

Do 527's Add Up to a Party?
Thinking About the "Shadows" of Politics

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ABSTRACT:

The creation and activities of the so-called 527 political organizations during the 2004 campaign support the framework created by John Aldrich in *Why Parties?* They also support the notion of a "party network": a web of actors united behind the common pursuit of power under a shared label.

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Many observers argued that the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act would weaken political parties by abolishing “soft money”. The success of both parties in raising “hard money” would seem to have disproved this prediction. But another outcome of the soft money ban supports a particular view of political parties, the “party network.” After BCRA was passed, leading operatives on both sides created new organizations meant to fulfill the functions previously funded by soft money: broadcast advertising and voter mobilization. These groups were formed as political organizations under Internal Revenue Code section 527, and are often known simply as “527”s. While they filed with the IRS as political committees, they claimed not to be covered by the Federal Election Commission since they did not engage in express advocacy. As such, they did not have to comply with restrictions on the size and scope of contributions. Probably the most notable 527s were those that composed a Democratic “shadow party”: America Coming Together, America Votes, and the Media Fund. There were Republican 527s as well, including Progress for America and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. (This paper will not deal with pre-existing 527 organizations such as the Club for Growth or the political funds of AFSCME and the SEIU).

Whatever these groups accomplished, they did not undermine the role of political parties. Party leaders encouraged their formation, longtime party operatives composed their staffs, partisan interest groups lent them assistance and partisan donors contributed their funds. The 527 groups generally pursued strategies compatible with party goals, whether America Coming Together’s mobilization of Democratic-leaning voters or the Swift Boat Vets’s criticism of John Kerry’s Vietnam record. In the case of the Swift Boat Vets, they spread their message, to a great extent, through the “new partisan press,”

e.g., Fox News, talk radio, conservative bloggers. The Swift Boat Vets were able to shape public opinion even when the mainstream media were ignoring them. The 527 groups were not competing with the parties; they were nodes within the broader party networks.¹

Theories of Parties

What is a political party? Political scientists have devised a variety of definitions, but generally agree that parties are groups of politicians seeking to win office under a common label. In the 1970s and 1980s, political scientists argued that political parties were in steep decline, with voters drifting away from partisanship, and with candidates conducting their own campaigns. Many argued that interest groups, PACs, political consultants, and the mass media had undermined the role of political parties. (Sabato 1981, 1984, 1988; Polsby 1983; Crotty 1984; Wattenberg 1998; Burnham 1982; Epstein 1986). Although there is now plenty of evidence that parties have strengthened in recent years, whether in their influence on voting behavior, their activities in campaigns, and their strength in government, the decline-of-parties argument remains popular. (For evidence of partisan strength, see Herrnson 2002; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 2000; G. C. Jacobson 2000; Bartels 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2001; Hetherington 2001; Layman 2002; Lawrence 2001; Brewer

¹ This paper includes some information from two series of interviews with interest-group representatives in the Washington area. The first series was conducted during May and June 2000, the second – meant to review the 2000 election – was conducted during February and March 2001. These two batches of interviews are supplemented by work done by the author and others for the Campaign Finance Institute. Two roundtables were held by CFI during the spring of 2001 that included representatives from leading interest groups. The author was partially responsible for selecting participants for these events. The roundtables were followed by a series of interviews that summer; the author conducted all the interviews, either on his own or in cooperation with Mark Rozell and Clyde Wilcox. The author thanks CFI, Rozell and Wilcox for giving him permission to use these interviews.

2004). Silbey (2002) argues that parties have declined as nonpartisan experts have gained control of an expansive federal government; the mass media and interest groups (both supposedly nonpartisan) have taken over the parties' role in connecting the people with public life. (Also see Schier 2000).

Parties as a Rational Choice

Following in the footsteps of Downs (1997 [1957]) and Schlesinger (1991), Aldrich (1995) applies rational-choice theory to political parties. Rather than focusing on party institutions, Aldrich instead argues that parties are endogenous units created by politicians to serve their own needs, especially to solve collective action problems and to reduce uncertainty. A political party is the "creature of the politicians, the ambitious office seeker and officeholder." Parties are built to respond to specific institutional and historical contexts. Martin Van Buren built the Democratic party as a loose confederation of state factions dominated by patronage-motivated politicians. More recently, in a more candidate-centered era, Bill Brock built up the Republican National Committee as a party-in-service that provides assistance to officeseekers.

