LET'S HAVE A PARTY: THE REPUBLICAN PRESENCE IN THE 1980 ELECTION[1]

Kenneth Janda
Northwestern University

Prepared for delivery at the 1981 Meeting
of the Illinois Political Science Association,
Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, October 23-24.

One of the supposed functions of political parties is conducting election campaigns. Nevertheless, the national organizations of both major American parties have long occupied an inferior role in election campaigns. Presidential campaigns have instead been under the control of candidate organizations, with the national committees playing a supporting role at best. Congressional and senatorial campaigns, while receiving some financial support from the parties' House and Senate campaign committees, have been highly decentralized, candidate-centered affairs. Gubernatorial campaigns have been even further removed from national committee participation, and state legislative races have definitely been on the periphery of the national committees' concerns.

Within the twentieth century, the American national party organizations have not had a major role in elections below the presidential level. In recent years, even that role has deteriorated with the change in campaign technology. Many observers have attributed the "decline" of American parties in large part to the parties' increasing loss of participation, much less control, of their candidates' campaigns. Crotty and Jacobson write:

> The role of the political party in campaigns has given way to the technology of television-centered campaigns built on polls and run by media and public relations experts.
>
> . . .
>
> The partyless campaign is a slick and expensive exercise that can often result in forceful, well-built, and highly professional candidate organizations. . . . By definition, the professional candidate organizations are bought by one man's money are committed to only one man's success. They are basically antiparty and contribute one more factor to the eroding base of party in campaigns. (1980: 65-66)

---

1 This paper is an expanded version of a section dealing with "Changes in the Republican Party," in Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda, Parties and Their Environments: Limits to Reform? New York: Longman, 1982. Pp. 112-116.

Although this process of declining influence in electoral campaigns had seemed inexorable, the process appears to have been halted, and even reversed, in the 1980 election by the Republican Party. Moreover, the Republicans seemed to have accomplished this feat while attracting relatively little attention from political scientists studying party reform. The convulsions within the Democratic party in the late 1960s and early 1970s quite properly attracted their attention (see Ranney, 1975 and Crotty, 1978), but the Republican Party now deserves the focus of attention for its transformation since 1976 and its unprecedented role in the 1980 campaign in elections below the presidency. (See Conway, 1981, for a comparable assessment.)

While changes in the Republican Party during the past decade have been much less controversial (and thus less visible) than those in the Democratic Party, they have also been quite different in character. Bibby (1980) argues that, while the Democrats were engaging in procedural reform, the Republicans were conducting organizational reform. The difference corresponds quite nicely to the difference between the concepts of decentralization and organizational complexity (see Janda, 1980, and Harmel and Janda, 1982). Reforms in the Democratic Party were aimed at "vesting legal authority over presidential nominating processes with the national committee," whereas in the Republican Party they involved "performing or supplementing the organizational and campaign functions previously considered to be the domain of state and local party and candidate committees" (Bibby, 1980: 113-114). In short, the Democrats sought to centralize authority within the national committee; the Republicans sought to develop the capacity of the national committee to help state and local parties and candidates win elections.

Republicans have traditionally placed a greater value on organizational details than Democrats. The rules governing the Republican National Committee and National Convention were more carefully codified than the "common law" that governed the Democratic Party before the adoption of its Charter in 1974 (Bibby, 1980: 103). This regard for formalization, however, did not extend to centralization. Responding to the Democrats' efforts at self-evaluation following the 1968 and 1972 conventions, the Republicans created two reform committees. The 1969 Committee on Delegates and Organization (known as the DO Committee) recommended electing more minority delegates to the party convention but stopped far short of setting mandatory quotas for state parties. The Rule 29 Committee, appointed in 1973, did recommend that state parties file reports on their minority action programs with the national committee but did not grant the committee any powers of enforcement. Even this weak proposal for centralization was defeated by the national committee itself and renounced by the Republican National Convention in 1976 (Bibby, 1980: 105). The Convention proceeded to adopt rules that recognized state party rights in delegate selection. These rules were reaffirmed by the 1980 Convention. As noted by Congressional Quarterly,

> Unlike the Democrats, Republicans have neither a compliance review commission nor detailed requirements to which states must adhere....Except for basic guidelines, nearly all important decisions are left to the state parties or to state law (1980: 70-71).

