

# **Trump and the Party-In-Organization: Presidential Control of National Party Organizations**

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## **Abstract:**

The election of Donald Trump not only placed a political outsider in the center of power in America's federal government, it also put him in a dominant position within the Republican Party as a national organization. While political scientists have traditionally described the parties national committees as inconsequential but impartial service providers, scholars have also long argued that incumbent presidents have considerable control over their party's national committee. In this paper, I explore the nature of presidential power over the party-in-organization, and whether Trump can take advantage of his control over the Republican National Committee. I show that presidential domination over the party-in-organization is based on the president's ability to nominate and replace the national committee's chair, and that presidents have used this power to push their committees to promote both their preferred policy positions and themselves. I argue this means Trump has the ability to use the RNC to promote the GOP as 'his' party – including during a potential primary challenge for his re-nomination in 2020.

**Keywords:** American political parties, American president, Democratic National Committee, Republican National Committee, Donald Trump.

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition. The dataset and other materials necessary to replicate the statistical analyses in this paper and the appendix are available on Dataverse.

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency elevated a political outsider to the most powerful position in the federal government. But in winning the White House, Trump also gained a remarkably influential position within the Republican Party as an organization. While American political parties do not provide their leaders with the type of control leaders have in (some) parliamentary systems, political scientists studying the relationship between American presidents and their parties have long noted that incumbent presidents have considerable control over their party organizations. Specifically, these scholars have argued that presidents control the actions of their party's national committees (the Democratic and Republican National committees – DNC and RNC, respectively) while in office. Thus, to use V.O. Key's classic distinction regarding the different realms of American political parties (Key, 1942), as president, Trump not only leads the Republican party-in-government, he is also in control of its party-in-organization.

However, while Trump may have control over the RNC it is not a given that such control is actually meaningful in political terms. Is it possible for Trump to use his power over the Republican party's national organization to benefit himself politically? Based on traditional political science research on parties as national organizations we may be hesitant to assume presidential control is all that relevant. Political scientists have long dismissed the national committees as being nothing but mere 'service providers': organizations that exist to assist candidates with campaign assistance, but which lack any real power over candidate selection, or the policies those candidates support. As Daniel Galvin has summarized, in this traditional view the party-in-organization is lacks political power and is at "the periphery of national politics" (Galvin, 2014, 185).

In this article I explore the relationship between presidents and their national party organizations and connect it to Trump's control over the RNC. First, I show that the basis of presidential control over their party's national committee is their ability to hire and fire national committee chairs. Using survival analysis I show that presidents actually use this power: chairs of parties 'in' the White House serve a significantly shorter time in office than those of 'out' parties. Second, building on Galvin's (2010) research on presidents as party builders, I challenge the traditional perspective of national party organizations as mere service providers. I argue that presidents have frequently used their control over national committees to promote their legislative agendas and themselves. Such promotion often comes at the expense of committee assistance that could have been provided to other political actors in the party. That is, the resources deployed to promote the president and their agenda could also have been used to assist other actors in the party with winning their reelection and, at times, may have complicated such efforts. Finally, I discuss Trump's reliance on the RNC during his time in office thus far.

### *Presidential Control over National Party Organizations*

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century both parties have had permanent national party organizations that provide a number of 'services' to their members, including raising and distributing campaign funds, providing support to candidates who are running for (re-)election, and organizing the parties' quadrennial national conventions (Cotter and Hennessy, 1964; Cotter and Bibby, 1980; Herrnson, 2010). Such services are largely provided in equal measure: that is, the national committees either provide them to all party members (organizing a national convention), or provide certain services to the members they believe are most in need (competitive candidates in

(re-)election campaigns). Importantly, in addition to this, the national committees also provide publicity for their parties by promoting the party as a national institution – a type of service party leaders believe helps shape the party’s brand in the eye of the voters (Heersink, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

Both the DNC and RNC consist of representatives of each state’s local party organization. In theory, the main source of power in both committees lies with the full body of these representatives. The members of the national committee vote to select the committee’s chair, approve its budget, and determine a variety of other decisions regarding the committees’ activities. However, because the committee as a whole meets infrequently, in practice power divisions within the DNC and RNC are skewed towards the committee’s chairperson. The committee chair selects its staff, proposes programs and budgets, sets the agenda for committee meetings, and (frequently) determines the membership of subcommittees or other temporary organizations related to the national committee. As such, the chair of either national committee dominates the organization while in office (Cotter and Hennessy, 1964).

