

# INTEREST GROUP POLITICS

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## Bridging the Gap between Political Parties and Interest Groups

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On January 22, 2011, 180 people representing 70 organizations from the “tea party” movement met in Sharpville, Indiana, to discuss the ouster of longtime US Senator Richard Lugar. Although Senator Lugar has long been considered a conservative stalwart, this group, calling itself “Hoo-siers for a Conservative Senate,” labeled him “too liberal” and sought to unify its support behind an alternative candidate.<sup>1</sup> Lugar had won 87 percent of vote in 2006, when he was elected to his sixth term in the Senate, so one might reasonably believe that Lugar should not worry about a small group of rabble rousers. Yet, in the 2010 congressional elections, tea-party-backed candidates defeated incumbent candidates in Republican primaries in Alaska, Nevada, South Carolina, and elsewhere, leading the tea party to be credited as a major player in the election.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the tea party is a force to be reckoned with.

While the tea party is busy attempting to upend the Republican Party, it may also play a role in upending the way that we think about interest group politics. While many people think of interest groups and political parties as clearly distinct entities, the activities of the tea party raise questions about how true that is. In some respects, the organizations behind the tea party movement—Freedom Works, Patriot Action Network, Tea Party Express, Tea Party Patriots, and others—look like traditional interest groups. They are autonomous organizations that express clear issue positions on topics such as taxation and health care. Yet they are attempting to reshape the nature of the Republican Party by fielding candidates in party primaries. Thus, in some ways, they look more like party organizations than like interest groups. So which are they?

Political parties and interest groups are more closely related to one another than is often supposed. Parties and groups are both types of political associations that seek to mediate the relationship between citizens and government. Interest groups usually seek to craft an identity based on the constituencies that they claim to represent, the issues that they work on, or their ideological perspectives.<sup>3</sup> They are formal organizations that advocate for relatively narrow interests, regardless of which party is in power. In contrast,

political parties usually seek to build a broader coalition of interests so that they can sustain majorities to control the government.<sup>4</sup> However, even though interest groups themselves do not seek to control the government, they care about who does. Which party is in power makes a difference to which groups’ interests are served.<sup>5</sup> Interest groups may care about not only *which* party governs but also *how* it governs. Likewise, political parties may not build the kind of narrowly focused constituencies that interest groups cultivate, but they may benefit from accessing those narrow constituencies for specialized tasks, such as raising money or getting out the vote. Thus, depending on the situation, interest groups and political parties often have strong incentives to work with each other, to fight against each other, or to try to control one another. As they cross paths with each other, parties and groups often step on each others’ toes and, in the process, blur the boundaries between these two types of political associations.

To understand better how political parties and interest groups relate to one another, the chapter discusses four aspects of this relationship.

1. It explores how parties and groups compete for the loyalties and attention of the same activists. Looking at these connections with citizens illuminates how both parties and groups are alternative ways that citizens can become involved in politics.
2. It explains how formal institutional structures create opportunities for groups and parties to assist and exploit one another. Parties and groups have coevolved symbiotically, each providing the nutrients that the other needs to survive.<sup>6</sup>
3. It illuminates how parties and interest groups are embedded with one another through elite networks. These networks create the channels through which parties and groups use one another to send information and develop the trust that is necessary to make political processes work.
4. It considers how the relationships between parties and groups weigh in their strategic calculations.

The chapter concludes by reflecting on how party-group dynamics factor into how these actors are situated in American politics.

### Competing for Hearts and Minds

Political parties and interest groups are both important avenues that citizens use to relate to the political system. Citizens learn about politics and are mobilized to action, in part, through their affiliations with parties and groups. These affiliations may reinforce one another, or they may pull at cross-purposes. These processes work differently in the Democratic and

Republican Parties. This section explores these issues first by addressing social identification, second by considering overlapping versus cross-cutting affiliations, and third by comparing affiliations across the two major parties in the United States.

Political scientists Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler contend that "partisan identification is a genuine form of social identification."<sup>7</sup> Individuals begin to form impressions about political parties at a young age. They learn about parties and form partisan attitudes under the influence of their parents, in school, and from watching the world around them.<sup>8</sup> As events unfold and issues evolve, emerging generations see parties in a new light and adjust their evaluations accordingly.<sup>9</sup> Activists may switch parties over the course of their lives, but party switching is more likely to occur early in life than it is later in life, partly because partisans are gradually socialized to accept the issue portfolios of their parties.<sup>10</sup> The acceptance or rejection of political parties becomes a vital part of the way that citizens understand their place in society.

Membership in interest groups may also be a form of social identification. Individuals often form identifications with interest groups as they mature in their occupational and professional lives. Labor unions, for example, may prompt people to think of themselves as "workers," which may further a group-based identity in relation to the polity.<sup>11</sup> Professional associations, such as the American Medical Association, may encourage people to bring concerns of professional autonomy to their involvement in politics.<sup>12</sup> Church membership may facilitate identification with issue-oriented groups that oppose abortion, same-sex marriage, or gambling.<sup>13</sup> Some religiously based interest groups, such as Focus on the Family, develop media and educational materials designed to educate youth from the viewpoint of that group.<sup>14</sup> While individuals are exposed to interest group messages throughout their lives, they often seize opportunities to become actively involved in an interest group when they are at turning points in their lives.<sup>15</sup>

Loyalties to political parties and interest groups often reinforce one another. For example, membership in a pro-life interest group is likely to strengthen an individual's identification with the Republican Party because that party maintains a fairly reliable pro-life stance. Similarly, membership in a labor union is likely to strengthen an individual's identification with the Democratic Party because that party maintains a fairly reliable pro-labor stance. By participating in the activities of an interest group, individuals may meet like-minded partisans who will celebrate a particular party's victories and commiserate after its defeats.

