

# Party crashers: Interest groups as a latent threat to party networks in congressional primaries

Party Politics

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DOI: 10.1177/1354068819834528

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq)**Cory Manento** 

Brown University, USA

## Abstract

Recent research asserts that coalitions of party leaders, interest groups, and activists will cooperate to support the nomination of mutually acceptable candidates in primary elections. In this article, I utilize an original data set containing FEC contributions and expenditures data for 1648 candidates who ran in open seat primary elections for the US House from 2006 to 2016 to measure the extent and effects of coordination among interest groups and party organizations. I find that Democratic-aligned interest groups and party leaders coordinate more often and with a more positive substantive effect than their Republican counterparts. Moreover, I provide evidence that, with the advent of super PACs in the second half of the 2010 primary cycle, a small number of interest groups can act as a latent threat to broader coalitions that unite behind a candidate using independent expenditures to outspend the broader coalitions. This increased resource parity has tangible representational consequences.

## Keywords

campaign finance, congressional elections, interest groups, party networks, primary elections

## Introduction

Prominent recent work in political science suggests that broad networks of party leaders, activists, and interest groups tend to coalesce around mutually acceptable candidates in primary elections and that primary voters follow the cues of that coalition (Bawn et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2008). Because congressional general elections have become less competitive due to some combination of incumbency advantage, gerrymandering, and geographic and ideological sorting among voters (Abramowitz et al., 2006; Ferejohn, 1977), primary elections have become increasingly consequential. And because at the macro level Republicans and Democrats compete for control of Congress at relative parity (Lee, 2016) and there is a heightened importance placed on every seat in the overall battle for congressional control, open seat elections have become especially pivotal to parties' chances at winning a majority. Thus, understanding who wins open seat party nominations and why has become central to understanding the functioning of our democracy, as primaries and open seat races are often the only venues for meaningful electoral competition in Congress.

While I do find strong support in this article for the strength of party organization and interest group coalitions in primaries, that support comes with two important caveats that can serve to refine our practical and theoretical understanding of the role of the party network in primary elections. The first is a more practical caveat that reflects the current relative strength of each of the parties: Democratic elites are notably more adept than Republicans at uniting behind candidates in congressional primaries, and Democratic primary voters seem to be more receptive to elite preferences than their Republican counterparts. Although network-preferred Republican candidates enjoy a notable boost in their vote share, controlling for several district- and candidate-level factors, Democratic network-preferred candidates see a higher boost and win their

Paper submitted 6 December 2018; accepted for publication 8 February 2019

### Corresponding author:

Cory Manento, Department of Political Science, Brown University, Box 1844, 111 Thayer Street, Providence, RI 02915, USA.

Email: [cory\\_manento@brown.edu](mailto:cory_manento@brown.edu)

nominations more often. The second caveat is that recent changes in federal campaign finance law, especially the creation of super political action committees (PACs), have empowered well-financed interest groups to defect from the consensus of a party coalition in a primary in favor of a more attractive candidate. Despite the good reasons to be cautious about making broad claims of super PAC influence in primaries (see Boatright et al., 2016), I argue that their existence and increasing ubiquity creates a threat that is more latent than overt. Groups who wanted to defect from or challenge the party network's consensus could spend no more than \$5000 USD throwing their support behind a different candidate prior to *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (FEC)* and a related case, *SpeechNow.org v. FEC*. Those cases effectively removed that limit, granting individual members of the party network significant leverage in gaining policy loyalty from candidates. And because I find that these defecting groups have become increasingly successful post-2010, the characteristics of the candidates those groups tend to support increasingly matter. Defecting groups on the Democratic side have been more likely than broader coalitions or the formal party organization alone to support women candidates, more likely to support experienced candidates, and less likely to support moderates. The candidates that Republican defectors have tended to support have been more male, less experienced, and also less moderate.

This article will proceed in four subsequent sections. In the next section, I situate this article in the existing literature on parties and interest groups in primary elections. In the third section, I describe my research design and specify statistical models. I present the results of several tests of party network strength and provide evidence for interest groups as latent threats in the fourth section. I conclude by discussing paths for further research.

