

## INTRODUCTION: EXTREME PARTISANSHIP

In the summer of 2003, as California's state legislators attempted to close a \$38 billion deficit in a \$100 billion budget, the parties stayed about as ideologically distant from each other as possible. Democrats wanted only modest cuts in services, but higher income taxes on the wealthy, a tripling of the car registration fee, and a hike in the state sales tax, which, at 7.25 percent, was already the highest in the nation. Republicans, for their part, opposed *any* new taxes, and not a few wanted tax *cuts*. To close the budget deficit, they called for massive cuts in spending, including eliminating the Seismic Safety Commission, a subsidy to poor blind people to feed their seeing-eye dogs, and public payments for the burial of dead foster children (Nicholas and Halper 2003). It seemed unlikely that the Democrats would get the tax hikes they sought (particularly with the Democratic governor facing a Republican-led recall), and even less likely that the budget could be balanced by starving seeing-eye dogs or leaving dead foster children unburied. Yet the lines were thusly drawn, and they held.

Amid a downgrading of the state's credit rating to near junk-bond status and threats that all state employees would have to go on minimum wage, the impasse dragged on for weeks. A mid-July Field Poll (DiCamillo and Field 2003) showed only 19 percent of Californians approving of the legislature's performance—a record low. Public animosity toward the California government hadn't been so high since the anti-incumbent fervor that swept the state in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which resulted in term limits, campaign contribution restrictions, mandatory cuts in legislative staffs, and 14 incumbents getting tossed out of the 80-person assembly. Legislators seemed to be courting that kind of reaction again.

The Democrats maintained large majorities in both houses of the legislature but fell a few votes short of the two-thirds supermajority neces-

sary to pass a budget. This put intense pressure on a handful of swing Republicans who could, in theory, win plaudits from constituents for working out a compromise with Democrats to end the standoff.

More effective pressure, however, came from state senator Jim Brulte of Rancho Cucamonga. Brulte, the acknowledged Republican leader in Sacramento, vowed to recruit and fund a primary opponent to any Republican of either house who voted with the Democrats. At the same time, the leader of the Club for Growth, an antitax political interest group, visited the Republican caucus and promised, “We’ve got the knives out for any Republicans who would agree to raise taxes and vote with [Democratic governor] Gray Davis” (Halper and Vogel 2003; Halper 2003).

These threats were credible because there was still blood on those knives from two years earlier. On the key budget vote for fiscal year 2001–2, four Republican assembly members had crossed party lines to approve the Democratic plan, which included both spending cuts and a \$1.2 billion tax increase. That was the last assembly session for all four of them, although none would be defeated in a general election. Anthony Pescetti of Rancho Cordova was confronted with a serious primary challenger the following year and dropped out. Dave Kelley of Idyllwild retired when he found that his assembly district had been made hostile to him in what was otherwise a profoundly pro-incumbent redistricting. Mike Briggs of Fresno decided to run for an open congressional seat, but was defeated in the primary by the little-known Devin Nunes; conservative donors throughout the state chose to back the unknown candidate rather than help a heretic. Finally, Richard Dickerson of Redding attempted a run for state senate but was defeated in the primary by assemblyman Sam Aanestad solely on the issue of Republican loyalty. Twenty-three of Dickerson’s Republican colleagues in the assembly and all but three Republican senators endorsed Aanestad, as did the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and many local officials (Cannon 2002; *California Journal Staff* 2002; Jeffe 2003; *Orange County Register Staff* 2001; Wasserman 2001). The specter of these four moderate Republicans being dispatched to private life for supporting a Democratic budget no doubt weighed heavily on legislators’ minds two years later.

This example would strike most observers as a clear-cut case of strong party behavior. Legislators stuck together in partisan blocs even though their behavior disappointed the general public and potentially lowered their chances of reelection. The example is particularly striking consider-

ing its locale. Until recently, California was not known as a particularly partisan state. Legislative party discipline was notably weak, and as recently as the 1960s, speakers of the state assembly were regularly elected on bipartisan votes.

And yet California's polarization differs only modestly from the polarization that has occurred in the U.S. Congress and across the nation. Since the late 1980s, one could scarcely set foot in the U.S. Capitol without immediately recognizing that party pervades nearly everything Congress does. On issue after issue, almost all Democratic members of Congress stand in firm opposition to almost all Republican members. Compromise is shunned as most members of Congress, Democrats as often as Republicans, take positions that are more partisan than the voters they purport to represent. And while it was once common for members of different parties to call each other friends, today that almost never happens; insults and even physical threats across party lines are becoming more common (Jamieson and Falk 2000). Extreme partisan politics—"total war," in the words of a leading journalist (Brownstein 2003)—is the norm in the U.S. Congress.

Following the dictum of former Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill that all politics is local, this book examines the local roots of the new extreme partisanship. It argues that party organization at the community level is responsible for partisan behavior not only in Congress but in many state legislatures across the country. Local parties are not merely more active, better staffed, and better funded than they used to be (Cotter et al. 1984); they also recruit candidates, dominate primaries, and demand a high level of partisanship from elected officials.

To grasp this essential feature of American politics, one must study legislative politics not as a world unto itself, but rather in terms of its relationship to local politics. One must, that is, study how party systems channel influence from the local grass roots to the centers of legislative power.

