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Investigating the Grassroots Activities of Northeastern State Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

In response to popular criticism that the major parties are more oligarchic organizations than democratic ones, this thesis builds upon previous research to offer a more current and nuanced understanding of the grassroots activities of state political parties in the northeastern U.S. Through interviews with state party executive and campaign directors, the civic capacity of political parties to promote participatory democratic action will be assessed. I will determine whether the major state parties are successfully engaging new voters/members, including existing members in electoral activities, recruiting candidates, and whether the methods employed could be described as grassroots.

INTRODUCTION

An unsatisfied, oppositional atmosphere in current partisan politics have led some pundits and academics to return to an old trope: that the American political party is fading. Richard Katz and Peter Mair write, “Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties,’ and if the parties are being fundamentally transformed, what happens to modern democracy?” (2009, p. 762). In 1914 Frances Kellor predicted the disintegration of the party, and yet again in the 1970s David Broder declared the party to be “dead”. Still sensing this climate in the late 1980s, Cornelius Cotter, James Gibson, John Bibby, and Robert Huckshorn embarked on the most comprehensive study of the American party system to date with these words:

For at least twenty years, political scientists and journalists have been conducting a death watch over the American parties...Some of the more impatient watchers have gone so far as to conduct the obsequies without benefit of the corpse, while others are seeking to apply resuscitation techniques. (1989, p. 168)

With the addition of another forty years, the same statement could be made today. Apathy, discontent, and even disgust with America’s major political parties has rebounded this year with formidable prevalence. In the aftermath of a rowdy, populist-driven, 2016 election season, there has once again been a perception of decline in the value of party infrastructure. The current share of people who choose not to identify with either party is at an all-time high. In 2016, a Pew poll found that 39% of Republicans and 26% of Democrats said that neither party represented their interests well (Pew Research Center, 2016a).

As we decry apathy, polarization, and stricter party lines, we perpetuate some of the same time-worn worries that the divides of the political parties are detrimental to essential democratic functions—namely compromise. In making this claim, it is often posited that polarization and the lack of inter-party compromise means that political parties are, overall, bad for democracy. Yet this idea ignores another vital facet of the democracy that political parties have the potential to foster: intra-party democracy and civic culture. As Jonathon Rauch wrote in a summer 2016 issue of *The Atlantic*:

Our intricate, informal system of political intermediation, which took many decades to build, did not commit suicide or die of old age; we reformed it to death. For decades, well-meaning political reformers have attacked intermediaries as corrupt, undemocratic, unnecessary, or (usually) all of the above. Americans have been busy demonizing and disempowering political professionals and parties, which is like spending decades abusing and attacking your own immune system. Eventually, you will get sick.

This dissatisfaction with the parties is often expressed through denouncement of “the establishment.” Thus many of the complaints levelled against Republicans and Democrats suggest that elite leadership has created an oligarchic reign, diminished democratic participation, and led to poorer constituent responsiveness. In political theory terms, a party that is part of the “establishment” might be compared to Katz and Mair’s “cartel party” which uses state resources to bolster its own electoral success rather than working with citizens and civil society (2009).

The natural backlash of the cartel party can be characterized by the rise of populists, driven by anti-establishment calls to action. As Katz and Mair put forth, “One may dispute the interpretation of cartelization, but what is beyond dispute is the popularity of what is now often identified as a populist, anti-cartel rhetoric” (2009, p. 760). Certainly, the 2016 election cycle saw unprecedented surges of support for populist candidates such as Bernie Sanders or the victorious Donald Trump, both candidates who ran campaigns supposedly in opposition to “the establishment” (see Rauch, 2016 or Taibbi, 2016). Even in my own experience interning for a state party, I witnessed similar local allegations that an elite establishment had too much control over the party’s politics. During a recent election for an interim party chair for example, a local newspaper remarked on the heated “establishment” versus “outsider” accusations between supporters of the two candidates for the position on social media (Walters, 2017).

These complaints are certainly legitimate to some extent—we know for example that certain Democratic Party leaders mocked the Sanders campaign in private during the primaries while publicly feigning neutrality (Shear & Rosenberg, 2016). Yet, as I began this thesis, I wondered to what extent the buzz over insiders and outsiders, elites and renegades, was appropriate at the state level. How much of the rise of these populist politicians is built on actual oligarchic factors or manipulated alarm? Are there really insiders and outsiders to the “party establishment”?

In my own experience, I had seen a little of both sides. On the one hand, working for the state Democratic Party I witnessed how their reliance on data and microtargeting during the 2016 campaign had in some ways disconnected them from messaging and interacting with voters. But I also knew that I had conversations with party staffers and affiliates every day who

said that they wanted nothing more than to involve more people in the political process and do better work for the voters in their communities. These supposed “elites” were desperate to improve the grassroots nature of their party. Yet while I heard those things in the office, the people that I was calling in phone banks claimed that the party wanted nothing to do with them, therefore they wanted nothing to do with the party. This felt like a fundamental paradox: how could people take advantage of the democratic support that parties can provide if political parties are painted as elite? How can the parties become more grassroots and more democratic without the people to power that movement? As one of my interviewees said:

On the one hand, there’s this energy and excitement of ‘we need to get to work now!’ but on the other hand there’s this backlash against the establishment which is partially warranted, but maybe not as black and white as people are making it seem.

Elizabeth Super, who wrote her University of Edinburgh dissertation on political party volunteers in Massachusetts, put it this way:

The paradox is that while political scientists may be deeply concerned about the state of political participation in the present day, current research agendas do not always, or even frequently, address the role of party and campaign organizations with respect to questions about civic and political participation. (2016, p. 9)

Interestingly, researchers do often address this question in relation to the democratic health of other countries. It is not unusual for comparative political scientists to investigate how foreign political parties are contributing to the democratic health of foreign countries. Democracy building through institution building has been a well-explored method of democratic development. Yet, while pitiful voter turnout and increasingly apathetic public leads

to assessments that American democracy is on its deathbed, little is being done to evaluate whether our own political parties can help revive it. Like Super's dissertation, this thesis seeks to fill that gap, though I will be focusing on how party leadership is initiating these grassroots efforts rather than the mobilization factors of individual volunteers.

