Presidential Party Building in the United States

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The current state of the two major political parties in America raises an obvious question: what happened to the once dominant Democratic majority? In *The New York Times,* former presidential candidate Bill Bradley opined that postwar Republicans gained a competitive advantage by building their party "consciously, carefully, and single-mindedly" into a stable pyramid of ideas, organization, and action, where "all you have to do is put a different top on it and it works fine." Meanwhile, Bradley wrote, the Democratic party became an inverted "pyramid balancing precariously on its point, which is the presidential candidate." Democrats have no "coherent, larger structure," because they are "still hypnotized by Jack Kennedy, and the promise of a charismatic leader who can change America by the strength and style of his personality." Bill Clinton's charisma, for example, "didn't translate into structure," Bradley argued, and going forward the Democrats must begin to "build a stable pyramid from the base up."[1]

Bradley's analysis, if not a dispassionate one, suggests one method of accounting for the events of the recent past, and indeed, for the political developments unfolding before us. Yet Bradley does not assign credit or blame to anyone or anything in particular: Democratic and Republican party leaders, their parties' constituent groups, internal cultures, and ideologies all seem to be implicated in the Republicans' success and the Democrats' failure to build durable party structures in the modern period. Surely it is worth probing a bit deeper, to examine the roles played by key political actors and consider how their agency and leadership might have contributed to the significant political changes we observe. In particular, what role did presidents play in pushing these developments along?

[1] Bill Bradley, "A Party Inverted," *The New York Times,* 30 March 2005.

Six different Republicans occupied the White House for 32 of the 52 years between 1953 and 2005, yet the extent to which they were involved in building the new Republican party organization of which Bradley speaks is not at all clear. If anything, Republican presidents are seen as the beneficiaries of a party built by others but were not themselves integral to the GOP party-building project. Was this, in fact, how things developed? And did the four Democratic presidents of the modern period try to build their party organization and simply fail, or were they, too, peripheral to the currents of party change, themselves mere products of a party searching for another Jack Kennedy?

Remarkably, most existing scholarship has passed over these questions and focused instead on the characteristic party building activities of "out parties." In the wake of electoral defeat, the minority party's organization leaders and activists are depicted as the real "party builders," as the primary actors who build new organizational capacities and develop new policy alternatives in an effort to reach out to new groups of voters and recruit new candidates.[2] Party building, in this frame, is the work of the underdog, the labor of the losing party. Presidents are nowhere in view.

[2] The losers are the ones who, in Kenneth Shepsle's turn of phrase, "are the desperate ones; they are the ones whose survival is at stake; they are the ones driven by their despair to seek ways to triumph; they are, therefore, the inventors. Defeat is the mother of invention." Kenneth A. Shepsle, "Losers in Politics (and How They Sometimes Become Winners): William Riker's Heresthetic," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2 (2003): 310. Many classic works in political science examine the efforts of "out" parties to rebuild and regain political competitiveness: see Robert Alan Dahl, ed., *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York,: Harper, 1957); Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties, Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (London: Wiley, 1954); William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Holt: Rinehart and Winston, 1960); William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, ed., *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). Prominent contemporary works examining the same subject include: Philip A. Klinkner, *The Losing Parties: Out-Party National Committees, 1956-1993* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Kenneth Finegold and Elaine K. Swift, "What Works? Competitive Strategies of Major Parties out of Power," *British Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 1 (2001); John Aldrich, *Before the Convention: Strategies and Choices in Presidential Nomination Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

In fact, when presidents do come into the picture, they are usually depicted as party "predators," not party "builders." They are portrayed as agents of party decline, as exhibiting either "benign neglect" or "outright hostility" toward their national parties.[3] There is a strong consensus in the literature that both Democratic and Republican presidents alike have shifted political operations to the White House, either ravaging their party organizations or leaving them to languish in the process. American political parties have developed, we are told, a symmetrical fashion, with both organizations suffering at the hands of modern presidents. This developmental symmetry results from the understanding that all presidents are independent constitutional actors with independent motives and purposes, all more concerned with their own problems than those of collective leadership: "Once elected," James MacGregor Burns explains, "they dominate the organization – to the extent that they bother with it at all." If modern presidents do bother with their parties, it is "not to create new party structures…but to disintegrate and pulverize political power" in the organization.[4]

Theodore Lowi, among others, notes that modern presidential practices such as "going public" had a deleterious effect on the parties. After FDR's experienced such success in speaking directly to the people, he wrote, "it became inevitable that these tactics would be repeated. Every success in that direction pushed the traditional political parties more to the

[3] Klinkner, *The Losing Parties: Out-Party National Committees, 1956-1993*, 2. See also James MacGregor Burns, *Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); Theodore Lowi, *The Personal President* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Samuel Kernell, *Going Public* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1997); George C. Edwards, III, *The Public Presidency: The Pursuit of Popular Support* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983); John F. Bibby and Robert J. Huckshorn, "Out-Party Strategy: Republican National Committee Rebuilding Politics, 1964-1968," in *Republican Politics: The 1964 Campaign and Its Aftermath for the Party*, ed. Bernard Cosman and Robert J. Huckshorn (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968); Harold F. Bass, "The President and the National Party Organization," in *Presidents and Their Parties: Leadership or Neglect?*, ed. Robert Harmel (New York: Praeger, 1984); Robert Harmel, "President-Party Relations in the Modern Era: Past, Problems, and Prognosis," in *Presidents and Their Parties: Leadership or Neglect?*, ed. Robert Harmel (New York: Praeger, 1984).
[4] James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 327.

periphery of national politics."[5] If all modern presidents do indeed adopt a predatory relationship toward their parties, if they seek not to strengthen and expand their organizations but to marginalize or debilitate them, then Democrats might do well to reconsider their lament of the 2004 election and simply wait for President Bush to sap the strength of the organization that defeated them.

