

How Newspapers Reveal Political Power: The Decline of American Party Organizations

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“Nobody wants to be the chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party, the job once held by Richard J. Daley...Nobody wants it because the Democratic Party of Cook County has become nothing more than a distraction...The Democrats [once] had a thing of beauty, a big, genuine, political machine...And now it's a victim of indifference.”

R. Bruce Dold, Chicago Tribune

When and Why Did State Parties Lose Their Power?

- Historically, state parties played huge role in elections, policy, patronage, etc.
- Now, seemingly irrelevant.
- Our (substantive) goal: A new empirical approach that offers a historical view on the waxing and waning power of party organizations.

Our (methodological) goal: More generally, how can we measure the power of organizations/actors like these?

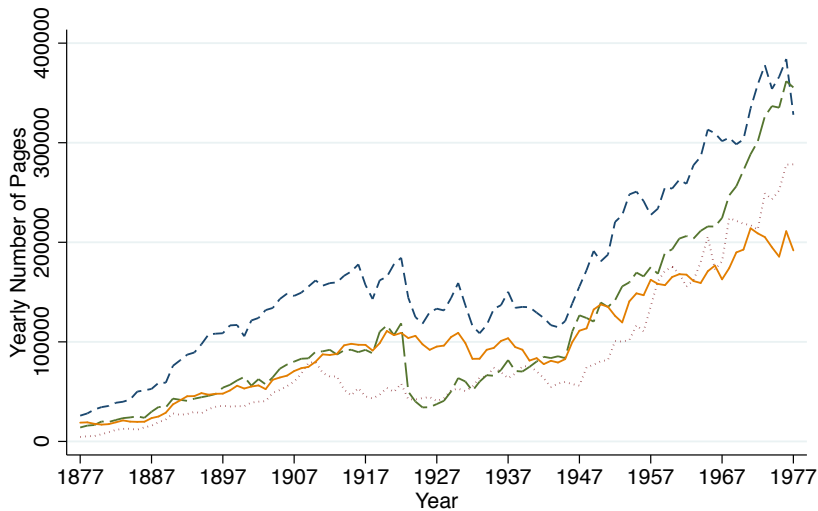
Measuring Power with Newspaper Coverage

- Claim: newspapers should by and large devote more coverage to more powerful political actors.
- Collect newspapers, count instances, and compare coverage of different actors.

Must be careful: newspapers also mention people for other reasons (e.g., entertainment).

New Dataset on Newspapers

- 2,700+ local newspapers from online sources
- Covers the years 1877–1977
- Almost 70 million pages of text
- Text generated via optical character recognition (OCR)
- Clean OCR text by correcting common errors, hyphenation, extra spaces, etc., with regular expressions



Outline of Talk

① Validation Tests for Newspaper-based Measure

- Mayoral reforms
- Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act
- Congressional leaders
- (Congressional committees)
- (MA Executive Council)

② When Did State Party Committees Decline?

- Australian (secret) ballot
- Direct primary elections

Validation 1: Reforms That Strip Mayors of Power

- Historically, cities changed from mayoral to city manager, city council government.
 - Mayor-council form: separately elected mayor has broad powers to appoint and dismiss department heads, prepare and administer city budget, etc.
 - Council-manager form: elected council appoints a manager to oversee executive branch, mayor is largely ceremonial
- Should see **decrease** in mayoral mentions, **increase** in city manager mentions.

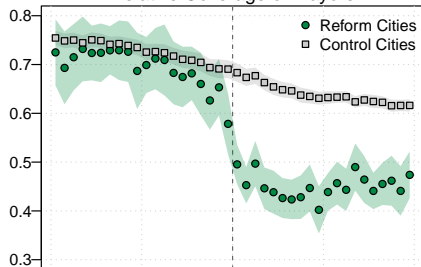
Validation 1: Mayoral Reforms

$$\text{Rel. Coverage of Mayor}_{it} = \frac{\text{Mayor}_{it}}{\text{Mayor}_{it} + \text{City Manager}_{it} + \text{City Council}_{it}}$$