At the same time, interest group membership and party membership have the potential to clash with each other. For example, a person who is both a member of the Republican Party and a labor union will be cross-pressured by these affiliations. The Republican Party may encourage her to

support right-to-work laws, while the labor union may encourage her to oppose them. The person could choose to ignore the cross pressures. Alternatively, she could choose to drop out of either the Republican Party or the labor union, thus costing one or the other of these organizations political support. Or, she could try to bring about change in the party or the labor union, either by pushing the Republican Party to be friendlier to the interests of organized labor (or at least to oppose them less actively) or by convincing the labor union to be a less vibrant supporter of the Democratic Party. Regardless of how the individual decides to act, the Republican Party and the labor union both have a member who has the potential to disrupt the agendas of their organizations.

The Republican union member is an example of someone who faces party-group cross pressures where the party and group in question have been antagonistic to one another throughout history. However, cross pressures may also exist in cases where the party and group are closely aligned with one another. For example, the Democratic Party and labor unions tend to be strongly aligned with one another. However, the Democratic Party sometimes takes issue positions that labor unions perceive to be adverse to their interests. When Democrats support free trade agreements, labor unions strongly object and attempt to convince the party to change its position.<sup>16</sup> If the party does not budge, Democrats who are in labor unions may complain that the party is not living up to its ideals, potentially making them less likely to support Democrats in the next election. These Democratic union members are unlikely to switch their votes to the Republican candidate, but they may neglect to engage in supportive activities that they usually undertake, such as making phone calls, knocking on doors, or raising money for Democratic candidates. In the Republican Party, conflicts between Christian interest groups and the party establishment are a common source of cross pressures. For example, members of Focus on the Family may want the Republican Party to take a stronger stand against same-sex marriage than some of the party's leaders view as politically wise.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, tea party interest groups are determined to make sure that the Republican Party takes conservative stands on fiscal issues. Cross pressures may not cause lifelong Republicans to become Democrats, but they may drain much of the usual enthusiasm from party members' participation. At the same time, some people do respond to cross pressures by switching parties.<sup>18</sup>

Interest groups and political parties compete for the loyalties of activists in both the Democratic and Republican Parties. However, the nature of this process is very different between the parties. In an earlier study that I conducted with Seth Masket, Dara Strolovitch, and Joanne Miller, we found significant differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties in terms of how their activists relate to interest groups.<sup>19</sup> We attended the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2008 and conducted

surveys of the delegates in attendance. First, the results showed that while both Democrats and Republicans join interest groups, Democrats join approximately 35 percent more interest groups than do Republicans. Thus, interest groups have more points of access into the Democratic Party than they do into the Republican Party. Second, the analysis revealed that interest group membership in the Republican Party is more hierarchical than it is in the Democratic Party. In the Republican Party, activists coalesce around a smaller number of leading interest groups, while in the Democratic Party, activists disperse their loyalties more evenly among prominent groups. A list of these leading groups is provided in Table 9.1.<sup>20</sup> Thus, interest groups are a greater source of hierarchical control over activists in the Republican Party than they are in the Democratic Party, where interest groups coexist with one another on a more equal basis.<sup>21</sup> Third, different kinds of interest groups dominate the two parties. Democratic activists are more likely to be associated with labor unions and identity groups, while Republican activists are more likely to be associated with civic, religious, and professional associations. Few interests groups have leading activists from both parties in common, reflecting the partisan polarization of interest group politics in the United States.

Recognizing that parties and interest groups draw upon a common pool of activists is a critical step to bridging the gap between parties and groups. Activists do not necessarily care whether their interests are served by parties or groups, only that their interests are ultimately served. Thus, activists are likely to direct their energies, loyalties, and resources to whichever

**Table 9.1** Leading Interest Groups among Democratic and Republican Party Delegates

Rank	Interest Group
<b>Democratic Party</b>	
1	Organized Labor (AFL-CIO, Change to Win)
2	MoveOn.org
3	National Education Association
3	Human Rights Campaign
3	NARAL Pro-Choice America
6	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
6	Sierra Club
6	Progressive Democrats of America
<b>Republican Party</b>	
1	National Rifle Association
2	National Right to Life Committee
3	Campaign for Liberty

Source: Surveys of 738 delegates at the 2008 Democratic and Republican national conventions.

organizations they perceive to be acting most effectively on their behalf. These dynamics not only affect rank-and-file activists but also shape future party leaders who, more often than not, once belonged to the rank and file. As a result, today's candidates increasingly have backgrounds that connect them to interest groups and social movements.<sup>22</sup> Thus, competition for these activists—and potential future party leaders—stimulates a continuous interplay between parties and groups.

### Institutional Opportunities for Cooperation and Exploitation

The relationship between political parties and interest groups is, in part, a product of the peculiar institutional structures of American government. Interest groups and political parties have coevolved within these structures such that mutual cooperation and exploitation are a routine part of their politics. Four institutional features promote party-group interactions. First, the existence of state and national platform committees provides an opportunity for activists and interest groups to influence public perceptions of a party. Second, primary elections restrict the ability of party leaders to select party candidates, providing an opportunity for interest groups to sway which candidates a party selects to stand in the general election. Third, campaign finance laws institute financial dependencies between parties and groups. Fourth, relatively recent changes in the structures of parties and interest groups create opportunities for each to have greater dependency on the other.

