

# The Life of the Party

By Morton C. Blackwell

What follows is advice for conservatives of whatever party. Here is how you can be a party leader, even if you're starting from scratch:

1. Volunteer to work in the election campaigns of your party's nominees. Under-promise and over-perform.
2. Donate to your party's good candidates. Financial contributions put you on the political map. Attend party fundraising events. Give to your state and local party committees.
3. Then attend party committee meetings. There you will get to know the existing party activists and leaders. And they will get to know you.

If your local party committee has a vacancy, accept it if offered. But modestly keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut as you learn the ropes.

Most such meetings are not very exciting. Always take with you something to read or write during the less interesting parts of party meetings.

4. If you are not familiar with the organizational structure and rules of your party, get copies of the state and local party committee rules. Study them and the applicable rules of procedure, usually Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised.
5. Participate in some party auxiliary group activities: youth groups, women's groups, etc. If there is none in your area, volunteer to start one.
6. In most areas there is a fairly rapid turnover of party officers. Don't push yourself for party office. If you do good work in the local party, others probably will ask you to take on some responsibilities. Accept these tasks. Perform them well. Soon you may be drafted into local party committee office. But you don't have to hold a party office to play a leading role from time to time in a party committee.
7. In some areas, local party committees are moribund or dead. The party officers may be unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons. They may be lazy. They may be incompetent. They may be fine people burned out from years of good work. They be hanging on to power for its own sake. They may be actively hostile to your conservative principles.

If party leaders are unsatisfactory, you should work to see that they are reformed or replaced.

8. Build strong working ties with any other conservatives you meet in party activities.
9. Build strong working ties with leaders of conservative non-party activity in your community, such as:

- Taxpayer associations
- Veterans groups
- Ethnic organizations
- Right to work groups

- Right to keep and bear arms groups
- Civic associations
- Church groups
- Traditional values groups concerned about such issues as abortion, drugs, education, pornography, etc.

10. Make contacts with national conservative groups to locate and involve their local activists in your party.
11. Learn the principles of effective direct mail and start to assemble lists of addresses and phone numbers of local conservative activists and donors.
12. Party committees often have influence in the election of candidates for public office, but in some cases they also have decisive power over the rules and therefore the outcomes of the nomination contests.

Find out the role of your state and local party committees in the nomination process and the schedule of their required activities before upcoming elections.

13. Party committees must renew themselves periodically, usually in two-year or four-year cycles. New party committees may be elected by primaries, conventions or mass meetings. Newly elected committees usually elect their new party officers. Local party units usually send delegates to state party conventions.

Sometimes, membership on party committees and delegate slots to party conventions are available just by filing properly for openings. Find out how these processes work in your party. Among the things you'll need to know:

- o When are the next party primaries or conventions?
- o What party offices are to be filled and for what public offices are party nominees to be chosen?
- o What are the deadlines for filing, dates of conventions and dates of primaries? And how does one file?

- o How are the dates set, by law or party decision?
  - o What are the requirements for party committee membership? For eligibility to be a convention delegate?
  - o If your party has an executive committee, who serves on it? How are its members chosen?
14. Because all local party committee elections and party primaries are open at the bottom, whoever gets the most people to participate wins.

Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to organize a sufficient number of conservatives to win primaries, conventions and party committee elections. It is simple but not easy.

15. Sometimes local party committees fail to run candidates for public offices. This is almost always a bad practice.

A major party should run candidates for every available office, whether or not there seems to be a good chance to win. If there appears to be no strong candidate available, run someone who would act responsibly as a candidate and who, if elected, would do a good job. Those are the only requirements.

Run a candidate even if the other party has an "invulnerable" incumbent, even if your candidate is unknown, even if your candidate can't raise enough money to make a serious race. That's how to build a strong and useful party over time.

16. A leader is someone who has a following, someone with influence over others. Review your list of conservative leaders you now know in your area, those active in your party and those who should become active.

17. Invite several of the key conservative leaders from your local area to a confidential meeting, perhaps one evening at your home, to discuss the future of your local party. Serve simple refreshments. Points to be discussed at this meeting should include:

- o The effectiveness of the local party committee and its officers.
- o The strength of conservatives compared with non-conservatives on the party committee and among the committee's officers.
- o The schedule and process by which the party committee renews itself and elects new officers.

- o The schedule and process by which delegates are chosen by the local party to any party conventions at the local, congressional district and state or national levels.
  - o Upcoming opportunities for the party to nominate candidates for public office.
  - o The feasibility of increasing conservative strength on the local party committee, among party officials, at party conventions and in the nomination process for public offices.
18. If there is general agreement at your meeting that conservatives should work together to increase their strength in party activities, ask those present for suggestions of other local conservative leaders who should be invited to a follow-up meeting, also confidential.

