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Review of *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush*

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Abstract

This article reviews Daniel Galvin's *Presidential Party Building* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

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Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), by Daniel J. Galvin.

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Much of the most influential scholarship on the relationship between the president and the political system – from Stephen Skowronek's *The Politics Presidents Make* to Sidney Milkis' *The President and the Parties* – frames the president in adversarial, or at least deeply uneasy, relations with the other institutions of American government. Presidents inevitably come to power with expansive policy agendas and high popular expectations in tow. However, they face an unwieldy set of governing arrangements at the federal level, as well as constraints imposed by the institution of federalism and a welter of interest groups. "Great" presidents thus must transform governing arrangements, altering the relations between the presidency and the other component parts of the system, while "failed" presidents are overwhelmed by conflicting demands and hostile interests.

Presidents' relations with political parties are particularly fraught with conflict. In principle, presidents and their parties should share some common interests and objectives, and thus possess incentives to work together to achieve common goals. In practice, however, presidents of the modern era have often sought to distance themselves from their parties. Scholars have shown that presidents have tended to appeal directly to the public while governing, rather than working through partisan channels; that they have tried to establish direct linkages with important constituencies instead of using their parties as intermediaries; and that they have often attempted to achieve policy objectives using administrative tools, rather than cooperating with their partisan brethren in Congress. Moreover, modern presidents have often preferred individualistic campaign strategies, which play up the personality and achievements of the president, to cooperative partisan campaigns.

In an exceptionally well-researched and beautifully written book, Daniel Galvin takes on this received wisdom, arguing that presidents – or Republican presidents, at least - may work assiduously to strengthen their parties. Galvin's extensive historical research, which draws on numerous archival sources, White House recordings, and personal interviews, reveals that modern Republican presidents have attended diligently to party building, working to provide campaign services, build human capital, recruit candidates, mobilize voters, finance party operations, and support internal party activities. In Galvin's view, only Democratic presidents consistently exhibit the "predatory" behavior often attributed to all modern presidents. But, Galvin suggests, predation by Democratic

presidents of their parties has been costly, often undermining the party's ability to raise funds, recruit candidates, mobilize voters, or reach out to new constituencies. The pattern that emerges is one of two distinct presidential party building strategies: a characteristically Republican constructive strategy, and a characteristically Democratic destructive one.

Galvin accounts for the varying behavior of Republican and Democratic presidents in the post-WWII period by pointing to the different electoral incentives they faced. The calculus is simple: "the president's party-building incentive will be *strongest* when he perceives his party's overall competitive standing to be *weakest,* and it will be *weakest* when he perceives his party's overall competitive standing to be *strongest* (25)."

Perceiving themselves as "minority" presidents in a "majority" Democratic nation, Republican presidents have viewed it in their electoral interest to strengthen their political party. While Republican presidential party building efforts have been instrumental in significant respects – geared toward winning the next presidential election – these investments have paid long-term dividends to the GOP as an organization. As Galvin explains, "[Republican presidents] aimed to "presidentialize" their party, to make it more responsive to their leadership and more reflective of their personal brand of politics, but at the same time, they sought to strengthen its organizational foundations and enhance its capacities to expand and improve in the future (9)." In contrast, Democratic presidents (at least until Bill Clinton) have recurrently perceived themselves as the chief officers of a durable "majority" force. Believing the party's electoral position secure, Democratic presidents have either ignored the task of party building entirely or attempted to siphon off party resources to augment their own campaigns.

Furthermore, because it is difficult and time-consuming, presidential party building has path-dependent qualities. "Without up-and-running party-building programs on which to build," Galvin suggests, "presidents are not likely to start from scratch (190)." The path-dependence of presidential party building has only served to reinforce Republican presidents' involvement and further depress Democratic presidents' interest, consolidating the partisan difference in presidential party building strategy over time. Inheriting an already active and effective organization, Republican presidents are likely to find party building a congenial task, whereas Democrats are likely to perceive it as an up-hill battle, and thus an inefficient use of time and resources.

Like the best scholarship in the field of American political development, Galvin's book leverages a treasure-trove of historical data to challenge the conventional wisdom and illuminate previously-obscured political processes. Indeed, the archival work is truly first-rate, a model for graduate students and young scholars. But the rich historical documentation not only drives Galvin's powerful argument; he also uses archival sources to identify episodes of

presidential party building hidden to scholars relying on secondary sources. For example, Richard Nixon is usually castigated as a typical party predator for his use of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) rather than the GOP for his reelection campaign and his role in the Watergate affair; but he emerges in Galvin's narrative as an effective party builder, helping the GOP build the capacity which made it a powerhouse in the 1980s. In a similar fashion, Galvin's analysis lends nuance to our understanding of the party leadership of Bill Clinton: often portrayed as a consummate party predator, Galvin shows that Clinton made significant investments in party building after the "Republican Revolution" of 1994 swept the Democrats from political power in Congress.

Presidential Party Building also makes important conceptual and theoretical advances. For example, Galvin makes a major contribution by demolishing the dichotomy between presidential interactions with their parties which are self-serving and those which are altruistic. As Galvin suggests, Republican presidents successfully pursued personal electoral and policy goals while at the same time strengthening their party. Indeed, because GOP presidents perceived their party as the "minority" party – and thus viewed their hold on power as tenuous – they saw broader party building activities (which would presumably grow Republican affiliation and support at the mass level) as a means for pursuing their own reelection. The relationship between the presidency and the parties is thus revealed as more variable than often thought. Galvin's research joins other recent scholarship, such as Keith Whittington's work on the relationship between the presidency and the Supreme Court, which usefully portrays inter-institutional dynamics as historically contingent rather than fixed.

