Resurgent or Just Busy?
Party Organizations in Contemporary America

John J. Coleman

Forty years ago, the American Political Science Association (APSA) Committee on Political Parties (1950) precipitated a storm of controversy with a critique of American parties. Many political scientists were sympathetic to the committee's call for responsible parties, but an equally sizable contingent agreed with Pendleton Herring's (1940) classic analysis: the United States had parties appropriate to its political culture and government structure, attempts to change these parties were probably futile, and any such changes would be dangerous for American democracy.

Twenty years ago, scholars began to diagnose the decline of American parties as central organizing structures in American politics. Many writers pointed to decline stretching half a century or longer; others argued that the decline was particularly severe in the postwar period. In effect, these writers viewed even the parties criticized by the APSA party report to be preferable to the parties of the late 1960s.

Today, a new orthodoxy in party organization scholarship challenges the party decline analysis. With few exceptions, writers concentrating on party organizations argue that parties are more active and more significant than earlier literature implied. According to this view, the party decline school mistakenly assumed that problems in the electorate and in Congress indicated the decline of the party system and, by extension, party organizations. Although these scholars concede that the strength of the party system cannot be inferred from the strength of party organizations, they also argue that such an assessment has to include party organizations (Gibson, Cotter, Bibby, Huckshorn 1983: 194). The logical implication of this analysis is that the party system is stronger than the party decline model suggests. The irony is rich: the "revivalists," who usually express sympathy with the Herring view of parties, argue that some of what the APSA committee demanded has come to pass and the American political order is better for it (see inventory in Baer and Bositis 1993: appendix). But they challenge the "declinists" who grudgingly accepted the Herring-approved political parties of the early postwar period.
Once we move beyond the notion of increased party activity, several shortcomings in the recent party revival literature become clear. Here I address several of these deficiencies. Because it is done so well in many of the sources I cite, I will not provide an extensive review of the findings in the literature. Moreover, despite a critical tone, this chapter should not be construed as a wholesale indictment on an impressive body of research. Recent party organization research has filled a large gap in the study of parties, addressed with precision several anomalies in that larger literature, been innovative in measurement and research design, and proven remarkably cumulative. My objective is to point out research gaps and to encourage a more integrated analysis of the party system.

The New Orthodoxy

The past decade has seen a sea change among party scholars regarding the health of party organizations in the United States. Where fifteen years ago there was consensus that party organizations were weak, today the consensus argues that party organizations are revitalized, resurgent, and relevant. Scholars have conducted large-scale surveys of state and county party chairs and found that those organizations report performing more activities today than at any time since the second World War. Campaign finance studies indicate that ever larger sums pass through the hands of various party committees on the national, state, and county (local) levels and that these funds, with some party differences, are generally targeted toward competitive races. These scholars are enthused about what they see happening with the party organizations and are convinced that “parties matter” (Gibson and Scarrow 1993).

Virtually all party scholars agree that there has been real change in party activity on the national, state, and county levels. But there are some peculiarities in the data. Cotter, Gibson, Bibby, and Huckshorn (1984: 39, 54), for example, find that most of the increase in state and county party organizational strength occurred in the 1960s, which is not widely considered the heyday of party organizational resurgence. Indeed, Herrnson and Menefee-Libey (1990), begin their overview of party organizational change in the late 1960s, and many writers focus on changes in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A second disturbance in the claims about party organizations concerns the status of local parties. Most of the literature focuses on county party organizations, and here, as with the national and state parties, the consensus is that parties are doing more today than previously (cf. Lawson, Pomper, and Moakley 1986). Studies of cities, however, show a more mixed pattern, with the authors in Crotty (1986) generally encouraged by what they see while authors like Ware (1985) argue city party organizations have lost so many of their traditional functions, especially control of nominations, that they are but a shell of their former selves (Johnston 1979).

Despite these peculiarities in the data, the case that party organizations are performing more activities and raising more funds today is strong enough that one cannot get very far arguing that it is not so. But armed with this data, the party organization literature has leapt too quickly to words like “resurgence” and “revitalization.” Increased activity should only be the start of a conception of resurgent parties. That conception also needs to account for the party organizations’ relations with other actors and institutions in the political universe. To make a business analogy, over the past few years there has been much speculation in the business press about the troubles affecting the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM). Suppose that with new leadership, IBM were to begin restructuring and reallocating organizational responsibilities, changing prices, and introducing new product lines. It is difficult to imagine that we would hear much about IBM being “resurgent” and “revitalized” unless customers returned to IBM products and IBM’s profitability improved, even if analysts admired IBM’s efforts. Even praising the company’s ability to hold its market share steady would be considered at best a backhanded compliment. We should ask the same questions of parties: are the customers returning and are the parties increasing their “market” share? One might argue that if market share is measured as the percentage of offices held by the two major parties or by candidates’ use of party services, then indeed market share is high and perhaps growing. But if market share is measured in other ways—such as the percentage of voters given enough incentive to turn out to vote—a different picture might well emerge. However one measures the benchmarks, the point is that resurgence is indicated not by organizational restructuring alone but by the effects of restructuring.

