Interest Groups and the Party Networks: Views From Inside the Beltway

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ABSTRACT:

A series of interviews with interest-group representatives in Washington, DC supports the proposition that many such politically active organizations are members of Democratic or Republican “party networks” – webs of relationships between individuals, groups and party committees. These networks assist candidates, share information and plot strategy. Personnel move between entities within the same network, but not between those in opposing ones. In an atmosphere of polarized parties and narrow margins of control, many interest groups appear to be strengthening their ties to their favored party.
A series of interviews with interest group representatives supports the proposition that many such politically active organizations are members of Democratic or Republican “party networks” – webs of relationships between individuals, groups and party committees.¹ (Monroe 2001; Schwartz 1990; Schlesinger 1985; Bedlington and Malbin 2003). These networks assist candidates, share information and plot strategy. Personnel move between entities within the same network, but not between those in opposing ones. In an atmosphere of polarized parties and narrow margins of control, many interest groups appear to be strengthening their ties to the favored party.

Political scientists have argued for years that interest groups undermine the party system. In the 1970s, many linked the rise of interest groups to the decline of political parties. On the fate of political parties, however, a new conventional wisdom is beginning to emerge: that parties have actually experienced a revival over the past two decades. (Bond and Fleisher 2000; Hetherington 2001; Bartels 2000).

With this strengthening and polarization of political parties, we may be seeing an evolution by some interest groups towards closer ties to the parties. With the current atmosphere of polarization and narrow margins of control, it may no longer be as easy for groups to work with members of both parties.

¹ This paper is based on two series of interviews with interest-group representatives in the Washington area. The first series was conducted during May and June 2000, the second – meant to review the 2000 election – was conducted during February and March 2001. These two batches of interviews are supplemented by work done by the author and others for the Campaign Finance Institute. Two roundtables were held by CFI during the spring of 2001 that included representatives from leading interest groups. The author was partially responsible for selecting participants for these events. The roundtables were followed by a series of interviews that summer; the author conducted all the interviews, either on his own or in cooperation with Mark Rozell and Clyde Wilcox. The author thanks CFI, Rozell and Wilcox for giving him permission to use these interviews.
There are limits to groups’ participation in the party networks. Obviously, pragmatic organizations, such as many corporate PACs, must keep their distance. But even highly ideological groups, that have little ability to persuade policymakers who oppose their positions, sometimes maintain a nominally nonpartisan image. As part of their mission, groups may wish to highlight issues that party leaders would prefer to keep hidden. Also, as part of their mission, groups usually cannot support candidates who do not share their positions. If they did, they would run the risk of alienating their supporters. Interest group representatives recognized that their members are usually much more interested in their specific issue than in the balance of power in Congress.

Nevertheless, this study shows that many politically active interest groups have developed close ties with the party committees and with ideologically sympathetic organizations. They are members of party networks based on shared values and interests. These networks are critical to understanding contemporary American politics.

**Groups in the Contemporary Partisan Environment**

Political scientists have argued for years that interest groups undermine the party system. They portray groups as being unable to assemble the broad coalitions that parties can build. They also argue that groups reinforce elitist biases of the American system (Schattschneider 1942, 1948, 1960). Numerous authors have described how political parties have declined, in large part due to the influence of “single-issue” groups. (Burnham 1982; Crotty 1984; Wattenberg 1998). Schier (2000) favorably compares the nineteenth century’s politics of “mobilization” when parties sought to encourage voting by the public at large to today’s politics of “activation” where parties, groups and
candidates target specific segments of the electorate. The decline of parties has been
accompanied by a surge in group formation that has favored the educated middle class.
Groups ignore much of the electorate, which lacks education or political socialization.
They instead target only a relatively small number of well-informed, well-connected
activists.

Berry (1997) asserts that parties are broad “vote-maximizers,” while groups are
narrowly-focused “policy-maximizers.”2 (Also see Walker 1991). But what if the best
way of maximizing policy outcomes is by maximizing votes for one party? But when a
group’s preferences overlap strongly with a party’s platform (for example, organized
labor and the Democrats), there is an incentive for such a group to support a party’s
candidates. When control of a House of Congress depends upon the outcome of a few
races, this incentive becomes even stronger.

The Party Networks

Nor are groups and parties easily disentangled. Parties are not simply formal
entities, such as a national or state party committee. Indeed, Monroe (2001) points out
that 19th century political parties rarely took the form of incorporated entities. Monroe
instead argues that political parties can better be understood as webs of relationships
between politicians. (Also see Bedington and Malbin 2003, Schwartz 1990 and
Schlesinger 1985). These “party networks” can include elected officials, party officers,
political consultants and staffers, longtime contributors and interest group leaders.
Members of this network work together to help party candidates win office. They also
share common ideological values.
The professionalization of politics has allowed more individuals to both live “off” politics and live “for” politics. Rather than being rewarded with deputy postmasterships or sinecures in the city Parks Department, today’s political professionals can instead seek jobs as chiefs of staff or communications directors, perhaps with an eye to an eventual corner office on K Street. As they move from position to position, professionals remain enmeshed in webs of relationships within their own partisan universes. Even when working as lobbyists or consultants, they remain active in support of their party and its candidates. (See Kersh 2002 for a discussion of how lobbyists can remain politically active while being paid to serve their clients).

Aldrich (1995) described contemporary political parties as “parties-in-service,” providing assistance to candidates. Perhaps we now have party-networks-in-service: amalgamations of party institutions, interest groups and individual activists all working together to elect candidates under a single banner. (Also see Kolodny 1998).

