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Introduction | A Common Half-Truth

Dramatic differences in the organizational capacities of the Democratic and Republican parties were on full display during George W. Bush's presidency. The Republican Party was revealed to be a vertically integrated, technologically sophisticated national political machine with impressive capacities to activate local grassroots networks in coordinated, "microtargeted," get-out-the-vote campaigns.¹ This durable, versatile organization was a source of great pride for Republican leaders: irrespective of the ebb and flow of election outcomes, they remained steadfast in their determination to develop and enhance its structures and operations. After he won reelection in 2004, for example, Bush's deputies at the Republican National Committee (RNC) launched a four-year plan to "internalize the mechanics" of the successful presidential campaign in the formal party apparatus.² And when Republicans lost control of Congress only two years later, party leaders saw an opportunity to measure the organization's performance, make incremental improvements to its operations, and rededicate the party to organizational development—to "expand and perfect what we did well, and identify and correct what we didn't."³ Bush reminded party leaders that the story remained the same: "You win votes by organizing and turning out the vote."⁴ This commitment to GOP party building remained unchanged in the final years of Bush's presidency.⁵

The situation on the other side of the aisle could hardly have looked more different. Although the Democratic Party was raising money more efficiently and effectively than ever before over the Internet, its electoral apparatus was seen as "decades behind the Republicans organizationally."⁶ Democrats had become accustomed to outsourcing their get-out-the-vote activities to largely uncoordinated advocacy groups, for-profit canvassing firms, tax-exempt 527 organizations, and other allies operating outside the formal party structure.⁷ Such an approach was not without consequence: "At the end of the campaign," the Democratic National Committee's (DNC) field director remarked, "you're left with nothing, basically."⁸ Inside the formal party umbrella, national party leaders played tug-of-war over scarce institutional resources. DNC chairman Howard Dean's ambitious "fifty-state strategy" to make long-term investments in state parties was met with fierce resistance from a hostile congressional party leadership accustomed to pursuing quick wins in swing districts.⁹ Dean also faced high start-up costs: state and local parties were in a state of organizational disrepair and required a significant investment of time and resources. Most needed financial resources and more staff, and some also needed legal assistance, technological upgrades, public relations support, and campaign expertise.¹⁰

How and why the two parties developed such asymmetrical structures and strategies has become the subject of increasing scrutiny. In most accounts,

however, credit and blame are assigned in a seemingly indiscriminate fashion: elite “power brokers,” special interest networks, policy choices, marketing strategies, rhetorical frames, and even contrasting ideological commitments are offered as explanations for the divergent paths taken by the two parties.¹¹ Undoubtedly, each of these factors played a role. But oddly, American presidents—the party leaders who have had, arguably, the greatest stake in their party’s current and future operations—have not made much of an appearance.

American presidents are perhaps the political actors most closely associated with major historical changes in the parties, but precisely what role they played in pushing these developments along is not at all clear. Six different Republicans occupied the White House for thirty-six of the fifty-six years between 1953 and 2009, yet the extent to which they were involved in building the new Republican Party organization of which we speak is not known. If anything, Republican presidents are seen as the beneficiaries of a party built by others, but are not, themselves, seen as integral to the GOP party-building project. Was this, in fact, how things developed? And did the four Democratic presidents of this period try to build their party organization and simply fail, or were they, too, peripheral to the currents of party change?

Remarkably, most existing scholarship has passed over these questions and focused instead on the characteristic party-building activities of “out parties”—that is, those parties that do not hold the White House. In the wake of defeat in a presidential election, the losing party’s leaders and activists are depicted as the real party builders, the primary actors who build new organizational capacities and develop new methods of reaching out to new groups of voters and recruit new candidates.¹² Party building, in this frame, is the work of the underdog, the labor of the losing party. Presidents are nowhere in view.

In fact, when presidents do come into the picture, they are usually depicted as party predators, not party builders. There is a strong consensus in the literature that all modern presidents—Democrats and Republicans alike—view their parties as “at best a drag,” and more commonly as “a nuisance.”¹³ They are portrayed as agents of party decline, as party antagonists whose approach ranges from “simple neglect” to “outright hostility.”¹⁴ Whether they treat their parties “with contempt” or mere indifference, modern presidents are said to “undermine the development and maintenance of a strong national party organization.”¹⁵

This prevailing view results from the assumption that all presidents are driven by self-interest and short-term calculations, and are more concerned with their own problems than those of collective leadership. Especially in the modern context of “rampant pluralism,” where presidents face “unnegotiable demands, political stagnation, and stalemate,” they are compelled to break free from the centrifugal force of their traditionally decentralized party organizations and develop their own capacities for independent leadership.¹⁶ They are said to have disengaged from their parties, transcended them, subordinated them, exploited them, or ignored them.

