

The Hollow Parties

Daniel Schlozman  
Johns Hopkins University  
daniel.schlozman@jhu.edu

Sam Rosenfeld  
Colgate University  
srosenfeld1@colgate.edu

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Party politics in 21<sup>st</sup> century America presents a paradox. Our polarized age is unquestionably also an era of partisan revival. In the mass electorate, party identification predicts voting behavior better than any time since the dawn of polling. In government, interparty antagonism and intraparty discipline have reached unprecedented levels, placing severe strains on the very functioning of a Madisonian system of separated powers and triggering just the kind of chronic, rolling crisis in governance that motivates volumes such as this one. The national party organizations have become financial juggernauts even in a regulatory landscape that offers powerful incentives for political money to flow elsewhere. After languishing in the television-dominated campaign era of the late twentieth century, parties have ramped up their efforts in the field. During those same decades scholars deemed parties to be in permanent decline—but no longer. American parties are strong.

And yet, even as the party divide defines the sides in America's political war, parties do not *feel* strong. They seem inadequate to the tasks before them—of aggregating and integrating preferences and actors into ordered conflict, of mobilizing participation and linking the governed with the government. This sense cannot merely be chalked up to popular misimpressions or to a mistakenly formalistic conception of the modern party. For years, warning bells had sounded. Parties' capacity to influence the political scene had grown brittle, they seemed to signal, and their legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary voters and engaged activists alike had abated. And then the warning bells became a honking siren. The developments of 2016 should upend any settled consensus that all is well in the party system. American parties are weak.

The solution to this paradox, we argue, lies in the reality that today's parties are hollow parties, neither organizationally robust beyond their roles raising money nor meaningfully felt as a real, tangible presence in the lives of voters or in the work of engaged activists. Partisanship is

strong even as parties as institutions are weak, top-heavy in Washington, DC, and undermanned at the grassroots (Azari 2016). The parties have become tarred with elements of polarization that the public most dislikes—from the screaming antagonism to the grubby money chase. More than any positive affinity or party spirit, fear and loathing of the other side—all too rational thanks to the ideological sorting of the party system—fuels parties and structures politics for most voters (Smidt 2015; Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Party identification drives American politics—but party loyalty, in the older sense of the term, has atrophied. Even the activists who do so much to shape modern politics typically labor outside of the parties, drawn to ideologically tinged “para-party” groups such as MoveOn.org on the left or the Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity on the right. The parties offer clear choices but get no credit.

The “Party Period” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century featured locally rooted and, in many instances, organizationally robust parties to which loyalties ran deep. Yet it aggregated participation into meaningful and distinct policy agendas only poorly. The party system often seemed little more than what a coalition of state parties could agree on. The situation has now reversed. Our new Party Period features a nationalized clash of ideology and interests but parties that are hollowed out and weakly legitimized. And much as 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans were said to have lacked “a sense of the state,” Americans in the contemporary era of party polarization can be said to lack a sense of party (Skowronek 1982).

By legitimacy we mean foremost citizens’ recognition that parties and partisan activity play a valid and important role in the polity, and additionally that, in party affairs, the actions and preferences of party elites merit due respect from loyal partisans. Americans need not celebrate everything about parties—ambivalence about political parties is as American as apple pie (Hofstadter 1969; Ranney 1975)—but they should recognize their distinct contributions not only

as organizers of political conflict but as distinctive sites of small-d democratic and small-r republican citizenship.

While both parties are hollow, their hollowness manifests itself in divergent ways. The Democratic Party finds itself without a deep core. Organizationally, a party increasingly bourgeois in orientation fails to mobilize downscale irregular voters and non-voters. Programmatically, its priorities appear little more than a list stapled together from particular constituencies. The Republican Party, by contrast, is less coreless than cleaved, starkly divided between a mass base and a well-heeled elite. Republicans have failed to embrace a positive vision that brings partisans together and that defines its boundaries against opponents and extremists alike.

We focus here on parties more than on partisans, but our assessment extends down to individuals. Even if “leaners”—independents who say they “feel closer to” one party—behave in the voting booth exactly like partisans, their increasing numbers should not be passed by so quickly. Instead, they suggest a reticence to march behind a party’s banner (Cf. Keith et al., 1992). At the same time, parties motivated by hatred for their opponents lose the capacity to enforce what Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum term “the discipline of regulated rivalry” (2016, 86; see also Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014). They become vehicles for partisans’ own venom and spleen, and their partial democratic visions descend into cabal and conspiracy.

The parties’ long-term hollowing-out has cost the political system dearly. This essay seeks to delineate that cost, in the service of proposing a more robust and meaningful role for parties in American politics. We assuredly do not present such prescriptions as a “solution” to modern polarization. We affirm a politics defined by partisan combat over ideologically informed policy agendas. Indeed, our diagnosis emerges from an older view of responsible party

government adapted for a new era. Ironic invocations of responsible party doctrine as laid out in the 1950 report by the APSA Committee on Political Parties have become a staple of political science, usually pitched as a warning to “Be Careful What You Wish For” (Rae 2007). We take a different view, reviving the prescription of an issue-oriented politics centered on the robust efforts of parties with real integrative tissue and policy capacity. If we paint a gloomier picture of the modern era, with its strong party partisanship and hollow parties, than what many party scholars offer, that may be because we retain a more ambitious vision for responsible political parties as instruments of democracy.

### **Parties in Theory and Practice**

Our polarized era has set the context for compelling and provocative new scholarly approaches to the study of parties. Group-centered theorists of parties have upended models predicting electorally induced partisan moderation, while a lively revival of skepticism toward procedural reform has occasioned new arguments for old-fashioned backroom politics. These two schools of thought share a self-conscious realism about the forces underpinning polarization along with a welcome leeriness of popular anti-party proposals that promise to restore moderation and comity to politics. But neither analysis accounts for the hollowness of contemporary parties or for the legitimacy problems that hollowness generates.

Advocates of a group-centered conception of political parties, chief among them a set of collaborators known as the “UCLA school,” have done a great service by reinvigorating the scholarly discussion of parties for a new era of hyperpartisanship (Cohen et al. 2008; Bawn et al. 2012). Defining parties not as organized teams of politicians but rather as long coalitions of “intense policy demanders”—activists, interests, and ideologues all using politicians as agents

rather than principals in the quest to achieve policy-related goals—the UCLA school helps account for the sustained absence of Downsian convergence in American elections. Instead, its insights direct attention to the real stakes as parties vie to determine the distribution of society’s goodies (Hacker and Pierson 2014). Moreover, by collapsing the distinction between formal party organizations and the networks of nominally independent advocacy organizations and allied interest groups, the UCLA school’s redefinition of parties provides a clearer picture of the actual combatants in contemporary political warfare.

Yet if parties appear only as the sum of the groups that comprise them, then parties have no intrinsic features *as parties*. Party politics in the UCLA school’s account is a game of engaged elites who, once formally nominated and elected by duped and distracted voters, pursue relatively extreme agendas in office.<sup>1</sup> It is a testament to the cold-eyed, disillusioned bent of this work that the authors’ normative conclusions have ranged from ambivalence to cautious endorsement of this very system and the structuring role that parties play in it (Cohen et al. 2008, 360-363; Bawn et al. 2012, 589-591; Cohen et al. 2016, 707-708). Little in this analysis, however, engages the relative strength or weakness of parties as they seek to facilitate agreement among their groups, *or* the capacity of parties to mobilize participation and popular sentiment, *or* the consequences of shifts over time in the legitimacy of American parties.