Bringing the Voters Back In

One striking anomaly in the contemporary party system is that at the same time scholars argue that party organizations are reviving, the public has become increasingly skeptical about the relevance of political parties to governing and the desirability of partisan activity in general (Fiorina 1980; Burnham 1982; Brady 1990; Milikis 1993). More citizens say that interest groups better represent them than do political parties, and the interest group advantage is particularly heavy among the young (Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1986: 52). Record numbers of voters split their tickets and record numbers of districts have split outcomes—that is, supporting a president of one party and a member of Congress from another. Voting patterns are increasingly inconsistent: it is harder to predict what will happen in one race by knowing the outcome in another and it is harder to predict
voting patterns two years hence based on voting patterns today. Only half the electorate bothers to vote in presidential elections and about one-third votes in off-year congressional elections. Electoral turnout varies substantially across states and across offices; in the absence of a gubernatorial campaign, turnout is low. Local turnout is usually low as well. In 1992, nineteen percent of the voting public supported an independent candidate for president who had held no political office, was all but unknown seven months before the election, did almost no campaigning in the traditional sense, and spoke a harshly antiparty message.

It is difficult to understand any of these developments through the lenses provided by party organization theory. Perhaps one could argue that decreasing party loyalty is a sign of party organizational strength: that is, the organizations have become so effective at campaigning that they Supplant traditional voter loyalties ( Cotter, Gibson, Bibby, and Huckshorn 1984: 103). Perhaps organizational strength would explain the phenomenon of segmented or dual partisanship—identifying oneself with one major party for federal offices and the other major party for state offices—but segmented partisanship is difficult to correlate with the data indicating that party organizations are also becoming more integrated, unless national-state-local party integration is devoid of substantive policy content. But we know that this is certainly not true for the Republicans and their widely praised service-provision activities for candidates at all levels. These arguments also reverse the causation in Schlesinger’s (1991) much cited formulation that decreased voter loyalty led to increased party organizational efforts (it is not clear in Schlesinger what led to the decreased loyalties). In short, no compelling case has been made within the organizational framework to explain increasingly variable voting patterns across offices and years.

Thus, widespread lack of trust in parties and the increasing tendency for voters to view parties as unnecessary and perhaps unhelpful appendages to the political system pose a large puzzle for the new orthodoxy ( Wattenberg 1990). Now, this is not to argue that antipartisan attitudes are unique to the present period; they have to one extent or another been a common part of American political culture ( Epstein 1986). But the level of disgust and bitterness with “politics as usual” is now exceptionally high—and political parties are surely part of “politics as usual.” Though today many political scientists do indeed scoff at the public’s discontent, suggesting that the public is either spoiled, ignorant, manipulated by demagogues, or all three, the negative public mood is reflected in turnout, voting behavior, and attitudes toward parties. Party organizations have increased their activity levels; voters are unimpressed. Ross Perot may not be easy to explain in any context, but within the celebration of party “resurgence” and “revitalization” in the party organization literature he becomes an enormous enigma. If the dominance of offices and votes by the two major parties is a measure of party strength, then it is hard to understand why one-fifth of the electorate abandoned the parties’ presidential candidates after a sustained period of party “resurgence.”

One might argue that this discontent is a result of particularly effective campaign tactics spearheaded by party strategists. In this reading, discontent is actually a result of party organizational strength. Certainly many post-mortem analyses of the 1988 Bush campaign reached such a conclusion. But for the party organizations, such a resolution is hardly satisfactory because it suggests one of two things: (1) party organizations help candidates whip up discontent about real issues to win office, but along with party-in-government they are unable to do anything to restore public confidence once in office—that is, the problems are real but the parties are unable to effect any change; or (2) party organizations help whip up discontent about nonexistent or irrelevant problems. The first alternative suggests a collapse of accountability in the political system, at least accountability oriented around political parties; the second suggests that party organizations willingly debauch public discourse to win office, which raises disturbing normative issues (see below).

