

A Theory of Political Parties

by

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Abstract

We propose a theory of political parties as coalitions of narrow interests in pursuit of policy demands. Nomination processes play a critical role as the point at which policy demanders exert maximum influence. In our theory, parties only strive to please voters when necessary to win elections. But this constraint is often minimal, however, due to voters' lack of information about politics. Our theory contrasts with currently dominant theories, in which modern parties are viewed as vehicles through which office-holders solve problems related to re-election.

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This paper offers a theory of political parties centered on interest groups and activists. Departing from standard theories, which place election-minded office-holders at the center, we theorize parties as vehicles by which intense policy demanders get what they want out of government. Interest groups and activists control parties by supplying endorsements, campaign workers, and cash to candidates for elections and especially by managing party nominations. Policy demanders focus on nominations because it is easier to gain a reliable agent at this stage than to capture an independent office holder later on. As E. E. Schattschneider observed, “He who has the power to make nominations owns the party” (1942: 100).

Our group-driven parties cede as little policy to voters as possible. The pressures of electoral competition occasionally requires genuine responsiveness, but parties mainly push their own agendas and aim to get voters to go along.

To explain the substantial autonomy we believe parties enjoy, we posit an “electoral blind spot” within which voters do not monitor party behavior. We argue that -- via agenda control, secrecy, and other institutional devices -- parties strive to keep the electoral blind spot as large as possible. Such opportunism is absent from existing theory. Even Anthony Downs (1957), who developed the notion of rational ignorance, did not consider the possibility that parties would seek to exploit lapses in voter attentiveness.

Our view resonates with the contemporary surge in activism in American politics, but we maintain that it applies broadly in American history.

Despite large differences between our theory and the standard view of parties, critical tests are hard to identify. Some telling evidence exists, but party nominations, central to our theory, are difficult to study and poorly documented. Measuring party responsiveness to groups or to voters is difficult. Hence, we content ourselves in this paper with developing our theory and demonstrating its plausibility.

Our argument begins with a survey of current party literature. We next develop our alternative theory, first as an extended hypothetical story and then with more rigor. We then describe relevant empirical evidence. We conclude with a plea for a broader conception of party in political science.

Theories of Party

The discipline’s leading theories of party are based on legislative politics. Yet as recently as 25 years ago, party was conspicuously absent from theories of the so-called “textbook Congress” (Shepsle 1989). Scholars emphasized the committee system, seniority, norms of deference and universalism (Mayhew 1974, Weingast 1979, Shepsle and Weingast 1981.) By the 1980’s, however, close observers of Congress began to note increasing

influence of majority party leadership (Sinclair, 1983). Soon after, a series of landmark studies added theoretical and empirical heft to this view (Rohde, 1991; Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1992; Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005). More so than previous studies, new scholarship focused on roll call voting and found, building on the historical studies of Poole and Rosenthal (1985, 1997), much stronger evidence of partisan voting than had previously been recognized.

Meanwhile, most studies of parties outside the legislature reported a weakening of parties. Levels of party identification in the electorate began to decline in the 1960s and remained below historical levels through the 1980s. “The Onward March of Party Decomposition” headlined one leading study (Burnham, 1976); “The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics” elaborated this thesis (Wattenberg, 1991).

In a further indication of weakening, the decline of traditional urban machines, under way since at least the 1930s, brought loss of party control over legislative nominations (Mayhew, 1986.) The McGovern-Fraser reforms of the 1970s led the national Democratic and Republican parties to open presidential nominations to mass participation in state primaries and caucuses (Polsby, 1983), leading Polsby and Wildavsky to observe that

Once upon a time, presidential nominations were won by candidates who courted the support of party leaders from the several states. . . . That system is history. Now, nominations are won by accumulating pledged delegates in a state-by-state march through primary elections and delegate-selection caucuses. . . . (2000, p. 97)

Parties, these authors concluded, have little impact on nominations because party leaders have no official role. In his textbook on congressional elections, Gary Jacobson took a similar view.

Primary elections have largely deprived parties of their most important source of influence over elected officials. Parties do not control access to the ballot and, therefore, to political office. (2004, p. 16; see also Herrnson, 2008, p. 50)

The one upbeat note in the parties literature of the 1980s concerned the condition of state and local party organizations, which grew in ability to raise funds, conduct polls, and assist candidates in their campaigns (Gibson, Cotter, Bibby, Huckshorn 1985). However, Coleman (1996) pointed out that the claim of organizational strength was somewhat hollow when juxtaposed with loss of control over party’s most important traditional role, nominations.

We question whether parties have in fact lost control of nominations. Interest groups and activists, we argue below, have developed informal controls over nominations that compensate for lack of formal power. But given these standard views of recent decades, it was natural for scholars wanting to explain party organization in Congress to focus on

Congress itself, seemingly the only arena of American politics in which parties were strong.

The theoretical view of parties in the new Congress literature is best introduced in the account of a mythical legislature offered in Schwartz 1989 and extended in Aldrich 1995. This logic underlies most current theorizing about legislative politics and also deeply influenced our alternative, group-centered view.

Schwartz’s mythical legislature has three members (A, B, C), each with a bill (X, Y, Z.) Pay-offs (from Aldrich) for each bill and each legislator are:

	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>
Bill X	3	-1	-1
Bill Y	-1	3	-1
Bill Z	-1	-1	3

If each legislator votes based on how she (or her district) is affected, all three bills fail. Each would be better off, however, if all three passed. Even better, A and B could form a “long coalition:” both voting in favor of X and Y, and against Z. Without the long coalition, the decisive majority is different for each bill (the coalition of B and C defeats X, the coalition of A and C defeats Y, etc.) By forming a majority coalition that stays together across votes, A and B increase their pay-offs to 2. The gains from keeping a stable majority together form Schwartz’s and Aldrich’s answer to the question “Why Parties?”

Cox and McCubbins (1993, 2005) focused on how legislative party leadership keeps a long coalition together. Their answer: by controlling the agenda, suppressing proposals that might split the party in important ways. Cox and McCubbins also offered a different, though complementary, reason why legislative parties form. Noting the difficulty voters face in monitoring individual legislators, they argued that party programs and labels function like “brand names,” valuable for winning elections.

The “brand name” concept has the virtue of referencing aspects of political life outside the legislature. Aldrich (1995) goes further, arguing that parties, while emerging from legislative politics, solve many problems legislators face as they attempt to win re-election and build stable careers.

For the congressional parties literature, the desire of incumbent office-holders for re-election drives the creation of parties. This view is plausible, but, in our view, unnecessarily limited. Long coalitions are valuable whenever more than one winning coalition is possible. If legislators are motivated by intrinsic policy preferences rather than re-election, or if the decision-makers are policy demanders voting on nomination decisions, the incentive to form a long coalition remains strong.

Since the 1990’s, no new model of parties has gained wide acceptance, but recent scholarship has laid a partial foundation for our group-centered view. Studies have

shown, first, that reputations created by legislative parties may hurt rather than help the re-election chances of members of Congress (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart, 2001, Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan, 2002, Carson, Koger, Lebo and Young, 2010.) A study of presidential nominations has argued that party insiders have managed to reassert much of their lost influence (Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller, 2008). Evidence from California has shown that, absent activist oversight of primaries, legislators do not form long coalitions to control the agenda, but take the simpler path of selling policy piecemeal to private bidders (Masket 2009). Finally, recent scholarship has found that reorganization of party coalitions on racial issues in the 1940s and 50s can be explained in terms of the demands of interest groups and activists within the party coalitions (Karol, 2009; Schickler & Feinstein, 2008; Schickler et al. 2010; Noel, forthcoming).

This paper's theory of party has developed out of several of these recent studies. We turn now to its myth of party origin. The myth's need to encompass both political and societal forces make it more complex than Schwartz's, but the purpose is the same: To use a stylized before-and-after narrative to communicate the logic of why parties form and how they matter.

A Founding Myth

Imagine a society in which no parties yet exist, about to elect its first president. The president governs by fiat, with re-election possible but not guaranteed.

Within this society, four "intense minority" groups have organized to promote policies that benefit group members but impose costs on society as a whole. The shepherds, for example, want a tariff on wool imports to increase the price they can charge for their home-grown wool. While many voters bemoan the high price of clothing, they know little about tariff policy or the arcane policy goals of other intense minorities.

As the election approaches, the shepherds work together to elect one of their own, who naturally favors a high tariff on wool imports. The shepherds are not rich or numerous, but in an otherwise unstructured electoral environment, with most voters uninterested, their chance of winning seems high.

But then another group, teachers, notices what the shepherds are up to. The teachers calculate they could easily outspend the shepherds to elect a teacher, whose top priority would be school construction. Or, they reason, they could join forces with the shepherds. The latter option seems preferable: a candidate supported by multiple groups has an even higher chance of winning. Leaders of the teachers union understand that the wool tariff increases the price everyone pays for wool, but this consideration is small compared to their desire for better school facilities. As they begin to pay more attention, two other groups, clergy and coffee growers, make similar calculations. The four groups decide they can do better by cooperating in electoral politics than by competing against each other.

The coalition encounters problems, however. The coffee growers want a new four-lane highway to increase market access for their remote region, but the other groups are

dubious. The requisite tax increase would likely draw the attention of normally inattentive voters. The other groups would themselves also be burdened with the tax. Several such concerns arise, but the groups bargain them out. Everyone agrees, for example, that a two-lane highway will suffice for the coffee growers. The clergy's plans to ban the sale of alcohol, the teachers' school improvements program, and the wool tariff are similarly scaled back from what their backers originally envisioned.