But what if the conventional wisdom is misleading or incomplete? In my investigation of the president-party relationship from 1953-2000, I find that at best only half the story is in view. Presidents, it turns out, do not act in a uniform manner with respect to their parties; in fact, the full scope of their party interactions reveals striking contrasts between them. While it is true that all presidents have sought to "presidentialize" their parties and *use* them instrumentally, I have found that Republican presidents did something more. At least since Eisenhower, Republican presidents persistently and purposefully tried to *build* their party, to expand and develop it into a stronger and more durable political organization. Their instrumental use of the Republican party organization did not prevent simultaneous efforts to develop new organizational capacities through new structural forms, new self-sustaining processes, and new large-scale activities to expand the party's reach and competitiveness.

Interestingly, the conventional wisdom is more accurate as an exclusively Democratic story. Democratic presidents worked assiduously to personalize their parties, altering and reconfiguring them to maximize immediate political benefit to their administrations, but took few, if any, steps to leave behind a more robust party organization able to persevere over the long term. Whether we choose to view all presidents in the modern period as a group or look within individual presidencies at the different kinds of party-changing activities that each undertook, it is clear that the "party predator" story is incomplete or misleading when taken

[5] Lowi, *The Personal President*, 65.

alone, and that variations in the president-party relationship have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the divergent political development of the two parties.

My aim in this dissertation is neither to champion nor indict presidents for how they interact with their parties, nor is it to elevate Republicans for their efforts or denigrate Democrats for theirs. It is to demonstrate the fact that some modern presidents act more constructively with regard to their parties than others, to consider why this might be so, and to bring *presidential party building* into view as a component of modern American political development whose significance and variability is clearly evident in politics today.

I do not go so far as to claim that the lack of presidential party building explains all of the Democrats' woes or that Republican party strength is due only to presidential party building efforts. No doubt, a host of factors are at work. Nor do I claim that every Republican presidential party building effort over the past thirty years was pursued with a vision of the conservative Republican majority of today in view.[6] On the other hand, it can be shown that the Democratic incumbents' persistent neglect of their parties and relative indifference to the long-term organizational impact of their actions helped to create the trends Bradley speaks of, if only by preventing the Democratic organization from capitalizing on the potential benefits of presidential power and making cumulative organizational development more difficult. And it can be shown that the efforts of Republican presidents to cultivate their party organization and develop its operational capacities facilitated the party building efforts of their successors.

What is Presidential Party Building?

[6] In fact, as we shall see, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford envisioned new Republican majorities that would have looked quite different from the conservative Republican coalition that emerged under Reagan in the 1980s.

Clarifying terms and setting definitions up front is critical, because the heart of the problem, and the objective of this study, is to make precise what has thus far been obscured. While all presidents in the modern period have tried to change their organizations to better suit their purposes, some presidents have taken additional steps to develop their parties' organizational capacities, strengthen their foundations, and expand their reach. In this way, their party building has not been *incompatible* with the instrumental party-changing acts presidents routinely undertake for their own immediate benefit. In fact, I will argue that the very essence of the thing -- that which makes it an interesting and significant political phenomenon – is that presidential party building is *both* instrumental and developmental at the same time. It is precisely that subtlety which provides the concept its analytic traction and theoretical significance.

What it means "to build" is, admittedly, not self-evident. In the first place, presidents never create parties from scratch. Even Jefferson, the first and perhaps greatest of presidential party builders, was acting upon an existing organization -- presidential party building always entails rebuilding, recasting, or reconstituting an existing structure.[7] Second, presidents frequently try to build electoral coalitions by speaking directly to the people – particularly in the interest of winning an election – without ever interacting with their party or trying to change it. And third, everything a president does in the course of his official duties – every speech, every policy proposal, every visit, every dinner party, every foreign initiative – will reflect on his party and may even be undertaken to some extent with partisan political gain in view. Any of these actions may at times have a considerable effect on the party. One of the reasons we have had difficulty coming to terms with the president-party relationship – one of the reasons the subject

has collapsed into a purely predatory perspective – is that it seems to be synonymous with whatever the presidents does. To shed some light on this relationship, we need to take a narrower view. In this dissertation, I will focus attention on what is at the heart of "presidential party building."

Party building will be distinguished here from everything else presidents do by its narrow *organizational* focus and by the activities specifically relegated to the party organization that the president's changes are purposefully intended to produce.[8] Party building is herein defined as *organizational reconfigurations intended to endow the party apparatus with enhanced capacities* for one or more of the following activities:

External/Electoral Operations:

- Registering or mobilizing voters
- Running more effective campaigns
- Developing and articulating a consensus party identity

Internal/Formative Operations:

- Recruiting candidates for public office
- Enlisting and managing party activists and members
- Forming new fundraising and disbursement methods

Decision rules, data sources, and other methodological issues are elaborated at length in Chapter Two. For now, it suffices to say that organizational reconfigurations undertaken to endow the party apparatus with new capacities on these dimensions is what counts as presidential party building; organizational reconfigurations that undercut the party as the agent performing

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[7] See Noble E. Cunningham, *The Jeffersonian Republicans in Power; Party Operations, 1801-1809* (Chapel Hill,: University of North Carolina Press, 1963); Daniel Galvin, "Thomas Jefferson and Presidential Party Building," *Journal of Contemporary Thought* 19 & 20 (2004).

