Chapter 1

Party Organizations in Their Environment

In 1972, longtime *Washington Post* journalist David Broder published a book he titled *The Party's Over: The Failure of Politics in America*. The cover is perfectly illustrated, the GOP elephant and the Democratic donkey looking a little green after what appears to be a night of overindulgence, booze bottles scattered across the floor. The text carries on the theme, arguing the parties have lost their vitality in an American political process that features candidate-centered campaigns vying for the votes of dealigned voters unmoored from traditional partisan identities and loyalties. The marginalization of parties was troubling to Broder because he saw the parties as the only vehicles for enacting major policy changes. With the parties hung over, government would be rendered incapable of collective action.

Hindsight always provides an illuminating perspective, and we can now see that the party was just getting started. "What this country needs is some unvarnished political partisanship," Broder wrote at the time in an *Atlantic Monthly* article echoing the themes of the book (Broder 1972b, 33). Wish granted. In 2015, partisan vitriol has seemed to reach a new zenith. Party voting in Congress has climbed to new highs, reflecting the polarization of the congressional party caucuses and the increasing cohesion within them (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Mass party identification has rebounded somewhat, but, more importantly, it has come to be more realigned with ideological viewpoints (Levendusky 2009). Ticket splitting has declined substantially from its peak in the early 1970s when Broder was writing about disintegrating parties. A red-state-versus-blue-state mindset has seemingly set in over the country.

While most Americans who pay at least some attention to politics are aware of the increasingly partisan political environment, few probably know what has happened to the party *organizations* during this time frame. As Key

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(1958) pointed out many years ago, the political parties in the United States are composed of three parts: party-in-the-electorate, party-in-government, and party organizations. Pundits and the public alike have tended to fixate on the first two, mainly because they are more visible. Partisanship in Congress is a common feature in the news, and public opinion polling keeps the public aware of its shifting party affiliations. But party organizations are less visible to the general public. Political scientists, however, have paid more attention to this component of the parties, and their findings run counter to broader perceptions of party degeneration. Despite the proclamations of the parties' demise, these organizations continued a trajectory of increasing institutionalization and activity through the 1980s and 1990s.

Fueled by an energized fundraising capacity, the national party committees arrived in the 21st century as mature and highly effective organizations. The national parties had become "fiscally solvent, organizationally stable, and larger and more diversified in their staffing" (Herrnson 2002, 54). Their new organizational capacity meant a greater role in candidate recruitment, campaign training and management, public opinion research, campaign advertising, fundraising, and grassroots activity (Sabato and Larson 2002). Their new status also allowed them a bigger role in helping state and local party organizations to build their capacity. State party organizations matured considerably during this period as well. By the end of the century, almost all state parties had permanent headquarters, professional and specialized staffing, and ample budgets (Bibby 2002). These structural improvements allowed a great expansion of activity in areas like fundraising, training, advertising, recruitment, and grassroots mobilization (Aldrich 2000).

This institutionalization was also evident among local party organizations, which are the subject of this book. In fact, local party organizations were substantially more mature and active in the late 1970s than they were in the 1960s, and this trend of increasing local party strength continued into the 1980s (Cotter et al. 1984; Gibson et al. 1985; Gibson, Frendreis, and Vertz 1989). Research in the 1990s verified that local party organizations were still strong and active in the electoral arena. Frendreis and Gitelson (1999) found that, compared to the 1980s, local party organizations were as structurally developed and were more active programmatically in the 1990s.

Rather than being sidelined by the changes to campaigns that Broder documented, party organizations in the 1980s and 1990s found new ways to be useful to key actors in the political process. But in the years since the 1990s, much has changed in the political environment. The laws regulating campaign finance have been transformed in major ways, shifting the currents of campaign dollars. The internet has become a powerful tool for

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political action. And, amid the din of media and electronic communication, grassroots campaigning has reemerged as a key strategy. Given these changes, a fresh examination of political party organizations is in order. This book focuses on these organizations in America's local communities—in the counties, towns, and districts across the country. Since the rise of mass party organizations in the mid-19th century, local organizations have been the heart and soul of American parties. They are the place where common people have always engaged in party activity. They are also the place where candidates have often gone for help getting elected. But are local parties still as vibrant and central to the political process today as they have been historically? Is there still a place for local party organizations in the electoral environment of the 21st century?

