The Conditional Influence of Parties in Congressional Elections

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Abstract:

The role of political parties in the United States has changed dramatically during the past two centuries. Whereas the party machines of the late nineteenth century wielded an enormous degree of power and influence in the electoral process, political parties today are much weaker in a number of respects. This paper seeks to examine the changing influence of party organizations over the past 150 years to better illustrate the conditional nature of that influence in the context of congressional elections. In particular, I illustrate how strong party organizations contributed to greater competitiveness in congressional elections during the latter half of the nineteenth century, which gradually started to wane as parties were weakened following the progressive era reforms. Although party organizations have witnessed a resurgence in recent years, especially with the increasing nationalization of politics, their influence has not yet translated into greater competitiveness in congressional elections.

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Although there is no direct mention of political parties in the U.S. Constitution, they have become regular features of the American political system since the early days of the republic. The earliest political parties would hardly be recognizable by today’s standards, but they have evolved and adapted to a variety of electoral and institutional changes over time. Most notably, parties transformed from fledgling organizations offering very limited services to candidates to powerful local and state-run associations that wielded remarkable influence in the political process during the nineteenth century. Eventually, a series of electoral reforms were adopted that served to weaken the role of parties and party machines. Even though parties are far less influential today than they once were in a number of respects as a result of these reforms, they have gradually evolved to changing political circumstances and now operate at the federal, state, and local levels (Aldrich 2011).

Political parties today provide a key linkage between the government and its citizens. In the U.S. setting, parties are generally thought to consist of three main parts: party in government (elected representatives who hold public office), the party organization (activists and elites who work behind the scene to promote the party and its candidates), and the party in the electorate (the voters who support the party and select its candidates on election day). Although much has been written about the party in government and the electorate, far less attention has been given to the party organization—especially relating to how parties influence and shape elections to the U.S. Congress. During the heyday of strong parties in the second half of the nineteenth century, party organizations actively recruited a greater proportion of experienced candidates to run for office, which contributed to more competitive congressional elections. With the adoption of the Australian ballot and the direct primary, the role of party machines began to wane leading to a noticeable effect on congressional election outcomes (Carson and Roberts 2013).
In an effort to better understand the important role of party organizations in influencing congressional elections over time, this paper explores two central questions. First, how have the role of parties, and party organizations in particular, changed across American history? Second, what impact have these changes had on competitiveness in congressional elections? We know that parties have undergone a significant transformation in electoral politics during the past 150 years. We also know elections are much less competitive today than in the past as reflected by declines in experienced candidate entry and increases in the incumbency advantage. This paper represents an initial step in providing a more direct linkage between parties and elections to account for these important historical changes. As such, this paper examines the role of party organizations in influencing congressional elections and illustrates the conditional nature of that influence in different eras of history.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I briefly discuss the central role that parties played in recruiting and supporting candidates in elections throughout the nineteenth century. Then I review the challenges the progressive era reforms posed to the parties’ role in influencing congressional elections before touching upon the unintended consequences of these reforms. From there, I discuss the decline and resurgence of parties in supporting candidates to run for political office. Lastly, I review how the parties have adapted to electoral changes in the modern era, emphasizing their new role as service providers to congressional candidates.

The Parties’ Role in Candidate Recruitment and Support

The parties’ efforts at recruitment and candidate support are vital to American politics, but these efforts have changed markedly over time. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, parties actively recruited and selected the candidates who would run for elective office. They
also exercised enormous control over the balloting process in the United States. When voters went to the polls on Election Day, they were given “party ballots” that were distributed by the parties rather than printed by the individual states. Each party designed its own ballot, often in a distinctive color, to ensure that individuals were voting for the party’s entire slate of candidates. Moreover, voting during this era was not a private act. During the early part of the century, most decisions at the polls were made by voice vote. By the 1840s, paper ballots were in use in most precincts, but voting was still performed out in the open where the party workers could observe individual voters’ choices. In this way, local party organizations could ensure that voters who showed up at the polls were selecting the “correct” slate of candidates by carefully monitoring the ballots that were selected (Aldrich 2011; Bensel 2004; Kernell 1977; Silbey 1991; Ware 2002). Thus, the parties could deliver on their promise that if a candidate agreed to run under the party banner, the organization would marshal its efforts on the candidate’s behalf.