The confounding events of 2016 have helped to lay bare the consequences. They highlight shortcomings in the theory of politics as a stable insiders’ game among groups, and compel scholars to refocus their gaze on parties as parties. That the Republican Party failed so spectacularly to “decide” its presidential nominee is hardly grounds to reject wholesale the theoretical insights for which the UCLA school’s famous argument about party nominations

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<sup>1</sup> Achen and Bartels (2016, 297-328) analyze mass political behavior and tell a similar story.

served as an elaborate empirical test. But consider some of the causes of Donald Trump's victory: party actors so terrified of backlash from voters or media-advocacy institutions within their own coalition that they neglected to offer endorsements or take other decisive action; the fruitlessness of the elite signaling that did occur, stemming from a collapse in legitimacy; and a massive and exploitable chasm between the respective priorities and agendas of the parties' policy demanders and rank-and-file GOP voters. Rather than reflecting a victory of one faction over another (Cf. Cohen et al. 2016), Trump beat all the established factions inside the party—and then, thanks to loyal support from Republican identifiers in the electorate, won the presidency.

A more openly prescriptive set of arguments from scholars and journalists loosely grouped under the moniker “new political realism” shares the UCLA school's hardheaded sense of democratic limits as well as their fateful blindness to parties' roles in bringing together disparate electorates and conferring legitimacy (La Raja 2013; Cain 2014; Pildes 2014; La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Persily 2015; Rauch 2015). Fittingly for an approach that celebrates the vote-maximizing transactional politics of a bygone era, the new realists adhere to an older conception of parties. They emphasize candidates' electoral needs and the imperatives of formal organization. Advancing a comprehensive critique of “romantic” democratic reforms in a number of different areas and institutions, the realists return consistently to a core prescription: empowering formal party actors and enriching formal party organizations relative to other players in the political system. Doing so, they argue, would channel power and resources away from more ideologically motivated and “purist” political actors to the sole institutions preoccupied chiefly with the practical task of winning elections, and thus incentivized toward moderation and bargaining. Stronger parties, the realists suggest, can save us from polarization.

Forceful arguments on behalf of parties as solutions to democratic failings are worth celebrating. But the new realists betray their own romanticism in presuming that a particular *kind* of long-faded party form, ideology-averse and ruthlessly transactional, could be revived in the twenty-first century. And their prescriptions to strengthen parties, which focus largely on helping them more freely and effectively vacuum up large financial donations, would only serve to magnify the parties' legitimacy crisis by doubling down on precisely the roles that the public finds most distasteful.

Nathaniel Persily, a leading new realist, has defined his view as a “‘pro-party’ ‘bad-government’ approach” (2015, 126). This essay, by contrast, reconstructs a good-government pro-party tradition, and applies it to contemporary dilemmas. Our outlook is “good government” in the sense that it retains the responsible-party commitment to the organization of political conflict around issues and public policy, and resists nostalgia for past political eras of blurred programmatic alternatives and rampant transactionalism. Nor do we find appealing the prospect of parties that wield vast influence entirely in service to their donors' bidding. Our differences with the new realists on this point recall disputes within the New York Democracy in the decades before the Civil War (Donovan 1925; Earle 2004). One faction, the “Hunkers,” ignored slavery and hunkered after patronage. Their opponents, the “Barnburners,” equally venerated political parties—and saw them as vehicles to rebuild society, foremost in opposing slavery. While in no way associating the new realists with the worst of the Hunkers, we place ourselves in the Barnburner tradition. Our vision is “pro-party,” meanwhile, in a more robust sense than the mere acceptance of the need for *somebody* to structure political choices—so why not parties? We emphasize instead the distinct and intrinsic qualities that, at their best, uniquely enable parties to

mobilize popular participation, to integrate disparate groups, interests, and movements, and to foster meaningful choice and accountability in policymaking.

This outlook, we contend, emerges from a venerable intellectual lineage. The midcentury prescription for responsible parties went beyond a call for clearer lines of differentiation between the party programs. It was a vision to put the full force of American-style mass party organizations into the service of issue-based politics. E.E. Schattschneider and his allies celebrated the restless power-seeking energies of the two major American political parties even as they sought their reconstruction into forces for cohesive policy agendas. They shared the Progressive goal of issue-based politics but shunned the Progressive impulse toward anti-partyism.

As Schattschneider noted, middle-class Progressive anti-partyism was “formulated in language which seems to condemn all partisanship for all time but [was], in fact, directed at a special form of partisan alignment which frustrated a generation of Americans” trapped in the sectional System of 1896 (Schattschneider 1956, 215). The New Deal had revolutionized national policymaking. A cross-party coalition of northern Republicans and southern Democrats had then stopped the Fair Deal in its tracks. For advocates of responsible parties, those conditions called for new approaches to parties and party reform. So, too, do we seek parties with real ideological meaning and mutual differentiation but also a tangible and felt presence in Americans’ lives.

American parties are notoriously diffuse and infamously hard to define. They have no formal members. The entities that control parties’ names and ballot access make up “the party” only in the most legalistic sense. We break no ground here; Schattschneider’s own minimal definition that “a political party is an organized attempt to get control of the government” (1942,

ix) still usefully separates parties from other entities that want influence and power. While recognizing the diverse actors inside American parties—elected officials, party functionaries, interest groups and social movements, lobbyists, grassroots activists, ordinary voters—we go against the modern party scholars who have treated parties chiefly as dependent variables, institutions created in response to needs and preferences derived elsewhere (Cf. Aldrich 2011). Treating parties as the end products of other actors’ work—as vehicles for interests or office-winners for politicians—leaves parties’ actual operations a black box.<sup>2</sup>

Instead, we treat parties principally as *collective* actors and as distinct institutions in their own right, focusing less on how they serve their constituent entities than on their capacities (or incapacities) in what Schattschneider called “the zone between the sovereign people and the government, which is the domain of the parties” (1942, 15). We ask not what other actors get out of parties, but how parties shape and reshape political combat.

A collective view of parties connects directly to the concept of responsible partisanship, with its recognition of party actors’ linked fate. Without a collective party, a “there there” to link elites and masses and put forth a clear alternative, collective responsibility becomes impossible (Fiorina 1980). And without some semblance of collective responsibility—in a far less formal sense than in Westminster systems, to be sure—a collective party will fail to make full use of its power.

Strong parties are not simply weak parties with strong bank accounts, but formal institutions that effectively and continually engage with voters, activists, and politicians to formulate and then implement party programs that clarify citizens’ choices. In the sections that follow, we evaluate parties in the polarized era according to these criteria. We assess the strength

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<sup>2</sup> In seeking to fill these lacunae, political scientists would benefit from engagement with the sociological literature on parties. See Mudge and Chen (2014).

and limitations of modern parties' organizational capabilities, their role in nominations, and their participation in agenda formulation, and then suggest some provisional approaches to reform in the direction of strong, responsible parties.

Any historically grounded account that indicts contemporary American parties runs the risk of golden-age-ism. If only the parties still dispensed turkeys at Thanksgiving, then somehow everything would be better again. But Americans have never had properly responsible parties in their history. Fully ideologically defined and sorted parties emerged only after the parties' coordinating capacities had collapsed, and to seek to revive those capacities is to pursue something new in American experience. Reconstruction of the parties begins, moreover, with the bedrock facts of a Madisonian political system, a sprawling state, and a distrustful public. The organizable alternatives in national politics flow from those harsh realities. Given the deep roots of contemporary polarization, our choices are circumscribed. Either Americans live with hollow parties or we reach for responsible parties.

## **Organization**

As parties in the electorate and parties in government have each revived, parties as organizations have tenaciously held on in the face of a broader American decline in federated membership groups (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). The national party committees have modernized their operations and supercharged their fundraising since the 1970s (Cotter and Bibby 1980; Conway 2003; Reichley 1985; Herrnson 1988). Party organizations have not, however, built meaningful connections upwards to elected officials or downwards to voters.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For similar themes amid a less polarized polity, see Katz and Kolodny (1994) and Coleman (1994).

At the local and state levels, signs of revival in the era of polarization are hardest to identify—and hollowness most easily detected. Surveys of local party chairs in 1980 and in 2008 show remarkable continuity in parties’ activities. In 1980, 60 percent of local Republican and 55 percent of local Democratic parties reported having a campaign headquarters at election time; in 2008, the figures were a near-identical 63 percent and 54 percent. And despite the avalanche of political money that pays canvassers for campaigns and Super PACs alike, local parties remain volunteer-led affairs. In 2008, as in 1980, only 6 percent of local Republican parties had any paid staff, while the figures for local Democratic parties rose only from 5 percent to 8 percent during the same period (Roscoe and Jenkins 2014).