Lost in the controversy over the Rule 29 Committee's "positive action" program for increasing minority representation in delegate selection were its other recommendations for reforming the party structure, which were accepted by the 1976 Convention (and were reaffirmed in 1980). As summarized by Bibby, they provided that:

(1) the chairman and co-chairman shall be full-time paid employees of the Republican National Committee;

(2) there shall be eight vice chairmen, consisting of one man and woman elected from each of four regions;

(3) the term of office of the Republican National Committee officers shall be two years (thereby giving the Republican National Committee formal power to pass judgment on its chairman and officers every two years);

(4) the composition of the Executive Committee shall be specified (thereby limiting the appointing discretion of the chairman);

(5) the Republican National Committee shall confirm the chairman's appointment of the General Counsel;

(6) the powers of the Executive Committee shall be specified, and the chairman shall be required to call at least four meetings of the committee annually;

(7) Republican National Committee approval of the budget shall be required; and

(8) the chairman shall be required to send out in advance of Republican National Committee meetings [an] agenda, minutes, and the proposed budget (1980: 105).

These recommendations were aimed at restructuring the Republican National Committee in keeping with the idea of organizational reform, i.e., improving the committee's services to its sovereign state parties. Ben Cotten, former Director of the RNC's Division of Political Affairs, believes that the 1976 rule establishing the chairman and co-chairman as full-time paid positions was one of the most significant changes in the party, often overlooked by party scholars (Cotten, 1981). He also argues that the organizational realignment of the national committee was largely successful due to the efforts of the RNC's first full-time chairman, Bill Brock. Brock's role in rebuilding the party has been widely recognized (National Journal, 1980:1617). The Republican Party had always been more organizationally developed than the Democrats. A study of the sizes of the paid staff of both national committees from 1952 to 1977 shows that the RNC averaged 204 employees to the DNC's 132 (Cotter and Bibby, 1980). The Republicans' research division had long been more active than the Democrats', publishing

detailed analyses of election results since at least 1960 (Republican National Committee, 1961). Since 1964, it has also operated a unique microfilm information retrieval system for newspaper clippings.

Under Brock's chairmanship, the RNC increased its research and service capacity. It acquired its own computer in 1977 and upgraded to a newer one in 1979. The party increased its already extensive publication program, publishing an impressive variety of magazines, reports, and newsletters. Commonsense, a journal of thought and opinion, and Public Opinion Report, a weekly summary of poll data on political topics, are especially noteworthy. For the 1980 campaign, the RNC had 390 employees housed in its own four-story building off Capitol Hill--compared to the 80 employees of the DNC occupying a floor of the Airline Pilots' Association building in downtown Washington (Cotten, 1981 and National Journal, 1980: 1618).

More importantly, the RNC under Brock applied its organizational capacity to develop and implement several new programs for assisting Republican candidates that overshadowed any comparable efforts by the Democratic National Committee. The RNC created a Local Elections Campaign Division (LECD) in 1978 to direct a national effort at winning seats in state legislatures. Bibby reports:

> In conjunction with state party organizations, the LECD collected data on thousands of districts, developed district profiles, and helped state organizations identify target districts....
>
> From January to September 1978, the LECD sponsored 75 candidate seminars. In the eastern region alone, out of 4,100 legislative districts, the campaigns of approximately 2,700 candidates were represented at one of the LECD seminars (1980: 110).

This unprecedented activity by an American national party appeared to pay off, as shown by data on Republican victories in state legislative races. The party had lost 692 seats in state houses across the nation in 1974, following President Nixon's resignation over the Watergate affair. In 1976, without the LECD activity, the party netted a gain of only 12 seats. In 1978, following the LECD activity, the party gained 307 seats (First Monday, December-January, 1981: 14-15).

It is impossible to tell how much the LECD program contributed to this gain, but the national party liked the result and expanded the program in 1980. At a cost of over two million dollars, ninety-six seminars trained more than 5,000 candidates and their staffs (Cotten, 1981). The increased activity was accompanied by another gain of 271 state legislators (First Monday, December-January, 1981: 15). Lest one think that the gain in state legislators was due instead to Ronald Reagan's Republican victory with 51 percent of the presidential vote, Cotten points out that the party won only 101 state seats nationwide in 1972, when President Nixon was re-elected in a landslide, winning 61 percent of the vote. Quite probably, the changed role of the RNC had something to do with the difference.