The striking contrast between the literature on party organizations and observations on partisanship in the electorate results from the dominance of supply-side analysis in the party organization literature, namely, examining what parties are doing (or say they are doing). From such analysis it is easy to conclude that parties are resurgent—parties must be stronger if they are doing more rather than less. But what this literature has ignored is the demand-side represented by the electorate. Where studies of late nineteenth and early twentieth century party organizations place a great deal of emphasis on the interaction between party officials and the citizenry ( McGerr 1986; Bridges 1986; Shifter 1976, 1994: chap. 4; cf. Brown and Halaby 1987), studies of recent party organization stress what the party is supplying and de-emphasize how the public is responding. The emerging “truncated” or service-provider model of the party teaches us about changes in modern campaigning, but not about the broader place of party in American politics. How much must public discontent with the parties grow before organizational studies recognize the implications of those negative signs for party “revitalization” or “resurgence”? Is it more important that targeted party activity might raise turnout two or three percentage points in a given election or that turnout has dropped steadily over time and is lower now than when the party organizations were “weak”? Only an unduly narrow view of party organization can suggest our primary interest is whether candidates think party assistance is helpful.

A handful of studies do look closely at the link between party organization (or party competition, which is not necessarily the same thing) and public response. These studies stress primarily the parties’ direct and indirect influence on turnout; they usually find that party activities indeed have some impact. But if public response to turnout efforts is a valid part of party organization scholarship, why not public views or behavior toward party?
One argument might be that party organizations see voter turnout as one of their functions, but public attitudes toward parties are not in their purview. This argument misses the point. Intended or not, party behavior through campaigning and governing are public acts and may produce public discontent. Parties ignoring this discontent because “it’s not our problem” have a history of being deformed through reforms. Public opinion matters.

What about linkage at the other end? Although my focus is on the linkage between party organizations and voters, studies of the connection between party organizations and party-in-government have been similarly limited. Two strong supporters of contemporary party organizations acknowledge that “much less is known about how party organizations affect public policy” (Gibson and Scarrow 1993: 245) than about how they affect elections. They note there is some possibility that these organizations can affect policy direction. On the whole, however, it is “highly doubtful that [they] have much of an ideological effect” (1993: 245) once public officials take office. But, they point out, there is some possibility for affecting party policy at the margin through the recruitment and nomination process (Gibson, Freidreis, and Vertz 1989). Although Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour’s involvement in congressional party strategy in 1994 and 1995 was notable, it is unclear whether this is an institutional relationship between the organizational and legislative branches of the party or a personal relationship between particular individuals that may fade as these individuals depart the scene. It is also unclear whether Barbour was a leading, influential policy player or primarily carrying water for the Republican leadership. One small group of recent studies does attempt to discern whether party organization activity has any influence on elected officials’ policy decisions; the influence is at best slight (Cotter et al. 1984; Leyden and Borrelli 1990; Dwyre 1992, 1993; cf. Wright 1994). As Lawson, Pomper, and Moakley (1986: 368, 369) point out, our knowledge about the parties’ performance as linkages between citizens and the state “remain[s] fragmentary and inconclusive.”

Methodological obstacles have surely been one hindrance to examining the linkage between party organizations and party-in-government. In their discussion of party organization relationships with elected officeholders, Cotter, Gibson, Bibby, and Huckshorn warn that “these interpretations must be treated as only suggestive because of the small number of cases, the lack of control variables, and uncertainty about the appropriateness of generalizing from the high and low strength ranges that are actually party-specific” (1984: 118). This cautionary note provides a good sense of the difficulties. Similar complexities face the analyst examining whether party organizations influence election results.

Linkage at both ends—citizen to party organization and organization to elected officeholder—is strained. Because I believe the problems with voters deserve special attention, I have placed extra emphasis on the former. If parties’ raison d’être is to create a substantive connection between rulers and

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Accentuate the Positive, Ignore the Normative

Part of the reason that party organization scholars have been eager to move the discipline away from the notion of party decline is that these scholars tend to believe deeply in the positive contributions parties make to the American political system. Even though many if not most disagree passionately with E. E. Schattschneider’s vision of the ideal political party for the United States, they typically endorse Schattschneider’s frequently noted contention that “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties” (1942: 1). When party organization students contend that “parties matter,” they are making both an empirical and normative statement.

