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Party Structure in Theory and in Practice

Organized Parties, Volunteer Parties, and Their Evolution

At an abstract level, it is easy to make an argument for the virtue of an effort to isolate and examine the impact of party structure. Political parties are the great intermediary institutions of democratic politics. Yet they inevitably transform and not just transmit public wishes. It is hard to imagine how their internal structure would not be central to that transformation. So the effort to unpack these influences should be inherently virtuous, that is, intrinsically connected to question of policy responsiveness and democratic representation. Yet the moment this effort shifts to the operational level, embedding a theoretical argument in the practical details of American politics, problems surface, likewise inherently.

Intermediary institutions are by definition connected to much else in the political process. Citizens have social backgrounds that shape the demands falling upon state parties in a powerful way. Pennsylvania will be an industrial state and Iowa a farm state whichever party model each approximates. Issues of the day go on to impinge on those parties with a force that their internal structure can mitigate but rarely dismiss. There are wars, recessions, and disasters, along with partially autonomous social movements, and these are unlikely to confine themselves to states with only one party type. Voters themselves acquire partisan identifications that may in fact be reciprocally shaped by life in an organized or volunteer party but are rarely altered by party structure alone at any single point in time.

And always in the background, interacting with all such social forces while offering a historically remarkable stability, is the US Constitution as governmental framework. In other words, we are trying to tease out the influence of an omnipresent factor – party structure – that is nevertheless

rarely the single dominant influence on political outcomes. On the other hand, these challenges do at least come almost prepackaged, with a nearly inescapable way of proceeding. The first step is to create defensible measures of the presence and distribution of organized and volunteer parties across an extended period of time, that time being the years from 1950 to 2010 for our purposes. This is the task of Chapter 1.

Thereafter, with policy responsiveness and democratic representation as the focus, it becomes necessary to apply these measures and search for distinctions between them with regard to public preferences and their transmission. The good news here is that the American National Election Study (ANES) now includes sixty years of survey evidence on policy preferences, and these do permit the creation of scales tapping partisan representation in major policy domains across the postwar years. Within them, it is additionally possible to isolate specific preferences by political era for the four key partisan populations in such an analysis: Democratic activists, the Democratic rank and file, the Republican rank and file, and Republican activists. That is the task of Chapters 2 and 3.

Underneath all of that, the two leading questions are simple enough to ask, if devilishly tricky to resolve. How are active partisans related to their rank and files in organized versus volunteer parties? And what do these activists contribute to the ideological positioning of the two party types in the process of managing partisan affairs? Chapter 4 brings back the answers that are contributed (and scattered) along the way, assembling them into a small set of larger and recurring impacts.

First, least common but most dramatic when they actually appear are differences in the overall partisan alignment of major policy domains. The question here is whether alternative party models go so far as to *align* the four main partisan populations in fundamentally different ways. This is a high standard of impact, yet it is met at various times with various policy domains, and when it is, the differential contributions of party structure stand out.

Second, more reliably present are contributions from party structure to the behavior of the active parties, that is, the aggregate populations of activist Democrats and activist Republicans. The key consideration here is the nature and scope of *partisan polarization*, both the distance between the active parties and the degree to which one or the other set of party activists shapes it disproportionately. Party structure proves to be reliably enmeshed in these activist divisions.

Third and most consequential is the question of how an active party relates to its own rank and file. There are periods and issues in which

active parties sit cheek by jowl with their partisans. These, however, are rare: there is usually some distance between party activists and their rank and file, a distance that changes by political era and by policy domain. Despite such variation, the evolution of this *representational gap* tends to be additionally shaped by party type. This is the most theoretically apt measure of representational difference by party structure as well as the least confounded by other factors that also effect the transmission of preferences.

