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Robert Mason

8 The Republican Minority and Voter Mobilisation

The Pursuit of Grassroots Activism and the Politics of Conservatism and Moderation in the United States, 1933–1964

Introduction

The Republican Party's descent to minority status in the American two-party system as a result of the Great Depression and the New Deal unleashed an intensely contested debate among activists and politicians about its future. Rooted in a search for a solution to the electoral puzzle that the success of the Democrats' new coalition posed, most prominently the debate involved ideology and policy—how Republicans should respond to the programmatic activism of New Deal liberalism, the source of the coalition's popular vitality. These responses varied between the more moderate—the more supportive of accommodation with “big government” in search of solutions to socioeconomic problems—and the more conservative, which challenged more fundamentally the expansion of the federal government's role.

From the start, the policy prescriptions associated with these responses connected with electoral calculations about how best to mobilise a majority at the polls. In his 1936 book *You and I—and Roosevelt*, Charles P. Taft, a lawyer active in Cincinnati politics, outlined an argument that the party's electoral success depended on the mobilisation of moderates and thus on a moderate agenda. “If the bitter enders win out and manufacture a platform from a miscellaneous assortment of political lumber glued together by the spittle of hate,” Taft wrote, “the Republicans are beaten before they begin.”¹ The counter-argument would inform the title of a book written by Republican activist Phyllis Schlafly—later to gain still greater fame at the forefront of the campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s—in support of Barry Goldwater's presidential candidacy in 1964, *A Choice Not an Echo*. But not long after the Republicans' landslide defeat of 1936, which confirmed the arrival of the party's minority status, former

1 Charles P. Taft, *You and I—and Roosevelt* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936), 109.

secretary of the Treasury Ogden L. Mills gave a series of lectures, published as *The Seventeen Million*, which offered a similar thesis—arguing that the defence of the individual against what he called the collectivism of the New Deal offered a route to electoral revitalisation for his party.²

As this chapter explores, the debate among Republicans about how to solve their party's minority problem did not involve connections between policy and strategy alone, however. Instead, believing that the work of party activists in mobilising voters was a crucial element in electoral success, Republicans also looked for ways to boost this work. Ostensibly neutral, perhaps, with regard to the intra-party debate about policy direction, these projects were actually linked closely to an ideological preference among their advocates, whether conservative or moderate. Seeking to recreate how Republicans analysed their party's problems in pursuit of remedying them through projects that intended to find organisational initiatives to mobilise voters more effectively, the chapter makes use of manuscript collections of leading figures involved in such efforts. Its starting point is the moment when Republicans lost control of the presidency, at the start of 1933, following the victory of Franklin D. Roosevelt; its end point involves the Goldwater candidacy, another loss for Republicans but a turning point that marked conservative victory in the intra-party debate.³

Scholarship on the Republican Party and on Voter Mobilisation

Exploring the debate between conservative Republicans and moderate Republicans has been at the heart of scholarly engagement with the party's history during this period.⁴ The aspect of politics beyond such questions of ideology and

² Phyllis Schlafly, *A Choice Not an Echo* (Alton, Ill.: Pere Marquette, 1964); Ogden L. Mills, *The Seventeen Million* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

³ Because of new campaign-connected technologies and because of new patterns of activism (exemplified by the rise of single-issue groups in the 1970s), the Goldwater candidacy probably also marked a turning point in the history of voter mobilisation in the United States.

⁴ Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York: Random House, 2003); Heather Cox Richardson, *To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party* (New York: Basic, 2014). Works that focus on Republican conservatives are Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); and David W. Reinhard, *The Republican Right since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983). Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation*

strategy that has gained attention from historians, focusing on conservatism more broadly than on the Republican Party in particular, is grassroots activism—most notably exemplified by Lisa McGirr’s study of “suburban warriors” in Orange County.⁵ In general, the chronological interest of this literature involves the resurgence of conservatism and of the Republican Party that largely defined politics in the United States from the late 1960s onwards, even if the search for the origins of this transformation has encouraged historians to investigate much earlier developments.⁶ There is a strong connection between much of this literature and the concept of voter mobilisation, because it has a central interest in why, and how, many voters switched from support for the Democratic Party to support for the Republican Party.⁷

And yet usually the understanding among historians of voter mobilisation is starkly different from that in political science. As Kenneth M. Goldstein and Matthew Holleque note, an expanded definition of political mobilisation is “the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate, which includes *any* activities that increase the likelihood of someone participating,” but political scientists have tended to employ a more limited definition, “focusing on what we call the canvass, meaning the direct contacts between political organisations and their representatives and citizens (e.g., face-to-face contacts, phone banks, and direct mailings).” Consequently, Goldstein and Holleque observe, political scientists have concentrated on “the medium of mobilization but not the message of mobilization.”⁸ It is an observation

and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) is a study of moderate Republicans.

5 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001). Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, in *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), analyses the significance of a “grasstops” level in politics—between grassroots activists and political actors belonging to high-level elites.

6 The long-term roots of “backlash” that fostered disillusionment with liberalism and that fed the conservative upsurge are explored, for example, in Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

7 There are, however, some significant exceptions. For example, in studying activism within the Republican party, Catherine E. Rymph, in *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), is interested not only in how antifeminism became stronger than feminism at the time of the conservative resurgence, but also more globally in the implications of women’s engagement in the party.

