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George W. Bush, the Party System, and American Federalism

Sidney M. Milkis* and Jesse H. Rhodes†

George W. Bush's presidency presents two major puzzles. The Republican Party has traditionally stood for "limited government," but Bush's principal legacy for federalism is centralization of power in the federal government and the executive branch. Most modern presidents have neglected their partisan duties, but Bush has been a uniquely vigorous party leader. Here, we show that Bush's puzzling lack of attention to federalism issues is in large part the result of his efforts to strengthen the Republican Party to cope with the political and electoral challenges characteristic of the contemporary political context. We explain why the Bush administration's strategy for redressing the Republican party's shortcomings has presupposed the deprecation of federalism, and consider the implications of our argument for the development of federal arrangements.

As William Riker argued more than four decades ago, the behavior of political parties has critical consequences for the integrity of federal systems (Riker 1964). It is widely recognized that George W. Bush's presidency has profoundly shaped the development of the American federal system—primarily by centralizing political power in the federal government and the executive branch. Cast against the Republican Party's support for limited government and states rights—a "new federalism"—for much of the past three decades, the Bush administration's embrace of "big government conservatism" is potentially a highly significant development in American politics. Much less understood is how Bush's approach to federalism has been shaped by his relationship to and leadership of the Republican Party. Bush's relative inattention to federalism must be seen against the larger changes in the American party system, a transformation in which the decentralized parties that shaped American politics and government well into the twentieth century have given way to more national and programmatic organizations that subordinate local self government to national administration.

Ambitious conservative presidents such as Ronald Reagan have been critical agents in the development of this "new party system," yet George W. Bush has

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led it in new, and sometimes surprising, directions. Ostensibly a party against national administration under Reagan and George H.W. Bush, an objective expressed most clearly in conservative activists' militant opposition to new taxes, the Republican Party of George W. Bush has facilitated a blending of partisanship and executive power.¹ The Bush White House, especially, with the steadfast support of a small circle of Republican leaders in Congress, has exploited national administrative power for partisan objectives.

The Bush White House's understanding of the imperatives of political party leadership in an era of stiff party competition, a closely divided electorate, and a War on Terrorism helps explain the administration's inattentiveness to federalism and sheds light on previously unrevealed ways in which the Bush presidency has influenced federal arrangements. Indeed, in important respects, Bush's inattention to federalism issues is a consequence of his efforts to strengthen the Republican Party in order to cope with the challenges posed by the contemporary electoral and political environment. Although the 2006 election dramatically revealed the limitations of this party-building strategy, long-term developments in American politics and government make it unlikely that either the Republicans or Democrats will embrace "new federalism" in the near future.

Political Parties, Federalism, and the Presidency Since the New Deal

George W. Bush's party leadership highlights a long-standing development growing out of the New Deal political order, which weakened localized party politics and spawned a new form of partisanship that was inextricably tied to the expansion of national administrative power. The coming of the New Deal dealt the death blow to a governing arrangement which had endured since the mid-nineteenth century, in which locally oriented political parties played a central role in constraining presidential aggrandizement and retarding the expansion of national administrative power (Milkis 1993, 1999; Skowronek 1982). A few progressives called for a nationalized party politics as the solution to the challenges facing the country. But Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal political allies sought to build a more progressive form of government within a reconstituted executive office rather than through a vital connection between the president, the parties, and the state and local governments.

The consequences of Roosevelt's and his successors' emphasis on administration for party politics and for federalism were profound. The Executive Reorganization Act of 1939, enacted after a bitter two year struggle with Congress, was the organic statute of the modern executive office. It led to the creation of the Executive Office of the President and the White House Office—the "West Wing"—and codified a development in which the president, rather

than the decentralized parties and Congress, became the principal agent of popular rule in the United States. Moreover, the New Deal's emphasis on entitlements and liberal internationalism initiated a political order in which the national government would become a leading seat of governmental action, partially displacing the authority of the states and localities (see especially Milkis 1993, 1999; Skowronek 1997).

The playing out of the New Deal gave rise to new relationships governing the interaction of presidents, parties, and the institution of federalism (for example, see Milkis 1993, 2001; Milkis and Mileur 2005). Since Democrats and Republicans differed significantly in their commitment to the institutional and ideological thrust of the New Deal, it is no surprise that each party crafted a characteristic response to the ascendance of the modern presidency and the expansion of national administration. The decline of traditional, decentralized political parties provided the opportunity for more national, issue-oriented parties to develop. These parties served as important "vendors" of campaign services to political candidates and increasingly reined in their state and local affiliates with new funding schemes and organizational regulations (Aldrich 1995; Herrnson 1988, 2002; Bibby 1998; Shea 2003). The Republican Party, under the leadership of party builders such as Ray Bliss and William Brock, was much more successful in developing a politically potent, highly centralized political organization than were the Democrats (Freeman 1986; Herrnson 1988; Reichley 2000; Galvin 2006).

Moreover, although both Democratic and Republican presidents' ambivalence about political parties and extensive use of executive administration to achieve core policy objectives constrained the full flourishing of the new parties (Milkis 1993, 1999), recent research suggests that Republican presidents were more willing to facilitate efforts to strengthen the party apparatus, rallying conservatives to a national Republican party that proclaimed to be against centralized administration (Milkis 1993; Galvin 2006; Milkis and Rhodes 2007). Indeed, the great controversy stirred by the programs of the Great Society, which exposed the limits of national administration in a federal system, prompted Republicans—with the blessing and leadership of Republican presidents—to embrace new experiments in the devolution of government power to the states.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Republicans under Richard Nixon and especially Ronald Reagan attempted to provide states with more discretion and authority in the implementation of federal programs. Although the effects of these efforts were strongly tempered by their embrace of the prerogatives of the modern presidency and by the resistance of Democratic congresses and the courts (Nathan 1975; Reichley 1985; Conlan 1991; Zimmerman 1991; Milkis 1993), the Nixon and Reagan administrations' "New Federalism" initiatives signaled that

Republican presidents might seek to use their administrative authority in defense of devolution and “limited government.”

