

Article

# Political Parties as “Great Schools” of Civic Education

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**Abstract:** Current attempts to improve civic education through higher education should be supplemented by a focus on political parties, which have traditionally served as the “great schools” of civic education. America’s nineteenth-century parties drew voters out of their private concerns, engaged them in social life, and taught them to tolerate and bargain with each other. Legal changes over the past century have deprived them of the tools needed to fulfill this role. Policymakers should reconsider campaign finance laws that cripple parties, especially state and local organizations. Moreover, parties themselves should dedicate more time and resources to building a permanent presence in local communities and engaging citizens on the ground.

**Keywords:** political parties; polarization; campaign finance law; Alexis de Tocqueville; civic education

## 1. Introduction

As Paul Carrese describes in his contribution to this special issue on civic engagement, justice, and the law, there are signs that America is experiencing a civic crisis that continues to deepen in the twenty-first century (Carrese 2024). Our civic culture is experiencing a period of disintegration, illustrated by rising polarization and civic conflict, increased fears about the sustainability of American democracy, and declining trust in America’s political institutions. Concerns about these developments have led scholars to revisit the issue of civic education and construct programs that promote civic education in America’s universities. Carrese and others have called upon America’s colleges and universities “to prioritize a rational and patriotic civic education in American constitutionalism, as well as the civic virtues required for citizens and leaders to operate our constitutional order, and thrive, in a still dangerous world” (Carrese 2024; Cooper 2024).

Such calls highlight the important and necessary role that higher education can play in teaching citizens the virtues necessary to sustain a republican government. What other institutions can play, or have played, an equally significant role in promoting civic virtue and engagement? How have legal changes to these institutions affected their ability to promote civic virtue? This article argues that treating America’s educational institutions as the primary teachers of civic virtues is insufficient. While it is important for such institutions to teach civic virtues, these virtues are most effectively inculcated through practice outside of the classroom. As this article explains, civic education in America was historically undertaken by a broader array of voluntary social institutions in civil society, and the role of these other institutions must not be overlooked. Chief among these institutions was the political party. Legal changes to America’s political parties, however, have deprived them of the means of serving in this critical role as civic educators.

This may seem paradoxical to contemporary readers because political parties are primarily viewed today as organizations that conduct and contest elections, mobilizing voters periodically to vote for their candidates. Many also think of parties as the chief instigators of



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polarization and civic discord rather than the antidotes to these problems. This contemporary view reflects changes that have taken place in the structure and functions of America's parties since the 1970s. But it is not an accurate view of how political parties functioned throughout most of American history. Until relatively recently, America's robust political parties did much more than wage national campaigns on behalf of (especially presidential) candidates seeking to win election. They were genuinely grassroots organizations that taught their members civic virtues and gave members a path to public service (McWilliams 1980). Foundational legal changes such as the Australian Ballot, direct primaries, and campaign finance reform have reshaped the parties from their nineteenth-century role as civic educators to their more recent function as mere service parties.

With a few notable exceptions, recent scholarship has overlooked the relationship between political parties, civic education, and civic association. (Rosenblum 2008) As Nancy Rosenblum (one of these exceptions) has argued, "The voluminous literature on civil society ignores political parties", which she considers "a remarkable lacuna" (Rosenblum 2000, pp. 813, 814).

This article attempts to fill the gap in contemporary proposals for civic education by highlighting the historical role parties have played in teaching citizens the habits of self-government. Political parties teach civic virtues through practice and habit by engaging citizens in electoral and political processes directly. Universities can *teach* civic virtues, but parties help citizens *practice* them. Moreover, universities can engage citizens intellectually, offering a reasonable argument for engaging in public life, but parties can motivate and encourage them to do so for tangible reasons. When parties teach civic virtues, they are not engaging in an intellectual pursuit; they are connecting to the hearts and motivations of citizens, encouraging them to become informed and to act on their shared interests. Universities, by definition, are limited in their ability to offer this encouragement.

While it may not be possible to revive this older understanding of America's parties entirely, understanding their traditional role as civic educators can help us see some possibilities for using parties to rebuild social capital. At a minimum, the history of parties in America forces us to widen our conception of what kinds of institutions should play a leading role in reviving civic virtue and engagement.

