

The Parties' National Organizations

Several decades ago, the national organizations of both major parties were like many college students: chronically short of cash and searching for new housing. Their small staffs moved back and forth between New York and Washington, and their activity was visible mainly during presidential campaigns. Leading students of the national committees could accurately describe them as “politics without power.”¹ The real power in the party system was decentralized, collected in the local party organizations.

There is good reason why the parties have long been decentralized, as Chapter 3 indicated. Almost all American public officials are chosen in state and local elections; even the voting for president is conducted mainly under state election laws. In years past, most of the incentives parties had to offer, such as patronage jobs, were available at the state and local levels, and the state governments have been the chief regulators of parties. All these forces have given the parties a powerful state and local focus that can restrain any centralization within the party organizations. So state and local party organizations have chosen their own officers, taken their own stands on issues, and raised and spent their own funds, usually without much interference from the national party.

In recent years, however, both parties have responded to the powerful nationalizing forces that have affected most other aspects of American politics. Since the 1970s, the two parties have reacted to a series of challenges by strengthening their national committees. Their resources and staffs have grown; both the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC) are now multimillion-dollar fund-raising and candidate-support operations. They have taken on new activities and influence, and the Democrats have limited the independence of state and local organizations in selecting delegates to the parties' national conventions.

The change has been remarkable. Only in the earliest years of the American parties, when presidential candidates were nominated by congressional caucuses, were the national parties as important in American politics. Although the local pull remains strong, the distribution of power among the national, state, and local parties is now more balanced than ever before. This chapter will examine the effects of this increase in national party power.

THE NATIONAL PARTIES

What is the national party? Officially, each major party's supreme national authority is the *national convention* it holds every four years to nominate a presidential candidate. However, the convention rarely does more than to select the presidential and vice-presidential nominees and approve the party's platform and rules. Between conventions, the two parties' main governing bodies are their national committees.

The National Committees

Each party's *national committee* is a gathering of representatives from all its state parties; its leaders run the national party on a daily basis. Their main focus is to help elect the party's presidential candidate. They also distribute polls and policy information, work with state parties, and assist in other races by recruiting and training candidates and helping them raise money. Both national committees have a long history: The Democrats created theirs in 1848 and the Republicans in 1856. For years, every state (and some territories, such as Samoa and Guam) was represented equally on both national committees, regardless of the size of its voting population or the extent of its party support. California and Wyoming, then, had equal-sized delegations to the national party committees, just as they do in the U.S. Senate, even though California has a population of about 37 million and Wyoming's is about 550,000. That system overrepresented the smaller states and also gave roughly equal weight in the national committees to the winning and the losing parts of the party. In practice, this strengthened the southern and western segments of each party, which tended to be more conservative.

Since 1972, when the Democrats revised the makeup of their national committee, the parties have structured their committees differently. After briefly experimenting with unequal state representation in the 1950s, the Republicans have kept their traditional confederational structure by giving each of the state and territorial parties three seats on the RNC. In contrast, the DNC, now almost three times the size of its Republican counterpart, gives weight both to population and to party support in representing the states. California, for example, has 21 seats on the DNC, and Wyoming has 4. This change reduced the influence of conservatives and moderates within the DNC.

The two national committees also differ in that the Democrats give national committee seats to representatives of groups especially likely to support Democratic candidates, such as blacks, women, and labor unions—a decision that shows the importance of these groups to the party—as well as to associations of elected officials, such as the National Conference of Democratic Mayors. National committee members in both parties are chosen by the state parties and, for the Democrats, by these other groups as well.

National Party Chairs

The national committee's chair and the staff he or she chooses are the heart of the national party organization. Members of the full national committees come

together only two or three times a year, mainly to call media attention to the party and its candidates. Officially, the national committees have the power to select their own leaders. By tradition, however, a party's presidential candidate can name his or her party's national chair for the duration of the presidential campaign, and the committee ratifies this choice without question. The national chair chosen by the winning presidential candidate usually keeps his or her job after the election, at least until the president picks someone else. Thus, in practice, only the "out" party's national committee actually selects its own chair.² In both parties, fund-raising is the chair's most important job (see box "Show them the Money" on this page).

Show Them the Money

The main responsibilities of a national party chair are to raise lots of money for the party and build or maintain an effective campaign apparatus. Michael Steele, the first black Republican National Committee chair (2009–2011), served during a period of exceptional election success for Republicans. But that wasn't enough to make up for Steele's weakness in fund-raising. He raised much less money than had previous RNC chairs and burned through those funds quickly with lavish spending, raising charges of mismanagement. He also alarmed party activists by criticizing Rush Limbaugh, expressing pro-choice views (in opposition to his party's platform), and stepping on congressional party leaders' toes. Several of the RNC's biggest donors warned that they would not keep raising money if Steele continued in office. So when Steele campaigned for a second two-year term in 2011, the RNC said no. Reince Priebus, the former Wisconsin Republican chair, was elected instead. His first challenge was to pay off the \$24 million debt the RNC had incurred under Steele's leadership. Priebus understood his mandate; he raised \$3.5 million in his first two weeks on the job and promised to focus on rebuilding relationships with major donors.

Priebus's counterpart at the Democratic National Committee was former Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, a close associate of President Obama, who appointed him to the post. Kaine's tenure earned better reviews than Steele's; he traveled frequently and held fund-raisers in most states. Although he was criticized by some for his unwillingness to go on the attack, his cooperative style helped to smooth relationships when the Obama grassroots campaign organization, "Obama for America," was renamed "Organizing for America" (OFA) and moved into the DNC. Some state party leaders worried that OFA would operate independently of the state party structure, but Kaine managed a fairly peaceful transition, in which the DNC took on many of the characteristics of OFA. Kaine resigned in 2011 to run for an open U.S. Senate seat, and Obama appointed U.S. House member Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a highly skilled fund-raiser, to replace him.

Sources: See Jeff Zeleny, "G.O.P. Elects a New Chairman as Steele Drops Out," *New York Times*, January 15, 2011, p. A1; and Ben Smith, "Tim Kaine," *Politico*, October 26, 2010, at <http://hamptonroads.com/2010/10/tim-kaine-dnc-chair-nice-guy-nasty-time> (accessed March 22, 2011).