The coalition drafts a candidate who demonstrates to them sufficient appreciation of the importance of education, sobriety, transportation, and the need to protect consumers from inferior imported wool. The groups and their candidate recognize that these issues might be perceived as special interest boondoggles, so they do not emphasize them. Instead the campaign emphasizes growing the economy and providing for the common defense. The election is low key, the coalition's candidate wins easily, and society takes pride in a government that is above petty politicking. The shepherds get their tariff, ground is broken for a state-of-the-art highway in the coffee region, new schools with majestic teachers' lounges are built, and the sale of alcohol on Sunday is forbidden. Several elections follow this pattern: candidates are vetted by the loose coalition of policy demanders, elections are low key, groups get their most important wants satisfied, and voters remain quiescent.

The Sunday alcohol ban, however, generates some controversy. The saloon keepers are dismayed to lose their Sunday evening revenue and fear stronger restrictions unless something is done to stop the clergy. Formerly uninterested in politics, the saloon keepers organize for electoral combat. They consider running their own candidate in the next election, but realize that their odds would be poor against the dominant coalition. But saloon keepers suspect that the teachers, worried about religious interference with their curricula, might join in support of an anti-clergy candidate. Moreover, preliminary discussions reveal that the coffee growers are concerned about retaliatory protectionism in the foreign markets to which they export. Out of these discussions, the Freedom Party is born. The Freedom Party recruits a candidate to challenge the incumbent President on a reform platform emphasizing free markets, secular humanism and an individual's right to choose what to drink on Sundays. Correctly anticipating a contentious election, the Freedom Party carefully selects a good-looking candidate with outstanding communication skills.

The incumbent President retains the support of the clergy and the shepherds. When the coalition first recruited the incumbent President, its primary concern was a candidate who would faithfully pursue its joint program. Now running under the mantle of the "Heritage Party," the incumbent proves to be an uninspired campaigner. The Freedom Party's reform candidate is elected and the era of consensual politics comes to an end.

The Freedom Party President is a savvy politician. He likes being President, wants to keep the job, and knows that any perception that he is in service to special interests will hurt his reelection odds. He repeals the Sunday drinking prohibition (a popular move) but otherwise pays little attention to the interests that sponsored him. He spends most of the national budget on fireworks for the popular Independence Day celebration, leaving

school construction and the coffee highway to languish. This enrages the teachers and coffee growers, who withdraw their support at the next election. The popular incumbent continues to claim the mantle of the Freedom Party and wins re-election anyway. Learning a lesson, the Freedom Party takes much more care in future years to select nominees with proven loyalty.

As the Freedom and Heritage Parties compete over many elections, political discourse is dominated by conflict between them. Soon the party programs are widely accepted as natural manifestations of competing worldviews: a “conservative” one that seeks to protect and restore the traditions of a religious society of herders, and a “liberal” one oriented toward cultivating human capital and infrastructure to compete in the global economy. The more attention a voter pays to politics, the more she associates public works projects with secularism and free trade, and the more she accepts one party’s programs in its entirety. Voters initially attracted by candidate charisma, sometimes develop an habitual party identification. Many other voters, however, remain uncommitted, voting for whichever party seems better on the issue of the moment. The conservative and liberal ideologies help the groups define the terms of their cooperation, and help coalition stay together, but close observers note that electoral competition is not perfectly one-dimensional. With their highway complete, religious coffee growers sometimes vote Heritage because of the party’s temperance plank. Even the saloon-keepers, despite continuing conflicts with the clergy over business hours, sometimes defect to Heritage in protest of the humanistic ideas teachers push on their children.

The parties manage these potential cross-cutting cleavages with sharper rhetorical appeals to Freedom and Heritage, saying less about specific programs, and continuing to nominate candidates committed to the party’s agenda. This confuses many voters, who then end up voting on the basis of the performance of the economy. The groups are happy enough with this outcome. Each coalition controls government about half the time, an outcome much better than the numerically small policy-demanders could achieve without parties.

The point of this extended myth has been to highlight our key claims. Parties form when groups with intense policy demands organize to control nominations and contest elections. Voter inattentiveness creates the opportunity for intense minorities to pursue particularistic goals. In the next two sections we bring legislatures into the argument and develop our main claims more systematically.

Why Nominations?

Consider the options of a group with a policy demand. Alone or with a coalition, it can lobby office-holders to take up its cause, providing facts and talking points. This strategy is unlikely to succeed, however, unless the demand either can be framed as uncontroversially beneficial for a large number of voters, and/or lines up with the office-

holder's existing goals. Lobbying works for policy demands that officials already favor (Hall and Deardorff 2006.)¹

Of course, a group can try to win over an elected official with campaign contributions, but a principal-agent problem inevitably looms. The official can tell whether the group is contributing or not; it is much harder for the group to know whether the official is really advancing its agenda. Easily observed activities (bill sponsorship, roll call votes) are less consequential than the behind-the-scenes coalition-building efforts needed to shepherd policy changes through the legislative process (Hall, 1996.) Office holders always have an information advantage over policy demanders. They know more about their own actions and the policy-making environment.

The rise of interest group newsletters in the 1970's and, more recently, blogs, have made it easier for interest groups and activists to monitor office holders on matters of medium importance, such as amendment votes. This may have contributed to the widely noted increase in the polarization of parties in Congress (see Figure 2 below). But the point remains that the nature of the principal-agent relationship between a policy demander and an incumbent rarely favors the former. Policy demanders can (and do) try to strike deals with incumbent who do not already share their goals, but they fare much better putting genuine friends in office.

In seeking to control a nomination, interest groups and activists are in a strong position. Multiple aspiring office-seekers, none secure in the office they covet, compete for donations and other campaign resources. Interest and activist groups can pick and choose, now able to purchase support by the candidate rather than by the bill. And the costs of giving an office-seeker what she needs to win a primary election may not be very large.

The advantageous position of groups at the nomination stage is bolstered by lack of voter interest. Most citizens pay little enough attention to general elections and even less to nominations. The few who vote in primaries lack the anchoring cue of candidate partisanship, rendering them open to persuasion. Media coverage of primaries is also generally less than in general elections, further increasing the expected impact of small amounts of paid communication.

A final consideration is that parties provide useful cover for group agendas. The parties can claim to be about abstract principles, such as liberty and equality, rather than the

¹ The myth's initial policy demands (tariff, etc.) fit Lowi's (1964) "distributive politics" model: benefits are concentrated, costs diffuse. Many of the policy demands animating real parties fit this general profile, and groups seeking concentrated benefits are relatively advantaged in solving their collective action problem to become organized (Olson 1965) But party coalitions include other types of demands as well. In our myth, the Sunday alcohol ban brought concentrated costs, and led to the organization of the saloon keepers in direct zero-sum conflict with the already-organized clergy. Bawn and Noel (2007) argue formally that zero-sum conflict is the primary reason that dominant monopoly parties (like our myth's "traditional coalition") devolve into two-party competition (see also Trounstein 2008.)

intense policy concerns of their groups. Groups need this noble fiction: what Schattschneider observed in 1960 is still true today:

All calculations of influence of pressure groups in elections must take account of the unpopularity of nearly all special-interest groups. Pressure groups are not only small; they are widely disliked. (1960, p. 53)

For many reasons, then, nominations are a natural focus of group activity. But how do multiple groups, each with narrow policy demands, choose a sympathetic candidate? Our answer: by forming a long coalition.

In choosing a candidate, a coalition of policy demanders picks someone that each group trusts to represent its interests in a manner acceptable to the coalition as a whole. As in legislative parties, groups are expected to support their side in most contests and oppose it in few. The benefit of coalition membership is tremendous: A group acting alone has little chance of filling a majority of government offices with friends or passing any large fraction of its desired policy; as a member of a party, it can realistically hope to do both.

There are, however, important differences between legislative and nominating coalitions. In the legislature, “supporting” the party means voting for its bills. In the electoral context, “supporting” means contributing resources (money, manpower or expertise) to its candidates. In legislative long coalitions, each legislator makes an identical contribution to success (a single vote) up until the 50%-plus-1 threshold is reached. In electoral long coalitions, contributions vary in size and nature. More significantly, in electoral long coalitions, there is no equivalent of the 50%-plus-1 threshold.

If a majority of legislators vote for a bill, then it passes. No uncertainty here. But if a majority of the groups involved in a campaign support Candidate X, there is no guarantee that X will win. Even if the groups controlling a majority of the resources in a campaign support X, still no guarantee. Even an oversized coalition does not insure victory. The election depends on voters.

What About Voters?

One might question whether policy demanders have anything to gain from nominating a friendly candidate. According to the Median Voter Theorem (Black, 1948; Downs, 1957), electoral competition should force parties to choose candidates who advocate policies close to those of centrist voters, far from what policy demanding groups prefer.

This argument, however, depends on the questionable assumption that voters can judge the policy and ideological positions of candidates.

Table 1 (on next page) presents relevant evidence. About 38 percent of voters in the 2000 election did not know that George W. Bush is more conservative than Al Gore. Voter awareness is lower for two concrete policy items at the heart of the current partisan divide – limits on abortion, and cuts in government to reduce spending. Only 47 percent knew which party controlled the House of Representatives.

Table 1. Voter Information about Politics and Government

IDEOLOGY

Rate each candidate on a 7-point scale from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative”

Bush rated more conservative than Gore	73%
Bush rated more liberal than Gore	11%
Percent correct with guessing adjustment	62%

ABORTION

Assign each candidate to a position on the following scale:

1. *By law, abortion should never be permitted*
2. *The law should permit abortion only in the case of rape, incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger.*
- 3 *The law should permit abortions for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established.*
4. *By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice*

Bush wants tighter abortion limits than Gore	54%
Bush wants less tight abortion limits than Gore	8%
Percent correct with guessing adjustment	42%

SIZE OF GOVERNMENT

Rate each candidate on the 7-point scale, with endpoints as shown:

Some people think the government should provide fewer services even in areas such as health and education in order to reduce spending. ... Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending.