There is evidence that the leaders and members of these nineteenth-century parties, during their period of ascendancy, were well aware of their role as civic educators. Though they were not always explicit about the connection between party activity, civic education, and civic virtue, members and defenders of nineteenth-century American parties indirectly explained the parties' contribution to civic education and virtue. In fact, there is evidence for this running throughout the history of American political parties.

This article proceeds by first assessing the greatest commentator on the relationship between political parties, civic education, and civic engagement, Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* offered a thoughtful but ambiguous account of the relationship between American partisanship and civic virtue. Following that, the article describes the relationship between nineteenth-century party activities and civic education and engagement by looking at the words and actions of the parties themselves. The article's final sections argue that the decline of strong, grassroots parties over the past century in America is connected with the decline in civic education and engagement. The article ends by discussing some possibilities for reversing this decline.

## 2. "The Art of Uniting with Those Like Him": Parties and the Art of Political Association

Tocqueville's assessment of America's political parties was complex and, in some ways, paradoxical (Bonetto 1981; Eden 1986; McWilliams 1992). He distinguished between "great

parties” and “small parties” and lamented that great parties no longer existed in America (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 167). Rather than focusing on great ideas and contests over first principles, American parties were merely concerned with “material interests”. As a result, Tocqueville believed that “public opinion becomes infinitely fragmented over questions of detail” (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 169). At the time Tocqueville visited America, the chief issues that divided the nation concerned matters like canals, tariffs, and banks. Tocqueville considered these issues secondary to the great matters that should concern statesmen.

This aspect of Tocqueville’s discussion of parties, Wilson Carey McWilliams admitted, paints “a fairly cynical picture” (McWilliams 1992, p. 193). However, Tocqueville also hinted that the lack of great parties in America had some positive consequences. Because “the people are everything” in American democracy, there are no parties organized around class interests. As a result, America lacked the kind of conflict typical of European nations, where the few and the many fought over matters of principle. By contrast, in America, Tocqueville believed that parties are deliberately created and organized by politicians who find material reasons to create conflict in order to veil their ambition for office. As Tocqueville put it, “ambition must succeed in creating parties, for it is difficult to overthrow the one who holds power for the sole reason that someone wants to take his place. All the skill of politicians, therefore, consists in composing parties” (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 169). Tocqueville suggested that America’s parties were, in a sense, artificial, created by designing politicians as a way of organizing the people in order to win elections and grab political power.

In short, Tocqueville believed that America’s “small parties” were organized on matters of secondary importance, such as material interests relating to agriculture or commerce. While Tocqueville treated these kinds of parties with a measure of contempt, he also noted at the end of his chapter on parties that they contributed to the art of association. “The two great weapons parties employ in order to succeed are newspapers and associations”, he explained (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 170). Parties are a mechanism for association.

Tocqueville distinguished political associations, such as parties, from civil associations, which took many different forms: occupational, religious, moral, and practical. However, he believed that “political association singularly develops and perfects civil association” (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 496). Political associations inculcate citizens in habits of association generally and thus work to preserve freedom. They are the “great schools, free of charge, where all citizens come to learn the general theory of associations” (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 497). Thus, Tocqueville implicitly connected the creation of political parties with the art of association that is so essential to the preservation of freedom.

Tocqueville emphasized the importance of association as a means of preventing democracies from succumbing to tyranny. As he argued, “if each citizen. . . does not learn the art of uniting with those like him to defend [freedom], tyranny will necessarily grow with equality” (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 489). Associations are especially important in democracies because, in Tocqueville’s view, citizens in a democracy are necessarily more isolated from each other. “In aristocratic societies”, he explained, “men have no need to unite to act because they are kept very much together” by the hierarchies that bind them. By contrast, in democracies, “all citizens are independent and weak” (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 490). Their isolation is a threat to their civic virtue and engagement, and associations of all kinds are necessary to counteract this isolation and weakness. Parties are key mechanisms for linking citizens together and fostering shared beliefs, goals, and practices. While their existence is dangerous because they tend to foster division, it is less dangerous than the alternative, namely individualistic and vulnerable citizens (McWilliams 1992, pp. 195–96; Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 183).