Meanwhile, state parties, central players in the American party system since Martin Van Buren, have become pawns in a mercenary, money-driven, candidate-led, nationalized, and deinstitutionalized game. Party reform denied state parties the ability to control their delegations at national conventions. Yet even as parties in service, state parties have been supplanted; in off years, many “barely even have anyone around to answer the phone” (Greenblatt 2015; see also Overby 2015 and Ronanye 2017). Legal legerdemain has pushed against statutory limits, without much benefiting state parties themselves (Vogel and Arnsdorf, 2016; Allison 2016; Confessore and Shorey 2016). A surviving piece of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002 bars the unlimited transfer of funds from national committees for party-building activities—the so-called soft-money loophole—and forces state parties to maintain separate state and federal accounts. Large donors in our nationalized polity, meanwhile have failed to step up. Their dollars have gone directly to candidates or through new para-organizations.

The national party committees have held their own in the dollar chase, even as total spending by Independent Expenditure PACs (“Super PACs”) now vastly surpasses the parties’

own haul. The brief “soft money” boom that BCRA closed has left few footprints. Yet—and notwithstanding the new realists’ hunches, based more on spending patterns than direct observation or analysis—we know little about national parties’ actual operations, either inside their staff-led political shops or among their memberships, mostly elected by state committees. Members of each national committee elect its chair (or, when the party occupies the White House, rubber-stamp the president’s pick for chair)—but how else do these well-networked individuals link candidates, causes, local notables, and national politics? The UCLA school has rightly shed light on informal interactions across partisan networks (e.g. Koger, Masket, and Noel 2009). A perspective rooted in formal parties would apply their insights to far thicker interactions inside the nerve centers of parties themselves.

As the new realists correctly argue, the dance of congressional legislation and legal and agency interpretation has created a campaign finance system that uniquely constricts parties, with relatively generous limits on individual contributions, no limits on independent contributions or expenditures, and strict limits on donations to parties. But to view parties simply as financiers is to misdiagnose their contemporary predicament. The realists aim for strong parties but, despite some residual sympathy for turning back the clock on presidential nominations to the pre-reform era, principally aim to make it easier for party committees to raise and spend vast sums.

On the contribution side, the new realists risk blowback from the access afforded to donors and their preferences in the New Gilded Age. Giving parties a more prominent place in a financing system that most Americans regard as corrupt will hardly regain for parties their lost legitimacy or rebuild the frayed ties between insiders and ordinary partisans (Schmitt 2015). Nor do the new realists reckon with the consequences of welcoming the super-rich into parties that,

unlike narrowly focused pressure groups, putatively equalize political voice (Mann and Dionne 2015). In the 2014 election cycle, one percent of one percent of Americans, a mere 31,976 donors, gave 29 percent of all dollars disclosed by federal election committees (Olsen-Phillips et al. 2015). Since their birth at the dawn of mass politics, parties at their best have been deeply egalitarian institutions. They should not become mere vehicles for plutocracy.

So, too, on the expenditure side. Nothing in a strategy to fund parties to the teeth will make them mobilize. Simply spending more money on television ads and, in swing states, on jerry-built campaign operations will not revitalize parties' fragile roots. Most dollars go into the interlocking network of political consultants and ad makers (Sheingate 2016). Segregated independent expenditure units at the national and congressional committees target funds for media buys and explicitly cannot coordinate with the rest of the party. If a party in service to its candidates wants to maximize seats without an ongoing organization, then its television buyer—neither a professional politician nor a partisan in any older sense of the term—sits in the catbird's seat.

Assume away these principal-agent problems and even then the realists' model portrays a politics devoid of principled commitments. Politicians interested in winning as many seats as possible, or their minions, control resources—including to candidates who have no loyalty to a party's priorities. Ordinary partisans (or, for that matter, high-demanding groups) with strong preferences have no say in their choices. Accountability takes place only via exit, and not by voice. For the realists, the venerable “iron law of oligarchy” that Robert Michels (1915) developed to explain why socialist parties seemed the captives of career politicians morphs into a positive good.

As the spasms of discontent in 2016 signal, the long-term corrosive effects of popular disconnection from parties pose challenges for representative democracy far more severe than the mere ideological distance between the parties. It would be hard to invent a prescription more likely than the realists' to inflame the particular admixture of anti-partisan purity and anti-plutocracy zeal that powered Bernie Sanders. Nor would all the hedge-fund kings' horses and men in the realists' ideal system prove able to stop Donald Trump—or whoever the next Trump turns out to be. Simply opening the spigot would only worsen the parties' legitimacy problem and reduce their role in democratic life. Forgive any cynicism about the cynics that from such seeds will a hundred democratic flowers bloom.

### **Mobilization**

The torrent of partisan money has not only gone to television. Layered on top of these party structures lie the new purpose-built campaign operations, including both para-organizations such as the Kochs' Americans for Prosperity and jointly funded but candidate-led coordinated campaigns. Person-to-person canvassing, experiments have repeatedly found, motivates and persuades voters (Green and Gerber 2013). And so, especially on the Democratic side, the field office has become a fixture of contemporary electoral politics (Masket 2009; Nielsen 2012; Darr and Levendusky 2014). Yet despite breathless cheerleading heralding the return of old-fashioned shoe leather, candidates and parties still underinvest in mobilization even by their own metrics (Broockman and Kalla 2014). If the parties spent directly on mobilizing voters, not only would more of them vote, but activists and ordinary citizens alike would have a greater sense of party.

The new field renaissance does not itself portend partisan renewal. Where parties' ward heelers once worked all the year round (Rakove 1975), contacting now comes only when the

electoral calendar demands. Although the hard work of canvassing remains in volunteers' hands, paid staff, parachuted in from afar and hoping for jobs in DC or perhaps the state capitol (before consulting or lobbying themselves), run the office (Schlozman 2016). Early-twenty-somethings arrive to serve as organizers, reporting up to late-twenty-somethings on regional field desks. The campaign—in the most generous interpretation, the joint coordinated campaign—is the principal; party workers are its agent.<sup>4</sup> Obama for America emphasized building capacity among grassroots volunteers (McKenna and Han 2015). It trained its Captains and Neighborhood Team Leaders extensively, but after Election Day in 2008 and again in 2012, let its organization wither on the vine.

The treatment must be compared with the control. Ryan Enos and Anthony Fowler (forthcoming) estimate that the 2012 campaign raised turnout in swing states by about 7 or 8 percentage points. Yet intensive grassroots campaigning raises turnout so substantially above the baseline precisely because, absent extraordinary mobilization backed with formidable outside resources, ongoing political organization has fallen into such decay.<sup>5</sup>

Figures 1 through 4 encapsulate these trends.<sup>6</sup> Using data from the American National Election Studies, they show partisan contacting by Democrats and Republicans, in battleground states and non-battleground states, divided into income thirds for respondents aged 25-64. Specifically, the ANES asks: “Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around to talk about the campaign?” We define battleground states as those in which the two-party vote in the average of the previous two presidential elections came within five percentage

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<sup>4</sup> This argument, never made explicitly, drives the analysis in Enos and Hersh (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Note the prevalence of highly competitive elections for Congress or governor even in states whose electoral votes are not much in doubt, underscoring the missed opportunity of disorganization and under-mobilization (Fraga and Hersh 2016).

<sup>6</sup> These graphs merge the insights on stratification by income in Campbell (2007) and those across states in Beck and Heidemann (2014). Beck and Heidemann identify battleground states using a different measure, based on the long-run normal vote.

points in either direction of the national means—in other words, the states that both parties have a reasonable shot at potentially including in their winning coalitions.<sup>7</sup>

As the figures show, the rise in contacting since 1996, as campaigns have grown closer and more expensive, has been principally limited to the band of closely contested states—and even there, fewer voters report being contacted in the most recent cycles. Patterns of class stratification appear consistent: across time, across levels of competitiveness, and for Democrats and Republicans, upper-income voters are more likely to report having been contacted by a political party. In 2016, 37 percent of upper-income battleground-state respondents reported being contacted by the Democratic Party and 30 percent by the Republican Party. Among low-income respondents in uncompetitive states, the figures are identical: 14 percent reported a contact from the Democrats, and 14 percent from the Republicans.