Responsible Parties

Another outlook on political parties is the so-called "responsible party" school;" it was given fullest expression in the 1950 report "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System," issued by the APSA Committee on Political Parties. The doctrine of responsible parties argues that political parties should adopt binding, programmatic doctrines on a wide range of issues. They should have strong centralized leadership, both

in government and in party organizations. Parties should base their appeals primarily on ideological differences, rather than on personality or patronage. Both Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt seemed to have held this view of political parties. (Ceaser 1977; Milkis 1999).

In recent years, the political parties have, in some ways, been evolving toward the responsible party model. The parties have become ideologically coherent. The party networks have become more centralized in Washington; “top-down” parties have replaced “bottom-up” ones. Party unity in Congress has increased. Party voting among the public has increased, at least among those who identify with a party. Party identification appears to be based more on perceived issue differences than on inherited loyalties than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. Ideological activists have mostly replaced patronage hacks as the lead players in party politics. The national party organizations spend more money and play increased roles in elections. Even state and local parties have revived, to a limited extent. But there are few signs of an increased role for rank-and-file voters; indeed, a party-defining document like the “Contract with America” was conceived by a few insiders, while most voters remained unaware. (Green and Herrnson 2002; Weisberg 2002; Pomper and Weiner 2002).

Party Networks

Another understanding of political parties conceptualizes them less as formal organizations than as webs of relationships between political actors. In her study of the Illinois Republican party, Schwartz (1990) describes a “party network” that includes elected officials, party officers, contributors and interest group leaders. Members of this

network work together to help party candidates win office. They also share common ideological values. The network can adapt to a changing environment and can admit newcomers. Schlesinger (1985) argues that our concept of political party needs to encompass more than simply the formal party apparatus; he calls upon us to understand the close links that parties have developed with PACs and other groups. Aldrich (1995) described contemporary political parties as “parties-in-service,” providing assistance to candidates. Bedlington and Malbin (2003) find members of the House of Representatives operating as part of this network, using their PACs and personal campaign committees to help their party’s candidates win close races. Members can do this both by contributing directly to candidates and by giving to the party campaign committees. Not surprisingly, party leaders strongly encourage such giving. These close races will determine which party will control the House, who will chair committees, and who will run the floor. Perhaps we now have party-networks-in-service: amalgamations of party institutions, interest groups and individual activists all working together to elect candidates under a single banner. (Also see Kolodny 1998, Monroe 2001; Cohen et al forthcoming; Cohen 2003).

Early treatments of political consultants, such as Sabato (1984), emphasized the damage they were inflicting upon parties. Consultants were assuming the roles that parties had traditionally played, such as communicating with voters or helping candidates raise money, and were enabling candidates to run campaigns without party assistance. Consultants were therefore making parties almost irrelevant.

But more recent studies of political consultants have painted a more complex picture. Parties rely on political consultants to provide services to candidates that they

cannot provide well themselves: media, direct mail, polling. Party officials often refer candidates to preferred consultants who can provide the necessary services and have established relationships with the party. Kolodny and Dulio (2001a) find that much of party spending goes to consultants, who provide the same services they perform for candidates. Consultants often have strong links to the parties: many began their careers working for party committees. Rather than weakening the parties, consultants are valuable members of the “party network” – “subcontractors” as Kolodny and Dulio (2001a) call them. (Also see Kolodny and Dulio 2001b; Dwyre and Kolodny 2001; Dwyre and Kolodny 2003).

Interest groups may also function as “subcontractors” for the parties. If campaign finance laws limit the degree to which groups can coordinate their actions with candidates, they certainly can perform functions for the parties for which they have special expertise: the National Rifle Association can contact gun owners, the Sierra Club can run advertisements about environmental issues, unions can communicate with their members. Group and party leaders know each other and work together for common goals.