The New Electoral Environment, Bush’s Party Leadership, and American Federalism

Though George W. Bush’s party leadership has antecedents in the Republican presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush (Galvin 2006), it is unusual both in its exceptional commitment to partisanship and its emphasis on dedicating the GOP to recasting, and sometimes advancing, rather than rolling back, national administrative power (Milkis and Rhodes 2007). These departures point to two puzzles: on the one hand, Bush, a modern president, defies expectations by engaging in the most intensive project of party-building pursued by a chief executive since that of Franklin Roosevelt; on the other, he, the titular head of the party of “limited government,” surprises by (in the eyes of both scholars and Reaganite conservatives) attending less assiduously to federalism issues.

The second puzzle can be resolved once we understand the logic of the first. The contemporary political and electoral environments have created strong incentives for President Bush to depart from expectations and engage in vigorous party-building efforts. Moreover, the contemporary American political context has encouraged the Bush White House to pursue a party-building strategy that emphasizes expansive national policymaking, celebration of executive power, and the further centralization of party organization and grassroots mobilization.

As we shall elaborate in greater detail subsequently, the logic of the administration’s party-building project has necessitated that federalism issues be downplayed, if not ignored. We conclude that the contemporary political environment suggests that this dynamic is likely to be durable: that is, it is unlikely that Republicans will renew a defense of federalism in the near future.

“Big Government Conservatism,” Republican Coalition-Building and Federalism

The Bush White House’s efforts to adapt the Republican Party to the development of the welfare state deflected its attention from state and local issues. Of course, Bush and his advisors felt a strong kinship with the fundamental conservative commitment to cut taxes (Hacker and Pierson 2005). At the same time, they strongly believed that Ronald Reagan’s “blind spot” to the important role government had come to play in people’s lives, and conservative Republicans’ embrace of his doctrine, had undermined Republicans’ opportunity to build an enduring governing majority (Hecl 2003, 34).² To be sure, Bush’s father, George H.W. Bush, had accepted some significant new government departures

that tended to limit states' discretion and centralize power in the national government, including the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Clean Air Act (Greene 2000); the senior Bush also proposed an expansion of the federal role in education (McGuinn 2006) and a broadening of other Great Society programs (Skowronek 1997, 434). Yet budget constraints, congressional Republicans' resistance, and his own political caution discouraged a more systematic and sustained effort to realign Republicans' political priorities away from Reaganism (Thompson and Scavo 1992; Mervin 1996; Skowronek 1997; Greene 2000; Barilleaux and Rozell 2004).³

George W. Bush came to power more determined than his father had been to leave his mark on the Republican Party and to demonstrate that the national government could serve conservative objectives. He and his political strategists believed that the antigovernment conservatism of the party's congressional wing, which intensified after the "Republican Revolution" of 1994, represented a dangerous threat to the party's long-term electoral chances. A particularly vivid lesson for Bush and his supporters was the revival of Bill Clinton's presidency and the enervation of the "Republican Revolution" in the wake of Republicans' unpopular "shut down" of the federal government in the winter of 1995 in an attempt to pressure Clinton to accept major budget cuts (Rauch 2003). In the eyes of Bush Republicans, this episode indicated that a successful species of modern conservatism would have to come to terms with the modern state. Tellingly, in a speech during the 2000 campaign that departed dramatically from Reagan's ideological jeremiads against the modern state, Bush pointedly observed that, "Too often, my party has confused the need for limited government with a disdain for government itself. Our founders rejected cynicism and cultivated a noble love of country. That love is undermined by sprawling, arrogant, aimless government. It is restored by focused and effective and energetic government" (quoted in Brooks 2004).

Bush presumed to ennoble "effective and energetic government." He championed "compassionate conservatism," a philosophy of government that he claimed wedded traditional Republican principles of individual responsibility, private enterprise, and resistance to government spending, taxes, and regulation with deep compassion for the disadvantaged and the belief that targeted federal activism could lubricate markets and promote the entrepreneurial spirit (Mucciaroni and Quirk 2004, 158).

On their face, Bush's campaign speeches during the 2000 campaign bore a striking resemblance to Clinton's rhetoric during the 1992 and 1996 elections, while programs that embodied his words—especially his reform proposals for education, social services, and welfare—closely mirrored ideas incubated at the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a centrist political group, that gave rise to many of Clinton's policy initiatives (Mucciaroni and Quirk 2004, 159; Milkis 2005).

