

Taking Sides: Party Competition, Interest Group Strategy, and the Polarization of American Pluralism

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Book Overview	1
Chapter Synopses	3
About the Authors	7

Book Overview

The traditional depiction of American organized interest groups casts them as “special interests”—that is, parochial-but-pragmatic pursuers of narrow political agendas. Special interests introduce challenges to American democracy: corruption of individual legislators, unequal representation, and difficult-to-penetrate issue networks that make government inefficient and unresponsive. At the same time, they offer expertise on policy issues, representation to industries, causes, and communities that transcend geographic boundaries, and the pragmatism necessary to build unexpected coalitions within our Madisonian system. This has allowed them to maintain a posture of nonpartisanship even as they partner with partisan lawmakers. Thus, groups have occupied a unique role in American democracy, dating back to the Founding and extending to the present.

This is beginning to change. While most interest groups in the United States still describe themselves as non-partisan, beginning in the 1990s more and more have aligned themselves with one of the two major political parties. They attend their chosen party’s conventions, make partisan campaign contributions, share donor lists with their chosen party’s fundraising arms, and encourage their members to vote exclusively for their party’s candidates. Prior work has demonstrated that parties benefit from these changes, as the relationships they cultivate grant them access to the funds and voters that each group represents. Yet, given interest groups’ traditionally narrow and pragmatic posture, it is far less clear why groups themselves go along with this. Indeed, by aligning with one party, groups risk alienating the other party, imperiling the group’s initiatives when that party is in power. Moreover, groups who “go partisan” risk alienating some of their own members—*the lifeblood*

of many interest groups—who may believe in the group’s cause but do not share its party label. When groups go partisan, then, their interests get tied to their party’s, and what they “represent” becomes less clear. So, what happens when interests are no longer “special”?

Taking Sides: Party Competition, Interest Group Strategy, and the Polarization of American Pluralism examines *why* some groups have grown more partisan over time, *which* groups have done so (and when), *how* partisan groups behave differently than “special interests,” and *what* the consequences of this growing trend are for American government and democracy. Leveraging a massive new dataset on interest groups’ publicly observable positions on congressional legislation from 1973 to 2021, as well as innovative preference scaling and text analysis to quantify partisan competition across disparate issue areas and over time, we offer the first examination of how modern party competition influences interest group strategy and lobbying success—and what that means for federal policymaking moving forward. We reveal how the pressure to “go partisan” compromises interest group representation, ultimately gaining short-term access at the expense of long-term independence and influence. This evolution has troubling consequences for the role of organized interests in American democracy.

While groups pursue policy objectives in multiple ways, their publicly observable positions on bills are critical for understanding their intentions with respect to other political actors. Public positions, indeed, help groups build brands and communicate with their own members, with other groups, and with policymakers. Thus, the bills on which groups take positions reveal their goals and priorities—from which we can assess their strategies. We analyze over 200,000 such positions, taken by several thousand organizations, on the full range of issues that Congress has addressed over the past five decades, making *Taking Sides* the first-ever quantitative, scholarly examination of interest groups’ federal policymaking behavior over this breadth of historical coverage.

Our key theoretical insights focus on how party competition affects interest group strategies and influence. We argue that party competition, rooted in the rise of insecure majorities in the 1980s and solidified during the Gingrich Revolution, has ensnared many organized interests into a feedback loop in which partisanship gets groups’ priorities onto the legislative agenda—but only when “their” party is in power and when it contributes to their party’s political brand (and even if it muddies their own). We advance a theory of group strategy whereby groups sometimes find themselves caught up in party competition over issue brands and feel pressure to respond in two ways: taking positions that are more consistently aligned with one party than the other, and, crucially, taking positions on a *wider range* of issue areas—known in Washington circles as “mission creep.” Our theory incorporates these dynamics into three common interest group behaviors: taking positions on bills, making campaign contributions, and joining lobbying coalitions.

We use our extensive data throughout the book to test our expectations about how party competition affects these behaviors. First, we demonstrate that, despite some claims that interest groups themselves drive polarization, polarization among interest groups emerged *after that of* elected elites, among groups who were not aligned with the party of the president during the Bush and then Obama administrations. Second, we show that a significant number of groups expanded the set of issues on which they took public positions over our

observed time period—and that this expansion exploded in the immediate aftermath of the Gingrich Revolution. Third, we show that such issue expansion is more likely to occur when a group’s core issue becomes more closely tied to a party’s brand. Indeed, we show that such displays of partisan loyalty extend to campaign contribution patterns if a group’s core issue becomes “partisan” enough. Finally, we conclude by showing that groups who expand their issue focus enjoy fewer legislative victories over time, particularly because they join lobbying coalitions that provide less useful information to agenda setters about the policy stakes of bills.