The goal of my research is to assess the capacity of political parties to promote participatory democratic actions. My analysis of past research shows that political parties remain major forces in contemporary politics. My own research not only observes what practices these parties are using and how the party leadership conceives of their own democratic role, but attempts to analyze these observations through a framework of participatory and grassroots democracy.

Today's American public could be considered hostile to political parties as a result of apathy, ideological disagreement, and populist anti-party rhetoric. Although much of the general criticism of party organizations is restricted to public opinion and punditry, I believe that the academic world still has a responsibility to offer a contrast to these analyses because of the integral role that political parties can play in building participatory democracy in states and local communities. It is critical to examine democracy-building work in the interest of providing clarity as to the actual extent of this potential. Ideally, with increased clarity we can have a better sense of the specific practices that are or aren't contributing to democracy. Illuminating parties' grassroots activities might help to reduce stigma around party association so that the institutions can be better utilized by the public. Better understanding of these "best practices" might even encourage them to increase and develop within the political parties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As explained previously, what is largely regarded as the most seminal work related to state political party organizations is an immense study undertaken by Cornelius Cotter, John Bibby, James Gibson, and Robert Huckshorn and published in 1989. While their work, largely conducted through survey instruments and statistical analysis, addresses an incredibly broad array of subjects, their focus is quite explicitly different from my own. As they write:

Our central concern is whether the strength of party organizations appears to influence their relationships with party officeholders, not whether there is a relationship between opinion and policy. Thus we operate at one end of the public-government linkage model, working with party and government rather than party and public. We are not concerned with party as an agent of government in linkage processes directed toward the public. (1989, p. 107)

These researchers set out to investigate the idea that political parties were “in an advanced state of decay.” Through investigating the strength of party organizations and the relationships between different organizational levels, they concluded that there was no significant decline in party strength.

In fact, these political scientists supposed that parties may in fact be strengthening. Despite the proliferation of factors that appeared to be working in opposition to party organizations, the authors determined that the parties were adapting rather than dying out. They wrote:

We readily concede that a number of important forces and trends relevant to party change (the declining partisanship of the electorate, the growth of amateurism among

party activists, the popularization of candidate selection, and the separation of candidate campaign organizations from the party) have materialized over the past two decades...But the implications of these forces and trends must be understood within the context of party organizations that are currently strong and not weakening," (Cotter et. al, p.34).

Their research indicated that state and local political party activity was actually increasing.

Though Cotter, Bibby, Gibson, and Huckshorn analyzed the party-state relationship whereas I am interested in the party-public relationship, their research set the stage for much of the work that followed. Their theory that party institutions were strengthening rather than declining continues to be confirmed. In 1989, Cotter, Bibby, Gibson and Huckshorn looked to the future, writing:

The new phase is not one of party-less politics, but of the continuing party system composed of parties which operate within a framework of public regulation and support which protects more than weakens the existing parties. (p. 168)

In 1999, Malcolm Jewell and Sarah Morehouse wrote *Political Parties and Elections in American States*, presenting additional research showing that political parties were still alive and well a full decade after the publishing of *Party Organizations*. They elaborate on Cotter, Bibby, Gibson, and Huckshorn's theory by giving a broader historical context to the evolution of state parties. Beginning with the "party machines" of the early twentieth century, the researchers analyzed changes in electoral activity that began to reveal interesting changes in party-public relations as well as party-state. In a transition away from the highly centralized

“party machines,” Jewell and Morehouse observed a trend towards more member-run and less leader-driven campaigns in the later part of the twentieth century (1999).

Two primary factors revealed that trend: the rise of candidate-centered campaigns and the increase in volunteer-driven campaigns. Jewell and Morehouse found that there was a distinct change in the kinds of incentives for party involvement in the second half of the twentieth century. Supreme Court cases such as *Elrod v. Burns* (1976) and *Rutan v. Republican Party* (1990) had prohibited hiring, firing, and promotion based on partisanship for government jobs, therefore the ability for the party to use patronage and material incentives to attract and retain party workers had disappeared (Jewell & Morehouse, 1999). This made it necessary for the party to attract activists through purposive and solidary incentives. Jewell and Morehouse write:

As material incentives decline in importance, it is clear that those who become political activists are increasingly motivated by purposive incentives. Because they have a strong interest in public policies, they are willing to work for the party and help elect the candidates who are committed to the policies they support and share their ideological beliefs.” (1999, p. 88)

The end of patronage systems had very positive implications for the improvement of grassroots democracy within the party.

In 2001, Malcolm Jewell, this time working with Peverill Squire and Gary Moncrief, continued to investigate the strength of state parties through a deep dive into state legislative campaigns. In their book *Who Runs for Legislature*, the authors concluded that parties continued to be strong forces in the candidate recruitment process. They found that while

parties less directly controlled the legislative candidate recruitment process than in the past, parties continued to prioritize indirect candidate recruitment (p. 25). Party officials from the state and local parties tended to contact potential candidates and encourage them to run in primaries, though the researchers were surprised that candidates did not report being contacted more often by party officials (2001, p. 43).

Notably for my purposes, the research in *Who Runs* also continued to reveal a trend towards greater use of volunteers than traditional advertising in state level campaigns (Moncrief et al., 2001, p.77). They noted the critical role that party organizations play in supporting smaller legislative campaigns, usually through providing a volunteer network. They write, "Sometimes volunteers are supplied by local party organizations. Helping to find and organize volunteers is probably the most important support that the local party organizations can provide," (Moncrief et al., 2001, p. 81).