The relationship between groups and parties may be analogous to that between parties and political consultants. Early treatments of political consultants, such as Sabato (1991), emphasized the damage they were inflicting upon parties. Consultants were assuming the roles that parties had traditionally played, such as communicating with voters or helping candidates raise money, and were enabling candidates to run campaigns without party assistance. Consultants were therefore making parties almost irrelevant.

But more recent studies of political consultants have painted a more complex picture. Parties rely on political consultants to provide services to candidates that they cannot provide well themselves: media, direct mail, polling. Party officials often refer

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2 One might question whether parties are always “vote-maximizers”: were Republicans vote-maximizing when they voted to shut down the government in 1995 or to impeach Bill Clinton in 1998? Will Democrats
candidates to preferred consultants who can provide the necessary services and have established relationships with the party. Kolodny and Dulio (2001a) find that much of party spending goes to consultants, who provide the same services they perform for candidates. Consultants often have strong links to the parties: many began their careers working for party committees. Rather than weakening the parties, consultants are valuable members of the “party network” – “subcontractors” as Kolodny and Dulio (2001a) call them. (Also see Kolodny and Dulio 2001b; Dwyre and Kolodny 2001; Dwyre and Kolodny 2003).

Interest groups may also function as “subcontractors” for the parties. If campaign finance laws limit the degree to which groups can coordinate their actions with candidates, they certainly can perform functions for the parties for which they have special expertise: the National Rifle Association can contact gun owners, the Sierra Club can run advertisements about environmental issues, unions can communicate with their members. Group and party leaders know each other and work together for common goals. Since 1993, Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform, has held a weekly meeting of conservative activists, including representatives from the Christian Coalition and the National Rifle Association; one of the meeting’s main purposes is to plan strategies for the election of Republicans. Even before George W. Bush announced his presidential candidacy, his campaign sent a staffer to the meetings; since he became president, a White House aide has been in attendance. (Barnes 2001; Drew 1997; Page 2001). Similar gatherings have taken among liberal activists.

Such party-group ties are not entirely new. Dark (1998) describes the decades-long alliance between organized labor and the Democratic party. In a survey conducted

be vote-maximizing if they nominate Howard Dean for president?
in the early 1980s, Schlozman and Tierney (1986) find that of groups seeking to influence the electoral process, 59 percent preferred a party. In recent years, the party system has been changing in ways that should encourage groups to strengthen their ties to the parties. Party unity in Congress, after bottoming out in the 1970’s, has rebounded to levels similar to or even higher than those seen in the 1940’s and 1950’s. The gradual realignment of conservative white Southerners from the Democrats to the Republicans has pushed Southern Democrats to the left, moved the national Republican party to the right and sharpened party differences in Congress and elsewhere. (G. C. Jacobson 2000).

While elites have polarized more dramatically than the masses, voters are increasingly divided by party, too. The National Election Studies show a steady increase since the 1970’s in the correlation between party identification and issue positions among voters in House elections. This increase was most marked for “social issues” such as abortion and attitudes toward minorities – issues that were once seen as threatening the party system itself. Instead, activists on such issues have become core elements of the two parties. Voting in congressional and presidential elections has become more consistent; ticket-splitting peaked in 1972 and has declined to the levels of the Kennedy years. (G. C. Jacobson 2000, also see Bartels 2000 and Hetherington 2001). Although it has been obscured by the third-party candidacies of recent years, partisans have become

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3 The endorsement of Al Gore by the National Abortion Rights Action League and the Human Rights Campaign (the nation’s major gay rights lobby) in February 2000 was seen as confirming his status as the putative Democratic nominee after his victory in the New Hampshire primary. These endorsements also served as a rebuke to Bill Bradley, Gore’s main opponent, who had a staunchly liberal record on these issues. Bradley had criticized Gore for opposing federal funding for abortions when he served in the House in the 1970s and 1980s. (See Ceci Connolly, “Early Endorsements of Gore Could Pay Off; Gay and Abortion Rights Groups Seek Leverage,” The Washington Post, March 1, 2000; Paul Schwartzman and Mike Allen, “Pro-Choice Groups Endorses Gore for President; NARAL Rebukes Bradley for Questioning Rival,” The Washington Post, February 16, 2000). Meanwhile, many observers gave credit to the Christian Coalition and the National Right to Life Committee for George W. Bush’s defeat of John McCain in the critical South Carolina primary. (See Bill Moore and Danielle Vinson, “The South Carolina Republican
less willing to defect to presidential candidates of the other party. According to the Voter News Service, just 11 percent of Democrats voted for George W. Bush in 2000 while only 8 percent of Republicans voted for Al Gore. This is a far cry from the one-third of Democrats who backed Richard Nixon over George McGovern. This growing polarization makes it more feasible for groups -- particularly those that are strongly ideological -- to increase their ties to the parties.

If interest groups pose a threat to the existence and well being of political parties, party leaders do not seem to have received this message. When the National Republican Congressional Committee gave $250,000 to the National Right to Life Committee, they were acting as partners, not rivals. (Leavitt 2000). Leaders of the AFL-CIO planned their 1996 political efforts in consultation with President Bill Clinton and his chief of staff and his labor secretary. This seems like a textbook example of a “party network” at work. (Dark 1998). When the Republican National Committee assisted in the formation of the Christian Coalition, they presumably were helping to create an ally, not a rival. (Sabato and Simpson 1996).