8 Kenneth M. Goldstein and Matthew Holleque, “Getting up off the Canvass: Rethinking the Study of Mobilization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior*,

that underscores the differences between research in the social sciences and the research of historians, who, by contrast, have explored the message much more than the medium.⁹ (The term has been used in a different way by scholars seeking to explain electoral change—most notably that which involved the Republicans' decline and the Democrats' ascendancy at the time of the Great Depression—who have debated the role of mobilisation, involving voters new to electoral participation, in these transformations, as opposed to the role of conversion, involving voters switching from one party to the other.¹⁰)

The Depression-era ascendancy of the Democratic Party, at the expense of the Republicans' electoral fortunes, involved the emergence of New Deal liberalism as centrally salient to electoral coalitions, disadvantageously for the Republicans—but the structures of voter mobilisation underwent change with regard to the medium as well as the message. As political scientist Sidney Milkis shows, Franklin Roosevelt's project of programmatic activism to tackle the Depression, in expanding the powers of the federal government and in particular the executive, pursued its goals via "the transcendence of partisan politics."¹¹ Furthermore, interest-group pluralism naturally complemented New Deal liberalism, with organised labour foremost among the Democratic Party's allies.

Because the new politics that Roosevelt shaped at the time of the Depression involved organisational as well as ideological change, it is logical that the Republicans' debate about their minority problem was not characterised by the

ed. Jan E. Leighley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 578. In his study of "presidential party building," Daniel Galvin identifies voter mobilisation as one of six elements (which also include the provision of campaign services, the development of human capital, the recruitment of candidates, the financing of party activities and support for internal organisation). Although Galvin is attentive to the policy goals underlying "party building," his emphasis remains on "organisational capacity"; Daniel Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 5–6.

⁹ Among the exceptions is one for which the medium is the news media: Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

¹⁰ See, for example, Kristi Andersen, *The Creation of a Democratic Majority, 1928–1996* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Robert S. Erikson and Kent L. Tedin, "The 1928–1936 Partisan Realignment: The Case for the Conversion Hypothesis," *American Political Science Review* 75 (1981): 951–962; James E. Campbell, "Sources of the New Deal Realignment: The Contributions of Conversion and Mobilization to Partisan Change," *Western Political Quarterly* 38 (1985): 357–376.

¹¹ Sidney M. Milkis, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Transcendence of Partisan Politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 100 (1985): 479–504; Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System since the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

moderate-conservative clash about policy alone, but also by a search for organisational initiatives to improve voter mobilisation. And yet projects in practice remained part of the larger battle between the competing visions of conservatives and moderates.

Projects of Party Revitalisation as a Response to the New Deal's Ascendancy

The connection between ideology and organisation was visible within the first responses of Republicans to their loss of electoral support in the 1932 elections, at the height of the Depression. Fresh from the campaign trail in support of Herbert Hoover's losing cause, Ogden Mills joined with other former administration officials to create Republican Federal Associates, "to supplement the work of the regular party organisations in promoting Republican principles of government." Alongside Mills in a leadership role for the new organisation was the former postmaster general Walter Folger Brown, and others who had worked at the Post Office Department under Hoover took on organisational responsibilities.¹² Republican Federal Associates' institutional roots in the Post Office Department revealed an interest in reimagining the structures of American politics in seeking to revitalise the Republican Party; lacking a permanent framework at the national level (with the exception of the national committee, a loose collection of state parties that organised the four-yearly national convention as well as smaller-scale meetings between conventions to discuss developments in politics), a party in control of the White House relied on political appointments to forge an organisational network, of which local postmasters formed the grassroots foundations. In the absence of such patronage, the "out-party" faced a formidable challenge as a presidential election approached—to set up the organisational infrastructure to take on such a task. As the Democrats' national chair during the Hoover years, mindful of this problem because of difficulties he had encountered in running their presidential campaign in 1928, John J. Raskob had reinvented the Democratic National Committee (DNC) as a permanent participant in American politics, with a Washington headquarters and a professional staff. Alongside Raskob was Charles Michelson, in charge of publicity for the DNC, who

¹² "Hoover Men Unite to Restore Party for Victory in '34," *New York Times* [hereafter NYT], April 24, 1933, 1, 6 (quotation, 1).

had successfully waged an ongoing effort to demonise Hoover as the face of the nation's economic crisis.¹³

If some contemporaries saw Associates as a Republican version of the Raskob project, the implications for grassroots organisation of the plans pursued by Mills and his colleagues possessed distinctiveness.¹⁴ Its roots in the Hoover administration also demonstrated an effort to maintain the political influence of the defeated president and his ideas, and this immersion in factional conflict about party control ignited controversy and fomented the initiative's speedy demise.¹⁵ Having aimed first to assist voter mobilisation in the 1934 midterms, Associates did not survive long enough to pursue such an effort.

Persistent in exploring ways to revitalise his party, Mills was already part of another project, Republican Builders, initially based in New York (and animated by concern about the electoral prospects of the state party in particular) but with ambitions to achieve a national presence. The target of Republican Builders involved, as Mills put it, "thousands of men and women who under existing conditions are unwilling to associate themselves directly with the regular Party organisation"; the organisation sought to "arouse great public interest and tend to develop new leaders and a new and militant spirit, both of which are essential if the Republican Party is to survive."¹⁶ Like Associates, Builders took an assertively conservative view of the New Deal. "The program, if made permanent," Mills told a Builders supporter, "would put in the hands of the Government in Washington the absolute power to regiment all business and direct the lives of 120,000,000 individuals."¹⁷ For William Allen White, a Kansas newspaper editor and longtime critic of conservatism within his party, the agenda of leading figures in Builders—"a bunch of frozen faces"—was counterproductive.¹⁸ But Mills disagreed with that perspective on the relationship between ideology and voter mobilisation. Although an anti-New Deal principle drove those in-

13 David Farber, *Everybody Ought to Be Rich: The Life and Times of John J. Raskob, Capitalist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 253–255.

14 "The R. F. A.," *NYT*, April 25, 1933, 16.

15 Thomas M. Slopnick, "In the Shadow of Herbert Hoover: The Republican Party and the Politics of Defeat, 1932–1936" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2006), 130–147.