Bush favors fewer services than Gore	70%
Bush favors more services than Gore	10%
Percent correct with guessing adjustment	60%

PARTY CONTROL OF GOVERNMENT

Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington BEFORE the election (this/last) month?

Republicans had majority	57%
Democrats had majority	10%
Percent correct with guessing adjustment	47%

Source: 2000 National Election Studies, face-to-face mode, voters only

How much should a party be expected to moderate its positions in deference to an electorate in which half the voters do not even know whether it or its opposition controls the government? Somewhat, sometimes, we concede, but usually not very much.”

While ideological positioning seems to have relatively little effect on presidential elections, uncontrollable events clearly have large effects. Achen and Bartels (2004) showed that bad weather (droughts, hurricanes) in the election year leads to substantial vote loss by the incumbent president’s party. Weather, they estimate, cost Gore one million votes in the 2000 election. Unsuccessful wars also hurt the incumbent party (Hibbs, 2008; Karol and Miguel, 2007). The largest and best-documented effect on presidential elections is the performance of the national economy, which is only marginally more amenable to political control than the weather. If voters held presidents accountable for economic performance over their full term in office, economic voting might be defensible as a criterion of choice. But voters actually seem to be influenced only by economic conditions over the last six months before Election Day (Achen and Bartels 2004.) Again, one must ask: How much attention should parties be expected to pay to voter preferences when a roll of the dice six months before Election Day will be the biggest factor in the election?

In analyzing parties’ electoral incentives, one must distinguish between individual voters and aggregate electorates. Many individual voters, especially better informed, are quite sensitive to policy and ideology. This sensitivity, however, leads them to become loyal partisans of one side or the other. Other voters, especially the poorly informed, are less sensitive to policy, less tied to a party, and hence more changeable between elections. The net result is an electorate that, in aggregate, is less responsive to ideological positioning (which the parties could affect) than to changes in national conditions (which they often cannot).² In this situation, parties have relatively little incentive to trim their ideological sails. Their better move is to stand for what they want and hope for favorable national conditions.

To be sure, parties must tread carefully. As V.O. Key famously argued, voters are not fools. Even the poorly informed find cues and heuristics that allow them to make sense of politics and respond with a degree of rationality (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, 1991; Lupia 1992, 1994, Lupia and McCubbins 1998, Ferejohn 1995.) A candidate with a reputation for extremism will fare poorly among voters who lack a coherent ideology but still know they don’t like extremism. Candidates who attack popular programs like social security, or promote unpopular ones like busing to achieve racial integration of schools may likewise arouse the ire of voters not usually attentive to politics.

² Based on state-level data over the period 1952 to 1980, Rosenstone (1983) demonstrates that the ideological location of presidential candidates affected voter choice. However, using national-level data over the period 1948 to 2000, Bartels and Zaller (2001) found that moderation had a small and non-statistically significant effect on national totals. A reasonable conclusion is that moderation has a small but real effect on the national vote.

Yet, while voters can recognize and resist some kinds of extremism, our main point here is that voters, especially those who swing between parties, know dramatically little about politics. In the competitive world of elections, this makes a difference. We try to capture this difference as an “electoral blind spot” -- a policy region within which aggregate electorates do not enforce preferences even when they have stakes.

Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 summarizes our key assumptions about the electoral blind spot in relation to the policy space that developed in our myth. The origin is the ideal point of the majority of voters, who are happiest when *none* of the groups’ policy demands are implemented. The ideal points for the Heritage Party (**HP**) and the Freedom Party (**FP**) reflect negotiated agreements among each party’s constituent policy demanders. Fully-informed voters would vote for the candidate closer to the origin, creating pressure for both parties to scale back the very policy demands they were created to promote. But uninformed voters may not be able to tell which platform they prefer.

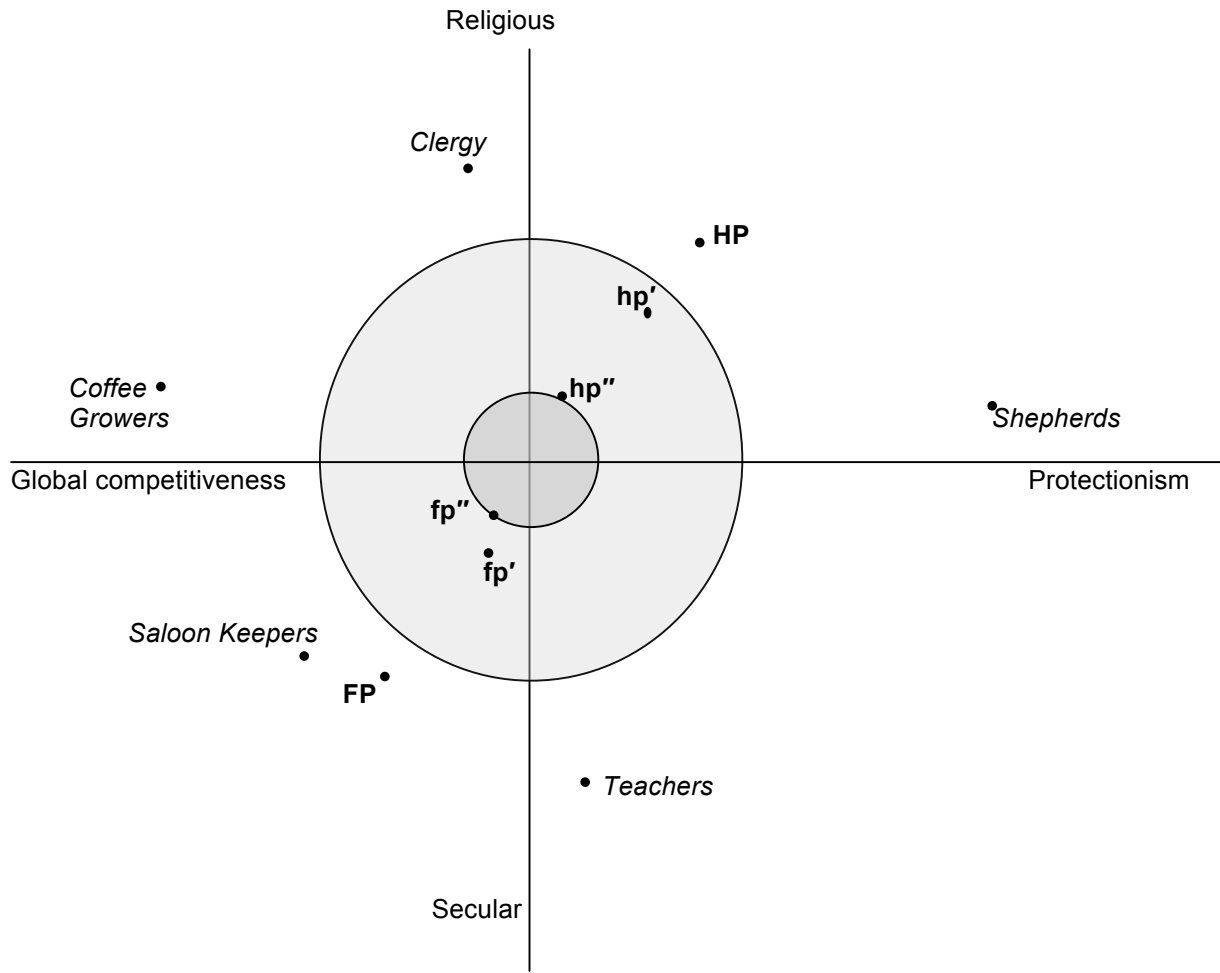
Consider first an extreme case, in which voters pay no attention at all, completely unable to distinguish between candidates’ positions, no matter how outrageous. In this case, parties can nominate candidates whose positions reflect only the negotiated position of their policy demanders. Voters will behave like fools, choosing candidates on the basis of weather, charisma or some other irrelevancy. Parties will abet voters’ foolishness by competing on these irrelevancies rather than on policy.

Now consider the opposite extreme: voters are fully informed and react to every nuance of the candidates’ positions. This is the assumption normally made in spatial voting models, usually (we hasten to note) for purposes of simplicity, not veracity. Under this assumption, we can use circles centered at a person’s ideal point to denote “indifference curves,” the set of policies regarded as equally good, that is, equally far from their ideal. In this case, with a majority of ideal points at the origin, the party with most moderate nominee will win.

More realistic than either extreme is the assumption that voters react only to large differences in policies. The inability to perceive small differences can be depicted in a spatial model as “thick” indifference curves.³ In Figure 1, suppose that voters do not discriminate among any of the policies in darker small circle, including their ideal point. To our inattentive voter, these policies all sound pretty reasonable; she would not quibble

³ Thick indifference curves are a standard way that microeconomics texts illustrate the inability to perceive small differences. They are not the way in which uncertainty is typically represented in rational choice models. A more conventional approach would model voter uncertainty about candidate positions as probability distributions, typically centered at the true values. Voters would then react to small difference in expected candidate position (see for example, Shepsle 1972, Lupia and McCubbins 1994.) Alternatively, probabilistic voting models assume that voter choice has a random component but also a typically a systematic component that -- again -- is sensitive to small changes in party position. Both of these approaches presume a higher level of engagement with politics than implied by our electoral blind spot.