The early part of the twenty-first century witnessed significant changes to the electoral landscape. In their 2014 edited volume, *The State of the Parties*, Daniel Green, John Coffey, and David Cohen defined three broad factors that summarized these changes. These were: 1) changes in campaign finance 2) the rise of the internet and digital technology and 3) the introduction of more complex and sophisticated canvassing activity. Through their own studies compiled with research by others, Green, Coffey, and Cohen continued to contradict the pervasive idea that the party system was weakening. They wrote:

[Our] findings challenge the notion that the parties are losing influence in the face of growing competition with many more nonparty groups and the parties' relatively restricted ability to raise and spend money on congressional races. Parties are certainly

not the monolithic political actors of the old days, but they also are not being squeezed out or marginalized by other political actors. The parties' ability to get others to join them in pursuing their primary goal of majority status is a clear indication of the parties' capacity for adaptation and of their continued influence. (2014, p. 228)

One chapter in *The State of the Parties* written by Douglas Roscoe and Shannon Jenkins focused specifically on local party activity. These researchers continued to witness a rise in volunteer-driven activities and grassroots activities in the lower party levels. While they note a dip during the nineties, they also write that "in the last several elections, there has been a renewed emphasis on grassroots effort on both sides of the aisle," (2014, p. 289). They describe how this effort was realized through increases in grassroots campaign activities such as: organizing campaign events, organizing fundraising events, distributing posters and lawn signs, conducting registration drives, organizing door to door canvassing, distributing campaign literature, and running get-out-the-vote drives. Simultaneously, there were declines for both parties in activities that required large money expenditures and mass marketing such as contributing money to candidates, buying newspaper ads, buying radio and television time, polling, and purchasing billboard space (2014, p. 292-293).

In a 2015 book of their own, Roscoe and Jenkins use this same research to support a broader hypothesis that parties are increasing their grassroots, participatory, and labor-intensive activities while money expenditure activities are declining. They hypothesize that the impetus for this change is largely due to the lasting effects of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002. Since access to large amounts of money is somewhat diminished, the

parties have been forced to adjust their efforts accordingly. They believe that the result is a historically unprecedented surge in “ground game” or “field” campaigning (2015, p.55-56).

In their conclusion, Roscoe and Jenkins describe that:

This focus extends to all levels. Local parties focus more now on labor-intensive electoral activities than in the past. But we also see this with state and national parties.

These organizations, which are increasingly spending money on their own as opposed to giving it to candidates, are also organizing the ground game. (2015, p. 120)

These labor-intensive activities could be indicative of greater movement towards grassroots democracy within political parties. Though Roscoe and Jenkins were primarily concerned with local parties, they highlight that the same phenomenon is occurring at the state and national levels.

In a 2012 book titled *The Parties Respond*, Mark Brewer and Sandy Maisel provide an interesting framework to analyze these trends. They describe two models of party structure: responsible and rational. According to Brewer and Maisel, party actors in the rational party model are simply “profit-maximizing entrepreneurs” for whom “the singular goal is the capture of political office for material gain”. In the rational model, parties seek only efficiency and the expansion of power and will do whatever pragmatically makes sense to achieve those goals (p. 107). In the most extreme, this could potentially be a party machine. These days, a rational model might be more akin to a party controlled exclusively by political elites that is unlikely to reach beyond its base to bring new people into politics as it only needs enough votes to survive.

The alternative to the rational-choice model is the “responsible party model”, which is descriptive of a more grassroots party. Brewer and Maisel write:

[Responsible parties] believe that political parties should not only attempt to win elections but facilitate citizens' political participation by mobilizing voters—especially new groups of voters such as young people and new immigrants. Further, political parties should aggregate their supporters' interests, and clearly articulate their resulting demands. (2012, p. 108)

It can be assumed that the intra-party democracy that political parties have the potential to build would be more likely in a responsible party system than a rational party system. Their whole structure is designed to build engagement from the ground up, as “formal membership is critical and grassroots committees play an important role in recruiting new members. Volunteers rise through the ranks as loyal, hardworking activists,” (2012, p. 108). By not only bringing new people into the political process but attempting to engage them in a long term and sustainable way, a responsible-model political party could contribute positively to the political engagement of citizens and thus improve participatory democracy in a state.

Brewer and Maisel's research revealed that increased use of modern technology was having a profound effect on the nature of campaigning. On one hand, they noted that the technologies could be having a negative impact on improving the youth vote. For example, until 2008 “microtargeting” with voter data was used to direct parties' electoral efforts towards a very selective group of “likely voters”—usually older and wealthier voters. This meant that younger and less wealthy voters were being largely ignored.

Parties have spent little of their new largesse to draw new (and from a rational perspective, unreliable) voters into the political process. Despite the disproportionate size of the millennial generation, the first demographic group to challenge the sheer

demographic weight of the baby boomers, most party chairs fail to see young voters as an important source of future support. (Brewer and Maisel, 2012, p. 113)

On the other hand, alternative new technologies, such as internet and mobile app campaigning, have helped to facilitate the coordination of “decentralized, grassroots campaigns”, which might be able to reach more diverse groups of people (2012, p. 240).

Brewer and Maisel also propose a third framework: that parties are most likely to take rational actions that happen to have responsible byproducts. In their final chapters they focus on identifying the “mix of circumstances” under which parties could be encouraged to do rational things that might result in responsible byproducts. They write:

This knowledge could be used to identify local parties engaged in best practices, and in-depth case studies of these could, in turn, help us more to precisely understand how these normative benefits for democracy are produced...we hope to develop empirically grounded insights into how best to restore local parties’ performance of the linkage function at the heart of the responsible party model,” (2012, p. 129).

Though not exactly a case study, my thesis aims to begin this kind of investigation suggested by Brewer and Maisel. The literature has established that political parties continue to be powerful and relevant forces in contemporary elections. It has also identified other forces that are changing the role that parties play and noted that certain changes are resulting in quantitative evidence of more “grassroots efforts” contrary to the popular narrative. With the 2016 election cycle as my backdrop, I seek to add qualitative nuance to these ideas and identify those “best practices” and their “normative benefits for democracy”. I assess whether and how

state parties are using their established power to positively contribute to a grassroots democratic culture.