Despite this normative endorsement of parties, the organization literature has been surprisingly quiet about key features of American politics during the era of resurgent party organizations. Beyond the problem of the electorate's response to party organizational changes are questions concerning practices in American politics that are directly related to the parties' service-provider activities. The results of these activities have not always been pretty. Yet the party organization literature has said little about their normative implications.

Our interest in the health of political parties should not be divorced from our interest in the health of politics or the political system. For example, the new orthodoxy is generally very positive about the efforts of the parties to raise and distribute more campaign funds and their efforts to coexist peacefully with interest groups and political action committees. Yet other studies raise troubling questions about the parties’ increasing reliance on raising huge sums of money from special interests (Edsall 1984; Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Ferguson 1995). The implicit stance of organization theorists is that the parties’ ability to raise this money is more significant than the effects of this reliance on massive fundraising. Are party organizations part of the problem with money in politics or part of the solution? Are they making a bad situation—the intersection of money and politics—worse? Indeed, the intersection of money and politics is a significant aspect of the public discontent mentioned above. It is one thing to note that a party committee is holding a “breakfast” for important contributors; it is quite another to ignore that these activities may resonate very poorly within the public at large and may, in the long run, be harmful for the credibility and legitimacy of political parties. The party organizations’ tremendous “success” at funneling “soft
money" into campaigns raises similar problems. Although some studies make the plausible argument that parties make the situation less distasteful than it might be by serving as an intermediary of funds for candidates—and as the largest single provider for most candidates (Herrnson 1988, 1990)—these important normative questions are discussed infrequently.

Another normative issue concerns voter turnout. As I mentioned above, several studies indicate that party mobilization efforts can have a positive impact on voter turnout. But studies of organization tend to ignore the flip side—parties can and do effectively demobilize as well (Shelton 1984; Piven and Cloward 1989). This is certainly not news, as the trajectory of Southern and Progressive politics after the turn of the century makes clear. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 162–77, 215) attribute the bulk of the decline in turnout since the early 1960s to decreasing efforts to mobilize voters by various organizations, including, most prominently, the political parties. One explanation is that the parties have chosen to de-emphasize labor-intensive mobilization in the new capital-and-technology-intensive electoral system (Frantzich 1989). Officials and workers in party organizations may not have the luxury to contemplate the participatory implications of this kind of shift; it is incumbent upon party organization scholars to do so. Organizational adaptation that is rational in the short term may not prove to be so in the long term.

The point here is simple: we either believe that declining turnout is bad for the political system or we do not. If we do, we need to be clear about the parties’ contribution to something we consider corrosive to democracy. Without denying the need for technological adaptation and sophistication, we can question whether the extent of the move away from labor-intensive mobilization is as inevitable as it is normally portrayed. It may be the case that county chairs see their efforts as most significant in "grass-roots activity emphasizing ties to local people," such as organizing campaign events and get-out-the-vote drives (Freidrichs, Gitelson, Flemming, and Liley 1993: 10), but the dismal state of turnout (especially in local races) has to lead one to question how effective or extensive these activities are. What do we want from parties? A party organization and party system that I would label "resurgent" or "revitalized" would not be one that witnesses sustained declining participation or one with participation levels as low as at present.

A third normative issue concerns the quality of modern campaigns. As party organizations claim increasing involvement in recruiting candidates, assisting the strategy and conduct of campaigns, and acting as intermediaries between the candidates and the private market of campaign services (Maiisel, Fowler, Jones, and Stone 1990; Kazee and Thornberry 1990; Freidrichs, Gibson, and Vertz 1990), they should be judged on the quality of these campaigns. I do not want to overstate this point. The organization literature is, it seems to me, very careful to avoid projecting party organizations as the lead institutions in contemporary campaigns but rather as the supporting cast for candidate organizations (which some students might, of course, reasonably note as a sign of party decline). Again, although party organizations do not have the luxury of stepping back to analyze the quality of campaigns, political scientists, even those enthused about the changes in party organizations, should. There are plausible arguments on each side of this issue—some argue that modern campaigns are informative (Popkin 1991), others assert that campaigns have become shill, uninformative, divisive, and unrelated to the real tasks of governance that follow the election (Blumenthal 1990; Dionne 1991; Bennett 1992). Are the resurgent party organizations helping corrode the discourse of American campaigns? If campaigning is increasingly divorced from governing, we should question the contributions of institutions intimately involved in campaigns and campaign strategy.

