



How to Revitalize America's Local Political Parties

Kenneth T. Andrews, Washington University in St. Louis

Hahrie Han, Johns Hopkins University

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Columbia University

Lara Putnam, University of Pittsburgh

Daniel Schlozman, Johns Hopkins University

Theda Skocpol, Scholars Strategy Network

Vanessa Williamson, Brookings Institution

Sarah E. James, Gonzaga University

Caroline Tervo, Duke University

Michael Zoorob, Harvard University

Since the emergence of popular politics in the early 19th century, American political parties have not only run election campaigns and organized government decision-making; they have connected ordinary citizens to each other and helped them persuade their neighbors of a vision for the common good. But in recent decades, local parties have withered, as the U.S. political system has been transformed by vast sums of political money distributed from afar to fund negative messages against the other team. Now many engaged citizens are trying to reinvigorate parties as participatory engines of year-round civic engagement. Between as well as during election campaigns, local parties can become vibrant hubs for citizens and aligned groups who wish to shape democratic government.

Good ideas are emerging on both sides of the partisan spectrum. This brief prepared by members of the Scholars Strategy Network's Working Group on State and Local Party-Building draws from existing scholarly research and real-world experiences around the country to suggest possibilities that can be adopted by local and state leaders in either party – working in places ranging from big cities to small towns. We include some alternative ways to achieve the same goals, because local contexts vary as do state-level laws governing political parties.

I. Making Local Parties a Year-round Presence

Across the country, parties exist on paper as sets of offices at county, city, and precinct levels, but often nobody is home or doing anything except during the height of election seasons. Precinct posts often go vacant for years, and citizens who want to participate do not know how. ***The first steps in grassroots party building require regular, publicly visible events organized year-round and a combination of electronic and face-to-face tactics for communicating a party presence.***

- Some county or city parties (or their local subgroups, such as ward or township committees) hold monthly publicized meetings, to which all are welcome. These can combine regular party business, led by officers, with a broadly engaging discussion topic or speaker likely to interest curious newcomers as well as stalwart attendees.
- In smaller places or where partisans are a minority, parties may prefer to hold one gathering every two to three months. The important thing is to do something during every season, ideally including both events for party members and public welcoming activities. Although inward-facing celebrations such as banquets for core activists and donors can be valuable, it is important to balance these with public-facing activities such as community panels or booths at local fairs where information about how to join can be shared and new members and volunteers recruited.
- Parties can co-sponsor public panels or events with other local groups – such as the Chamber of Commerce or a local union, the NAACP or the NRA, a local Tea Party or an Indivisible group.

- Interested people cannot always make it to events or meetings because of work obligations, family duties, or because they are too sick or elderly to travel. The local party can help by posting videos of compelling events – such as candidate forums or panels on pressing public issues.

II. Welcoming Participation by Interested Citizens and Constituencies

Citizens must be able to easily learn about the local party and figure out how to get involved.

- A year-round local office, staffed by volunteers at predictable times, may make sense – especially in places with a downtown or local center of activities where people might just drop in to learn more.
- An informative website and Facebook page are always important – sites where people can easily find out about upcoming meetings or events; learn the names and contact information for local party leaders; and read the party's by-laws, rules, mission statement and meeting minutes. Sites must make it easy for people to ask questions or offer to get involved by email or phone. And they should give descriptions and contact information for working committees and subgroups (like Young Republicans or Hispanic Democrats).
- Affiliated subgroups often can help grow party engagement – sometimes organized by and for women, young people, minorities, or military veterans – and sometimes organized by and for those interested in particular issues (like environmental protection or gun rights) or who would like to sharpen a party tendency (like progressive Democrats or Tea Party Republicans). Having many routes to engagement is optimal. Participants in a vibrant party should not have to agree about all matters or care about exactly the same priorities.
- The most committed partisans may want a dues-paying membership group to express commitment and provide predictable local party funding. Some state laws do not allow parties to run such groups directly, but affiliated non-profits (often called Democratic Clubs or Republican Clubs) may be possible.
- Every party organization should task leaders with reaching out to new participants and volunteers – and follow up on any messages left by phone or email or at Internet sites, so no one who gets in touch or expresses interest is ignored. Automated email lists are not adequate substitutes for personal outreach and follow-up.