Last but most common are impacts limited to single partisan populations – Democratic or Republican, activist or rank and file – each of which is fully capable of major policy shifts without any echoing impact from its opposite numbers. Differences in party structure almost always distinguish such shifts additionally, and the postwar period comes close to offering all the logical possibilities: Democratic activists moving (leftward) on their own, Republican activists moving (rightward) with the same autonomy, Democratic rank and files standing to the left of their own active parties, Republican rank and files standing to the right of theirs, all four populations polarizing simultaneously, and activists polarizing while their rank and files stay put.

The effort in Chapter 1 to set up this analysis begins in the first section with a quick summary of the relevant literature from the mid-twentieth century, when the topic returned as a major analytic concern. Relevant indicators, producing the essential scale, will be gathered and analyzed in the section after that. Next, it becomes important to demonstrate that these concrete indicators and their composite scale can be linked convincingly to the rich but impressionistic literature from which they grew. All that accomplished, the chapter can go on to trace the actual distribution of organized and volunteer parties in the American states across the postwar period, 1950–2010. This proves to be largely a familiar story, now systematically supported but with fresh nuances and an enlarged reach. Chapters 2 and 3 can then turn to its democratic impact.

THE POSTWAR SCHOLARLY BACKDROP

The strong political parties of the nineteenth century, built around the spoils of politics – jobs, contracts, and favors – and mounting army-type campaigns to maintain control of those spoils, were a revelation when they appeared.[1] The Jacksonians brought them to life as an institutional

[1] Silbey, *The American Political Nation*.

form; the years after the Civil War brought them a level of fungible resources never previously seen. Yet those years also brought a chorus of disenchantment, whose members saw the need for some institutional alternative. Their dissent from the organized model of party structure had both theoretical and practical roots. The high costs of corruption associated with this organized model,[2] along with the insulation from politics that followed for those not among the social groups supplying party retainers,[3] caused the Progressives to go to war on existing arrangements by way of a fresh and comprehensive alternative.

Their volunteer model valorized an educated and disinterested citizenry, and it quickly acquired a phalanx of associated reforms that were intended to bring the model into being and buttress it thereafter. Major elements within this alternative structure included the secret ballot, civil service, and primary elections, though the full panoply would become voluminous.[4] Yet what resulted was hardly a rapid transformation but rather a long incremental conflict between (a) differing approaches to party business, (b) differing constituencies seeking to shape public policy, and at bottom (c) differing conceptions of democratic politics – featuring two models with distinctive internal arrangements at the center of these ongoing struggles in the fifty states.

At the same time, the long war over party structure was implicit evidence of the degree to which both scholarly theorists and practical politicians continued to believe that the internal arrangements of political parties mattered to policy responsiveness and democratic representation. Anecdotal reports on the intensity of the battle, usually accompanied by rhetorical arguments about its consequences, were readily available.[5] Yet systematic evidence for the truth of these beliefs remained in surprisingly short supply. In what ways did party structure matter? Where did it matter? When did it matter? The main purpose of this chapter, then, must be to assemble the systematic indicators, ideally leading to the creation

[2] Mark W. Summers, *The Era of Good Stealings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3] Arthur S. Link & Richard L. McCormick, *The Progressives* (Arlington Heights, VA: Harlan Davidson, 1983).

[4] Alan Ware, *The American Direct Primary: Party Institutionalization and Transformation in the North* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), follows the fortunes of the most stereotypical reform device, the public primary election.

[5] For example, Edward J. Flynn, *You're the Boss: My Story of a Life in Practical Politics* (New York: Viking Press, 1947). The jacket proclaims, "This is the story of the man who has ruled politics in the greatest Democratic county north of the Mason-Dixon line – New York's Bronx – for a quarter-century and has never lost a local election there."

of a defensible scale, which would permit cataloguing the comparative progress of two alternative models and then searching for the actual impact of organized versus volunteer political parties.