Party platforms are largely symbolic statements of party positions. Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole once famously quipped that he had not read the Republican Party Platform, and was not bound by it, when asked about what he thought about its plank on pro-life issues.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, platform committees, populated by activists at the state and national levels, provide an opportunity for interests groups to infiltrate parties formally and engrave their policy positions as party doctrines. In a study of state Republican Party platforms in 2000, Kimberly Conger demonstrates how Christian Right organizations penetrated the party at the state level.<sup>24</sup> Using state Republican platforms, she reveals how Christian Right penetration varied from state to state according to differences in religiosity, ideology, and competition. Although platforms do not bind candidates' rhetoric or positions in elections, they may influence public perceptions of a party, thus making them a potential starting point in groups' efforts to define a party.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike party platforms, primary elections are (usually) *binding* institutional structures that afford significant opportunities for party-group interaction.<sup>26</sup> In a parliamentary system of government, it is typical for party

leaders to select the slate of candidates who will run on behalf of the party in the general election.<sup>27</sup> This procedure ensures that candidates who stand on behalf of the party reflect its policy positions, at least as understood by the party leaders. Given this institutional arrangement, it would be difficult for leaders of outside groups to dictate the agenda of a party. In the United States, however, candidates usually must stand for election in a primary or caucus before they stand in the general election. The existence of a primary or caucus expands the possibility that voters will select candidates that do not reflect the policy positions or priorities of party leaders. In the Democratic Party, in particular, the reforms of the McGovern-Fraser Commission (1968–1972) opened the primary process to the influence of outside groups.<sup>28</sup> Republican reforms also opened its party nominating process in the 1970s, but party organizations maintained greater control over the process than was the case in the Democratic Party.<sup>29</sup> Party organizations attempt to resist allowing outside groups to control nominations by creating rules and procedures biased toward party loyalists.<sup>30</sup> However, their ability to influence the nomination process varies from party to party and from state to state. Some state parties allow party leaders to endorse candidates before the primaries, though most do not.<sup>31</sup> The party establishment often uses contributions to incumbents through leadership PACs (Political Action Committees) to discourage challenges to incumbents.<sup>32</sup> Occasionally, party leaders offer inducements, such as promises of administrative appointments to prospective challengers, to avoid contested primaries.<sup>33</sup>

No matter how hard party leaders may work to avoid it, incumbents and other preferred party candidates always have the potential to be defeated in American primaries. This possibility creates an opportunity for interest groups to influence who stands on a party's slate. Indeed, some interest groups have made their reputations, in part, by challenging party candidates in primaries. The classic example of such a group is the Club for Growth. The Club for Growth was founded in 1999 with the goal of electing fiscally conservative candidates in Republican primaries. The Club has had several notable successes, including Sharon Angle's victory in Nevada's Republican U.S. Senate primary and Mike Lee's win in Utah's Republican U.S. Senate primary.<sup>34</sup> In 2010, Republican Pat Toomey was elected U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania after a longtime affiliation with the Club.<sup>35</sup> While there is no perfect parallel to the Club for Growth within the Democratic Party, MoveOn.org has sometimes played an analogous role. For example, in 2006, MoveOn.org was a visible supporter of Ned Lamont's primary challenge to sitting U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut.<sup>36</sup> Lamont and MoveOn.org claimed that Lieberman was too conservative for the Democratic Party, especially on issues of national security where Lieberman had been a vocal supporter of President George W. Bush. Lamont and MoveOn.org attained a Pyrrhic victory over Lieberman in the

primary, as Lieberman was able to win the general election with the support of the Republican Party.

Political scientist Michael Murakami calls organizations such as the Club for Growth and MoveOn.org "party purity groups."<sup>37</sup> They are so called because they work to attain ideological purity within a particular political party. When party purity groups judge elected officials to have strayed from the party line, these groups let it be known that the candidates are vulnerable to a purity-group-inspired primary challenge. Officeholders know that a serious primary challenge raises the prospect that they will not be reelected, as they must prepare for battle on two fronts—against their own party's puritans in the primary and against the opposing party in the general election. In using this approach, party purity groups have the potential to influence politics far beyond the elections in which they actually field a candidate or win an election. If elected officials know that straying from the party line may make them vulnerable to a purity-group-inspired challenge, then they may be less likely to deviate from the party line. Thus, potentially vulnerable politicians may move their policy positions toward a perceived ideologically "pure" point in order to fend off the potential challenge.<sup>38</sup>

Party purity groups provide an example of how interest groups have the potential to use primaries as an opportunity to supplant party leadership. Party purity groups may aid party leaders by disciplining errant party members. But they may also create problems for the party. Rather than enforcing uniform party discipline, parties may benefit from flexibility across political contexts. For example, Democrats may have a better chance of winning political office in a relatively conservative state if they run a candidate that is slightly more conservative than the typical Democratic officeholder. The same is true of Republicans seeking office in relatively liberal states. If ideological purity is enforced, the party may wind up worse off than it would have been by allowing deviation from the national party standard. Such was the case in Rhode Island, where attacks by the Club for Growth weakened liberal Republican U.S. Senator Lincoln Chafee enough that he was replaced by the much more liberal Democratic U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse.<sup>39</sup> The Republican Party is numerically weaker in the Senate with a liberal Democratic senator from Rhode Island than it would be with a liberal Republican senator from Rhode Island. But the Club for Growth hopes that Republican officeholders see what happened to Lincoln Chafee and, in turn, become more reliably conservative in their voting. Thus, while the Club for Growth helped to lose a Republican Senate seat in Rhode Island, it believes that it helped to gain a Republican Senate caucus that is more compliant with its vision of Republicanism. This example illustrates how, when primaries are involved, parties and interest groups may compete for control of the party system.