This level of control applies to all chairs of the DNC or RNC. However, there is a notable difference in the level of agency chairs have to use their institutional power based on whether their party is ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the White House. Out-party chairs have considerably more freedom than those who serve under a president of their party (Klinkner, 1994). Indeed, scholars who have studied the relationship between presidents and their parties have argued that incumbent

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, presidents can, and consistently do, rely on their own position independent of the party to promote their preferred policies. The influence of presidential rhetoric in this regard has been studied extensively, see among many others: Azari (2014), Villalobos, Vaughn, and Azari (2012), Canes-Wrone (2001, 2006); Cohen (2009); Kernell (1986).

presidents have near complete control over their party's national committee (Milkis, 1993; Galvin, 2010).

Presidents have such control because they select the national committee chairs while in office. In out-parties, selection of the chairperson is based on open competition and a vote among the full membership of the committee. For example, after the 2016 election several candidates ran for the position of DNC chair, and the members of the full committee elected Tom Perez, the former Secretary of Labor in the Obama administration, as its chair in a February 2017 meeting.<sup>2</sup> In in-parties, presidents nominate their preferred chairs, with the committee subsequently approving this choice.<sup>3</sup> Equally important, this presidential power to select also means that in-party chairs serve at the pleasure of the president. Thus, presidents control their party's national committee in two related ways: they select the person who runs the party, and they can replace them should that person not meet their expectations.

This presidential selection of committee chairs is a holdover from the period when national committees played a crucial role in the organization of presidential election campaigns. Both committees began to involve themselves in campaign politics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Klinghard, 2010). Because of this, presidential nominees were also given the right to select a new chair to manage their campaigns. This right was extended to those nominees who successfully won the presidency. Nowadays, nominees no longer have such power: with the rise

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<sup>2</sup> "Thomas Perez Elected the First Latino Leader of Democratic Party," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, this means the committee could reject the choice, but there are no cases where this has actually happened. It is possible that presidents may coordinate with other party leaders – including members of the committee – in selecting their committee chairs, though there is little evidence that this is a notable constraint on the president.

of presidential primaries in the 1970s, presidential candidates began to develop their own independent campaign organizations and, generally, no longer rely on the DNC or RNC to manage their general election campaigns to extent that candidates used to. As a result, starting with Walter Mondale in 1984, nominees have been denied the power to nominate their own national committee chair.<sup>4</sup>

However, presidential power over the national committee has survived to this day, and therefore presidents can still hire and fire national committee chairs at will. Of course, the president's ability to select the party chair does not mean in-party chairs by definition must serve short terms. Indeed, because presidents select these chairs in the first place we should expect many of them to serve lengthy terms. To be sure, there are several examples of committee chairs serving for such extensive periods of time. The longest serving chair in the history of either party was James Farley, who served between the 1932 and 1940 Democratic national conventions. Similarly, John Bailey served as DNC chair throughout both the JFK and LBJ administrations, and Frank Fahrenkopf Jr. was RNC chair for six years during the Reagan administration. However, presidents have also been quite willing to use their power to replace incumbent national committee chairs when they deemed it necessary. For example, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford – in their combined eight years in the White House – went through four RNC chairs. More recently, Bill Clinton appointed five DNC chairs,<sup>5</sup> and George W. Bush appointed six chairs for the RNC in their respective two terms as president.

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<sup>4</sup> “Manatt Retained as Chairman,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Note that Clinton for much of his presidency relied on appointing two individuals to simultaneously hold the DNC chairmanship: generally, one was put in charge of managing the day to day affairs of the national committee's

In some cases, presidents replaced a chair after they engaged in actions that explicitly went against the president's wishes. Among a more extreme example of such open conflict between president and committee chairman is the case of Calvin Coolidge forcing the resignation of RNC chair John T. Adams in 1924, after Adams had engaged in a systematic series of attacks against Republican progressives.<sup>6</sup> Such public clashes between president and committee chair are rare: in most cases, presidents replace chairs on the basis of more opaque political calculations. For example, after winning reelection in a landslide in 1972, Nixon replaced RNC chair Bob Dole with George H.W. Bush, then Ambassador to the United Nations. This change was not based on a scandal, or any particular missteps by Dole, but rather on Nixon's desire to use his second term to invest in a specific set of party building activities, and his belief that Dole was not the right operative to manage this process (Galvin, 2010). However, beyond such anecdotal evidence, we don't yet have a consistent metric of what the actual effect of the president's ability to nominate and replace their party's national committee leader in terms of the chair's job security.

Given that out-party chairs can only be replaced by a vote of the national committee as a whole – which, as noted, engages in infrequent meetings for which the chair sets the agenda – and in-party chairs can be replaced by the president at any moment in time, all else equal we should expect in-party chairs to serve shorter terms in office than out-party chairs. A basic analysis of the number of days each chair of the DNC and RNC spent in office between 1912 and 2016 suggests that this is indeed true. I collected data covering the number of days each DNC

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headquarters, and one served as a public figurehead of the party. Since these duos served simultaneous terms we can consider them as the same 'chair.'