The second meeting should be held in a different location, to make clear that this is a coalition, not just your personal project. But you or someone else reliable should do the inviting.

19. The second meeting should also be informal. Pass around a sign-in sheet to get names, addresses and phone numbers of all present. Later, get copies of the list to all present.

Begin with a review of the discussion at the first meeting. The new people will probably have new information to share. Then discuss what should be the group's goals. Among the possibilities:

- o Get more conservatives on the party committee.
  - o Elect conservatives to party offices.
  - o Elect conservative delegates to party conventions.
  - o Nominate conservatives for upcoming general elections.
  - o Assist conservative elected officials.
20. The number of subsequent meetings will depend on how long you have before the local party renews itself by selecting new party committee members or elects officers or when the next primary election or party convention is.

At each meeting, ask for suggestions of other leaders who should be invited. Keep in mind, though, that all those invited should be trustworthy, principled people who have political or financial resources. Invite new participants by consensus of

current participants. Focus on honorable people who, if they choose to do so, can make things happen. For these meetings, you want leaders.

Regardless of their individual interests, all those you invite should be willing to work with economic conservatives and with social-issue conservatives.

21. At the third meeting or at a later meeting, discuss how the group will make its decisions.

Then the group should select a person or a sub-committee to draft simple, written rules of procedure by which the coalition can decide whom to support for party committee membership, party committee office, party convention delegate or party nomination for public office.

Your opportunities will vary with your local circumstances. For example, in some areas the party committee is huge and almost anyone wishing to serve on it can do so. In other areas, the party committee is small and elections to it usually well-contested.

22. At the fourth meeting or at a later meeting adopt the rules, by a majority vote, by which your coalition will make its decisions about whom to endorse and support. Generally, the rules will include a secret ballot, with a runoff if no one gets the majority required for endorsement by your coalition.

To receive the coalition's support, anyone must agree in advance to be a candidate and to accept your support.

Most important, the rules should require that all who participate in your coalition's balloting meeting must solemnly promise to work hard to elect to party position, or to nominate for public office, all those who win the majority vote in your endorsement meeting.

At this time, set the date of your decision-making meeting and agree, unanimously if you can, on the exact list of those who will be invited.

23. Your coalition's decision-making meeting (balloting) should be a month or more before the filing deadline for the upcoming party convention or party primary.

Start the meeting by having everyone present pledge to support vigorously everyone the coalition decides to back. If more than one kind of party office, delegate or party nomination are at stake, conduct votes on each kind of position.

Brief "nominating" speeches are a good idea, because not all those present will know enough about your potential candidates to make informed decisions.

At the close of this meeting, remind everyone that all have committed to work hard for the success of your coalition's candidates.

24. At the same, decision-making meeting, organize your effort to make sure your endorsed candidates win. Here are appropriate items to decide or plan for:

Pick a descriptive, simple name for your ad hoc coalition, something like:  
Conservative Leadership Coalition, Conservative Unity Ticket or 201\_  
Action Team.

Appoint a finance chairman and a finance committee.

Take up a collection at the meeting to start your coalition's campaign fund.  
Everyone present should contribute. Raise additional funds as needed, by direct mail to likely donors, by phone and by personal visits. You might decide to schedule one or more fundraising events.

Set up a temporary bank account to receive contributions to pay for mailings, literature production and other predictable costs such as convention activities. If party nominations for public office are at stake, make sure you comply with applicable financial reporting laws.

By phone or mail, recruit a distinguished list of endorsers for your coalition.  
Consider those who participated in your meeting plus other party activists, party donors, public officials and well known leaders of community activities. People like to be asked. The endorsers can be listed on your coalition letterhead or on your printed literature.

Generate a mailing to likely participants in your upcoming party primary, local party election caucus or party convention. Introduce your ticket. Explain why it's important your candidates win. Ask for support. People do like to be asked. Be specific in your letter about when and where to vote, etc. Include filing forms if applicable, and make sure they are filed on time. Enclose a return envelope and a reply card or a reply form by which people can pledge their political support and make a financial contribution.

Some members of your coalition should have mailing lists and email lists. Leaders should send special, personal letters to their lists, urging participation in the convention, caucus, mass meeting or primary in which the party will pick its leaders or nominees. These letters and emails should ask for support for your whole ticket. Don't worry about duplication of effort. People respond best if asked in more than one way.

Have lists of possible supporters called and asked to vote for your ticket in the election meeting, convention or party primary.

As your mailings, phone calls, and emails create a list of those pledged to support your coalition, make careful plans to remind supporters by phone the day

before the election meeting or primary. Arrange car pools and whatever else is necessary to make sure everyone gets to where you want them when you want them there.