[8] A more thorough justification for these specifications is elaborated in chapter two.

these functions or otherwise make the party *less* capable of performing these critical organizational tasks do not "count" as party building.

As this specification suggests, party building involves fostering party development – it is aimed at creating *durable* changes in the party's capacities. To be sure, party building should be expected to redound to the immediate benefit of the sitting president as well, but the relationship established by presidential party building is constructive rather than predatory and looks as much to the future as to immediate political gain.

The implications of presidential party building are far-reaching. For one, the component parts of party building involve the creation of precisely those party activities that "functionalists" long argued were the core "constituent" functions parties played (or should play) in the United States.[9] When presidents party build, they seek to cultivate a durable organization to engage new voters, register them, and mobilize them to vote; a durable organization that will recruit new candidates for elected and appointed office; a durable organization that will attract new political activists to get involved in politics; a durable organization that can adapt to meet changing conditions; and a durable organization to pace their opposition in electoral politics and provide a distinct political alternative. Indeed, new "functions" are instilled precisely through new party

[9] See Theodore Lowi, "Party, Policy, and Constitution in America," in *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, ed. William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Leon D. Epstein, *Political Parties in Western Democracies* (New York: Praeger, 1967); Theodore Lowi, "Toward Functionalism in Political Science: The Case of Innovation in Party Systems," *American Political Science Review* 57, no. 3 (1963); Austin Ranney and Willmoore Kendall, *Democracy and the American Party System* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956). In the Chambers and Burnham volume, Sorauf critiques the traditional functionalist assumption that parties perform certain key functions in the American political system, including (but not limited to) the following: "mobilize majorities, organize dissent and opposition, recruit political leadership, socialize voters into the norms of the system, legitimize the decisions of government, and so on." Frank J. Sorauf, "Political Parties and Political Analysis," in *The American Party Systems; Stages of Political Development*, ed. William Nisbet Chambers, Walter Dean Burnham, and Frank J. Sorauf (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). An excellent discussion of the functionalist paradigm and its relationship to other currents in the party literature, see John Coleman, "Responsible, Functional, or Both? American Political Parties and the A.P.S.A. Report after Fifty Years," in *The State of the Parties: The Changing Role of Contemporary American Parties, 4th Ed.*, ed. John C. Green and Rick Farmer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

structures, processes, and activities.[10] Through these efforts, presidents might be seen as motivating agents of the recurrent regeneration of the parties' functions in the American political system.[11]

Lest I overstate the case, I hasten to repeat that the interesting thing about presidential party building is that it is never fully about building "the party" per se, as an independent political entity separate from the president or as a responsible or functional instrument of democracy. This is not "altruistic" behavior. All presidential-party interactions are undertaken with the president's best interest in mind, and all *party building* actions should be expected to serve the president's interest as well. The peculiarity of the phenomenon, and perhaps the reason why it has long passed under the radar in the existing literature, is that presidential party building involves both the personal *and* the collective; the instrumental *and* the developmental. At issue here is the claim that instrumental action need not always be predatory, that while it is safe to assume that the president's relationship to his party is always instrumental, it might at times also be directed toward building something stronger and more durable.

Herein lie the two literal alternatives suggested by the term *presidential party building*. One might take the term to mean either "party building, undertaken by the president," or "building a *presidential* party." The first reading implies that the presidents help to build durable electoral organizations, organizations with the wherewithal to operate continuously and independently of them; and the second implies that the president sidelines the regular party

[10] See Sorauf, "Political Parties and Political Analysis,"

[11] Especially their *electoral* functions: one area of agreement among disparate scholars of American parties is that parties exist, and continue to exist, because they serve critical electoral functions (such as candidate selection, campaign support, and activist/volunteer participation). Over the course of American political development, even as the parties' electoral compositions, their ideologies, structures, and activities changed, and even as electoral rules governing party behavior were periodically reformed, the two parties' "functions" in the electoral arena remained constant. See, for example, the conceptions of "party" in Joseph A. Schlesinger, *Political Parties and the Winning of Office* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); John Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

organization and builds an alternative wholly dependent on himself.[12] While the range of the concept may be encompassed by these two alternatives, much of this dissertation is meant to elaborate upon the possibilities that lie in between. We will see some of each, but more importantly, we will see that neither tells the whole story. Republican presidents in the modern period did not seek to sacrifice their party's independent capabilities at the alter of their personal interests, *but neither* did they try to build their party to operate independently and without regard for their personal purposes. Instead, their party building was geared toward creating a new and different kind of party. They aimed to "presidentialize" their party, make it more responsive to their leadership and more reflective of their personal brand of politics while simultaneously strengthening its organizational foundations and enhancing its capacity to expand and grow. They sought to "nationalize" party structures while empowering its grassroots organizational capabilities. And they treated the GOP as central and consequential, not peripheral or detrimental, for themselves and others.

Whether their party building efforts helped to create a normatively desirable party – one that might, for example, judiciously balance the president's interest with the collective interest – is an important matter for debate. The current GOP seems, by most accounts, to be both organizationally robust and highly subordinate to the White House. With this combination of attributes, it may well have sacrificed some of the capacities of earlier American parties to hold presidents accountable to a collective interest.[13] But my aim is not to adjudicate the results so much as it is to account for it and to clarify the political dynamic at the heart of this modern political development. By conflating presidential instrumentalism with the notion of the *party*

[12] See, for example James A. Davis and David L. Nixon, "The President's Party," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1994).
[13] Sidney M. Milkis, *Political Parties and Constitutional Government* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

predator who seeks to ignore or weaken the regular party organization, existing scholarship has missed out on a critical, variable feature of the president-party relationship and obscured an integral component in the development of the modern Republican party. Republican presidents in the modern period did not perceive their party as an obstacle or detriment to their leadership, but rather saw it as a useful and beneficial resource. In their persistent attempts to reconfigure their party organization, these presidents systematically created new, potent resources for presidential power and also new, durable organizational capacities which last well beyond the moment at hand.