Another important institutional change for parties that began in the 1860s involved the development of congressional campaign committees. These committees emerged in large part to help prevent congressional candidates from being subsumed in races where the president was at the top of the partisan ticket (Kolodny 1998). In light of the fact that the president had been viewed as the head of his political party since the 1840s, members of Congress wanted to make sure that the presidential candidate would not dictate or adversely affect their electoral strategy. Since the parties relied extensively on straight party ballots during this period, they gradually came to recognize that House candidates were directly affected (and often adversely) by the candidate at the top of the ticket (Engstrom and Kernell 2005, 2014). With the emergence of campaign committees, members of Congress running under the party label could work toward attaining majority control without fear of having their efforts undermined by a weak presidential
candidate.\textsuperscript{1} These campaign committees also allowed the local party organizations to more easily promote their candidates during midterm elections when the president was not at the top of the partisan ticket (Carson and Sievert 2014; Kolodny 1998). The campaign committees’ added support for candidates, then, gave the parties even more reason to argue that strong prospective candidates would have a lot of party support if they chose to run.

In many respects, one could easily characterize the latter half of the nineteenth century as the “golden age” of political parties and party machines. Local and state party bosses exerted a tremendous amount of influence during this era, especially in the area of candidate recruitment. Unlike the modern era where elections are mostly candidate-centered, elections during the late nineteenth century were largely party-centered affairs. Before the advent of direct primaries, coalitions of state and local party machines selected candidates to run in House races via party caucuses. Party bosses put a premium on recruiting candidates who were absolutely loyal to the party machine and able to recruit supporters for the party organization. This, in turn, led to a large number of representatives who were beholden to individual party bosses, which resulted in artificially higher levels of party loyalty among candidates and elected officials (Carson and Roberts 2013; Summers 2004).\textsuperscript{2}

One of the main reasons party machines were so successful in recruiting candidates for office during this era is that they were largely underwriting the candidates’ campaigns. In contrast to the modern era where candidates have to assume greater levels of risk when running for elective office, parties were able to minimize such risks during the age of machine politics.

\begin{itemize}
\item[1] Kolodny (1998) provides a definitive history of congressional campaign committees beginning in the 1860s. She traces the evolution of these committees into the modern era and discusses how they adapted in response to various institutional and electoral reforms.
\item[2] Summers (2004) offers a fascinating and insightful account of party politics during the Gilded Age of American political history.
\end{itemize}
you ran and were successful, you received the benefit of serving in the position while the party machine got a loyal surrogate. If you ran and lost, however, the party could offer the candidate a patronage position, which guaranteed employment until the next electoral cycle rolled around. Thus, prospective candidates had relatively little risk in running, because the local bosses could offer them political “insurance” in case they ultimately lost their electoral bid (Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999a). This system worked effectively for the party machines, as long as the patronage system was in place to reward loyal partisans who ran under the party label. It also led to a higher percentage of experienced candidates running against incumbents in the nineteenth century as depicted in Figure 1 (Carson and Roberts 2013).

For the first few decades depicted in Figure 1, experienced challengers were significantly more likely to face off against incumbents compared with their modern day counterparts since they often had the strong backing of the party machines during this era. Party bosses would incentivize experienced candidates to run by offering them insurance in the form of patronage jobs or other forms of employment in the event they lost. This promoted a much greater degree of electoral competition than we regularly see today, which varied by whether it was a midterm or presidential year. With the passage of electoral reforms at the end of the century as part of the progressive movement, we see a precipitous decline in the percentage of strong challengers willing to run against incumbents. Party machines were significantly weakened by the reforms that were enacted and lost the ability to underwrite the campaigns of experienced challengers. This, in turn, helped to contribute to the growing careerism in Congress since strong challengers were more risk averse about running for office without the backing of strong party organizations. Although the post-World War II era did witness a brief resurgence in the percent of experienced
challengers facing off against incumbents, the effect was short-lived and has continued to decline during the past few decades.

Figure 1: Percentage of House Incumbents Facing a Quality Challenger, 1840-2014

Challenges to the Parties Posed by the Progressive Era Reforms

By the late nineteenth century, party bosses and elites came to recognize that maintaining firm control over the electorate was becoming increasingly difficult. Whereas party machines had once wielded near universal control over candidates, voters, and the electoral process, a variety of demographic and institutional changes began to challenge their once monopolistic influence. One of the biggest challenges the parties faced was the growing population within the nation. As the size of the electorate grew with each passing decade, it became more difficult for party workers to recognize loyal voters at polling places in an effort to get a party ballot into
their hands. Individuals would show up expecting to vote but would sometimes be turned away since they were not immediately recognized as loyal supporters of the party. This issue was especially pronounced in larger, urban areas where an increasing number of Americans and immigrants were flocking by the late 1800s in response to new job opportunities stemming from industrialization, particularly in the Northern states (Ware 2002).