A Changing Political Landscape

The survival of party organizations, even amid seemingly existential threats, is a theme recurring throughout American history. Almost a century earlier, Progressive reformers took aim at party organizations that had metastasized into party machines. Fed up with the inefficiencies and corruption perpetuated by machine politics, reformers gutted many of the tools party organizations relied on to exert influence on the electoral process. The introduction of the government-printed, secret ballot and the replacement of patronage with merit hiring systems removed the party's ability to arrange quid pro quo transactions with voters. Nonpartisan local elections removed the party's ballot gatekeeping role in many cities, and the introduction of the direct primary seemingly eliminated the organization's role in nominations, transferring this power to the party-in-the-electorate. Writing in the wake of the Progressive reforms, Frances Kellor predicted the atrophy of the party—at least its traditional role dealing with campaigns and elections:

> The direct primary, the abolition of conventions, fusion in municipal affairs, the commission form of government and similar movements are making the party less powerful. If the party is to survive as an instrument of power and as a means of expressing the will of the people there must be an expansion elsewhere. (Kellor 1914, 883)[1]

Despite these Progressive Era threats to party organizations, state and local party organizations persisted, albeit in different forms. The grip of

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the party machines on electoral politics weakened, but party organizations did not suddenly vanish. However, continued changes in the political environment forced parties to adapt yet again. The rise of mass media in the 1950s and 1960s led to the emergence of candidate-centered campaigns and continued worries about the fate of political parties, as articulated by Broder. The introduction of the McGovern-Fraser reforms in the Democratic Party, which constrained the ability of state and local party leaders to select delegates for the national party convention, were also seen as fundamental threats to party organizations. Yet parties still thrived, adapting to these changes in the political environment to continue their essential role in electoral politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite continued threats to the vitality of party organizations and despite continued concerns about the demise of political parties, party atrophy never occurred, even at the local level, where party organizations are least institutionally mature.

But the environment never remains static for long, and so we must continue to reconsider parties and their role in the American political process. We believe three key recent changes in the electoral environment may have had a profound impact on local parties and make this reconsideration necessary.

First, as Frendreis and Gitelson (1999) note, local party organizations in the past have focused on fostering connections between candidates and resources, with money being one such critical resource. The passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) in 2002, however, eliminated the flow of soft money from national to state and local party organizations (Bibby and Holbrook 1996; La Raja 2003). There was disagreement over what impact the BCRA would have on state and local parties, but there was consensus that the law's passage would alter the functioning of party organizations and the relationships among them (La Raja, Orr, and Smith 2006). The elimination of soft money meant parties had to work harder to raise more hard money to maintain previous levels of fundraising, so this environment created more incentives for entrepreneurial thinking (Dwyre et al. 2007). Ultimately, as La Raja, Orr, and Smith (2006) show, the effect of BCRA on state parties was to increase voter mobilization efforts and to decrease issue ad activity. Little is known, however, about the nature of fundraising and financial activity among local parties in the aftermath of BCRA and subsequent changes in campaign finance brought about by Supreme Court decisions.

In addition, the rise of the internet has changed the electoral environment. Candidates increasingly use the internet to connect with voters as well as to raise money, and voters are increasingly turning to the internet as

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a source of campaign information (Farnsworth and Owen 2004; Williams et al. 2005). Many local party organizations have begun to maintain their own website, separate from the state party organization, and have begun to use social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter. However, little is known about how widespread these tools are among local parties. The development of these cheap and effective means of directly communicating with voters and party loyalists may have provided local parties with new ways to reach out and attract activists and supporters.

Finally, recent election cycles have seen the reemergence of sophisticated canvassing and voter mobilization operations (Bergan et al. 2005). Hogan (2002) notes that during the 1990s many of the local parties' traditional grassroots functions gave way to service-oriented candidate assistance. During this period, party efforts were directed more toward candidates than voters (Frendreis and Gitelson 1999). However, in the last several elections, there has been a renewed emphasis on grassroots activity in electoral campaigns, with notable increases in door-to-door canvassing and voter mobilization, particularly among the presidential candidates. Bush political operatives, under the direction of Karl Rove, developed the 72-Hour Strategy in the 2002 midterm election as a way of piloting a major grassroots operation that would be used again in 2004. Democrats, while traditionally more committed to mobilization activity, also developed particularly extensive operations in 2004. And, of course, these trends continued in 2008 and 2012, particularly on the Democratic side, where the Obama campaign developed a remarkable grassroots operation. These changes may reflect a growing sense that, as the country polarizes, the portion of the electorate amenable to persuasion may be shrinking and so campaigns must focus on mobilizing their bases (Bergan et al. 2005). In the end, the renewed focus on voter mobilization efforts in recent elections may mean the resources local party organizations have the most access to, namely, motivated volunteers, are increasingly important. Combined with the loss of soft money, this new strategic imperative may mean state parties and candidates—state, local, and national—are focusing more on working with these local organizations to utilize their large pools of volunteers.

Organizational Evolution

Before considering how these recent environmental changes have affected local parties, it is worth reflecting on the nature of local party organizations and the general process by which they adapt. Why have parties persisted so

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well in the United States in the face of all these seemingly fatal threats? To answer this question, it is useful to begin with a theoretical exploration of organizational change at a general level. The adaptation of all organizations to their environment occurs in ways that parallel the adaptation of biological populations, and this realization has spawned an extensive literature on organizational evolution and ecology. This theoretical perspective is helpful in illuminating how parties have been successful at adaptation.