Modern presidential practices, we are told, have only made matters worse. By “running alone”—that is, by relying on independent, highly personalized campaign committees whose sole purpose is “to get them into office”—presidents are said to undercut their parties’ core electoral functions.¹⁷ Likewise, by creating offices for political affairs and public liaison inside the White House, they build “the equivalent of a presidential party for governing” inside the White House and short-circuit the party as a mechanism for representation.¹⁸ And by employing common strategies such as “going public,” presidents push their parties further “to the periphery of national politics.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, they “appoint a nonentity” to serve as national committee chairman, “downgrade the job, and humiliate the incumbent.”²⁰ “The development of the modern presidency,” Sidney M. Milkis summarizes, “clearly weakened party organizations by preempting many of the tasks they performed prior to the New Deal.”²¹

If all modern presidents do indeed adopt a predatory relationship toward their parties, if they seek not to strengthen and expand their organizations but to marginalize or debilitate them, then Howard Dean and the Democrats might have done better simply to save their money and wait for President Bush to sap the strength of the organization that defeated them.

But what if the conventional wisdom is wrong? In my investigation of every presidential administration from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush, I find that at best only half the story is in view. Drawing upon a wealth of primary source materials, including internal White House memos, letters, strategy papers, personal notes, party documents and publications, oral histories, memoirs, White House tape recordings, and personal interviews, I find that modern presidents did not act in a uniform manner with respect to their parties; in fact, the full scope of their party interactions reveals striking contrasts between them.²² While it is true that all modern presidents sought to “presidentialize” their parties and use them instrumentally to pursue their independent purposes, Republican presidents did something more. Since Eisenhower, Republican presidents persistently and purposefully worked to *build* their party, to expand and develop it into a stronger, more durable, and more capable organization. Their instrumental use of the Republican Party organization did not prevent them from simultaneously investing in new organizational capacities to expand the party’s reach and enhance its electoral competitiveness.

The conventional wisdom, it turns out, is more accurate as an exclusively Democratic phenomenon. Democratic presidents worked assiduously to personalize their party, altering and reconfiguring it to maximize the immediate political benefit to their administrations, but took few steps, if any, to leave behind a more robust party organization able to persevere over the long term. Whether they ignored their party, exploited it, or purposefully sought to undercut its organizational capacities, their actions had a debilitating effect on its organizational development. This Democratic pattern of behavior remained remarkably stable until Bill Clinton’s second term. As Clinton’s competitive

environment changed, so too did his approach to his party organization; as discussed below, his presidency thus offers critical insights into *why* Republican and Democratic presidents acted so differently over the course of more than forty years.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, it is worth dwelling a bit more on this variation in presidential behavior. Partly because we have assumed that all presidents act in fundamentally the same ways, and partly because of the methods we have used to research such questions, we have long missed out on this striking pattern. But this has been no minor oversight: the different approaches taken by Republican and Democratic presidents clearly contributed to the divergent historical trajectories taken by the two parties over the course of the modern period and helped to create the uneven—and unsettled—political landscape of the early twenty-first century.

My aim in this book is neither to champion nor indict presidents for how they interact with their parties, nor is it to elevate Republicans for their efforts or denigrate Democrats for theirs. It is to show that the president-party relationship has not been all of a piece. Some modern presidents have acted more constructively with regard to their parties than others; my objective is to consider why this might be so and to bring *presidential party building* into view as a variable component of modern American political development whose significance is clearly evident in politics today.

I do not go so far as to claim that the lack of presidential party building explains all of the Democrats' organizational woes over the second half of the twentieth century or that the Republican Party's organizational strength, as observed in the Bush administration, was only due to presidential party-building efforts. No doubt a host of factors are at work. Nor do I claim that every Republican presidential party-building effort over the past sixty years was pursued with a vision of the contemporary Republican Party in mind. Quite the contrary: each Republican president pursued different visions of what a new Republican majority would look like, and each met with at least as many disappointments as successes. However, I do argue that in the course of pursuing their own distinctive purposes, each Republican president made incremental contributions to his party's cumulative organizational development. Likewise, I aim to show that the Democrats' persistent inattention to their party organization and their relative indifference to the long-term impact of their actions prevented the Democratic Party from capitalizing on the potential benefits of presidential power and made cumulative organizational development in their party more difficult.

What Is Presidential Party Building?