Pressing the Limits of Current Scholarship

As stated, political scientists have had next to nothing to say about presidential party building as a general phenomenon. We have a vague notion that most "great" presidents – Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR – were also great party builders, but virtually everything we know about that connection comes from historians and remains scattered and anecdotal.[14] The relationship has literally been squeezed out. In early years, it lost out to the Progressives' celebration of a presidency-centered government as an alternative to the alleged corruptions of party government, and in later years it fell victim to the normative critique of the modern presidency, especially as this was tied to a lament for the decline of parties.[15] But there is an analytic as well as a normative component to this remarkable lacuna: the approach most political

[14] With the exception of Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Martin Shefter, "Party, Bureaucracy, and Political Change in the United States," in *Political Parties: Development and Decay*, ed. Louis Maisel and Joseph Cooper (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978); and Mark Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, *Presidential Greatness* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).
[15] Stephen Skowronek, "Presidency and American Political Development: A Third Look," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2002); Milkis, *Political Parties and Constitutional Government* . Henry Jones Ford, *The Rise and Growth of American Politics* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1898) and Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1961 edition. New York: The Columbia University Press, 1908) probably best

scientists have taken to studying the presidency for over the past forty years has given us only limited purchase on presidents as agents of systemic political change.

Presidents are usually evaluated and compared in terms of how much of their agendas they can accomplish within the bounds of a tightly constricted political system and a short time frame. In the standard accounts, the contours of the political system are essentially given; the president faces a fixed environment which, although different for each incumbent in its particulars and different perhaps even from one biennial election to the next, is treated as largely external to the leadership problem the president confronts. The environment is, in this sense, a "deal of the cards" in an ongoing game over which the president exerts little control. As presidents are seen as confined to working with their political environments as they find them, their own capacities to *change* the existing configuration of political forces, including their parties, seldom receive direct attention. What escapes investigation is the possibility that presidents are out to change the rules of the game itself, and that party building is one of the instruments at their disposal to try to do that. Concomitantly, the dominant frame excludes attention to the cumulative effects presidents can have over time, to the opening and closing of political possibilities which results from presidential action, and to the ways in which presidents can initiate long-term developments through the intended and unintended consequences of their efforts.

According to presidential scholar George C. Edwards III, an investigation cast along these lines is likely to come up empty: "there is little evidence that presidents can restructure the political landscape to pave the way for change. Although not prisoners of their environment,

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exemplify the Progressives' perspective; Arthur M. Jr. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973) and Lowi, *The Personal President* present the more recent critique.

they are likely to be highly constrained by it."[16] I do not mean to suggest that all presidents successfully or permanently change their parties and restructure the political landscape according to their own designs. Most do not; nor, it is clear, do they even try to do so to the same extent. But Edwards' findings must be understood as severely delimited by the premises of his research questions. Indeed, if the current Bush presidency does not conclusively refute his conclusion, it certainly does raise questions about it and about the methods by which it was reached.

The dominant frame of presidential scholarship might be described as "the-man-against-the-system." The assumption is that if the president does not dominate the system, it will dominate him; that other component parts will smother him with their demands, if not their own special interests. Presidents are more or less able to get things done depending on a given configuration of political forces in play and their own individual leadership styles, strategies, and skills.[17] The behavioral school of presidential studies ushered in by Richard Neustadt in 1960 inaugurated a debate as to whether the individual or the contextual configuration was most important in determining how much a president could get done, and Edwards' contribution has been to weigh in heavily on the side of context.[18] Either way, the dominance of the predatory view of the president-party relationship is implicit in the assumptions that frame these analyses.

A more dynamic and interactive sensibility might be teased out of the new rational choice scholarship. Terry Moe, in particular, finds an impulse to alter, politicize, and control all aspects

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[16] George C. Edwards, III, "Campaigning Is Not Governing: Bill Clinton's Rhetorical Presidency," in *The Clinton Legacy*, ed. Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000), 34; see also George C. Edwards, III, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[17] James David Barber, *The Presidential Character* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 1990 ed. (New York: Wiley, 1960); Erwin C. Hargrove, *Presidential Leadership: Personality and Style* (New York: MacMillan, 1966); Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from F.D.R. To George W. Bush*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[18] Neustadt, *Presidential Power* ; George C. Edwards, III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Edwards, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress* ; Edwards, *The Public Presidency: The Pursuit of Popular Support* ; George C. Edwards, III, *Presidential Influence in Congress* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1980).

of governing as inherent in the president's leadership position.[19] Suggestive as this insight is, rational choice scholars have not thus far followed through to consider whether these efforts have any effects more durable than those realized in the moment at hand; subsequently, the terms of analysis have not been fundamentally altered. Work in the rational choice tradition remains very much preoccupied with a Neustadian understanding that the problems to be addressed in presidential politics are framed by the structural limits of presidential power and the strategies available for presidents to get more done.[20] Presidential policymaking, agenda setting, bureaucratic leadership, and legislative bargaining are all studied for the purpose of learning how much the president can extract from a system stacked against him.

