challenges, as well as keeping lists ‘clean’ for canvassing. The campaign’s ability to provide personalistic updates and assistance through phone banking may have on the margins, helped alleviate concerns among vulnerable groups, counteracting any potential downturn based on newly restrictive voting laws.
Table 2.7: 2012 OFA voter contact. Source: Obama for America.

The reconstitution of a high resource mobilization apparatus helped down-ticket Democratic fortunes as Obama vote totals replicated across federal elections. This led to Democratic gains in Congress. Yet 2010 redistricting helped protect Republicans, minimizing losses in the House. Redistricting further exacerbated vertical fragmentation within the party, as even in presidential years, congressional gerrymandering can dampen the advantage of base mobilization in House races. If districts are uncompetitive, even significant turnout increases cannot put seats in play.

One major shift in Democratic campaigning during 2012 was an embrace of Super PACs. This marked a dramatic departure from 2008 and 2010, when donors were generally discouraged from giving to non-coordinated vehicles. Resisting such vessels could be tempting, and not just as protest. After the Supreme Court’s loosening of campaign finance rules on non-coordinated electioneering in the Citizens United and Speechnow decisions, there were still strategic reasons for hesitancy to embrace Super PACs. While Super PACs (and other forms of dark money campaigning through
nonprofit organizations) have relatively few financial restrictions, coordination firewalls between such organizations, candidates, and parties are strict. This sort of fragmentation has little downside in regards to paid media, yet pursuing voter mobilization through a fragmented organizational structure can lead to redundancy and inefficiencies. This was the case in 2004 where battleground states were flooded with 527 organizations dedicated to mobilizing Democrats, but were outflanked by a more centralized and efficient Republican operation.147

OFA discouraged sympathetic organizations from doing supplemental field campaigning in 2008, believing that building a coherent voter file and volunteer apparatus through explicit coordinated campaign organization was the most effective way to do mobilization. While field efforts were successful in ’08, a massive upswing in IE spending by Republicans in 2010 was due at least partial credit for their electoral success.148 In response, the Democrats were more open to the strategic use of Super PAC campaigns in 2012,149 including the Obama-led Priorities USA and AFL-CIO backed Workers United, complimenting OFA efforts. While viewed as necessary to keep up with Republicans, such organizations created another level of fragmentation within the party, instituting a number of high resource electoral vessels that would not be able to coordinate.

After the 2012 election, the presidential electoral campaign apparatus (OFA 3.0) restructured into a 501(c)4, dubbed Organizing for Action (OFA 4.0). Eschewing a party organization,\textsuperscript{150} the hope that a focus on maintaining activist networks would eventually translate into party electoral resources. Restructuring was premised on a hope that freeing OFA from the restrictions of a party brand many activists still viewed with suspicion, as well as the fundraising limits placed on party organization, activist networks could be more easily maintained. Under OFA 4.0’s status, the organization be freer to raise large sums of money, as to expand their staff support of activists. Activists would be more attracted to participate, by having more influence over the issues, with control devolving to local volunteer leadership. While the ambition was that by keeping these networks active they could be channeled back into electoral politics, OFA 4.0 marked an explicit retreat from the task of institutionalizing the Obama apparatus within the Democratic Party. Yet on a systematic basis, this strategy has appeared to be unsuccessful. OFA 4.0 has also struggled like 2.0 to maintain activist networks as well as the financial resources necessary to induce participation.\textsuperscript{151}

Despite intra-party tensions, the roots of these struggles remain a bit puzzling. Obama activists tend to be ideologically committed to the articulated programmatic agenda of the Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{152} Activists appear motivated by more than just a cult of personality, as they articulate a largely coherent set of policy preferences as well as being demographically rooted in the party’s emerging electoral coalition. Yet per OFA’s own

\textsuperscript{150} Organizing for America was terminated as a project inside the DNC.

\textsuperscript{151} Waldman, 2014

\textsuperscript{152} OFA, 2013
internal polling, they remain consistently skeptical of electoral politics and institutional actors independent of Obama.\textsuperscript{153}

2014: Midterms Redux

The 2014 midterm elections followed a similar pattern to 2010. The DNC (still presidentially-led) sensitive to criticisms of its 2010 strategy, focused on a broader collection of states, devoting $60 million dollars to the “Bannock Street Project.” This initiative used capital-intensive OFA mobilization strategies in a number of strategically important states, attempting to build an apparatus to mobilize an Obama-like electorate in competitive senate races concentrated in the South.\textsuperscript{154} Much like the presidential campaigns, this was temporary infrastructure with a focus derived from short-term electoral goals based on national strategy, than long-term state level party building. Yet this project included a number of states that were not presidential battlegrounds and saw their first large-scale financial infusions in an attempt to build OFA-like infrastructure.\textsuperscript{155}

If the 2014 election saw a broader party dedication to mobilizing the Obama coalition, the results tracked closely to those of 2010. Why should this be so? In part, the variation in strategic focus from year to year meant that resources were often not built evolutionarily, but were based on the attempt to rebuild an Obama-like apparatus under a

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{154} Bannock Street states were: Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Michigan, Montana and West Virginia.
lower salience election, without preexisting infrastructure. OFA’s original success in the 2008 election was a combination of both high levels of financial resources and the salience of the election. The DNC trumpeted that it made 41 million voter contact attempts on behalf of 2014 races, yet this was still under half of OFA’s totals for 2012. This was also largely the result of out of state phone banking, rather than door to door canvassing. While increases in phone banking in 2012 helped work against voter disenfranchisement due to new electoral barriers, the task of mobilization in lower salience elections such as midterms may require comparatively stronger communicative methods such as canvassing to be effective.156

This is not to say that Bannock Street’s efforts did not have an effect. An analysis by the Brookings Institute, concluded that Bannock targeted states saw an increase of 81,000 Democratic votes compared to their counterparts.157 While the study does not claim that this disparity just attributed to Bannock money, it does suggest that Bannock might have had a significant marginal effect on Democratic turnout. Yet significant is not determinative. Further investment in such efforts is challenging if they are not associated with party victory, regardless of actual causal effect.

Even in states that were both presidential and midterm battlegrounds, the party still fell short. North Carolina and Colorado benefitted from both being presidential and 2014 battlegrounds. Yet in neither of these states were the cumulative amassing of resources sufficient to carry the top of the Democratic ticket to victory. North Carolina’s

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senate race was a race more competitive than the national dynamics might indicate. This might suggest that the long-term success of building toward a consistently mobilized Democratic electorate will be a slow process and dependent on consistent resources. Such gradualism however will give little solace to office-seekers searching for an electorate for their next race, not a far-off campaign. Nor will it convince politicians to buy in to such a long-term strategy at the expense of their own electoral fortunes.

**Conclusion: The National Legacy of the Obama Years**

The Democratic Party of the post-civil rights era has been marked by coalitional tensions. White working class defections compromising the party’s national majority, spanning the half century since the New Deal, was a constant vulnerability. Entering the 2008 election, Democrats had not received a majority in the popular presidential vote since 1976. While organizational transition to a party-in-service helped Democrats remain financially competitive with Republicans, candidate-centered campaigning did not suggest sufficient incentives for mass mobilization through party mechanisms such as during the high point of the New Deal Era Democratic-labor nexus.

How has the development of a new campaign template, prioritizing mobilization affected the party nationally? The most broadly recognized durable resource developed has been data. Voters and activists have become more legible and easier to communicate with, which incentivizes political strategies based upon doing so. If the construction of robust and durable voter and activist files make the future cultivation of actual concrete resources easier, it still is not a guarantee of success. Obama’s victories and deep party coattails suggest the realization of the mobilization of a majority coalition; yet persistent
fragmentation has prevented the party from moving successfully toward consistent victories dependent on such a coalition.

While twice mobilizing a majority electorate in presidential years, an inability to institutionalize this voter universe is both a reflection, and cause of, tensions remaining in party. These tensions are no mere accident, but the result of institutional arrangements that have stymied the construction of an American mass party. Yet parties have still had periods of relative strength when the political environment has provided an opportunity for organizational responses to mitigate such barriers. Digitalization and increasing national ideological coherence of parties appear to suggest such a period. The political environment should incentivize campaign strategies based on an expansion of the scope of conflict. This is at least for a Democratic Party anchored in a coalition that comprises a majority of the populace, if not always the electorate. The broad goals of the party seem best served by consolidating its presidential coalition of an irregular, yet coherent majority.

Still, the persistence of fragmentation has frustrated efforts to construct an effective and durable organization to mobilize such an electorate consistently. Coalitionally, the party has made progress since the 1980’s in creating a more peaceable and coherent electorate. Yet coherence to the point in which disparate party factions all buy into the centrality of mobilization of a party electorate remains unrealized. The 2008 primaries, the inability to fold Obama activists into the party organization, and the immediate second-guessing of such mobilization strategies after losses (as expressed by Sen. Schumer at eh top of this chapter), all illustrate continued challenges to bring the party together.
Obama’s victories overcame these challenges. Yet the struggle to institutionalize both the campaign’s electorate and turnout apparatus point to fragmentation still impending consolidation. Ephemeral resource construction at the presidential level can overcome party fragmentation in a specific election, but does not provide a path for integration and institutionalization. Outside the high tide of the presidential season, tensions that have plagued the party since the New Deal era continued to persist. In some sense, the disjuncture became even greater as the presidential wing of the party’s success further alienated other actors within it. A new campaign template was constructed, but institutional fragmentation prevented adoption throughout the party. Without consolidation of the presidential electorate, coalitional tensions are likely to persist. Without broad coalitional congruence, the party will have difficulty efficiently constructing organizational economies of scale. A conundrum remains.

The American constitutional structure has presented a set of formidable barriers: creating divergent logics for politicians in different levels of government, and on different electoral calendars. Even a coalition dependably mobilized as a presidential majority, does not service the needs of numerous party politicians in the wrong place and at the wrong time, unable to ride presidential coattails. Most notably, a successful presidential coalition will see its efforts at maintaining such a coalition immediately cut against the interests of disparate actors in the party who do not benefit from a presidential majority’s electoral path.

A quick look at top-line election results of 2008 and 2012 might give the impression of a party vote, broadly exploitable by Democratic office-seekers. Yet, even at the national level, a closer look suggests the party as set of political actors, navigating
idiosyncratic electoral environments. If in a macro sense, the party looks more coherent and organizationally capable, the test of consolidation still lies in the perception and decision-making of various party actors all over the nation. From their standpoint, party integration looks much different from the neighborhood teams and hi-tech digital tools of presidential campaigns.

In the following chapters, this story will move to Ohio and down to the local level, where we will see how both these processes of mobilization and fragmentation play out closer to the ground, through the idiosyncratic lenses of both state and local politics.
Chapter 3

Ohio: So Goes the Nation

Ohio encapsulates both the promise and the perils of the Emerging Democratic Majority. Like nationally, Democrats were largely successfully in 2006, 2008, and 2012. Yet these victories were interrupted by bitterly disappointing midterm elections in 2010 and 2014. Ohio is also the case that perhaps best captures campaign resource disparities between presidential and non-presidential election years. Institutional fragmentation produces variation in the strategic priorities of the national party and aligned donor networks. Even in a specific state, organizational scale is contingent upon the short-term electoral priorities of national party leaders.

There is nowhere more coveted during the presidential season than Ohio. It received more money for the presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012 than any other state. Yet this influx most clearly crystalizes how a temporary injection of resources can present challenges to institution building on behalf of mobilizing a consistent party electorate. Ohio did not feature top of the ticket priority races in 2010 and 2014. Its vulnerability to the ebb and flow of the national spigot illustrates the difficulties of building durable institutions with such fluctuation in resources. This instability accentuates the fragmentation at the heart of the American party system.
This chapter focuses on state level party organization over this period. It recounts these elections through interviews with senior staffers of both the Ohio Democratic Party (ODP) and Obama for America’s Ohio operation (OFA). It then attempts to tease out the challenges to institutionalization of the campaign apparatus, and intra-party, inter-organizational tensions that follow from the contemporary American political campaign environment. Of central importance is how the presidential campaign as a provider of money, staff, activists, and campaign strategy, interacts with the state party as an institution.

As a case, Ohio illustrates that presidential party building is a very specific type of organizational development. Its integration into durable party structures is highly contingent. Strategic theories of campaigning suggest that some states will be winners or losers organizationally due to their priority for national party and specifically presidential prerogatives. Yet, even for battleground beneficiaries, goals of the state party may be very different from just quadrennial statewide mobilization. Institution building is a

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158 Table indicates money raised only by state federal coordinated venture. Presidential year totals were complemented by significant funds spent through the national party/OFA.
function of the cultivation and maintenance of networks, data, and processes that bring diverse party stakeholders together. Such development benefits presidential organization in the long run. Yet to borrow from Keynes, “in the long run we are all dead.” Short-term imperatives reign in electoral politics. Campaign infrastructure might be determinative for party success, yet party building in the contemporary era appears to be largely a positive externality of more narrow short-term electoral priorities. Fragmentation disrupts the building of a statewide apparatus, even where presidential resources are generous.

Also illustrated is a movement away from candidate-centered campaigns to top of the ticket-dominated parties. Data and polarization strengthen the logic of mobilizing a party electorate. Yet this is not centrally contingent on durable state party structures, but on top of the ticket campaigns that control resources and therefore strategy. If these campaigns construct resources to mobilize a party electorate, they are as formal organizations, only temporary. Formal party structures play an ancillary role, and yet are the ones charged with bridging resources from one election to the next. It is this paradox of party-based mobilization without an integrated party apparatus, which marks the broad challenge of this era in high-resource states.

**Brief Background on a Battleground**

Demographically, Ohio’s national representativeness might depend upon the metrics that one chooses. It earns its reputation as a reflection of American regional diversity. It has media markets and cultural characteristics distinct to the Northeast, Appalachian, and Midwest states it borders. The state also captures the common rust

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belt struggles of deindustrialization and economic decline (although with signs of a late period coda of revitalization). Yet, attributable to its economic condition, it has faced recent stagnation in its population. As a result, it has not been subject to the rapid influx of immigrant and younger workers that has shifted the national political picture and driven much of Democratic battleground strategy. Ohio curiously, is at the fore of national priority and yet incongruent with the demographic shifts that animate party strategy.

While its African-American population of approximately 12% is roughly reflective of the national average, the state is otherwise significantly older and whiter than the nation as whole. Its Latino population rests at under 2%. Although Ohio boasts a large public university system, it is well behind the national average of 18-29 year olds as a population cohort. This leaves a Democratic Party more oriented toward the traditional labor-farmer nexus of the New Deal coalition. Urban political organization is often characterized by still functioning machines. Cuyahoga, the largest county in the state and home to Cleveland, still boasts Democratic clubs in most of its 56 municipalities.

Electorally, the state has recently drifted from leaning red to blue in presidential years. Despite experiencing competitive races at the presidential level, Ohio Republicans

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164 Schultz, Personal Communication
enjoyed unified control of state government from 1995-2006; and held the governorship from 1980-2006. This streak was interrupted by a Democratic governor from 2006-2010, and state house from 2009-2010. Yet precipitous drops in midterm voting coupled with districts gerrymandered for optimum Republican representation, have helped insulate Republican state legislative majorities from the Democratic presidential coalition.165 Gerrymandering has also strongly affected congressional elections. Despite statewide competitiveness, the GOP retains a sizable lead in their House delegation with few seats competitive.166 The consequences of this partly accounts for the lack of national Democratic money during the midterm cycle, as congressional fundraising goes elsewhere.

Inducements to party building in Ohio remain as variegated as in the nation as a whole. Consistently competitive statewide elections incentivize the mobilization of a party electorate every two years. Yet from the top-down, national resources are typically relegated to presidential year priority: when campaign and party money floods the state. From the bottom-up, gerrymandering minimizes robust electoral competition. This diminishes incentives to build strong mobilization apparatus’ locally, as most seats below the statewide level remain uncompetitive.

**Strickland, Redfern and the ODP**

Despite decades of being shut out of the governor’s mansion, Democratic candidate Ted Strickland’s personal popularity, scandal within the previous Republican

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166 Since 2010 redistricting, no seat has flipped, with the state congressional delegation remaining 12-4 Republican.
administration, and a national Democratic wave led him to an easy victory over his opponent Ken Blackwell, by a 60-40% margin in 2006.\textsuperscript{167} Strickland, the son of a steelworker, and an ordained minister from rural Scioto County, represented a potent combination of the populist union and farmer traditions of the Ohio Democratic Party. Having been elected to congress (after two unsuccessful tries), he ran for office having built potent fundraising networks as well as relationships with state politicians. Yet despite large leads in polls heading up to the election, Strickland remained in relative parity with his opponent in fundraising. According to Strickland staffer, Carri Twigg:

“In the 20 years previous to 2006 there hadn’t been a Democrat anywhere and so you probably saw the greatest amount of collaboration and goodwill...by the time we got to autumn of 2006 we could taste that the tide was in our favor, the polling reflected that, Ken Blackwell was a mess, people believed in Ted to carry the ticket.”\textsuperscript{168}

Yet the strategic tensions involving urban vs. rural remained:

“You saw a huge amount of resources comparatively going into the places that Ted was strong: the Appalachians, industrial (sic) Youngstown, Steubenville. There was a constant tug for resources with the cities and they got the resources they need, but it wasn’t like we’re going to win this campaign by winning Cleveland, that was never the catalyst. It was lose better everywhere else, where Democrats historically have lost.”\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{167} Strickland’s win was viewed as a combination of a candidate well suited for his electorate, the national Democratic wave of 2006, and the ‘coingate’ scandal that engulfed Ken Blackwell and the Ohio GOP in early 2006. By fall, national Republicans had given up on Ohio as a competitive gubernatorial race.

\textsuperscript{168} Personal Communication

\textsuperscript{169} Personal Communication
Strickland’s ascent to office was paralleled by that of the new party chairman, state assembly minority leader Chris Redfern. Redfern was a logical bedfellow for Strickland, hailing from a conservative district he navigated with his own populist sensibilities. Yet in contrast with Strickland’s amiable old-line minister persona, Redfern’s loquacious and bombastic personality somewhat belied his small-town roots. The state’s executive committee, half elected and half appointed, decides the state party chair. Traditionally, like the national party, control over the appointed portion of the committee, and by extension the chairmanship itself falls de facto to the highest elected Democrat in the state. For Redfern, Democratic struggles to win statewide races however had created a leadership gap with the party:

“When you have no natural leader like a governor or a United States Senator, there is a vacuum of power that is created, and there are a lot of people that want to fill that vacuum, some for their personal political reasons, some more nobly for idealistic reasons, but the overwhelming majority for money and power”

Redfern in the years leading up to 2006 found himself by default hoisted into this position:

“When I became chairman there were no elected officials in Ohio, and as the minority leader I had spent the previous two years (sic) traveling the state doing the things the highest ranking elected official would do. He’d be the surrogate for John Kerry in 2004, he’d be the guy carrying the torch in 2005 convincing Democrats that we ought not write our obituaries”

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170 Redfern won office in December of 2005. He would preside over the party during the proceeding gubernatorial primary race of 2006.
171 Personal Communication
172 Personal Communication
Gubernatorial victory in 2006, gave Democrats a significant opportunity to focus on party building efforts. Redfern saw the chance to give the party organization two things it desperately needed: a statewide officeholder tethered to the electorate rather than party insiders, and the fundraising network that came with control of the governor’s mansion. If Redfern had become the party leader by default during its time in the wilderness, he lacked the office necessary to cultivate resources to induce party cohesion. Leading a legislative minority does not come with much cache for major donors and interests. Without the power of the purse, and its carrots and sticks, there is little party leadership can do to induce unity and build the party as a coherent team of politicians. Taking control of at least one branch of state government, especially the executive, gave the party the potential influence to bring people to the table.

