The Washington Party Networks and the Future of American Politics

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ABSTRACT:

Political parties today can best be understood as matrices of relationships between political actors, rather than merely as formal institutions. This notion allows us to better understand today’s intensely partisan environment. The Washington party networks consist of professionals involved in party politics; some of these individuals hold public office or work for party committees; many others pursue careers as lobbyists, consultants or interest group representatives. As they move from job to job, they remained ensconced in webs of partisan relationships.
What is a political party? Political scientists have devised a variety of definitions, but generally agree that parties are groups of politicians seeking to win office under a common label. In the 1970s and 1980s, political scientists argued that political parties were in steep decline, with voters drifting away from partisanship, and with candidates conducting their own campaigns. Many argued that interest groups, PACs, political consultants, and the mass media had undermined the role of political parties. (Sabato 1981; Polsby 1983; Crotty 1984; Wattenberg 1998; Burnham 1982; Epstein 1986). Although there is now plenty of evidence that parties have strengthened in recent years, whether in their influence on voting behavior, their activities in campaigns, and their strength in government, the decline-of-parties argument remains popular. (For evidence of partisan strength, see Herrnson 2002; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 2000; G. C. Jacobson 2000; Bartels 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2001; Hetherington 2001; Layman 2002; Lawrence 2001; Brewer 2004). Silbey (2002) argues that parties have declined as nonpartisan experts have gained control of an expansive federal government; the mass media and interest groups (both supposedly nonpartisan) have taken over the parties’ role in connecting the people with public life.

Following in the footsteps of Downs (1997 [1957]) and Schlesinger (1991), Aldrich (1995) applies rational-choice theory to political parties. Rather than focusing on party institutions, Aldrich instead argues that parties are endogenous units created by politicians to serve their own needs, especially to solve collective action problems and to reduce uncertainty. A political party is the “creature of the politicians, the ambitious office seeker and officeholder.” Parties are built to respond to specific institutional and historical contexts. Martin Van Buren created the Democratic party as a loose confederation of state factions dominated by patronage-motivated politicians. More recently, in a more candidate-centered era, Bill Brock built up the Republican National
Committee as a party-in-service that provides assistance to office-seekers. If politicians create parties to respond to specific contexts, then parties may take distinctively different shapes under differing circumstances. If parties are fundamentally about assuming power, then their formal organization may not be central to their mission. As Bernstein (2005) points out, while formal party organizations have revived in importance, they seem inadequate to explain the pervasive partisanship of contemporary American politics. Instead, we must look to informal party organizations – party networks.

Political parties today can best be understood not as a series of committees with offices on Capitol Hill, but as webs of relationships between political actors. These networks assist candidates, share information and plot strategy. Personnel move between entities within the same network, but not between those in opposing ones. These networks include both entities and individuals. Political professionals may move from job to job, but remained enmeshed in a web of contacts with their co-partisan peers. Parties are not simply formal entities, such as a national or state party committee. These “party networks” can include elected officials, party officers, political consultants and staffers, longtime contributors and interest group leaders. Members of this network work together to help party candidates win office. They also share common ideological values.

The professionalization of politics has allowed more individuals to both live “off” politics and live “for” politics. Rather than being rewarded with deputy postmasterships or sinecures in the city Parks Department, today’s political professionals can instead seek jobs as chiefs of staff or communications directors, perhaps with an eye to an eventual corner office on K Street. As they move from position to position, professionals remain enmeshed in webs of relationships within their own partisan universes. Even when working as lobbyists or consultants, they remain active in support of their party and its candidates. Aldrich (1995) described contemporary political parties as “parties-in-service,” providing assistance to candidates. Perhaps we now have party-networks-in-
service: amalgamations of party institutions, interest groups and individual activists all working together to elect candidates under a single banner.

We need to understand better the party networks, especially the national party networks centered in Washington. The principal players in these networks include elected officials, congressional staffers, fundraisers, lobbyists, interest group representatives, political consultants, think tank researchers, even some figures in the mass media. Events of the 2004 election cycle vindicate the idea of party networks, including the rise of the so-called “527” organizations and the “new partisan press” of Fox News and conservative talk radio, that show the continuing value of the “party network” concept.

Thinking About Party Networks

Schwartz (1991) developed the idea of a party network through her sociological study of the Illinois Republican Party, in which she found continuing bonds between officeholders, interest groups, and financial contributors. These actors share information, plot strategy and share ideological values. Schlesinger (1985, 1991) describes a “multinuclear” party in which each unit is an individual race; but he also discusses the ties between parties and some political action committees. Indeed, Monroe (2001) points out that 19th century political parties rarely took the form of incorporated entities. Monroe instead argues that political parties can better be understood as webs of relationships between politicians. Monroe bases his findings on a study of elected officials and their staff in Los Angeles County, California.