Clarifying terms and setting definitions up front is critical, because the heart of the problem, and the objective of this study, is to make precise what has thus far been obscured. While all modern presidents have tried in some way

to change their party organizations to better suit their purposes, some have taken additional steps to develop their party's organizational capacities, strengthen its foundations, and expand its reach. Their party building has not been incompatible with the instrumental party-changing acts all presidents routinely undertake for their own immediate benefit. In fact, I will argue that the very essence of the thing—that which makes it an interesting and significant political phenomenon—is that presidential party building is *both* instrumental and developmental at the same time.

What it means “to build” is, admittedly, not self-evident. In the first place, presidents never create parties from scratch.²³ Even Jefferson, the first and perhaps greatest of presidential party builders, was acting upon an existing organization.²⁴ Presidential party building always entails rebuilding, recasting, or reconstituting an existing structure. Second, presidents frequently work to build electoral coalitions, but often do so without ever interacting with their party apparatus. “Going public,” stumping for fellow partisans, promoting carefully tailored policy programs, staging symbolic spectacles, and other such strategies are often designed to mobilize electoral support for presidents and their fellow partisans, but they are not necessarily meant to “build” the party *per se*. Third, everything a president does in the course of his official duties—every speech, every policy proposal, every local visit, every dinner party, every foreign initiative—will reflect on his party and may even be undertaken to some extent with partisan political gain in view; most presidential actions have an impact on their party's public standing, even if only incidentally so. But the incidental effects of presidential action cannot possibly “count” as party building. One of the reasons we have had difficulty coming to terms with the president-party relationship—one of the reasons the subject has collapsed into a purely predatory perspective—is that it seems to be synonymous with whatever presidents do.

To shed some light on this relationship, we need to take a narrower view. In this study, I focus attention on what is at the heart of party building. Presidential party building will be distinguished here from everything else presidents do by its organizational focus and its explicitly constructive aims. Presidential party building aims to enhance the party's capacity to

1. Provide campaign services
2. Develop human capital
3. Recruit candidates
4. Mobilize voters
5. Finance party operations
6. Support internal activities

Decision rules, data sources, and other methodological issues are elaborated in the appendix. For now, it suffices to say that concrete evidence of efforts undertaken by the president to endow the party organization with enhanced capacities on these six dimensions is what counts as presidential party building. Actions that are indifferent, exploitative, or meant to undercut the party's

organizational capacities along these dimensions count as confirmation of the conventional image of the president as party predator. As this specification suggests, presidential party building aims to bolster the party's operational wherewithal, both now and in the future. It is an intentional effort to foster party development: it is aimed at creating durable improvements to the party's organizational capacities. To be sure, presidential party-building efforts are meant to redound to the immediate benefit of the sitting president as well, and are usually designed with this goal in view. But they are constructive rather than exploitative and look as much to the future as to immediate political gain.

As this definition suggests, it is the party's organizational capacity that takes center stage in this study. Sometimes the term *party building* is used differently, so it is important to be clear. Sometimes it refers to discipline building in Congress, coalition building in the electorate, policy agenda building, party brand building, ideology building, and sometimes even giving campaign stump-speeches for fellow partisans.²⁵ Sometimes a president's expressed feelings of partisanship—his willingness to identify with and speak well of his party—are treated as evidence of his overall approach to his party, no more or less significant than purposeful organizational changes. Sometimes “party building” is meant to encompass multiple notions of party leadership at once.²⁶

Organizational capacity, however, must be the starting point if we are to gain a fuller and more precise understanding of the relationship between presidential action and party development. Without organizational capacity, after all, parties cannot possibly perform any of the functions we ascribe to them. As Frank Sorauf has written: “A meaningful approach to political parties must be concerned with parties as organizations or structures performing activities, processes, roles, or functions. . . . The logical intellectual and analytical point of reference is the party as a structure. Activity (or function) is certainly important, but one must begin by knowing who or what is acting.”²⁷ Organizational capacity can be built, it can be ignored, it can be undermined, it can be altered. It can grow, diminish, stay the same, or be transformed; it is where durable party change is executed. The party organization—its structures, processes, and operations—is thus the principal site for observing, measuring, and evaluating purposive president-party interactions.