Organizational evolution is a process of relatively durable change in a population of organizations. The most important process in evolution is the adaptation of forms (Aldrich 1979; Stanley 1979). Forms are organizational structures or functional repertoires that describe a set of organizations in a population. Nelson and Winter (1982) refer to these regular and predictable patterns of behavior as "routines" that serve as the genes of an organization. Over time, adaptation occurs as less successful forms die out and successful forms persist.

The key to understanding organizational evolution is describing the adaptation process. For adaptation to occur, there must be three processes: variation, selection, and retention (Aldrich 1979; Campbell 1965). Populations of organizations must contain some diversity (variation), and some of these forms must function better in the environment (selection). Finally, these more functional forms must then persist over time (retention).

It is important to point out that theorists of organizational evolution perceive an actual process of natural selection at work. As Lewis and Steinmo (2012, 315) put it, "We do not use evolution as a metaphor." Organizational evolution can be viewed as an example of universal Darwinism, generalized Darwinism, or universal selection theory (Bickhard and Campbell 2003; Campbell 1965; Cziko 1995; Dawkins 1983; Hodgson 2005; Nelson 2007). Wherever there is variation, selection, and retention within populations of individual entities, there is a true process of evolution. Biological evolution is but one manifestation of this broader class of change, with specific biological mechanisms driving variation, selection, and retention.[2]

Of course, evolution does not unfold identically in different contexts (Lewis and Steinmo 2012). One key difference is the source of variation in a population. In biological populations, the key adaptation process is Darwinian natural selection.[3] In this process, variation arises from random mutations in the genetic code; most mutations reduce an organism's chances for survival and procreation, but some increase the chances, and these forms are selected and retained by the offspring. There is an ongoing, selective attrition at the individual level, a survival of the fittest. In Darwinian pro-

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cesses, individual organisms do not change over their lifetime in ways that are retained by future generations.

Some theorists emphasize this kind of Darwinian process among organizations. This perspective focuses on the extent to which organizations are burdened with substantial inertia, which limits meaningful change at the level of the individual organization (Carroll 1984; Hannan and Freeman 1989). Organizations arise, are imprinted with a form early on, and then succeed (persist) or fail (die) based on how well suited their forms are for their environment. Carroll (1984, 73) calls this perspective the "selection approach to evolution" and notes an emphasis on population-level phenomena. The work on organizational ecology, which seeks to understand organizational populations within certain niches, falls into this category. A good example of this approach is the work on interest group populations by Lowery and Gray (1995; 2000), which seeks to understand the size and diversity of interest group populations within the states.

In this view, individual organizations do not alter form substantially during their existence. The adaptation of *forms* arises because at any given point the organizations that have persisted have a successful (adaptive) form and the ones that died out had less successful forms. Selection happens because of the natural diversity occurring as organizations in a population are *created* and the differential effect that the environment has on organizations with different forms. This process works well for explaining adaptation among some types of organizations, such as business firms. For example, the restaurant industry is marked by great diversity, achieved by entrepreneurs realizing various concepts for restaurants. Each restaurant tends to maintain a singular identity over its life, but mortality is high, so unsuccessful forms die out and successful ones persist.[4] The successful form is retained within the existing restaurant but may also be copied by new restaurants—for instance, the fundamentals of the fast-food franchise form created by McDonald's (e.g., counter service with quick delivery of food) have remained virtually unchanged and have been copied by many other restaurants.

Alternatively, the adaptation of forms need not arise only through mortality and birth processes. It is possible that existing organizations change their form during their lifetime and that these changes are retained. After all, organizations are created and maintained by people, and people have the cognitive capacity to shape organizations in ways they reasonably expect will be adaptive. "Humans' creative capacities and problem-solving abilities are important mechanisms for generating continued variation in human social

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systems" (Lewis and Steinmo 2012, 316). We strive to improve our organizations. "Much learning, adaptation, and change take place within organizations" (Meyer 1990, 301). People are able to reflect on the routines of their organizations and alter them in ways they expect will improve performance; this creates the "mutations" that lead to variation in the organizational population (Nelson and Winter 1982). Efforts to manage the culture of organizations can be seen as an example of attempts to encourage organizational adaptation. Research has demonstrated that organizational culture is linked to organizational effectiveness (Denison 1990); organizational leaders who are aware of this often seek to manage their organizational culture in order to increase organizational effectiveness through mechanisms such as employee hiring processes, rituals, and formal codes of behavior (Gibson et al. 2002; Luthans 1995).

Of course, managing organizational culture is difficult (Gibson et al. 2002), which illustrates the limits on the ability of humans to manage organizational adaptation. Though we may attempt intentional change, we lack "the capacity to fully predict the consequences of any particular institutional change" (Lewis and Steinmo 2012, 322). Some of these mutations are adaptive, and others are not. Furthermore, whether these mutations are adaptive may depend on the environment in which these adaptations occur. For example, in the context of organizational culture, Denison (1990) notes that some organizational cultures that are adaptive in one environment may not be particularly effective in a different environment. Hence, this variation in both adaptations and environments sets the stage for selection.

