*Party Organizational Strength and Public Support for Parties**

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Theory: Theories of party organizational resurgence suggest that the strength of party organizations counteracts weakness and decline in other portions of the party system.
Hypotheses: Higher levels of total party organizational strength in an area lead to more supportive attitudes toward political parties as institutions. Consistent with Progressive fears of concentrated power, an imbalance in the organizational strength of the two parties in an area fosters more critical attitudes toward parties.
Methods: NES survey data and county party organizational strength data from the Party Transformation Study are used in ordinary least squares and logit analysis to test three models of the relationship between party strength and public support toward parties.
Results: Strong party organizations contribute to public support for parties, particularly when strength is not exercised by one party alone. Total party strength is significantly related to public support only in a limited pooled analysis, but the organizational strength gap between the two parties is significantly related to public support as expected and is robust across several alternative measures of perceived party performance.

Concurrent with an apparent resurgence of political party organizations, support for parties languishes in the public. Scholars are convinced that party organizations matter (Cotter et al. 1984; Herrnson 1988, 1994; Baer and Bositis 1988; Patterson 1989; Frendreis, Gibson, and Vertz 1990; Kazee and Thornberry 1990; Shea and Green 1994). But discontents in the public are legion. Public views have become increasingly skeptical about the relevance and usefulness of political parties in the political process, the extent they should guide voting and policymaking, and the contributions parties make to solving public problems (Fiorina 1980; Burnham 1982; Dennis 1986; Wattenberg 1990; Dennis and Owen 1994; Brady and Buckley 1994). Voting patterns are unstable and voter turnout is low. In 1992,

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19% of the voting public supported an independent candidate for president who had held no elective political office, was all but unknown to the electorate seven months before the election, did almost no campaigning in the traditional sense, and projected a strongly antiparty image. A Louis Harris survey in July 1992 found less than one-third of the public expressing support for continuation of the present two-party system.[1]

The simultaneous renewal and decline of different portions of the party system poses important theoretical questions about the integration of political parties. Do changes at one level of the party system (e.g., party organizations) lead to changes at other levels (e.g., party-in-the-electorate)? Schlesinger (1991) has argued that changes in the public produce changes in party organizations. But might party organizations also change public attitudes? In particular, do stronger party organizations produce more support for parties as institutions? That is the central question explored in this paper.

Theoretical Background

The most explicit attempt in the party organization literature to address the mismatch between stronger party organizations and party decline in the electorate is the suggestion that the increased activity and institutionalization of party organizations help to "counteract" decline elsewhere in the party system (Cotter and Bibby 1980, 26–7; Frendreis, Gibson, and Vertz 1990; Coleman 1994a). As part of their theoretical framework placing party organizations in the broader party system, Bibby et al. (1983, 26; see also Cotter et al. 1984) assert that strong party organizations have "[made] the party system more resilient to anti-party and dealigning influences." Precisely what this idea means, however, is not clear. One view might consider "decline" as a sum total of three different types of decline—in organizations, in the electorate, and in the legislature. Even if problems continue in the electorate and in legislatures, improvements in organizations reduce the overall sum total of decline. This notion would be essentially true by definition and thus neither of great theoretical interest nor of clear consequence for the political system. Another formulation might be that decline in the electorate continues apace, but livelier party organizations offset this decline by mitigating some of the negative consequences of decreased partisanship in the public. This approach might represent where most of the party organization literature sits, given the interest in that literature on the importance of party organization for recruiting and financing candidates and providing some common themes or strategies for a party's candidates. Neither of these alternatives allow for change in one segment of the parties to induce change elsewhere.

[1]Louis Harris study number 921105, July 1992, question D4. $N = 1256$.

A third possibility is that counteraction means the party organizations manage to change public attitudes, thereby softening the damaging impact of variables contributing to a less supportive attitude toward parties. This formulation may be the most demanding, but it is also the most theoretically and empirically interesting. For theory, it suggests the importance of building theories across traditional tripartite (party-in-the-electorate, party-in-government, party-in-organizations) divisions. Empirically, finding that party strength matters for public attitudes provides reason to be optimistic that public skepticism and cynicism can be at least partly ameliorated as party organizations become stronger. Surely party organizations cannot restore public confidence by themselves, but if party organizations begin to pull the electorate along as the organizations perform their activities, then assertions that American parties have revitalized will be more meaningful.