Presidents and Their National Parties

Presidents came to dominate their national committees early in the twentieth century and especially since the 1960s. In the president's party, then, the national committee's role is whatever the president wants it to be. James W. Ceaser cites the example of Robert Dole, RNC chair from 1971 to 1973, who was quickly fired by the president when Dole tried to put a little distance between the party and the president's involvement in the Watergate scandal: "I had a nice chat with the President ... while the other fellows went out to get the rope."³ Some presidents have turned their national committees into little more than managers of the president's campaigns and builders of the president's political support between campaigns. Other presidents, such as George W. Bush, have used their control to build up the national committee to achieve party, not just presidential, goals.

When their party does not hold the presidency, the national party chair and committee have the freedom to play a more independent role in national politics. At these times, the "out" party's national chair becomes one of several people (including past presidential nominees and congressional leaders) who may speak for the party and its policies. He or she will also need to help pay any debts from the losing presidential campaign, energize the party organization around the country, and—always of prime importance—raise as much new money as possible for the party.

Because of changes in campaign finance rules (see Chapter 12), the national committee has had to work separately from the presidential candidate's own campaign organization in presidential elections. To play this more autonomous role, national chairs have recruited staffers with extensive experience in raising money, managing databases, and mobilizing organizers and grassroots supporters.

OTHER NATIONAL PARTY GROUPS

Several other party organizations are normally included in the term "the national party," even though they work independently of one another and often compete for donors, resources, and other sources of power.

Congressional Campaign ("Hill") Committees

The most important of these related groups are each party's *House and Senate campaign committees*, called the "*Hill committees*" (because Congress is located on Capitol Hill) or the CCCs (Congressional Campaign Committees). The House committees were founded in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War; the Senate committees came into being when senators began to be popularly elected in 1913. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) are concerned entirely with House elections, and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) and the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) fund Senate races.

Although incumbent House and Senate members control these committees, they have resisted pressures to work only on behalf of incumbents' campaigns; they also support their party's candidates for open seats and challengers who have a good chance of winning. In short, they concentrate their money where they think they are likely to get the biggest payoff in increasing their party's representation in Congress. During the past four decades, the Hill committees have developed major fund-raising and service functions, independent of the DNC and RNC. They provide party candidates with a wide range of campaign help, from get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts to hard cash (see box "How to Target a Congressional Campaign" on page 74). For House and Senate candidates, the Hill committees are more influential than their parties' national committees.

Democratic and Republican Governors' Associations

State governors have long had a powerful voice in their national parties, for several reasons. They have won statewide elections for prestigious offices. Many lead or, at least, are supported by their state party organization, and some will be considered potential presidential candidates, such as former governors George W. Bush of Texas, Bill Clinton of Arkansas, Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, and Ronald Reagan of California. Governors' organizational influence in the national parties tends to be greatest, like that of the national committee chair, in the power vacuum that occurs when the other party holds the presidency. The Republican Governors' Association was especially prominent in fund-raising for the 2010 elections, to help make up for the RNC's financial troubles. State party leaders have also recently formed the Republican State Leadership Committee (RSLC) and the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (DLCC) in order to help fund state legislative and statewide campaigns. The RSLC made a big splash in 2010, spending \$31 million in a coordinated nationwide effort.

Women's and Youth Groups

For a long time, both the Democrats and Republicans have had women's divisions associated with their national committees.⁴ The importance of these women's divisions has declined markedly in recent decades as women have entered regular leadership positions in the parties.

On campuses, the College Republican National Committee (the CRs) and the College Democrats (whose Web log or "blog" is named Smart Ass, in honor of the party's donkey mascot) have experienced big increases in membership and numbers of chapters in the 2000s. Both these groups train field representatives to recruit volunteers for campaigns at all levels. The CRs have been closely associated with a number of conservative nonparty groups. The Young Democrats of America and the Young Republican National Federation also work actively among high school and college students as well as other young adults.

Party Networks

Just as state and local parties do, the national party committees work closely with a network of allied groups. For the Democrats, these include labor unions, environmental, women's rights, and civil rights groups, and other liberal organizations. Organized labor in particular has supplied the volunteer canvassers and callers so vital to Democratic campaigns. The national Republican network includes small business groups, the National Rifle Association, and groups of conservative Christians. In competitive races, these allied groups often run parallel campaigns to those of the candidates—as do the parties themselves—providing independent media ads, canvassing, and other forms of electioneering,⁵ as you'll see in Chapter 12. Several other groups outside of the formal party structure act as “idea factories” for the party in government. For the Democrats, the leftist Center for American Progress and the more moderate Progressive Policy Institute and Third Way serve this function. On the Republican side, groups such as the conservative Heritage Foundation and the more libertarian Republican Liberty Caucus try to affect party policy.

How to Target a Congressional Campaign

The parties' Hill committees hope to support all their congressional candidates to at least some degree, but they target a few candidates for much more intensive help. The most important criteria for choosing which campaigns to target are the competitiveness of the district and candidate quality, as measured by the amount of money the candidate has been able to raise (or contribute to his or her own campaign) by June 30 of the election year. Candidates, then, raise money not only to run their campaigns but also to leverage even more money by impressing the party operatives. In giving money directly to candidates, Hill committee targeters also ask, Is the candidate's organization capable of spending the money effectively? Has he/she effectively generated media coverage? How expensive are the district's media? Targeting decisions can change daily as the election approaches, depending on movement in the candidates' poll numbers and on the parties' finances. The Hill committees can offer these services to targeted candidates:

- Candidate recruitment and help with hiring and training campaign staff, choosing consultants, and making strategic decisions
- Development of campaign messages, information about issues, and “oppo” research on the opponent's strengths and weaknesses
- Advice on making effective television and radio ads at low cost (though the production is done mainly by party-related private consultants)
- Commissioning poll data to gauge the campaign's progress and measure responses to particular issues and messages

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- Contributor lists given to selected candidates on the condition that these candidates give their own contributor lists to the party after the election
- Fund-raising events in Washington and party leaders' visits to candidate events, to help candidates raise money and attract votes
- "Hard-money" direct contributions to campaigns*
- "Coordinated spending" to buy polls, media ads, or research for a candidate*
- Independent spending on ads in the candidate's district* and help in raising money from political action committees (PACs), other political groups, and individuals.