This book is an attempt to do this in one particular state: California. Utilizing firsthand observations of party organizations in five communities, more than 150 years of roll calls in the state legislature, and a fresh interpretation of historical case material, I seek to illuminate the most basic features of party politics, prominently including the dependence of legislative parties on local party organization.

Although I might have done this study in any of several locales, California makes a particularly good setting. Its party system is small enough

to be studied holistically, but also large enough to constitute a real system. In addition, the state's unusual political history affords a rare but convenient natural experiment in party organization: Progressive reforms in the early twentieth century effectively cut off state legislators from their roots in local parties. Then, about forty years later, voters repealed these reforms through the initiative process. By studying how this sequence of events affected legislative politics, one can see how local organization matters to party politics.

This is not simply a study of local parties; it is a study of the local roots of national politics and, as such, our contemporary party system as it operates at the local, state, and national levels.

Partisanship has been increasing at the national level for more than two decades now. Milestones along this path include the dispute over the 1984 house race in Indiana's "Bloody Eighth" district, the rejection of arch-conservative jurist Robert Bork for the Supreme Court in 1987, the forced resignation of Speaker Jim Wright in 1989, and the 1995–96 federal budget shutdown. In all these instances, moderate politicians turned their back on constituent sentiment to vote with their parties.

I have depicted the polarization of congressional politics graphically in figure 1. The figure presents evidence from four legislative sessions—1969, 1983, 1995, and 2001. In each period, we see the relationship between the vote for president in a congressional district and the floor voting behavior of its member of Congress. The Republican presidential candidate's vote share in each district is on the horizontal axis, and roll call liberalism/conservatism, as measured by the Poole-Rosenthal NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), is on the vertical axis. In each time period, the members from districts that vote Republican for president are, as would be expected, somewhat more conservative than members from districts carried by Democratic presidential candidates. But the relationship goes from anemic in 1969 to overwhelmingly strong in 2001.

Indeed, the relationship seems arguably *too strong* in the 2001 session. Districts that are strongly Democratic or Republican in their presidential votes have, unsurprisingly, members of Congress that are extremely liberal or extremely conservative. But districts that are only barely Democratic or barely Republican elect people that are almost as extreme. Indeed, even districts that are almost evenly split between Democrats and Republicans in presidential elections are represented by

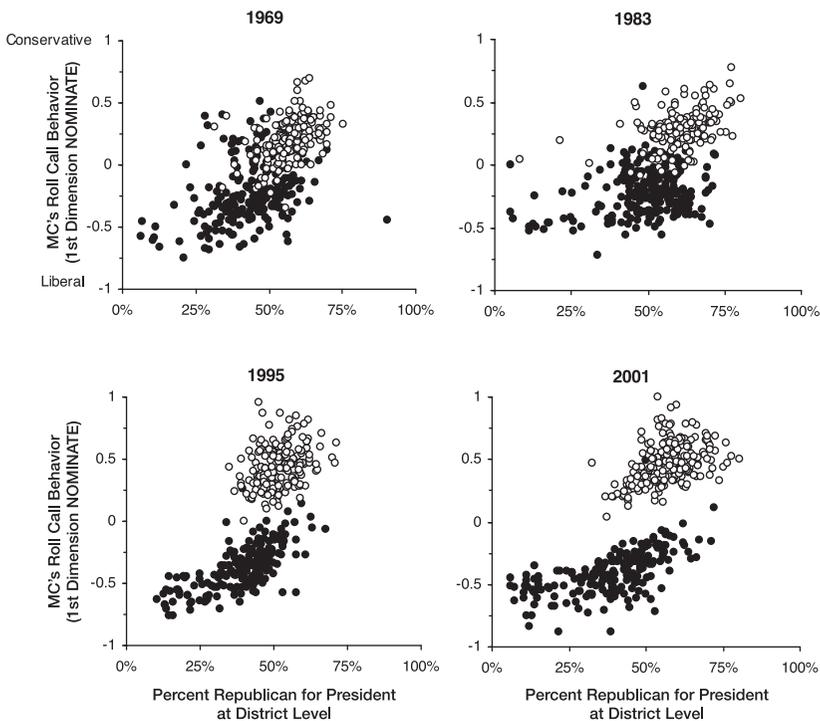


Fig. 1. Representation in the U.S. House at four time periods. Each data point indicates a member of Congress (MC). Hollow dots depict Republican House members; solid dots depict Democratic House members. Members are plotted horizontally by the conservatism of their district (as measured by the Republican vote for president) and vertically by their roll call conservatism (as measured by NOMINATE ideal points). (Adapted from Cohen, Noel, and Zaller 2004.)

members of Congress who are either extremely liberal or conservative. Where is the middle? Why is it missing?

Voters have noticed this change, and they don't particularly like it. Journalist E. J. Dionne (1991) argues that parties have caused Americans to hate the political system by creating a "false polarization":

Liberalism and conservatism are framing political issues as a series of false choices. Wracked by contradiction and responsive mainly to the needs of their various constituencies, liberalism and conservatism *prevent* the nation from settling the questions that most trouble it. (11)

Similarly, Fiorina (1999b: 4) notes that today's politicians seem to have become insensitive to the appeals of the centrist voters who, ac-

ording to much evidence, determine election outcomes. “Whatever happened to the median voter?” he asks. “Rather than attempt to move her ‘off the fence’ or ‘swing’ her from one party to another, today’s campaigners seem to be ignoring her. Instead, they see their task as making sure that strong partisans and ideologues don’t pout and stay home.” Many political observers today are clearly concerned that the nation’s political system is becoming too partisan. Even David Broder, who just a few decades ago penned *The Party’s Over* (1972), now complains that “partisan excess” is contributing to the “perversion of representative government” (Broder 2003).