The parties have failed to mobilize their voters even in the much-vaunted new era of campaign analytics. Turnout among the voting-eligible population dropped from 61.6 percent in 2008 to 58.0 percent in 2012, and inched back up to just under 59 percent in 2016, with Donald Trump's popular vote total besting Mitt Romney's four years earlier while Hillary Clinton's share fell just short of Obama's. On-the-ground postmortems on the Clinton loss emphasized a field operation that amplified the pathologies of contemporary approaches to mobilization: overconfidence in analytics wizardry, disconnection from existing networks of activists and party workers rooted in their communities, and a consequent, yawning absence of local knowledge or capacity to adjust efforts in response to dynamics on the ground (Parenti 2016, Dovere 2016, Schlozman 2016).

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<sup>7</sup> This is the Partisan Voting Index developed in 1997 by election prognosticator Charlie Cook, with lower values indicating states closer to the national average. See Wasserman (2013). Results are similar using absolute margin of victory in past two presidential elections rather than deviation from national average.

Whether one views parties as the creations of politicians or high-demanding groups, or as autonomous organizers of conflict, they exist to bring to the polls would-be voters who will elect a government that achieves backers' goals. As in the 1870s and 1880s, today's parties again stand evenly matched in national politics and fight each election aware that control over the entire government hangs in the balance (Lee 2016). Yet neither party has organized to maximize its vote, and both suffer the consequences. Their failures to turn out potential voters are not just structural facts but *partisan* failures.

Critics from the left have long bemoaned the feckless Democrats (e.g. Piven and Cloward 1988), but the devastating midterm losses of 2010 and 2014 followed by the shocking Electoral College upset in 2016 give the charge new salience—and new urgency. Gerrymanders, all the easier given patterns of residential dispersion, leave Democrats hobbled in state legislatures, and, absent the rare wave election, constrict their chances to win seats in Congress. The consequences have devastated groups at the very heart of the Democratic coalition. In Wisconsin, Michigan, and North Carolina, as well as in deep-red states, Republican legislatures have passed draconian restrictions on abortion rights and crippled unions in the public and private sectors alike.

For their part, Republicans have in the “voting wars” instituted voter ID requirements to protect against the miniscule problem of in-person voter fraud, and restricted voting procedures, such as early voting, disproportionately used by their political opponents (Hasen 2012, Berman 2015). Strategies of demobilization are nothing new in American politics. Jim Crow in all its electoral manifestations, from the literacy test to the white primary to the grandfather clause and, with a much weaker treatment, the northern pushback against the popular politics of the Party Period prove as much (Kousser 1974; McGerr 1988). The modern voting wars raise larger questions about the racial odyssey of the Republican Party and the bounds of legitimate political

competition. Yet the Republicans, too, suffer from failure to mobilize their would-be voters. In an influential analysis, Sean Trende (2013) attributed Mitt Romney's defeat in 2012 principally to 6 million "missing white voters," mostly downscale and outside the Greater South, who chose to stay home. A total outsider waged a hostile takeover of his party in 2016 by mobilizing many of those voters. Yet the nature of his victory more underscores the disconnect than solves it for the long term.

Perhaps, naysayers will reply, even with rising education levels the sky-high turnout of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century will never return. The video game and the app have replaced the torchlight parade while the Super Bowl provides the excitement once garnered by a booze-soaked Election Day waving the party ticket. The United States has not, however, put that hypothesis to a proper test. It is hard to imagine truly strong parties when such weak organization manifests in mediocre presidential and abysmal midterm turnout—and harder still to argue that the parties have really tried to mobilize their potential supporters (Crenson and Ginsberg 2002).

## **Nominations**

Parties still choose their nominees by the votes of delegates assembled at a national convention, as the Democrats have since 1832 and the Republicans have since 1856. The parties' formal authority still reaches its apex at "the pure partisan institution" of the convention (Shafer 2010). Behind the debate over the ability of insiders—including elected officials, well-connected donors, and allied interest groups—to shape contemporary nominations lies a process that resists partisan appeals to authority. Like the new political realists (e.g. Persily 2015, 128-130), we think parties ought to control their nominations. But we would add a caution against Pyrrhic

victories and poisoned chalices, in which procedures survive merely as much-criticized relics and party organizations endure quadrennial turns as punching bags.

From their Jacksonian institutional inheritance, the parties still retain influence. The states select delegates to a convention that is essentially a private meeting—and not a public utility subject to regulation. Proposals for a national primary have come and gone since the first presidential primaries without ever coming close to passage, not least because states like to set their own calendars in statute. In the Party Period, primitive practices mixed with a politics where parties mobilized mass electorates. Now only the forms linger, a product of a decidedly incomplete modernization. “If there is any arena where the rights of US states have survived the twentieth century, the New Deal, and all other expansions of the scope of the federal government,” writes Walter Dean Burnham, “it is the conduct of elections” (2015, 32).

Yet even as the delegate hunt traces far back in American political history, the popular conversation increasingly accepts the plebiscitary logic of a national primary, wherein the candidate with the most votes automatically gets the nomination. Attacks against perceived violations of that norm come fast and furious. Parties and partisans offer only muted, and usually hypocritical, replies. One would be hard-put to find a full-throated defense of the party as the correct deciders of nomination—and still less, of the party as decider not simply because it will pick an electable nominee who will make a good president (Polsby 1983) but because it will put forth an appropriate standard-bearer for the party’s vision of democracy.

The most sustained attention to parties as arbiters of procedure comes from presidential contenders on their way to losing the nomination, and it is not pretty. The postreform era offers temptations unavailable to strategic politicians in earlier partisan constellations. Interminable campaigns and a thin sense of what party loyalty requires have rendered parties vulnerable to the

predations of fair-weather friends. Especially once the debates have stopped, and there are few issues to pick over any longer, losing candidates turn their fire to a process that they claim to be rigged against them. Front-runners blithely ignore the complaints, keeping their eyes on November, and challengers attack the system. The ongoing Trump story, while broadly consonant with the idea that the contemporary parties prove weak defenders of their prerogatives, raises larger, still unsettled questions to which we return in the conclusion; the Democrats' lessons seem clearer.

No procedure has been more controversial than the unpledged Party Leader Elected Official delegates introduced by the Hunt Commission in time for the 1984 convention. The unpledged PLEOs, whom everyone terms “superdelegates,” have always been a hard sell. They aimed to recreate the old process by which party leaders could judge their peers. In February 2016, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the chair of the Democratic National Committee, offered the risibly incorrect view that superdelegates exist to allow grassroots activists a chance to attend the convention without having to run against elected officials to earn a slot (Borchers 2016).<sup>8</sup> Even the chair of the national party could not defend with an appeal to public reason her party's hard-fought procedures.

Rather than seeking to take over the Democratic National Committee, Bernie Sanders's campaign sought to neuter it. In pre-convention talks, Hillary Clinton's campaign acceded to a commission that will almost certainly strip DNC members of their unpledged first-ballot votes, and also to a left-leaning platform. Then, his demands met, Sanders became—poof! presto!—an apostle of party responsibility, waving a copy of the platform on late-night television (Wagner

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Democrats' pledged PLEO delegates, chosen by state party conventions or committees and allocated in proportion to candidates' vote share, precisely address Wasserman-Schultz's professed concern.

2016). None of the leading players in the Democrats' 2016 drama stuck up for party principle when it went against expedient interest.