Just as there are reasons for focusing on the party's organizational capacity, there are reasons for moving *presidential* party building to the center of the analysis.²⁸ While other actors surely have a hand in building the party's organizational capacities, the party-building efforts of presidents stand out as particularly portentous for the party's development. To be sure, some “out-party” national committee chairmen have been formidable party builders: former RNC chairmen Ray Bliss, Bill Brock, and Haley Barbour, for example, were critical agents of the GOP's organizational development in the modern period.²⁹ And former DNC leaders, including Charles Manatt, Paul Kirk, Ron Brown, and Howard Dean, have also received attention for their organization-building initiatives.³⁰ Congressional party leaders, too, have sought to strengthen their party through various means: consider Newt Gingrich's efforts to recruit

and train candidates through GOPAC and other initiatives in the 1980s and early 1990s, Tom DeLay's redistricting efforts in the early years of this century, or the McGovern-Fraser reforms in the Democratic Party in the early 1970s. Extrapartisan outfits such as think tanks, advocacy groups, and non-profit organizations are also sometimes credited with affecting a party's capacity to contest elections, recruit personnel, and so on.³¹

But in contrast to these nonpresidential party builders, presidents possess unusually potent resources to effect significant party change. In addition to their usual sources of leverage (appointments, endorsements, and so on), they can also draw upon the administrative muscle and unparalleled prestige of the presidency. For example, their West Wing teams can marshal considerable administrative resources to plan extensive party activities; presidents can raise more money with a single appearance or signed letter than any other political figure; and a simple call from the White House can inspire reluctant candidates to stand for office or rouse a complacent local leader to action. Whatever resources they choose to use in any given instance, presidents also tend to be skilled political actors, and should be expected to bring their own personal touch to the project at hand.

Presidents are also set apart from other party leaders by their unique position of authority in their parties. Though formally independent from them, modern presidents assume their parties' "titular" leadership, handpick the national chairperson and other leaders at the national committee, and exercise decisive authority over the party's national activities. Perhaps most important, their actions effectively define the parties' political purposes, a fact that by itself can induce concerted organizational action. For all of these reasons and more, modern presidents possess unusual capacities to effect party change.³²

But the importance of presidential party building is not simply a matter of resources and authority. It is also a matter of the opportunity costs that are incurred when presidents choose *not* to involve themselves in party building. Squandering the opportunity to leverage presidential power and prestige on behalf of constructive party change during periods when the party holds the White House may be more detrimental to the party's long-term development than is often realized. For instance, we know that some ambitious Democratic "out-party" chairmen took pains to launch new party-building initiatives, but in the absence of continued presidential support during subsequent "in-party" periods, there was little that these chairmen could do to effect long-term change in the party. Their periodic attempts at party building became isolated events.³³ Eschewing party building, Democratic presidents not only set their party's organizational development back, but they made it more costly for future party leaders to launch new programs.

On the Republican side, in contrast, persistent investments in the party organization fostered the continuous, cumulative growth of the GOP's organizational capacities. Each new round of party building not only carried forward past successes, but built on them and fostered conditions amenable for

further party building in the future. Investments and reinvestments in human resources, technological capacities, and strategic operations made for durable, self-reinforcing processes that helped to carry forward constructive, party-building purposes over time despite personnel changes in party leadership; such stability and continuity in party activities also helped the Republican organization withstand fluctuations in its electoral fortunes. With ongoing programs on which to build and low start-up costs, future presidents were more likely to find it in their interest to continue down the party-building path. As this contrast makes clear, presidents can either be a boon to party development or they can stop it dead in its tracks—either way, they are formidable political actors whose actions cannot help but shape the course of party change.

Presidential party building, it should be noted, also speaks to those activities that party “functionalists” have long argued are the core “constituent” or “integrative” functions parties play (or should play) in the United States.³⁴ When presidents engage in party building, they seek to enhance the party’s capacity to engage with voters, register them, and mobilize them to vote; to attract new volunteers and activists and involve them in politics; to encourage citizens to stand for elected office and serve in appointed office; to adapt to meet changing conditions; and to pace the opposition in electoral politics. To the extent that the necessary starting point for assessing party functions must be the structural, procedural, and operational wherewithal of the party to implement these activities, presidential party building becomes an important factor in how we evaluate the “proper” functioning of the political system and how we assess different functional trade-offs under different conditions.³⁵ These questions are addressed further in the concluding chapter. Suffice it to say, unpacking the president-party relationship promises to address long-standing concerns about the representative process in America and the variable role presidents play.

Lest I overstate the case, I hasten to repeat that the interesting thing about presidential party building is that it is never fully about building “the party” per se, as an independent political entity separate from the president, or as a responsible or functional instrument of democracy. This is not “altruistic” behavior. All president-party interactions are undertaken with the president’s best interests in view, and all party-building actions should be expected to serve the president’s interest as well. The peculiarity of the phenomenon, and perhaps one of the reasons it has long passed under the radar, is that presidential party building involves both the personal and the collective, the instrumental and the developmental. As this book aims to make clear, instrumental action need not always be predatory; indeed, while it is safe to assume that the president’s relationship to his party is always instrumental, it might at times also be directed toward building something stronger and more durable.

