Party Blight in Rural Missouri: Causes and Consequences of Local Organizational Decline

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Party Blight in Rural Missouri:
Causes and Consequences of Local Organizational Decline

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
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Abstract

Political parties are fundamental institutions to representative democracies, and they have been an integral part of the American political fabric since the early 1800s. Changes in the political landscape have pressed social scientists to engage in a now long-running academic debate as to whether political parties are in a state of reform and adaptation in the modern campaign environment, or if they are in an overall state of decline. While there has been considerable attention given to national and state party organizations, very little is known about how local party organizations are faring in the modern campaign environment. This dissertation examines the state of local political parties in rural communities in Missouri, areas that have become more ideologically polarized in recent election cycles. This study uses a mixed-methods research design; multiple forms of data have been collected from surveys, public documents and archives, personal interviews, and participant-observation. This study seeks to address the questions, are local political parties in rural Missouri in a state of decline? What are the causes of local party decline in rural communities? Is there a relationship between local party strength and electoral outcomes in rural communities? Finally, what are the implications and consequences of local party decline in rural communities? This study finds that in some rural communities, local party organizations have become so inactive as to be functionally non-existent. This dissertation introduces the idea of “party blight” to describe a process of organizational decay in rural communities, and it further details the emergence of “filler organizations” in rural counties where local parties have become latent.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation represents five years of research, field work, and writing, and it is largely motivated by my 15 years of previous professional experience working in political arenas via advocacy organizations and interest groups. The leaders, volunteers, and ordinary people I encountered throughout my career in politics have cumulatively impacted me as a person, and they have further informed my belief that organizations matter. People rely upon organizations to structure the opportunities that allow them to act publicly on their personal and political values. Further, organizations should do more in society than just provide the public with messaging cues or media-driven persuasion campaigns. Organizations, at their best, can bring people and communities together in ways that forge lasting relationships, develop collective identities, and mobilize people in ways that forever impact policy outcomes. Without organizations, people are not likely to come together on their own accord to discuss difficult social or political issues, and they are even less likely to have the ability to channel their beliefs into action in any sort of a meaningful way. Therefore, organizations have a responsibility to prioritize work that builds local relationships, local skillsets, and builds local structures over time. In the modern campaign era, political parties and candidates have become as enamored by technological advances and efficiencies as the rest of us; these new technological strategies, however, have largely replaced strategies that develop local and interpersonal relationships. This dissertation provides some insights into how these shifts in party organizations have impacted rural communities in my home state of Missouri.

There were many people who contributed their time, knowledge, and expertise to the substance of this dissertation. For the purposes of anonymity, individuals will not be named here, though each one deserves my deepest gratitude. Leaders from both the Missouri Democratic Party and the Missouri GOP shared their time with me, and they also helped me to identify other key and local leaders across the state within their networks. Additionally, the staff at the Missouri Rural Crisis Center helped connect me to local leaders in rural counties, and they were absolutely critical to much of the research and findings presented here.

Finally, an enormous amount of gratitude is reserved for my dissertation committee, led by Todd Swanstrom. Professor Swanstrom was always available to answer questions, puzzle through ideas and chapters, and to challenge my thinking in ways that helped develop the findings and theoretical implications of the final dissertation. In addition, Professors David Kimball, Dave Robertson, David Cunningham and Adriano Udani all contributed their time, energy, and substantial knowledge to the development of this dissertation, as well as to my development as an emerging scholar. The level of engagement, guidance, support, and feedback I received from my committee cannot be understated. I can only hope to pay their service forward in future years, and I aspire to be the kind of scholar who also supports his students in the ways that I have been supported in my time at the University of Missouri in St. Louis.

To all of you who have contributed to this dissertation, I thank you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview
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Introduction

Political parties are fundamental to the success of representative democracies, and it is difficult to examine any part of American politics and not also touch upon the roles of these organizations. Parties are a uniquely powerful form of organization in U.S. politics because, as political sociologist Cedric de Leon notes, “...of their control of the system of nominations, elections, and appointments to political office” (2014: 1). In other words, political parties are the only formalized membership organization that can also control state power. Therefore, understanding the changing nature of political parties is important to understanding the changing nature of American society more broadly.

Political parties have changed substantially throughout American history, as Chapter 2 will explain further. Due to legislation that has mitigated the influence of parties, as well as major advances in technology, both the organizational forms and functions of political parties have shifted in some substantial ways over a relatively short period of time. While much scholarly attention has been given to how these changes have affected state and national party structures, less is known about how changes in the political landscape have impacted local party organizations over time. In addition, almost nothing is known about how these changes in party forms and functions have specifically impacted rural communities.

This dissertation addresses some of the questions about local party organizations that are unanswered in party scholarship. Specifically, what is the state of rural local party organizations in the modern campaign era? Compared with earlier decades, are
rural local party organizations in a state of adaptation or decline? If local parties are in a state of decline in rural areas, does this matter? What are some of the electoral and participatory implications of diminished local organizational strength in rural areas? How are local activists and partisans engaging if local party organizations are inactive? This study uses a mixed methods research design to shed light on these questions in a multi-dimensional way.

The findings in this study indicate that local parties are in a state of organizational decline in several rural Missouri counties. The decline is so substantial in some cases that local party organizations appear to be functionally non-existent. Traditionally, party organizations provide some of the only scale-able capacities to recruit candidates, mobilize voters, and to connect candidates with policy platforms that represent collective concerns (Herrnson 2005).

This dissertation will demonstrate that when local party units no longer serve these core functions, an organizational vacuum exists that is often difficult for other institutions to fill in rural communities. This steep and relatively recent organizational decline of local party structures in rural Missouri counties is a concept referred to in this dissertation as “party blight.” This dissertation uses case studies, qualitative research, and survey data to show how this local organizational decline has occurred over time, and that it comes with important repercussions in rural communities.

Contributions

The existing literature provides a solid foundation for how to measure and
operationalize the strength of local parties as well as testable frameworks and theories for why local parties are strong and/or succeed in impacting electoral outcomes. Some contributions that this study will add to the existing literature include: 1) an understanding of how modern campaign environments impact rural political party organizations specifically—their activities, strength, and priorities; 2) an understanding why and how local organizational decline has occurred in rural communities, and 3) an understanding of some of the impacts of and responses to local organizational decline in rural communities. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to contribute to the breadth of scholarship and healthy debate around the fundamental question, “are political parties in a state of decline?” Further, the dissertation will begin to address the question of whether and how party decline impacts political ecosystems more broadly.

This dissertation examines that state of Missouri, because it was until recently a very electorally dynamic state. In 2008, Barack Obama narrowly lost the state by just over 3,000 votes (out of almost two million cast), an outcome that contrasts sharply with Donald Trump’s nearly 19-point victory in the state in 2016. Additionally, Missourians have chosen divided government for most of the state’s recent history—one party has controlled the executive branch while the other controls the legislative branch. In fact, the election of 2016 was the first time that Missourians have elected one-party control of both branches of government since 1964, when Democrats controlled these branches. This substantial and relatively quick shift in voting behavior—particularly in rural communities—has brought forth the most simple yet important question one can hope to answer through research: why? Why have rural Missourians
gone from splitting their ballots to voting single-party and in such wide margins for GOP candidates, all in the past two to three election cycles? Why has Missouri gone from being a hotly contested battleground state to one that now is considered rigidly red?

There are some academic explanations that have been offered for the growing polarization between urban and rural voters, as well as for the increasing alignment between rural voters and the GOP. For instance, in her book *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Katherine Cramer argues that rural voters have become to see themselves as ideologically distinct from a “liberal elite” who control government and whom mostly care about urban centers (2016). Cramer further argues that a sort of collective identity exists in these areas, one that she calls “rural consciousness” (2016: 5). Over time, this rural consciousness has aligned more with political behavior that has favored the GOP.

Through a series of intensive interviews and participant observation with small town residents in rural Wisconsin, Cramer develops a construct to explain that changing rural perspectives are rooted in an underlying feeling of “rural resentment” (2016: 6). This rural resentment is identified by the findings that rural residents feel that they are not getting their fair share of resources compared with big cities, they feel that urban and liberal decision-makers look down upon rural areas, and the feeling that those who do receive a higher proportion of resources were “undeserving” (85). Additionally, Cramer argues, rural residents strongly identify with their sense of place; that rural areas and their way of life is valuable.
Cramer also finds, however, that “...the alliance of Republican and rural is not inevitable” (2016: 14). As one point of evidence, Cramer notes that many of her study’s participants were New Deal Democrats who now vote more consistently for the GOP.

This dissertation does not address the shifting landscape of rural politics from a voter-centered perspective, rather it takes an organizational view of this puzzle. For the purposes of this study, the work of Cramer is helpful in understanding that rural consciousness is a form of collective identity that differs sharply from that of urban or suburban identities. It is also important to remember that this form of consciousness can take on a political identity, but that this identity is not inherently or pre-determined to be aligned with the Republican Party.

While the constructs of rural consciousness and resentment are necessary in thinking about rural voting behavior, Cramer’s study does not delve into the roles of political organizations in the shifting landscape. This is not a critique of Cramer’s work, only an explanation of how this dissertation aims to build on academic understanding of shifting political behavior in rural America.

In an in-depth case study of a small town in Louisiana, Sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild also finds that rural residents have an increasing sense of resentment toward elites in her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*. This resentment, Hochschild contends, extends to the federal government as well; rural residents feel that that the government has abandoned their areas, as evidenced by fewer economic opportunities and increasing poverty rates (2016). Again, this dissertation is limited in its scope of addressing the question of changing political behavior in rural America, and it does not
address the changing identities of rural voters nor their changing political consciousness—though there is much evidence that these factors are very much a part of the landscape.

Both Cramer and Hochschild’s research designs included in-depth interviews, participant-observation, and longitudinal qualitative data collection. In a similar vein, this study uses a mixed-methods approach that also includes interviews and participant-observation as a way of understanding rural America. Like Hochschild and Cramer, this dissertation takes the position that understanding the people in rural communities helps us to better understand their politics. It is difficult—if not impossible—to glean true understanding of how people operate, form relationships, and develop political behaviors from survey instruments or polling data alone. For these reasons, this study is informed by the methodological approaches of Hochschild, Cramer, and other scholars who utilize substantive qualitative data into their research.

There is strong and consistent evidence that rural voters are becoming more aligned with the Republican Party, and rural voters in the South are even more likely to vote for GOP candidates (McKee 2009: 485). Political Scientist Seth McKee uses national exit poll data and census data to examine the importance of location in Presidential voting patterns in the 2000 and 2004 election cycles. McKee finds evidence that rural residence is a strong predictor of GOP voting behavior (2009: 490).

Many of the currently popular hypotheses around the Republican shift in rural America lead back to demographic and geographic assumptions. For instance, Bill Bishop argues in The Big Sort that as Americans gain greater mobility and more freedom
in choosing where to live, people have naturally “sorted” themselves into racially and politically homogenous communities (Bishop, 2008). Additionally, McKee argues, regions like the South have become more politically homogenous, because people are increasingly mobile and choosing where to live based upon political like-mindedness (2009: 490). While Bishop’s and McKee’s research illuminates the growing urban-rural political divide and offers evidence of cross-state sorting and suburban sorting that have made regions more politically consistent, these studies does not go so far as to explain whether rural geographic sorting explains increasing electoral homogeneity within a single state. This study examines more in Chapter 4 the theory of geographic “sorting” (Bishop 2008) as a way of explaining the shifts in rural voting behavior in rural Missouri counties.

There is very little question that there are other variables to consider in explaining rural voting behavior, such as the roles of ideological realignments within parties, religious conservatism, increasing anti-government and anti-immigrant sentiments, among others. One study, unfortunately, cannot hope to accurately operationalize each of these factors nor create a statistical model that can parcel out the causal linkages of each factor into neat percentages that explain exactly how each is connected to the shifting rural political landscape. To that end, this study recognizes that there are larger contributory variables to the equation that are not and cannot be measured in the dissertation. What this study aims to do is to contribute to broader understanding of how and why certain political processes occur.
This dissertation offers an under-studied explanation for the relatively recent shifts in rural voting behavior in Missouri counties, one that looks at the role of local party organizations. Political scientists have shown that in a representative democracy where civic participation is crucial, organizations are critical institutions that bridge gaps between citizens and government (Hatch 2011). Additionally, scholars have found that parties are key organizational drivers of political participation through mobilization (Green and Gerber 2015). To contribute to these debates, this dissertation approaches the political puzzle with a multi-method research design, including surveys of local party leaders, extensive electoral and party data, face-to-face interviews, and participant-observation.

Evidence introduced in this study finds that traditional Democratic Party organizations in many rural Missouri counties are in a state of decline, and some local groups no longer exist or are inactive to the point of invisibility. As a result, fewer elections for state legislature are competitive now than in the 1990s, fewer people are participating in democratic processes such as direct mobilization, and many of the policy priorities engendered by rural Missourians are not represented within the platforms of the state Democratic Party candidates running for office. These findings have important implications for rural communities, where party organizations are historically the only institutions providing consistent, formal structures through which individuals can express their political values.

Local party organizations in rural Missouri over the past 30 years have been impacted by party reforms on both the Republican and Democratic sides of the aisle,
though this shift has unquestionably favored GOP candidates in Missouri. Why this organizational shift has favored the GOP is an important question that still needs more investigation, though some preliminary findings in Chapter 6 provide insights and guidance.

Existing theories in political science that explain rural voting patterns point to ideological realignments within parties over issues such as abortion, guns, and LGBTQ rights, and these arguments likely do hold to some degree in Missouri. However, the rural shift to unitary GOP-aligned voting behavior has occurred incrementally and over an extended period (1990-2016) in many Missouri counties, therefore it cannot be directly timed with nationally-recognized cultural shifts within parties (which mostly occurred from the 1960s through the 1980s). Some theories, such as ideological realignment and geographic sorting, have merit and are very likely a part of the explanation for rural voting shifts in Missouri. This dissertation argues, however, that these broad factors alone are not enough to explain how and why rural Missourians have shifted from ballot-splitting to consistently GOP voting patterns in the past two to three Presidential election cycles.

There is room in Missouri for an organizational explanation for shifts in rural voting patterns, which is the primary focus of this dissertation. Interviews and participant-observation have supported this organizational hypothesis in many cases, and they have also illuminated a fragmented network of progressive “filler” organizations and revived local Democratic Party clubs that have sprung up in rural counties since the 2016 election cycle. In most cases, these clubs and filler organizations

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have been established due to an organizational gap not filled by traditional local party organizations. While these groups are often vigorous in their efforts, they also tend to be under-resourced and bound in their capacities to fulfill many electoral functions. Without the support of a party network, rural groups are limited in their capacities to recruit candidates, engage voters, and connect with other groups like theirs across the state.

**Why It Matters**

Ultimately, understanding the realignment puzzle in rural Missouri matters, because if supported, the hypothesis proposed here will offer an organizational root to the major shifts in voting behavior that have occurred in rural Missouri, and thus an organizational solution (or at least understanding) around these shifts. The findings here may be relevant to other states’ rural realignments as well.

Political Scientists and Sociologists have written about the breakdown of civic associations in American democracy, and how these breakdowns have caused noticeable repercussions. In his famous book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert D. Putnam uses extensive data to show that individuals were far less likely to join a civic or social organization in the 1980s and 1990s than they were in earlier decades. Putnam attributes this decline in organizational membership to a number of systemic and individual factors, such as advancing technology that has made people less reliant on one another, sprawl and geographic disconnectedness, as well as increased pressures on the time and money demands of individuals (2000). The
processes of building “social capital” through these organizational spaces has declined substantially, and this decline has impacted communities more broadly.

Theda Skocpol notes similar themes in her book, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. Where Putnam focuses on specific membership organizations and the individuals who are or are not joining these groups, Skocpol takes a more systematic approach to measuring the decline of civic associations. In addition to the technology and individual factors that cause people to be less likely to join organizations, Skocpol argues that membership organizations have adopted new priorities and strategies that are as much about their survival and economic success as they are about the democratic principles for which they advocate (2003). Putnam and Skocpol are among several scholars who point to the changing roles of civic organizations and society, as well as the changing perspectives of the public about these associations. These findings are important and helpful as this dissertation embarks upon a study of local political party organizations in rural Missouri.

This project does not aim to counter or to refute existing theories about rural shifts in voting behavior, rather it argues that while some demographic and attitudinal criteria may be necessary components of understanding Republican realignment in rural areas, they are not sufficient to explain the dramatic electoral shift that has occurred in some rural Missouri counties over a relatively short span of time. Some Missouri counties may have shifted demographically, however these shifts are arguably not substantive enough to warrant a greater partisan shift in that county’s voting behavior.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

The goal of this project is to test the hypothesis that there is an organizational explanation for why rural Missouri has realigned toward the Republican Party. In other words, local party structures have impacted electoral outcomes; Democratic committees have gotten weaker, and Republican committees have grown stronger (or have at least maintained their capacities) in rural counties in Missouri. A secondary hypothesis that will be tested as well, is whether state and national Democratic party structures have also under-resourced local party structures in rural Missouri over time. A finding of weakened party structures would diminish the local Democratic parties’ capacity to both recruit candidates for office and to mobilize voters; perhaps these activities have declined so substantially that elections in these counties are no longer competitive, and thus voters are no longer splitting their ballots. It is also possible that local churches have taken on many of the voter registration and mobilization roles that local party structures once held, which would theoretically also benefit Republican candidates.

Layout of the Dissertation

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides the reader with an overview of some of the classical and modern scholarship around political parties in American democracy. This chapter focuses primarily on the debate around whether political parties in the modern era are in a state of “decline” or “resurgence.” Additionally, Chapter 2 establishes that the core functions of traditional party organizations are to
recruit candidates for office and to mobilize voters to participate in elections and political processes more broadly.

Building upon the substance of Chapter 2, Chapter 3 of this dissertation takes a closer look at the existing literature on local political parties. This chapter homes in on the importance of local party organizations in the overall party system, and it also reviews previous studies that analyze the strength and activities of local party units.

Chapter 4 of the dissertation explores Missouri’s dynamic electoral history, and it explains why Missouri is an interesting and important state in which to study local party organizational dynamics over time. Chapter 5 explains the data used in this study, and it lays out results and findings of the data analysis. The final substantive chapter, Chapter 6, proposes a new concept for the noticeable shifts in party organization over time; the concept is referred to as “party blight.” Additionally, Chapter 6 illuminates the electoral, participatory, and representative implications of this rural party blight, as well as analyzes data on the presence of “filler organizations” in many rural Missouri counties. Filler organizations are those groups that have arisen in an attempt to fill a void left in their counties by local party organizations. These organizations, however, cannot fulfill all of the functions of traditional party organizations.

Overall, this dissertation addresses recurring and fundamental debates in the field of political science, such as, do political parties matter? Are American political parties currently in a state of strength or decline? Have civic associations broken down in local communities? If so, what are the consequences of these organizational breakdowns? The following pages are presented with these questions in mind.
Chapter 2: The Changing Functions of Political Parties
The Importance of Political Parties

This chapter reviews key scholarship on American political parties to set the foundation for the rest of the dissertation. One chapter cannot cover all of the expansive literature that addresses political parties in academic scholarship, and this section reviews some of the key changes parties have undergone since their inception in American politics. Most importantly, parties have shifted from focusing on local organizational structures to becoming more nationalized, campaigning has shifted from being party-centered to candidate-centered, and party mobilization strategies have moved away from face-to-face tactics that engage local party organizations. Ultimately, this chapter shows that political parties are still important institutions in American politics, and that their focus has shifted from local organizational units to the national party network.

Sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan contend that the ability of any nation to manage “conflict within consensus” is key to a stable democracy. Lipset and Rokkan also argue that political parties provide formal channels for this conflict and dissent through elections, which legitimize the state and allow people to accept defeat: “[t]he function of political parties [Lipset] held, was to provide an avenue through which the conflicts between a community’s primary social groups could be expressed but contained, such that electoral defeat could be tolerated and the authority of the state could remain legitimate” (de Leon 2014: 23). As de Leon argues, political parties “...justify and manage dissent in such a way as to avoid the appearance of treason, on
the one hand, and to prevent differences of opinion from evolving into unprincipled opposition, or worse still, civil war and revolution, on the other” (2014: 8).

Classic political science literature also points to this important function of political parties in American democracy. The first political parties were established within Congress to give voice to the dissenters of Presidential policy agendas; the alternative would have meant the dissolution of early American government. As V.O. Key writes:

Into [Jefferson’s] Republican party flowed all the discontents that might otherwise have found expression in revolutionary strife or insurrection. By the channeling and the organization of these forces into a political party, change ‘became possible without destruction’ [Henry Jones Ford] (1942, 1964: 204).

Thus, political parties help to establish a healthy representative democracy, because of their capacity to absorb, channel, and organize political opposition and public dissent into actions that could otherwise spiral into revolution.

As parties evolved from their upstart beginnings, Key further notes that their “operations provided a substitute for revolt and insurrection and a new means for determining succession to authority” (1942, 1964: 205). V.O. Key further argues that through stabilizing political and democratic processes, parties have also stabilized American society:

As party practices took root, party conflict became institutionalized: that is,
generally accepted patterns of organization, of behavior, and of action developed. By the groping and halting processes by which human organization evolves, new habitual ways of governing came into being. Those new methods implemented the idea of popular government; they provided a means for obtaining popular consent in keeping with democratic ideologies...[t]he institutionalization of party warfare marked a major innovation—or invention—in the art of government (Key 1942, 1964: 205).

In sum, healthy parties are integral to a healthy representative democratic system, because they “...work to enable the smooth operation of democracy in the face of potentially divisive contrasts” (de Leon: 121). The primary finding of this paper is that local Democratic party organizations in many rural counties may no longer exist. This result begs the question, if parties no longer exist as organizations, how is public discontent absorbed, organized, and channeled locally in rural communities in their absence?

In sum, political parties are organizations that are critical to the success of representative democracies. They provide channels for the expression and absorption of political opposition, they legitimize elections, and as a result healthy political parties are integral to healthy democracies.
Chapter 3: Local Parties Matter

Identifying Political Party Organizations

Political parties were not formally written into the U.S. Constitution, and as a result most policies that address party organizations have been left up to the states. While many states, including Missouri, have passed laws that formalize the procedures and practices of party organizations within their state borders, party organization can take different forms at the local level. For instance, in Missouri political parties hold internal conventions to select committee members to represent their respective platforms in each county; these positions and elections are tightly regulated through Missouri statute (RSMO 115). In addition to the structures laid out in Missouri law, many rural counties have established parallel party “club” organizations that operate in more informal ways within counties. These party clubs are often the places where rank-and-file party members socialize, raise money for candidates and activities, create visibility opportunities through booths and parades, and mobilize voters through direct contact in election cycles. This study finds evidence that neither the Democratic Party committees nor the party clubs have been active in many rural Missouri communities in recent election cycles.

From a theoretical perspective, scholars have different perspectives on what constitutes the ideal form of party organization. E.E. Schattschneider proposed that the ideal party organization is one that is highly engaged with the electorate in and between election cycles, one that works to expand political participation across diverse constituencies, and one that offers real, substantive choices to citizens through candidates and policy platforms (1942). Schattschneider famously argued that parties

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have *created* democracy through their existence: “...the political parties created
democracy and the modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties”
(1942: 1). Schattschneider (and many other scholars in this tradition) have argued that
in addition to recruiting and supporting candidates, parties should act as repositories for
dissent and action, as mobilizers that seek to expand participation, and as
intermediaries for a diverse collection of interests that represent the complexities of the
electorate (1942). This tradition is considered the “pluralist” view of parties.

Other scholars, such as Joseph Schlesinger, take a more minimalist approach
when defining political parties and their role in America democracy. Schlesinger argues
that the most important way to determine whether a party structure exists is simply
whether the party recruits and fields candidates for office (1985: 1154). By this
definition, parties need only be active in election cycles, and they are largely—if not
only—vehicles for candidate recruitment.

Schlesinger also offers a testable—and memorable—criterion upon which to
assess parties’ functions and strength, stating that “[t]he basic unit of the party is the
nucleus, which consists of the collective efforts to capture a single office (Schlesinger
1985: 1160). In examining local party units, particularly in rural areas, both of these
definitions can help to identify the core functions of party leaders and members. This
dissertation adopts the argument that parties are at their best when they do more than
just recruit candidates; parties also play important social and representative roles in
communities. Some important findings in this study show evidence that local party
organizations in rural Missouri communities do not exist by either of the definitions

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offered by either Schattschneider or Schlesinger. This organizational absence has implications at the local level, particularly in rural communities.

While the literature offers opposing definitions of the ideal party structure, scholars do largely agree on several of the core functions of parties in the American political process. Parties perform vital functions in democratic processes; they provide shortcuts for voters in developing vote choices and policy positions, they aggregate citizens’ collective interests, they build policy coalitions in campaigns and government, recruit candidates, and they actively mobilize their constituencies to vote and participate in the political process (Hershey 2015: 9; Aldrich 1995: 3; Stonecash 2010: 4; Key 1942, 1975).

Sociologists Lipset and Rokkan describe the buckets of functions as “expressive,” “instrumental,” and “representative” in nature. With their expressive functions, parties “develop a rhetoric for the translation of contrasts in the social and the cultural structure into demands and pressures for action or inaction” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967:5). Through parties’ instrumental and representative functions, “…they force the spokesmen for the many contrasting interests and outlooks to strike bargains, stagger demands, and to aggregate pressures” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967:5). This study finds that without formal party organizations in rural communities, partisans in these areas are often disconnected from and left out of these core party functions defined by Lipset and Rokkan.

In describing the functions of political parties in the United States, political science scholars have largely accepted V.O. Key’s (1942, 1964) “tripod” or “trinity” typology of the (1) party-in-the electorate, (2) party-in-government, and (3) party-as-
organization. The party-in-the-electorate leg is defined as the identification of voters with a party, as well as the intensity of this partisan attachment. Party identification has long been thought to be a durable predictor in voters’ preferences for candidates and public policies. Political parties shape how individuals interpret political events. These partisan attachments are the result of deep beliefs on issues and a socialization from family and other social circles—a person’s partisan identity is slow to change (Bartels 2000; Campbell et al. 1960: 120; and many other scholars). The party-in-government bucket of functions refers to the role of parties in the policymaking arena; once candidates are elected it is the party’s responsibility to then create and maintain successful coalitions that result in positive policy outcomes.

Finally, the party-as-organization category of activities defines the ability of the party to sustain itself structurally; this means physically, financially, and as a relevant and effective mobilizer of people and other resources in and between elections. John P. Frendreis, James L. Gibson, and Laura L. Vertz (1990) argue that all functions of political parties are ultimately rooted in their ability to be successful as parties-as-organization; without this leg, the other legs of the party tripod cannot be realized. [Footnote: Further, Daniel Shea argues for adding a fourth leg to Key’s original tripod model, a “party-in-campaigns” bucket to capture the unique ways in which parties affect and interact with candidates and voters in electoral campaigns in the modern political era. This leg is necessary Shea argues, because “[a]lthough parties may be losing voters [and members], they are making up for that loss by providing new and expanded services to
candidates” (White and Shea 2004: 124).] This dissertation is primarily focused on the party-as-organization category of party functions.

Political science scholarship demonstrates that the primary technical functions of political parties are that of candidate recruitment and support, as well as voter mobilization (Herrnson 2005). Political parties have traditionally borne almost sole responsibility for recruiting candidates to run for political office at all levels. Further, parties support candidates through fundraising, voter contact, advertising, and electoral mobilization. This paper explores the levels at which local parties are fulfilling these core organizational roles in rural Missouri in the modern campaign era.