16 Letter, Ogden L. Mills to Robert A. Taft, June 10, 1934, folder "Correspondence Re. Rep. Builders (A-Z) 1934–35," box 80-A, Ogden Livingston Mills Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

17 Letter, Ogden L. Mills to Walter E. Frew, May 10, 1934, folder "Correspondence Re. Rep. Builders (A-Z) 1934–35," box 80-A, Mills Papers.

18 Letter, William Allen White to David Hinshaw, March 9, 1934, folder "Hinshaw, David 1934," box C215, William Allen White Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

volved in Builders, Mills also believed that a focus on opposition to the Democrats was likelier to catalyse engagement with the organisation, observing, “it is much easier to get people to attack something than it is to unite them on a constructive and affirmative program.”¹⁹

In an era when women had little presence of any visibility in politics (even if in Washington a “women’s network” was achieving influence in shaping the New Deal), Republican Builders, with its mission to increase political engagement beyond existing Republican activists, possessed a gender profile of more diversity. The inspirational force for its creation was May Davie, chair of the New York party’s finance committee, who found that women (“much less busy and almost always available for Organisation work,” she noted) were likelier than men to be responsive to her efforts in support of Builders. “I am completely exhausted,” she told Mills about six months after the launch of Builders, “with trying to make busy and tired men (who by the time I see them usually have had the extra cocktail that entirely dulls their brains) work for the Builders.”²⁰ In her work for Builders, Davie encouraged women who had been “far too ladylike, far too genteel and far too nice to get into politics” to take on a political role as significant as that of men, or more so.²¹

But if efforts among Republicans to achieve organisational revitalisation depended on the contribution of women (rather like the role of McGirr’s “suburban warriors” in the conservative upsurge of the 1960s), then their opponents in the Democratic Party were already being innovative in fostering the political involvement of women via the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee, under Molly Dewson.²² Dewson’s work is just one example of diverse and multifaceted initiatives among Democrats to mobilise voters in support of the New Deal, in the end outflanking the pursuit of mobilisation among Republicans as a way to rescue their party from its Depression-era collapse. Dewson worked at the heart of the party, but especially as the 1936 campaign approached, other organisational initiatives—including the Good Neighbor League and the Commit-

19 Letter, Ogden L. Mills to H. Alexander Smith, May 29, 1934, folder “Correspondence Re. Rep. Builders (A-Z) 1934–35,” box 80-A, Mills Papers.

20 “Republicans Form New State Group,” *NYT*, September 29, 1933, 3; letter, May Davie to Ogden L. Mills, March 15, 1934, folder “Correspondence Re. Rep. Builders (A-Z) 1934–35,” box 80-A, Mills Papers. Davie stepped down as finance chair to concentrate on Builders, especially to pursue its national ambitions. “Mrs. Preston Davie Resigns Party Post,” *NYT*, March 2, 1934, 28.

21 “Republican Builders Plan New Deal Fight,” *NYT*, October 2, 1934, 3.

22 John Thomas McGuire, “Beginning an ‘Extraordinary Opportunity’: Eleanor Roosevelt, Molly Dewson, and the Expansion of Women’s Boundaries in the Democratic Party, 1924–1934,” *Women’s History Review* 23 (2014): 922–937.

tee of One—were extra-party and candidate-centred, further examples of Franklin Roosevelt’s transcendence of party at a time when Ogden Mills, by contrast, saw the revitalisation of party-oriented organisations as key to successful mobilisation of voters. Even while Associates and Builders revealed a faith in voter mobilisation of this kind, Franklin Roosevelt and his aides were pioneering a new understanding of how to achieve this goal, which Mary Stuckey argues contributed to the Democrats’ electoral success of the 1930s and to the emergence of the New Deal coalition.²³

Nevertheless, an approach that placed relatively greater emphasis on the party, as opposed to the candidate, would continue to be a characteristic of Republicans. In his study of “presidential party building” from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush, Daniel Galvin shows that Republican presidents differed from their Democratic counterparts in consistently demonstrating greater engagement in building their party’s organisational capacity. Although the minority status of the Republican Party accounts in part for the difference, this is not the only explanation. “Party building bred more party building,” writes Galvin, “if only because the existence of party-building operations created incentives for their further use.”²⁴ If Mills’ efforts to mobilise voters via party-connected structures did little to challenge the Republican Party’s decline, then, they contributed to the institutionalisation of an intra-party difference with regard to politician-party interactions.

John D. M. Hamilton, Activism, and the Model of the UK Party System

The organisational focus of both Builders and Associates was in New York (despite bolder ambitions), but a politician with a similar belief in the importance of organisational innovation as a means of party revitalisation—John D. M. Hamilton—pursued his vision at the national level. Hamilton encountered this opportunity in particular because of his connection with fellow Kansan Alfred M. Landon, the party’s 1936 presidential nominee. Hamilton, who represented his state on the Republican National Committee (RNC), revealed an interest in organisational innovation in 1934 by advocating outreach to young people and de-

²³ Mary E. Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively: FDR and the 1936 Presidential Campaign* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2015).

