

PART ONE

Scholarly Perspectives

Overview of Research on Party Organizations

Leon D. Epstein

Asked to discuss briefly the state of research on party organizations, principally understood as state and local organizations, I shall first comment generally and then cite only a few studies to illustrate the extensive scholarly literature on the subject.

My perspective these days is principally that of a synthesizing user of the organizational research conducted by others. It is about 35 years since I studied party organizations in Wisconsin counties, employing interviews, mail questionnaires, and participant-observations (Epstein 1958: Chapter 5). That experience, together with a nearly simultaneous study of candidate-selection practices of British constituency associations, convinced me of both the value and the arduousness of such research. At the time of my Wisconsin work, political scientists in other states were also studying the new ideological activist organizations that seemed to be replacing patronage parties. Some of these studies, completed in the early 1960s, were widely recognized as important scholarship; striking examples are the books written by Samuel Eldersveld (1964) and James Q. Wilson (1962). Their work maintained a traditional professional concern with party organizations as key elements in understanding the democratic political process. That concern goes back to Ostrogorski (1902) and Michels (1915), and it includes landmark studies of old party machines like Chicago's (Gosnell 1937). Surely, the profession's concern with the subject persists, as all of us know and as I shall emphasize in discussing work of the last decade. Nevertheless, studies of party organizations appear less salient since the mid-1960s or thereabouts. I mean not only less salient in political science generally, where of course the development of many new fields reduces the relative importance of parties, but also less salient even within the parties field itself. I believe that more time and energy are devoted to party systems, party competition, party voters, party identifiers, and legislative parties than to extra-governmental party organizations.

Perhaps research on party organizations, especially at state and local levels, has not been the readiest path to fame and fortune for political scientists during the last quarter century. That supposition can be supported by at least one crude measure: among 238 articles and research notes appearing in twenty issues of the *American Political Science Review* during a recent five-year period (March 1986 through December 1990), only one—a research note—was devoted to extra-governmental party organization at any level in the United States or elsewhere. This statistic may reflect more than the fact that party organization is but one of the multitude of subjects now attracting political scientists. Research on organizations ordinarily requires field work, either by a principal investigator or through specially developed survey instruments, while scholars are understandably tempted by inquiries that can be pursued by using already available data from established surveys, documents, and secondary sources, or by philosophical and methodological work for which no empirically-derived data are needed. Thus, only a modest percentage of *APSR* articles *on any subject*, I once observed in the mid-1980s, contain newly gathered data from elite interviews, participant-observation, or specially developed surveys or questionnaires (as distinct from national surveys used in many voting-behavior articles).

The very state and local character of party organizations may also help account for the subject's lack of prominence. Political scientists, like many Americans, are likely to be more interested in national than in state and local affairs. To some extent, that interest is reflected in useful and important studies of national party organizations. Their recent expansion surely justifies attention, and the availability of campaign finance data from the Federal Election Commission facilitates relevant research. Hence, it is harder than ever to persuade a Ph.D. candidate in the parties field to forgo the greater visibility of a national study in favor of studying state and local organizations. Yet good reasons remain for looking to sub-national units for most party organizational activity. We are far from certain that state and local parties have declined as conventional wisdom suggests, and we still know too little about the non-patronage organizations that have developed, ever since the 1950s, to serve different purposes from those of the old machines. Several examples of new developments will be found in the excellent studies in Pomper (1980).

Characteristic of most recent scholarship is the realization that party organizations have had to accommodate to a candidate-centered political culture and particularly to a nominating process that they cannot control but may seek only to influence. The significance of this point is readily understood in comparative context. Everywhere outside the United States, party organizations, at one level or another but usually local or regional, control the bestowing of their party labels; that is to say, dues paying party members or their chosen executive committees select (nominate) candidates.

Only in the United States do laws turn over candidate selection by parties to voters, whose commitment to party is no more than a legal registration or declaration in order to participate in primaries. Direct-primary laws, apart from their other effects, are thus widely believed to have reduced the power of party organizations and therefore also to have reduced a principal motivation for individuals to become regular and active party members.