**Candidate Recruitment**

Political parties have traditionally borne almost sole responsibility for recruiting candidates to run for political office at all levels. Further, parties have traditionally supported candidates through fundraising, voter contact, advertising, and electoral mobilization. Also notable is that local party committees are historically the only unit of the party system that is actively engaged in doing candidate recruitment for local offices (which very often leads to higher office-seeking), and the unit of the party most likely to do face-to-face voter contact and mobilization (Burbank et al. 2008: 38; Epstein 1986: 134). A substantial amount of literature provides evidence that active candidate recruitment for local races is how many citizens enter political office for the first time (Crowder-Meyer 2011, 120). Additionally, people who run for local office are often more diverse than candidates for higher office, and successful local candidates tend to
Chapter 3: Local Parties Matter

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seek higher offices later in their careers (Crowder-Meyer in State of the Parties 6th ed., 120). This study finds that local political party organizations have not been carrying out candidate recruitment in many rural Missouri communities across the past several election cycles.

Mobilization

A substantial amount of academic evidence shows that direct voter mobilization, particularly face-to-face contact, can make an enormous difference in political participation, as measured by voter registration and turnout (Gerber & Green 2015). A piece of this review is devoted to examining some of the key findings in political mobilization literature because, as Rosenstone and Hansen put it, “the essential feature of electoral politics is, in short, electoral mobilization” (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003: 161). Additionally, direct mobilization has historically been the function of the local party committees in the American political party system (Burbank et al. 2008: 38; Epstein 1986: 134). Thus, understanding how mobilization priorities have shifted within parties is key to understanding how local parties have changed over time in rural Missouri counties.

Some scholars use terms such as “old-fashioned,” “unsophisticated,” and “mom-and-pop” to describe grassroots direct mobilization strategies, which are the kinds of activities that connect local party members with voters in campaign settings (Burbank, Hrebenar, and Benedict 2008: 128; White and Shea 2003: 217; Rosenstone and Hansen). These scholars suggest that face-to-face and other forms of direct mobilization tactics...
are *ineffective* techniques in the modern campaign environment. These direct contact voter mobilization tactics, however, are well-supported by evidence (Gerber and Green 2004).

Rosenstone and Hansen were able to isolate the effects of party mobilization in voter turnout in their mobilization research, and they found that “[t]he political parties’ efforts to mobilize have considerable effect. When parties make the effort, the people they contact are far more likely to participate in electoral politics than the people they pass over [almost 8% more likely to vote in presidential and over 10% more likely in midterm elections]” (2003: 170).

However, Rosentstone and Hansen also find that:

...partisan mobilization [has] declined. Political parties and campaign organizations increased their efforts to contact people in the 1960s, never failing to mobilize less than a quarter of the American electorate directly. As campaigns abandoned the labor-intensive canvassing methods of the 1960s for the money-intensive media strategies of the 1980s, they contacted fewer and fewer Americans (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003: 215, 217).

Studies also show that parties are doing less and less direct mobilization with each election cycle:

In 1956, the political parties contacted about 17 percent of the electorate during the presidential election campaign...Party mobilization [in presidential elections] reached its peak in 1972 when 29 percent of the
electorate reported contact with a political party. Thereafter, mobilization dipped, with the parties reaching just 24 percent of the electorate during the 1988 presidential election campaign (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003: 162).

There are studies that demonstrate that voter mobilization activities have been on the rise again since 2000. For instance, political scientists Douglas Roscoe and Shannon Jenkins determined through a series of national surveys of local party leaders that direct mobilization activities were increasing in the 2000s (Roscoe and Jenkins 2014). Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld also find evidence that political parties are expending more resources and labor toward direct voter contact activities. What all of these authors also find, however, is that these mobilization activities are largely being carried out by paid consultants and operatives, and without engaging local party leaders or volunteers. This fact leads Schlozman and Rosenfeld to contend that parties have become “hollow” structures that do not build organizational depth at the local level (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2017).

Evidence in this study also finds that direct mobilization activities that engage local party organizations have decreased or gone away entirely in rural Missouri counties over several election cycles. If parties are the most important mobilizers in the political community (and many scholars argue this), then what happens if these organizations are no longer focused on mobilization? What are the implications for voter turnout and political participation for these local communities?
Mobilization through direct voter contact and candidate recruitment have traditionally been core party functions. In the modern campaign era, however, direct voter contact has been replaced by more media and technology-centric tactics (Nimmo 1970; Frantaich 1989; Shea 2013). In addition, when direct voter contact strategies are implemented in modern campaigns, they are often done so on the part of candidate-based campaigns, who are more likely to hire outsiders to do the direct voter contact work (Corrado 1994). As this study will demonstrate, this marked shift in mobilization strategies has uniquely impacted the roles and structures of local party organizations, particularly in rural communities.

**Intra-Organizational Cohesion**

This study features one of the particularly emblematic components of the political party system in the United States: federalism. In this federalized system, party organizations are broken down into three separate national, state, and local units, just like American government is federalized. Joseph Schlesinger argues that these party units are naturally disaggregated at the local, state and national levels, unless these units are intentionally brought together through organization. Schlesinger envisions a single candidate and his or her campaign as one “nucleus” of a party; it is the connecting of these nuclei that create party organizations. Schlesinger writes:

> [t]he central problem then for the theory of party is explaining why and where party nuclei will emerge and how they will link up with other to create multinuclear parties” (Schlesinger 1985: 1153) ...The ‘distribution’
of party nuclei reflects first of all the existence of office worth organizing to capture...[p]arty nuclei will emerge in those constituencies where the party has some short or long-run chance of winning the office (Schlesinger 1985: 1154)....The simplest test for the distribution of party nuclei is whether or not a party fields candidates for elective office” (Schlesinger 1985: 1160).

Cedric de Leon also contends that party structures must actively work to cohere their organizational networks and to build their bases of support. This process of party linkage is something de Leon describes as “political articulation.” Political articulation is defined as “...the process by which parties ‘suture’ together coherent blocs and cleavages from a disparate set of constituencies and individuals, who, even by virtue of sharing circumstances, may not necessarily share the same political identity” [italics original] (de Leon 2015: 2). Some of these tools or articulation include rhetoric, public policy, electoral mobilization, and the recruitment of individuals and other organizations (de Leon 2015: 4).

A process of “disarticulation” can also occur, however, “…when there is a deterioration in the ideological linkages between parties and their social base...” (de Leon 2015:3). By not actively utilizing the tools of articulation, however, de Leon argues that political parties risk their very survival: “…[T]he strength of both [organizations and individual members] paradoxically depends on articulation (hence, [organizations] avoid the game of articulation only at their own peril)” (de Leon 2015: 28). Because understanding the articulation and integration of party organizations across different

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federalized units is important to understanding the overall strength of party organizations, this paper examines the levels of coordination between state and local party organizational units of the Missouri Democratic Party over time. Overall, this paper finds evidence that coordination between state and local units of the Democratic party has diminished substantially in rural Missouri counties.

**Decline of Party Organization**

This study addresses an important line of debate around political parties in the United States: are American political parties in a state a of decline or resurgence in the modern campaign era? The Postparty period, lasting from the 1940s to present day, is characterized as being a “service-oriented” model, meaning parties provide specific services to candidates rather than serving the public or electorate. In other words, parties have shifted from activating and responding to the electorate to responding to candidates’ individual campaign needs.

Most often, rather than being run by party leaders or officials, candidate campaigns in the Postparty Era are run by individual consultants who may have little to no contact with the party organization, and almost never coordinate between themselves. As Anthony Corrado states, “...campaign operatives and political consultants have usurped many of the functions formerly carried out by party officials” (Corrado 1994: 72). The service-driven model of campaigning means that campaigns are developed that are specific to candidates and localities, however they do not build organizations or relationships with the community outside of these campaigns. These
changes in how campaigns operate have shifted the roles of party organizations in noticeable ways, however the implications of these changes on parties is not entirely clear. This fact leads John Coleman to argue that, “[t]he emerging [in 1994] “truncated” or service-provider model of the party teaches us about changes in modern campaigning, but not about the broader place of party in American politics” (Coleman in State of the Parties 1st ed., 315).

Evidence shows that political parties at national and state levels have increased their budgets, their staffing, and their professionalization over time (Coleman 1994: 311; Frendreis et al. 1996). Yet local parties are structurally weaker now than in the 1980s (Crowder-Meyer 2008), voter turnout declined with each election cycle [until 2018] (White and Shea 2004: 122), and more voters have de-aligned from political parties and partisan affiliation than at any other point in history (Zajnal and Lee 2011). This contradiction leaves scholars locked in a debate even to this day as to whether parties are adjusting to modern times and are still impactful within electoral arenas, or if they have weakened, becoming just one or two voices that voters hear amid a cacophony of other interest groups—and individual campaign organizations to boot.

This debate was amplified by political scientists in the middle of the 20th century. From the early 1900s through the 1940s, a rising trend of nonpartisanship among the electorate shaped the two major party platforms to be so similar that they were indistinct from one another (Herrnson 2005: 23). Because of the lack of difference between the parties’ policy preferences and engagement strategies, voter turnout declined, and many political scientists proclaimed that the United States was in danger
of becoming a one-party system (Schattschneider 1964). This flattening of political activity and, what some scholars believed, political choice, was so pronounced that in 1950, the American Political Science Association (APSA) published a report titled “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System.” This now-infamous report called upon parties to amplify the differences between their policy positions and priorities, to be more active in engaging and informing the electorate, to make their elections and campaigns more competitive, and to be more representative of distinct policy coalitions and constituencies. The APSA report also recommended that parties become more professionalized and consistently-staffed in their roles in, and in between, campaigns (APSA, Toward A More Responsible Two-Party System 1950). In Schattschneider’s ideal version of party, as with the APSA “responsible party” model, successful parties measure their success more by building an organization that represents diverse interests and mobilizes an active, engaged, informed electorate, than by simply winning elections.

Additionally, since the 1980s, a series of reforms in campaign finance laws have weakened party organizations and have caused organizational competition between political parties and other interest groups, and they have propelled rise of candidate-centered campaign organizations. Additionally, there has been an increasing nationalization of political party resources, and an onset of funding-competitive campaign committees, PACs, and other campaign organizations that run their own candidates independent of party organizations. Additionally, the “big business” model of campaigning taken on by party organizations (and one that will be discussed later in...
this chapter) has displaced parties’ traditional organizing tactics, replacing them with media and mailing strategies. These changing tactics are signs of a decline in political parties, some scholars argue. As Corrado notes,

...presidential elections have become candidate-based contests in which contenders, relying on their own organizations and fundraising abilities, attempt to mobilize issue activists and other constituencies behind their individual candidacies (Corrado 1992: 61).

In 1985, Schlesinger contradicted the APSA (and Crotty, Wattenberg, and others) argument that parties were declining due to nonpartisanship and other factors. Instead, Schlesinger argued that parties were instead more competitive because of the electorate’s greater propensity to split their tickets; this behavior made more elections up for grabs, thus parties were more competitive with one another. Other scholars have also agreed with the position that parties were in a state of “resurgence” rather than decline, based upon such factors as policymaking success of parties (Fiorina 2002: 93; Bibby 2003: 19-46).

Other political scientists also disagree with party-decline proponents, arguing that political parties have changed tactics, but that they are simply adapting well to the new candidate-centered campaign model by becoming more service-oriented institutions (Herrnson 2005: 29). While scholars agree that on the trend in increasing service-provision roles and technological innovations within parties, this shift has replaced more traditional methods of campaigning, they disagree as to whether this tactical shift is a positive or negative one for the party system.
As White and Shea note:

During most of the life of the parties, communication between politicians and citizens was either through word-of-mouth or in the local newspapers. With their legions of volunteers, parties were well suited to carry out this vital communications function. In the Information Age, television remains the principal intermediary between the governed and the governors. If parties have abandoned their labor-intensive activities for a thirty-second television advertisement, is that evidence of decline or simply smart thinking? Is it reasonable to expect voters to form personal allegiances to parties when they are inundated with appeals from hundreds of interest groups?” (White and Shea 2004: 124)

Additionally, Schlesinger argued that the growing nonpartisanship and split-ticket voting behaviors of the electorate caused political parties to become more competitive, leading him to declare that parties were strong: “Thanks to increasing levels of competition between the parties, then, American political parties are stronger than before” (Schlesinger 1985: 1168). Notably, split-ticket voting has decreased since 1985, perhaps an indication that parties have become weaker since then (Burden and Kimball 2004: 66).

Even if one agrees that parties have been more resurgent than in decline over recent decades, distribution of the effects could also be uneven and may not have reached the level of local parties. As Shea observes:
...the focus of rejuvenation has been primarily at the national and state levels. As the party system moved from local structures, [voters] conceivably found less of a connection to the entire electoral system (Shea in State of the Parties 6th ed., 140).

There has been very little study of the impacts of the modern campaign era on local party organizations, and no known study that has examined rural political party organizations. This dissertation provides qualitative and quantitative evidence that local party organizations have been negatively impacted by these changes in party functions, and that these impacts have important consequences for rural communities.

**Current Party Scholarship**

An emergent contribution to party scholarship, known as the “UCLA School” or Theory of parties, argues that national political parties have become a network of interest groups and individuals whom they call “intense policy demanders” (Bawn et. al 2012; Masket 2016). These policy demanders, scholars argue, have taken command of party networks as “anti-party” reforms have taken hold. The power of the policy demanders comes from their ability to do two core things: 1) Form effective coalitions with one another, 2) Recruit and support candidates for office. These policy demanders have been able to keep the party structure alive in many cases, creating organizations that might not otherwise exist in the party-reformed era.

This new makeup of party leadership, however, is not always representative of moderate voters’ concerns due to the ideological makeup of the new party coalitions (Bawn et. al 2012; Masket 2016). These studies focus on national networks of political
parties, observing that activists and interest groups now play roles that were once traditionally held by party elites and professionals. In theory, this model creates a pluralistic landscape in which any organized interest can hold a seat at the proverbial table and have somewhat equal opportunity to influence party decisions.

This paper finds that the UCLA model holds up in some ways in rural Missouri counties, however, the model does break down at the local level in some other ways. Bawn and Masket find that statewide networks of party organizations are comprised of and in close collaboration with interest groups. This study finds, however, that emergent interest groups and party organizations are physically and ideologically disconnected from each other in many rural communities.

The UCLA Theory examines national party networks, and this study embarks upon studying local party organizations. An additional question worth further study is whether the Missouri Democratic Party more closely resembles the national or local model of party leadership. Additionally, if statewide party organizations are made up of intense policy demanders, these demanders are not including statewide progressive organizations that represent rural issues. This study does find evidence to support the scholars’ claim that many rank-and-file or moderate voters feel unrepresented by traditional party organizations, and that they feel that the policy priorities of these organizations have become ideologically more extreme. This evidence is discussed in more detail in later chapters.
There is no question, however, that parties have changed dynamically over time in substantial ways. The next section will lay out three ways in which parties have shifted, and the impacts these shifts have had on local party organizations.

**1) From Localized to Nationalized**

Political parties at national and state levels increased their budgets, staffing, and their overall professionalization in the 1980s (Coleman 1994: 311; Frendreis et al. 1996). Local parties were believed to be structurally strong in 1980 as well (Cotter et al. 1984). From the 1980s on, however, local parties and candidates have been de-prioritized within the party system. Many of the functions of parties at the local level have been replaced by consultants and technology (Crowder-Meyer 2008; White and Shea 2004) or have been abandoned altogether.

In the 1970s, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act was passed by Congress, prohibiting the transfer of “soft money” contributions between national and state parties. This law meant that national parties could no longer donate staff, technology, office space or other key resources “in-kind” to state parties; all contributions had to be made in hard dollars (Herrnson 2005: 30; Cohen et al. 2008: 47). This shift in resource allocation protocol caused parties to adjust, and they did so by creating a series of “campaign committees,” which centralized funding for campaigns at the state and national levels, and also generally placed these resources outside of party structures (Dwyre et al. 2007).

Campaign committees at both the national and state levels have taken over party officials’ historic roles in many ways (Herrnson 1994: 85; Shea, 1994, 220).
Therefore, as monetary streams and other resources began to shift to national party structures in the 1980s, strategic decisions also shifted to national party structures. Lawson, Pomper and Moakley argue:

[A] consequence [of the BCRA] has been the development of the national parties as efficient electoral managers. First the Republican, and now the Democratic, national committees have become deeply involved in campaigns for the Senate, House, governors, and even state legislative seats. They not only raise considerable funds, but get down to such electoral activities as setting strategy, polling, developing issues, registration, getting out the vote, and even selection of candidates (Kayden and Mahe, 1985). This development will probably increase the stress on electoral activities that we have already found in the local party organizations. Yet, it also raises a question about the survival of these organizations (369).

(2) From Party-Centered to Candidate-Centered Campaigning

Political parties have moved away from being a central, critical component to winning elections in the modern campaign era; campaigns have become “candidate-centered” (Herrnson 2005: 30; Maisel 2007, 2016: 43; Hershey 2007; Nimmo 1985). Part of the reason for candidate-centered campaigning lies in the weakening of party influence through legislation in the 1960s and 1970s that limited parties’ ability to control nominations and funding streams. Advances in technology also now allow
candidates to connect directly with the public, and to perform such necessary functions as fundraising and mobilization, without the party organization as an intermediary (Sibley in The Parties Respond 2002: 13; Burbank, Hrebenar, and Benedict 2008: 129).

As Corrado notes, “...presidential elections have become candidate-based contests in which contenders, relying on their own organizations and fundraising abilities, attempt to mobilize issue activists and other constituencies behind their individual candidacies” (Corrado 1984: 61).

Most campaigns today are run by independent consultants, who work largely out of coordination with one another. [Footnote: Richard K. Scher, however, argues that even in this modern environment, there is still room for coordination (i.e. still room for party structures) around the “axioms of campaigns;” the common “hurdles” all candidates and campaigns must overcome to be successful (Scher 2016: 19).]

One study found in the 1970s that “more than two-thirds of campaign managers had a background in public relations, advertising, journalism or media, and only 11 percent came from a traditional political party or campaign staff position” (Burbank, Hrebenar, and Benedict 2008: 139). This displacement of party leadership in electoral campaigns matters to local party committees, because and independent consultants have very different priorities in a campaign environment than do party leaders:

The professional campaign manager of today differs from past managers...The traditional campaign manager, who had many years of experience, relied heavily on the organization and the skills of [local] party workers for the traditional vote-getting procedures—knocking on
doors, canvassing, and personal voter contact in the precincts. The professional, however, however, operates largely from an established, private, profit-making firm that is relatively independent of the political party...[t]he professional is well-versed in marketing, public relations, and communications rather than door-knocking... (Burbank, Hrebenar, and Benedict 2008: 139).

(3) *Mobilizing to Selectively Targeting Participants*

Perhaps one of the most important changes in the modern campaign era is that political parties have shifted their fundamental mobilization tactics from trying to expand their electoral coalitions to trying to narrow them. Quickly advancing technology and polling instruments have been key factors in these changing mobilization strategies of political parties. The technologies of texts, emails, Internet and social media allow parties to communicate with carefully constructed niche audiences (Shea, Strachan and Wolf in The Parties Respond 2013: 103; Frantaich 1989: 266).

Since the onset of televised political ads in the 1960s (Nimmo 1970; Frantaich 1989), political parties have gradually shifted their techniques to media rather than toward relationship-building and direct voter contact at the local level. Parties now rely heavily on tactics such as direct mail, advertising, and social media to contact potential voters, and spend much time and resources on crafting their “messages.” Additionally, parties have increasingly relied upon and spent copious amounts of money on public opinion polling. While polls do help parties hone their messages to specific audiences,
studies also show that parties are just as often taking audiences out of their communication loops. In other words, more and more, parties are choosing whom to engage through polling, and perhaps more importantly, whom not to engage—hence, the de-mobilizing effect (Shea, Strachan and Wolf in The Parties Respond 2013: 112).

In Shea et al.’s words: “[The modern campaign era has] discouraged political parties from expending resources to bring new voters into the political fold. Innovations in both communication technology and means of voter research continued to evolve, allowing candidates to move from broadcasting to narrowcasting their messages” (Shea, Strachan and Wolf in The Parties Respond 2013: 112). Shea et al. argue that while political parties have grown in professionalization, staffing and budgets over time, most of “...this money was spent to further refine the ability to engage in the selective mobilization of the electorate” (Shea, Strachan and Wolf in The Parties Respond 2013: 113, italics added).

Shea et al. are referring in part to a popular narrowcasting innovation in the modern campaign era, the practice of microtargeting. Microtargeting is a practice wherein campaign professionals gain access to vast amounts of consumer information about voters, and then carefully choose their universes and audiences, constructing messages that most appeal to specific niches of the electorate. The ultimate concern with practices such as microtargeting is that, “[w]hile data mining can be used to identify people who are not active in politics, the software can be used to depress turnout as well. Because the costs of campaigning are so high, the party may engage in what Philip Howard (2006) calls ‘political redlining’” (Burbank, Hrebenar, and Benedict...
In other words, in modern campaigns parties can (and do) actively choose who participates and who does not participate in campaigns and elections. Often, parties prioritize mobilizing people who already participate at high levels, and this strategy can create a mobilization bias toward those who are white, well-educated, and have middle to upper-middle class incomes. Thus, when party leaders win elections, they feel most beholden to these participants, and they move farther away from representing centrist, minority, or other under-represented interests. As Danial Shea notes, “[t]he overall reconfiguration of party activities has shifted party concerns away from greater links with the electorate to greater help to candidates, and as a result much of what parties now do turns off voters to the political process” (Shea Strong Parties and Alienated Voters in State of the Parties 2nd ed.: 296).

John Coleman summarizes research by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 162-77), who “…attribute the bulk of the decline in turnout since the early 1960s to decreasing efforts to mobilize voters by various organizations, including most prominently the political parties. One explanation is that the parties have chosen to de-emphasize labor-intensive mobilization in the new capital-and-technology-intensive electoral system” (Coleman 1996: 361).

Local party structures and local party members are not able to compete with the broad array of services and consultants provided by state parties, national parties, or any of the respective new campaign committees. At the same time, national and state
structures in the modern party system is neglecting and under-resourcing local party structures:

Political party operatives [at the local level] quickly realized that these new technologies were making them irrelevant. Yet instead of sharpening their relationship with the voters, the parties chose to expand the very types of services that allowed candidates to ignore large portions of the electorate (Shea, Strachan and Wolf in The Parties Respond 2013: 113).

The Electoral College system has compounded the resource-distribution problem, in that the national parties also only tend to focus resources in a handful of states—and only a few areas within those states—in Presidential election cycles; this means that local parties get very little if any financial or labor support on a regular basis (Shea 2004). Findings in this paper show that many rural party organizations in Missouri have not had a consistent relationship with their state or national party organizations in over a decade.

If direct mobilization that leads to citizen participation is the key to electoral success and democratic health, then why are parties abandoning these tactics? A large part of the answer is that parties find direct voter contact work to be incredibly costly and labor-intensive. Additionally, technological advances have made mass communication easier to use, cheaper, and more exciting to young (and old) campaign staffers.

As parties have become more professional and candidate-oriented, they have also looked for ways to make their efforts more efficient and cost-effective. This is one
reason why microtargeting and other de-mobilization practices, as well as media-heavy strategies, have overtaken direct voter contact strategies at all levels of the party system:

The goal of political parties is to win enough votes to elect their candidates to office. Mobilization efforts are designed to help make that happen, by inducing people to vote, persuade, contribute, and volunteer. Given their limited resources, however, parties must decide on whom they will target their efforts. Resources they devote to people who are unlikely to turn out or unlikely to support them are resources wasted (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003: 163).

Further complicating the argument for efficiency, mobilization efforts are best carried out by local organizations, and by motivated, well-trained volunteers (Carton 1973: 7; Shea 1999: 299). As Shea notes, “[t]he proper party system, then, is one in which citizens connect with local organizations—units that are amateur-based, localized and ideologically driven” (Shea in State of the Parties 2nd ed.: 299).

John Coleman summarizes a study by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 162-77, 215), who “…attribute the bulk of the decline in turnout since the early 1960s to decreasing efforts to mobilize voters by various organizations, including most prominently the political parties. One explanation is that the parties have chosen to de-emphasize labor-intensive mobilization in the new capital-and-technology-intensive electoral system” (Coleman 1994: 361). In the technological age of candidate-centered campaigning, parties have also shifted where they focus resources, and they mobilize...
constituencies in ways that do not engage local leaders or organizations in rural Missouri counties.

Political scientists Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld call modern political parties “hollow,” stating that they are “…neither organizationally robust beyond their roles raising money nor meaningfully felt as a real, tangible presence in the lives of voters or in the work of engaged activists” (2017:1-2). Schlozman and Rosenfeld’s theory that parties have become hollow entities that do not engage with local communities is supported by evidence in this study on rural Missouri party organizations.

Overall, party organizations have abandoned organizing models that allow for relationship-building, reciprocity, and conversation, and it appears that they have also abandoned the physical organizational structures that employ these methods in rural counties. Because of these factors, this paper finds that local Democratic political party organizations are in a state of substantial decline in rural areas. This finding is important, because little is known about the direct and specific effects of modern campaign tactics on party organizations at the local level, and this dissertation provides specific case studies that show exactly how modern campaign techniques have impacted local party structures. These findings are important, because as Daniel Shea writes: …the focus of party rejuvenation [theorists] has been primarily at the national and state levels. As the party system moved from local structures, [voters] conceivably found less of a connection to the entire electoral system” (2013: 140).
Conclusion

The literature on political party organizations shows that parties provide specific functions such as candidate recruitment and direct voter mobilization, and that they also mitigate dissent and legitimize election outcomes (and therefore government at large). Scholarship also shows that the core functions of political parties have changed over time; in the modern era, political parties rely heavily upon strategies that selectively mobilize the electorate and do not utilize face-to-face tactics that build up local party structures. This dissertation analyzes the effects of the modern campaign era on local political party organizations in rural Missouri.

While modern campaign strategies might be expedient in calculating percentages and crafting message-driven contacts with likely voters, they have also replaced the interpersonal, relationship-based communication strategies that engage local party organizations and are arguably most effective with rural voters. This study finds that in the modern campaign era, exogenous factors such as the nationalization of party resources, the rise in candidate-centered campaigning, and the shifting mobilization priorities of party organizations have all negatively impacted the roles and structures of local parties in rural Missouri.
Chapter 3: Local Parties Matter
Local Organizations Matter

Chapter 2 broadly reviewed some of the important literature around political parties, and this chapter will hone in on the literature that speaks directly to local party organizations. Paul Allen beck defines local political parties as “…a creature of the grass roots—typically led by local residents, drawing upon local talent and…[is] dedicated to electing an entire party ticket in the immediate election as well as in the future” (1997: 1264). Local political party organizations play unique roles within the party system, and this chapter will show that the nationalization of party structures, as well as shifts to candidate-centered campaign models have displaced local party organizational structures. The displacement of local party organizations has implications for the success of the party system overall.

Sociologist Kenneth T. Andrews has shown that the continuity and consistency of local organizational structures matters in building long-term policy success for rural communities (2004). In his book Freedom is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and its Legacy, Andrews uses both qualitative and quantitative data to show that a strong, physical network of local organizations and organizers achieved the most substantial policy gains in Mississippi only after the formal civil rights movement had ended. Relatedly, scholar Aldon Morris (1984) points to the importance of physical local organizations, such as African-American churches and local civil rights groups, in establishing the important foundations upon which long-term coalitions and policy successes were built in the Civil Rights movement. Sociologist Jane McAlevey also points to the importance of “structure-based organizing” in the gains of the labor and
civil rights movements (2016:12). In each of these studies, as well as for the purposes of this paper, the term “structure” does not necessarily always refer to a constant, rigid, physical building. Rather structure in these contexts refer to a consistent space for developing collective identity and collaborative action opportunities. Through such structures, McAlevey argues that successful local organizations are “bound by a sense of place” (2016: 12). For instance, union members associate with one another in their workplaces, and civil rights movement activists were bound by their local black churches and congregations. McAlevey offers a second perspective on the idea of structure as well; she argues that organizational structures also have somewhat formalized leadership roles. In this way, organizations are structured as well; therefore, structures are spaces that are both physical and process-oriented.