The RNC also began a program of financial support and staff direction to the Republican Governors' Association in 1978, establishing a task force for state campaigns that visited 12 states to provide evaluations and advise concerning campaign plans and headquarters operations (Bibby, 1980: 111-112). Again, the effort was rewarding, for the party gained seven governorships for a total of nineteen. In 1980, the RNC expanded its support to the Republican Governors' Association giving $500,000 for races in thirteen states. The party picked up four more governorships for a total of twenty-three.

The RNC was equally active in campaigns for the United States Congress. It gave 1.1 million dollars to 138 Republican candidates for the House and showed a gain of 33 seats (Chairman's Report, 1981). It spent nearly $.4 million for Senate contests and picked up 12 seats and control of the Senate for the first time since 1954. Furthermore, as noted by the RNC's Director of Political Affairs in 1980, the national party undertook for the first time in U.S. political history, institutional advertising of a political nature. Between five (5) and nine (9) million dollars was expended on an advertising campaign to make the general public aware that the Democrats had been in control of Congress for some twenty-five (25) years (Cotten, 1981).

The magnitude of the Republican national organization's campaign activities can be compared with that of the Democrats by reference to the astounding difference in expenditures reported in Table 1. According to data furnished by the Federal Election Commission, the national, congressional, and senatorial committees of the Republican Party outspent the counterpart committees for the Democrats by more than $100 million dollars--a ratio of over 6 to 1!

TABLE 1
Expenditures by Democratic and Republican National Party Organizations in the 1980 Elections[a]

	Democratic	Republican
National Committees	14,909,724	71,013,779
Congressional Committees	2,038,401	25,690,935
Senatorial Committees	1,618,162	21,920,337
Totals	18,566,287	118,625,051

[a]Source: Federal Election Commission, Index C, dated February 24, 1981. These data are the total expenditures disclosed from January 1, 1979 through December 30, 1980.

No doubt many will think that the vast difference in party expenditures reflects comparable differences in the sources of party revenue, with the Republican Party tapping the "big bucks" whereas the Democrats must raise money in smaller amounts from the masses. In fact, it was the Democratic Party that relied most heavily on fat cats, obtaining an estimated 67 percent of their funds from contributions greater than $100, while the Republicans projected about 80 percent of their funds coming from contributions less than $100 (National Journal, 1980: 1617). The reorganization of the Republican National Committee was itself responsible for its flood of small contributions, most of which came from direct mail solicitations made possible by its computerized operations. Conway writes:

> The number of direct mail contributors to the RNC increased from 650 thousand in 1979 to approximately 1.2 million in 1980. Direct mail contributioins by the RNC, NRSC, and NRCC were coordinated during 1980, with a mailing going out every 20 days, but efforts were made to ensure that no individual was contacted by any of the three committees more than once every 60 days. This direct mail effort was not without considerable cost; the RNC spent $5.5 million to raise $7.2 million, but it gained 400,000 sustaining members while almost doubling its basic direct mail contributor file (1981: 9-10).

The party-supplied information about contributors matches with available data from the 1980 CPS post-election survey. Only 51 persons reported giving money to a political party, but those who did contributed to the Republican party by more than 3 to 1. The survey also reveals that the party's organizational activity had an impact on respondents in 1980 compared to 1976. Of the 623 respondents who reported being contacted by a political party following the 1976 election, 40 percent said they were contacted by the Democrats and only 30 percent named the Republicans (28 percent said both). Of the 322 persons reporting party contact in 1980 (when the sample was only about half the size), more persons (39 percent) cited the Republicans than the Democrats (36 percent). So between 1976 and 1980, the Republicans replaced the Democrats as the more active party nationally in contacting voters during an election campaign.

So far, the Republicans' organizational efforts have occurred without insistence on national direction and control. It appears that the party extended its philosophy of governmental decentralization to party decentralization. Crotty explains:

> The Republicans, during the post-World War II period . . . had become perhaps more politically committed to the ideological implications of a highly decentralized party system. Authority over state matters such as delegate selection standards resided at the lower levels. This emphasis did not prohibit a strong national headquarters staff from emerging, but it did require that the national party assure a basically supportive and suppplemental posture to state party actions. Noninterference was emphasized.