In recent years, several scholars have turned to the “party network” idea to explain a variety of phenomena in American politics, often applying social network analysis. Cohen et al (2001, 2003, forthcoming) have suggested that political elites have responded to the reform of the presidential nomination process by collaborating to reduce uncertainty. By bringing to bear the resources of the party networks, party leaders
can shape outcomes without the open bargaining of the days of bossism. Dominguez (2005) examines the overlap between donors to parties, PACs and 527 organizations; she finds distinctive Republican and Democratic networks, with similar levels of centralization. Bedlington and Malbin (2003) argue that leadership PACs support the notion of party networks, with many such groups contributing to party candidates in competitive races. These leadership PACs do not simply support the political advancement of their sponsors; they also seem to be concerned with party control -- which will ultimately influence their sponsors’ clout. Using interview data and press coverage, Masket (2002, 2004) finds party networks functioning in California at the local level. Skinner (2004) finds that many of the most politically active interest groups, such as the AFL-CIO and the National Rifle Association, have developed close ties to the parties, and can be best understood as members of the party networks. Bernstein (1999, 2000, 2005) has studied the career paths of activists and campaign professionals; most do not work for one politician over time, but instead move between candidates, formal party organizations, and consulting firms. These political professionals build their careers by moving through the party networks. Koger et al (2005) use another methodology to trace the party networks: by subscribing to political magazines and donating to interest groups and party committees, they are able to track the exchange of address information.

**The Washington Party Networks**

*Contra* Masket, the party networks function nationally, as well as at the state and local levels. The Washington party networks consist of political professionals who have made their careers within the political parties. They also include those institutions closely associated with the parties, not only party committees, but also leadership PACs, think tanks, even some media outlets.
**Party committees:** At the heart of the party networks, of course, are the party committees, which have greatly increased their activities in recent years. These include outreach to other participants in the party networks: briefings for sympathetic PACs, close relationships with leading consultants, distribution of “talking points” to supportive bloggers and talk show hosts. The Capitol Hill campaign committees have become one-stop-shopping-places for congressional candidates. (Herrnson 1988, 2003; Kolodny 1998).

**Officeholders and staff:** Despite the many candidate-centered aspects of our political system, most officeholders are elected on a partisan basis, and many are deeply involved in party politics. Recent presidents, such as George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan, have been more involved in the affairs of their parties than their predecessors were. (Skinner 2005b). The parties that these presidents lead are not the decentralized, non-ideological federations of the 19th century. They are nationalized, ideologically coherent, and headquartered in Washington – ultimately in the Oval Office. Congressional leaders – such as Newt Gingrich, Tom DeLay and Dick Gephardt – lead large personal enterprises that include personal and campaign staff, leadership PACs, even allies among lobbyists, consultants and government officials. (Loomis 1988). These personal enterprises are deeply embedded within the party networks. Of course, these leaders also raise money for candidates and party committees; Bedlington and Malbin (2003) find that leadership PACs pursue both individual and party-related goals. Bernstein (1999, 2000, 2005) notes that political staffers build careers within the party networks, rather than work for one politician for an extended period.
Fundraisers and major donors: Like so many other political specialties, fundraising has become dominated by professionals. Indeed, the hiring of professional fundraisers has become one of the earliest rituals of the presidential campaign season. (See Cohen et al 2001, 2003, forthcoming). Many of the same major donors who gave soft money to the national party committees before BCRA gave to the 527 organizations created for the 2004 elections. Dominguez (2005) finds strong overlap among the donors to party committees, 527 organizations, leadership PACs, and some sympathetic interest groups. As Koger et al (2005) have shown, one can find party networks functioning even in the world of direct mail, although it would be going too far to place these small donors within the networks, which are fundamentally matrices of elites, rather than rank-and-file voters.

Political consultants: Early treatments of political consultants, such as Sabato (1991), emphasized the damage they were inflicting upon parties. Consultants were assuming the roles that parties had traditionally played, such as communicating with voters or helping candidates raise money, and were enabling candidates to run campaigns without party assistance. Consultants were therefore making parties almost irrelevant.