DEFINITIONS

My definition of grassroots democracy is largely inspired by the “responsible-party model”. Brewer and Maisel, in *The Parties Respond*, define the model as the following:

Political parties should not only attempt to win elections but facilitate citizens’ political participation by mobilizing voters—especially new groups of voters such as young people and new immigrants. Further, political parties should aggregate their supporters’ interests, and clearly articulate their resulting demands. (2012, p. 108)

The responsible-party model is further defined by what it is not: the rational-choice model. Under rational-choice, the political party is solely concerned with winning elections. Everything that a rational-choice party would do is considered through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis that rewards profit and efficiency in achieving this goal over any other.

There are three factors in particular that characterize my definition of grassroots democracy. Each is further defined by three distinct aspects that I consider evidence of the primary factors. This is a framework that I developed through my own reflection and conversations with fellow political science students. Although it is inherently influenced by the literature I reviewed, the factors are my own:

- 1) Participatory potential
 - a. Volunteerism
 - b. Long-term sustainability

- c. Candidate recruitment
- 2) Local and community nature
- a. Local issues campaigns
 - b. Committees
 - c. Candidate recruitment
- 3) Unmediated voter contact
- a. Person-to-person interaction
 - b. Engaging new voters
 - c. Accessibility of party leadership

Because “grassroots” is a rather amorphous concept, I felt that it was necessary to clarify my own conception of it with observable factors. This definition of “grassroots” is also particular to political institutions, therefore it might differ somewhat from the definition of a grassroots social movement or some other use of the term. My own understanding of grassroots is based on the idea that a grassroots institution is not only organically concerned with issues in its constituent (rather than the elite) base, but is also powered by those same people in a transparent and welcoming way. The “participatory potential” factor addresses this membership aspect. I figured that I would be able to observe robust participation in volunteers and candidates. Long-term sustainable opportunities for members to participate though would be particularly evident of contributions to participatory democratic culture, rather than one-time participation. As for local and community nature, I reasoned that grassroots parties, if they have a bottom-up rather than a top-down agenda, should be concerned with local issues, establishing a presence in local communities, and representing local communities in their

candidates. Lastly, the unmediated voter contact refers to the openness, transparency, and broadness of grassroots activities.

METHODOLOGY

Following the November 9, 2016 election, I began requesting interviews from the Executive Directors and Political Directors of the major political parties in Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Maine. The original contacts were all made via email, though in many cases I sent at least one follow-up email as well as multiple follow-up calls in order to reach the party leaders.

It was surprisingly difficult to find contact information for many of the party leaders. Professional emails were not often posted online and generic catchall email addresses rarely yielded a response. Phone messages on main office lines were also often fruitless. In some cases, party websites didn't even list names or biographies for their professional staff, making contact even more difficult. Though I may have set out overly optimistic about the accessibility of these party leaders, I was especially surprised at the lack of transparency and accessibility that this experience revealed. After a complete lack of response from the Maine Democrats or Republicans following two months of attempted contacts, I chose to drop them from my research and began to contact party leadership in Connecticut and New York instead, where I was met with limited success.

In total, I was able to conduct eleven interviews out of the twenty attempted (or twenty-four if Maine is included). The interviews lasted between ten minutes at the very shortest and forty minutes at the longest. There were thirteen questions that focused on voter

mobilization, volunteer work, and candidate recruitment and they were asked to all participants fairly uniformly. My voter mobilization questions were formulated to assess the amount of unmediated voter contact that parties were participating in and whether they were reaching out to new voting blocs. The volunteer questions examined the participatory aspect of the campaign—both whether and how volunteers were being utilized. Lastly, my candidate recruitment questions focused not only on the participatory aspect, but also whether candidates were coming organically from the community or being chosen by “party elite”.

I was often declined citing time limitations or my affiliation with the Vermont Democratic Party, which means that my sample includes more Democratic leaders than Republicans (who only constitute three of the eleven interviews). All of the interviews were conducted via phone excepting the interviews of the two Vermont Democratic Party Leaders. They were all recorded and transcribed. In one case a Committee Chair stood in for an Executive Director because the role was in transition. Due to the positions held by my interviewees, their identities will all remain confidential aside from geographic locations when pertinent.

Due to the lack of diversity and the small size of my sample, the conclusions drawn here cannot be considered definitive. Furthermore, I am cognizant of the possibility that there was subjective bias being built into the wording of my research questions. In addition, the highly political nature of the research subject and job titles of the interviewees may have affected the authenticity of the responses somewhat. Political party leadership have incentives to tell me what they believe I might want to hear to present themselves and their organizations in the best possible light, and other research methods such as surveys might be more effective in

avoiding that inherent bias. Yet, with those considerations, I still believe that this research is valuable in illuminating trends and areas where further research is necessary. In general, my findings corroborate previous research that showed an increase in grassroots and volunteer-driven electoral activities. The findings also largely support my original hypothesis that party leadership is actively working to promote grassroots action and participatory democracy.

FINDINGS

Party's Biggest Successes

When asked generally what they felt like their greatest successes were in the most recent election, the largest number of responses referenced the sheer number of direct voter contacts. The second most common response mentioned the large size of the field organization itself. There was no variation across party lines on this account—leaders from both parties relayed this in generally equal numbers. Many of these comments elaborated that this past year's election stood out in comparison to previous elections. One party leader from New Hampshire said to me regarding their field program:

It was the strongest it's ever been. We broke fundraising records, we broke staffing records, we broke voter contact records. We basically shattered the whole thing.

On one hand, this information means that direct voter contact, rather than mass messaging methods, was the preferred strategy for campaigns. In great contrast, "fundraising" was only mentioned once as one party's greatest success. Since direct voter contact facilitates greater interaction between voters and the political party, it is the more grassroots method and its prevalence might signify a shift away from reliance on more "hands-off" monetary strategies

such as print and media advertising. Furthermore, the other grassroots effect of a greater reliance on direct voter contact is that it requires more hands and feet to make phone calls and go door-to-door. This means that political parties are dependent on either/both spending funds on a large field staff or attracting many volunteers. Both situations expand the number of available entry-level opportunities for party members to either amplify their political involvement or take political action for the first time.

