

**FAILING PARTY ORGANIZATIONS:  
LESSONS FROM THE 2016 ELECTION**

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Loss by the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in 2016 and victory by an outsider to Republican politics who still became its standard bearer become less surprising when we focus on the organizational underpinnings of both parties and the role they played in the final outcome. That outcome reflects how those parties have been responding to changes in technology and methods of campaigning and to national and global economic forces as these affect the lives of population groups that can be crucial to their electoral success.

Cohen et al. (2008) argue that, through "invisible primaries," where partisan insiders in interest groups and state parties endorse presidential candidates, frontrunners are created before the actual primaries. It is such frontrunners who are then the party choices. Their argument is based on historical analyses but when these are extended to 2016, the latter election becomes a non-conforming one (Kurtzleben 2016). Hillary Clinton was the Democratic Party insiders' choice and she lost. Donald Trump was never a favorite of the Republican establishment and received no party endorsements until the primaries were well underway, yet he won the election. Steger (2013), in contrast to Cohen and associates, uses a different data set to suggest there has been a decline in the influence of party insiders since 2000.

Although the 2016 results were generally unexpected, they were not totally anomalous when viewed from the perspective of organizational analysis. The organizational apparatus of both parties has been undergoing changes that have made it less able to control electoral outcomes, particularly since the millennium. My approach to change and electoral outcomes (Schwartz 2011) began with a study of the Illinois Republican Party prior to the election of President Reagan (Schwartz 1990). There I introduced the concept of network to characterize how political parties were networks of relations among both official and unofficial components, whether individuals or groups, that adhere to a single label.

Three kinds of network actors can be identified, beginning with national, state, and local elected officeholders along with their election-oriented committees. A second category represents the party apparatus, consisting of salaried personnel plus officeholders elected in party primaries or caucuses who are charged with carrying out party activities.

The third category, made up of advisors, financial contributors, and interest groups, had not, in the past, been recognized as included in the party network. Yet the role of advisor has always been present in the form of trusted and loyal individuals offering advice to candidates and officeholders. Today, there is new emphasis on their technical skills appropriate to the changing complexity of campaigning and governing (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Grossman 2009). The older kind of advisor still exists and may or may not be paid for services offered. What makes an advisor, whether someone personally connected to a candidate, a professional campaign consultant, or a campaign staffer (Thurber and Nelson 2000), a member of the party network is that the services provided are solely for one party (Schwartz 1990: 39-40).

Similarly, inclusion in the party network as a financial contributor is reserved for individuals or groups who make large donations, usually not limited to a single electoral district, and primarily, if not exclusively, in support of one party (Schwartz 1990 40-41).

The category of interest group is a broad one and may, at times, be almost indistinguishable from a political party. But the two are analytically distinct because an interest group has functions or goals other than primarily electoral ones. An interest group becomes a participant in a party network when it directs its political activities solely or largely on behalf of that party (Schwartz 1990: 9). Heaney and Rojas (2015) point out that, in addition to interest groups, social movements can form within a party and become the “party in the street.”

The distinction between the official party apparatus and the larger party network is now widely recognized as critical to defining the total party organization. For example, Fishkin and Gergen (2016: 187) see party “as a loose coalition of diverse entities, some official and some not, organized around a popular national brand.”

My expectation that the 2016 results were foreshadowed by trends in party networks, discernable over approximately five decades, was stimulated by new and not always consistent evidence. One set of findings focuses on efforts to strengthen the party apparatus. For example, Galvin (2012) documents, from his research and that of others, how, over several decades, the Republican and Democratic national committees increased their investments in human resources and informational assets to become service providers to candidates for office. Galvin’s assessment leaves open questions about the evolution and relative strengths and weakness of both parties’ apparatus leading up to the 2016 election and how these contributed to its outcome.

Without discounting institutional changes in both parties that enhance the ability to gain electoral advantages, others argue for countervailing trends. Fishkin and Gerken (2015) see “shadow parties,” nominally independent but run by party insiders, now performing many tasks formerly the purview of the formal party apparatus. When I analyzed contacts among all actor types that were included in the Illinois Republican Party network, it was possible to develop a measure of network centrality. Approximately 40 years ago, the three most central collective actors were financial contributor, interest group, and advisor. That is, it was the unofficial wing of the party that already had the greatest impact. I would anticipate, then, that 2016 would be more of the same.

In his earlier research, Galvin (2010) showed how Republican presidents played a greater role in party building than did their Democratic counterparts, a theme that he reemphasizes in evaluating the Obama presidency (Galvin 2016). Because the presidency is available to only one party at a given time, possible influences from individual party actors can be expanded to include other officeholders, including candidates for those offices.