What, then, if we assume that the contours of the system are not given, but are, in each instance, a main object of contestation? It is hardly a stretch to think that presidents see it this way, that they are not just interested in realizing particular policy objectives but also in securing their own view of legitimate national government, and that policy objectives themselves are, more often than not, promulgated with these larger ends in view. Getting at this would require an analysis that treats presidents as *constitutive* of the political system, as actors who can affect their political environment just as surely as their political environment affects them. It would require a more protean view of the system in which some basic structural features remain unsettled, ripe not only for presidential manipulation but for mutual advancement as well. It would require a more "endogenous" view of the political actors engaged in determining

[19] Terry Moe, "The Politicized Presidency," in *The New Direction in American Politics*, ed. John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985); also see Daniel Galvin and Colleen Shogan, "Presidential Politicization and Centralization across the Modern-Traditional Divide," *Polity* 36, no. 3 (2004).
[20] William G. Howell, *Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Charles M. Cameron, *Veto Bargaining* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Kenneth R. Mayer, *With the Stroke of a Pen: Executive Orders and Presidential Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); David E. Lewis, *Presidents and the Politics of Agency Design: Political Insulation in the United States Government Bureaucracy, 1946-1997* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Keith Krehbiel, *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

outcomes and of the political contests in which they are engaged. What such a view would offer is a fuller accounting of presidents as agents of political change, as party *builders*, not just party *leaders.*

There are a few studies that proceed along these lines, enough to suggest that presidents do have unique capabilities to bring about dramatic change in the political landscape. For example, Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter have argued that presidents are capable of rearranging the configuration of social groups. In their view, presidents "reorganize interests, destroy established centers of power, and even call new groups into being…" they "attempt to enhance their own power and promote their own policy aims by constructing a new, more congenial configuration of social forces…" They are "not in fact limited to dealing with some predefined or fixed constellation of forces."[21] Similarly, Sidney M. Milkis shows how, in seeking to enhance their administrative capacities, successive presidents since FDR have contributed to the emergence of a modern executive establishment and a more national and programmatic party system. Changes in the party system have been endogenous to changes in executive administrative capacity – each one implicates the other, with presidents as the main facilitators of these developments.[22]

And in Stephen Skowronek's study of presidential leadership, the president is depicted as a "blunt disruptive force" who always shakes up, and sometimes reorders, "basic commitments of ideology and interest" in the course of exercising power.[23] Along the way to fulfilling their constitutional duties as national representatives, Skowronek's presidents routinely "make"

[21] Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter, "The Presidency and the Organization of Interests," in *The Presidency and the Political System, Volume 2*, ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1988). Along these lines, see also the excellent analysis by Paul Frymer and John David Skrentny, "Coalition-Building and the Politics of Electoral Capture During the Nixon Administration: African Americans, Labor, Latinos," *Studies in American Political Development* 12, no. 1 (1998).
[22] Milkis, *The President and the Parties*
[23] Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 4, 9.

politics and leave an altered political landscape in their wake. What these and other like studies aim to show is that presidents are powerful agents of change, capable of redrawing the lines of political contestation and restructuring political power, authority, and influence.[24]

Thus far, however, this alternative conception of how presidents interact with political environments and how they shape their political contexts remains far too under-specified. At times, the incumbent appears a bull in a china shop, changing things willy-nilly. Presidential rhetoric, policy promotion, formal powers, coalition-building, even symbolic actions appear to cause political change. As too often happens with an endogenous view of change, we have been left with a thick composite of determining factors and everything of significance appears to be bound up with everything else. The task at hand for anyone seeking to advance a more endogenous view of presidential action and its system-altering potential is to approach the problem with greater parsimony and sensitivity to mechanisms of historical change.[25] For example, begin by specifying the president's actions more carefully – identify those actions which recur only periodically and separate them analytically from those which occur consistently in every presidency. Then, examine the conditions under which those variations occur and consider competing explanations for the patterns observed. Once there is a clearer appreciation for what presidents do and when they do it, assess the temporal sequence of their actions, investigating how, and in what ways, their periodic and recurrent actions may serve to delimit or motivate future action. Party building stands ripe for scrutiny in this regard.

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[24] See also, for example, Adam D. Sheingate, "Political Entrepreneurship, Institutional Change, and American Political Development," *Studies in American Political Development* 17, no. 2 (2003); Keith E. Whittington and Daniel P. Carpenter, "Executive Power in American Institutional Development," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 3 (2003); and Scott C. James, *Presidents, Parties, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[25] Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Elisabeth S. Clemens and James M. Cook, "Politics and Institutionalism: Explaining Durability and Change," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999); Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions*

Considering the Variation

My research reveals that all presidents from Eisenhower to Clinton sought to use their parties instrumentally – to shape them to be more responsive and tractable organizational supports for their administrations. This finding is consistent and reliable across all presidents in the modern period, though some presidents acted with more zeal than others (e.g., Nixon more than Ford, Johnson more than Kennedy) and some met with more success than others (e.g., Ford more than Nixon, Kennedy more than Johnson). The interesting thing is *not*, however, the uniform pattern of instrumentalism across all presidencies, nor is it that certain presidents managed to extract more from their position of party leadership than the others. Rather, what stands out for attention is the profoundly different *kinds* of party organizations Democrats and Republicans sought to create in the process. Despite their uniform desire to extract personal benefits from their party leadership, Democrats and Republicans aimed to leave their parties with significantly different organizational capacities. This *partisan asymmetry* is a striking finding in its own right; but it becomes all the more significant when it is observed that the presidents' divergent approaches had *developmental consequences* for the trajectories their parties would take and for future president-party interactions. My dissertation elaborates these two findings.