Important differences marked Bush's and Clinton's stances toward partisanship, however. Clinton and the DLC were highly ambivalent, if not avowedly hostile, to partisanship (Milkis 2001). In contrast, Bush embraced "compassionate conservatism" as a doctrine that he and his close advisors hoped would strengthen the appeal of the Republican Party (Balz 2005).⁴

Bush's rhetoric and policy proposals, his top political strategist, Karl Rove, claimed, were a deliberate attempt to play to conservative values "without being reflexively antigovernment" (Rove 2001). In fact, as Michael Gerson, Bush's principal speech writer, argued, the president's rhetoric did not try to "split the difference between liberalism and conservatism," but rather conveyed how "activist government could be used for conservative ends" (Gerson 2001). Another top White House advisor, who spoke on conditions of anonymity, conceded that while he was philosophically uncomfortable with some of the administration's statist policies, these initiatives, especially those aimed at educational reform, made "great politics" (Anonymous Bush-Cheney Campaign Official 2005).⁵

A significant component of this strategy has been the sharp downgrading of federalism in presidential and party rhetoric. This approach diverged significantly from that of Bush's immediate Republican predecessors in office, who had made federalism an important theme of their presidencies. Of course, Bush's 2000 presidential bid trumpeted his experience as governor of Texas, and his strongest supporters were fellow Republican governors who hoped he shared their desire for greater state autonomy and authority from the national government (Smith 2001). Bush's expressed support for many traditional Republican federal principles during the campaign fueled their enthusiasm for his candidacy (Kincaid 2001; Smith 2001). Nonetheless, President Bush has been notably indifferent to federalism (Krane 2004; Nathan, Gais, and Fossett, 2003). Bush has neither rolled out an explicit federalism agenda nor established any new executive orders on federalism issues.

Significantly, the White House's inattention to issues of federalism was actually codified in the Republican platform for the 2004 presidential campaign, which offered no defense of states rights (Krane and Koenig 2005); indeed, the platform lauded No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the education reform legislation enacted in 2001, which as Raymond C. Scheppach, executive director of the National Governors Association, has lamented, was "an unfunded mandate that created a federal education framework and accountability system and imposed a significant testing burden on state governments" (Scheppach 2006).

The Bush White House's commitment to big government conservatism—as evinced in its support for expansive new national policies such as NCLB, Medicare prescription drug benefits, and the faith-based initiative—has challenged, if not transformed, the Republican Party's commitment to federalism. Yet new, centralizing policies have been calibrated in part to consolidate support among

important Republican constituencies—constituencies which have become favorable to significant government intervention in particular areas of policy (see Conlan and Dinan this issue; Edsall and Harris 2005). NCLB catered to moderate swing voters uneasy about the state of the American education system (McGuinn 2006); Medicare reform signaled Republicans' credibility on health policy in an era in which health care is a highly salient issue (Barnes 2003; Skocpol 2004); and faith-based initiatives responded to religious organizations' belief that they had been unfairly disadvantaged in obtaining federal funds to help the poor, uneducated, and addicted (Milkis 2005).⁶

To be sure, the commitment to “big government conservatism” during Bush's tenure has been strongly reinforced by the War on Terrorism. Central authority and budgets inevitably expand during wartime, and indeed, both did so during Bush's first term, particularly in areas related to the War on Terrorism and homeland security (Krane 2004). Nonetheless, the president's unusually aggressive attacks on the states' prerogatives with respect to issues such as education and health care and his willingness to expand nonmilitary discretionary budgets are indicative of his deeper commitment to a conservative form of administrative power born of the exigencies of coalition maintenance in the contemporary political environment.

Bush's inattentiveness to federalism and his willingness to pursue “big government” solutions have not gone unnoticed, or unchallenged, by small-government conservatives and “states' righters” within the Republican Party (see, for example, Ponnuru 2003; Economist 2004; Bartlett 2004, 2006; Kudlow 2006; Tanner 2007; for a response to the critics, see Gerson 2007). Nonetheless, before Hurricane Katrina and the collapse of the president's policy in Iraq undermined public approval of Bush and his party, “big government conservatism” appeared to be a politically beneficial position that helped Republicans win important victories in the 2002 and 2004 elections. Congressional Republicans seemed to have recognized this: as Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein have shown, until 2005, the Republican Congress marched in lockstep with the Bush White House's executive-centered approach to governing (Mann and Ornstein 2006, 139).

Bush's Party-Building and Federalism

Bush's party building complemented and abetted the efforts of his administration to consolidate Republican political strength. In important respects, Bush's strong ties to his party followed from his affiliation with the Reagan “revolution” (Skowronek 2005). Reagan had been an aggressive party leader, readily lending his popularity to the party, fundraising and campaigning on behalf of congressional candidates, and helping to build up the party's organizational resources

(for extensive discussion of these developments, see Milkis 1993; Busch 2001; Galvin 2006; Milkis and Rhodes 2007). Early in his presidency, George H.W. Bush continued many of Reagan's earlier practices: Bush not only followed the Reagan practice of campaigning for fellow Republicans and of raising funds for the regular party apparatus, but he also gave his party's national organization an unprecedentedly high profile in the era of the modern presidency. Significantly, Bush placed his chief political advisor, Lee Atwater, not in the White House (the usual custom of modern presidents), but in the post of RNC chairman (see also Bass 1992; Milkis 1993, 291; Galvin 2006).⁷

Although George W. Bush built on many of these accomplishments, his party leadership differed in two important respects from that of Reagan and his father. First, whereas his predecessors sought to exploit the national Republican Party to serve their commitment to limited and decentralized government, Bush sought to exploit national administrative power for partisan objectives. Second, although Reagan and George H.W. Bush embraced their role as leaders of the Republican Party, their administrations were more reserved about partisanship than Bush and his top political strategists have been. Bush's unstinting partisanship, and its consequences for federalism, have been driven by the desire to cope with the contemporary political environment. The election campaigns of the 1980s and early 1990s were characterized by a lopsided organizational environment. Due to Republicans' heavy investment in party organization from the late 1960s to the early 1980s and the cresting of the Conservative Movement by the early 1980s,⁸ Republicans' were perceived to have a strong organizational advantage (both in terms of technical capacity and grassroots organization) (Herrnson 1988; Busch 2001, 2005).