### **The Adaptive Party**

To locate and account for when and why party organizations fail requires beginning with a model of a working party that is not necessarily ideal or even unusually strong. I term this an adaptive party--one that displays the ability to alter itself and adapt to a continually changing environment (Schwartz 1990: 17). Building on previous research on parties, including my own, and theoretical insights from the organizational literature (e.g., Scott and Davis 2007), four characteristics are identified that capture the tensions parties face as they go about their job of nominating candidates for public office and mobilizing voters while, at the same time, presenting

and maintaining a message or theme that symbolizes the party's identity and sustains the loyalty of network members and voters.

At the most general level, the absence of any one of the four characteristics lowers the level of adaptability and curtails a party's ability to fulfill its responsibilities. But, for the most part, it is not so much whether an attribute is present or absent but whether it presents itself by being too much or too little. The ideal amount needed for optimum adaptability cannot be precisely defined. That imprecision is in line with the organizational perspective known as contingency theory, which posits that there is no best way to organize (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967). Yet some sense of what represents greater or lesser optimality should emerge from the following discussion.

### **Loose Coupling**

The first characteristic of an adaptive party is its loose coupling (Weik 1976; Orton and Weik 1990). Rather than being governed through a single hierarchical structure, loose coupling is necessary to hold together the disparate components of the party network and allow enough flexibility for each to respond to challenges encountered in its own environment. This means, as well, that the problems found in one arena, like specific Congressional districts or entire states, may be dealt with independently without affecting other arenas. Looseness allows new political actors to enter the party and become incorporated into the network. In the face of an uncertain environment, such looseness is a sign that the party is open to changing influences and sources of support.

Loosely coupled structures are often unstable. For example, the failure to achieve electoral victory may spur a push for tighter coupling. Such tightness may be effective in the short-run by giving the party a clearer focus and by turning aside the influence of newcomers

with their own agendas, especially when the latter attempt to exert their power in opposition to long-time network members. But, in the long-run, the tighter the coupling, the less adaptable the party is likely to become.

Coupling may also be too loose. This is signaled whenever the network proves inadequate in protecting a party's boundaries from penetration by disruptive incursions.

### **Meaning System**

An adaptive party is a cultural system which offers ways of interpreting the political world that set it apart from other parties. Culture provides the core of a party, "the soul that keeps its boundaries from being eroded" (Schwartz 1990: 282). It can be symbolized by a President or by presidential contenders (Alexander 2010); it is found in party platforms and in an ideology. Given the diverse actors within a party's network, diverse ideological emphases may also emerge, along with variations in commitment to any one of them. But just as with coupling, a party can have too little or too much ideology along with too much or too little commitment to existing meaning systems.

A party without a soul, so to speak, is one that exists without an identifiable brand that sets it apart from other parties. Such a situation may occur after electoral defeat, to be followed by efforts by various party actors to establish a more or less coherent identity that symbolizes what the party stands for. But that search can also lead to tensions within the party, as different voices vie for dominance.

Over-commitment to any single ideology leads to unwillingness to compromise, making for inflexible relations within the network, with potential supporters, and, it goes without saying, with the opposing party. The result is that the direction ideology ordinarily gives to a party and its usefulness in rallying support becomes a source of bitter conflict.

## **Goal-directed**

Overall, the adaptive party is a rational, goal-directed body, always searching for ways to enhance its electoral advantage. When organizational theorists speak of rationality, they have in mind the efficiencies that come from dividing work into coherent tasks, assigning personnel based on training and competence, and linking elements through free information flows. In parties, such rationality is demonstrated when new techniques of organizing and campaigning are employed, aimed at mobilizing an increased share of the electorate. Additionally, rationality is signaled by a search for and selection of candidates who appear most likely to win.

Yet, just as in the case of limits on loose coupling or on an organizing theme, there can be either too much or too little emphasis on apparent efficiency (March and Simon 1958). Too much may lead to excessive attachment to established routines and to established party actors. The latter may be manifested by underestimating the potential contributions of political entrepreneurs who come from outside the usual pool of candidates or contributors (Schwartz 1990: 281) or to the effects of changing trends in population groups and their interests, processes that can lead to inefficiencies in a party's orientation to the future.

One example of how candidate selection can affect a party's goal direction is when an individual who has gained fame in some other capacity, like sports, then turns to run for office. The formal party retains some control over such a person when it invites him or her to run. The clearest example is General Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose renown as a wartime military commander was the basis for his recruitment as a presidential candidate by the Republican Party. The military as a training ground for political office has some precedent but it has been overtaken by sports, television, and the movies. For example, Jesse Ventura achieved initial

celebrity in professional wrestling, then the movies, before running successfully for governor of Minnesota on the Reform Party ticket.