This trend is decidedly not limited to the federal level. In 2003, Republican legislators in Colorado and Texas attempted to redraw congressional districts for the second time in two years to exploit their partisan advantages following the 2002 elections. Although the Colorado Supreme Court decided such activity was unconstitutional in that state, the successful redistricting in Texas resulted in five new Republican districts for the 2004 elections. These actions represented the first time in the past half century that any state attempted a mid-decade redistricting for reasons other than a court order. Democrats then threatened to retaliate by redistricting Democratic-controlled Oklahoma and New Mexico (Reid 2003; Marshall 2003). Even as voters and journalists complained that such behavior was petty and disgusting, politicians seized every chance to eke out even a small victory for their party.

These examples and others are jarring for the generation of students assigned to read David Mayhew’s influential *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (1974). That book famously described members of Congress as single-minded seekers of reelection and legislative parties as all but meaningless entities with little desire and less power to compel members to vote contrary to their districts’ wishes. Mayhew’s book was but one part of a vast literature that saw politicians as craven protectors of their own hides and parties as laughable in their impotence.

Clearly something has changed in the decades since that book was penned. Indeed, in recent years, a new literature has arisen to explain why strongly partisan behavior by members of Congress is entirely logical and expected. These titles, including John Aldrich’s *Why Parties?* (1995) and Cox and McCubbins’s *Legislative Leviathan* (1993), depict an almost totally different political system from the one Mayhew described just a few decades earlier. How could such astute observers of the political system see things so differently? What has changed?

One possible explanation is that the nature of politicians has changed. That, however, seems inherently unlikely, and as I shall show in a later chapter, the evidence is strongly against this view. Much more likely, politicians are operating in an environment that is somehow different from that of their predecessors. One major difference is that general elections don't matter as much as they once did. In recent years, House incumbents have won upward of 95 percent of their reelection battles. Ninety-nine percent of incumbents retained their seats in 2002, and the 2006 election—a “thumpin'” of President Bush that saw the Democrats take over both houses of Congress—only involved 30 seats changing hands. Whether one attributes it to redistricting, realignment, or increasingly strategic parties, far fewer congressional districts are in play today than at any time in recent history (Jacobson 2001; Abramowitz and Alexander 2004; Abramowitz 2004; Krasno 2007).

What's more, the major parties aren't even bothering to put up a fight for most districts, particularly when there's an incumbent involved. Only a handful of incumbents have encountered significant spending by the opposing party in recent elections. Even prior to the 2006 elections, as pundits broadly predicted the best environment for Democrats in a generation, the most optimistic Democratic strategists targeted 50 Republican incumbents, leaving the other 182 unmolested (VandeHei 2006). Incumbents, by and large, are being left alone.

That most congressional seats go essentially uncontested in general elections tells us something about why officeholders would be ignoring voters. But it doesn't tell us everything. Defeats do still occur, and, as Thomas Mann (1978) has famously argued, members of Congress feel “unsafe at any margin” because they know that political tides can turn quickly. Or, as Mayhew has put it, “Congressman Smith is unbeatable as long as he continues to do the things he is doing” (Mayhew 1974: 37).

It is, moreover, the case that electoral extremity still carries electoral risk. Members of Congress who take ideologically extreme stances significantly dampen their reelection prospects (Erickson 1971; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Wright and Berkman 1986). And yet such risky behavior is apparently acceptable today, and historically, as well. According to Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001), the custom of voting one's district from the 1940s through the 1970s was actually an aberration in American history. Today, and for most of the time since the mid-nineteenth century, candidates for Congress have regularly deviated from their districts' median voters. In other words, politicians are inten-

tionally pursuing behavior that angers the bulk of their constituents and decreases their chances of electoral success.

We have, then, a small mystery. Members of Congress are partisan—indeed, extremely so—even when they come from relatively moderate districts. The risks of extremism are diminished as a result of declining competitiveness in congressional elections. But risk still exists, and just in the past few years, dozens of members of Congress have flouted district opinion on issues from the Iraq War to Terri Schiavo—exposing themselves to greater risk of an adverse partisan tide than, by all appearances, they have any reason to.

The most likely explanation for this new state of affairs is the resurgence of party organization at the local level. While members have grown less fearful of challenges from the other party, they have become more concerned with threats from within their own party.

I cannot prove this thesis for the nation as a whole, because I cannot investigate local party organization on a national scale. But I can offer supporting evidence from the local party organizations that I have studied in California—organizations that send a substantial number of representatives to Washington.

Yet a striking feature of local party organization is that it is not organized by congressional district boundaries, state legislative district lines, or any other legal description. Legal boundaries do, of course, influence party structure (Aistrup 1993), but the main boundaries are those of organic political communities. Hence, there is a local party organization for the Latinos of Eastside Los Angeles County, the African Americans of South Los Angeles, the well-off Republicans of Orange County, and so forth. These organizations do not specialize by office; rather, they are concerned with all offices within their boundaries, from city council to state legislature to Congress. They may also become active in gubernatorial and presidential campaigns, but their bread-and-butter concern is the locally elected public official. The rules that apply to filling one of these offices tend to apply to all.