In contrast, the 2000 election persuaded Bush political strategists that Republicans suffered from an organizational disadvantage with the Democrats, especially with respect to grass roots mobilization (Dowd 2004a; Franke-Ruta and Meyerson 2004; Iverson 2004; Institute of Politics 2006, 31). This perception made party building a higher priority for Bush than it had been for his predecessors. Similarly, just as large number of political independents and conservative Democrats encouraged the deployment of candidate-centered, mass media campaigns, rather than straightforwardly partisan appeals during the tenures of Reagan and George H.W. Bush,⁹ increasing partisan polarization at the dawn of the twenty-first century motivated the Bush White House to pursue rhetorical and organizational strategies that would energize and mobilize partisans (Institute of Politics 2006, 67).

Finally, although during Reagan's tenure Republicans had a legitimate shot at winning control of the Senate (and, in fact, they did so during this period), the House of Representatives appeared firmly under the control of the Democrats. Unlike Reagan or George H.W. Bush, who could reasonably anticipate

facing divided government throughout their tenures, a fact which reduced considerably their investment in the fate of their congressional colleagues, and thereby weakened their incentives to engage in party-building for their benefit, Bush experienced the advantages of, and saw the possibility of extending Republican control of Congress.

In short, the electoral environment of the 1980s and early 1990s provided more limited incentives to engage in energetic presidential party leadership than that of the early twenty-first century. Bush came to office just as a national party system was cresting—and a disciplined national Republican party could serve his devotion to conservative policy making. As Krane and Koenig have noted (2005), President's Bush's inattention to federalism might be an indication that his policy ambition, shared by Republican leaders in Congress, “[could] be achieved using the [Republican's] centralized organization to overcome dispersed and fragmented authority characteristic [of America's federal democracy].” More than Reagan or George H.W. Bush, then, the contemporary political context encouraged George W. Bush to attend to party building, and to do so in a way that strengthened national institutions—in particular, the presidency—at the expense of state and local ones (see also Milkis and Rhodes 2007).

The Consequences of Bush's Partisan Campaigning for American Federalism

The dramatic Republican triumph in the 1994 elections, in which the GOP took control of the House and Senate for the first time in 42 years, meant that Bush was greeted by a militantly partisan and seasoned Republican majority on taking office (Milkis and Rhodes 2007). Bush's fragile, controversial victory in 2000, which had little if anything to do with the Republicans' ability to retain their majorities in both congressional chambers, made him far more dependent on his partisan brethren in the legislature than either Ronald Reagan or George H.W. Bush had been (Jones 2006). The possibility of enjoying unified government created a strong presidential investment in partisan campaigning.

In 2002, 2004, and 2006, Bush engaged in exhaustive efforts to support Republican candidates. Some of Bush's efforts, that is, raising funds and campaigning for Republican candidates, represented an intensification of those of Reagan and his father; others, especially the use of partisan appeals and the construction of a hierarchical grassroots campaign, represented a significant departure from past precedent.¹⁰ During the 2002 campaign, Bush was extremely active in raising money for Republican candidates (Busch 2005, 51).¹¹ The president also made an unprecedented effort to campaign on behalf of his partisans in Congress. Trumpeting the achievements of the modern presidency in time of war, Bush sought to lend the popularity he enjoyed in the wake of the

September 11 terrorist attacks to his congressional partisans. He made 108 campaign stops on behalf of 26 House candidates and 20 candidates for the Senate, including an unparalleled blitzkrieg tour across 10,000 miles, 15 states, and 17 cities to stump for Republican candidates during the final five days of the campaign (Herrnson and Morris, 2; Beachler 2004).¹²

Significantly, though, unlike Reagan and his father, who tended to downplay partisan rhetoric even as they campaigned for their partisans (see especially Milkis 1993; Milkis and Rhodes 2007), Bush's campaigning was cast in a stridently partisan tone (Milkis and Rhodes 2007). This sharp partisanship was joined to an effort to increase the Republican base. Indeed, Bush's most distinctive contribution to Republican presidential campaigning was the creation of a centralized grassroots operation. Believing that they were out-organized "on the ground" by Democrats in the 2000 election, Bush and his political advisors enlisted the support of the RNC in putting together an impressive grass roots mobilization in the midterm elections, which would form the foundation for the more elaborate grassroots campaign of 2004 (Franke-Ruta and Meyerson 2004; Dowd 2004b, Nelson 2005; Milkis and Rhodes 2007).

Bush's diligent support for his partisans continued in 2004. Bucking the trend characteristic of his Republican predecessors (Milkis and Rhodes 2007), the White House's electoral strategy again focused on strengthening the position of the Republican Party rather than concentrating on reelecting the president. An important part of this strategy was to calibrate the grassroots machine to benefit as many Republican candidates as possible. Not content to mobilize "swing voters," who could be persuaded to vote for the president for reasons particular to Bush's candidacy, the Bush-Cheney grassroots organization, in coordination with the Republican party committees, emphasized reaching and turning out "lazy Republicans" who were predisposed to vote for Republicans at all levels but who were unreliable in their voting habits (Dowd 2005; Matalin 2005; Magelby, Monson, and Patterson 2005, 31; Nelson 2005; Wallace 2005).

During the 2006 midterm campaign, the White House again engaged in vigorous campaigning on behalf of Republican candidates. Remarkably, given the decline of his political fortunes after his successful reelection, Bush once again showed himself to be an extraordinary financial asset to his party: he brought in more than \$188 million for Republican candidates with 80 appearances, mostly in private homes (Daniel 2006).¹³ Because the war in Iraq had sapped his popularity, Bush made fewer public appearances on behalf of candidates than in 2002 (Daniel 2006); however, the president did make important appearances in targeted districts where it was believed his presence would make a difference for candidates (Hennessey-Fiske 2006; Rutenberg 2006).