Despite a substantial victory, Strickland recognized that he would be unlikely to have such a favorable electoral environment in the future. He remained tasked to deal with a unified Republican legislature in the state. Consistent with Galvin’s view of the president’s relationship with the national party, the executive was motivated to engage in party building to win party control of the legislature. Yet without a history of competitive local elections or leadership from the state, many county parties were moribund with little in the way of resources and expertise. This was reflected in a statewide audit and listening tours of county parties conducted in 2006, which showed a strong demand for resources on the local level. “Doug (Kelly, the party Executive Director at the time)…let everyone beat up on them about how they didn’t get what they

wanted in 2006… the party had historically been under resourced, there was lingering tension.”\textsuperscript{174} (Twigg)

Beyond organizational decay, the party also had to deal with strengthening alliances within its coalition. Both Strickland and Redfern, in their respective gubernatorial primary and party chair races, beat out African-American challengers seeking more diversity in party representation. As nationally, the social-choice problems of navigating a multi-racial coalition were never far from the fore. Despite being a largely white state, and still majority white party, African-Americans made up a significant minority of the party’s voters and elected officials. Yet representation on the state level through both party and political office remained nearly exclusively white.\textsuperscript{175} Congresswoman Stephanie-Tubbs Jones and other African-American leadership had a history of not always seeing eye to eye with Strickland as well as much of the state party’s white power structure.

In a state that did not feature the same growth in demographic diversity as the nation, the party’s electoral viability remained largely in generating and maintaining support of a nearly 90% white populace. Organizationally, the party was wedded to hierarchal institutions of machines and labor unions. Leadership was a result of seniority and paying dues more so than diversity and democratic responsiveness. These factors gave little opportunity for African-American leadership to develop institutionally within the party, outside the machines of African-American districts. The result was a sense of suspicion and alienation among many black political leaders. Strickland’s electoral

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{174} Personal Communication
\item \textsuperscript{175} Ohio has never had a black statewide Democratic officeholder or party chair. Since 1972, 13 black candidates have run statewide as Democrats, all have lost. (http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2012/11/electing_black_statewide_offic.html)
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
courting of a more rural electorate stoked these fears, yet victory, and its spoils—including the soon to come presidential largesse—led to improved, if not yet quite smooth, relations.

**Building for the Presidential Election**

Foremost for the state party was building for the eventual takeover of the state legislature. The assembly was a realistic option in the short-term future. Yet district apportionment and the structure of the electoral cycle presented significant barriers. The senate’s gerrymandering kept it largely insulated from even a significant Democratic wave election such as 2006. Years of Republican control resulted in districts highly favorable to the GOP. In addition, with seats up once every four years, the senate remained electorally insulated from the majority preference of any given election.

Most important however is the opportunity that would come with the influx of resources into the state for the presidential election. For Redfern, a reinvigorated state party would offer the opportunity to channel these resources in ways productive for state, not just presidential goals:

“When Bill Clinton was setting up his organization in 1996, or Al Gore in 2000, or Kerry in 2004, they had to build their own organization and it involved the Ohio Democratic Party. But it was just a framework, it was a pass-through organization for the whims and the wishes of the presidential candidate. Once the presidential candidate left, the party was left as a shell…I vowed when I was elected not to allow that to occur again.”

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State party leaders were early and strong endorsers of the Clinton campaign. Ohio’s stature as a battleground meant the Clinton’s had deep ties with the party infrastructure dating to the 1992 and 1996 elections. Obama was a long shot, and one whose campaign strategy was not particularly congruent with the characteristics of the Ohio party. In a race in which the primaries wound up roiling racial cleavages, Ohio’s party leadership, populist and white, stood in stark contrast to Obama’s coalition. Obama had little in the way of institutional support within the state. Indeed, the language used in the run-up to the Ohio primary, even by the normally restrained Strickland, was evidence of a highly competitive election, and one in which the delegate math was making the Clinton campaign increasingly desperate to find a way to alter the candidates’ coalitions. Such a tone however would further exacerbate tensions that threatened coalitional unity.

Yet if state-level competition frayed nerves, it also created a strong inducement to take advantage of intra-party competition and mobilization to build the party. Unlike many other states, the ODP gave both Obama and Clinton campaigns access to voter and volunteer files, with the understanding that each would build the database with their activists and voter contact data once the primary concluded. Ohio, whose primary came relatively late in the contest, was important ground for Clinton to stop Obama’s momentum. Clinton’s win by a 54-44% margin, represented both her demographic and

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177 One of the defining moments of the increasingly hostile spring 2008 primary season was Hillary Clinton inveighing ‘shame’ on Obama with Ted Strickland prominently featured nodding in the background at an Ohio rally.

178 Ohio’s primary was March 4th. After which only 601 of the 3,564 pledged delegates remained to be awarded.
institutional strength in the state. Obama however, would nonetheless claim the nomination, and be the vessel on which Ohio Democratic futures depended.

**OFA Comes to Columbus**

The Obama campaign’s general election staff began arriving in the state in May of 2008. OFA and the state party folded, as it conventionally does, into a coordinated campaign, a legally structured joint venture of OFA, DNC, and the ODP, called the Ohio Campaign for Change.\(^{179}\) This allowed money and coordination to flow freely through this structure. Significantly, in respect to state coherence, there was no U.S Senate race on the ballot in 2008. Another key election at the state level could have potentially caused tension. A presidential campaign, especially one targeting a somewhat non-traditional state Democratic electorate, might have been in jeopardy of butting heads with another high resource statewide race in play.

Tensions between national and state parties are largely inevitable. Disjuncture is not just a matter of strategy, but tactics. Differences will arise not just over narrative and coalitional structure, but the modes of campaigning used to communicate and organize on the local level. The national party controls the financial resources and the brand of the party. Staff implements modernized campaign techniques. These honed through dynamic competition, are adapted to highly resourced and competitive political environments. This was especially true for OFA, which won a strongly contested fifty state primary campaign against a formidable candidate, with the help of new developments in

\(^{179}\) This is the conventional structure in modern battleground states. In safe states, OFA (and most other presidential level campaigns) usually do not form joint structures with the state party.
campaign data and field organization. Yet the state party is likely to feel a sense of expertise when it comes to the specifics of their own backyard.

The state party stands as an intermediary of sorts between the national and local parties. Like the national party, it is primarily concerned with statewide turnout, yet its own linkage is strongest and most consistent with its county parties. These clashing roles can bring to the forefront inevitable structural tension. One former county party chair, described a meeting with her colleagues where the role of the national party during a presidential election year was: “they come in [and] tell everyone what to do and leave nothing.” State parties are dependent on national resources, yet much of their function is in supporting in-state candidates, subject to different electoral rules than federal candidates.

To bridge this divide, OFA made sure to integrate experienced state staffers into their operation. Two veteran Strickland staffer’s, Aaron Pickrell and Greg Schultz, joined OFA as General Election and Constituency Directors, respectively.

“One of the smartest things Barack Obama’s people did, Plouffe did a lot of smart things, but hire the very person who beat him (in Ohio) in the primaries, and so Pickrell (Schultz and others)…those people know how to pronounce Lima. They know they have to understand the dynamics of Ohio and respond to them accordingly.” (Redfern)

Electorally, the coordinated party strategy reflected not Strickland’s 2006 coalition, but that of the other successful statewide candidate running that election year-Senator Sherrod Brown. Brown, a nationally prominent liberal, was more representative

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of the electorate Obama (and the ticket) would be able to attract. In addition to being more ideologically in tune with the Obama coalition, Brown’s name “sounded black,” which gave operatives confidence that his voters would be transferable to Obama.

OFA’s first task was to build relationships with a party infrastructure that was suspicious, if not in some instances hostile. According to Schultz:

“My role coming in as both an Ohio native, and having worked on the Hillary primary, was to help the Obama campaign with some relationships they just never had an opportunity to form during the primary…and then part of my role was to introduce the campaign to the rest of Ohio, whether they were involved in Hillary or not…Hillary had most of the establishment in Ohio…the Obama campaign didn’t walk into the campaign for the general election with a lot of relationships to the county party structures, local electeds, because the vast majority of them (sic) endorsed Hillary…and I don’t use (establishment) as a pejorative, but quite the opposite, truly infrastructure.”

Statewide OFA senior staff set up shop within the ODP’s state headquarters in Columbus. The spacious former church, while costly, supported integrating national staff and grassroots activity in its meeting rooms. Breaking with tradition, staff at the Field Organizer (FO) level was tasked with setting up Neighborhood Teams; each with a volunteer neighborhood team leader responsible for building up and running their area.

Staffing apportionment was itself an attempt to bridge the priorities and prerogatives of national and state operations. Focus on high-density areas, while best from OFA’s standpoint, competed with a focus on turnout in swing legislative districts. Negotiating these priorities was a first order of business in building a harmonious culture within the state. While consideration was given to legislative districts, overwhelming
priority was given to urban and university areas central to Obama’s coalition. According to Deputy Field Director Chris Wyant “first and foremost…we went where the votes were.” Luckily, resources can alleviate tensions, and OFA, already directing tens of millions of dollars within the state helped pacify all.

OFA in the Field: Giving up Power to Get More Back?

Yet, if resources were abundant, OFA’s field strategy was still unusual. Relational organizing tactics were nothing new, but they were not associated with presidential campaigns. Schultz notes: “It was super old, but was done at a level that was new.” Traditionally, the presidential field program is designed to have staff help support preexisting apparatus from unions, and other active civic groups, increase campaign visibility, and distribute ‘chum’ (lawn signs, buttons, bumper stickers etc.) to loyal supporters. The OFA neighborhood team (NTL) model focused on cultivating new infrastructure particularly among Obama activists. These were often people previously uninvolved in politics, largely indifferent, and perhaps even hostile to traditional party institutions, especially at a local level.

Field staffers, who traditionally acted like ambassadors from the national party, went to work recruiting volunteers, having one on one conversations, house meetings, and evaluating volunteer leadership for training in sophisticated voter contact operations. This might have been a strange sight to long time party stalwarts. One staffer characterized local politicians’ reaction: “I think they viewed us as aliens and were not really sure whether we were allies or enemies.” According to Schultz: “What the

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decentralized organizing model of the campaign does as a structure is that it forces (the local party) to give up power, but I think at the end of the day, it gives you more as a result.”

While the organizational locus of voter outreach flows through OFA, the resources (and down-ticket electoral victories) garnered can help local parties in the long term. Yet this would be a difficult sell to many accustomed to their own way of doing things.

The first task over the summer was increasing voter registration rolls. Ohio did not have the same high ceiling on its Democratic electorate as many states with rapid population growth: especially among youth and Latinos. Yet outreach in urban, African-American, and university areas was integral before the late September voter registration deadline. OFA was not alone in doing registration. ACORN, a mass national organization with a long history of organizing the poor, ran a separate program, with a focus on urban minority areas. Organizationally far more unwieldy than OFA, the two organizations (unable to coordinate legally) made at times strange bedfellows. From OFA’s standpoint, data was of the utmost importance, and registering through OFA was the most surefire way to have an exact sense of the changing voter universe as registration increased. Yet a significant increase in the voter rolls, beyond the efforts accounted for by OFA, made ACORN’s contributions difficult to deny.

Frustration and skepticism with sympathetic outside organizations is common for campaign organizations. This is especially true as voter universe modeling has grown.

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185 ACORN ran a registration program in which campaign workers were paid by the signature. This contrasted with the professionalized OFA model, in which registration was the first phase of activist organization building on behalf of the campaign. Through the summer and early fall of 2008, much of urban and university OFA activism was focused on registration.
more sophisticated and dynamic. OFA viewed outside groups with suspicion. This went beyond mere parochialism. In 2004, blame for the Democrats’ close loss in Ohio was directed at organizations such as ACT and MoveOn. Such groups had the advantage of being able to raise large unrestricted sums of money from wealthy donors, however firewalls between each organization and the actual campaign/party led to confusion and redundancy in organization and voter contact activities. As a result, OFA (and the ODP) signaled strongly to leave the field to them in 2008. This would give the campaign the advantage of having up to date lists of the voter universe and voter contacts, necessary to ensure turnout models are dynamic and accurate. Information is power, and other groups meddling was assumed counterproductive. Activists were encouraged on a local level to fold their activities into the OFA organization.

Incongruity between the party brand and Obama brand continued to cause difficulty. Indeed, in Ohio the primary campaign was bitter, encapsulated by coalitional fragmentation through both racial and generational divides. Yet if OFA was to run the mobilization effort it intended, it was essential to put the party back together for the general election. The campaign often ran a concurrent if (by varying degrees) cordial campaign with local Democrats. Local party and candidate outreach efforts lacked formal integration into OFA. This was in part due to fundraising restrictions that did not allow local candidates using ‘state raised’ money to use literature featuring Obama. Conversely, while OFA was legally able to use federal money to support state races, they resisted

186 A common election day scene told by many (and corroborated by the author’s own experience in Columbus) was volunteers from as many as a half dozen liberal organizations standing outside the polls attempting to clean (check of those who voted) the exact same voter lists and offering protection from any potential disenfranchisement at the polls.
systematic coordination with local candidates.\textsuperscript{187} It was viewed on the state level that deciding which local candidates to do ‘asks’ on behalf of could impact local cohesion and cause headaches and distraction for field staff. Better for all to focus on mobilizing on behalf of Obama, letting local candidates ride the coattails of an efficient operation.

If OFA organization tended to remain separate from local party infrastructure, it seemed to do significantly better with local liberal activist networks. Learning from 2004, MoveOn, rather than form its own IE on the ground, instead encouraged its members to go to their local Obama field office and volunteer with the campaign. While MoveOn activists and other local groups provided support for the campaign, less clear was large-scale integration into the neighborhood team leadership, so important to the OFA model.

Indeed, almost without exception, sentiment among the OFA staff interviewed for this project was that high-level volunteer leadership (NTLs and other ‘captains’) tended to be new to political activism. They were not formerly involved with the party or issue activism. Obama’s appeal as an outsider candidate, attracting people often alienated and frustrated by the political process, may help explain this. It is also likely that building organization around activists with a blank slate was simply easier than if they had preconceived notions of campaigning at odds with the OFA model.

Why such divergence in electoral campaign activity between an ‘OFA’ and ‘traditional’ model? Here, variation in electoral competition comes to the fore. Whereas the OFA model blossomed in a highly competitive environment, many local activists remained cut off from infrastructure developed under dynamic strategic incentives to experiment with field mobilization. Without consistent and intense party competition,

\textsuperscript{187} Coordination did happen informally at times through local level OFA decision-making, yet it was not part of the state-directed field plan.
local party infrastructure is primarily tasked with managing power in a governing party and safe electoral districts rather than building infrastructure for constant mobilization. State and national party competition is the state and national parties’ problems. Challenges on the local level more oriented toward managing the majority through control of government. Keeping the peace is normally a higher priority than mobilization.

Relationships between local parties and OFA seemed to vary greatly as the next chapter makes clear. In many localities, warm and cooperative relationships were reported. With local elected and party leaders impressed by the OFA organization. Yet even in these spaces, organizational integration was not usually significant. In other areas, often with more horizontal fragmentation, mutual suspicions persisted between OFA and the local party. In Columbus, however, relationships remained friendly with operatives from the Strickland, Obama, and Clinton universes all united behind a field plan that would mobilize a coherent Democratic electorate across the state.

**Targeting and Voter Contact**

Field campaigning has two overreaching goals: mobilization and persuasion. While the mechanics of voter contact are the broadly the same, effective approaches differ. Mobilization targets are usually new or sporadic voters with high probability of voting for the candidate (and likely his or her party). Mobilization is largely a function of registration, identification at point of contact (the correct address/phone number), and repeated contact in the days leading up to Election Day (what campaigns colloquially refer to as ‘touches’). This culminates in ‘knock and drag’ on Election Day to make sure people have voted. Electoral rules have a significant impact on the efficacy of such
tactics. For example, the longer the gap between the end of registration and the election, the more difficult mobilizing sporadic voters either unregistered or without updated registration will be.

Perhaps most significant is whether there is an ‘early vote’ period, in which voters can vote in person before Election Day. Early vote creates significant advantages for campaign mobilization. Rather than using the period before the election to prime voters contacted to get out on Election Day, it allows the campaigns to run a days/weeks/months long knock and drag operations, allowing any voter contacted to vote immediately. On Election Day, this lends itself several advantages. The universe of voters to mobilize is significantly smaller and more manageable and the infrastructure can therefore be more focused and efficient. At the polling site, itself, lines will be significantly shorter, as well as the number of voting irregularities the campaign must deal with, allowing campaigns to be better able to stay on top of and address any such complications.

In Ohio, this is consistently a pitched battle around election time. Control of the state executive branch, who oversees elections, is critical in this respect. In 2004, Republican Secretary of State Ken Blackwell was accused of attempting to depress Democratic turnout by limiting early/absentee voting opportunities and putting too few voting booths in high-density urban areas, leading to hours long lines and depressing


turnout. Strickland on the other hand supported a significant early vote period, the first week of which overlapped with voter registration, effectively creating what functionally amounted to an opportunity for same day registrants to vote. Republicans attempted to block and curtail many of these measures in court, yet despite some temporary injunctions, early voting went off rather successfully.

Persuasion, on the other hand, focuses on consistent voters who are demographically likely to be undecided or ‘swing’ voters. While these voters are easier to find, campaign effects are notoriously difficult to ascertain. Research shows that most contemporary self-identified independents are in fact partisans, who do normally vote a straight party ticket. Yet in a state like Ohio, which featured a smaller pool of ‘mobilizable’ base Democrats than many other competitive states, there were further incentivizes for the campaign to focus on persuasion. If the mechanics of effective voter persuasion are still mysterious, one important tactic for OFA was the recruitment of local volunteers to do this voter contact. While out of state volunteers were often voluminous, much like the Dean orange hat brigades, they were thought to have lower levels of efficacy than organically built local teams. Policy would move voters less than the credibility of local activists vouching for the candidate.

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194 The NTL model was predicated on making sure contact was anchored in local organization.
What is the profile of a persuadable Ohio voter? Overrepresented in the Ohio electorate are those who at least superficially look strongly like the type of voters who have vacated the Democratic Party over the past several decades. They are working class, white rust belt voters, like those profiled in Macon County by Stanley Greenberg.\(^\text{195}\) Yet, Ohio has still (relatively) high union density\(^\text{196}\)- a strong predicator of retained Democratic loyalty among the white working class.\(^\text{197}\) In addition, the economic devastation in Ohio that took place under Republican state and national regimes had reduced whatever loyalty many Ohioans might have gained for the GOP. This was evident in Strickland’s landslide victory and the strong Democratic showing of 2006.\(^\text{198}\) Yet, if these voters were open to the Democratic Party, it was not certain they would be for Obama’s’ Democratic Party. This was strong ‘Clinton Country’ after all, in the Democratic primary. It remained a major question as to whether a candidate with Obama’s particular appeal-- so mismatched with the typical Ohio Democratic voter-- could build a winning coalition.

The goal was for GOTV (scheduled for the entire last week of the campaign) was to have staging locations run by trained local volunteer leadership. With the voter universe narrowed by early vote, identifying and making sure Democratic targets made it out to vote was more manageable. Capacity to track and project the voter universe greatly improved by 2008, yet uncertainty persisted. Were persuadable voters actually

\(^{196}\) Ohio remains seventh in the country in union membership, despite a multi decade trend toward per capita decline. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.toc.htm
\(^{198}\) Coffey et al. 2011.
persuadable? Were canvassers getting positive IDs? Were the turnout targets right? From a local party perspective, would a rising Obama tide lift all Democratic boats?