In fact, the volunteer operation itself was the third most-mentioned success of the most recent election. Three interviewees specifically told me that their party's engagement of new volunteers was one of their successes. One person told me in this regard: "I think that mobilization makes all the difference," and another said that "the strengths [of the state party] are being able to get folks involved and engage volunteers to connect to races that really matter,".

Room for Improvement

Political engagement was the area in which most party leaders felt that their party had room to improve. The specifics of engagement varied a little between interviewees, but overall many leaders explained that they wanted to work to actively bring new people into the political and electoral process. For the most part they referred to volunteers and activists when discussing engagement rather than voter registration. Thus, the engagement that they are hoping to improve seems to be closer to that higher commitment level of engagement, wherein people have a more long-term investment in the party infrastructure rather than just bringing new people in simply to get them to the polls. As one leader said to me,

Building the party infrastructure year-round and keeping people involved and then activating them during the campaign to get out and work is clearly something that could be improved upon and we would benefit from that improvement.

One important caveat was that leaders wanted to be careful that they were bringing in new voices without alienating the 'old guard' of the party. As one leader asked, "how do you transform the party and bring new people under the fold while not needing to ostracize the folks that have built up the systems?" This question is particularly pertinent because so many of these leaders are specifically trying to target youth and Millennials to engage them in the party. This is an uphill battle considering that that generation is home to the greatest percentage of independents in recent American history (Pew Research Center, 2016a), but an admirable one since the engagement of new voting blocs such as youth and immigrants is a particularly responsible action for a political party to take. Engaging those new voters is a risk because they may not be reliable as the traditional base, but it has definite benefits for the diversity of the democratic culture at large.

Another interesting comment made by a leader regarding engagement was that they very specifically wanted to decrease the number of paid workers doing direct voter contact and increase the number of volunteers working on it. They believed that volunteer-voter contact was "superior" to contact by a paid worker from the party. This could be construed as being positive or negative for grassroots party activism. On one hand, increasing the number of volunteers means that they are more genuinely involved in the party community for ideological reasons rather than material or tangible rewards. On the other hand, entry-level paid political

positions such as interns and field organizers are an important way for people that can't afford to volunteer for the party to get their foot in the door of the political process.

This emphasis on improving engagement does have positive ramifications for the hypothesis that leaders want to improve the grassroots nature and participatory democratic culture of the parties. Although the interviewees largely acknowledge that they might not have engaged people as successfully or as broadly as they aspired to during the last election, there appears to be a movement to keep doing so in the future. Bringing new people into the political process and engaging them long term is a critical means of ensuring that the membership base is diverse and non-elite, and therefore a positive counter-force to power consolidation within the party.

Volunteer Recruitment

As one interviewee told me, "Volunteerism is the lifeblood of the state party." But where do those volunteers come from? Interestingly, while many leaders mentioned that they would pull new recruits off internet signups or from data targeting and phone banks, even more said that they relied on local committees to connect the state party with new volunteers. One person said, "Ideally, it's the county chairs, who are recruiting at the grassroots level," and another elaborated that they

actively recruit volunteers into these committees and let our incredible town and county chairs do the work for us. Me, here at the party as the political director, I kind of oversee the local and county committees. Really it's more like I'm working for them.

Similar sentiments were repeated across parties and states throughout the northeast.

While there are obvious reasons that the personal networks of the kinds of people who fill these committee seats would be helpful for recruiting more volunteers, it is interesting that committees were still mentioned more often than microtargeting. This might be an example of a rational action with a responsible byproduct. As Brewer and Maisel write:

From a rational vantage, new recruits are sought in order to secure an electoral advantage, and from the responsible model, they are essential for maintaining intraparty democracy. As noted in the 1950 APSA report, 'Widespread political participation thus foster responsibility as well as democratic control in the conduct of party affairs and the pursuit of party policies. (2012, p. 125)

Relying on personal networks might be genuinely more effective than cold-calling micro-targeted lists, but the effect is that it is likely to build a more communal volunteer team. Local and community nature as well as unmediated, person-to-person interaction are two critical aspects of grassroots democracy, which this utilization of committee networks to recruit volunteers would fulfill.

First-Time and Returning Volunteers

While party leaders generally said that their volunteers were more likely to be returning faces than newcomers, four people explicitly said that they said that they felt like there were an unusual number of first-time volunteers during the most recent election cycle. Having more first-time volunteers during presidential elections is more common than during midterms because of the visibility, but leaders seemed to feel as though this year was even more unusual. Most theorized that this rise in first-time volunteers was a function of particularly popular

candidates who were appealing to new groups of voters, as well as particularly unpopular candidates who were motivating previously unengaged people to work in opposition to them.

The latter was realized even more strongly after the election. In many cases, parties saw a surge in volunteer applications and submissions in the days directly following the election. An interviewee said:

We have seen since the election a lot more volunteers and people who are first-timers, who have never gotten involved until now and are understanding that 'I can make a difference and I can't just sit back and watch behind a computer screen. I need to go out and do something and talk to people'.

Another explained that, "People were feeling nervous and the best way to combat those nerves is to get involved." This phenomenon could bode well for party member engagement outside of the election cycle, though since it is a pretty unique occurrence, few conclusions can be made about the long-term impact yet.

Leaders were also particularly optimistic about the number of youth volunteers that they were able to engage. Although they acknowledged that they still had room to improve as far as attracting young people to the parties, as one person said, "it's still too old, but it's moving in the right direction." Again, specifically targeting and engaging youth is a positive indicator that the parties are not only trying to engage new reliable volunteers, but engage new voting blocs who may never have participated in the political process before. This would be another counter-example to the idea that parties are consolidating power and narrowing their reach, rather than decentralizing and diversifying.

Access to Party Leadership

In an attempt to gauge how much access ordinary volunteers and party members had to party leadership, I asked interviewees what kinds of party staff volunteers interact with during the campaign. My idea was that grassroots organizations would have less isolated staff and leadership who would be more accessible to volunteers and members. Overall, it was reported that most volunteers just interact with field coordinators and field organizers—the individuals that are paid by the party to direct the regional levels of party campaigns. Nearly everyone expressed that volunteers would end up interacting with a field organizer or lower-level party associate at some point.