<sup>6</sup> "Coolidge Chooses Butler to Succeed Adams as Chairman," *The New York Times*, May 2, 1924.

and RNC chair spent in office by selecting newspaper articles reporting on the election and replacement of all 82 DNC and RNC chairs serving between 1912 (starting with RNC chair Charles D. Hilles and DNC chair William F. McCombs) and 2016 (ending with RNC chair Reince Priebus and DNC chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz). While there is (unsurprisingly) considerable variation in the number of days each chair served,<sup>7</sup> in-party chairs on average serve a shorter period of time than out-party chairs. As can be seen in Figure 1, which shows a Kaplan Meier survival estimate, by far most chairs last no more than four years in office. However, in-party chairs serve an average of 604 days, while out-party chairs served an average of 739 days.<sup>8</sup>

[Figure 1 around here.]

Of course, a basic comparison between averages does not provide the full picture of how presidential control might affect the chair's job security since in-party chairs do not exclusively see their time in office end *because* the president replaces them. Some chairs of in-parties leave their position because they were promoted to a different position in government. For example, Nixon appointed RNC chair Rogers Morton Secretary of the Interior in 1971, and Ford appointed

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<sup>7</sup> This difference ranges from the mere 59 days Debra DeLee served in office as the interim chair of the DNC after the Democrats' dramatic 1994 midterm losses, to the 2,952 days Farley served as DNC chair during FDR's first two terms in office.

<sup>8</sup> I define a chair as an "in-party" chair if they served the majority of their term while their party was in the White House. An out-party chair is one who served the majority of their term while their party was not in the White House. In general, it is rare for a chair to serve extensive periods of time under both in- and out-party status: if there is any overlap, it usually concerns a transition period, or cases where chairs were appointed while their party still held the White House but remained in office after a lost election.



George H.W. Bush to be Chief of the U.S. Liaison Office in China in 1974.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, chairs in both in- and out-parties may resign for a variety of reasons unrelated to whether their party holds the White House. That is, chairs may face personal scandals, health complications, or other personal issues that can result in their resignation. While there is no reason to believe these issues should affect in-party chairs more so than out-party chairs, it is possible that it nonetheless affects the average length on office between the two types. Additionally, some chairs may leave their position to focus their attentions to running for office themselves.<sup>10</sup> Finally, chairs may resign after a presidential or midterm election defeat for their party.

To assess whether presidential control over the committee is a cause of the difference for the average time served in office between in- and out-party chairs, I conducted a logged event history model. This model allows us to identify whether a particular variable – in this case, the party’s control of the White House while a national committee chair was in office – is correlated to a shorter ‘survival’ time in office. In this model I control for a variety of variables that possibly could also affect survival rates. Specifically, I control for whether the chair is a Democrat, and whether the chair resigned within four months of their party losing a presidential

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<sup>9</sup> The other cases of presidents ‘promoting’ their national chairs out of office are: Vance McCormick, who left the DNC to serve as the US representative at the Versailles treaty negotiations; J. Howard McGrath, who resigned as DNC chairman to become Attorney General in the Truman administration; and Clayton Yeutter who left the RNC to serve as Counselor to the President in the George H.W. Bush administration.

<sup>10</sup> Additionally, while in-party chairs do not tend to face competitive reelection votes, out-party chairs can be voted out of office by the full committee. This is somewhat rare since unpopular incumbent chairs will generally decline to run for reelection. However, Michael Steele – who served as RNC chair between 2009-2011 – was denied a second term through this mechanism. See: “G.O.P. Elects a New Chairman as Steele Drops Out,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2011.

or midterm election. Additionally, I control for whether the chair announced at the time of their appointment or election that they would only serve for a limited amount of time (for example, to manage a presidential election campaign), whether the chair resigned in the middle of their term to take on a new position in the government, whether they resigned for clearly stated personal reasons (such as health issues and personal scandals unrelated to their service as national committee chair), whether the chair resigned to run for elected office, and whether the chair was voted out of office by the national committee independently of any actions by an incumbent president.

The results (see Table 1) show that the difference in survival rates does indeed appear to be related to White House control. Controlling for the other variables that can affect time in office, serving as an in-party chair is a negative predictor for surviving in office longer.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Note that the N in each model is 115: this does not refer to the number of RNC and DNC chairs (82). Rather, in these models the N relates to the number of intervals a chair served through. In this particular case, the N is affected by the way lost presidential and midterm elections are coded: if a chair served through an election their party lost, but remained in office four months after, this is coded as the chair having ‘survived’ the event of a lost election, which produces an additional row of data. If the chair served during a lost election and resigned within four months, it is coded as them not having survived the event. For example, David Wilhelm served as DNC chair starting January 21, 1993. Days after the disastrous 1994 midterm elections he resigned. Thus, Wilhelm’s time in office can be summarized in one row of data, starting with Wilhelm’s first day in office and ending with his resignation in the wake of a lost midterm election. In contrast, Tim Kaine served as DNC chair from January 21, 2009 through May 2011 when he resigned to run for a senate seat in Virginia. In this period, Democrats lost the 2010 midterm elections, but Kaine remained in office in the wake of this loss. Thus, Kaine’s tenure is summarized in two rows of data: the first row covers the period between the start of his chairmanship through the end of the four month period *after* the 2010 midterm election loss (March 2, 2011), but does not end his chairmanship. The second row, runs from

