



U.S. Presidents and the Challenge of Party-Building

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For decades, U.S. presidents have dealt very differently with the political parties that helped them to office. Until recently, Democratic presidents have done very little party-building, while modern Republican presidents have persistently invested in GOP organizational capacities. What happened, why – and why does it matter for American democracy?

One-Sided Conventional Wisdom

Until recently, scholars and pundits have taken for granted that modern U.S. presidents will not build their parties. Presidents may try to polish party images for voters, but White House incumbents have grand ambitions, limited resources, and short time horizons. Their party organization may seem a distraction or loom as an obstacle to be run over or maneuvered around.

Is this always true? To find out, I have conducted in-depth investigations of all U.S. presidents since Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961). My findings show that the conventional wisdom tells only half the story. To be sure, all modern presidents *use* their parties instrumentally. But Democrats and Republicans in the White House have diverged in their willingness to build their party organizations. Democrats have used party organs to maximize immediate personal and political benefits, but have done little to leave behind a more robust party organization. In contrast, every Republican president starting with Eisenhower worked to build the GOP – investing in new organizational capacities to expand the party's reach and enhance its electoral competitiveness.

Why the Divergence Happened

It turns out that presidents are more likely to invest if they feel they need the party to sustain their legacy. During the second half of the twentieth century, Democrats were the ostensible majority party. More citizens told pollsters they were “Democrats” than “Republicans”; and most of the time until 1994, Democrats controlled both houses of the U.S. Congress as well as most state houses and governors’ mansions. Although Republicans were regularly elected to the presidency, they lacked overall political majorities and were concerned that their accomplishments could leave a light footprint in history. Each party's presidents acted rationally in the circumstances, with opposite consequences for party-building:

- GOP presidents were strongly motivated to try to build and claim credit for a new Republican hegemony. From Eisenhower's “Modern Republicanism” to Richard Nixon's “New Majority” to George W. Bush's hope to cement a partisan realignment, these presidents saw party-building as a means of forging a new majority in their image. Most efforts fell short, but as party-building progressed, each GOP president felt compelled to continue the effort.

- Democratic presidents from John F. Kennedy to Bill Clinton had chances to build their party, too, but repeatedly refused. With comfortable majorities, their top priorities were legislative, not electoral. Determined to use their current majorities to enact major policy accomplishments, modern Democratic presidents did not think in terms extending the party's reach or building new capacities for the future. Labor-intensive get-out-the-vote drives were deemed an unnecessary expense, and incumbent Democrats were left to raise resources on their own. And with their majority coalition a sprawling, heterogeneous hodge-podge, Democratic presidents spent their time nurturing alliances, tending to factional disputes, and resolving intraparty tensions.

Can Democrats Do Sustained Party-Building?

As my perspective would predict, when Democrats lost their long-standing majorities in the 1994 elections, their approach to party organization and electoral outreach began to change. Bill Clinton, who exploited and damaged his party during his first term, made a number of targeted investments in party organization during his second term, and as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee in the mid-2000s, Howard Dean built on those beginnings, developing a national voter file and training activists in all of the U.S. states. In the 2008 campaign, Barack Obama's operation used and extended Dean's 50-state strategy, coordinating grass-roots mobilization with the latest technologies.

But old patterns returned when Obama moved into the White House in 2009. Like his predecessors, Obama exploited his party's majorities to help push through legislation for health reform, financial reform, and other key presidential goals. But he failed to keep his promise to nurture a more participatory politics. Rather than use his massive "Obama for America" operation to revitalize the party at all levels, Obama relabeled it "Organizing for America" and kept it an ambiguously independent entity within the DNC. Activists were told to send emails for Obama's legislative priorities, but were not used to renovate party operations top to bottom.

In the wake of huge gains by the Tea Party-boosted GOP in the 2010 elections, Obama has new incentives to engage in party-building. Such efforts are vital to his reelection, not to mention helping Democrats regain momentum in all races. If 2012 proves revitalizing, Obama will be well-positioned in his second term to make historic gains in party-building. None of his predecessors had such a well-organized and vibrant campaign organization on which to build.

A reelected President Obama will thus make pivotal decisions. If Obama converts Organizing for America into a multipurpose entity that can boost his party's electoral operations at all levels, he can strengthen the Democratic Party for years to come. But if, like his Democratic predecessors, Obama lets the new chance slip away, he would risk allowing the Democratic Party to fall further behind a Republican Party that, despite its well-documented troubles in recent years, has not abandoned its own dedication to long-term party-building.

Read more in Daniel J. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton University Press, 2010), supplemented by "Changing Course: Reversing the Organizational Trajectory of the Democratic Party from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama," *The Forum* 6, no.2 (2008): 1-21.