## Party networks and primary elections

Representative Connie Mack IV (R-FL) decided to run for the US Senate rather than running for Florida's newly drawn 19th congressional district seat in 2012. The southwestern Florida district is solidly Republican. Trey Radel, a former local CBS-affiliate news anchor with no previous political experience, entered the open seat race along with five other Republican candidates. Among the other candidates were former Paul Ryan (R-WI) aide Chauncey Goss, state representatives Paige Kreegel and Gary Aubuchon, and Tea Party activist Byron Donalds. Radel ultimately won the primary which raises the questions of how he managed to do so despite his relative lack of party organization and activist group connections, and what this election can tell us about the nature of modern primaries writ large.

An answer to these questions lies in analyzing party network support in this primary by taking note of which

party actors and interest groups contributed to each candidate's campaign. Goss, for example, received contributions from the PACs of his former boss Paul Ryan, now-disgraced ex-Speaker Dennis Hastert, and five unique interest group PACs including the United Services Automobile Association.<sup>1</sup> Kreegel and Aubuchon were supported by 12 and 27 unique interest group PACs, respectively. Donalds was supported by one PAC. Radel was supported by just six interest group PACs and zero PACs belonging to parties or members of the formal party organization. If winning a primary election only required building a broad coalition of interest groups or winning over party leaders, we might have expected either Goss or Aubuchon to win this election.

However, in 2010, the Supreme Court gave individual groups a tool to break from this coalition. I argue in this article that interest groups continue to seek agenda loyalty from primary candidates, but they are less tethered to a broad coalition than they were before key changes in the campaign finance system. Interest groups who are less apt to compromise and form a coalition with other groups are better equipped to defect after the US Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) and the D.C. Circuit Court's decision in *SpeechNow.org v. FEC* (2010). Together, these rulings allowed for PACs to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money to overtly advocate for or against a candidate in an election.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to Florida's 19th congressional district, it is clear that although Radel did not receive the *breadth* of support that three of his competitors received, his support had more *depth*. Despite being outraised by each of Goss, Kreegel, and Aubuchon in traditional direct PAC contributions (which continue to be limited to \$5000), the Conservative Values Project, an ideologically conservative super PAC supporting Radel, spent over \$100,000 more in independent expenditures supporting him than the total amount spent on independent expenditures in support of the other three candidates combined.

Support from a coalition of interest groups, members of the party organization, and activists is still imperative for candidates who hope to win a primary election, but this example shows that with the advent of super PACs individual interest groups can now act as a latent threat to coalitions that unite behind a candidate in a primary election. Candidates with deep, rather than broad, elite support can challenge the consensus of party leaders and core party interest groups and activists, which in turn changes who governs and how.

Once elected to Congress, Radel proved to be very conservative. Of 239 Republicans who served in the 113th Congress, Radel was rated as the 16th-most conservative when examining roll call votes.<sup>3</sup> Among Radel's most notable actions in Congress was his vote against the compromise bill that ended the 16-day government shutdown in

2013. The entirety of Republican House leadership supported the bill. Radel's brief tenure in Congress effectively ended about a month after that vote due to a scandal involving illegal drugs<sup>4</sup> so it is unclear whether he would have continued to be a headache for party leadership if he remained in Congress. As I will show, these patterns (excluding the scandal) are not limited to Radel among successful candidates who were supported by network-defecting groups.

### *Parties, formal and informal*

There is no shortage of debate among political scientists attempting to accomplish the elusive task of defining what a political party is. Without traversing too far into the weeds, early attempts at defining the political party amounted to basic summations of party goals; Schattschneider describes a political party as "an organized attempt to get power" (1942: 35) and Anthony Downs styles a political party as "a team of men seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election" (1957: 25). Other scholars describe the different segments of the party apparatus (Key, 1958; Schlesinger, 1985) or feature legislative officeholders as the primary party actors (Aldrich, 1995; Cox and McCubbins, 2005). More recent scholarship has sought to broaden our view of political parties to an informal extended network of interest groups, activists, and party elites (Bawn et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2008; Desmarais et al., 2015; Herrnson, 2009; Koger et al., 2009). However, when examining candidate recruitment and emergence (Herrnson, 2005; Hassell, 2018; Kazee and Thornberry, 1990; Maestas et al., 2005; Seligman, 1961) or the formal party organization as a mechanism for coordinating contributions to preferred candidates (Currinder, 2009; Dwyre et al., 2006; Dwyre and Kolodny, 2003; Hassell, 2018), there is notable evidence that the party organization plays a major role in this network, however broadly defined. Thus, in this article I explore the role that the formal party organization plays both separately from and together with the extended network of party-aligned interest groups that seek to nominate candidates.