Specifically, the estimated effect for being chair of an in-party is -0.54. This means that, at any moment in time while in office, in-party chairs see a 41.72% *decrease* in their survival time in comparison to out-party chairs – an effect that is statistically significant at the 0.00 level. By calculating the marginal effects of in- and out-party status in this model (see Table 2 and Figure 2), we can identify the average expected difference in term length between the two types of chairs. In-party chairs are expected to serve about 493 fewer days than out-party chairs (a difference also statistically significant at the 0.00 level).<sup>12</sup>

[Table 1 around here.]

[Table 2 around here.]

[Figure 2 around here.]

### *Presidential Party Leadership in Practice*

While these results suggest that presidents do indeed use their power to control their party's national committee, it does not explain if, or how, presidents can benefit from such control. I argue the key to understanding the value national committees present for presidents is a

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March 2, 2011 until his resignation on May 4, 2011, when his chairmanship ends due to his desire to run for elected office.

<sup>12</sup> As mentioned, these results rely on a logged event history model. Alternative approaches to running event history models exist and rely on different assumptions regarding the distribution of the hazard ratio. Given the actual distribution of the end of chairs' terms in this data set, I believe the logged model is the best fit. However, in the online appendix I also run the model in Table 1 as Weibull and Cox event history models. The substantive conclusions presented here are not changed by those results. For an extensive discussion of the use of event history models and different possible approaches, see: Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (2004).

specific type of service these organizations provide: publicity. Historically, presidents have relied on their national committees' publicity services to promote their preferred government policies, their reelection efforts, and their role as party leader. By controlling the committees' publicity role, presidents have tried to improve their own chances of reelection. However, even after reelection was successfully achieved, many presidents continued to use their national committees to present the party as being under their personal control.

For example, as Galvin (2010) has shown, Dwight Eisenhower invested considerably in expanding the institutional strength of the RNC during his presidency. At the same time, Eisenhower used the RNC extensively to promote the Republican Party as a moderate party in his image. Eisenhower also ordered the RNC to invest extensively in attempts at building the Republican Party in the South – a region where the GOP had been historically unpopular, but where Eisenhower had managed to win several states in both 1952 and 1956.

In the run-up to the 1972 election, Richard Nixon used the RNC predominantly to promote himself, and attack his opponents. The RNC's main goal in this period – in the assessment of its vice-chair Thomas Evans – was to “provide Republican leaders [...] with ammunition with which to speak up for the President.”<sup>13</sup> Once Nixon was reelected, the RNC continued to promote the GOP as, essentially, Nixon's party – at least until Watergate made such efforts all but impossible. As one RNC member explained, in the wake of Nixon's landslide reelection victory “the Republican Party is the minority party. The President is the majority

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Kesaris, Blair Hydrick, and Douglas D. Newman (eds). 1987. *Papers of the Republican Party*. University Publications of America. Series B, Reel 8, Frame 513-514.

president. Let's bridge that gap. [...] I say let's sell what's popular. That's the President"<sup>14</sup>  
(Heersink, 2018).

Under Ronald Reagan, the RNC engaged in a similar approach, attempting to appeal to voters who had supported Reagan in the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections but continued to vote Democratic in down-ballot races. For example, the RNC used FEC data to create a list of voters that had donated to both Reagan and Democrats, and contacted them to support Reagan's economic proposals.<sup>15</sup> Much of these publicity efforts promoted not just Reagan's legislative agenda, but also the president as leader of the Republican Party. During Reagan's first term, the RNC engaged in – what it referred to as – the longest and most expensive national advertising campaign in the history of either party at the time. Between the fall of 1981 and spring of 1982, the RNC spent more than \$12 million on advertisements, in which it promoted the GOP as Reagan's party and defended his legislative policies.<sup>16</sup> The RNC even unanimously endorsed Reagan for reelection during its January 1983 meeting – months before the president announced he would run again in 1984 and before RNC members could know for certain that there would not be a potential primary challenge.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Bush Remolds GOP Committee Into Adjunct of White House," *Washington Post*, March 19, 1973.

<sup>15</sup> "GOP Going to Bat to Get 62 Democrats on Board With Reagan Budget," *Washington Post*, May 2, 1981.