Other studies that look closely at the link between party organizations and public response usually stress party influence on turnout (Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko 1985; Lawson, Pomper, and Moakley 1986; Bledsoe and Welch 1987; Caldeira, Clausen, and Patterson 1990; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Certainly, this focus is appropriate: parties' grassroots activities are fundamentally concerned with mobilization of the faithful. But party interaction with the public is not this simple. As important, visible, and sometimes grassroots political institutions, party organizations might be expected to have some impact on public attitudes. One study, for example, shows that where party organizations are strong, the mix of media messages is less dominated by candidate-centered appeals and voters' likes and dislikes focus proportionately more on parties than on candidates (Wattenberg 1990, 103–4).

In practice, the relationship between the party organization and the public extends from comprehensive grassroots connections, with party machines providing a classic example (Lawson 1980; Ware 1985; McGerr 1986; Shefter 1976, 1994; Brown and Halaby 1987), to purely functional connections driven by immediate electoral needs. The contemporary party organization falls closer to the functional end, as does the "truncated" or service-provider party model dominant in the literature (Baer and Bositis 1988; Frendreis 1994). Party organizations do not often have the luxury of drumming up support for the party system qua system, but they may influence public attitudes about parties through their activities and conduct.

Gerber and Jackson (1993) show that party activity can indeed change the policy preferences of partisan supporters endogenously; that is, the effects of party activity cross tripartite boundaries. Although Gerber and Jackson focus on direct attempts by parties to shape preferences, parties might also shape preferences or perceptions about the usefulness of parties indirectly, without any explicit campaign to rouse support for American party

politics. Surely the urban machines did not deliberately set out to create an image of corruption and inefficiency, but that is the impression that sizable segments of the Progressive-era population held because of perceived poor performance and perceived pathologies of the campaigning and governing process. A similar argument could be made about Congress today. On the positive side, competitive and active parties might well encourage beliefs that the parties are in touch with "real people," offer real options, and have some intention of carrying through with promises. On the negative side, these strong parties might be viewed cynically as just another large interest or organization dominating politics, effectively reducing support for the party system. Or party organizations might have no particular effect. Each alternative has implications for theories of party organizational resurgence and the ability of party organizations to produce change elsewhere in the party system.

Hypotheses

If party organization strength might counteract weak public partisanship, several facets of partisanship could be subject to influence. Greater party strength might depress support for political independence and independent candidates. Higher levels of party activity might discourage split-ticket voting and generate "likes" and "dislikes" about particular parties. Or party strength might influence generalized partisanship (i.e., attitudes toward parties as institutions, not toward particular parties). As parties increase their presence and involvement locally, attitudes may change about the trustworthiness of parties, whether they offer real differences, whether they are necessary, and whether they serve a linkage function by making the government pay attention.

Though each of these potential connections between party organizational strength and public response deserves further attention, I focus here on the general attractiveness of parties *as institutions.* In many respects this is the most fundamental possible connection between party strength and public partisanship—do stronger parties produce more support for parties as institutions? In these generalized attitudes, "antipartyism" can be expressed most directly. Two distinct sets of expectations vie here. A supportive party perspective would argue that through institutionalization parties would be seen as a legitimate and permanent part of the political landscape. A Progressive, party-skeptical view would expect that strong parties would come to be seen as omnipresent and overbearing institutions that distort and corrupt the governmental process. Such an interpretation would expect stronger parties to produce less generalized support of parties.

Both of these views of party are likely correct. Strong parties are likely to stress the positive attributes of partisan support, reduce information costs,

present the parties' candidates as a coherent team distinctive from the alternative, and provide some opportunities for public input and participation. By improving the linkage function for citizens, party strength should lead to more generalized support for parties. The urban machine example, however, does suggest that this heavy presence can come at a price.[2] If one party's organizational presence is far stronger than the other's, the public may perceive a power imbalance, and this imbalance may be viewed negatively. Huckfeldt and Beck (1994; see also Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992) show that a voter's perception of an area's party power balance is greatly influenced by simple but visible activities conducted or influenced by party organizations such as placement of yard signs and bumper stickers. Certainly this sense of a power imbalance was at the core of anti-machine agitation among Progressives. All the advantages of strong parties cited above diminish when only one party is institutionally capable of providing these benefits. As American political culture distrusts monopoly or concentrated power, whether in politics or business, citizens may distrust concentrated services and information from party organizations (Epstein 1986). Thus, my expectations are twofold: stronger parties produce more generalized partisanship, but a strength imbalance between the two parties diminishes generalized partisanship.