**Groups Look at Parties**

During interviews conducted in 2000 and 2001, not all interest group representatives saw an increasingly polarized environment. Greg Casey, president of the Business-Industry Political Action Committee (BIPAC), actually argued that the parties...
were becoming less polarized on some economic issues, such as trade. Casey noted that some conservative Republicans, particularly those from a Christian Right background, have opposed normal trade relations with China, and some centrist “New Democrats” had supported it. While data does not generally support Casey’s position, his observation may still hold some validity (Shoch 2001, Vita and Eilperin 2000). A Republican Party that is increasingly supported by blue-collar social conservatives and by Main Street small-business interests, may become less disposed to supporting such traditional Wall Street issues as expanded trade. Certainly, such prominent conservatives as Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-CA) have been critical of free-trade legislation. Similarly, while most access-oriented business PACs did increase their giving to Republicans after 1994, they usually still gave a healthy percentage to Democrats. Nor have they increased their giving to challengers. (See Boatright et al 2003). Since these groups usually do not have a strong partisan preference, and are more concerned about getting along with incumbents than in changing the composition of Congress, they have little incentive to change their behavior.

Not surprisingly, these groups generally have not engaged in substantial non-PAC activity. One exception has been the Business Roundtable, which sponsored advertisements in 2000 praising 40 incumbent House members for their support for business’s agenda, including expanded trade. While most of the ads supported Republicans, a few backed such Democrats as Cal Dooley (D-CA), Dennis Moore (D-
KS) and Gregory Meeks (D-NY). (Eilperin 2000a). The pharmaceutical industry, which strongly supports Republicans in its PAC giving, has also funded the issue-advocacy groups Citizens for Better Medicare and the United Seniors Association, which spent millions on ads praising GOP candidates in 2000 and 2002. They have also funded broadcast campaigns by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Unlike big-business groups, the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) has remained very close to the Republican Party. Its strong reliance on purposive incentives helps reinforce its partisan and ideological characteristics. Unlike many business groups, the NFIB cannot depend on a handful of large firms that would support it through good times and bad; it must provide a steady stream of purposive incentives to win new members. Its membership comes from a variety of economic sectors, so the NFIB must focus on issues that unite the small-business community – which tend to be the conservative perennials of opposing higher taxes and government regulations. (Industry-specific trade associations tend focus on a narrower range of issues that are less likely to break along party lines).

Mary Crawford, communications director for the NFIB, remarked that “party control is very important” to her organization. Democrats find it difficult to receive a high rating from NFIB, since to do so they would need to frequently oppose their party leadership on such core issues as the minimum wage and workplace regulation. Unlike the Business Roundtable, the NFIB is not interested in foreign trade issues; Crawford explained that the group’s membership did not see permanent normal trade relations with China as a priority: “When you ask our members, ‘What do you care about?’ trade is like
– down at the bottom of the list." In 2000, the NFIB did not endorse a single Democrat for federal office. Crawford herself was a veteran of both the Republican National Committee and the National Republican Congressional Committee, and later joined the Department of Commerce under President George W. Bush. Jack Faris, who revitalized the NFIB during the 1990s, had previously served as head of the Republican National Finance Committee. (Shaiko and Wilcox 1999). More so than its big-business counterparts, the NFIB has enjoyed a warm relationship with the Republican congressional leadership and the more conservative activist community. (Balz and Brownstein 1996).

Organized labor has maintained its decades-long relationship with the Democratic Party, including close links at the grassroots. While staff at the AFL-CIO reported some dissatisfaction with the Democrats, they remained intensely anti-Republican: “The Republican takeover was rhetorically and really committed to doing as much damage to us as possible. … And it became important to demonstrate to Republican leadership that we weren’t going to get annihilated fighting back.” On issue after issue, the AFL-CIO sees the Republican leadership as its enemy; there are only a few Republican members from the Northeast and Midwest who have good relationships with labor.  

Since 2000, two unions with special concerns, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, have developed stronger ties with the Republicans. But their endorsements and PAC giving still heavily favor Democrats. From the 1997-98 cycle through 2001-02, the percentage of the

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8 Interview with Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO, March 1, 2001.
Teamsters’ PAC giving that went to Republicans rose from 7 percent to 16 percent; the comparable figures for the Carpenters were 7 percent and 24 percent. While these are well above the figures for most other major unions, they still mark these two unions as strongly Democratic.

One faction of liberal interest groups that has steadily improved its relationship with the Democratic party is composed of those organizations that focus on noneconomic issues, such as abortion and the environment. In the 1970s, when these groups were first becoming active in Democratic politics, they were regarded with skepticism by party regulars and union leaders, who saw them as fringe players who could only alienate their blue-collar supporters. In return, many “new politics” activists disdained traditional Democrats as part of an “establishment” uninterested in change.

Today, the social-issue activists are full-fledged members of the party networks. For example, one interviewee at a pro-choice group later became the director of a liberal PAC with close ties to organized labor. With the growing polarization of the political parties, especially among activists, on social issues such as abortion and the environment, it makes sense for NARAL and the Sierra Club and similar organizations to build strong ties with the Democrats. Planned Parenthood broke with a tradition of political reticence by spending $7 billion on broadcast ads in 2000 attacking George W. Bush for his views on abortion and sex education. Nina Miller, political director of Planned Parenthood, reported that some Republican donors were upset by the organization’s more partisan stance, but that staff felt that the differences were so great between Bush and Gore that

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10 Center for Responsive Politics.
they had to become more aggressive.\textsuperscript{11} Miller said she had noticed a shift among liberal organizations in recent years to being more forthrightly partisan and seeking to build stronger coalitions.

Unlike many other areas of political activity, PAC donations generally do not reflect an increasing partisan polarization. Most single-issue groups have not changed the partisan distribution of their contributions; by 1992, most were already making their donations almost solely to candidates of one party. NARAL directed 92\% of its money in 1992 toward Democrats, and 94\% in 2000. The National Right to Life Committee channeled 86\% of its funds to Republicans in 1992, compared with 83\% in 2000. The NRA is the exception to this rule, increasing from 64\% to Republicans in 1992 to 92\% in 2000. (Wilcox et al 2001).