* Explained in Chapter 12.

Sources: Paul S. Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2008), pp. 90–131; and Victoria A. Farrar-Myers and Diana Dwyre, "Parties and Campaign Finance," in Jeffrey E. Cohen, Richard Fleisher, and Paul Kantor, eds., *American Political Parties: Decline or Resurgence?* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), pp. 143–146.

TWO PATHS TO POWER

The national parties have traveled two different roads to reach these new levels of effectiveness. The Republicans have followed a service path by building a muscular fund-raising operation that pays for needed services to their candidates and state parties. The Democrats, in contrast, first followed a procedural path, strengthening their national party's authority over the state parties in the selection of a presidential nominee.

The central element in both national parties' continued development, however, was their ability to attract thousands of small contributions through mass mailings to likely party supporters. This gave the national parties, which formerly depended on assessments provided by the state parties, an independent financial base. Ironically, then, at a time when some were warning that the parties were in decline, the national party organizations were reaching levels of strength that had never been seen before in American politics.

The Service Party Path

A party organization that supports campaigns with money and other help, as opposed to running the campaigns itself, can be thought of as a "*service party*." The foundation for a service party was laid during the 1960s, when RNC Chair Ray Bliss involved the committee to a much greater degree in helping state and local parties with the practical aspects of party organizational work. Chair William Brock continued this effort in the mid- to late 1970s as a means of reviving the party's election prospects after the Republican losses of the post-Watergate years. Under Brock, the RNC helped to provide salaries for the executive directors of all 50 state Republican Parties; offered expert

assistance to the state parties in organizing, strategizing, and fund-raising; and contributed to more than 4,000 state legislative candidates. Bliss and Brock fashioned a new role for the RNC by making it into an exceptionally effective service organization for the state and local parties.⁶

There were two keys to success in performing this new service role: money and campaign technologies. Using a marketing innovation of that time, computer-generated mailing lists, the Republicans began a program of direct-mail appeals that brought in ever-higher levels of income. The RNC's fund-raising jumped from \$29 million in 1975–1976 to \$105.9 million in “hard money” (contributions regulated by federal law; the terms *hard money* and *soft money* are explained in Chapter 12) in 1983–1984—a record for national committee fund-raising that wasn't broken until 1995 (see Table A.1 in the online Appendix at www.pearson.com/hershey). The RNC used the money, as Bliss and Brock had, to offer a broad array of services to candidates and state and local party organizations, including candidate recruitment and training, research, public opinion polling, data processing, computer networking and software development, production of radio and television ads, direct mailing, and legal services. State party leaders were glad to accept the help; as the party more closely identified with the business community, Republicans felt comfortable with these marketing techniques.

The Democrats' Procedural-Reform Path

At about the same time, Democrats expanded the power of their national party organization for other reasons. Reformers supporting the civil rights movement and opposing American involvement in the Vietnam War pressed for change in the Democratic Party's positions on these issues. The reformers focused on the rules for selecting presidential candidates. Their aim was to make the nominating process more open and democratic and, in particular, more representative of the concerns of people like themselves: blacks, women, and young people.

The reforms started in the mid-1960s with efforts to keep southern Democratic Parties from sending all-white delegations to the national convention and excluding blacks from participation. After the 1968 election, the first of a series of reform commissions overhauled the party's presidential nominating process. (This story is told in more detail in Chapter 10.) The Democrats limited the autonomy of the state parties and the authority of state law in determining how convention delegates were to be selected, thus giving the national party the authority over the rules for nominating a presidential candidate.⁷ Key court decisions upheld these actions, further solidifying the newfound power of the national party.

This change was limited to the Democrats, however. Republican leaders, consistent with their party's commitment to states' rights, did not want to centralize power in their own party organization.⁸ Yet the GOP was still affected by the tide of Democratic Party reform because the bills passed by state legislatures to implement the reforms usually applied to both parties.

In the early 1980s, the Democrats took stock of the reforms and did not like what they saw. The newly centralized authority in nominating a presidential candidate and increased grassroots participation in the nominating process had done little to win elections. Further, it had divided the party and alienated much of the Democratic Party in government, many of whom stayed home from party conventions in the 1970s. Therefore, the national Democrats decided to soft-pedal procedural reforms and move toward the Republican service model. The party rushed to broaden the base of its fund-raising and to help recruit candidates and revitalize state and local party organizations. When the dust from all this effort settled, authority over party rules had become more nationalized, and what had been two models for strengthening the national party were rapidly converging into one.⁹

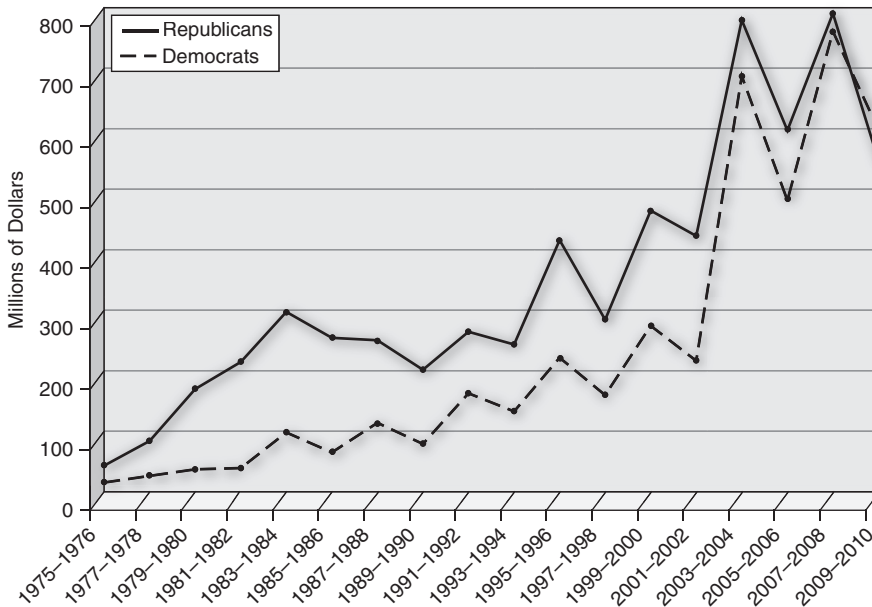
Both Parties Take the Service Path

The good news for the Democrats in the 1980s was that they were dramatically improving their fund-raising, reducing their long-standing debt, and increasing their activities in the states and localities. The bad news was that the Republicans were far ahead of them to begin with and were continuing to break new ground. The national Democrats made no secret of their effort to imitate the Republican success in raising money and using it to buy services. Slowly, they began to catch up; what began as a three-to-one and even five-to-one financial advantage for the Republicans was reduced over time (see Figure 4.1).