Variations seemed to be more dependent on the size of the state than anything else. Large states were more likely to be decentralized and thus volunteers would have less contact with higher-ups and party leadership. A party official from the most populous state in the study said,

This is where you have to think of it as being pretty decentralized. We don't do a lot in the central office so individual county chairs will have people in their office or out on the street. The campaigns manage these folks. You wouldn't have the candidate but you'd have their campaign manager or the field director of the individual campaign manage people. Or you would have the county chairs do their volunteer operation.

The opposite was the case in smaller states, wherein party leadership was more likely to travel between field offices or the leadership's office was more likely to be available for volunteer use. For contrast, a party leader from the least populous state told me:

We have such a small staff that I tell them that everyone sort of has to be an organizer during the campaign. You're a finance director, you're an organizer. You're the data director, you're an organizer. Communications director, etc...We're not doing our jobs if we're just sitting in an office in front of the computer or something. We have to be out there talking to people.

This information is not particularly revealing, although it confirms the general assumption that large state parties will be more decentralized, giving volunteers less access to leadership, and that the opposite will largely be true in smaller state parties.

Electoral Volunteer Activities

Every interviewee that I spoke with said that volunteers were mostly involved in doing direct voter contact work. The most common activity seems to be phone-banking for get-out-the-vote, candidate surveys, or volunteer recruitment—though door-to-door canvassing was a close second.

This evidence concurs with previous research indicating increasing levels of labor-intensive volunteer activity. Again, this may be another example of a responsible byproduct of a rational activity. Although I cannot conclude from my research alone that the parties are overall conducting more direct voter contact than mass messaging or fundraising initiatives, this trend has been established in literature such as *The Parties Respond* (Brewer & Maisel, 2012) and *Local Party Organizations* (Roscoe & Jenkins, 2016). Changes to campaign finance laws and declining use of television and radio likely make direct voter contact a more rationally effective

marketing option. “Fundraising” was only mentioned once as a potential volunteer activity, compared to the eleven comments about direct voter contact.

But direct voter contact is also a more grassroots option in three ways. First, it forces the party to recruit more volunteers and get them engaged in the electoral process at a higher level of commitment than going to the polls. This addresses the “participatory potential” that characterizes grassroots democracy. Second, it brings party associates and volunteers into unmediated contact with voters far more often than if parties rely on traditional advertising. Third, while volunteers may occasionally go to other towns and states to volunteer, it is probably more likely that they work in their own communities, thus reaffirming the local and community nature of the party’s campaign.

As to the local and community nature of grassroots democracy, I was particularly interested and surprised to find that party leaders from two different states mentioned community service as a volunteer activity. Though other electoral support activities like administrative tasks, communications, and attending events came up more often, I had not expected to hear that parties were having volunteers do community service. This is somewhat reminiscent of party machine days when parties provided supportive services for their members in exchange for electoral loyalty (Jewell & Morehouse, 2001). One leader said that they had volunteers make “blankets and toiletry kits” for local service organizations, while another suggested conducting a food drive at the doors during regular electoral canvassing. Though it doesn’t seem to be particularly pervasive yet, these comments did have promising potential for increasing the amount that parties are involved in local communities and diversifying roles available for volunteers.

Non-electoral Volunteer Activities

Party leaders were asked to identify in what ways the state political party continued to engage their members and volunteers outside of the regular election cycle. About half of all interviewed party leaders said that they encouraged people to join their local town and/or county party committees. While this was more common among Democratic leaders, one Republican leader also mentioned that they would direct people to the committees to keep them involved. In *The Parties Respond*, Brewer and Maisel's definition of a responsible party model specifically mentions the importance of local committees in creating a participatory political institution. They write: "Responsible (party-democratic) parties...maintain a highly integrated structure. Formal membership is critical and grassroots committees play an important role in recruiting new members" (2012, p. 108).

Considering a responsible-party model as the ideal of a participatory, grassroots political party, the prevalence of committees should be considered an extraordinarily positive signal in this regard. Town and county committees are a volunteer position within the party with ample room for volunteer leadership and independent action. As one party leader said to me: "Our town and county committees should have some autonomy...the county committees should be empowered to pass resolutions to do work at the local level..." Another said:

We try to refer people to their county because that's the more grassroots level. It's really dependent on me to give the resources to county chairs to do the grassroots work that they do as opposed to managing it all centrally from our office.

These sorts of comments display a willingness for state party leadership to allow dispersion of power. Rather than centralizing control, empowering committees and

encouraging volunteers to participate in them broadens the power base, expands the party's participatory potential, and amplifies their local and community-based nature.

The next most common response to this question was that the party encouraged members to participate in events and rallies for the party or affiliated organizations. Though event attendance is less commitment than joining a local committee and is therefore a lower level of participation, it is still evidence of leadership encouraging participation. Event and rally attendance is also a form of community-building and provides space for party leadership to interact with members in a less formal setting.

Candidate Support Versus Long-Term Engagement

When Brewer and Maisel conducted a survey of party committee chairs in 2011, one aspect was meant to assess the chairs' perceptions of party goals and functions via the rational/responsible party models. Since my research was focused on a very similar goal, I chose to reuse one of their questions and direct it to state party leaders instead. The question posed was: "Is it more important for the party to help candidates win elections or to help the voters develop a long-term attachment to the party?"

Since Brewer and Maisel's survey instrument only allowed for a binary choice, they were able to conclude that, "In 2003, 61 percent [of party chairs] thought helping their candidate win was more important, and 37 percent suggested connecting with voters was more central. By 2011 this pattern had shifted, 53 percent suggested helping candidates was more important and 35 percent connecting with voters," (2012, p. 121).