This kind of change might be viewed as Lamarckian selection, in that organizations that have maladaptive forms can *learn* new approaches and develop into a new form that then persists within the continuing organizations and that may even be imitated by other organizations in the population (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Lewis and Steinmo 2012). Successful organizations are those that adopt, through innovation or imitation, more adaptive forms.

It is likely that in most organizational populations there are both Darwinian and Lamarckian processes at work, with the relative importance of each depending on the nature of the organization. However, for some kinds of organizations, Darwinian selection is essentially impossible. When the existence of organizations in a population is supported by external forces, there can be no selective mortality. As Perrow (1979, 242) put it, "we simply do not let schools and garbage collectors go out of business." Of course, Perrow's choice of examples underscores the extent to which organizations are never fully protected from death; garbage collection in many communi-

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ties has been privatized since he wrote in 1979, and school restructuring options under No Child Left Behind allow state governments to replace public schools with charter schools, replace all of the school staff, or even contract with a private management company. For this reason, it is better to think about some organizations as being protected from mortality, to varying degrees, rather than being immortal.

Political party organizations enjoy this kind of protection. One major reason is that party organizations have a special legal status that protects them from mortality in a way not enjoyed by interest groups, business firms, or biological organisms. Parties are, at one level, strictly private organizations composed of private citizens coming together to engage in collective action. But their tight relationship with official governmental functions, particularly elections, has made them semi-public in practice—what Epstein (1986) terms "public utilities." Particularly since the Progressive Era, state laws have attempted to regulate party organizations in various ways. As Epstein (1986) notes, the adoption of the Australian ballot meant the government was responsible for printing the names of parties and their candidates on the ballots. This responsibility brings with it a need to determine what is and is not a political party and which candidates should have the right to attach their names to the parties on the official ballot.

Consequently, states had to issue regulations about ballot access that, at a minimum, identify which organizations are the "official" Democratic and Republican parties with the ability to nominate candidates. Of course, the direct primary largely has taken away this power from the party organizations and placed it in the hands of party voters, but in many ways this has tightened the link between the law and parties, as the state has entered the business of running (and paying for) the elections that nominate party candidates.

State regulations today may encompass very specific elements of party structure, such as "procedures for selecting officers, composition of party committees, dates and locations of meetings, and powers of party units" (Holbrook and La Raja 2013, 66). As just one example, Wyoming statute specifies the existence of county committees and precincts and the number of committeemen and committeewomen for each precinct; calls for regular county committee meetings and sets rules for the timing and notice for these meetings; establishes the selection process for the county committee chair and the delegates to the county and state conventions; delineates the composition and selection of state party committees; and mandates state party conventions, sets rules for these conventions, and even enumerates the specific powers of the convention, for instance, to nominate electors

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for presidential elections and to adopt a platform (Wyo. Stat. §22.4-1). Additionally, in the modern era of campaign finance regulation, state as well as federal laws have become involved in establishing the legal identity of political parties for the purposes of collecting and distributing election funds (sometimes from public funding programs).

These state laws, overall, greatly favor the two major parties over third parties. For example, they typically grant ballot access more-or-less automatically to the major parties, while requiring sometimes extremely burdensome petition requirements for third party candidates.[5] Federal campaign finance laws automatically qualify Democratic and Republican presidential nominees (and their parties' nominating conventions) for the public general election grant; minor parties must qualify by showing adequate vote share. Similar standards apply for state public funding programs.

The effect of this preference for major parties is that the law regulates party organizations differently than other types of organizations. Corporations and interest groups, for example, are subject to numerous laws and regulations at both the federal and state levels. But these laws apply to *classes* of organizations, not specific organizations. In contrast, because the law buttresses the two major parties, it effectively regulates particular Republican and Democratic organizations. As Epstein (1986) points out, this puts parties in the same protected class as heavily regulated public utilities. The presence of state and local parties "has been practically mandated by state law and their continued existence virtually assured" (Holbrook and La Raja 2013, 69).[6]

The place of local party committees is supported not only by these legal provisions but also by the internal rules of the parties overall. Local committees, state committees, and national committees are bound together by formal rules that define how the committees interrelate. National committee rules, for instance, specify how state parties may select their representatives to the national committees as well as how delegates are selected to national conventions. Similarly, state party rules delineate how local committees may select their officers, their representatives on the state committee, and their delegates to state conventions. Because of these rules, local committees can be said to exist as part of the larger web of party committees, even when there is little or no actual activity in these committees.

And, indeed, it is important to point out that the life support provided by state laws need not guarantee a meaningful existence for local party committees. They may become empty shells, doing very little, catatonic patients kept alive by machines. But they still exist as formal organizations, recognized by state party bylaws, state law, or both. This kind of dormancy

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describes, for instance, many local Republican organizations in the South throughout much of the 20th century. A Democratic county party chair in Maine whom we interviewed described a local party committee that had been very successful mobilizing a large group of local activists until its chair passed away. Subsequently, those activists were staying home during election season and the party became dormant. But the activist network was still there, and the county party still existed; a new leader could very easily revive that organization. These organizations never really died, in a formal sense. Instead, they persisted much like shell corporations—serving as a vehicle for party business but not really having any actual activity.