The natural political communities that are at the base of local party organization are often politically (and racially) homogeneous. Hence the parties tend to be concerned more with party nominations, which are often wide-open contests, than with general elections, where the results are foregone conclusions. But even in those few places where the general election outcome is in doubt, the role of local parties in nomination politics is too important for even sitting officeholders to ignore.

Nominations are made in primaries that typically have low turnout, little advertising, no rival party labels among which to choose, and virtually no media attention until they are over. For these reasons, nominations are often easily controlled by political insiders, including legislative leaders, interest groups, activists, and others. I call this collection of actors the *informal party organization*, or IPO, and I argue that these IPOs are the heart, soul, and backbone of contemporary political parties. Since activists are a prominent and energetic component of these organizations, IPOs tend to seek the most ideologically extreme candidate they feel they can get elected in a general election. And, since most general elections are not seriously contested today, winning at that stage is often not much of a constraint.

My claim, then, is that the parties control the public behavior of their officeholders by acting as gatekeepers to political office. Just as it is nearly impossible to win office without the nomination of a major political party, so is it nearly impossible to win the nomination of a major political party without the backing of a local IPO. Those interested in being candidates must work their way up through the IPO, proving their abilities to win votes and return public goods to their backers. Those who pass these tests receive the campaign resources—money, endorsements, Election Day labor—needed to prevail in a primary. And if they fail to deliver once in office, those resources will not be there for them the next time around. Incumbents are the most responsive to those with the greatest capacity to fire them. Today, thanks to the organizational abilities of activists and the declining importance of the general election, those who control party nominations are more terrifying to incumbents than the median voter is.

IPOs stay involved after the election, monitoring officeholders more carefully than ordinary voters can and pressuring them to enact a partisan agenda. Officeholders who drift toward the center after their initial election may face punishment by IPO leaders. A vast, poorly informed general electorate that leans toward the incumbent's own party does not instill as much fear among incumbents as a smaller, tightly controlled primary electorate. To be sure, few politicians are defeated in primaries. But few need to be if politicians are risk averse—one or two examples are usually sufficient to keep members in line. The end product of these political arrangements is a highly polarized government whose elected officials are often ideologically steadfast and unwilling to compromise, even in cases in which they might win a few more general election votes by doing so.

E. E. Schattschneider (1942: 35) defined a party as “an organized attempt to get . . . control of the government.” This is precisely what these informal party organizations are. They pick the candidates who are capable of winning and endow these candidates with the resources—campaign funds, workers, and political cues such as endorsements—that make it possible to gain office. Because IPOs are active across levels of government—local, state, and national—they may be able to satisfy a wide range of demands, including those of benefit seekers for government aid and of career politicians for upward mobility.

Since these informal party organizations function primarily at the local level, and since it is at the local level that nomination battles are fought and won, this is where I focus my study. Although this study centers largely on the state of California, I develop arguments that are entirely general and test them in conditions that are common throughout the nation. California is like the nation in that it has achieved high levels of partisanship despite the weakness of its formal party organizations. And it is like the nation in that its voters are frequently frustrated by partisan acrimony but cannot seem to do anything about it. As we will see in chapter 3, the increasing polarization of legislators in Washington, DC—even among those representing moderate legislative districts—has been occurring in the California assembly, as well.

Another trait California shares with the nation is that most of its legislature’s general elections are predetermined. As will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, assembly election results are wildly lopsided. Candidates are either winning by huge margins or losing by them, even in districts in which the two parties are evenly matched in terms of presidential voting or voter registration. Indeed, the *California Journal* declared a mere two of the state’s eighty assembly districts to be toss-ups in the 2004 election; the rest were safely in the hands of one party or another (*California Journal* Editors 2004). No assembly incumbents have lost in the past five general elections.

And as with the U.S. Congress, California assembly general elections are not seriously contested by the two parties. The number of open-seat races in which the two major party candidates spend roughly equal amounts has been declining since the 1970s, and incumbents have never faced many serious challenges over this time span. Thanks to term limits, there are more open seats (roughly a third of the chamber) in assembly elections than there are in most U.S. House elections, but there is much less competition for those open assembly seats. In the 2002 gen-

eral election, only two incumbent-held seats and three open seats saw candidates spending even roughly similar amounts. As at the federal level, with few exceptions, California's general legislative elections are not serious contests.

One way in which California stands out from the nation is that it has achieved its current high level of partisanship despite an unusual history of nonpartisanship. As late as 1984, a leading textbook on the state described its parties as existing solely on paper (Christensen and Gerston 1984: 37). This reputation is largely attributable to the state's experiences with the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century. Some of the most radical Progressive reforms in the country's history—cross-filing chief among them—were enacted in this state. Many forms of party organization taken for granted in other states were made illegal in California for the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, traditional forms of patronage (public jobs and cash payments available to large numbers of regime supporters), which have been in decline across the nation for decades, were never much of a fixture in California, forcing political actors to organize politics without such help. Despite the state's anti-party legacy, today it has two of the most ideologically polarized legislatures in the country (Wright and Osborn 2002).