One of the questions this article seeks to answer is, how successful is the formal party organization at nominating its preferred candidates? And what about the informal party network? Casey BK Dominguez (2011) finds that party endorsements are significant predictors of success in congressional primaries, while Thad Kousser et al. (2015) argue that the effects of party endorsements are positive but limited. In a more expansive study, Hans JG Hassell finds that the party organization influences the process, including clearing the field for preferred candidates, and outcomes, of primary elections, and "do not merely jump on the bandwagon of already successful candidates" (2018: 19). Although I do not use formal endorsements as a

measure of support, I utilize contributions data to examine the effects of formal and informal party support.

### *Primaries as an opportunity for policy loyalty*

Despite recent changes in campaign finance law that have made it much easier for interest groups to exert influence in elections, interest groups are no stranger to primaries. In the 60 years since VO Key (1958: 23) argued that interest groups "promote their interests by attempting to influence government rather than by nominating candidates," interest groups have become heavily involved in the candidate nomination process. Party network scholars assert that parties are intimately intertwined with policy-demanding groups who form coalitions to support the nomination of acceptable candidates (Desmarais et al., 2015; Herrnson, 2009; Koger et al., 2009; Masket, 2009; Masket et al., 2012). For a candidate to be successful in a primary election, she must obtain the support of the interest groups and activists likely to contribute essential resources to her campaign. These policy-demanding interest groups form coalitions with one another "to capture and use government for their particular goals" (Bawn et al., 2012: 571) and will typically come to a consensus about which primary candidate is broadly acceptable to the groups' agendas (Cohen et al., 2008).

There is support in the literature for the contention that interest groups seek policy loyalty in primaries. Terry Moe finds that teachers' unions in California "appear to use endorsements strategically to promote the candidacies of people who are sympathetic to union interests" (2005: 271). Sarah Anzia (2011) argues that interest groups will mobilize and persuade voters to support loyal candidates in primary elections, and those efforts have an outsized impact in primary elections because of low voter turnout. Jeffrey Berry and Clyde Wilcox (2016: 71) note that interest groups "try to influence the outcome of party primaries so that policymakers more sympathetic to their cause become the party nominees" by encouraging their own members to run for office, recruiting nonmembers who support their agenda to run for office, or by asking primary candidates to answer surveys in order to determine which would be best for the group's agenda. Still others (Grossmann and Dominguez, 2009; Godwin, 1992; La Raja and Schaffner, 2015; Stratmann, 1998) argue that interest groups use their resources in primary elections to boost friendly or ideologically congruent (Barber, 2016) candidates. Interest groups can even seek loyalty to the point of being detrimental to their preferred party. Jonathan Rauch and Raymond La Raja (2017) describe the impact of non-party actors on candidates in primary elections:

Today, those seeking office receive their political education in a world where their viability is determined increasingly by freelancing individuals and free-wheeling activist groups, and

**Table 1.** Summary statistics of open seat house primaries, 2006–2016.

Cycle (Party)	Number of candidates	Number of primaries	Candidates per primary	Number of unique party PAC contributions	Number of unique IG PAC contributions
2006 (R)	101	27	3.74	443	1446
2006 (D)	99	27	3.66	239	1381
2008 (R)	107	32	3.34	192	969
2008 (D)	87	31	2.81	339	1510
2010 (R)	189	36	5.25	360	1318
2010 (D)	90	37	2.43	243	1014
2012 (R)	231	54	4.28	313	1280
2012 (D)	162	55	2.94	313	2168
2014 (R)	147	39	3.77	276	1365
2014 (D)	116	40	2.90	267	1428
2016 (R)	189	42	4.50	193	990
2016 (D)	130	41	3.17	413	1349
<b>Total (R)</b>	<b>964</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>4.19</b>	<b>1,777</b>	<b>7368</b>
<b>Total (D)</b>	<b>684</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>2.96</b>	<b>1,814</b>	<b>8850</b>

Note: PAC: political action committee.

decreasingly by party regulars and establishment insiders...many people who, in the past, would have been screened out as unsuitable—sometimes wrongly, but often rightly—will find their way to the primary ballot.