<sup>16</sup> "GOP Launches Ad Blitz 13 Months Before Vote, Aims to Deflect Griping," *Washington Post*, September 29, 1981;

"G.O.P. Fund Goals Set for '82 Races," *New York Times*, October 29, 1981; "Weepy TV Ad Could Give GOP Something to Really Cry About," *Washington Post*, May 18, 1982; "G.O.P. Ad Crediting Reagan For Pension Rise is Attacked," *New York Times*, July 7, 1982.

<sup>17</sup> "Reagan Unanimously Endorsed for '84," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1983.

After Reagan's victory, the RNC continued to promote the president as the center of Republicanism. During Operation Open Door – a major 1985 campaign intended to convince 100,000 voters to switch their party identification to Republican – the committee distributed 1.3 million pieces of mail to registered Democrats inviting them to “join the party of President Reagan.”<sup>18</sup> Reagan even appointed his daughter Maureen, otherwise something of a political novice, vice-chair of the RNC in 1986.<sup>19</sup> After George H.W. Bush's election, control of the RNC switched effortlessly to the new president. Lee Atwater, Bush's appointment as RNC chair, explained that he did “not consider myself the leader of the Republican Party. President Bush is.”<sup>20</sup> Crucially, this identification of the president as party leader continued even when Bush was challenged for the party's 1992 presidential nomination. Despite the fact that Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign meant that Bush was not guaranteed re-nomination, a spokesperson for the RNC declared in the spring of 1992 that “the chair is 100% behind George Bush and so is the committee.”<sup>21</sup>

Presidential control of the national committee thus has meant that committees often prioritize presidential preferences over those of other party members. For example, John F. Kennedy used the DNC to promote his legislative agenda. Specifically, the DNC stimulated the Kennedy administration's policy proposals through a program called “Operation Support.” This program included the organization of a series of conferences across the country in 1961 and 1962

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<sup>18</sup> “Republicans in 4 States Try to Lure 100,000 Voters From Democrats,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> “High Party Post Due For Maureen Reagan,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> “Man As Symbol: Atwater's First Year as the Republican National Chairman,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1989.

<sup>21</sup> “Buchanan Calls for Ouster of GOP Chairman Bond,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1992.

during which administration officials explained and defended policy proposals. Notably, Operation Support also saw the DNC prioritize Kennedy over other elected Democrats. As part of Operation Support, the DNC sent information on administration supported bills in Congress to local party organizations in districts or states of members who opposed the plans in order to increase local support (Galvin, 2010). However, at times this included areas where the opposing member of Congress was, in fact, a fellow Democrat.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1990s, Bill Clinton extensively used his control over the DNC to endorse his administration's policy proposals, and to promote his own reelection (Herrnson, 1999). For example, in 1993 and 1994 the DNC supported the Clinton health reform plan by airing television ads targeting senior citizens, organizing events (such as house parties for people to watch Clinton's major speech on health care in September 1993), and defend the plan from its opponents in the GOP and the insurance industry (Hacker, 1997).<sup>23</sup> Other Democrats criticized the ads as being hurtful to their own reelection chances, with Senator Bob Kerrey (D-NE) urging "all my friends for the moment not to give money to the Democratic National Committee."<sup>24</sup> In discussing the DNC's health reform campaign, the *New York Times* concluded that the committee "devoted itself, and millions of dollars, to fighting for Mr. Clinton's programs rather

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<sup>22</sup> See: "Democrats Mail Tax Cut Publicity," *New York Times*, October 15, 1993; "Democrat Takes Blame for Tax-Cut Slap at Gore," *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> "The Health Care Speech, Closely Watched," *Washington Post*, September 23, 1993; "Democratic Party Chief Scorches Clinton Agenda's Foes," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1993; "Democrats' Ad for Health-Care Reform Distorts Governor's Position, GOP Says," *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 1994; "Getting Even With Harry and Louise," *New York Times*, July 10, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> "New DNC Health Ads Wind Up Offending Senate Democrats," *Washington Post*, July 15, 1994.

than promoting the prospects of individual Democrats.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, David Broder, writing in the *Washington Post*, argued that the DNC’s focus on defending Clinton meant the organization “diverted much of its focus to support efforts – mainly misguided TV campaigns masterminded by White House consultants – for the embattled Clinton legislative program. The fundamentals of precinct-level organizing were given short shrift.”<sup>26</sup>

After the failure of healthcare reform, the DNC switched its attention to promoting the prospects of Clinton’s own reelection. As early as March 1995, the DNC sent out a mailer promoting Clinton’s 1996 presidential campaign. Between August 1995 and January 1996, the DNC spent more than \$15 million on ads backing Clinton’s reelection campaign, and scheduled another \$10 million for the spring and summer of 1996. The ads were part of a strategy designed by Dick Morris, Clinton’s personal pollster who was put on the DNC’s payroll in 1995. This early wave of extensive campaign spending was intended to build a firewall for Clinton before his Republican opponent, Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) had won the nomination. The ads focused on Clinton’s positions on Medicare, promoted his image as crime fighter, his support for welfare reform, and for tax cuts. While the DNC paid for the ads, they were mostly the product of the White House, with Clinton himself directly involved in their creation. Indeed, Clinton personally went through possible 30-second ads, and “offered suggestions and even edited some of the scripts” (Woodward, 1996, pp. 236).