### **Program**

The paradox of parties dominating politics while seeming institutionally ancillary to that very domination—at once central and wraithlike—likewise characterizes their programmatic functions. Parties structure policy choices and articulate conflict in 21<sup>st</sup> century politics. Elites, activists, and the mass electorate alike have sorted into the “correct” party. The parties now take distinct positions on ever greater numbers of topics, along multiple issue dimensions (Layman et al. 2010). Just as members of Congress have polarized, as documented exhaustively using aggregate roll-call-based measures like NOMINATE, so too have positions in party platforms diverged over time (Paddock 1992; Coffey 2011; Gordon, Webb, and Wood 2014).

This divergence is not only real but, perhaps just as importantly, *perceived*. At midcentury, the APSA Committee on Political Parties identified as a core problem of American politics the fact that “alternatives between the parties are defined so badly that it is often difficult to determine what the election has decided even in broadest terms” (1950, 4-5). Even as a system of separated powers still stymies party responsibility, the 21<sup>st</sup> century electorate at least recognizes that the parties offer genuine alternatives on Election Day. The proportion of Americans who saw “important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for” rose from 46 percent in 1972 to 60 percent in 1992 to 81 percent in 2012 (American National Election Studies).<sup>9</sup> When contested, general elections now provide choices rather than echoes. The days of tweedle dum and tweedle dee are over.

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<sup>9</sup> The relevant table is here: [http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/text/tab2b\\_4.txt](http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/text/tab2b_4.txt). Similarly, Americans are better able to identify the Republicans as the more conservative party; see [http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab2b\\_5.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab2b_5.htm).

Instead, our polarized era features a grand partisan battle over public purposes from which the parties themselves have receded. In place of programmatic formal parties are polarized networks of interest and advocacy groups, drawing on research and expertise from higher education and think tanks. A fluid midcentury landscape of “issue networks” working in ad hoc bipartisan coalitions has given way to a far more structured pattern of conflict between densely clustered partisan teams in civil society.

Yet platform-by-proxy imposes costs. Agenda formation carried out among less visible and formalized channels of elite actors faces real limits without the cross-fertilization of ordinary peoples’ concerns, technical expertise, and political savvy that only parties can provide. So, too, the dominance of interest groups in generating policy with respect to their particular issues limits the potential for substantive coherence and responsibility in the party agendas. Finally, when issue activists perceive that parties are disconnected from the work of agenda generation, then any sense of party in the system further diminishes and the parties’ legitimacy problems worsen further.

The weakness of American parties as vehicles for generating and articulating policy agendas is an old story. The *Sturm und Drang* of campaign rhetoric and the lofty bromides of party platforms notwithstanding, the major American parties have been held to be comparatively lacking in coherent policy agendas or ideologies at least since the Party Period (Cf. Gerring 1998). Analysts have pointed variously to institutional fragmentation (Epstein 1986; Samuels and Shugart 2010), liberal anti-majoritarianism (Ranney and Kendall 1956), and early mass suffrage (Katznelson 1985; Shefter 1994). Whatever the mix of causes, the result is a system in which formal parties lack the in-house research and policy operations typical among parties in parliamentary systems (Campbell and Pederson 2014). Despite party organizations’ sporadic

twentieth-century experiments in formal policy work (Rosenfeld 2018), American parties as a rule pursue agendas that are generated by satellite research and interest group networks engaging candidates and office holders directly.

The hollowness of the parties' programmatic efforts is evident along various fronts. The national party committees engage issues and policy largely through publicity efforts on behalf of the party "brand" rather than attempting to alter the brand itself through substantive research and deliberation. The modern platform-drafting process serves principally to gauge different factions' relative institutional clout within the party. Victorious nominees often use the platform as a consolation prize for vanquished candidates, while other times the documents are largely unmediated litanies of policy positions advocated by specific interest groups. As a logroll, the platform becomes the progeny of a thousand fathers; as meaningful expression of the party's agenda in government, it is an orphan.

The two major parties betray contrasting strengths and weaknesses in their approaches to program. The conservative movement transformed public policy expertise in the second half of the twentieth century by propounding a model of openly ideological think tanks exclusively engaged in a single party's extended network (Weaver 1989; Ricci 1993; Rich 2005; Stahl 2016). For all its pitfalls, that approach warrants appreciation from those interested in party responsibility. The turn away from a mythos of disinterested technocracy toward the mobilization of expertise in conscious conflict goes at least part of the way toward legitimizing parties as programmatic actors. Under conditions of 21<sup>st</sup> century polarization, however, the right's policy infrastructure has bifurcated. At the programmatic core of the modern GOP's agenda, interest groups and donors have fought for upwardly redistributive economic policies notably lacking in mass support, even among Republican partisans (Hacker and Pierson 2010).

Outside of the narrow channels that generate such positions, however, lie populist campaigns of position-taking, symbolic conflict, and mobilized resentment that frequently merge seamlessly with the activities of the right's commercial media institutions (Ball 2013). Both sides of the modern Republican approach to agenda generation—the narrow band of regressive policy commitments and the Fox-and-Breitbart world of permanent confrontation—only accentuate the gap between Republican elites and Republican voters on basic priorities and policy views.

The Democratic Party, for its part, enjoys comparatively robust policy capacity. Yet just as the formal parties' organizational hollowing out has augmented the upper-class bias of American politics, so does their absence from policy development, since parties bring in actors with experiences and priorities beyond the technocrats' ken. The class skew inherent to elite policy networks too often limits Democrats to expertise produced by white men with fancy degrees. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan once remarked tartly, “a party of the working class cannot be dominated by former editors of the *Harvard Crimson*” (Heilbrunn 1997). Democratic policy elites have responded to rising inequality only fitfully, with solutions that retreat from larger questions of political economy (Weir 1998). And as the politics of Obamacare well indicate, feedback from such opaque policymaking rarely shores up partisan loyalties (Oberlander and Weaver 2015).

For leftist critics, elite technocratic control dovetails with the Democrats' reliance on large donors to produce elite agenda control. And because the party as a formal organization is not seen to actually participate in programmatic work, it gets none of the credit even when candidate nomination fights, movement mobilizations, or other intraparty dynamics actually help to produce significant and progressive changes in the party agenda. This dynamic played out like clockwork during the 2016 nomination contest, and helps explain why a substantive success

story for insurgent energies seemed to produce so little in the way of new, positive attachments to the Democratic Party.

### **Toward More Responsible Mass Parties**

If hollowness provides the answer to the paradox of ineffectual parties in an age of hyperpartisanship, what achievable steps might imbue American politics with a stronger sense of party? In the search for a usable past, a good-government *pro-party* approach emphatically rejects a period that good-government *anti-party* advocates happily tout (Cf. Rahman 2016). In the Progressive Era, middle-class WASP reformers aimed to purify the political system by weakening parties. In their stead, they substituted a technocratic elite that would staff the burgeoning bureaucracy. In a fractured and pluralistic polity, we have no elite unified and confident enough, or invested with sufficient public support, to continue such a project today. The further recrudescence of the Progressive strategy to strengthen the presidency at the expense of party organizations and Congress hardly seems wise for a repeat run.

Nor do other rich democracies provide much in the way of helpful models. Indeed, the crisis of political parties extends far beyond American borders (Katz and Mair 1995; Stokes 1999; Blyth and Katz 2005; Katz and Mair 2009; Mair 2013; Ignazi 2014). Under proportional and majoritarian electoral systems alike, parties have grown hollow and lost legitimacy. The complaints here about too-powerful staff at the central office and frayed ties between party elites and the grassroots echo across the rich democracies. Populism, in many though by no means all instances fueled by racism and xenophobia, is on the march.