Similarly, this dissertation offers that when considering local political parties, an organizational “structure” may be something physical in some cases, such as a storefront on main street or a permanent party headquarters. Some local organizations have also had party headquarters spring up during election cycles, though this location can differ from cycle to cycle. In some rural areas, however, these hard-and-fast party structures have rarely been present, and thus it would be a blunt instrument through which to measure rural party organizations. For the purposes of this study, the term “structure” is used in its broader sense, to mean either a physical space for party organizations where applicable, or an entity in which leadership roles filled and there is regular, consistent, party activity.
This dissertation contends that local party organizational structures that exist in and between elections are important to the success of the advancement of the platforms of political parties as well. Political Scientist Samuel Eldersveld (1964) argues that local parties are “key cogs” in the wheel of the party system (141). Cornelius P. Cotter et al. (1984) agree that local units are foundational to party organizations, stating that “[w]hat happens in the 3,600 county [party committees] determines the politics of the states and nation” (41). Historically, the local party unit has been an important piece of the party system, because it has been most responsible for direct mobilization and local candidate recruitment efforts. In a campaign setting, local parties derived most of their power and influence within the party system (which was considerable until the 1960s), through their relationships with voters, volunteers, and community leaders: “Historically, party units first cultivated voter loyalty and then transmitted this base into a resource for candidates. Build the voter bank, so to speak, and they will come” (Shea in State of the Parties 2nd ed.: 298).

Local parties are the grass roots of the political system—the organizations most likely to be in contact with any given citizen and consequently most likely to affect whether and how the citizen participates politically” (Crowder-Meyer in State of the Parties 6th ed., 116).

Local parties are valuable to both the electorate and the rest of the party system because of their unique and powerful contributions to the political and campaign process.
environment. From a strategic perspective, investment in local party organizations and races should be part of building a winning electoral strategy, because as Pew has found:

Closely contested counties aren’t, as you might expect, predominantly in the “swing states” that get the lion’s share of attention from presidential campaigns and media covering them. While there were notable concentrations in 2012 in the upper Midwest and along the Pacific coast, closely contested counties were scattered across the country; they could be found in both strongly Democratic states (such as California and New York) and largely Republican ones (such as Texas and North Dakota)” (Pew 6/30/2016).

Arguably, however, local parties have been neglected and deprioritized by state and national parties in their push to achieve technological prowess and budgetary efficiency. As this chapter will show, many of the roles and functions of local party units have been displaced or overtaken by other entities in the modern campaign environment. Later chapters will also show that a lack of functional local party organizations has participatory, electoral, and representative implications for rural communities.

Local Parties Recruit Local Candidates

In political science literature, local party organizations have been shown to be critical to democratic engagement and political participation (Shea 2004; Ware 1985). Local party organizations are historically the only unit of the party system that is actively engaged in doing candidate recruitment for local offices (which often leads to higher
office-seeking), and the most likely unit of the party to do face-to-face voter contact and
direct voter mobilization (Burbank et al. 2008: 38; Epstein 1986: 134).

Frendreis, Gibson and Vertz (1989) find that strong local party organizations are the most important unit of the system recruiting candidates for local office, which greatly increases the party’s chances of creating competitive elections up-ticket later on:

Local party chairs report their organizations are involved in a number of electorally relevant activities, including candidate recruitment...The data demonstrate that county party organizations are indeed effective. The probability of a minority party’s running candidates for lower-level offices, which contribute to higher vote totals for higher-level offices, is a function of the local strength and activity level of the party...even if mainly at the candidate recruitment state of the process, [local] organizations play an important role in local electoral politics (Frendreis et al. 1989: 1).

Melody Crowder-Meyer found in a 2008 national survey that Democratic and Republican local party committees both recruit and support candidates for local office, though Republicans slightly more so:

There are some differences in levels of campaign activity. Republicans lead Democrats in both the total number of activities in which they participate and almost all specific activities. Republicans seem to have a particular advantage over campaign
strategy and training. They are more active than Democrats in providing campaign advice, training on issues, and help with campaign coordination and strategy. This is a marked departure from past results, which found that in both 1980 and 1996 Democratic county parties nationwide matched or surpassed Republican parties in assisting candidates with campaign coordination” (Crowder-Meyer 2011: 125).

Additionally, Crowder-Meyer adds a key variable to the existing literature as a predictor of party strength, that of population density; local parties are stronger and do more recruitment in counties with higher and more closely-knit populations: “the higher the proportion of the population living in rural areas, the less structured and active are party and nonparty groups” (Crowder-Meyer 2011: 129). While this study does not compare local party organizations’ candidate recruitment efforts across urban and rural jurisdictions, it does find that candidate recruitment efforts in rural Missouri counties have declined substantially or have ceased altogether. Political Scientists Douglas Roscoe and Shannon Jenkins also find that local political parties were declining in their candidate recruitment activities in a 2012 survey of local party leaders. (Roscoe and Jenkins, 2013: 289).

Scholars have also found that candidate recruitment, most often taken on by local committee members in the past, was a critical entry point to elected office for those whom later sought higher office. Additionally, local candidates tend to be more
diverse in their representation than candidates for higher offices, as noted by Crowder-Meyer:

It is particularly important to examine candidate emergence at [the local] level, as in many cases the decision to run for lower level offices provides the foundation for a political career. Additionally, certain underrepresented groups such as women are even more likely than others to begin their political careers at the local level...[t]hus, it is critical to understand candidate emergence at the local level in order to explain representation at all levels of government (Crowder-Meyer in State of the Parties 6th ed., 120).

This study finds that candidate recruitment efforts for state representative races has decreased substantially on the part of local parties in rural Missouri counties over the past several elections cycles.

Local Parties Directly Mobilize Voters

Political scientist Daniel Shea has conducted several studies on the connection between local party organizations and effective voter mobilization. Shea surveyed 403 Democratic and 402 Republican local party chairs across the country to find out how effective local party structures were in mobilizing younger voters. Shea found that local committees can have a strong influence in increasing voter turnout among young voters, however, the challenge is that local party members do not seem to prioritize youth outreach or mobilization (usually prioritizing the mobilization of senior citizens).
instead). Regardless of the latter finding, Shea’s findings are encouraging in regard to the effectiveness of local party organizations in mobilizing voters (Shea, 2007).

Scholars have found evidence that local parties are not only effective in mobilization and candidate recruitment within their communities, they are often the *most* effective unit of the party organization to carry out these duties. Local parties are uniquely effective in doing direct mobilization because they build local, institutional expertise in mobilization activities, committee members live in and are rooted in their communities, and they often have long-standing relationships with the voters being mobilized (Crowder-Meyer 2008). Even well-constructed statewide and Presidential campaigns do not entirely fill voids left by absent local party structures. For all the well-publicized grassroots success of the 2008 and 2012 Obama Presidential campaigns, according to accounts written by staffers and historians, the campaign did not develop a campaign that relied upon local structures, people or resource. Most staff were brought in from outside of local communities and not well-integrated with these communities:

> According to personal accounts, Obama campaign operatives were told NOT to work with county party leaders, but to focus on direct voter contact instead (Blumberg et al. in State of the Parties 6th ed., 110)

Blumberg et al. further elaborate:

> In 2008, Barack Obama’s campaign rewrote Coordinated Campaign ‘rules’...it replaced the traditional integration between the presidential candidates, local parties, and other organizations with a novel kind of integration: a separate, single-purpose
organization reaching down to the grass roots with only modest links to party organizations. This innovation left the local party organization in Mahoning County on the periphery of the presidential campaign (Blumberg et al. in State of the Parties, 6th ed.; 105).

This type of nationalized, candidate-centered structure, according to several accounts, negatively impacted the Obama campaign, because it did not effectively engage local leaders:

It is worth noting that for all its innovation and success, the [Obama] Campaign for Change did not perform especially well when compared to the approaches used in other presidential years. Even within the context of a heavily Democratic county, it did not generate the most votes, the highest Democratic percentage, or the highest level of voter registration...[m]any local observers believe [the campaign would have been more successful if] it had [worked more closely with the local party] because the great resources and organizational skills of the Obama campaign could have been combined with knowledge of local politics and local resources (Blumberg et al. in State of the Parties 6th ed.: 114).

While much more study is needed on how and how effectively local party members mobilize and recruit candidates compared with outsiders, this initial research suggests that local parties provide valuable and arguably irreplaceable contributions to voter mobilization.
As discussed in the previous chapter, in the modern campaign era the roles of local party units are being usurped and neglected by state and national political parties, as well as a growing consultacracy that is responsible for running campaigns in place of local career party professionals. As Anthony Corrado states “...campaign operatives and political consultants have usurped many of the functions formerly carried out by party officials” (Corrado 1994: 72). This displacement of party leadership in electoral campaigns matters to local party committees, because independent consultants have very different priorities in a campaign environment than do party leaders:

The traditional [party-based] campaign manager, who had many years of experience, relied heavily on the organization and the skills of [local] party workers for the traditional vote-getting procedures—knocking on doors, canvassing, and personal voter contact in the precincts. The professional, however, however, operates largely from an established, private, profit-making firm that is relatively independent of the political party...[t]he professional is well-versed in marketing, public relations, and communications rather than door-knocking... (Burbank, Hrebenar, and Benedict 2008: 139).

As evidence from Missouri finds, candidates running for state and federal office no longer invest staff or other resources into rural communities. Similar to findings after the Obama Presidential campaigns, when candidates do campaign in rural counties, they do so in ways that do not invest in building up the local party organization in or between election cycles.
Other modern trends in parties and campaigns have also negatively impacted local party structures. For example, a documented “nationalization” of the party system has drawn resources up to national and state party leaders, who then fail to effectively redistribute these resources down to local parties (Herrnson 2005: 25; White and Shea 2004: 15; many others). There are also consequences for political information processes without local party organizations:

In most parts of the country, campaigns—even at the congressional and gubernatorial levels—have been fast becoming impersonal, centrally-directed, media-dominated affairs. As has often been noted, the media have in large measure assumed the local party's information-disseminating functions (Price and Lupfer 1973: 410)

This dissertation uses existing literature to develop an argument that as political parties have become more nationalized, candidate-centered, and technology-focused over time, local party committees and their roles in campaigns have been displaced altogether, or local parties have been pushed to adopt a similar “service-oriented” style of campaign support that has become the trend at state and national levels of the party system. A service-oriented model de-prioritizes party integration, a reliance upon local relationships, and grassroots mobilization strategies (Hershey 2007: 282). The shift away from local party structures and interpersonal strategies could negatively impact party membership, as well as have negative effects on political participation within the electorate overall.
The shift to a service-driven model has trickled all the way down to local parties, whose best resource to campaigns had previously been their relationship to voters, volunteers, and leaders in their local communities. In a 2011 survey of local party chairs and their activities, Daniel M. Shea et al. “...found that local parties fit the “party-in-service” model...[t]heir activities were aimed at the here and now, winning particular elections and helping specific candidates” (Shea, Strachan and Wolf in The Parties Respond 2013: 129).

Local party structures and local party members, however, are not able to compete with the broad array of services and consultants provided by state parties, national parties, or any of the respective new campaign committees. At the same time, national and state structures in the modern party system are neglecting and under-resourcing local party structures:

Political party operatives [at the local level] quickly realized that these new technologies were making them irrelevant. Yet instead of sharpening their relationship with the voters, the parties chose to expand the very types of services that allowed candidates to ignore large portions of the electorate (Shea, Strachan and Wolf 2013: 113).

Local candidates for office almost never have the resources to support even a single staff person or consultant, nor do they have the resources (or need) to hire consultants for paid media campaigns. This lack of resources, coupled with a de-prioritization of local structures by state and national parties has de-prioritized local relationships and direct mobilization.
In addition to displacing local political parties, the modern campaign era has turned even more so to less personal/more technology-driven mobilization tactics, and they have even recently adopted strategies that have a “demobilizing” effect on the electorate—a far shift from where parties were focused in the middle of the 20th century. In sum, the “top-down, microtargeted, television-based model [of campaigning] that has existed since the 1960s” (Shea in State of the Parties 6th ed., 143) has increasingly prioritized technology, data, and candidate-centered activities over conversation-based tactics that tie in to party platforms. The nationalization of parties, and the onset of candidate-centered campaigning has had a “demobilizing” effect on voters; voter turnout has decreased steadily over time, and disgust with political parties has grown stronger over that same period of time. As Danial Shea notes, “[t]he overall reconfiguration of party activities has shifted party concerns away from greater links with the electorate to greater help to candidates, and as a result much of what parties now do turns off voters to the political process” (Shea Strong Parties and Alienated Voters in State of the Parties 2nd ed.: 296).

While studies show that overall voter turnout has not declined since 2000, findings in this study show that rural party organizations have not had a consistent relationship with their state or national party organizations in over a decade in Missouri. Rural party organizations are on the brink of dissolution, and this has important consequences for people living in these areas.
Measuring Party Organizational Strength

Several studies have been undertaken previously to measure and assess local party strength. Broadly, scholars suggest that local party strength can be measured by (1) local party activity, (2) physical structures, (3) electoral outcomes, and (4) intraparty integration. This dissertation examines all four of these categories in studying local party organizations in rural Missouri.

Cornelius P. Cotter, James L. Gibson, John F. Bibby, and Robert J. Huckshorn were the first to measure the strength and activities of local party structures. In 1980, Cotter et. al developed and disseminated the inaugural “Party Transformation Study.” The researchers mailed 7300 surveys to county party chairs across all 50 states, and (after multiple mailings) they received 4000 responses. From these data, the scholars were able to develop the first indices to measure party strength at the local level. These indices include: (1) Ability to fill key leadership positions, (2) Election-period organizational maintenance, (3) Formalization of structure, (4) Non-election period organizational maintenance, (5) Continuity of structure in non-election periods, and (6) Professional staffing. These categories cover the important features for identifying the structure and strength of local party organizations. Some of Cotter et al.’s key findings were that in 1980, local political parties were strong and not in the scholarly-presumed state of decline as was the case with state and national parties. Most local parties were active and had staff in 1980, and most local committees also had ongoing activities, even in non-election periods.
James Gibson, John Frendreis and Laura Vertz (1989) followed up on Cotter et al.’s original survey in 1988, and they confirmed that local parties “[present] a clear pattern of increasing or constant organizational strength” (70). Another relevant contribution of Gibson et al.’s research was the finding that local party strength was correlated with state and national party-based investment (“intraparty integration”): “Regardless of the causal connection, state-local integration seems to provide both motivation and resources for county-level organizational development” (1989: 79). The challenge foreshadowed by these scholars is that:

[t]he intraparty transfer of organizational resources may result in a lessening of the dependence of local party organizations on local groups for resources and support...[a]s party organizations become more nationalized, party politics at the local level will surely be changed”

(Gibson et al. 1989: 86)

The survey sample of county chairs for Gibson et al. was smaller, and across nine states total, compared with Cotter et al.’s nationwide survey. Gibson et al. do agree with Cotter et a. that the state of local parties is strong:

First, the local organizations engage in a substantial amount of direct campaign activities [between 1980 and 1984] (e.g., voter registration drives or the distribution of voter guides). Far from withering away, the trend between 1980 and 1984 is in the direction of greater organizational activity. Second, in addition to these direct campaign activities, virtually all of the county party
organizations are also involved in the campaigns of candidates, particularly those running for local office (Gibson et al. 1989: 227).

Perhaps one of the most important contributions of Gibson et al.’s research is that “[s]tructural strength is substantially more important than immediate campaign activity...[local] party organizations do ‘matter’” (Gibson et al. 1989: 230). Gibson et. al concluded that the local party committees that had a physical headquarters, full time staff, and held more non-election cycle activities were more likely to engage in mobilization strategies and candidate recruitment efforts in election cycles. Thus, Gibson et al. make a compelling argument for building and maintaining local party structures. For these reasons, in 1989, Gibson et al. cautioned: “…party organizations need not compete with candidate campaigns. Instead, they provide the sort of institutional support and infrastructure that few campaigns are motivated to develop” (Gibson et al. 1989: 228).

The “Elections Dynamics Project” fielded by Frendreis and Alan R. Gitelson and colleagues measured local party strength in the early 1990s by surveying a sample of local party chairs from 9 states. The scholars found that local political parties were just as strong and active if not more so in 1994 than in 1984. Specifically, in 1980, 48% of Republican and 49% of Democratic committees did door-to-door canvassing compared with 59% and 56% respectively in 1994 (Frendreis and Gitelson 1996: 156). Additionally, Frendreis and Gitelson et al. found that local parties had headquarters and staff, and that structurally, “…local parties have not weakened over the last decade and, if anything, they have become slightly stronger” (1996: 153).
Douglas D. Roscoe and Shannon Jenkins repeated Cotter et al.’s study in 2010, emailing a survey to a national sample of party chairs from 48 states, though they only made one attempt to receive responses (compared to Cotter et al.’s three attempts), and thus received a much lower response rate (27%) compared with than Cotter et al. (55%) (State of the Parties 7th ed.: 288).

Roscoe and Jenkins also found that voter contact and mobilization activities had increased from the 1980s, and that this activity was largely carried out by volunteers:

...the number of Republican local parties running registration drives went up 11 percentage points, canvassing went up 12 percentage points...similarly among Democratic local parties there was a 7 percentage-point increase in registration drives, a 24 percentage-point increase in canvassing... (Roscoe and Jenkins 2014.: 295).

In some contradiction with other scholars who have documented a more service-driven model trending among local parties, Roscoe and Jenkins’ findings lead them to conclude that “indeed it is accurate to say that local parties have shifted away from a financial service role and toward a grassroots role” (Roscoe and Jenkins in State of the Parties 7th ed.: 295).

Despite increases in mobilization activities, however, Roscoe and Jenkins find evidence that local party organizations were still not necessarily coordinating local campaign efforts. Local parties in 2008 were activating their volunteers toward grassroots activities, however these activities were largely driven by candidate-centered
campaigns, not local or even state party organizations. As Roscoe and Jenkins argue:

“Local parties do not run campaigns, they supply campaigns” (2016: 12).

Roscoe and Jenkins found that local party organizations had become “more institutionalized” and had a high level of “structural maturity” regarding their organization fundamentals—local parties were more likely to have a formal set of bylaws, a constitution, and a budget in 2008 than in the 1980s, though they were operationally less active (2016: 53). The results in this study support these structural findings of Roscoe and Jenkins as well. Additionally, while the Roscoe and Jenkins study is foundational and important, the analyses do not break out party organizations by rural or urban designations. This paper aims to contribute to the existing scholarship on local party strength by assessing rural party organizations in particular.

Melody Crowder-Meyer conducted a nationwide survey of county party chairs in 2008, also as a retest of Cotter et. al’s initial local party survey. Crowder-Meyer found that local parties were still recruiting candidates to some degree, however local committees were indeed playing more of a “service-oriented” role in campaigns than a party-oriented role. In other words, party members were spending more time providing services to candidates such as fundraising and consulting, and less time doing direct voter contact or organizing volunteers (Crowder-Meyer, 2011). Crowder-Meyer finds more mixed results of party strength in her survey than in her predecessors:

In all I find that county parties today are structured and active and recruiting and supporting candidates, campaigning, and
cooperating with other groups in their communities (Crowder-Meyer in State of the Parties 6th ed., 116).

The strength, structure and activity of local parties varied greatly, however, in Crowder-Meyer’s results (Crowder-Meyer, 132); this variance is based upon region, competitiveness as a battleground state, and other factors. The strength and activities of local parties today, particularly in rural communities, are still largely unknown in the modern campaign era, and that is an insight this project hopes to bring to the existing literature.

To date, political scientist Alan Ware has provided one of the few known qualitative, case-study analysis of local party deterioration in his book The Breakdown of Democratic Party Organization 1940-1980. In his study, Ware examines three urban political party structures and finds that they have all deteriorated, a process which began in the 1960s. Ware attributes this organizational decline to several interlocking factors, including the rising technological advances and candidate-centered campaigning (Ware 1985). Ware’s desire to understand local party organizational decline and its consequences is shared by the author, and here an analysis is attempted for the first time of decline in rural party organizations.

A more recent longitudinal case study of local party organization was conducted by scholars Melanie J. Blumberg, William C. Binning, Sarah K. Lewis and John C. Green. Blumberg et. al observe and study the local Democratic Party committee in Mahoning County, Ohio in Presidential elections from 1992 to 2008, through both survey and interview instruments. Blumberg et al. were interested in examining the relationship...
between local party structures and national party structures in a Presidential campaign, because in their words: “[t]he political science literature on local political parties and presidential campaigns pays relatively little attention to the relationship between these two actors” (Blumberg et al, 2011: 103).

Mahoning County was a particularly important county in a particularly important Presidential battleground state. The scholars use some survey instruments, however a bulk of their data come from conducting interviews with current and past party officials on their strategic decisions and relationships—data that are not otherwise publicly available (Blumberg, Binning, Lewis & Green, 2009). Overall, Blumberg et al. find that in the Presidential campaigns they studied, the local Democratic committee in Mahoning County provided a bulk of the volunteers and networked relationships needed to boost the national presidential campaign’s integration into the community. Additionally, the scholars found that the willingness of national parties to incorporate local parties into their efforts depended greatly upon the local party’s chairperson and his or her style of leadership. Ultimately, as local committee chairs became less independently-resourced and ambitious over time, the local Democratic Committee in Mahoning County became depleted; it was less effective in connecting with voters and the local party was less of a factor in determining local election outcomes (Blumberg et al, 2011).

Between 1992 and 2008, the Democratic presidential campaigns found ways to obtain grassroots services for voter registration and mobilization...in Mahoning County, Ohio. However, the presidential candidates obtained these services in different ways with different
degrees of integration between the presidential campaign and the local party organization...In 2004, much of the grassroots effort in Mahoning County was outsourced to new organizations...the result was three different campaign efforts in Mahoning County directed at mobilizing voters for the John Kerry/John Edwards ticket [an ‘uncoordinated’ campaign] (Blumberg et al. in State of the Parties, 6th ed.; 104).

The Mahoning County Democratic Party then, had become noticeably displaced and disengaged from their historic—and valuable—roles in voter mobilization and community integration.

As this section has demonstrated, scholars are mixed on whether local parties are active and strong, or inactive and declining, though objectively scholars agree that local parties are less well-staffed, have less formal resources, and are doing less non-election related activities than they were in 1980. Some recent scholars (Blumberg et al.) have found that grassroots mobilization—the local party unit’s primary skill and resource—is being outsourced to interest groups and national campaigns in a candidate-centered presidential campaign environment.

The strength and activities of local parties today, particularly in rural communities, is still largely unknown in the modern campaign era:

Local parties exist, but often they take their cues from state and national committees. They may have larger offices, better equipment, heftier budgets, and provide more services, but they arouse few passions. They may have adapted to the Information Age, but they have lost their
relevance as articulate spokespersons for traditional party values (White and Shea 2004: 125).

Additionally, while scholars have done a comprehensive job of creating metrics for party strength and assessing local parties over time using these metrics, very little is still known about how local party strength affects electoral outcomes (not just candidate recruitment), and whether strong parties have more electoral success over time:

Surprisingly...the exact nature of the success achieved by [local parties] is often left vague. And measures of success that appear obvious are overlooked. This problem is related to the more general tendency to focus on activities and pay less attention to effects...evidence is mixed regarding the effect of party organizations on election outcomes...note that evidence suggests party organizations made a difference in election outcomes in specific cases. Cotter et al. (1984), on the other hand, found that over time a party’s relative electoral success...bore little relationship to the strength of state party organizations...[b]oth studies properly note the methodological difficulties inherent in teasing out the effect of party organizations on election results” (Coleman in State of the Parties 1st ed., 320).

In 1986 Political Scientist William Crotty produced an edited volume of case studies measuring local party strength in 5 major cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit,
Nashville, and Houston. This study uses historical data and data the activities of these local party units during election cycles. Ultimately, the findings lead Crotty et al. to determine that local political party organizations in these cities were very active, and “largely unaffected” by parallel national party and PAC-level activities. Notably, this study was carried out in the 1980s, well before the onset of PACs and the rise of outside interest groups in electoral politics.

The existing literature provides a solid foundation upon which to measure and operationalize the strength of local party organizations in rural Missouri in the 2016 election cycle. This dissertation aims to contribute to this field in some substantive ways. For instance, previous studies of local party organizations have utilized national surveys to local party leaders. These data are often taken in aggregate, and they do not always take into account the nuances of state political cultures and climate. This study focuses only on counties within the state of Missouri, which allows for closer investigation of the differences in local party strength within a state, and what might account for these differences.

Additionally, this study incorporates case studies and qualitative data to examine the deterioration of local party organizations from a multiplicity of angles. Interviews and participant-observation reveal data that are not illuminated through surveys. For instance, while national surveys give a snapshot of local party activities in a given election year, these data do not show what local parties do between elections, nor do they illustrate how local party units change from election to election.
One final contribution that this study makes is in understanding the challenges of local parties in rural communities. Case studies tend to focus on urban centers, which operate through very different forms and have different histories than do rural party organizations. Additionally, national surveys do not break the data down into urban and rural designations for local party organizations—controlling for geography shows that rural and urban party organizations are different in several ways, something that is discussed in later chapters.

Perhaps most importantly, national surveys make the simple assumption that local party organizations exist to be studied, and evidence in this dissertation indicates that in some rural counties, this assumption is not met. Qualitative data are the most informative sources of information for this claim. This dissertation finds evidence that local party organizations in rural Missouri counties are in an overall state of decline, and that in some cases these organizational structures have ceased to exist altogether. As the paper will later demonstrate, this organizational absence comes with some important implications in rural communities.

Conclusion and Further Research

Since its inception in the 1790s, the American political party system has endured many shifts and some dramatic changes in its functions, roles, and relevance within the electoral process. Local party units have historically played a key role in the party system, as they are shown to be the most effective in mobilization and candidate recruitment—areas considered critical to each party’s success. In the modern campaign
era, however, technology and independent resourcing have led to the rise of candidate-centered campaigning, and parties have become service-oriented toward these candidates. Direct mobilization strategies have been displaced by modern technologies that allow parties to both broadcast and “narrowcast;” that is, selectively mobilize or demobilize the electorate rather than expanding the scope of potential voters.

Additionally, the party system has become more “nationalized,” with decisions and resources coming from state and national structures to local parties, which have been shown to have been circumvented and de-prioritized in recent presidential campaigns. Local parties have been negatively impacted by many of the changes in the party system, because national parties, outside interest groups, and independent candidate campaigns have usurped local parties’ traditional roles in campaigns and local communities, in addition to shifting their mobilization strategies away from interpersonal relationships with voters. This displacement of local parties could have negative impacts on the entire party system, making them less effective in mobilization and candidate recruitment efforts. These shifts could also negatively impact participatory democracy, and the health of the electoral system overall, as mobilization by parties has been essential to getting people to participate in political opportunities.

While the literature covered in this chapter has set a strong foundation for understanding the importance and uniqueness of local party units in the American political party system, more research is still needed. For instance, recent political events and research have identified a growing divide between Americans based upon geography; rural Americans have very different perceptions, experiences, and political
persuasions than do urban Americans (Bishop 2008; Cramer 2016; Russell-Hochschild 2016). To date, almost all literature of local political parties—their strength and activities—focuses on either a broad national sample, or on urban/non-rural local parties. Further research could enlighten the academic community as to whether there are also differences in the strength and/or activities of local party committees in rural and urban America (or any given state).

In summary, evidence shows that local parties matter. Local parties matter because they are the unit of the party system responsible for direct mobilization of the electorate, and they act as an important entry point for candidates seeking office and the establishment of political careers. Perhaps even more important than their tactical skills or political capabilities, local parties humanize issues and platforms, and they create structures for political interaction within communities in ways that cannot be replaced by television or social media.

