



Why Strengthening Citizen Ties —Not Unleashing Big Donors— is the Way to Revitalize U.S. Political Parties

Tabatha Abu El-Haj, Drexel University

Scholars and reformers increasingly agree that weaknesses in U.S. political parties contribute to the ills of American democracy today. What should be done? Some liberal and conservative commentators are calling for legal changes that would allow parties to accept unlimited contributions and engage in unlimited spending, thereby placing parties on a stronger competitive footing with the Super Political Action Committees (super PACs) that have remade campaign finance since 2010. But this approach, I argue, would further exacerbate the key weakness of contemporary parties: their lack of strong ties to citizen groups and networks.

Serious party reform, I argue, requires a fundamental rethinking of political parties and how to make them both more responsive to constituents and more capable of governing. Ideally, political parties should function as densely networked civic associations. From this perspective, the primary impediment to responsive politics today is not that the parties are fiscally weak but that they increasingly lack social ties and feedback loops through which party elites can learn about the concerns of ordinary Americans. The contrast between contemporary political elites and those in prior eras of American history is both stark and revealing.

The Misguided Argument for Party Finance Deregulation

Proponents of deregulation that would allow parties to freely collect and spend donations believe that the Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* has allowed extra-party donors to hijack party agendas. Polarization driven by well-resourced ideologues and their Super PACs, they argue, feeds both legislative gridlock and growing gaps between public preferences and the policies parties pursue. In this view, deregulating federal campaign finance restrictions would level the playing field between party leaders and outside groups. With a more level fundraising playing field, party leaders would supposedly be able to reign in extreme elements in partisan networks – leading to reduced polarization, greater leverage for moderates, and the end of legislative gridlock.

Such projections sound great, until one realizes that the reforms in question are predicated on untenable and outdated assumptions. A key assumption is that competitive elections could push elected officials to be responsive to the average voter's preferences. That might have been true in the mid-twentieth century, but U.S. politics today features decidedly uncompetitive elections. Politicians in many swing states have been able to draw electoral maps that entrench their party's power. More important, because voters cluster in the locales with others of the same partisan bent, most district elections are unlikely to become competitive. This is all the more true given the Supreme Court's reluctance to strike down maps gerrymandered for partisan purposes.

Unlike in the 1950s, while political parties are now ideologically distinct, candidates face little competition except in primaries. This feeds irresponsible governance in which elected officials routinely ignore the preferences of most of their constituents. In the absence of renewed party competition, merely deregulating donations would likely result in leaderships and office-holders becoming even more beholden to ideological donors.

Rethinking Political Party Networks

Imagining better approaches to political party reform requires thinking of parties as networks rather than money machines. Although the era of political machines fueled by strong personal ties and patronage operations may be gone in most places, political parties remain social networks of individual activists, donors, and officeholders, along with associated civic groups – whether the National Rifle Association on the right or

labor unions on the left. Such party networks are tied together and to the electorate by various kinds of social connections.

To win elections before the advent of mass media, candidates built extensive interpersonal networks. Because the path to political power ran through membership in socially integrated economic organizations or civic associations, political leaders had to connect with Americans from different parts of society. The connections they forged facilitated political participation and, more importantly, two-way flows of information between party leaders and many kind of people.

Today, by contrast, electoral incentives pull candidates and parties into narrow networks of extremely unrepresentative and often ideologically insular sets of donors and activists. In turn, these limited social circles influence the types of policies and actions politicians consider, even in the absence of outright corruption. Elected officials, like the rest of us, are influenced by these regular social interactions in how they set priorities, perceive problems, and envision solutions.

Because relationships and social networks drive political recruitment, convey information, and sustain political activism, the road to effective party reforms lies in reengineering regular interactions and deploying new kinds of peer relationships. Optimal partisan networks should have social, economic, and generational breadth along with interpersonal depth. In such networks, volunteers rather than donors should take the lead. By looking for ways to foster more such networks from the local level up, parties would become more capable of mobilizing and keeping in touch with voters of all ages. Networked parties of this kind would likely become much more capable of disseminating political information during and between elections and more capable of alerting elected officials to the concerns and experiences of the fellow citizens whose votes they seek.

Enhanced party financing may well have a role to play in network reforms, but the pertinent question would have to become: Where within the party is the new money likely to flow? The emphasis should be placed on encouraging peer-to-peer party-building and the deployment of voter-mobilization tactics that rely on civic associations and recurrent, face-to-face interactions.

Further research remains to be done on exactly how legal structures and citizen efforts can best reinvigorate state and local parties. But the direction for optimal reforms is clear: efforts to strengthen the associational roots of political parties are far more promising than merely loosening or abolishing limits on big donor contributions to entrenched party leaders.

Read more in Tabatha Abu El-Haj “Networking the Party: First Amendment Rights & the Pursuit of Responsive Party Government” *Columbia Law Review* 118, no. 4 (2018): 1225-1301.