Election Day was an uneasy experience. Early vote numbers were not current, creating uncertainty. Internal accounting also was far from reliable. Polling places seemed ominously sparsely attended. ‘Project Houdini,’ a system that was supposed to give OFA up to date information on which voters had turned out, allowing them to adjust canvassing accordingly, broke down early in the day.

Yet less than two hours after polls closed it was clear that both Obama and the ODP were on their way to a resounding victory in Ohio. Obama would win the state 51%-47%, while Democrats would take back the state assembly and make gains in the senate. Overall turnout had dropped modestly from 2004. Yet this could be the result of a decline in state population over this period rather than ineffectiveness of mobilization.

Concerns that Democrats would suffer down ballot did not come to fruition. However, there were exceptions. This was especially true in county judge races, as judges do not have a partisan indicator on Ohio ballots. While sample ballots with ‘the ticket’ proved largely unnecessary for those listed as Democrats, without the partisan cue, many Obama voters simply left those races blank. If the OFA model was largely successful, this illustrates that getting the party ticket into voters’ hands still matters.

2009-2010: Organizing for America and the Midterms

OFA 2.0 would get off the ground in Ohio in March 2009. Leading the organization was Greg Schultz, now a former Obama and Strickland staffer. Without any staff in the state for five months, reconstituting OFA’s volunteer networks would be
challenging. Schultz started out, much like the ODP in 2006 by conducting a listening tour of forty cities. County chairs were invited to kick off the meetings, encouraging relationships with local parties. Schultz found a generally warm reaction from the county parties. Yet warm did not necessarily translate to knowing what to do, or what could be done, with such an organization: “We understood that what we had done was new to almost everybody, particularly at the scale with which we did.”

Local politics were outside of the explicit OFA 2.0’s mission. Yet the overarching aim was to institutionalize the Obama organization as an electoral infrastructure. This was sold as being to the significant benefit of local parties, too.

“we tried to encourage the county establishments to say (sic) now is this the time (for those who had not embraced OFA during the campaign)… we were here to grow this coalition…how do we keep (the volunteers) engaged for the foreseeable future.” (Schultz)

Yet OFA, centered on national issue advocacy, was not at the outset particularly relevant to local political actors. As the next chapter will discuss in detail, the party at the local level looked less like an assemblage of a singular party, and more like silos grafted onto the federal system. This meant a lack of local integration into the party as it faced an election without Obama at the top of the ticket. OFA 2.0’s potential for local parties meant channeling its activist networks into local campaign work, yet this was a far bridge to cross for volunteers whose political linkage was to Obama, not local party politics. According to Schultz, the sell to the local parties had mixed success:

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200 Personal Communication
201 Most early organization building during this period centered on the legislative fights over healthcare reform.
“Some were open (but for some the argument is) you’re bringing new people in who don’t know how things have been done…those people have been around for decades, they’re part of the structure and that’s a good thing. But you have people that have just shown up six months ago and were then given control of turning out their neighborhood, standing next to someone who had for 20 years been in charge…They saw resources that they thought should have been dedicated to them, and look we had two staff and maybe a laptop, so we weren’t taking up anything, but what people thought is usually you elect a president and three, three and a half years later, they come back. But we weren’t going away, some people were encouraged by that, but some people were like well, you need to be doing this.

So we said we were going to work on issues and certain people said well you should work on electing Democrats, which is certainly fair, but some of our belief, well more my belief, is you can’t have a perpetual campaign. You can have a perpetual organization and I think people, especially new people, were not involved because they loved the Democratic infrastructure. They were involved because they wanted to see a change. Now many people involved in the Democratic infrastructure wanted to see a change as well, but these new people were involved because they believed a person and a presidency could make a difference, and I think our assumption was if you wanted to keep them engaged, ok now we’re going to elect every other Democrat, part of it is how do you show what the president’s doing and connect it to other Democrats.”

If the party infrastructure could not be immediately integrated, could OFA at least maintain its networks and hope that in the long term such a transition was possible?

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Institutionalizing the neighborhood teams was proving to be a significant challenge. OFA 2.0 had few\textsuperscript{203} staffers in the state, tasked with maintaining the capacity of organization that took several hundred staff to build. Issue advocacy helped bring a significant number of new volunteers in. Yet there was a sense that many activists were burnt out from the presidential election, found the tasks confusing, or were disappointed by what they viewed as capitulations from the White House.

Another concern was that this new vessel would be competing for not just activists, but financial resources with the party’s electoral organizations:

“\textquote{I think there was skepticism about OFA’s capacity to organize around issues…people just don’t get as jazzed, and these legislative battles would be unfolding at the same time as mayoral campaigns, city council campaigns, that are lifeblood to the structure of the Democratic Party}”\textsuperscript{204} (Twigg)

“I’m sure many Dems were saying well look OFA, you’re spending all this money, you’re getting these activists out to do things that don’t directly help us. Why worry about this healthcare stuff when you’re not going to make a difference, when you can help us get ready for this state house…I don’t know what the right answer is, but I think that’s why there was frustration.”\textsuperscript{205} (Wyant)

As the 2010 election approached, strong national headwinds against the Democrats created a conundrum for Strickland and the ODP. Should Strickland, who in 2006 showed an ability to transcend the national Democratic coalition, distance himself

\textsuperscript{203} Staffing over this period fluctuated between 2-6, until late 2011, when build up began for the 2012 presidential election.

\textsuperscript{204} Personal Communication

\textsuperscript{205} Personal Communication
from Obama and the national party, or attempt to reconstruct the Obama infrastructure and coalition? Strickland did have the advantage of being an incumbent, raising over $30 million dollars for his campaign. This gave him the autonomy to construct his own electoral organization separate and autonomous from OFA and national Democratic financial arms. If OFA was the chief resource driver to the state party in presidential years, they were, financially at least, a minor player compared to what Strickland himself could raise in 2010. Yet, OFA still had its volunteer networks and expertise that if activated could take much of the field burden off the Strickland campaign’s hands.

“As we were contemplating Ted’s path to victory, we all wanted to keep as many of the voters of the president’s as we possibly could, but we were under no false notion that could get them all or that we could even get a majority of them. Tensions remained between the White House and Ted that were very real, very tangible (from the 2008 primary)”206 (Twigg)

Strickland’s electorate would look similar, if perhaps smaller, than 2006. Yet with the hopes of greater support of high-density urban African-American voters:

“There wasn’t a contentious primary, and so the governor had been through the win as governor and announced programs and just had developed a greater level of comfort in some of those cities that he had never been in before.”207 (Twigg)

For Twigg, his strength in the black community has less to with 2008 and more to do with his transition from a congressional representative from a white, rural district to statewide officeholder with a significant African-American constituency:

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“(He didn’t) have deep roots in these communities. Four years later as governor for a long time it’s just a different proposition. He had an opportunity to work with these civic leaders in a formal capacity, he built better relationships, and then you probably get invited more places and feel more comfortable seeking out richer opportunities.”

Strickland would wind up losing a close and contested election, with significant Democrat loses in the legislature. African-American turnout remained constant with its percentage from 2008 and share of the state population. Yet turnout was depressed, especially among youth and women voters. Despite Strickland faring better than national dynamics might have suggested, a loss in politics is nonetheless a loss, and viewed so by party insiders. Increased black turnout was a positive and evidence of Strickland’s improved relationship with black constituencies since 2006. Yet without significant youth turnout, the national party brand presented a seeming liability among the white working class voters that were integral to Strickland’s 2006 electorate. At minimum, no mechanism existed to remobilize necessary portions of the 2008 democratic coalition.

How close Strickland hewed to Obama, is a point of contention. Strickland had Obama in the state six times and built a field program to attempt to remobilize the Democratic coalition. Yet this infrastructure was not integrated with OFA. While OFA encouraged volunteers to go to Strickland’s field offices, Schultz believes there was a significant cultural difference in the field program:

“Wave elections happen nationally, that being said the state of Ohio did not run an Obama-model organizing effort in 2010…people didn’t knock on doors, (instead) people jumped onto a phone system that would lead
them into a central system and they would call people 13 counties away. It was the exact opposite of the Obama model…The volunteers who came (out for Strickland) through the Obama model…saw that the culture of the 2010 campaign did not reflect the culture of the 2008 campaign…(there was) a lack of understanding of the model by some decision makers… I don’t know if it was a lack of faith…I don’t know if it was a belief that if you don’t have 500 field organizers that it’s not possible…what I don’t understand is when you are between two presidential elections with a sitting president with (sic), maybe excitement’s the wrong word, but (a) knowledge base of a group of volunteers, why would you change the structure? And I understand why, people said well look this worked in ’08, but ’08 will never happen again. More African-Americans won’t vote, more youth won’t vote, but in 2012 we surpassed that…and (the people running the 2010 campaigns) are good people, but there are different models of organizing. In 2010 we used a more traditional model…and I’m not saying that people didn’t listen to us and if they did we would have won, I do believe that the model is more productive and would have yielded more votes…and change is hard, you know that you’ve run the last 20 gubernatorial campaigns a certain way and one presidential race a certain way, and you’ve won (a number of races in the past) that (traditional) way, so you have one proof point and you have twenty. The culture’s not there…it requires buy in and an acceptance of decentralization.”

The consistency of weak midterm results for the incumbent president’s party remains a systematic hurdle to party building. The salience of presidential elections presents the opportunity to shift and restructure a national majority coalition. Yet if unfavorable conditions are present as the party seeks consolidation of that coalition in the

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next federal election, party office-seekers are likely to turn away from constructing party resources. If put in a persistently vulnerable position, office-seekers cultivating their own electorate and financial resources is a quite understandable strategic choice. Insulation from competition by taking advantage of incumbency to cultivate strong personalized fundraising networks provides a clearer path to electoral stability than movement toward long-term building of a party.²¹⁰

There was little to suggest at a local level that OFA was of great benefit in the midterm elections. Party activists are traditionally different from that of presidential campaigns. The post-2010 period was a struggle for the party in Ohio as well as nationally. A return to unified GOP control of state government was particularly poor timing with post-census redistricting immanent. Such efforts would make regaining control of the House significantly more difficult in the near future and depress incentives for robust party building in many localities.

**Regaining Momentum for ’12: The 2011 Referendums**

Failure at the state and national level left a sense of disappointment among many Democrats. The pre-presidential year in Ohio is often a sleepy one, with no federal or statewide offices decided. Yet, 2011 would be different. Resurgent Republicans quickly attempted to capitalize on their victories. The Ohio GOP would move in two areas with far-reaching consequences for Democratic resources and constituencies: legislation to restrict unions and voting rights. These efforts however would provoke a counteraction,

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²¹⁰ Incumbency fundraising and name recognition advantages can often scare off strong opposition, even in districts with weak partisan support for the incumbent.
galvanizing progressive forces who would push referenda eventually leading to the defeat of both bills.

On March 31, 2011, freshly elected John Kasich and Republican legislative majorities passed Ohio Senate Bill 5 against unified Democratic opposition. It featured numerous provisions restricting the power of public sector unions: allowing members to opt out of political dues, as well as restricting the unions’ rights to collectively bargain and strike. The bill provoked a strong response by the Ohio (and national) labor movement, who in conjunction with state and federal Democratic interests formed the “We Are Ohio” campaign to repeal the bill via a referendum in November of 2011. The repeal referendum passed overwhelmingly, with nearly 62% or the vote, and over 2.2 million voters supporting it. This was over 400,000 more voters than had turned out for Strickland one year earlier.211

During this period, another polarizing bill passed, this time involving voting restrictions. House Bill 194 cut the early vote period from one month to two weeks, along with reducing polling hours for early vote and Election Day. By fall of 2011, a referendum campaign, largely driven by African-American constituencies, was gathering steam. After collecting more than a million signatures, rather than having to face a referendum likely to drive Democratic turnout, Republicans reversed path, repealing the bill with the hopes of returning to the issue after the 2012 election.212

Both bills drew key Democratic constituencies, who organized in collaboration with the Democratic infrastructure in the lead-up to the 2012 election. If national issue

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campaigning through OFA 2.0 was not having a transformative grassroots effect, the threat of losing labor and voting rights reenergized and unified progressive forces within the state, as well as bringing attention (and resources) from national interests.

“You re-woke the Ohio working class...you were able to remind Ohio voters...that elections matter and probably more importantly that they have a role. So you think about in 2011, (with the anti-union bill) you had white working class in particular, it was much broader than that, and then you have African-Americans, you’ve got a legislature that directly has gone after one of the most sacred obligations we have to our citizens-- the right to vote. So in one calendar year after 2010 you had reminded every part of Obama and the Democratic coalition that elections matter and they have a role. You had citizens stop a legislature from doing something and that is one of the most empowering things (you can do). And so we had in African-American churches people talking about Selma, with this president, a year before Election Day. I would say without HB 194, 2012 was always going to be tough...it would have been closer...You can’t replace getting a million signatures...we had lists, we had leaders, we had people speaking out, and you could say this is why we need to vote.”²¹³(Schultz)

Yet if these referenda were integral in the build up to 2012, another that did not get off the ground reflected tensions between national and state Democrats. The ODP wanted to challenge the state legislature’s redistricting plan-- which would both reduce overall competition as well as the number of seats in play, through a referendum. Yet, it was not such a priority for the national party:

If we would have collected the petitions in 2011, we would have stopped the implementation of the gerrymandered map, not because we would

²¹³ Personal Communication
have won in the ballot initiative, we would have stopped it because the timing meant that those elections could have not been held and that a federal judge would have had to come in and make the map…so that’s a big deal, we’re Ohio, why wouldn’t you get involved if you were Steve Israel and the DCCC…but he doesn’t care (where his districts come from), his job is to (get to a majority)” (Redfern)214

While the national party has a strong interest in the state as a presidential battleground, this does not necessarily extend to the national congressional committee, whose priorities differ. For the DCCC, as Redfern states, districts can come from anywhere in the nation. While redistricting and a subsequent lack of competition could have significant effects on state party building, and therefore the party’s presidential chances in the state, such concerns are several steps removed from the calculations of the congressional campaign committee.

The two issues, in which referenda were successful, were of high salience to national organized interests, local activists, as well as voters. In both cases, the infrastructure of ODP/OFA was essential in providing staff, data, and activist resources to bring coherence and scale to the campaigns. Yet redistricting, not yet seen as the existential partisan threat it would become, was not able to garner such support. With political salience, the party organization appeared integrated and effective. However, in the case of the district map, the party was not able to manufacture such focus and cohesion on an issue with few natural stakeholders able to provide raw political resources that the party infrastructure could then channel into campaign organization.

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2012

If OFA 2.0 did not save state Democrats electoral fortunes in 2010, it did leave an important proto-infrastructure of staff and volunteers in place for a quick transition to the 2012 election. This allowed the campaign to begin to scale back up in Ohio during the first quarter of 2012. In 2008, Democratic success was attributed to a positive national environment for Democrats, and excitement around Obama’s campaign. However, 2012 was more reminiscent of 2010’s climate. The presidential election would test organizational capacity and strength of the Obama coalition under election fundamentals not conducive to Democratic success. In persuasion-heavy Ohio, coming off a gubernatorial loss, a tough election was ahead.

OFA valued continuity in personnel. Greg Schultz, Ohio OFA 2.0 director remained to run the campaign for OFA in 2012. Chris Wyant, a former Deputy Field Director also returned as General Election Director. Despite a challenging national climate, several developments would complement Democratic efforts. Fundraising would reach an even grander scale than 2008. While this would be the case for both parties, the struggle to scale the field operation that plagued Democrats in 2010 would not be an issue. Tens of millions of dollars went into in the general election field infrastructure by spring of 2012. While many Democrats, including the president, greeted Super PACs ambivalently, Democrats conceded their apparent success in helping GOP efforts in 2010. This led Democrats to a weary acceptance that that they would have to create their own Super PACS to keep pace. Priorities USA and others complemented party and candidate money both in the battle over the airwaves, as well as targeted field campaigning. This allowed more OFA resources directed toward a focused field program.
Most significant however were advances in data that made voter targeting more precise and dynamic. Cross-tabulating consumer data with previous voter contact information allowed the party’s data analysts to construct a highly nuanced and accurate profile of the electorate, including the likelihood of an individual voter to be an Obama supporter and Democrat. OFA used its influx of data and field resources to run field experiments in the hopes of better framing individual-level voter contact interactions. Scripts were A/B tested\textsuperscript{215} for efficacy in moving voters toward the Obama support column.\textsuperscript{216} Ohio, as the most lavishly resourced state was central to these efforts.

“At its core it was about our data. It was so different, our analytics while very sophisticated in ’08, and way beyond anything we’ve ever seen before in campaigns, (but) you were flying blind largely in that your kind of like ok these five or six factors: a person’s age, race, precinct, voting history, maybe a couple other things. Here’s the likelihood that this person’s supporting us, and we had the pulp persuadability score, but it wasn’t really a persuadability score. Fast forward four years and just the accuracy of the support models…was just phenomenal. To know that you called this universe of people and you talk to them enough times and from these hundred people, you’re probably going to get five new supporters.”\textsuperscript{217} (Wyant)

These new data tools were a boon for the development of the voter file and the identification of the Democratic electorate. Yet they also shifted the organizational culture around OFA’s field program. Whereas team building was the central focus in

\textsuperscript{215} Contrasting wording was testing during voter contact and voter responses were then recorded to optimize the language. Think about a visit to the optometrist, where your ideal prescription is identified by choosing between binary options.

\textsuperscript{216} Issenberg, 2012.

\textsuperscript{217} Personal Communication
2008, many staff saw 2012 as increasingly motivated not by the building of neighborhood structures, but by reaching data metrics. Increasing confidence in the location and majority status of your electorate would indeed make such strategy understandable. Yet, this could come at the expense of an organizational focus on network and skill building that would be the mark of any long-term residue left by OFA.

When organic teams presented the best linkage to the electorate, OFA focused on team building. Yet with precision targeting, an even greater influx of field staff, and an environment in which locally based activist activity might not reach the levels of 2008, these networks might have taken a backseat in the grind toward a close victory. Could the increase in field resources possibly be a double edge sword? In 2008, most staff joined the campaign over the summer. Yet the steady trickle of hiring in 2012 might have disrupted linkages between staff and local volunteers. According to 2008 and 2012 Ohio OFA field staffer and co-author of “Groundbreakers: How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America.”:

“All of that relationship building…having been the foundation…in’08 was impossible to do while onboarding a (field organizer) while doing dry runs for GOTV. So it was…onboarding people during the mobilization period (instead of) the organizational period. Then there’s also the question of overabundance of resources. So in ’12 we had all this money, the sense that we got was (we) didn’t know what to do with this money: Do we need more printers? Do we want more chum? More organizers?"\(^{218}\)

A GOP governor also made for significantly more resistance to early voting, through efforts to restrict the hours of county locations. Yet, technological advances were

\(^{218}\) Personal Communication
a major asset. The further development of user-friendly call tools allowed an out of state volunteer to have their own virtual personal phone bank, directing millions of calls into Ohio. These calls were not high quality as persuasion. However, they helped to keep mobilization lists clean and data dynamic, allowing in state staff and volunteers to focus on actual persuasion, and knock and drag, through the early vote period.

With Sherrod Brown’s senate seat also up for grabs, there was another competitive statewide race. While Brown was previously the template for Obama’s 2008 coalition, as the senator’s profile grew in the state, his campaign believed that it had the opportunity to play a map that hewed close to Strickland’s, running up votes in rural areas. This would protect against an overdependence on mobilization of base Obama Democrats. In an election year in which Ohio and the nation were likely to be highly competitive, and with the president having sagging approval ratings, insurance seemed prudent. A separate high resource field program ran through the ODP with efforts focused on mobilizing a wider and more rural electorate. Yet this produced tension between OFA and the Brown campaign/ODP.