²⁴ Galvin, *Presidential Party Building*, 26.

veloping a network of Republican clubs for them.²⁵ In 1935 he then worked with fellow RNC members from the Midwest in convening a “grassroots conference” in Springfield, Illinois—a location deeply reminiscent of the party’s Lincolnian heyday.²⁶ Following the success of the campaign he led to capture the nomination for Landon, Hamilton became national chair, with key responsibility for running the campaign against Franklin Roosevelt.²⁷ Underpinning his work in this capacity was a belief in the importance of strong organisation at the local level—precinct by precinct—in order to mobilise support for the party at the polls.²⁸ “The cornerstone of practical politics is work and more of it,” Hamilton said. “I never knew the time when a group of volunteer political workers couldn’t make a bunch of paid workers look like chumps.”²⁹

Although the Landon campaign gained a reputation for what became known as a “me too” brand of Republican moderation, Hamilton stressed a stauncher conservatism.³⁰ Hamilton asserted a connection between the New Deal and communism; “preserving the American form of government,” he said, was at stake in the campaign.³¹ On a visit to Texas, he said that the Roosevelt administration had “all the makings of a dictatorship,” condemning its New Deal initiatives that “keep us goose stepping toward the Administration’s promised land of a completely planned economy.”³² Such rhetoric reflected an outlook on the New Deal that differed from Landon. But it also revealed an approach to voter mobilisation distinctive from that of Charles P. Taft, whom Landon had recruited as a policy advisor. Whereas Taft was convinced that moderation was necessary

25 Henry Wesley Morris, “The Republicans in a Minority Role” (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1960), 72–73.

26 “Memorandum of Conference Held at Kansas City, Feb. 17, 1935,” folder “The Grassroots Republican Conference,” box 1, John D. M. Hamilton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

27 “GOP: Kansans Capture the Convention, Rout the Old Guard, Nominate Two Bull Moosers, and Adopt a States’ Rights Platform,” *News-Week*, June 20, 1936, 10–11.

28 “Hamilton Plans To Visit Every State in Union,” *Washington Post* [hereafter *WP*], June 18, 1936, 2; “Main Fight in West, Hamilton Asserts,” *NYT*, August 21, 1936, 8. “With party organisations in every State, with 6,000 county and 138,000 precinct committeemen and workers all eager and ready,” he said in August, after a tour of western states, “there isn’t anything under the sun we fear.”

29 “Hamilton Maps ‘Precinct’ Fight Of Republicans,” *WP*, September 15, 1936, X9.

30 “Campaign: ‘Me Too’ Is Battle Cry as Nominees bid for Farm Vote; Landon Urges Own Security Plan,” *News-Week*, October 3, 1936, 15–17.

31 “Hamilton Warns of Reds,” *NYT*, September 30, 1936, 19.

32 Leland Stowe, “Hamilton Takes Fight to Texas and Oklahoma,” *New York Herald Tribune* clipping, August 19, 1936, folder “Hamilton, John [3]” box 147, Raymond Clapper Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

for an appeal to “independent” voters in the political middle (neither as conservative as loyal Republicans, nor as liberal as loyal Democrats), Hamilton’s stress on organisational strength as the building block of voter mobilisation encouraged him, by contrast, to prefer a stress on conservative principle. This, he believed, unlocked activist energies that were crucial to voter mobilisation.³³ At the height of the campaign, Wilma D. Hoyal, the head of the RNC Women’s Division, told reporters that the issue of communism was yet more effective than other attacks on the Democrats in mobilising women; whether with hyperbole, from propagandistic intent, or with a spirit of impassioned advocacy, Hoyal claimed that almost one million women were working in support of the Landon campaign.³⁴

On suffering defeat by a landslide, Landon acknowledged “mistakes” in his campaign, adding that “possibly we made a few more mistakes because of the disorganized condition of the Republican party in so many states as the result of the elections of two and four years ago.”³⁵ (Because the parties, lacking much institutional infrastructure, relied on the presence of elected officials, and on patronage connected to office-holding, for organisational support, the Republican Party’s electoral losses of the Depression deepened the organisational problems it faced.) Retaining confidence in an avowedly conservative message, Hamilton, as national chair, looked for ways to tackle the problem of disorganisation between campaigns. A visit to the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom in 1937 provided him with inspiration. Over the years that followed, Hamilton’s study of British politics informed the creation of *The Republican Reporter*, a publication targeted at those who spoke for the party, and modeled on the Conservatives’ *Hints for Speakers*, and his support for the establishment in 1938 of the National Federation of Republican Women (because the organisational effectiveness of the Conservative Party’s separate institutional structures for women and men had impressed him). This work was guided more profoundly by the belief that the more permanent, more centralised, and more bureaucratised institutions of the Conservative Party were more effective in fostering activist energies than the looseness and impermanence of the Republicans’ campaign operations. By contrast with a counterpart in the United States, the political engagement of a Conservative activist, Hamilton observed, was deeper—connected with a culture of political activism that facilitated voter mobilisa-

33 Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 62.

34 “Says G.O.P. Musters a Million Women,” *NYT*, October 18, 1936, N2.

35 “Landon Sums Up Race,” *Kansas City Times* clipping, November 13, 1936, folder “Offer Resignation,” box 1, Hamilton Papers.

tion.³⁶ “It is recognized that the maintenance of this group of volunteers is dependent upon their continued interest in the Party and its affairs and there is further recognition that sometimes and, indeed, often the dry and uninteresting field of politics will not attain that goal,” Hamilton wrote. “The result is a very definite trend to the social side.”³⁷

Hamilton’s admiration for the Conservatives—who offered a strong example of a mass-membership party—was indicative of a different vision for political organisation from that successfully pursued by Franklin Roosevelt, who mobilised the New Deal coalition through the transcendence of party. Despite Hamilton’s organisational initiatives of the late 1930s, and despite Hamilton’s success as a fundraiser, that vision experienced eclipse within the Republican Party in 1940 with the emergence of Wendell Willkie as its presidential nominee. Affiliated with the Democratic Party until late 1939, Willkie achieved success among Republicans not so much because of his charisma and his effectiveness, as a corporate executive, in attacking “big government,” but especially because the arrival of World War II in Europe made obsolete the anti-interventionist approach to foreign policy that the leading contenders for the nomination had advocated. On Willkie’s nomination, Hamilton lost his job as national chair.³⁸ It was by no means unusual for a new presidential nominee to select a new national chair, but for Hamilton this was a signal that his project of organisational transformation had failed—because it challenged the institutional permanence that he had sought for the national committee.³⁹

“Amateurism” and the Pursuit of Independent Voters

No less than the Hamilton project, the Willkie candidacy was informed by a belief that Republican success depended on organisational revitalisation. By deep contrast with that project, however, this belief saw extra-party activism as cru-

36 Robert Mason, “Transatlantic Dimensions of Electoral Strategy: Republican Party Interpretations of UK Politics, 1936–c. 1960,” in *Postwar Conservatism, a Transnational Investigation: Britain, France, and the United States, 1930–1990*, edited by Clarisse Berthezène and Jean-Christian Vinel (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 220–223.

