



# A REPUBLIC, If We Can Keep It

## *The Problem of Hollow Parties?*

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The Problem of Hollow Parties

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Contemporary American parties are hollow parties—top-heavy as organizations, underlegitimized as shapers of political conflict.<sup>1</sup> Facing the pathologies of hollowness requires addressing parties’ legitimacy crisis head-on. That means building up parties as civic institutions with roots in civil society. And, though identifying the problem hardly offers a solution, it also means reckoning with the internal bargains inside the Republican Party that lie at the heart of our present discontents.

By historical standards, centralized party leadership in Congress is alive and well. At the mass level, party identification steers public opinion and voting. In the spaces in between, however, parties are neither organizationally robust beyond their task to raise money—and increasingly losing out even there to candidates and paraparty groups drawing plutocrats’ dollars—nor meaningfully felt as a real, tangible presence in the lives of voters or in the work of engaged activists. Parties cannot inspire positive loyalties, mobilize would-be supporters, effectively coordinate their influencers, or police their boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

This hollowness has had dire consequences. The parties have failed to meet the challenges that the combination of polarization and fracture have thrown up. As Thomas Edsall summarizes, “Over the past 50 years, overarching and underlying conflicts about morality, family, autonomy, religious conviction, fairness and even patriotism have been forced into two relatively weak vessels, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.”<sup>3</sup> In a period when parties’ alternatives define American politics, those parties cannot fulfill the tasks that fall under their traditional purview.

The “Party Period” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century featured locally rooted and, in many instances, organizationally robust parties to which loyalties ran deep. Yet it aggregated participation into meaningful and distinct policy agendas only poorly. The party system often seemed little more than what a coalition of state parties could agree on. The situation has now reversed. Amid a nationalized clash of ideology and interests, parties are hollowed out and weakly legitimized.<sup>4</sup>

The developments above apply to both parties in full measure. For the regime commitment that makes parties central to small-d democratic and small-r republican politics,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on, and owes much to, an ongoing research collaboration with Sam Rosenfeld. Various sections are adapted from Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, “Party Blobs and Partisan Visions: Making Sense of Our Hollow Parties,” in *State of the Parties*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. John C. Green, Daniel Coffey, and David Cohen (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming), which contains citations not included here. See also Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, “The Hollow Parties,” in *Can America Govern Itself?*, ed. Frances Lee and Nolan McCarty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, “Prophets of Party in American Political History,” *The Forum* 15 (2017): 685-709; and, on 2016, Daniel Schlozman, “The Lists Told Us Otherwise,” *n+1*, December 24, 2016, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-lists-told-us-otherwise/>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Julia Azari, “Weak parties and strong partisanship are a bad combination,” *Vox*, 3 Nov. 2016, <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2016/11/3/13512362/weak-parties-strong-partisanship-bad-combination>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, “President Trump Is the Enemy of Their Enemies,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/opinion/president-trump-is-the-enemy-of-their-enemies.html>.

<sup>4</sup> By legitimacy I mean foremost citizens’ recognition that parties and partisan activity play a valid and important role in the polity, and additionally that, in party affairs, the actions and preferences of party elites merit due respect from loyal partisans.

however, the Republican Party poses a particular challenge. Parties motivated by hatred for their opponents lose their capacity for regulated rivalry. They become vehicles for partisans' own venom and spleen, and their partial democratic visions descend into cabal and conspiracy. As Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum write, "There is no interest in democratic reform, no prescription for institutional innovation, or any form of collective democratic action."<sup>5</sup> And so a double caution is in order. Treatments of the parties must grapple with the saga, going back long before 2016, of the Republicans. And calls for reform on the Right must go beyond exhortations for individual courage or institutional reform and grapple with the Republican Party *as a party*.

### Party and Blob

To begin with the practical, the parties still organize the quadrennial conventions. At the same time, the primaries and caucuses that select the delegates provide months-long fodder for candidates and their supporters who feel aggrieved. The process of nominating a president, the preeminent though far from singular task of American political parties, serves not as a celebration of party but as an extended opportunity to bash it, without the parties themselves, or anybody on their behalf, offering principled responses. In February 2016, Democratic National Committee chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz spoke up for those beleaguered embodiments of institutional party authority, the unpledged "superdelegates" to the national convention. But she did not offer the straightforward defense that leading, loyal Democrats should have a voice in picking their party's nominee. Instead, she risibly argued that their purpose was to allow grassroots activists a chance to attend the convention without having to run against elected officials to earn a slot.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether "the party decides" the nominee,<sup>7</sup> it wins few friends in the deciding.