Personnel move between groups in the same party network. Chuck Cunningham served as field director for the Christian Coalition before he became the NRA’s director of federal affairs. Margaret Conway, who is now political director for the Sierra Club, previously held similar positions at Planned Parenthood and the Human Rights Campaign. Before Mary Crawford served as communications director for the NFIB, she worked for the Republican National Committee and the National Republican

Congressional Committee.² Mary Beth Cahill moved from running EMILY's List to directing John Kerry's presidential campaign. In 2004, America Votes, led by Cecile Richards, a onetime aide to House Minority Nancy Pelosi, brought together dozens of liberal groups in order to coordinate their efforts.

Ideas, as well as personnel, move between groups in the same party network. When the NAACP created the National Voter Fund to foster African-American political participation, Heather Booth, the Fund's executive director, consulted with staff at Handgun Control and the Sierra Club. She sought advice from them even though the Fund's target audience was very different from those of the two organizations.³ Gloria Totten reported regular meetings between leading liberal and labor organizations to share information about political developments, as well as consultation between NARAL and Planned Parenthood about activity in individual congressional races.⁴ The parties themselves foster sharing of information by holding regular briefings for sympathetic PACs. During the 2004 campaign, America Votes, a coalition of pro-Democratic groups, held bi-weekly meetings of liberal activists to plot strategy. America Votes allowed member organizations to share voter files, survey data, and demographic information. This allowed America Votes staff to coordinate the efforts of groups such as the Sierra Club, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and the League of Conservation Voters in stimulating voter turnout and contacting swing voters. America Votes targeted 13 battleground states; in some states such as Michigan and Florida, the organization may continue its efforts for key 2006 races. (Hadfield 2004).

² Interview with Mary Crawford, National Federation of Independent Business, May 24, 2000

³ Interview with Heather Booth, NAACP National Voter Fund, June 11, 2001.

⁴ Interview with Gloria Totten, NARAL, April 19, 2001

The professionalization of politics has allowed more individuals to both live “off” politics and live “for” politics. (See Johnson 2001). Rather than being rewarded with deputy postmasterships or sinecures in the city Parks Department, today’s political professionals can instead seek jobs as chiefs of staff or communications directors, perhaps with an eye to an eventual corner office on K Street. As they move from position to position, professionals remain enmeshed in webs of relationships within their own partisan universes. Even when working as lobbyists or consultants, they remain active in support of their party and its candidates. (See Kersh 2002 and Loomis 2003 for discussions of how lobbyists can remain politically active while being paid to serve their clients).

Even some media outlets have become part of the party networks. Republicans have long distributed “talking points” to conservative radio talk show hosts; Roger Ailes, a longtime GOP operative, founded the Fox News Channel. While most media outlets have audiences that reflect the partisan diversity of the general public, a few have striking tilts in viewership. A 2004 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 35 percent of Republicans “regularly watch” Fox News; only 21 percent of Democrats do. One in seven Republicans regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show; only 1 in 50 Democrats do. (Pew Research Center 2004). Twice as many viewers watched the Republican convention on Fox as watched the Democratic gathering (overall ratings for the two events were about equal). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). 77 percent of Limbaugh listeners call themselves conservative. (Pew Research Center 2004). The Project for Excellence in Journalism notes the growth of a “journalism of affirmation” (e.g, Republicans watching Fox News) and a “journalism of assertion” (e.g.,

a blogger or talk show host making unsubstantiated charges). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). This contrasts sharply with the Progressive ideal of objective, scientific journalism conducted by experts. (Lippmann [1922] 1997).

The concept of a party network has validity across time, although it probably applies better to today's politics than to that of a generation ago. There have always been interest groups that had close relationships with the political parties. But there have been changes in recent decades that have made the parties more "network-y" and simultaneously more polarized. These include:

- Legal changes in the 1970s that favored the creation of political action committees.
- A long series of legal changes, administrative decisions and judicial rulings that encouraged the rise of issue advocacy and soft money.
- The rise of political consultants.
- The rise of more openly partisan media and think tanks.
- The creation of leadership PACs and similar operations controlled by party leaders.
- Adaptation by existing groups (such as the AFL-CIO and the NRA) that have made them more purposive or more politically effective or both.
- The rise of strongly purposive interest groups and their subsequent integration into party networks.
- A general trend toward purposive (often highly ideological) incentives throughout our political system.
- The growing partisan polarization both in voting in Congress and voting by the electorate.