37 John Hamilton, “Memorandum on English Conservative Party Organisation,” June 1937, folder “Chairman’s Speaking Schedules 1937,” box 2, Hamilton Papers.

38 Elliot A. Rosen, *The Republican Party in the Age of Roosevelt: Sources of Anti-Government Conservatism in the United States* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 107–108.

39 Mason, “Transatlantic Dimensions,” 224.

cial. A network of clubs first organised support for Willkie's nomination and then formed part of the fall campaign against Franklin Roosevelt, with responsibility for mobilising voters who were independent of party affiliation (about one in five of the electorate) or disaffected Democrats. Boosting Willkie's prospects in the South formed a strand of the clubs' mission; because memories of the Civil War and Reconstruction were long, the Republican Party remained anathema to most white southerners, but club activists believed that many were sympathetic to Willkie and open to mobilisation.⁴⁰

Making use of the clubs alongside the party was in alignment with the argument that effective mobilisation of independent voters alongside Republican loyalists was the way to achieve a majority at the polls. But if such a bifurcation of responsibility represented promise, it encountered difficulties in practice. Rivalry and jealousy obstructed harmonious cooperation. The "professionals" believed that club activists lacked experience, whereas the "amateurs"—described by one Republican as "starry eyed enthusiasts who have just discovered civic consciousness"—saw the conservatism of party activists as hostile to effective outreach.⁴¹ A Massachusetts journalist not only observed that "the enthusiasm of the volunteer Willkie workers was far ahead of the effectiveness of their efforts," but also saw tensions embedded in different visions of political activity. "Another aspect of the campaign which hurt ... was the faintly superior attitude which too many of the volunteers adopted with respect to the party faithful, who have been working for Republican gains for the past 10 lean years," he wrote not long after election day. "Granted the G.O.P. organisation is cluttered with hacks and incompetents; their ruffled feelings nonetheless lost votes."⁴² Although the purported promise of the Willkie clubs was to reach voters usually sceptical of the Republican Party—those less socioeconomically advantaged than its habitual supporters, alongside white southerners—campaigners experienced difficulty in realising this promise. (That this outreach was a key goal for the clubs was a recognition of the principal shortcoming within the Republican coalition, but paradoxically their origins were grounded in an elite. Oren Root Jr., a young lawyer who worked for a leading firm, initiated his pro-Willkie odyssey

⁴⁰ Letter, Richard M. Egan to Jennings C. Wise, July 27, 1940, folder "Club Corres. Virginia: Charlottesville Wise, Jennings C.," box 15, Willkie Clubs Papers, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

⁴¹ Letter, David Hinshaw to Raymond L. Buell, September 11, 1940, folder "Miscellaneous 1," box 46, Raymond Leslie Buell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴² Letter, Walter T. Bonney to Raymond L. Buell, November 11, 1940, folder "Bonney, Walter T.," box 2, Buell Papers.

by seeking to mobilise people who had graduated from Ivy League colleges in 1924 and 1925.⁴³) “I have heard a number of criticisms from the so-called common people about too much Ritz in this campaign,” an Oregon activist advised Root.⁴⁴

Even if not only the enduring strength of the New Deal coalition but also the climate of international crisis assisted Franklin Roosevelt in his successful pursuit of a precedent-breaking third term in the White House, leaders of the Willkie campaign identified organisational deficiencies as an additional factor that explained their candidate’s failure.⁴⁵ For longer-established Republicans, the Willkie clubs had not helped. “From what I have heard from over the country I believe the Willkie Clubs did more damage than they did good,” wrote Alf Landon. “That is, the way they were handled.”⁴⁶ But Club activists saw things differently. Believing that the organisational infrastructure that their energies had created could still revitalise the Republican Party, Club activists planned to sustain their operations “to encourage the exercise of good citizenship ... and to encourage competent men and women to seek public office.” But the institutionalisation of such a candidate-centered initiative proved difficult to achieve, and the Willkie clubs had closed by the end of 1941.⁴⁷

Citizens for Eisenhower as a Response to the Political Role of Organised Labour

Over time concern among Republicans about their party’s organisational capacity did not alleviate but rather intensified. Initially, a dominant explanation within the party for the success of their Democratic rivals in mobilising the New Deal coalition was the significance of the “bought vote”—support for the Democrats

43 David Levering Lewis, *The Improbable Wendell Willkie: The Businessman Who Saved the Republican Party and His Country, and Conceived a New World Order* (New York: Liveright, 2018), 128–129.

44 Letter, Kenneth L. Cooper to Oren Root Jr., August 24, 1940, folder “Club Corres. Oregon: Portland Cooper, Kenneth C.,” box 14, Willkie Clubs Papers.

45 “Buell Predicts Willkie Will Be Two-Term Leader,” *Berkshire Eagle* clipping, December 4, 1940, folder “Miscellaneous 1,” box 46, Buell Papers.