Even if interest groups do not wish to compete with parties for control of nominations, the campaign finance system is a third institutional structure that affords opportunities for party-group interaction. Many observers have speculated that PAC contributions to campaigns allow interest groups to have undue influence over politicians.<sup>40</sup> However, the relationship is more realistically characterized as a vehicle for information sharing and displays of loyalty than for raw vote buying. Interest groups (through their PACs) tend to support one party exclusively, unless their contributions are unlikely to affect electoral outcomes.<sup>41</sup> Rather than taking risks, PACs concentrate their funds on the politicians most likely to win elections.<sup>42</sup>

Although PAC contributions are the most well-known aspect of the campaign finance system, interest groups and political parties collaborate through numerous other campaign finance channels. PAC contributions are regulated by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and are subject to strict dollar amount limits. Groups and parties have long found loopholes through these limitations. For many years, interest groups made unlimited contributions directly to political parties that were intended to support party-building activities and issue advertisements. These unregulated contributions were known as “soft” money because they could not be used explicitly to support or oppose a candidate for office (as is the case with “hard” money). This particular loophole closed when soft money contributions were banned by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Action (BCRA) of 2002, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in the case of *McConnell vs. Federal Election Commission*.<sup>43</sup>

Parties and groups were quick to adapt to the new regulatory regime created by BCRA. They began to make use of a previously obscure provision of the Internal Revenue Code known as Section 527. This provision allows for the creation of independent political committees—referred to as “527 organizations”—that are unregulated by the FEC. These organizations cannot explicitly endorse or support a particular candidate, but they can undertake myriad activities that support the functions of a party, as long as those functions are not explicitly coordinated with the party. The new 527 organizations became a significant element of the party-group relationship when they were incorporated into the 2004 presidential election campaign. Despite the supposed absence of explicit coordination, a network of 527 organizations arose in 2004 that divided the electioneering functions of parties (e.g., fundraising, grassroots turnout, media) among a handful of unaffiliated but allied organizations.<sup>44</sup> These organizations hybridized the organizational forms used by the political parties and interest groups. Political scientist Richard Skinner goes so far as to argue that, collectively, this network of 527s constituted a “shadow party” in 2004.<sup>45</sup> This metaphor highlights the ways in which a network of 527 organizations was able to offer alternatives to party functions, at least for a short period of time.

In the 2008 presidential election, 527 organizations were much less active than they had been during the 2004 presidential election. Parties may have turned away from 527 organizations partly because of the difficulty of coordinating their functions across several organizations and partly because of the rise of the Internet as an effective tool for raising large volumes of hard-money contributions from individuals.<sup>46</sup> The 2004 presidential election may prove to have been the one moment in the sun for 527s. However, the emergence of this type of organization is revealing of the nature of the relationship between parties and interest groups. When the opportunity for groups to donate soft money to parties was foreclosed in 2002 by BCRA, parties and groups quickly adapted by seizing upon a somewhat obscure provision in the tax code. They used these innovative organizations to rally around or oppose the presidential candidate of their choice. In some ways, this network of 527 organizations served as a partial substitute for party organizations.

The changing organizational structure of political parties and interest groups creates a fourth opportunity for party-group interaction. For many years, mass political parties operated through deeply embedded grassroots structures with well-organized connections between parties and voters at the smallest geographic units, usually precincts, that spanned only a few blocks of a city or town. Since at least the 1960s, this machine-style of organization has been in decline such that it is no longer recognizable in most parts of the United States.<sup>47</sup> In its place, campaign organizations that focus on serving the needs of candidates have emerged. This shift has created a vacuum such that parties no longer have the organizing capacity to perform core functions, such as get-out-the-vote drives. Many of these functions have been outsourced to private companies and nonprofit organizations, such as the Fund for Public Interest Research.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, this decline in party organizations opens the door for interest groups to replace the ancillary functions of parties. Interest groups may find that supplying the infrastructure for electoral mobilization and offering policy expertise play an even greater role than financial clout in steering the direction of parties.<sup>49</sup>

Working America is an example of an interest group that has stepped into the on-the-ground roles once played by the Democratic Party. Working America was founded in 2003 with financial support from the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the nation’s largest federation of labor unions. Formally speaking, Working America is a nonpartisan organization that does not endorse any particular party. But, in practice, it throws its support almost entirely to Democrats, making exceptions in only a handful of cases. This support is not expressed primarily through monetary donations but through grassroots canvassing efforts on behalf of pro-labor, Democratic candidates.<sup>50</sup> The Democratic

Party relies heavily on these kinds of efforts in a way that it might not if its local-level infrastructure were as robust as it once was.

Weaknesses in the institutional structures of interest groups concomitantly create opportunities for political parties. As Harvard Professor Theda Skocpol has shown, cross-class, membership-based interest groups have been in decline in the United States since at least the 1960s, if not earlier.<sup>51</sup> Skocpol reveals that where interest groups were once firmly grounded in chapters and local-level organizing, they now rely predominantly on national-level managers who sell a package of services to their supporters. Today's "supporters" have less of a stake than the "members" of a previous era, who developed a greater identification with organizations that more regularly allowed them to attend meetings, vote, and shape the direction of their organizations. Without these strong ties to interest groups, citizens are less likely to feel cross pressured to support their concerns when they clash with party loyalties.<sup>52</sup>

Many of the interactions between parties and interest groups are born from opportunity. The institutions of American politics open the door for parties and groups to lean on one another. Party platform committees, primaries, campaign finance laws, and organizational changes allow parties and groups to be solutions to one another's problems. The coevolution of parties and groups is, thus, a fundamental outcome of the institutionalized structures of American government.