The activity (or non) of local parties has deep implications for the entire American political party system, as well as for the overall participatory tenet of American democracy. The literature hypothesizes that 1) Local parties perform unique and crucial roles, and 2) Local parties have deteriorated for several different reasons, such as changing laws, advancing technologies, and the rise of candidate-centered campaigning. This study will test these two primary hypotheses and build upon the literature in the next chapters to come.
Chapter 4: The Missouri Political Puzzle
The Missouri Landscape

This chapter explains the shifting political landscape of Missouri over time, and it establishes why Missouri is an interesting state for the study of local party organizations. Common theories on rural voting behavior stress the importance of demographic factors of voters, such as white, working-class voters who have been moving more toward populism and the GOP in recent election cycles (Tucker, Torres, Sinclair, and Smith 2019). Another common theory is that rural voters are voting more consistently conservative because they are more religious, and this religiosity has taken on an increasingly salient political identity since the 1980s. Finally, a thread of academic debate centers around changes in local population and that of geographic “sorting;” the idea that as individuals have gained greater mobility, they have chosen to aggregate themselves into politically and demographically homogenous communities (Bishop 2008; McKee 2009). While these and other current theories on rural voting behavior have merit, this chapter shows that they may not fully explain the recent and dramatic shifts in rural voting in Missouri counties. This chapter ends by proposing another explanation for rural voting shifts, the strength of local party organizations.

The political landscape in Missouri and the voting behaviors of rural Missourians have changed substantially over a relatively short period of time. The electoral history of Missouri is quite dynamic; it is a state traditionally defined by split-ticket voting behavior. This history of swing voting behavior made Missouri a Presidential battleground state for almost every Presidential contest through the 2000 cycle. As Figure 1 demonstrates, Missourians made bipartisan choices across races for executive
offices from 1980 through 2012. The 1984 election cycle is perhaps particularly
emblematic of Missourians’ electoral proclivities. In 1984 voters chose John Aschcroft
for Governor—an evangelical Christian whose religion did not allow him to swear, drink,
or dance. In that same election, Missourians elected Harriett Woods for Lieutenant
Governor, the first woman ever elected to statewide office in Missouri, and one who ran
on a progressive Democratic Party platform of gender equality and women’s rights.
Both candidates were re-elected in 1988 as well, showing a decisive (if not confusing)
quality about Missouri voters’ traditionally mixed and bipartisan electoral preferences.

Figure 1: Margins of Victory and Outcomes for Missouri Executive Branch 1980-2016

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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-19</td>
<td>-19</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>-22</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>-4</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>-10</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the state legislature, the shift from Republican to Democratic control
occurred over time, switching completely to GOP hands in 2002 in both chambers. As an
illustration of the dynamic and substantial shift in voting patterns in Missouri, we can
compare the legislative majorities in the Missouri House and Senate as shown in Figure
2. In 2016, Republicans held majorities in the House and Senate like the majorities the

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Democrats held in 1980; Democrats controlled the Senate by 10 seats and the House by 71 seats in 1980, while Republicans controlled the Senate by 16 and the House by 70 seats in 2016.

Republicans took over the redistricting process after the 2000 census, therefore redistricting is one possible explanation for the Republican power shift in 2002 within the state legislature. As the data show, however, Democrats in the state House and Senate were losing their strong majority status in the mid and late 1990s; Republicans had already won a two-seat margin in the Senate and Democrats held only a 10-seat advantage in the House in 2000.

Additionally, many voters in other rural Missouri counties were still electing Democrats to the state legislature after the 2000 census. Redistricting may be part of the reason Republicans took the majority in the state legislature in 2002, however, it appears that it is not the only explanation for dramatic shifts in electoral outcomes in at least some rural Missouri counties. In addition, term limits for state legislators took effect in 2002 in Missouri, and this could be another factor in the switch to GOP control of the House and Senate. As this chapter will later show, however, several rural counties continued to vote for both Democrats and Republicans for state legislative races as well as races for statewide office well after 2002.

Figure 2: Seat Advantage for Majority Party In Missouri Legislature 1980-2016

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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>State House</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis
Voters within rural Missouri counties have traditionally split their votes within rural counties as well, voting Republican for some offices and Democratic for others within the same election cycle. In other words, it is not the case that Democratic votes have been isolated in urban centers while rural Missourians have voting straight-ticket Republican. Two rural Missouri counties, Iron and Oregon counties, demonstrate this split-ticket voting history in Figure 3. Rural Missouri voters have largely shifted toward the Republican Party over time, however these shifts to single-party voting behavior have happened unevenly—at different times and with different intensities—across rural counties in Missouri.

**Figure 3: Electoral Outcomes of Select Races in Iron and Oregon Counties, Missouri from 1980-2016**

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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<tr>
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<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Rep 2</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OREGON</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>President</td>
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<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>R</td>
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<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 1</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar electoral variation is found in other rural Missouri counties as well. For instance, Pemiscot County sits on the east side of the Missouri bootheel in southeast Missouri. The county seat of Pemiscot County is Caruthersville. Pemiscot County voted
solidly Democratic through the 1990s, and the county split its votes between Republicans and Democrats as late as 2008. By 2016 Pemiscot County was voting solidly Republican.

Table 1: Voting Preferences in Pemiscot County

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOS</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Representative</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Representative</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, Sullivan County is in the northern central region of Missouri. Voters in Sullivan voted solidly Democratic in the 1990s, then split their tickets through the early 2000s, and were voting solidly Republican by 2016.

Table 1: Voting Preferences in Sullivan County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOS</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Representative</td>
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<td>R</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Representative</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The unevenness of the timing of GOP alignment across rural Missouri counties, and the fact that these shifts in voting behavior mostly happened later in the 2000s, indicate that some counties’ electoral alignments toward the GOP are also not completely explained by the well-documented ideological shifts within parties around social and cultural issues that began to take hold in the 1980s. One interviewee in this study commented that in her county most residents voted consistently Democratic until...
1996. There was such a solid Democratic base in this county that election officials “...forgot to bring Republican ballots to the polls” in the 1992 election cycle (personal interview: February 21, 2018).

While it is clear when the shift toward straight-ticket GOP voting occurred in Missouri, what is less clear is why this shift has occurred. The timing of the shift in voting behavior does not line up with major ideological realignments within the political parties around social issues, nor does it completely align with redistricting control in the Missouri state legislature. In fact, one long-time and high-ranking GOP official interviewed in this study confirmed that he does not believe that ideology is the reason for shifts in rural voting behavior. He states that changes in party preferences “are not ideologically-driven, they are anti-establishment-driven” (personal interview: February 20, 2018). Common hypotheses on shifts in rural voting patterns are discussed later in this chapter. Overall, this study offers an additional, under-studied factor of local party strength to explain the recent major shifts in voting behavior of rural Missourians.

**The Missouri Political Puzzle**

The data presented here show how voting patterns have shifted in Missouri both at a statewide level and in several rural counties between 1980 and 2016. Missouri was once a more politically dynamic state where voters were well-known for splitting their ballots between Republicans and Democrats; this voting behavior often resulted in divided partisan control of the executive and legislative branches. Until the year 2000, Missouri elected Democratic majorities in the state legislature, executive branch, and
federal offices. In fact, Democrats simultaneously controlled both chambers of the state legislature and dominated the executive branch for a greater part of the 1980s and 1990s. Most recently in 2016, however, Missouri voters elected large Republican majorities in both chambers of the state legislature, voted for the Republican candidate for President, and simultaneously voted in Republicans for all statewide executive branch offices—2016 gave complete control of Missouri government to one party for the first time in decades. This major shift begs the question, why have voters in rural Missouri cohered and aligned their ballots entirely in favor of the Republican party, when they once voted Democratic and/or split their ballots?

The 1990s were arguably the Democratic “heyday” in Missouri politics. Democrats came very close to single-party control of the executive branch and state legislature in 1992, 1996, and 2000, however, Missouri voters still managed to split their ballots in these elections, electing a Republican State Auditor in 1992 and 1996 (Margaret Kelly), and a Republican Secretary of State in 2000 (Matt Blunt). Between 2004 and 2012, Missourians consistently voted Republican for Lieutenant Governor, and elected Republican majorities to the Missouri House and Senate. Democrats, however, were consistently elected to the offices of Secretary of State and Attorney General between 2004 and 2012. Missouri voters split their partisan preferences in electing the Governor, Treasurer and Auditor between 2004 and 2012. As Figure 4 demonstrates, uniquely in 2016, Missouri voters did not split their ballots or vote Democratic for any statewide office, and Republicans maintained their control of the legislature.
Figure 4: Margins of Victory for Statewide Candidates in Missouri 1980-2016:

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<td>13.4</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
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<td>2.9</td>
<td>18.9</td>
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<td>25.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>10.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secretary of State</td>
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<td>8.2</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>19.1</td>
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<td>Treasurer</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attorney General</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditor***</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>23.4</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State House*</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* State Senate and State House MOV’s are measured by number of seats advantage of majority party
** A Democrat was appointed to the office in 2015 after the death of the Republican officeholder
*** State Auditor is elected in midterm election cycles

The margins of victory between Democrats and Republicans in electoral contests also provide some insights into the dynamic nature of ticket-splitting preferences of voters between 1980 and 2012, shown above in Figure 4. In gubernatorial outcomes for instance, the data show that out of 10 election cycles, Republican and Democratic candidates have each been elected five times, and each time candidates have been elected by decisive majorities. The biggest margin for Republicans occurred in 1988 (John Ashcroft won by 25 points), and for Democrats in 2008 (Jay Nixon was elected by a 19-point margin). In each of these election cycles, voters elected a Lieutenant Governor of the opposite party, though these margins were less dramatic (a 5-point margin in 1988 and a 3-point margin in 2008).

**How Rural Voting Theories Fit Missouri**

Scholars, journalists, pundits, and strategists have asserted many different explanations for major partisan realignments in voters’ preferences over time. This dissertation tests two hypotheses associated with this documented realignment in

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electoral voting behavior: (1) that religious influence has increased in rural areas, causing voters in these areas to become more conservative, and (2) that residents are “sorting” themselves geographically into like-minded communities as their levels of mobility have increased over time. This paper will test these two hypotheses in two rural Missouri counties: Iron and Oregon.

The primary research questions driving this paper are: have demographic and political sorting processes occurred in Iron and Oregon Counties? Does sorting provide a necessary and sufficient explanation for the Republican realignment in these counties? Have religious institutions and/or voters' levels of religiosity increased or decreased in Iron and Oregon counties? Is religious influence a sufficient explanation as to why Iron and Oregon counties have realigned toward the GOP since the 1990s?

This paper does not argue against or attempt to contradict the hypotheses that rural communities are more politically or culturally homogenous than in previous decades and/or that rural communities have become more religious over time. Demographic and religious shifts may, in fact, be necessary components of the explanation of some of the Republican realignment in rural Missouri. This paper argues that demographic or religious shifts alone are not sufficient in understanding why major realignments toward the GOP have happened in some rural counties in Missouri.

There are several hypotheses not tested here that have important literature behind them. For instance, theories of racial threat (Giles and Hertz 1994, among others) or xenophobic motivations among voters are not explored in this paper. Additionally, this paper does not dive deeply into the literature or study of redistricting...
reforms and their effects on electoral outcomes (though notably many rural Missouri counties continued to elect Democratic State Representatives even after the GOP gained control of redistricting after 2000). While these hypotheses are not tested here, they are also not contradicted nor challenged in this paper. It will likely be useful to study the different effects of these variables in case study counties in the future, however, this paper will concentrate on testing religious influence and demographic sorting on changes in voting behaviors in Iron and Oregon counties, Missouri.

Religion and Politics

That a person’s religious identity can have implications on their political beliefs has been well-documented. Angus Campbell, in his canonical book The American Voter, finds that whether a person identifies as Jewish or Catholic is one of the more “stable” characteristics in determining voter preference, at least in terms of party identification (305). More recent studies have also shown that voters with higher levels of religiosity are more conservative in their political leanings. For example, a key predictor of support or opposition to gays and lesbians has been a person’s religious values (Brewer, 2008; Egan & Sherrill, 2009). Broadly speaking, people who identify as more religious are less supportive of gay and lesbian issues, and this trend is particularly noticeable among Evangelical Protestants (Brewer, 2008). A substantial amount of literature provides evidence that evangelical voters consider their religious status a significant part of their identity, and that this identity has led to the formation of a principally conservative voting bloc (Smith & Walker, 2013; McDaniel & Ellison, 2008). Therefore, if religious
capacities have influenced electoral outcomes in Iron and Oregon counties since 1980, the results should find that the number of evangelicals and evangelical churches in these counties impacts electoral outcomes.

Relatedly, ideological rigidities around social issues have grown more rigid and more visible since 1980. The Moral Majority was founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979, and its influence within the Republican party increased over the next several election cycles. The Moral Majority raised massive amounts of money and communicated with members through a nationwide direct mail network and prioritizing their opposition to abortion and LGBT issues. As the organization gained influence within the Republican party, it also began to recruit and support candidates to run on ideologically conservative tickets. This documented ideological and issue realignment was most dramatic in shifting (and polarizing) the parties’ agendas during the 1980s and 1990s (Levendusky 2009). If this ideological shift within the parties is the primary reason for the Republican realignment in Iron and Oregon counties, this paper should find that electoral outcomes become more single-party and conservative in the 1980s and 1990s in these counties.

Population Changes

Journalist Bill Bishop argues in his book The Big Sort: How the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart that as individuals have become more residentially mobile, they have also chosen to cluster or “sort” themselves geographically into politically and culturally homogenous communities (2008). This sorting is noticeable,
Bishop argues, even at the neighborhood level (2008:5). Bishop further argues that this geographic sorting is one major reason why politics have become so polarized and non-centrist in America, because voters now self-select communities in which they are not exposed to a diversity of opinions, experiences and cultures. Bishop argues:

Today the division in the country isn’t about party allegiance. It’s about how we choose to live. And as the parties have come to represent lifestyle—and as lifestyle has defined communities—everything seems divisible, Republican or Democratic (2008: 232).

Wendy K. Tam Cho, James G. Gimpel, and Iris Hui find evidence to support Bishop’s premise in their paper “Voter Migration and the Geographic Sorting of the American Electorate.” They find that residents do move to different zip codes to be among “copartisans.” The authors find that some constraints to this theory exist as well; voter migration mostly occurs from cities to suburbs, and that mobility depended on that zip code’s ability to provide better economic opportunities (Tam Cho, Gimpel, and Hui, 2013).

The sorting theory has drawn critics, including Samul J. Abrams and Morris P. Fiorina, who call Bishop’s methodology and conclusions “weak” (Abrams and Fiorina 2012: 203). The scholars take most issue with Bishop’s methodology, and using his same analysis techniques, Abrams and Fiorina state:

[W]e show that the case for geographic political sorting has not been made. Indeed, using Bishop’s standard, the data suggest the opposite:
geographic political segregation is lower than a generation ago...although the concerns expressed by Bishop are legitimate—that various factors may be operating to make Americans more culturally inbred than a generation ago—geographic political sorting has little or nothing to do with that development (203).

Given its mixed reviews and outcomes, geographic sorting will be tested in Iron and Oregon Counties.

**Testing Two Traditional Hypotheses in Missouri Counties**

This analysis relies upon publicly-available data acquired from the U.S. Census and American Community Survey, The U.S. Religious Census (Glenmary Research Center), IRS migration statistics, and Official Missouri State Manuals (published by the Missouri Secretary of State). The paper often refers to elections’ “margins of victory,” (MOV) which is the percentage margin between the winner and loser of an electoral contest. This paper only measures the margin of victory between Democratic and Republican candidates, not third-party candidates.

The primary regression model used OLS analysis with the dependent variable as the shift in Presidential margins of victory (MOV) for each Missouri county between 1980 and 2016. The two independent variables chosen were the shift in the percentage of evangelicals in the county between 1980 and 2010, and the percent of white high-school graduates as of the 2010 census for each county. The reason why the evangelical variable was chosen has been explained in an earlier section. Analyses of the 2016
Presidential election outcomes show that part of the success of the Trump candidacy was his ability to appeal to white, working-class voters (Hochschild 2016; Morgan and Lee 2018). In this case, “working-class” residents are defined as those individuals who are employed with a high school education.

The results of this model are shown in Figure 5, and they indicate that there is a strong, positive relationship between the percentage of whites with a high school diploma and the shifts in Presidential margins of victory between 1980 and 2016. As the percentage of whites with a diploma increases by one percentage point, margin of victory for the Republican candidate between 1980 and 2016 also increases by 1.8 points. These results indicate that we cannot completely rule out that shifts in voting behavior in rural Missouri counties are a part of national shifts in rural political ideology; one that moves toward conservatism and populism.

The coefficient of the independent variable measuring the shift in the percentage of evangelicals in each county was not statistically significant. Thus, it does not appear that the change in the number of evangelicals in each of these two counties had a direct relationship with Republican margins of victory. The r-squared value in the first model is relatively high at .62, indicating that these variables make for a strong model fit.
Figure 5: The shift in MOV for Republicans between 1980 and 2016 by shifts in evangelicals and percentage of whites with HS education

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>P value</th>
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<td>Evangelical Shift 1980-2016</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>p = 0.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites with HS Diploma in 2010</td>
<td>1.82*</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>p = 0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.001  
R-Squared = .62

Another set of OLS regression models looks at the 1980 and 2016 elections separately, with the percentage of evangelicals in those years as an independent variable in both models, and the percentage of white residents with a high school diploma in 2010 as an additional variable in the 2016 model. The results show that in 1980, the percentage of evangelicals in each county did not have a statistically significant relationship with the Republican Presidential candidate’s margin of victory. In 2016, however, this variable was statistically significant, showing that as the percentage of evangelicals increases by one percentage point, the margin of victory for the Republican candidate is predicted to increase by roughly .28 of one percentage point. This finding indicates an increased politicization of evangelicals within Iron and Oregon Counties in 2016.

In 2016, the percentage of whites with a high school education also had a statistically significant relationship with Republican margins of victory—this variable had a stronger relationship than the percentage of evangelicals in counties, in fact. The
results show that as the percentage of whites with a high school diploma increases by one percentage point, the margin of victory for Republican candidates is predicted to increase by almost two percentage points.

Figure 6: Effect on Republican MOV’s in 1980 and 2016 elections by percentage of evangelicals and whites with HS diploma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evangelicals</td>
<td>.10 (.119)</td>
<td>.28** (.140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites with HS Diploma</td>
<td>.1.86* (.094)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001
**p < .05

The graph below also demonstrates that the evangelical effect was generally greater on Republican margins of victory in 2016 than it was in 1980, as well as had greater variation in its influence in 1980 compared with 2016. Counties with less than 20% of residents identifying as evangelical had the widest variation in margins of victory between 1980 and 2016. The smallest difference in effect on victory margins between 1980 and 2016 were observed in counties that had between 25 and 30 percent evangelical residents, as well as when counties reached 50-54% evangelical—these counties had similar margins of victory for Republican Presidential candidates in 1980 and 2016. Interestingly, counties generally had higher percentages of evangelicals in 2010 than they did in 1980. Counties with high rates of evangelicals (around 35% and higher) are electing Republicans by higher margins of victory in 2016 than they were in 1980—further evidence that the evangelical effect has grown stronger on GOP victories.
over time in Missouri.

From a statewide perspective, it would appear that the evangelical effect is related to the Republican cohesion of voting behavior in Missouri; however as the analysis below on Iron and Oregon Counties has shown, this effect is not necessarily as strong within specific counties or the primary reason why some counties have become more rigidly Republican over time.

**Graph 1: GOP Margins of Victory in 1980 and 2016 by Percent Evangelical in Missouri Counties**

A Tale of Two Counties

This section analyzes the effects of sorting and religiosity in two rural Missouri

*Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis*
counties and their electoral outcomes between 1980 and 2016. Because this section can only cover two counties (out of Missouri’s 115), this analysis is only preliminary and is not meant to draw generalized conclusions about all of Missouri’s rural counties. Some initial understanding of the demographics and politics within these two counties over time, however, could establish a foundation on which to build future analyses and to test additional hypotheses.

**Iron County**

Iron County is technically located in the southeastern region of Missouri, though it sits well above the bootheel and is closer to St. Louis County (south and west of St. Louis County, separated by Washington and Jefferson Counties) than it is to most southeast Missouri counties. Iron County gets its name from the multitude of natural resources within its borders—iron, lead, granite, and marble—that have also led to local industries and economies around these resources (Emerson 1876).

Demographically, Iron county’s median age has increased from 33 in 1980 to 43 in 2015, however, the percentage of residents who are 65 and over has remained relatively stable since 1980. The percentage of residents who are white has also remained steady over time, with a slight decrease from 99% in 1980 to 96% in 2015. The percentage of individuals living below the poverty line in 1980 (17%) is comparable to 2015 (18%), as is the percentage that relies on Social Security pension (34% in 1980 and 36% in 2015). The unemployment rate in Iron County decreased over time, down to 6% in 2015 from 8% in 1980 (though it rose to 11% in 1990). The percentage of
residents 25 and over with only a high school diploma decreased substantially from 71% in 1980 to 40% in 2015 (with an even lower percentage in 1990 at 34%).

Table 3: Iron County Demographics Over Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>11084</td>
<td>10726</td>
<td>10630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td>11760</td>
<td>22574</td>
<td>36239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 65 and Over</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Foreign Born</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Below Poverty</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Social Security</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% HS Diploma</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% HS Diploma White</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Electorally, Iron County is an interesting case study, because voters there not only have a history of splitting their ballots, they also voted largely Democratic in the 1990s (as Tables 4 and 5 demonstrate). Iron County was represented by two members in the State House until the 1990 census and subsequent redistricting. Iron County residents consistently voted for Democratic state representatives until as late as 2010—one of these Democratic representatives, J.C. Kuessner, was elected by a 22 point margin in 2002, even after Republicans gained control of the redistricting process in 2000. Kuessner was then re-elected three times by staggering margins (45, 57 and 57 points, respectively) until he was term-limited out in 2010. Additionally, Iron County was one of only three non-urban counties to vote for Barack Obama for President in 2008, and it was the only 100% rural county to do so.
Table 4: Iron County Voting patterns 1980-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 1</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 2</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

Table 5: Margins of Victory by Race for Iron County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IRON</th>
<th>MOV 80</th>
<th>MOV 84</th>
<th>MOV 88</th>
<th>MOV 92</th>
<th>MOV 96</th>
<th>MOV 00</th>
<th>MOV 04</th>
<th>MOV 08</th>
<th>MOV 12</th>
<th>MOV 16</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Oregon County

Oregon County is placed squarely in the Ozark region of the country, known for its hills, valleys and deep tree lines. Oregon County’s local economy was historically built around timber and logging industries, as well as peach orchards—some of which were the largest in the entire country in the late 1800s (Oregon County Historical Society 1990).

The median age in Oregon County decreased slightly to 41 in 2015 from 43 in 1980, however the percentage of those 65 and over increased from 19% to 22%. The percentage of residents who are white also decreased somewhat, from nearly 100% in 1980 to 95% in 2015. In 1980, 29% of residents lived below the poverty line compared with 26% in 2015. Residents receiving Social Security increased slightly from 42% in
1980 to 45% in 2015, though the percentage of residents who were unemployed decreased from 6% to 4%. Finally, the percentage of residents with only a high school diploma decreased from 49% to 40% from 1980 to 2015.

Table 6: Demographic Profile of Oregon County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oregon County</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>10238</td>
<td>9470</td>
<td>10979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td>7937</td>
<td>13705</td>
<td>29851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 65 and Over</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Foreign Born</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Below Poverty</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Social Security</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% HS Diploma</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% HS Diploma White</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Residents of Oregon County voted overwhelmingly Democratic from 1980 through 2000, even after counties around Oregon began to realign substantially toward the Republican party in Presidential contests (e.g., Ripley, Carter, Shannon, and Howell, none of which had voted Democratic for President since at least 1980). By 2004, however, Oregon County had also realigned almost completely with the Republican party, except for a strong victory for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Jay Nixon in 2008. This solidly Republican electoral outcome in 2004 was substantially different than the Democratic outcomes for Governor and state Representative in 2000.

Table 7: Oregon County Voting Patterns 1980-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 1</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 2</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8: Margins of Victory by Race and Year for Oregon County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OREGON</th>
<th>80 MOV</th>
<th>84 MOV</th>
<th>88 MOV</th>
<th>92 MOV</th>
<th>96 MOV</th>
<th>00 MOV</th>
<th>04 MOV</th>
<th>08 MOV</th>
<th>12 MOV</th>
<th>16 MOV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 1</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Rep 2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Geographic Sorting in Iron and Oregon Counties

Bishop’s argument of geographic sorting rests on two pillars examined here, that sorting (1) changes communities demographically and economically by making them more homogenous over time, and that (2) sorting occurs because people physically move to be around like-minded neighbors (“copartisans”). In fact, the mobility of residence is a core component of Bishop’s thesis: people move, he argues, to areas that reflect their cultural, political, and moral values. Particularly important for this paper is that Bishop finds that more conservative (and white) people move to rural areas from cities, causing these areas to become even more conservative (and vice-versa for urban areas).

Bishop uses county-to-county migration data provided by the IRS to document and support his argument, and this paper uses that same data to see if and how much migration has occurred into and out of the two case study counties, as well as where residents are moving to and from. While electoral outcomes are measured from 1980 through 2016, the initial analysis of the migration data in this paper goes back to 2007.

Iron County showed a net loss in population, though relatively minor, from 2007 through 2009, then increased in population nominally by four residents in 2010-11. Iron

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County received its biggest population boost in 2011-12 when the county netted 186 new residents. After a small decrease in 2012-13, Iron County grew again by 133 residents in 2013-14. While the number of residents moving into and out of the county from 2007-2014 is measurable, the relatively low values of population growth and loss in Iron County is not equivalent to the percentage shifts in electoral outcomes. In other words, voters chose Republican candidates in 2010, 2012 and 2014 at much higher margins than can be accounted for simply by the relatively minor changes in population; Iron County has between 10,500 and 11,500 residents on average, so even a net increase of 186 residents would likely not affect electoral outcomes.

Additionally, the IRS reports that residents were largely moving from and to other rural or semi-rural counties in Missouri—not to or from cities as Bishop finds in his study. There is some movement back and forth between Iron County and St. Louis County, the only county in Missouri that has grown more Democratic over time. It is possible that those residents who moved to Iron County from St. Louis County were conservative voters, and that residents moving from Iron County to St. Louis County were more Democratic-leaning. The number of people moving into and out of St. Louis County, however, is so small that the impact is unlikely to be politically ineffectual on electoral outcomes on its own.

Oregon County steadily loses population from 2007 through 2011-12, though again the net loss of residents is relatively small. In 2012-13 and 2013-14, Oregon County does have a net gain of a few residents, though it loses population again in 2014-15. As with Iron County, the net population growth and loss in Oregon County does not
match the margins of victory for Republican candidates as the county changed its voting patterns. Similar to Iron County, Oregon County’s residents moved from and to other rural counties in Missouri (most commonly Howell County which is a close neighbor), and not to or from cities, as Bishop argues in his study.