One reason was the Democratic Party's increasing reliance on "soft money" (see Chapter 12)—funds donated to party organizations in unlimited amounts, most often by labor unions, businesses, and wealthy individuals, and exempted from federal campaign finance rules. Big contributions from labor unions made it easier for the Democrats to compete with Republicans in soft money than they could in raising federally regulated donations. Both national parties' committees began major efforts to solicit soft money in the early 1990s. In 2000, the national Republicans established the "Republican Regents" program for individuals and corporations who gave at least \$250,000 in soft money to the party during a two-year period, which helped produce record soft-money donations. The Democratic "Jefferson Trust" honored givers of at least \$100,000. By that year, almost half of the national parties' fund-raising came in the form of soft money.

Some of the money went into building up the state and even the local parties. A much larger portion of the national parties' money went into races for the U.S. House and Senate. Since the mid-1980s, both parties provided increasing amounts of aid to selected candidates. The Republican committees opened an early lead; the stunning success of GOP candidates in the 1994 congressional elections, for example, was due in part to aggressive fund-raising as well as candidate recruitment by their Hill committees.

Campaign finance reform adopted in 2002 (the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, or BCRA, discussed in Chapter 12) barred the national committees from collecting soft money after the 2002 elections. The Democrats



Ratio of Republican to Democratic Receipts:

2.9 3.2 4.6 5.5 3.0 3.9 2.1 2.4 1.5 1.8 1.9 1.8 1.7 2.0 1.1 1.2 1.0 -0.9

FIGURE 4.1
Democratic and Republican Fund-Raising, 1975–1976 to 2009–2010.

Note: The data points are total party receipts (including state/local, House, Senate, and national committees) in millions of dollars. Soft money is not included, nor is money (after 1987) transferred among committees. Table A.1 in the online Appendix (at www.pearson.com/hershey) provides a breakdown of these totals by type of party committee within each party.

Source: Federal Election Commission, at www.fec.gov/press/2010_Full_summary_Data.shtml (accessed July 6, 2011).

saw the coming ban on national party soft money as a particular threat because their soft-money collections had been flourishing—the Democratic Hill committees outraised their Republican counterparts in soft money by \$151 million to \$136 million in 2002—but their federally regulated contributions had expanded only gradually.

Rising to the Challenge of New Campaign Finance Rules

Once the BCRA rules came into effect in the 2004 campaigns, many observers felt that the loss of soft money would seriously weaken the national parties. In fact, the transfers of money from national party committees to state and local parties dropped markedly in most states, because BCRA allowed the transfer of federally regulated money only. But as they have so often in their history, the parties adapted successfully to the new rules.

Who Got the Most National Party Money in 2007–2008 and 2009–2010?

State parties

2007–2008	2009–2010
Ohio Democratic Party \$10.3 million	Virginia Republican Party \$4.9 million
Florida Democratic Party \$10.1 million	Pennsylvania Democratic Party \$4.3 million
Florida Republican Party \$9.9 million	Florida Democratic Party \$3.6 million
Pennsylvania Democratic Party \$7.4 million	New Jersey Democratic Party \$3.6 million

Senate candidates (including party direct contributions, coordinated spending, and party independent spending)

Jeff Merkley, Oregon Democrat (challenger—won) \$12.5 million	Kenneth Buck, Colorado Republican (challenger—lost) \$11.4 million
Kay Hagan, North Carolina Democrat (challenger—won) \$11.7 million	Patrick Toomey, Pennsylvania Republican (challenger—won) \$8.8 million
Jeanne Shaheen, New Hampshire Democrat (challenger—won) \$9.6 million	Alexi Giannoulias, Illinois Democrat (open seat—lost) \$7.7 million
Al Franken, Minnesota Democrat (challenger—won) \$9.5 million	Michael Bennet, Colorado Democrat (incumbent—won) \$7.4 million

House candidates (including party direct contributions, coordinated spending, and party independent spending)

Travis Childers, Mississippi Democrat (incumbent—won) \$3.1 million	John A. Boccieri, Ohio Democrat (incumbent—lost) \$3.1 million
Carol Shea Porter, New Hampshire Democrat (incumbent—won) \$2.5 million	Mark Schauer, Michigan Democrat (incumbent—lost) \$2.9 million

Note: National party money includes money spent or transferred by all six national party committees (DNC, RNC, NRSC, DSCC, NRCC, and DCCC).

Source: Federal Election Commission data, at www.fec.gov/press/2010_Full_summary_Data.shtml (accessed July 6, 2011).

Both national parties tried to make up for the lost soft money by working harder to attract hard-money donations from individuals. The DNC greatly expanded its direct mail fund-raising program, which had been minimal during the 1990s, and reaped millions of new donors. In all, the DNC collected almost five times as much federally regulated money in 2004 as it had in 2002—\$312 million compared with \$67 million, and raised more than 40 percent of its total fund-raising in contributions of less than \$200. The DCCC and the RNC both doubled their hard-money fund-raising in 2004, and the DSCC came close. BCRA made it easier for the party committees to raise hard money by setting the cap on an individual's aggregate donations to party and political action committees (which reached \$70,800 in 2012) higher than the aggregate cap on donations to candidates. Both parties encouraged big hard-money donors to solicit similar contributions from their friends and colleagues and to “bundle” these donations to reach totals of \$100,000 or \$200,000 or more, in return for recognition from the party.

With all these incentives, the national parties broke all fund-raising records in the 2000s. Even after the BCRA reforms, the two parties' national and Hill committees came up with an eye-popping \$1.7 billion in 2004 and more in 2008. Remarkably, the Democrats almost matched the Republican Party's fund-raising during the 2008 election cycle for the first time in at least 30 years, and actually outraised the Republicans nationally in 2010.