46 Letter, Alfred M. Landon to Raymond Clapper, November 30, 1940, folder 11, box 101, Alfred M. Landon Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

47 Donald Bruce Johnson, *The Republican Party and Wendell Willkie* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), 169.

among the direct beneficiaries of federal spending.⁴⁸ As the Great Depression faded away, and as the programs of the New Deal thus dissipated, many Republicans instead concentrated on the interest-group pluralism of New Deal liberalism as an explanation for their woes at the polls. Unions in particular, Republicans believed, provided the organisational muscle that ensured the success of Democratic efforts in voter mobilisation. Crystallising this belief was the emergence in electoral politics of the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO), created in 1943 and already in the following year identified as a crucial factor in assisting Roosevelt to achieve his fourth presidential victory.⁴⁹ Against this backdrop, no less than his predecessor John Hamilton, Herbert Brownell, who ran the party's presidential campaign in 1944 and acted as national chair from 1944 to 1946, identified an imperative for organisational transformation and in particular institutional permanence. "Our party organisation nationally must be put upon a full-time basis," he said in early 1945. "Its primary job, to educate the voters in the principles of the Republican Party, must be carried on constantly. Its publicity and research facilities must be strengthened. Its machinery of getting out the vote must be modernized."⁵⁰

Questions of the connection between organisation and voter mobilisation took a new turn at the start of the 1950s, in parallel with a new turn in the party debate between moderates and conservatives. The electoral argument in favour of an assertively conservative alternative to the Democrats' liberalism had gained strength especially in the aftermath of Thomas E. Dewey's unexpected loss to Harry Truman in the 1948 presidential election. "The result of the election was a tragedy, largely because it was entirely unnecessary," commented Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, an unsuccessful challenger to Dewey for the party's nomination, and emerging as the figurehead of conservatives (and thus with a political outlook quite different from that of Charles P. Taft, his brother). "Dewey could have won, and we could have elected a Republican Congress if the right kind of campaign had been put on."⁵¹ Especially after he apparently demonstrated his vote-getting qualities in resisting a labour-supported challenge to his Senate re-election in 1950, Taft seemed certain to become the party's presidential

⁴⁸ Mason, *Republican Party*, 49–52.

⁴⁹ "Bloc Votes Tipped the Balance in Closest Election Since 1916," *Newsweek*, November 20, 1944, 27–28.

⁵⁰ Herbert Brownell, "The Republicans' Future Role," January 21, 1945, folder 13, box 38, series 2, Thomas E. Dewey Papers, University of Rochester Libraries, Rochester, New York.

⁵¹ Letter, Robert A. Taft to Billie Noojin, January 17, 1949, folder "Mrs. B. L. Noojin (Billie)," box 34, Robert A. Taft Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

nominee in 1952—as the first flagbearer of Republican conservatism, in the eyes of his “Taftite” supporters, since the arrival of the New Deal. But the entry in party politics of Dwight D. Eisenhower, hero of World War II, reignited the fortunes of “Deweyite” moderates. Just as Eisenhower transformed the ideological battlefield, defeating Taft for the nomination and creating a new opportunity for a moderate Republican alternative to New Deal liberalism, his charismatic appeal as a candidate inspired an organisation that promised to offer a powerful alternative to labour unions as a vehicle for voter mobilisation.

Launched as the organisational framework for Eisenhower’s quest for the presidential nomination, Citizens for Eisenhower achieved unusual success—claiming a membership of some 250,000 activists at the height of the campaign against Taft. Unsympathetic Republicans not uncommonly saw parallels with the Willkie clubs of 1940—parallels that led RNC officials to resist the creation of a role for Citizens in the fall campaign. This resistance was unsuccessful, however, and Citizens secured a similar organisational role in the campaign against Adlai Stevenson, charged with voter mobilisation among independents and disaffected Democrats (while the party concentrated on Republican loyalists), then reaching a claimed membership of some two million Americans. The stress of Citizens, in providing organisational infrastructure for voter outreach, was on grassroots activism, but it also offered a framework for expert assistance to the Eisenhower campaign—for the contributions in particular of advertising executives and television professionals. Eisenhower as a candidate and then as president successfully made pioneering use of television, rapidly achieving dominance as a medium of political communication. If, until this historical moment, success in voter mobilisation had depended overwhelmingly on activism, now television possessed a central role in the relationship between politicians and voters.⁵²

Yet mastery of television did not alleviate concerns among Republicans about what they perceived as their party’s organisational inadequacies. Leonard Hall, the party’s national chair between 1953 and 1957, remained sure that “there is no substitute for doorbell-ringing and shoe leather,” and thus that the role of

52 “Fast Start,” *NYT*, August 10, 1952, E1; W.H. Lawrence, “Aide of Eisenhower Spurns Reports of Mississippians’ Third Party Proposal,” *NYT*, August 3, 1952, 50; Robert Mason, “Citizens for Eisenhower and the Republican Party, 1951–1965,” *Historical Journal* 56 (2013), 513, 520; Craig Allen, *Eisenhower and the Mass Media: Peace, Prosperity, and Prime-time TV* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); David Haven Blake, *Liking Ike: Eisenhower, Advertising, and the Rise of Celebrity Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

party workers remained crucial in mobilising voters.⁵³ Reflecting on the disappointing results of the 1954 midterms, when Republicans lost control of Capitol Hill (which they would not recover for decades), Robert Humphreys of the RNC observed that the party “was out-maneuvered, out-manned and out-financed”—especially because of organised labour.⁵⁴ The 1955 merger between the CIO and the American Federation of Labor, to form the AFL–CIO as a single umbrella organisation for unions, further boosted this concern.⁵⁵