In sum, Tocqueville connected the existence of political parties and Americans' aptitude for forming associations, and he understood that parties contributed to the art of associating. Practicing this art produced a connected citizenry that had a higher degree of knowledge of and engagement in public life. This kind of citizenry would be more capable of resisting a tyrannical central state. They did this, as the next section demonstrates, by organizing members through local associations, thus empowering them to participate fully but also moderately in public life. Moreover, the role that parties played in civic education and civic engagement was noted and emphasized by the leaders and the members of these parties. Americans of the 19th Century corroborated Tocqueville's account of their parties as civic associations. When we consider the need for civic education today, these "great schools" should not be neglected—civic education occurs outside of classrooms as much as or more than it occurs within them.

### 3. America's Decentralized Party Associations

Although the U.S. Constitution, as originally ratified, did not anticipate a place for political parties and even undermined them, the Framers of the Constitution quickly organized into parties and engaged in heated partisan conflict during the new republic's first decade (Hofstadter 1969; Ross 2019).

Unlike today's parties, however, the parties they created were decentralized, rooted in states and localities, and they played an ongoing role in the lives of communities rather than appearing sporadically around election time. James Madison justified the creation of these parties as necessary "local organs" for conveying the sentiments of the people to the national government (Madison 1791). Though the parties of which he was speaking were nascent, over time, these local parties would establish organizations that both united the communities they served and connected those communities to other different but like-minded communities within the same party. In the words of the American Political Science Association in the middle of the twentieth century, these parties were "loose associations of state and local organizations, with very little national machinery and very little national cohesion" (Committee on Political Parties 1950, p. v). They were heterogeneous in the sense that they united disparate groups under a general party banner but allowed these different communities to retain their own distinctive character (DiSalvo 2012).

#### 3.1. Local Parties and Civic Engagement

Local parties carried out a variety of functions that promoted civic engagement and civic virtue. They organized and mobilized voters, distributed ballots, informed members through newspapers and public meetings, organized public festivals, and created clubhouses and fraternal societies that linked citizens. The development of patronage and locally-based nomination conventions gave citizens an opportunity to become active in shaping local, state, and national affairs (Keller 2007, pp. 71–82; Schefter 1994, pp. 66–71).

Local party leaders on the ground were primarily responsible for reaching out to voters, recommending loyal partisans for patronage positions, creating associations, and cultivating support for party activity. Voters were personally engaged by a member of their own community. During the nineteenth century, it was ward and district captains, not national leaders, who interfaced with rank-and-file voters on the ground. As Schlozman and Rosenfeld explain, "Parties flourish when their organizational practices resonate with the community life around them. . . . The block captains of the classic political machines could only perform their electoral role—turning out their voters—thanks to knowledge of their neighbors accrued through regular face-to-face engagement" (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024, p. 265). In short, parties had incentives to be ever-present in local communities because their presence was necessary to cultivate the support needed to win elections.

Their constant presence in local communities encouraged citizens to become politically engaged and to associate with fellow citizens to advance common interests. Citizens developed personal connections to parties and learned to associate on the local level.

Today, the bosses of past local party machines are often portrayed as corrupt. No doubt they were to an extent. But scholars have also noted the positive goods that they contributed to American civic life. For instance, Robert Merton's landmark work *Social Theory and Social Structure* noted that America's local party machines enabled communities to govern themselves effectively. He explained that "one source of strength of the political machine derives from its roots in the local community and the neighborhood". Rather than treating voters as "a vague, undifferentiated mass," parties focus on specific and concrete problems. Moreover, "The machine welds its link with ordinary men and women by elaborate networks of personal relations. Politics is transformed into personal ties. . . . In our prevailing impersonal society, the machine, through its local agents, fulfills the important social function of humanizing and personalizing all manner of assistance to those in need" (Merton 1957, pp. 127–28). Merton even ventured to suggest that "it is clearly the machine politician who is better integrated with the groups which he serves than the impersonal, professionalized, socially distant and legally constrained welfare worker" (Merton 1957, p. 129). Local political machines, in other words, were more attuned to the needs of the communities they represented because they developed personal connections with and between citizens on the ground.