But more recent studies of political consultants have painted a more complex picture. Parties rely on political consultants to provide services to candidates that they cannot provide well themselves: media, direct mail, polling. Party officials often refer candidates to preferred consultants who can provide the necessary services and have established relationships with the party. Kolodny and Dulio (2001a) find that much of party spending goes to consultants, who provide the same services they perform for candidates. Consultants often have strong links to the parties: many began their careers working for party committees. Rather than weakening the parties, consultants are valuable members of the “party network” – “subcontractors” as Kolodny and Dulio
(2001a) call them. (Also see Kolodny and Dulio 2001b; Dwyre and Kolodny 2001; Dwyre and Kolodny 2003; Dulio 2004).

Indeed, several studies of party networks have focused on the roles played by political consultants (See Bernstein 1999; Doherty 2004, 2005; Masket 2004). Understanding party networks naturally brings one to the study of political consultants, since they make their living in partisan politics, usually without being employed by formal party entities. A Democratic pollster may conduct surveys for the DNC, a Senate campaign, and NARAL; a Republican media consultant may produce ads for the NRCC, a presidential candidate, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

**Interest groups**: Political scientists have argued for years that interest groups undermine the party system. They portray groups as being unable to assemble the broad coalitions that parties can build. They also argue that groups reinforce elitist biases of the American system (Schattschneider 1942, 1948, 1960). Numerous authors have described how political parties have declined, in large part due to the influence of “single-issue” groups. (Burnham 1982; Crotty 1984; Wattenberg 1998).

Berry (1997) asserts that parties are broad “vote-maximizers,” while groups are narrowly-focused “policy-maximizers.” But what if the best way of maximizing policy outcomes is by maximizing votes for one party? But when a group’s preferences overlap strongly with a party’s platform (for example, organized labor and the Democrats), there is an incentive for such a group to support a party’s candidates. When control of a House of Congress depends upon the outcome of a few races, this incentive becomes even stronger.

Interest groups may also function as “subcontractors” for the parties. If campaign finance laws limit the degree to which groups can coordinate their actions with
candidates, they certainly can perform functions for the parties for which they have special expertise: the National Rifle Association can contact gun owners, the Sierra Club can run advertisements about environmental issues, unions can communicate with their members. Group and party leaders know each other and work together for common goals. Since 1993, Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform, has held a weekly meeting of conservative activists, including representatives from the Christian Coalition and the National Rifle Association; one of the meeting’s main purposes is to plan strategies for the election of Republicans. Even before George W. Bush announced his presidential candidacy, his campaign sent a staffer to the meetings; since he became president, a White House aide has been in attendance. (Barnes 2001; Drew 1997; Page 2001). Similar gatherings have taken among liberal activists.

Such party-group ties are not entirely new. Dark (1998) describes the decades-long alliance between organized labor and the Democratic party. In a survey conducted in the early 1980s, Schlozman and Tierney (1986) find that of groups seeking to influence the electoral process, 59 percent preferred a party. In recent years, the party system has been changing in ways that should encourage groups to strengthen their ties to the parties. If interest groups pose a threat to the existence and well being of political parties, party leaders do not seem to have received this message. When the National Republican Congressional Committee gave $250,000 to the National Right to Life Committee, they were acting as partners, not rivals. (Leavitt 2000). Leaders of the AFL-CIO planned their 1996 political efforts in consultation with President Bill Clinton and his chief of staff and his labor secretary. (Dark 1998). When the Republican National Committee assisted in the formation of the Christian Coalition, they presumably were helping to create an ally, not a rival. (Sabato and Simpson 1996). Skinner (2004) finds that several important interest groups enjoy close ties with the political parties; ideas and
personnel regularly move among these entities on the same side of the partisan divide. Many interest-group activists meet regularly, in formal and informal situations, to discuss political strategy.

**Lobbyists:** Many former officeholders or staffers can turn their expertise or connections into a profitable lobbying career, whether working for a corporation or trade association or for a stand-alone firm. Often, these political professionals find they are able to remain active in party politics, even as they represent their clients’ interests (Kersh 2002; Loomis 2003). They can raise money for candidates and PACs, they can help plot campaign strategy, they can promote party positions to the media; all of these both promote their short-term careers as lobbyists, while advancing their long-term goals within the party networks. Ed Gillespie, Ralph Reed, and Haley Barbour all spent lucrative years as lobbyists during careers that included numerous high-ranking positions in Republican politics. Even as these men built careers within the GOP network, they were able to form lucrative relationships with Democratic professionals; Jack Quinn, Gillespie’s longtime lobbying partner, served as Chief of Staff to Vice President Al Gore and White House Counsel to President Bill Clinton. This illustrates a critical distinction: as individuals, Quinn and Gillespie participate in the Democratic and Republican party networks, but their firm Quinn Gillespie does not. Quinn Gillespie clients such as Coca-Cola and Microsoft can benefit from the contacts and expertise developed through partisan politics without having to become involved themselves. Berry (1997) and other observers draw a dichotomy between lobbying and partisan politics; they are unable to explain how the current era of intense partisanship can also see explosive growth on K Street. Nor can they understand how a partisan warrior such as Tom DeLay can also develop enviable contacts among lobbyists (many of the most influential among them having had worked for him). But the theory of party networks can.
Think tanks: The past three decades have seen an explosion of ideologically driven think tanks, with the most conspicuous ones on the Right: the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute. While these institutions have produced some serious scholarship, they tend to see their mission as being the provision of ammunition for ideological combatants rather than the detached analysis of public policy issues. Former officeholders and policy advocates often hold fellowships at think tanks in between positions in government. Think tanks frequently issue press releases or place op-eds that influence the editorial writers, talk show hosts and bloggers who in turn define the “correct” ideological messages that shape mass opinion. (Zaller 1992).