The point of these examples is that such normative issues should not be ignored by the proponents of party organizational resurgence. The literature lacks a critical appraisal of the content of the activities the parties perform. By way of contrast, analyses of interest groups often manage to merge support of interest group involvement in the political process with critical assessments of the impact of interest groups on the political system. This omission is important, for as Lawson, Pomper, and Moakley (1986: 369) note, "the parties, including their hard-working activists, may be willing to endure public contempt so long as they win elections, but how long will the public tolerate such parties?"

Successful at What?

One message found throughout the party organization literature is that party organizations play an important role in American politics. Surprisingly, however, the exact nature of the success achieved by these organizations is often left vague. And measures of success that appear obvious are overlooked. This problem is related to the more general tendency to focus on activities and pay less attention to effects.

Most studies on party organization are particularly impressed with the efforts of the Republican Party to restructure its organizational apparatus, upgrade its service capacities, and improve the product it offers candidates and potential candidates. What is surprising, however, is the lack of hard data in the literature showing that the Republican efforts have made much difference in the electoral landscape. Republican organizational efforts have probably boosted the party’s fortunes in the South, though certainly the internal collapse of the Democrats was also a factor. But more generally one can ask: where is the evidence that Republicans have received much of a return on the massive amounts of money they have spent on organizational enhancement over the past two decades? Perhaps the Republican capture of the Senate in 1980 was due in part to Republican organizational efforts, with
the cooperation of sympathetic groups like the National Conservative Political Action Committee. Some scholars (e.g., Jacobson 1985–86) argue plausibly that Republican losses might have been much more severe in the deep recession of 1982 if not for the efforts of the Republican campaign committees, but the data is not hard. And one can expect similar contentions about Republican prowess to be made in the wake of the massive Republican success in the 1994 elections. Party organization efforts, however, must compete with other significant explanatory factors. General approval of the Reagan/Republican governmental reduction agenda, skepticism about Democratic competence, lack of a Democratic program, a perception of tremendous economic and social insecurity, the inexorable waning of the Democratic New Deal regime; the efforts of Republican leadership PACs, the widespread funding of conservative think tanks and ideas, and the gradual withdrawal of lower-income individuals from the electorate are all of the more prominent possibilities for explaining these recent events. I make these points not to suggest that the Republican organizational efforts have been for naught; at the very least, the Republicans’ ability to compete for more offices has been a great boon to the party. Even here, however, ambition theory suggests that an ambitious politician would find the Republican label attractive not because of the Republican organization per se but because of the long-term implosion and dissolution of the Democratic Party made it an increasingly questionable strategic career choice (Aldrich 1995; Schlesinger 1991). If the Democrats do not seem to be the road to political security and success, and certainly they looked less and less like that road over the last two to three decades, then the Republicans are the only other significant game in town. Republican organizations can assist these stopgap candidates; they are less likely to create the conditions that produce these candidates. My point is simply that for all the apparent Republican advantages in party organization, both at the national and state level, one might have expected some clearer demonstrated payoff over and above the success produced by the other forces listed above.

Beyond the question of recent Republican “success,” evidence is mixed regarding the effect of party organizations on election outcomes. Gibson and Scarrow (1993: 242–43) note that evidence suggests party organizations made a difference in election outcomes in specific cases. Cotter et al. (1984), on the other hand, found that over time a party’s relative electoral success (measured by the Ranney index) bore little relationship to the strength of its state party organizations. A mild to moderate relationship was, however, uncovered for nonsouth gubernatorial elections. Both studies properly note the methodological difficulties inherent in teasing out the effect of party organizations on election results.

Success is also related to what writers believe the important role of the parties to be. As mentioned above, the service-provider and party-as-broker views have clearly gained ground in recent years, but it is not generally acknowledged that we should consider the set of tasks confronting parties—or that they choose to confront—when we estimate whether party organizations are resurgent and revitalized. In other words, what are we expecting parties to do? The more limited our expectations, the more likely we see success and resurgence. Ware perhaps puts this point most clearly when he observes that

A strong party organization is one which, at the very least, can determine who will be the party’s candidates, can decide (broadly) the issues on which electoral campaigns will be fought by its candidates, contributes the “lion’s share” of resources to the candidates’ elections campaigns, and has influence over appointments made by elected public officials. (1988: x)

For scholars the question must be whether the “successes” garnered by the truncated party are as significant as the “successes” of past parties as depicted by Ware.