But these official PAC figures obscure some important changes. Many of these PACs sometimes backed vulnerable candidates from the other party in 1992, but in 2000 gave virtually all of their cross-party money to safe incumbents. (Wilcox et al 2001). Additionally, usually the only effort on behalf of candidates of the other party was a financial contribution from the PAC; by contrast, voter contacting, issue advocacy, and other efforts were heavily partisan. It does not appear that the close margins and party polarization led these groups to abandon their token bipartisanship in 2000, but it does appear that the more partisan side of their activity was conducted at a far more intense level in 2000 than in years past. (Wilcox et al 2001).

The Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 forced many liberal groups to change their views of the political parties. No longer could they count on a friendly congressional leadership that would kill unfavorable bills in committee or keep them

\textsuperscript{11} Interview with Nina Miller, Planned Parenthood, July 9, 2001
from ever coming to the floor. In its place was a militantly conservative Republican party that threatened all their values and interests. In response, the AFL-CIO greatly expanded its political activity across the board but, after 1996, with a special emphasis on grassroots mobilization. According to political director Gloria Totten, NARAL became less tolerant of Republicans with “mixed-choice” records, those who mostly favored abortion rights but voted for some restrictions. NARAL also reduced its assistance to those supporters who had safe seats, instead shifting resources to competitive races. In addition, NARAL also shifted its emphasis from lobbying to electoral activity, merging its PAC with its field department.12 While the environment is not as polarizing an issue as abortion, Kim Haddow, media consultant for the Sierra Club, commented that although the Club’s leadership was grateful for Republican support, they were aware of the importance of party control.13

### Providing Aid to the Parties

Of all the interest groups included in this project, only organized labor and the National Rifle Association gave significant amounts of “soft money” to the political parties. Unions were among the most important soft-money donors to the Democrats. In the 1999-2000 cycle, organized labor gave $30 million in soft money to Democratic committees, about one-eighth of the party’s total soft-money intake. AFSCME, SEIU, the Carpenters and Joiners, the Communications Workers of America, and the United Food and Commercial Workers were the Democrats’ five largest single donors. The

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13 Interview with Kim Haddow, Sierra Club, June 15, 2000.
NRA gave nearly $1.5 million to the Republican Party in the 1999-2000 cycle and smaller amounts in earlier and later cycles.\textsuperscript{14}

Despite the wide variety or activities they pursue, interest groups have not become the financial juggernauts that the political parties are. While some of these groups do have impressive political budgets, they cannot match the parties’ resources. Sometimes, group representatives will compare their groups’ activities favorably to those pursued by the parties; indeed, more than one interviewee expressed the view that the political parties have become primarily mechanisms for fundraising. But they admitted that the parties were better at performing many political tasks, such as recruiting candidates and providing targeting information. This finding is analogous to Dulio and Kolodny (2001)’s discovery that political consultants tend to specialize in some fields such as polling and media strategy, while leaving others (fundraising assistance, voter turnout) to the party committees.

\textbf{Networking Among Groups}

Groups on either side of the partisan divide are increasingly networking with each other, sharing information about candidates and techniques. Campaign finance regulations do limit the ability of groups to share information about specific races, since groups that are coordinating their activities with candidates cannot share information with groups that are doing independent expenditures in the same contests. Nevertheless, extensive networking does occur. The most conspicuous examples are the weekly meetings of conservative activists held by Grover Norquist and Paul Weyrich. The Business-Industry Political Action Committee (BIPAC) has long sought to coordinate

\textsuperscript{14} Center for Responsive Politics
political activity by businesses. Labor and liberal groups have their own networking activities. Personnel move between groups in the same party network. Chuck Cunningham served as field director for the Christian Coalition before he became the NRA’s director of federal affairs. Margaret Conway, who is now political director for the Sierra Club, previously held similar positions at Planned Parenthood and the Human Rights Campaign. Before Mary Crawford served as communications director for the NFIB, she worked for the Republican National Committee and the National Republican Congressional Committee.¹⁵

Ideas, as well as personnel, move between groups in the same party network. When the NAACP created the National Voter Fund to foster African-American political participation, Heather Booth, the Fund’s executive director, consulted with staff at Handgun Control and the Sierra Club. She sought advice from them even though the Fund’s target audience was very different from those of the two organizations.¹⁶ Gloria Totten reported regular meetings between leading liberal and labor organizations to share information about political developments.¹⁷ The parties themselves foster sharing of information by holding regular briefings for sympathetic PACs.

**The Limits of the Party Network**

While groups in the party networks may share an interest with party organizations in partisan control of Congress, they have different ultimate ends. Groups seek control to enact favorable policy; party leaders may see control as an end in itself. But in today’s polarized environment, those goals are not easily disentangled. Totten recalled how pro-

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¹⁵ Interview with Mary Crawford, National Federation of Independent Business, May 24, 2000
choice Democratic chairmen would kill anti-abortion bills in committee, even when they might have commanded a majority on the floor. By contrast, Republican leaders have repeatedly spearheaded attempts to limit abortion rights, including a ban on “partial-birth” abortions. Totten expressed her frustration at leaders’ ability to restrict abortion in low-visibility, technical ways; this allows Republicans to satisfy their right-to-life constituency without giving pro-choice activists easy grounds to rally support.18

Another source of conflict is groups’ inability to support candidates that oppose them on their key issue, even if the race could make a difference in partisan control. In 2000, NARAL supported pro-choice state Senator Allyson Schwartz for the Democratic nomination to oppose U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA), a staunch abortion foe. When Schwartz lost to pro-life Representative Ron Klink, NARAL pulled out of the race. Klink went on to lose to Santorum, in part because of the coolness of pro-choice voters and donors. Had Klink won, the Democrats would have immediately taken control of the Senate, rather than after Sen. Jim Jeffords’ leaving the Republican Party. (Soskis 2000).