The “new partisan press”:

While most media outlets have audiences that reflect the partisan diversity of the general public, a few have striking tilts in viewership. A 2004 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 35 percent of Republicans “regularly watch” Fox News; only 21 percent of Democrats do. One in seven Republicans regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show; only 1 in 50 Democrats do. (Pew Research Center 2004). Twice as many viewers watched the Republican convention on Fox as watched the Democratic gathering (overall ratings for the two events were about equal). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). 77 percent of Limbaugh listeners call themselves conservative. (Pew Research Center 2004). The Project for Excellence in Journalism notes the growth of a “journalism of affirmation” (e.g., Republicans watching Fox News) and a “journalism of assertion” (e.g., a blogger or talk show host making unsubstantiated charges). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). This contrasts sharply with the Progressive ideal of objective, scientific journalism conducted by experts. (Lippmann [1922] 1997). The George W. Bush Administration has often showed a preference for ideologically sympathetic media outlets such as Fox News and conservative talk radio, rather than the traditional “objective” press that had defined the Modern Presidency of
FDR and JFK (West 2001; Skinner 2005). The “new partisan press” played prominent roles in the 2004 campaign, highlighting stories avoided by the mainstream media, helping candidates raise money on-line, supplying frankly partisan narratives accepted by millions.

“527s” as “Shadow Parties”

Several events of the 2004 elections support the theory of party networks. Many observers argued that the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act would weaken political parties by abolishing “soft money”. The success of both parties in raising “hard money” would seem to have disproved this prediction. But another outcome of the soft money ban supports a particular view of political parties, the “party network.” After BCRA was passed, leading operatives on both sides created new organizations meant to fulfill the functions previously funded by soft money: broadcast advertising and voter mobilization. These groups were formed as political organizations under Internal Revenue Code section 527, and are often known simply as “527’s”. While they filed with the IRS as political committees, they claimed not to be covered by the Federal Election Commission since they did not engage in express advocacy. As such, they did not have to comply with restrictions on the size and scope of contributions. Probably the most notable 527s were those that composed a Democratic “shadow party”: America Coming Together, America Votes, and the Media Fund. There were Republican 527s as well, including Progress for America and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. (This paper will not deal with pre-existing 527 organizations such as the Club for Growth or the political funds of AFSCME and the SEIU). (See Skinner 2005a; Magleby et al 2005).

Whatever these groups accomplished, they did not undermine the role of political parties. Party leaders encouraged their formation, longtime party operatives composed their staffs, partisan interest groups lent them assistance and partisan donors contributed
their funds. The 527 groups generally pursued strategies compatible with party goals, whether America Coming Together’s mobilization of Democratic-leaning voters or the Swift Boat Vets’s criticism of John Kerry’s Vietnam record. In the case of the Swift Boat Vets, they spread their message, to a great extent, through the “new partisan press,” e.g., Fox News, talk radio, conservative bloggers. The Swift Boat Vets were able to shape public opinion even when the mainstream media were ignoring them. The 527 groups were not competing with the parties; they were nodes within the broader party networks.¹

The leadership of the so-called “527” organizations formed after the passage of BCRA – America Coming Together, the Media Fund, America Votes – included not only veterans of the Clinton White House and the Democratic National Committee, but also longtime officials of the AFL-CIO, EMILY’s List, and the Sierra Club. This “shadow party” could also be called “The Democratic Party Network, Inc.” Both former President Bill Clinton and Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe strongly encouraged the formation of these entities.