Partisan Asymmetry

Scholarly claims of uniform presidential behavior are, it seems, reinforced by some of our most deeply rooted assumptions about American political parties, how they are structured, and how they operate. Most theories of the parties rest on the assumption that, except for their

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Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

policy proposals, the Democratic and Republican parties are essentially the same kind of organizations; they both face the same institutional incentives to structure their operations and activities to appeal to the median voter and construct majorities throughout the constitutional system. Much of the party competition literature, for example, takes for granted that the two major parties are essentially symmetrical creatures.[26] Regardless of the president, party, or moment of American history we are concerned with, it is usually assumed that both parties are structured and operate in fundamentally the same ways. Especially within demarcated party "periods" or "systems," both parties are presumed to exhibit organizational isomorphism.[27] While the symmetry assumption has been widely useful as a theoretical device in political science, it has led to a chronic and pervasive failure to observe demonstrable evidence of party *asymmetry* in reality.

This dissertation finds a marked asymmetry in president-party interactions along each of the six dimensions of party operations listed above.[28] *Which party* the president belonged to was the best predictor of whether he tried to build or undercut his party's organizational capacities. Indeed, when comparing presidents' actions across each dimension, the usual suspects for explaining presidential behavior fall out: the 'man versus the times' debate, for example, is

[26] These assumptions have been productively used for decades, particularly in comparative analysis as well as in studies of congressional elections and incumbency advantage. See, for example, Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* ; Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* ; Gary W. Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); V. O. Key, *Politics, Parties, & Pressure Groups*, 5th ed. (New York,: Crowell, 1964); also see the "textbook" literature on parties, for example Frank J. Sorauf, *Party Politics in America*, 4th ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1980); Marjorie Randon Hershey and Paul Allen Beck, *Party Politics in America*, 10th ed. (New York: Longman, 2003).

[27] Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983); Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in *The American Party Systems*, ed. William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[28] Disaggregating president-party interactions into events or episodes along each of these six spheres -- or sites of potential president-party interaction, if you will -- expands six-fold the number of observable implications of the phenomenon under consideration and allows significantly more analytical leverage in comparing president-party

rendered moot in the face of a persistent party difference. The chapters to follow elaborate these comparisons, case by case, using detailed archival research and historical investigation. Briefly considering comparisons of president-party interactions along two dimensions – *forming new fundraising and disbursement methods* and *running more effective campaigns* – should suffice to introduce this framework.

First, consider how Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Gerald R. Ford sought to alter the fundraising and fund-disbursement routines of their parties (Chapters 5 and 9). Fundraising capability is a major advantage presidents can bring to their parties – as national icons, presidents can usually draw more money in a single instance than any other political actor. But if presidents can raise money quickly, they can also raise it for a variety of more specific purposes; and on that account, the fundraising activities of Johnson and Ford were markedly different. While both presidents broke fundraising records of the past, the money Johnson raised remained tightly controlled by the White House while most of the money Ford raised went directly to state parties. Moreover, Johnson's money was disbursed to those specific candidates deemed particularly responsive or useful to the president; Ford's money went to general state party treasuries to help them develop improved local campaign operations, recruit new candidates, and register and mobilize voters.

Second, consider the approach John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan took to changing their party's capacity to assist in running campaigns (Chapters 6 and 8). In preparation for his 1964 reelection campaign, Kennedy constructed a highly responsive and loyal campaign coordination network, bypassing the existing party apparatus. He refused to seize upon the opportunity provided by his presidential campaign to develop and enhance the Democratic

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interactions across time and space. See Chapter Two for more on the methodological rationale for using this heuristic.

party's organizational capacities -- instead he purposefully centralized campaign resources in his personal support structure, removing from local party organizations the ability to gain practical knowledge and informational resources for use in their own campaigns. In contrast, Ronald Reagan integrated the RNC into his 1984 reelection campaign as an equal partner. A division of labor applied to massive voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns between the RNC, the Reagan-Bush '84 campaign committee, and several other groups employed in the campaign. Taking advantage of the prime-time event of a presidential campaign, Republican party activists, volunteers, and party members were able to develop their organizational skills, millions of new Republicans were registered and brought into politics as volunteers, and a durable voter information database was developed for use in future campaigns. Reagan's reelection campaign was turned into a party-building affair.

While these Democratic and Republican presidents all had similar interests in securing reelection, achieving policy successes, and leaving personal legacies, and while all found that they could use their party in some way to assist in these purposes, their interactions with their parties' organizational capacities were qualitatively different. They were different in their organizational aims: Republicans sought to bolster the independent organizational capacities of their parties down to the local volunteer; Democrats hoarded knowledge and diverted resources away from local party organizations and eliminated opportunities for their party to benefit from presidential political activities. And they were different in their time horizons: the Republicans' efforts were geared toward strengthening the party as it looked toward the future; Democrats aimed to maximize their immediate benefit from party activities and assumed that their party's future would take care of itself.

Divergent Paths of Organizational Development

As these brief examples suggest and the chapters to follow document, both types of party interactions -- party building and undercutting the party's organizational capacities -- can sow the seeds for later party developments. By tightly controlling the who, what, and how of party activities, Democratic president-party interactions kept their party's operational capacities inchoate. They helped to ensure that every new Democratic president would need to start anew and build new organizational capacities on their own. Presidential party building in the Republican party, on the other hand, created cumulative organizational development and established conditions wherein future presidents would be more likely to find it in their interest to continue down the party building path.