The National Rifle Association follows a different path. When both the Democratic and Republican candidates in a congressional race support gun control, the NRA does not support either one. But the NRA does send to its members what federal affairs director Chuck Cunningham calls a “RINO letter” (for Republicans In Name Only), which, while not endorsing the Republican, criticizes the Democrat much more vehemently. Cunningham explained that the NRA sends the RINO letters for two reasons. First, because the anti-gun Republican would still vote for GOP control of the House, which means a pro-gun Speaker and pro-gun committee chairmen. Second,

17 Interview with Gloria Totten, NARAL, April 19, 2001
18 Interview with Gloria Totten, NARAL, May 26, 2000.
because Cunningham believes that anti-gun Republicans are much less likely than their Democratic counterparts to sponsor legislation, make speeches or otherwise promote their gun-control agenda:

There will be some districts in which the Republican is a not a friend of ours and the Democrat would be even worse. And we will communicate with our members, not endorse the Republican, but really vilify the Democrat. In the hope that the anti-gun Republican will prevail over the anti-gun Democrat. Because most of the Republicans who are anti-gun don’t sponsor bills, don’t speak out, and there is a difference. … Those are races where the Republicans are lousy, but the Democrats would be even worse. We’re not going to lose credibility by saying, go out and support the Republican, but we’re going to highlight how bad the Democrat would be.

Q. Is that simply based on what that person would do in Congress or because they might be part of a Democratic majority?

A. Both.19

Because there wasn’t anything good to say about the Republican, we focused all of our discussion in those mailings, which hit on Friday and Saturday before the Tuesday election, about the details of how bad the Democrat candidate was. Because it is in our best interests that Lott be Majority Leader, and that Hastert would be Speaker, and that Sensenbrenner be Chairman of Judiciary in the House and Hatch in the Senate.20

Through the use of “RINO letters,” the NRA is able to help Republicans maintain control of Congress without alienating its highly ideological membership. Such low-key, low-visibility assistance is probably more acceptable than an overt endorsement, which would open the NRA to charges of hypocrisy.

Groups can also conflict with parties’ ultimate goal of gaining or holding control by supporting candidates in primaries who may not be the most electable. The Club for Growth, a small group of wealthy conservative donors, has supported conservative

19 Interview with Chuck Cunningham, NRA, May 26, 2000.
20 Interview with Chuck Cunningham, NRA, February 7, 2001.
candidates in Republican candidates against the wishes of party leaders. NARAL has supported pro-choice candidates in culturally conservative districts who seem unlikely to win. While most groups confine their activities to primaries of either the Democrats or the Republicans, some have played roles in both. In 2002, the NRA played a significant role in two Democratic congressional primaries, helping to re-elect Rep. John Dingell (D-MI), a longtime NRA ally, and to defeat Rep. Tom Sawyer (D-OH), a supporter of gun control. But those were the exception rather than the rule.

Finally, interest groups must be aware that their members are motivated much more by their specific issues than by party control of Congress. While Totten acknowledged that the Republican takeover in 1994 had a huge effect on the politics of abortion within Congress, it did not motivate pro-choice voters as much as the prospect of an actual ban on abortion. Between the 1989 Webster decision and the 1992 Casey decision, NARAL saw a dramatic increase in its membership; it did not see such an effect after the 1994 elections. Totten recounted the days after Webster:

And then people started hearing … about Webster, you know, the threat was so real. Everybody believed that Roe vs. Wade was going to be overturned. Upper middle class white women who could fly to London in a day and get an abortion if they needed one were threatened by what was happening. And so people were coming out of the woodwork; you would open the door, checks were coming in, money was coming in, people were becoming members. It was incredible.

And then after the ’92 election with the election of Clinton there was a complete and immediate drop off. It’s like somebody turned off the music. It just stopped. Our budget was cut first by a third, then by a half. We laid off a third of our staff, about a month after the ’92 elections. A third of the people had to go. There was no more money. And that was that.  

21 Interview with Gloria Totten, NARAL, May 26, 2000.
By contrast, congressional Republicans omitted any discussion of abortion from the “Contract With America.” Since they took power, Republicans have mostly stuck to incremental changes in abortion policy; these satisfy their right-to-life constituency without arousing the ire of pro-choice swing voters:

And so then of course in ’92, they learned a big lesson with ’92 – the other side – because they that they couldn’t again get that in your face of the American public. And so the ’94 elections, even these crazy nut jobs that they elected, like Steve Largent, know enough to not put up amendments to outlaw Roe vs. Wade. Go after it, get it another way.

… So then the effect in ’94, even without getting elected, was not, it did not galvanize our folks at all. … They see this prize and we don’t see [the] threat, that’s the problem.22

**Groups in the Party Network**

With the strengthening and polarization of political parties, we may be seeing an evolution by some interest groups towards closer ties to the parties. With the current atmosphere of polarization, it may no longer be as easy for groups to work with members of both parties. Narrow margins of control make every seat count. Close group-party alliances, such as those between the Democrats and organized labor and between the Republicans and the Christian Right, have been flourishing. These ties may be growing strong enough that we can treat some groups as actual parts of a party network. As part of this party network, groups can perform valuable tasks that are beyond the capabilities of the party committees.