My interview on the other hand gave subjects more freedom to openly respond to the question, but this meant that subjects were more likely to avoid a direct answer to what is admittedly a difficult choice. This is a question that might be better clarified with a clearer understanding of parties' resource allocations. An examination of party expenditures could reveal the ratios that parties fund each of these activities. Not unsurprisingly, the vast majority of respondents said that both helping candidates win elections and helping voters develop long-term attachments were equally important. This makes it difficult to draw clear conclusions about the results of this question, since they were effectively null.

The specific metaphors of hand-in-hand or hand-in-glove were frequently mentioned. Party affiliation made no difference. One Democrat told me, "I do think it's sort of a hand in glove sort of thing. The way we can best help our country is to get [our candidates] elected. The way to do that is to keep folks engaged, keep folks involved, to continue sort of that pushing of our ideals and our values." Whereas another Republican echoed, "I think that those kind of go hand in hand though. If they're excited and really engaged by their candidate, then they're going to be invested long-term in the party and kind of vice-versa."

In a couple cases, certain respondents acknowledged that although the two goals are intricately related, they did feel that one was a more fundamental objective of the party. Two leaders determined that helping candidates win elections was more important. As one person stated, "The goal of the state committee is to get Republicans elected, everything after that is secondary." Yet two other leaders definitively said that they thought the long-term attachments were more important:

It is in our best interests and the interest of the candidate if the interest of the Party is actively building these relationships and managing these relationships so that you're keeping them involved and active and happy.

Voter Registration

While I had originally figured that having a robust voter registration operation would be a sure sign of grassroots efforts, the prevalence of same-day and automatic voter registration laws made this difficult to assess. Many leaders said that their get-out-the-vote efforts were intrinsically tied to voter registration because same-day voter registration laws made it possible for people to register while they cast their first ballot. With automatic voter registration, people would have to opt out of being registered when they got state IDs rather than opt in. Therefore, although many party leaders said that voter registration was not a priority, it didn't seem like this was a definitively bad sign in relation to parties' new voter engagement.

On the contrary, party leaders on both sides of the aisle were active in trying to educate voters about both same-day and automatic voter registration laws, as well as early voting in certain states. These laws are fairly new in most of the states that I researched. Furthermore, a few leaders specifically mentioned that when they did hold traditional voter registration drives, they did so at colleges or universities to target younger, possibly first-time voters, or else in partnership with other organizations. One person also said that they partnered with local committees to conduct registration drives. So, while voter registration itself does not seem to be a priority, the party leaders still appear to be working to make the ballot more accessible and taking advantage of these laws that facilitate access to the voting booth.

Voter Mobilization Methods

To determine the amount of unmediated voter contact that parties are participating in, I asked subjects in what ways their parties were mobilizing voters to vote. My interviewees reported that their parties were using volunteers to do direct voter contact more than any other mobilization tactic. Many parties said that they had substantially larger “field programs” for canvassing and phonebanking in 2016 than in previous years. This is an opportunity for unmediated contact between the volunteers (who are effectively party representatives) and voters. Although volunteers are likely working off scripts, the person-to-person interaction that direct voter contact facilitates is a sign of grassroots organizing at work.

Another positive sign for the prevalence of grassroots mobilizations efforts was that a couple party leaders explained that they were deliberately educating voters about early voting. One interviewee told me:

I think a crucial element is just getting to them either on the phone or at the door and letting them know that they can vote at the school today, or if they plan on voting this weekend they have to go to the town hall and it's open until four. That's something that town and city clerks also tried to get out, but the people need to know and getting that message across as much as possible seemed to really help with turnout.

Early voting is generally thought to be a good opening for engaging new voters and unreliable voters who may not be able to get to the polls on election day. Early voting allows more people with alternative lifestyles or unusual schedules to have a longer window of opportunity to cast their ballots.

On the negative side, the next most mentioned means of mobilizing voters was through digital and internet advertising. While digital apps and tools can help facilitate grassroots organizing and ease participation, online advertising is highly targeted and therefore might be less likely to reach the new or unusual voters (Brewer & Maisel, 2012, p. 240). Furthermore, it is a monetary expenditure rather than a labor-driven effort. That said, one interviewee did tell me that their party was trying to use social media advertising specifically to target those “low propensity voters” and young people, proving that some party organizations may be shifting towards this more “responsible party” method.

New Voters Versus Base Voters

Very slightly more party leaders told me that engaging new voters was more important than mobilizing their base. Engaging new voters should be evidence of grassroots efforts, since focusing on the already-engaged base theoretically limits a party’s reach to the “political class”. These leaders told me that expanding the electorate was a priority for them, but also that this growth was necessary to their survival. A few specified that they tried to focus this expansion of the electorate on particular groups:

I think what is more important is engaging that new voter, engaging that young person who may not be a part of the party yet or may not want to identify ever with a political party—just showing them that these are the issues that they care about.

It is important to note though that a few of them said that the reason they were able to prioritize engaging new voters was because they felt like they had an especially reliable base, implying that it may not be the case otherwise. For example: “We don’t really have to worry

about our base, one of the things that we do know from political science is that Republican voters tend to be better voters.”

On the other hand, equal numbers of respondents either said that both were important or prioritized mobilizing the base. Those who went with the latter almost all said that it was because it was “easier” since those base voters are reliable and already involved, but nobody made the argument that it was the better option from a moral standpoint.

Candidate Recruitment

My last area of interest was candidate recruitment. I asked both whether parties were actively recruiting candidates as well as what kinds of criteria they were looking for in potential candidates. For the most part I found that state party staff were an active part of candidate recruitment, or at least worked in conjunction with local committees or legislative caucuses and staff to do recruitment. Only two leaders told me that their staff weren’t at all involved in recruitment. This reinforces Squire and Moncrief’s findings that parties continue to be strong forces in the candidate recruitment process. It was particularly interesting to hear about how the party staff was working with local committees to do recruitment. One subject described to me:

As the Executive Director, I’m not going to know necessarily all the good candidates that are up in [the northern counties], but my county chair will. In all of these counties, we rely on them to talk to us about good candidates that they want to put forth. We think through strategy, how to support them, how to give them polling support, messaging

support, financial support. We try to be very organic in that regard, and let it come from the ground up, as opposed to us centrally dictating who should run.