“I think that the biggest challenge was having a presidential race and a senate race in the same place during the same cycle and trying to navigate that because, frankly OFA was going to be far more resourced, and there’s a ton of data that makes clear that people rise and fall with the presidential, with the top of the ticket. I think many of the people on the OFA side would have said you should just trust that we’re going to run a really good turnout operation and you should be thoughtful about your communication strategy and we’ll ID for you where we can, but ultimately our analytics are clear in that people support us both enough, just join, just
trust us we got this. Obviously if someone’s political fate is on the line it’s hard to...just trust that we’ll take care of it.”²¹⁹ (Wyant)

Without field coordination, efforts could become redundant, much like the 527 chaos of 2004. Given the importance of volunteer-led infrastructure, the campaigns would risk competition for the same activist support, rather than building a coherent apparatus. Perhaps even more concerning in a close race was the possibility that the other statewide Democratic campaign could be expending resources to mobilize Romney voters. Such scenarios did not sit well with OFA.

“Certainly, I would have loved if there was no one (else) in the field organizing, and people hired for other campaigns were doing events, or political connections, or communications...it can be an interference. When you have two people in the same turf who have goals for doors and knocks...it makes it less efficient.”²²⁰ (Wyant)

Yet from the ODP’s standpoint efforts were seen as qualitatively different, according to Elizabeth Brown, the 2012 ODP Executive Director (and Sen. Brown’s daughter):

“We didn’t use (the NTL) model and that’s a pretty big differentiation I think. We were also because OFA was here, we were able to fill in parts of the state where they didn’t concentrate as heavily: the Mansfield’s, the Zanesville’s, the Middletown’s...places like that, what we called the hometowns. So you have the three biggest cities, then you have the next five, and that’s where most of your driving up turnout happens, and then there that other (sic) set of cities where organizing looks very different”²²¹

²¹⁹ Personal Communication
²²⁰ Personal Communication
²²¹ Personal Communication
Whereas for OFA, the level of cooperation with local parties was contingent, the ODP side focused largely on supporting the county infrastructure:

“We would hesitate to open up an office space outside a county party headquarters…when you’re organizing via a state party you inherently are thinking about the long-term value of the campaign. That does not mean people who work for OFA don’t [care] about long-term value, but they are two different mechanisms.”222 (Brown)

By October, an increasingly bullish outlook on the party’s presidential odds coupled with the overwhelming capacity of OFA in Ohio, led to the Brown campaign and state party relenting in its ancillary field plan, and folding its ground operation into OFA. This helped the party run a coordinated GOTV effort. Obama would wind up victorious in Ohio by a closer margin than 2008. Yet with only 100,000 fewer voters than 2008, this seemed to reflect stability in the Democratic electorate in a more challenging political environment. Brown would also have a slightly smaller vote total than his first senate race (although he would outpace Obama’s percentage). Top of the ticket success once again translated down ticket. Gerrymandering however, prevented state vote share from translating into dramatic state legislative victories.

There was a sense that at the least the culture of the OFA model was filtering through the state:

“I think in a lot of the bigger counties there is now a really good integration…you’ve got new blood…and by 2012 you had the overwhelming majority of Ohio county parties understand we can all work together and actually these new voters are an asset and it’s how you

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After 2012

Like 2008, once the general election campaign concluded, its staff structure was quickly dismantled. Based less on explicit presidential electoral considerations and more on supporting grassroots activity wherever they sprouted, OFA 4.0, “Organizing for Action” had fewer resources dedicated to Ohio than 2.0. After two elections, even if not the norm, there would be neighborhood teams across the state that appeared to be durable as activist networks. Because of the 501(c)4 status of OFA, these teams could not be explicitly channeled into party activity, at least not by OFA staff. Yet, in a number of counties, OFA organization had penetrated the county party and local politics. The 2014 campaign would be a challenge as it lacked OFA’s presidential resources and activist passion, as well as Strickland’s incumbency and personal popularity. Given a challenging environment, finding Democrats for the top of the ticket was a difficult task.

One task of parties not yet discussed is that of the candidate recruitment. Presidential elections often feature competition between highly resourced candidates acting as proxies for various alignments of interest groups. In most other elections, parties must recruit a singular ‘viable’ candidate. While an impressive resume is useful for a potential candidate, more important is a base fundraising network. In return for what could be viewed a down payment on viability, the party might pledge staff support and further assistance in fundraising. The state coordinated campaign director focuses on prepping and grooming candidates new to the statewide ticket. When the party brand and

\[223\] Personal Communication
its resource network is strong, it will be more likely to draw top rate amateurs into politics, and lower level politicians into bigger competitive races. Yet, when the brand is a liability and the party can offer little in the way of support, there are few inducements to coax the best candidates. Potential candidates will be reticent to jump into races with little chance for success.

Incumbency is an overwhelming predictor for victory, as its likelihood increases through the fundraising advantages it confers. The lack of this can be devastating for party building. A lack of incumbent resources over time is likely to have the effect of starving the party infrastructure, further depressing its capacity for candidate recruitment. Long-term incumbency by candidates not facing term limits and parties in safe districts will likely institutionalize into patronage machines that further buttress party support. Strong candidates bring with them robust fundraising networks, which even if not directly becoming institutionalized as an explicit party resource, allow other candidates to free ride on financially strong Democratic candidates’ campaigns. If over time, the candidate pool is weak on the federal level and for other high resource campaigns, this is likely to hurt down ticket party strength, further dissuading new potentially strong candidates to run for office. Winning begets winning; losing begets losing. These patterns will alter party logic over time.

In 2014, the political environment pushed several high profile Democrats away from taking a chance at the top of the ticket. This included Ted Strickland, as well as Betty Sutton, a prominent former congressional representative from the Akron area, redistricted out of her seat in 2012. With a Republican-held senate seat up for grabs in the
2016 presidential year, and the hope of better conditions in 2018, neither was willing to fight an uphill race during the midterm year.

The party settled on Cuyahoga County Commissioner Edward Fitzgerald. A less well-known pol without an established fundraising background (and as it would happen a less than well-vetted background in general). The lack of star power at the top of the ticket would harm down ticket recruitment. It would also lead to fundraising effects that affected other statewide down ticket races. Yet the hope would be that better targeting, complemented by the increasing sophistication of the party’s data tools could perhaps help to pull an unexpected upset, or at least help the party pull a few surprises down ballot.

The goal was to raise $30 million dollars for coordinated efforts. While reaching Obama-levels of youth vote was seen a bridge too far for this election, the party’s strategy was focused on maintaining turnout within the black vote, while making significant gains among white woman who are likely Democrats, yet sporadic midterm voters. Advances in targeting hoped to better identify Democrats among broad-based demographic profiles. By identifying low turnout voters within higher turnout groups, a more modest field apparatus could be more efficient. Better targeting of precincts with loyal Democratic voters could capitalize on those likely to be responsive to campaign mobilization treatment.

Yet Fitzgerald would quickly wind up failing to meet his modest expectations. Early fundraising was lackluster. Party insiders grumbled about his effort doing the grunt
work of fundraising and campaigning. When personal scandals hit the press, any momentum and veneer to maintain a credible campaign quickly collapsed.224

The lack of a strong top of the ticket would subsequently halt momentum for the entire party. This illustrates the precarious nature of even a well-resourced and coherent party. Party institutions could not cultivate resources outside of the strength at the top of the ticket. Fundraising and activist resources are dependent on a baseline level of enthusiasm, harnessed on behalf of the lead candidate.

While a couple of statewide candidates maintained respectable fundraising and poll numbers through the fall, Election Day would be an unmitigated disaster for the party. This suggests both the importance and relative helplessness of the contemporary party as an institution. Without strength at the top of the ticket, idiosyncratic coalitions and resource construction have little chance against a consolidated opposition. As an institution, the party as a brand cannot induce support from its loyal voters, activists, and donors absent a figurehead at the top of the ticket that can inspire confidence.

**State Parties and the Top of the Ticket**

Clear over the period of study is the importance of the top of the ticket to state party organization. While the state party represents the institutional expression of the party team, its ability to provide resources rests on the candidate positioned at the top of the race. State parties have little in the way of an independent fundraising apparatus, without at the very least a credible candidate. Fundraising is still a result of interpersonal

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224 By fall of 2014, the Fitzgerald campaign was dragged down by numerous scandals unearthed from the candidates past. This halted momentum and made an already steep fundraising challenge nearly impossible, with senior staff quitting, as the campaign could not make payroll.
relationships. Candidates, not the party, are under most circumstances expected to make the pitch to donors. The party may be an intermediary vessel, important in providing both networks and the brand signature of a major party. Yet if it is to provide a connection between a team of politicians and a state electorate, it remains largely a prisoner of its premier candidate.

In Ohio, where the gubernatorial election (along with much of the state legislature) tracks with midterm federal elections, the party seems situated to have a top of ticket candidate amassing resources for the party apparatus. Yet evidence from the period under discussion presents several impediments to the institutionalization of an every-other-year apparatus. Despite an Ohio electorate that is more homogenous, and perhaps therefore ‘less complicated’ than much of the nation, we have seen different strategies to constructing a Democratic majority. At least a portion of the rural conservative electorate has demonstrated a willingness to vote for at least some Democratic candidates. Disagreements over whether to pursue these voters at the strategic expense of a more demographically dependable, yet irregular electorate, pervades even the top of the ticket. Even in 2012, such tensions persisted between an incumbent president and senator’s respective organizations.

Further, as impressive as Strickland and the ODP’s efforts at fundraising and party building were from the period of 2006-2010, it was not enough in a bad Democratic year to replicate the coalition that won with ease just two years earlier. Despite all the resources of the presidential year, Strickland’s own success at using the office of governor to unite the party, and make it a fundraising force, was not sufficient in 2010 to carry himself, nor the party slate, to victory. National donors and party priorities still
revolve around short-term campaign-centered resource construction, making steady state-level party building difficult.

**Fragmentation in the Coordinated Legal Structure**

A point of consistent frustration for ODP staff interviewed is how campaign finance law makes it difficult to mobilize on behalf of a party ticket. While federal laws are far more restrictive than that of the state of Ohio, its election law does not allow federal money in state races or vice versa. This means that money raised by the state party, cannot feature the president and other federal candidates often most strongly associated with the party brand. While these resources can be devoted to field operations, identification with the leader of the party who is the most salient cue for the party’s irregular electorate is a violation of campaign finance law.

By fall in presidential years, national party donors will often have reached the fundraising limits for national campaign and party committees (now jointly organized as ‘Victory Funds’) and therefore often donate large sums to the state party state election campaign funds. Yet the inability to produce campaign literature or coordinate with federal campaigns prevents using these resources efficiently. The state party can then do little with this money, but supplement paid media campaigns of local races. This might win the goodwill of some local actors (and perhaps even offices), yet will do little for long-term party integration and organization building.

If one consequence of campaign finance law is fragmenting and weakening party organization through coordinating firewalls, even more severe is the advent (and increasing popularity) of political vehicles that eschew explicit party and campaign
structures completely. The macro story of the rise of Super PACs and other IE vehicles has been discussed in earlier chapters. Yet from the standpoint of the state party, what is apparent is both the frustration and relative unawareness as to how IE’s have affected campaigning.

While the development of the Democracy Alliance\textsuperscript{225} has made liberal IE’s more coherent and efficient as a network,\textsuperscript{226} this is of little consolation to state party actors. Put simply, without coordination, the ODP has no real idea what IE’s are doing and how effectively they are doing it. Precision in voter targeting is a function of up-to-date voter ID’s that are made impossible if the contact is done through an IE vessel, as they cannot share data. While some efforts by labor are thought of more forgivingly, the consensus appears to be that IE’s are offering little help on the ground to the party’s efforts.

What IE’s do accomplish is to give big donors alternative vessels to give money. This has accelerated the process of consultants channeling political resources away from more efficient, if unexciting vessels, such as parties. These sentiments might reflect frustration that organizations that used to hold a near monopoly on political resources must compete in a marketplace of sorts (in which campaign finance rules handicap their ability). Yet when considering both efficiency in campaign mobilization, as well as normative academic considerations of party function and value, the evidence seems to

\textsuperscript{225} Democracy Alliance is a coalition of liberal donors and organizations patterned to be a progressive version of the right-wing Koch network. See: Skocpol, Theda, and Alexander Hertzel-Fernandez. "The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism." \textit{Perspectives on Politics} 14.03 (2016): 681-699.

\textsuperscript{226} The development through Democracy Alliance of state tables has brought significantly increased coherence to Democratic IE organization. Yet such organization remains firewalled from state/campaign organizations during the election season.
suggest that IE’s play a distorting role, adding another layer of fragmentation to the American political system.

**Digital Diffusion**

In addition to money, another resource diffused unevenly through national-state party mechanisms was its data tools. The two most significant forms of information developed by OFA were its voter and activist data files. The anticipated transfer of this information was for the ODP, an opportunity to connect its candidates to the Obama volunteer base and electorate.

In 2008, the post-election transition of OFA and its activist networks from presidential campaign into the national party, gave it paternal considerations regarding the data. Hopes were that using the OFA brand to keep the Obama network active could mean a permanent army for the party. Yet this meant keeping the data as an OFA resource, as the volunteer networks were thought best activated maintained by OFA, not the local and state party. This led to tensions as local and state actors wanted to translate such enthusiasm to their own efforts and saw the potential for party building squandered. This reinforced preexisting perceptions of an obtuse party in D.C. Once again, so the story goes, the autonomy and prerogatives of the national party would leave the local party organization out in the cold. This would be another example of the winds of a national campaign that blew in and blew out without local parties having much tangible to show for it. What is telling is the ‘lists’ as reflections of differing campaign practices and culture among party actors:

“Everybody wanted the list, everybody wanted the list. The list was supposed to be this magical piece. They wanted the email list and they
wanted the volunteer list. I was telling people the DNC was holding the list, but we are facilitating the relationships. The list is not worth anything, the relationships are worth everything, you have the one on ones, people come for Obama, but they stay because of the relationships with other people…that took a long time to communicate…we want to build something that is more meaningful than a bunch of emails.”

After 2012, it again hoped that OFA data would quickly filter to the local and state parties, especially since OFA had now abandoned attempts at explicit national party building. Yet the story of who got the data is a muddled one. Many different actors have different perceptions of how and when the data finally made its way to the state and then local parties. This is at the least, once again evidence of fragmentation between national and state party, as once the presidential campaign leaves, so too do the relationships and accountability between the varying levels of the party. State OFA operatives and the data shop disappear. There is nobody left at a desk handling the specifics of data transmission to the state party.

If big data is the future of campaigning, confusion and tension remains over exactly why and how it is important. From the standpoint of many the OFA staff interviewed, frustration over when and what data made its way to the Ohio party is misplaced. The networks that OFA constructed do not come from the Voter Action Network (VAN), but the real world, where it is the state and local party’s responsibility to take those relationships and channel them into their campaigns. Yet from the state party’s perspective, it is the data, and efficiency of contact facilitated by it that is a necessary first step for that cultivation. The inability to receive the data quickly and

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transparently is a reflection of the indifference and perhaps even mistrust of the national party.

**Voter Contact and Identification**

One outstanding question raised by the last several presidential elections appears in the cross-sectional data available on voter contact. While significant technological advancements in field campaigns have taken place in 2008 and 2012, surveys have shown that the height of voter contact made by campaigns happened in 2004.\(^{228}\) One should however be careful when delineating between quantity and quality in this regard. Elections, especially national ones, fought on the margins mean efficacy in individual voter outreach varies greatly because of contingent factors. Sending a piece of literature to millions of dependable partisan voters in non-competitive states will not have the impact of just a handful of well targeted door to door canvassing attempts to reach persuadable or irregular voters.

It follows that large-n national and state analysis taken with caution. Efficacy comes from the communicative impact of a mixture of individual (and media) communication techniques over the course of the election. As influenced by Donald Green and Alan Gerber’s research,\(^{229}\) the general rule for presidential campaigns is to make three successful door contacts in the months leading up to the election for those in the persuadable universe. The development of more precise voter targeting might mean

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\(^{228}\) Coffey, et al., 2011.

fewer people overall contacted, with efforts more economically focused on those whose behavior is likely to vary from campaign treatment. 

Voter identification for individual campaigns over this period can also lead to tension in joint organization through the party. Lower-level campaigns will often want a top of the ticket race to do identification on their behalf. Yet such asks become logistical hassles and can impede volunteer activity (for instance, those canvassing for Obama may not be comfortable campaigning on behalf of down-ticket candidates). As a result, the decision made at the state-level was to eschew having OFA do voter identification for candidates other than Obama. This was out of the belief, as one of OFA staffer said: “A rising tide lifts all boats...we were confident that Obama voters would be Democratic Party voters...”

On the local level, OFA staff had more flexibility to ‘carry lit’ for other candidates, yet this too was generally resisted. Such efforts were seen as logistical hassles during a campaign period in which building infrastructure and efficiency among volunteers was paramount: “I mean if you carry lit for one race, when does it end? Soon your carrying around a different lit piece for every Democrat running...I get that trust us, let us handle it can sound arrogant...but look at the results.” Yet from the standpoint of local candidates, it reflected enough of an insensitivity toward their own interests that there was little incentive to integrate voter contact into OFA operations.

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231 Organizers at times made mention of ‘going rogue,’ meaning deviating from the state field plan to cater to local idiosyncrasies. Such behavior was widely practiced and accepted on the margins, but low-level staff recognized inherent risk in deviating too significantly from the chain of command.
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Conclusion

In the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, no state was more prized than Ohio. As a locus of high resource campaigning, development in party organization associated with an OFA-like campaign model should be more apparent here than anywhere else. In the most basic and important sense, variation was clear: Democrats, after losing the state in three straight presidential elections, carried it twice. On a macro-level, Obama’s vote totals held down ticket. This success cannot be explained by the major demographic shifts affecting the nation, which were largely absent in Ohio.

Yet this success did not transition to midterm election years. In these cases, an older and whiter electorate carried the GOP to victory. The party could not reconstitute the money, staff, and volunteer base necessary for the mechanics of high-level voter mobilization efforts. If we expect office-seekers to turn to parties to solve their collective action problems, why the continued struggle for cooperation across campaigns to build an apparatus that could like serve as a determinative factor in many of their electoral fortunes? A large part of the answer is the feast or famine of resources associated with the presidential year. Politicians do not decide to construct a joint apparatus by committee, but ride the wave of resources procured at the highest reaches of politics. When those resources contract in non-presidential years, the lines of fragmentation, never erased, but overwhelmed by a national infrastructure and electorate that can make effective, if perhaps somewhat resentful, free-riders of those underneath it, come back to the fore.

Parties and party organizations matter. Yet the most durable party vessels, state parties themselves, are limited in their own resource construction, often in function being an ancillary actor to candidate-based, top of the ticket resource construction. The ephemeral
nature of candidate campaigns focused on party mobilization, while comparatively durable structures of party building face neglect, presents an apparent conundrum in the institutionalization of an organization that can consistently mobilize a loyal party electorate. In the next chapter, these dynamics and their consequences will be discussed in more depth.