Yet the predicament of the center-left and the rise of the revanchist right, familiar transnational themes, manifest themselves unusually in the American context. Even as American parties remain, across a series of dimensions, comparatively weak, the United States retains as

pure a duopoly as any democracy. While insurgent parties have reshaped party systems across Europe, challenges to the established order in the United States have at least so far come from within rather than without. The most notable third-party presidential candidates since Ross Perot, Ralph Nader in 2000 and Gary Johnson in 2016, won only 2.74 and 3.28 percent respectively. Precisely this fact of voice rather than exit makes renewal possible. Far easier to rehabilitate the parties, however fragile their gears, than somehow to reassemble them anew once they have split into shards.<sup>10</sup>

This configuration leads to a tempered conclusion. Given the strength of partisan loyalties in structuring political conflict, parties in the polity known for weak parties have the ingredients for renewal. At the same time, the fracture of so many once-strong organizations across the developed world tempers any enthusiasm that partisan renewal will be an easy or automatic process. The case for strong American parties rests less on successful contemporary models from abroad than on the bedrock reality of partisanship inside two parties. And indeed, though reversing America's century-spanning decline of federated membership organizations may not be in the cards, polarization arguably creates a setting distinctly suited *for parties in particular* to build more robust participatory organizations.

Parties must reinvigorate committees from the national all the way down to the precinct level. At the national and state levels, where staff working directly with top politicians typically run the show, their membership ought to reflect genuine commitment. When membership means more than adjudicating rules, it should appeal to activists, high-demanding groups' leaders, and politicians alike.

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<sup>10</sup> We thank Henry Farrell for helping us to formulate this argument.

The nascent mobilizations of the twenty-first century—Dreamers, Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and also the Tea Party and the Alt Right—have generated energy aplenty. Some are more promising than others as partners to parties, and the parties have approached them in different ways (Parker and Barreto 2013; Heaney and Rojas 2015). As a general matter, however, while movements have reason to preserve their autonomy and parties to steer clear of doctrinaire elements that threaten electoral majorities, alliance between parties and movements not only generates votes on Election Day but institutionalizes movements' cadres and priorities once the initial ardor has faded (Schlozman 2015). For all the inevitable frustrations, that promise remains. Parties will have to work to shape it to responsible ends.<sup>11</sup>

American history provides examples of formal parties that combined robust organization with issue-oriented politics. Reformist Democratic state parties in the postwar era, such as the UAW-aligned Michigan Democratic State Central Committee and the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party that powered Hubert Humphrey's rise in Minnesota, serve as models for responsible parties (Buffa 1984; Delton 2002). Far from being mere ineffectual talking shops for white, upper-middle-class activists, in both states responsible parties pushed forward visions that, whatever their contradictions, offered powerful support for the black freedom struggle and linked racial and economic justice (Boyle 1995; Lichtenstein 1995; Thurber 1999; Schickler 2016). A half-century on from their heyday, the time has come for activists to step out of the shadows of party networks and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of open partisanship.

Those models of responsible partisanship were found at the state level, however, and they suggest one key point where midcentury theorists got the story wrong. As good New Deal liberals, the academic proponents of responsible national parties deplored sectionalism—above

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<sup>11</sup> For an incisive take from the left, see Shahid (2016).

all in the Solid South—and sought coherent national parties oriented around national issue commitments. Yet they failed to anticipate how nationalized parties would hollow out the very organizations, reform as well as machine, that did the parties' work on the ground. Party-building in the twenty-first century requires sustained and continuous investment in state and local parties, and in our nationalized partisan era the onus falls on the national party organizations to carry that out. As long as shadow party organizations funded by big donors remain central to electoral politics, the staffers and elected officials who gatekeep and direct their giving ought likewise to steer rich donors to, and then reward them for, investment in state-level organizing and party-building. The fruits of sporadic twentieth-century efforts in this vein (Cotter and Bibby 1980; Klinkner 1994; Galvin 2009; Conley 2013), not to mention Howard Dean's short-lived but fruitful Fifty-State Strategy for the DNC early in the twenty-first (Kamarck 2006; Jacobson 2013; Kuttner 2017), make the case for pursuing such activity as a core party task. The anti-Trump "Resistance" has begun to revive long-dormant local parties even in unlikely places (Putnam and Skocpol 2018; Galchen 2018).

Our vision for rejuvenated grassroots parties echoes Samuel Gompers's old line about what labor wanted: "We want more." We seek parties that organize consistently and effectively, and that see their purpose as persuading and mobilizing voters rather than simply "messaging" (Skocpol 2017). The precise basket of activities they undertake will vary, but the basic model for local parties is no mystery. Nor, in the main, has the story much changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, except that local parties can no longer rely on the inducement of patronage. In an age of atomized polarization, as local parties puzzle how to rope in partisans with little sense of party, the humdrum work of party-building endures.

The model should be familiar to any veteran of local party politics, and so should the primary challenge local parties face: the institutional maintenance to keep a volunteer-led low-budget operation afloat leaves too little time for organizing. Local parties seek to engage and recruit volunteers as members and supporters with regular activities that offer solidarity as well as purposive incentives (or, to cut the jargon, that mix in some fun). They support candidates up and down the ticket, encourage promising figures to run and offer assistance to those who do, monitor party affairs, and help make sure that state conventions, platforms, and the like reflect partisans' concerns. Revitalization would not replace such activities, but rather marshal people and resources so that they actually get performed. And that means shifting electoral resources further away from advertising and toward mobilization—continually and not just quadrennially.

A few points seem salient. First, local parties should both meet regularly and go beyond meetings to engage with voters all year round, rather than simply emerging Brigadoon-like at election season or for their formal tasks. The state of the art suggests that long-form “deep canvassing” would be particularly effective, given how person-to-person interaction with neighbors establishes rapport (Denizet-Lewis 2016). Second, even if they hire an office worker or two, local parties are voluntary associations *par excellence*. In an age when formal meetings conducted under *Robert's Rules* hold ever less appeal, local parties must figure out how to hold volunteers' attention. At the most minimal level, that means giving volunteers meaningful tasks, the training to do them, and the opportunity for leadership. Third, analytics and “Big Data” should not restrict themselves to headquarters or to operatives churning among campaigns, consultancies, and Silicon Valley. A culture of experimentation works best when knowledge can be democratized and diffused. Local parties need not be backwaters, but creators of knowledge—and national and state parties ought to help them in that effort. Fourth, volunteer-

led local parties serve as a bulwark against the predations of staff and of donors. Time is distributed more equally than money, and rare are the plutocrats who spend their evenings with the ward committee.

Strong parties support one another across levels of government. Local parties now find their work difficult because their counterparts above provide few activities between elections that serve as focal points to organize. The Democratic National Committee, for example, provides virtually no direct support for local parties or for field services.<sup>12</sup> By the standards of contemporary politics, local parties are cheap. A few bucks from above to rent a meeting hall and provide some food would seem money well worth spending—or, at the very least, a proposition about the efficacy of spending well worth testing.

Perhaps no partisan realm reveals such a gap between widespread norms and the institutional practices necessary for strong and vibrant partisanship as candidate selection. Even when party actors do succeed in “deciding” their nominations in the modern era, they do so in the shadows. 2016 revealed the brittleness of even their capacity for low-visibility signaling and deck-stacking. Small-d democratic norms serve as the default standard by which any potential reform to the system is judged, with perverse consequences for party responsibility. In this area, the central and most difficult task will come in changing those very norms among partisans themselves. Rolling back the Progressives’ watershed introduction of primaries is unlikely. And the activists who powered the McGovern-Fraser reforms at the national level had their reasons, in spades (Plotke 1996). But the first step in advancing the idea that permeable and issue-driven parties are entitled to a say in deciding who stands for office in their name is for party officers themselves to cease speaking out of the sides of their mouths in deference to their own

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<sup>12</sup> We thank Kate Donaghue, a member of the DNC, for this insight.

legitimacy problems, and instead to begin forthrightly making the party's case. Democrats on the precipice of eliminating superdelegates to the national convention might first pause to take a long, sober look at the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Republicans, of course, must take an even longer look.