Data and Methods

To investigate the possibility that party organizations encourage supportive attitudes toward parties, I use data from the county-level Party Transformation Study (PTS) and from the 1980 National Election Study (NES). The PTS provides information on party activities for just over half the county party organizations in the United States in 1980. It also provides the often cited party organizational strength scores discussed at length in Cotter et al. (1984). The PTS asked county party chairs to complete a mail questionnaire covering a wide range of questions about their personal backgrounds, the organizational presence of their party in the county (e.g., staffing, funding, permanent headquarters), the activities of the party organization in campaigns, recruitment, and party building, and the relationship of the party organization to the state and national parties and elected officials. Cotter et al. (1984, 183–7) derived the strength scores through factor analysis. The initial factor analysis of county chair responses found factors for organizational program and activity, year-round organization function,

[2]This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that these very high levels of party strength could be virtuous for the fortunes of individual parties even if detrimental for parties in general, but the literature sustaining such an argument is presently thinner than one might like (Coleman 1994a).

and electoral period organization. A second-order factor analysis revealed a single factor of party organizational strength. Factor scores from the second-order factor analysis provide the strength scores for each county party organization. The strength score thus emphasizes the integrated nature of party organizational strength; how well a party performs activities, for example, is related to the depth of its bureaucratic structure. Stronger parties are those that live beyond election campaigns, have a sense of permanence and ongoing involvement in the community and in politics, and are engaged in matters such as party building that have effects beyond the next election. The 1980 NES is employed because the time period is consistent with the PTS, and there is an unusual number of questions tapping generalized support for parties and the party system.

Ideally, party strength scores could be assigned as a variable for each NES respondent. But three obstacles prevent using the entire sample. First, many NES respondents resided in counties not in the PTS dataset. Second, strength scores were available for only one party in many counties. And third, to ensure comparability across cases I used only those PTS cases coded as counties. Towns and districts, as used in the PTS sample for some states (Massachusetts and Virginia, for example), were not included in the sample. With these three restrictions, about two-thirds (1,110 of 1,614) of the NES cases can be assigned a strength score for at least one party in the respondent's county. Data for both parties are present for 330 respondents, though the actual N in an estimation depends on missing data for other variables. I compared the included and excluded NES respondents on all variables included in this study; two variables had significantly different means between the two groups, but do not appear to pose a problem for analysis.[3]

I examined the impact of party organizational strength on public attitudes toward parties by using ordinary least squares and logistic regression to estimate models of the form:

[3] T-tests were used to compare means; Levene's test was used to compare equality of variance. The means test shows the included sample to be significantly more southern than the excluded sample ($p < .05$, two-tailed). In the results presented below southern residence is used as a control (dummy) variable, so this difference should not hamper analysis. The antipartyism index (described in the text below) shows significantly less antipartyism in the included sample ($p < .05$, two-tailed). The variance in the two groups is equal. The difference in means is about .4 on an antipartyism scale that ranges 8.8 points from minimum to maximum. Weighting the included sample so that southerners are equal to their size in the excluded sample reduces the difference in antipartyism means by about half and eliminates the statistically significant difference. Leaving the included sample unweighted neither favors nor disfavors confirmation of my hypotheses, one of which predicts increased antipartyism and one of which predicts the opposite.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Generalized party support} = {} & \text{Education} + \text{Ideology} + \text{Income} \\ & + \text{Female} + \text{Minority} + \text{South} \\ & + \text{Strong party identification} \\ & + \text{Party performance} + \text{Party strength} \\ & + \text{Constant}\end{aligned}$$

where Education refers to the respondent's educational level (in six groups); Ideology refers to the respondent's self-described political ideology (in three groups); Income notes the respondent's 1979 family income (in five groups); Female is a dummy variable for the respondent's sex; Minority is a dummy variable where a value of 1 indicates a racial group coded by the NES as black, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, or other; South is a dummy variable indicating the respondent lives in a Southern state; Strong party identification is a dummy variable indicating whether a respondent self-identifies as a strong party identifier; Party performance is a feeling thermometer evaluation of "political parties;" and Party strength refers to measures of party organizational strength.