The success of Citizens in 1952 encouraged its reactivation in subsequent campaigns—not only Eisenhower’s bid for re-election in 1956 but also the midterms contests of 1954 and 1958 (when the organisation stressed the need for congressional support of Eisenhower). There was even an effort to resuscitate the organisation in 1962, after Eisenhower had left the White House, as the National Republican Citizens Committee. Even in 1956, however, the organisation lacked some of the energy associated with the initial mobilisation in support of Eisenhower, which had prompted many to identify it as a “Crusade.”⁵⁶

That Citizens achieved a degree of longer-term institutionalisation is indicative of this candidate-centred organisation’s power as a vehicle for voter mobilisation, but it also reveals the failure of a larger goal—to achieve the ideological and organisational transformation of the Republican Party. The revitalisation of the party was an important project for the Eisenhower administration.⁵⁷ Among its strands was an effort to integrate Citizens into the party. Soon after the 1952 election, Walter Williams, a leader of Citizens, urged members to keep alive the “spirit” of their movement “by infusion of that ‘spirit’ in the form of people—live, pulsating, forward-looking Citizens—into the Republican Party.”⁵⁸

As Williams’ words suggest, this idea did not involve a straightforward effort to improve the party’s organisational capacity. A belief in the democracy-enhancing impact of expanded engagement in political activism underpinned Citizens, but more centrally this aspiration for Citizens activists to become active in the party connected with the administration’s promotion of “Modern Republi-

53 Leonard Hall, “An Old Pro Describes How Politics in U.S. Has Changed,” *Life*, April 25, 1960, 127.

54 Harold Lavine, *Smoke-Filled Rooms* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 135.

55 Mason, *Republican Party*, 169.

56 See, for example, “The General’s ‘Crusade,’” *Commonweal*, July 25, 1952, 379–380.

57 Cornelius P. Cotter, “Eisenhower as Party Leader,” *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (1983): 255–283; Galvin, *Presidential Party Building*, 41–69.

58 Letter, Walter Williams to Citizens members, December 31, 1952, folder “Williams, Walter,” box 822, series 320, Pre-Presidential Papers of Richard M. Nixon, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California.

canism”—a label that Eisenhower adopted for his agenda, involving a moderate alternative to the Democrats’ New Deal liberalism. He was sure that a stress on conservatism was electorally counterproductive. “Should any political party attempt to abolish Social Security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs,” Eisenhower observed in 1954, “you would not hear of that party again in our political history.”⁵⁹ Thus the recruitment to the party of Citizens activists not only would improve the Republicans’ capacity to mobilise voters, but their inclination to a moderate perspective on politics would support the embrace of Eisenhower’s Modern Republicanism. “Within the party organisation itself, the indefatigable worker is rarely to be denied, especially when there are enough of them to support each other,” Jacob K. Javits, a New York Republican, advised Eisenhower in late 1954. “Therefore, independents and young people who are for the President’s policy should be encouraged by Citizens for Eisenhower to join the political organisation itself and exercise their strength and influence within the political organisation in adequate numbers.”⁶⁰ There was, however, a significant exception to the connection between Citizens and the politics of moderation—in the South, where the organisation operated as a way to achieve outreach to whites for whom the Republican Party remained anathema. Instead, not only the defense of states’ rights but even support for segregationism infected the message of Citizens campaigners.⁶¹

According to studies of public opinion, the quest for Modern Republicanism had limited success in modifying perceptions of the Republican Party; although the Eisenhower administration’s record encouraged fewer Americans to see the party as a threat to the achievements of the New Deal, there was not equal success in challenging its disadvantageous image as aligned with the interests of a socioeconomic elite.⁶² Furthermore, the call-to-arms issued by Walter Williams to Citizens activists at campaign’s end in 1952 failed to initiate an organisational transformation of the party. In the 1960, at the close of the Eisenhower years,

59 Letter, Dwight D. Eisenhower to Edgar Eisenhower, November 8, 1954, folder “DDE Diary—November 1954 (2),” box 8, DDE Diary Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers as President, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.

60 Memo, Jacob K. Javits to Dwight D. Eisenhower, December 27, 1954, folder “Presidential Campaign – 1952 [iii],” box 3, subseries 2, series 5, Jacob K. Javits Collection, Frank Melville Jr. Memorial Library, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, New York.

61 Julian M. Pleasants, “‘Call Your Next Case’: H. F. ‘Chub’ Seawell Jr., the Gubernatorial Election of 1952, and the Rise of the Republican Party in North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 76 (1999), 88; G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 56.

62 Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960), 47.

Walter N. Thayer, another Citizens leader, observed that “the Republican Party, for whatever reason, during the past eight years has not found the way to avail itself of the energy and enthusiasm these people have to offer.” There had been missteps within the administration in formulating an effective strategy to foster the integration of Citizens into the party, and at local level factional jealousies sometimes hindered the harmoniousness on which integration depended. But more profoundly the candidate-centred political interest that informed Citizens activism was not necessarily similar to the party-oriented motivation that sustained Republican activism. Furthermore, an impulse to participate in a campaign was not necessarily similar to an ongoing commitment to political work. Valley Knudsen and Henriette Cowgill, two leaders in Citizens, noted that activists in their organisation were ready to “come in on a crusade for a Candidate or on an issue and work hard for a short time but wanted to be relieved of any Party organisation responsibility.”⁶³

“A Choice Not an Echo” and the Conservative Ascendancy

Not only did the twofold project of Citizens for Eisenhower and Modern Republicanism fail to achieve lasting success for a moderate alternative to New Deal liberalism, but the 1950s even witnessed the revitalisation instead of conservative Republicanism. Within the party the leader of this new conservatism was Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, whose 1960 book *The Conscience of a Conservative* was scarcely less angry in criticising the moderate Republican agenda of Dwight Eisenhower than the Democratic opposition’s liberalism.⁶⁴ Buoying Goldwater’s advocacy of conservatism was a challenge to the argument that moderation possessed electoral promise. Like John Hamilton in the 1930s, Goldwater saw conservatism as necessary to motivate activism, which in turn he saw as necessary for success in voter mobilisation. He told Javits, by then his Senate colleague, “that we can elect individual governors or presidents on a personal, popular basis; but this in itself, unless the candidate stands on a philosophical ground acceptable to the majority of Republican workers, will not enhance the Republican Party’s position.” The defeats of Willkie and Dewey, Goldwater claimed, led to the loss of House seats gained in off-year elections; because

⁶³ Mason, “Citizens for Eisenhower,” 524–527 (quotations, 525).