Given the dramatic population growth in the late 1800s, party machines also began to see a rapid rise in the financial costs associated with the electoral process. During this era, each party was responsible for producing its own ballots, and the number of ballots that had to be printed and distributed every time there was an election steadily increased. Additionally, parties had to make concerted efforts to get this increased number of voters to the polling places on Election Day. Not surprisingly, both of these activities involved significant costs in both time and money. Party machines tried to pass along these rising costs to the candidates in the form of increased monetary pledges to the party organization, but candidates often balked at having to put up greater amounts of their own money in order to gain a position on the party ballot (Korzi 2004; Summers 2004).

A related problem that party bosses struggled with during this era stemmed from their inability to successfully coordinate party activities at the local or state level. Local factions in particular would occasionally use their control over the ballot to extract concessions from the statewide or national parties. If the party machines failed to buy off the local factions prior to an election, the latter would engage in a variety of treacherous practices that would undermine the party’s collective efforts. Such practices included leaving candidate names off the ballot, “knifing” through names included on the ballot, and distributing “pasters” that voters could use to cover up existing names so they could write in a different candidate’s name in their place. In
short, the increasing size of the electorate and growing urbanization of the country made it substantially more difficult for the party bosses to ensure that their local subordinates were distributing the proper ballot at the polls. Given the increasing costs associated with elections, it also became more challenging for party elites to effectively monitor the behavior of local factions in an effort to circumscribe such behavior (Summers 2004; Ware 2002).

In addition to these issues, party machines began to face hurdles with respect to candidate recruitment in light of the gradual demise of patronage politics. Following President Garfield’s assassination by a disappointed office seeker in 1881, Congress finally had the momentum needed to pass serious legislation reforming the patronage system. In 1883, the Pendleton Act was adopted, which fundamentally changed the basis for recruiting employees for government positions. Instead of the existing patronage system that had been in place for decades, a new civil service system would be used to recruit and hire government workers largely on the basis of merit. This had serious consequences for party machines, since the steady decline in the number of patronage positions in the ensuing decades made it unsustainable for parties to continue to subsidize candidates who unsuccessfully ran for elective office (Carson and Roberts 2013).

Another Progressive reform adopted at this time also had a major impact on the parties’ efforts and successes at candidate recruitment. One of the biggest criticisms that had often been made by voters was that the act of voting was done out in the open, and poll workers could easily monitor which candidates were supported by the color of the ballot selected. This, in turn, made it easier for party workers to intimidate voters into supporting the candidates they preferred rather than those favored by the voter. With the rapid and widespread adoption of the Australian (secret) ballot by the states beginning in 1888, voters were now assured privacy at the polling places as well as the ability to vote on a ballot provided by the states rather than the parties. As a
result, the incidence of voter intimidation was dramatically reduced following adoption of the secret ballot (Ware 2002). This, in turn, made it substantially more difficult for the parties to deliver votes for the candidates that they had recruited for elective office. A party organization that could not deliver on the votes it had promised a candidate would find it much harder to convince potential candidates to take the risk of running for office, especially without the guarantee of a patronage job in case of a loss.

By 1892, every state in the country had adopted some version of the secret ballot. At first glance, it may seem surprising that the major parties exerted little effort to try to block adoption of the Australian ballot within the states. In reality, and as discussed earlier, the party machines did not have nearly as much control over elections as many believed. For the two major parties, adoption of the Australian ballot was appealing for a number of reasons. Now that each of the states was responsible for printing individual ballots, party machines no longer had to fear that their preferred candidates would not appear on the ballot as a result of efforts on the part of local factions to sabotage the party. More important, the use of the secret ballot shifted the enormous costs of producing the ballots from the parties to the state and local government, which freed up considerable party funds for mobilizing voters on Election Day. Rather than try to fight a losing battle over Australian ballot reform, the parties preferred to influence the type of ballot selected in each of the states (Carson and Roberts 2013; Carson and Sievert 2015). Among the ballot options, party machines preferred the party column ballot, which most closely approximated the older party ballot that had previously been in use and served to facilitate straight party voting.³

With the successful adoption of the Australian ballot, it was only a matter of time before progressives pushed for changes in how candidates themselves were selected for elective office.