Figure 1: Groups, Parties and the Electoral Blindspot



with any of them. The next indifference set consists of a lighter shaded area in the larger circle. The voter recognizes that both policies **fp'** and **hp'** in this region are somewhat more extreme than she would like: they are not in the same indifference set as her ideal. The voter does not, however, recognize that point **fp'** (too much Freedom) is actually closer to her ideal point than point **hp'** (too much Heritage.)

If low information creates wide bands of indifference for voters, each party has an incentive to nominate a candidate whose position is *just on the edge* of the voters' highest indifference set – that is, to a point like **fp''** or **hp''**. Nominating a more extreme candidate will lead to defeat. That is, if Freedom's candidate scales back the party's demands for highways, schools and beverages to **fp''**, but Heritage's candidate promotes wool tariff and religion to the level **hp'** (or, worse, insists on its ideal point **HP**), Heritage is certain to lose. There is no need for either party, however, to scale back beyond the point where voters will notice any difference. Thus, the voters' innermost indifference set is our "electoral blind spot," the set of policies that will not arouse the attention and ire of voters. As long as parties stay within the electoral blind spot, they are effectively free to nominate any candidate they want. They have nothing to gain from further compromise, nothing to lose from sticking to their guns.

In reality, however, the blind spot is neither clearly demarcated nor fixed for all time. What voters notice, or fail to notice, depends on media coverage, campaign dynamics, suddenly salient events, and how candidates express themselves. In the face of this uncertainty, parties continually test the limits of the blind spot, striving to find the most extreme candidate still able to win the general election.

To study this trade-off, assume the party has two potential candidates, with names borrowed from Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign. Mr. Echo is a moderate. Ms. Choice is more radical, potentially outside the safe zone of the electoral blind spot, but indisputably committed to the goals of the policy demanders. Letting U_E represent the party's utility if Echo wins the election, U_C if Choice wins, we have $U_C > U_E$. (If the other party wins, utility is normalized to zero.)

Let p_E denote the probability that Echo will win the general election, p_C the probability that Choice will win. The party best pursues the collective interest of its policy demanders by picking the candidate that offers the higher *expected* utility, taking account of both how much the party would benefit from either candidate taking office (U_E versus U_C) and how likely each candidate is to win (p_E versus p_C). A unified rational party will favor moderate Echo over radical Choice if

$$p_C U_C < p_E U_E$$

or

$$\frac{U_C}{U_E} < \frac{p_E}{p_C} \tag{1}$$

The left side of Inequality (1) is the proportional utility advantage to the party from nominating the radical candidate, the “policy benefit” of radicalism. The right side of Inequality (1) shows the relative electability of the moderate, the “electoral benefit” of moderation. When the electoral benefit of moderation exceeds the policy benefit of radicalism, the party will prefer the moderate.

An important implication is that the more voters are blind to extremism – that is, the closer p_E is to p_C – the more parties will tend to nominate extremist candidates. The more election outcomes are affected by non-policy factors, from economic voting to charisma, the more leeway parties have to nominate extremists.

Different policy demanders will likely evaluate candidates differently, so U_C and U_E will differ among the groups. Even in the absence of uncertainty about the size of the electoral blind spot, \mathbf{fp}'' in Figure 1 is but one of many positions on Freedom Party’s edge of the electoral blind spot. The coffee growers would clearly prefer a candidate less stridently secular and more strongly committed to free trade; the teachers would prefer the opposite.

Reconciliation of these intra-party differences is an essential feature of nomination processes. For the coffee growers, for example, \mathbf{fp}'' is both closer to their own ideal point and closer to the majority of voters, indicating greater electability. Obviously the coffee growers prefer \mathbf{fp}'' . The teachers would prefer \mathbf{fp}' on policy grounds, but taking electability into account, they might be almost as happy with \mathbf{fp}'' . If these were available candidates, the teachers and growers might find it easy to agree on the nomination of moderate \mathbf{fp}'' . If, however, \mathbf{fp}' were to move northward in the space, the teachers and growers might find it harder to agree.

Pundits often recount nomination struggles in terms of extremism versus centrism. Our concept of the blind spot shows how intra-party differences in priorities matter as well.

Discussion

A reader who went from our above discussion to leading textbooks on parties and elections would experience a severe disconnect. She would find no hint that parties seek, consciously or otherwise, to exploit voter inattentiveness. Her main impression from the textbook account would be that parties work very hard to win elections.

The disconnect would be as great for what textbooks do discuss. One major topic is coordination among state and national party committees and the election committees of the House and Senate. Another is the capacity of party professionals to help candidates with polls, staffing, and media relations, which is viewed as a key indicator of the health of parties. Textbook writers often view the professional staff of parties, overseen by leading office holders and in service to their candidacies, as “the party.”

“Party-linked” interest groups are recognized in the textbook view as important to parties, but as potentially rival influences, not core components. As Marjorie Randon Hershey

comments in the 14th edition of *Party Politics in America*:

In addition to competition within each party, parties also compete on the electoral stage with other political organizations. Groups such as single-issue organizations, labor unions, religious lobbies, insurance companies, and other business groups involve themselves in campaigns in order to achieve their political goals. Some of these groups work very aggressively to help candidates get nominated, raise money, influence public opinion, and win elections. (159-60)

Activists, too, compete for influence. Hershey writes that activists are “essential to a party’s success” because of their volunteer efforts, but can “complicate the lives of party leaders” by demanding involvement in party decisions (98). Hershey considers whether activists might do more harm than good, concluding that they are “not necessarily a threat to strong party organizations.”

The textbook party, as described by Hershey and other leading scholars, is clearly a different animal than the one we have theorized. The question is which conception enables us to better explain how the political system operates.

Aldrich’s *Why Parties?* has perhaps done more than any other work to precisely define the textbook view of parties. As we have seen, Aldrich holds that legislative office holders create political parties for their purposes. Office holders also set up electoral institutions to help with their re-elections. Aldrich uses the term “party in service” to describe the role of the modern form of these electoral organizations. Aldrich views interest groups and activists as an important part of the modern service party, but of secondary importance to office-seekers. Commenting on “benefit seekers” who seek extreme policies, he writes:

The political role of this part of the party is to attempt to constrain the actual leaders of the party, its ambitious office seekers as they try to . . . [appeal] to the electorate (p. 183).

In sum, the textbook party puts office-seekers and professional staff at the center and policy demanders at the periphery.⁴ This is a much different animal than the one we have theorized, which puts the coalition of policy demanders at the center.

Although proposing a group-centered theory of parties, we acknowledge that not all groups associate with parties and that parties are not always dominated by groups. Many conjectures are possible for the lack of partisan associations of groups such as AIPAC or

⁴ Other works taking this general view are Maisel and Brewer, 2010, 232-238; Hetherington and Larson, 11th edition, 2010, pp. 3-5; Hermanson, 2008, 5th edition, Chapter 4.

the elderly, but non-partisanship is unusual among politically active groups.⁵

Similarly, the most common example of a party dominated by more by office holders than policy demanders is the urban party machine, which Mayhew (1986) calls Traditional Party Organization (TPO). But as Mayhew showed, even in their heyday TPOs were not the dominant form of political organization in the U.S. Now they are all but extinct. Non-partisan groups and party machines pose interesting questions for the study of parties, but in our view they are best regarded as exceptional cases rather than paradigmatic examples.

EMPIRICAL SOUNDINGS

Most of what political scientists know about parties is unhelpful in discriminating between office holder and policy demander parties. For example, a party dominated by policy demanders needs strong legislative institutions to work out coalitional differences and pass party legislation, just as does a party dominated by office holders. Both want professional staff in service to candidates. Nonetheless, there is relevant evidence, not definitive but strong enough to establish the group-centered theory as a credible alternative.

We begin by examining evidence on legislative politics, moving from there to nominations and then to formation and change of national party coalitions.

Excess polarization.