An increasing party role in campaign finance is seen by many as a key success of modern party organizations. Although it is true that the parties raise more money than previously and that they use that money more carefully, it is also the case that legislative campaign committees have become dominant in the funding of legislative races. Rather than increasing the influence of party or working to pull parts of the party together, Sorauf and Wilson (1990) argue that the dominance of the legislative campaign committees reflects an effort by legislators to remain autonomous from the wider party (see also chap. 11 in this volume). Therefore the increasing role for the parties in this aspect of campaign finance may increase the likelihood of party members winning but it does not, as Sorauf and Wilson suggest, increase the integration of the party.

Another irony regarding success is that as party organizations became more efficient in campaign finance and campaign assistance, fewer members of the parties in Congress needed the services as incumbency reelection rates and margins increased. When one-half of the challenger party’s adherents are willing to abandon their party identification in order to support the incumbent member of Congress (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1994), the incumbent’s party organization needs to play a truly relevant role in fewer contests. This is useful, because it allows parties to concentrate their resources, but it does suggest how much of the electoral universe is largely beyond the influence of party organizations.

As noted above, organization scholars are careful to avoid attributing too much influence or strength to party organizations. In campaigns, for example, the party is clearly seen as a supporting institution to the candidate. Yet the line between success and failure is perilously close. To take the most recent data as an example, Freidrich, Gitelson, Flemming and Layzell (1993) report that state legislative candidates rate county party organizations as “slightly” effective only in recruiting campaign volunteers and getting out the vote. On organizing campaign events, fundraising, and campaign management and
the Congress and party organizations both showed new signs of life in the 1980s. But when most of the decline arguments were being written, it was indeed difficult to see signs of renewal. This was especially true because of the lack of any overarching theory of party that integrated the developments at each geographic level of party and for each of the three major party components. Yet far from falsely assuming party decline, the decline theorists did not typically make arguments that were incompatible with "the facts" as presented in the party organization literature. One major study in the party organization school, for example, accepts that the party organizations from World War II to the mid-1970s were clearly inferior to and of lesser significance than the party organizations before the war (Herrnson 1988). For a decline writer to assume weak party organizations was not advisable, but apparently not incorrect. Herrnson argues that the party organizations adapted and took on new roles after the mid-1970s and that the party organizations now fit their environment well (Herrnson 1988: 30). But he does acknowledge that they may not be needed to the same degree they were in the environment of the late nineteenth century—that is, the "constituent" nature of and demands on parties had shrunk (Lowi 1975 and also chap. 4 in this volume).

Intent on demonstrating that at least part of the party system was not declining, a second problem in the party organization literature is an insufficient emphasis on integrating party theory. As I stated above, this relative neglect has meant turning a blind eye to the response of the public to the improvements in party organizational strength. Cotter et al. (1984: 167), for example, who are interested in integrating party organizations into the bigger party picture, devote but one paragraph to the relations between party organizations and the public, and that one paragraph seems to dismiss the reality or significance of negative public perceptions. I would suggest that the failure to deal with normative questions also stems from this desire to demonstrate that not all of the party system has declined. This approach was perhaps warranted at the outset; it has now become counter-productive.

Third, there is a real risk of walking into the same analytical trap that ensnared writers on party decline: if one builds ones theory on a single part of the data trend one finds it very difficult to explain how that trend might stop. The variables examined by party decline analyses pointed in the direction of future decline; by limiting the dependent variable to periods of decline, declinists overlooked independent variables that might alter the trend. Today, the party organization literature faces the same problem. To build more theory into these studies, revivalists need to consider seriously what could disrupt the projected trajectory of ever more involved, ever more relevant party organizations.

Finally, this concern with fighting the last battle leads to the use of a "counteracting" party model (see Cotter and Bibby 1980: 26-27 for an early example; see Frendreis, Gibson, and Vertz 1990 for a recent treatment). This model suggests that even if there is some sign of decline elsewhere in the
party system, say among voters, the revival in party organization "counteracts" that decline. Unfortunately, it is not clear what is entailed in counteracting other parts of the political system. What would be different if this counteraction did not occur? How do we know? How does this counteraction affect what happens in those areas that might indeed be in decline; that is, what does this mean for the "counteractee"? How are party organizations different because they play a counteracting rather than parallel role with other party elements? A stronger version of the counteracting model argues that party organizational resurgence depended on party decline among voters (Schlesinger 1991). Although perhaps consistent with recent American politics, a look back to the late nineteenth century suggests that this pattern is not a general principle of party development. A more modest version asserts that strong party organizations have counteracted party decline elsewhere in the system, "thus making the system more resilient to anti-party and dealigning influences" (Bibby et al. 1983: 26). But how do we know if these organizations have indeed made the system more resilient—what is the null expectation? Looking at the recent developments in public opinion and behavior makes one wonder just how effective these counteractive party organizations have been in resisting these influences, or whether counteraction is likely only under certain conditions (Coleman 1996b).