The logic for including these explanatory variables is straightforward. Given results of previous research (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), individuals with more education should be less likely to emphasize voting by party label but more likely to be aware and supportive of parties' contribution to governance. For ideology, one might expect conservatives to be less approving of those institutions whose lifeblood is government (albeit parties can argue against government involvement). The next three variables examine the impact of minority-status groups. Classic portrayals see parties as a way to offset the power of the economically advantaged (Key 1949; Schattschneider 1960; Burnham 1982, chap. 1), suggesting that lower-income individuals should be more supportive of parties. Historically, parties expended great energies to exclude women and racial minorities from participation in the political system. Any lingering resentment of parties might have diminished by 1980 because of the 1960s voting rights revolution and the 1970s Democratic reforms (and softer Republican moves) that better represented these groups in national conventions and party committees (Baer and Bositis 1988). For this analysis, however, I assume that the legacy of disfranchisement leads women and racial minorities to be more skeptical toward parties than are men and whites, respectively.

The final set of variables looks more specifically at parties themselves. Given its unique history of party organizations and the region's legacy of one-party control, controlling for the South is important when measuring

the impact of party organizational activity and strength.[4] Otherwise, one risks absorbing the South's historically unique regional effects in the party strength variables. Individuals with strong levels of party identification would be expected to hold supportive generalized views of the parties. Assessments of party performance also bear a straightforward relation to partisan attitudes: individuals who are more supportive of parties' general job performance would be expected to hold more supportive institutional views of parties. It is not hard to imagine an individual rating party performance low but generally supportive of parties otherwise, but I expect the two to vary positively for most respondents. The difficulty here is finding an adequate measure of party performance. While the 1980 NES is unusual in that it includes a nine-point scale specifically asking how well parties are doing their job, use of this question erodes the sample size because it was asked only in the postelection interview and there are a high number of "no opinions." The feeling thermometer for "political parties" is more highly correlated with this variable than are other plausible measures of party performance and also more readily available in other survey instruments. This variable also taps into national images of the parties. These images should positively influence generalized partisan support. Because I focus on generalized partisanship rather than attitudes toward a specific party, the party thermometer is preferable to other possible measures of party image, such as specific candidate appraisals. I test alternative measures below.

Finally, as discussed above, I hypothesize that stronger, more active parties should produce better general images and perceptions of parties. But this strength has its limits: if one party is strong and the other is weak, the imbalance will be associated with more negative generalized views of parties. The sense that concentrated power is a danger runs through American political culture, from support of separation of powers and term limits through the belief of many that divided government appropriately limits the power of either party. Balance also enhances the choices available to voters and increases the power of the vote. An imbalanced party organizational presence and strength is inconsistent with the public's desire to defuse concentrated power and to enhance the meaning and power of the vote.

This discussion suggests three models to test. First, higher levels of total party strength (i.e., the summed total of Democratic and Republican party organizational strength scores) produce higher levels of generalized partisanship. I refer to this as the total party strength model. Second, a larger gap between the parties' organizational strength (i.e., the absolute value of Democratic minus Republican party organizational strength) di-

[4]The South includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

minishes supportive attitudes toward parties. This is the party strength gap model. And third, both of these relationships occur simultaneously (the combined model). Therefore, this third model expects to find significant relationships for both total party strength and the party strength gap when each controls the other in a multivariate analysis.[5] All other independent variables are the same in the three models.

For dependent variables, several 1980 NES items tap generalized party support. In particular, the 1980 NES included a sequence of five items designed to measure antipartisan attitudes (v357 to v361). Following Dennis (1988, 206–7) and Keith et al. (1992, 183–4), I combined three of these items in an antipartyism index.[6] I also include three other items dealing with the party-public linkage. The variables and NES question wording are presented in the Appendix. Except for the antipartyism index, the dependent variables have been recoded so that positive coefficients indicate greater generalized support for parties. In a recoded three-point scale, for example, 3 indicates the most party-supportive response and 1 indicates the least supportive response, regardless of the original NES question wording in the Appendix.

Findings

This analysis involves four dependent variables and three versions of party organizational strength. Because the central item of interest is the contribution of party organizational strength to public partisanship, I first present results emphasizing only that independent variable. I then look at one of the models more comprehensively.

Table 1 presents the summarized results of the twelve ordinary least squares and logistic regression estimations. Each estimation includes one form of the party strength measure and the remaining set of independent variables discussed above. Looking down each column, the table indicates whether party organizational strength as measured in the total party strength, party strength gap, and combined models of party strength was significantly related to the dependent measures of party support. In every instance, coefficients were correctly signed. Considering statistical significance, the results indicate that party organizational strength has a discernible counteractive impact on three of the four measures of generalized party support. But this counteraction is not a simple reflection of increased party organizational strength. The total party strength model directly tests the notion that more party strength produces more favorable attitudes: the results in Table

[5] Additional models are considered in Coleman (1994b).