Herein lie the two literal alternatives suggested by the term *presidential party building*. One might take the term to mean “party building, undertaken

by the president,” or, alternatively, “building a presidential party.” The first reading implies that the president helps to build a durable electoral organization with the wherewithal to operate continuously and independently of his administration; the second implies that the president sidelines the regular party organization and builds an alternative wholly dependent on himself.³⁶ While the range of the concept may be encompassed by these two alternatives, much of this book is meant to elaborate upon the possibilities that lie between. We will see some of each, but more importantly, we will see that neither tells the whole story.

Republican presidents did not seek to sacrifice their party’s independent capabilities at the altar of their personal interests, but neither did they try to build their party to operate without regard for their personal purposes. Instead, their efforts were geared toward creating a new and different kind of party. They aimed to “presidentialize” their party, to make it more responsive to their leadership and more reflective of their personal brand of politics, but at the same time, they sought to strengthen its organizational foundations and enhance its capacities to expand and improve in the future. Though they hoped to benefit personally from their party interactions in the short term, they did not exploit or debilitate their party organizations in order to do so. On the contrary, they perceived that a constructive approach promised a higher political payoff than an antagonistic approach. Republican presidents treated the GOP as central and consequential, not peripheral or detrimental, for themselves and others.

Whether their party-building efforts helped to create a normatively desirable party—one that might, for example, judiciously balance the president’s interest with the collective interest—is an important matter for debate. The Republican Party under George W. Bush, for example, was by most accounts a robust organization that was also highly subordinate to the White House. With this combination of attributes, it may well have sacrificed some of the capacities of earlier American parties to hold presidents accountable to a collective interest; as we will discuss, variations in the president-party relationship have entailed some rather unexpected trade-offs in party “functions.”³⁷ But my primary aim is not to adjudicate the results so much as it is to account for them and to clarify the political dynamic at the heart of this modern political development. By conflating presidential instrumentalism with the notion of the party predator who ignores or weakens the regular party organization, existing scholarship has missed out on critical variation in the president-party relationship and obscured an integral component in the development of modern American politics. Republican presidents in the modern period did not perceive their party as irrelevant or as an obstacle to their leadership: rather, they saw it as a useful and beneficial resource. In their persistent attempts to fortify their party organization, these presidents created new, potent resources for presidential power and also new, durable organizational capacities in their party to last well beyond the moment.

Pressing the Limits of Current Scholarship

As I have noted, political scientists have had next to nothing to say about presidential party building as a general phenomenon. We have a vague notion that most “great” presidents—Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR—were also great party builders, but virtually everything we know about that connection comes from historians and remains scattered and anecdotal.³⁸ The relationship has been squeezed out of discussion. In early years, it lost out to the Progressives’ celebration of a presidency-centered government as an alternative to the perceived corruptions of party government, and in later years it fell victim to the normative critique of the modern presidency, especially as this critique was tied to a lament for the decline of parties.³⁹ But there is an analytic as well as a normative component to this remarkable lacuna: the approach most political scientists have taken to studying the presidency for almost fifty years has given us only limited purchase on presidents as agents of systemic political change.

Presidents are usually evaluated and compared in terms of how much of their agendas they can accomplish within the bounds of a tightly constricted political system and a short time frame. In the standard accounts, the contours of the political system are essentially given; the president faces a fixed environment that, although different for each incumbent in its particulars and different perhaps even from one biennial election to the next, is treated as largely external to the leadership problem the president confronts. The environment is, in this sense, a “deal of the cards” in an ongoing game over which the president exerts little control. Because presidents are seen as confined to working with their political environments as they find them, their own capacities to *change* the existing configuration of political forces, including their parties, seldom receive direct attention. What escapes investigation is the possibility that presidents are out to change the rules of the game itself, and that party building is one of the instruments at their disposal to do that.

The typical finding of work that proceeds on these assumptions is that presidents have no durable effect on the political environment in which they act. George C. Edwards III, for example, casts his investigation along these lines and finds that “there is little evidence that presidents can restructure the political landscape to pave the way for change. Although not prisoners of their environment, they are likely to be highly constrained by it.”⁴⁰ I do not mean to suggest that all party-building presidents successfully or permanently change their parties and restructure the political landscape according to their own designs. Most do not; nor do they all try to the same extent. But findings such as Edwards’s must be understood in relation to the premise of their research questions. Indeed, if the George W. Bush presidency does not conclusively refute the standard conclusion, it certainly does raise questions about it and about the methods by which it was reached.