⁶⁴ Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepardsville, Ky.: Victor, 1960).

“Me-too-ism” characterised the presidential candidacies, “the Republican workers would not buy their philosophy, and they didn’t work and we did not win.”⁶⁵

Informed by the paradigm for voter mobilisation of “a choice not an echo”—at fundamental odds with the electoral assumptions behind the Eisenhower project—Goldwater enthusiasm swept the party in 1964. Indeed, the pro-Goldwater movement drew benefit from that project’s shortcomings because the party’s continuing grassroots weakness allowed Goldwater enthusiasts to take control of local Republican committees.⁶⁶ This impetus was carefully led by a central campaign operation that emphasised organisational might as the foundation of success in the battle for the Republican nomination. “Precinct organisation means political power,” wrote Peter O’Donnell Jr. to his fellow leaders of the Goldwater campaign.⁶⁷ “There are only 1,308 individuals who nominate the candidate,” said one of them, F. Clifton White, soon after the convention. “I learned to count and count accurately.”⁶⁸ This focus on enthusiasm-impelled organisation helped to secure the nomination for Barry Goldwater, though relative disarray among anti-Goldwater Republicans was a factor, too.⁶⁹

Paradoxically, what had been strong during the nomination campaign was weak instead during the fall campaign against Lyndon B. Johnson; it was, one Republican said, “the most poorly run campaign I’ve ever seen.” Furthermore, relations between the new Goldwater activists and longer-established Republicans were often tense, even though Goldwater had rationalised his conservatism as in harmony with party workers.⁷⁰

Although the issue context was anyway not favourable to the Goldwater candidacy, the campaign also demonstrated the hollowness of its underlying paradigm of voter mobilisation. As he had outlined to Javits, Goldwater believed that a stress on conservatism would unlock activist enthusiasms necessary to success in voter mobilisation. But the “choice not an echo” thesis also now posited a problem of non-mobilisation on the grounds that the Republican alternative to the Democrats’ liberalism was inadequately distinctive to encourage conserva-

65 Letter, Barry Goldwater to Jacob K. Javits, May 25, 1960, folder “Barry Goldwater 1960,” box 9, subseries 2, series 5, Javits Collection.

66 Jack L. Walker, “The Republican Party and the Birth Rate,” *Antioch Review* 25 (1965), 299.

67 Peter O’Donnell Jr., “Progress Report #4,” n.d., folder 7, box 155, William A. Rusher Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

68 “Let’s Grow Up, Conservatives!” *Newsweek*, July 27, 1964, 28.

69 Contingency was significant, too; Goldwater narrowly won the critically significant California primary shortly after news of a baby for key rival Nelson Rockefeller, reminding voters of Rockefeller’s divorce and remarriage, then widely considered scandalous.

70 “After the Fall: To the Mainstream?” *Newsweek*, November 9, 1964, 31–32 (quotation, 31).

tive voters to participate in elections. During the summer and fall of 1964 the idea of a “hidden” or “silent” vote, open to mobilisation by Goldwater conservatism, gained currency especially because of the increased salience of civil rights issues; there was much talk of “backlash” against civil rights that would boost Republican support.⁷¹ On election day, however, not only did a hidden vote in support of Goldwater fail to appear, but “frontlash”—of habitual Republican voters who preferred Lyndon Johnson’s record of action on civil rights—seemed more significant than backlash. The argument about voter mobilisation that has been powerful enough to inflame the Goldwater candidacy was, the returns suggested, a myth.⁷²

Conclusion

Concern about Republicans about their party’s organisational deficiencies were persistent, and so was the belief that these deficiencies accounted for inadequacies in voter mobilisation—and perhaps critically so. In studying the Republican Party during this period, historians have tended to overlook the significance of this belief and the ways in which, for political actors of the era, the secret to success at the polls by no means entirely involved the right set of policies; questions of organisation and campaign technique were important too. The issues explored by scholars in political science interested in voter mobilisation deserve attention among historians, too.

Distinctive at first sight from the ongoing debate over policy between conservatives and moderates, ideas about voter mobilisation were actually in close connection with that debate. In a political era characterised by Franklin Roosevelt’s success in building an electoral coalition through the transcendence of party, these initiatives often revealed a confidence in the revitalisation of party organisation as a route to the restoration of the Republican Party’s electoral fortunes. But although Republicans of this era possessed this confidence in organisational enhancements, from the 1930s to the 1960s such innovation in pursuit of voter mobilisation did not uncover a solution to the Republicans’ minority problem.

71 John Chamberlain, “These Days: The Silent Vote,” *WP*, October 14, 1964, A13; Earl Mazo, “The Silent Vote,” *NYT*, October 23, 1964, 27; Tom Wicker, “Election Trends Please Both Sides,” *NYT*, October 27, 1964, 31; “VPA: The Making of an Avalanche—1964,” *Newsweek*, November 9, 1964, 28–29.

72 Philip E. Converse, Aage R. Clausen and Warren E. Miller, “Electoral Myth and Reality: The 1964 Election,” *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 321–336.

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