³ The other popular alternative was the office-bloc ballot, which listed candidates by office on the ballot, rather than by party affiliation. These types of ballots made it somewhat more difficult for voters to select individual candidates solely on the basis of party given how the ballot was organized.
Given the degree of influence party machines had in selecting candidates to run, voters often felt as though they had virtually no say in who would represent them in Congress. In conjunction with the movement toward direct election of senators that was gaining momentum at the same time, progressive reformers began calling for changes in the nomination system. By the early part of the twentieth century, the most popular reform effort—the direct primary—was gaining widespread attention and support in many of the states (Reynolds 2006; Ware 2002). Somewhat surprisingly, local and state party machines did not initially stand in the way of such efforts. Indirectly, it appears as though Australian ballot reform helped to usher in legislation that called for greater citizen participation via the direct primary. At the same time, the transition to the secret ballot had been relatively smooth and even beneficial to the interests of party machines; this may have led the parties to mount less opposition than expected to direct primary legislation.

**Unanticipated Consequences of Reform**

In retrospect, it appears that the party bosses and machines that had once wielded nearly universal influence failed to recognize that the progressive era reforms ultimately ushered in the demise of the party-centered electoral system within the United States. With the rapid adoption of the Australian ballot by the states in the early 1890s, for instance, the incentive structure for individual candidates steadily began to change. Candidates who had previously felt beholden to the party as a result of the structure of party ballots started to recognize that the transition to the secret ballot made it substantially easier for them to begin cultivating a “personal” vote with their constituents (Katz and Sala 1996). As a result, legislators began devoting more time to activities like credit claiming and distributive politics that would yield more immediate dividends with voters. These same individuals also became more career-oriented as they quickly recognized
that they no longer had to pursue a career within the party, but could instead pursue a career in Congress. After adoption of the secret ballot, for example, the average length of careers in the House of Representatives steadily increased (Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999b; Polsby 1968).4

A second and perhaps more serious consequence for parties following the adoption of the Australian ballot was variation in partisan loyalty among candidates selected via the secret ballot. In the past, party machines demanded and typically received high levels of party unity on certain key votes taken in Congress. If legislators failed to comply with the party’s demands, the bosses would take immediate steps to punish recalcitrant legislators. Such actions ranged from minor sanctions imposed on candidates who willfully defected on certain votes to, in more extreme cases, failure of a candidate to regain the nomination (Carson and Sievert 2015). At the same time, parties found it increasingly difficult to monitor the behavior of voters once the Australian ballot was in use. Whereas machine bosses and party workers had once intimidated voters into supporting their slate of candidates, such intimidation was far less effective now that voting was done in secret. Voters no longer felt pressured to vote for the party’s favorite sons, and they started to reward those legislators who were responsive to the voters’ own concerns and interests.

Another change wrought by the direct primary in the parties’ nomination process was the emergence of candidates regarded as weaker by the party organization. During the heyday of strong party machines, party elites played a more centralized role in recruiting candidates for office. They were able to handpick candidates to run on the party label on the basis of factors such as loyalty and devotion to the party. Even more important, however, was the machine’s ability to prevent inexperienced or weaker candidates from running—those individuals who brought little to the table with respect to the party’s broader legislative agenda. With Australian

4 The average length of service in the House hovered around 4 years at the end of the nineteenth century and steadily increased during the twentieth century. At present, the average length of House service is approximately 9 years (Glassman and Wilhelm 2015).
ballot reform and later the adoption of the direct primary in the early 1900s, the responsibility for selecting individual candidates for office was shifted from the parties to the voters in an attempt to break the hold party bosses traditionally held over the nomination process. As such, the parties could no longer discourage weaker candidates from running the way they once did. This, in turn, meant that elected candidates had further incentive to buck the party in favor of increased responsiveness to voters who were electing them (Carson and Roberts 2013).

Within a short period of time, direct primaries yielded another important consequence for parties. Their adoption significantly reduced levels of competition in congressional elections. As Figure 2 reveals, the proportion of competitive races (the incumbent receives less than 55 percent of the vote) began to drop in the late nineteenth century but has progressively declined ever since. Whereas approximately 40 percent of incumbent-contested House races were competitive in the late nineteenth century, that number has declined to about 10 percent in recent elections.