[6] As these scholars note, including either or both of the remaining items makes the antipartyism index unreliable (as measured by Cronbach's alpha). Coleman (1994b) includes analysis of these variables (v357, v358).

Table 1. Relationship Between Party Strength and Public Support for Political Parties

	Models of Party Strength (Independent Variable)		
Dependent Variable	Total Party Strength	Party Strength Gap	Combined: Total Strength & Strength Gap
Parties are interested in people's opinions	not significant	not significant	not significant
Parties make government pay attention	not significant	significant	gap significant
Parties have important differences	not significant	significant	gap significant
Antipartyism index	not significant	significant	gap significant

Notes: "Significant" means significant at $p \leq .10$, one-tailed. Cell entries indicate whether the independent variable measuring party organizational strength had a correct, significant relationship to the dependent measures of generalized party support. Other independent variables are not shown. Estimation was ordinary least squares for "parties make government pay attention" and the antipartyism index; logistic regression was used in the remaining estimations.

1 are clear and consistent. Total county party organizational strength is not significantly related to any measure of generalized support for parties.

Viewing party organizational strength from the perspective of the party strength gap and combined models, however, suggests parties can exhibit counteractive effects on negative public attitudes. The key finding in the party strength gap estimation is the importance of the comparative levels of party strength for public attitudes. As the strength gap between the parties widens, i.e., as the gap between their party organizational strength scores expands, public support toward parties decreases significantly for three of the partisanship measures. The result for the antipartyism index, for example, shows that as the gap between the organizational capacities of the two parties widens, antiparty attitudes increase. When one party dominates an area organizationally, public attitudes tend to turn skeptical about political parties, controlling for other independent variables. Similarly, as the gap between the parties widens, the public is less likely to see important differences between the parties. An area with competitive party organizations fosters images of important differences between the parties.

The combined model tests for the simultaneous influence of total party strength and the party strength gap. Including both party strength measures allows interpretation of one strength measure while controlling for the other. The results in Table 1 reinforce the findings for the total party

strength and party strength gap models. In the estimations of the combined model, the strength gap is correctly and significantly related to three of the measures of generalized partisanship; total strength, although correctly signed in each estimation, is significantly related to none of the dependent measures. Regressing the dependent variables on a form of the combined model that includes the strength gap, total strength, and an interaction between the two produces the same results (not shown). This form of the model tests the possibility that the impact of either the strength gap or total strength is conditional on the specific value of the other. In no instance is the interaction term or total strength significant; the strength gap remains significant. The results for the three models support the idea that supportive attitudes will more likely flourish where there is not too great a gap between the organizational condition of the two major parties: if one party alone builds power, critical responses increase. Americans are more approving of parties as institutions when their experience is with competitive party organizations. This is certainly consistent with the stress elsewhere in the party literature on the importance of competitive parties for turnout, representation of the have-nots, and broadening the spectrum of organizable debate. If party organizations follow a performance symmetry strategy (i.e., parties build strength in response to the strength of the other party; see Gibson, Frendreis, and Vertz 1989), these organizations can help diminish negative public perceptions of parties.

Though party organizations can assist in the construction of public support for parties, they are not the only important influence. Because the strength gap model provides a superior explanation of generalized partisanship than the total strength or combined models, I present more detailed results of the strength gap model in Table 2. The results show that several variables in the strength gap estimations are significantly related to public support for parties, but a large amount of variance remains unexplained (or, in the logistic regressions, a substantial proportion of cases remains incorrectly predicted). Party organizations can make a difference in public perceptions about parties as institutions, but their ability to change these perceptions is limited.

Table 2 reaffirms that the party strength gap is signed correctly in all instances and significantly related to three measures of party support.[7] When the strength gap is statistically significant, it also tends to be substantively important: standardized coefficients (not shown) indicate the strength

[7]To determine whether length of county residence (v714 in the 1980 NES) significantly affects generalized support for parties, I added this variable (in various forms, both individually and interactively) to the estimations. No significant effect on support for parties was found.