Table 9: Residential Mobility in Iron and Oregon Counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Net</th>
<th>FROM</th>
<th>TO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>St. Francois (68), Jefferson (23),</td>
<td>St. Francois (106), Madison (17),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Washington (23), Madison (15), Wayne (14),</td>
<td>St. Louis Co. (14), Washington (14),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>St. Louis Co. (12), Crawford (11), Reynolds (11)</td>
<td>Dent (12), Crawford (11), Jefferson (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>-34</td>
<td>St. Francois (76), St. Louis Co. (15), Crawford (13), Jefferson (12), Washington (10)</td>
<td>St. Francois (95), Jefferson (16), Washington (15), Wayne (15), Madison (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>-53</td>
<td>St. Francois (60), Crawford (17), Washington (14), Jefferson (10)</td>
<td>St. Francois (97), Madison (21), Washington (13), Wayne (11), St. Louis Co. (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>St. Francois (82), Washington (21), Jefferson (13), Madison (10), Reynolds (10)</td>
<td>St. Francois (89), Crawford (12), Madison (12), Jefferson (11), Dent (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>St. Francois (185), Madison (182), Washington (48), Jefferson (42), Reynolds (41), St. Louis Co. (28)</td>
<td>St. Francois (169), Madison (71), Washington (53), Crawford (38), Dent (26), Jefferson (25), Wayne (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>-17</td>
<td>St. Francois (171), Madison (44), Jefferson (39), Washington (34), St. Louis Co. (26), Reynolds (23)</td>
<td>St. Francois (188), Madison (45), Reynolds (41), Wayne (30), Crawford (27), Jefferson (27), Washington (25), St. Louis Co. (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>St. Francois (212), Madison (112), Washington (72)</td>
<td>St. Francois (158), Crawford (84), Washington (57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because religious conservatism is often linked to rural residents in the U.S., this paper will also examine the religious profiles of Iron and Oregon counties, in order to assess if religious influence has played a role in the Republican realignment in these counties.

As Tables 10 and 11 illustrate, the percent of county residents who said they were churchgoers reached its peak in the 1990s with both counties—52% of Iron County...
residents said that they attended church, and 62% responded affirmatively in Oregon County. The percentage of total residents in Iron County who said they attended church went down nominally from 1980 (47%) to 2010 (46%), though the total percentage went up 7 points in Oregon County (39% to 46%). In both counties, the percentage who said they went to church only surpassed majority of each county’s residents in the 1990s.

The number of total congregations in Iron County did not fluctuate much between 1980 (34) and 2010 (35), though the number of evangelical congregations increased by 3 during this same timeframe. In 2016, 77% of congregations in Iron County identified as evangelical, compared with 71% in 1980. The percentage of churchgoers who identified as evangelical went up substantially by 11 points between 1980 and 2010, though the percentage of total residents who identified as evangelical only went up 4 points and was still a minority of the county population at 38% in 2010.

In Oregon County, the number of churches increased by a substantial amount, particularly given the relatively small population within the county. In 1980, Oregon County was home to 33 congregations, however in 2010 there were 52 total congregations; 79% of congregations were evangelical in 1980 compared with 88% in 2010. The percentage of churchgoers who identified as evangelical rose from 84% to 90%, and the percent of county residents who identified as evangelical rose from 32% in 1980 to 42% in 2010, though this number surpassed majority status at 55% in 1990.

Despite the increasing presence of religious and evangelical institutions in the 1990 and 2010 religious censuses, the rising percentage of county residents who said they were churchgoers in the 1990 census, and the steady rise in percentage of
evangelical churchgoers in these areas, both Iron and Oregon Counties continued to elect Democrats to statewide office and as state representatives throughout all of the 1990s. In fact, voters in Iron and Oregon counties appear to grow more conservative in their voting habits as the percentage of churchgoers decreases over time, which runs counter to common hypotheses. Thus, it would appear—at least initially—that a growing religious presence and/or heightened ideological conservatism among churchgoers is not the primary cause of the Republican realignment that has occurred in Iron and Oregon counties.

One interesting finding is that in both Iron and Oregon Counties, the percentage of churchgoers who identify as evangelical increases substantially between 1980 and 2010. Because we know that evangelicalism is an increasingly political and well-mobilized constituency, it is possible that churches are playing a role in the shifting rural Missouri political landscape. This question is worth further investigation.

**Table 10 & 11: Religious Presence in Iron and Oregon Counties**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Iron County</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Churchgoers</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Churchgoers Evangelical</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% County Evangelical</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Congregations</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Evangelical Congregations</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oregon County</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Churchgoers</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Churchgoers Evangelical</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% County Evangelical</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Congregations</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Evangelical Congregations</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis*
Discussion

Through initial analyses, it appears that the self-sorting hypothesis argued by Bill Bishop is not supported in Iron or Oregon Counties, Missouri. While Iron and Oregon Counties have both experienced some changes in their populations over time, these changes are relatively small in scale compared with the dramatic changes in margins of victory for Republican candidates in these counties over the same time period. Additionally, data show that residents moving into and out of both case study counties were largely coming from and moving to other rural or exurban counties in Missouri—not the urban areas that vote much more heavily Democratic. Therefore, demographic and geographic sorting processes are not sufficient in explaining conservative electoral shifts on their own in these counties.

It also appears that religiosity was not the primary cause of the Republican realignment in the case study counties. Both Iron and Oregon Counties saw fluctuations in the presence of churches and percentage of residents who identify as churchgoers between 1980 and 2010. The total number of congregations went up by one in Iron County, and by 19 congregations in Oregon County between 1980 and 2010. The percentage of county residents who identified as churchgoers, however, went down by one point in Iron County between 1980 and 2010, though it rose by seven percentage points in Oregon County. What is perhaps most compelling is that both Iron and Oregon Counties were electing Democrats to statewide office and the state legislature throughout the 1990s; the 1980s and 1990s were when religion had its biggest physical presence in these counties, and it is also the decade in which the national parties began
to take up and align more rigidly with opposite sides of “moral” policy issues like same-sex marriage and abortion rights. If the Republican realignment in these counties was primarily a result of religious and/or ideological influences, then arguably Iron and Oregon Counties would have voted solidly Republican in the 1990s (and perhaps even in the 1980s).

Another Explanation for Rural Voting Shifts

This section briefly lays out an additional explanation for realignment in Missouri, the strength and/or weakness of local political parties within rural communities. The evidence in this dissertation offers some interesting findings. As discussed in previous chapters, local party committees are historically the unit of the party system that is most actively engaged in doing candidate recruitment for local offices (Burbank et al. 2008: 38; Epstein 1986: 134). Joseph Schlesinger argues that the most important factor in determining whether a party structure is active in creating and supporting competitive elections, is simply whether the local party recruits and fields candidates for office under their party label. (Schlesinger 1985: 1154). There are some additional academically-accepted measures of party strength that can be accessed through public data, three of which are (1) number of candidates filing for office, (2) the “competitiveness” of elections, measured in this paper by margins of victory, and (3) the number of officers and members of local political parties.

As Tables 12 and 13 demonstrate, both Iron and Oregon Counties had hotly-contested primary races for state representatives in the 1980s, with both parties fielding
multiple candidates for each seat (note that two state representatives were elected for each county until 1992). In the 1990s, in more races than not, Republicans did not field a single candidate; in fact, Oregon County did not have any Republican primary candidates for state representative races the 1990s, and Iron County only fielded a Republican candidate in 1992 and 1996.

Perhaps just as interesting is that in some of these elections where there was no Republican primary election, there was more than one Democratic candidate running. Beginning around 2000-2002, far fewer candidates were running in primary elections for either party, in both counties. Republicans did field at least one primary candidate in every election from 2002 through 2016, and in several elections two candidates ran in the primary election. On the Democratic side, counties often only had one primary candidate, and Oregon County did not field a Democratic candidate at all in 2008 or 2014—a far cry from the number of Democratic candidates who lined up in the 1980s and 1990s to run for state representative.

Thus, a preliminary analysis suggests that fewer candidates were running for office, perhaps because fewer candidates were being recruited by weakened and/or less active local party structures.

**Tables 12 & 13: Number of Primary State Representative Candidates by County and Year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>REPUBLICAN</th>
<th>DEMOCRAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Tables 14 & 15 demonstrate, membership in Iron and Oregon Counties’ local Democratic organizations decreased between 1980 and 2016, though more so for Oregon than Iron County. These two counties have roughly the same population,
however the number of Democratic committee members in 1980 in Oregon County is almost three times that compared with Iron County. In 2016, however, the membership in the Oregon County Democratic committee had dropped to only 4 members, down from 29 in 1980. Iron County’s Democratic committee began with 11 members in 1980, and reported 8 members in 2016; certainly the committee in Iron County was smaller, however it experienced less of a decrease in membership over time compared with Oregon County.

The Republican local committees in Iron and Oregon Counties fared better overall; Iron County’s membership stayed the same at 9 members in 1980 and 2016, and Oregon County’s committee only dropped by seven members, from 25 to 18.

These very initial analyses indicate that Democratic local committees may have declined in these two case study counties, while Republican party structures have been relatively stable or have only slightly declined since 1980.

Tables 14 & 15: Number of party members in two case study counties over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Democratic Party Members</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Republican Party Members</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More research is needed to fully understand the impact of local party structures on electoral outcomes in rural Missouri, though initial findings on primary candidates and committee membership do show some evidence of a relationship between these two variables.

Conclusion

Missouri is traditionally an electorally dynamic state; voters are known for splitting their ballots between Democrats and Republicans and for their preference for divided state government. Over a relatively short time, however, Missouri voters have been trending more toward the GOP in their vote choices. These shifts in rural voting behavior are not completely explained by common theories of rural voting such as ideological realignments within parties, increased religiosity in rural areas, nor by the theory that rural and urban voters are geographically “sorting” themselves into politically homogenous communities.

This chapter set out to test two hypotheses related to Republican realignment in two rural Missouri counties: (1) whether and to what extent geographic sorting has occurred, and (2) whether and to what extent religious influence has affected electoral outcomes in these two counties. Ultimately, the study found that geographic sorting has not occurred in Iron and Oregon counties in ways that would impact electoral outcomes, nor could sorting be the primary explanation for the dramatic shifts in partisan preferences each of these counties have experienced since 1980.

The chapter also found that while the number of congregations and the
percentage of churchgoers increased from 1980 to 1990, Iron and Oregon Counties still voted heavily Democratic in most statewide and state legislative races throughout the 1990s. Finally, this chapter offers an additional explanation for Republican realignment in rural Missouri, that of local party strength. This hypothesis needs more substantiation, however, initial analyses indicate that local Democratic party committees in Iron and Oregon Counties are recruiting fewer candidates and declining in their membership levels, and these clues energize further investigation.

The findings here suggest that voters in rural Missouri communities were, until recently, splitting their ballots across races. There is also some evidence to show that local parties in rural Missouri communities have declined in membership substantially over the past several election cycles. These findings allow us to explore the organizational hypothesis of local party decline in the following chapters of the dissertation.
Chapter 5: Causes and Consequences of Local Party Decline
**Research Questions**

This chapter addresses questions about local party organizations that are not yet addressed in party scholarship. Specifically, what is the state of rural local party organizations in the modern campaign era? Compared with earlier decades, are rural local party organizations in a state of adaptation or decline? If local parties are in a state of decline in rural areas, does this matter? What are some of the electoral, representative, and participatory implications of diminished local organizational strength in rural areas? Additional questions driving the research in this project are: why have counties in rural Missouri realigned toward the Republican Party since 1980? Why are some rural Missouri counties, who once split their ballots (or even voted entirely Democratic) now voting straight-ticket Republican? This chapter explains the data and research design employed to address these research questions. This section also details the key findings and results of the analyses from these data. I find evidence of declining local party organizations in rural Missouri counties.

**Hypotheses**

The project views the Missouri realignment puzzle from an organizational lens; the author argues that the structures, roles, and strength of local political party committees have declined over time in rural areas. The foundational hypothesis offered in this paper is that local Democratic Party organizations are in a state of decline in rural Missouri counties. As the literature review in section three demonstrates, the weakening of local party structures is expected to result in less candidate recruitment.
and less direct voter contact, all of which lead to fewer competitive elections and political opportunities for rural communities.

Evidence is also likely to show that in case study counties, local parties are primarily doing “service-oriented” activities, if any at all; in other words, local parties have moved substantially away from direct voter contact and relationship-based campaigning in recent election cycles. The research will also likely reveal that this service-oriented model de-prioritizes party integration between state and local party organizations. The potential findings of this project matter, because they suggest that elections could become competitive (again) in rural Missouri when local party organizations are rebuilt with local leadership. The aim of this project is to show that the shifts in rural voting behavior have at least in part an organizational explanation; these shifts are not simply a function of demographic change or geographic destiny on the part of rural Missouri voters.

**Data and Methods**

This study utilizes a mixed methods approach to studying local party decline and its effects in rural Missouri counties. Original survey data are utilized from national surveys fielded in 1992 and 1996. Additionally, an original survey was conducted in 2017 by the author which was mailed to the 2016 Missouri local party leaders in both the Democratic and Republican parties. The 2016 Missouri party leader survey (n=72) was mailed to local party chairs and vice-chairs found through the Missouri State Manual (aka the “blue book”). The Missouri survey data from 1992 (n=128) and 1996 (n=115) were obtained by the author from scholars Douglas Roscoe and Shannon.
Jenkins, purveyors of the surveys carried out in the 1990s and authors of the local party chair survey in 2008. While similar national surveys were conducted in 1980 and 2008, unfortunately no Missouri data are available from these surveys. This study compares the results from the 1992 and 1996 surveys to a 2016 survey conducted in Missouri.

Several sets of survey questions were grouped to create index variables used in this paper. Index variables include (1) local party structure/fundamentals, (2) direct voter contact (3) indirect voter contact, (4) electoral publicity and (5) state party coordination. These five scales were then combined to create a single index variable for each local party organization for each election cycle, a local party strength variable for Republicans and one for Democrats in 1992, 1996, and 2016. For the six index variables measuring local party strength, the range of Cronbach alpha reliability scores was from .61 to .86, demonstrating a strong reliability for these scaled measures (see appendix for the elements of the scale variables and their Cronbach alpha reliability scores). As a result, six regression models were employed to test the relationship between local party strength and margins of victory in rural counties.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were employed to analyze the relationship between each party’s local strength variable against the dependent variable, the average margins of victory between Republicans and Democrats in 1992, 1996, and 2016 across the races of President, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, State Treasurer, Attorney General, Secretary of State, State Auditor, and State Representative.Margins of victory are calculated as the percent difference between the Republican and Democratic candidates; positive values indicate a Republican margin of victory, and
negative values are a Democratic margin of victory. Because this paper is particularly interested in rural Missouri counties, the results reported are bound to rural Missouri counties; urban and suburban counties are not included in this paper. The results of the analyses are detailed in the next section.

Qualitative data were also gathered through individual interviews with party network stakeholders at the state and county levels. Interviewees were chosen through a combination of pre-existing relationships with the author, outreach through social media and email, and through recommendations from high-level party network stakeholders. The interviewees were selected via the snowball method of interviewing; participants each suggested further interviewees for this study. While the dissertation does not select case study counties per se, the snowball method of interview data collection yielded a representative sample of party network stakeholders in a representative sample of rural Missouri counties. Interviews were conducted with participants in Lafayette and Nodaway Counties (Northwest); Adair and Macon Counties (Northeast); Howell, Laclede and Greene Counties (Southwest); Howard County (Central); as well as Cape Girardeau, Pemiscot, and Dunklin Counties (Southeast). In addition to these regional actors, several statewide party and interest group leaders participated in this study as well. Each interview participant signed a consent form to be interviewed, and their names and exact county locations have not been used in this dissertation for confidentiality purposes.

Qualitative data were also gathered through participant-observation at local organizational and events in rural Missouri counties from February through October of
Chapter 5: Causes and Consequences of Local Party Decline

2018. In total, 34 field interviews were conducted in-person and via telephone, and 10 participant-observer experiences have been documented at three local party meetings, three meetings of local progressive organizations, and four regional events convened by political party organizations and interest groups.

Table 1: Role and Number of Interviewees in Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROLE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former and Current Statewide GOP Party Leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Statewide Democratic Party Leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide Electoral Interest Group Director</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Democratic Party Leader</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local GOP Party Leader</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Statewide Candidate Campaign Directors</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filler Organization Leaders</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidates for State Legislature</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Leaders</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Results and Findings

Overall, responses from the 2017 survey have been relatively even across party affiliation for all three election cycles. An overview of demographic factors of survey respondents in 1992, 1996, and 2017 shows that local party organizations were slightly more male-led in 1992 (71%) compared with 2016 (64%), and that all respondents were white in 1992 compared with 97% of respondents in 2016. The mean age of respondents rose 9 years between 1992 and 2016, from 56 to 65 years of age. This

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change shows a substantial aging of the local party infrastructure, a factor that was also raised as a challenge by several of the participants interviewed in this study.

| Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Local Party Surveys in 1992, 1996 and 2016 |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Republican                                      | 46%             | 51%             | 49%             |
| Democrat                                        | 54%             | 49%             | 51%             |
| Mean Age                                        | 56              | 60              | 65              |
| Male-Led                                        | 71%             | 67%             | 64%             |
| White                                           | 100%            | 99%             | 97%             |
| Bachelor or Up                                  | 41%             | 56%             | 63%             |

Structurally, local parties in rural Missouri have experienced some noticeable changes between the 1992 and 2016 election cycles. In 2016, 89 percent of respondents said that their local party organization had a complete set of officers, compared with 96 percent of units in 1992. Only three percent of rural party organizations say that they maintained a local office outside of campaign season in 1992, compared with four percent in 2016. More respondents said that their local party organizations had a budget in 2016 (14%) compared with 1992 (10%), and 71 percent of respondents had an organizational constitution in 2016 compared with 58 percent in 1992. Finally, the percentage of rural respondents who said that they had a campaign headquarters during campaign season fell 13 percentage points, from 61 percent in 1992 to 48% in 2016. This last statistic shows some evidence of declining party organizational presence in rural counties, a point that supports the hypothesis proposed in this dissertation.
A scale of the variables shown in Table 4 was created as an overall measure of rural local party organization “fundamentals,” and the results of an analysis of this is shown in Figure 1. Structurally speaking, local Republican Party organizations had the strongest fundamentals score in 2016 between the three election cycles, compared with a low for Democratic party organizations in the 1996 cycle. Additionally, the results show that local party organizations were relatively even in their fundamental strength in 1992, however in 2016 the gap had widened in favor of Republican organizations.

Table 3, shown below, gives the overall responses given by local party leaders in rural Missouri counties across both parties to a series of questions about their formal organizational structure. This index of variables has been labeled the local party organization “fundamentals,” and it is used as an independent variable late in this chapter. Local party leaders overall reported that fewer local units have a complete set of officers in 2016 than in 1992 and in 1996. Additionally, both parties report a substantial decrease in campaign activity between the Presidential election cycle of 1992 and that of 2016. Interestingly, both parties also report relative weakness in 1996 in the areas of having a budget and a formal campaign headquarters.

Table 3: Local Party Organization Fundamentals in Rural Counties: 1992, 1996, and 2016, GOP & Democratic Combined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete Officers</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Time Staff</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains Office</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Budget</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5: Causes and Consequences of Local Party Decline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has Campaign HQ</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Constitution</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relatedly, Figure 1 below breaks out the organizational fundamentals index by party across the same three election cycles. The data show that local Democratic Party organizations in rural Missouri counties overall had a lower fundamental score in 2016 than they did in 1992, while local GOP organizations showed an increase in these organizational components between 1992 and 2016.

It is also notable that both parties reported a sharp decrease in these fundamental scores in 1996. Initial qualitative evidence suggests that both local Democratic and GOP party organizations were weak in the later 1990s for the same reason: Democrats dominated Missouri politics in this decade. For this reason, the state GOP did not invest heavily in rural counties where Democratic state legislators prevailed, and the state Democratic party did not invest in these areas because they felt that these seats were safe. In 2002 when term limits took effect for state legislators, the importance of local party organizations and candidate recruitment for state legislative seats re-emerged. According to several accounts discussed later in this dissertation, the GOP state organization responded better to these shifts in the Missouri political landscape than did the Democratic party organization.

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Further analysis and broader sampling is needed from this initial study to make it more generalizable across the state of Missouri, as well as to test and compare this model to rural counties in other states. For instance, the results from rural counties across Missouri were taken all together for election cycles in 1992, 1996, and 2016. Therefore, it is possible that different counties responded in 1992 than in 1996, and in 2016, and that these counties did different things from one another—this effect could produce a form of sampling error. A more in-depth analysis can look at specific counties, and their individual results across time, measuring these specific county responses against the margins of victory in those counties.

Membership has declined substantially in local Democratic Party committees in many rural Missouri counties. While membership in local Republican parties has also declined in four of the six counties highlighted here, the decline on the GOP side has been much less severe. In two counties, membership in the local Republican party has increased. These findings lend
support to the primary hypothesis that local party strength is a strong component of electoral outcomes in these case study counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Democratic Party Members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buchanan</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pemiscot</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Republican Party Members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buchanan</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pemiscot</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Declining Local Organization**

For manageability, the analysis in this chapter focuses specifically on Democratic Party organizations in rural Missouri counties, though interviews were also conducted.
with GOP leaders. As defined by de Leon, political articulation is the process of “suturing together” the activities, messages, and policy platforms of political parties to the broader public. De Leon contends that through their articulation activities, parties cohere for individuals the different moving pieces within the political process. Evidence finds that not only are state and local party units not connected to one another through their activities, candidates and activists are also no longer a part of formal party organizations in rural communities.

For instance, when asked how his organization had engaged in the 2016 election cycle, one longtime labor leader in southern Missouri said that his members did not necessarily knock doors or carry campaign literature for candidates simply because they were Democrats. He explained, “[w]ell, Chris Koster’s campaign was here [gubernatorial], Jason Kander’s campaign was here [U.S. Senate], but Hillary Clinton’s campaign was not here. So we knocked doors for Koster and Kander, but not for Clinton” (personal interview: February 2018). In a sentence, this labor leader’s experience describes the level of cohesion that is lost between candidates of the same party label without clear political articulation from formal party structures.

By another account, a current local party leader in Southeast Missouri states that when he became politically interested after the 2016 election, he was not sure where to turn. He states, “[b]efore [2016], [the Democratic Party] didn’t have meetings, work with candidates, committee members’ information was not on a website…there was no outreach. There was no way for anyone like me to say ‘hey, I just discovered I’m a Democrat. How can I help?’” (personal interview: April 18, 2018). In fact, by this same
leader’s account when he decided to get more involved, he “…got in contact with the county Democratic party and said ‘hey, I want to help, I want to be a part of things…what do I need to do?’ And there wasn’t really a [Democratic Party] committee. There were people on the committee that had died years ago and nobody knew. So when I decided I wanted to get involved, there was nowhere for someone like me to go” (personal interview: April 18, 2018).

The leader further noted that this was a marked change from elections in the past in that same county, one in which he was born and raised:

Some folks here who were active in the 1970s and 1980s who will tell you that you had to run against somebody to be on the [Democratic Party] committee, and they had precinct captains, it was just a machine down here. And I guess as the years passed and the state started to trend redder and redder, the older folks just sort of died out or they lost interest, and they weren’t able to cultivate a new generation to come forward (personal interview: April 18, 2018).

One woman who attended a Democratic club meeting in Southeast Missouri stated that she had been the local party chair in that county during the late 1990s and early 2000s. She confirmed her colleague’s account, stating that at the beginning of her tenure, the local Democratic party committee had begun to meet less consistently and were overall much less active (participant observation, June 2018). Another local party leader in central Missouri conferred, “Eight years ago, 40-50 people would attend Democratic club meetings in [this] county. Now it is extremely difficult to find people to
run for committee positions and offices.” She went on to further state that “[w]hen people stopped running for office, things fell apart” (personal interview: April 14, 2018).

Through survey data, evidence shows that most local Democratic party organizations had some fundamental elements such as bylaws and elected officers in 2016. Through interview and participant observation data, however, it appears that local party organizations have become much less active and visible in rural counties compared with the 1990s. This evidence supports the argument in this paper that local parties have declined relatively recently in rural Missouri counties.

**Intra-Organizational Cohesion**

Findings in this paper show that the party organization in Missouri is very disaggregated; state and local party organizations are not cohesive in their structures or strategies. This finding suggests that the Democratic Party is not connecting their “nuclei,” to use Schlesinger’s metaphor, and therefore the party organizational network in Missouri appears to be very weak. Implications of this organizational weakness in rural areas will be described in a later section.

Some evidence from survey data show that coordination between local and state party units in Missouri decreased in the 2016 election cycle in rural areas compared with the 1990s. Coordination between GOP state and local units was higher than that of Democratic organizations in 1992 and 1996, though coordination between state and local party organizations declined for both parties across these three election cycles. In 2016, the levels or state and local party coordination were relatively even across both
parties, however coordination between the two levels was at its lowest point in 2016 as well. These results indicate that state party organizations invested substantially less in local party organizations in 2016 than they did in the 1990s.

**Figure 2: Level of State Party Coordination with Rural Local Units by Party, Across Election Cycles**

Qualitative data also illustrate that the state and local units within the Democratic party structure have not worked consistently together across at least two Presidential election cycles. One senior-level staffer with the 2012 Democratic gubernatorial campaign in Missouri stated that, “...[our] campaign was not connected to the Presidential campaign” operating in the state that same year (personal interview: November 23, 2017). Evidence shows that local party units have also become disconnected from state party operations and statewide candidate campaigns in Missouri. At one local Democratic club meeting in Southeast Missouri, the group assembled talked about a Democratic campaign headquarters that would be opening in
their county in the next few weeks. As the club chair made the announcement, he also offered the caveat that “…it will be [U.S. Senator] Claire [McCaskill]’s campaign, to be clear” (participant-observation: May 2018). Attendees at the club meeting appeared to understand that the campaign office would be a temporary structure in their community, and as one member put it, the establishment of the temporary headquarters “…was an opportunity to get as much out of the state [party] as possible.” The office would operate with its own campaign staff, and the local Democratic club chair was unaware of anyone from the local party or community who would be on staff with the campaign office (participant-observation: May 2018).

Interviewees from across the state illuminated that some candidates running for statewide or federal office have prioritized rural areas during recent campaign cycles, however the Democratic party as an organization has not invested in rural communities in a long-term or consistent way since the 1990s. According to an elected Democratic party committee member in Northeast Missouri, the Democratic state party once recruited and managed volunteers to run local campaign offices in rural areas, however “the [state Democratic Party] quit doing that in 2000.” This same source said that state party staff were visiting rural areas more in 2016, but they were still not investing in local organizations financially or through staffing; this is largely due to lack of resources at the state level, he also offered (personal interview: April 18, 2018).

Another local Democratic Party leader in Southern Missouri stated that he understood that the state party organization was constrained by resources, however new organizational leadership did make some changes in the 2016 election cycle: “The
state party can’t give donations to candidates here, because they are strapped for cash. But they give free trainings to candidates...those were non-existent before” (personal interview: April 18, 2018). A third local Democratic Party leader in central Missouri conferred that the state party until 2016 was “very disorganized,” and that the local party’s relationship with the state party organization had been strong in the 1990s but had been weak all through the early 2000s (personal interview: April 14, 2018). In 2016, the central Missouri Democratic Party leader said that she had some help from the state party on things such as training with the voter database, but that this support was still “spotty” and inconsistent (personal interview: July 2018).

Thus, while there is some evidence of a presence of statewide party and candidate-based political operatives in rural counties in the 2016 cycle, these activities did not necessarily build the capacity of local organizational structures for the long haul.

**Mobilization and Candidate Recruitment/Support**

Mobilization through direct voter contact and candidate recruitment have traditionally been core party functions. In the modern campaign era, however, direct voter contact has been replaced by more media and technology-centric tactics (Nimmo 1970; Frantaich 1989; Shea 2013). In addition, when direct voter contact strategies are implemented in modern campaigns, they are often done so on the part of candidate-based campaigns, who are more likely to hire outsiders to do the direct voter contact work (Corrado 1994).

The results of the 2016 survey support the existing evidence that local party
organizations are doing less direct voter contact in the modern campaign era. Results also show that in 1992 and 1996 Republican Party organizations were doing slightly more direct voter contact on average than were Democratic organizations, and that in 2016 Democratic organizations did more than Republican organizations. Respondents across both parties indicate a decline in these direct contact activities steadily across all three election cycles.