Searching for Integration: "The State of the Parties"

I have suggested in this chapter some reasons to question the new orthodoxy that party organizations are "resurgent" or "revitalized." In conclusion I want to focus less on the organizations per se and more on the political science analysis of these organizations.

Party scholars need to take seriously the goal of integrating party theory and probing the relationships between different parts of the party system. Herrnson reports:

Some analysts have questioned the propriety of using evidence about the party-in-the-electorate and the party-in-government to support the hypothesis that political parties in general, and especially party organizations, are in decline. Blurring the distinctions between the three dimensions of the political party may lead to a misunderstanding of the nature of party development and result in faulty conclusions about the condition of party organizations. (1988: 5)

I am not arguing that the distinctions be blurred, only that we understand better how these aspects of party fit together. Indeed, many party organization studies touch on these connections. I am not arguing that we aim for faulty conclusions, only that we recognize that because the party system fits together it is misleading to ignore the other components when studying any one of the three. If there is finally something called "party" that exists beyond these individual components, it is at least partially defined as the centrality of party organizations, party-in-government, and party-in-the-electorate to the way in which the business of democracy gets done: selecting candidates and running campaigns, deciding how to vote, designing and implementing public policy, and so on. If voters were exceptionally loyal to parties and thought they mattered greatly, but parties in Congress were hardly cohesive and party organizations did next to nothing, I would be uncomfortable talking about parties being healthy. Similarly, when assessing the health of the party system it is a mistake to overlook party-in-government and especially unwise to overlook public opinion, voting turnout, and political behavior; even if the party system has active party organizations. When party organizations begin to pull the electorate along as they perform their activities, my enthusiasm about the revitalization of American party organizations and the party system will increase.

Though there are good reasons to begin integrating party theory, less clear is how one goes about this (Epstein 1986; Schlesinger 1991). Elsewhere I make the argument that party decline—and party improvement—can be understood only if parties are analyzed within their structural and policy settings (Coleman 1994, 1996a). For the postwar period, this means tying party decline to the construction of a "fiscal state" in the 1930s and 1940s that oriented party competition around macroeconomic management issues on which the parties in Congress tended to converge at crucial moments (e.g., recessions). At the same time, this fiscal state structurally limited party responsibility for the economy. Voters, sensibly, paid decreasing attention to parties, and either exited the electorate or focused on individual candidates. When this macroeconomic system began to crumble in the stagflation of the 1970s, the collapse of the Keynesian consensus created an opening for improvement in the status of political parties. Increased party cohesiveness in Congress and new attempts to enhance the capacities of party organizations reflected this improvement. But enough of the fiscal state remained intact that these changes did not filter down to the electorate. Because elites and voters can restructure the state, especially at crisis points, the decline of party need not be inevitable or irreversible. To this approach, "the state of the parties" is a phrase rich in meaning.

There are three important points here. First, this kind of approach suggests that party organizational resurgence occurred when it did for some concrete reasons. Herrnson and Menefee-Libey's (1990) outline of the development of party organization since 1968 is a necessary but not sufficient explanation of what happened because it overlooks the success of the parties' fundraising efforts from the donors' perspective. To understand the changes in party organization over the past twenty-five years, we need to know why donors were particularly willing to give in the late 1970s. With the collapse of the postwar macroeconomic governing consensus and dramatic changes emerging in the global economy, it is not surprising that concerned elites and
members of the middle class would find Republican appeals to be particularly attractive. That is, Republican organizational improvement depended crucially on the availability of a large body of willing givers, and a model of party development needs to explain why those givers were available at that particular time. Organizational and technological changes may have helped locate these donors, but it was less responsible for creating the incentives to contribute than were the events in the political economy. In this vein, one might say that the difference between Barry Goldwater in 1964, Ronald Reagan in 1980, and Newt Gingrich in 1994 was not that the Republicans' party organization had become so much more proficient, but that Goldwater was running in 1964, Reagan in 1980, and Gingrich in 1994—years that were worlds apart politically and economically.