In a convention or a primary you must make sure all your identified supporters actually vote and that the vote counting is honest. Whether the voting will be by paper ballot or voting machine, make sure your side is represented in the set up of the voting, certification of voters' eligibility and the counting of the ballots. Unfortunately, no party is entirely free of people willing to cheat if you let them do so.

If the voting will be done at a convention, your coalition must designate a floor leader. All delegates who support your coalition should follow this person's instructions during the convention. Positioned beside the floor leader should be your floor parliamentarian, someone who can give advice on procedural matters.

For a big convention, make large, colored signs to let your supporters know whether to vote yes or no on complex procedural motions. Signs would include your coalition's name. They could read "Action Team -- YES" and "Action Team -- NO."

In a big convention, you also will find that ward, area or county sub-leaders are necessary. Their job is to get their delegates to the convention, keep them posted about what's happening and lead them when it's time to vote.

Designate someone to be your coalition's vote counter. From the beginning of the process of filing of delegates, this person will keep and constantly update a careful estimation of how many delegate votes your side has, how many are for your opposition and how many are unknown or genuinely undecided. The night before the convention and during it, your vote counter will be very busy. He will give you guidance on when and what you can win.

No later than the night before a convention, gather the leaders of your floor organization to discuss what must be done during the convention. Efficient organizers write out in great detail an expected "script" for a coming convention.

The script is a step-by-step description of the anticipated meeting or convention events, detailing who will do what and in what order, from the opening gavel to the final adjournment. It includes what the convention officers will do, what you expect your opposition to do and what your team plans to do. If the opposition tries any surprises, your floor leader must be ready to respond appropriately. Your supporters follow his lead.

If you arrive at a convention with more support than your opposition, you should win. If your opponents try dirty tricks with credentials certification or the meeting's rules, be prepared to make a steal more expensive than it's worth to them.

People without strongly held political philosophy often lack ethics as well. If they think you'll meekly accept their cheating, they'll cheat. If they know cheating would embarrass them within the party, in the news media and in the courts, they may decide not to cheat. Cheaters hesitate if they know you have perseverance, good lawyers, good news media contacts, communications skills and ties with high-ranking party officials and public officeholders. Most dirty tricks can't stand the light of public exposure.

25. Win or lose, be polite. That's not always easy. Never lose your temper if you lose or swagger if you win.
26. If you win, remember that winning politics involves addition and multiplication on your side, not subtraction and division. You may have the opportunity to organize a nominated candidate's general election campaign or to set up the executive committee and appoint officers of your party committee.

In either case, involve some people who are part of, or friendly to, the side you just defeated. Don't turn over to them the power you just won. That would be foolish. But you should, by your appointments and in other ways, let everyone know you are willing to work with others, even former foes, who are willing to work with you for the party and its candidates.

27. When beaten by conservatives in party contests, liberals often try to shut off the finances to party committees and to conservative candidates. Therefore, it's a good idea for your new party leaders and your new party nominees to forestall this if possible by quickly announcing prestigious finance committees which include some unexpected names.

These committees should also quickly develop a base of direct mail donors, which will sustain them if liberals get some big donors to stop giving. Sometimes those you defeat may stay active only to gripe and make life miserable for you. Keep building and ignore their antics as much as you can. In the long run they will be self-destructive.

In volunteer politics, a builder can build faster than a destroyer can destroy. Win or lose, keep building.

28. If you lose, don't be discouraged. Winston Churchill started out as a soldier and became a politician. He noted much later that in his "former profession one could die but once, but that in politics one can die many times." And still come back to win.

29. If you win a party nomination contest, run the general election campaign in a way that increases the number and effectiveness of your party's activists. Run a people-oriented campaign. Campaign consultants often try to spend all the candidate's money on ads in print or broadcast media. Don't let them do it.
30. If you win control of a party committee, run it in such a way as to increase the number and effectiveness of your party's activists. Hold your own political education and training programs. And send local activists to training programs offered by party groups, non-party activist groups and educational foundations at the local, state and national levels. Have good social events.

Winning gets easier with experience. But no political victory is permanent. Repeat the above 30-step process in each election cycle, from the beginning. Coalitions will vary over time. Some people drop out; others will sell out. Activate new people.

Succession is a problem in any political system. If you are an elected officeholder or if you are one of those in a conservative majority of a party committee, you should nevertheless plan succession for fellow conservatives in the same open way. Expand the leadership. It's tempting to try to hand-pick your successors, but you'd lose the major benefits of coalition support and set yourself up for an accusation of machine politics. Organize your coalition anew before each potential major conflict.