After the passage of BCRA, McAuliffe established a Task Force on BCRA that included Harold Ickes, former deputy chief of staff to Bill Clinton; Michael Whouley, a longtime Democratic operative who worked for both the Al Gore and John Kerry presidential campaigns; John Podesta, former White House Chief of Staff for Clinton; as

¹ This paper includes some information from two series of interviews with interest-group representatives in the Washington area. The first series was conducted during May and June 2000, the second – meant to review the 2000 election – was conducted during February and March 2001. These two batches of interviews are supplemented by work done by the author and others for the Campaign Finance Institute. Two roundtables were held by CFI during the spring of 2001 that included representatives from leading interest groups. The author was partially responsible for selecting participants for these events. The roundtables were followed by a series of interviews that summer; the author conducted all the interviews, either on his own or in cooperation with Mark Rozell and Clyde Wilcox. The author thanks CFI, Rozell and Wilcox for giving him permission to use these interviews.
well as two top officials of the DNC. Ickes devised the Media Fund (to conduct broadcast advertising previously funded by soft money), which he subsequently led; before BCRA became effective, McAuliffe encouraged leading Democratic donors to give to the new organization. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming).

Ickes also helped devise America Coming Together and America Votes through meetings with top members of the Democratic party network. These included Sierra Club director Carl Pope, EMILY’s List president Ellen Malcolm (who also serves on the DNC’s executive committee), SEIU president Andrew Stern, and former AFL-CIO political director Steve Rosenthal. They agreed on the need to coordinate interest-group electoral operations; this became America Votes. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming).

Stern and Rosenthal also discussed their desire to create a “ground war” operation funded by unions, and that would apply to the general public the voter-turnout techniques used to mobilize union members. This eventually became America Coming Together; billionaire George Soros and insurance tycoon Peter Lewis pledged $20 million to fund ACT as long as Rosenthal controlled its operations. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming). Malcolm and Ickes formed the Joint Victory Campaign to raise money for all three groups. With the assistance of Soros and Bill Clinton, Malcolm and Ickes wooed many of the party’s top donors; Hollywood producer Steve Bing was among the many onetime soft-money givers who helped fund ACT and the Media Fund. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming).

During the campaign, ACT, America Votes, and the Media Fund, along with two labor-backed 527s, were all headquartered in the same building in downtown Washington, across the street from the AFL-CIO’s headquarters. By the fall of 2004, ACT had 55 offices in 17 states, and 1300 paid canvassers working to turn out Democratic voters. (Dwyer et al 2004) Not only was the leadership of the “shadow party” groups deeply embedded in the party networks, their staff was too. Both the Media Fund and ACT hired the Thunder Road Group, run by former Kerry campaign
manager Jim Jordan, to handle their communications. Larry Gold served both as counsel for ACT and for the AFL-CIO. Bill Knapp served as a consultant for the Media Fund before he quit to work for the Kerry campaign. (Drinkard 2004).

America Votes held bi-weekly meetings of liberal activists to plot strategy. America Votes allowed member organizations to share voter files, survey data, and demographic information. This allowed America Votes staff to coordinate the efforts of groups such as the Sierra Club, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and the League of Conservation Voters in stimulating voter turnout and contacting swing voters. America Votes targeted 13 battleground states; in some states such as Michigan and Florida, the organization may continue its efforts for key 2006 races. (Hadfield 2004).² The groups involved in America Votes are central elements in the Democratic party network; they put the lie to the conventional wisdom that interest groups always undermine political parties.

The Democratic “shadow party” was primarily funded by a few very large donors, many of them who had given large amounts of “soft money” to party committees. These included some leading unions, such as AFSCME, SEIU, the Teamsters, and the American Federation of Teachers. But there were also several large individual donors who had been longtime supporters of the Democratic Party, most notably Soros and Lewis. Hollywood producer Steve Bing, Chicago radio magnate Fred Eychaner, New York pharmaceutical entrepreneur Agnes Varis, Slim-Fast founder S. Daniel Abraham, and live-entertainment tycoon Robert Sillerman were all among those who gave hundreds of

² Members of America Votes included ACORN, the AFL-CIO, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), ACT, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Association of Trial Lawyers of America (ATLA), the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, Clean Water Action, Defenders of Wildlife, Democracy for America, EMILY’s List, Environment 2004, Human Rights Campaign, League of Conservation Voters (LCV), the Media Fund, MoveOn.org, Moving America Forward, Music for America, the NAACP National Voter Fund, NARAL Pro-Choice America, the National Education Association (NEA), the National Jewish Democratic Council, the National Treasury Employees Union, the Partnership for American Families, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Sierra Club, USAAction, the Young Voter Alliances, Voices for Working Families, and 21st Century Democrats.
thousands of dollars (or even millions) to the Democratic Party and to the 527s. Susie Tompkins Buell, founder of the Esprit clothing line (and now head of a feminist foundation) gave over a million dollars to the Democratic “shadow party” and also served as vice chairman of the Kerry campaign.