“527s” as “Shadow Parties”

The leadership of the so-called “527” organizations formed after the passage of BCRA – America Coming Together, the Media Fund, America Votes – included not only veterans of the Clinton White House and the Democratic National Committee, but also longtime officials of the AFL-CIO, EMILY’s List, and the Sierra Club. This “shadow party” could also be called “The Democratic Party Network, Inc.” Both former President Bill Clinton and Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe strongly encouraged the formation of these entities.

After the passage of BCRA, McAuliffe established a Task Force on BCRA that included Harold Ickes, former deputy chief of staff to Bill Clinton; Michael Whouley, a longtime Democratic operative who worked for both the Al Gore and John Kerry presidential campaigns; John Podesta, former White House Chief of Staff for Clinton; as well as two top officials of the DNC. Ickes devised the Media Fund (to conduct broadcast advertising previously funded by soft money), which he subsequently led; before BCRA became effective, McAuliffe encouraged leading Democratic donors to give to the new organization. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming).

Ickes also helped devise America Coming Together and America Votes through meetings with top members of the Democratic party network. These included Sierra Club director Carl Pope, EMILY’s List president Ellen Malcolm (who also serves on the DNC’s executive committee), SEIU president Andrew Stern, and former AFL-CIO political director Steve Rosenthal. They agreed on the need to coordinate interest-group electoral operations; this became America Votes. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming)

Stern and Rosenthal also discussed their desire to create a “ground war” operation funded by unions, and that would apply to the general public the voter-turnout techniques used to mobilize union members. This eventually became America Coming Together; billionaire George Soros and insurance tycoon Peter Lewis pledged \$20 million to fund ACT as long as Rosenthal controlled its operations. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming). Malcolm and Ickes formed the Joint Victory Campaign to raise money for all three groups. With the assistance of Soros and Bill Clinton, Malcolm and Ickes wooed many of the party’s top donors; Hollywood producer Steve Bing was among the many onetime soft-money givers who helped fund ACT and the Media Fund. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming).

During the campaign, ACT, America Votes, and the Media Fund, along with two labor-backed 527s, were all headquartered in the same building in downtown Washington, across the street from the AFL-CIO’s headquarters. By the fall of 2004, ACT had 55 offices in 17 states, and 1300 paid canvassers working to turn out Democratic voters. (Dwyer et al 2004) Not only was the leadership of the “shadow party” groups deeply embedded in the party networks, their staff was too. Both the Media Fund and ACT hired the Thunder Road Group, run by former Kerry campaign manager Jim Jordan, to handle their communications. Larry Gold served both as counsel for ACT and for the AFL-CIO. Bill Knapp served as a consultant for the Media Fund before he quit to work for the Kerry campaign. (Drinkard 2004).

America Votes held bi-weekly meetings of liberal activists to plot strategy. America Votes allowed member organizations to share voter files, survey data, and demographic information. This allowed America Votes staff to coordinate the efforts of

groups such as the Sierra Club, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and the League of Conservation Voters in stimulating voter turnout and contacting swing voters. America Votes targeted 13 battleground states; in some states such as Michigan and Florida, the organization may continue its efforts for key 2006 races. (Hadfield 2004).⁵ The groups involved in America Votes are central elements in the Democratic party network; they put the lie to the conventional wisdom that interest groups always undermine political parties.

The Democratic “shadow party” was primarily funded by a few very large donors, many of them who had given large amounts of “soft money” to party committees. These included some leading unions, such as AFSCME, SEIU, the Teamsters, and the American Federation of Teachers. But there were also several large individual donors who had been longtime supporters of the Democratic Party, most notably Soros and Lewis. Hollywood producer Steve Bing, Chicago radio magnate Fred Eychaner, New York pharmaceutical entrepreneur Agnes Varis, Slim-Fast founder S. Daniel Abraham, and live-entertainment tycoon Robert Sillerman were all among those who gave hundreds of thousands of dollars (or even millions) to the Democratic Party and to the 527s. Susie Tompkins Buell, founder of the Esprit clothing line (and now head of a feminist foundation) gave over a million dollars to the Democratic “shadow party” and also served as vice chairman of the Kerry campaign.