After you win, be prepared for more challenges. It is easier to win an election than to govern well. Some of your problems will come from within your own party.

At the dawn of the era of political parties, Edmund Burke defined a political party as "a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." But in practice, as Burke himself discovered, serious people often disagree about which principles should unite their party. Some partisans reject principles almost entirely. Nevertheless, British parties and most political parties around the world have unitary structure, party discipline and at least a superficial resemblance to Burke's description. A U.S. political party doesn't.

What we call a party today in the United States is clearly a different thing. Our two major parties have no unitary structure. Each has a proliferation of official, independent committees. No national party committee can direct state parties or has authority over the operations of all national groups which bear the same party name. Similarly, the state party committees generally have no control over their candidates' campaign committees, state party legislative caucus campaign committees, local party committees or party auxiliary groups.

A national or state party committee cannot even revoke a person's party membership. In those states without official party registration, it's difficult or impossible to say who is or isn't a party member. By law, you are what you say you are.

What's a U.S. political party for?

Here are some of the many different purposes I have heard mentioned:

- o To recruit candidates
- o To run candidates' campaigns
- o To win elections
- o To advance a specific political philosophy
- o To serve elected public officials of the party
- o To provide an organizational structure for citizens to participate in the political process
- o To pass or defeat certain legislative proposals
- o To get political jobs for party members
- o To provide a social outlet for people who can't find any better way to meet new people
- o To advance the financial interest of participants
- o To conduct class warfare
- o To assemble coalitions of interests for the purpose of governing

Many of these are legitimate functions of a party. In practice, any of these purposes may conflict with other functions.

Long affiliation with a party is usually necessary for successful American political leaders. The few major exceptions in our history are when military heroes have been elected to office after demonstrating their leadership skills in battle. Even so, among our military-hero presidents, only George Washington was elected without first affiliating with a party.

Some leaders of non-partisan groups greatly influence elections and the legislative process. But they are forced to work through parties to get their favorites nominated. Often they must work with party leaders in legislative bodies to pass or defeat specific bills. Politicians neglect party ties at their peril.

In 1976 President Gerald Ford picked Sen. Bob Dole as his running mate and dropped Vice President Nelson Rockefeller from the national party ticket. A reporter then asked Vice President Rockefeller, now that it was unlikely he would ever achieve his ambition to be

President, if there were things he wished he had done differently. The Vice President answered to this effect: "Yes, I spent my adult life preparing myself to be President, but I neglected to prepare myself to be nominated."

Most people do not participate in parties. They don't even vote in party primaries, much less serve as party convention delegates or as members of party committees. Yet most of the political power in America is channelled through political parties.

Like it or not, parties are necessary. To pretend they don't exist or don't matter is to limit or destroy our political effectiveness.

Because our major parties are composed of disparate elements and have few and weak mechanisms to enforce party unity on any topic, they seldom reach unanimity on anything. It's no more realistic to expect to find unanimity of opinion within a party than it is to find a winning majority of the voters who agree on every issue.

Many people with strong preferences about specific issues and with firm beliefs about the proper role of government do work in parties. Such people, men and women with political convictions, often comprise a majority of the party activists. But they always encounter inside a party others with different policy preferences.

They also find themselves working with different kinds of people who have no strong political convictions at all. These include:

- o People who seek power for its own sake.
- o People for whom the party is a social outlet.
- o People for whom the party is merely a family tradition.
- o People who are looking for a political job.
- o People who are active as a favor to their friends.
- o People whose only political principle is to seek consensus.
- o People for whom party participation is merely fulfillment of a civic obligation.

Parties, like coalitions of voters on election day, are uneasy alliances. Nevertheless, parties and winning coalitions of voters tend to be stable for extended periods of time.

A new, normal winning majority in presidential elections is formed no more than a couple of times each century in America. The Presidential election majority which won consecutive landslide victories in 1980, 1984 and 1988 may reassemble in future presidential elections. I believe it will, as it did in congressional elections across America in 1994. But that's an open question.

I wish more citizens were politically active. But since relatively few people choose to participate in party activity, those who do participate have a disproportionate share in our politics and government. In a practical sense, they are the political leaders of our country. If you're not one of them, you have to influence them to accomplish much in the area of public policy.

Election laws and party rules vary from state to state and within each state. Veteran party activists understand the applicable procedures and use their knowledge to maximize their own power. Party leaders in the United States, in contrast to party leaders in other countries, have little direct control over party activists.

Indeed, party leaders must depend on the voluntary cooperation of others. Our party structures are wide open at the bottom. Power in a party goes to those who recruit and lead others.

Anyone can be a party activist. With a little effort and the resulting experience, almost anyone can be a party leader. Why not you?