In organizing these activities, parties involved ordinary citizens in the day-to-day affairs both locally and nationally, giving practical effect to Thomas Jefferson's famous call for "ward republics" that "giv[e] to every citizen, personally, a part in the administration of public affairs" (Jefferson 1816; Milkis 1999, p. 15). As Sidney Milkis summarizes, "Political parties were formed in the early part of the nineteenth century as a means of engaging the attention of ordinary citizens, and with localistic foundations that were critical for the maintenance of an engaged citizenry" (Milkis 1999, pp. 13–14). They increased the civic engagement and activity of American citizens. And as Tocqueville observed, somewhat unsympathetically, "To meddle in the government of society and to speak about it is the greatest business and, so to speak, the only pleasure that an American knows". Instead of attending the theater, Tocqueville observed, American women visit clubs and engage in political discourse (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 232).

At the same time, Tocqueville believed that Americans' engagement in public life expanded "the scope of their ideas" and brought them out of their own self-interestedness (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 233). Citizens in a democracy tend to withdraw into their own personal, private concerns. They are not connected in a hierarchical form of government such as a monarchy or aristocracy. Thus, parties that provide places and opportunities for citizens to engage in common activities elevate the civic life of their communities. The local party machines of the nineteenth century were constantly relevant to the citizens they represented, and they were indispensable to Americans' civic identity and engagement.

### 3.2. Local Parties' Defense of Their Civic Role

The leaders of these parties occasionally defended their work by explaining the central role they played in serving their communities and promoting civic virtues and civic engagement. In so doing, they made explicit what Tocqueville only implied. As one Jacksonian newspaper put it, "Parties, though liable to great abuses. . . are the schools of political science", and "party contests. . . diffuse knowledge, cultivate the popular mind, and as they tend to give the people larger liberties, prepare them for enjoyment" (quoted in Milkis 1999, p. 25). Connecting individuals to their communities was especially important in nineteenth-century cities, where immigration brought large numbers of new voters who



needed to be integrated into civic life. As Richard Croker, grand sachem of Tammany Hall from 1886–1902, argued, “There is no denying the service which Tammany has rendered to the Republic. There is no such organization for taking hold of the untrained, friendless man and converting him into a citizen. Who else would do it if we did not?” (Reichley 2000, pp. 174–75).

The most famous defense of the parties’ civic role was offered by George Washington Plunkitt, whose lectures were published in William Riordon’s *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*. Plunkitt’s lectures colorfully described the civic role that parties and bosses played in late nineteenth-century American cities. Plunkitt is well known today for drawing a distinction between “honest” and “dishonest” graft. Though he openly admitted practicing honest graft, he insisted that he never engaged in dishonest graft, which he defined as blackmail, theft from the public treasury, and the like (Riordon 1905). Plunkitt maintained that there was a difference between the “political looter” who practiced dishonest graft and the “politician” who profits personally while also promoting the good of the community. As he put it, “The looter goes in for himself alone without considerin’ his organization or his city. The politician looks after his own interests, the organization’s interests, and the city’s interest all at the same time” (Riordon 1905, p. 54). The members of the organization, similarly, have “one thought” which is “to serve the city which gave him a home” (Riordon 1905, p. 58). Both the district leaders and the rank-and-file members benefit reciprocally. And the district leaders serve the rank-and-file not only with patronage jobs but also with philanthropy and by establishing voluntary associations like glee clubs and baseball teams (Riordon 1905, p. 47).

It is appropriate to acknowledge the excesses to which these local parties sometimes contributed. At their worst, they contributed to vote fraud, stole from the public treasury, and nominated candidates who did not reflect the views of their constituents. But scholars have suggested that the portrayal of these machines as corrupt institutions run by bosses is overstated (Stave et al. 1988). More important, a fair assessment must account not just for the excesses of party machines but also for the civic role they played in linking the lives of citizens, particularly immigrants. The leaders of these machines explicitly explained and defended their activities in civic terms. While these parties were not altruistic, they harnessed “self-interest rightly understood” by engaging in transactional politics (Tocqueville [1835] 2002; Rauch 2015). Scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of these machines in providing assistance and political voice to the lower classes in urban areas (Stave et al. 1988, pp. 296–97).