In this context are many studies of how party organizations cope with nominating problems in the late twentieth-century American environment. Malcolm Jewell (1984) provides a leading example in his careful exploration of five of the several states whose parties used endorsing conventions to influence gubernatorial primaries in 1982. Viewing the pre-primary endorsing convention as an increasingly popular device for party activists, Jewell finds it to have organizational advantages, measured in part by the satisfaction that convention delegates expressed about their roles when answering questionnaires. Success in winning primaries for endorsed choices was, however, by no means uniform. Nor, it should be added, was organizational control of nominations anywhere near uniform during previous decades of direct-primary experience. Thus, Mayhew (1986) shows that traditional party organizations, while surviving in strength until the 1960s, had not been pervasively present and effective (even earlier in the century).

Most of the organizational research from the 1980s that I have encountered does not deal directly with Jewell's subject. More typical, I believe, is the use of surveys to learn about the backgrounds, motivations, and activities of party members. Crotty (1986) has edited an excellent set of studies of party committee members in five cities (Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Houston, and Nashville). Among the findings are: continuing and even increasing activity during recent years in the first three cities; better Republican than Democratic organization in Houston and sometimes elsewhere; greater non-patronage incentives except in Chicago, with motivations most often provided by policy commitments; an adaptability of party organizations to changing ethnic populations; and a general loyalty of activists to their party despite their own occasional ticket-splitting. Incidentally, Crotty's book includes a chapter by Eldersveld that exemplifies his continuing research leadership in the party organizational field.

Inferentially at least, the relatively substantial organizational activity reported by the several studies in Crotty suggest that incentives for party participation remain despite the impact of the direct primary and of candidate-centered politics. Indeed, in Los Angeles the weakness of organizational power in matters like nominations is specifically cited to indicate that activists are attracted despite the weakness. A similar point is more explicit in Mildred Schwartz's study of the Illinois Republican Party (1990). She rejects the view of Mayhew (1986) and the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (1986) that the older control of nominations

is a key criterion in measuring organizational success. Thus, Schwartz finds that the Illinois Republican organization is effective even though its role in nominating contests falls short of regular control of outcomes. Her research is notable for its many and repeated interviews with various sets of party actors at various levels; these actors include government officeholders as well as party committee members. They supply both tabular data and apt quotations.

With its focus on a state party organization, Schwartz's work, as one reviewer (Flinn 1991) points out, may represent a shift from the conventional belief in the centrality of the county organization in the American party system. Schwartz is not alone in studying state organizations during the last decade. Jewell has been noted already. And there is also the NSF-funded, nation-wide Party Transformation Study by Cotter, Gibson, Bibby, and Huckshorn (1984), best known for its measures of the organizational strength and the professional bureaucratization of the several state parties. It does, however, devote a substantial chapter to local party organizations, in which the authors report considerable county-level activity bolstering the book's principal thesis that party organizations have not recently declined but have in some respects become more significant since the 1960s. Thus, even if state parties have become a primary focus for organizational research, local parties remain within the scope of inquiry. An apt illustration is provided by the one piece on party organization that I found in the twenty issues of the *APSR* noted earlier; it was a research note on "The Electoral Relevance of Local Party Organizations" by Fren dreis, Gibson, and Vertz (1990) and it drew on data from the Party Transformation Study.