Up to 2016, the most notable translation of celebrity status into presidential office was made by Ronald Reagan, who went from the movies to television announcing before entering politics. Yet he had already gained some political experience while an actor by serving as president of the Screen Actors Guild. He began as a Democrat but became increasingly conservative, publically supporting Barry Goldwater in 1964. His interest in running for office now intersected with interest from the Republican Party and led to his election as governor of California in 1966 and 1970. He was an unsuccessful candidate as the Republican candidate for the presidency in 1968 and 1976 but prevailed in 1980, when he was elected President.

Although Reagan is an example of how celebrity status can be used to penetrate the party network, his cumulative journey still took place within the context of normal party politics. He was, in other words, clearly identifiable as a Republican. The true challenge to the party network comes from celebrity candidates who bring with them their own resources and who can then direct the party in new directions.

### **Power System**

Finally, an adaptive party is a system of power, able to exert its authority internally to keep the network aimed at winning elections and, externally, able to gather resources with which to control the uncertainty that is intrinsic to its environment (Schwartz 1990: 291). On the surface, it may be difficult to conceive of a party having too much power. But because the range of actors within the network also ensures that there are multiple centers of power, able to call on their own stock of resources, this raises the potential for internecine struggle over resources. An adaptive party will then be one that recognizes the need for limits on the uses of power to control



network members. Like finding the most effective level of loose coupling, an adaptive party searches for the best routes to acquiring resources without unduly constricting particular network members from their own independent searches.

The implications of too little power, either for the network as whole or for any of its components, are clearer. Weaknesses in power mean limits on how effectively the party is able to mobilize resources of money, influence, and support. An adaptive party forges long-term connections with supportive interest groups and financial contributors without becoming subordinate to them.

### **The Electoral Environment**

Parties operate in national and subnational, civic, institutional, and electoral environments that present constraints on and opportunities for gaining resources. I examine one relevant aspect of this resource dependence (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), found in the electoral environment and created by the need for supportive voters. Over time, voters in particular states and regions, of different racial and ethnic origins, religions, genders, and class positions have demonstrated loyal support for one of the two major parties. But events affecting these demographic groups can shake up old loyalties and lead to new ones. Perhaps the best known example is the move from the solid South attached to the Democrats to one now in the Republican camp. For this discussion, I confine myself to those demographic voting patterns current just prior to the 2016 election since they made up the scenarios encountered by each party as it evaluated its opportunities for winning.

It has become commonplace to divide the country into Red and Blue states according to whether they vote mainly Republican or Democratic. Measures vary according to whether they are based on presidential vote, Electoral College vote, party identification, or cumulative state-

wide measures based on other offices. In essence, they all point to a cleavage where Republican majorities predominate in the South and heartland and Democratic ones do so in the northeast and along the Pacific coast. Although Red states currently outnumber Blue ones, it is the Blue ones that have larger numbers of voters and thus more Electoral College votes. In efforts to gain more votes, adaptive parties need to assess both the relative stability of past loyalties and the current vulnerability of states that had recently voted for the opposing party. In engaging in such an exercise, it is especially useful to simultaneously take account of those demographic characteristics that enhance or decrease vulnerability to changing partisanship.

If the Republicans had done such an assessment, even without taking into account specific presidential candidates or contenders, they would have felt secure in all their usual party strongholds. In addition, states that had voted Democratic in the past but now showed signs that their attachment had weakened were Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania while Florida, a state that would be won by the Republicans in 2016 by a thin margin, had become a more volatile setting.

Additional signals of new or enhanced opportunities for the Republicans among disgruntled voters could be found in a number of economic and racial/ethnic indicators. Based on an analysis of census data by the Economic Innovation Group, the 10 most economically distressed cities included 4 already in the Republican fold plus 3 others—Youngstown in Ohio and Flint and Detroit in Michigan—that would swing to that party (Florida and Bendix 2016). Those measures of distress were reflected in evolving alignments in class voting. Blue collar workers, who have been most affected by changes in the U.S. economy and who were once the most stalwart supporters of the Democrats, had, since the 1970s, been increasingly switching to the Republicans (Hout and Laurison 2014: 1040). Another sign of that changing alignment was

a widened educational divide, with those with a college degree overwhelmingly favoring Hillary Clinton (Suls 2016). Without even distinguishing by partisanship or social class, we can infer further symptoms of distress among those white Americans who have come to favor the Republicans by their group's increased morbidity and mortality since the millennium, of which a notable portion comes from suicides and drug overdoses (Case and Deaton 2015).