Yet, despite the tensions and frustrations involved, Redfern remains confident OFA-like turnout and mobilization can indeed be institutionalized:

“It can happen. Sure, it can happen. You have to have a strong political directive and confidence in the state level parties to ensure that it does happen. Here’s the deal: it doesn’t mean anything unless you understand data. If you can get the data, you can manipulate it and start turning out folks down ticket. If you start turning out folks down ticket, you’re going to pull up not just county commissioners, but state legislators. If you pick up state legislators, you’re going to start getting control of legislative chambers. Then you can end gerrymandering and become more competitive going forward from a DCCC perspective….Now there’s an ability to walk down a sidewalk now and in real time download all the information about that particular voter from the value of their house, to what college their kid goes to, and whether or not they have a hunting license and tailor a door to door message...(make) sure that that technology is going to be fungible and that it is going to be able to advantaged at the state level, otherwise you’re just letting the consultants get rich.”^233

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^233 Personal Communication
Chapter 4
Local Party Organization in Ohio

“All you can really ask a party to do is mind the gaps, right?”
- Elizabeth Walters, (D) Akron Councilwoman at large, Former OFA staffer and ODP Executive Director

This chapter looks at local level electoral organization. Up to this point, this dissertation has viewed the party through national and state politics. At these higher altitudes, money flows and macro-strategic decisions happen. Yet, scenes of Washington D.C. and even Columbus, OH remain far removed from where such strategies take place. They succeed or fail on the ground, precinct by precinct. In this chapter, I will attempt to sketch local party organization: the point of contact between campaigns and voters. Most importantly, I suggest how mechanisms of micro-level fragmentation impede institutionalization of an efficient party mobilization apparatus. At a superficial glance, this may seem like a function of interpersonal tensions among the political actors involved. Yet, I argue that such tensions result from structural conditions that create different incentives and practices for party actors. Previous chapters have presented a temporal narrative of specific sets of actors. Because of the idiosyncrasies of local level politics, in this chapter I focus less on a detailed singular case, and more on situating tensions and challenges that exist in the local setting.

Central to this discussion is the contrast between OFA and the local party. New research has begun to reimagine contemporary political organization, focusing on ‘hybridity.’ Information Communication Technologies have led to increased flexibility

234 See: Chadwick, Andrew. 2007). Digital Network Repertoires and Organizational Hybridity. Political Communication, 24(3), 283-301; Chadwick, Andrew. "The Internet, Political
in modal forms of political organization. If organization has become increasingly
mercurial, our political system still imparts different institutional logics to intra-party
actors. These are challenges not mediated by smart phones and social media alone. In
fact, the incongruity between campaign environments that incentivize adapting to these
developments, and those that do not, can exacerbate these tensions further.

Recent academic works have discussed the development of the Obama
model,235 along with the diffusion of new forms of campaigning.236 Yet these shifts are
neither linear nor complete. They are characteristic of high resource, high competition
campaigning that is not reflective of most contemporary elections in the United States. At
the local level, presidential campaigns in states like Ohio penetrate deeper than ever
before with robust high resourced field operations. Yet this does not mean integration
with preexisting local party structures, developed under a very different electoral logic.

OFA brought unparalleled resources to the local level for presidential
campaigning. Staff worked close to the ground, organizing volunteers. This was not just
to engage in voter contact, but to develop and thicken horizontal relationships to
institutionalize Obama’s grassroots enthusiasm. Data deployed and cultivated by the
campaign offered a far more precise understanding of the electorate, and where its

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235 McKenna & Han, 2014.
236 Kreiss, 2012; Kreiss, Daniel. Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the
Gibson, Rachel. "From Brochureware to ‘MyBo’: An Overview of Online Elections and
Campaigning." Politics 32.2 (2012): 77-84; Karlsen, Rune. "Obama’s Online Success and
European Party Organizations: Adoption and Adaptation of US Online Practices in the
Democratic voters could be found, than ever before. Yet continuing institutionalization would not fall in the long term to OFA, but instead to local party structures.

**A Tale of Two Democrats**

*Picture a scenario.* You are a young field staffer for the Obama campaign. You are sitting across the table from the chair of the Democratic Party in a midsized Ohio county. This is perhaps your first or second political campaign. Yet you are a representative of a near billion-dollar organization whose chain of command leads directly to the highest profile and most respected strategists within the party. You have been trained in the most cutting edge campaign techniques, developed and instituted by a large and sophisticated organization. Your campaign is at the forefront of using data and advanced voter turnout modeling, while incorporating the outpouring of grassroots support for your candidate from millions of activists, many completely new to the political process. Your job is to build an organization to mobilize new and sporadic voters, while persuading voters who might be undecided, through contact with trained campaign activists. You are confident that by following the program you are in this county to implement, you will not only mobilize voters for a presidential majority, but on behalf of the down ticket candidates the local party supports.

The chair sitting across from you seems skeptical of your approach. He or she is several decades older than you, and begins to tell you about how politics are ‘done’ here at the county level. The chair boasts of his or her years of experience in local politics. Yet the chair has never been a full-time staffer or worked for a national campaign. Perhaps it is 2008 and you are coming off a record primary turnout, where your campaign out-
organized the most dominant force in Democratic Party politics of the last several decades (you did happen to notice the Hillary bumper sticker still on the chair’s car as you passed it). Maybe it is 2012, and you are rebuilding the organization that carried Ohio for the Democrats for the first time in twelve years in 2008; that won the first national majority for the Democrats in several decades by mobilizing this new electorate (that Hillary sticker is still there…if now next to an Obama one). You have the money, the activists, and the computer scientists in Chicago. So why is this person talking your ear off about palm cards with local judges?

_A slightly different vantage point._ You are the chair of the Democratic Party in a midsized Ohio county. You are sitting across from a young staffer from the Obama campaign assigned to your area. You grew up here, lived most of your life here. You have spent most of your adulthood active in local party politics, slowly rising through the ranks. Perhaps you have held office in local government at some point, or maybe you have stayed within the party infrastructure, moving up through the county central committee to your position now. It has never been particularly glamorous work: potluck fundraisers, dropping off lawn signs, distributing literature at the Veterans Day parade. The lack of panache though makes it all the more important: after all, someone has to do it.

Every four years there is a kid like the one sitting across from you. Nice and enthusiastic, probably from New York or the Bay area (they usually are), who nonetheless seems to think he or she knows a bit more than actually may be the case. The kid will be gone in six months anyway; off to DC, or law school, or whatever. But you’ll still be here. Your years of experience have given you hard-earned knowledge. You know
what streets you need to hit at 5:00 PM on Election Day to get out those last couple dozen Democratic votes; who has the house right off of Main Street that will let you put up the 6 x 6 sign for the top of the ticket candidate; who you can depend on to host a local fundraiser; what local civics teacher or professor can be depended on to steer a few interns your way; the names of the group of older ladies who will stuff envelopes on Thursday evenings for all the campaigns; which streets not to waste time with because they vote Republican, or just don’t vote. You know how politics work here, and when that kid and their laptop are long gone, you will still be here, talking with the next kid four years from now.

**Fragmentation on the Ground**

If this scene is marginally a work of fiction, it nonetheless is one that approximates many of the conversations that take place in the summer and fall in local party offices across Ohio (and the country) during the presidential season. Many good national campaign staffers and local party officials will learn to work together and use their disparate resources and knowledge for mutual benefit. Yet the tensions that undergird this relationship are not interpersonal, but based within the deeply embedded, fragmented institutional logic of American party politics. Both sides are in the right. Yet the varied structural incentives within the American federal system mean that, on the local level, where campaigns large and small actually interact with the citizenry, different sets of resources, strategic templates, and even cultures will exist. This is as a response to the different patterns of development within these organizations and institutions. They
exist side by side, but rarely do they truly integrate as a party apparatus- into a unified and efficient mechanism to mobilize the party vote.

If parties are multifaceted, we assume that a party organization remains patterned coherently on the federal system: with national, state, and county party organizations. Perhaps they are stronger or weaker based upon the idiosyncrasies of the political era, but they are still holistic as entities. Yet in a given place during election season, the party apparatus may be several different entities, working with little organizational coherence beyond a rough understanding of an allied electorate. We might think of this through the prism of the candidate-centered era, where party organization was largely replaced by individual campaigns looking to idiosyncratically aggregate majorities for singular candidates. Yet these are not candidate-campaigns in this sense. Data, polarization, and money have changed campaigning in ways discussed in earlier chapters. These organizations are built as centripetal forces over political resources. They operate on behalf of mobilizing a defined and coherent party electorate. Put plainly, many political organizations, and OFA especially, should be considered party organizations. The last chapter illustrated OFA’s centrality to the state-level Democratic ticket. Despite this, OFA did not integrate seamlessly into a joint organization with the local party. It was however responsible for the bulk of party resources, in ways not always aligned with other, often more durable, party actors.

The varying modes and scale of resources around each election create multiple iterations of campaign templates, all operating in their own overlapping yet distinct universes. Competitiveness and control/representation within government influence the sort of resources that compel party unity, at and between different levels of government.
Electoral organization remains an awkward combination of slick billion-dollar modernized campaigning and old school ward heeling, in which party organizational unity is contingent on wedding this diversity under one schematic. This remains a steep challenge.

One thing most will agree upon is that when looking at the county level, is there is very little generalizability. Each county has its own idiosyncratic culture based a laundry list of variables. Competition, and intertwined strategic importance, activism levels, and the organic political enthusiasm of the electorate will all affect local party development. Yet in Ohio, we can make a crude contrast between different types of dominant electoral and party organization that overlap, yet are largely without integration, while representing multiple distinct political cultures.

**Figure 4.1: Party Organizational Templates**
Resources, responsibilities, and tactics will vary on each level of the party structure. Modes of field campaigning and voter contact look very different depending on the resources available to the campaign. High resource models have become data intensive and dynamic. OFA also introduced relational organizing techniques that changed the responsibilities of both staff and volunteers on the ground. Organization centers on the NTL/snowflake model, which requires a largely front-loaded staff presence to construct a volunteer campaign mobilization apparatus. This however exists independent from the local party structure. While the scale of OFA dwarfs that of local organization, life for the local party goes on. City council candidates run small canvasses; the county party has its summer fundraiser, and the Democratic Clerk of Courts candidate gives her supporters T-shirts and lawn signs.

**Mapping the Party Assemblage**

Rasmus Nielsen, in his valuable description of the campaign assemblage in a 2008 Connecticut congressional race, traces campaign resource construction as mediated by the congressional campaign itself. Nielsen describes the assemblage as an ephemeral organization that draws from durable institutions such as parties, unions, and civic groups, while also cultivating its own makeshift staff and activist networks. At the base of the assemblage is the explicit campaign infrastructure, charged with integrating the exogenous raw materials channeled into an electoral apparatus. It is:

> Not a thing “out there” in the sense a human being is, but rather a name for a combination of technologically augmented organizations, groups, and individuals whose combined capacity for action is brought to bear on

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Nielsen 2012.
a shared project. In a few corners of the United States, where the finely meshed networks still exist or have found new forms, one can perhaps think of personalized political communication as something pursued by a single organization or a set of firmly institutionalized practices. Yet Nielsen argues that such institutionalization is uncommon today. Entrenched electoral organization has been replaced in politics by weak yet diffuse networks, and money. This new environment makes local field organization construction ad hoc and idiosyncratic. Campaigns use professionalization, aligned interest groups and activists; a party, what the particulars of their situation allow.

The choice to focus on a congressional race makes sense in a state like Connecticut—a non-presidential battleground, where the most highly resourced campaigns are likely to be at the congressional level. Yet this description is contingent on a campaign scaled accordingly, and the ancillary resources available to it. This is unrepresentative of OFA, which had the financial capacity and organic activist support, to build its own assemblage largely from scratch through the neighborhood team model. OFA had the resources to subsume whatever skeleton of infrastructure existed in other local races. It remained largely divorced in many places from the local party organization, a significantly more modest, yet perhaps more durable assemblages.

A distinction between a campaign assemblage and party organization rests upon the level of institutionalization of the organization. As networks and data become

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238 Ibid. p 20.
239 This fluidity appears to present a disadvantage for Democrats as conservative donor networks presently dwarf their liberal counterparts in resources and sophistication. See: Skocpol & Hertzel-Fernandez, 2016.
increasingly critical to electoral politics, organizational hybridity makes both modes of organization, and the strategic incentives associated with them less defined. Whether aligned with a current formal organization, candidate networks exist as a potential party resource. For example: after 2004, Howard Dean supporters who got together at local meetups through the primary, might have transitioned themselves into Democracy for America (DFA), the formal organizational outgrowth of his campaign. Yet it is possible (and given the modest size of DFA, even likely) that the network could be at least partially maintained outside this formal organizational vessel. They might have organized for John Kerry in 2004, perhaps after Dean became party chair, integrated themselves into the local party, or for a progressive local candidate; potentially they joined or formed the local MoveOn chapter or another local progressive group; maybe one of them even eventually became an OFA NTL and brought the rest of group into their team. Networks, once cultivated are likely to exist outside of the organizational apparatus that fostered them. They exist, at least latently, beyond the structures that brought them into being.

Because assemblages are so unwieldy, creating efficiency among them can be difficult. In the gap between local parties and presidential campaigns, are races that command both financial and activist resources at the scale necessary for professionalization. In a resource-heavy state where the federal is under the presidential brand, such efforts would likely to be redundant. As discussed in the last chapter, in 2012, Sherrod Brown attempted to do this with a more modest, yet distinct field program run through the state party. This created tension as the different Democratic campaigns jostled over activist networks. Ostensibly, this was a function of the Brown campaign considering a potentially larger electorate than that of Obama. Yet these redundancies
carried over into urban areas, where at the micro-level it got in the way of building efficient economies of scale. Campaigns wound up recruiting from overlapping volunteer networks and engaging in overlapping voter contact.

Linkages between local party organizations and OFA did exist. Local parties can often provide know how and even networks to OFA. The first point of contact for most OFA staff when ‘getting on the ground’ is the local party chair. Many of these interactions are warm and integral in helping OFA get off the ground locally. Elizabeth McKenna, recalls her 2008 experience in Ottawa County initially meeting the county party chair:

“(We met) over chicken salad, Wendy’s is a big deal in Ohio. She was a Hillary supporter and so the training that I got on the Obama campaign was simply to talk about myself…why I was interested in working for the Obama campaign, and elicit her expertise on the county that I just parachuted in to….talk (sic) about what we hoped to do in the county in the next three or four months. Not just to elect Obama, but to strengthen the progressive Democratic Party structure.”

Yet this cooperation is largely idiosyncratic as there is no systematic organizational apparatus or incentive to fuse party campaigning together under one roof. OFA’s field plan was fundamentally distinct from that of the local party; as was its later post-campaign bridge organizations Organizing for America (2.0) and Organizing for Action (4.0). Politicians may share offices, know how, and even their homes with national staff, yet they often remain organizationally balkanized, practically speaking different languages.

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Figure 4.2: Party Organizational Flow

The figure above illustrates the flow of resources from the national party down through the local level. OFA’s joint fundraising ventures do indirectly filter to the local party through the state party. Yet there is no direct organizational linkage between OFA and the local party, financially or otherwise. The state party will channel resources to both the county parties and individual candidates running for state/federal office. These candidates will run their own smaller voter contact operations, culling assemblages like those described by Nielsen. At the local level, candidates will attempt to run their own modest idiosyncratic campaigns with county level support. Such campaigns however, will be a drop in the bucket, in both sophistication and output, of the federal level campaigning going on around them.

There is no formal chain of command between local OFA and the local party. OFA-local party relationships are idiosyncratic. In most places, only the county party
chair, not local elected officials will have a working relationship with OFA. The county party chair is likely to want to preserve their own chain of command and not want interference from an outside force. Conversely, from OFA’s standpoint, since they do not run coordinated campaigns with local candidates, there is little need to be in conversation. While such a schema reflects a short-term electoral logic, there is no mechanism for party-wide integration of networks and expertise. According to 2008 Regional Field Director and 2012 State GOTV Coordinator Max Lesko:

“There’s both the city level and the county level. I recall the county level being the mama bear and ultimately trying to protect [the interests of the local party]. The county executive was the starting point in conversation between myself and the local community. There’s three entities: the county party, the county executive’s office and the city elected (officials)…but I never really spoke with the third group…(The county) wanted things from us, we weren’t necessarily willing to do that, but there’s ways to be approachable and receptive without necessarily agreeing on everything.”

The Role of the State Party Locally

The state party derives its power, at least in a technical sense, from its county party clients. Local candidates usually do not have access to significant fundraising networks or large campaign staffs. They are dependent on the state party to help navigate developments in campaigning as well as providing them with professional resources. Actual locally dedicated financial resources are fleeting and often contingent on the strategic importance of districts. Yet the state party is influential in directing federal-level resources. This includes money, statewide campaign staffing, and events for principals and surrogates. As put by Janet Carson, chair of the Ohio Democratic County Chairs

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Association (ODCCA), and Geauga County chair: “Most chairs work outside their party chairman duties and most are older and have never had the professional training party staffers have.”

Permanent state staff such as the Executive Director and Political Director spend much of their time working with county parties, assessing their needs and attempting to procure the resources to meet them. Positions such as data and field directors exist on a semi-permanent basis, as they scale for the height of the campaign cycle. This staff also works with county parties often traveling the state attempting to train county party leadership on data and organizational techniques early in the campaign season.

Compared with an organization like OFA’s presidential campaign, resources are scarce. State staff is responsible for complementing 88 counties with largely volunteer leadership, all with their own issues and demanding the state party’s finite attention and resources. Urban vs. rural, majority vs. minority districts, and other variables all lead to different considerations and challenges. For Carson, responsibilities and challenges include:

“Bring(ing) county organizations into the 21st century (through) help with technology, data and fundraising. To develop a regional structure so chairs could mentor and communicate with their local peers, sharing best practices to strengthen every county organization and to hold annual listening tours to learn what is important to our members and their constituents.”

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State parties get little in the way of support nationally as independent infrastructure. Instead, the ODP’s role is often as firefighter of last resort in mediating tensions between presidential campaigns and local parties. The small monthly DNC contribution helps to support their bare bones staff, but state party building is largely a function of the electoral clock and its impact on national fundraising. As a point of comparison, there were on average several OFA organizers for each county during the presidential elections.

If the state party exists as a mediating structure between national and local parties, it only has the resources to do so in a passive sense. At the height of presidential campaigns, its job is to build cohesion or at least keep the peace between the presidential and local parties. State party staff will relay to local party leadership presidential campaign events and surrogates coming to the state and their region. Yet as previously seen, the state party’s resources are tethered to forces such as control of government. Absent state level executive power, close support of localities, let alone the coercive power necessary to promote party integration appears unrealistic.

**The Challenge of Party Congruence**

From the general perspective of the party, an efficient field strategy should be a singular apparatus in which all resources of aligned party office-seekers combine to mobilize a coherent party electorate. Money, volunteers, data would all integrate in a single organization that conducts outreach in the service of mobilizing a party electorate for its candidate slate. This however is not empirically the case, as various assemblages and organizations work with little coordination. The consequences of this are a high
resource top of the ticket campaign carrying the organizational burden with smaller campaigns orbiting. Yet without integration, election-to-election resource disparities will hamper the party’s ability to translate its latent coalition in the electorate into government power.

From the local party’s perspective, it may be that there is little that OFA can do to help build its organization. OFA recruits volunteers under the Obama brand, trains them on a high resource campaign model that is based on organizing others around that brand; and then institutes a sophisticated volunteer-led mobilization apparatus based on targets that come from national headquarters, developed by dedicated targeting professionals, once again on behalf of the specific appeal of the Obama brand to its voter targets. The brand and resources that OFA capitalizes upon therefore is not easily replicated. Yet even other forms of institutionalized resources can have difficulty translating to the local party. Progressive activists are often loyal to ideological candidates, not the party operating under constraints of government and/or sensitive to other considerations of resource construction. From one long-time county chair’s perspective:

“Obama activists have not become a part of local parties and though we worked hard to court them, their interests weren’t in helping the party but in supporting their candidate…many chairs felt this was a failing on the part of OFA.”