### Embeddedness in Elite Networks

Elite networks play a critical role in bridging the gap between political parties and interest groups.<sup>53</sup> These networks are composed of influential people who are linked to both parties and groups. Within these networks, people exchange information, share resources, build loyalty, and create coalitions. Getting access to these networks makes a difference to how political parties and interest groups operate. They may help to determine who selects political leaders and who influences public policy.

Lobbyists play an especially important role in linking political parties and interest groups. They generally move back and forth between working for these two types of organizations over the course of their careers. They play this role, in large part, because of the nature of the lobbyist's job. A lobbyist is someone who represents an interest group before Congress (or another governmental body). But, in order to represent an interest group effectively, the lobbyist has to be intimately familiar with the inner workings of Congress. The people who have the best knowledge of Congress's inner workings are those who have worked for it in the past, either as an elected member or as a hired staff member. Since any member of Congress is identified with a particular political party (as even so-called "independents" must

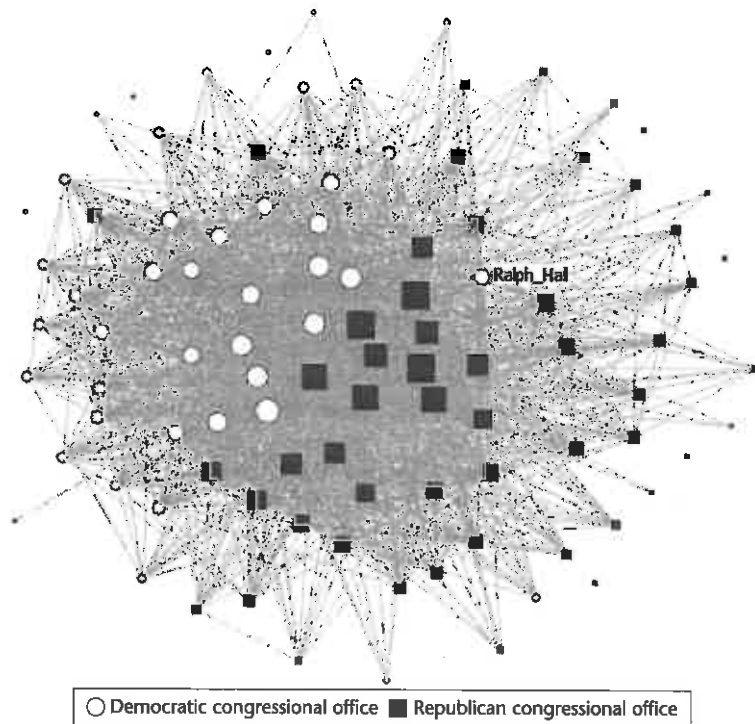
caucus with either the Democrats or the Republicans), those people who have worked for Congress have known partisan identities. Someone who has worked for Senator Dick Durbin is known to be a Democrat, and someone who has worked for Representative Eric Cantor is known to be a Republican. Political scientist Rogan Kersh documented this point in a study showing that all the corporate lobbyists that he followed were known as either Democrats or Republicans.<sup>54</sup>

The partisan identities of lobbyists are a notable part of their work. Since lobbyists are known as either Democrats or Republicans, they have difficulty lobbying members of the party of which they are not a member. Members of Congress may be inherently suspicious of lobbyists who are not members of their party and may be more likely to trust lobbyists from their party. Democratic lobbyists are most effective in lobbying Democratic members of Congress, and Republican lobbyists are most effective in lobbying Republican members of Congress. Thus, an interest group's leaders must either consciously hire both Democrats and Republicans for their lobbying team or risk that their group will become known for the partisanship of its lobbyists.

The partisan demand for lobbyists helps to produce a partisan structure in elite lobbying networks. To understand this structure better, I interviewed health policy staff members in the offices of ninety-five members of Congress in 2003. I asked each staff member to look at a list of 171 interest groups that were highly active on health policy issues. Each staff member was asked to rate his or her office's lobbying contacts with each interest group according to their frequency (i.e., regular, occasional, never) and reliability (i.e., reliable, sometimes reliable, not reliable).<sup>55</sup> Figure 9.1 reports the network of these contacts. Each circle in the graph represents a Democratic congressional office, while each square in the graph represents a Republican congressional office. A line between two shapes indicates that the offices receive regular, reliable lobbying contacts from the same interest group. Larger shapes represent offices that receive more lobbying contacts, while smaller shapes represent offices that receive fewer lobbying contacts.

The polarized partisan structure of the lobbying network represented in Figure 9.1 is unmistakable. The upper left side of the network is composed almost entirely of Democrats, while the lower right side of the network is composed almost entirely of Republicans. There are only a few exceptions. First, two Democrats and two Republicans appear out of place on the periphery of the network. These anomalies are due to the fact that these congressional offices are not major players in health care policy, so their health lobbying contacts are driven more by district-based concerns than by ideology. The core of the network is almost perfectly polarized, with the office of Representative Ralph Hall of Texas serving as the only exception. At the time the interviews were conducted in 2003,

**Figure 9.1** The Party Bias of Health Care Lobbying Networks in the US Congress, 2003



Source: Interviews with ninety-five congressional staff members working on health policy in 2003.

Hall was a Democrat, so his office appears out of place since it is grouped with the Republicans rather than with the Democrats. However, in 2004, Hall switched to the Republican Party. Indeed, the network shows that in 2003, Hall's lobbying contacts were already more akin to those of Republicans than to those of other Democrats. Hall is the exception that proves the rule.