Because of these protections from mortality, any change among party organizations must result from Lamarckian change. Lamarckian change requires a mechanism of learning, a way in which organizations can gauge the possibilities for new forms, assess which will work better, and adopt wholly new structures and functional repertoires. Humans, of course, have the capacity to engage in these kinds of learning (Lewis and Steinmo 2012). As Schlesinger (1984, 390) puts it, parties "are perhaps best described as forms of organized trial and error." To understand party change, we must examine the individuals who drive this trial and error.

Party Organizers and the Party Exchange

Within party organizations, there are individuals who might be termed *party organizers*, who manage the organizational life of the party committees and push their organizations to try new ways of accomplishing their goals or even to attempt new goals. These individuals create the diversity of forms within the population of party organizations. Because of their key role in the adaption process, it is worth considering what motivates them.

We see the role of party organizers as similar to the role of interest group organizers in Salisbury's (1969) exchange theory of interest groups. In Salisbury's theory, group organizers package a set of selective benefits and seek members who will provide material support to the group in exchange for these benefits. The organizers take a sort of profit from this, either in money, as salary, or in terms of their own purposive satisfaction.

The role of the party organizer is slightly different, because the nature of parties is different. Though parties can be viewed like businesses selling a product to consumers, party organizations act more like wholesalers or distributors. Their activities often involve connecting the needs of different actors in the political sphere. Party organizers use the party organizations as

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a way of connecting pools of resources to unfilled or poorly filled political functions. Often, party organizations "market" not to voters but to other political elites who have specific needs in order to achieve their own goals (usually related to voters).

For example, party organizations often organize fundraising events at which candidates can solicit direct contributions from individuals or PAC leaders. One Democratic chair in a South Carolina party organization suggested this type of event was one of the most important activities in which it engages, because the party is able to leverage its credibility and network for the candidates. Similarly, local parties may be the source of various kinds of expertise, particularly for neophyte candidates. This might include legal advice, accounting assistance, or even polling. If the party cannot provide this help directly, it is likely to know which private consultants or firms would be best able to help a candidate. Even local party activists must be viewed as a brokered resource. Among the chairs we interviewed, many explained that the presidential campaigns would liaison with the local party committees, often in ways mediated by the state party leadership, to direct and coordinate local grassroots activity. As we will show in chapter 3, local parties are far less likely to engage voters directly through mass media than to provide supporting services to candidates or leverage their volunteers for grassroots campaign activity. Local parties do not run campaigns; they supply campaigns.

In this regard, we disagree with Schlesinger (1984), who adopts Downs's (1957, 25) definition of parties as a "team seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election." For Schlesinger, this team includes candidates, office holders, and, presumably, party organization leaders; it excludes voters. While this definition may be workable for the concept of *party*, it does not adequately capture what we mean by *party organization*.[7] The organizational apparatus is distinct from candidates and office holders. Chairs and officers in local, state and national party committees are very often not office holders or candidates themselves. Even when they are, they play distinct roles. Lumping the organizational and office-seeking parts of the party into a single team obscures what is really happening in the electoral process, especially in contemporary elections.

In the age of candidate-centered elections, candidates are more like private labels. Rarely do candidates even include their party affiliation on campaign material, websites, or ads. Candidates are independent operators. They are selling themselves to voters, each a small business (or large, in the case of presidential candidates). Party organizations do not sell candidates any more than Foxconn, the Chinese manufacturing firm, sells iPads. The

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role of the party organization is to support the candidates, in ways the candidates find useful.

As Frendreis and Gitelson (1993; 1999) explain, party organizations are *adaptive brokers* that make connections among elite actors who either have or seek electoral resources. Parties "often serve as brokers, facilitating the connection between candidate organizations and pools of necessary resources, such as money, expertise, and volunteers"; adaptation occurs as "party organizations respond to changes in their environment . . . by developing new capacities and altering the electoral roles they perform" (Frendreis and Gitelson 1999, 152). The individuals we are describing as party organizers are the people responsible for creating these new capacities and developing the new roles. They look for new functions and new sets of resources and find novel ways to connect them.

The emerging use of micro-targeting data is a good example. Both parties have developed very sophisticated databases—the RNC's Voter Vault and the DNC's DataMart/Demzilla databases—that contain detailed information about voters. At some point in the 1990s and early 2000s, forward-thinking individuals within the party organizations grasped the utility of this kind of database for targeting election appeals to voters. These data have been used by thousands of candidates. Similar kinds of innovation occur on a more mundane level in local parties on a regular basis. An organizer might decide to try decentralized cell-phone banking, or to canvass in a new location, or leaflet in the parking lot of the local youth soccer fields. Moreover, the internet has created new opportunities for party organizers to innovate. As we will see in chapter 3, many local parties have begun to assist candidates with online fundraising.