In contrast, there was clear cause for alarm for the Democrats, again without even considering candidates or contenders. Not only had the uneven patterns of economic recovery opened the party to the discontent roiling its once loyal supporters in the working class but the absence of a presidential candidate with a galvanizing effect on African-American voters introduced new uncertainty about the participation rates of those voters. Results of the 2016 election later confirmed the lower turnout of blacks (Mellnik et al. 2017). Although the population of the United States is anticipated to become increasingly non-white (e.g., Iceland 2017), a trend expected to be advantageous to the Democrats, it remains, like the participation rates of blacks specifically, affected by a lower propensity to vote. Moreover, the discontent of white voters has a strong racist component that augments partisan divisions (DiTomaso 2017).

Another relevant electoral cleavage is associated with religion, ranging from 70 percent of Mormons who identify with the Republicans to 92 percent of African Methodist Episcopal Church members who are allied with the Democrats. Religious minorities tend to be generally Democratic as do those without any formal religion. White Protestant Evangelicals are mainly Republican and mainline Protestants and Catholics are divided more or less equally between the two parties (Lipka 2016). This distribution of partisanship occurs at the same time as white Christians have become a religious minority (Shepard 2017). What religion, like race/ethnicity, brings to the fore is the changing character of the United States with its new threats to the

ascendancy of what were the dominant groups in the society and renewed sources of opposition to political changes, particularly those associated with morality politics (e.g. Schwartz and Tatalovich 2018).

Gender and age also divide Republicans and Democrats. In general, Republicans have done more poorly among women and younger voters. Since 1980, a majority of women have voted for the Democrats and have higher rates of turnout than men (Chaturvedi 2016; Center for American Women and Politics 2017). For younger voters, however, while a leaning toward Democrats is clear (Fischer and Hout 2006: 235-6), it has been offset by a lower rate of turnout compared to older voters (Schlozman et al. 2012: 199-231).

One could assume that this brief overview of the electoral environment would normally be assessed by party organizations in finer detail. Yet such information is often open to different interpretations and to different evaluations of significance. What are seen either as obstacles too difficult to overcome or as opportunities for gaining new resources interact with the characteristics of each party's network. How challenges are evaluated and acted on then become a way for assessing party adaptability.

## **Meeting Environmental Challenges**

### **Loose Coupling**

In my model of the adaptive party, I argue that some degree of loose coupling is necessary to allow enough flexibility to meet changing conditions, both in general and in their own locale, and to attract new network members and supporters. This conception of loose coupling fits well with Epstein's (1986) characterization of U.S. parties as porous—open to the penetration of new supporters and new interests. Going into the 2016 election, each party

demonstrated differing amounts of openness and cohesion as demonstrated by the presidential candidates that emerged and the interest groups and social movements that found it a congenial home.

Most looseness was demonstrated most by the Republicans. This became apparent in the large number of candidates--17 in all--that presented themselves during the primaries. Of these, five were current or former U.S. Senators and nine were former or current state governors. The remaining three came from business or the professions. Party insiders--those network actors who make up the party apparatus, hold key legislative positions, or constitute the informal core of the network--had already picked a former governor, Jeb Bush, as the choice for President. His lack of broader support from the larger network invited challenge from the eleven others with political experience who were, in effect, dismissing the claim of insiders to anoint a new leader. The remaining three candidates who came, in varying degrees, from outside the party—Carson, Fiorina, and Trump—showed even less inclination to respect insiders' authority.

The looseness of network ties indicated by the array of presidential candidates was even more evident from the variety of interests that had already penetrated the network. Among them are evangelical Christians, the Tea Party (Almeida and Van Dyke 2014; Williamson 2012), pro-life activists, libertarians, federalists, big business interests, sympathetic media outlets. These were augmented during the 2016 campaign by the so-called alt right that was advancing the cause of white nationalism (Schwartz 2016; Marantz 2016). To the extent that these and similar groups are committed to a policy agenda, they ensure that the Republican Party will be steered in their direction even when they come in conflict with each other and, especially, with more pragmatic congressional leaders.

Like Republican insiders, Democratic ones also were attracted to the potential of a dynastic standard bearer, in their case, a wife rather than a son and brother. In this, the Democrats were more successful in elevating their choice to be the favored presidential candidate and to reducing the full primary slate to six. All the candidates, with the exception of Larry Lessig, a Harvard professor, had governing experience in either the U.S. Senate or as state governors. Of those, only Bernie Sanders would remain in the race until the end despite pressure to step aside. Sanders, who ran as an Independent in home town races for mayor and then for Congress, caucused with the Democrats and was rewarded by them with committee appointments. In entering the primary race for President, he did so as a Democrat, but one only loosely attached to the party. It was this candidacy that most clearly revealed the extent of loose coupling in the Democratic organization.