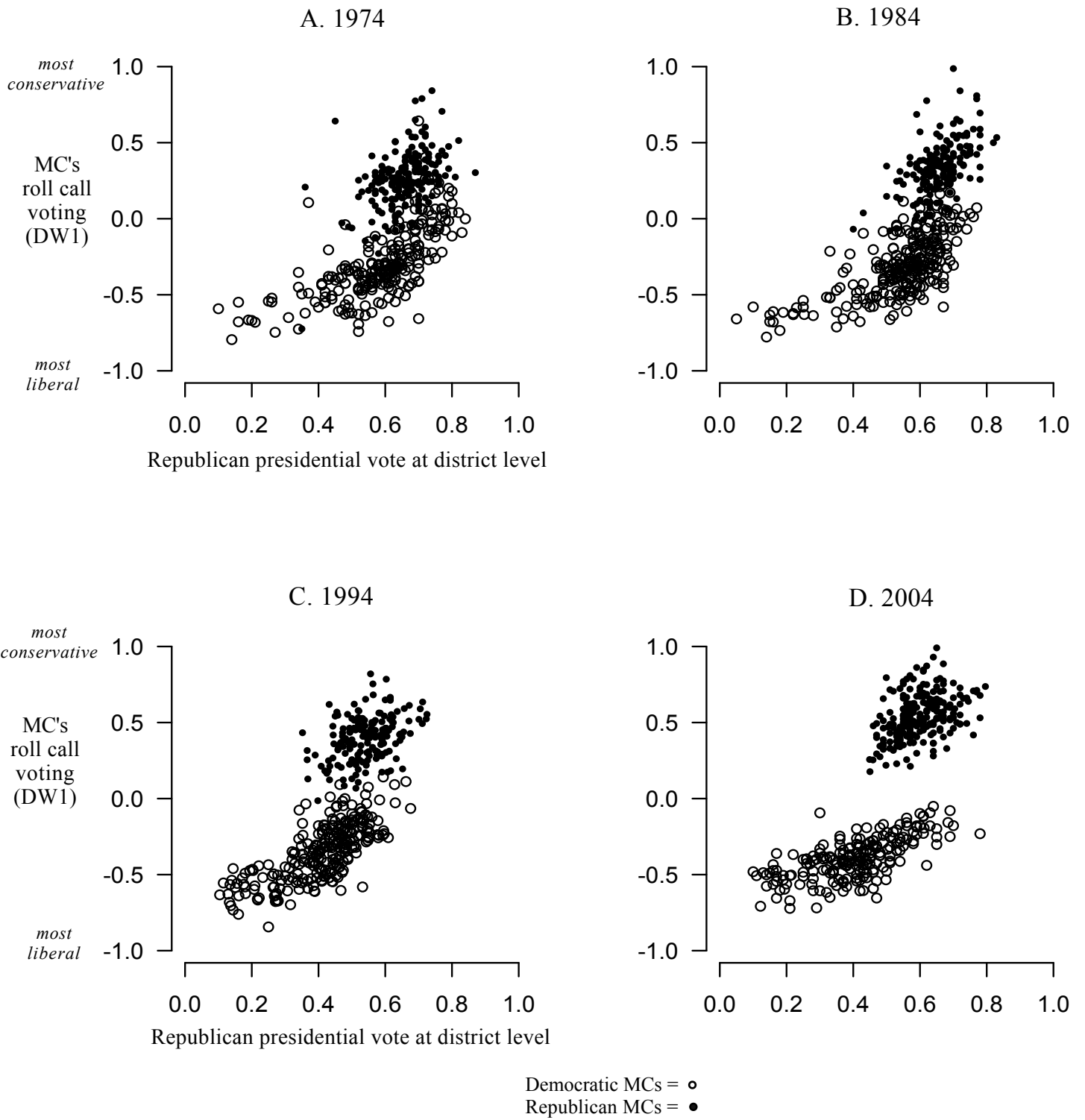
Leading theories of Congress hold that legislators organize parties in order to control the agenda on behalf of an electorally valuable “brand name” (Cox, 1987; Cox and McCubbins, 1992, 2005; Snyder and Ting 2002). In recent decades, the Democratic brand is associated with ideological liberalism and the Republican brand with conservatism.

Figure 2 gives an overview of liberal and conservative brands in the House of Representatives in the period 1974 to 2004. In each panel, the horizontal axis shows the vote for the Republican presidential candidate in the nation’s 435 congressional districts, and the vertical axis shows the roll call liberalism/conservatism of the Member of Congress from that district. The measure of roll call voting is the standard NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997).

The data show, as would be expected, that MCs from Republican districts vote more conservatively on House roll calls than do MCs from Democratic districts. Note, however, that the parties become more polarized over time. The pattern for 2004 is especially striking: Even though many districts are about 50-50 in voting for president,

⁵ Grossman and Dominguez (2009), using social network analysis, find that most group behavior is partisan in the electoral realms of endorsements and campaign contributions, less so in support for specific pieces of legislation.

Figure 2. *Patterns of political representation at four time points*



only a tiny number of districts is represented in Congress by a centrist MC. Nearly all MCs make voting records in the House that are either well to the right of center or well to the left. Are such extreme “brand names” really electorally valuable?

They are not. Although some brand differentiation may be electorally useful, the parties have gone too far. Legislators who vote with the polarized positions of their parties are more likely to suffer defeat (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan, 2005). The more extreme the MC’s voting record, the greater the electoral penalty. Ansolabehere, Stewart, Snyder (2001) show that this tendency of parties toward politically damaging excess polarization goes back to the 19th century.

Excess polarization is precisely what our above discussion of the electoral blind spot and nomination trade-offs predicts. It is at least mildly inconsistent with the idea that party brands serve electoral interests. Electoral losses result not from insufficient branding, but from party brands that are too clear and strong for voters’ tastes.

Aldrich acknowledges both excess polarization and the role of activists (policy demanders) in bringing it about. He writes:

There are . . . at least three ways a party filled with policy-motivated activists can generate candidates who reflect, in part, the policy cleavages separating the two parties’ activists. They will recruit, in part by self-selection, candidates whose personal preferences reflect those cleavages. The need for the support of party activists to gain nomination and the value of those activists’ working for the nominee in the general election will work against the incentive to moderate . . . [And finally] this pull away from the electoral center toward the party center will continue, generate incentives to act in office as [the candidates] advocated on the campaign trail. (p. 191-2)

Aldrich’s thesis in *Why Parties?* is that “the major political party is the creature of the politicians” (p. 4). But from our vantage point, a party in which activists recruit office seekers who are more extreme than voters want and induce them to pursue polarizing policies in office is an activist-dominated party.

Polarization and voter information

Notwithstanding the defeats of a few extremists, 95 percent of incumbents in the highly polarized House of Representatives win re-election, most by large margins. This could be construed as vindication of party brands, evidence that voters generally accept, perhaps even like the brands, that they do serve the electoral needs of most if not quite all MCs.

In contrast, we view the polarized votes of MCs as pursuit of policies demanded by interest groups and activists. The fact that voters only infrequently penalize this behavior reflects not approval, but the limited capacity of voters to discern extreme policy agendas for what they are.

How to adjudicate between these competing views? First, note that most voters cannot recall the names of both congressional candidates. Many do not know which party controls Congress. This suggests lax monitoring, but we concede lax monitoring might indicate well-earned trust. The critical question is: How would voters evaluate their MCs if they were able to monitor them more easily? If re-election rates remained uniformly high, it would suggest that voters are, after all, happy with the polarized party brands. But if easier monitoring leads voters to reject extremist MCs more often, it would suggest that normal levels of congressional polarization are tolerated only when beneath voters' normal radar.

Cohen, Noel and Zaller (2011) measured an exogenous determinant of monitoring and showed its effect on voter tolerance of extremist MCs. The key variable is the degree of overlap between congressional districts and newspaper markets (which generally reflect television markets as well.) When congruence is high – the newspaper market exactly overlaps the congressional district – everyone in the market is represented by the same MC. Journalists have an incentive to cover the MC and competing candidates find it economical to buy advertising against one another. In congruent districts, for reasons having nothing to do with MC behavior, voters end up relatively better-informed. When, however, congruence is low – when, for example, a district is one of 10 or 20 within a large metropolitan market – stories or advertising about one MC go to viewers who are mainly represented by other MCs, reducing the efficiency and hence the amount of such communication.

Cohen, Noel and Zaller calculate congruence as the number of newspaper markets into which a district falls, divided by the total number of districts covered by those newspapers. The measure varies from about .03 to 1 and can be calculated for nearly all districts from 1972 to 20[10].⁶ Mean congruence is rather low, 0.17, and only two percent of districts have congruence scores above .50. Thus, most voters live in districts in which mass communication about their MC is likely to be sparse.

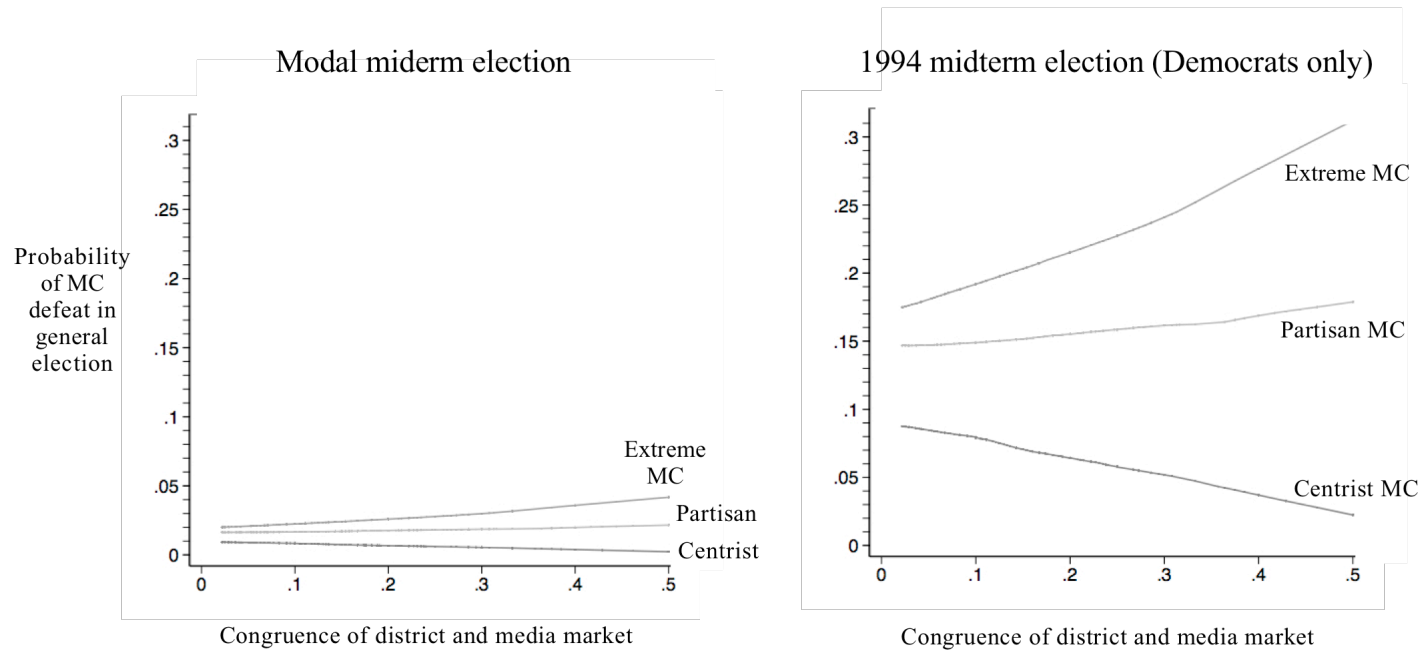
Figure 3 shows the effect of these congruence scores on probabilities of general election defeat for incumbent members of Congress who vary in ideological location. The panel at left shows results for a modal midterm election; the panel at right shows defeat rates for Democratic MCs in the 1994 midterm, when losses by Democratic incumbents were unusually numerous. All results are derived from a model of elections from 1972 to 2000 in which an incumbent sought re-election.