Bringing parties back into the process of policy development may prove comparatively easy. The “diminishing oddness” of American parties has arguably rendered them *more* conducive to explicit programmatic work now than ever before (Rae 2012; see also Pomper and Weiner 2000). Pushing the parties in this direction would serve to instill a greater sense of party in American politics. For the UCLA school, parties are delegated with implementing policies chosen by the groups in the party coalition. But what if, alternatively, groups make their preferences clear and delegate to parties the task of forging policy? Given the integrative functions that parties alone possess at their best, such a process might be expected to produce agendas that better reflect the priorities of supporters and that bear the stamp of clearer, more responsible authorship. Twentieth-century experiments by both parties provide the precedents and potential forms that such programmatic work might take: formal policy councils housed in the party committees, party-sponsored publications covering substantive topics in public policy, and biennial issue conferences that once before and might once again serve as, in the words of James MacGregor Burns, “a transmission belt between movement politics and party politics” (Cronin 1986, 536).

What might the two parties look like with more robust organizations and more significant roles in agenda development? The implications of responsible mass partisanship differ for the two major parties. Drawing on a growing body of scholarship documenting the especial contribution of the GOP to modern polarization, Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins argue

for a more fundamental partisan asymmetry in American politics pitting a Democratic Party organized as a coalition of distinct social groups seeking benefits in the form of public policy against a Republican Party organized as a vessel for ideological conservatism.

For the Democrats, the very group-oriented log-rolling—at times reified in theories of pluralism and pragmatism—that can undercut the party’s capacity to articulate a coherent agenda provides a rationale for party mechanisms that provide connective tissue and an *esprit de corps* to the party’s coalition members. Since midcentury, when responsible partisanship left behind its Anglophiliac roots, liberals have proven its strongest adherents. As the Democratic Party now edges ever closer to the core dilemma of Western social democracy—how to sustain a working-class base while also attracting bourgeois votes (Przeworski and Sprague 1986)—the promise of responsible, integrative parties remains as potent and relevant as ever before to long-term prospects on the center-left.

Our read on the disarray visible within the hollow parties inclines us toward skepticism about the significance of Republicans’ alleged zeal, given that little in the way of ideological constraint appears to unite engaged Republican elites and the party’s base voters behind a shared program. The gap between the two proved ripe for exploitation in 2016, with explosive results.

For country’s sake, responsible conservative partisanship remains a worthy goal, even in the age of Trump. The Republican Party would have to move beyond showmanship and position-taking on the one hand and a narrowly regressive policy agenda on the other hand (Douthat and Salam 2008; Dionne 2014). A rejuvenated Republicanism could no longer cede its messages to talk radio, Fox News, and Breitbart. Responsible partisanship, at its best, restrains partisans’ worst impulses, muffling extreme voices and channeling energy toward the hard work of campaigning and governing. While political parties, even in democratic societies, can certainly

be harnessed for malign purposes, a revitalized GOP would, we argue, be better placed to redirect the party's agenda beyond donor demands to the task of strengthening the frayed bonds of family and civil society, and to broaden its electoral appeal beyond a politics of white status anxiety and racial and ethnic nationalism. Perhaps the center-right mass party can no longer answer populist discontent. That these statements sounds so exhortatory precisely emphasizes the distance between hollow and responsible partisanship in contemporary Republicanism. Yet whatever the prospects for a responsible conservative party, the alternatives on the right seem far, far worse. When parties are susceptible to donors and demagogues, democracy becomes susceptible to takeover and breakdown.

The connection between party organizations and the lived experience of ordinary Americans has frayed over time. So, too, party responsibility for the policy conflicts that structure the party system has likewise attenuated. This essay has sought to diagnose the correct problem with American political parties in a polarized age. Our vision of responsible parties as the solution to hollow parties is unavoidably hooded and suggestive, as is our notion of how to get from here to there. Stronger parties will not solve the dilemma posed by the ill fit between disciplined ideological partisanship and Madisonian institutions—though we suspect they would mitigate the potential for crisis. But strong parties will help to clarify the nature of the conflict and mobilize Americans to participate as responsible citizens. A great partisan era calls for parties without apology.

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## Appendix

### Data:

American National Election Studies, Time Series Cumulative Data File, 1948–2016.  
Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, [uselectionatlas.org](http://uselectionatlas.org).

### Procedure:

We include only respondents aged 25-64. Using the age variable (VCF0102), we drop all respondents younger than 25 (codes 0, 1) and older than 64 (codes 6, 7).

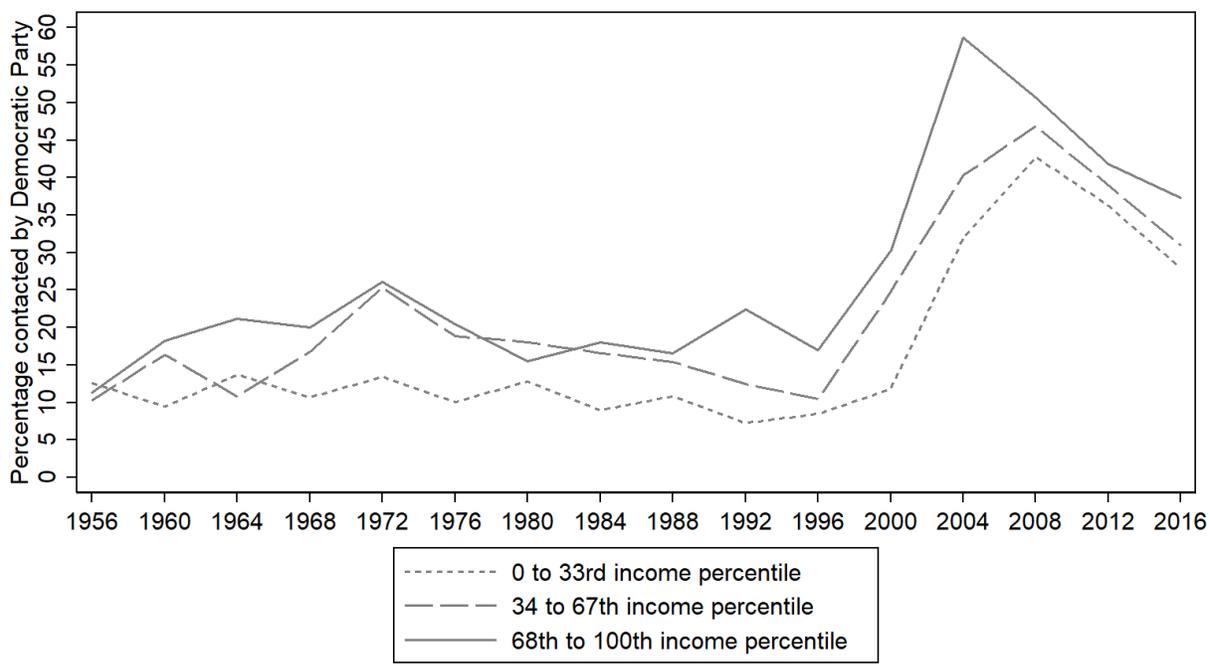
We recode the income variable (VCF0114) so that all respondents who are in the 0 to 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile of the income distribution displayed the same code (1, 2 to 1). We follow the same procedure for respondents in the 34<sup>th</sup> to 67<sup>th</sup> percentile (3 to 2) and in the 68<sup>th</sup> to 100<sup>th</sup> percentile (4, 5 to 3).

Battleground states are those with Partisan Voting Index (<http://cookpolitical.com/house/pvi>) whose absolute value is less than 5. Alaska and Hawaii in 1960 and 1964 and the District of Columbia in 1964 and 1968 are coded as non-battleground states.

For each year (VCF0004), for all three income groups, and for battleground and non-battlegrounds states, we plot the percentage of respondents who indicated that they were contacted by the Democratic Party (VCF9030b) and by the Republican Party (VCF9030c).