The lack of brand congruence on a local level is a function of the structural impediments to a joint local party structure. Different political teams, linked to different campaign assemblages and electorates, all exist within the same party. Methods of

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campaigning all develop due to the political culture fostered in response to peculiar conditions. According to McKenna, older county party leaders:

“…were weary of the organizing techniques that Obama organizers were taught to implement. So house parties, one on one meetings, neighborhood teams, these were all an entirely different lexicon for establishment Democrats. They were used to pot luck dinners, debate watch parties, and yard signs.”245

Critiques of national organization are usually around what many consider a cookie-cutter national template that does not prioritize the local idiosyncrasies of politics. The long-term personal relationships that undergird local organization have little use in a high resource election where turnout and salience is significantly higher. For Elizabeth Walters:

“There’s always that push and pull between folks whether they be voters, or volunteers, or donors who only show up during the presidential year and wanting to encourage their activism and make a place for them within the party and the operation. But then you also have that huge group of long term activists who maybe they don’t knock doors as much as they used to, they may be a little more old school, but they carry the banner in the mayoral races in our communities every year and so…the (local politicians) say yeah that’s nice Barack Obama, that you say if you win it’s going to help me, but how do I know that the voter in my county even knows my name when you won’t invest in a sample ballot, you won’t carry my lit. If I go into your local campaign office on the ground, I’m being told I can’t even leave my lawn signs or my literature there. It’s hard and I don’t know what the answer is because I see both sides of the coin.”

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Organization must be scaled beyond the local party organization, and it must be done quickly. From the standpoint of the national organization, local strategies are often ineffective. Based upon the management of moribund structures not subject to robust electoral competition. Infrastructure appears hollow compared to the model OFA implements. For one Regional Field Director, describing these divergent perspectives:

“Get a truck with a big poster on it and drive around these key neighborhoods with a megaphone. That’s what folks thought of as turnout, and we were saying, you know this idea of micro-targeting, where (sic) we want to hit a lot of the voters in those areas, but we also want to hit these traditionally maybe Republican neighborhood(s) where there’s key pockets of Democratic voters that don’t always turnout. The pushback on our universes was always a contentious argument. As a (Regional Field Director), I didn’t have a firm understanding of how that (sic) universe was created and I also didn’t necessarily have the ability to communicate that.”

From the standpoint of the local party, highly resourced organizers show up, construct their own organization out of largely non-party activists, and leave. They may well win and carry local candidates with them, but they will just as sure skip town after the election and deconstruct their apparatus. They, nor their organization, will be there for the mayoral race next year or state senate race the year after.

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Local Organization

In their book on Obama field organization, McKenna & Han contrast the OFA model with traditional campaigning.248 They give comprehensive treatment to the differences between electoral campaigning in the past and OFA. Yet this was not so much of a transition from one method of campaigning to another. Instead, one form has largely grafted itself over the other, ebbing once the presidential season has ended with questionable impact on durable local party institutions.

Local campaigning tends to be a low resourced affair. Small donor events pay for a modest staff, office space, mailings, and perhaps modest media buys. Much campaigning still resembles the iconic picture of yesteryear’s parades and potluck dinners. Visibility in low salience elections is important (or at least is perceived as so), as is the party brand and ticket for politicians fortunate enough to be in the majority. Lawn signs, literature, and downtown handshakes make up the lynchpin of a typical campaign template. Voter targeting is an oral tradition of blocks, precincts, and wards that make up the party vote. Walters, discussing the varying roles of the local party:

“It greatly varies by county. Some county parties say we’re going to drill in, raise money to do a sample ballot, or raise money to support a judicial candidate piece, because judicial candidates have a harder time raising money at the local level… Very few counties have full time staff, usually it’s just the bigger urban ones that are able to afford it. They provide office space, they provide telephone lines, they provide connection to donor networks if they exist in the county…time saving things that would take the candidate or a volunteer two days to tack down, the county party does it.”249

248 McKenna & Han, 2014.
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The party can provide basic resources, institutional memory, and a venue to workout conflict and build cooperation among party politicians. Tammany may be dead, but the party, as a physical place, is still how politicians can coordinate on behalf of shared interests and electorates. Large urban counties, and robust smaller ones, will have offices that serve as meeting spaces for the community as well as political figures. These venues can be integral for phone banking, fundraising, and morale of party loyalists. Over the period under study, one major institutional development is the procurement of office-space for medium to smaller-sized county parties. Carson discussing the importance of this for the county party:

“The (Republicans) had never had a HQ or office except during limited campaign cycles. We have had a HQ open year round for the last six years. Now the (Republican)’s have felt compelled to spend funds and have their own HQ, although not permanent as ours is. This gives us a presence in the county and makes it easier for Dems to find us.”\(^\text{250}\)

County party chairs and most elected officials are not full-time politicians, but have significant experience with the local party. The prerequisites for these positions is often mastering the local party template as candidate or campaigner.

Extra-organizational resources will vary significantly from one county to another. A cornerstone of ODP organization in urban and industrial areas is still unions that have significant resources to get out voters (especially members and their families) in many places. In urban and liberal enclaves, there are often local progressive organizations such

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as MoveOn that have built a presence. These may be important fundraising networks as well as provide ground troops for voter contact. These networks may constitute the basis of resources on a local level, where they remain more durable than OFA activist organization. In some instances, these more ideological organizations have been outlets for activists groomed by OFA and other campaigns, who have remained ambivalent about participating in explicit local party institutions.

Candidates however usually must provide basic campaign resources for themselves. For those in small counties that nonetheless fall in major media markets, television advertising is impractical. Viability is a function of demonstrating the fundraising prowess necessary to build a campaign. County party endorsements in primaries can be an important signifier in low turnout elections for party stalwarts. Yet parties find themselves caught between wanting to put forward the strongest ticket possible and risking making choices that could alienate stakeholders.

Local party organizations are highly institutionalized with clear hierarchies and rules for advancement. They are not large organizations in the popular sense, but are what is necessary to maintain an effective local apparatus for low salience local politics. They are the institutional memory, and often gatekeepers, for political amateurs looking to enter the electoral arena.

This presents a marked contrast with what the presidential template developed by OFA looks like on the local level. Local organization is the tip of a highly sophisticated and bureaucratized national organization. Financial resources are significant. So are the raw materials that could be cultivated locally, especially volunteers. This is a function of the salience of a presidential election, and particularly with a candidate of Obama’s
appeal. Despite having to build an organization from scratch, OFA’s resources can very quickly dwarf the organizational apparatus of the local party. Money, volunteers, data, and staff infrastructure (especially when aggregated from the national level—such as the data and communication staff in Chicago that work with local organizers) all are orders of magnitude higher than what can be summoned by the local party.

Professionalization also operates through a very different landscape. While volunteer networks are ‘snowflaked,’ at the staff level, the campaign remains very much hierarchal. Strategies are dynamic, having come out of a national template through electoral competition. Social media, data implementation, and even field tactics can all quickly move from experimental to institutionalized within a national campaign apparatus, when proven effective. Development and diffusion of new tactics is necessary in this environment: with data, organizing, and communications strategies developing rapidly to be best appropriated by the campaign. For example, resource intensive voter contact A/B testing took place all over Ohio in 2012. This requires computer scientists building a sophisticated model; field staff in place building the voter contact apparatus months (if not years) before the election; and activists to go out and conduct voter contact. Such a program would be impossible to scale without millions of dollars in necessary campaign infrastructure.

The NTL model locally, is in function, independent from the party organization. Senior volunteer cadre get significant training by dedicated local staff on the OFA model. Focus is not just on the mechanics of voter contact, but relational organizing techniques to build network capacity over the course of the campaign. The snowflake model further diffuses campaign activity by putting organizations of precinct clusters into the hands of
the volunteer neighborhood team leader who responds directly to the OFA field organizer. This will usually take the place of whatever social diffusion might happen in a local party campaign office. Some county party chairs relayed a sense that OFA is often poaching their volunteers. This may stand at odds with claims by many of the same people that OFA volunteers are qualitatively different from that of the party. Yet it is evidence of the frustration of party regulars that local organizing is escaping the grasp of the permanent party infrastructure.

“There was cohort of maybe a dozen to twenty folks (that) were the party volunteers. We worked with them as the campaign continued. We collaborated on how we can best lift all boats, but we could have 200 (OFA) canvassers across the county one day and they could say, nope we’re going to do this thing that we’ve always done. That’s fine, the real question is, it’s the people who have been involved in local politics, and do they gravitate to that core of a dozen, or do they go on over to the presidential. Do they go to the kids?”251 (Lesko)

While idiosyncratic, OFA volunteer networks are often built from scratch with little channeled from preexisting organization. Some local party activists and even politicians may join, but many will continue in their local party activities. OFA has access to most of the existing party activist data. Yet it also has a linkage to those who have signed up through OFA social media. Staff can continue to build networks through early voter contact and the social networks of their prime volunteer targets. The point of the community-organizing model is indeed to maximize their impact by drawing on their

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social networks, rather than throw volunteers “onto doors.” This allows them to largely bypass the party infrastructure and focus on molding new volunteer cadre.

Yet it is a resource intensive model that would be impractical for local organization. There were instances reported of local party leadership participating in OFA organization. Yet, OFA leadership is a labor-intensive task (NTLs are expected to volunteer 10-15 hours a week) that would even in the best of circumstances be difficult for volunteer party leadership, which must assume responsibility for normal party functions.

**Competition and Resources**

In previous chapters, the fight over resources—where they go, and when they go there—has been at the fore. Yet there is another important factor in incongruity, most salient at the local level. Highly competitive national elections remain juxtaposed with local politics—where increased spatial sorting and gerrymandering has stunted the competitive environment.

A lack of competition at the county level is not a new phenomenon. County level competition also does not guarantee higher-level party sponsors. Chairs in competitive counties complain that they are also ignored, as statewide resources often filter to Democratic ‘base’ turf. Yet the sorts of races that would be receptacles for statewide party targeting, that encompass districts larger than many small counties, such as congressional or state senate races, have been gerrymandered out of competition. It is the varying and crosscutting levels of competition that so impacts the institutional logic of campaign culture. This is especially so concerning ‘safe’ non-competitive Democratic
counties that (are perceived to) receive the bulk of resources for statewide base mobilization, and the high level of OFA resources dedicated there.

Long-standing theories explain how the party system is influenced by robust electoral competition. Competitive two-party systems can lead to dynamic shifts in leaders and representation. Under these conditions, competition can incentivize individuals, and most importantly parties, to expand participation to construct their majority. Yet, one-party systems display collusion among party elites, incentivized to conspire and restrict competition. A narrow and managed electorate is under the control of the leadership of the dominant party, who ensure stability through patronage and the repression of countervailing organizational power, which could lead to competition and threaten the status quo power arrangements.

Historically speaking, the machine’s strength came from its control over the mobilization apparatus. The local party held a monopoly over the institutional knowledge of the precinct-by-precinct party vote. Yet this today is no longer the case on the local level. There is a registered, at least latent electorate, loyal less to the local than to the national party. This linkage is characteristically through the personalized brand associated with the presidency. Indeed, it is the incongruity between the national brand

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252 How much evidence there is for this critique is debatable. Over the period of study, both the Strickland campaign and OFA point to heavily investing in these areas. This may be less of a resource issue than an attention issue.
and the local party organization, which is at the center of the struggle for organizational integration. If the heart of the historical party was the local boss, it is now a voter file and a presidential slogan.

Local parties often still display characteristics of the traditional political machine. They are durable, hierarchal organizations. Advancement comes from working your way up the party hierarchy over time. Robust competition on the county level is rare, where electoral turnout and public attention is low. Majority parties will have some amount of patronage to pass around. Minority parties meanwhile will have little in the way to offer politicians and activists to engage them.

Yet safe counties today in battlegrounds such as Ohio are, if one-party dominant, still analytically different from historically non-competitive systems. They are over-laid by state and national campaign organizations that are functioning under the logic of a competitive two-party system-- where high turnout elections are necessary. This does not create a classic one-party system, but an incongruence between a permanent local organization whose most narrow prerogatives (control of local government) remain unaffected by mobilization, yet share a ticket with state and national campaigns whose outcome will be decided by marginal gains in state-wide turnout. The increasing scale and professionalization of national politics has increased the field presence of national campaigns: to the point in that they now often create robust parallel organization, scaled well beyond the durable party apparatus. This is especially true in Ohio. Its strategic importance means building presidential assemblages exponentially larger and more sophisticated than that of the local party. OFA’s implementation of neighborhood teams,
however, has taken this to a new level. Hundreds of organizers built sophisticated local organizations reliant on community-based volunteer cadre.

As an orchestrator of assemblages, the local party still best aggregates the local apparatus, even if that organization exists largely outside the explicit hierarchy of the party machine. This is to say; it falls largely to the party to capture whatever networks exist for local candidate campaigning. It maintains institutional memory and infrastructure, which provide necessary if not sufficient resources for new candidates. Whatever latent tension might exist between OFA activists and the local party, there is little to suggest long-term, large-scale competition between them in any systematic fashion. OFA largely demobilized or continued to work on behalf of national politics, paying little attention to the local organization. The label and narrative of OFA remains strongly connected with national politics and that of the president. OFA 2.0 felt it would be unsuccessful if it attempted to involve itself in local politics. The local party and politics, if viewed with suspicion by those OFA successfully tapped into, generally remained ignored as a vessel of contention. Yet true party building must be a function not of segmentation of these networks and organizations, but integration.

**Competition and its Consequences**

History shows that managing of a one-party system will create a very different logic and mode of organization than parties operating in competitive environments.\(^{258}\) Where a party operates outside of robust competition, its central focus is likely to be the

management of patronage-based resources that fortify its dominant position.\textsuperscript{259} Intra-party conflict is handled not through democratic competition, but highly institutionalized hierarchies. Success depends on the management of conflict to keep entrenched powers satisfied enough to not have large scale revolt.

In competitive electoral environments, party cohesion is not a function of maintaining the status quo, but creating structures that can increase electoral support.\textsuperscript{260} This means exerting centripetal force on electoral resources to create an efficient economy of scale to mobilize for a party ticket. With this cohesion, resources amalgamate to construct the infrastructure necessary to mobilize a dynamic electorate and consolidate electoral coalitions. Yet cohesion comes out of an alignment of interests among party stakeholders. If the county parties are not aligned with temporary high resource presidential organization, as they are not responding to the same competitive mechanisms, whether on the county level or overlapping state legislative districts, there is little inducement for integration necessary for efficient mobilization.

Growth in the quantity of non-competitive elections, even in localities that suggest strong competition, exacerbates these differences. Carson explaining the consequence of this in minority districts:

“Unsuccessful local races tend to perpetuate the views that Democrats are unelectable, we don’t have qualified candidates and that there aren’t many Democrats in the county. These perceptions have to be reversed for


\textsuperscript{260} Schattschneider, 1960. ch 1.
voters to identify as Democrats and be willing to become active party members.”

Historically, one-party systems were typologically characteristic of the solid south. Today, advanced gerrymandering techniques and more precisely targeted electoral strategies have created patterns in which insulation from competition is the norm. This is regardless of federal, state, or local nature of the race; and is even so in places like Ohio that remain highly competitive on the state level. There is evidence of this as part of a deliberate conservative strategy to curb representation away from an emerging progressive majority. Resource construction has also become significantly more idiosyncratic as advances in polling have incentivized the concentration of resources in peculiar areas and elections in which they are likely to produce marginal strategic gains.

The strange consequence is that despite financial resources increasing by orders of magnitude, and data innovations revolutionizing political communication, this explosion of resources is being driven into increasingly narrow channels of electoral competition: battleground states, battleground districts, battleground wards; with precision focus on a select group of persuadable or sporadic voters. Almost unimaginable resources are directed toward mobilizing the party vote, yet are applied on the ground in ways that impede the development of something that looks like a traditional mass party through unified and durable joint structure. Electoral strategies follow short-term logic, with precision targeting of resources and voters. Yet, this precision creates strategic

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idiosyncrasies that hamper institutionalization of a mass party. Voters are not economic or social classes, but individuals measured by party confidence scores based on data points, histories of voting behavior and consumption habits, and their strategic need for any given election.

Stunted competition manifests itself within the same geographic space, creating overlapping but largely disconnected party structures. The resources, strategies, and people involved are all largely different. This can translate to the brand, or lack of one at a local level, and mistrust between the divergent activists and networks at the county level. Without salience or resources, local activism has a much stronger relationship with traditional patronage, or close personal relationships with the local party infrastructure. In a micro-sense, activist patterns fall into different universes under different logics of participation. OFA activists, conditioned for high resourced data intensive campaign activities, follow national-level structures.

The local party infrastructure is seen as disconnected from the party’s presidential electorate and activist base. It represents the management of the status quo. For the local party, these activists present an inconsistent and undependable resource as well as electorate. For locally dominant parties however, if it isn’t broke, why fix it? It is unrealistic to expect the modal shift to come from politicians protected under the status quo.

This tension was central to Obama’s narrative appeal in the Democratic primary. Earlier chapters have discussed in-depth horizontal conflict. Yet it is worth reflecting on how this conflict might play out at the community level between the party, its activists, and voters. The Obama coalition demographically is what most think of when they
imagine a national Democrat. Yet attitudes among these voters often reflect high degrees of suspicion toward the institutions of the party. If this seems a paradox, it may be less so when the national party profile is often absent at the local level, where voters actually interact with the living breathing expression of the party. One OFA organizer relayed:

“(The party was) older and white…there were some leaders of color who were excited to build this out in way that was different from the party, (they saw the party) as not very responsive or interested in building community leadership capacity.”

Barack Obama represents the national party profile; and party solidarity expresses itself through personalistic loyalty to him. At the local level, party precinct captains and city council members: older, whiter, etc. can come across as vestiges of the past. If the brand remains untethered to a local institutionalized organizational linkage, there is no apparatus to connect the party to the electorate. Another OFA organizer:

“Our capacity exceeded what we could organize out of the local party office and they had a volunteer coordinator and office manager and they told us they wanted us to find another space and kicked us out of the office…I got the sense that the local party leadership was old and out of touch and not interested in running the kind of campaign that the Obama organization was building…they were more interested in handing out lawn signs then relational organizing.”

The irony remains that when aggregated, the inability to connect the local party to the national electorate leads to depressed turnout that harms the party on a statewide and national level. National politics remains personalistic in the attachment to a particular

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candidate,\textsuperscript{266} or perhaps ideological demands.\textsuperscript{267} This exists in a different space from that of the local party seeking to manage resources and power through transactional and interpersonal relationships. Without an organization successfully mediating this however, everyone is underrepresented.

From a partisan vantage point, this seems like a maddening disconnect. Political actors whose cooperation would be to their overwhelming mutual benefit cannot find an effective structure to come together. For Walters:

“"There’s only going to be so much a county party chair or a county party structure can do to engage an activist in a party structure, but what needs to happen is that the county party has to be the bridge that takes the activist who is passionate about their president and helps them become just as passionate about their mayor.”\textsuperscript{268}

Yet a collective action problem persists in that no actor is properly incentivized to bridge the gap between the differing path-dependent party organizations. All are responding to highly institutionalized peculiar logics. Whatever they have to gain is counter-posed by what they have to lose—the autonomy to run campaigns in a way consistent with customs dictated by their own structural conditions. Campaign finance law also create high barriers to the construction of organization that transcends them. Put simply—who would create such an apparatus? Local parties composed of elected officials who are in safe seats? The national party constructed to prime turnout once


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every four years? A state party caught in between these two party forms with no true local presence?