As with group organizers, party organizers take some form of profit. This profit can be purely purposive, accruing simply from the act of helping to fulfill functions that are congruent with the entrepreneur's purposive beliefs (Clark and Wilson 1961). The profit can also be material, as when employment opportunities are enhanced by one's position in the party. Monetary profit may be unethical, such as in party machines whereby money is funneled out of the resource-function connection and into the pocket of the party organizer. Profit can also be political, meaning the party leader increases his or her own ability to run for an elected office or gain employment in the political establishment at a later point. This kind of political profit is partly purposive, partly material, and partly serving ambition. But, in most cases, this is more like an investment than a dividend. Indeed, it's possible to think of these politically ambitious individuals as *party investors*. They provide their labor now in the hopes of accruing some future

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political benefit. A Democratic chair in Florida we interviewed described a set of "new, really young, savvy individuals who are very ambitious" and who compete to take charge of various party operations in order to make a name for themselves in the party establishment. These "field marshals" operate as managers and innovators within the party in order to "make their own path in the process," and they end up "jockeying for the state party positions, for the appointments, for the political consultant jobs in DC."

It is important to make a distinction between party organizers and party activists. The latter also engage in party activity in exchange for purposive, material, or solidary benefits, but from an organizational perspective, they must be viewed more as resources than as actors who direct those resources. Organizers are the leaders within the organization, frequently those with the most commitment to sustained organizational work, who typically occupy formal positions. They may have some political ambition for higher party offices or elective office themselves, and they are most likely tied into the elite networks within their communities, especially those connected to political and economic affairs. Party activists, in contrast, tend to be episodic participants in party affairs, being drawn into party activity around election time and sprung into action by the issues and personalities of the elections at hand. Activists may show up to make phone calls, hold signs at visibility events, deliver lawns signs, or go door-to-door talking with voters. But most will not attend local party committee meetings, and only a very few would consider holding an office within the party organization. As one Florida chair explained, there may be "fifty people who are more than willing to pick up a sign and knock on a door and pick up the phone and make a phone call, but usually only five of those people are willing to actually call the other volunteers and pull them together and motivate them and move them around." In contrast to the organizers, who ascend to permanent leadership positions within the organizations, the activists are electoral transients. As the Florida chair explained, "After the election, you lose so many people, because they're no longer fighting for anything." Of course, there are some activists who more regularly participate in party activity, and most party organizers likely were at some point activists who then decided to commit more fully to the party. There is perhaps more of a continuum than a clean set of categories, but the distinction between the two types is nonetheless still clear.

The distinction between organizers and activists bears some resemblance to that between professionals and amateurs (Conway and Feigert 1968), but only in part. Party activists, like those traditionally defined as amateurs, tend to be motivated by purposive and solidary benefits. And

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those individuals identified as professionals, with strong material motivations and ambitions for careers in politics, would certainly fall into the category we are describing here as party organizers. But not all organizers are professionals—many local party chairs are filled by committed ideologues who devote extensive amounts of their time for purely purposive gains, with no interest in climbing any ladder of political ambition.

Innovation and Adaptation

While activists provide their labor, organizers provide their leadership, and part of leadership is guiding an organization through periods of change and adaptation. How does this change and adaptation occur?

Some innovation occurs when longstanding leaders within the organization attempt new ways of doing things. For example, while the fundamentals of McDonald's business model have not changed, a customer from the 1950s would hardly recognize the McDonald's menu these days: smoothies, wraps, Happy Meals, and more all represent changes made by the corporation to remain relevant in today's changing fast-food landscape. Market research and attention to changing consumer tastes drove these changes. Denison (1990, 10) notes organizations that are externally focused and driven are better able to translate signals from the external environment into behavioral changes, increasing the organization's chances for survival and growth. So organizations, particularly those that are externally focused, may drive adaptation in recognition of the need to do things differently in order to thrive.

Among party organizations, this change may be top down, as when a national or state party works to produce changes in local party organizations, or it may be bottom up, as local parties try out different ways of engaging in party business. The Democrats' 50-state strategy is an example of change driven by the national parties. The party describes this strategy as "an ambitious effort to build the Democratic Party from the ground up in every single precinct, city and state in the country" (DNC 2014). Party leaders, recognizing the importance of strong party organizations on the ground, worked to build and change state and local party organizations. And news accounts largely praise this strategy for helping greatly with Obama's 2008 election efforts. Republicans, learning from the success of the Democrats, launched their own 50-state strategy after the 2012 elections (Hamby 2013), illustrating how organizations may seek to adapt based on feedback from the environment and by examining the actions of other successful organiza-

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tions. State parties can also drive top-down innovation. A Republican chair in Georgia we interviewed reported an effort by the state party committee to target dormant county committees by identifying and supporting local politicos who might revive the local organizations.