Our book makes several major contributions to the study of American politics. First, we document and explain how party competition can induce interest groups to become more or less partisan and the conditions under which groups are especially sensitive to incentives to do so. Second, we introduce the most comprehensive database to date on interest groups’ supporting and opposing positions on congressional legislation, over a time period rarely covered by studies of interest group behavior. Our data not only includes actual support or opposition to specific bills, which the most common alternatives do not, but also contains other information to facilitate merging with datasets on issue areas, bill- and legislator characteristics, and campaign finance. Finally, our book provides a single unifying explanation for several critical observations about modern advocacy—from the 1990s “K Street Project” encouraging lobbying firms to hire Republicans to today’s reckoning whereby leftist groups adopt more equity- and justice-focused agendas—and explains why intensifying party competition and smaller, less-durable congressional majorities ultimately create perilous incentives for interest groups. By revealing the extent to which groups have become partisan, how such partisan organizations lobby and represent differently from traditional special interests, and the consequences of these changes for what makes advocacy influential, our book clarifies how partisanship “locks in” a form of advocacy that is *both* less representative and less impactful.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Pragmatic or Programmatic? For much of American political history, the overriding concern about the role of organized interests was that they were pulling policy making toward parochial “special” interests at the expense of the public good. However, the role of organized interests in American politics has changed. In the past few decades, so-called special interests have come to behave more like political partisans. That is, rather than pragmatically pursuing policy goals or “rents,” interest groups today are well-characterized by a single preference dimension and have sorted into left-leaning and right-leaning poles—much like every other actor in American politics. Taken together, the observation of interest group polarization raises a series of fundamental questions about both American political history and contemporary American politics. To what extent are interest groups primary movers in the polarization of American politics? How do partisan interests behave differently from classic “special” interests? Why do some groups align with a single “side” of the partisan and ideological spectrum—particularly in an era lacking in stable partisan control? Finally, how do partisan interests seek policy influence, and when do they succeed? Chapter 1 identifies intensifying party competition beginning in the 1990s as a key factor in interest group polarization and partisanship. We introduce the key

conceptual distinction between “special” interests and “partisan” interests, foregrounding how partisan interests polarize and broaden their agendas to appeal to copartisans while ultimately losing policy influence. We also introduce our methodological approach, which draws on an expansive, original dataset of interest group position-taking on bills before the U.S. Congress from 1973 to the present, leveraging recent advances in preference measurement, text analysis, and causal inference.

Chapter 2: Lobbying Competitive Parties. Existing theories view lobbying as a dyadic relationship between individual lawmakers and lobbyists, trading access for resources such as electoral support and policy information. In chapter 2, we consider how such relationships change during intense party competition. Competition induces legislators to focus on party brand maintenance. Interest groups seeking access to such legislators, then, must have not only signaled shared policy objectives on the group’s issues, but shared partisanship as well. To do so without sacrificing the group’s main policy objectives, groups take partisan positions on bills outside of their core issue areas. From this theoretical dynamic, several predictions follow. First, group polarization and partisanship *followed*, rather than *preceded*, polarization and party competition among elected officials. Second, compared to groups whose core issue is less partisan and contentious, groups whose core issue area is more contentious will be more likely to broaden their positions to bills in other issue areas. Third, compared to their positions on bills in their core issue area, groups’ “off-core” positions will be directed toward partisan bills. Fourth, campaign contributions can substitute for off-core position-taking for groups in less contentious issue areas, but will complement it for groups in more contentious issue areas. And finally, during intense party competition, lobbying coalitions joining groups across varied industries, causes, and communities will be increasingly bifurcated by party and less influential when “their” party is not in power. This chapter also lays out expectations of alternative explanations for group partisanship, which we will test against our theory of partisan group positioning in response to party competition.

Chapter 3: Interest Group Polarization: Primary Mover or Primarily Moved? Interest groups today appear to have sorted into left and right leaning poles, but it remains unclear whether this reflects a longstanding regularity in group behavior or a recent change. This chapter examines the timing of group polarization. Some popular accounts of U.S. political parties argue that extreme group interests have driven partisan polarization, implying that groups have always been polarized. By contrast, we posit that interest group polarization is a response to broader polarizing forces in American politics. Thus, we hypothesize that groups have polarized over time, and in particular *after* polarization among elected officials.

To test these competing expectations, we introduce our expansive new dataset of interest group positions on bills introduced in Congress from 1973 to 2021. Using these data, we develop a new set of ideal points for interest groups and members of Congress. Importantly, not only do these ideal points characterize revealed preferences for the largest set of both donating and non-donating federal level interests available to date, but they are dynamic in nature, capturing shifts in interests’ position-taking patterns over time. We use these scores, termed *dIGscores* (Dynamic Interest Group Scores), to establish that interest groups have not always been polarized. Instead, interest groups only began polarizing in the 1990s. Moreover, this polarization occurred

firmly *after* members of Congress moved apart from one another—suggesting that polarizing forces in American politics come from a source beyond the interest group population.