Democratic Party boundaries were also stronger than Republican ones, at least in keeping out disruptive competing interests. This is not to say that the party network had not been penetrated by a variety of groups, from trade unions to civil rights, feminist, and racial/ethnic organizations and including some business interests, particularly those associated with high tech industries. Many had a long history of attachment to the Democrats and their agendas had a well-established place in the party's campaign promises. But, in the sense that the Democrats represented a more tightly coupled organization than did the Republicans, it was also a sign of their weakness, a weakness that would be exploited by Sanders, able to tap into otherwise under-represented progressive interests, hungry for change.

## **Meaning System**

Evaluations of both parties during the 2016 election often focused on how well each presented an overriding theme or message, able to attract resources of people and money. One party had a clear and strong message; the other conveyed the opposite.

The Republican Party has, over time, presented a consistent conservative ideology, legitimated during the 1964 election by Barry Goldwater (Wildavsky 1965), reinforced under the guidance of Newt Gingrich in 1982 (Petrocik and Steeper 2010), and further established through the actions of the Tea Party movement (Williamson et al. 2011). To a considerable degree, in 2016, every presidential candidate brought with him or her some portion of that existing ideology. Although some conservatives in the party network were disparaging of Donald Trump's attachment to their core values, in the end they saw no alternative to supporting him because of their shared ideology. For example, an ethnographic study of Tea Party members during the primaries and through the campaign found that their eventual willingness to support Trump was linked to shared perspectives on immigration, taxes, and national security (Yates 2017). In addition, Trump's slogan of "Let's make America great again," both echoed a similar message that came from Ronald Reagan's campaign and tapped into voters' strong identification with nationalism. Based on data from the 2004 GSS and compared to data from 1996 and 2012, Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) probed the varieties of nationalist sentiment. Almost two-thirds of their sample revealed views that narrowed the definition of who should be considered a "true American" to Christians and the native-born as the most favored representatives of the nation. Supporters of such positions could be found in both parties but Republicans dominated those with the most extreme views.

Compared to the Republican Party, the Democrats have, historically, been more diverse and more affected by their local components (Schwartz 2011: 48), sometimes leading to

internally incompatible or competing positions on issues (e.g., Frymer 2008). Grossman and Hopkins (2015: 120) present the two parties as fundamentally different.

The Republican Party is best viewed as the agent of an ideological movement whose members are united by a common devotion to the principle of limited government. . . . In contrast, the Democratic Party is properly understood as a coalition of social groups whose interests are served by various forms of government activity.

The historical attachment of some groups to the Democratic Party would not remain stable. The Viet Nam War and the cultural revolution of the 1960s and '70s had driven away longstanding support from working class and Catholic voters while the effects of the civil rights movement would alienate whites in the South (Manza and Brooks 1999). Yet the seriousness of these defections did little to inspire any countervailing ideological message. More modestly, beginning in 2005, party insiders began exploring new ways to frame issues and events (Bai 2005). Candidate Obama's call for change in 2008, though vague, still had some emotional resonance that would help in mobilizing support (Lemann 2009). But however unifying his message had been initially, it eventually lost its utility. By the time of the 2016 election, no alternative themes had appeared and it was left to the candidates to create them.

Hillary Clinton is alleged to have been torn in choosing from among three alternatives: to present herself as continuing either Bill Clinton's or Obama's administration or come up with a new direction. Her early speechwriters, Joe Favreau (who had worked for President Obama) and Lissa Muscatine (who had worked for Clinton) were soon dismayed. They were said to conclude that the campaign suffered from "tangled lines of authority, petty jealousies, distorted priorities, and no sense of greater purpose. No one was in charge, and no one had figured out



how to make the campaign about something bigger than Hillary” (Allen and Parnes 2017: 13.) Whatever message was conveyed was limited to the benefits of Clinton’s prior experience and the value of electing a woman as President. Meanwhile, her one serious challenger, Bernie Sanders, had no difficulty in formulating a populist appeal centered on income inequality and the need for campaign finance reform.