The dominant frame of presidential scholarship might be described as “man against the system.” The assumption is that if the president does not

dominate the system, it will dominate him; that its component parts will smother him with their demands, if not their own special interests. Presidents are more or less able to get things done depending on the given configuration of political forces in play and their own individual leadership styles, strategies, and skills.⁴¹ The behavioral school of presidential studies ushered in by Richard Neustadt in 1960 inaugurated a debate about whether the individual or the contextual configuration was most important in determining how much a president could get done, and Edwards, for one, has weighed in heavily on the side of context.⁴² Either way, the predominant assumption that the president must subdue his party before it subdues him is implicit in these analyses.

A more dynamic and interactive sensibility might be teased out of the new rational choice scholarship. Terry Moe, for example, finds the impulse to alter, politicize, and control the president's governing environment to be inherent in his leadership position and particularly consequential for the development of American political institutions. Presidents, he says, take "aggressive action within their own sphere of authority to shift the structure of politics for themselves and everyone else."⁴³ Suggestive as such insights are, however, rational choice scholars have not thus far followed through to consider whether the institution-controlling efforts of presidents have any effects more durable than those realized in the moment at hand; subsequently, the terms of analysis have not been fundamentally altered. Notwithstanding its critical thrust, work in the rational choice tradition remains very much preoccupied with a Neustadtian understanding that the problems to be addressed in presidential politics are framed by the structural limits of presidential power and the strategies available for presidents to get more done. Presidential unilateral action, legislative bargaining, executive branch management, and legislative policymaking are usually examined for the purpose of learning how much the president can extract from a system stacked against him.⁴⁴

What, then, if we assume that the contours of the system are not given, but are, in each instance, a main object of contestation? It is hardly a stretch to think that presidents see it this way, that they are not just interested in realizing particular policy objectives but also in restructuring the political landscape and tilting the competitive balance in their favor, and that their actions are, more often than not, undertaken with these larger ends in view. Getting at this would require an analysis that treats presidents as constitutive of the political system, as actors who can affect their political environment just as surely as their political environment affects them. It would require a more protean view of the system in which some basic structural features remain unsettled and open to presidential manipulation. What such an approach would offer is a fuller accounting of presidents as agents of political change, as engines of party development, as potential party *builders*, and not just transient party actors.

There are a few studies that proceed along these lines, enough to suggest that presidents do have unique capacities to bring about dramatic change in

the political landscape. Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter, for example, have argued that presidents are capable of rearranging the configuration of social groups. In their view, presidents are “not in fact limited to dealing with some predefined or fixed constellation of forces.” Rather, they can “reorganize interests, destroy established centers of power, and even call new groups into being.” They can “attempt to enhance their own power and promote their own policy aims by constructing a new, more congenial configuration of social forces.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Sidney M. Milkis shows that, in seeking to enhance the administrative capacities of the executive branch, successive presidents since FDR have contributed to the emergence of a modern executive establishment and a more national and programmatic party system. Changes in the party system and changes in executive administrative capacity have been inextricably linked—each one implicates the other, with presidents as the main facilitators of these developments.⁴⁶

And in Stephen Skowronek’s study of presidential leadership, the president is depicted as a “blunt disruptive force” who always shakes up, and sometimes reorders, “basic commitments of ideology and interest” in the course of exercising power.⁴⁷ Along the way to fulfilling their constitutional duties as national representatives, Skowronek’s presidents routinely “make” politics and leave an altered political landscape in their wake. What these and a few other like studies aim to show is that presidents are powerful agents of change, capable of redrawing the lines of political contestation and restructuring political power, authority, and influence.⁴⁸

Mainstream presidential scholarship, however, has yet to heed the call of these scholars and follow up in earnest on their theoretical and empirical insights. How, precisely, presidents interact with their political environments and shape the structures of which they are a part remains far too underspecified in most studies. Presidential rhetoric, policy promotion, unilateral action, coalition building, and even symbolic action are presumed to cause political change; the outstanding challenge is to test these assumptions by specifying how each factor does so. As too often happens with an endogenous view of change, we run the risk of leaving a thick composite of determining factors where everything of significance appears to be bound up with everything else. The task at hand for anyone interrogating the system-altering potential of presidential action is to clarify the relationship between action, circumstance, and effect. Presidential party building is ripe for scrutiny in this manner.

But a new analytic approach that relies on the same data will not do. One of the reasons the received wisdom regarding the president-party relationship has remained intact for so long is that we have been too willing to rely on secondary sources and recycle familiar stories.⁴⁹ As burgeoning work in the traditions of American political development and historical institutionalism demonstrate, there is no substitute for going directly to the primary sources to investigate pressing conceptual and temporal political puzzles.⁵⁰ Immersing oneself in the archives may not be the most glamorous of undertakings,

but it does allow for new findings to emerge that can cast old assumptions in new light, generate new questions, and open up new lines of investigation.