But there are limits to groups’ participation in the party network. Obviously, pragmatic organizations, such as most corporate PACs (see Eismeier and Pollock 1988), will want to keep their distance. But even highly ideological

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22 Ibid.
groups, which have little ability to persuade policymakers who oppose their positions, may still want to maintain a nominally nonpartisan image. While both groups and parties may want their side to win control, party leaders may see it as an end in itself while group leaders seek it as a means to enact their agenda. (Of course, party leaders may have their own policy goals – Newt Gingrich may have thought “dismantling the welfare state” was key to his vision of the Republican Party, while Bob Dole probably would have disagreed). As part of their mission, purposive groups may wish to highlight issues that party leaders would prefer to keep hidden. Due to the incentives they offer, groups usually cannot support candidates who do not share their positions. If groups did so, they would run the risk of alienating their supporters.

Even given all these caveats, some interest groups clearly have developed closer relationships with the political parties. They are often part of the same partisan and ideological networks of individuals and organizations. (These party networks not only include party committees and friendly interest groups, they include individual politicians and the leadership PACs under their control, think tanks, lobbyists, perhaps even media figures. The Republican National Committee, the NFIB, Tom DeLay and his leadership PAC (Americans for a Republican Majority), the Heritage Foundation, Vin Weber (a onetime House Republican, now a well-connected lobbyist) and Rush Limbaugh are part of a Republican network. This network shares information and coordinates activity. Individuals can build careers by moving through the network. Ralph Reed has, in turn, served as national leader of the College Republicans, executive director of the Christian Coalition, a political consultant working for Republican candidates, and chairman of the
Georgia Republican Party. While not all of the positions involved working for Republican party organizations, they were all part of an identifiable Republican party network. Party networks are not monolithic. They can encompass groups and individuals that have their own interests, even whole sub-networks (such as organized labor within the Democratic network). But they do bring together actors with shared interests and values.

Not every actor in American politics is part of a party network. Access-oriented corporations and trade associations can seek their particularistic benefits from legislators of either party -- although Republican leaders have put pressure on trade associations to hire Republican lobbyists. (See Confessore 2003). But the atmosphere created by partisan polarization makes it difficult for more ideological groups to play on both sides of the aisle. This is true for single-issue groups interested in abortion and gun control; it is also true for organized labor, NFIB and similar groups with broad multi-issue agendas.

We need to expand our notion of what a political party is. It is not simply a series of committees. It is instead a matrix of relationships between politicians, whether they work in party organizations, in interest groups, in the media, in political action committees, in consulting firms or in government itself. The activists at the Sierra Club, or EMILY’s List, or the AFL-CIO may not get their checks from the Democratic National Committee, but they are part of the same Democratic Party network. The people working for the NRA, the NFIB or other Republican-leaning organizations are essential parts of the Republican Party network. Rather than tearing down the party system, they are among its most important pillars.
If Republicans gain a “lock” on the control of Congress, there could be important consequences for both liberal and conservative groups. If liberal groups appear completely ineffective, they may have difficulty raising money. Some labor unions may choose to follow the path trodden by the Carpenters and the Teamsters toward a more pragmatic relationship with the Republican Party. But if Republicans overreach, whether by appointing conservative judges who overturn *Roe v. Wade*, or by rolling back environmental regulations, liberal groups could see a new spurt in membership and fundraising. Sometimes the worse can truly be the better.

Conservative groups face the opposite problem. With Republicans in control of the Presidency and Congress, conservative groups will face little threat to their causes. While the National Right to Life Committee can play upon the continuing legality of abortion, the NRA may find it difficult to retain members if the threat of federal gun control disappears. Business groups may settle into cozy relationships with insiders and abandon more confrontational tactics. Indeed, if partisan control of Congress becomes less contested, we may see a general reduction in interest-group activity. Conservative groups may instead emphasize maintenance of their existing relationships with policymakers. Liberal groups may change their focus to fundraising and building larger memberships. Both groups may choose to concentrate on presidential elections, which may promise more heated competition than their congressional counterparts.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) has also changed the playing field for interest groups. No longer will they be able to donate soft money to the national parties. Their ability to run “issue ads” will be severely curtailed. Wilcox et al (2001, 2002) found that many groups were reorienting their strategies to focus more on targeted
communication, which would accelerate a pre-existing trend. Others may choose to run broadcast advertisements earlier in the cycle, before the 60-90 “window.” Many activists already expressed dissatisfaction with television, because of high advertising costs, audience fragmentation and the rise of the Internet. (Boatright et al. 2003). Some group representatives predicted a revival of PAC activity. Boatright et al (2003) suggest that some soft money that corporations gave at the request of politicians may leave the political system entirely.

In the absence of soft money, big donors may turn to interest groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the NRA to fund voter mobilization and other electoral activity not covered by BCRA. (Republicans may just choose to give to George W. Bush’s re-election effort). “Bundling” groups such as EMILY’s List and the Club for Growth could also benefit, especially with the increase in the individual limit from $1,000 to $2,000.