Inhabiting the space where parties once dwelled is a disorderly assortment of actors best described as the Blob. Today's parties are distinctive for the presence of so many figures entwined with and buzzing around but not organizationally part of parties themselves. The list goes on and on: issue groups, many of them with paper members or no members at all; media from talk-show hosts to Twitter personalities, guided by profit and celebrity at least as much as by ideological or electoral goals; policy experts in think tanks generating party programs by proxy; engaged activists giving time or a few dollars to prominent and often extreme candidates; ideological warriors at CPAC and Netroots Nation; the mass affluent munching on canapés at fundraisers; high rollers with real access and, often, very specific agendas of their own; consultancies and staffers hoping for a share of all the money sloshing through the system. The Blob is porous, amorphous, and frequently directionless. Its actors include but are not limited to

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<sup>5</sup> Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, "The New Conspiracists," *Dissent*, Winter 2018, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/conspiracy-theories-politics-infowars-threat-democracy>.

<sup>6</sup> Callum Borchers, "We need more questions like this one from Jake Tapper to Debbie Wasserman Schultz [video]," *Washington Post* online, 12 February 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/12/we-need-more-questions-like-this-one-from-jake-tapper-to-debbie-wasserman-schultz-video/>.

<sup>7</sup> Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, "Party versus Faction in the Reformed Presidential Nominating System," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 (2016): 701-708.

“policy demanders” who want goodies from the state.<sup>8</sup> Nor are they just candidates, their supporters, or members of the candidate-money-consultant nexus. Nor are they just “groups,” with the internal structure that that label implies. Parts of the Blob tend to polarize the system, others to bring it toward the center.

See this Blob as a whole, grasp, if you will, its shapeless shape, its formless form, its headless body, and the picture starts to fall into place. Its constituent pieces—“members” is too strong a term—all have internal incentives of their own, many of which militate for them to work against rather than with other parts. The drivers of the behavior—the principals—and the underlying goals being pursued are difficult to identify. The figures in the Blob cannot be reduced to a single analytic category without losing the internal variation that is precisely its defining feature. This jumble of principals and incentives is precisely how the Blob contributes to hollowness. The limits of coordination in contemporary parties go beyond signaling games, in nomination or elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> The vast failure to build the collective goods through which parties helpfully channel citizens’ passions and organize political conflict is the central non-event in the hollow parties.

### Democrats and Republicans

For Democrats, the consequence is a party without recourse to a shared, affirmative language or concept of *party* beyond celebrations of particular politicians’ leadership and denunciations of intransigent opponents. Instead, Democrats oscillate between two tendencies, neither of them a genuine commitment to a party inside a political regime. On the one side comes accommodation to the party’s many stakeholders, itself a reflection not only of coalitional diversity but of the less reformist strands in its heritage. The *groupedness* of the Democratic coalition of interests is more visible and pronounced than in the GOP case—comparatively speaking, the seams show.<sup>10</sup> On the other side lies the commitment to continual reform in search of a common good that is “simply being reasonable and rational”<sup>11</sup>—unlike the intransigent and maybe even crazy folks on the other side. Jon Stewart may be the contemporary patron saint of this view. More consequentially, though Barack Obama also played the Democratic straddle, he never lost “his conviction that reconciling differences contributes more to contemporary democratic culture than exacerbating conflicts.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Bawn, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, “A Theory of Parties: Groups, Policy Demands, and Nominations in American Politics.” *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2012): 571-597.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gregory Koger, Seth Masket, and Hans Noel, “No Disciplined Army: American Political Parties as Networks,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks*, edited by Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Alexander H. Montgomery, and Mark Lubell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). The point is less the particular points of cooperation and coordination than the overall structure (or non-structure) of the party network, and the weaknesses of the connections that might bring its pieces together.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group-Interest Democrats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Russell Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 14.