Considering the Variation

The tendency to view modern presidents as party predators is encouraged and reinforced by some of our most deeply rooted assumptions about American political parties, how they are structured, and how they operate. Most theories of the parties rest on the assumption that, except for their policy proposals, the Democratic and Republican parties are essentially symmetrical organizations that face the same imperatives to structure their operations and activities to appeal to the median voter and construct majorities throughout the constitutional system.⁵¹ Regardless of the period of American history we are concerned with, scholars usually assume that both parties are structured and operate in fundamentally the same ways. Especially within demarcated party “periods” or “systems,” both parties are presumed to exhibit organizational isomorphism.⁵² While this assumption of party symmetry has been widely useful as a theoretical device in political science, it has led to a chronic failure to observe evidence of party asymmetry in reality.

Despite the pervasiveness of these assumptions, the existing literature does not go so far as to portray the president-party relationship as wholly static. Variation, however, is usually presumed to be historical—change is thought to occur around historical breakpoints, at least four of which can be readily identified:

1. *Assumption:* Each incumbent acts differently toward his party on account of his individual personality, skills, and style.⁵³
Expected variation: Every four or eight years, with every new administration.
2. *Assumption:* John F. Kennedy’s “going public” strategy ushered in a new era of president-party interactions in the television age.⁵⁴
Expected variation: Before and after Kennedy’s presidency.
3. *Assumption:* The presidential primary system and campaign finance reforms altered how presidents approached their party organizations.⁵⁵
Expected variation: Before and after the reforms of the 1970s.⁵⁶
4. *Assumption:* The growing use of independent presidential campaign organizations had a deleterious effect on the parties.
Expected variation: A gradual increase in party subordination culminating in 1972, followed by an “established pattern” thereafter.⁵⁷

As we shall see, these presumed sources of variation, especially changes in the campaign finance regime in the 1970s, did significantly alter the institutional environment in which presidents operated, and presidential practices changed as a result. But these historical junctures do not represent the critical pivot-points in the president-party relationship. When the data is assembled

		Party Building					Party Predation					
		C	H	R	V	F	C	H	R	V	F	I
Republicans	Eisenhower	•	•	•	•	•						
	Nixon	•	•	•	•	•	•					•
	Ford	•	•	•	•	•						
	Reagan	•	•	•	•	•						
	Bush	•	•	•		•						
Democrats	Kennedy						•	•				
	Johnson						•	•	•	•	•	•
	Carter						•	•	•	•	•	•
	Clinton (1st term)						•	•	•	•	•	•
	Clinton (2nd term)	•	•		•	•						

C=Provide campaign services, H=Build human capital, R=Recruit candidates, V=Mobilize voters, F=Finance party operations, I=Support internal activities

Figure 1.1. Variation in President-Party Interactions

and the comparisons are made, an altogether different pattern emerges: for a quarter of American history, *which party* the president belonged to was the best predictor of how he would approach his party. Figure 1.1 illustrates this rather striking partisan pattern across the six dimensions of party activity listed above.⁵⁸

This partisan pattern was not, however, a simple matter of inherent differences between the parties. As we will see, it resulted from the very different competitive environments in which Democratic and Republican presidents found themselves throughout this period. With their party in the ostensible minority, Republican presidents engaged in party building as a means of building a new majority. With deep and durable majorities, Democratic presidents faced different challenges, and the condition of their party apparatus did not figure as a prominent concern. Both impulses came into play during Bill Clinton's presidency, which helps to explain the mixed bag of party interactions over the course of his two terms in office. This "competitive standing" theory of presidential party building, and the assumptions and expectations it entails, is elaborated in detail in chapter 2. For now, brief comparisons along two different dimensions of party activity suffice to introduce the basic contrast between party building and party predation.

First, consider how Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Gerald R. Ford altered their parties' capacities to *finance party operations*. As I have noted, fund-raising capability is a major advantage presidents can bring to their parties. But if presidents can raise money quickly and easily, they can also do so for a variety of specific purposes; and on that count, the fund-raising activities of Johnson and Ford were markedly different. While both presidents broke fund-raising records, the money Johnson raised remained tightly controlled by the White House, while most of the money Ford raised went directly to state parties. The contributions Johnson raised were spent at his sole discretion—some were disbursed to members of Congress and other officials deemed particularly useful to the president, and the rest were used to build

up his campaign war chest. The money Ford raised went directly into state party treasuries to help them get out of debt, develop improved local campaign operations, recruit new candidates, and register and mobilize voters.