The Party Transformation Study, in its several published products, illustrates another characteristic of recent research on party organizations: an emphasis on gathering information that can be quantified and tabulated. For Cotter, Gibson, Bibby, and Huckshorn, numerous questionnaires produced this kind of information, although their research also involved interviews with certain party officials. Mail questionnaires are reasonably economic means for learning about party activists, and they have been used along with personal interviews in the several well-known studies of national convention delegates. Large-scale work of this kind is by Miller and Jennings (1986), and in Miller (1988). They have returns from Republican and Democratic delegates to the conventions of 1972 through 1984, and accordingly a wealth of data on their degree of party commitment, class background, motivational bases, and ideological positions. On the last of these, in particular, Miller and Jennings are able to show significant differences not only between Republican and Democratic delegates but also between each party's delegates and its electoral supporters (whose opinions are revealed in established surveys of the national electorate). Their work is perhaps the most elaborate of the several national convention delegate studies that began thirty years ago. Although such studies

do not directly explore what party organizations do, they certainly tell us a good deal about the nature of party organizations—or at least about the nature of *presidential* party organizations. County chairs, Baer and Bositis (1988) have found, are ideologically distinguishable, especially on the Democratic side, from national convention delegates.

Referring to Baer and Bositis reminds me to observe that their book includes, along with research data, a useful discussion of how crucial organizational studies are to the maintenance of a distinguishable parties field. Without such studies, we might have only party-related research in other fields—legislative behavior, presidential or gubernatorial leadership, and voting behavior. Tendencies in that direction may help explain recent departmental difficulties in recruiting parties specialists among new Ph.Ds. Already, scholars primarily identified with other fields do a large share of the research of concern to students of parties. For example, legislative behavior specialists have much to tell us about the recently strengthened legislative parties, particularly their campaign committees. The importance of these office-holder parties, as well as those of governors and presidents, is apparent, and so is their often vexed relationship to ideologically oriented extra-governmental parties. Nothing, of course, precludes parties specialists from studying office-holder parties along with extra-governmental parties, and some of us have tried to do so.

Yet, it seems clear that it is the extra-governmental organizations that lie at the heart of our field. It is also clear that a renewed concern with these organizations must be based on evidence of their actual activity. Are they substantial and active enough so as to be effective in a candidate-centered political culture? Here, recent research findings are reassuring. All of the scholarship that I have observed, in this paper and elsewhere, points to a continuing and even increasing organizational presence. Only the most skeptical would dismiss the findings as products of an over-identification of scholars with the subject matter of their research. It is true that party scholars welcome the signs of strength that they discover, and that a few even share and seek to promote the organizational activism that they study. Nevertheless, the scholarly evidence is persuasive at least with respect to the presence of substantial numbers of activists committed to party organizations. Less but still something is known about influence in nominations and election campaigns. To learn as much about the latter as about the characteristics and beliefs of organizational participants will require field work in addition to the sample surveys and mail questionnaires that now provide impressive quantifiable data.

References

- Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. 1986. *The Transformation in American Politics*. Washington: ACIR.
- Baer, Denise L., and Bositis, David A. 1988. *Elite Cadres and Party Coalitions*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Cotter, Corelius P., Gibson, James L., Bibby, John F., and Huckshorn, Robert J. 1984. *Party Organizations in American Politics*. New York: Praeger.
- Crotty, William, ed. 1986. *Political Parties in Local Areas*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Eldersveld, Samuel J. 1964. *Political Parties*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Epstein, Leon D. 1958. *Politics in Wisconsin*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958.
- Flinn, Thomas A. 1991. Review of Mildred Schwartz, *The Party Network*, *American Political Science Review* 85:654-55.
- Frendreis, John P., Gibson, James L., and Vertz, Laura L. 1990. "The Electoral Relevance of Local Party Organizations." *American Political Science Review*. 84:225-35.
- Gosnell, Harold. 1937. *Machine Politics: Chicago Model*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jewell, Malcolm E. 1984. *Parties and Primaries*. New York: Praeger.
- Mayhew, David R. 1986. *Placing Parties in American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Michels, Robert. 1949. [1915]. *Political Parties*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Miller, Warren E. 1988. *Without Consent*. 1988. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Miller, Warren E., and Jennings, M. Kent. 1986. *Parties in Transition*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Ostrogorski, M. 1964. [1902]. *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Pomper, Gerald M., ed. 1980. *Party Renewal in America*. New York: Praeger.
- Schwartz, Mildred A. 1990. *The Party Network*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wilson, James Q. 1962. *The Amateur Democrat*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.