There is considerable evidence that Bush's partisan campaigning and efforts to develop the grassroots organization paid off for Republican partisans in 2002

and 2004.¹⁴ Yet these efforts also tended to impinge on traditional state and local prerogatives. The Bush White House tended to involve itself more deeply than had Reagan or George H.W. Bush in the cultivation of Republican candidates for national office, intervening in state and local party politics to ensure that “electable” moderates, rather than conservative ideologues, represented the party in the general elections. This strengthened the party’s electoral performance and thereby furthered Bush’s national agenda, but it frustrated grassroots conservative activists as well as state and local party leaders (Milkis and Rhodes 2007).

Moreover, the White House’s strategy to rally Republicans marked a major break from that of his predecessors insofar as its strategic themes and practices tended to subordinate state and local issues to national causes that exalted the presidency. Indeed, Bush’s energetic campaigning on behalf of congressional candidates in the 2002 midterm campaign served to transform the elections into a referendum on his leadership in the War against Terror. Convinced that, in the context of the War on Terror—national security—was Republicans’ strongest electoral issue, the Bush White House urged campaigns that celebrated executive power and emphasized the modern presidency as the center of government action (Mitchell and Nagourney 2002, A1; Beachler 2004, 41–42).¹⁵ The administration also calibrated its own interventions to bolster Republican prospects by trumpeting the superiority of Republican management of the War on Terror.

The president’s blitzkrieg in the final days of the 2002 campaign, emphasizing his proposal for a Department of Homeland Security, targeted Democratic senators who opposed certain features of the White House’s plan for creating the new department. Although both parties supported this objective (indeed, the original plan for a new department was conceived by Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-CT), congressional Democrats had resisted the Bush administration’s insistence that the president be vested with power to suspend collective bargaining rules for departmental employees (Jones 2006). In response, Bush charged that the Democrats were putting “special interests” ahead of the interests of the American people, thus linking Democrats to weakness in the face of a national security threat (Beachler 2004). The intensity of presidential intervention in the campaign and the extent to which the campaign revolved around the issue of terrorism effectively transformed the campaign into a referendum on Bush’s wartime leadership.¹⁶ Following the election, the chairman of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee declared, in telling language, that “We made history tonight. *It was a great win for the President of the United States* (*New York Times*, November 6, 2002, as quoted in Keele, Fogarty, and Stimson, emphasis added).”

The strategy of deliberately promoting administrative achievements for partisan gain was repeated, indeed accentuated, in the 2004 campaign.

As Matthew Dowd, the chief political strategist for the Bush–Cheney campaign, explained, Bush’s command was promoted so as to highlight the Republicans’ advantage over Democrats on matters of national security (Dowd 2005).¹⁷ Furthermore, the president and the party strongly downplayed federalism issues, evinced not just in the Republican campaign platform but also in absence of attention to state and local issues in Bush’s campaign speeches (Krane and Koenig 2005).

The Bush White House planned to deploy this strategy once more in the 2006 midterm elections (Luce and Yeager 2006). In July, Karl Rove contended that Republicans would maintain their hold on Congress in the November elections by stressing Republicans’ superiority on the issues of terrorism and national security (Meyerson 2006). As in 2002, the White House repeatedly encouraged Republican candidates to “run on the war” (McAuliffe 2006), and the RNC circulated a memo suggesting that Bush’s handling of “foreign threats” was the primary factor motivating the Republican base during the election cycle (Wallsten 2006). The White House stuck with this strategy up to the election. At an early November campaign event, Bush declared “As you go to the polls, remember we’re at war And if you want this country to do everything in its power to protect you and at the same time lay a foundation for peace for generations to come, vote Republican” (VandeHei and Balz 2006).

This strategy foundered on the rock of the declining political support for Bush and the Iraq War. As fears abounded that the administration’s policy in Iraq was failing and expressed support for the president in public opinion surveys plummeted, Republican candidates increasingly sought to distance themselves from Bush and his foreign policy.¹⁸ Party organization stalwarts, hitherto deferential to the White House, also appeared to abandon the president on the war issue.¹⁹

The disjuncture between the White House’s campaign strategy and that embraced by many Republican candidates and the party committees was considerable. Nonetheless, GOP candidates’ efforts to distance themselves from the president were compromised by White House messages emphasizing the importance of the war in Iraq and the need for constancy in the face of adversity (Nagourney 2006). Ironically, the very same presidential strategy that enhanced the Republican Party’s fortunes during Bush’s first term, contributed significantly to the “thumping” (in the president’s words) Republicans received in the 2006 election. The election turned out in large measure to be a referendum on Bush and the Iraq War, with very unhappy results for Republicans. Bush’s celebration of executive power and the Republican commitment to national security had benefited his party during the first 5 years of his presidency; by the 2006 election, the subordination of state and local issues to executive administration had become a severe liability to Republican candidates whose political fortunes

suffered dearly as a result of the nationalization of the congressional elections (Pew Research Center 2006).²⁰

The Consequences of the “New National Machine” for American Federalism

Though the Bush White House has sought to strengthen the Republican Party by challenging traditional Republican ideology and by celebrating executive administration for partisan gain, perhaps its most significant and distinctive contribution to Republican politics has been its efforts to develop a new grassroots organization. Just as these other efforts served to displace the position of federalism in Republican Party ideology, so too did the national grassroots machine challenge federal relations within the party organization.