Figure 3: Levels of Direct Voter Contact by Party Across Election Cycles

Candidate Recruitment

In addition to a shift away from mobilization activities, local party organizations in rural areas are constrained in their abilities to recruit and support candidates for local and district-level offices. Of the seven candidates for local and state legislative seats interviewed or observed in this study, none had been recruited by their local party
organization. One candidate for state representative in 2018 had also revived his local Democratic Party organization in southern Missouri after the 2016 election cycle. This candidate stated that no one recruited him to run for office. As he stated, he realized that “...the deadline [to file for the state representative race] was two weeks away, and [I noticed that] nobody else was signed up. That was my ‘recruitment’” (personal interview: June 2018).

Another 2018 candidate for state representative in a southwest Missouri district was recruited to run by her former high school civics teacher. At a local party picnic in the summer of 2018, the author was part of a conversation with this candidate for state representative and a Democratic candidate for U.S. Congress. These two candidates commiserated about the difficulties they had in raising money, the lack of seasoned campaign staff available, and the need to hire local people for their campaigns. In her experiences coordinating with the state party, the Congressional candidate stated that the people she encountered were not from or familiar with her district, or with rural Missouri more broadly. At one point she contented, “We need people working on these campaigns who are from here, from rural Missouri, not city folk” (participant-observation: June 2018). Yet another local party leader stated in a personal interview that the Democratic organization in her county had “given up” on candidate recruitment for local and state offices, because they did not have the capacity to take on such work (personal interview: July 2018).

Two former executive directors of the Missouri state Democratic Party interviewed for this study confirm that candidate recruitment in rural areas was a priority.
for the state party organization in the 1990s, however that began to change in the early 2000s with new staff and leadership (personal interviews, June and August 2018). The state party invested staff resources in candidate recruitment and support in some key legislative areas in rural Missouri in the 1990s, as told by the interviewees. The state party also offered a free, comprehensive candidate training in multiple locations across the state to any candidates who wished to participate. Both former state Democratic Party directors stated that this candidate training was the launching pad for several successful Democratic campaigns for the state legislature throughout the 1990s (personal interviews: June and August 2018). This training was de-prioritized by new leadership, however, beginning in the early 2000s.

The graph in Figure 4 shows the change in proportion of uncontested races for state representative in the 1992, 1996, and 2016 election cycles. The results show clearly that the number of uncontested Republican candidates has risen sharply between 1992 and 1996. In 1992, roughly 12 percent of GOP incumbents were uncontested in their races for state representative, compared with a massive 68 percent of unopposed GOP incumbents in 2016. On the Democratic side of the aisle, 31 percent of incumbent state representatives were unopposed, compared with just 1 percent of Democratic incumbents in 2016. These stark numbers demonstrate that candidate recruitment for these offices was strong on the part of Democrats in 1992 but relatively week for the GOP. Flashing forward to 2016, however, and Republicans have ensured that every Democratic incumbent state representative has a challenger, while a strong percentage of their GOP candidates run unopposed.
Figure 4: Proportion of Uncontested Races for State Representative In Rural Districts 1992, 1996, & 2016

Percent State Rep. Races Uncontested

Margins of Victory in rural counties 1992-2016

The dependent variable used in analysis paper is the “margin of victory” (MOV), or the difference in percentages, between the Republican and Democratic candidates in an election contest. A Republican MOV is indicated by a positive number, and a Democratic MOV by a negative number. For instance, in a race for Governor, if a Republican candidate received 54 percent of the vote and a Democratic candidate 46 percent, the MOV would be 8 points (and a -8 for a Democratic victor). For this paper, the average margin of victory is taken across races for President, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, State Treasurer, State Auditor, and State Representative for each rural Missouri County. The mean total MOV across these races acts as the dependent variable in this study, and the compressed index measuring
local party strength for each party is the independent variable.

As shown in Figure 5 below both the mean total and direction in margins of victory have shifted dramatically in rural Missouri counties between 1992 and 2016. In both 1992 and 1996, the mean MOV for rural counties was negative, or more Democratic, with a slightly stronger Democratic MOV in 1996. In 2016, however, the mean MOV for rural Missouri Counties was decidedly in the Republican direction, with a \textit{mean} MOV total of over 50 percentage points across the races measured.

\textbf{Figure 5: Margins of Victory Across Election Cycles}

The question this chapter addresses is whether the proposed measures of local party strength have any relationship to electoral outcomes; in other words, do stronger local party organizations mean higher margins of victory for their respective candidates? None of the six regression models were statistically significant, likely due to small sample
sizes of survey returns that were then separated by party, further winnowing the statistical pool.

The direction of the relationship generated by these regression models are plotted in Figures 6-8, however, and these graphs show that the relationships between the variables are in the hypothesized directions in five out of six cases. These plots indicate support for the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between local party strength and electoral margins of victory for the respective party candidates. As shown in 1992, as Republican party strength increases, the average MOV for all races trends more Republican. Additionally, probabilities show that as Democratic Party strength increases in 1992, the MOV’s trend more Democratic. Notice that the margins of victory along the y-axis are all negative in 1992, strongly favoring Democratic candidates overall.

In 1996, as Republican local party organizations get stronger, MOV’s still trend Democratic, which is the only case out of the six that does not initially support the proposed hypothesis. This result could be spurious. The result could also indicate that local Republican organizations were particularly inactive in 1996, a possibility that is supported by the graph showing local party fundamental strength. In 1996, as Democratic local party organizations get stronger, the margins of victory also strongly increase in their favor. Notice how the MOV’s in 1996, even though still favoring Democrats, are much smaller and trending more GOP during this election cycle.

The probabilities of 2016 show a positive relationship between local party strength and margins of victory for both local party organizations. Republican margins of
victory increase (though somewhat marginally compared with other cycles) as local party organization strength increases, and Democratic margins of victory also increase as their local party strength increases. Again, notice the values along the y-axis showing the GOP MOV’s in 2016 are enormous—especially compared with the values along the y-axis in 1992.

Figure 6: Relationship Between Local Party Strength & Expected Margin of Victory 1992:
Figure 7: Relationship Between Local Party Strength and Expected Margins of Victory 1996:
Figure 8: Relationship Between Local Party Strength and Expected Margins of Victory 2016:

Conclusion

The strength and activities of local party committees have changed substantially between the 1990s and 2016, a finding that is true for both Republican and Democratic committees in rural Missouri. While most local party organizations report that they have a constitution or by-laws, and a complete set of officers, data also show that levels of direct voter contact are down in 2016 compared with the 1990s, as well as levels of coordination with state party organizations. These results could indicate that local party organizations exist on paper in rural counties, however they also are declining in their
roles and activities in and between elections. Existing research shows that many elements of the modern “post-party” campaign era have negatively impacted or altogether displaced local party units, and this chapter found evidence supporting this theory. The chapter also addressed the question, does local party strength impact margins of victory and electoral outcomes in rural Missouri counties? While the regression models testing this question were inconclusive, plots of predicted probabilities indicate that there is in fact a positive relationship between local party strength and margins of victory for parties’ respective candidates. Larger sample sizes and controls for other factors will be needed to provide more determinative evidence of a causal relationship.

The qualitative data presented here bolster some of the preliminary quantitative findings, demonstrating at least that locally-based organizations matter, and that party organizations matter uniquely in rural Missouri. There are indicators that state and national party organizations have invested less in rural Missouri party committees over time, leaving local parties to fend for themselves. Additionally, candidate-centered campaign activities provide some political opportunity structures in rural communities, however these opportunities are sporadic and do not typically buttress or even include local party organizations (Blumberg, Bining, and Green 2003, 2007, 2011). Qualitative research to date observers that “filler” organizations exist in rural counties, and these groups can take on some of the roles of local political parties, though not all of these roles. Electoral outcomes may also be a function of the presence and/or strength of

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these filler organizations in some rural counties. The qualitative data also need a bigger sample size and more observations before generalized predictions can be made.

Regression models in this chapter were not statistically significant, and therefore it is not possible to determine a causal relationship between the measures of local party strength offered here and the margins of victory for Republican candidates. The models do report, however, that there is some relationship between these variables. Additionally, qualitative evidence backs the claim that local Democratic Party units declined in rural counties as the GOP gained ground in the legislature and the executive branch. Without stronger statistical evidence, one cannot know if local Democratic Parties declined because of GOP momentum, or if GOP momentum is a result of declining Democratic organization.

The results presented in this chapter do not show a causal connection between local party strength and electoral outcomes; this finding is similar to previous studies in this same arena. Previous scholarship, however, has laid the foundation of knowledge that shows us that organizations are important to civic society, critical to electoral participation and mobilization, and at their healthiest when they build local infrastructure and processes. While from these findings one cannot clearly say that local party organizations determine electoral outcomes, one would be hard-pressed to argue that the Missouri Democratic Party can win in these areas without strong local organizations.

Further, the findings in this chapter arguably show that there is enough of a relationship between local party strength and margins of victory that the link is worth
investigating. Additionally, there has been a consistent shift toward the GOP among rural Missouri voters since 1992, however it does not appear to be a sudden shift. This slow process of alignment with the GOP is arguably inconsistent with theories that suggest conservative voters shifted unilaterally and decisively to the GOP when cultural issues began to dominate party agendas. In Missouri, rural voters were still voting Democratic for many offices even after these issues became aligned with national party platforms. Data also suggest that local party organizations have receded almost entirely in some rural counties, and this organizational absence comes with some important repercussions. These new findings are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
Chapter 6: Party Blight and Filler Organizations

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Introduction

This chapter addresses the question, what has happened to local party organizations in rural Missouri counties in the modern campaign era? This chapter proposes that local parties in many rural counties are in such a state of decline that they have become functionally absent in electoral arenas. This chapter proposes the concept of “party blight,” the idea that physical organizational structures in rural Missouri counties have been hollowed out over time.

Additionally, this chapter provides evidence of a new form of organization in rural areas, that of “filler organizations.” This chapter first reviews literature on the importance of organizations in modern society, as well as literature on identifying organizational forms and structures. Then, academic conceptualizations of “blight” are examined further. The chapter then introduces and explains the concept of party blight, as well as some of the observed implications of this organizational decline in rural counties. Some proposed explanations are offered for why the GOP has been able to thrive in rural counties even with broader shifts to the campaign environment and a blighted local party structure. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of emergent filler organizations in many rural Missouri counties, and why they do not completely fill the void left by latent party organizations.

Organizations as Institutions

Political science and sociological literatures each devote volumes of research to the study of organizational structures, and this overview can only cover the top layer of this
scholarship. For the purposes of this chapter, it is helpful to understand the importance of organizations in society, as well as the formal and informal components of organizations. These elements of organizations relate to the study of local political parties and filler organizations covered in this dissertation.

As scholar Lynne G. Zucker contends, “[o]rganizations are the preeminent institutional form in modern society. They organize and structure the daily lives of most people...[o]rganizations are everywhere, involved in almost every possible sphere of human action” (1983:1). By one definition, organizations are “coordinated efforts” to accomplish things an individual could not otherwise accomplish on their own (Hatch 2011: 1). For the purposes this study, local party organizations are analyzed as the primary organizational structures that attract and coordinate a community’s collective efforts to influence election outcomes.

An important point related to this study is illuminated by scholar Mary Jo Hatch, that “[c]ompetition is as important to organization as is cooperation” (2011: 3). Chapter 2 highlights academic literature that names electoral competition as an indicator of party organizational strength. As chapters 4 and 5 illuminate, recent cycles elections in rural counties have been increasingly non-competitive; the number of candidates running unopposed for state representative in rural districts has risen sharply over the past 20 years. This decrease in the number of competitive races is one indication that local party organizations may be in a state of decline.

Organizational literature also distinguishes between an organization and organizing; organization refers to a physical, structural, and stable entity, while organizing is the
processes through which organizations achieve their goals (Hatch 2011: 10). The findings in this study indicate that changes in the processes of organizing have also negatively impacted the physical organizational structure of political parties. In other words, how parties organize determine how party organizations look. This contention is also supported by Mary Jo Hatch who argues that “strategy, structure, and behavior [within organizations] are mutually influential and interdependent” (2011: 27).

Organizational processes are carried out through formal and informal mechanisms. Formal organizational structures typically include the components of hierarchy, division of labor, specialization (Weber 1957). The physical space occupied by an organization is also a component of formal organization, and literature finds that consistent physical space is related to organizational behavior and its stability (Hatch 2011: 38). As earlier chapters have illustrated, most rural, local party organizations do not have a physical office space year-round (and never have). What has changed most dramatically regarding space and rural party organizations is that many more leaders report that the presence of party and candidate campaign offices during election cycles has decreased substantially over the past 20 to 30 years. Therefore, this study examines both permanent and temporary party headquarters as a sign of local party decline.

By comparison, informal components also contribute to organizational structures. Informal elements include organizational culture, social bonds, and relationships built between individuals within organizations (Hatch 2011). These bonds are built through individuals engaging in work together that benefits the entire organization. As has been pointed out previously, many rural parties lack physical office space in and between
elections, and they now exist within a broader campaign environment that is now focused on media, messaging, and technology-driven strategies at the expense of relational, face-to-face mobilization tactics. Therefore, the structured and consistent opportunities for rural partisans to engage with one another directly have decreased substantially over the past 20 to 30 years.

James Q. Wilson denotes that individuals join political parties for a combination of material, solidary, and purposive benefits (Wilson 1995). Material benefits include tangible rewards for organizational membership, like patronage jobs or political favors (Wilson 1995: 97). The purposive benefits of party membership are those that give an individual meaning in their public actions (Wilson 1995: 101). Finally, solidary benefits of party membership include social interactions, interpersonal relationships, and the feeling of being part of a team (Wilson 1995: 110). In the modern campaign era, however, state and national party units have abandoned the physical organizational structures that build social and interpersonal relationships through political opportunities in local communities.

This dissertation contends that to fulfill all of their core functions, political parties cannot only focus upon media and communication strategies, because these strategies do not build local organizations. This is true, because “[o]rganizational social structure is created by patterns of interaction and relationships through which the work of an organization is accomplished, and its purpose realized” (Hatch 2011: 25). This social structure is critical to organizational success, as Hatch argues, because organizations “are structured by relationships that grow from interactions, the repetition of which
(e.g. in organizational routines) provides stability and helps to ensure cooperation” (Hatch 2011: 25). In the 1990s, there is evidence that local party organizations in rural Missouri counties were engaged in candidate recruitment and direct voter mobilization, in addition to holding regular Democratic Party meetings. Since the 2000s, however, these activities have declined sharply for local Democratic Party organizations in many rural counties.

Much of the sociological literature on organizations is rooted in industrial and workplace studies. Even so, one can see parallels in the social impacts of quickly-advancing technology on both industrial and political organizations. Hatch notes that advancing technology, “particularly computer chips and satellite communication networks” have dramatically changed organizations, because they have “reduced the need for physical proximity and face-to-face coordination. In doing so, they have encouraged virtual organizations and enabled networking” (Hatch 2011: 47). As Chapter 2 covers, studies show that political party organizations have also moved toward more technology-driven strategies than interpersonal and face-to-face strategies. While these efficiencies may make sense for industrial productivity, when applied to political parties, these technology-driven tactics do not engage local party members in direct mobilization campaigns that build local organizations.

Political parties are considered institutional organizations in American politics. Zucker defines institutionalism as “a process by which certain social relationships and actions come to be taken for granted...while at the same time it is the structure of reality defining what has meaning and what actions are possible“ (1983: 2). Zucker also
argues that organizational institutionalization creates cognitive processes within people where alternatives are “unthinkable” (1983: 6). In these ways, this dissertation argues that not so long ago, local political party organizations were institutions within rural communities; it was nearly impossible to become politically engaged or effective without working through or with these party organizations.

In the current political landscape, however, rural Democratic Party organizations have become inactive and invisible, creating an opportunity chasm for would-be political actors in rural communities. As this chapter will later illustrate, new organizations have arisen in some counties to fill the void left by traditional party organizations, however they have nowhere near the level of institutionalized presence established by traditional party organizations.

**Party Blight**

The findings in this study indicate that local party organizations were once strong in many rural Missouri counties, and that much of this strength was dependent upon resources from the state party organization. Over time, however, the state Democratic Party in and most statewide candidates in Missouri have pulled organizational resources out of rural areas, and local party units have withered away as a result. This dissertation proposes a concept for this process of the loss local of formal organization called “party blight.”

In the social sciences, the term “blight” is most often used to describe the deterioration and decay of urban structures and/or neighborhoods. The official
definition of blight offered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a blighted structure when a structure “exhibits objectively determined signs of deterioration sufficient to constitute a threat to human health, safety and public welfare” (Housing and Urban Development). In short, urban blight is the process by which a previously functioning part of a city falls into structural decay. This dissertation uses the term blight to describe what has happened to local party organizations in rural Missouri counties over the past three decades, because the processes of structural/urban blight and organizational blight are analogous in some ways.

Urban blight is often brought on when industrial and economic opportunities leave an area—when industry leaves, jobs, wages, and often people also leave. In an analogous way, this study argues that when formal party organizations leave an area, political opportunities for rural residents also leave. With urban blight comes some measurable and identifiable social impacts, such as increased crime and poverty rates, as well as a depreciation of property values (Breger 1967). Compared with urban blight, the structural and social consequences of party blight are not as easily measurable, and they are perhaps less acute in nature overall.

Economist G.E. Breger explains the social and perceptual changes that lead to urban blight this way:

...the historic prototypes of [blighted property] uses were all considered acceptable to society during some earlier period of urban development.

The essential, though perhaps not the existing, uses then have

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Chapter 6: Party Blight and Filler Organizations

depreciated. The effects are nevertheless identical. And the fact of
depreciation is no less real (1967: 373).

Certainly, this description of urban blight can be applied to local political party organizations in rural counties; local parties used to hold the so-called keys to the political kingdom. Local parties were the center of campaign and political activity, and they once were considered valuable to statewide candidates and party platforms. Arguably, however, these local party units have depreciated in value over time, as political parties have become more nationalized and technology-driven.

Breger also notes that blight “designates a critical stage in the depreciation process. This process appears to involve either functional depreciation (loss of productivity) or social depreciation (loss of prestige) or both... beyond which its existing condition or use is unacceptable to the community” (1967: 372). In many ways, the state of local party organization has become “unacceptable” to local partisans and activists in rural communities as well. This has led to the establishment of several “filler organizations” discussed later in this chapter.

Additionally, Breger argues that the elements of social depreciation are more subjectively determined rather than objectively measured, stating that structures that “have come to be blighted due to social depreciation but are otherwise unchanged, have suffered relative rather than absolute depreciation...[t]hus social depreciation may be relative or absolute” (1967: 372). This point is important in understanding how party organizations have become blighted in rural Missouri as well, because this organizational decline has social implications that are unique to each county. In other
words, there is not one way to measure party or organizational depreciation, because each county has a different social standard for that decline.

Breger develops his definition or urban blight around the depreciation of “real property” in urban cities, and there are organizational analogies that can be made with this frame as well. For instance, Breger points to the functional “disutility” that precedes urban blight; this concept refers to the idea that urban policymakers decide that a property no longer has value or potential for generating value for the city. This depreciation process, Breger argues, “...may result from either deterioration of the capacity to render service or a decline in the demand for the service rendered” (1967:374). We can apply this process to local party organizations as well, in the sense that the literature shows that the demand for the “services” provided by local parties has declined in a candidate-centered and technology-driven modern campaign era. Perhaps it is this decrease in demand for the services of local party organizations that precipitated their decline.

There are also places where the frame or urban blight does not entirely transfer the idea of organizational blight. For instance, definitions of urban blight are dependent upon the identifiable, objective and physical structural decay of property in a specific geographic area. In identifying the blight of party organizations in rural areas, this sort of physical structural decay is not always an observable unit of analysis. Some large rural counties, such as Cape Girardeau in Southeast Missouri, did have a physical Democratic Party headquarters until the 2000s. In Dunklin County, one of the two counties in Missouri’s southern bootheel, the Democratic Party had a permanent
headquarters in the 1980s and 1990s, which was shuttered in the 2000s. The state Democratic Party re-opened a permanent headquarters in Dunklin County in 2018, with a part-time organizer on staff, perhaps an indicator of the Party’s attempt to rebuild organization in rural Missouri. Most of Missouri’s 81 rural counties, however, have never had a permanent Democratic Party headquarters in their areas; therefore, using permanent office space as an indicator of party blight would not be accurate because few rural counties have ever had these structures. Even without permanent headquarters, many rural counties had local party organizations and established physical campaign headquarters in major election cycles through the 2000s, and these temporary structures are also taken into account in measuring party blight. Data from Chapter 5 show that the presence of campaign offices in rural counties have also declined in rural areas.

Urban blight scholarship takes an economic approach in explaining and identifying decay; property values, poverty levels, and unemployment rates are all units of analysis in designating an area as blighted. This piece of the frame for blight does not quite transfer when applied to party organizations; there are no real, observable, economic indicators of party blight. Instead, when measuring party blight, this study analyzes the membership levels of local party organizations over time, as well as the activities of local party organizations to quantitatively measure this concept. The measurable decline in activities such as direct voter mobilization and candidate recruitment over time indicates that local party units have arguably become more blighted over the past 20 to 30 years in rural Missouri counties.
Two important tenets of urban blight that relate to party blight are that blight is a process that occurs over time, and this process is due to a lack of “human investment and maintenance” (Newmax: November 17, 2010). This incremental process of decline applies in observing the blight of local party organizations as well. The Democratic Party in Missouri was very strong in the 1990s, and since the 2000s the Party has steadily been losing ground in rural areas. Additionally, this dissertation argues that local party decline is fundamentally due to a lack of investment on the part of state and national party organizations, an observation that aligns with the disinvestment causes of urban blight. This disinvestment in local party structures is not just prevalent in Missouri. Journalist Alex Roarty reported in 2016 that local party leaders from around the country “say their warnings about the party’s lackluster outreach to rural voters went unheeded by Democratic leaders for years” (Roll Call: November 29, 2016). The findings in this study contribute to broader understanding of how state and national party disinvestment directly impacts local party organizations in rural areas.

In addition to the survey data presented in Chapter 5, there are several substantiated accounts showing that the National Democratic Party has intentionally shifted its organizational resources away from local party organizations and from rural areas over time. One recent Washington Post article by Holly Bailey says it all with a simple title: “Still traumatized from 2016 loss, Democrats weigh how much to reach out to rural America” (Bailey Washington Post: May 8, 2019). The article points to the “crossroads” within the Democratic Party on whether the organization will continue to
try and pursue rural voting blocs or if they will instead focus almost entirely on urban areas (Bailey Washington Post: May 8, 2019).

Roarty reported in 2016 that “[a]ccording to some strategists, the [Democratic] Party didn’t even bother to organize a voter outreach effort in rural America, they say, much less send candidates to hold rallies there” (Roll Call: November 29, 2016). Reports from rural party leaders in Nevada, Massachusetts and Georgia also confirm that state and national party structures are simply not working in rural counties, and when they do attempt outreach, it is superficial and inconsistent (Roll Call: November 29, 2016). Bailey and Roarty illustrate that leaders within the National Democratic Party have made decisions that do not invest nor maintain local party organizations in rural areas. In these ways, the process of party blight seems to follow from similar circumstances as urban blight.

Further, when state and national party organizations do reach out to rural areas, they do so in ways that do not connect with the local party or electorate (Roll Call: November 29, 2016). As Roarty finds: “[rural leaders] feel that the Democratic Party has become captive by a set of city-dwelling political professionals who personally don’t understand the important differences of urban versus rural campaigns (Roll Call: November 29, 2019). Arguably, this intra-party disconnect between urban and rural mobilization strategies is further evidence of and reasons for the blight of local party structures.

There is evidence of the intra-party disconnect between urban and rural Democratic Party leaders in Missouri as well. A new Democratic Party leader who had
revived her local party organization in a rural Northwest Missouri county recounted how members at a meeting had been visited in 2016 by staff from the state Democratic Party. The leader said that afterward, members thought that the State Party staff were “kids with city haircuts” who did not understand rural politics (personal interview, February 15, 2018). A Congressional candidate running in a predominantly rural district stated at a regional event, “[w]e need people working on these campaigns who are from here, from rural Missouri, not all of these city folk” (participant observation: June 3, 2018). Additionally, four of the eleven local Democratic Party leaders interviewed for this study expressed in some form that while the 2016 state Party staff were more visible in their counties than in previous elections, the staff were often there to present their own agendas, and they positioned themselves as the “experts” on how to win elections in particular counties without engaging local leaders (personal interviews: February 15, February 16, February 21, May 24, 2018).

A leadership factor in declining local Democratic Party structure was a consistent thread through interview data as well. All five of the newly elected local Democratic Party leaders interviewed in this study expressed some dissatisfaction with the previous or existing leadership whom were increasingly inactive yet unwilling to resign their formal Committee positions. One local party leader said that there was complacency among the “old guard;” elected Democratic committee members would meet from time to time, but they would not make phone calls or knock doors on behalf of candidates. Other interviewees reported that their elected Democratic committee members do not show up to meetings, and that some did not even know that they were committee
members when approached. At the same time, the interviewee said, the “old guard” would not yield their elected committee positions (personal interview: May 24, 2018).

Another party leader in Northern Missouri elaborated on this theme of leadership decline as well. Every year the state party organizes an event called “Democrat Days” in Hannibal, which has historically been attended by hundreds of local Democratic leaders from around the state. Participation in the event has dwindled so much in the last few years that the longtime state party leadership did not want to hold the event in 2018. As described by the local party leader, the decision not to hold the event was largely influenced by a 90-year-old committeeman who did not want to organize the event and who is known as a “gatekeeper.” The local party leader also stated that this committee member did not want to give up his seat on the committee. A local party leader eventually stepped in to organize the event with one month’s notice, however the scenario paints a picture of decreasing organizational activity (personal interview, February 21, 2018). This example shows, however, that stale and inactive leadership is another indicator of local party blight in rural areas.

As a functional definition, blight describes something that was once viewed as strong, functional, and vibrant, but that has deteriorated over time due to institutional and human neglect. This process is partly a result of a combination of shifting priorities within institutions, as well as advances in modern technology. Party blight refers to the physical exodus or substantial recession of parties-as-organization (money, staff, space) from rural communities over time. Both in and between elections in the 1990s, Democratic Party organizations once held physical space in rural counties that it appears
they no longer hold. Party blight specifically describes the process of institutional neglect of local organizational structures; physical and consistent spaces that bring people together to build public relationships, form cohesive collective identities, and to channel political values into action. This dissertation argues that by blighting rural party organizations of resources and attention, political parties are neglecting an essential function that determines their normative value and overall strength.

On paper, local party leaders in rural Missouri report that they tend to have bylaws, elected officers, and a website. Therefore, the structural bones of party organizations still exist in many areas--just like in many blighted areas within cities, the bones of a house can still be seen standing even if the inside of the structure has been hollowed out. Functionally and operationally, however, local Democratic Party organizations are not fulfilling their traditional organizational duties in many Missouri counties. The data presented in this study point toward not just a weakening of local party organizations, but an increasing absence of party organization altogether in some rural Missouri counties. These findings have important consequences that are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Thus, as an institution, political parties are no longer fulfilling some of the core functions that they are “supposed” to be fulfilling, which indicates a type of organizational failure. The term “failure” takes on specific meaning, and the word is not used lightly in political science scholarship. Broadly speaking, the term failure is attributed an institution that fails to live up to its expectations and/or democratic
norms. Typically, failure is used to describe economic and market conditions. As James A. Caporaso and David P. Levine state:

The idea of a general failure of the market has a meaning significantly different than that of an individual failure. It means that the aggregate of goods that people need are available and yet cannot be bought and sold because the market mechanism that circulates money into the hands of those who need the goods has broken down...[p]articular failure results from individual miscalculation or misfortune; systemic failure means that the market mechanism is inherently flawed. Systemic failure means that the market frustrates individuals even if they have made the ‘right’ decisions regarding what goods to bring to the market (Caporaso and Levine 1992: 40).