Party Money and Activism in 2008, 2010, and 2012

Although the biggest portion of party fund-raising comes from individual citizens, an increasing proportion of the contributors to party committees and candidates were members of Congress. In the early 1990s, some Republican House leaders, fed up with their long-time minority status, pressed party colleagues to donate some of their campaign war chests to Republicans in more competitive races. The aim was to redirect campaign money from those who could most easily raise it to those who most needed it and therefore to increase the number of Republicans in the House. Winning a majority of seats would give all House Republicans the power to achieve their policy goals, given that the flow of legislation in the House is controlled by the majority party. Republicans did capture control of both the House and Senate in 1994, and soon after, the new Democratic minority also saw the value of spreading the wealth to help vulnerable incumbents and promising challengers.

Since then, both parties' Hill committees have urged, and even required, their members to channel money to the party committee, not just to particular candidates. This gives the party the opportunity to target the races it considers the most winnable, rather than leaving the decisions to individual incumbent donors. House members can donate funds from their personal campaign committees and their “leadership PACs” (see Chapter 12) and also ask their own contributors to give to the party's Hill committee. In 2010, for instance, the DCCC chair asked for contributions of \$1 million from each of the powerful committee chairs, \$250,000 or \$150,000 from many others, and \$30,000 from rank-and-file Democratic House members. The House Speaker at the time, Nancy Pelosi,

raised more than \$23 million for the DCCC. In the Senate, the leading donor was Senator Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who gave \$4 million to his party and colleagues from his unused campaign funds. Each member's contributions were tracked by party leaders, just as party whips track legislative votes.¹⁰

Getting members of Congress to give to their parties can be a difficult sell, especially for incumbents of the weaker party, who are understandably worried about protecting their own seats. As a result, although Democratic senators and House members gave their Hill committees more than twice as much as Republicans did in 2008,¹¹ their donations were harder to get in 2010 when Democratic incumbents feared for their own reelection. But the parties' success in getting incumbents to hand over these impressive sums and to put their fund-raising skill in the service of other party candidates demonstrates the extent to which the congressional parties have become important instruments of collective power for their members.

The increased fund-raising from Congress members and other sources gave the Democratic committees the money to take a page or two from the Republicans' playbook. Starting in 2000, the national GOP had created a massive databank of voter information gleaned from party canvassers and commercial databases—individuals' past voting records and their opinions and consumer preferences—so that, just as corporate market researchers do, party strategists could make predictions as to how particular types of people were likely to behave. This “micro-targeting” helped the Republicans focus their persuasive efforts and GOTV activities on the individuals most likely to support Republican candidates. The resulting database, called Voter Vault, required funding and computer facilities on a scale that the national Republicans could afford. It was widely heralded as a major reason for the Republican victories in 2002 and 2004.

Democrats were slow to respond, but later created two separate national databases. One, maintained by the DNC, was made available to Democratic candidates at all levels. The other, a huge dataset managed by Catalyst, an organization headed by Democratic political operative Harold Ickes, was used extensively by the Obama campaign and liberal groups supporting Obama. Voter contact programs (“field operations”) based on these datasets were field-tested in some congressional special elections in 2008, all of which resulted in Democratic wins. The DCCC and DSCC then applied these programs nationally, beginning well in advance of the presidential election.

By early September 2008, the DCCC had four times more money than did the NRCC to spend on House races and embarked on a lavish independent spending drive. As you'll see in Chapter 12, court cases have allowed party organizations to run unlimited amounts of advertising in House and Senate campaigns as long as the party spends its money independently of the candidate it intends to help (“independent spending”). This produces the odd picture of two groups of partisans from the same party—those helping the candidate and those doing independent spending—working to elect the same candidate but officially ignorant of one another's activities. The great majority of party funds in recent House and Senate races have come in the form of independent spending (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Although the Republican

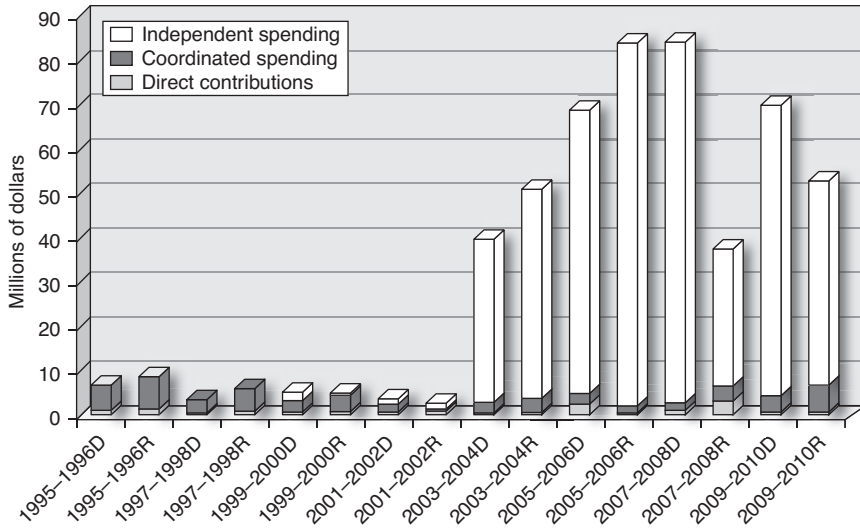


FIGURE 4.2
National Party Money in House Races, 1995–1996 to 2009–2010.

Source: Federal Election Commission, at www.fec.gov/press/2010_Full_summary_Data.shtml (accessed July 6, 2011).