Figure 3 about here.

The pattern is clear: When congruence between markets and districts helps voters learn about their congressional candidates, they prefer centrists. In modal midterm elections, as shown on the left, this preference has little practical effect because the overall defeat rate for incumbents is low. But in the Republican landslide of 1994, as depicted on the

⁶ E.g., Arnold (2004) measured the actual amount of news coverage for a random sample of 187 MCs in 1993-1994. This amount correlated at .74 with the market-based measure.

Figure 3. Media markets, MC ideology, and probability of general election defeat



Note: Curves show probability of general election defeat for three kinds of MC at different levels of congruence between congressional district and media market. Extremist MC is defined by NOMINATE score of $|\geq .75|$; partisan MC is defined by score of $|\geq .50|$; centrist is defined by score of 0. Results in left panel are for a modal midterm year; results in right panel are for Democratic MCs in 1994 midterms. Estimates are derived from model of all general congressional elections from 1972 to 2010. The models contain controls for race, urban location, and district vote for president, all of which have large effects. From Cohen, Noel and Zaller (2011).

right, the defeat rate of extreme Democratic MCs in well-informed electorates is 30 percent, versus only 3 percent for centrists in such districts.

These results make it hard to argue that polarized party brands attract voters. One might still contend that the party brands have *indirect* electoral value because they please core policy demanders who then exert themselves for the re-election of MCs. But we would counter that parties that aim to achieve electoral success by first pleasing policy-demanding groups, forgoing the more comfortable path of centrism to do so, are best described as group-centered.

The preference of voters for centrists over partisan extremists is so strong that one may wonder why Congress has so few centrists (see Figure 2). One reason is that overall congruence between media markets and congressional districts is, as we noted above, quite low -- high enough to make clear that better-informed electorates favor centrists, but not high enough to elect a large number of them. Another, as we discuss below, is that moderates find it hard to win nomination -- and may be de-nominated if they stray from party orthodoxy after taking office. Finally, as Figure 3 indicates, parties pay heavy electoral penalties for extremism only in tidal eruptions like 1994. Since World War II, these eruptions have occurred about once per decade, often in response to events like war and depression that might cause big losses even if parties were far more moderate. Given this, parties are probably best off nominating staunch partisans and thereby maximizing the policy gains from the majority of elections in which extreme partisanship goes largely unnoticed by the electorate.

Growing the blind spot

One of the most important votes on any piece of major legislation in the House of Representatives is the vote to adopt the “rule” under which the bill is considered. The rule specifies amendments that can be offered, the order in which they are voted, and the substitution of new elements as debate proceeds. Sophisticated observers of Congress interpret these rules as complex partisan devices needed to insure that what ultimately passes reflects the position of the median legislator in the majority party (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005.)

An odd feature of votes on these rules is that many MCs with overall moderate records nonetheless vote for rules that assure passage of the more extreme position of the majority party. (Cox and McCubbins 1993, Theriault 2008.) Procedural votes are similarly partisan in the Senate (Lee 2009, 134). This misleading behavior is possible because procedural votes are often too obscure for citizens back home to understand. Compounding the deception, rules often allow amendments that are popular with ordinary voters but that, as the sequence of amendments is structured, have no chance of becoming part of the final law. Rules are also routinely used to prevent votes on amendments that would be popular with voters but are opposed by policy demanders.

The use of complex rules to assure partisan outcomes can be interpreted as way of controlling the agenda to create a brand name. Or it can be interpreted as a means to diminish “traceability” (Arnold 1990), to prevent voters from understanding how their

MCs are behaving, thereby enlarging the electoral blind spot. These interpretations could hardly be more different: The first highlights efforts by parties to create electoral accountability; the second highlights efforts by parties to avoid accountability and bamboozle voters.

Change in Party Coalitions

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the parties flipped positions on civil rights. The Democratic Party, after a century of domination by the southern defenders of Jim Crow, became the party of racial liberalism. The Republican Party, despite its anti-slavery origins, became the party of racial conservatism.

Party position change as momentous as this is rare in American politics, but parties do change positions on major issues with some regularity (Karol, 2009). How such changes occur – and especially the roles of office holders and policy demanders in bringing them about – is likely to reveal where the real power in parties lies. On this assumption, we now examine changes in party positions on race and on abortion

In a study that frames much research in this area, Carmines and Stimson (1989) propose a general model in which party leaders try different issues in an effort to lure voters to their side. The leaders aim to be strategic, but Carmines and Stimson, following a biological model of evolution, posit that successful adaptation is largely a matter of luck. When an issue catches on, leaders communicate their success to party activists, who recruit candidates advocating the new position to the party, who then complete the realignment by attracting new voters. The two scholars apply their model to racial realignment, explaining how the 1958 congressional election, which was not at all focused on racial issues, led to strategic decisions by Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater in 1964 to adopt new party positions on race, from which the racial realignment followed.

Carmines and Stimson thus take a decidedly office-centered view of party position change. This view has come under attack in recent research. Karol (2009) finds that on many issues Members of Congress and Presidential candidates changed positions in order to represent groups that had become more prominent in their party's coalitions or had new demands. He shows that Republican members of Congress began turning racially conservative in the 1940s – not in order to attract new voters, but to satisfy business concerns that anti-discrimination legislation would bring unwelcome federal interference in the marketplace. Republican House Speaker Joe Martin, who had some personal sympathy for a Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), explained the party's position in 1947 as follows:

I'll be frank with you: we are not going to pass a FEPC bill, but it has nothing to do with the Negro vote. We are supported by New England and Middle Western industrialists who would stop their contributions if we passed a law that would compel them to stop religious as well as racial discrimination in employment.⁷

⁷ Cited in Feinstein and Schickler, 2008, p. 19.

The Republican Party remained, as it had traditionally been, opposed to lynching and other manifestations of Jim Crow, but when civil rights conflicted with the interests of a core policy demander, the party stood with the policy demander.

The situation in the Democratic Party was less straightforward. The migration of African Americans to the North and their incorporation into urban machines gave northern office holders an interest in representing them. The enthusiasm of black voters for Franklin Roosevelt heightened this interest and led to civil rights initiatives by urban Democrats. But support for civil rights among northern Democrats during the New Deal was modest and a dominant block in the Democratic Party – the white South – was adamantly opposed.

The earliest indication of reliable left-wing support for civil rights appeared not in the Democratic Party, but among political intellectuals and pundits associated with progressive causes. As late as 1910, leftist political intellectuals were no more likely to sympathize with African Americans than were conservatives, but by 1930 the left was systematically more favorable (Noel, forthcoming). “Progressive ideology,” soon to be re-christened as “liberalism,” had realigned to favor it.

Shortly thereafter, groups associated with the Democratic Party became favorable toward civil rights and exerted pressure on the party to do so as well. Explaining this turn among northern Democratic MCs in the 1940s, Schickler, Pearson, and Feinstein (2010: 682) write:

... the Democratic Party’s core coalition partners were instrumental in transforming the party to embrace civil rights. These coalition partners included not only civil rights organizations, but also labor unions, religious- and ethnic-affiliated groups . . . and broad-based progressive policy groups, such as Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). These organizations, which were drawn into the Democratic Party during the New Deal for reasons having little or nothing to do with race, became among the most vocal proponents of civil rights measures, pulling the party towards their position.

Schickler et al. found that the Democratic MCs who became supportive of civil rights in the 1940s were not responding to constituency pressures from African Americans in their districts (see Figure 6a). The pressure came from more broadly from Democratic groups.

In another study, Feinstein and Schickler (2008) found that mid-level party officials and “amateur activists” at state Democratic conventions began in the 1940s to take pro-civil rights stances. These same forces, augmented by labor, pressed for a strong civil rights plank at the 1948 national party convention, causing southern segregationists to bolt to a new party. When it appeared that they might bolt again in 1952, the president of the United Auto Workers, a key player in the Democratic Party, said he doubted they would, “but if [the South] so chooses, let this happen; let the realignment of the parties proceed” (Feinstein and Schickler, 2008, p. 16).

Meanwhile, Republican Party platforms continued to favor civil rights through 1960. However, American conservatism had by 1950 adopted a new states' rights stance toward civil rights (Noel, forthcoming), and the conservative wing of the Republican Party was in virtual revolt against the party's moderation on just about everything, including its civil rights positions. One party operative, F. Clifton White, convened a meeting of militant conservatives in 1961, claiming in his opening statement, "We're going to take over the Republican Party . . . and make it the conservative instrument of American politics" (Middendorf, 2006, 15). An organizing genius, White brought a flood of new conservative activists into the Republican Party, many from the South, who became the backbone of Barry Goldwater's nomination in 1964.

These developments make it implausible to interpret the racial realignment of the parties in the candidate-centered terms of Carmines and Stimson. In both parties, traditional interest groups and realigned ideological groups had been pressing for change for at least 20 years before the 1964 election confirmed a new alignment. As Feinstein and Schickler say:

Johnson and Goldwater's respective embrace of civil rights liberalism and conservatism in 1964 are better understood as responses to deeply rooted forces within their parties than as free and independent decisions by the first movers in a sequence (p.18).