Many large donors to the Democratic 527s came from communities well-plugged into the Democratic party network. Buell and Varis have both been active in feminist causes. Eychaner and software entrepreneur Tim Gill (who gave $1 million to Democratic 527s) are both openly gay. Sillerman, Bing, and “Roseanne” producer Marcy Carsey (who gave $1 million) are all figures in the entertainment industry.

A Republican “Shadow”

Republicans were initially reluctant to set up their own 527 organizations; the RNC had never depended as much on soft money as the DNC had, the Bush re-election campaign could raise as much money as it needed, and the legal status of 527’s seemed shaky at first. But eventually a Republican “shadow” emerged. Progress for America, a leading Republican 527 group, was also run by people active in their party network. PFA was founded in 2001 by Tony Feather, political director the 2000 Bush-Cheney campaign, and ally of Bush advisor Karl Rove; after a year of inactivity, Feather handed over PFA to Chris LaCivita, former political director for the NRSC. In the spring of 2004, Brian McCabe took over PFA; McCabe was a partner in the DCI Group, a political consulting firm. Even when LaCivita was running PFA, he was also doing work for DCI. DCI and its affiliate FLS-DCI both later did work for the Bush campaign. Tom Synhorst, a partner in both DCI and FLS-DCI, served as a strategic advisor and fundraiser for PFA. Synhorst had worked as an advisor to the 2000 Bush campaign and helped run the 1996 and 2000 Republican national conventions. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming). Benjamin Ginsberg served as counsel to PFA; he served in similar capacities for both the 2004 Bush re-election effort and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. The Swift Boat
organizers approached PFA, seeking advice; PFA personnel encouraged them to see LaCivita, who became an advisor to the group. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming; Stone 2003a).

PFA became a 527 organization in May 2004, after the FEC decided not to regulate 527s; Bush-Cheney campaign chairman Marc Racicot and RNC chairman Ed Gillespie soon released a statement urging support for PFA and other sympathetic 527s. PFA quickly gained access to the financial resources of the Republican party network, hiring some well-connected fundraisers (such as Texas public relations executive James Francis), holding an event at the national convention, and gaining the assistance of such party stalwarts as San Diego Chargers owner Alex Spanos. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming; Drinkard 2004; Cannon 2004).

Two other 527s began outside the party network but worked their way into them. The liberal group MoveOn.org was founded by Bay Area software entrepreneurs Wes Boyd and Joan Blades in 1998 to oppose Bill Clinton’s impeachment. (Initially, Boyd and Blades created an on-line petition urging Congress to censure Clinton and “move on,” which eventually attracted a half million signatures). (Burdman 2004). In 2000, MoveOn.org raised $2.4 million for Democratic congressional candidates; a focus on the environment and campaign finance reform in 2002 failed to attract members. But opposition to the Iraq War led interest in MoveOn to soar in 2003-04. By the 2004 election, MoveOn had attracted nearly three million members. (McKelvey 2004; Cha 2004). MoveOn controlled three entities: a PAC (which did the bulk of the spending), a 527 political organization, and a 501(c)4 social welfare organization. MoveOn’s PAC conducted a $12 million independent expenditure campaign supporting John Kerry for president.

As MoveOn.org proved its worth to Democratic insiders, it was able to plug into the resources of the party network, hiring political consultants and holding events with
former Vice President Al Gore. (Janofsky and Lee 2003). Boyd spoke at the 2003 “Take Back America” conference in Washington, a gathering of progressive Democrats. (Von Drehle 2003). Zack Exley served as organizing director for MoveOn’s PAC, but later worked for both the Howard Dean and John Kerry campaigns. (Abraham 2004). MoveOn.org received a combined $5 million from George Soros and Peter Lewis to match the same amount of small individual donations; Hollywood producer Steve Bing gave nearly $1 million. (Center for Public Integrity).