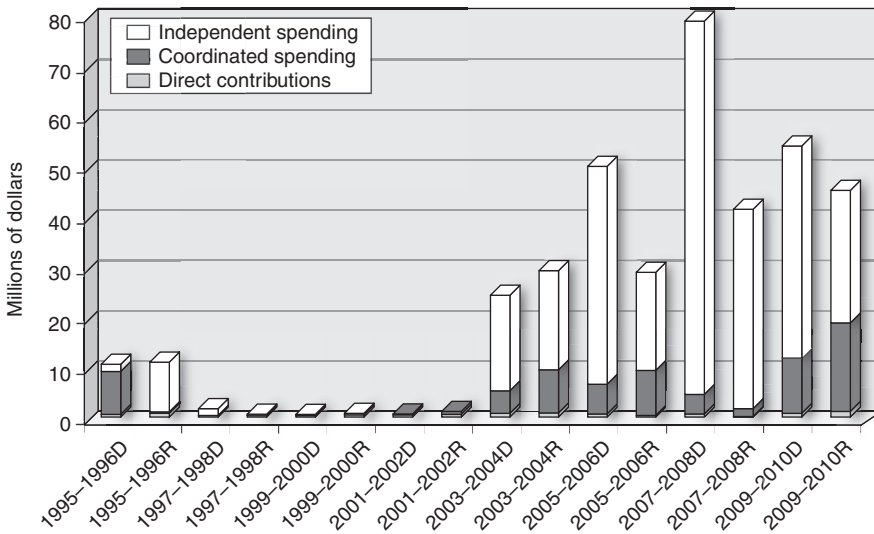


FIGURE 4.3
National Party Money in Senate Races, 1995–1996 to 2009–2010.

Source: Federal Election Commission, at www.fec.gov/press/2010_Full_summary_Data.shtml (accessed July 6, 2011).

committees' independent spending fell dramatically in 2008, in tandem with their election prospects, Democratic spending reached unprecedented levels. The DCCC put \$1 million or more into each of 38 House races, largely open seats and challengers' campaigns, and won most of them.

Freshman legislators, especially those elected in districts that normally vote for the other party's candidates, tend to be most vulnerable in their first reelection race. To protect the freshman Democrats elected in 2006, Democratic House leaders had given them helpful committee assignments and followed up with careful targeting of funds and other services. With this help, only four of the freshman Democrats lost in 2008. Flush with money, the DCCC also aggressively went after Republican-held seats, recruiting experienced challengers and backing them with party funds. The NRCC was forced to use most of its independent spending to defend embattled incumbents.¹²

The parties' situations were reversed in 2010. The Democratic Party "brand" suffered mightily after 2008 due to the continuing economic downturn and President Obama's controversial health care and stimulus programs. Democratic committees pulled back in 2010 to support only those vulnerable incumbents with a chance of winning, whereas the NRCC had the opportunity to successfully target some powerful Democratic veterans as well as a number of freshmen who had been elected in 2008 in Republican-leaning districts. The result was a record-breaking Republican sweep.

But the NRCC then had 87 freshman incumbents to defend in 2012. It raised money to support the most promising candidates by offering these "Young Guns" funding, training, and other assistance. In its "Patriot Program," begun in 2009, the committee set a series of fund-raising, voter contact, and coalition-building benchmarks for the freshmen and some other vulnerable incumbents if they wanted to get NRCC money. Since the mid-1980s, then, both national parties have become institutionalized as active, well-staffed "service parties" working to support party candidates and state and local party organizations, not only through direct contributions and independent spending but also through investments in voter identification and database management.¹³

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THESE STRONGER NATIONAL PARTIES?

These dramatic changes in the national party organizations have helped to beef up the parties' roles in nominating and electing candidates, roles that had been seriously undercut a century ago with the advent of the direct primary. To an important degree, the national and state parties are now actively involved in the campaign support functions that private campaign consultants and other political groups had monopolized until recently. The money and services provided by the national parties have helped to raise their profiles in the eyes of candidates. The increasing strength of the national parties has also altered the relationships within the parties.

Effects on Candidates' Campaigns

The strengthened national parties perform a number of vital functions in presidential campaigns. As we have seen, both national committees research issues, study the opponent's record and background, and search for their own candidate's weak points and ways to thwart attacks. They train state party staff and field directors and maintain relationships with important groups in the party's network.

In Senate and House campaigns, however, there have been some marked recent changes in the national parties' decisions as to where to deploy their newfound strength. In the 1980s and 1990s, the national party committees had supported a wide range of viable candidates. The committees tended to protect their incumbents when they expected a lean election year and to invest in challengers and open seats when a big victory looked likely. But by the early 2000s, the House and Senate were so closely divided by party and the number of truly competitive seats had shrunk so much that both parties' congressional committees were pouring the great majority of their money and help into those competitive races.¹⁴

There was so much party money and field staff coming into these competitive campaigns that at least in those targeted races, party money at times outweighed candidate spending. The national party committees' money and other resources have given them real power over the targeted campaigns. For instance, early in the 2000s, the national parties spent more in a closely fought Colorado congressional race than the candidates' own campaigns did, and the national party committees specified exactly what the campaigns had to do with the party money. The Democratic candidate's campaign manager probably spoke for both candidates in his exasperation at the national party's micromanaging: "They crawl up our ass on a daily basis."¹⁵ Although most candidates are grateful for the support, the party-funded advertising can sometimes backfire. Party-funded ads are much more likely to feature attacks on the opposition than are the candidates' own ads. Because most voters do not distinguish between candidate and party ads, a candidate can be tarred with a negative image that he or she has worked hard to avoid.

The "wave" elections in 2008 and 2010 greatly expanded the playing field for the dominant party. But most congressional races are not competitive. In the remaining elections, the national party committees have not put in enough money or other resources to attract even some attention from, much less power over, the candidates and their staffs. That can result in a great deal of frustration for the less-competitive candidates and, in some cases, missed opportunities. As Gary Jacobson points out, nine Democratic House challengers lost narrowly in 2008, each receiving more than 45 percent of the vote, but did not receive substantial help from the DCCC. Some of these candidates might have won if they had received party money.¹⁶

Effects on State and Local Parties

More generally, have the increasing visibility and resources of the national parties led to a transfer of power from the state and local to the national party

organizations—to centralization rather than decentralization of the parties? Probably not. The forces that encourage a state and local party focus remain strong.

But it is clear that the national parties' new strength has lessened the *decentralization* of the party organizations. When the national parties have a lot of money and services to give, their power and influence grow. In a number of cases, as in the Colorado campaign mentioned above, national party committees have made their funding or other help contingent on the campaign's or state party's acceptance of certain requirements: that they hire particular staffers or consultants or use particular campaign techniques. The result can be more of a national imprint on the nature of state and even local campaigns, the kinds of candidates recruited, and the ways in which the parties are organized. Is this a good thing for American politics? "Which Would You Choose?" (on this page) provides arguments on both sides of this question.