In another major change in party positions, Republicans have emerged in the last several decades as pro-Life on abortion and the Democrats as pro-Choice. In a leading study of this development, Layman, Carsey, Green, Herrera, and Cooperman (2010) argue that party change occurred when abortion activists (pro- and anti-) entered the presidential nomination process, offering their support to candidates who took the correct position. Ambitious office seekers, looking for advantage, were forced to accommodate, even when it meant changing long-held positions (Karol, 2009). Layman et al. argue that abortion fits other cases in which parties have "extended" conflict to new issues and offer this general model:

Once multiple groups of activists, each with noncentrist views on different issues, come into a party, office seekers have incentives to take ideologically extreme positions on all of those issues in order to appeal to them (327)

Party alignment on abortion in congressional politics seems to have followed a similar course. In three case studies, Cohen (2005) found that the election of pro-Life Republican MCs in the early 1990s was due to morally conservative activists who took on economically conservative "country club Republicans" in congressional primaries and won. In a systematic study of about 100 districts, Cohen further found that a large part of Republican gains in Congress in the 1990s was due to the replacement of office seekers who were non-committal on abortion with candidates who took pro-life positions.⁸

⁸ The adoption of a pro-choice position by the Democratic Party does not appear due to the hostile entry of a new group to the party (Wolbrecht, 2002). But as indexed by the

Not all office-seekers are bystanders in this process: Party leaders may seek to draw new groups to the party, just as new groups may seek entry to the party by advancing the interests of politicians who favor them. FDR's close relationship with organized labor in the 1930s and Ronald Reagan's with moral conservatives are examples of this (Karol, 2009). But the dominant forces in most party position changes are policy demanding interests and activists whom no office holder can control and all must accommodate.

Nominations for legislative office

Masket opens his (2009) study of polarized politics in California with an account of a closed-door meeting of Republicans in the legislature in 2003. The Democratic governor needed a handful of Republican votes to pass his budget and was negotiating private deals to get them. But the Republican Senate leader vowed that he would personally make sure that any Republican voting for the governor's budget would face a stiff challenge in the next primary. The Republican legislative leader had no direct power over primaries, but he did have the ties to local activists and donors to make good on his threat. His colleagues knew this. In the previous budget cycle, four Republicans had made private deals to support the Democratic budget and all were forced from politics, weeded out by various means at the nomination stage. So Republican party discipline held in 2003; bipartisan compromise, even if lubricated by benefits targeted to the districts of the compromisers, was a path too dangerous to tread.

This incident highlights the importance of nominations in our theory of political parties. Not the effort to create a party brand, but fear of de-nomination is the motive that holds legislative coalitions together.

Systematic evidence that party control of nominations has this effect is, however, lacking. Indeed, the textbook view is that parties have little control over legislative nominations. They may sometimes recruit candidates to run in the other party's bastions, or to head off nomination of an extremist in a moderate district, but in the large majority of races, parties play little role. As Paul Herrnson (2008) writes

Candidates, not parties, are the major focus of congressional campaigns. ... The need to win a party nomination forces congressional candidates to assemble their own campaign organizations, formulate their own electoral strategies, and conduct their own campaigns. (p. 6)

Or, as Jacobson puts it, a nomination "is not something to be awarded by the party but rather a prize to be fought over ... by freebooting political entrepreneurs" (2004, p. 16; see also Herrnson, 2008, p. 50).

But freebooting entrepreneurs do not fight with bare knuckles. They need money, door knockers, pollsters, ad makers and much else. Where do they get it? Usually from the

attitudes of delegates to national party conventions from 1972 to 1992, the party did become more pro-choice over the period 1972 to 1992 (Wolbrecht, 2002).

coalition of interest groups and activists associated with a party in a particular community. With some local variation, members of these coalitions espouse the set of positions for which their national party stands, and insist that candidates do too. These party positions, as we just saw above, do not descend from on high; they result from politicking within the national party. Serious candidates know they need to support national party positions in order to attract the support of local coalitions and mostly toe the line. This critical aspect of party control of nominations is largely overlooked by the candidate-centered view of parties.

Local party coalitions do not typically work through formal party structures, but they may still have definite organizational structure. In a study of four communities in California, Masket (2009) found that each had an active local party organization that was deeply involved in primary elections for local, state, and congressional offices. None of the local parties looked like one of Mayhew's TPO's. Rather, they consisted of networks of office holders, interest group leaders, activists, consultants, and assorted others, which Masket called an Informal Party Organization (IPOs).

In two urban communities, successful party nominees worked up the ladder of an informal Democratic organization dominated by orthodox liberals. In consequence the nominees were liberals too, especially on race issues, a matter of intense local concern. In one congressional district, however, a 18-year incumbent drifted toward moderation, voting in favor of fast track trade negotiating authority, and was beaten in his primary by a union-backed state legislator.

In a third community, the preferences of a conservative Republican organization, the Lincoln Club, dominated nominations. The club collected dues to use as campaign donations, formed committees to decide which candidates to support, and wound up on the winning side of almost all Republican nominations in its area.

Local party involvement in nominations is thus alive and well in at least some communities. How many exactly is impossible to say without more investigation. But one point is worth underscoring: If Masket had limited his research to formal party organizations, he would have found much less evidence of party influence.

What is the role of local parties in the larger universe? Do they simply feed ambitious office holders into the legislature, where the real work of party organization then occurs? Or are local nominating coalitions the primary driver of party organization?

Further evidence from California addresses this question. In the 1910s, California Progressives enacted an unusually effective set of anti-party reforms. Foremost among them was cross-filing, which allowed state legislative candidates to run in both primaries:

For example, a Republican Assembly member could run in the Democratic primary, as well as her own, without her party affiliation being visible to voters. If she won both primaries (as the vast majority of incumbents did during this era), hers would be the only name appearing on the general election ballot, accompanied by a "Rep-Dem" hybrid label. Most incumbents won reelection at the primary stage through such means. (Masket 2007, p. 485)

Cross-filing, combined with the absence of party endorsements in primaries, severed the link between local party organization and party nominations. In these circumstances, partisan organization ceased to play any real role in the state legislature. Voting for the Speaker became non-partisan and stable voting coalitions (as measured by NOMINATE) largely disappeared. When a Democratic speaker in the 1930's tried to enforce party discipline in service of a New Deal style agenda, the legislature revolted and he was replaced.

Policy-oriented group—unions on the left and the fledgling California Republican Assembly on the right – agitated to end cross-filing. Legislators resisted, but liberal activists were able to end it via a ballot initiative. Almost immediately, interest groups, working through a newly partisan Speaker, became active in party primaries. The subsequently elected Democratic majority voted as a stable coalition, passing a raft of important liberal legislation. Masket shows that the abolition of cross-filing – that is, the removal of the barrier to control of nominations by local activists – was the turning point.

Masket's findings are hard to reconcile with the view that legislators want strong parties. In mid-century California, legislators not only didn't want parties, they resisted measures intended to bring them about.

Nominations for President

From 1828 through 1968, America's two major parties chose their presidential nominees in national conventions of delegates from the nation's state parties. Many political scientists think of these national conventions, with their colorful demonstrations and smoke-filled rooms, as the national parties. The fact that conventions occurred regularly and conducted their business in brief quadrennial meetings made the study of national parties straightforward and convenient to study.

It was convenient for candidates as well. Convention delegates were typically long-time party workers and often voted as instructed by state and local party leaders. Presidential aspirants knew where the power lay and how to compete for the party's favor. Starting in the early 20th century primaries were part of the process, but most delegates were still chosen in less open, party-dominated caucuses and committee meetings. Candidates' goal in running in primaries –which they did very selectively- was to impress the party leaders who would make the final choice at the convention.

All this ended abruptly in 1972 when the Democratic Party adopted the McGovern-Fraser reforms in the wake of protests at its 1968 convention. The most important reform was limiting national conventions to delegates chosen by voters and pledged to particular candidates.⁹ The candidate who won the most pledged delegates in primaries and caucuses was the de facto nominee. Delegates continued to gather in national

⁹ Since many states adopted primaries to comply with McGovern-Fraser's requirements Republican Conventions were transformed as well.

conventions, but their task, like that of the Electoral College, was to ratify rather than to choose.