Gary Jacobson and Jamie Carson (2016) illuminate this point with the example of the conservative Club for Growth's support of a primary challenger to moderate Republican US senator Lincoln Chaffee of Rhode Island in 2006. Although the primary challenger lost to Chaffee by a narrow margin and Chaffee himself ended up losing narrowly to Sheldon Whitehouse (D) in the general election, this episode illustrates that the Club for Growth was willing to sacrifice electability for policy loyalty. I argue that *Citizens United* and *SpeechNow.org* have served to enhance this ability of interest groups to boost candidates who, especially on the Republican side, may have been considered "unsuitable" in the past.

### Changes in the campaign finance landscape

*Citizens United* and *SpeechNow.org* have created a more favorable environment for candidates to overcome parties' traditional gatekeeping tactics and instead mount serious primary campaigns using the resources of loyalty-seeking interest groups. In *Citizens United*, the Court ruled that the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act's restrictions on corporate and union funding of independent political broadcasts in candidate elections amounted to a First Amendment violation. As a result of this case, PACs are allowed to overtly advocate for or against a candidate using independent expenditures without having to contribute to the candidate directly. Three months after the Court's decision in *Citizens United*, the D.C. Circuit Court, citing the new precedent set by the Supreme Court, ruled in *SpeechNow.org* that PACs who strictly utilize independent expenditures without

contributing to or coordinating with candidates at all may accept contributions in excess of the \$5000 limit that exists for "normal" PACs. Thus, these two court decisions paved the way for the creation of super PACs that can raise and spend unlimited sums of money to advocate for or against a candidate as long as they do not coordinate with the candidate's campaign committee.

### Data and research design

The data set that I constructed uses the 1648 candidates who ran in an open seat US House Democratic or Republican primary between 2006 and 2016 as the unit of analysis.<sup>5</sup> Broken down by party, there are 684 Democrats and 964 Republicans who ran in 461 total primaries. Summary statistics are presented in Table 1. I focus only on open seat races in this article because the dynamics of a primary election with an incumbent are entirely different than an open seat race (Ansolabehere et al., 2007; Boatright, 2013). The incumbency advantage is even more pronounced in primary elections than it is in general elections: From 2006 to 2016, only 32 House incumbents failed to win their party's nomination, while 142 House incumbents lost in general elections during that period.<sup>6</sup> Open seats are much more competitive and provide a more useful lens through which to view parties' and interest groups' recruitment of and support for candidates friendly to their agendas. Open seats are also the principal means by which new representatives enter Congress, so they provide an excellent venue for examining shifts in the characteristics of candidates elected to Congress.

I utilized FEC data gathered by the Center for Responsive Politics and created several variables to measure the extent of financial support from party groups and interest groups to candidates or independent expenditures made in support of candidates. Although excluding independent

expenditures made against candidates allows for more concrete determinations of PAC preferences, it is possible that this exclusion may pose a problem for data analysis. To account for this possibility, included in the Online Appendix is a robustness check which suggests that little, if anything, would change in my results if such expenditures were included.

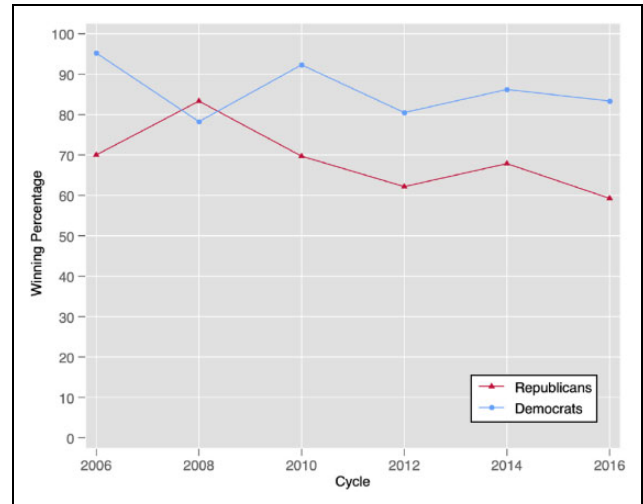
PAC contributors in my analysis are coded as either *party PACs* or *interest group PACs*. I code a party PAC as a PAC belonging to a current or former member of Congress, a national party organization (e.g. the DCCC), or a state or local party organization (e.g. the Republican Party of Cuyahoga County). This essentially encompasses what we might consider to be the formal party organization at the local, state, and national levels. The Center for Responsive Politics helpfully categorizes each PAC contribution by the sector and industry of the contributor.