⁵ Members of America Votes included ACORN, the AFL-CIO, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), ACT, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Association of Trial Lawyers of America (ATLA), the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, Clean Water Action, Defenders of Wildlife, Democracy for America, EMILY’s List, Environment 2004, Human Rights Campaign, League of Conservation Voters (LCV), the Media Fund, MoveOn.org, Moving America Forward, Music for America, the NAACP National Voter Fund, NARAL Pro-Choice America, the National Education Association (NEA), the National Jewish Democratic Council, the National Treasury Employees Union, the Partnership for American Families, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Sierra Club, USAction, the Young Voter Alliances, Voices for Working Families, and 21st Century Democrats.

Many large donors to the Democratic 527s came from communities well-plugged into the Democratic party network. Buell and Varis were both active in feminist causes. Eychaner and software entrepreneur Tim Gill (who gave \$1 million to Democratic 527s) are both openly gay. Sillerman, Bing, and “Roseanne” producer Marcy Carsey (who gave \$ 1 million) are all figures in the entertainment industry.

A Republican “Shadow”

Republicans were initially reluctant to set up their own 527 organizations; the RNC had never depended as much on soft money as the DNC had, the Bush re-election campaign could raise as much money as it needed, and the legal status of 527’s seemed shaky at first. But eventually a Republican “shadow” emerged. Progress for America, a leading Republican 527 group, was also run by people active in their party network. PFA was founded in 2001 by Tony Feather, political director the 2000 Bush-Cheney campaign, and ally of Bush advisor Karl Rove; after a year of inactivity, Feather handed over PFA to Chris LaCivita, former political director for the NRSC. In the spring of 2004, Brian McCabe took over PFA; McCabe was a partner in the DCI Group, a political consulting firm. Even when LaCivita was running PFA, he was also doing work for DCI. DCI and its affiliate FLS-DCI both later did work for the Bush campaign. Tom Synhorst, a partner in both DCI and FLS-DCI, served as a strategic advisor and fundraiser for PFA. Synhorst had worked as an advisor to the 2000 Bush campaign and helped run the 1996 and 2000 Republican national conventions. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming). Benjamin Ginsberg served as counsel to PFA; he served in similar capacities for both the 2004 Bush re-election effort and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. The Swift Boat

organizers approached PFA, seeking advice; PFA personnel encouraged them to see LaCivita, who became an advisor to the group. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming; Stone 2003a).

PFA became a 527 organization in May 2004, after the FEC decided not to regulate 527s; Bush-Cheney campaign chairman Marc Racicot and RNC chairman Ed Gillespie soon released a statement urging support for PFA and other sympathetic 527s. PFA quickly gained access to the financial resources of the Republican party network, hiring some well-connected fundraisers (such as Texas public relations executive James Francis), holding an event at the national convention, and gaining the assistance of such party stalwarts as San Diego Chargers owner Alex Spanos. (Weissman and Hassan forthcoming; Drinkard 2004; Cannon 2004).

Much like the Democratic “shadow party,” PFA relied on a small number of large donors. Over half of the \$45 million collected by PFA came from ten individuals: Spanos (\$5 million), Dawn and Roland Arnall of Ameriquest Capital (\$5 million), Richard DeVos and Jay Van Andel of Amway (\$2 million each), Jerry Perenchio of Univision (\$4 million), Texas homebuilder Bob Perry (\$3 million), Wal-Mart heir Alice Walton (\$2.6 million), and oilman T. Boone Pickens (\$2.5 million). (Center for Public Integrity). All of these donors had also given large amounts of soft money to the GOP. Perry, Pickens, and Dallas billionaire Harold Simmons (who gave \$1 million to PFA) provided the great bulk of the funding for Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. PFA spent \$36 million, including \$25 million on “electioneering communications” reported to the FEC. (Federal Election Commission; Center for Public Integrity). PFA’s spots included the

most aired advertisement of the campaign, featuring Ashley Faulkner, whose mother was killed in the World Trade Center attacks, recounting being hugged by President Bush.