The network in Figure 9.1 reflects the strong networks that exist between political parties and interest groups. It shows that lobbying contacts are heavily influenced by party ties. Members of Congress from the same party tend to prefer to hear from the same interest groups, who tend to hire lobbyists from their party. These patterns may contribute to the polarization of interest group politics. If lobbyists have incentives to become tied to one political party, then interest groups are likely to gravitate toward

only one party. Because of this polarization, interest groups that are able to reach across party lines tend to be more influential than those who are not able to do so, because of their potential to act as brokers.<sup>56</sup>

Networks of lobbying contacts are only one example of the ways in which parties and interest groups are connected through lobbyists. Parties and interest groups are connected through multiple kinds of networks, including networks of candidate endorsements, donations, and legislative support for pending legislation.<sup>57</sup> Political scientists Gregory Koger and Jennifer Nicoll Victor show that patterns of polarization are present in campaign contributions by lobbyists.<sup>58</sup> They observe that "the donation behavior of individual lobbyists appears to be quite partisan. About 29% of lobbyists gave almost nothing to Democrats, while another 28% gave almost nothing to Republicans."<sup>59</sup> Koger and Victor find that this pattern is even more pronounced among big spenders (lobbyists who gave five or more donations to members of Congress). These lobbyists tend to pick a party and stick with it. Further, two members of Congress are most likely to receive donations from the same lobbyists when they are of the same party.<sup>60</sup>

The networks that connect parties and interest groups can prove to be valuable resources to all involved. In an ingenious study, political scientists Gregory Koger, Seth Masker, and Hans Noel made \$25 donations to an ideologically diverse set of interest groups, magazines, and party organizations using aliases.<sup>61</sup> They observed how organizations sold their information to other organizations by recording the new solicitations that they received. The results of the analysis showed that the information was sold within clusters that closely related to political parties. This study reveals the behind-the-scenes way in which political parties and interest groups exchange valuable information, such as the names and addresses of individuals who are likely to contribute to their causes.

Networks connecting parties and interest groups have wide implications. In their book *The Party Decides*, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller demonstrate that these networks are decisive in the selection of presidential nominees by the Democratic and Republican Parties.<sup>62</sup> After conducting a wide historical survey of data on party nominations, delegate selection, and candidate endorsements, they conclude that interest "groups can often get more from government by funneling their resources through a party coalition to nominate and elect officeholders friendly to their interests than by buying policies one at a time from independent officeholders after they have taken office."<sup>63</sup> Thus, even though members of interest groups may be numerically small in a general election contest,<sup>64</sup> they have disproportionate influence on the political process by helping to select presidential nominees. Interest groups are at the core of party coalitions.



The value of elite networks makes them an object of contention in the political process. If political actors gain an advantage by connecting through networks, then their opponents may try to do what they can to prevent them from benefitting from network connections. At the outset, deliberately influencing the structure of political networks seems like a difficult thing to do, since networks are highly decentralized and not always easily observable. However, two prominent Republicans—Tom DeLay, Majority Whip (1995–2003) and Majority Leader (2003–2005) of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Grover Norquist, President of Americans for Tax Reform—made changing the nature of Washington lobbying networks a cause célèbre for a decade, from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s.<sup>65</sup> Prior to that time, the Democratic Party had controlled the U.S. House of Representatives continuously from 1955 to 1995. As a result, the lobbying and campaign contribution networks surrounding the House had heavily favored the Democrats. After the Republican victory in the 1994 congressional elections, DeLay and Norquist concluded that these networks should change to the advantage of Republicans. DeLay and Norquist initiated “the K Street Project” to encourage previously “Democratic” lobbyists to shift their giving to the Republicans. Further, they pressured trade associations to appoint Republican lobbyists to high positions within their organizations. By doing so, DeLay and Norquist hoped that they would be able to alter the structure of elite networks in a way that would benefit Republicans.

Attempting to influence lobbying networks, as undertaken by Republicans through the K Street Project, is ostensibly legal and ethical. For example, it is perfectly legitimate for Republicans to keep a record of campaign contributions by lobbyists and to remind them that Republicans control the majority. However, the actual implementation of the K Street Project by Tom DeLay began to raise questions. For example, DeLay was accused of insisting that the Electronics Industry Alliance name a Republican lobbyist as president if it expected favorable treatment in the provisions of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.<sup>66</sup> These accusations of attempted extortion, along with other ethical irregularities, helped to force DeLay to resign his seat in the House in 2006. Through DeLay, the K Street Project also became associated with a scandal involving corrupt lobbyist Jack Abramoff.<sup>67</sup> As a result of this unwanted attention, Republicans began to back away from the K Street Project.

The failure of the K Street Project had numerous causes. One cause was the personal flaws and excesses of Tom DeLay, one of the project’s most visible leaders. However, another cause of the K Street Project’s failure was how difficult it is to bring decentralized networks under centralized control. While networking is a way in which parties and interest groups line up to support one another, this outcome is not easily dictated or coordinated by any

central person or organization. Outcomes result from thousands of individual decisions made by lobbyists, members of Congress, party officials, and other political players.