<sup>12</sup> James T. Kloppenberg “Barack Obama and Progressive Democracy,” in *Making the American Century: Essays on the Political Culture of Twentieth Century America*, ed. Bruce Schulman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 284. See also Daniel J. Galvin and Chloe N. Thurston, “The Democrats’ Misplaced Faith in Policy Feedback,” *The Forum* 15 (2017): 333-43.

For their part, the party's "outs," to use V.O. Key's apt phrase, who backed Bernie Sanders, too, lack any special sense of party. Sanders's supporter spent the nomination season bemoaning a "rigged" process, though what exactly was rigged beyond a few television debates scheduled at odd hours was never quite clear. Yet after Sanders, in a concession not uncommon from winning candidates, extracted a 2016 platform much to his liking, the erstwhile opponents of overweening parties became positive apostles of party responsibility, urging candidates from Hillary Clinton on down to fall in line behind the stated positions of the Democratic Party. Speaking more broadly, if left populists embrace radical democracy, they have less sense of what form the political party ought to take as a means to realize that vision.<sup>13</sup>

These same maladies infect the very efforts meant to solve them. The Democracy Alliance, a collection of liberal interest groups and rich donors established explicitly to resist short-termism and fragmentation, has straddled the Democrats' internecine battles and spread its cash thinly and widely. Rather than building institutions that would push a clear partisan or ideological vision, it has simply pumped more money into the Blob.<sup>14</sup> For its part, the unfolding story of Trump-era "resistance" highlights the long-term costs to know-how and capacity in a top-heavy, hollowed-out system. Citizens across the country seek to fill voids in Democratic organizations. Yet, despite some bright spots, formal party actors at the national and, in many instances, state and local levels have typically offered little help, and have little help to offer.<sup>15</sup>

Electorally, the Blob has hardly proven the same kind of drag for Republicans. The signal political victory in our 50-50 era of party competition has been Republicans' success in the states. Via gerrymanders in Congressional districts, they have imprinted that victory on national politics. Rather than stemming from strong state parties, their state-level success has emerged from linked actors outside, but entwined with, formal parties. The critical non-party actors, including the Koch network and the American Legislative Exchange Council, seized the opportunities that the midterm gains of 2010 offered, consolidated power, and changed the playing field by starving out their opponents, foremost in public-sector unions. The structural power of business, the alliance between conservatism and right populism, and, critically, a set of powerful actors that knew what it wanted, all came together.<sup>16</sup>

Instead, the failure to build a Republican Party that inculcates positive loyalties manifests itself in the party's distinct incapacities either to draw firm lines (the "cordon sanitaire") between themselves and the revanchist grassroots right or, even in more polite precincts, to set forth the rules of parliamentary war. Through the 2016 nomination fight, coverage depicted sober-minded

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<sup>13</sup> The point also applies to the intellectuals. The work of Chantal Mouffe, often cited as an important thinker by left populists, emphasizes resisting the drift of center-left politics toward some chimerical consensus and reconstituting the people, but is remarkably thin on how to conceptualize the role of the political party. See, e.g., *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Jason Sclar, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Theda Skocpol, and Vanessa Williamson, "Donor Consortia on the Left and Right: Comparing the Membership, Activities, and Impact of the Democracy Alliance and the Koch Seminars," paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association, April 2016, [http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/mpsa\\_donor\\_consortia.pdf](http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/mpsa_donor_consortia.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Lara Putnam and Theda Skocpol, "Middle America Reboots Democracy," *Democracy*, February 20, 2018, <https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/middle-america-reboots-democracy/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016); Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism," *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (2016): 681-699.