New outside groups are being formed that have informal links to party leaders. Liberal activist Michael Lux has formed the Progressive Donor Network to steer givers to NARAL and other groups. (Edsall and Eilperin 2002; Eilperin 2002). Current and former leaders of the AFL-CIO, the SEIU, EMILY’s List and the Sierra Club have joined together to form a new PAC. America Coming Together plans to spend $94 million on voter education and registration in seventeen key states; it has received start-up funds from unions and wealthy liberals such as financier George Soros. (Edsall 2003b; Janofsky 2003). ACT’s leadership includes Steve Rosenthal, former political director of the AFL-CIO and Ellen Malcolm, president of EMILY’s List. (Rosenthal also heads the Partnership for America’s Families, which aims to promote voter registration in major
cities; Voices for Working Families, a similar group, is headed by a former aide to John Sweeney and has been funded by AFSCME). Harold Ickes, a former deputy chief of staff for President Bill Clinton, has created the Media Fund, which seeks to raise $70 million to $95 million to sponsor TV issue ads supporting the Democratic presidential nominee. Liberal groups may face special pressure since the Democratic Party had become more dependent on soft money than the GOP and since the re-election campaign of George W. Bush is expected to smash all fundraising records. (Edsall 2003a; Carnery, Stone and Barnes 2003).

The 2004 elections may pose a special challenge for many liberal/labor groups. While the House is likely to stay Republican, the Senate may be more competitive. But many of the states likely to see competitive races are poor targets for liberal/labor groups. Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina are among the ten states with the highest percentages of evangelicals and those with the lowest percentages of union members. (Oklahoma, another state with a key Senate race, has somewhat more union members but is similarly socially conservative). While they will be able to help Democrats in those states raise money, the AFL-CIO, NARAL, and other liberal groups may find it difficult to affect the outcome of these races much. They may need to build more strength in the “Red States” to match their power in the “Blue States.” On the other hand, Democrats are targeting the seat being vacated by Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R-IL); Illinois is a state where both union and pro-choice forces are well-organized and effective.
How Groups Have Shaped the Party Networks

Generally speaking, my findings have tended to confirm the view that ties have grown stronger between some groups and the political parties and that these groups are part of broader party networks. But these groups have their own interests separate from the parties. Their ultimate goals—which include organizational maintenance, achievement of favorable public policy, advancement of staff’s careers—are not always compatible with the party’s goals. But traditional party organizations also included factions of “Stalwarts” and “Half-Breeds,” “Hunkers” and “Locofocos,” as well as scores of self-interested politicians. A party network will always include individuals and organizations that do not agree on everything. That does not mean that the party network does not exist.

Evidence for increased partisanship is mixed. Most of the increase in non-PAC activity is clearly on one side or the other of the party divide. With the notable exception of the AARP, most of the organizations included in the case studies report stronger ties to one party, and that those ties are growing stronger. But many of these groups already had very close links to the parties before 1994, as the PAC data show. (See Eismeier and Pollock 1988). Perhaps a “new partisan era” has begun, one of greater polarization and ideological conflict, but it may have started in 1980 as much as in 1994.

It is highly partisan groups that have led the way in innovating campaign techniques and in stepping up their overall involvement. This includes the mobilization by the NRA and the NFIB in 1994 and the reaction to the Republican takeover by the Sierra Club and the AFL-CIO. These are groups with very close ties to one party or the other; personnel frequently flows between these groups and the parties, or between
groups in the same party network. Staff at these groups see very sharp differences between the parties; there may be a few people on the other side with whom they have decent relations, but only a few.

By contrast, nonpartisan groups – access-oriented corporations, most trade associations – have not fundamentally changed their behavior in recent years. They make PAC contributions and give soft money on both sides of the aisle. They steer away from controversial issues and try to keep a low profile. They rarely help challengers. Nor do they usually go “beyond the limits” – except to give soft money in the same access-oriented fashion in which they make PAC contributions.

The concept of a party network has validity across time, although it probably applies better to today’s politics than to that of a generation ago. There have always been interest groups that had close relationships with the political parties. But there have been changes in recent decades that have made the parties more “network-y” and simultaneously more polarized. These include:

- Legal changes in the 1970s that favored the creation of political action committees.
- A long series of legal changes, administrative decisions and judicial rulings that encouraged the rise of issue advocacy and soft money.
- The rise of political consultants.
- The rise of more openly partisan media and think tanks.
- The creation of leadership PACs and similar operations controlled by party leaders.
- Adaptation by existing groups (such as the AFL-CIO and the NRA) that have made them more purposive or more politically effective or both.
- The rise of strongly purposive interest groups and their subsequent integration into party networks.
- A general trend toward purposive (often highly ideological) incentives throughout our political system.
- The growing partisan polarization both in voting in Congress and voting by the electorate.

One essential difference between today’s party networks and those of, say, the 1950s is that contemporary networks are more fundamentally based on purposive incentives. As the histories of the NRA and NARAL show, purposive groups are dependent upon sharp policy conflict for their very survival. (They are not the only ones – where would Rush Limbaugh or Sidney Blumenthal be without enemies to demonize?) Perhaps this is the age of the institutionalized ideologue and the professional amateur.

Groups that are dependent on purposive incentives have to maintain a degree of ideological purity in order to hold onto old members and win new ones. They are also likely to attract staff who share those values. To the extent that they are involved in party networks, they are likely to push the parties toward ideological extremes. NARAL and the National Right to Life Committee exert great power with the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively, over abortion policy. But there is no organization of people who, for example, believe that abortion should remain legal but be more greatly restricted. While there are business groups that follow a nonideological path, they generally do not play the political role that the NFIB, the Club for Growth and other purist groups do. The Republican party network (e.g., the congressional leadership, the
National Right to Life Committee, Rush Limbaugh) backed George W. Bush throughout the 2000 presidential primaries and excoriated John McCain for his ideological heresies. While purism is usually tempered with pragmatism, the net effect of the involvement of these groups is probably to heighten the polarization between the parties – a polarization that leaves out many Americans. (See Dionne 1992). The general trend by groups to focus more on encouraging turnout among targeted voters, rather than on persuading undecided voters, probably also accentuates this polarization. (Boatright et al 2003).