Of course, while Hamby (2013) describes the efforts of the Republican National Committee to build local Republican organizations as a "bottom-up" effort, true bottom-up change may be initiated by local party officials seeking to do things differently. Like an old dog learning new tricks, local organizers may undertake entirely new and innovative activities or adopt changes from other party organizations. One Republican chair in Illinois revamped the local party bylaws in order to empower the midlevel leadership at the township level, providing a more effective connection between the county leaders and the precinct captains. As he explained, "Boss Hog–style politics isn't going to work here." State party conventions, which bring local party organizers and activists together, may be fertile grounds for information about successful adaptation, and, of course, local party organizers may learn from looking across the party aisle.

Alternatively, party innovation can occur when outsiders come into the organization and attempt to remake it. These outsiders might be viewed as party entrepreneurs and fall into a special class of party organizer. Entrepreneurs play a critical role, of course, in the natural selection process of other organizational populations—indeed, the term is usually applied to individuals launching business organizations. It is the risk-taking of entrepreneurs that creates the natural diversity of a population that allows selection processes to unfold. But, in most populations, entrepreneurs create a new organization with a distinctive form, and that organization will die or persist based on how adaptive that form is to the environment. In the case of parties, the entrepreneurs do not create new organizations but rather come into existing party organizations and push new forms onto them.

What drives these innovations in party organizations? Appleton and Ward (1997) identify a number of ways party organizations might be prompted to innovate. Occasions for innovation can be both periodic and accidental—for example, elections often prompt reflection, and major policy shifts can be a powerful stimulus for change. Usually, there is some disruption that creates disequilibrium, and this serves as the impetus for change. How well these stimuli are converted into innovation depends on a number of intervening factors, according to Appleton and Ward, among them internal factionalism, institutionalization, and fragmentation.

As noted earlier, party innovation, regardless of the nature and source, occurs within continually existing organizations. These circumstances might,

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at first glance, appear likely to dampen party adaptation. Many theorists of organizational change have emphasized that human organizations have tendencies to fall into regular patterns and become resistant to change (Carroll 1984; Hannan and Freeman 1989). However, there are three key features of political parties and the environment in which they reside that make them highly adaptable through Lamarckian processes.

First, the legal protections for parties mean fundamental organizational tasks are unnecessary. The practical consequence of maintaining life support for the party organizations is that there are very small startup costs for a party entrepreneur or little disincentive for leaders within a nonthriving organization to attempt change. The organization already exists. It has a formal structure, with formal connections to other organizations. It is well known and connected to a longstanding brand. Therefore, party innovators may find it easier to attempt a new form of organization than an interest group or business entrepreneur.

Second, these same legal regulations have increasingly meant local party committees are permeable organizations. Individuals can essentially self-select into membership. To become involved in a party organization, a person need do nothing more than show up at meetings (and perhaps register to vote in party primaries). Though historically parties were not always so unbounded, it has always been possible for individuals willing to do party work to get involved in local committees. In contrast, business firms select only employees they choose. Even interest groups are fairly bounded. Becoming truly involved in the organizational life of an interest group, beyond simply donating money, requires a much greater commitment and connection than showing up at the local party committee meeting. As a result, new ideas are easily injected into parties through new membership.

This permeability has meant that party entrepreneurs inject a dynamism into party organizations that may be lacking in other organizations. Organizations may tend toward ossification, as Hannan and Freeman (1989) assert. People resist change. But, the openness of party organizations helps overcome this.

Consider the example of a young, conservative activist who would like to help other conservatives get elected. To found an interest group, he would have to figure out the legal requirements for establishing a nonprofit corporation and would then have to recruit some other individuals to help with a membership drive. Like most membership drives, this would require a direct mail and/or email solicitation and so would necessitate a substantial up-front investment in cash. However, it would seem relatively easy for him to take a dormant local party organization and push it in new directions.

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He might attend some meetings of the county Republican Party, network, get elected chair, and perhaps harness other local conservative activists for a new canvassing operation in aid of local Republican candidates. The organization is already there. Membership is already there, even if minimal. He could focus his entrepreneurial energies on developing the new organizational forms rather than on basic startup operations.

This example may be common, as the evidence suggests high levels of turnover among party organizers. Data from a 1996 survey of 673 local party chairs (the study is described in Frendreis and Gitelson 1999) reveal quite a lot of turnover. The median year at which the respondents first became chair was 1993, and 65% had started as chair in 1991 or later.

In addition to permanence and permeability, a third feature that promotes adaptation is the periodicity of regular elections. For business organizations, feedback may be nearly constant, supplied by sales and earnings figures; this constant data stream may reveal only incremental change and may make it difficult for businesses to engage in anything more than incremental adaptation. But for parties, feedback via elections occurs at periodic intervals and is typically quite dramatic and visible. Every two years (perhaps more frequently depending on the nature of state and local elections), parties must assess the results of their efforts and determine what adaptations are necessary in the wake of these results. Election results, particularly poor election results, provide the impetus for party strategic planning on a biennial basis. Dramatic losses can catalyze major organizational change.