“grown-ups” scrambling to resist a political force they associated with reckless extremism—and, more to the point, electoral weakness. In the years leading up to 2016, however, that very same staid establishment, had become the subject of increasingly alarmed diagnoses depicting the modern GOP as an extremist “insurgent outlier” in American politics driving forth “a slow-moving constitutional crisis.”<sup>17</sup>

Establishment Republicans tell a story to themselves and their cadres: that of the modern conservative movement from the Goldwater insurgency to the apotheosis of Saint Reagan.<sup>18</sup> Behind that lingua franca, however, lies a decidedly more pragmatic bargain. GOP electoral success over the last half century has ridden the realignment of the South and the potency of racial resentments and cultural grievances felt by white voters, North and South. Appeals that speak to identity and culture have won the party majorities—which in turn have facilitated policies advancing regressive economic and fiscal policies far dearer to the party’s donors than its voters.<sup>19</sup> The elite agenda, built around marginal tax cuts to the rich that reflect a group interest fortified with its own sort of intense class solidarity, drifts away from a set of priorities among base voters that themselves flow from the potent group identities of race, faith, and nationalism. To distinguish Trumpist populism from the GOP mainstream is correct. Trump’s takeover truly was a hostile one. But the longstanding interpenetration of ethnonationalist elements speaks to the deeper partisan reasons behind his victory.

Trump instinctively identified and exploited that gap in his nomination campaign, doubling down on the virulent politics of in-group identity while jettisoning rhetorical or substantive fealty to the economic side of the conservative catechism. Remarkably, Republican elites’ “what-would-Reagan-say” charges of ideological apostasy fell largely on deaf ears, undercutting establishment Republicans’ key claim to party stewardship. But consider some of the causes of his victory: party actors so terrified of backlash from voters or media-advocacy institutions within their own coalition that they neglected to offer endorsements or take other decisive action; the fruitlessness of the elite signaling that did occur, stemming from a collapse in legitimacy; and a massive and exploitable chasm between the respective priorities and agendas of the parties’ policy demanders and rank-and-file GOP voters. Rather than reflecting a victory of one faction over another,<sup>20</sup> Trump beat all the established factions inside the party—and then, thanks to loyal support from Republican identifiers in the electorate, won the presidency.

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<sup>17</sup> Quotes respectively from Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the Politics of Extremism*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2016), xxiv; and Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, “Confronting Asymmetric Polarization,” in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, ed. Nathaniel Persily (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 60.

<sup>18</sup> Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York: Free Press, 1999) offers a pitch-perfect example of the genre. Scholars tell the story differently; see Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98 (2011): 723-43.

<sup>19</sup> On donors’ views, see Peter L. Francia, John C. Green, Paul S. Herrnson, Lynda W. Powell, and Clyde Wilcox, “Limousine Liberals and Corporate Conservatives: The Financial Constituencies of the Democratic and Republican Parties,” *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (2005): 761-778; Sean McElwee, Brian Schaffner, and Jesse Rhodes, “Whose Voice, Whose Choice?: The Distorting Influence of the Political Donor Class in Our Big-Money Elections,” *Demos*, December 8, 2016,

[http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Whose%20Voice%20Whose%20Choice\\_2.pdf](http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Whose%20Voice%20Whose%20Choice_2.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cohen et al., “Party versus Faction.”

With Trump's election, the United States found its own version of a right populism that has manifested itself, in various guises, across the globe. "People who work hard but no longer have a voice," Trump told the 2016 Republican convention in language that uncannily matched scholars' definitions of transnational populism, "I am your voice!"<sup>21</sup> The leader's legitimacy is rooted in an essential connection with supporters among the people, whom the leader conjures up and for whom the leader alone may speak.<sup>22</sup>

Right populism ceaselessly exploits divisions between the people and the forces out to thwart them, while denying political parties their place as mediating institutions and their role in restraining the baser passions. In such a political vision, though parties themselves may not wither away, what Schattschneider long ago described as "The zone between the sovereign people and the government, which is the domain of the parties" empties out.<sup>23</sup> The usual meso-level players inside parties—group or politician, Blob or otherwise—may serve an instrumental but not a legitimizing function. Ironically for an ideology that celebrates the traditional ties of church, family, neighborhood, and, at times and more ominously, blood, the political party, maybe *the* defining intermediary institution in civil society, has no meaningful role to play.<sup>24</sup>

Once Trump's unlikely candidacy led to Trump's unlikely election, however, the GOP establishment behaved with characteristic discipline, coalescing support for their new president and sustaining—however unsteadily—the basic GOP bargain in governance. And so the tests that Trump's presidency poses for the American political system are thus *fundamentally party tests for the Republican Party*.