### Strategic Implications of Party-Group Connections

Interest groups and political parties are extensively intertwined. Both types of organizations compete for individual loyalties, draw upon institutional opportunities for cooperation and exploitation, and are mutually embedded within elite networks. What are the strategic implications of this relationship? The leaders of political parties and interest groups both are well advised to approach group-party relations cautiously. While relations may prove to be mutually beneficial, they may, alternatively, serve the interests of one side more than the other. Interest groups may be captured by parties, or groups may come to dominate the agenda of a party. Relationships once thought of as mutual may become parasitic.<sup>68</sup> Parties have to decide whether or not to bring interest groups into the fold. Interest groups have to decide whether to align with a party or attempt to offer an independent voice. As party-group relationships evolve over time, the leaders of parties and groups may find it wise to reevaluate these relationships.

Alliances between political parties and interest groups have the potential to be mutually beneficial, especially when the allied party wins elections. In the 2008 election, a wide range of interest groups worked to elect Barack Obama as president. His election meant that many of these groups would see the benefits of substantive policy changes along the lines that they advocated. Benefits were not distributed in an indiscriminate, spoils-system arrangement but by providing a subtle advantage to liberal groups in the policy process. Although Obama campaigned against corporate lobbyists and interest groups in 2008, these players still had a voice at the bargaining table once Obama was elected. For example, support from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers was an important factor in passing economic stimulus legislation in 2009. Yet Obama’s election created disadvantages for groups representing “evangelical Christians, outdoor sportsmen, conservatives, rural residents, small business owners, financial professionals, and farmers,” while providing advantages to groups representing “African-Americans, Hispanics, liberals, college students, immigrants, gays and lesbians, urban residents, government employees, lawyers, scientists, and teachers.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, George W. Bush’s presidency benefitted conservative interest groups, such as pro-life organizations, faith-based organizations, anti-immigration groups, business associations, and energy industry associations.

While party-group alliances often pay dividends, it is also possible for alliances to be too close to benefit the group. If an interest group is so

closely allied with one party that the opposing party chooses to ignore the group's interests entirely, then the group may find that its allied party also neglects it and takes advantage of its loyalty. Since such a group cannot credibly threaten to leave its allied party and support the competitor party, the allied party may choose to attend to the group's interests only when it is easy to do so. When politics get tough and important decisions are on the line, the group may find that its "allied" party is not a very useful ally. Under these conditions, the group may be said to be "captured" by its allied party.<sup>70</sup>

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is one group that may have been captured by the Democratic Party. In his book, *Uneasy Alliances*, Paul Frymer argues that African-American interests have suffered at the hand of the Democratic Party, which counts on loyal support from African Americans at the ballot box.<sup>71</sup> This capture has deep historical roots, beginning with the disenfranchisement of black voters in the south during Reconstruction, and continues to present times. For example, when he was campaigning for president in 1992, candidate Bill Clinton used an NAACP forum to attack Jesse Jackson by castigating black recording artist Sister Soulja.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, the NAACP did not seize the opportunity to counterattack Clinton. Instead, leaders of the organization, and other African-American leaders, accepted that Clinton made the attack in order to reach out to the white majority. Even if Clinton attacked a prominent member of its community, NAACP still preferred a Clinton presidency to a continuation of Republican presidential dominance. Thus, silence rather than rebuttal was the NAACP's response. This episode is symbolic of how Democratic politicians are able to take support from black interest groups for granted.

Much has changed in America since 1992, yet much has remained the same. The election of Barack Obama signals great promise for race relations—and raises the hope that black interest groups will no longer be captured within the Democratic Party. However, Obama's 2008 campaign and first-term avoidance of core black issues, such as civil rights, suggests that the Democratic Party may still have African-American interest groups captured.<sup>73</sup>

While captured interest groups may tend to demonstrate loyalty to their allied party, other interest groups may place greater reliance on voice and exit strategies.<sup>74</sup> The Log Cabin Republicans—an interest group within the Republican Party that advocates for the rights of gay and lesbians—has attempted to push the Republican Party toward more inclusive views on same-sex marriage as a reaction to the party's strong antigay stances. In 2004, the organization chose to withhold its endorsement of George W. Bush's reelection as president.<sup>75</sup> This move let the Republican Party know that it could not automatically count on Log Cabin's support if it was not responsive to Log Cabin's policy demands. Nonetheless, Log Cabin faced

backlash within the party for its decision. Failure to endorse the party's nominee was construed as an act of disloyalty, raising questions about the legitimacy of Log Cabin as a Republican group. Opponents of gay-lesbian rights within the party expressed the opinion that they were glad to be without Log Cabin. Indeed, it is not clear whether the decision to withhold the endorsement helped or hurt Log Cabin's case for equality. In any case, Log Cabin returned to the Republican fold in 2008 by endorsing John McCain for president.

If close alignment of a group with a party risks interest group capture, then forging a bipartisan, independent stand may be an alternative way to gain political influence. In his book *Gaining Access*, John Mark Hansen recounts that the Farm Bureau rose to a position of influence in the mid-twentieth century largely due to its ability to establish recurring, reliable channels of information to elected politicians, information that was better than that provided by party organizations.<sup>76</sup> The Farm Bureau's independent reputation did not materialize overnight but was painstakingly cultivated for decades, from the 1920s to the 1950s. Nonetheless, political, economic, and technological changes undercut the Farm Bureau's influence in the 1960s and 1970s, as it abandoned its bipartisan posture and aligned decisively with the Republican Party.