WHICH WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Could a Stronger National Party Help You?

YES! Political parties offer you a valuable shortcut. Government decisions affect almost everything you do, but you may not have time to research dozens of complicated issues (health care, energy prices) and candidates in order to vote for those who will act in your interest. A party can do the research for you. If you generally agree with, say, the Republican Party, it can offer you a set of recommended candidates with no effort on your part. But if each state and local Republican organization can act independently, and if some of these organizations are moderate and others are conservative, then how can you be sure that your state and local Republican candidates will support the positions that drew you to the party? A strong national party could help recruit candidates whose views are consistent with the party's philosophy and help them get elected. Besides, who would you rather have raising campaign money: the national party or the individual candidates who will soon be voting on bills affecting the donors' interests?

NO! The United States is very diverse; the concerns of Democrats in Omaha may well be different from those in San Francisco, New Hampshire, and the Florida Panhandle. If a national party is strong enough to promote a clear set of ideas on what government should be doing, then whose ideas should it promote: those of the Omaha Democrats or the San Francisco Democrats? If a national party is strong enough to elect its candidates, wouldn't it be capable of telling them how to vote in Congress, whether or not their constituents agree? Even if a national party organization confines itself to raising money and giving it to candidates, doesn't that give the national organization a great deal of influence over state and even local candidates? In a nation with a tradition of hostility to "boss rule," couldn't a strong national party raise those fears again?

At times, state parties have welcomed this national involvement. One of the more successful examples of national and state party cooperation was former DNC Chair Howard Dean's "*50-state strategy*" in the 2006 and 2008 elections. As Chapter 3 mentioned, Dean used DNC money to pay field organizers to work with each of the state parties. Colorado, for instance, had been a Republican state for several decades but had experienced an influx of younger, more liberal voters in the early 2000s. So starting in 2005, the DNC provided money for the state party to fund field directors in rural areas and to purchase a new database of voter information. The DNC investment also invigorated several other state parties in areas that the national Democrats had previously written off as Republican-dominated. One study found that these DNC staffers improved the candidates' vote totals in these races, even beyond the other advantages that Democrats had in 2006.¹⁷ Dean and his supporters argued that this was the foundation for the Obama campaign's successful national strategy in 2008.¹⁸ The Obama campaign felt differently, noting that it had relied almost entirely on its own staff and money in these "red" states; it contended that the candidate's own strengths and the Bush administration's weaknesses were at least as important.¹⁹

Under other conditions, the increased national influence can strain the relationships among party organizations at different levels, just as it has produced strains between the parties and some candidates. One of the areas of greatest conflict between the national parties and their state and local brethren centers on national party involvement in primaries. It is always a temptation for national party officials to try to select and groom the candidate they think will have the best odds of winning in a district. The House and Senate campaign committees, whose chance for a majority in Congress depends on the effectiveness of candidates in competitive races, dread the possibility that a less-capable candidate will win their party's primary and go on to run a less-than-professional campaign for the seat. But the risk of becoming involved is that if the national party backs a candidate who later loses the primary, then the party could suffer; it might alienate the winning candidate, make itself look weak, and even split the state party and lose the election.

In 2010, Republican national leaders took that risk. After a wide range of candidates flooded into Republican primaries, anticipating a coming Republican wave, the national Republican campaign committees endorsed the candidates in a number of House and Senate primaries who they felt were most likely to win the general election. In several of these states, Tea Party supporters and other strongly conservative voters rejected the party establishment's advice. Perhaps the best example was the Delaware Senate race, where the national and state parties' preferred candidate for the nomination was defeated by a Tea Party-endorsed challenger, Christine O'Donnell. A campaigner with an all-too-colorful past, O'Donnell decided to deal with an earlier admission that she had dabbled in witchcraft by opening her first general election TV ad with the words, "I am not a witch." The ad quickly went viral, and O'Donnell lost the November election—a seat the national party had

considered a likely pick-up if its preferred candidate had won the primary. Although the NRSC chair vowed to stay out of Republican primaries in 2012, the national Republicans did convince a number of “A list” candidates to run in the hopes of gaining a Senate majority in that year, far outstripping the DSCC’s recruitment successes.

In short, when national party committees use their money to affect the choice of candidates or the direction of a campaign, it is likely that there will be ruffled feathers within the state party and the campaign, who feel that they are better judges of what works in the district (see box “Hoosier Candidate?” on this page). That was the case with the Democrats in 2006, when DCCC Chair Rahm Emanuel bulldozed more than a few local party chairs to get moderate candidates nominated in socially conservative areas and thus increase the party’s likelihood of winning.²⁰ However, the temptation will always be present; Emanuel, after all, could claim that these moderate “majority makers” produced the Democratic victories that brought the party a House majority in that year.

Hoosier Candidate?

Moderate Democrat Evan Bayh’s popularity in the Hoosier state was legend. But the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) thought it had found a candidate who could beat Bayh for reelection to the U.S. Senate from Indiana. The NRSC courted former Indiana Senator Dan Coats and convinced him to run. Some state Republican leaders and Tea Party groups did not appreciate the national party’s efforts. They felt that Coats was too moderate, too weak on gun rights, and had few remaining ties to Indiana politics. They resented the interference of “Washington insiders” in a state contest. One Tea Party group e-mailed supporters with this subject line: “NO to RNC/Coats for force feeding us this crap sandwich.” Although Coats did win the primary, the national party’s efforts to endorse the most electable candidates prior to the primaries raised controversy in several other states as well, including New Hampshire, Florida, Kentucky, Nevada, and Delaware. And when Bayh announced suddenly that he would not seek reelection, and state and national Democratic leaders worked to clear the primary field for Democratic U.S. Rep. Brad Ellsworth, Republicans campaigned against Ellsworth as the candidate of party “bosses.” In short, national party pressure to nominate an electable candidate can backfire, especially when local and state activists value ideological purity over electability (see Chapter 5). A reporter concluded, tongue in cheek, “The public, it turns out, prefers a say in the electoral process.”

Sources: Alex Isenstadt, “Coats Comeback Hits GOP Pushback,” *Politico*, February 13, 2010, at www.politico.com/news/stories/0210/32922.html (accessed March 23, 2011); and Carl Hulse, “Seeing Hand-Picked as a Bad Thing,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2010, p. 1.