Figure 2: Proportion of U.S. House Incumbents in Competitive Races, 1840-2014
The main reason for the decline in competition was the variation in the experience of candidates emerging to run against incumbents and in open seat races. The “cartel-like” system of nominations that had been in place throughout much of the nineteenth century was gradually replaced with a political market, where individuals had to decide for themselves whether seeking elective office was worth the potential costs. Candidates who may have emerged under a party-centered system became much more risk-averse about running once the party machines were no longer able to underwrite their campaigns. With the steady demise of patronage jobs available to offer candidates who ran and lost, candidates were much less likely to run in situations where their chances of victory were not already quite high (Carson and Roberts 2013). As a result, incumbents started to retain seats that might have otherwise been competitive, which contributed to a noticeable long-term trend in increased vote share as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Average Percent of the Major Party Vote Won by House Incumbents in Contested Elections, 1840-2014
At the same time, the value of holding a House seat as reflected by vote share has varied historically since the 1840s. Figure 4 displays a popular measure of the incumbency advantage, the Gelman-King index, calculated from 1840-2014.\(^5\) Using this popular measure, we see that incumbents received approximately a 2 to 3 point advantage for the first 100 years of the series before that advantage gradually started to increase in the 1940s and continuing into the 1980s. Over the past few decades, we have begun to see a gradual decline in the incumbency advantage although it has not yet reached levels of much of the nineteenth century (Jacobson 2015).

**Figure 4: Incumbency Advantage in House Elections (Gelman-King Measure), 1840-2014**

\(^5\) Gelman and King compute the incumbency advantage by regressing the Democrat’s share of the two-party vote on the Democrat’s vote in the previous election, the party holding the seat, and incumbency (which takes a value of 1 if the Democratic candidate is an incumbent, –1 if the Republican is an incumbent, and 0 if the seat is open). The coefficient on the incumbency variable estimates the value (in percentage of votes) of incumbency for each election year.
A second way to think about the decline in competitiveness in House races over time is reflected in the percentage of “marginal” seats in the chamber. Figure 5 displays the percentage of House candidates (both incumbents and open seat winners) receiving greater than 60 percent of the major-party vote from 1840-2014. Prior to midway through the twentieth century, the two patterns varied quite consistently with one another. Shortly after World War II, however, we begin to see increased divergence between incumbents and open seat winners; this is especially pronounced after 1954 and the two lines do not coalesce again until 2010. From 1946-1966, an average of 61 percent of House incumbents won in excess of 60 percent of the vote; the percent increases to 73 percent for the 1968–1982 period and higher still, to 83 percent, for 1984–1988. For 1990–1998, it dropped back down to 71 percent, rose to an all-time high of nearly 88 percent in 2002 before falling back below 70 by 2010 with an uptick in both 2012 and 2014.

**Figure 5: House Candidates Receiving Greater than 60 Percent of the Major-Party Vote, 1840-2014**
Another unintended effect of the adoption of direct primaries may have been to establish the necessary conditions that would eventually contribute to increased polarization in Congress. During the past few decades, both chambers of Congress have steadily become more polarized to the extent that the level of polarization is greater than any other period in history since the Civil War. The main reason for this is that the moderate members of Congress are being increasingly replaced with more extreme legislators (Poole and Rosenthal 2008). Though this change has occurred several decades after the adoption of direct primaries, the selection of candidates by the voters was a necessary condition that most likely contributed to more extreme legislators being elected. This has had enormous consequences for policymaking, in that more ideologically extreme legislators are increasingly reluctant to reach across the aisle to form compromises with other legislators who have very little in common with them.6

Figure 6: Party Polarization: Distance Between the Parties on the First Dimension DW-Nominate Score, 1879-2014

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6 See McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2008) for a more extensive discussion of the underlying causes of polarization within the United States.
This raises an obvious question—why are voters selecting more extreme candidates in primary elections? Some research suggests that the voters who participate in primary elections tend to be more extreme ideologically than those participating in the general election, which naturally results in the selection of more extreme candidates (Boatright 2013; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2015; Norrander 1989). Since far fewer voters participate in primary elections compared with the general election, it is easier for the influence of more extreme voters to be felt when selecting individual candidates for nomination. This pattern has become especially pronounced during the past few decades, leading to the greater levels of polarization that we observe in the modern era. Increasingly, this trend has also made it more difficult for certain candidates to get elected in November because more ideologically extreme candidates have a much harder time appealing to the larger pool of mainstream voters who participate in the general election.