From Outside to Inside

Two other 527s began outside the party network but worked their way into them. The liberal group MoveOn.org was founded by Bay Area software entrepreneurs Wes Boyd and Joan Blades in 1998 to oppose Bill Clinton's impeachment. (Initially, Boyd and Blades created an on-line petition urging Congress to censure Clinton and "move on," which eventually attracted a half million signatures). (Burdman 2004). In 2000, MoveOn.org raised \$2.4 million for Democratic congressional candidates; a focus on the environment and campaign finance reform in 2002 failed to attract members. But opposition to the Iraq War led interest in MoveOn to soar in 2003-04. By the 2004 election, MoveOn had attracted nearly three million members. (McKelvey 2004; Cha 2004). MoveOn controlled three entities: a PAC (which did the bulk of the spending), a 527 political organization, and a 501(c)4 social welfare organization. MoveOn's PAC conducted a \$12 million independent expenditure campaign supporting John Kerry for president.

As MoveOn.org proved its worth to Democratic insiders, it was able to plug into the resources of the party network, hiring political consultants and holding events with former Vice President Al Gore. (Janofsky and Lee 2003). Boyd spoke at the 2003 "Take Back America" conference in Washington, a gathering of progressive Democrats. (Von Drehle 2003). Zack Exley served as organizing director for MoveOn's PAC, but later worked for both the Howard Dean and John Kerry campaigns. (Abraham 2004).

MoveOn.org received a combined \$5 million from George Soros and Peter Lewis to match the same amount of small individual donations; Hollywood producer Steve Bing gave nearly \$1 million. (Center for Public Integrity).

The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth began in the wake of the publication of Douglas Brinkley's *Tour of Duty*, depicting John Kerry's service in the Vietnam War. In early 2004, Roy Hoffmann, a retired naval officer who was upset both by his portrayal in *Tour of Duty* and by Kerry's activities in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, contacted John O'Neill, a Houston lawyer. O'Neill, who had succeeded Kerry in commanding his Swift boat, had been an antagonist of Kerry since he debated him on the Dick Cavett Show in 1971. O'Neill put Hoffmann in touch with millionaire homebuilder Bob Perry, a longtime Texas Republican donor. Perry gave \$200,000 to the newly formed Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (Dobbs 2004). Two other prominent Texas Republicans later gave vast amounts to the organization. Billionaire Harold Simmons gave \$6 million, while oilman T. Boone Pickens donated \$2 million. (Perry eventually contributed a total of \$6.6 million). While Swift Boat Vets later collected thousands of on-line contributions, the bulk of its funding came from this small number of wealthy donors. (Center for Public Integrity).

O'Neill initially tried conventional means to gain attention for his criticisms of Kerry. In May, he wrote an op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal*, while the Swift Vets appeared at the National Press Club; but most media outlets ignored both. (Last 2004). Swift Boat leaders worked with Republican consultants Chris LaCivita (who formerly directed Progress for America) and Rick Reed to produce their first TV ads. (Miller

2004). The Swift Boat Vets spent only about a half million dollars on these ads, which aired in small markets such as Wausau, Wisconsin. (Edsall and Grimaldi 2004).

Rather than rely on a mainstream media that was initially reluctant to cover the charges made against Kerry, the Swift Boat Vets instead turned to more partisan outlets such as the Fox News Channel, talk radio, and conservative bloggers. *Unfit for Command*, an anti-Kerry book co-authored by O'Neill, was published by Regnery, a house identified with conservative causes ever since it published William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* in 1951. On July 28, the Drudge Report publicized the charges in *Unfit for Command*, which promptly shot to #1 on Amazon.com. (Dreher 2004). On August 4, the first SBVFT advertisement appeared; Fox News not only covered this spot, but the following night the Swift Vets appeared on "Hannity and Colmes." Conservative bloggers followed up on the charges in *Unfit for Command*; conservative talk show hosts kept the story percolating. (Last 2004).

These partisan outlets served multiple purposes for the Swifties. They allowed the Swift Boat ads to "fight above their weight," as conservative commentators hyped their charges, giving them visibility. They allowed conservatives to narrowcast their message to sympathetic voters; by the end of the campaign, Republicans had a more negative view of John Kerry than any Democratic nominee since George McGovern. Finally, the conservative media gave the Swift Boat charges so much publicity that mainstream outlets were forced to pay attention. As Fox News played up the Swift Boat Vets, CNN and MSNBC felt compelled to host them as well, often reporting their accusations without rebuttal or challenge. (Thomas 2004; Gitlin 2004). The Kerry campaign reacted slowly, failing to recognize the impact of the Swift Boat charges and fearing that

responding would only give them more publicity. (Thomas 2004; Lizza 2004; Gitlin 2004). Mainstream media outlets such as *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune* waited several days until they published stories investigating the claims made by the Swift Boaters.