All non-party PACs are treated as interest group PACs. Interest group PACs comprise the remainder of PAC categorizations. In order to test the strength of the party organizations themselves along with the party network as a whole, it is useful to treat interest group PACs and party PACs separately, then see to what extent they coordinate. Importantly, Boatright et al. (2016) note that some super PACs have close ties to party leaders and act as though they are arms of the formal party organization. Thus, some of these groups may be classified here as interest group PACs when they are de facto party PACs. I account for this possibility, detailed in the Online Appendix, and find that these leadership-aligned super PACs almost always focus their spending on incumbents—either by supporting their own party’s incumbents or opposing vulnerable incumbents of the opposing party—and rarely foray into open seat House primaries.

The top five interest group PAC contributors in open seat House primaries in each cycle are presented in Tables 3 and 4 in the Online Appendix. The top contributors in each cycle are often ideologically oriented groups like the Club for Growth or access-oriented business groups like the National Association of Realtors. Beginning in 2012, super PACs like Progress for Washington and the Liberty for All Super PAC penetrate the list of top contributors. I will show that this shift is indicative of a broader trend that has allowed candidates supported by a small number of party network-embedded interest groups to be successful.

### Dependent and independent variables

I use four OLS regression models to estimate the effect of coordination by both the formal party organization and the extended party network on a candidate’s vote share. In all four sets of OLS regression models, the dependent variable is the candidate’s percentage of the vote in the primary election. Model 1 estimates the effect of being the apparent choice of the party organization in an open seat House



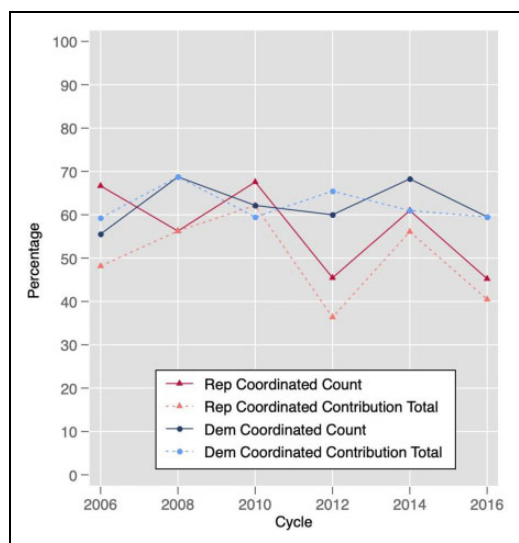
**Figure 1.** Winning percentage of party-preferred candidates in open seat primaries, 2006–2016.

primary, with separate results for Republicans and Democrats. I created a party choice variable and coded it as 1 if the candidate received more contributions from unique party PACs than her primary competitors, and 0 otherwise.<sup>7</sup> Although not perfect, this measure represents a meaningful proxy for a candidate’s breadth of support among the formal party organization.

I expect candidates preferred by the Democratic Party organization to be more likely than candidates preferred by the Republican Party organization to win their primary elections. At the presidential level, Democratic primary voters have backed candidates supported by party elites relatively consistently, while Republican primary voters have been less likely to do so.

The winning percentages of House primary candidates chosen by each party organization are displayed in Figure 1. This figure suggests that Democratic candidates supported by the party organization are indeed more successful than their Republican counterparts and that Democratic voters are more receptive to elite cues than Republicans. Interestingly, Democratic party organization-preferred candidates have performed relatively consistently since 2006, while Republican organization-preferred candidates have performed worse over time, including falling below a 60% win rate in 2016. Party-preferred candidates on the Democratic side seem to perform worse during presidential election years, perhaps because of an increase in base engagement activating voters who are less responsive to elite preferences.<sup>8</sup>

I used the same process for creating a dummy variable for whether a candidate is the interest groups’ preferred choice: If a candidate receives contributions from more unique interest group PACs than her primary competitors, I coded the variable as 1. If a candidate is both the party organization’s and interest groups’ preferred choice,



**Figure 2.** Percentage of party organization and interest group coordination, 2006–2016.

I coded the coordinated choice variable as 1 (and 0 otherwise). Model 2 examines the effect of being the coordinated choice of the party and interest groups in the party's extended network. I expect this effect to be stronger than being the party organization's choice alone, though the patterns should be similar.