Table 2. The Party Strength Gap and Public Partisanship

Independent Variable	Parties are interested in people's opinions	Parties make government pay attention	Parties have important differences	Antipartyism index
Party strength gap	−.293	−.140*	−.793***	1.009***
Feeling thermometer	.041***	.003	−.008	−.025***
Political Parties				
Ideology	.299*	.056	.089	.194
Education	.402***	.110***	.117	−.087
Female	−.218	.060	−.064	.145
Minority	−.051	.116	.127	1.093**
Strong party ID	.270	.186*	1.234***	−1.816***
Family income	.060	−.021	.018	−.087
South	.428	.176*	.543*	−1.198***
Constant	−4.190***	.407**	.722	1.250**
Method	Logit	OLS	Logit	OLS
Adj. R^2 or % correct	70.94%	.04	66.67%	.20
Std. error of reg. or −2LL	232.875	.674	248.309	2.180
F or Chi-improvement	34.544***	1.984**	17.253**	6.747***
N	203	217	201	210

Notes: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients or logistic regression coefficients (Method row indicates which). Standard errors omitted for clarity.
***$p \leq .01$; **$p \leq .05$; *$p \leq .10$; one-tailed.

gap has the second or third strongest relationship with these three dependent variables. The party strength gap ranges from 0.02 (little difference in party strength) to 2.21 (wide difference in strength), with a mean of about 0.89. Thus a one unit increase of the strength gap represents a jump about halfway along the strength gap scale. Looking at whether parties make government pay attention to the people, there is an overall weak (though significant) fit with the independent variables. As the strength gap moves from little party strength difference to about the average (i.e., a one-unit jump from .02 to a little over the mean), for example, the perception that parties help make government pay attention declines by .14 on a three-point scale. On the antipartyism index, a one-unit leap in the strength gap increases skeptical responses by a little over 1.0. (Antipartyism ranges from −4.58 to 4.22, with a mean of 0.) Respondents' perceptions of important party differences are also influenced by the party strength gap. With all dummy variables set at 0, and all remaining variables set at their means, a decrease in the party strength gap from .89 to .02 increases the probability that a

respondent perceives important differences from just under .50 to .66. Increasing the strength gap from .89 to the maximum of 2.21 decreases the probability from just under .50 to .26. These are the probabilities for those respondents who are not strong party identifiers. For strong party identifiers, moving from the mean toward the lowest strength gap increases the probability of perceiving important differences from .77 to .87; moving from the mean toward the greatest strength gap decreases the probability from .77 to .54. The effect of changes in the strength gap on perceived party differences are less dramatic but still substantial for strong party identifiers.

Education, strong partisan identification, and evaluations of party performance (as measured by the feeling thermometer) also tend to have significant relationships with generalized attitudes toward parties. For each of the four measures of generalized partisanship, additional education contributes to an appreciation of party's role in the political process; for two of the dependent measures the relationship is significant.[8] Strong party identification has the expected effect of enhanced support for parties as institutions. And with one statistically insignificant exception (important party differences), positive evaluations of party performance lead to support for parties as institutions. Minority status (females and racial minorities) and family income do not influence generalized party support consistently.

Alternative Performance Variables

The estimations reported in Table 2 use the feeling thermometer for political parties as an evaluation of party performance. As noted above, this is not an ideal measure. Would the findings on the importance of the party strength gap differ if an alternative item was employed for party performance evaluations? To address this question, I included a series of alternative performance measures, first in conjunction with the feeling thermometer, then replacing the feeling thermometer. The findings are encouraging. In the original estimations, the party strength gap was significantly related to three measures of public partisanship. For all three, the party strength gap remains significant when alternative performance evaluations supplement or replace the feeling thermometer. Table 3 presents the results for the antipartyism index. The table compares the original estimate and significance of the party strength gap (from the antipartyism column in Table 2) to the coefficient and significance estimated when alternative performance measures supplement or replace the feeling thermometer. Most of the alternative measures have little impact on the size or significance of

[8] Coleman (1994b) shows that, as one would expect, additional education makes individuals less likely to agree that party labels are more important than judging individual candidates or being independent.