Evidence of organizational failure is found through interviews with local Democratic Party leaders and candidates in rural areas, whom all express a lack of support and attention from state and national Party organizations in recent election cycles. Rural local party decline could perhaps be considered as a negative externality of the modern campaign era; this era has enabled parties to message and advertise to millions of people, however this has come at the expense of building local party organizations that connect through personal relationships with voters. Political scientist Hahrie Han and Historian Lara Putnam argue this point defeats purpose of party organization in their article, “The best way for Democrats to win in 2020? By ignoring the candidates for now.” They write:
Democratic Party leadership gives rhetorical attention to the grass roots. But instead of investing in local party offices and recruiting, training and listening to local leaders who can nurse year-round relationships, the party puts more resources into tools and national communications. With that approach, come election time, voters are merely data points instead of humans enmeshed in a latticework of local relationships (Washington Post: April 29, 2019).

According to one long-time and senior GOP state official interviewed, local party organizations for both parties have shifted from being “very important to increasingly irrelevant,” due in large part to the shift funding streams away from parties and toward candidates as contribution limits have also been eliminated. This leader’s opinion was confirmed by at least four other interviewees, including a former a state Democratic Party director, a former statewide electoral interest group director, and a former high-level gubernatorial campaign staffer. Additionally, this GOP official argued that legislative campaign committees have weakened the local party system, because “they can target races and candidates where they please, and they rarely strengthen the local party when they do engage in rural areas.” The GOP official holds the grim but perhaps realistic view that local parties will not be particularly relevant moving forward; leadership, he argues, will be the key to their success (Personal interview: February 20, 2018). This dissertation finds evidence that local party blight and organizational decline has certain implications in rural Missouri counties. The next section details some of these implications.
Implications of Local Party Blight

The phenomenon of party blight comes with some observable consequences in rural Missouri counties, particularly for the Democratic Party. These consequences have been categorized into two primary categories for this paper: (1) Electoral, and (2) Participatory. In the electoral arena, races for state representative and state senate have become much less competitive for Democrats in rural Missouri counties compared with the 1980s and 1990s (see Figure 1). In 1996 for instance, 15 percent of races with a Republican incumbent and 20 percent of races with a Democratic opponent went unchallenged. There is a substantial increase in unchallenged Republican races in 2016—almost 70 percent of GOP candidates were unchallenged by Democrats that cycle (compared with less than 2 percent of Republican races). This finding is important, because it shows that without local party structure, very little if any candidate recruitment occurs for state legislative races. Two former executive directors of the Missouri Democratic state party also confirm that candidate recruitment in rural areas has not been a priority for the state party since the early 2000s.

In addition to a lack of candidate recruitment, local party organizations struggle to support Democratic candidates in rural counties. Of the four candidates for local office interviewed for this study, all of them said that their respective local party organizations had no capacity to help their candidacy with voter mobilization or fundraising. Thus, findings in this study point to some important electoral implications for a lack of local party organizational structure in rural Missouri counties.
In addition to the electoral repercussions of party blight, there are participatory repercussions as well. For instance, after the polarizing 2016 Presidential election outcomes, several local organizations in rural Missouri counties reported that this had been the incentive for their establishment and/or organizational resurgence. Of the seven interviewees who were leaders of their local Democratic party organization, three reported that their clubs had not been active or had held a meeting before the 2016 election. All seven of the leaders of local Democratic organizations who were interviewed said that they saw a noticeable upsurge in attendance in the meetings just after the 2016 elections, however attendance dropped off after a few months in each case as well (Personal interviews February through October 2018).
One local party leader in a town with a population of less than 5000 people reported that over 100 people attended the Democratic Party meeting in January of 2017. The same result was reported in a small county in the Southeastern region of the state, where over 100 people attended a newly revived Democratic club meeting in December of 2016. All local party leaders report that attendance at meetings began to drop off again after this initial upsurge, and several expressed frustrations at this decline in attendance. Overall, leaders wanted to find ways to keep members engaged and active, however they all struggled with the capacity and knowledge of how to accomplish this goal.

Therefore, evidence in this study shows that without strong local party organizations, there can be missed participatory opportunities for residents in rural areas to engage in political action. While there are signs of new life in local Democratic Party organizations, leaders in this study still report constraints on resources, a lack of capacity to recruit and support candidates, and that they largely feel disconnected from the state party organization.

**Reasons Blight Favors GOP**

The broad shifts in party organization and technology have impacted local parties overall, not just Democratic Party organizations. This fact raises the question, why has the GOP continued to thrive and win so decisively in Missouri since the 2000s? One broad explanation is offered by Hahn and Putnam, who note that national
Democratic Party leaders have responded less well to local grassroots movements than have Republican Party leaders. Han and Putnam find that:

[T]ea party anger on the right translated into high-impact organizing, as new local groups supported and held accountable Republican candidates for school boards and state legislatures across the country. Instead of silencing tea party dissenters, Republican leaders negotiated with them, allowing local leadership to grow. This investment laid the foundation for the GOP “shellacking” of Democrats in the 2010 midterms and the down-ballot victories Republicans racked up from 2009 to 2016 even as Obama won reelection in 2012 and Hillary Clinton won more overall votes than Donald Trump in 2016 (2019).

This paper offers additional case study evidence as to why the GOP has been more successful in rural counties in Missouri in recent election cycles. One senior official with the Missouri State Republican Party who has been involved with the organization since the 1970s gave two primary reasons for why he thinks Republicans have increased their margins of victory in rural Missouri over time. The first reason he gave was that the state GOP has been better historically about doing candidate recruitment for municipal offices, a practice that began in the 1980s. His counterpart, a former director and chair of the Missouri state Democratic Party in the 1990s and 2000s, confirmed this point as well; he stated that while the Democratic Party was well-represented in the legislature in rural areas, the Party itself did not invest much in rural candidate recruitment. (Personal interviews: February 13, and February 20, 2018).
The GOP senior official also stated that he believes that some electoral outcomes, particularly the 2016 electoral outcomes in Missouri are more representative of rising anti-establishment and anti-party sentiments than they are of new or stronger ideological affiliations with the GOP platform. Thus, the relatively recent and increasingly large Republican margins of victory may signal more of an anti-establishment sentiment than an ideological shift within the rural Missouri electorate (Personal interview: February 20, 2018).

Another explanation for the rural alignment toward the Republican party may be found in the presence (or lack) of the below-described “filler organizations.” Churches are still a dominant form of organization in rural Missouri counties. While evidence presented in Chapter 4 indicates that the number of people who are joining churches is largely stable or decreasing, the percentage of rural residents who identify as evangelical is increasing. Additionally, churches are known to provide many messaging and political cues, especially in evangelical settings. If churches are indeed acting as filler organizations and quasi-mobilizers in some rural counties, this activity would likely benefit the GOP. The organizational strength and resources of churches are likely to outweigh any Democratic filler organizations that may be present in these rural counties. Churches have become more politicized and are consistent institutions in rural Missouri counties, even as traditional party organizations have declined. This is perhaps one explanation for why the GOP is continuing to gain ground in an environment where local party organizations are struggling.
This study also provides qualitative evidence that churches as organizations have had a growing influence in politics in rural Missouri communities. One participant interviewed in this study spoke of a “big box” church was built right outside of town 10 years ago; this institution is both conservative and politically active (personal interview: February 21, 2018). A participant who is a statewide interest group leader and lifelong rural Missouri resident discussed her 80-year-old mother who stopped going to the church she had gone to her entire life, because the minister openly spoke of his support for Trump from the pulpit (personal interview: March 21, 2018). While more evidence is needed to come to conclusions about the influence of church organizations in rural communities, initial data seem to support the hypothesis that religious organizations have become more politicized in these areas. Churches as organizations then may be acting as filler organizations in some rural counties, and this could explain why Republican candidates have fared so well in recent election cycles.

Finally, interviewees associated with the Missouri GOP report that not only has the party been more focused on candidate recruitment in rural areas, they also began to focus on rebuilding their local party organizations as well beginning in the 1990s (Personal interviews: February 20, April 24, 2018). A current senior leader with the Missouri State Republican Party was interviewed for this study. She said that since her involvement with the party beginning in the 2003, she has “focused on the grassroots and winning elections” (Personal interview: April 24, 2018). The GOP leader stated that when she became a leader with her county party organization, the local and state party organizations were ineffective—many elected committee positions were vacant, and
Republicans were deflated after a decade and a half of dominant Democratic state politics.

The interviewee and other GOP leaders of the state party began to focus on rebuilding local and central Republican committees shortly after her arrival, as a way of trying to chip away at the massive Democratic majority in the state legislature and executive branch (Personal interview: April 24, 2018). She stated, “From [the moment I began as an elected member of the state GOP] I could see right away, our first job is we have to fill these empty township seats” (Personal interview: April 24, 2018). The party leader reported that Central Committees then began to recruit candidates for local, municipal offices, because as she says, “[t]he road to the state house goes through the court house.” The GOP leader further stated that this revival of local GOP committees and a focus on candidates for local office started a wave of success that led to state legislative victories in 2004. These victories shifted momentum for the state GOP, and it infused local party organizations with purpose and energy (Personal interview: April 24, 2018). This GOP local party reboot all occurred at a time when local Democratic Party organizations were becoming more complacent and less organized, according to interviewees in this study (Personal interviews: February-July 2018).

While this line of questioning still needs more substantiation to provide causal explanations, the roles of state party involvement in candidate recruitment, churches as political organizations, and the rebuilding of local GOP organizations in the 1990s are all plausible avenues of exploration. The next section will delve more into the emergence
of filler organizations and local party organizations in rural Missouri counties after the 2016 election cycle.

**Filler Organizations and Local Party Resurgence**

Initial research indicates that there are still ways that rural partisans are engaging around their political values, even in the absence of functional local party structures. For instance, some candidate campaigns for statewide office spend a great deal of time and resources in rural Missouri counties during re-election campaigns, often setting up temporary offices with staff. These campaigns do mobilize rural voters. There are downsides to this candidate-centered mode of mobilization, however. Most often candidate campaigns are staffed by outsiders; hired campaign staff from out-of-town who leave again once the campaign is over, a process that does not strengthen local party leadership or organizations.

More interestingly, however, is that field research for this dissertation has uncovered a series of “filler organizations” in rural counties who are fulfilling some—though not all—of the roles of latent party organizations. The term “filler organization” was established to describe these groups after a conversation with staff at the Missouri Rural Crisis Center who believe that local party organizations are gone in many rural counties, but that there are other groups “filling in” in their absence (Personal interview: February 17, 28, 2018). Theda Skocpol and Lara Putnam call these organizations “pop-up” organizations in suburban areas, their article is discussed later in this section.
For the purposes of this study, filler organizations are defined as formal and informal organizations in rural counties that are fulfilling some of the roles that local political parties once carried out within their communities. Namely, filler organizations focus on building consistent, structured spaces that build the solidary and purposive elements of their local organizations. Some filler organizations formed in response to the 2016 election outcomes, though others have been around for much longer. There are informal filler organizations that are Democratically-aligned in many rural counties. At the other end of the spectrum churches can operate as filler organizations as well, because they have become increasingly politicized institutions over time in rural communities. These filler organizations, by definition, do not completely replace traditional party organization, both in terms of scope and resource capacity. Thus, while filler organizations do rise to fill some of the void left by party organizations, their effectiveness is often constrained and bounded in some important ways.

Overall, filler organizations observed in this study work to create physical spaces for regular public meetings, they engage in political discussion, and they establish consistent opportunities for local direct action. While the filler organizations observed in this study all talked about candidates running for office and publicized campaign events, none of these groups recruited candidates nor did they engage in consistent direct voter mobilization.

In many cases, filler organizations in rural Missouri counties formed in direct response to a combination of national political events and perceived local party failure. The Howard County Progressives is one example of such a filler organization in rural...
Howard County is in the central part of the state, and it has a total population of 10,100 residents. The county seat is Fayette, population 2,500, and the Howard County Progressives have been meeting there once a month since late 2001. The group formed after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent military campaigns launched in the Middle East. Long-time members say that the group started as a “peace potluck” and evolved to take on broader progressive issues, in large part because the local party organization was “not active,” according to one founding member. A group of 25-30 people meets once a month and relatively informally, but conducts regular business, takes minutes, discusses and endorses candidates, and they involve themselves in campaign activities as a collective body (Personal observations: March 31 and April 28, 2018). Similar coalitions exist in other rural Missouri counties, many forming (and staying) around the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, and still others have formed around local health ordinances that seek to regulate factory farming in their communities (Personal interviews: February through June, 2018).

In Howell County, an area in the Missouri Ozarks whose southern border touches Arkansas, a group calling themselves “Stand-and-Resist” has been meeting and mobilizing since December of 2016. Every month, Stand-and-Resist holds a general meeting in the county seat of West Plains (population 12,100) and is regularly attended by anywhere between 20 and 40 people. The group plans and engages in various public actions in West Plains, such as protesting President Trump’s policies and doing door-to-door canvassing with local progressive candidates. When asked in an interview why the group originally formed, one leader of Stand-and-Resist explained that the formal,
elected members of the local Democratic committee in Howell County had not held a single public meeting in 2015 or 2016. After the results of the 2016 Presidential election, Democratic committee members were bombarded with requests from residents to hold a meeting. The committee members complied, called a public meeting in December of 2016, and over 100 people attended (Personal interview: June 6, 2018).

According to participants in that meeting, Democratic Party committee members encouraged those in attendance to be more active in the 2018 elections; they asked meeting-goers to work for candidates and perhaps run for office themselves in the next election cycle. This strategy was met with some frustration by the now Stand-and-Resist organization leaders. As one leader put it, “I stood up and told [the Democratic committee chair] that we have all these people in their boats on the river. They want to put oars in the water now and start rowing. We can’t wait until 2018. But [the committee chair] told me that if we wanted to engage voters between now and the next election, we would have to start another organization. So we did.” (Personal interview: June 6, 2018). While the entrepreneurial spirit of the Stand-and-Resist leaders to form a new organization is certainly noteworthy, the implications of such organizational abdication on the part of the Democratic Party are concerning. If Democratic Party organizations in rural counties do not engage or even acknowledge their responsibilities to engage the local electorate in and between elections, how will partisans build and mobilize their bases of support over time?

Additionally, filler organizations are not connected with local party organizations in rural counties. One filler organization leader in Southern Missouri said that he and
the local party leader regularly “butted heads,” and that the party organization did not approve of their group (Personal interview: May 24, 2018). In another interview, a local Democratic Party leader in central Missouri said that she did not attend the local progressive organization’s monthly meeting, because “it wasn’t [her] thing.” In other words, the local party leader felt that the mission of the progressive organization was outside the scope of that of the local party organization (Personal interview: March 29, 2018). These findings raise interesting questions about the relationship between interest groups and political parties at the local level. As political scientist Sarah Anzia finds in her study of urban interest groups and political parties, “[i]nterest groups can choose to work alone—without parties [in local elections]. If we set our sights on a theory of interest groups rather than a theory of parties, then it becomes clear that scholars should consider the conditions under which interest groups might not work with a party coalition” [italics original] (2019: 34).

Political scientist Theda Skocpol and Historian Lara Putnam find evidence of parallel “pop-up” organizations in suburban areas, as they detail in their piece “Middle America Reboots Democracy” (2018). In their study, Skocpol and Putnam find that a breadth of grassroots organizations has sprung up in several suburban counties across the country since the 2016 election. These organizations were established as a direct response to counter the agenda of the Trump presidency, and they have arisen in areas where the party organization is weak or lacking (Skocpol & Putnam, 2018).

Political scientist Sarah Anzia finds that interest groups are active in local elections in urban areas, even those without functional party organizations. Anzia
engages with a relatively new area of party scholarship, the UCLA Theory of Parties. Scholars of the UCLA Theory of Parties (namely political scientists John Zaller, Hans Noel, Kathleen Bawn, Marty Cohen, and Seth Masket) argue that modern political parties are made up of active interest groups and “intense policy demanders,” who have the power to control party organizations. These groups wield power within party structures, because they 1) build policy coalitions with one another, and 2) recruit and run candidates for office. The UCLA Theory examines national party structures, and Anzia is the first to test this new theory of parties at the local level in her forthcoming book chapter “Political Parties in U.S. Local Elections” (March 2019). Because this study focuses on the role of non-party organizations in rural counties, it is helpful to review some of Anzia’s finding in urban areas here as well.

Anzia analyzes national surveys of local elected officials and finds that locally-based interest groups—those that operate outside of traditional party organizations—are noticeably active in municipal elections across the country “in all but the smallest of municipalities” (2019: 2). In urban areas at least, Anzia observes that interest groups form coalitions that are not always reflective of the ideologically-pronounced national party coalitions; “for example, it is very common for government employee unions to back the same candidates as local businesses and construction companies” (2019: 2). Notable for this study, Anzia illuminates the presence of many interest groups and their in urban areas, which does give them the ability to form coalitions with one another. Interest groups are so effective at building these electoral coalitions in some cities that “[p]arties may or may not be active in local politics” (2019: 6).
Anzia further tests the UCLA Theory of Parties at the local level by arguing that where interest groups are active in local elections, political parties should also be active—after all if parties are made up of interest groups, an increase in the activity of interest groups would correlate with activity of political parties. Anzia finds mixed results in her study of 600 municipalities; in some cases, interest group activity and political party activity were tightly linked, though she notes that it is hard to distinguish whether these were causal or simply parallel organizational structures. Anzia also finds in some municipalities, interest group activity occurred where there was little to no party activity (2019: 10).

The analysis offered by Anzia in urban areas is helpful to this study of rural local party organizations as well. Like Anzia’s findings, this study observes that interest groups in rural areas (aka filler organizations), are often active in elections even when local party organizations are not active. There are some key differences, however, in observing rural party organizations compared with the urban organizations in Anzia’s study. In urban municipalities, established and well-resourced interest groups take on the roles and form the coalitions once led by traditional party organizations and leaders. The broad landscape of established interest groups that one may find in urban centers, however, does not exist in the same way in rural communities. Filler organizations in rural areas do not have the same capacity to form electoral coalitions as groups in urban areas. Further, rural filler organizations often intentionally operate outside of the party system. These are important distinctions, because they demonstrate that the UCLA Theory of Parties—which studies national party organizations—breaks down somewhat
when applied to local party units in rural areas (as well as in urban areas, according to Anzia).

Additionally, the UCLA model argues that intense policy demanders and the interest groups that have taken over parties recruit and support candidates for office. This study finds, however, that filler organizations in rural Missouri communities do not typically recruit candidates for office due to a lack of institutional knowledge and organizational capacity. Therefore, local party organizations in rural counties do not appear to be made up of coalitions of interest groups or intense policy demanders. Further, filler organizations do not actively recruit nor support candidates for office.

One final important point is that without a functional party network, filler organizations are not connected to one another throughout the state; they do not coordinate with one another nor do they develop a common policy agenda. When told of the existence of other non-party progressive organizations in other counties, each of the leaders interviewed from filler organizations expressed surprise at this fact—none of the filler organization leaders knew that other groups like theirs existed.

Evidence shows that while filler organizations do provide some of the social benefits of formal party organization, they do not replace the more institutionalized components of these structures.

Even if the Missouri State Democratic Party does reflect a series of interest groups and intense policy demanders as the UCLA Theory contends, groups that represent the policy priorities of rural Missourians are not consistently represented within the Party. For instance, one statewide organization known as the Missouri Rural
Crisis Center (MRCC) has been working with and representing family farmers in rural Missouri since 1985. MRCC works to influence policies that relate to the sustainability and development of smaller, family-run farming operations, and they have over 5600 formal members across the state. Part of MRCC’s mission statement reads: “Our mission is to preserve family farms, promote stewardship of the land and environmental integrity and strive for economic and social justice by building unity and mutual understanding among diverse groups, both rural and urban” ([https://morural.org/about](https://morural.org/about)).

In addition to influencing public policy in the state legislature, MRCC has also been successful in building local, bipartisan coalitions to pass county-level “health ordinances” that essentially zone out or highly regulate corporate agricultural industries (known as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs). For instance, out of 14 counties in Northwest Missouri, MRCC has helped family farmers establish strict health ordinances in 7 of these counties. MRCC’s statewide impact has been substantial as well; compared with Iowa’s over 14,500 CAFOs, Missouri has only around 500 of these operations, due in large part to the local health coalitions the organization has established.

Issues around regulating corporate agriculture also arose at two independent county-level progressive organizational meetings as high-priority action items. Both groups discussed the passage of local health ordinances at length and made decisions to question Democratic candidates for U.S. Congress about these issues as well. In the qualitative evidence gathered, keeping tight control of factory farming operations in
rural areas seemed to be a top issue for many rural activists and organizations. In fact, one staff member at MRCC believes that people have remained Democrats in rural Missouri largely because of CAFO and clean water issues (personal interviews, May and July 2018).

The primary opponents to the passage of local health ordinances are corporate agricultural companies who work to pass anti-local control measures that strip counties of their abilities to make such policy decisions independently. However, Chris Koster, the Democratic candidate for Missouri Governor in 2016, was backed by corporate agriculture and the statewide Farm Bureau (a sort of chamber of commerce for agriculture). Koster’s positions of support for factory farming were out-of-step with family farmers in rural Missouri, according to MRCC. It is worth noting that Koster did not carry a single of the 100 rural counties in Missouri in the 2016 election. Additionally, the MRCC staff member noted that with Koster as the prime example, “…candidate accountability to organizations has been lost” due to the loss of strong, local party organizations (Personal interview: February 21, 2018). This example illuminates a loss of the representative function of the Missouri State Democratic Party in regard to the concerns of rural Democrats (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

Civic and political organizations like MRCC are important, regardless of whether party organizations are strong or weak. These interest groups offer to their members focused policy agendas and opportunities for deeper action around and understanding of specific policy arenas. This dissertation is not arguing that groups like MRCC and local issue-based organizations should be absorbed into party organizations. Rather, the
argument made here is that these organizations cannot be expected to fill the void of party organizations, because this is not their primary purpose. Interest groups and filler organizations play important roles in holding policymakers and party leaders accountable to their respective issues, however they cannot be expected to replace the coalition-building and broad mobilization functions of traditional party organizations. While filler organizations do offer rural Missourians some important political opportunities, the lack of a cohesive, formal party organization leaves these organizations fragmented, under-strategized, and under-resourced. Thus, local party blight has created an organizational vacuum in many rural counties that cannot be—and perhaps should not be—filled completely by other organizations.

**Conclusion**

This chapter addresses a question that has until now remained unanswered in the literature: how has the modern campaign environment impacted local, rural party organizations? This chapter, along with evidence in Chapter 5, demonstrates that formal local Democratic Party structures have declined or collapsed altogether in several rural Missouri counties. This finding is important, because political parties are integral institutions in American politics, and they serve important functions that other organizations cannot provide in rural counties.

There has been a substantial academic debate around political parties in the modern campaign era, and whether they are in a state of adaptation or decline. This chapter gives evidence to support the position that local political party organizations are
in a state of substantial decline in rural areas. This organizational decline has happened over time and is relatively recent in Missouri, according to the survey and qualitative data presented here. The recent removal of organizational structure in rural counties is called “party blight” in this study. Party blight comes with some important and negative political repercussions in rural communities. Because of this so-called party blight, fewer Democratic candidates are being recruited to run for office in rural areas, policy priorities of rural Missourians are not reflected in the platforms of statewide Democratic candidates, and opportunity structures for political participation are being lost. When party structures are absent, both voters and candidates are left to fend for themselves, which is neither a sustainable organizational model nor one that helps sustain a healthy representative democracy.

Findings in this study indicate that rural Missourians, at least those with partisan interests, are finding ways to receive political information and to engage their political values—however they are not engaging through local party organizations as they once did. As the director of a well-respected organization representing family farmers in rural Missouri stated, “[b]uilding political organizations in some of these rural counties is possible...it may not be through the parties, but it could be something else.” This line of inquiry led to the discovery of “filler organizations” in many rural Missouri counties, particularly where local Democratic Party organizations have become latent. While filler organizations do provide some political opportunities for rural partisans, these groups do not completely fill the void left by party organizations. Specifically, filler
organizations in rural communities do not engage in candidate recruitment, nor do they have the capacity to build policy coalitions with other interest groups.

The UCLA Theory of Parties contends that modern political parties are made up of interest groups and “intense policy demanders” who build coalitions with one another and run candidates for office. Evidence from rural Missouri shows that the UCLA Theory breaks down somewhat at the local level in rural areas. This study addresses the perennial question, “do parties matter?” and contributes qualitative and case study data to show that local party organizations do matter. Further, state and national party structures ignore rural party organizations at their own internal peril.
Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations
Conclusion and Recommendations

A long-running academic debate within political science questions whether political parties are thriving and adapting to modern technologies in a changing political landscape, or if parties are in a state of decline. This dissertation set out to answer some important questions related to the state of political party organizations. The primary research questions driving this study are: Are local party organizations in a state of decline or resurgence in the modern campaign era? What is the state of local party organizations in rural Missouri counties? How have rural political party organizations changed over time? Are rural Republican Party organizations stronger than Democratic Party organizations? If local party organizations are in a state of decline, does this matter? Is there a relationship between the strength of local party organizations and shifts in rural voting behavior in Missouri? Finally, what are the electoral and participatory implications of local party decline in rural counties?

This study reviewed key literature related to political parties in American politics, as well as the unique and important roles of local political party organizations. The dissertation then explained why Missouri, as a once-Presidential battleground state, is an interesting case for the study of party organization and electoral dynamics. Data were presented that show evidence of a decline in local party strength over time in rural Missouri counties, particularly among Democratic Party organizations. This dissertation ends with the proposal of a new concept for party scholarship, that of “party blight,” which argues that local party organizations have become completely abandoned in many rural communities over time. Finally, this study illuminates the presence of

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emergent “filler organizations” in many rural counties where party organizations have become inactive.

Overall, this study contributes to existing scholarship by explaining how rural local party organizations have been impacted by broader shifts in the political landscape and campaign environment; previous studies have not parceled out the measuring of local party strength by urban and rural geographies. The findings presented here argue that rural party organizations face unique challenges in organizational maintenance and effectiveness. Much of the party scholarship has focused on the party-in-the-electorate and party-in-government buckets of party functions, and this study contributes to our understanding of the party-as-organization leg of the tripod. Additionally, party scholarship that does focus on the organizational elements of parties examine national and state party structures.

This study contributes to academic knowledge on how local party organizations are impacted by broad shifts in the political and campaign landscapes, and why these impacts are important. Further, this study provides case study and qualitative evidence to bear on analyzing the process of local party decline over time, which brings a new element to the traditional survey method of measuring the health of local parties. While previous research has offered valuable findings on the strength of local party organizations at various points in time through national survey data, survey data do not reveal empirical depth on how or why local party organizations thrive or decline. This dissertation offers insights into the processes and reasons for local organizational decline in rural counties over time, and it also illuminates some of the consequences of
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this decline. Finally, this study contributes findings on how individuals and organizations in rural communities find ways to engage in political life even when local party organizations are not viable.

Political Parties in American Democracy

While they were not enshrined into the U.S. Constitution nor supported by many of the founding fathers, political parties have become institutionalized organizations within American politics. Political parties are crucial in every aspect of the American political system—they determine how voters align themselves with candidates and issues, they determine the policy coalitions within legislative bodies, and they have traditionally been most responsible for channeling public dissent and organizing political action. These are all important functions for the health of a representative democracy such as the United States.

Political science literature demonstrates that parties have changed dramatically over time; this is true in regard to both their physical structure and form (organization) as well as their changing strategies and tactics (organizing). In the United States, political parties are federalized into national, state, and local organizational units, like American government. This point is important to note for this study on political parties, because it means that while ideally all three units of the party system coordinate and cooperate with one another, this collaboration is not at all guaranteed.