Second, consider how John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan influenced their parties' capacities to *provide campaign services*. In preparation for his 1964 reelection campaign, Kennedy refused to seize upon the opportunity provided by his presidential campaign to enhance the Democratic Party's organizational capacities. Instead he established a highly personalized campaign network that bypassed the existing party apparatus. Largely an ad hoc arrangement of gentlemen's agreements, fragile deals, and personal loyalties, Kennedy's evolving campaign offered little help to his fellow Democratic candidates and proved to be useless for his successor. In contrast, Ronald Reagan integrated the RNC into his 1984 reelection campaign as an equal partner. The RNC, the Reagan-Bush '84 campaign committee, and several other groups divided the labor of registering and mobilizing voters. Taking advantage of Reagan's popularity and the prime-time event of a presidential campaign, Republican activists, volunteers, and party members were able to develop their campaign skills; millions of new Republicans were registered and brought into politics as volunteers; and a voter information database was developed for use in future campaigns. Reagan's reelection campaign, in short, was turned into a comprehensive party-building affair.

Johnson, Ford, Kennedy, and Reagan all had similar interests in securing reelection, achieving policy successes, and leaving personal legacies, and each found that he could use his party to assist in these purposes: but the nature and extent of their interactions with their party organizations were qualitatively different. They were different in their aims: Republicans sought to bolster the independent organizational capacities of their party down to the local volunteer; Democrats exploited their party organization for their own purposes and diverted resources away from local party organizations. Republicans seized the opportunities afforded by presidential politics to enhance their party's operations; Democrats either ignored or eliminated those opportunities. And they were different in their time horizons: the Republicans' efforts were geared toward strengthening their party as it looked toward the future; Democrats aimed to maximize their immediate benefit and assumed that their party's future would take care of itself.

The story does not end with this bifurcated partisan pattern, however. Variations can be found within each partisan grouping; indeed, variations can even be found within individual presidencies. The richness of the data proves to be indispensable to the analysis: it offers important lessons about why and when presidents act the way they do, and it strengthens the conceptual framework elaborated in the next chapter. Each of the following chapters, therefore, provides a means of probing the explanation from different angles and subjecting it to very different tests in each instance.

First, however, we need to consider more fully the question of why Democrats and Republicans acted so differently over such a long stretch of time. What was it about their competitive environment that motivated Republican

presidents to adopt a more constructive approach to their party than Democratic presidents? And how should we think about enduring differences between the parties, and the relationship of those differences to patterns of presidential behavior? These questions are taken up in detail in chapter 2.

Organization of the Book

After chapter 2 presents a theory of presidential party building, the book divides into two parts. Part I, “The Republicans,” examines the presidencies of Dwight D. Eisenhower (chapter 3), Richard Nixon (chapter 4), Gerald R. Ford (chapter 5), Ronald Reagan (chapter 6), and George H. W. Bush (chapter 7). Part II, “The Democrats,” then examines the presidencies of John F. Kennedy (chapter 8), Lyndon B. Johnson (chapter 9), Jimmy Carter (chapter 10), and Bill Clinton (chapter 11). The conclusion summarizes the findings and the explanatory framework, elaborates upon them, and takes up long-standing questions about the role of the presidency and the parties in the American constitutional system. The afterword then discusses the presidency of George W. Bush and offers an update on the Democrats’ organizational development through Barack Obama’s election.

All of the case study chapters follow the same organizational schema. Each begins with a brief summary of the president’s competitive political environment and the condition of the party apparatus he inherited—the two factors that I argue are critical to explaining the variation in presidential behavior (see chapter 2). The discussion of each presidency is then structured around three or four “lessons”—or general observations—about the relationship presidents tend to establish with their parties under different conditions. The lessons are derived from the case study in which they appear, but they are not tied to that case; they are meant to be applicable to every presidency within each part and freely interchangeable therein. The historical material then cuts through these lessons in mostly chronological fashion. The goal, however, is not to provide a step-by-step historical account—it is rather to explicate the more general phenomenon of presidential party building as it is revealed in each episode of president-party interaction under consideration. Finally, each chapter concludes with a brief discussion and summary table that locates these episodes along the six dimensions of party activities.

The case studies are divided by party, rather than presented chronologically, in order to draw attention to the carryover effect of each president’s actions from one administration to the next and to provide a better sense of the different organizational trajectories taken by each party. By starting with Eisenhower and finishing with Clinton and his successors, this organizational structure is meant to provide the semblance of chronology while also bringing the analysis full circle. The hope, in any case, is that this organization will accommodate readers with historical and theoretical interests in equal measure.