An illuminating example of how different president-party interactions create different developmental trajectories for the two parties can be found in the contrast between Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford – both "accidental" presidents who came into office without the benefit of the usual transition period between election and inauguration. Both men were consummate party insiders; both understood how party organization worked; both had political ambitions of their own. Neither had much time, early on, to design new party building programs from scratch. Both had reason to keep key personnel in place and support political activities that were proving to be effective. Johnson, in particular, had every reason to claim "continuity" with the past and build upon the work of his fallen predecessor – Kennedy was more beloved than ever in the wake of his assassination. If either of these presidents had a reason to make a clean break with the past, it was Gerald Ford, whose predecessor resigned in disgrace and was widely charged with enervating his party's functional capacities.

In their public statements, both Johnson and Ford gave signs that their behavior would conform to expectations: Johnson repeatedly promised to continue along the path charted by his fallen predecessor and Ford promised to turn the page on the past.[29] But their party interactions could not have been more different. Johnson sought to reverse, or undo, all that Kennedy had done to the Democratic Party; then he refused to build his party anew, instead taking steps to debilitate, rather than strengthen, its independent functional capacities. Ford, in contrast, made a conscious and strategic decision to perpetuate, build upon, and nurture the party building work of his predecessor, supporting both continuity and innovation in the Republican party's structures, processes, and activities.

Only when we allow for the possibility that presidents do not walk on untrodden ground can we appreciate *how* and *why* each president interacted with his party as he did. When Ford took the reins of his party's leadership, multiple organizational capacity-building programs were currently in the works. His predecessor Richard Nixon, the president we tend to associate the most with presidential aggrandizement at the expense of party, had, in fact, developed an elaborate plan to strengthen and expand the Republican party in 1973-1974. Once his highly personalized reelection campaign was over in 1972, Nixon began to build an organizational foundation for "campaign management colleges" and "new majority initiatives" to train party

[29] In his memoirs, Johnson wrote: "Rightly or wrongly, I felt from the very first day in office that I had to carry on for President Kennedy. I considered myself the caretaker of both his people and his policies. He knew when he selected me as his running mate that I would be the man required to carry on if anything happened to him. I did what I believed he would have wanted me to do. I never wavered from that sense of responsibility, even after I was elected in my own right, up to my last day in office." Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, 1st ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 19.

Ford's comments at the Midwest Republican Leadership Conference on March 30, 1974 were intended to separate Ford from the Watergate scandal and the discredited president he would soon succeed. His comments were well-received he repeated them often: "Never again must Americans allow an arrogant elite guard of political adolescents like CREEP to bypass the regular Republican Party organization…[CREEP] violated the historic concept of the two-party system in America and it ran literally roughshod over the seasoned political judgment and the seasoned political experience of the regular Republican Party organization in all of our 50 states." Reprinted in Gerald Ford, "Lessons of Watergate," in *First Monday* (Washington, D.C.: Republican National Committee, 1871-1990), May 1974, p. 2.

workers to run more effective campaigns, recruit new candidates, and appeal to new constituency groups. Ironically, left over funds from the infamous CREEP -- perhaps the most anti-party building presidential initiative to date -- were earmarked as seed money for Nixon's new majority party-building project.[30]

Nixon's party building strengthened local party capacities and developed new "foot soldiers" who were committed to the Republican party – not to the Nixon White House. After Nixon resigned, these people and programs remained. Ford stood only to benefit from supporting their continuance. Nixon's party building had created self-perpetuating structures, processes, and activities – Ford's decision to support party building initiatives was a cheap and easy move: party building "startup costs" were low, and the likelihood that he could benefit from enhanced organizational capacities in his party was high.[31] With only slight tweaks and enhancements, Ford would quickly become the most ambitious and comprehensive party building president since Eisenhower.

As we shall see in chapters eight and nine, Johnson faced an entirely different set of circumstances in his party. Kennedy and his team had worked hard to build personal ties between the Administration and certain party leaders, but they did not attend to the party's organizational capacities. They reorganized party structures at the national level and in many states to align party activities with the Administration's political purposes and cultivated

[30] As Chapter 4 explains, Nixon's CREEP, which diverted resources away from the formal Republican party apparatus and showed a marked indifference toward the party's capacities to contest local and congressional campaigns, was in many ways the proverbial "exception that proves the rule." CREEP was not the only interaction Nixon had with the Republican party organization. Throughout his first term, Nixon concentrated on developing the organizational capacities of state and local Republican parties in the South, and at his direction RNC Executive Director Thomas Evans initiated numerous training seminars and created a "field force" to assist state party development projects (among other party building initiatives); immediately after reelection, Nixon deeply regretted his lack of coattails and swiftly empowered the RNC to launch a multifaceted "New Majority" campaign to redress the problem, by strengthening the Republican party and expanding its reach outward.

[31] The "positive feedback" of Nixon's party building initiatives and Ford's strategic decision to continue along the path charted by his predecessor instantiates several of the central properties of path dependence as described in

dependencies on the White House for operational direction. Kennedy aimed to exploit the "cult of personality" surrounding his presidency, which meant building political networks that were loyal to JFK and developing Democratic party programs to advertise and sell the Kennedy personality. He demonstrated a marked indifference toward his party's local organizational capacities to contest elections, recruit candidates, enroll new activists, develop a collective identity, and raise and distribute funds. Through his party interactions, Kennedy built a highly responsive and personalized structure of political support – but it proved to be a house of cards that collapsed with his assassination. Upon assuming the presidency, Johnson found himself the titular leader of a party prepared to reelect John Kennedy -- not Lyndon Johnson, or any other Democrat, for that matter. To the extent that Johnson proceeded to interact with his party organization, he sought to eliminate Kennedy's influences embedded within it and prevent it from interfering with his personal ambitions. He dismantled the limited programs that were in place and either fired or neutralized Kennedy's people at the DNC. He made it clear to party leaders across the country that all debts and arrangements made under Kennedy were now null and void.