Forging an independent role is more difficult in today's polarized political system than it once was, but attempting to do so remains a strategy available to interest groups. The greatest challenge of such strategies is to build bipartisan trust in an environment that prizes partisan loyalty. Organizations that attempt to play both sides of the partisan fence may find themselves isolated and widely distrusted.<sup>77</sup>

The relationships between political parties and interest groups cannot be defined once and for all. Which strategies work or fail changes over time. Interest groups representing African-Americans and gay-lesbian interests may find that the 2010s afford a more favorable environment within the parties than was true in the 1990s or 2000s. Conservative Christian interest groups and labor unions may find that their positions were more favorable in the 1990s than they are today.<sup>78</sup> Antiwar interest groups, such as United for Peace and Justice, worked in concert with Democratic goals from 2003 to 2006, but they found themselves abandoned by the Democratic grass roots once Democrats started to achieve electoral success in 2006.<sup>79</sup>

Relationships between parties and groups that once were equal partnerships may be come decidedly one-sided over time. For example, in his classic 1969 book, *Labor in American Politics*, J. David Greenstone detailed the close collaborative relationship between the American Federation of Labor—Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the Democratic Party.<sup>80</sup> This close collaboration was vital to passing legislation on Medicare, reapportionment, and civil rights, leading Greenstone to

conclude that organized labor was not merely “a conventional interest group, but . . . an *organized constituent interest* [emphasis added] of the Democratic party.”<sup>81</sup> In the years that followed the 1960s, however, labor received fewer dividends from its friendship with the Democrats. In an essay commemorating Greenstone’s book, Peter Francia wrote in 2010 that

American labor has done its job effectively as a campaign and electoral arm of the Democratic Party. However, for its effort, organized labor has received comparatively little in return from elected officials in the Democratic Party. This one-sided relationship raises questions about the future of the labor–Democratic Party alliance that Greenstone described some four decades ago.<sup>82</sup>

Labor leaders have mused about reducing support to Democrats or perhaps shifting their energies to an independent “Labor Party.” They might alternatively promote their interests by seeking rapprochement with the Republican Party, perhaps in an effort to forestall the type of extreme antiunion measures pursued by Republican Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin.<sup>83</sup> The difficulties that unions would face in attempting such a rapprochement is one cost that they must pay for aligning, almost exclusively, with only the Democratic Party for decades. Regardless of how labor unions reevaluate their partnership with the Democrats, a simple continuation of the 1960s status quo into the 2010s is unlikely produce significant policy victories for labor interests.

The shifting asymmetries of party-group relationships generate imperatives for these organizations to react to the inchoate factions of the American political system. As a result, strategic politicians continually craft new organizational forms out of the raw material available from parties and groups. Inventing hybrid organizational forms is one way to adapt to changing circumstances.<sup>84</sup> For example, in 2008, MoveOn.org merged organizing ideas from political parties, interest groups, and social movements to become a rising star in the Democratic Party network within a decade of its founding.<sup>85</sup> In a similar vein, 527 organizations spliced party-styled campaign tactics with the independence of interest groups.<sup>86</sup> If such adaptations continue to take place, then political parties and interest groups may become as unrecognizable in 2050 as MoveOn.org would have been in 1970.

### Conclusion

When placed in the context of the long history of party-group interaction in the United States, the rise of the tea party in 2009 seems less anomalous than it appears on the surface. Political parties and interest groups have a long tradition of trying to seize control of one another. We might think of

the tea party’s attempt to upend the Republican Party in 2009 as the natural counterpoint to the Republican Party’s effort to discipline business associations through the K Street Project in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The tea party’s ascendance in 2009 benefitted from conservatives’ anxieties over recession, a unified Democratic federal government, and a president whose unique background made him seem somewhat “other” to many Americans. With the Republican Party establishment still licking its wounds from its decisive defeat in 2008, the tea party helped to fill a void in leadership and enthusiasm within conservative ranks. Because midterm elections, more often than not, turn against the party of the president, the tea party was well positioned to claim credit for Republicans’ electoral success at the ballot box in 2010. Most participants in the tea party do not want to form their own political party, *per se*.<sup>87</sup> Rather, they seek use tea party organizations as a vehicle to advance their views within the structure of the Republican Party. With the Republicans again in power in the U.S. House of Representatives, much of the anger among tea party activists had abated by 2011. Given the fragmented and decentralized nature of the tea party (and other social movements), it is unlikely to continue to dominate the Republican Party for long, though it promises to be a significant factor in the 2012 Republican presidential primaries.

In order to make sense of the tea party and see it as a typical product of the American political system, this chapter offers a framework for bridging the gap between political parties and interest groups. Parties and groups compete to mobilize the same activists, they seize upon institutional opportunities for cooperation and exploitation, and they are jointly embedded in elite networks. These interdependencies compel parties and groups to strategize over relationship formation. We can understand these strategies better by thinking about activists, institutions, and networks as key parameters of parties’ and groups’ competitive environments.

E. E. Schattschneider, one of the great theorists of American democracy, wrote that “it is nearly impossible to translate pressure politics [i.e., interest group politics] into party politics [emphasis removed].”<sup>88</sup> Schattschneider saw the principal difference between parties and interest groups as a difference of scale: parties mobilize large numbers of citizens around broad political concerns, while interest groups mobilize comparably smaller, but much more intense, groups of citizens. Schattschneider assumed that these numerical weaknesses would prevent groups from competing with parties.

The argument of this chapter demonstrates that Schattschneider’s view of party-group competition is fundamentally wrong. Groups and parties *do* compete directly with one another. The political game is not simply one of counting bodies. Parties may be “larger” than groups, but groups have institutionally created advantages that allow them to navigate behind the

sciences of partisan politics. I thus, instead of referring to the “two-party” system in America—which has become a hegemonic way of thinking about politics<sup>89</sup>—it would be more accurate to refer to the American “factional system.” The factional system is the complex result of the strategies of parties and interest groups, continuously coevolving over time.

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### III. GROUPS AND POLICY MAKING