The White House’s attentiveness to grassroots organization-building has been motivated by its understanding of the exigencies of the political environment. The debacle of 2000 indicated to party strategists that the election of 2004 would hinge on voter turnout, and that Republicans’ capacity in this regard was lacking in comparison with that of the Democrats (Dowd 2004a, 2004b; Franke-Ruta and Meyerson 2004; Wallace 2005). Democrats since the New Deal had relied on auxiliary party organizations, especially labor organizations, to get out the vote. But the Bush White House and Republican National Committee created a centralized party organization to mobilize supporters (Dowd 2004a, 2004b; Madden 2005; Wallace 2005). In light of findings from studies of the 2001 gubernatorial and 2002 congressional campaigns by the RNC’s “72 Hour Task Force” that demonstrated the superiority of face-to-face contact in getting voters to the polls, Bush–Cheney strategists decided to develop an elaborate grassroots organization for the 2004 campaign emphasizing interpersonal interaction between locally based campaign volunteers and targeted publics (Dowd 2004a; Franke-Ruta and Meyerson 2004; Iverson 2004; Madden 2005; Wallace 2005).

In its organization and execution, the Bush–Cheney effort was extremely sophisticated and disciplined, creating what was effectively a “centralized grassroots campaign” or “national party machine.”²¹ Concentrated in the sixteen “battle-ground” states, the grassroots organization was constructed as a multiple-level hierarchy centered at the Bush–Cheney headquarters in Arlington, Virginia (Wallace 2005). Notably, the campaign recruited volunteers not only through the professional staff on the ground but also through its website, allowing the Bush–Cheney headquarters to develop a personal line of communication with campaign workers through email and the internet (Ruffini 2005; Madden 2005). Campaign volunteers were charged with responsibilities for reaching specific goals laid out by the Bush–Cheney headquarters (Bai 2004; Madden 2005), and were held accountable by state-level campaign professionals for

the targets that were set by higher level officers (Klinger 2005; Madden 2005; Mehlman 2005; Wallace 2005). Indeed, volunteers who failed to attend diligently to their assigned tasks were discouraged from future participation in the campaign (Gillespie 2005).

The Republicans' elaborate grassroots organization was highly successful in mobilizing supporters and voters, especially in crucial battleground states,²² undoubtedly aiding the president and his partisans in their campaigns. At the same time, it has had important consequences for the relationship between the national party, the state and local parties, and the citizenry, reinforcing the administration's centralizing tendencies. The "national machine" was organized from the top-down, rather than trickling up from the organizational efforts of the state and local party organizations (Dowd 2004a, 2005; Madden 2005; Wallace 2005). For the most part, direction and organization came from the Bush–Cheney headquarters which transmitted strategy via White House-appointed regional coordinators to state and local organizations (Dowd 2004a; Madden 2005). Moreover, because the grassroots organization was largely directed through the internet, the national Bush–Cheney campaign could and did connect directly with campaign volunteers on the local level rather than working through state and local parties (Iverson 2004; Ruffini 2005).

In fact, campaign officials told us in interviews that the national campaign often deliberately bypassed party organizations in the states and localities that were perceived as inept or intransigent, and created new campaign organizations from scratch to maximize the effectiveness of grassroots efforts (Anonymous Bush–Cheney Campaign Official 2005). The architects of these efforts recruited new GOP leaders in the states and localities whom they viewed as the foot soldiers of a nationalized party system. Ironically, even as the Republicans developed sophisticated grass roots methods that drew millions of Americans into the political process, the GOP "national machine" reinforced and extended the trend toward the development of a centralized party system that weakened the electorate's connection with state and local party organizations.

Similarly, the national grassroots machine relied much more on Bush's personal charisma and popularity than on the organizational or social infrastructure of the state and local party organizations. The success of the remarkable grass roots effort in Ohio, a local Bush–Cheney official insisted, was due in large part to the "volunteers' admiration for and loyalty to George W. Bush," and relied on frequent presidential visits to "fire up" the grass roots organization (Klinger 2005). Indeed, as Matthew Dowd acknowledged, "both parties' organizing force has focused on President Bush—the Republicans in defense of his leadership; the Democrats in opposition—hostility—to it. After the election, both parties will be challenged to sustain a collective commitment independently of their devotion to or hatred of Bush" (Dowd 2004a, 2005).

Dowd's observation proved prophetic, as the 2006 elections were in large measure a referendum on the president and his policies, especially the War on Iraq. Just as the many Republicans expressed remorse for resting their party's fortunes in the president's leadership and program, so a number of Democrats acknowledged that they had not yet developed a strategy of party renewal that would endure once Bush left the White House.

Conclusion: Presidential Party Leadership and American Federalism in a Partisan Era

As Derthick (2001, 35) has noted, "it is a commonplace of scholarship that American federalism constantly changes." Party politics—and the dynamic relationship between presidents and parties—plays a central role in driving forward the evolution of the American federal system. George W. Bush is often seen as an enigmatic Republican president, unusually willing to expand federal power at the expense of the prerogatives of the states. As we have suggested here, the White House's programmatic ambition was joined to militant partisanship: Bush's inattentiveness to the institution of federalism is in part due to his efforts to strengthen the Republican Party in the face of challenges posed by the contemporary political and electoral environment. His presidency thus suggests that a new relationship between the president, the parties, and American federalism may be emerging, one in which presidents and parties are more closely allied, partisan mobilization is once again a central concern of parties and presidents, but federalism, having enjoyed considerable attention in national politics from the 1970s to 1990s, may once again be receding as an object of political interest (Krane and Koenig 2005).²³

Of course, the "new party system" may yet unravel when Bush passes from the political scene, thereby making our claims of party system development, and its consequences for federalism, premature. Yet there is reason to suspect that the national structure of the party system—and a politics that privileges national issues and conflict—might endure. Indeed, although the Democrats have renounced the fierce partisanship that the White House and Republican Congress practiced during the first 5 years of the Bush presidency, many liberal public officials and strategists have expressed more than grudging admiration for the effective party building that buttressed partisan rancor in the nation's capital (Nagourney 2006). Democrats, in fact, demonstrated in their effective 2004 and, especially, 2006 national campaigns, that they learned a great deal from, and have mimicked successfully many features of, the national Republican machine.