Figure 2 displays the percentage of party and interest group coordination by party since 2006. The solid lines indicate the percent of open seat races in which the party and interest group PACs coordinated based on the total unique PAC contributor count.

The dashed lines show the frequency of party and interest group coordination based on the total dollar amount in contributions from PACs. Again, the Democrats are showing more signs of strength than the Republicans. The Democratic party organization and interest groups united behind a candidate more often since 2006 in both unique PAC count and contribution totals. These party disparities run counter to Hassell's (2018: 110, 128) finding of few differences between the parties in their ability to clear the field for preferred candidates<sup>9</sup> and more closely align with the work of Dominguez (2011) who finds that Democratic elites tend to endorse more candidates (and thus coordinate more) than Republicans. I expect models 1 and 2 to reflect this disparity between the parties and reveal that Democratic candidates receive a bigger boost from party and interest group choices.

Models 3 and 4 estimate the added value to a candidate's vote share from receiving a contribution from a unique party PAC and interest group PAC, respectively. I expect a Democratic organization PAC contribution to translate to a higher vote share than a contribution from a Republican PAC, and party PAC support should be worth more than any individual interest group's PAC support, on balance. Interest groups are more numerous, and each represents a

smaller spectrum of interests than a state, local, or national party or a member of Congress. I focus on unique PAC contributions and expenditures in my statistical models because that measure better captures whether a candidate has a wider breadth of support among the extended party network than the total dollar amount contributed by PACs.<sup>10</sup>

I introduce five control variables to ensure that effects on candidates' vote share are apparent independent of other district- or candidate-specific factors. At the district level, I control for the total number of candidates in the race, whether the state uses a multiparty (top two) primary ballot, and the candidate's party's competitiveness in the district as defined by the party's vote share in the most recent presidential election.<sup>11</sup> I expect candidate vote share to be negatively associated with the party's competitiveness in the district. If, for example, President Obama receives 27% of the vote in a district in 2012, it may be difficult for the Democratic Party to field more than one candidate for an open seat race in that district in 2014. If the party fields exactly one candidate in a primary, that candidate receives 100% of the vote by default. As the party's competitiveness in a district increases, so should the number of candidates, and thus each candidate's vote share should decrease.

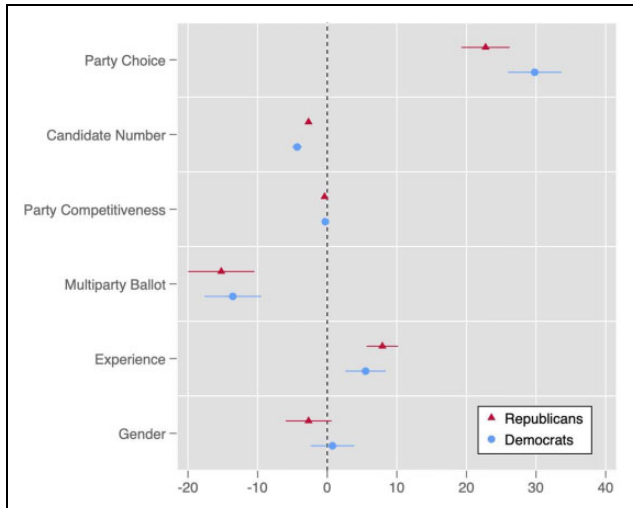
At the candidate level, I control for experience and gender. Having previously held elected office is arguably the best objective proxy we have for candidate quality, and factors contributing to candidate quality help voters make decisions especially in lower-information environments (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). Higher quality candidates more experienced in politics and campaigning should be more successful in open seat primaries. I include gender as a control because scholars have shown that voters can take candidates' gender into consideration. Gender can be especially prevalent in primary elections, in which all candidates run under the same party label and party cannot be used as an information shortcut for voters. The gender variable is a binary indicator with women coded as 1 and men coded as 0. Karin Kitchens and Michele Swers (2016) find that women's ability to fundraise in congressional primary elections is asymmetric among the parties. In part because Democratic women are perceived to be more liberal than they actually are, and Republican women are perceived to be more moderate than Republican men (King and Matland, 2003; Koch, 2000), Kitchens and Swers argue that Republican women are subsequently disadvantaged in primary election fundraising especially from ideologically motivated donors. Thus, I expect women to be more successful in Democratic primaries and less successful in Republican primaries.