California's nonpartisan history is actually a boon to understanding current partisanship. It means that a state's current vibrant partisanship cannot be explained as simply an inheritance of the past. And cross-filing, which was implemented in 1914 and eliminated in 1959, uniquely focuses attention on party control of nominations as the key to understanding how parties work and why they are important.

Another important distinction between California and the United States is the existence of term limits on officeholders. Like the declining contestation of general elections, term limits have had the effect of making the nominations stage even more important. By compelling career politicians to change offices regularly, term limits force them into primary elections in which they must run as nonincumbents. With their incumbency advantage gone, these candidates become more dependent upon and subservient to IPOs for assistance in winning office.

A central part of my argument is that legislators are behaving like partisans because (1) they are chosen for such behavior, and (2) they fear the wrath of the activists and other political actors who control the primaries more than they fear the judgment of voters in the general election. This book is not, however, a study of extreme partisanship *per se*. Rather, it uses

this extreme partisanship as a jumping-off point to understand what parties are and how they function, both in California and, as more limited evidence suggests, many other parts of the nation. The most distinctive element of this study is that it examines parties both in government and in the local community and relates the two venues of party activity to one another.

My study argues that we need a new framework for understanding what exactly political parties are. The existing views of parties in their relation to politicians can be divided into two main competing camps. One sees politicians as ambitious, self-interested actors who care about nothing except winning and remaining in office, and views parties as having little or no power to compel them to act otherwise. Issues are either ignored or cynically exploited to win votes. As a congressional staffer famously claimed, “The point on Capitol Hill is not to win on issues, it’s to get reelected. Issues are checker chips. You give some away, you take some back” (Jackley 1992: 179). Politicians’ convictions shift with the wind, conforming to whatever some narrow majority of voters believes. Politicians, in this view, run politics by themselves—they may construct weak parties as service organizations to help them get reelected, but such parties could never force them to vote against their wishes or those of their constituents.

The other main view sees politicians as the parties’ willing warriors, eagerly submitting to whatever their legislative party leaders want them to do or say. If a Republican leader claims that torture is a necessary component of modern warfare, then all other Republican members of Congress are expected to say the same thing. Likewise, virtually all Democrats stood up to be counted with a philandering president in 1998 because that’s what the party demanded. Advancing the party’s goals takes precedence above truth or principle, and certainly above the wishes of one’s district. What’s more, these partisan politicians are willing participants in this arrangement; they constructed the parties to serve their careers and their ideological goals.

To be sure, there are plenty of anecdotes available to support either of these claims, and many political observers frequently make both claims simultaneously. Author Ron Suskind, for example, has, in separate works, characterized Bush administration officials as both “Mayberry Machiavellis” who force their policy shop to conform to poll-tested political considerations (2003) and ideological warriors who advance ideals without consideration of political feasibility (2004). What such observers often fail to recognize is that these views are incompatible. Politicians are

either poll-watching risk-minimizers or they are staunch ideologues who ignore their constituents—they cannot simultaneously be both.

So which is it? Are politicians just in it for themselves? If so, how could that explain the Clinton impeachment vote, in which many Republican House members acceded to party pressure to vote for impeachment against the clear wishes of their constituents? But are they blind partisans? If so, how did parties change from being little more than convenient labels to the organizing force behind much legislative voting? And why would these politicians manufacture and willingly submit to a party that puts their own careers in jeopardy?

The problem with this puzzle is that it's a false dichotomy. It's false because it looks to politicians to understand parties. Both theories proceed from the assumption that the "party is the creature of the politicians" (Aldrich 1995: 4). In fact, as I shall argue, quite the opposite is true. Politicians, like all professionals, would like to keep their jobs and the attendant privileges, but they must conform to a political institutional environment *that they do not control* in order to do so. That is, politicians may be craven individualists or devoted partisan foot soldiers, depending upon who is controlling politics and how they are doing it.

Years ago, the common practice for understanding parties was to look not at the legislators in Washington but at the people in the home districts—party bosses, business interests, newspaper editors, and so forth—who sent them there in the first place (Mayhew 1986; Dahl 1961; Wolfinger 1972; Kent 1924). The typical finding of such studies was that traditional party organizations (TPOs), in the style of Chicago under Richard J. Daley and New York City under Boss Tweed, control the behavior of elected officials by handpicking candidates for nomination, manipulating nominations through patronage, and credibly threatening denunciation as a punishment for disloyalty. This model obviously has some traction for explaining modern politics, since it accepts an expanded view of parties with multiple types of actors (bosses and politicians) and paints a picture of politicians who are sometimes compelled to behave in ways they don't wish to. It helps resolve the question of why politicians appear to be party warriors at some times and median-hugging centrists at others by arguing that partisan forces come from outside the legislature; when these forces are strong and ideologically motivated, incumbents will be compelled to construct party institutions and march as ideological foot soldiers; when they are weak, legislators will eschew partisanship and individualism will reign.

A problem for this third view, however, is that few believe that there are national political machines operating today, if such a thing can even be said to exist at the national level. There are some problems with applying this model to California, as well. For one, California lacks strong formal party organizations—TPOs simply don't exist there, by scholarly consensus. Second, who's the boss? There are obviously influential figures in California politics today, including congresswoman Maxine Waters, former assembly Speaker and San Francisco mayor Willie Brown, and governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. But it would be difficult to match any of them up with the classic definition of *boss*.