There is a real sense, therefore, in which the 2004 and 2006 elections have marked a culmination of sorts in the development of a "new" party system.

In both these contests, the Republicans and Democrats instigated a serious partisan dispute about the War against Terror, extended with such controversy in Iraq, that captured the attention of the American people and mobilized, when compared with recent electoral history, large turnouts. Prior to 2004, the national and programmatic parties had strengthened partisan discipline in Washington, DC, most notably in Congress, and had been a valuable source of campaign services—especially campaign funds—for candidates. But these nationalized parties had failed to stir the passions and allegiance of the American people, attested to by declining partisan identification and anemic voting rates. In contrast, both the 2004 and 2006 contests were passionate, polarized, and participatory. Thus, the Republican grass roots mobilization and earnest Democratic efforts to compete with it suggest that a nationalized party system, three decades in the making, has come of age.

This structural transformation may not bode well for America's federal democracy. In an ironic twist, the vaunted Republican machine, born of a commitment to challenge the working arrangements of the entrenched liberal administrative state, assumed command of all three branches of government for the first time as an executive-centered national party of "big government conservatism." These efforts to consolidate a conservative administrative state on Bush's watch may represent, to use E.E. Schattschneider's phrase, a "displacement of conflict," in which the struggle between champions and opponents of the administrative state has given way to a battle between liberals and conservatives—Democrats and Republicans—for its services. Such a centralized and polarized conflict, as Dale Krane warns, might "trump the democratic art of compromise" that sustains America's federal democracy: the "spirit of federalism embodied in the ideas of 'shared rule,' respect for the integrity of others, and the pursuit of the common good in society withers in an ideologically driven political environment" (Krane 2004, 53).

Of course, the states have protested vigorously against federal encroachments on their prerogatives in education, environmental protection, social services, and security policymaking (see other contributors to this issue). What's more, the 2006 elections, in which the political center forcefully asserted itself, might encourage the national political parties to view foreign and domestic problems more practically as well, with greater attention to the participation of states and localities in policy making.²⁴ Just the same, given the current state of parties and government in the United States, federal encroachments on state and local authority seem natural; resisting such intrusions requires political art of the highest order. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "Among public men of democracies there are scarcely any but very disinterested or very mediocre people who want to decentralize power. The former are rare. The latter are powerless" (Tocqueville 2000, 703).

Notes

1. To be sure, George H.W. Bush ultimately accepted tax increases in order to confront a ballooning deficit. However, this strategy ultimately led many prominent members of his own party to repudiate him (Mervin 1996; Greene 2000).
2. It is important to note that Reagan was not fully consistent in his support for federalism or devolution. Reagan maintained reasonably consistent rhetorical support for a New Federalism, and sought to devolve decision making in some policy areas to the states, but his administration also presided over an expansion of federal mandates and federal preemption rules, which on the whole tended to centralize political power. See Kincaid (1990), Conlan (1991), Zimmerman (1991).
3. For excellent year-by-year reviews of the dynamics of federalism politics during Bush's tenure, see Pagano and Bowman 1989; Bowman and Pagano 1990, 1992, 1993; Pagano, Bowman, and Kincaid 1991.
4. Bush's approach was embraced by other party leaders. As Conlan and Dinan note in this issue, former RNC chairman Ed Gillespie told conservative newspaper editors: "The public wants an expanded federal role in [education, health care, social services, and homeland security], and the Republican Party at the highest levels has decided to give the public what it wants."
5. Other "movement conservatives" have expressed these arguments as severe criticisms of the administration. See, for example, Bartlett (2006) and Tanner (2007).
6. Bush has made additional efforts to court social conservatives in ways that have (or would have) expanded federal authority at the expense of the states.
7. After severe health problems forced Atwater from the RNC Chairmanship, however, Bush's concern with partisan issues declined (Bass 1992, 120) Bush's ability to exercise authoritative party leadership was further compromised by his retraction of his 1988 campaign pledge not to raise taxes in 1990, which infuriated congressional Republicans. The fractious state of the party contributed to the Republicans losing eight seats in the House and one in the Senate in the 1990 midterm elections, a result which, although mild by historical standards, was seen as a major disappointment by party activists (see Milkis 1993, Chapter 11).
8. For outstanding treatments of the Conservative Movement from the 1940s to the 1980s, see Brennan 1995; McGirr 2001; Schoenwald 2001; Schaller 2007.
9. Troy 2005 shows that Reagan's campaigns were deliberately crafted as personalistic, rather than sharply partisan, enterprises. See also Milkis 1993.
10. For a discussion of Reagan's fundraising and campaigning efforts, see Galvin 2006; Milkis and Rhodes 2007. For a discussion of George H.W. Bush's party leadership during the 1990 midterm congressional elections, see, Mashek 1990; Bass 1992; Greene 2000, 88; Galvin 2006. In other work (Milkis and Rhodes 2007), we provide evidence suggesting that previous Republican presidents largely avoided making partisan appeals. We also demonstrate the novelty of Bush's centralized grassroots "machine."
11. The president's fundraising efforts placed the Republican National Committee at a distinct advantage against its Democratic counterpart; as the election neared, "the