With the widespread adoption of direct primaries during the early part of the twentieth century, it is no surprise that congressional elections gradually shifted from party-centered to more candidate-centered in nature. Parties initially retained some semblance of influence over nominations in states that continued to rely on party caucuses rather than immediately adopting direct primaries, but such influence began to fade with each passing election. Eventually, parties lost even further influence over the electoral process as more states began adopting some version of the office-bloc ballot, which placed greater emphasis on individual candidates at the expense of the parties (Carson and Roberts 2013). In conjunction with technological changes that were occurring, such as the emergence of television that could be accessed by anyone with sufficient funds, candidates found it substantially easier to campaign on their own without having to rely exclusively on the parties, as had once been the case (Prior 2007).
Decline and Resurgence of Parties in Recruiting Candidates

The period immediately following the progressive era was undoubtedly a low point for party organizations with respect to their power over candidate selection and their capacity for influencing elections. Their ability to coerce and intimidate voters had been undermined by the widespread adoption of the secret ballot during the 1890s. The demise of the patronage system weakened the party machine’s ability to dole out jobs to loyal party workers and underwrite the campaigns of candidates seeking elective office. As more states began adopting direct primaries in the early twentieth century, this severely curtailed party machines’ ability to choose who ran for elective office. In addition, senators started to be directly elected by the people following the adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913, which further restricted the influence of party bosses and corrupt state legislatures (Schiller and Stewart 2014). With the introduction of referendum and recall initiatives during this same era, party influence in the electoral process was soon at an all time low in the United States.

The preceding events notwithstanding, the changes that occurred during the progressive era did not always yield negative consequences for political parties. Candidates running in a system of direct primaries still needed a large number of signatures to get on a state’s primary ballot, and parties were often helpful in this regard. Senate candidates, in particular, continued to rely on party organizations to assist with their campaigns given their much larger constituencies relative to House candidates. Party contributions regularly flowed in from businesses and large corporations, which helped the parties support candidates’ campaigns financially. Even more important, however, were certain legal implications stemming from the progressive era reforms. Parties no longer exercised the degree of influence that they once had in the electoral arena, but the reforms also made it substantially more difficult for independent and third party candidates to
appear on the ballot. Since ballots were now distributed by the states, candidates from the two major parties regularly appeared on them given their past record of success, but candidates from other minor parties typically lacked the resources necessary to secure a place on the state ballot (White and Kerbel 2012).\footnote{See White and Kerbel (2012) for more on the evolution of parties in the early twentieth century.}

Another major transformation in American politics during this period that would affect the parties’ relationships with the candidates bearing their party labels was the emergence of television as a medium for reaching the people. Television was largely in its infancy during the early 1950s, but it quickly became a powerful tool for candidates who were seeking elective office. Presidential candidates could now make personal appeals on television to prospective voters, which meant that they no longer had to rely so heavily on party organizations to convey their message to citizens (Baum and Kernell 1999). The same phenomenon took place at the congressional level where incumbents began emphasizing personal rather than partisan themes in their campaigns, which directly affected how voters perceived candidates for office.

In many respects, the rise of television as a means of reaching voters firmly cemented the notion of candidate-centered politics and further limited the role of parties in candidate selection. Candidates for elective office began emphasizing personal qualities and traits over their partisan labels in their campaign advertisements and messages (Jacobson 2013). By the late 1970s, candidates were talking more about their own accomplishments and less about the party label under which they were running. During this same period, candidates began hiring professional campaign consultants who emphasized the importance of reaching large numbers of voters through television and mass mailings. These strategies fundamentally changed the nature of political campaigns as candidates for office began relying less on the traditional volunteer-based or party-run campaigns that had previously been the norm. And for a brief period of time during
the late 1960s and 1970s, and in response to these and other changes, voters began identifying less strongly with the two major parties (Prior 2007). Since that time, however, the trend in partisanship among the electorate has been restored to previous levels.

How did the parties respond to these diverse institutional and political changes? One can imagine a scenario where the party organizations gradually eroded over time to the point where they were by and large discounted in the political process. They no longer exercised the degree of influence over candidates or the voters that they once had and were struggling to keep up with new ways of running campaigns. In light of the dramatic political and technological changes that were occurring throughout the twentieth century, it would have been understandable if the major parties had failed to respond to these events. Although this may have occurred for a period of time following the progressive era, the parties did what they have done repeatedly throughout history—they adapted with the times and found new and innovative ways to reinvent themselves. As I discuss in the next section, parties identified new strategies and techniques in the latter part of the twentieth century to continue to remain relevant within the arena of electoral politics.