Another major strength of this work is its clear and consistent conceptualization of presidential party building. As Galvin notes, one of the challenges plaguing scholarship on presidential-party relations is the inconsistency of metrics and concepts used in judging presidential contributions to partisan development. In *Presidential Party Building,* Galvin develops a multi-faceted conceptualization of presidential contributions to party, focusing on six core activities: providing campaign services, building human capital, recruiting candidates, mobilizing voters, financing party operations, and supporting internal activities. He then uses this tool throughout the manuscript to gauge the behavior of each post-war president. This allows Galvin to make consistent, and effective, comparisons of the behavior of Republican and Democratic presidents. The thorough development and consistent deployment of his core concept is a major virtue of the book.

Galvin's is an ambitious and wide-ranging book; like all works of this type, it answers many questions, but also raises some. For example, (how much) does presidential party building matter? Considered in the light of the Republicans' electoral advances since the mid-1970s, Galvin's contrast of

Republican and Democratic presidents' party building strategies begs the question whether GOP presidents' party contributions help account for the party's political successes. While it is unnecessary (and perhaps impossible) to precisely estimate the electoral effects of presidential party building, Galvin might help answer this question by linking his discussion of Republicans' presidential party building more concretely to the growing theoretical and empirical literature on the effects of party organizational and mobilizational efforts on turnout, vote share, and so forth. This would also join Galvin's work to the growing body of scholarship on the ascendance of the American conservative movement, which has emphasized organizational innovation and investment as a key to the movement's success. Of course, the conservative movement should not be equated with the Republican Party. But the interactions, and tensions, between the organization-building of the conservative movement and the party-building of Republican presidents seems a particularly fruitful avenue for additional study.

A second, and somewhat related, question is: how does any given Republican (or Democratic) president compare as a party builder to other members of his party? Galvin's work ably demonstrates that, on the whole, Republican presidents were much more attentive to party building than were their Democratic counterparts. But did all Republican presidents make equally impressive contributions to their party's well being (and were all Democratic presidents equally maladroit party builders)? On this score, Galvin's work is unclear. Future research might build on Galvin's work by attempting to refine his party building schema to permit even more nuanced comparisons among presidents, opening the door to the investigation of additional hypotheses about the effects of context on presidential party building.

Galvin's analysis of presidential party building behavior is confined to the post-war era. This is understandable: given the tremendous amount of research and analysis involved in each case study, accomplishing an accounting of presidential party building for each president from Eisenhower to Clinton is a remarkable accomplishment. However, scholars might extend Galvin's research by inquiring into the factors driving presidential party building during earlier eras of American political development. The conventional wisdom is that the pre-modern era was, in an importance sense, the "golden age" of political parties. This wisdom in turn implies that many (if not all, as Michael McGerr's work reminds us) pre-modern presidents were attentive to the party-building activities appropriate to their era; or, at least, that pre-modern presidents did not generally work to undermine their parties. But is this so? Galvin's book, which amends the received wisdom concerning modern presidents' contributions to party politics, invites us to reconsider pre-modern presidents' party building activities, as well. Indeed, Galvin hints at this possibility when he notes that "We have a vague notion that most "great" presidents – Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR – were

also great party builders, but virtually everything we know about that connection comes from historians and remains scattered and anecdotal (10)." Future work could build on Galvin's analysis, as well as Marc Landy's and Sidney Milkis' *Presidential Greatness,* to consider variations in presidential party building in the pre-modern era.

Finally, one might offer amendments to Galvin's conceptualization of presidential party building. Significantly, Galvin excludes articulation – and achievement – of programmatic objectives from his definition of presidential party building. Indeed, in *Presidential Party Building,* "…it is the party's *organizational capacity* that takes center stage (6, emphasis added)." But achieving major policy goals is arguably a very important form of party building. Following through on stated objectives is not only a means for winning the next election; it is potentially a powerful mechanism for building enduring attachments among voters for one's party, as the cases of Social Security, Medicare, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964/Voting Rights Act of 1965 illustrate. Moreover, as this discussion suggests, Galvin's choice to exclude articulation and achievement of programmatic objectives from his definition of presidential party building has the consequence of casting Democratic presidents in a very unfavorable light. For example, in describing Lyndon Johnson's admittedly dubious practice of conveying cash assistance to Democratic candidates, Galvin suggests that "the purpose of providing direct assistance was clear: Johnson was not building a new majority for the Democratic Party, he was building support for his legislative program (195)." But what if Democratic presidents such as Johnson believed (not unreasonably) that the best way to strengthen their party in the long run was to enact policies of enduring significance, which would consolidate the support of existing constituencies and attract new adherents? This expanded definition of party building would suggest that Democratic presidents may not have been quite as predatory as they seem.

These small quibbles aside, Galvin has written a powerful book which fundamentally alters our understanding of presidents' contributions to the development of political parties. *Presidential Party Building* will likely become a classic in the field, both for its substantive contributions and for its conceptual and analytical innovations. Galvin's book will probably not be the last word on the subject of presidential party building, but it will be tremendously illuminating for scholars of the presidency, party politics, American political development, and political organizations.