There was a general sense among those who studied these developments impressionistically and through specific historical cases that the onward march of party reform and its volunteer model was the dominant story of the ongoing war. Official party structures of the traditional kind – fully developed, fully staffed, fully resourced, and effectively hierarchical – reliably seemed less common than they had once been, and they occasioned more comment in places where they did exist. Yet there was little historic benchmarking of a systematic sort through which to back up – or dissent from – this general sense – that is, until a set of major efforts toward just such a picture began to appear in the mid-twentieth century, with results that occasioned some surprise.

Efforts to think about the intermediary structure of American political parties in the postwar world usually begin with the work of James Q. Wilson. In a crucial early article from Wilson and Peter B. Clark, the authors set out a theoretical framework for linking incentive systems with structural impacts.[6] Within this framework, Clark and Wilson argued that the crucial maintenance activity of any organization was to mobilize and distribute incentives, that all such incentives had consequences for individual behavior, and that changing the nature of these incentives would thus alter institutional (and not just individual) activity. They then classified their incentives in three general categories: *material*, the most tangible and fungible; *solidary*, the most social and associational; and *purposive*, the most substantive and ends related: "If the behavior of organizations is closely related to their incentive systems, the dynamics of organizational change may be predicted by knowing the circumstances under which incentive systems change."[7]

A dozen years later, Wilson took this theory onward, applying it to the full range of organizations regularly involved in American politics in the book-length *Political Organizations*.[8] Yet his crucial elaboration for our purposes, focusing the theory on political parties, came in chap. 6, where Wilson tied his three categories of incentives to what were in principle three types of party structure: "The Machine," "The Purposive

[6] Peter B. Clark & James Q. Wilson, "Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 6(1961), 129–166.
[7] Ibid., 149.
[8] James Q. Wilson, *Political Organizations* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

Party," and "Solidary Parties." Each featured different patterns of recruitment, different operating priorities, and different contributions to policy outputs. Yet while this analytic schema had room for all three party types, there was from the first an underlying dichotomy in Wilson's further argument, one based on the first two polar types. In turn, these generated his ideal-typical participants, the "professionals" and the "amateurs":

> A decentralized party structure will, among other things, use a variety of appeals to enlist members. And for each kind of incentive, there is a corresponding organizational style and pattern of internal control, though perhaps not a characteristic strategy. . . . A political machine is a party organization relying chiefly on the attraction of material rewards. These rewards include patronage jobs, preferents, economic opportunities, and finally, exemptions. . . .
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> This does not mean that considerations of policy are entirely absent from materially induced party organizations. One policy in particular is of great importance – namely, whether or not the candidate is prepared to take care of his supporters if elected. And publicly, policy is much discussed. . . . Partly, this is ammunition being passed out to workers so that they in turn can use it on voters, most of whom receive nothing of material value directly from the party but whose questions and concerns need to be dealt with.[9]

While at the other end of the continuum:

> By "amateur" is meant a person who finds an enterprise – here, politics – intrinsically rewarding because it expresses a commitment to a larger purpose. Though an amateur is not indifferent to considerations of partisan and personal advantage or unmoved by the sheer fun of the game or the opportunities to meet people and wield influence, he is distinctive in that he takes the content of public policy and the outcomes of government seriously.
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> Because establishing the proper relationship between means and ends is vital to the amateur, he is concerned with devising mechanisms to ensure not only that the right ends are selected, but also that they are selected for the right reasons and that effort toward them on the part of political leaders is continuous and sincere. Accordingly, political amateurs in this country, and perhaps generally, are vitally interested in mechanisms to ensure the intraparty accountability of officeholders and party leaders. . . . The concern for policy implies a concern for mechanisms, such as intraparty democracy, to ensure that the correct policy is followed. In addition, a chance to participate in making decisions is in itself an important incentive for members of amateur clubs.[10]

By the time Wilson was applying this theoretical argument to the available alternatives for American politics, he believed that the effort had gained urgency because the balance of party types in the United States

[9] Ibid., 97, 100. [10] Ibid., 106–107.