The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth began in the wake of the publication of Douglas Brinkley’s Tour of Duty, depicting John Kerry’s service in the Vietnam War. In early 2004, Roy Hoffmann, a retired naval officer who was upset both by his portrayal in Tour of Duty and by Kerry’s activities in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, contacted John O’Neill, a Houston lawyer. O’Neill, who had succeeded Kerry in commanding his Swift boat, had been an antagonist of Kerry since he debated him on the Dick Cavett Show in 1971. O’Neill put Hoffmann in touch with millionaire homebuilder Bob Perry, a longtime Texas Republican donor. Perry gave $200,000 to the newly formed Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (Dobbs 2004). Two other prominent Texas Republicans later gave vast amounts to the organization. Billionaire Harold Simmons gave $6 million, while oilman T. Boone Pickens donated $2 million. (Perry eventually contributed a total of $6.6 million). While Swift Boat Vets later collected thousands of on-line contributions, the bulk of its funding came from this small number of wealthy donors. (Center for Public Integrity).

O’Neill initially tried conventional means to gain attention for his criticisms of Kerry. In May, he wrote an op-ed for The Wall Street Journal, while the Swift Vets appeared at the National Press Club; but most media outlets ignored both. (Last 2004). Swift Boat leaders worked with Republican consultants Chris LaCivita (who formerly directed Progress for America) and Rick Reed to produce their first TV ads. (Miller
The Swift Boat Vets spent only about a half million dollars on these ads, which aired in small markets such as Wausau, Wisconsin. (Edsall and Grimaldi 2004).

Rather than rely on a mainstream media that was initially reluctant to cover the charges made against Kerry, the Swift Boat Vets instead turned to more partisan outlets such as the Fox News Channel, talk radio, and conservative bloggers. *Unfit for Command*, an anti-Kerry book co-authored by O’Neill, was published by Regnery, a house identified with conservative causes ever since it published William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* in 1951. On July 28, the Drudge Report publicized the charges in *Unfit for Command*, which promptly shot to #1 on Amazon.com. (Dreher 2004). On August 4, the first SBVFT advertisement appeared; Fox News not only covered this spot, but the following night the Swift Vets appeared on “Hannity and Colmes.” Conservative bloggers followed up on the charges in *Unfit for Command*; conservative talk show hosts kept the story percolating. (Last 2004).

These partisan outlets served multiple purposes for the Swifties. They allowed the Swift Boat ads to “fight above their weight,” as conservative commentators hyped their charges, giving them visibility. They allowed conservatives to narrowcast their message to sympathetic voters; by the end of the campaign, Republicans had a more negative view of John Kerry than any Democratic nominee since George McGovern. Finally, the conservative media gave the Swift Boat charges so much publicity that mainstream outlets were forced to pay attention. As Fox News played up the Swift Boat Vets, CNN and MSNBC felt compelled to host them as well, often reporting their accusations without rebuttal or challenge. (Thomas 2004; Gitlin 2004). The Kerry campaign reacted slowly, failing to recognize the impact of the Swift Boat charges and fearing that responding would only give them more publicity. (Thomas 2004; Lizza 2004; Gitlin 2004). Mainstream media outlets such as *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune* waited several days until they published stories investigating the claims made by the Swift Boaters.
While the charges against Kerry were generally disproven, they dominated campaign debate for three weeks, during a period when the Kerry campaign was out of money. By the end of August, one poll showed that 57 percent of Americans had heard of the Swift Boat ads; about half of those believed the charges against Kerry. (Schneider 2004). A post-election study found that the first Swift Boat ads had the greatest impact of any spots aired during the campaign. (Birnbaum and Edsall 2004). The SBVFT spent $23 million, and aired several more ads, but none had the impact of their initial buy. (Center for Public Integrity).

Changes Over Time

The concept of a party network has validity across time, although it probably applies better to today’s politics than to that of a generation ago. There have always been interest groups that had close relationships with the political parties. But there have been changes in recent decades that have made the parties more “network-y” and simultaneously more polarized. These include:

- Legal changes in the 1970s that favored the creation of political action committees.
- A long series of legal changes, administrative decisions and judicial rulings that encouraged the rise of issue advocacy and soft money.
- The rise of political consultants.
- The rise of more openly partisan media and think tanks.
- The creation of leadership PACs and similar operations controlled by party leaders.
- Adaptation by existing groups (such as the AFL-CIO and the NRA) that have made them more purposive or more politically effective or both.
- The rise of strongly purposive interest groups and their subsequent integration into party networks.
• A general trend toward purposive (often highly ideological) incentives throughout our political system.
• The growing partisan polarization both in voting in Congress and voting by the electorate.

Conclusion

As the theory of party networks develops, the field faces a series of challenges. Bernstein (2005) notes the need to develop better notions of boundaries of the party network, to define better who belongs and who does not. He accurately suggests that organizations within the party network can vary in their ties to the party. Drawing upon his own research into presidential campaign staff, Bernstein urges scholars to examine party factions more closely; but Reiter (2004), Dominguez (2005), and Koger et al (2005) all find little evidence of enduring party factions in contemporary politics. Whatever differences exist within the parties, they pale beside the chasm separating them.