### 3.3. Local Parties and the Civic Virtue of Tolerance

Transactional politics among “small” parties divided by interests rather than foundational principles also cultivated another kind of civic virtue: tolerance. By centering conflict around secondary questions, nineteenth-century parties engaged citizens without exacerbating their tendency to turn against each other.

Parties could supply this practical training in part because they were non-ideological. In most cases, nineteenth-century parties could vigorously contest elections because the stakes were lower. They involved canals, banks, tariffs, and so forth. Existential ideological questions were not at stake every election cycle. Questions of interest rather than ideology provide greater space for bargaining and compromise and thus enable the kind of give-and-take that republican citizens need to practice in order to live together.

As Morton Keller puts it, the differences between Whigs and Democrats in the 1840s “were differences of degree, not kind”. Their disagreements “were not fundamental and irreconcilable” (Keller 2007, pp. 82, 83). In this less intense environment they could co-exist, each seeking to win the spoils needed to serve the interests of their members but

moderating their behavior with an acceptance that their political opponents constituted a legitimate opposition.

In the nineteenth century, parties taught citizens the necessary give-and-take of politics because neither party tried to destroy the other. Instead, they contested elections, enjoyed the fruits of victory when they won, but accepted the existence of the other party as a legitimate opposition (Hofstadter 1969). De Tocqueville explained that the “first idea that presents itself to the mind of a party. . . is the idea of violence: the idea of persuasion arrives only later; it is born of experience” (Tocqueville [1835] 2002, p. 185). Parties are born out of conflict, and they often seek to destroy their opposition. This was a recurring feature of party politics in the “First Party System” between 1789 and 1828 (Hofstadter 1969).

However, that impulse to destroy opposition was tamed as parties developed in the nineteenth century. Parties and their members learned to accept the existence of their political opponents and sought to bargain with and persuade rather than eradicate them. This turn occurred when Martin Van Buren and other members of the “Albany Regency” operated under a different model of partisanship, which began to prevail after 1828 signaled the end of the so-called “Era of Good Feelings”. As James Ceaser has explained, Van Buren sought to reconstitute the party system as a two-party system focused on secondary issues rather than the existential question of slavery (Ceaser 1979). Van Buren’s approach was born from and largely succeeded in creating, on a national scale, a political culture in which partisanship was “an anti-ideological force” (Hofstadter 1969, p. 246). While the Democratic Party that Van Buren helped to create was dedicated to advancing a defined set of economic interests and greater decentralization, those commitments were broadly defined and flexible. This allowed Van Buren and his associates to practice a “sportsmanlike decency” in politics (Hofstadter 1969, p. 249).

This kind of party division allowed each side to check and monitor the other. It forced the majority party to remember that it could become the minority party in the foreseeable future. This reality tempered the majority party’s willingness to use its power tyrannically. “The best partisans hope their side wins,” Russell Muirhead explains, “yet know that victory should never be total”. These partisans “are capacious enough to know that what they see is not the whole of things” (Muirhead 2014, pp. 106, 107). The ability to work “across lines of difference”, Yuval Levin writes, “gives us practical experience in the formalities of democratic life and in the forming of coalitions with people who don’t share all our priorities. . . . These are all essential liberal-democratic habits, rooted in core republican values” (Levin 2024, pp. 84–85).

Plunkitt illustrated this tendency of non-ideological parties in his characteristic folksy manner. In his words, he practiced “Reciprocity in Patronage”. “Me and the Republicans are enemies just one day in the year—election day. Then we fight tooth and nail. The rest of the time it’s live and let live with us. . . . You see, we differ on tariffs and currencies and all them things, but we agree on the main proposition that when a man works in politics, he should get something out of it” (Riordon 1905, p. 72). After the election, according to Plunkitt, the leaders of both parties work together to ensure that both parties can distribute benefits to their constituents.