III. What Effective Local Parties Can Do

Parties can carry out vital political and civic tasks during and between elections:

- Of course, local parties work for aligned candidates up and down the ticket and across the electoral cycle. They can recruit new candidates for every position, gathering signatures and donations, and deploy volunteers to canvass, phone bank, and get-out-the-vote. They may also work for party-aligned candidates in nominally nonpartisan races.
- Local parties can be liaison points and sources of volunteer support for statewide and presidential campaigns. Office-seeking politicians need local knowledge and connections, and in turn, local parties can benefit by channeling volunteers generated by the urgency of election season into subsequent opportunities for ongoing membership and participation.
- To inform the public and attract new members and supporters, local parties can host regular outreach events such as candidate meet-and-greets and issue panels. More broadly, a local party should aim to be a vibrant community presence, taking part in community occasions, volunteering for community projects, and serving as a contact for other groups.
- Local party leaders and task forces can register voters on an ongoing basis, with a special focus on hard-to-reach communities. They should make sure all party activists know the rules around registration and voting.
- Well before election season arrives, local party people can canvass neighbors and broad cross-sections of local voters to learn their concerns and take their suggestions.

- Local parties can develop leadership capacities among volunteers of all ages and abilities, both by spreading opportunities and by helping people attend formal trainings along with participants from other local and state party groups. Training sessions can teach party rules and procedures and help people understand ways to run meetings or work with various people and networks. Trainings can convey crucial citizenship skills like how to write letters to the editor or contact legislators, how to gather valid signatures for petitions or nominations, and how to help staff candidate campaigns.
- Even without a lot of money, local parties can help their participants make connections with state parties and with fellow local parties in other parts of their state or region. Some local parties form ongoing partnerships, so activists can provide mutual support and learn what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican in very different community contexts.

IV. How State Parties Can Help

Political party leaders above the local level need to start by recognizing two basic truths:

The United States is a federated polity, so every party needs a presence everywhere – especially, perhaps, in constituencies where co-partisans are currently a tiny minority. In addition, state party leaders should recognize that it is in their interest to urge openness and engagement, even when local stakeholders prefer closure and stability. Even when no authoritative “sticks” are available to order local leaders around, state party officials can encourage enthusiastic outsiders and newcomers to create affiliated participatory groups to complement and revitalize local party structures (as Tea Parties and Trump volunteers have done in the GOP orbit and as grassroots resistance groups have done since 2016 in the Democratic orbit).

More broadly, state and national leaders can take many steps to support local parties:

- If possible, ensure regular grants as predictable partial funding all for all local parties. If that is not possible, set up competitions for seed grants to local parties that apply with promising plans or for allocations to local parties able to raise matching funds.
- Create and publicize guides to available affiliation options. Explain how to create a group, and how to meet all party and state rules.
- Help local parties build their presence online, and provide guidance on data security issues.
- Provide workshops and training to offer information and build skills, with travel grants to help far-flung participants attend. These matter for conveying shared information, and they also give local party activists chances to connect and learn from one another in regional conclaves and summits around specific challenges.
- Back up efforts by local party leaders to recruit promising candidates for offices at all levels.
- Provide high-profile state speakers or help local parties arrange visits by speakers – using network contacts and providing travel funds, or even setting up a speakers bureau to serve local parties in the states.
- Hire regional organizers, paid a proper wage, to keep in touch with manageable sets of local areas and support local leaders and activists over an extended time period.
- Deploy properly supported and trained interns over the summer and in the campaign season to work directly with local parties and not simply for candidates.

V. Considerations for Donors and Strategists

Backed by research and experience, the suggestions assembled here are grounded in an understanding that the vitality of local parties rests in face-to-face interactions. That is how political parties made themselves the centerpieces of American politics for generations, and how they can become central again. ***U.S. parties looking to flourish beyond the heyday of television advertisements cannot rely on digital strategies alone, but must involve active citizens on the ground, where they live and work.***

For donors and activists alike, investments in participatory parties should be central, not mere after-thoughts. As U.S. politics has become increasingly polarized and fragmented, non-party advocacy groups seek to leverage tax-deductible dollars for advocacy and voter mobilization. Some of these outside activities should shrink to enable publicly accountable parties to flourish. **Funders, in particular, should resist giving to advocacy operations that often have weak local ties, if any, yet seek to serve as unaccountable alternatives to political parties.** Parties are core citizen utilities in a democracy, and they need support of all kinds to do their job.