**The Parties Adapt to Electoral Changes**

As a result of numerous institutional and political changes during the twentieth century, parties look very different today than they did in the past. Less power is centralized in the local and state party organizations than was the case in the late nineteenth century, when party bosses wielded considerably more influence over both candidates and the voters. In recent decades, party organizations have become more national in scope, with a corresponding agenda and vision in the electoral arena (Aldrich 2011; Hershey 2014). To maximize their available resources, the

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8 See Prior (2007) for a greater exposition of the history and impact of television on candidates and the electoral process during the second half of the twentieth century.
national party organizations and even the state parties have chosen to put greater emphasis on targeting a subset of campaigns for special attention. Party leaders recognize that not all congressional races today will be competitive as a result of local or district-specific conditions. Instead, they focus on the subset of House or Senate races that are considered to be “winnable” and direct the necessary resources to them (Jacobson 2013). This, in turn, increases the value of party involvement in specific races, since they can be selective about which candidates they choose to support.

A related area where parties have adapted to changing political conditions to remain relevant in electoral politics has to do with candidate recruitment. If the party organizations are to stand a good chance of winning targeted races, then they must start with a strong candidate. But with the adoption of primaries in the early part of the twentieth century, parties can no longer restrict access to political office via the ballot the way they once did. Although party leaders cannot easily discourage candidates from running, they can encourage experienced candidates to emerge in races where they think they will be especially competitive. Indeed, parties have refocused their efforts in this regard in an attempt to continue to exert influence in the electoral process. During the past few decades, new hierarchies have emerged with respect to candidate recruitment such that state legislatures now regularly serve as the “farm system” for the U.S. Congress. State legislators have always made up a significant proportion of the candidates who run for either the House or Senate, but now party leaders are making a more concerted effort to recruit suitable candidates at the state level to run in the most competitive and open seats races.9

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9 As recently as the 2012 and 2014 elections, both major parties have made concerted efforts to get more directly involved in recruitment efforts in key House and Senate races. This was motivated in large part by an increasing number of ideologically extreme candidates winning primary races who later went on to lose in the general election (Hershey 2014).
Party organizations recognize the realities of modern politics and work hard to recruit the best crop of candidates possible each election cycle. This is more straightforward in some election years than in others, though. When national tides or conditions are favorable for a given party, it is far easier for that party to recruit experienced or quality candidates to run in specific House and Senate races since the candidates with prior elective experience are more willing to assume the risks associated with running for higher office. In years when national tides are less favorable to a given party, many potential challengers such as state legislators are more risk averse about running for office since waging an unsuccessful electoral bid could put an end to an otherwise promising electoral career (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson 2013).

As noted earlier, recruiting the best crop of potential candidates is not always an easy task. In the modern era, party organizations lack the necessary incentives to successfully entice the strongest possible candidates (i.e., in most cases, former or current state legislators) to run for office. Unlike the strong party machines of the nineteenth century, modern parties are unable to exercise near monopolistic control over the nomination process. This means that parties cannot guarantee a seat for a candidate they would like to see run for office nor can they deter a potential candidate from running in a congressional primary. This, in turn, means that more ideologically extreme candidates occasionally win the nomination and go on to get elected to Congress. Additionally, parties do not always have sufficient money or resources to spread around to all House or Senate races, which can make it difficult for them to support the broadest possible number of candidates in a given election year.

In light of these constraints, who are the party organizations most likely to recruit to run for political office? Both major parties tend to prefer candidates possessing valued resources like money who can largely self-fund their own campaigns. They also prefer to recruit candidates
who are already connected to other political activists, which gives them an edge in running a successful political campaign. When former or current state legislators decline to run, parties target individuals in professions such as law, business, or education who have the flexibility to wage a campaign, the skills necessary to understand the political process, and the types of resources needed to win an election (Carson and Williamson N.d). One downside to this strategy of recruiting from the list of “usual suspects” is that parties tend to get the same types of candidates running for political office from one year to the next. Indeed, they are far less likely to recruit from a broad range of professions, as was the case during the era of strong party machines, when the parties exerted more influence over the nomination process (Herrnson 2012).

In addition to candidate recruitment, modern parties have probably been able to exert the greatest amount of influence in the realm of fundraising for individual congressional candidates. As a result of changes in campaign finance law in the past few decades, the biggest contribution parties make to candidates is in the form of coordinated expenditures. In fact, congressional candidates have been able to use these expenditures for a variety of purposes where additional resources are needed, including buying airtime, conducting campaign-related polls, and creating campaign advertisements. Fundraising strategies by the parties have not been limited to coordinated expenditures; in recent years, the national party committees have also engaged in independent spending on behalf of individual candidates. With independent expenditures, parties tend to restrict their spending to races where they believe their candidate has the best chance of winning in November. As a result of such efforts, these races tend to be the most competitive since large sums of money are flowing in from independent and outside groups in addition to the money received from the party committees. In light of the enormous stakes associated with majority party control in Congress, the national parties have invested millions in
key House races during the past decade as shown in Figure 7. On occasion, and in especially close congressional races, the parties may actually spend more money than individual candidates in an attempt to promote victory.