OFA 2.0 presented the most explicit organizational attempt to overcome these boundaries, yet would be hard to characterize as transformative on the local level. Caught in some ways between these structural boundaries, it lacked the resources, brand, and institutional knowledge, to be effective as a permanent bridge organization bringing these diffuse actors together.

Indeed, if the national and local parties are qualitatively different entities on the local level, the state party remains largely absent. State parties remain stuck between on the ground relationships and national salience. Even effective state campaigns are, as seen in last chapter, based on the cultivation of financial resources and empowering patronage based local organizations, rather than building grassroots organization such as during presidential elections.

The Obama era has marked an observable decline in down ticket competition. This has the consequence of reducing resources in a competitive national environment, where donors and national organizations will channel resources where marginal gains are most likely. While top of the ticket campaigns garner the greatest amount of resources, competitive congressional races are also multi-million dollar campaigns that can affect the party ticket. Republican-led gerrymandering has not only given the GOP a representative advantage, but has also inhibited long-term Democratic resource development. Both a reduction in incumbency and competitiveness have hurt Ohio Democratic congressional fundraising. As the Democratic congressional caucus has withered post 2010, so too has candidates’ ability to raise money.
Table 4.1: Mean fundraising total per Ohio Congressional Democratic candidate. Source: Opensecrets.org *After 2010 redistricting Ohio congressional delegation was reduced from 18 to 16.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Congressional Campaign Fundraising</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>$376,777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>$712,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>$1,108,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>$977,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012*</td>
<td>$641,844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014*</td>
<td>$414,190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the state legislature has been subject to a reduction in competition over this time. Perhaps the greatest prize for Democrats on the state level was victory in the state assembly in 2008. This victory was short lived however. Republicans recapturing the state house in 2010, would consolidate these gains through redistricting, making their majority virtually unassailable in the short term. Table 4.2 illustrates the precipitous drop in competition since 2010. In 2012, races decided by less than three points dropped to their lowest level in four elections. In 2014, a strong Republican year, only five races were decided by less than ten points. This was significantly fewer than any other election over the last decade. The senate, which already displayed a Republican lean, had only one of its 15 seats up for grabs decided by less than ten points in 2012, and none in 2014.
Table 4.2: Competitive races in 99 member Ohio State Assembly. Source: Ohio Board of Elections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Less than 3 pts</th>
<th>3-5 pts</th>
<th>5-10 pts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed in the previous chapter, this lack of competition decimates the Democratic farm team, as there is little inducement to run for office and build fundraising and organizational networks that can have positive effects on local party building. These races would be the most resource heavy at the sub-state level. Local party building, generating resource networks on behalf of state-level and congressional races, is not feasible if there are no competitive races to build on behalf of.

**Collusion or Inertia?**

Piven & Cloward\(^{269}\) raise a serious caveat with Schattschneider’s assertion that party competition creates equalitarian political institutions. Parties may at times socialize conflict, yet are also inhibited by oligarchic tendencies that make them just as likely to restrict and manage competition through collusion. The one-party system is every bit, if not a more prevalent force in the American party system, as truly competitive electoral equilibrium. This is not as an accident, but as a natural outgrowth of general organizational dynamics from which parties are not immune.

Yet when looking at contemporary Ohio, we often see both in the same place and time, party organization based on high resource, high competition strategies, overlaid with sturdy hierarchal local organization often responding to one-party dominance. From a systematic standpoint, such stunted competition quite clearly appears caused by the partisan motivations of the opposition party. Yet what motivations underlie Democrats inability to respond effectively? This gap appears less the consequence of collusion in the restriction of competition, than inertia. This is a result of the lack of a mechanism to transcend local templates for ones useful for state and federal competition. These are forces not so much resistant to change and dynamism, but without strong enough incentives to institute a massive modal shift in resource construction. The institutional logic of their position remains in the netherworld between the old machine and a newer networked politics. Repertoires slowly seep through in many cases, yet there is no organizational capacity to institutionalize OFA-like mobilization. Party actors are not actively resistant, but have neither the resources nor strong incentive in their non-competitive districts to adapt.

Mediating structures have been absent, at least at levels strong enough to bridge networks, repertoires, and brand. OFA 2.0 and the ODP attempted to provide this function. Yet neither statewide organization had the resources to work closely and entrepreneurially with stakeholders such as local parties to convince, nor coerce, them. Data and mobilization strategies have unevenly diffused into county calculations, yet there is little systematic evidence that this has altered local practices in significant ways. Local party leaders discuss these tools and strategies. They may quite sincerely want to modernize, yet such changes take resources that they do not have the organizational
capacity to build, nor do they feel they receive sufficient resources from higher levels of the party.

**Literature, Lawnsigns, & Laptops**

Campaign tactics and the tension over their priority, effectiveness, and application; illustrate how structural fragmentation plays out on a day-by-day basis. While perhaps seeming pedestrian, such issues illustrate the gaps in practice that persist. Data distribution seemingly comes with few transaction costs. Indeed, the VAN’s intent was to establish a centralized user-friendly vessel for Democrats to have real time access to voter and activist files. Yet the diffusion of data from presidential campaigns to county parties has been uneven at best, with responsibility difficult to untangle.

While data for voter turnout is applicable on a small scale by local campaigns (even without advanced universe modeling, ‘cutting’ lists of high probability Democrats is simple), there is no real mechanism to integrate such tactics into local campaigns and parties. While the state party attempts to coordinate with and train the local parties, they do not have the staff presence to continually service local politicians and campaigns on data maintenance. Without the resources to professionalize, many local party actors will be unlikely to overcome the learning curve and integrate data into party activities.

Local party leaders are not luddites. They talk often and excitedly about data and its current and potential importance to their efforts. Several smaller county parties have volunteers dedicated to data maintenance:

“\"We have a full time VAN person who spends hours on the system providing data to candidates. He is constantly checking the data imputed by national and state organizations for accuracy and content. Our
candidates use (the) VAN extensively and it’s an appreciated asset the state party provides to counties.” 270 (Carson)

Yet as the last chapter illustrated, OFA personnel remain adamant that data itself is worth little outside the OFA networks and culture that many local parties remain at a distance from.

Mechanically, it is conceivable to do voter contact and even recruit volunteers, while eschewing the OFA model and its associated network. Yet for OFA, ignoring the philosophy of volunteer empowerment will stunt contact capacity and therefore the ability to reconstruct Obama’s coalition. Conversely, local party actors feeling of having vital information withheld increased distrust of OFA, making them less amenable to the integration of tactics and networks. It is this propriety view of data, held across multiple party factions that illustrates a lack of a truly joint party mechanism.

Another constant tension in campaign coordination involves the carrying of candidate literature. For national staff, campaign literature pieces are a necessary but largely anachronistic campaign focus. Voter persuasion is most effective when done through the personalized narrative of volunteers (supplemented with the support of analytics). Split ticket voting is not a concern when a Democratic majority is identified, and certainly not one that can be addressed by a palm card. As one OFA RFD says:

“One big question is always how much lit will you carry? So when you’re doing voter contact…will you carry down ticket candidate lit, how far down ticket? Often there’s an agreement where there’s one presidential piece of lit and one county-wide piece of lit that’s all the down ticket (races). I think that was kind of assumed that we would do that, and the idea that we wouldn’t would have been thought of as inconsistent with

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previous practice and so there’s a little bit of tension there in that it’s assumed that we’re going to do this, but we haven’t agreed to do this yet…it’s all on the margins of voter contact impact. The reason we do voter contact is because it changes behavior, because (of the impact of) someone who talks to their neighbor about why their supporting Obama. If undecided, of every hundred voters they talked to, that changes two or three, or four, or maybe five as the top end of that prediction, right? If the message is more complex that dilutes our core message. For turnout…you leave a piece of lit at the door as a reminder of who the candidate is and what our core message is. But if you have two pieces of lit, it is more likely to end up on the coffee table or end up in the trash.\textsuperscript{271}

Local parties and candidates however have long maintained their linkage to the electorate through the ‘party ticket.’ They find it integral for campaigning. Their brand and name recognition is a function of Democratic ‘literature drops’ that anchor them within the community. For local candidates in low salience races, candidate visibility along with the party identifier, are thought vital campaign tactics. Indeed, while broadly, Obama’s victory carried Democrats, Obama’s votes did not always necessarily carry down ticket candidates. Federal level candidates largely paralleled Obama’s success, yet the further down ticket one looks, the more evidence of under-voting and even in some cases party switching.

While perhaps exceptions to the rule of increased coherence of party voting, it is understandable when politicians see evidence of colleagues in competitive seats losing close races in districts that Obama easily carried to be reticent to defer to the national party. Can office-holders be expected to trust new ways of campaigning if the top of the ticket effects remain idiosyncratic?

\textsuperscript{271} Personal communication.
Conclusion

Fragmentation between OFA and the local party infrastructure is not always the case. In a small number of circumstances, OFA organization has not just integrated unevenly with county party structures, but has taken them over. This has tended to be the case in rapidly growing exurban areas such as Warren County. This should not be surprising. Such ‘high social capital’ areas are often most conducive to OFA style organizing. Areas which are experiencing rapid population growth may also give people increased motivation to create social bonds through organizational participation. Because many of these communities tend to lean Republican, minority status may make activists feel their political identity more acutely and instill bonds on that basis.

Yet another important consequence of Republican domination is weak county party structure. These activists face little to no resistance in taking parties over, as there is no strongly entrenched organization to resist. Weakly institutionalized party organization may indeed present more opportunity for newer networks to institutionalize as a party vessel. As these counties continue to grow and competiveness increases, they may be able to respond with greater success in mobilization-- and perhaps with the integration of national and local apparatuses. Whether the capture of formal party structures increases network durability, campaign effectiveness, and party integration will be important questions for further study.

Ohio has been at the fore of the rapid development of new presidential organizational strategies in 2008 and 2012. These strategies have emphasized voter contact and the scientifically targeted mobilization of a Democratic electorate. They suggest a significant shift in the party organizational apparatus. Yet, when viewed from
the ground, these shifts remain unevenly integrated into the permanent institutions of the party. They would be measurable in resources including money, data, activists, and of course most importantly an electoral coalition, that replicates presidential ticket success in off-year elections.

On the national level, coalitional and institutional fragmentation impede efficient resource construction. When we move to the micro level, these forms of fragmentation become even more complex. At the local level, activist cultivation is a function of networks instituted by multiple campaigns, all with different brands, in uneasy alliance with the formal party structure. Peculiar electoral organizations develop varying modes of campaigning ranging from precise micro targeting to blunter instruments of traditional visibility.

Institutional variation at the local level is not just a product of the electoral cycle and fundraising rules, but also highly idiosyncratic levels of competition and resources in each locality. Competition attracts resources, as well as gives incentives for dynamism in campaign strategies. While such resources are in abundance on the presidential level, interaction with highly institutionalized local party structures, developed under very different structural conditions, impedes diffusion and institutionalization over the few months that are the zenith of the campaign season.

This is not to say such efforts have not had a significant effect on party resources. The voter file gives the party a map to its electorate not even dreamed of a few years earlier. Voters are now known block-by-block and precinct-by-precinct, with near pinpoint precision. Local party’s live in an ocean of newly constructed activist networks, experienced in sophisticated electoral operations.
Further, these tensions do not mean integration is completely nonexistent. Almost all interviewed had anecdotal examples of activists, networks, and on occasion even large-scale local organizational diffusion into, if not the explicit local county party, at least what could be viewed as durable resources accessible by party institutions. Many long-time party officials were greatly impressed by OFA’s operation and looked forward to incorporating both activists and organizing techniques. Yet such integration was not deep and systematic enough to move turnout in ways evident at the state level.

What remains absent is effective mediating mechanisms to bond these varying institutions, networks, and campaign modes together in the service of a joint electoral organization. Fragmentation at the upper echelons of the party has impeded the development of high resource vessels that could serve as such a bridge in local level organization building. A disconnect remains between resources exhausted under short-term campaign imperatives and the need for long-term institution building. Relationships, while patterned by structural forces, matter deeply in politics. Mediating structures that bring financial resources, institutional know-how, and (perhaps most importantly) put people in a room together long enough to gain mutual understanding of their institutional position and develop a shared culture can help overcome remaining challenges at the local level.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Fragmentation is at the core of the American electoral system. Yet, the early twenty-first century brought vast and swift changes to modes of political participation. If we think of parties as the vessel of a would-be majoritarian coalition, there are reasons to suggest a strengthening of their logic. For Democratic Party office-seekers, the institutionalization of the Obama coalition presents the clearest, and perhaps only, path to electoral success. Yet, moving effectively and efficiently toward an apparatus in service of this task has remained challenging. Institutional barriers to party building remain steep.

In its formative stages, this project sought to answer simply whether campaign trends that favored mobilization strategies, provided evidence of strengthening party organization and resources. Parties however are not simple. On the one hand, Obama mobilized more people to vote for Democrats than ever before. Yet, the formal institutions of the party, along with its representation in government across the country, is significantly weaker than when he took office. Consensus around the New American Electorate’s destiny appears shattered. In 2016, Democratic performance among the white working class hit lows often thought unimaginable even in the post-Obama era.\(^{272}\) OFA projects, Organizing for America and Organizing for Action, designed to turn the presidential grassroots army into a permanent force, far from revolutionized American

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politics. Rather, the right-wing populist insurgence of 2010 led to increased gerrymandering and restrictive voting laws.

Conventional wisdom in 2007, found Obama’s electoral strategy audacious and unrealistic. The same would be said of Mr. Trump’s eight years later. Certainly, if nothing else, many assumptions about American politics seem ready for discarding. Economic stagnation and social change have had profoundly alienating effects on the average citizen’s relationship to political institutions. The media has made information significantly easier to access, yet facts are more difficult to ascertain. From YouTube ads to ‘fake news’ websites, campaigns and parties exploit these changes, yet can only harness them for a short time. Long-term effects are more difficult to disentangle and manage. Political communication advances quicker than professionals can master. Its consequences unclear.

The future is difficult to predict. Yet what this project illustrates are the multi-dimensional barriers that parties must still hurdle under the American system. However, invention in politics is often a consequence of desperation and necessity. The party, as a collective good that can connect office seekers to a stable majority electorate, remains a potent potential asset. A template has been developed that can provide networks and legibility of such a party electorate, yet ironically, an organizational template to harness this remains at a distance.

In this concluding chapter, I draw attention back to the key themes of this dissertation, pointing to what this research might suggest about contemporary parties

empirically and conceptually. I will also briefly discuss the 2016 election and how the findings of this project can be reconciled with its results.

**The Future of Competition**

Competition sits at the center of the theory of party democracy. As we have seen however, the peculiarities of the American system create many opportunities to insulate politics from competitive dynamics and their consequences. Historically, the Electoral College and senate distorted expressions of national majoritarian preferences. Yet new challenges have also interceded. Spatial sorting of the electorate in states, regions, and localities has created less organically competitive elections. Gerrymandering further exacerbates this process.

Big data has also had a complicated impact on competition. Information lowers costs and creates potential to mobilize voters, easing the task of finding an electorate that could make a candidate or party competitive in a previously safe district. Those looking to restrict competition however have the same tools available. Precision in electorate mapping can also restrict party building strategies. A better understanding of where chances for marginal effects are greatest means an increasingly narrow focus for resource distribution. Ironically, this may lead to resource overkill in a district, as knowing where voters are does not mean parties and campaigns know what and how much treatment is necessary to influence voting behavior. The marginal impact on a district does not mean that such an infusion of resources is effective, especially when deployed late in a campaign. Once again, campaigns still operating under a candidate-centered paradigm of organizational development may lead to continued inefficiencies. Yet absent a centripetal
organizational force, there is little to correct this. Without a strong party organization to manage and ration resources to build mobilization infrastructure with an eye on the long-term, resources will be concentrated on haphazard infusions in few areas with the greatest predicted short-term marginal effect.

The decline of local level competition presents an extraordinary challenge for not just party building, but democracy. Grafting parliamentary parties on a system such as ours is not easy. Yet, districts siloed by party, where one-party is destined to rule, are not sustainable in the American system. Our system’s design does not account for such extreme polarization. A patchwork of one-party fiefdoms is simply unworkable under American institutions designed for deliberation and compromise. Reforms for fairer districting would help, yet as polarization has turned this into a zero-sum game, the impediments to reform seem profound.

Could electoral reform gain popular salience? The public consistently derides the gridlock that has become characteristic of late period American government.275 Yet mass pressure for complicated procedural reform, subject to multiple levels of government, through a patchwork American system, remains a difficult ask of the average citizen. Democrats have claimed that if they were to win broad majorities, this would be at the top of their agenda.276 Yet such concurrent majorities will not happen tomorrow, and even if they were to exist, such notions of reform are easy to support in the abstract, but

more difficult when they can harm the electoral fortunes of constituent party politicians. Office-holders rarely legislate themselves out of a safe seat.

**RPG and Polarization**

Responsible Party Government advocates yearned for the grafting of parliamentary parties over the American system. They imagined that the development of strong and deliberate parties could overcome systematic barriers that our constitution puts in the place of majority governance. Yet, fragmentation at the core of our system, led to new developments that weaken the logic of parties. Politics were in fact nationalized, yet institutions that political actors must be responsive to maintain decentralizing and segmenting dynamics. Political contention is national and ideologically coherent, but electoral institutions remain largely the providence of state-level rules.

If coherence makes parties more responsible, it does so at the price of introducing a new set of mechanical problems for the majority party. A minority party has many opportunities and the incentive to use its vested power to complicate the already near Herculean task of majority rule. Recent history has shown nationalization and polarization can create an ideologically and politically coherent minority, that can not only limit a majority party’s agenda through obstruction, but capitalize on perceived government dysfunction electorally.\(^{277}\) RPG assumes that by simplifying the process, the average voter can better ascertain who to reward and punish come election time through party cues.\(^{278}\) Recent work however, has laid doubts to even the most modest claims of


retrospective voting. Yet even if one remains vigilant in their optimism for this basic democratic linkage, polarization and coherence combine to produce a strong logic of minority obstruction to majority rule, and produces a dynamic of presidential party weakness. Cross-pressures of party, ideology, and section historically incentivized cooperation for a critical mass of congress. Contemporary minority parties’ members, need only concern themselves with constituents largely antagonistic toward the ruling party, and interest group allies dependably opposed to that party’s agenda. In such an environment, little power exists for the president and their party to influence opposition party office-holders.

A myriad of electoral rules can further stymie institutionalization of a majority. A coherent minority party, with the help of aligned interest groups, increased gerrymandering. In an immediate sense, this distorts representation in both state and federal government. Yet really, its most devastating long-term impact is its effect on party building. Variation in competition lies at the center of coordination problems facing a party’s constituent politicians. The lesser the level of competition, the less dependence there is on the party as a necessary electoral tool.

Minority coherence has also supported efforts to erect barriers to the franchise. Judicial and legislative strategies have made voting harder over this period in many states. Historically such strategies have been the domain of the local party. Nationalization however, has produced greater coherence and concentrated in service of

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the purveyors of such tactics. Once again, the clear immediate impact is the depression of
the vote to the partisan advantage of the party with the smaller but more consistent
electorate. Yet a less direct, but more significant, consequence is such barriers impact on
the political calculation of politicians to pursue mobilization. If costs of mobilization
make it ineffective as an electoral strategy, office-seekers will not to pursue it. This
means on a local level, eschewing party vessels for efficient mobilization, and leads to
further disjuncture between the local level and any national party apparatus pursuing
party mobilization. High resource national campaigns have a chance to overcome
marginally higher barriers to voting by still pursuing mobilization; for low resource local
races, this will usually not be the case.