Table 3. Antipartyism, Performance Evaluation Measures, and the Party Strength Gap

Alternative Measure of Party Performance	*n*	Strength Gap Coefficient if Alternative Performance Measure: Supplements Feeling Thermometer	Replaces Feeling Thermometer
Carter approval	203	1.052***	1.035***
Financial status past 12 months	208	1.032***	1.007***
Financial status next 12 months	193	.880***	.881***
Economy past 12 months	207	1.026***	1.003***
Economy next 12 months	191	1.014***	.994***
Income eroded by inflation	209	1.008***	.915***
Carter approval inflation	195	.928***	1.003***
Carter approval unemployment	180	1.021***	.984***
Inflation personal impact	208	.999***	.989***
Congress approval	162	.810**	.787**
Parties' performance	169	.894***	.823***
Government can reduce inflation × inflation an important problem	201	1.200***	1.182***
Government can reduce unemployment × unemployment an important problem	198	1.029***	1.027***
Original strength gap coefficient (from table 2) = 1.009***, *n* = 209			

Notes: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients of the strength gap. In order of their appearance in this table, the 1980 NES variables are v63, v147, v148, v150, v152, v153, v198, v200, v205, v217, v784, v768, v202 × v203, v206 × v207, v213.
***$p \leq .01$; **$p \leq .05$; one-tailed.

the party strength gap coefficient. Three of the alternatives—prospective financial conditions, congressional approval rating, and political party job performance—reduce the size of the strength gap coefficient by 10 to 20%, but with minimal impact on significance. Overall, the party organizational strength gap is sustained as a significant influence on public partisanship.[9]

[9]Significance is reduced from .01 to .05 when congressional approval is added to the estimation, for example, but the significance remains very close to .01: the gap in party organizational strength is significant at .0104 when congressional approval supplements the feeling thermometer and .0138 when it replaces the feeling thermometer. One possibility is that evaluations of the parties are influenced by the news media. Following the argument that the parties' image is hurt by the media (Wattenberg 1990, 90–102), especially television broadcasting, I tested whether attention to the media and reliance on particular kinds of media (NES variables v213, v214, v217) were related to generalized partisanship. The media connection to public partisanship was minimal and scattered. More important, none of these media variables affected the strength or significance of the party strength gap. It is also

A Pooled Extension

As noted above, one of the drawbacks to merging the Party Transformation Study (PTS) and NES datasets was loss of cases because of missing information, principally missing party organizational strength scores for one or both parties in a county. To address this problem, I gain additional cases by adding respondents from the 1984 NES.[10] Unfortunately, the only measure of generalized party support found in both the 1980 and 1984 NES is whether the respondent sees important differences between the parties. Though not ideal because of its reliance on a single measure, pooling cases to examine perceptions of important party differences provides another way to test the relationship of party strength and public partisanship. One potential problem is that party organizational strength may have changed between 1980 and 1984. Indeed, Gibson, Frendreis, and Vertz (1989) show that 1984 party strength improved for a resurveyed subsample of the original 1980 PTS respondents. The changes were on average fairly small, however, so pooling 1980 and 1984 cases does not appear to be stretching unduly the applicability of the party organizational strength scores.

Table 4 presents the pooled analysis of the combined model including both total party strength and the party strength gap. (The estimation includes a dummy variable for 1984 to absorb changes in perceived party differences produced by changes outside the block of independent variables. Estimation results without this dummy variable are very similar.) The party strength gap remains significantly related to this measure of public partisanship. Indeed, the coefficient size (−.746) is quite close to that obtained for the 1980 sample alone (−.793 in Table 2).[11] The main difference between the pooled data and the 1980 data is that total party strength is

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possible that attitudes toward parties are simply part of a larger set of evaluations of government. To test whether public partisanship is subsumed by larger evaluations of government, I included the well-known "government is run for the benefit of all the people/big interests" NES item (v403) as an additional independent variable. One would expect that those believing government is run for a few big interests would not be supportive of political parties as institutions. The "big interests" item significantly influences the antipartyism index and whether parties are interested in people's opinions in the expected direction. The party strength gap is also significantly related to the antipartyism index, but including "big interests" as an evaluation item does not weaken the strength or significance of the relationship between the gap and antiparty attitudes.

[10] Creating a less demanding index of party organizational strength is another way to address this problem. For example, one could build an index of campaign activity only. This solution would increase sample size, but would ignore the multiple factors of "strength" emphasized in the Party Transformation Study.

[11] Without the dummy for 1984, the strength gap coefficient at −.780 is even closer to the 1980 figure. Adding the "big interests/all the people" item to the estimation had almost no effect on the results and was dropped.