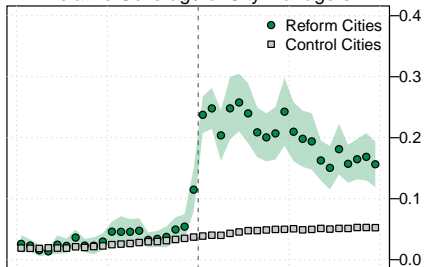
$$\text{Rel. Coverage of City Manager}_{it} = \frac{\text{City Manager}_{it}}{\text{Mayor}_{it} + \text{City Manager}_{it} + \text{City Council}_{it}}$$

$$\text{Rel. Coverage of City Council}_{it} = \frac{\text{City Council}_{it}}{\text{Mayor}_{it} + \text{City Manager}_{it} + \text{City Council}_{it}}$$

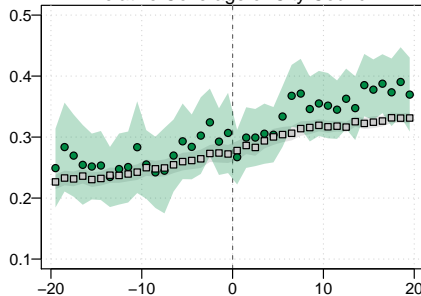
Relative Coverage of Mayors



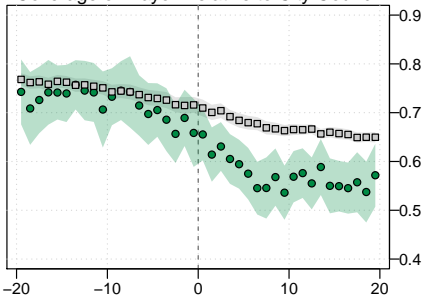
Relative Coverage of City Managers



Relative Coverage of City Council



Coverage of Mayor Relative to City Council



Time Until Reform

Validation 2: The Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act

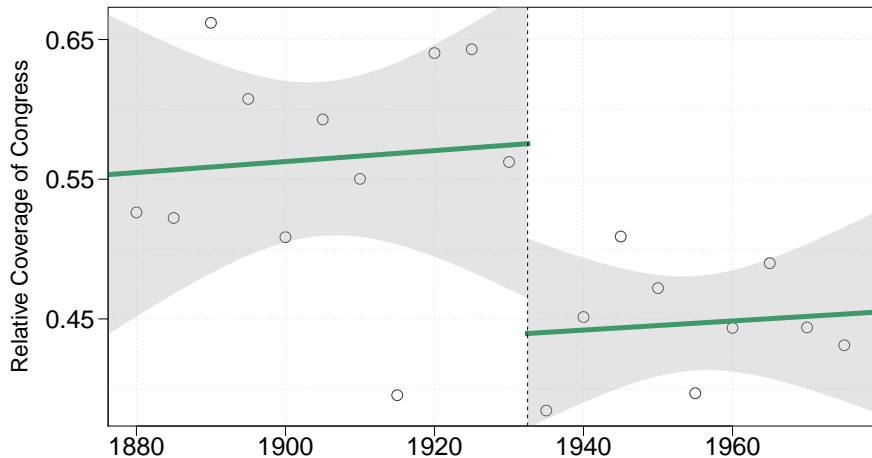
Widespread agreement that RTAA (1934) entailed a substantial transfer of power over tariff policy, from Congress to the President.

Count mentions of Congress/President near word “tariff.”