Figure 7: U.S. House Party Committee Campaign Activity, 1990-2014

The increase in independent and outside spending in recent elections is not without its potential downsides, however. Money that originates from the party is often used as part of an organized effort to benefit candidates of that party. Unfortunately, money can come from a variety of sources beyond that of the major parties. Following the Court’s decision in *Citizens United*, outside money has flowed in from a variety of external groups whose interests do not
always align with that of the candidate or the party (Bonica 2014).\textsuperscript{10} This can raise significant challenges since independent ads can emphasize specific themes that the candidates might prefer to avoid in a close election. Perhaps even more problematic is the increased use of negative ads from outside groups that can distract from a candidate’s message in an election campaign. Thus, independent expenditures can be a double-edged sword since neither candidates nor the parties can always control how such money will be spent.

Beyond candidate recruitment and fundraising efforts, party organizations have engaged in a variety of organizational changes in the modern era. As noted earlier, party leadership was reorganized away from the local level to the state and federal levels during the twentieth century in an attempt to adapt to changing political circumstances. In this capacity, both of the parties have become much more service-oriented than they were in the past. For instance, parties at the state and national levels provide valuable assistance to candidates seeking elective office. As a result of their continuing status from one election to the next, party organizations can provide helpful resources like party contacts, donor lists, and fundraising strategies for candidates who are running for elective office. The parties also engage in micro-targeting strategies and help to mobilize voters on Election Day, which have become necessary tools to win elections in the modern era (Herrnson 2012).

In short, the parties have responded to forces that have threatened to weaken their links with candidates by stepping up their efforts at candidate recruitment and selection, with varying degrees of success and various effects on American politics. The party organizations have had to find new incentives to use in candidate recruitment. These range from informal persuasion to the great increase in party independent expenditures injected into targeted races. Furthermore, the

parties help candidates secure key endorsements from various political elites, which serves to validate their candidacies in the eyes of both potential contributors and voters. By engaging in each of these activities, the parties have continued to remain relevant in electoral politics and may even be more influential than they have been at any point since the late nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Political parties have undergone a remarkable transformation in their ability to recruit candidates for office and structure electoral choices for citizens during the past 200 years of our country’s history. What started out as fledgling organizations in the early nineteenth century gradually evolved into powerful coalitions of party bosses and elites in the ensuing decades. The era of party machines is one characterized by remarkable partisan influence over both candidates and voters, and where elections were highly regulated and competitive. Unfortunately, there was also widespread corruption and intimidation during this era, which led to increasing frustration on the part of reform-minded individuals. Beginning in the late 1880s, a variety of progressive reforms were implemented that fundamentally changed the way that the party machines influenced the electoral process. The elimination of the patronage system, the adoption of the secret ballot, and direct primary reform radically altered the party machines’ ability to recruit candidates and get them elected.

With the adoption of the progressive reforms, party organizations had no choice but to adapt and change with the times. The major parties became more national in scope during the twentieth century as power steadily shifted away from the local levels. The party organizations also recognized that their ability to influence candidates and voters in elections had waned significantly as a result of the reform efforts, and they needed to adopt new strategies to remain relevant. Over time, they did exactly this by modifying their strategies with respect to recruiting
candidates for elective office, supporting candidates, and mobilizing voters. At the same time, the parties also became more service-oriented as they came to recognize that their best chance of influencing elections involved being more selective in allocating their resources every two years.

In the modern era, the national parties play a prominent role in assisting candidates in the most competitive races to ensure that their candidates have the best chance possible at winning elections. The parties have also adopted a variety of strategies to target prospective voters in an effort to get them to show up at the polls to support their slate of candidates. Given the evolution of the parties during the past 125 years, it is easier to see that their influence over congressional elections has become conditional in nature. Strong parties promote more competitive elections whereas weaker parties lead to less competition and more candidate-centered politics. Although party organizations have seen a bit of a resurgence in the past few decades, they are clearly not back at the level of influence that they were in the late nineteenth century. Given how resilient they have proven, however, it is clear that the parties will continue to adapt to new and perhaps unanticipated events, allowing them to continue to remain relevant in the electoral process for many years to come.
References