At the same time as the Democratic Party continued to show its aversion to ideology and its difficulty finding a unifying theme under the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, the Republican Party displayed its weakness in having too much ideology in the sense of increasing polarization within the society (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Even before Donald Trump entered the political arena, the advantages Republicans had acquired through their clear message also opened questions about how long aspects of that message about immigrants, non-whites, and the economically disadvantaged could continue without negative consequences for its electoral future (e.g. Skocpol 2012). The more recent addition of the alt-right’s perspective to the Republicans’ mix of messages has made those questions about the future of the party even more pertinent (Green 2017). Under President Trump, ideology is seriously dividing his own party, preventing the passage of legislation and antagonizing Republican congressmen both to the left (Martin and Landler 2017) and right (Martin and Burns 2017; Flake 2017) of him.

### **Goal-Directed Rationality**

In explaining earlier what I meant by a rational, goal-directed party, I spent most time considering the effects of recruiting presidential candidates from within the existing network or allowing the entry of outsiders, an issue that also bears on the degree of loose coupling. Rationality comes into play in the interaction between the apparatus/party insiders and potential

candidates as it affects finding the most effective candidate. For insiders, the choice lies in locating the candidate most likely to win while not alienating others whose eventual support will be needed.

To influential Democrats, the choice of Hillary Clinton was a relatively easy one. She had the experience of election to the Senate from a critical state; prior participation in a presidential primary race, though one she lost; admirable performance as secretary of state; and even familiarity with life in the White House. She was strongly connected to many in the Democratic network, among whom were major donors and fund-raisers (Confessore, et al. 2015). She also had some known negative attributes but these were apparently dismissed (Cohen 2015) even though they would become important during the campaign. Some found her unlikable and, from her performance when her husband was President, a poor administrator when she attempted to develop a health care policy. Her opponents found ammunition with which to attack her judgment from her service as secretary of state because of her use of a private email server and from actions during the Libyan embassy siege. Others would attack her for her close ties to Wall Street. But none of that seemed to matter to Democratic decision-makers.

Another establishment candidate on the Democratic side who might have been a viable contender was Joe Biden. As Vice President in the Obama administration, he could have followed the path of other vice presidents who have gone on to seek the higher office. But early in the onset of the campaign, when it was apparent that he had already lost the momentum needed to obtain the best staff and the best access to funding (Allen and Parnes 2017: 70-9), he dropped out.

Bernie Sanders, a more serious Democratic contender, entered the race specifically because he was unhappy with how the party establishment was defining the issues by anointing Hillary Clinton as its favorite. As an outsider, he operated without concern about how the policies he advocated might conflict with those of others in the party network. His ability to attract media attention, enthusiastic support, and substantial money from many small donors soon meant that the party establishment had to take him seriously. He became a more central network actor because of his access to these multiple resources but also a source of concern over the issues he advocated and whether he would support the party's winning candidate and bring his supporters with him. Sanders's candidacy would then challenge the boundaries of organizational rationality.

On the Republican side, insiders saw Jeb Bush as the most feasible candidate. He had experience as a governor, strong name recognition, access to major funding, general likability, and identification with the less strident forms of conservatism. Other experienced politicians running in the primaries had drawbacks in one or more of these respects. Network openness to entrepreneurial outsiders can then be a sign of rational responsiveness to a changing electoral environment if it produces a winner. But Donald Trump, coming from beyond the usual road to candidacy, did not appear to have that potential. In fact, Trump was highly disruptive of normal party procedures and relationships (Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017). Yet, in the end, though the organization suffered, the party won the presidency.

In addition to candidate choice, organizational rationality has other components that affect efficiency. Most relevant is how election campaigns are run. But in this regard, there has been little difference between the two parties. Both have become essential service providers for candidates (Galvin 2012), both have been affected by the enlarged sources of funding that go

directly to candidates and reduce the parties' organizational impact , both have come to rely on professional advisors and campaign managers (Laurison 2017a; Schwartz 2011: 44), and both have responded to the opportunities opened by electronic media. But beyond those similarities, organizational rationality is altered through the agency of specific candidates and their campaigns, as happened with those of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

Clinton's campaign has been subject to close scrutiny and strong criticism. It appears to have been an over-professionalized organization, with too many advisors, leading both to infighting and strong pressure for consensus. Along with a candidate reluctant to move beyond her comfort zone and commitment to a model that downgraded campaigning on the ground (Allen and Parnes (2017: 597-8), local Democrats saw problems that remained unmet. For example, according to Virgie Rollins, DNC member and chair emerita of the Michigan Democratic Women's Caucus, "When you don't reach out to community folk and reach out to precinct campaigns and district organizations that know where the votes are, then you are going to have problems" (Dovere 2016).