was in fact shifting decisively, from material incentives and hierarchical organization to purposive incentives and the volunteer party:

> The chief consequences of these trends have been a change in the process of candidate selection and in the nature of electoral appeals. Party organizations composed of persons motivated by material rewards have a strong interest in winning an election, for only then will their rewards be secured. Provided there are competitive parties, candidates, at least at the top of the ticket, will be selected and electoral appeals fashioned so as to attract votes from the largest possible number of citizens. When the organization consists of members motivated by purposive rewards, the candidate selected must be one that can attract their enthusiasm, even if he cannot attract voter support, and the appeals issued must be consistent with their preferences, even if voters find them repugnant.[11]

Alan Ware was a second scholar who shared this sense of a crucial turning point in the structural character of American party politics. So, not long after the publication of *Political Organizations*, Ware began a book-length attempt to unpack the specifics of this transition, away from material incentives and an organizational hierarchy among formal officeholders and toward purposive incentives and their social networks among issue activists. *The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization, 1940–1980*[12] features a lament in its opening pages about the absence of wide-ranging and systematic data on party structures nationwide – a dilemma that we attempt to begin addressing in the subsequent pages of this chapter:

> [E]ven those aspects of party organization which could be illuminated by the data pose a problem for the researcher, because so little material of this sort was collected by our predecessors. This means that anyone who wishes to trace, say, the decline in recruitment to party organizations will find hardly any material with which to compare profiles of contemporary organizations.[13]

In an effort to capture this change with sufficient richness to talk about it operationally, Ware focused on three very different locales: New York City, once the stereotypical home of a Democratic Party machine; Denver, a voluntaristic culture that had nevertheless generated a Democratic Party capable of coordinating multiple campaigns; and the East Bay in California, self-consciously hostile to organized politics but producing a network of reform Democratic clubs that performed many of the same

[11] Ibid., 115.
[12] Alan Ware, *The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization, 1940–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
[13] Ibid., 9.

functions in all but name. Careful and rich consideration of these archetypically diverse parties convinced Ware – as they would convince Mayhew in his counterpart national survey – that the demise of material incentives and hierarchical structures had been overstated:

> The main thrust of our argument differs from a popular contemporary view. For we claim that in the 1940s and 1950s, the parties were not becoming so weak that complete collapse in the 1960s was inevitable. Far from being in continual decline since the height of the New Deal, in some respects the parties actually had a brief revival about the middle of the century.[14]

Yet what Ware described as an "Indian Summer" for organized parties did finally come to an end. The late 1960s and 1970s threw up a set of further challenges to these continuing structures, and it was these challenges that would ultimately bring about the demise of old structural arrangements. Leading stresses on the old order still varied from place to place: fratricide in New York, reform in Denver, extremism in the East Bay. But despite their idiosyncratic starting points and regardless of the particular mix of stressors that fell upon these differing incarnations of old-time party structure, the result was generalized, sweeping, and qualitatively different. This result was given further impetus – a further shove – in Ware's argument by the explicitly anti-party issues of the time:

> There can be little doubt that what happened to the Democratic Parties in America between the early 1960s and the late 1970s was truly extraordinary. Within a few years, most of them were transformed.
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> ... [T]here are two important respects in which issue conflicts did harm the Democratic parties. First, they helped to make issue-oriented activists much more skeptical about the value of party; what emerged in the 1960s was issue-activism which was not party-oriented, as it was in the 1950s, but which was prepared to use party institutions for realizing objectives as, and when, they seemed useful. ... Secondly, the issue conflicts actually revived long-standing anti-party sentiments in America, sentiments which were minority ones in the amateur Democratic movement of the 1950s, but which became more apparent in the late 1960s.[15]

At about the same time that Ware was deep-mining his three major cases, David R. Mayhew, in *Placing Parties in American Politics,*[16] was taking the opposite tack. Working on essentially the same problem, Mayhew began by accumulating any and all available reports of party