- Republican National Committee had a six-fold advantage in available funds over its Democratic counterpart (\$30 million to \$5 million for the Democrats at the beginning of October) (Busch 2005, 51).”
12. To be sure, both Reagan and George H.W. Bush had fundraised and stumped diligently for their congressional partisans (see Milkis and Rhodes 2007 for details on Reagan’s efforts; see Mashek 1990; Greene 2000; Galvin 2006; for a discussion of George H.W. Bush’s campaigning).
 13. Bush’s diligent campaigning on behalf of his partisans, even as his prestige with the public and with members of his own party was falling, in many ways mirrors the diligence of his father’s campaigning in 1990, following his breaking of the “no new taxes” pledge. See Greene 2000, 88.
 14. For a thorough review of this evidence, see Milkis and Rhodes 2007.
 15. During the 2002 campaign, Karl Rove exhorted Republican candidates to “run on the war (Busch 2005, 45),” while Bush’s White House political advisor Ken Mehlman argued in a presentation to Republican officials that the party’s greatest advantages in the campaign were the president’s high public approval ratings and the increased salience of national security issues (Beachler 2004, 41).
 16. Other recent significant midterm elections have served as referenda on the administration of the majority party’s president (for example, 1986 and 1994). Our contention is not that such elections *per se* are unusual, but rather that it is rare that a sitting modern president would deliberately trumpet his administrative achievements as a primary means for benefiting his partisan brethren in Congress. It is the deliberate politicization of administrative achievements for partisan ends by the incumbent president, not the midterm-as-referenda itself, that is remarkable about Bush’s party leadership.
 17. Indeed, Aldrich, Griffin, and Rickershauser (2005, 12) show in an empirical analysis of Bush’s campaign rhetoric that the president clearly sought to focus the campaign on the issue of terrorism, with 30 percent of all speeches primarily dedicated to this issue, slightly more emphasis than was given to the economy, and considerably more than was given to Iraq, which was defended as critical front in the War on Terror, and domestic issues.
 18. Rep. Christopher Shays (R-CN) trumpeted his independence from Bush in his campaign advertisements; Sen. Lincoln Chafee (R-RI) emphasized his antiwar credentials on the campaign trail; Maryland Senate candidate Michael Steele failed to attend his own presidential fundraiser; and Senate candidates Bob Corker of Tennessee and Robert Menendez of New Jersey called for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s resignation (Nagourney and Rutenberg 2006).
 19. As one anonymous Republican Party Senate campaign strategist confessed, “We have certainly advised candidates to not appear that they are marching in lock step with the administration in terms of how the Iraq war is being conducted. If you aren’t speaking out against the way that this war has been conducted, you are dead in the water (quoted in Nagourney and Rutenberg 2006).”
 20. According to a national exit poll, about six in ten voters (59 percent) said they were dissatisfied (30 percent) or angry (29 percent) with President Bush. By more

than two-to-one, those dissatisfied with Bush supported the Democratic candidate in their district (69 percent to 29 percent); among those angry with the president, the margin was more than fifteen-to-one (92 percent to 6 percent). Significantly, Bush appeared to be more of a drag on his party's candidates than was former President Clinton in 1994. More than a third (36 percent) of the electorate said they voted to oppose Bush; that compares with 27 percent who voted to oppose Clinton in 1994, and 21 percent in 1998, the year Congress impeached the president. Several studies appeared to show, moreover, that general unhappiness with the White House and the war in Iraq not only contributed to Democrats taking control of the House and Senate, but also to the substantial gains they made in gubernatorial and state legislative races (Thomas and Garber 2006).

21. Dowd insisted that a *centralized* grass roots campaign was not an oxymoron. The "ground war" was built with community volunteers, but "once they volunteered, we ask them to do certain things. A national organization has to have a consistent message and mechanics. If the message is not consistent, if tasks are not systematically assigned, the campaign will implode. This was the message of the [failed Howard] Dean campaign: letting people loose can get the candidate in trouble. The message and organization must be relatively disciplined." The centralized grass roots campaign was not without spontaneity, however. "The campaign headquarters gave people tasks, but Bush-Cheney staff and volunteers on the ground had some flexibility in determining how to carry out those tasks. It was local volunteers, for example, who learned that model homes in subdivisions was a good place to register new voters." (Dowd 2004a)
22. Campaign officials estimate that between 1.2 and 1.4 million individuals volunteered for the campaign nationwide (Gillespie 2005; Nelson 2005; Ruffini 2005). Significantly, the 2004 election ended four decades of desultory participation in presidential campaigns: slightly more than 60 percent of the eligible electorate voted, the largest turnout in a presidential campaign since 1968 (Faler 2005). Detailed case-studies of individual states suggest that the Bush campaign's grassroots organization contributed significantly to increased Republican registration and higher voter turnout in the election (Crew, Fine, and MacKanus 2005; Magelby, Monson, and Patterson, 2005; Mockabee et al. 2005; Atkeson et al. 2005).
23. Other factors—most obviously, the election debacle of 2000, the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and the War on Terrorism, and the Hurricane Katrina disaster—undoubtedly contributed to the centralizing tendencies evident in Bush's administration. For explorations of the effects of these events on Bush's federalism policy, see the other contributions to this volume.
24. The national exit poll showed that political independents, who divided their votes evenly between George Bush and John Kerry in 2004, swung decisively in favor of Democrats in 2006. With roughly nine-in-ten Republicans and Democrats casting ballots for representatives of their parties, just as they did in 2004, the Democrats' 57–39 percent advantage among independents proved crucial (Pew Research Center 2006).

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