Yet, despite the state's weak formal party structure, there is a great deal of party organization going on in California. Politicians are compelled to hold a party line and are punished—sometimes terminally—for failure to do so. They may also be rewarded for going along with what's asked of them. This control is being exerted by forces inside and outside the legislature, perhaps a combination of officeholders, activists, and benefit seekers who are capable of influencing the party nomination process. The dominant influence, however, comes from outside the government, and to the extent politicians are able, they attempt to insulate themselves from it. This is not the kind of relationship described by most modern studies of political parties.

The reason, I suspect, that existing models of political parties miss so much of the party action in California and elsewhere in the United States is that much of this action occurs out of plain sight and leaves little trace of quantifiable data. It occurs in local communities, at odd hours, behind closed doors, and occasionally outside the law. Because local organization is central to my argument, I have gone into the field to learn about it. Some of what I have found includes the following:

- A group of wealthy conservative activists, land developers, and officeholders has effectively controlled Republican nominations in Orange County for decades, and maintains a large presence in the state Republican Party. Some of these conservatives work in activist groups or on the county's Republican Central Committee. Many of the developers work through an organization known as the Lincoln Club, which uses its members' \$3,500 annual dues to fund conservative candidates for state offices and to groom future candidates who can help their businesses. Through the centralization of money and the coordination of efforts, these conservative activists have played no small

role in keeping the state's Republican elected officials well to the right of most Republican voters. Not only do they actively recruit conservative candidates and discourage or even threaten moderates who run for party nominations, but they also punish Republican officeholders who deviate from the party line. Members of the Lincoln Club were behind the 1995 recall of Speaker Dorris Allen—the assembly's first Republican Speaker in twenty-five years and first female Speaker ever—because she had made a deal with outgoing Speaker Willie Brown and the other assembly Democrats to win her position with their support. The Lincoln Club also backed a successful primary challenger to unseat her replacement, Brian Setencich (R-Fresno), who had become Speaker by a similar arrangement. In the minds of these activists and benefit seekers, bipartisanship is a punishable offense.

- In South Los Angeles, Democratic candidates for local, state, and federal offices all compete for the endorsement of Congresswoman Maxine Waters in primary elections. This endorsement brings with it access to Waters's benefit-seeking allies (often Los Angeles business leaders outside her congressional district), who donate substantial sums to her anointed candidates. Her endorsement also comes with the Election Day labor of activists in friendly unions, clubs, and churches. Finally, Waters publicizes her choices in her highly influential slate mailer, which alone can move thousands of voters toward one candidate or another (Lewis 2003). Locals describe Waters's grip on politics in the same way that Chicagoans have described Mayor Richard J. Daley's reign. "If she supports a candidate," a Democratic club member explains about Waters's political style, "as a rule, they will win, because that's how strong her influence is in her district."
- For more than two decades, aspiring Democratic politicians in Los Angeles County's Eastside have had to choose between aligning with the organization run by County Supervisor Gloria Molina or with the Alatorre-Torres-Polanco machine. Each of these organizations works closely with its affiliated activists in the labor unions and political action committees to elect dependable candidates who are typically well to the left of most Democratic voters in the area. The public offices of these principal elected officials and those of their close allies are filled with young aspirants waiting their turn for a chance to run for office, knowing that they will only receive their leaders' blessings—and accompanying donor lists and Election Day labor—if they

stay in the queue. Winning office without the backing of one of these organizations, or switching between these organizations, is considered nearly impossible due to their control over the nominations process and their demand for loyalty.

- In rural Fresno County, weak formal party organizations of both parties have yielded to coalitions of elected officials (such as former Democratic congressman Cal Dooley and former Republican state senator Chuck Poochigian); benefit seekers, including wealthy agribusiness people and land developers; and passionate activists, including unions and business and law enforcement organizations. The success of these organizations is more impressive on the right than the left. In a county where the two parties roughly parallel each other in voter registration (and the median voter is thus quite moderate), the Republicans elected from this area are fiercely conservative, in part due to the influence of these organizations. Local conservative activists have proven their willingness to punish those Republican officeholders who vote with Democrats once too often. They were behind the 2002 primary defeat of Republican assembly member Mike Briggs after he supported a tax increase to balance the state budget in 2001.

As these examples suggest, party politics in California is driven by informal alliances between officeholders, benefit seekers, activists, and the candidates they back—alliances that center on party nominations. Nominations weigh heavily on the minds of incumbents and candidates, compelling them to deviate from the typical voter in their district even when experience, career-mindedness, and common sense might tell them to do otherwise. None of the leading views of parties does a good job explaining this phenomenon.

In the model I propose, candidates, officeholders, activists, and benefit seekers have a variety of incentives for working together to form informal party organizations. These actors understand that they can achieve more in politics by working together than they can on their own. For candidates, the organizations offer a chance at a stable support structure; the higher they wish to go in the hierarchy of offices, or the more often term limits force them to change offices, the more they need help from IPOs in primaries. For ideological activists and benefit seekers, IPOs ensure that campaign donations will be more effective. Instead of spreading money over a broad range of candidates, they can learn who

has the support of insiders and who, therefore, is most likely to win. And even if that candidate doesn't win, their support will be remembered by IPO leaders. There is no such solace for the unaffiliated donor who contributes to a losing campaign. Finally, these organizations also arise because ambitious officeholders realize they can use them to build their own power bases, deliver for their constituents, and achieve more while in office.