[14] Ibid., 42. [15] Ibid., 241, 246–247.
[16] David R. Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics: Organization, Electoral Settings, and Government Activity in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

politics in the fifty states and their major localities, whether historical or journalistic. From these, he fashioned a data set that was encyclopedic if still inevitably impressionistic and nothing like a random sample. Like Ware, he lamented the absence of anything even vaguely resembling systematic data on his central phenomenon, party structure. Yet in adopting the opposite strategy in the face of that problem, Mayhew argued that good accounts of the operative nature of politics in major areas almost always revealed its structural principles or, when they did not, reflected the simple fact that such principles were more or less nonexistent:

> One reason for supplying the close documentation on traditional and other sorts of electoral organization . . . is to show that it can be done. Good observers are capable of noticing organization, describing it, and telling what it does. This is important: it produces a suspicion that writers who give detailed accounts of nominating politics without discussing organization are dealing with places that do not have much organization to discuss.[17]

Asking "What if the more fundamental policy-related distinction in the American party sphere of the last century or so has indeed had to do with structure rather than competition?"[18] Mayhew turned to defining his central focus as clearly as possible, so that it could be applied to distinguishing among the state party systems that surfaced from good descriptive accounts. For this, it was the notion of a traditional party organization (TPO) that was specified, elaborated, and mobilized:

> Finally, the special term *traditional party organization* is needed since no other has quite the right meaning. . . . [I]ts acronym TPO will be used interchangeably in the following chapters to refer to any organization at the level of county, city, city ward, township, or other local jurisdiction about which all five of the following statements can be made:
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> 1) It has substantial autonomy . . .
> 2) It lasts a long time . . .
> 3) Its internal structure has an important element of hierarchy . . .
> 4) It regularly tries to bring about the nomination of candidates for a wide range of public offices . . .
> 5) It relies substantially on "material" incentives, and not much on "purposive" incentives, in engaging people to do organizational work or to supply organizational support.[19]

In search of the distribution and evolution of these TPOs, Mayhew came to much the same conclusion as Ware: that the many previous reports of the death of organized parties had been overstated. Like

[17] Ibid., 143. [18] Ibid., 5. [19] Ibid., 19–20.

Ware, however, Mayhew also concluded that the era of the TPOs was indeed coming to a close as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s. Accordingly, a major side benefit to pursuing party structure at that time and in this manner was that it affirmed and reinforced what many authors had treated as a key turning point in the long war over party structure:

> The late 1960s is a good time to inspect because it both closes and samples fairly well a long twentieth-century span between the second and third of three major periods of structural change in American parties – the first being the Jacksonian period, the source of the nineteenth century's characteristic system; the second, the Progressive period, during which national, state, and local parties were substantially overhauled with the effect of producing a hybrid twentieth-century system; and the third, the last decade and a half or so, during which local party organizations have decisively declined and telecommunications processes, candidate organizations, and capital-intensive party organizations have become central features of distinctive new electoral politics.[20]

MEASURING PARTY STRUCTURE

To retreat to basics: the problem common to previous students of the nature and impact of party structure has been that measures that fully satisfy the theoretical distinction between organized and volunteer parties, tapping most especially the nature of internal party careers and the scope of internal party resources, were available only as rare snapshots of a particular place at a single point in time. Or, said the other way around, they were not available nationally at any time, much less regularly across time. As a result, analysts could not check the contribution of party structure to policy responsiveness and democratic representation in anything other than an impressionistic fashion, much less track continuity and change in that contribution in any objective and systematic way.

Formally, this problem is opposite to the one often found in tracking the evolution of public opinion. There, the latent variable in question cannot in principle be measured directly. By contrast, here, the analyst knows exactly what an ideal measure of the latent variable would look like. It remains "latent" only because the relevant direct indicators never were (and never will be) collected. In the end, however, the solution to both problems is the same: collect and analyze a sufficient array of

[20] Ibid., 7.