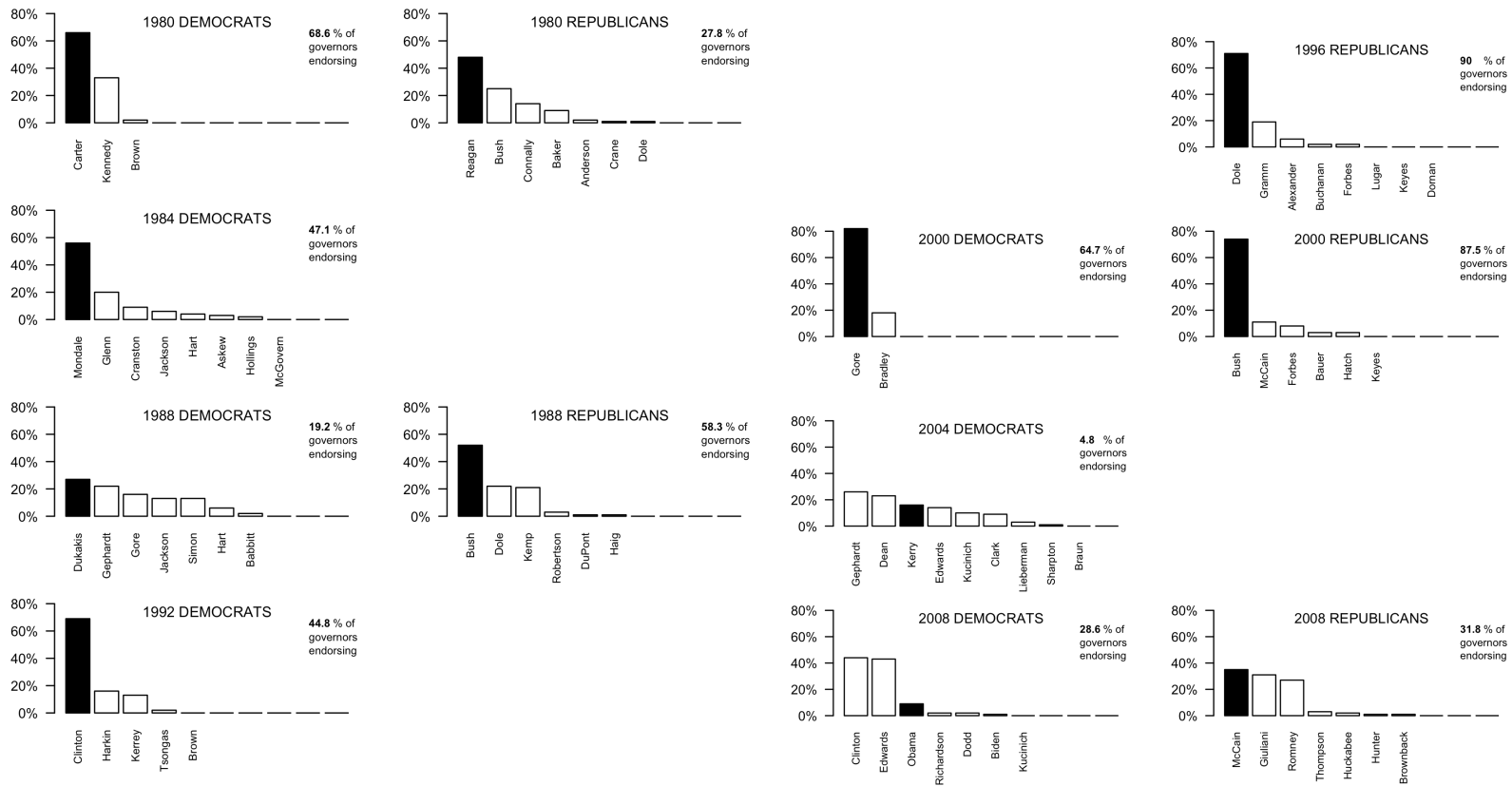
Most political scientists concluded that the reforms, soon adopted by the Republican Party as well, killed the national parties. If the national party is thought of as state party delegates assembling to choose a nominee, then the verdict was correct. In a precursor to this paper's theory of party, Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller (2008) argued that the national party is better thought of as a coalition of policy demanders trying to elect loyalists to office. Using this broader view, they found that many of the same policy demanders who had been active in the pre-reform system adapted to, and remained important in, the new system. The adaptation was to reach a consensus ahead of the state primaries and caucuses on a candidate acceptable to all of them, and to then work together to promote that candidate through the new system of delegate selection.

The key evidence for this thesis consists of public endorsements of candidates made by party leaders and activists prior to the Iowa caucuses, as shown in updated form in Figure 4. In nine of 12 nominations from 1980 to 2008, the candidate with the most endorsements won nomination; in only one of the 12 cases did a candidate lacking early commitments from insiders win. Changes in endorsement rates preceded gains in fundraising and poll standing, which allays concerns that endorsements might simply respond to polls and money. On this evidence, Cohen et al. concluded that party groups and activists continue to play a big role in the nomination process and often to dominate it. Rank-and-file voters possess the formal power to nominate, but they normally follow the insider consensus.

The evidence for this view has limits. Most strikingly, the role of insiders seems (in Figure 4) sharply diminished in the two most recent cycles, 2008 in particular. With just over 10 percent of pre-Iowa endorsements, Obama caught frontrunner Hillary Clinton in Iowa and slogged to victory in the state contests that followed. Yet, while one cannot say that Obama's nomination was the insider choice, he had much more early support than shows in Figure 4. In spring, 2006 Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid summoned the freshman senator to his office and urged, to Obama's amazement, that he run for president. It later surfaced that the entire Senate Democratic leadership, along with several other senators, were early Obama backers. None, however, made an early public commitment, partly because of fear of retribution by Clinton, and partly because they needed evidence that the neophyte politician could win outside of his base in Chicago (Heilemann and Halperin 2010). However in Iowa, the site of the first public contest, Obama had more insider endorsements than Clinton or Edwards and trounced both of them. From the start Obama also had strong support among Democratic fundraisers, who kept him even with the Clinton money machine throughout the contest. Obama was not an outsider crashing the party; he was the stealth candidate of the anti-Clinton wing of a divided party.

In studying an institution as deeply strategic as a party, one must notice what does not happen as much as what does. In this vein, we note the large number of major figures who test the waters of presidential politics but then simply drop out. Examples include

Figure 4: Insider Endorsements in Presidential Nominations



Gerald Ford in 1980, Donald Rumsfeld in 1988, Dan Quayle and Dick Cheney in 1996, Dick Gephardt in 2000, Al Gore in 2004, John Kerry in 2008 and Haley Barbour in 2012. Most races attract 10 to 15 interested politicians, but fewer than half actually place their name on a ballot. In the testing phase, office-seekers meet with groups, leaders, activists, fund-raisers, and top office holders, who grill them on their strategy to become president and the agenda they would pursue in office. From the candidates' side, the question is whether they can get the backing needed to mount a serious campaign. For a few, the answer is a clear yes; they easily and quickly put together juggernauts that suck resources from other candidates and sweep to victory in the state contests. Al Gore and George W. Bush were in this category in 2000. For some others, the answer is equivocal, encouraging the politician to run but guaranteeing nothing. Obama and Clinton were in this category in 2008. And sometimes the answer is so discouraging that the candidate, even major candidates like Gore in 2004, simply drop out. This screening process, though lacking formal structure and difficult for political scientists to observe, explains how a party, conceived as a coalition of interest groups and activists, can get the candidates it wants out of the nomination process despite the demise of the traditional nominating convention.

We do not claim that the pattern of insider influence in Figure 5 decisively supports our group-centered account. The three recent prediction failures are too important to overlook. The pre-Iowa endorsement data do, however, lend plausibility to our account, and they raise an important question for candidate-centered views (e.g., Aldrich, 1995; Wayne, 2008.) With so many candidates trying to build campaigns and so few making it even to first base, how do we know that the stable set of groups supplying campaign resources are not the ones calling the shots?

Parties and Democracy

In *Winner-Take-All Politics*, Hacker and Pierson claim that the “dominant view of American politics” in public discourse is that electoral politics is simply a “spectacle”:

In the audience sits a fairly inchoate mass of voters. In the ring are politicians, individual showmen who seek their favor. They succeed or fail in wooing a fickle electorate, partly based on events -- Vietnam, riots, an assassination, an economic downturn--and partly on their skill in managing the related challenges. This view of politics is ... reassuring: If politicians are doing something, it must be because voters want them to. There's just one problem: It misses the essence of American politics. In particular, this near-universal perspective leaves out two critical things: public policy and organized interest groups (pp.100-101).

They go on to develop their alternative view, “politics as organized combat.” Leading the combat are skilled and resourceful interest groups, especially business, who get their way far more often than they deserve.

We agree with Hacker and Pierson on their central point. To posit that American politics is mainly organized by election-minded politicians, as the dominant school of American

politics does, is to miss its essence. Organized combat among groups who aim to get more than their fair share of government policy is closer to the heart of the matter.

We would also agree that business groups, which pour huge amounts of cash into politics, get more than their fair share of government policy. How could it be otherwise? But numerous other groups, from Christian fundamentalists to gun advocates to environmentalists to civil rights activists, behave similarly. They differ from business in the type of resource they pour into politics: more manpower, less cash. But they are trying to do exactly what business groups try to do – pursue their policy demands, which they regard as just and fair, whether most voters agree or not.

The important question here is not whether the organized get more out of politics: surely they do. The question is how to understand and evaluate a political system inevitably dominated by organized interests.

Our complaint with currently dominant theories of party is that they perform poorly at this task. Political science too often views party as an institution standing apart from major societal groups, organized by office holders and for their purposes. This is not an implausible description; indeed, it applies reasonably well to the machine party organizations once seen in U.S cities. Applied to contemporary politics, this view focuses on what organized groups do to help office-holders: conveying information, contributing to campaigns in the form of money for advertisements and volunteers for mobilization. Groups' primary role is to support persuasion efforts in service of the reelection of incumbents.

In our theory, major parties do not stand apart from society's organized forces; they are the political action arms of competing coalitions of these forces. These coalitions attempt to select office holders at the nomination stage, enable them to win the general election, and keep them loyal while in office. Organized groups also assist office holders in communicating with voters, but persuasion is not the most important aspect of their involvement with parties. The difference between a party system in which interest groups and activists mainly help self-selected office seekers to communicate with voters, and one in which policy demanders use nominations to select office seekers (and also help with communication), is significant.

As we acknowledged, evidence in support of our theory of party is not definitive. But it is strong enough to raise questions about existing theory and to motivate future research. This research should branch out from the official organizations and top office holders on which it is now focused. It should consider more carefully whether agenda control in Congress aims at pleasing voters or pleasing policy demanders. It should, above all, find ways to extract systematic information about the informal, de-centralized, often secretive process by which interest groups and activists do the sensitive work of coordinating among themselves to nominate candidates for party office. Fifty years ago, political scientists were aware of the centrality of party nominations and adept at studying them in urban machines and party conventions. In today's political world, the selection of party nominees is as important to politics as in the past, but much more difficult to observe and analyze.

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