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The challenge of local party brand differentiation

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ABSTRACT

In the USA, the two major parties put great effort into defining their national brands by publishing platforms, engaging social media, and so on. Given the immense regional differences in American politics and culture, however, these national brands are unsurprisingly more popular in some places than others. Local Republican and Democratic parties therefore have incentives to develop their own local brands, distinct from the national party's. The best known case of local brand differentiation occurred among Southern Democrats in the late 20th century. As this research shows, however, local party brand differentiation efforts continue today, and under predictable circumstances: Local parties are more likely to pursue brand differentiation efforts the less popular they are locally, assuming they can muster the resources to do so. Unfortunately for local party leaders, though, the incentive to pursue a local brand differentiation strategy rises even as the ability to do so falls.

1. Introduction

The Republican and Democratic parties write platforms, maintain social media profiles, run advertisements, and take other actions to define their national "brands." However, political cleavages differ so much from place to place that local Republican and Democratic parties sometimes have incentives to differentiate themselves with their own local brands. In American politics, the most familiar example of local branding remains the decades-long differentiation between Southern Democrats and national Democrats during the post-WWII southern realignment. Such local branding efforts have not ceased, however, even though they no longer capture as much attention from scholars and pundits. Even in our post-realignment era, 74% of state Republican parties and 65% of state Democratic parties have their own written platform, separate from the national platforms; a substantial minority of county-level parties do the same. Other local branding efforts, such as maintaining a local party website, are even more common. It is puzzling that so many state and county party organizations would pursue these costly efforts rather than free ride on the national party brand.

This article identifies two variables that help explain why some local party organizations pursue branding efforts independent of—and often conflicting with—the national party's. The first concerns incentives, while the second concerns resources. (To increase observations and variance, this article focuses on county-level parties.) First, county parties have a greater incentive to differentiate themselves when the national party is locally unpopular. Indeed, it appears that county-level brand building efforts are more about differentiating the local party from its national coalition than about differentiating it from its local opponent. Second, county parties are more likely to pursue local branding efforts as their membership resources grow; a larger membership base generally implies a deeper leadership pool from which to draft an active county chair and leadership team, allowing the county party to overcome the resource costs inherent in drafting a platform, maintaining an online presence, or otherwise pursuing a local

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branding strategy. Unfortunately for county party chairs, these two factors often work against each other. In areas where a local brand would most help local Republicans (or Democrats) win office, local parties often lack the necessary resources. This, then, is the challenge of local party brand differentiation: Those who need differentiation the most find it hardest to obtain. These results highlight the need for renewed attention to local party brand differentiation in the post-realignment era.

2. Theory

Every four years, the Republican and Democratic parties update their national platforms. Because the two major parties dominate electoral competition in every part of the United States, their platforms serve as a written reminder of the fundamental disagreements that drive American political dialog. They also foster national brand reputations for both major parties—presumably so that a voter who moves from Kentucky to Massachusetts can have some confidence that Democrats and Republicans represent roughly the same coalitions in her new state as her old one. In practice, of course, Kentucky Republicans differ markedly from Massachusetts Republicans (Shor & McCarty, 2011). The regional differences within each party go beyond simple movement along a left-right ideological continuum, though (Gelman, Park, Shor, & Cortina, 2009). A lengthy literature has shown that American politics divide around entirely different cleavages from one state to the next, whether for reasons of political culture (Elazar, 1966), issue salience (Brown, 1995), racial-ethnic composition (Hero & Tolbert, 1996), class composition (Hill & Leighley, 1992), or ideology (Carsey & Harden, 2010).

Despite these profound differences, electoral forces drive diverse voters into only two national parties. The first-past-the-post electoral rules prevalent in most of the country prevent local multiparty systems from emerging (Cox, 1997; Duverger, 1954). Of course, nothing about this phenomenon demands that the *same* two parties dominate in every state or even in every county (Cox, 1999). Given the marked political differences between Utah and New York, between Alabama and Oregon, and even between coastal and inland California (Douzet, Kousser, & Miller, 2008), we might marvel that the same two parties compete throughout the United States. Yet two major forces—fiscal centralization (Chhibber & Kollman, 1998) and the supreme importance of presidential elections (Hicken & Stoll, 2011)—interact with the nation's first-past-the-post electoral rules to ensure that the two national parties will also be every county's two local parties (Bowler, Grofman, & Blais, 2009; Cox, 1999).

These dynamics create strange bedfellows. Consider Utah's conservative Utah County and California's liberal Santa Cruz County. In 2008, John McCain won 78% of the presidential vote in Utah County, while Barack Obama won 78% of the vote in Santa Cruz County.[1] In 2010, Republicans won every statewide, Congressional, and legislative race in Utah County; Democrats won every race in Santa Cruz County. What makes these two counties interesting is not their lopsidedness, but rather that Santa Cruz County Republicans differ so dramatically from Utah County Republicans. In Santa Cruz County, 62% of Republicans have permissive views on abortion, 67% oppose same-sex marriage, and 48% report praying daily; in Utah County, these figures change to 17% (permit abortion), 94% (oppose same-sex marriage), and 88% (pray daily).[2] One marvels that Santa Cruz County Republicans and Utah County Republicans claim loyalty to the same party. As for Democrats, 95% in Santa Cruz County support action against climate change and 78% favor stricter gun laws; in Utah County, both figures drop to 56%. One marvels again.

In these two lopsided counties, the perpetual losers—Utah County Democrats and Santa Cruz County Republicans—have every reason to distance themselves from aspects of the national party brands that are least popular locally. The Santa Cruz County Republican Party's platform "supports the right of elected officials to protect air quality, water quality, coastlines, and parks" and "supports the right of private sector employees . . . to unionize and bargain collectively." The Utah County Democratic Party's platform stresses "the importance of religious faith" and opposes "elective abortion for personal or social convenience." Moreover, both county parties pursue active branding efforts online. For months, Utah County Democrats ran their "I'm your neighbor and a Utah County Democrat" campaign online. Those profiled on the party website would have their photograph and name displayed, followed by a few words about why they vote Democratic. For obvious strategic reasons, many of those profiled had held prominent positions within the Mormon church's local lay leadership. Meanwhile, the Santa Cruz County Republicans feature scenic photographs of wild California splashed across the top of their website—presumably for the same reason that their platform takes pro-environment stances—above a regularly-updated blog.

Though each national party seeks to brand itself in ways that will satisfy its most ardent supporters without alienating its more reluctant allies (Eyster & Kittsteiner, 2007; Kollman, Miller, & Page, 1992; Monroe, 1983; Page, 1978), national brands will inevitably fit some counties poorly. Local branding efforts worked well during the decades-long southern realignment: Democrats continued to govern the South long after Southern voters began voting for Republican presidents, because successful branding persuaded voters that Southern Democrats were different from other Democrats. Building a separate Southern Democratic brand was far more effective than forming a third party could have been.[3] Scholars and pundits alike talk less about local brand differentiation today than during the southern

[1] In the national sample discussed below, 9.6% of counties had a 2008 vote at least as lopsided as these two.

[2] Data drawn from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey. Santa Cruz County supplemented with respondents from adjacent (and politically similar) San Mateo County. Having permissive views on abortion or supporting action against climate change means choosing one of the two more liberal options out of four offered.

[3] This remains as true today as during George Wallace's failed 1968 presidential bid. Nationally, the median vote share for minor party state legislative candidates between 1967 and 2003 was a paltry 2.2%. For inde-

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