When asked how they decided who to recruit, or what they personally found to be the most attractive qualities in a potential candidate, most respondents told me that they preferred someone who had been a community leader or somehow involved in local leadership. This seems like a good thing for the grassroots aspect of candidate recruitment because it reinforces the local and communal nature of the party. As one person told me:

We want somebody who knows what their community wants and can represent their community the best and has those kinds of networking connections to really start and launch a great campaign.

Pulling from those local networks also has practical rational benefits for the party's success as well. One leader told me a story about how those community networks helped the party to elect someone in a very unexpected part of the state:

We had a [candidate] in a town which is a rather left-leaning town where it's usually pretty tough for us to win. But he was a business man and he founded the farmer's market in town—everybody knows him and everybody likes him. When he was recruited to win four or six years ago, he won pretty handily even though he was a Republican running in one of the more Democratic districts in the state. So, if you can find someone that's already well known and already well liked, you're ahead of the game. You know the saying, 'all politics is local?' That is especially true for our state representatives.

While more people also said that they looked for a potential candidate who could speak genuinely about the political issues at hand, two subjects also explained that they had to take fundraising ability into consideration when determining who to recruit.

This is kind of a reality nowadays; candidates need to be able to raise money. And they need to be able to have some sort of network to pull from in that aspect, I mean, you can't run a campaign with nothing.

Since few people have an especially wealthy network of friends, these sorts of considerations limit the kinds of people that a party might recruit, negatively impacting the diversity and breadth of their potential pool. Luckily, relatively few leaders identified this as a major factor in recruitment decisions.

CONCLUSION

Without a broader set of subjects, it is difficult to generalize these findings. Yet, it appears that at least according to this sample, northeastern state parties are using their institutional power to take actions with responsible byproducts that are contributing to grassroots, democratic culture. These parties are continuing to focus their efforts on labor-intensive and volunteer-driven activities, prioritizing direct voter contact, and focusing on utilizing and empowering local committees. If we consider the three characteristics of grassroots democracy to be participatory potential, unmediated voter contact, and local/community nature, then each of these has been generally confirmed by my interviews. Participatory potential is apparent in the number of opportunities for volunteers to be involved, not only in election campaigns that seem more volunteer-oriented than ever before, but in long

term and sustainable ways largely through local committees. The prevalence of unmediated voter contact is clear through the reportedly unprecedented size of field operations and the rarity with which mass messaging techniques are mentioned in contrast to phone banks and canvassing. Local and community nature is evidenced by not only the focus on local committees, but also the emphasis on recruiting candidates who are community leaders above anything else. Furthermore, parties appear to be explicitly targeting youth and attempting to encourage new voting blocs in the political process, as well as emphasizing early voting and same day registration to open up the process further.

The significance of these findings is that state political parties have the potential to be important democracy-building institutions in the U.S. We might want to be wary of demonizing these institutions since they offer a valuable outlet to engage people politically and serve as a sort of activist training ground. If one ascribes to a participatory or grassroots ideal of democracy, as I do, evidence of greater participation, more voter contact, and responsiveness to communities should appear to have positive potential ramifications. Though I cannot say how well the institution is actually being utilized in this regard, the openings seem to exist. I must also concede that it is not a universally held belief that grassroots participation is necessarily a normative good, and while I certainly agree that there are limitations to its positive impact, I hope that the research I've presented here shows that it might at least be a first step towards improving the American political climate.

One final line of questioning remains though: if party leadership really are working to improve grassroots participation, why does the perception of elitism still exist among the regular voters? In response to this fundamental paradox, I would posit that this gap between

reality and perception stems from the fact that my research focused on state parties, while it is national parties that affect the major media narratives. From my cursory conversations on this subject with my interviewees, the relationship between state and national parties seems to be shifting, and possibly growing farther apart. Therefore, the on-the-ground action of the state parties is not visible enough to attract media attention, allowing for the considerably less grassroots actions of the national party to control the media conversation.

There are four distinct areas for future research that would help to solidify and expand this conclusion. First, more investigation into local party activity would help to reveal how active or beneficial these community institutions are. While Roscoe and Jenkins' research determined their relative strengthening, we could do more to learn about what this activity looks like in practice. Similarly, further volunteer profiling and long-term assessment like Elizabeth Super's that could be expanded to encompass other states would help to reveal the sustainability of the greater political engagement that growing volunteer operations imply. Do these volunteers continue to be engaged in long-term and meaningful ways? Further, a better understanding of how much and in what ways the state parties are integrated with national parties could offer more insights as well. Are the national organizations supportive of these grassroots efforts? Last, detailed examination of the state parties' expenditures could clarify whether the flow of funding tells the same story that the leadership has here.

While there is still much work to be done to expand upon this theory, this thesis presents preliminary evidence that if we can harness the democracy-building potential of the institutions available to us, perhaps not only is the death of the party not quite so imminent, but neither the death of grassroots democracy itself.

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APPENDIX A – SURVEY QUESTIONS

Name / Date / State / Phone / Email / Position / Party

Introduction

What are the strengths of the party's electoral field campaign?

Where do you see room for improvement in terms of the party's electoral field campaign?

Volunteer Recruitment

In what ways is the party recruiting volunteers and who is responsible for recruiting them?

Are volunteers more likely to be first-timers or returning volunteers from past years?

What kinds of party staff will the volunteers interact with during the campaign?

What kinds of activities do volunteers do and what kinds of roles do they have?

In what capacities can volunteers continue to work with the party after the election?

Is it more important for the party to help candidates win elections or to help the voters develop a long-term attachment to the party?

Voter Mobilization

In what ways does the party work to register new voters?

In what ways is the party mobilizing voters to vote?

Is it more important for the party to engage new voters and volunteers or mobilize its base?

Candidate Recruitment

Is the party actively recruiting candidates? If so, how?

Who in the party works to recruit new candidates?

In what ways does the party decide who to recruit?

What are the criteria that the party is looking for in a potential candidate?