Relative Coverage of Congress and Tariffs_t =

$$\frac{\text{Congress and Tariff}_t}{\text{Congress and Tariff}_t + \text{President and Tariff}_t}$$

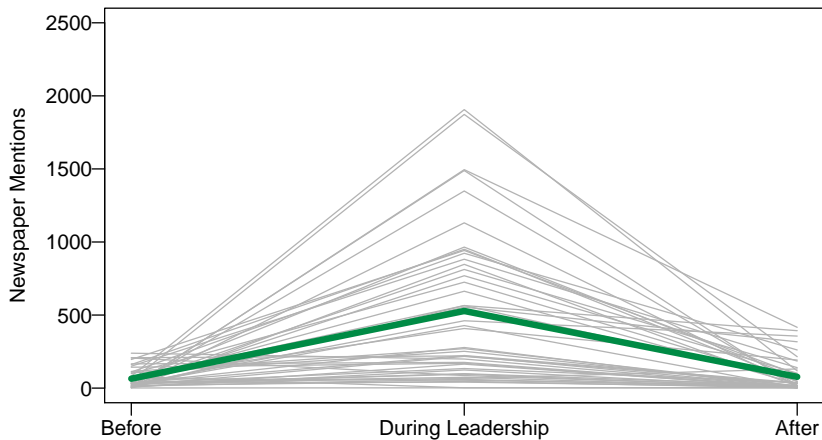
After RTAA: Tariff Coverage Shifts From Congress



Validation 3: Leadership Positions

- MCs should be discussed more when they assume positions of power.
- We look at individuals before, during, and after they are Speaker of the House.
- Only use case where keywords appear nearby (e.g. “congress,” “rep,” “honor,” etc.)

Coverage Higher During Leadership Term



Coverage Higher During Leadership Term

Coverage 5 years before, during, and 5 years after leadership term:

Panel A: Speakers			
	Before	During	After
Hits	42.94 (61.00)	315.31 (502.41)	42.92 (88.32)
Difference	-272.37		-272.39
P-value	0.00		0.00
N	86	113	98

The Power of State Parties

- Goal: Understand when/if state party organizations lost their political power.
- Idea: use coverage of candidates as natural opposite to coverage of party organizations.
- Measure the rate at which state and local party organizations are mentioned in the news, relative to individual candidates themselves, over the period 1877–1977.

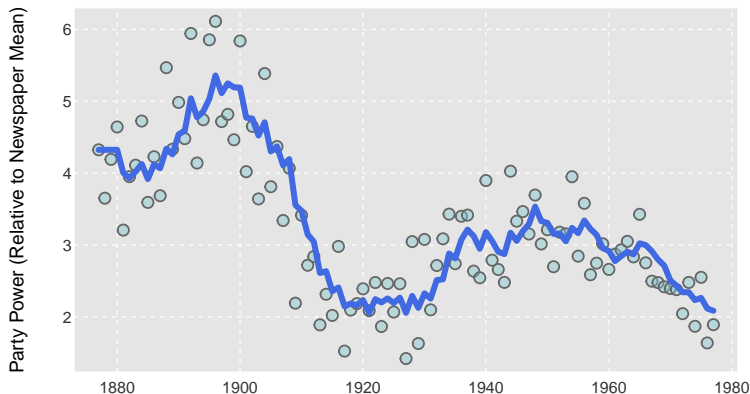
Our Approach

- Define $Party\ Mentions_{ijt}$ as the total number of times (summing across articles in newspaper j in year t in state i) that the word “committee” appears within 5 words after:
 - either the word “Democratic” or “Republican” or “GOP”
 - and after one of the words “state”, “county”, “district”, “local”, “central”, “executive”, “regular”, “organization”
 - Example: Illinois Democratic state central committee, Montgomery county Republican executive committee
- Define $Candidate\ Mentions_{ijt}$ as the total number of times that candidates for major offices (e.g. governor, U.S. senator, and U.S. representative) are mentioned.

$$Relative\ Party\ Mentions_{ijt} = \frac{Party\ Mentions_{ijt}}{Party\ Mentions_{ijt} + Candidate\ Mentions_{ijt}}$$

Patterns over the full time period of our data (1877-1977)