As these examples show, national committees frequently are not the impartial service providers scholars have previously presented them as. Presidents have frequently used their control over their party’s national committees to benefit themselves politically. That is not to say

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<sup>25</sup> “Clinton Moving to Avoid Losses in ’94 Elections,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> “The Road Back,” *Washington Post*, November 20, 1994.



that each of these presidents engaged in purely predatory<sup>27</sup> behavior: in some cases, focusing publicity on the incumbent president can be very beneficial and politically sensible for the party as a broader organization. For example, in the case of presidents like Eisenhower, Nixon, or Reagan – who all served in the White House while their party generally was in the minority in Congress – having the party connect itself to a popular incumbent president is a logical electoral strategy. However, in other cases the unconditional support national committees provide presidents meant that the party-in-organization promoted policies that were not endorsed by other party members. Additionally, when presidents order their committees to use resources to promote their own reelection chances, it means these resources cannot be used to help other party members in their own (re-)election battles. Thus, presidential control often results in a tense relationship between the president and ‘their’ national committee on one side, and other elected officials and candidates within the party on the other.

### *Trump as Party Leader*

Trump’s election to the presidency followed two presidents who deviated from the norm of presidential use (or abuse) of their national committees as described above. In the modern primary process, presidential candidates build up their own campaign organizations to win their party’s nomination. Over time, these organizations have become increasingly professional, and,

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<sup>27</sup> Galvin (2010) distinguishes between ‘predatory’ presidents, and presidents who engage in party building. Note though that a number of presidents who invested in their national committees (Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan) still used those committees in the manner described above. Thus, while presidents might differ in the extent to which they give back to the party, they relatively consistently take from it.

if a candidate wins the White House, frequently are maintained in some form for later use – most notably to help them win reelection. Since 2000 both presidents prior to Trump, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, had such personal campaign organizations and as a result were not particularly engaged with their national committees. Bush incorporated most of his campaign staff and political advisors into the White House rather than placing them in the RNC. Obama all but ignored his national committee during his time in office, preferring instead to invest in Organizing for America (OFA) – a continuation of his campaign organization for the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections independent from the DNC (Milkis and York, 2017).

Both cases suggest that the relationship between president and national committee in the 21<sup>st</sup> century could continue to deteriorate. However, unlike either Bush or Obama, Trump's presidential campaign was not nearly as developed as a stand-alone organization. Notably, during the general election campaign in the fall of 2016, Trump relied heavily on the RNC for organizational and financial support – a reliance that is more comparable to the traditional relationship between candidate and party organization than that of either Bush or Obama in their respective elections. This reliance also meant that Trump did not have the kind of external political organization that Obama and, to a lesser extent, George W. Bush, had when moving into the White House. Thus, the RNC may hold more value to Trump as a publicity organization than it did for his most recent two predecessors. And, while as president, Trump may not necessarily share the desire other presidents have had to use the RNC to promote a specific policy agenda, he might be equally (or, indeed, *more*) inclined to use the RNC to promote himself.

By all accounts, the RNC itself has not adjusted its perspective on the role a national committee plays when its party is 'in' the White House. After winning the White House, Trump selected Ronna Romney-McDaniel, the chair of the Republican Party in Michigan, as RNC chair.

While Trump has received a remarkable amount of public pushback from a number of Republican elected officials since taking office – most notably by a number of Republican senators, including Arizona’s Jeff Flake and John McCain – the RNC has remained staunchly supportive of its president. Indeed, McDaniel has acknowledged that she views the committee’s role as supporting Trump, noting that “you know the job you’re signing up for”<sup>28</sup> when serving as the in-party chair of a national committee. Other Republicans share this sentiment: Saul Anuzis, a former chairman of the Michigan Republican Party described McDaniel’s role as being “the president’s chairman [...] if she is going to do a good job, then she’s going to have to be a Trump person.”<sup>29</sup>