While it’s tempting to focus on the seedy aspects of personal politics (such as the use of personal favors and influence to sway votes and hiring decisions), Plunkitt was also calling attention to the way in which transactional politics helps to connect and organize citizens without causing them to engage in ideological conflict for the sake of destroying their political opponents. As Russell Muirhead argues, the right kind of partisanship can cultivate civic virtues such as “a willingness to compromise, to give and to take, and (perhaps most of all) to bear the burdens of standing with one’s fellow citizens” (Muirhead 2014, p. 91). These are core civic virtues; they are best acquired, and perhaps can only be

acquired, through practice. By identifying, connecting, and enlisting rank-and-file members in their work, parties helped their members acquire the experience of self-government, of voting and running elections, of associating with each other, and of working together for common purposes.

In sum, the parties of the nineteenth century served as a way of reconstructing the ties that connected people in hierarchical, aristocratic societies. They unified citizens together for common, public purposes, developing their commitments to public life and engagement. As Wilson Carey McWilliams wrote, for the architects of the nineteenth-century parties, a party “is not only a form of organization but is a quality of spirit, a set of commitments, and a dedication to public life” (McWilliams 1980, p. 58). These parties start at the local level, where “Natural leaders from several localities, united in a face-to-face society of their own, would select their natural leaders. Ideally, an ascending hierarchy of face-to-face societies, connected by relations of personal trust, would connect the locality and the central state” (McWilliams 1980, p. 59). In short, McWilliams argued, “Political parties, as mediating strata, helped build the emotional and personal bonds between local communities and the republic as a whole” (McWilliams 1980, p. 55). They also taught citizens to be publicly engaged, gave them opportunities to influence and serve in the public square, and tempered their desires to tyrannize over their fellow citizens. While it is fair to criticize some of the methods the parties used to cultivate these civic virtues—patronage, “graft”, and the like—it is also important to acknowledge the role they played as “schools” of civic education.

#### 4. From Civic Associations to Candidate Servants

Today’s parties, as opposed to the traditional parties of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have abandoned their roles as civic educators. In part, they abandoned this work voluntarily, but these changes were mostly forced upon them by reformers seeking to purge politics of the corruption of the party machines.

##### 4.1. *The Decline of American Party Organizations*

At the broadest level, the twentieth century witnessed the decline of party organizations due to legal reforms that aimed to cure American politics of party corruption. States enacted “Australian Ballot” laws that replaced party-printed ballots distributed by party volunteers with government-printed secret ballots distributed and collected directly by government officials. Seven states passed such laws by 1889, and by 1896, thirty-nine states used government ballots (Evans 1917). While this enabled a more secret ballot and diminished opportunities for vote fraud, they also weakened local parties whose district captains were responsible for turning out voters.

In addition, civil service reforms gradually eroded the patronage system that served as a key resource for local party machines. At the national level, the passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883 set the stage for the eventual replacement of patronage with nonpartisan civil service (Postell 2017). Reducing the number of patronage jobs reduced the parties’ ability to distribute favors to loyal voters. Direct primary laws, also enacted during the Progressive Era, further reduced party organizations’ control over party nominations, enabling less connected “outsider” candidates to capture the party label (Milkis 2009).

In short, reforms in the twentieth century eliminated or significantly reduced party organizations’ control over jobs, resources, ballots, and nominations. The “state and local orientation of the party system” of the nineteenth century gave way to “a national, executive-oriented party, which would be more suitably organized for the expression of national purposes” (Milkis 1993, p. 4). While this reconstituted party system was well-suited to advance the goals and programs of progressive reformers, it weakened the



grassroots parties that had previously connected citizens at the local level. Those machines gradually withered over the course of the twentieth century, illustrated most vividly by the fate of Tammany Hall itself. By 1943, its financial situation was so dire that it sold its headquarters building to a labor union, and Tammany ceased to exist by the mid-1960s (Wilson 1966, p. 41).