If RPG hoped coherence could strengthen American democracy, it appears to
have undersold how many bullets it leaves in the chamber of a threatened coherent
minority to take advantage of institutional rules. This does not just impede majoritarian
efforts to govern, but wreaks havoc on the endogenous logic that undergirds party
building. Minority parties have opportunities for all sorts of mischief to weaken
unconsolidated coalitions in our system. Notably this does not entail peeling off factions
from that majority coalition, as ‘healthy’ party competition under democratic regimes
suggests,\(^{282}\) rather using the ample tools our system presents to weaken the internal logic
of the majority coalition. This makes mobilization and the resulting programmatic
possibilities of party government arduous, if not sometimes seeming near impossible.

\(^{282}\) Downs, Anthony. "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy." *Journal of
Political Economy* 65.2 (1957): 135-150.
The System of 2010?

Changes in campaigning have affected party organization on the national, state, and local level. Communication structures, activist networks, and the electorate itself have been upended by recent political and technological change. Yet party organization still must struggle against a system designed to stymie the institutionalization of a majority coalition. Madison himself, who as constitutional architect and philosopher railed about the dangers of the majority faction, was quickly rebuked by Madison the politician, who saw the largeness of the republic itself as more than enough to constrain majoritarian passions. Yet constitutional barriers to party government persisted and grew as a function of minority faction entrepreneurs taking advantage of anti-party sentiment to protect against threats of consolidated majority power.

Schattschneider, describing what he called “the system of 1896” argued party competition at the turn of the twentieth century dulled through state level electoral monopolies. Since then, nationalization and party coherence have had a complicated effect on competition. At the statewide level, competition in strategically important races is more important than ever. Mobilization efforts (and demobilization efforts) have become increasingly integral to campaigning. Yet local organization remains hollowed out. Mobilization is counteracted by anticompetitive strategies that dissipate the internal

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284 Madison, in 1792: “The Republican party, as it may be termed, conscious that the mass of people in every part of the union, in every state, and of every occupation must at bottom be with them, both in interest and sentiment, will naturally find their account in burying all antecedent questions, in banishing every other distinction than that between enemies and friends to republican government, and in promoting a general harmony among the latter, wherever residing or however employed.” Madison, James. "A Candid State of Parties." National Gazette 22 (1792).
resource construction of local parties and increase their incongruity with national organizations.

In 1896, the Democratic-Populist coalition failed because of an inability to link urban immigrant party machines with rural farmer populists. Coalitional fragmentation presented an opening for antagonistic forces to install further barriers to its possible future success. Bryan’s would-be coalition was still a threat to powerful interests. They responded by passing electoral reforms that reduced competition, mobilization, and the broad outlawing of fusion voting. This curtailed the organizational logic of the Bryan coalition. With the machine and fusion weakened, building such a coalition was doomed. Perhaps a tempting historical counterfactual is that a Bryan victory, having established this coalition at the federal level, could have invested in it the power to resist eventual changes in electoral rules that ultimately made its viability untenable.

Yet in 2008 victory, not just for a president but a party coalition, was still not enough. Like 1896, a set of powerful interests pursued a national strategy of institutional reform designed to curb a potential consolidated majority. That redistricting would come after a midterm election is an unhappy coincidence for Democrats. Minority status did not prevent these counter-forces from capitalizing not just on this historical accident, but the institutional advantages conferred on minority interests. The American electoral system gave them capacity to pursue multiple strategies, preventing party government and further undermining competition and organizational development. If the Democratic electorate can only be competitive in presidential years, it will remain at a disadvantage. Uneven performance in congress, state, and local government, means lacking influence

\[286\] Ibid.
over electoral rules, starving the party of its potential farm team for higher office, and limiting the programmatic power of party to deliver policy goods for its constituents and consolidate its coalition.

The system of 1896 was one in which the threat of a majoritarian coalition with an eye on brokering class-based preferences was thwarted by various localized mechanisms that undermined competition and the logic of mobilization. Today, party mobilization remains frustrated by oppositional attempts to erect new barriers to voting and limiting local competition through partisan redistricting. Only through victories at the state-level and control over electoral institutions, can such structures be reshaped and overcome.

Indeed, the electorate of 2008 is frustrated by the system of 2010. Momentary success created a profound threat for an opposition party, supported by a smaller yet more coherent electorate and powerful aligned special interests, united in concern about the consequences of Democratic governance. Institutional fragmentation further exacerbates coalitional tensions bound to rise as majority status is threatened. The system of 1896 was only undone decades later after American economic catastrophe. Such devastation finally bonded Bryan’s urban/rural majority as the New Deal coalition. Extreme crisis did what national party entrepreneurs and organization could not.287

Top of the Ticket-Centered Campaigning

In the late twentieth century, elections were ‘candidate-centered,’\textsuperscript{288} with party organization passively complementing individual campaign constructions as a ‘party-in-service.’ Yet polarization and digitalization may be altering this dynamic. If parties have not regained their machine-like centripetal force on resources, coalitional coherence and transparency have increased incentives to focus electoral strategy on mobilizing a party ticket. However, resources are cultivated and deployed by top of the ticket campaigns, not a party boss. In the place of robust and institutionalized party organizations are individual high resource campaigns that build a mobilization apparatus, which down ticket party candidates can free ride upon. Yet these constructions are idiosyncratic, ephemeral, and should not be confused with a satisfactory replacement for a durable mass party organ. Top of the ticket races control resources. As such, the top of the ticket maintains primary responsibility for electoral resource construction. The conundrum yet remains that the top of the ticket changes from election to election. Party organization traditionally, at the least, intendeds to be a bridge between such campaigns. Yet the candidate-centered era has exacerbated vertical fragmentation in the American system. Numerous vessels, with varying relationships to parties, exist for electoral resource construction, all serving different specific prerogatives. Top of the ticket candidates control resources, yet there are deep barriers to the construction of collective goods, even at the state level, where presidential and gubernatorial candidates seek to mobilize similar electorates.

\textsuperscript{288} Wattenberg, 1990; 1991.
All top of the ticket races are not created equally. While at the presidential level, incumbency is not the chief driver of funding, this is often the case for gubernatorial candidates in states such as Ohio. Incumbency dictates fundraising, not just for the candidate, but the state party organization. Incumbency also gives coherence to the state party as an organization. Yet presidential victory does little to institute resources or manage political actors on the state level. Fragmentation continues, as the primary resource provider changes from election to election. This variation is not just at the individual level, but is an institutional logic. Presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial candidates all have not only different strategies, but also varying institutional linkages with down ticket candidates and considerations.

The central paradox is that despite incentivizes for mobilization and party coherence, organization struggles to escape candidate-centered vessels. The top of the ticket must reconstitute the party repeatedly, assuming the costs of doing so, bringing latent networks back to life or starting from scratch. In yesteryear, the party boss’ durability solved the collective action problem of permanent infrastructure building. Yet today, party chairs (at all levels) are either brokers of a top of the ticket incumbent, serving at their pleasure and structurally aligned with their institutional logic; or they preside over an out-party, which will often struggle at the state and local level to raise the resources necessary to develop organization and build infrastructure. One way or another, the incentives and resources for robust party building do not line up. Institutional weakness begets institutional weakness.

The party, as a set of latent resources is perhaps stronger than we have ever seen. Coherence, data, and money present a clearer electorate and activist base than historically
possible. Yet fragmentation impedes organization building, as party actors still reach out for their idiosyncratic slices of the party pie absent the quadrennial presidential top of the ticket. Who can create the boss, but the boss? Nationalized parties mean coherence is subject to the coordination problems of the federal system. When party resources were under local control, organizational logic and development followed. Yet national parties have the entire panoply of fragmenting mechanisms in the American system standing in the way of their development. If the burden falls on the national top of the ticket, incentives for party building are weaker and challenges far deeper than for the amalgamated local machines of the mass party era. Such campaigns will not have the capacity to reconstruct the party locally, but must use their resources to override it.

Mobilization has two primary components: data and field. Party organization has advanced greatly in building data infrastructure. Any candidate with VAN access has a knowledge of the (and their) electorate that could only be dreamed of just a few years ago. Yet capitalizing on this requires an equally robust field program. Here, the development of durable party infrastructure has been significantly weaker. Instead, it is the responsibility of the top of ticket to construct such an apparatus. Capacity and desire remains idiosyncratic. Resources and electoral competition remain necessary prerequisites.

The 2016 Election: The Failure of Party Building

In liberal democracies parties are supposed to serve as a linkage between the citizenry and the state. Yet at this moment, their ability to do so appears in grave
Party and civil society decline has resulted in a vicious cycle of delinking citizens from the institutions expected to represent them. Communication is more democratic, but the state as a mechanism to protect citizens has been weakened and lost legitimacy in the eyes of much of the public. Alienation from, and antipathy toward, elite institutions has been thought to have aided in the rise of not just Donald Trump on the right, but Bernie Sanders on the left.

The election of 2016 presented a compelling test of whether Democratic victory in 2008 and 2012 was a function of institution building or simply Obama’s narrative appeal. Superficially, the case for the former is difficult. Democratic vote share regressed across the country. Turnout among the various groups within the Obama coalition declined. Beyond this, the ramifications of a coalition overrepresented in urban areas, structurally underrepresented in American government, were laid bare. Much was made, in the weeks and months following the election, of how this has starved Democrats on the state and local level over the past eight years.

Bernie Sanders, a self-proclaimed independent socialist, whose primary challenge to Hillary Clinton—now the preferred candidate of Obama and his team-- was far more
successful than even his most optimistic supporters could have imagined. That a candidate, who does not even identify as a Democrat did so well, demonstrates how difficult consolidation over this period has been. Significant amounts of Democratic primary voters were moved by a message openly hostile to the Democratic Party as an institution. Moving beyond Obama’s insurgent message, Sanders often advanced a critique of a broadly coopted party duopoly. This critique found resonance among liberal and especially young voters—staples of Obama’s primary and general election coalition.

The 2016 primary seemed to suggest a reopening of the intra-party tensions that plagued the party’s progressive wing before Obama. Sanders had great success among the youth vote, but struggled greatly with African-American voters. This could in part be attributed to his distance (and perhaps critique) of Obama, as well as an outsider strategy that often did not cultivate community leaders effectively. Yet the difficulty of holding the Obama coalition together without Obama, is a clear indicator that no institutional mechanism has been built that can be depended on to bind the party’s presidential electorate together.

The success of anti-establishment and anti-institutional frames point to both the failure of the party to provide this linkage, as well as the consequence of party weakness. A lack of organizational consolidation could in part explain the aggravating of coalitional rifts. The party could not consolidate its majority; it could therefore not provide sufficient programmatic goods for its majority; and so the party turned to recriminations of itself. This tension continued into the general election, with many Sanders loyalists continuing

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294 Sanders who was considered a mere protest candidate at the start of the race won 43% of the vote, 39% of delegates, and 23 of the 65 nominating contests.
295 Sanders won the youth (17-29) vote by 44%, yet lost the African-American vote by 54%; http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/voter-demography/
to be skeptical and critical toward Clinton. In addition, while Clinton was successful in mobilizing the black primary electorate, she fell well short of Obama’s numbers in the general election. This and her continued struggles with young voters were clear factors in her loss.

The effectiveness of Clinton’s field efforts has been a point of contention since the election. While her data team were confident that they were gliding toward a modest but safe victory, her modeling appeared off. Yet her field trouble might have been less attributable to faulty mechanics than a simple lack of enthusiasm. Integration and efficient distribution of financial resources cannot overcome the necessity of a robust volunteer activist base to run a successful high turnout field apparatus. While it is incumbent on party officials to structure organization in ways open and efficient for building volunteer voter contact infrastructure, top of the ticket activist enthusiasm is also an integral ingredient.

Was weak party organization causally determinant? In an election as close as 2016, any number of variables are a safe bet for having a deciding influence. Field campaigning pays dividends in high resource states decided on the margins. Here, Clinton did far worse than Obama, losing several deciding states by fractions of a percentage point. One can blame Clinton the candidate, or her campaign. However, party

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296 The black vote would decline overall by 7% in from 2012, with Trump garnering 7% more of the black vote than Romney four years earlier: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html
infrastructure is supposed to protect against such idiosyncrasies, especially with an opponent who is anathema to the party base. As mentioned above, all tops of the ticket are not created equal. A party over-dependent on its momentary lodestar is always assuming substantial risk.

What the Future Holds

Political professionals have become increasingly interested in field experiments, attempting to identify scientific mechanics of mobilization.\(^{299}\) For all their hope, no set of practices has so far overcome the scourge of low salience. Voter contact remains an inexact science. Yet faith persists that it remains the future of value-added campaigning. However, if hampered by inefficient party organizational structures, even the most precise campaign treatments will produce suboptimal results.

More and more money goes toward narrow, yet dynamic localities. Local institutions, not subject to influxes in resources and consistent competition, are charged with (quite literally) carrying the party banner. Strengthening majoritarian institutions follows strategically from the tenuous electorate of one of the major parties. Yet it must navigate both internal tensions that turn its own actors away from this long-term strategy, as well as an opposition party devoted not to finding their own majority through competition, but limiting the Democratic vote through anti-competitive practices.

What can a party dependent on a sporadic high salience coalition do in low salience elections? Demographic drift is unlikely to stop. Presuming coalitional stability, the Republican Party will find itself operating on increasingly unfriendly electoral turf.

\(^{299}\) The Analyst Institute was formed in 2007 to synthetize professional and social science knowledge of campaign practices and experiments.
Marginal effects of barriers that minimize turnout, and even the most efficient of gerrymandering efforts, can only go so far in mitigating this.

Mechanisms of fragmentation will appear different depending on the perspective from which you view them. Yet what remains consistent is coalitional and institutional incongruities between political actors and their party team. This disjuncture is a process of path dependent history that any actor must navigate. An abstract notion of the importance of party building does not obviate the short-term electoral prerogatives that predominate for office-seekers who constitute a party.

At the national level, we see fragmentation through its two baseline dimensions: horizontally in the big tent party of a large republic and vertically through institutional rules. The closer one gets to the ground, the more granularly one can see how campaign organization remains at the mercy of these tensions. One party, many factions, many logics. An opposition happily jumping on already tilted scales is not a new phenomenon in American elections.

National level politics is an amalgamation of this disjuncture, as it affects the various actors in the party. This is clear in the national party structure, itself fragmented by organizational vessels focused on different offices. As has been illustrated, the president as party leader, even one with long coattails, constructs organization at odds with the priority of many party actors. Aggregating a national presidential majority is a tough enough task in itself. Yet bridging the gaps that separate various faction within the Democratic Party is critical if it is to actualize the Obama coalition as a governing majority.
This dissertation does not provide a precise measurement of (1) how responsible field was for Democratic success and failures over the period of study, nor (2) how generalizable the processes described have been. Several studies have attempted to ascertain the effects of field treatments, yet to what extent field organization could have improved Democratic prospects remains an open question. This project does not pose an answer, instead accepting that field organization is one important treatment that influences voter behavior, and that more of it practiced effectively produces marginal gains for campaigns. Further, micro-processes describing organizational tensions rest on largely qualitative characterization that nonetheless reflect rough consensus among party actors, as illustrated by primary research and journalistic accounts. They are nonetheless broad attempts at characterization of highly idiosyncratic processes. Yet they aim to provide empirical description and conceptual heft to a set of phenomena that frustrate party organizational development.

This project hopes to have initiated a cursory attempt to conceptualize and map contemporary party organization. It attempts to put forth a framework describing the national, state, and local level: illustrating how electoral resources are constructed, and the structural constraints that impede even and efficient party building. Much further research is needed, adding detail and generalizability to these processes. State party

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organization remains understudied, despite states being the locus of American electoral institutions. Ohio, as a case, illustrates the advantages and difficulties of attempting to build state infrastructure while being a top priority presidential battleground. While its successes and failures map reasonably neatly on the national story, the study of other states will yield significant variation and value. States that are not competitive at the presidential level, or in other statewide elections, will follow different logics. This will be a function of competition, as well as relationship to national party structures. Whatever difficulties the ODP faced organizationally, it was still responding to dynamics of competitive statewide elections. Deep blue and red states will likely function very differently.

Local organization is also only discussed here in the broadest terms. This project sought to sketch the logic of general intraparty incongruities as they manifest themselves on the local level. Contemporary local party organization also suffers from a lack of scholarly attention, especially using qualitative research to map relationships. This knowledge is hard to gain through existing data sets. Yet as this project makes clear, national-level mobilization is a product of the building and integration of local-level infrastructure. There is much to gain by detailed mapping of county level organization and networks. How electoral campaign organizations function on the ground, over time; where, when, and to what extent, it institutionalizes as organization capable of consistently mobilizing on behalf of a party ticket, is of utmost importance to understanding contemporary American parties and elections. Understanding how variation in resources and competition produce variation in patterns of local organizations is key.
While there is a body of emerging research mapping donor and even activist networks, what this dissertation has hoped to do is place a politician-centered view of resource construction back into consideration. All sorts of networks exist exogenous to organization controlled by office-seekers. Yet parties, and party weakness (defined as incongruity and inefficiency in organization) remains patterned by politicians, not aligned interest groups. Analysis that avoids conceptualizing party structures as driven by a team of politicians electorally and organizationally linked to a majority, at relative levels of strength and coherence, is likely to miss important phenomena.

Party organization as traditionally understood, strengthens state-society linkages by connecting politicians to an electorate without mediating interest organizations. The difficulties of constructing such organization in the American system should be central to any analysis of party networks. That interest organization fills the vacuum created by weakness of the classically conceived party is the basis of Schattschneider’s framework.

What lies in the future for the Democratic Party? After 2016, the lag between the presidential election and the race for DNC chair, left the formal organization of the Democratic Party unequipped to harness the anti-Trump activism bursting all over the country. In this vacuum, new decentralized digitally based organization, took hold. Most notable was Indivisible, less an actual organization than a how-to manual adopted by thousands of local chapters with loose national coordination. These networks (at the time of writing) have in most cases no relationship with formal party structures or

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301 Skocpol and Hertzel-Fernandez, 2016.
303 https://www.indivisibleguide.com/web/
politicians, yet they represent the primary vessel of activity early in the Trump era. How they will integrate with the Democratic Party is still an open question.

The major puzzle remains whether the party can transcend short-term electoral logics on behalf of a long-term strategy of infrastructure building. As this dissertation has sought to demonstrate, politicians change strategy slowly and reluctantly. Styles and modes of campaigning are path dependent practices. The benefits of incumbency mean that successful office-holders are going to be unlikely to adopt to new modes of campaigning to win unnecessary marginal benefits. Only when dislodged from stability can we expect actors to make a dramatic shift. If nothing else, the Democratic Party does appear to be currently dislodged. Rhetorical gestures by party leaders since Trump’s election suggest a party with a renewed commitment to organization building. The two main candidates for DNC chair both made central to their platform using the DNC to revive a more muscular version of Dean’s 50 state strategy, with a focus on local party infrastructure building.\(^{304}\) Chuck Schumer, now perhaps the most powerful Democrat in office, has articulated strong support for this approach.\(^{305}\) One thing that appears beyond contention is that things change very quickly in contemporary American politics. The 2020 election, a presidential year after which the decennial redistricting process will take place, represents a generational opportunity for a presidential coalition to grasp power over the process. Whether the party can take advantage of this, not just on the federal


level, but in state representation all over the country, will pattern American politics through the middle of the century. A reconstitution of the Obama coalition in 2018 and 2020 could have seismic impact on representation and eventually policy. The Republican Party’s viability is dependent on institutional insulation from this coalition. Shifting this terrain could put the Democrats in position to overcome the legislative veto powers of the GOP. Yet, such ambitions are married to maximizing turnout across the nation in elections taking place between now and then, reconstituting and reinvigorating currently moribund party structures with its base’s new anti-Trump energy. The clock is ticking.
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