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, political parties and candidates began to adopt more technologically-driven strategies like television advertising, polling and
micro-targeting, and direct mail outreach. A series of legislative campaign reforms began to chip away at the power of political parties in the 1970s and 1980s by introducing primary elections and limits on party fundraising and resource distribution. This re-organization of political parties combined with technological opportunities allowed for the rise of candidate-centered campaigning, a model that is the primary method of campaigning in present day. In this modern campaign era, political parties have centralized party resources at the national level, prioritized mass messaging over relational organizing strategies, and a series of campaign committees now compete with party organizations in both fundraising and candidate recruitment. Each of these developments in party functions has negatively impacted the role and structure of local party organizations, as this dissertation shows.

Local Parties

Some scholars argue that political parties are as strong as ever, and that they are simply changing form and function to adapt to a modern technological campaign era. Existing literature also shows, however, that political parties have adopted practices that displace the relevance and expertise of local party organizations. Some studies have been conducted to measure the strength of local party organizations. A series of national surveys to local party leaders began in the 1980s, and these surveys were carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s as well. This dissertation duplicated these surveys with an original survey to 2016 local party leaders in the state of Missouri.
The survey results in the 1980s and 1990s showed that local organizations were relatively strong; most had all of their elected positions filled, had bylaws, and engaged in direct mobilization activities during elections. Surveys from the 2000s also showed that local parties did not necessarily decline in strength, though scholars note that it became more difficult to delineate whether campaign activity was driven by the local party or by candidate-centered campaigns and outside consultants. Earlier studies show mixed results on the impacts of local party strength and electoral outcomes—this has been difficult causal relationship for scholars to pin down. This study was no different; models predicting electoral outcomes based upon local party strength were not statistically significant. Data do show, however, that there is a substantial enough relationship between these two variables that the question is worth further evaluation.

While survey data have provided a terrific foundation upon which to build, these data can only tell so much. Survey data give a temperature reading of how local parties are faring across the decades, however they cannot necessarily tell us how or why changes in local party organization occur. This dissertation introduces qualitative and interview data that illuminate some of the processes and implications of local party changes in rural areas.

This study finds that local party organizations are in a state of decline in many rural counties. Further, in some cases, local party organizations are completely absent in some rural counties where they once thrived. These findings are important, because local organizations are the most direct link between individuals and the political arena. Local political party organizations are an important unit of the party system, because
they are traditionally the branch that is most responsible for direct voter mobilization and candidate recruitment for local offices. Through physical spaces and regular activity, local party organizations also create interpersonal networks and institutional skills that can be strengthened over time within communities. In the modern campaign era, however, local party organizations have been neglected by state and national party structures in many rural Missouri counties.

Missouri as a Case Study

Missouri is an interesting state to study political parties, because it is historically an electorally dynamic state. Traditionally, Missourians have split their ballots between Republican and Democratic candidates; evidence of this can be found in statewide elections, as well as elections within specific counties. In 2016, Missourians elected one party to control both the legislative and executive branches of government; this has not occurred since 1964, when Democrats controlled these branches. The 1990s were the “heyday” of the Democratic Party in Missouri; during this entire decade Democrats controlled both houses in the state legislature as well as most offices in the executive branch. Missourians also voted in the majority for President Bill Clinton in both of his elections in 1992 and 1996. This Democratic stronghold began to slip in the early 2000s, however, as the GOP made gains in the state legislature. The GOP began to elect more candidates to statewide office as well, though as late as 2012 Missourians elected a Democratic Governor and were still splitting their ballots between Republicans and Democrats.
Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

There are current hypotheses about rural voting behaviors that have merit, however they do not completely explain the dramatic and relatively sudden shift in voting behavior that has occurred in rural Missouri over the past 10 to 15 years. For instance, some scholars show that rural voters tend to be more religious and are therefore more conservative on issues such as abortion, immigration, and same-sex marriage. These broad ideological shifts within parties occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s, however, and this study has shown that rural Missourians continued to split their ballots and vote for Democrats long after this marked shift.

Other hypotheses of rural voting behavior point to demographic voting trends or shifts in population that have created more demographically and politically homogenous communities. Data from two rural Missouri counties, Iron and Oregon counties, show that there has been very little change in population over the past several decades. While more research is needed to make these results generalizable, initial findings suggest that changes in population do not completely explain the increasingly large margins-of-victory for GOP candidates over a relatively short period of time. This dissertation argues that there is room for an organizational explanation in analyzing the shifts in voting behavior in rural Missouri counties. Data show that membership in several rural counties has declined measurably across both parties, and the number of uncontested races for state representative increased sharply between the 1990s and 2016. This evidence lays the foundation for an exploration of local party organizations in rural Missouri, the subject of this dissertation.
Data and Findings

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to address the puzzle of local party strength in rural Missouri counties. Extensive electoral and party data were collected from state resources and archives. An original survey was conducted with local party leaders across Missouri, and this survey was modeled after previous local party surveys discussed in Chapter 3. Additionally, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with party network stakeholders in 8 counties across the state. Finally, participant-observation data were gathered at several events and meetings organized by local party organizations. All these data sources triangulate the research and are able to inform the findings in a multi-dimensional way.

Survey data reveal three important findings related to this study. First, local party “fundamental” scores have declined sharply between 1992 and 2016. This means that fewer local party organizations in rural areas have a full slate of officers, official bylaws, or have passed an organizational budget. This decline is sharper for Democratic that GOP local party organizations. Secondly, local party organizations report a decline in direct mobilization activities, a traditional hallmark of local party strength. And finally, local party organizations in rural counties report a substantial decrease in the levels of coordination between their local unit and the state party organization between the 1990s and 2016.

Qualitative data from interviews and participant-observation confirm that on the Democratic side of the aisle at least, local party organizations in rural Missouri have received very little attention from state or national party organizations over the past
several election cycles. Democratic candidates for office are visiting these areas far less than they have in the past—if they show up at all—and the state party organization has not supported a permanent rural headquarters anywhere in Missouri since the early 2000s. Additionally, when staff from the state party do show up in rural areas, they often do not defer to the expertise of local party leaders. These shifts have led to a certain structural decline regarding party organizations; elected committee positions within the Democratic Party are now vacant where they were once competitive, campaign headquarters are no longer established in election seasons, and party clubs do not have regular meetings. This study also shows that organizational decline comes with some important implications in rural communities.

It is important to note that there is not substantial evidence of a causal relationship between local party strength and electoral outcomes or split-ticket voting behavior in rural Missouri counties. Due to small sample sizes and a range of other, unknown variables, it is difficult to prove that local party strength directly impacts electoral outcomes. Further, it is difficult to disentangle the relationship between the state and local party units in Missouri. In other words, it is difficult to know if local party organizations declined because the state Democratic Party stopped investing in these areas, or if the state Party stopped investing because these local organizations had already become inactive. There is some qualitative evidence that points to the former scenario, as highlighted in interviews in Chapter 5 and 6. The causality and directionality of this relationship between local and state party units, however, is still largely unknown.
Party Blight and Filler Organizations

The concept of “party blight” is proposed in this dissertation, as a way of explaining the physical receding of organizational structures in rural Missouri over time. Similar to urban blight, party blight is a process that has occurred incrementally over time, and it is due to a lack of institutional prioritization and maintenance. This dissertation finds evidence that local party organizations have declined substantially in some rural Missouri counties, leaving an organizational void in these rural communities. In urban areas, when party organizations are weak or absent, party activists typically have other organizations to which they can turn. In rural communities, however, traditional party organizations are some of the only institutionalized and formal organizations that exist. This means that if these organizations are absent, would-be political actors in rural communities have no avenues to turn to for political engagement.

This study argues that local parties are no longer serving one of their core functions: creating interpersonal networks of expertise and political action within communities, and that this change in function is a form of organizational failure. There are some observable implications to the decline and absence of local party organizations in rural Missouri communities. The first set of implications are electoral; very little to any candidate recruitment occurs without local party organizations in rural communities, and candidates who do run receive little to no support from traditional party structures.
Secondly, there are participatory implications for party blight. Several participants in this study stated that when they decided to become politically involved, they did not know where to turn in their county, and that their local party organization was not active. Additionally, after major political events like the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election, hundreds of rural Democrats gathered in meeting spaces around the state. Without the sustained support of a state party organization, however, attendance and leadership at these meetings waned back to pre-2016 levels—or disappeared entirely again.

One question that energizes future research efforts is why organizational blight has favored the GOP in rural Missouri counties. A few explanations have emerged through the qualitative data collected in this study. For instance, former statewide chairs and executive directors of both Republican and Democratic Parties in Missouri state that the GOP was more focused on candidate recruitment for local offices in the 1990s than were Democrats.

Additionally, the current statewide chairperson of the GOP stated that she and the rest of the Party have been focused on rebuilding local party committees and getting Republicans elected to local offices (and later state legislative seats) since the early 2000s. Both explanations indicate that the GOP has done a better job of maintaining and strengthening their local organizational structures than did the Democratic Party in the 1990s and early 2000s. Finally, data show that while the percentage of people who identify as religious has not increased within several rural counties in Missouri, the percentage of church-goers who identify as evangelical has
increased. Given that evangelical identity and churches generally have both have become increasingly politicized and given that churches are institutional organizational structures that still exist in rural counties, it is possible that churches are playing some of the roles local political parties once played. If this is true, it would likely partially explain why the GOP has become so dominant in Missouri politics over the past 15 years, even if local party organizations are declining in their strength.

This study finds that in some rural counties, local parties have been re-energized after the 2016 elections, and in some cases “filler organizations” have emerged to fill the holes left by latent local party organizations. These filler organizations take different forms in different counties, but all groups work to create physical spaces in which activists meet consistently, discuss political issues and candidates, and develop opportunities for political action. As the data show, however, filler organizations do not enjoy many of the institutionalized and resourced qualities as traditional party organizations. For instance, filler organizations are not connected to a statewide network, or even to other similar organizations in neighboring counties. Additionally, these organizations are tightly constrained in their abilities to recruit candidates and participate in direct mobilization activities.

The presence of these locally emergent organizations raises important questions that are worth more investigation. For instance, how and where do filler organizations emerge in rural counties? How effective are these organizations in impacting electoral outcomes? In which cases do filler organizations work with local political parties, and in which cases do they work outside of the traditional party system? Some of the
participants interviewed in this study do not believe that local party organizations are revivable in their rural counties. If these predictions are true, studying the emergence, development, and activities of these filler organizations is even more important.

It should be noted here that the findings and analyses offered in this dissertation are difficult to generalize across all rural communities, or even all rural communities across the state of Missouri. There are substantial differences between rural counties, and several variables that play a role in shifting electoral behavior could not be measured in this study. There are other once-battleground states that may be similar to Missouri in regard to their rural party organizations, though only further research could say for sure. The longitudinal case study of a local Ohio Democratic Party organization offered in Chapter 3 provides some evidence that local party organizations have shifted dramatically in their functions in relation to Presidential campaigns, and that party organizations are becoming less active. While one case study is not conclusive, this study shows indications that similar electoral and organizational patterns may be occurring in other states.

Even though this study does not find a directly causal relationship between local party decline and electoral outcomes, and though the small scope of the study makes it difficult to generalize, it still offers contributions to broader understanding of local organizations. This dissertation examines rural organizations and the communities that surround them through a telescopic lens, and it finds that while some organizations are struggling and perhaps fading away, new forms of democratic participation are rising to take their place. These organizations are limited; however, they demonstrate a
perseverance of organization, community, and political engagement. While this study does introduce the idea that rural parties are withering, it also aims to illuminate hopeful examples such as the filler organizations in Howell and Howard Counties. Ultimately, this dissertation contends that organizations matter, and that we can help to rebuild rural communities by rebuilding local organizations.

**Recommendations**

Political scientists can identify problems or breakdowns in political processes without always addressing how to fix or rectify these problems. This section will give some attention to the question, “so now what?” regarding the breakdown of local political parties in rural areas. This dissertation takes the perspective that local organizations are important to the health of the overall party system, and that they are critical institutions that provide some of the only formal structures of political participation in rural areas. Political parties, however, have been neglecting local organizational structures and have all but abandoned mobilization strategies that connect people to one another within communities.

If evidence from this study is not enough to convince the reader of the need for an examination of local organizational decline, consider what sociologist Jane McAlevey finds in her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (2016). McAlevey elevates case studies from labor unions and social movements to make the argument that national progressive organizations have abandoned the “ground-up” model of organizing they once thrived upon, in favor of “shallow mobilization tactics.”
that treat their members as consumers of information. McAlevey examines three case studies using a multi-method approach—a nursing home workers’ union in Washington State, a Chicago teachers’ union, and a labor union representing Smithfield factory workers. McAlevey finds that labor unions, which once had thriving local networks built around consistent action and workplace demands, have become hollowed out much like political parties (2016).

McAlevey argues that major labor unions have centralized staff and financial resources in Washington DC, and that these unions spend a bulk of their resources influencing DC policymakers. Gone, McAlevey observes, are the locally-led, outwardly-organizing collective bargaining units that knitted together the fabric of the organization. This “structure-based” power-building model has been all but abandoned by labor unions (McAlevey 2018: 12).

McAlevey further contends that modern labor unions build “pretend power”—perceived power that is based upon their ability to lobby Congress and build an organizational brand—rather than “actual power”—power that resides in building strong local membership units led by local leaders. It is because of these changes in strategy that McAlevey argues that labor unions “are dying from the inside out” (2016: 211). There are many parallels that can be made between the modern organizational structure of labor unions and the structure and strategies of modern political party organizations.

Political scientist Hahrie Han agrees with McAlevey’s primary contention, that an abandonment of relational organizing strategies comes with organizational fragility and
peril. Han’s recent book, *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century*, uses case studies to examine how social movement organizations successfully develop their members to become effective and consistent actors on behalf of the organization. Through qualitative and quantitative data, Han develops her theory that organizations use a mix of tactics that can be classified as “transactional mobilization”—short-term, superficial participation opportunities, and “transformational organizing”—tactics that deepen members’ skillsets, commitment, and activity levels over time (2014).

Han finds that the civic associations which focused on building leaders and ensuring that these leaders were continuing to learn and grow were the organizations that were the most successful in building a base of local activists over time. Han writes that strong bases of activists are built when organizations “actively [cultivate] their members’ motivation to engage in higher levels of activism by building relationships with their members, developing a sense of community, and structuring work in ways that build ongoing commitment” (2014: 156). Han further warns that an organization that just engages in mobilization strategies without practicing deeper, transformative organizing is taking a risk, because “the democratic skills and capacities [of members] are not cultivated” (2014: 170). Without these skills, Han argues, long-term and successful organizations cannot be maintained. Political parties can look to the work of Han to better understand how to develop local networks of consistent, long-term, and increasingly engaged activist members.
The idea is not new that large organizations can become captured by elite or more narrow interests that was originally intended. In fact, many organizational studies point back to Robert Michels original work on organizational oligarchy, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (1962). In this seminal work, Michels contends that all large organizations are destined to become oligarchical—serving the interests of a few elite and well-funded interests, who are become more consumed by their own organizational survival and ascendancy than with broader democratic principles. Thus, what is arguably occurring within political parties and labor unions is perhaps not unusual or even unexpected.

Political scientist Dara Strolovitch finds modern evidence of the oligarchical tendencies of major membership organizations in her book *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class and Gender in Interest Group Politics*. Strolovitch uses original survey and interview data from hundreds of American interest groups, and she finds that often, organizations prioritize the interests of their most well-off members; men over women, and white members over racial minorities, and middle-class issues over issues prioritized by poor members, as examples (2007: 46-75). Strolovitch also finds that there are organizations that recognize this imbalance and try to adjust their priorities accordingly. Strolovitch collects the best practices of these organizations and develops a set of principles that systematizes this work.

In other words, Strolovitch contends that large membership organizations tend to prioritize the interests of elite members, but that they also have an obligation to refocus their resources on advancing issues of their more under-represented...
constituencies. Strolovitch also argues that organizations have a responsibility to explain these intentional organizational priorities to their more well-off members (2007). In these ways, one could argue that political parties have an obligation to prioritize issues raised by their least-represented members (rural Democrats, for instance), and a responsibility to explain these organizational priorities to the more well-represented constituencies (urban Democrats).

In sum, political parties need not reinvent the wheel when looking for ways to rebuild their local organizational units. Several studies and scholars have demonstrated that even in a modern technological age, organizations can—and should—still find ways to personally connect with members, build interpersonal local organizational structures, and to communicate these intentions to their memberships in ways that build organizational cohesion and commitment.

This dissertation has shown that organizations matter in a representative democracy like the United States, and that political parties are institutionalized organizations within the United States—it is nearly impossible to talk about American politics and not also discuss the role of political parties. Parties have changed substantially over time in their form and functions, and these changes have had specific and negative impacts on local parties. A candidate-centered and technology-driven modern campaign era has displaced the roles and relevance of local party organizations. Local party organizations are the foundation of the party system, and they are how many people enter into political engagement for the first time. Without these structures, partisans in rural areas struggle to find ways to engage in political
opportunities and to build collective political identities. Emergent filler organizations can only go so far, they cannot fulfill all the roles of traditional party organizations. For these reasons, it is important that political parties assess how to rebuild their local units, and that they begin to breathe new life into these blighted local party organizations.
Appendix 1: Missouri Local Party Leader Survey Instrument

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Your responses are extremely important for understanding local party organizations in Missouri.

I greatly appreciate your cooperation. Thank you,

Joseph Anthony
PhD Candidate in Political Science
University of Missouri in St. Louis

1) What COUNTY do you live in?

________________________________________________________________________

2) Which political party are you affiliated with?

________________________________________________________________________

3) First, a few basic questions about your local party organization. Please select all of the items that describe your party organization.

☐ Has a complete set of officers
☐ Has paid, full-time staff
☐ Maintains a year-round office
☐ Has a regular annual budget
☐ Has a website
☐ Has email addresses listed
☐ Operates headquarters during campaign season
☐ Has a constitution, charter, or formal set of rules
☐ Has social media account(s) (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis
4) Which of the following activities did your party organization engage in the 2016 election campaign?

☐ Organized door-to-door canvassing
☐ Organized campaign events (rallies, parades, etc.)
☐ Arranged fundraising events
☐ Conducted party fundraising online
☐ Sent mailing to voters
☐ Distributed campaign literature
☐ Distributed posters or lawn signs
☐ Contributed money to candidates
☐ Organized telephone banks/campaign calls
☐ Purchased billboard space
☐ Coordinated county-level campaigns
☐ Conducted voter registration drives
☐ Utilized public opinion surveys
☐ Publicized party and candidates through newspaper ads
☐ Publicized party and candidates by buying TV and/or radio time
☐ Publicized party and candidates through email
☐ Publicized party and candidates through a party website
☐ Publicized party and candidates through social media
☐ Coordinated local PAC activity
☐ Conducted get-out-the-vote efforts

5) Does your local organization participate in any of the following activities with the state party organization?

☐ Shares mailing lists of contributors and members
☐ Joint fundraising programs
☐ Cooperates in recruiting patronage appointments (public jobs, boards and commissions)
☐ Joint get-out-the-vote drives
☐ Joint voter registration drives
☐ Assists in identifying races targeted for extra campaign efforts

6) Which of the following do you receive from the state party organization?

☐ Assistance with financial record-keeping
☐ Legal advice

Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I</strong>n <strong>t</strong>his <strong>p</strong>arty, <strong>m</strong>embers <strong>a</strong>re expected to contribute towards the achievement of the party's objectives and this is what is rewarded.</td>
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<td><strong>P</strong>arty <strong>m</strong>embers <strong>a</strong>re <strong>p</strong>ersonally committed to making the organization successful.</td>
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<td><strong>D</strong>ecisions about party policy are made by state leadership with little input from local committees.</td>
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<td><strong>T</strong>he <strong>s</strong>haring of information among local party committees is not encouraged.</td>
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<td><strong>T</strong>his party does not allow itself to get side-tracked by issues that do not really matter.</td>
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<td><strong>L</strong>ocal committees are sufficiently aware of the party's strategy and goals.</td>
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<td><strong>T</strong>his party has strong values which are widely shared by its members.</td>
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<td><strong>I</strong>deas tend to percolate up from the local committees and rarely come down from the state party leadership.</td>
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<td><strong>T</strong>his party believes that achieving individual local committee goals is more important than collective party goals.</td>
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<td><strong>E</strong>lectoral viability is valued more than ideological agreement in a party candidate</td>
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*Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local party committees are not encouraged to work together effectively toward the achievement of the party’s goals.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local committees do not understand what contribution is expected from them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party members are given wide latitude in accomplishing goals without much direction from state leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This party rarely holds events designed to create a shared sense of direction and accomplishment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local committees are encouraged to be creative and innovative.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This party rewards those who contribute to the success of the organization rather than those who have good connections.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This party believes it is more important to act quickly to achieve party goals than to use established decision making procedures.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- [ ] Computer services/IT support
- [ ] Research
- [ ] Office space
- [ ] Staff during campaign seasons
- [ ] Assistance with candidate recruitment
- [ ] Funds for operating expenses
- [ ] Campaign training

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Appendix

☐ Assistance with website development
☐ Assistance with social media accounts

7) Next, we have some questions about your views on your party as a whole in your county. For the following questions, the term “party” is used to refer to all of the party committees (state and local) that constitute your party organization. Please make a mark in the box that corresponds most with the statement given.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>The party emphasizes the importance of exploring and discussing all options when making decisions more than making decisions quickly and efficiently.</td>
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<td>Few of the activities in this party center around things that are really vital to its success.</td>
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<td>The state party goes out of its way to ensure that different local party organizations cooperate in a coordinated way.</td>
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<td>Candidates who agree with party positions get more support than candidates who are most likely to win.</td>
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<td>This party concentrates on activities that are fundamental to the success of the organization.</td>
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<td>When this party makes decisions, getting things done efficiently is more valued than ensuring consensus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local parties are always encouraged to be flexible to changes in the external environment.</td>
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<td>Information is disseminated down from the state committee and rarely flows up from local committees or laterally among local committees.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This party values</td>
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*Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis*
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<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>Following the rules to reach decisions in the right way more than making decisions quickly.</td>
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<td>This is not an innovative organization and new ideas about winning elections are generally discouraged.</td>
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<td>Power in this party flows from the bottom up, rather than from the top down.</td>
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<td>Party members do not experience a sense of belonging to this party.</td>
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<td>Party members lack a clear understanding of what its values and philosophies are.</td>
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<td>Getting state committee work accomplished usually comes before local committee work.</td>
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<td>In this party, goals are not clearly defined.</td>
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<td>Party members lack an emotional connection to the party.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In this party, there is not a clear link between reward and performance.</td>
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<td>When doing party work, members are given explicit instructions and are obligated to follow rules.</td>
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Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis
8) What is your age? ___________________

9) What is your gender? ___________________

10) What is your racial background? ___________________

11) Please indicate the highest level of formal education you have completed:

- Grade School
- High School
- Some College
- Associate’s Degree
- Undergraduate/Bachelor’s Degree
- Graduate Degree

12) Below is a scale on which the political views people might hold are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale? Please indicate the term that best describes you:

- Very Liberal
- Liberal
- Somewhat Liberal
- Moderate, Middle-of-the-Road
- Somewhat Conservative
- Conservative
- Very Conservative

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND COOPERATION!

If you would like to provide additional comments, please do so below, or
Appendix 2: Interview Consent Form

I, Joseph Anthony, Ph.D candidate with the University of Missouri in St. Louis, am conducting a study of local parties in Missouri counties. I would like to ask you to read this form and bring up any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the interview.

I. **Background Information:**
The purpose of this study is to understand your experiences in local party activities.
Questions will involve:
- Your current and past work with local party committees and campaigns

II. **Procedures:**
The interview will last about 45 minutes and will take place at a location mutually agreed upon by interviewer and interview participant. If you agree to the interview, then I will ask your permission to tape-record it once we get started. Taping or not is entirely your choice. And, you can decide to not answer specific questions.

III. **Risks, Benefits, and Compensation:**
Participating in this project does post some risks, which I would like to clarify. There is no guarantee that your information will lead to the total understanding of local parties and local campaigns. There is no direct benefit to you. However, the benefits of participating in this project include having opportunities to reflect on your experiences in doing this work, and in helping to develop a narrative of how the work has happened over time. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to bring more understanding of local political organizations in rural Missouri counties.

IV. **Confidentiality:**
Your real name and the real names of your peers will be used in any outcome of this study, unless these names are asked to be withheld. I do intend to use your stories, experiences, and opinions for the purposes of telling the story of how local parties have been involved in the community and in campaigns. The outcomes of the study may include such items as a written dissertation project, a journal article, or report to local party officials. Only I will have the ability to link your identity to the information you provide. Whether I tape or just take notes, the record of the interview will be kept private. Only I and my dissertation adviser will have access to it, now and later. If the interview is taped, the tapes will be kept in a locked computer. Joseph Anthony will be the only one asking questions. He will allow you to elaborate as much as you feel necessary and will clarify any questions that seem confusing. Joseph will not use any information that you do not want used in written form, and you also have the option of remaining anonymous in any and all written materials. Anything that you declare to be “off the record” will by default not be used in any written materials or publications.

V. **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**
The interview is voluntary. If you agree to be interviewed, you will still be free to stop at any time if you don’t wish to continue. You are also allowed to decide not to answer any specific questions.

VI. **Contacts and Questions:**

*Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis*
Appendix

If you have any questions later, my name is Joseph Anthony and you can call me at 314-608-2043 or josephanthony@mail.umsl.edu.

I will give you a copy of this form to keep for your records.

VII. Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in an interview.

Your Signature ____________________________ Date __________

Signature of Researcher __________________ Joseph Anthony
Date ___4/23/18________

Appendix 3: Scale of “Local Party Fundamentals” variables from local party survey

Local Party Scale 1: Direct voter contact
This variable measures whether or not local party organizations engaged in any of the three activities (scale 0-3).
- Door to Door Canvassing
- Phone banks
- Get-Out-The-Vote Efforts

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<td>Democrat</td>
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Local Party Scale 2: Local party structure and fundamentals
- Has a complete set of officers
- Has paid, full-time staff
- Maintains a year-round office
- Has a regular annual budget
- Has a website

Joseph Anthony, PhD Candidate University of Missouri in St. Louis
- Has email addresses listed
- Operates headquarters during campaign season
- Has a constitution, charter, or formal set of rules
- Has social media account(s) (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

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**Local Party Scale 3: State Party Coordination**
- Shares mailing lists of contributors
- Joint Fundraising Programs
- Cooperates in recruiting patronage appointments (public jobs, boards and commissions)
- Joint GOTV Drives
- Joint voter registration drives
- Assistance with financial record keeping
- Legal Advice
- Computer services/IT Support
- Assistance with Research
- Staff During campaign seasons
- Assistance with candidate recruitment
- Campaign training
- Assistance with Website development
- Assistance with social media accounts
- Funds for Operating Expenses

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Appendix 4: Interview questions/face-to-face survey instrument

1) What is your background? Have you always lived in this county?
2) When did you join the local party?
3) Why did you join your local party organization?
4) Are you still a member?
5) What first engaged you with the local party organization?
6) Have you seen changes in the local party organization over time?
7) What kinds of changes have you seen and experienced?
8) What is the relationship like between the state party and your local organization?
9) Has that relationship changed over time? How?
10) How is your local organization funded? Has that changed over time?
11) Do you work with volunteers? How?
12) How do you get involved in candidate campaigns?
13) Does your party organization recruit candidates? For what offices? How do you go about this work?
14) How do new members come into your local party organization?
15) What would like to see your local party organization engaged in over the next several election cycles?
16) Why are you a [R/D]? What does it mean to you?
REFERENCES


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Carton, Paul 1984. *Mobilizing the Black Community: The Effects of Personal Contact Campaigning on Black Voters.* Joint Center for Political Studies.


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