## Results and discussion

### *Disparities in party coalitions*

Figure 3 displays the coefficients of model 1 for both Democrats and Republicans (see the Online Appendix for full



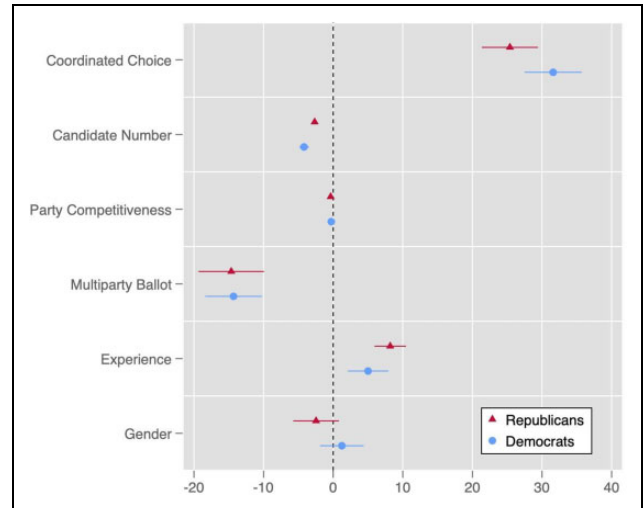


**Figure 3.** The effect of party organization choice on vote share (model 1), 2006–2016.

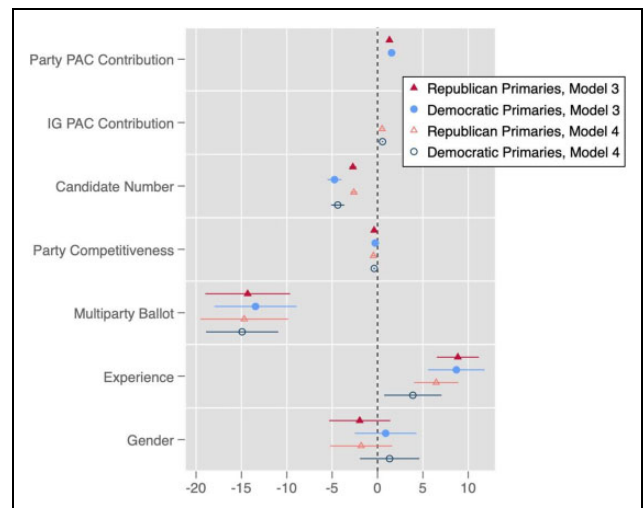
regression tables). As expected, being the party organization's choice in an open seat House primary has a significant positive effect on a candidate's vote share, controlling for district and candidate factors. These results again suggest that Democratic primary voters seem to respond more positively to party elite preferences than Republican primary voters. Control variables performed mostly as expected with one notable exception: The gender variable did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, which would seem to validate scholars who find that women tend to face more bias in recruitment rather than from voters directly (see Ashe and Stewart, 2012; Lawless and Fox, 2010; Niven, 1998).<sup>12</sup>

The coefficients for model 2, which estimates the effect of being the preferred choice of both party and interest group PACs, are presented in Figure 4. The results show a significant positive effect when the party organization and interest groups unite behind a single candidate. This is strong evidence to support the arguments of the party network camp. The coefficients in this model are higher than being the party pick alone, although the confidence intervals are relatively wide and there is less of a stark difference between the parties in this model. As a robustness check, I ran these models as logistic regressions with a binary dependent variable indicating whether the candidate won their primary. The results (presented in Table 7 in the Online Appendix) suggest that support from both the party organization and the extended party network are highly predictive of *winning* primaries as well as predicting which candidates will be competitive.