Not as much is known about the details of the Trump campaign. The candidate entered the race as a virtual outsider to the Republican Party, whom party insiders were initially reluctant to endorse. He was a media celebrity inexperienced in electoral politics who introduced an unprecedented level of coarseness and animosity into national politics. Once he gave the leadership of his campaign to Steve Bannon, this gave Bannon the opportunity to introduce his version of ethnic nationalism and deliberately disrupt political expectations (Green 2017). Yet, at the same time, it appeared to some Republican advisors that the Trump campaign was relatively traditional in its approach to campaign basics (Laurison 2017b).

My summary assessment of how well the parties adapted to changing environments by following the path of organizational rationality sees opposing strengths and weakness in each. The Democrats were inclined to over-rationalize, limiting opportunities for new and exciting candidates to energize the party and sticking too closely to a formal model of how campaigns should be run (Allen and Parnes 2017: 397-8). The Republicans, in contrast, were under-rationalizers, making it too easy for outside candidates to disrupt the party and impose new approaches to campaigning.

### **Power System**

An adaptive party has the capacity to use its power to reduce the uncertainty that accompanies every election by mobilizing resources of support and money and channeling them to ensure the election of its candidates. Today, a party's ability to raise significant sums has been seriously undercut by the rise of super PACs with their own agendas that support specific candidates. In the last election, based on information given to the Federal Election Commission, super PACs raised \$615 million in support of campaigns while candidates reported raising \$1,463 billion (Center for Responsive Politics 2017). Money as a usable resource has now shifted from both parties' central committees and senatorial and congressional party committees to a different locus in the party network, the one I designated as "financial contributor." One important result of that shift is less central control over candidates and their campaigns,

Money is used to pay for staff, office and travel expenses, and publicity, usually in the form of media ads. In the past election, Clinton raised almost twice as much as Trump, who, in contrast, aided his campaign by sizable contributions of his own money and other personal resources (Allison et al. 2016). The unexpected element was how Trump's television career

created his celebrity status that then became convertible into a political resource (Nussbaum 2017). His every antic--denigrating opponents; bragging of his achievements, even those entailing sexual harassment; telling unapologetic falsehoods—gave him “earned media” in the form of unpaid coverage, estimated to have been worth two billion dollars by the middle of the primary season (Confessore and Yourish 2016).

If money was not a major resource usable by the official parties, there was another, even more formidable, resource to be found in loyal electoral support. Who those voters are has changed over time so I look only at group attachments as they appeared before the 2016 election. The Democratic Party was home to blacks, other racial/ethnic minorities, professionals, students declining numbers of trade unionists, and regional strongholds in the Northeast, the west coast, and big cities. But this combination of demographic characteristics with the issues that helped bring them together contributed to giving the party an elitist image (Edsall and Edsall 1992: 5) that accompanied the continuing loss of support from the white working class (Teixeira and Rogers 2000). Nancy DiTomaso (2017) gives a grave evaluation of current fissures.

The problem in the Democratic Party has not been that they have forgotten the white working class, but rather than they have not been able to resolve the internal conflict within the Party to create a policy agenda that is mutually beneficial to both the white working class and race and ethnic minorities, who perceive themselves as competing with each other over access to good jobs. Each group has made demands on the Democratic Party that suggest they feel that their interests have been sacrificed for the sake of the other constituency, and professionals and students with the Democratic Party have contributed to this internal party conflict, by siding first with the civil rights wing of the party against those representing the white working class, and then more recently siding

ostensibly with the white working class against the “identity politics” attributed to those concerned with civil and social rights.

According to the foregoing assessments, what the party could offer Clinton by way of commitment from demographic groups was somewhat shaky. This was compounded by the competition she faced from Bernie Sanders among the young and those attuned to a progressive agenda (Cohen 2015). Although Debbie Wasserman Schultz, chair of the DNC, responded by trying to undermine Sanders’s appeal, revelations of her actions, discovered by hacking of DNC emails and made public by WikiLeaks, generated an internal party crisis. It also brought into question whether Sanders and his youthful followers would go on to support Clinton (Allen and Parnes 2017: 263). In the end, the failure to mobilize turnout by blacks and Hispanics, especially in key states (Mellnik et. al 2017), contributed to the failures of Clinton’s campaign.

The Republican Party could, in contrast, give a more stable level of support to a candidate running under its label in the South, Southwest, and the Midwest. It had committed support from conservative Christians, whites, the more prosperous, and those who lived in small towns and rural areas. Showing compatibility with Trump’s expressed views were those self-identified Republicans who had become increasingly more likely to oppose government action in the economy (Baldassarri and Park 2016). The party operated in a climate where anti-immigrant sentiment was high and accompanied racist resentment (Tesler 2016). Most critically, Trump’s victory brought together the Republican base, including Evangelicals who might be presumed to have been put off by the candidate’s language and behavior (Gorski 2017). It had exploited nationalist and populist sentiments but without transforming the party into one that primarily represented the economically depressed (Atkins 2016; Manza and Crowley 2018; Melnik et al. 2017).