Though Johnson certainly *could have* initiated brand new party building programs, he chose not to. With little to build on, and facing an existing party structure that was largely antagonistic toward him, Johnson found it advantageous to tear down Kennedy's jerry-rigged party organization and cultivate his own personal networks of political support outside the party apparatus. Ford, too, *could have* turned away from his party – after all, it had reached an unprecedented low in party identification in the electorate (18 percent), Ford's personal popularity was high, and conservatives were talking about starting a third party. But in contrast

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Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* , ch. 1. For a more detailed discussion of the limits of this conceptual framework in the setting of party developments, see the concluding chapter 12.

to Johnson, Ford had no reason to dismantle the capacity-building programs that were set in motion under Nixon – on the contrary, he stood to benefit from their continuance. The irony, of course, is that Ford's oft-quoted critique of his predecessor's party relations would have been much more fitting if it had come from Johnson. Nixon, after all, bequeathed to Ford important new party resources to build on. While these examples are discussed in detail later, for the moment it should suffice to say that both Kennedy's and Nixon's party interactions had an observable impact on the calculations and behaviors of their successors, which, in turn, either contributed to cumulative organizational development or kept their party inchoate.

The Democrats' efforts to shift traditional party functions *elsewhere* – into the White House, out of established organizational routines – diminished their party's capacities to reproduce its activities under changing conditions and in new contexts, and left their successors, including President Carter eight years later, few robust party structures, processes, or activities to build on. Republicans, by consistently leaving behind robust organizational capacities and ongoing party operations, made party building nearly irresistible for their successors. Reagan's intensive party building in the 1980s, for example, built directly upon the constructive programs of his predecessors. As we shall see, from Eisenhower to the George W. Bush, party building in the Republican party was undertaken extensively by presidents, for presidents, and with the assistance of presidents. The Republican party developed organizational capacities which *benefited* from presidential attention and control rather than were *weakened* by it. By putting the party on the trajectory of expansion and growth, presidential party builders created an organization primed for further presidential party building in the future.

Summary

As stated, one objective of this study is to avoid the pitfall of assuming that everything of significance impacts everything else of significance. We want to be able to specify and understand that which is empirically observable: namely, what do presidents do, when do they do it, how, and with what effect. Taking some time to sort out these factors can reveal useful clues with which to test competing hypotheses about *why* Democrats and Republicans acted so differently.[32] It can even open up new avenues of inquiry into the path dependence of party developments. Thus, it is prudent to focus first on bringing the historical findings into sharper relief. This is attempted in the following chapters, in efforts to systematically identify and specify the various party-changing actions presidents undertook, to examine carefully the conditions under which this variation is observed, and to explore available evidence of the effects.

To summarize, then, the most significant finding of this dissertation is the demonstration of marked differences in how Democratic and Republican presidents have interacted with their parties in the modern period. Each chapter aims to elucidate these differences through detailed historical investigation. Taken cumulatively, the chapters challenge prevailing assumptions of symmetry between the parties and the invariance of presidential behavior. They also point to some important ways in which presidents are consequential engines of party development in America. Indeed, in the chapters to follow, I explore how the presidential actions at one time shape the opportunities and constraints perceived by presidents in their interactions with the parties down the road. Along the way, much conventional wisdom will be exposed to critical scrutiny.

For example, I will show that Dwight D. Eisenhower, who for all the revisionism of recent years is still depicted as a "president above party" was, in fact, compulsively preoccupied

[32] For an extended discussion of this critical and pressing question, see Chapter Two.

with building a new Republican party in his image, and that he undertook a variety of actions to create a durable party organization with enhanced capacities to help it move in a new direction long after he left the White House. I will show that the publicly magnanimous John F. Kennedy systematically shattered established party routines and tore apart existing partisan networks in order to enhance his electoral prospects in 1964; that Lyndon B. Johnson, known as a masterful politician who haplessly divided the Democratic party with his decisions in Vietnam had already thoroughly enervated his party by aggressively supplanting its collective capabilities with new structures of partisan support dedicated to him and him alone. Richard M. Nixon, whose CREEP innovation and Watergate debacle are widely perceived as bringing the G.O.P. to its lowest point ever will be shown to be only a piece of the puzzle – I will demonstrate that Nixon was actually quite persistent in his quest to build the Republican party in the South, enhance the coordinative capacities of the National Committee, and create a durable "New Majority" for the Republican party. Gerald Ford will be shown to pick up where Nixon left off: his alleged lack of political astuteness did not prevent him from becoming one of the most comprehensive and deliberate grassroots party builders in the modern period, one who sought to expand the party's base through the cultivation of new party structures and operations. Jimmy Carter's well-known incompatibility with the Democratic party powers-that-be will be shown as a mere backdrop for his frequent secretive efforts to reconfigure the party's structures and rules to serve his own reelection campaign, tactics he pursued even at the expense of the ideological values he espoused. I will show how Ronald Reagan's "New Beginning" in American politics was an exercise in continuity and innovation at the level of his party's organizational development, and that while his party building efforts were impressive in scope, they clearly did not represent a wholesale transformation or reconstruction of the Republican party. George Bush will be shown

to persevere along the path charted by his predecessors despite facing repudiation by his own party leaders; and Bill Clinton's "New Democratic party" will be shown to be a stillbirth innovation at best – not only a result of his "third way" political posture but also of his inattention to his party's organizational capacities.

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