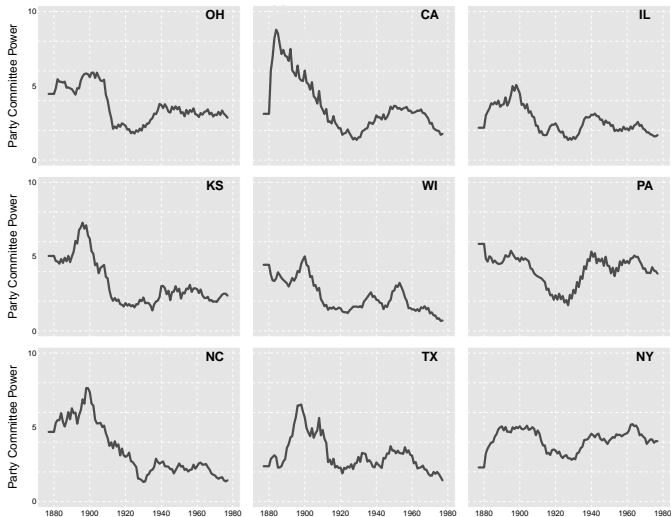
Party organizations peaked at the turn of the 20th century. Though they enjoyed an apparent resurgence in the 1940s and 50s, their relevance is now near all-time lows.



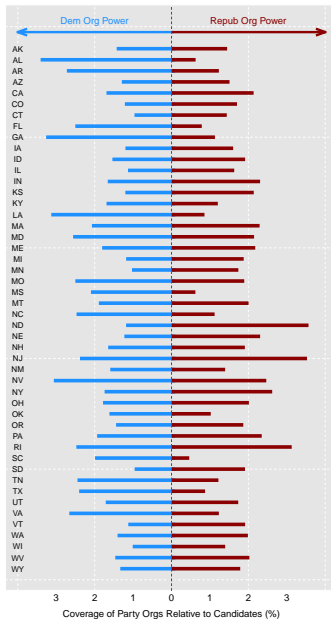
Note: Dots = annual medians across all states. Line = 5-year moving average.

Decline is more pronounced in some states than others

Party Committee Power Over Time in Nine U.S. States. Plots our coverage-based measure of state party committee power over time for OH, CA, IL, KS, WI, PA, NC, TX, NY



Average Power of Party Organizations by State and Party



Progressive reforms

- Previous scholars have identified several reforms which may have significantly weakened the power of state and local party organizations
 - **Australian ballot:** thought to prevent vote buying
 - But, party organizations have many other ways of generating votes
 - **Direct primary:** remove party organization's power to choose candidates
 - But, party organizations might still capture the primary election process
 - (Non-partisan local elections)
 - (Civil service reform)
- Did these reforms affect the power of parties?

Difference-in-differences design

We exploit the panel structure of the data and the fact that different states adopted the reforms in different years.

$$\begin{aligned} \textit{Relative Party Mentions}_{ijt} = \\ \alpha_{ij} + \theta_t + \beta_1 \textit{Secret Ballot}_{it} + \beta_2 \textit{Direct Primary}_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

where α_{ij} denotes newspaper fixed-effects and θ_t denotes year fixed-effects.

- Can use several time period windows: whole period, or smaller windows around the reforms

Reforms Erode Party Power

Table : Effect of Personalistic Reforms on the Power of State and Local Party Organizations.

	Share of Coverage to State/Local Party Organizations					
	All Years				1876–1950	
Australian Ballot	-0.56 (0.25)			-0.52 (0.23)	-0.53 (0.23)	-0.35 (0.24)
Primaries		-0.66 (0.24)		-0.62 (0.24)	-0.63 (0.22)	-0.62 (0.23)
Newspaper Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper-linear Trends					Yes	
# Observations	42,270	42,270	42,270	42,270	42,270	32,053

Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses.

Conclusion: Newspaper Coverage and Political Power

- Introduce a measure of political power using newspaper coverage of relevant political actors
 - Historically comprehensive
 - Applies to political individuals and also institutions
 - Limitations: “celebrity coverage” or “conflict coverage”
 - Measurement error: probably best used as large, aggregate outcome variable
- Document substantial decline in coverage of state party organizations
- Primaries and Australian ballot both appear to contribute to this decline