Table 4. Pooled Estimate of Perceived Important Party Differences, 1980–84

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard error
Party strength gap	−.746***	.265
Total party strength	.195**	.085
Ideology	−.002	.150
Education	.163*	.100
Female	−.004	.230
Minority	−.079	.409
Strong party ID	1.086***	.292
Family income	−.076	.093
South	.820***	.316
1984	.345*	.231
Constant	.058	.554
% correct	68.23	
−2 Log Likelihood	471.481	
Chi-square improvement	36.140***	
N	406	

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients.
***$p \leq .01$; **$p \leq .05$; *$p \leq .10$; one-tailed.

significant in the pooled estimation. The significant positive coefficient for total party strength indicates that perceptions that the parties offer important differences increase as total party organizational strength increases. At the same time, the strength gap warns that the public is more supportive of parties if this growth in strength is produced by both parties rather than one-party domination.

Conclusion

Recent party organization theory suggests that stronger organizations have potentially counteractive effects upon the decline of parties elsewhere in the political system. But this suggestion has not been pinned down theoretically or empirically. A strong form of the counteractive effect of party organizations contends that party organizations may reduce some of the negative perceptions of parties caused by poor party performance and other forces. The data presented here provide support for this version of the counteractive effect of party organizations on public attitudes. The results show that party strength can help build supportive partisan attitudes, particularly when strength is not exercised by one party alone. This finding is consistent both with the historical attacks on the dominance of city machines and with fears in American political culture about concentrated political power. These conclusions hold true when controlling for other likely influences

on generalized partisanship. Strong, competitive party organizations contribute to generalized support for parties.

The findings also compel cautious interpretation. For one measure of public partisanship, party organizational strength was not significant. And the estimations leave much variance unexplained, even when party strength is significantly related to public partisanship. Both these points suggest there is a substantial amount of cynicism about political parties that organizations will not be able to counteract. To the extent that these attitudes are important for the long-term viability of the parties, other leverage will need to be employed to improve public perceptions. Whether this limited ability of party organizations to improve generalized support for parties is a fixed limitation or a result of strategic decisions by the organizations to emphasize their service-provider or service-broker roles cannot be determined with these data.

Careful interpretation is also required because static analysis, such as that presented here, may suggest dynamic relationships, but it cannot alone test such relationships. Differences in generalized party support between respondents in areas of evenly-matched party organizations and those in areas of a single dominant party organization lead to plausible conjectures about what happens to public partisanship when party organizations in an area become comparably strong or when one organization becomes dominant. One could also offer a reasonable competing argument that party strength responds to supportive public attitudes, rather than the converse. But if this construction were correct, it would be logical to expect supportive attitudes to produce high levels of party strength and a lack of support to produce low levels of strength. The analysis above, however, shows little connection between supportive public attitudes and the total party strength in an area.

Time series data, not comparative statics, are ultimately needed to confirm or reject these conjectures. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of party scholars, that is where organizational data is sharply limited. Building this longitudinal data and building an integrated analysis of party that probes the interaction of various components of political parties are two worthy objectives for future research.

The findings suggest party organizations had some role in the brief leveling-off of antipartyism in the mid-1980s (Dennis 1986), but just how large a role remains to be determined. Of course, antipartyism returned with a vengeance in the early 1990s. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) suggest that the pulling back of partisan organizations from grassroots activities and linkage was a strong contributor to turnout decline. Since grassroots activities are important components in party strength measures, and since these strength measures have a discernible impact on public partisanship,

this pulling back may also have contributed to increased negative perceptions of parties as institutions. Empirically, these observations suggest that party organizations can help or hinder turnout and generalized support for parties, depending on the level of organizational strength of the two parties. Theoretically, they indicate that to understand the decline or resurgence of party in American politics requires integrated analysis that looks across the tripartite division of parties in the electorate, in the legislature, and in organizations.

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APPENDIX
Dependent Variable Measures of Generalized Support for Parties

Variable	Question	NES variable
Parties are interested in people's opinions	"Parties are only interested in people's votes but not in their opinions." (agree/disagree)	v1035
Parties make government pay attention	"How much do you feel that political parties help to make the government pay attention to what the people think—a good deal, some, or not much?"	v889
Parties have important differences	"Do you think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for?" (yes/no)	v776
Antipartyism index	Index of *z*-scores of the following items:	na
	"The parties do more to confuse the issues than to provide a clear choice on issues." (7-point scale)	v359
	"It would be better if, in all elections, we put no party labels on the ballot." (7-point scale)	v360
	"The truth is we probably don't need political parties in America anymore." (7-point scale)	v361

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