A substantial and influential literature today argues that politicians themselves build parties to solve certain problems, including the unpredictability of careers, the instability of legislative majorities, and the difficulty of passing legislation they care about (Aldrich 1995; Schwartz 1989). I argue that political actors outside the government have precisely the same motivations. They need things from government—changes in social policy, public contracts for sympathetic businesses, and so on—but can't get those things by themselves. To meet their goals, they follow the logic of the minimal winning coalition (just as legislators are said to do) by finding just enough allies to control nominations. Indeed, these local actors are much better able to form durable coalitions than legislators are because they are closer to the voters and understand the appeals and issues that will turn elections. Once they have formed such a coalition, they are the gatekeepers to political office; no one can hold office without meeting their standards and owing them something in return. Thus do these informal party organizations control the government, or at least part of it.

Would-be candidates accede to this system not because they want to but because, except for a few characters with atypically high name recognition and large personal fortunes, they have to. The system is designed to produce ideologically polarized candidates, but officeholders may often resist party control from the outside. For example, when urged to abolish the Progressive reforms that made it difficult for activists to control primaries, legislators repeatedly refused to do so. Even legislators whose party would have benefited from the end of these reforms resisted ending them.

Evidence from other states suggests that this nomination-centered model with IPOs at its center has at least some validity in other parts of the nation. In Nebraska, for example, we find a unicameral state legislature that has forgone parties altogether. Reviewing the existing literature on parties, we might expect Nebraska's incumbents to have created weak parties to help them win reelection; they haven't. Or we might expect

that incumbents have built disciplined parties to enable them to carry out the ideological agendas that their members run on and presumably believe in. They haven't done that, either (Wright and Schaffner 2002). Nor do there appear to be any local party bosses. Interestingly, a conservative group of activists recently approached the Nebraska legislature's leaders and urged them to make it a partisan institution, promising that the Republican Party would be able to hold it for the foreseeable future. Incumbents, however, rejected the suggestion, concluding that the nonpartisan environment to which they were accustomed was preferable (Sittig 1997: 196).

My interpretation of this story is that, consistent with my theory of party organization, informal forces outside the government were attempting to impose partisan control but that officeholders resisted. It seems obvious why legislators—even those in the dominant party—would resist external control, but this is not the dynamic envisioned by the leading theory of legislative partisanship. According to this theory, legislators of the dominant party should have seized the opportunity to create a durable, long-term coalition for policies they believed in.

By no means do I suggest that existing models of parties are without merit. Each has been appropriate to certain places and times in history. Mayhew's (1974) book, for example, is an excellent description of politics when it is actually candidate-centered, as it was nationally from the 1950s through the early 1980s, and in California during the first half of the twentieth century. But the nub of the problem is this: It is certainly correct that if legislators want to get things done, they need to create a legislative party organization to do it. What many scholars miss, however, is that legislators don't necessarily want to get things done—they just want to stay in office. That explanation, however, misses the fact that *somebody* may want to get things done, and that these somebodies can sometimes organize politics, control nominations at the local level, and force officeholders to pursue partisan goals. The traditional party organization model captures all this. What it misses, though, is that people who want to get things done don't need to work through the formal party structures to do it; informal party organizations can be just as effective.

This is where my nomination-centered approach to parties makes its contribution. It is essentially a more general version of the traditional party organization model, in that it sees control of the nominations process as the key to control of the parties. But if formal party organizations are not available or powerful enough to do that job, those interested

in controlling government will find another means of doing it. Specifically, they will band together as informal party organizations (IPOs). These IPOs—coalitions of top elected officials, activists, and benefit seekers—are the modern equivalents of the old-fashioned political party, doing what it did by other means. When TPOs or IPOs are strong, party organization develops within the legislature because the external party leaders insist on getting things done, and strong legislative organization is a useful means of doing so. And when TPOs or IPOs are strong, the view of officeholders as single-minded seekers of reelection has little relevance, not because officeholders don't care about the electoral connection as Mayhew describes it, but because, unlike the situation Mayhew describes, parties interpose themselves between officeholders and voters and often thoroughly dominate the relationship.

My study proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 addresses the key question of why parties appear to be weak at some points and strong at others, laying out in greater detail my theory of nomination-centered politics. As I argue, the modern political party is remarkably similar to the machines that once dominated places like Chicago and New York City. Then, the behavior of officeholders was determined by the actions of those outside government, and those seeking to understand parties examined the local hierarchies of ward bosses and precinct captains who slated candidates for office and made sure they won. Although the shape of the modern party is more of a network than a machine hierarchy, the function is essentially the same: a small group of people operating only barely within the law manages to control elections and thereby the government. The major difference between these modern informal party organizations (IPOs) and their machine forebears is the existence of ideological activists. Machines distrusted ideologues; IPOs rely on them. The result is extreme candidates and highly polarized politics.