Chapter 4: How Groups Get to the Party. The timing of interest group polarization suggests that it is unlikely that extreme interest groups are responsible for the polarization characterizing the modern American political system. But while this finding rules out one of the most important alternative explanations for interest group polarization, it does not itself evince our own account. To provide evidence more specific to our theory, we begin in Chapter 4 by using our new position-taking data to demonstrate two macro-level trends that are predicted by our theory—but not necessarily implied by alternative theories. First, our theory argues that interest groups take positions outside of their core issue areas in order to signal their party loyalty. An empirical implication of this decision, which we demonstrate here, is that when interest groups take positions on bills outside of their core issue areas, their position taking is more easily characterized by a single dimension and appears similar to a partisan lawmaker. Consequently, in periods of intense partisan competition, interest groups should appear more consistently unidimensional in their revealed preferences. Second, as a result of their loyalty signaling, interest groups will take positions on a more diverse range of issues. Here again, as partisan competition increases over time and the need for loyalty signals increases, interest groups will exhibit higher levels of position taking diversity. We contend that these global trends are better explained by our theory than others, and these findings form the basis for individual organization level analyses to follow.

Chapter 5: Issue Partisanship and Mission Creep. Our theory suggests that groups have been pressured to take partisan positions outside their core issue areas, to signal party loyalty in the era of insecure majorities. Empirically, however, we have yet to establish that party competition—and not other, contemporaneous changes in American politics—is responsible for the sorting we observe. We thus move in Chapter 5 to the group level, where we hypothesize that interest groups are differentially subject to this pressure, according to the contentiousness of their “core” issue area. In particular, we predict that as a group’s core issue becomes a focus of party competition, the group will be more likely to expand their lobbying agenda, and will do so into other contentious issues. In order to test these issue-specific temporal hypotheses, we use party-line voting and rhetoric in the *Congressional Record* to develop a unique time series measure of the degree of partisan contentiousness for each of the 21 major topic codes of the Comparative Agendas Project. After demonstrating that partisan contentiousness in these measures varies both across issues and over time, we show that interest groups whose core issue areas have become contentious 1) increase their position taking diversity by taking positions on issues for which they were not historically active, 2) take positions on partisan issues, and 3) that, in doing so, their behavior cannot fully be explained by arguments that group partisanship is membership-driven or the result of recent attention among left-leaning groups to broader notions of social justice.

Chapter 6: Campaign Contributions and Partisan Positions—Complements or Substitutes? Where issue polarization represents an external factor driving groups to become more partisan, there are internal factors that condition this process as well. In Chapter 6, we focus on a group’s access to campaign contributions it can offer political candidates. A potential implication of our theory is that the strength of a group’s partisan affiliation might serve as a substitute for other means of gaining access to partisan actors, including campaign

contributions; thus, we would expect low resource groups to be more inclined to engage in off-core, party consistent position taking than high resource groups, who can instead use those resources to pursue access and influence. However, we argue that this dynamic flips for groups with partisan core issue areas, where complementary, heterogeneous signals of party loyalty are especially valuable. Joining our position-taking data to information on groups' campaign contributions, we find evidence for this conditional complementarity expectation. Position-taking diversity is higher among groups giving more campaign contributions, but only when their core issue area is more partisan. For groups with less partisan core issue areas, position-taking diversity is lower for groups that give greater campaign contributions.

Chapter 7: Partisan Interest Groups in, and as, Lobbying Coalitions. What are the consequences of interest group partisanship for groups' ability to secure desired legislative outcomes? In previous chapters, we demonstrated that in the era of insecure majorities, many groups—especially those with campaign resources to offer or whose core issues are highly partisan—have broadened their lobbying agendas to signal partisan loyalty. But what do groups give up to get a seat at the party table? In Chapter 7, we incorporate group partisanship into an informational theory of interest group influence on lawmakers' decisions to attend to, support, and/or oppose a bill. We theorize that issue broadening in groups' position-taking patterns leads lawmakers with uncertainty in distinguishing groups' "core" positions from "loyalty-signaling" ones. Our core expectation is that the attributes that give groups and group coalitions influence on the outcomes of specific bills under "normal" conditions will matter less when incentives for partisan signaling are the highest: namely, in the era of insecure majorities and in issue areas that are more closely tied to party brands. While we confine our analysis to specific bill outcomes, we conclude the chapter by considering how other institutions—e.g., legislative oversight of the executive branch, bureaucratic implementation, and federalism—might be affected when the informational value of lobbying is diminished.

Chapter 8: When Interests are No Longer Special. This book has aimed to describe partisanship in the American interest group system as it has developed over the last several decades. We have shown that groups have changed their position-taking, contribution-giving, and coalition-building strategies to signal partisan teammanship. What does this mean for groups' role in American democracy? To conclude the book, we consider the larger ramifications of our findings. The patterns uncovered here suggest that many interest groups in the U.S. should no longer be thought of as "special interests," voicing the needs of societal constituencies, but instead as partisan interests, conduits by which parties fundraise and mobilize voters. We argue that partisan interests cannot serve the same functions as special interests: their positions are less informative about the interests they purport to represent, their contributions less responsive to legislator behavior, and the coalitions they build confuse teammanship for shared policy goals. This distinction between special and partisan interests should contribute to debates about the role of organized interests in American politics. Lastly, we speculate about how the forces we uncover here could be relieved through institutional reforms.

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