Party networks also clearly shape our politics. Karl Rove’s fabled political skills seem to, to a great extent, consist of the ability to manage all the elements in the Republican party network. Indeed, the Bush administration seems to have consistently given priority to the needs of this network: rewarding loyal constituencies such as the business community and the Christian Right, working closely with Republican party committees, rewarding conservative intellectuals with spots on the Council on Bioethics, preferring conservative talk radio and Fox News to more traditional media, emphasizing Republican turnout over wooing swing voters.

One essential difference between today’s party networks and those of, say, the 1950s is that contemporary networks are more fundamentally based on purposive
incentives. As the histories of the NRA and NARAL show, purposive groups are
dependent upon sharp policy conflict for their very survival. (They are not the only ones
– where would Rush Limbaugh or Sidney Blumenthal be without enemies to demonize?)
Perhaps this is the age of the institutionalized ideologue and the professional amateur.
They are also likely to attract staff who share those values. To the extent that they are
involved in party networks, they are likely to push the parties toward ideological
extremes.

There are two fundamentally different ways of conceptualizing the roles that
political parties should play in our system. One is known as the “responsible” or
“programmatic” school;” it was given fullest expression in the 1950 report “Toward a
More Responsible Two-Party System,” issued by the APSA Committee on Political
Parties. The doctrine of responsible parties argues that political parties should adopt
binding, programmatic doctrines on a wide range of issues. They should have strong
centralized leadership, both in government and in party organizations. Parties should
base their appeals primarily on ideological differences, rather than on personality or
patronage. Both Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt seemed to have held this view
of political parties. (Ceaser 1977; Milkis 1999). While most of the Founders disdained
parties, they arose within a few years of the Constitution. To the extent that the
Federalists and Republicans accepted political parties, it was a temporary strategem until
the opposition was overcome. But to that extent, they saw parties as stemming from
profound philosophical differences with little respect due to those who disagreed.
(Hofstadter 1969).
The other school of thought might be called the doctrine of “integrative parties.” In this view, parties should encompass a variety of views. Rather than consistently stake out bold views on matters of principle, party leaders should play down controversial issues. Parties should work to bring together people of various perspectives in a common pursuit of office. Opposition should be tolerated and treated as legitimate; politicians of differing parties should have amicable relations. This view is most associated with Martin Van Buren, eighth president and principal founder of the Democratic Party. The party organization that Van Buren created in the 1820s was decentralized and non-ideological, interested more in securing patronage than in seeking programmatic change. (Ceaser 1979; Hofstadter 1969).

In recent years, the political parties have, in some ways, been evolving toward the responsible party model. The parties have become ideologically coherent. The party networks have become more centralized in Washington; “top-down” parties have replaced “bottom-up” ones. Party unity in Congress has increased. Party voting among the public has increased, at least among those who identify with a party. Party identification appears to be based more on perceived issue differences than on inherited loyalties than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. Ideological activists have mostly replaced patronage hacks as the lead players in party politics. The national party organizations spend more money and play increased roles in elections. Even state and local parties have revived, to a limited extent. But there are few signs of an increased role for rank-and-file voters; indeed, a party-defining document like the “Contract with America” was conceived by a few insiders, while most voters remained unaware. (Green and Herrnson 2002; Weisberg 2002; Pomper and Weiner 2002).
Not all of the consequences of this evolution have been salutary. Fiorina (2001) muses that the American political system has become too responsive to unrepresentative ideologues, whether in government, the political parties or interest groups. As purposive incentives have replaced material benefits as the main motivation for political actors, officeholders now have “deeper policy commitments than their counterparts of a generation ago.” As the parties have polarized and the number of competitive constituencies shrunk, candidates have become less concerned with the “median voter” and more attuned to activists at the extremes. As the parties become more internally homogeneous, only the ideologically faithful are able to advance politically.

Despite the polarization among elites, the American public remains essentially moderate. Politicians have instead become responsive to ideological activists; many officeholders are themselves driven by their own strong policy preferences more so than the often-fuzzy views of ordinary citizens. Strong partisans – who are most likely to vote in primaries, contribute money and knock on doors – have increasingly diverged from the general public. While voters often make clear their disdain for ideological extremism, politicians pursue it when they can. For example, during the aftermath of the 1994 election, many Republican freshmen made clear their lack of regard for public opinion, preferring to follow their own conservative convictions. As voters see their own centrist views being ignored, they lose trust in government. (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000)
Bibliography


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