And of course, the media feeds this critical self-reflection. A Google search in 2014 for "end of the Republican Party" suggests autofills of "2008" and "2012." Pundits liked to speculate about the coming death of the Republican Party in the wake of both Obama elections. But as noted earlier, the Republicans have adapted and remain, much to the chagrin of the Obama administration, a potent force in US politics. Like Mark Twain's, the death of the Republican Party has been greatly exaggerated, as illustrated by the 63 seat pick-up in the House in the 2010 midterm elections and the return of the Senate to Republican control in 2014. Furthermore, elections may induce entrepreneurs into party adaptation. Frustration over lackluster party efforts may finally motivate entrepreneurs into activity.

Consequently, large or unexpected electoral losses naturally induce party reflection about what went wrong. Democrats engaged in such soul-searching after dramatic Republican gains in 1994, as they wondered how to develop their own Contract with America. And Republicans have engaged in their own soul-searching about the role of the Tea Party after the 2012 elections. Parties seek to determine what they could (or can) do differently.

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Regular national elections, and the swings that often accompany them, mean that no party organizations are immune to this self-reflection. Even though gains and losses may be concentrated in specific areas or regions, the national nature of these results often induces across-the-board reflection, meaning party committees in highly favorable or unfavorable environments may still work to adapt. Local party organizations often think nationally but act locally, particularly after their team or brand has suffered a setback. Like sports fans who analyze reasons for team failures and earnestly debate what the team needs to do next year, party organizations—national, state, and local—look for ways to improve the party's fate come next election. The rhythm of elections, therefore, provides a strong impetus for party adaptation.

Conclusion: Local Parties in the 21st Century

Why have parties persisted so well in the United States in the face of so many seemingly fatal threats? The answer is that party organizations have been exceptionally successful at adapting to changes in the external environment. While party organizations have maintained their fundamental utility in electoral politics, the ways in which they are useful have changed. In the early 20th century, party organizations were useful both to candidates, to whom they delivered voters, and to voters, to whom they delivered jobs and services. As Progressive Era reforms undermined parties' ability to deliver goods to voters, they continued to deliver voters to candidates. As partisanship declined and mass media rose, parties adapted and found ways to deliver services to candidates who increasingly operated independently of political parties. Soft money, in particular, was a new resource that allowed parties to thrive, but even when this resource largely disappeared, parties did not wither away. Instead, they have shifted their focus from brokering money to brokering people—as we will show, local party organizations are now critical for providing labor for mobilization efforts. Across the 20th and 21st centuries, party organizations have adapted to a variety of political conditions, and it is this story of adaptation that is critical to understanding how political parties have continued to thrive over several centuries, despite a continually changing political environment. Local party organizations persist because they adapt their forms and their activities in response to a changing political environment.

The key implication of this fact is that, to have a full understanding of the role they play in American politics, local parties must be conceptualized as organizations within an environment. We need to understand how they

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are organized and whether organizational structure influences what they do. We need to describe what they do as organizations and whether any of this activity matters. And we need to understand how both structure and activity are shaped by the broader environment.

This environment includes the socioeconomic and political context in both the local community and in the broader state context and state party. In chapter 2, we examine the features of state political parties that vary and that may shape local political parties. State parties have a wide variety of tools they may use to shape local organizations. Whether a state party provides assistance with organization-building to local parties will surely affect that local organization's capacity to build a local party organization. Thus, we look at the nature of state party assistance to local parties and how it varies in chapter 2. Second, we believe each state party—encompassing the state committee, the local committees, and the relationships among them—has its own organizational culture that is important to understand for a full picture of the party's role in the political system. The effectiveness of this state party culture can shape the forms and activities of these local organizations. We describe the variations in party organizational culture more fully in chapter 2.

Next, in chapter 3, we examine variations in local party organizational form. Central to this understanding of local party form is organizational structure. Some local committees are highly developed institutions, with mature work routines, well-established staff positions, and relatively permanent organizational life. Other committees are moribund or dormant. Local party form, we hypothesize, is shaped by a variety of local forces, such as the socioeconomic environment and the level of interparty competition. We also believe that the assistance provided by the state party and the organizational culture of the overarching state party will affect the organizational form of local party committees in important ways.

The level of structural maturity, along with other environmental factors, determines the capacity of local party organizations to engage in electoral activity. Parties with a more mature structure will have a greater ability to engage in activity, as they will have systems in place that support undertaking these activities. Structural maturity creates capacity for action. Of course, other environmental factors—such as party competition and urbanization, to name a few—will influence the electoral activities of local parties, but we believe that parties with stronger structures will engage in more activities, a hypothesis we examine in chapter 3.

Also, we believe a party's candidates will do better when the local party is more active; after all, this is presumably why parties engage in these

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