Effects on the Presidency

Is a stronger national party likely to compete with the president's power or to add to it? Clearly, the increasing resources of the national committees give them the opportunity for a more independent political role. Federal funding of presidential campaigns, with its strict limits on party spending for presidential races, freed the national committees from their traditional concentration on presidential elections and allowed them to dedicate at least some of their resources to party-building at the state and local level. At the same time, the party committees carved out new roles in raising money for use in federal campaigns.

On the other hand, these new capabilities make the national committee an even more attractive resource for presidents. Naturally, presidents want the new party power to be at their service, and every president in recent memory has kept his party's national committee on a short leash. RNC Chair Jim Gilmore was edged out in late 2001, for example, because he clashed with the White House over control of the committee. Presidents will certainly want the party committees to mobilize all those members of Congress whom they recruited, trained, financed, and helped elect to support the president's program. Presidents in their first term will want to draw on the assets of the national party for their reelection campaigns, as much as campaign finance rules permit. Thus, there is considerable pressure on these stronger national parties to put their capabilities at the service of presidential goals.

Effects on Congress

At around the time that the Hill committees have become much more active in recruiting and supporting party candidates, Congress members have been more likely to cast legislative votes with the majority of their party (as Chapter 13 shows). Did these new campaign resources help convince Congress members to vote for their party's positions on bills? To this point, the party committees have not given out campaign money and services on the basis of a candidate's support for the party's program. In 2010, for instance, the DCCC gave only last-second aid to Colorado incumbent Betsy Markey in her close (and ultimately losing) race in Colorado, though she supported the Democratic leadership on some tough votes in Congress, whereas it spent \$1 million on ads in the campaign of Bobby Bright, an Alabama Democrat who had cast hundreds of votes against his party leaders. Party funds usually go to competitive races rather than to candidates who are ideologically "pure."²¹

Even though the party committees have not used their funding to influence the ideological complexion of Congress, some members of the party in Congress have tried to do so. In 2010, conservative Republican Senator Jim DeMint used his leadership PAC—groups whose contributions are normally used to gain a leadership position for the PAC's sponsor by helping other members—to funnel campaign money to strong conservative candidates such as Tea Party favorite Marco Rubio, running in the primary for a Florida Senate

seat. DeMint's aim was to make the Senate Republican contingent more deeply conservative.

Yet the committees have not been bashful in reminding members, especially newly elected members, that the party played some role in their election success. Party campaign help is only one part of the story of party support in Congress, but the remarkable cohesion of the House Republicans since 1995 was surely bolstered by the party leadership's financial and other support for Republican candidates. Constituency pressures will always come first in Congress. However, the more that senators and representatives can count on campaign help from the congressional party, the more open they will be to party-based appeals.

Relationships Within the National Party

The three national committees of each party—the DNC or RNC and the party's Hill committees—have good reasons to cooperate with one another. When the party's presidential candidate does well, most of the voters he or she attracts will also vote for the Senate and House candidates of the president's party. Similarly, an effectively run Senate campaign can bring out voters for party colleagues running for president and House seats.

But the party's resources are not unlimited, and each of the party's national committees would prefer the biggest share. Democratic congressional candidates in 2010 worried that the DNC's activities in their districts might have more to do with laying the groundwork for the 2012 Obama reelection campaign than with supporting their own races. In the run-up to the 2012 election, DNC efforts to raise money from wealthy donors for Obama's campaign threatened the ability of the Democratic Hill committees to get substantial donations from the same sources, because individuals' total donations to committees, campaigns, and PACs are limited (see Chapter 12). The party committees have long competed with one another in raising as well as spending money. They seek financial support from the same contributors (and jealously guard their contributor lists) and recruit political talent from the same limited pool.

THE LIMITS OF PARTY ORGANIZATION

In sum, the national party organizations have recently generated remarkable amounts of new money and other resources. They have used these resources, expertise, and energy to become major players relative to the state and local parties and major influences on the lives of many federal and even state-level candidates. Organizations capable of raising and spending a billion dollars during a two-year period are not easily ignored. The rise of Super PACs (see Chapter 12) is likely to cut into the parties' fund-raising capability, but the national party organizations remain stronger than they have been through most of their history.

This impressive increase in strength has not come at the expense of the state and local parties; in fact, the national parties have used at least some of their resources to build the capabilities of these party organizations. Nor has the national parties' new strength made the local and state party organizations into branch offices of their national parties, following their orders in developing campaign strategy and taking stands on public policy. There are still too many forces in American politics encouraging independence, especially in the local parties, to permit the two major parties to centralize their organization and power. The federal system, in which most public officials are elected at the local level, the separation of powers, variations among states and local areas in public attitudes and regulation of the parties, and the BCRA rules that discourage cooperative campaigns between federal and nonfederal candidates all work against a centralized party system.

Thus, as resource rich as they have become, the American party organizations remain fairly decentralized by international standards. At a time when Americans can be assured of getting the same Big Mac in Cincinnati as they can in San Diego, the American parties lack the top-down control and efficiency, the unified setting of priorities, and the central responsibility that we often find in other nations' parties. Where the party organizations of many other Western democracies have had permanent, highly professional leadership and large party bureaucracies, most American party organizations, especially at the local level, are still in the hands of part-time activists.²²

The parties have increased their emphasis on grassroots campaigning through canvassing and phone banks and have used the information to develop micro-targeting, aiming specific messages at individuals known to be receptive to those messages. Yet even this greater reach into the grassroots may not be enough to make the party organizations more prominent in the public's mind. The parties' messages focus on the candidates rather than on the party itself. More professional, service-oriented parties may be better at helping candidates run for office than in expanding the role of the party organization in citizens' political thinking.²³ American political values do not welcome stronger and more centralized party organizations with more power in American political life.

The American party organizations are fundamentally flexible and election oriented. Their purpose is to support candidates for office and to make the adjustments needed to do well in a pragmatic political system. As a result, they have long been led by candidates and officeholders, not by career party bureaucrats. As the political system grows more polarized, the party organizations have taken the opportunity to expand their roles and to add to the polarization. But at least to this point, even though the national party committees now have unprecedented levels of funding and activity, they remain candidate-centered organizations in a candidate-centered political world.