## **Assessing Organizational Adaptivity**

My purpose in this paper is to review and assess the role of party organizations in contributing to the outcome of the 2016 election. It is clearly not possible to make a sharp distinction between the behavior of the candidates and their own organizations from the parties themselves when the presidential candidates are the foremost representatives of their party. But premised on conceptualizing a political party as a network of relations among a variety of individual and collective actors under the same label, presidential candidates and the President himself, along with entourage, become one unit in that network. Components of the network as a whole can then be assessed with respect to how well they contribute to adapting to their environment and, ultimately, facilitating the election of the party's presidential candidate.

Loose coupling is a characteristic of US political parties but they can vary in how such coupling takes shape. The Democratic network was judged to be too tightly coupled by making the nomination of Hillary Clinton a foregone conclusion. Instead of allowing a range of candidates to emerge who could bring new messages and new support or energize old ones, she faced serious opposition only from Bernie Sanders, coming from the party's periphery.

In contrast, the Republican network was too loosely coupled, permitting entry from a broad range of contenders and quickly forestalling opportunities for the formal party to make its choice dominant. That loose coupling, instead, became the avenue for Donald Trump, unmoored from the party network and from political experience, to become the successful contender.

A similar assessment can be made about each party's ability to present a comprehensive and unifying theme, spelling out its brand. On one side, the Democrats have been unable to generate such an appealing message at least since the 1960s although this has not always



prevented it from winning the presidency. Sanders was notable for his clear message but only modestly successful in persuading party officials to adopt portions of it into the party platform. More critically, Clinton was never able to find an appealing message that made a mark during the campaign.

The Republican case was the extreme opposite. Although there has been a history of a core conservative ideology, it has been elaborated by the addition of many more themes, ranging from nationalist, small government, anti-regulatory, states' rights, moralistic Christian, to anti-immigrant and related ones. Any Republican candidate then had an array of ready-made messages on which to build a campaign and Trump's campaign incorporated some of the more extreme themes to his advantage. Although an excess of ideology could be anticipated to divide party supporters, its presence in 2016 was used effectively to mobilize support from, for example, Evangelicals, Tea Party supporters, and disgruntled working class voters who might otherwise find Trump an unattractive candidate. Rather than being foreign to the mainstream of Republican values, Trump's message was, in this respect, a reflection of what already existed (Mast 2017).

The adaptive capacity of a rationally organized, goal-directed party is premised on its capacity to find the most efficient means to mobilize voters and select winning candidates. By these criteria, both parties displayed weaknesses. The Democrats' inner circle, in a sense, over-rationalized by picking Hillary Clinton as its candidate too early in the electoral cycle. Although the Republicans did the same in their choice of Jeb Bush, they quickly lost control over candidate selection and ended up with one with only modest ties to the official party. Shifting attention to each nominated candidate's own organization, the Democrats' rigidity continued. It is true that Clinton won substantially more popular voters than did her opponent, but her

campaign's assessment of where to put resources failed to anticipate how much the final outcome would depend on the Electoral College—a failure in organizational rationality. In contrast, even with an uncontrollable candidate, the Trump organization found the key to victory.

Finally, an adaptive party is one able to obtain and deploy resources in ways most beneficial to it. Money has always been an important resource but I tended to be dismissive of how powerful a role money now plays in the activities of the party apparatus, given the diffusion of fund-raising capacity to other party units and the growing influence of the largely free new social media. Money may even have lost some of its power in the campaign process. For Trump, it was both the social media and his celebrity status that gave him “earned credit” from the old media without requiring payment. Together, that gave him a substantial, if not overwhelming, advantage.

More critical even than money is the existence of a loyal social base that can be mobilized to vote for the party candidate, regardless of who has that position. The Democratic base has been eroding despite opportunities to expand among minorities and immigrants. The Clinton campaign was not as effective in mobilizing even its known support and faced uncertainty in winning over Sanders's base. The Republican base has become firmer and passed on this advantage to the Trump campaign.

Donald Trump's victory and Hillary Clinton's defeat were the result of multiple facts. One that should not be neglected is the contribution made by each party's organizational network in effecting that outcome. If both parties demonstrated weakness in the ability to adapt to a changing environment, overall, it was the Democratic Party that revealed most shortcomings.

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