> Power, if not always political resources, remained at the state level. Within this framework, any reform recommendations that impinged on what were considered state processes, even if adopted by the national convention, were accepted only as suggestions (1977: 256).

Although the Republicans have heeded their aversion to national control of state and local party activities, the national organization has become such an important source of funds and intelligence for candidates at all levels that one wonders how long organizational reform (i.e., greater complexity) can exist without procedural reform (i.e., centralization). For example, Cotten notes that in the past, the RNC used to finance part of its activities by assessing the state parties a certain quota for national operations. As a result of the Federal Election Campaign Act and new programs for fund rising in the RNC, the national organization became "a distributor of funds not only to candidates but to state parties rather than merely a collector of funds" (1981). If the RNC pays the piper, the RNC may decide to call the tune.

Although the potential for power exists in the Republican National Committee, there are two factors which may halt its exercise. One is the Republican adversion to national control already mentioned. The other, ironically, is the party's success in winning the presidency in 1980. As Bibby writes:

> The ultimate test of the durability of Republican National Committee programs is likely to come when the GOP next regains the presidency and the Republican National Committee ceases to be the most important and inclusive Republican organization in the country. (1980: 114).

American presidents have not looked with favor on strong national party organizations, <u>especially</u> in their own parties. Just as President John Kennedy relegated an invigorated DNC to a minor role after he won office following eight years of Republican government, so President Reagan may allow the RNC to lose its momentum. However, Reagan's appointment of Richard Richards to replace Bill Brock as Chairman of the Republican National Committee suggests that he wants the party to continue on its course, for Richards is widely regarded as interested in the mechanics of party organization. It well may be that the RNC has already grown beyond the point of decay through neglect and that only the President's active opposition could derail the sizable, well-funded, party bureaucracy now in place and running in the Dwight Eisenhower Center. If this is true, then the RNC may write a new chapter in American electoral politics.

The situation that will then confront the Democratic Party recalls an earlier stage of political party evolution. Like the bourgeois parties around the turn of the century who were confronted with the superior organization of rising socialist parties, the Democrats will be forced to develop a counter-organization at the national level. Whereas Duverger had described this process as "contagion from the left" (1963: 25), the politics of the contemporary political scene more appropriately fits Epstein's

characterization of "contagion from the right" (1967: 257-258). Perhaps because of its business connections and consequent exposure to media-oriented organizational techniques, the Republican Party may be well-suited to leading the way toward a new role for American parties in election campaigns.

REFERENCES

Bibby, John R. (1980) "Party Renewal in the National Republican Party." In Gerald M. Pomper, ed., Party Renewal in America: Theory and Practice. New York: Praeger, pp 102-115.

Congressional Quarterly. (1980) Elections '80. Washington, D. C.

Conway, M. Margaret. (1981) "Political Party Nationalization Campaign Activities and Local Party Development." Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Cincinnati, April 16-18.

Cotten, Ben. (1981) Personal letter from the General Counsel, Republican National Committee. Dated February 6.

Cotter, Cornelius P., and John F. Bibby. (1980) "Institutional Development of Parties and the Thesis of Party Decline." Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 95 (Spring, pp. 1-27.

Crotty, William J. (1977) Political Reform and the American Experience. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

_____. (1978) Decisions for Democrats. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

_____, and Gary C. Jacobson. (1980) American Parties in Decline. Boston: Little, Brown.

Duverger, Maurice. (1963) Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State. London: Lowe and Brydone, 1964. Originally published in 1951. Published in 1961 and 1963 by Wiley.

Epstein, Leon D. (1967) Political Parties in Western Democracies. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Harmel, Robert and Kenneth Janda. (1981) Parties and Their Environment: Limits to Reform? New York: Longman.

Janda, Kenneth. (1980a) Political Parties: A Cross-National Survey. New York: Free Press.

Ranney, Austin. (1954) The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government. Urbana, IL.: University of Illinois Press.

Republican National Committee. (1961) The 1960 Elections: A Summary Report with Supporting Tables. Washington, D. C.