Under McDaniel’s leadership the RNC has attempted to do exactly that, consistently promoting Trump and his policies. This has included already creating and airing campaign advertisements apparently aimed at Trump’s 2020 reelection.<sup>30</sup> In the 2017 Mississippi senate race, the RNC also bowed to Trump’s demands. While the committee initially cut Republican nominee Roy Moore’s funding after allegations regarding sexual misconduct with minors, Trump overruled the decision and ordered the committee to reinstate its support for Moore after Trump publicly expressed his support for the embattled candidate.<sup>31</sup> The RNC also has put a considerable number of Trump campaign workers on its payroll and has hired a company owned

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<sup>28</sup> “A Romney Who is Unfailingly Loyal to Trump,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Trump filed paperwork setting up his 2020 campaign on the day of his inauguration in 2017. See: “RNC ad Hits Pelosi, Schumer Day after Trump Cut Deal with Them,” *CBS News*, September 7, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> “National Republican move Against Roy Moore Grows – But Key Alabama Republicans are not Joining In,” *Washington Post*, November 14, 2017; “RNC to Support Roy Moore in Senate Race in Alabama, Weeks After Cutting Ties with his Campaign,” *Washington Post*, December 4, 2017.

by Keith Schiller – Trump’s former personal assistant and bodyguard.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the RNC has spent considerable funds for events and office space in Trump owned properties,<sup>33</sup> covered part of Trump’s legal fees in the Russia investigation,<sup>34</sup> hosted Trump’s “Fake News Awards” which criticized media coverage of his presidency and campaign on its website,<sup>35</sup> and warned critics in the Republican Party that they should support Trump.<sup>36</sup>

All this suggests that Trump is following in the long traditions of presidents using their national committees for personal benefits, and that he is likely to continue to use the RNC in this regard in the years to come. It also suggests that the RNC will continue to present the GOP as, essentially, Trump’s party. Additionally, the back-and-forth regarding the RNC’s funding for Moore in the Alabama senate race suggests that Trump may be inclined to influence the committees’ decisions regarding the kind of funds and campaign support it provides Republican candidates in the 2018 and 2020 elections – something which previous presidents generally avoided.

Perhaps most importantly, should Trump face a primary challenge to his re-nomination in 2020, the RNC is likely to side with its president. While national committees generally do not participate in primary elections, the RNC’s support for George H.W. Bush in 1992, and other

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<sup>32</sup> “Trump Television Stalwart Kayleigh McEnany Named Republican Party Spokesperson,” *USA Today*, August 7, 2017; “Company Run by Trump Associate Has Received \$75,000 from RNC,” *Washington Post*, February 21, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> “RNC Pays \$37G a Month to Rent Trump Tower Office for President’s Re-Election Campaign in ‘Unprecedented’ Use of Funds,” *New York Daily News*, February 24, 2018; “Republican National Committee Spent Big at Trump Properties in February, Filings Show,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> “About 25% of Trump’s Re-Election Spending Continues to Go to Lawyers,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> “Trump Hands Out ‘Fake News Awards,’ Sans the Red Carpet,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> “RNC Chair to Flake: GOP Candidates Who Didn’t Support Trump Lost in 2016,” *USA Today*, August 8, 2017.

cases where committees endorsed or supported reelection efforts of incumbent presidents well before the national convention confirmed they would indeed be the party's nominee again, suggest that any potential Republican challenger to Trump could face staunch opposition not just from Trump's own campaign, but also from the Republican party-in-organization.

### *Conclusion*

While control over the party-in-organization does not provide incumbent presidents with the kind of power over internal party matters that party leaders in parliamentary systems frequently have, presidents have historically used this control to benefit themselves. Thus, while presidents do not get to determine who runs as their party's nominees in down-ballot races, and cannot force their fellow party members to embrace their policy agenda in Congress, they can use their party's national committee to promote those policies, their reelection efforts, and the image of them being the leader of their party. The president's ability to hire and fire committee chairs provides them with the control necessary to ensure that their party's national committee follows their expectations in this regard, and results in a notably shorter time in office for chairs serving while their party is 'in' the White House. In having their national committees publicize their preferred policy positions and themselves, presidents have frequently forced them to spend considerable resources which otherwise could have been used to the benefit of other party members. As a result, the national committee – the perceived impartial service provider – is frequently turned into a presidential promotion machine.

As president, Donald Trump has control over a considerable organization that he can use to promote himself and his preferred policies as representing the Republican Party. Crucially,

past experiences in which national committees have supported incumbent presidents for reelection before they won their party's nomination again suggests that Trump can also use the RNC to fend off any challenges to his re-nomination in 2020. Given that the RNC (helps) set the 2020 primary agenda, divides delegates across states, helps organize primary debates, and organizes the Republican National Convention, Trump's control over the RNC could be important in battling any intra-party challenges to his leadership, and in presenting the Republican Party as Trump's party in the years to come.