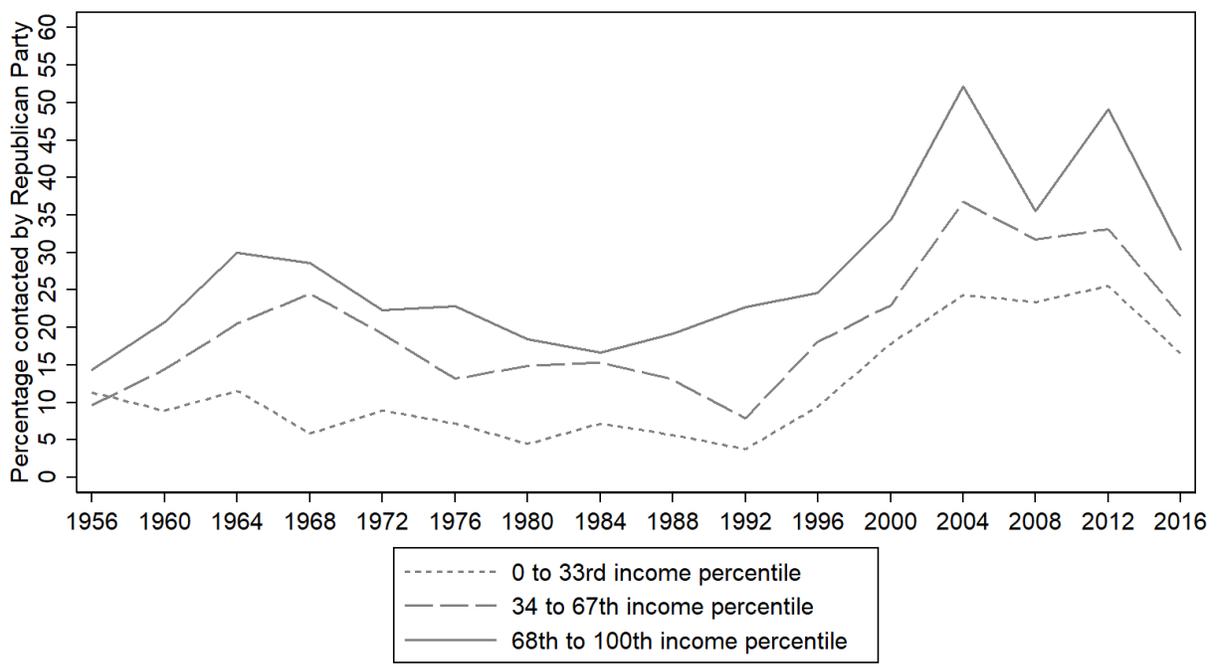
For 2012, we include the full sample (in-person and online). We employ sample weights (VCF0009z).

**Figure 1**  
**Contacting by Democrats in Battleground States, 1956-2016**



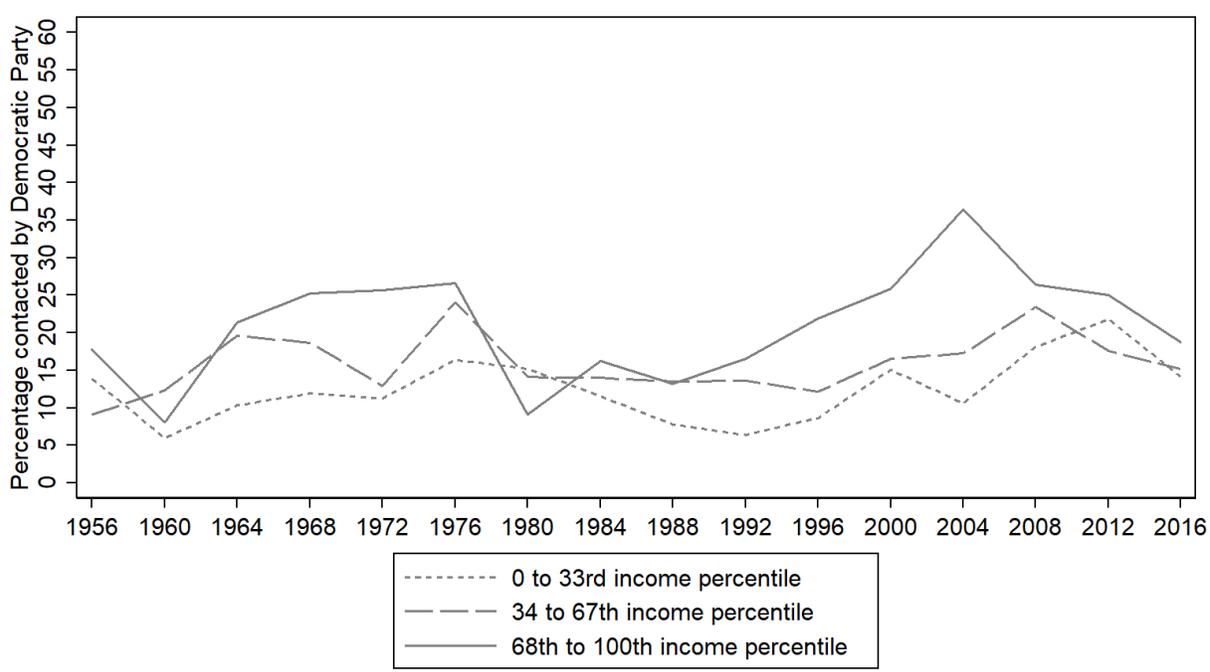
Source: American National Election Studies

**Figure 2**  
**Contacting by Republicans in Battleground States, 1956-2016**



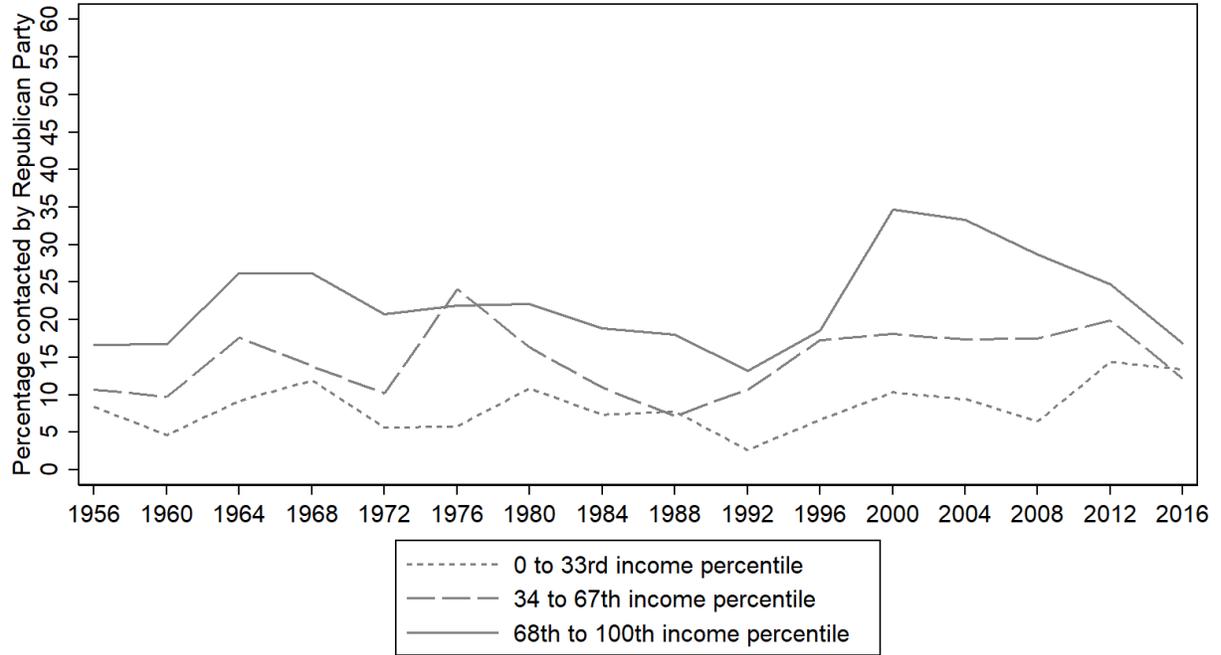
Source: American National Election Studies

**Figure 3**  
**Contacting by Democrats in Non-Battleground States, 1956-2016**



Source: American National Election Studies

**Figure 4**  
**Contacting by Republicans in Non-Battleground States, 1956-2016**



Source: American National Election Studies