While the charges against Kerry were generally disproven, they dominated campaign debate for three weeks, during a period when the Kerry campaign was out of money. By the end of August, one poll showed that 57 percent of Americans had heard of the Swift Boat ads; about half of those believed the charges against Kerry. (Schneider 2004). A post-election study found that the first Swift Boat ads had the greatest impact of any spots aired during the campaign. (Birnbaum and Edsall 2004). The SBVFT spent \$23 million, and aired several more ads, but none had the impact of their initial buy. (Center for Public Integrity).

Responsible Parties?

In some ways, the 2004 election continued the trend toward party responsibility. The parties were relatively unified, and George W. Bush provided the GOP with the type of strong, centralized leadership that Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt had sought. Dodd and Oppenheimer (2005) note the continued trend toward partisan consistency in presidential and congressional voting.

The Internet helped fulfill another aspect of party responsibility, allowing wider participation in party politics, as thousands of Americans contributed to campaigns and to party committees on-line. Howard Dean raised \$13 million on the Internet; after his triumph in the Iowa caucuses, John Kerry raised \$65 million. Blogs and Meetups helped

transform many Americans from passive observers to active participants. Many bloggers blurred the line between journalism and activism, including the liberal, Howard Dean-supporting Daily Kos and the conservatives behind Powerline, which helped bring down Dan Rather. Both parties placed a greater emphasis on “ground war” operations, with the GOP encouraging supporters to contact friends and co-workers. (Gerber and Green 2004 appears to have influenced many political operatives).

There were some complications, however. Howard Dean discovered that generating enthusiasm among young, wired supporters did not guarantee backing from the wider public. While the political parties and many presidential campaigns relied more heavily on small donations than they did in the past, 527s such as ACT and PFA were funded primarily by a small number of very wealthy individuals and unions.

Conclusion

The events of the 2004 election can enrich our understanding of political parties. The activities of the 527 organizations support the notion of party networks. Groups such as America Coming Together were formed by activists enmeshed in the party networks, with the encouragement of party leaders, with the backing of interest groups close to the political parties, and with the funding provided by longtime party donors. The Swift Boat Vets spread their message through partisan media, and benefited from the assistance of donors and political consultants with longstanding partisan ties. MoveOn.org began outside the Democratic party network but rapidly gained access to its resources as the on-line newcomer proved its utility.

These groups also support John Aldrich's insights in *Why Parties?* Once again, politicians responded to a new context by creating new structures that allowed them to fulfill their ambitions. There was also evidence that the parties continue to evolve towards the ideal of responsibility.

But there were still grounds for concern. Many of the 527 organization relied heavily on very large donations. Not only does this pose problems for democratic norms, it also opens the door to the possibility to the problems of preferential treatment and access-selling seen during the era of soft money. Given the close ties that groups such as America Coming Together and Progress for America enjoy with officeholders, and given their ability to accept unlimited donations, the era of the big-donor shakedown may return. If the FEC treats the 527s as PACs, this possibility may be avoided.

The distinct leftish tinge to MoveOn.org gives rise to another concern. Our system already gives great leverage to highly unrepresentative activists on both sides. Will the Internet, by cutting the cost of organization, only accentuate this tendency? (See Fiorina 2001) muses that the American political system has become too responsive to ideologues, whether in government, the political parties or interest groups. As the parties have polarized and the number of competitive constituencies shrunk, candidates have become less concerned with the "median voter" and more attuned to activists at the extremes. As the parties become more internally homogeneous, only the ideologically faithful are able to advance politically.

Despite the polarization among elites, the American public remains essentially moderate. But strong partisans – who are most likely to vote in primaries, contribute money and knock on doors – have increasingly diverged from the general public. While

voters often make clear their disdain for ideological extremism, politicians pursue it when they can. For example, during the aftermath of the 1994 election, many Republican freshmen made clear their lack of regard for public opinion, preferring to follow their own conservative convictions. As voters see their own centrist views being ignored, they lose trust in government. (Fiorina 2005; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Too often our party system produces a fun-house reflection of the American electorate, distorting the extremes and shrinking the middle.

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