The notion that parties are not lying in service to elected officials but are, rather, controlling them from outside the government runs counter to the views of many modern scholars. However, I show exactly this to be the case in chapter 2, using California's unusual history to illuminate the nature of parties. Specifically, I examine the California assembly's responses to several state antiparty reforms enacted during the Progressive Era. The most influential of these reforms was cross-filing, which allowed candidates for partisan office to run in multiple party primaries without their party label appearing on the ballot. The Progressives' aim in creating cross-filing was to kill parties, and their theory of party was essentially

mine: if parties could be severed from nominations and those who control them, party activity would wither and die. And indeed, the legislative parties collapsed in the aftermath of cross-filing. No longer needing to appease their partisan primary constituencies, legislators eagerly voted across party lines even on such crucial issues as the election of the assembly Speaker. Incumbents in the cross-filing era not only failed to develop partisan institutions but also rejected efforts to reintroduce partisanship to the legislature. When an anti-cross-filing initiative made it onto the ballot, legislators of both parties conspired to defeat it by advancing a watered-down compromise that they claimed to be superior. Legislators did not seek to build partisan institutions to “whip themselves”; parties and party discipline had to be imposed by forces outside the legislature.

While chapter 2 focuses on legislative behavior surrounding the imposition and removal of cross-filing, chapter 3 takes advantage of more than 150 years of legislative roll call data to examine a much broader range of incumbent activity. In this chapter, I examine the power of various influences on legislative behavior. The evidence in this chapter testifies to the profound dampening effect that cross-filing had on partisanship and the strong polarization that has occurred since cross-filing’s demise. It also captures some of the ephemeral coalitions—often led by bosses, ideological activists, and other people outside the legislature who could affect incumbents’ careers—that arose to influence legislative behavior when the formal parties were weak or nonexistent. This chapter provides further evidence that legislators will only act like partisans when people outside the government compel them to.

The evidence presented thus far has supported the notion that party groups outside the government control nominations and compel the behavior of elected officials. But how do they do it? Finding out how these groups function requires leaving the legislature and talking to the folks at the local level who actually structure politics. This is what I do in chapter 4, going inside the informal party organizations that exist throughout California today by means of dozens of interviews with key local political figures. I show how officeholders, donors, activists, and brokers form alliances and conspire to control nominations and elect people who will be faithful to them while in office. These organizations do not function the same way in every part of the state or every race; sometimes they will help a little-known but promising candidate, other times they may rally around a very well-known candidate who would likely win anyway. But

they are always doing something to influence nominations and fill government with people who will bring public goods to them and their allies.

Chapter 5 complements the previous chapter's interviews and anecdotes with some quantitative evidence for the existence and influence of IPOs. I start with a discussion of the challenges in distinguishing between a candidate-centered political system and a party-centered one, using several historical examples of ambitious candidates within strong party systems to illuminate the analysis. I then investigate the paths that many current California officeholders took to power—whether, that is, they received the assistance of IPOs or jumped into politics on their own. The evidence confirms the role of IPOs as the gatekeepers to political offices. Current officeholders are overwhelmingly recruited by activists or other officeholders, or worked their way up within a political organization. The evidence also demonstrates that candidates with ties to IPOs are greatly advantaged in nomination races over those who are not. I then attempt to measure the influence of IPO endorsements in primary elections while controlling for the influence of campaign spending and candidate quality. The aim is to discover, for example, whether an IPO simply uses fundraising to aid its candidates or enlists Election Day labor to boost its candidates' performance. The evidence in this chapter firmly rejects the idea that candidates and incumbents are their own bosses; they depend upon outsiders to obtain and retain power.

The book's concluding chapter assesses the normative implications of my findings about political parties. Is California—or the country, for that matter—better off with stronger parties or weaker ones? I assess the advantages and disadvantages of each system, concluding that citizens have little direct control over politics in either system, but that stronger parties generally provide greater accountability by elected officials. I further suggest some avenues for reform to improve governmental responsiveness and performance.

A note about terminology: The informal party organization (IPO) I have described is a network, in the sense that it is, in Tichy's (1981: 225) respected definition, "a system of participants—people, groups, organizations—joining by a variety of relationships." Nonetheless, I have avoided using the term *network* in the label. *Network analysis* in the social sciences has come to mean a large study of points of contact between multitudes of actors. In theory, this is the correct approach for my study, and a few researchers have attempted this approach for studying parties (Schwartz 1990; Koger, Masket, and Noel 2009; Dominguez 2005). How-

ever, because I endeavor to study these organizations throughout the state of California, and because many of these organizations involve city council members from small towns, reclusive donors, busy activists, and others about whom little is generally known, the type of data collection necessary for quantitative network analysis is simply not available. I do attempt to get under the skin of these organizations to discover how they work and what motivates their members, but I am not capable of doing a statistical network analysis in a way that would satisfy adherents of that field.

I also offer a note about abbreviations. Although I will frequently refer to informal party organizations as IPOs, I will try to avoid excessive use of abbreviated terms so to spare those readers possessing fine literary sensibilities the pain that acronyms can inflict. When I do use acronyms, it will be only to avoid excess verbiage on terms for which the reader is already familiar.

Finally, I offer a remark about methodological pluralism. Studying the dynamics of political parties, particularly the more expanded, informal parties I describe herein, is a murky process. No one piece of evidence is likely to jump off the page as irrefutable proof of the existence and power of IPOs or any other form of party. I therefore employ a variety of methods—historical, statistical, qualitative—to examine the party phenomenon from all available angles. I believe that the preponderance of evidence, collected and presented methodically over the course of this study, persuasively supports my arguments and significantly advances our understanding of political parties at the local, state, and federal levels. The final verdict, of course, is the province of the reader.