Second, political scientists have learned a significant amount by analyzing the components of political parties in isolation from each other, but in a period of transition such as the present this tripartite model of parties obscures our understanding (Baer and Bositis 1988: chaps. 1–2; Aldrich 1995). We cannot understand what has happened with party organizations or, more importantly, the significance of any changes that have occurred, unless we demonstrate concretely how party activity affects citizens, public officials, and elections.

The final point is that in a democratic polity the status of political parties ultimately boils down to the public. Despite the enthusiasm in the party organization literature, party decline does not end until the voters return to party. The public's beliefs and behavior regarding the salience and relevance of party has to be an important standard of party decline or resurgence. Not just changes in party activities, but also changes in the state—the structural settings of parties—are required before the voters return. Voters (and nonvoters) must believe parties control policy areas, that these policy areas are important, and that the parties differ in significant ways before we can expect any resurgence at the voter level. Short of this change, the plausibility of parties as grassroots, representative institutions comes under serious strain. The meaningfulness of party organizational “resurgence” in such a system is dubious.

Notes


4. "When levels of trust in government plummet, our finest students of public opinion say, 'it does not matter.' When divided government becomes the norm on every level of government and threatens civic accountability, our wisest scholars show us why it does not matter. When discontent with politics causes party identification to crumble, participation to fall, and younger Americans to disengage from public affairs, political scientists just repeat, 'it does not matter.' And when a remarkable mobilization of middle America is aborted by Ross Perot's personal idiosyncrasies, we sigh with relief. It didn't really matter after all . . . [The] discussion can be summarized in three aphorisms: There is nothing wrong. If there is, we don't know how to fix it. If we do, it's politically impractical, anyway" (Putnam 1993).

5. Two-party dominance is not in fact a compelling measure of party strength. One can have three parties competing because people have indeed greater faith in the potentialities of political parties; i.e., it's worth the effort to create and support a third party. Such an interpretation of the People's Party, for example, would not do great violence to history (Goodwyn 1978). But this observation does not get us far with Perot because his was so strongly an antiparty appeal.

6. Interestingly, McGillem (1993) finds that there is no clear relationship between the extent of activities performed by a state political party in the South and the perception of the party's organizational strength held by grassroots party activists. Note also that for reasons of space I focus here on activities as a measure of strength rather than devote attention to changing organizational complexity, i.e., bureaucratization. Cotter, Gibson, Bibby, and Huckeshorn (1984: 44–45) point out that one should not dismiss party significance simply because of the lack of organizational complexity.

7. Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko 1985; Lawson, Pomper, and Moakley 1986; Bedsole and Welch 1987; Caldeira, Clausen, and Patterson 1990; Fendrell, Gibson, and Vertz 1990; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; and Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992. In some cases, however, party activities and campaign activities are lumped together. See, for example, Caldeira, Clausen, and Patterson (1990). This study also provides a unique measure of turnout as the number of offices for which a voter recalls voting. The respondents' ability to recall this information might be questioned, but this novel attempt to view voting as a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable deserves testing elsewhere.

8. Lawson's (1980) elegant essay acknowledges the difficulties inherent in such a seemingly simple statement.

9. To avert misunderstanding, I will simply state here that I believe that parties can and have made important contributions to American democracy and that they are crucial agents of representation. For an elegant discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of party organizations in pursuit of these functions, see Pomper (1992: 20–34).
10. On the other side, one might suggest that the improvement in Democratic fortunes in the late 1980s and 1992 were a result of organizational efforts, but one would need to contend with the argument that a fundamental fissure in the Democratic Party organization exploited by the Democratic Leadership Council was just as responsible for this renewed party success (see Rae 1991 and Hale, chap. 16 in this volume, for overviews of the development of the DLC).

11. The notion of a “few” political machines is particularly misleading. Brown and Halaby (1987) show that from 1870 to 1945 at least 50 percent of all middle and major sized U.S. cities featured machine politics, from the mid-1870s to the mid-1930s the figures were above 60 percent, and in the early 1890s the figures were at least 80 percent of all cities.

12. Baer and Bocičić (1988) excellent study of how social movements revitalized party organizations runs into similar difficulties, especially when attempting to explain low voter turnout (118-19). This is an important problem for their approach because it is never very clear why, if social movements infused the political parties with new life and new representativeness, the impact in the public was rather muted. If social movements were sweeping through party organizations, as the authors argue, then where were the followers of these movements? Why did movement elites fail to bring their adherents into the party system? Why is voting turnout stagnant or declining during most of the period they study?

13. Though with a different interpretation than the suggested here, Cotter and Bibby (1980) also link changing national party organization to the evolution of the New Deal political settlement.