The dynamics of the modern campaign finance system, stemming from the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act amendments (FECA) in 1974, further limited the resources party organizations could spend on civic engagement. Modern campaign finance law privileges expenditures to individual candidates and independent expenditures to political action committees (PACs) over donations to party organizations. It was deliberately designed to weaken party influence over elections (La Raja 2008). Because campaign finance law limits contributions to political parties while allowing unlimited contributions to other organizations, parties' role in spending on behalf of candidates has diminished. As Ray La Raja explains, "the FECA institutionalized a process of financing candidate campaigns directly through donations from individuals and interest groups, with the party playing a peripheral role. Since its inception, party contributions and spending on behalf of candidates has typically been in the range of 5–6% for challengers and just 1–2% for incumbents" (La Raja 2013, p. 94).

#### 4.2. *The Nationalization of the Parties*

Eventually, the two major parties' national organizations assumed more of the responsibilities that previously fell to state and local organizations. Beginning in the late 1970s, the national party committees expanded their fundraising through direct mail and began to recruit candidates even for state-level elections (Reichley 2000, pp. 294–304; but see Klinghard 2010). Because they could no longer raise large amounts of money from individual donors, parties had to resort to smaller donations from a larger number of citizens reached through direct mail advertising. These efforts did lead to an increase in national party fundraising.

Though on the surface this new activity appeared to revitalize the national parties, scholars referred to this new model of national party activity as the "service party," a new kind of party that existed primarily to funnel resources to candidates rather than connect with voters on the ground (Cotter and Bibby 1980; Conway 1983; Aldrich 1995). Parties responded to the changes in Section 4.1 above by changing their functions. As Cotter and Bibby explained in 1980, "while national parties are less involved than in the past in controlling presidential nominations, managing presidential campaigns, and dispensing federal patronage, they are more heavily engaged in rule enforcement, campaign and organizational services, and administrative activities" (Cotter and Bibby 1980, pp. 1–2). Nineteenth-century parties were institutions with an ongoing presence in communities, and people identified with them first and candidates second. The modern service party, conversely, exists to serve candidates who now represent the party's identity. Service parties put their money and volunteers in service of candidates, and their main function is to help candidates get elected rather than connect with voters and connect voters with each other.

While in the short term, these new service parties effectively mobilized voters on behalf of national elections and national party objectives, they also produced a more "hollow" party structure, top-heavy and ill-connected to the daily lives and concerns of their voters (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024). These effects had, to some degree, been foreshadowed by the call for a "more responsible two-party system" led by the American Political Science Association in the 1940s (Committee on Political Parties 1950). Such a vision still commands considerable support today. Even those who explain how grassroots

political parties promote civic virtue and engagement also call for a more ideological, issue-based party system (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024; Jenkins 2023). However, if we consult experience, this kind of ideological party system seems to be at odds with how grassroots parties function.

In summary, today's parties bear little resemblance to the older parties that contributed to civic attachment, connection, and engagement. They have become more nationalized, more ideologically homogeneous, and more focused on periodically contacting voters to turn them out on election day rather than facilitating association at the local level. They have also become weaker in the sense that they have fewer benefits, such as jobs and social services, to offer voters. The decline in parties' civic presence has likely contributed to the civic crisis of our time.

#### 4.3. Reforms to Restore Parties as Civic Educators

It would be difficult for parties to return completely to their traditional role as civic educators. Nevertheless, political parties can take measures to become more deeply rooted in communities and serve as civic educators.

Most significantly, national parties can rededicate themselves to their more traditional roles as grassroots organizations with an ongoing and permanent presence in communities rather than national organizations that show up for elections and vanish shortly after votes are cast. In practice, this means that they can invest more of their resources in building local and state organizations. County party headquarters used to be permanent fixtures across the country, but today they contact voters only during election time (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024, p. 265). One recent survey found that while most local parties have a constitution and officers, very few (around 10%) have full- or part-time staff. In short, "local parties, while moderately institutionalized, still do not engage in a level of ongoing activity that demands a permanent physical location and regular working staff" (Roscoe and Jenkins 2014, p. 291). Today's parties are preoccupied with short-term electoral victory at the expense of long-term and meaningful connections to voters. The old parties handed out coal in wintertime and turkeys on Thanksgiving. Today's parties bombard voters with campaign advertisements during election season and then vanish.