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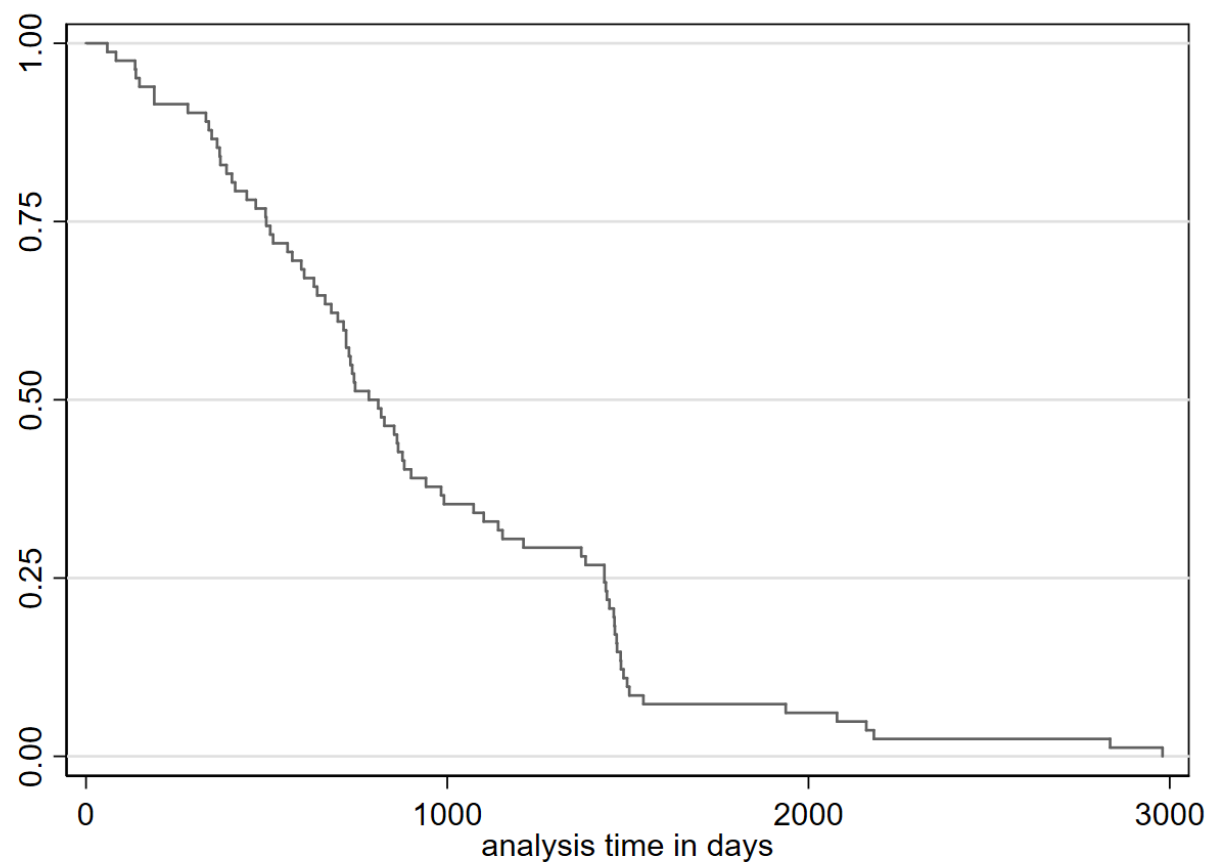
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**Figure 1: Kaplan-Meier Survival Estimate of National Committee Chair Time in Office**



**Table 1: In-Party Effect on Length of National Committee Chairs' Time in Office**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>P-Value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
In-Party	-0.54	0.15	0.00	-0.84 – -0.24
DNC	0.18	0.14	0.19	-0.09 – 0.46
Presidential Election Loss	0.02	0.18	0.90	-.34 – 0.39
Midterm Election Loss	0.99	0.21	0.00	0.58 – 1.40
Interim Chair	-1.95	0.36	0.00	-2.65 – -1.25
Government Job	-0.38	0.26	0.14	-0.88 – 0.13
Personal Reasons	-0.53	0.28	0.06	-1.08 – 0.02
Run for Elected Office	0.01	0.52	0.99	-1.02 – 1.04
Lost Chair Reelection	-0.18	0.60	0.76	-1.35 – 0.99
Constant	6.75	0.13	0.00	6.50 – 7.00

*Number of observations = 115, Log likelihood = -61.91, Prob > chi2 = 0.000.*

**Table 2: Marginal Effects of In-Party Status on Length of Chair Tenure, in Days**

	<i>Days</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>P-Value</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
In-Party	727.89	73.43	0.00	583.97 – 871.81
Out-Party	1245.35	170.17	0.00	911.83 – 1578.87
Predicted Difference	-493.34	156.63	0.00	-800.32 – -186.36

**Figure 2: Marginal Effects of In- and Out-Party Status on National Committee Chair Survival**