**How Are Groups Shaping Parties?**

There are two fundamentally different ways of conceptualizing the roles that political parties should play in our system. One is known as the “responsible” or “programmatic” school;” it was given fullest expression in the 1950 report “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” issued by the APSA Committee on Political Parties. The doctrine of responsible parties argues that political parties should adopt binding, programmatic doctrines on a wide range of issues. They should have strong centralized leadership, both in government and in party organizations. Parties should base their appeals primarily on ideological differences, rather than on personality or patronage. Both Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt seemed to have held this view of political parties. (Ceaser 1977; Milkis 1999). While most of the Founders disdained parties, they arose within a few years of the Constitution. To the extent that the Federalists and Republicans accepted political parties, it was a temporary strategem until the opposition was overcome. But to that extent, they saw parties as stemming from
profound philosophical differences with little respect due to those who disagreed. (Hofstadter 1969).

The other school of thought might be called the doctrine of “integrative parties.” In this view, parties should encompass a variety of views. Rather than consistently stake out bold views on matters of principle, party leaders should play down controversial issues. Parties should work to bring together people of various perspectives in a common pursuit of office. Opposition should be tolerated and treated as legitimate; politicians of differing parties should have amicable relations. This view is most associated with Martin Van Buren, eighth president and principal founder of the Democratic Party. The party organization that Van Buren created in the 1820s was decentralized and non-ideological, interested more in securing patronage than in seeking programmatic change. (Ceaser 1979; Hofstadter 1969).

In recent years, the political parties have, in some ways, been evolving toward the responsible party model. The parties have become ideologically coherent. The party networks have become more centralized in Washington; “top-down” parties have replaced “bottom-up” ones. Party unity in Congress has increased. Party voting among the public has increased, at least among those who identify with a party. Party identification appears to be based more on perceived issue differences than on inherited loyalties than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. Ideological activists have mostly replaced patronage hacks as the lead players in party politics. The national party organizations spend more money and play increased roles in elections. Even state and local parties have revived, to a limited extent. But there are few signs of an increased role for rank-and-file voters; indeed, a party-defining document like the “Contract with America” was
conceived by a few insiders, while most voters remained unaware. (Green and Herrnson 2002; Weisberg 2002; Pomper and Weiner 2002).

Not all of the consequences of this evolution have been salutary. Fiorina (2001) muses that the American political system has become too responsive to unrepresentative ideologues, whether in government, the political parties or interest groups. As purposive incentives have replaced material benefits as the main motivation for political actors, officeholders now have “deeper policy commitments than their counterparts of a generation ago.” As the parties have polarized and the number of competitive constituencies shrunk, candidates have become less concerned with the “median voter” and more attuned to activists at the extremes. As the parties become more internally homogeneous, only the ideologically faithful are able to advance politically.

Fiorina sees interest group involvement as adding to this trend:

As traditional patronage-based organizations withered, a wide variety of groups stepped into the space unoccupied. Increasingly such groups generate candidates and take an important role in organizing and funding campaigns. But the reason for belonging to such groups is commitment to group goals, and that is also a prerequisite for gaining group support. … It seems likely that members increasingly motivated by policy goals would be more likely to establish records rich in policy content, to emphasize issues as part of their personal political image, and to attract the notice of groups and individuals with similar policy commitments. (Fiorina 2001).

Some observers might hail these developments; the parties finally stand for something, they would say. But Fiorina worries that Congress has become simultaneously “less insulated” and more “out of touch.” Less insulated, because members are more subject to influence by activists outside the institution. Out of touch, because those activists are highly untypical of the American public. With both
officeholders and activists driven by purposive incentives and holding strongly ideological views, compromise becomes almost impossible. (Fiorina 2001).

In a very different era, Wilson (1962) praised the American political system for serving as a means of “social integration rather than of political cleavage.” Parties tended to stick to a “politics of interest” that played down divisive issues, except when external influences forced them temporarily into a “politics of principle.” He feared the effects of converting “the two party system from an integrative to a divisive agency”:

The need to employ issues as incentives and to distinguish one’s party from the opposition along policy lines will mean that political conflict will be intensified, social cleavages will be exaggerated, party leaders will tend to be men skilled in the rhetorical arts, and the party’s ability to produce agreement by trading issue-free resources will be reduced.

There are worse ways of describing the political system of the early 21st century.\textsuperscript{23}

It is not an insult to the interest group activists interviewed for this study to say that they often aggravate this tendency toward ideological polarization. The “politics of principle” is their job, after all. But as they help push the party networks into greater programmatic coherence, one must ask if parties are to be responsible, who should they be responsible to? Ideological activists? Officeholders? “The people?” The “public interest?”

Alexis de Tocqueville has his own terminology for differentiating between “responsible” and “integrative” parties, or the “politics of principle” or the “politics of interest.” He called them “great” and “small” parties. Ceaser (1979) suggests a third middle path: “Burkean” parties that are principled but moderate, energetic but civil.

\textsuperscript{23} Wilson’s statement is consistent with high party voting in Congress; first, the high degree of ideological cohesion within the parties makes the use of “issue-free resources” less important; second, the House majority leadership’s control of the floor (and increasing dominance of the committees) makes it easier to control voting in such a way as to reduce the need for such resources. See Sinclair 2000.
Perhaps such parties are more compatible with our system than purely “great” parties. (Van Buren-style “small” parties are probably gone forever. In an era of television and the Internet, who needs armies of patronage workers to reach voters?) But some ballast of moderation to balance the heaps of ideology already in the system would be welcome.
Bibliography