A second reform involves campaign finance. One key factor that contributed to the decline in local parties' community activities came from the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002, which banned so-called "soft money". Soft money refers to transfers of funds from national party committees to state and local party organizations. Soft money was used for party-building activities as opposed to hard money funds given by parties directly to candidates for campaign purposes. Those funds had contributed mightily to the revitalization of the civic activities of state and local parties. By one measure, "the two major parties together raised an estimated \$263 million in soft money" in 1996 (Reichley 2000, p. 344).

The Supreme Court upheld the provisions of BCRA in *McConnell* (*McConnell v. Federal Election Commission* 2003). The ultimate effect of BCRA's ban on soft money was to channel political contributions to "non-party, non-candidate groups" such as PACs and Super PACs (Schuck 2019, p. 78). As this source of revenue for local and state party organizations dried up, those organizations were forced to adapt by focusing on organizing to help candidates during elections rather than their civic activities (Roscoe and Jenkins 2014, p. 296).

Although the ban on soft money has surely contributed to the withering of local party organizations, reinvesting in local parties is inexpensive compared to the cost of campaign advertising. As Schlozman and Rosenfeld put it, "By the standards of contemporary politics, local parties are cheap. A few bucks from above to rent a meeting hall and provide

some food would seem money well worth spending” (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2019, p. 140). Of course, hosting a few meetings with free food will not restore local parties to their former status. But local party organizations ought to invest some resources in order to reconnect with and represent their members. And it would be sensible to modify campaign finance law to encourage contributions to parties for such community-building activities.

As parties have embraced a new “service” model for maintaining relevance in the twenty-first century, they have abandoned their more traditional role as schools of civic education. This has contributed to a noticeable decline in voters’ affection for the parties, illustrated by the dramatic increase in the number of independent voters and the rise in negative rather than positive partisanship. Although some of the parties’ decline can be attributed to reforms that were imposed upon them, they have also voluntarily withdrawn from local communities. A new class of party leaders, genuinely rooted in local and state communities and dedicated to reconnecting with voters, could help contribute to a revitalization of civic engagement.

## 5. Conclusion—Civic Education Outside the Classroom

The recent focus on civic education as a means of renewing civic virtue should acknowledge the role that political parties once played in that regard. As Wilson Carey McWilliams explained, “Traditional parties were, in crucial ways, the schools for civic education, inculcating the middling sort of civic virtues possible in a vast state”. Yet he concluded as early as 1980 that our parties “are waning along with the communities that were their foundation” (McWilliams 2011, pp. 25, 27). Elsewhere, he noted that “in the school of citizenship, parties are like institutions of higher education” (McWilliams 1992, p. 196). The decline in parties as civic associations has only accelerated in recent decades, and as parties and politics have become more hollow and nationalized, citizens have become less engaged in public life.

Higher education can only do so much to cultivate civic virtue. Political parties, if revitalized, could help to fill in the space that education is unable to reach. Refocusing on “parties’ positive civic roles” and the ways in which they “connected ordinary citizens to each other” (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024, p. 258). can help us consider how to revitalize parties to perform this function once again. This article has explained how parties used to play a civic role on the ground in America’s communities through their constant presence in the daily lives of citizens. It has also called for policymakers to reconsider campaign finance reforms that have weakened parties’ civic role and recommended that parties reinvest in this civic role to combat the decline in civic education and engagement, as well as the concomitant rise of polarization and negative partisanship.

There is evidence that scholars are coming back around to see parties as civic associations that can restore meaningful connections between citizens and government (Abu El-Haj and Kuo 2022). A scholarly agenda to revitalize and buttress civic education should emphasize the role that political parties play alongside other institutions, educational and otherwise, to teach and preserve the habits of citizenship to Americans across the political spectrum today. As Russell Muirhead argues, “a civic education for partisanship might be effective—more effective than traditional civic education, which often aims to impart a command of propositional knowledge that is disconnected from action” (Muirhead 2014, p. 169). Paradoxically, partisanship can serve as an additional school of civic education, one that teaches in practice what institutions of higher learning can teach as theory.

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