Animated by cycles of insurgency and the language of ideological purity, the GOP has shown itself to disinclined to set lines that cannot be crossed. Here the historical experiences of conservative parties that proved weakly resistant to radical infiltration—that lacked, in Daniel Ziblatt's words, "the capacity to stimulate but subordinate outside groups" so as to balance party activism and temperate forbearance—become illuminating, and worrisome.<sup>25</sup> Facing a substantively disaffected rank and file, an array of conservative institutions structured to stoke

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<sup>21</sup> Trump belongs to what Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser define as xenophobic populism, though Trump routinely invokes what the euphemism of the hour terms "racially charged rhetoric" against the native-born, as well. "Populism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Populism, as Margaret Canovan wisely notes, "can have different contents depending on the establishment it is mobilizing against." Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 4. Nor, friend or foe, is the overworked term an objective one. A delightful line attributed to the Southern writer Louis Rubin, equally applicable with the shoe on the other foot, holds that "A populist is a rabble-rouser you like. If you don't like him, he's a demagogue." See George B. Tindall, "Populism: A Semantic Identity Crisis," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 48 (1972): 518.

<sup>22</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Rinehart, 1942), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Joshua Mitchell, "A Renewed Republican Party," *American Affairs*, Spring 2017, 7-30; and Publius Decius Mus [Michael Anton], "The Flight 93 Election," *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, <http://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/the-flight-93-election/>.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 49.

permanent outrage at GOP capitulation, and a decreasingly resonant rallying cry for the party itself, Republicans proceed full tilt down a political highway devoid of guardrails.

### Towards Party Renewal

If the diagnosis is party hollowness, then the solution is party renewal, rooted in genuine civic renewal. Political parties should not simply serve as restraints on polarization or as the playthings of insiders. Those nostalgic for the mixed system of presidential nomination often overlook its seamier side, as if Richard J. Daley were some kind of paragon of party democracy.<sup>26</sup> While the Democrats are in my view quite wrong to curtail their superdelegates (as of this writing, the exact plan is still undetermined), doubling down on strategies to stop hostile infiltrators, like other such attempts to strengthen insiders without addressing the legitimacy problem square in the face, entirely misses the point. Certainly the Republican experience in 2016 and since suggests that soldiers stationed in the elite barracks may not always take up arms for democracy. While the chimerical hope shimmers on, in a polity riven with deep cleavages between the two parties, it hardly seems realistic to imagine enlightened technocracy will serve as a means of democratic renewal.<sup>27</sup> And the notion of a polity where personal character and probity outshine party seems itself a kind of wish fulfillment for a benevolent dictator.

Rather, parties, at their best, offer clear and compelling choices inside a shared commitment to a political regime, and connect ordinary partisans with the leaders that they choose. Parties, despite a long tradition of antipartyism in American life, are civic institutions. The resolution to their legitimacy problem begins by recognizing as much, and cultivating parties' civic capacities. And so we should resolve to build participatory, movement-oriented parties that emerge from people's deeply felt commitments and that devote themselves to real social change. Critically, party renewal in this framework begins with the volunteer-led local parties that do the work on the ground.<sup>28</sup> If the prescription is the same, the implementation will be different across the two parties. I offer no magic strategy to reorient the priorities of the Republican Party. Yet however it may come to pass, the challenge of building a responsible center-right is inseparable from the challenge of building a responsible center-left party. As a scholarly Committee on Party Renewal affirmed four decades ago in another, and rather different, period of malaise about the parties' capacities, "Without parties, there can be no organized and coherent politics. When politics lacks coherence, there can be no accountable democracy."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., the treatment of the 1968 Democratic convention in Nelson W. Polsby, *The Consequences of Party Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 26-36.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Goldhammer, "Democracy and Its Discontents," *American Prospect*, February 16, 2018, <http://prospect.org/article/democracy-and-its-discontents>.

<sup>28</sup> This is a call for scholars and party practitioners alike to apply the frameworks in, e.g., Kenneth T. Andrews, Marshall Ganz, Matthew Baggetta, Hahrie Han, and Chaeyoon Lim, "Leadership, Membership, and Voice: Civic Associations That Work," *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (2010): 1191-1242. On local parties, see Douglas D. Roscoe and Shannon Jenkins, *Local Party Organizations in the Twenty-First Century* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> "Professional Notes," *PS* 10 (1977): 144.