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## The death of the two major political parties isn't inevitable, if ...

### Relevance comes from filling needs

By Leo Haggerty

For The Kentucky Gazette

Political parties are gasping their last breaths. Not just in Kentucky but across the country, and it's especially true of the Kentucky Democratic Party.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, "When party politics come to an end I want to be a Kentucky Republican because they are always 10 years behind." It's true: Thanks mainly to GOP patriarch U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, the state's Republican Party will gasp a little longer. But, at 74, McConnell's days in office are numbered. When he's gone, the forces he's held at bay will guarantee the RPK's role diminishes as well.

Why? Because parties are losing their relevance.

For most of the 20th century, parties were largely political mechanisms for patronage, fundraising and candidate selection. Now, one of two things needs to happen to breathe new life into them. Either campaign finance laws and civil service/merit laws have to change – unlikely – or the parties have to reinvent themselves for the 21st century.

It's interesting that the waning of parties has paralleled that of neighborhood churches, while "megachurches" thrive. That new dynamic holds a lesson for political parties.

Megachurches have made it their job to meet not just

their congregants' spiritual needs, but also their need for child care, travel, entertainment, recreation, camaraderie and more.

Political parties can regain relevance by pinpointing needs they can fill. Not just needs of fat-cat contributors, but those of elected officials at all levels, local parties and, especially, the average voter.

I'm not suggesting the Kentucky Democratic Party install a swimming pool or start Tai chi classes on the back patio. But, regular social events devoid of fundraising pitches would be a good start. There is great value in offering like-minded people a place where they can relax, network and exchange views without being squeezed for money.

Communication is also paramount. Parties can start with communication that goes beyond the blatant push for money. People want to know what's going on in the larger party, with their elected officials and, more broadly, in Frankfort and Washington. If they feel they are the party, and the party is them, donations will follow.

Under current fundraising laws, the party will continue to play second fiddle to 527s and 501(c)4s, so parties need to radically re-imagine fundraising and spending. Donors have to be confident their hard-earned money is being spent fairly and effectively.

The party can also play a role in training. It's not enough encouraging someone to run, but not preparing them to win is political malpractice that spawns burnout.

Elected officials, local party chiefs, and anyone who

wants be involved with elections need access to training in fundraising, GOTV, social media, grassroots organizing, media relations and more. Now is the time to do the training, before candidates file and before local parties are caught up in the heat of an election cycle.

The parties also need to be willing to consider radical changes to their organizational structure. In the Kentucky Democratic Party, for example there are thousands of "precinct people" whose only real job takes two hours every four years. Forty years ago, they were their communities' go-to people for jobs and other government assistance, but now they are too often abandoned after voting at their county conventions.

Unless the party wants to replace the current process, these folks must be given a real role and a say in state-level activities, like annual or bi-annual state conventions.

Some of these suggestions may be less viable than others, and there may be other needs to fill. What we know for sure is that as long as parties focus efforts on trying to be something they haven't been in decades, they'll continue to fade until they're like the fallback teams we cheer for in the playoffs.

Some argue that political parties are unnecessary. I disagree, but if parties refuse to change, it won't matter. They really will be dead.

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