Figure 5 shows the effect of having received a contribution from a single party PAC and a single interest group PAC. For both Democrats and Republicans, support from each additional interest group PAC is worth about 0.5 percentage points in vote share. Support from each additional



**Figure 4.** The effect of party/interest group coordination on vote share (model 2), 2006–2016.



**Figure 5.** Effect of party and IG PAC contributions on vote share (models 3 and 4), 2006–2016. PAC: political action committees.

party PAC is worth about 1.5 percentage points in vote share. These results confirm my hypothesis that party organization support is more valuable than interest group support, but there does not appear to be a large difference between the parties. The control variables again performed about as expected and again with the notable exception of gender.

### Are super PACs changing the game?

We have seen that the party organization and interest groups unite behind a candidate, that candidate is especially likely to win. But what happens when interest groups favor a different candidate than the party? Table 2 uses campaign contributions data to display primary outcomes when the candidate raising the most in contributions plus

**Table 2.** Frequency of total interest group contribution consensus differing from total party contribution consensus, 2006–2016.

Cycle (Party)	Interest groups' preferred candidate defeats party org.'s preferred candidate	Party org.'s preferred candidate defeats interest groups' preferred candidate	Party org. and interest group candidates both lose	Races with party org./interest group disagreements
2006 (R)	2	1	1	4
2006 (D)	0	3	1	4
2008 (R)	3	3	1	7
2008 (D)	0	1	0	1
2010 (R)	1	7	2	10
2010 (D)	1	2	0	3
2012 (R)	9	5	2	16
2012 (D)	4	1	1	6
2014 (R)	1	3	2	6
2014 (D)	3	1	2	6
2016 (R)	5	2	1	8
2016 (D)	1	2	1	3
Total (R) 2006–2010	6	11	4	21
Total (D) 2006–2010	1	6	1	8
Total (R) 2012–2016	15	10	5	30
Total (D) 2012–2016	8	4	4	15
<b>Total (R)</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Total (D)</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>23</b>

independent expenditures from interest group PACs differs from the candidate who raised the most in contributions plus independent expenditures from party PACs. Although it is a relatively small sample size, the data suggest that it was rarer for interest groups to differ from the party organization choice prior to the court decisions in 2010. That year itself is fuzzy because the *SpeechNow* case was decided in late March. *Citizens United*, decided in January of 2010, allowed for PACs to engage in electioneering communications that explicitly endorse or advocate against candidates, but those expenditures were still limited. *SpeechNow* removed those limits. Not only had primary elections in Texas and Illinois already taken place prior to *SpeechNow*, but it gave groups little time to engage in super PAC formation before primary season continued. Indeed, non-party-organization PACs recorded about \$3.2 million in independent expenditures in open seat House primaries in 2010, while that number jumped up to \$8.9 million in 2012, dropped to \$7.3 million in 2014, and reached \$17.3 million in 2016.<sup>13</sup>

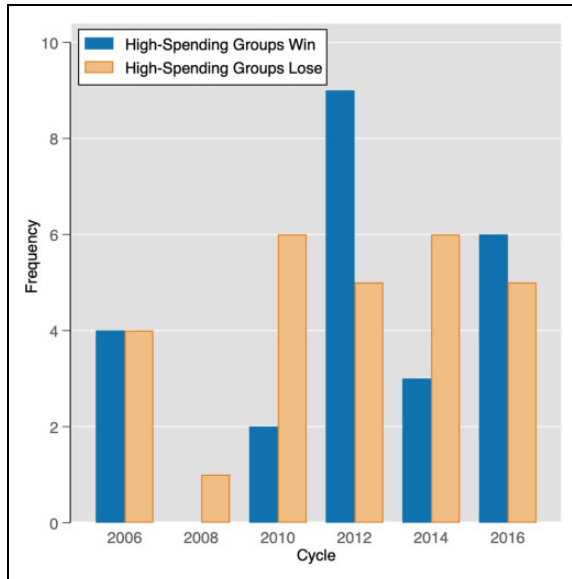
Prior to 2012, the first full cycle in which super PACs existed, interest group PAC expenditures favored a different candidate than party PAC expenditures a total of 29 times. Of those 29 instances, the interest group's preferred candidate defeated the party organization's preferred candidate seven times (24%). From 2012 to 2016, the interest group choice differed from the party choice 45 times, with the interest group's preferred candidate winning 23 of them (51%).<sup>14</sup> In other words, not only are interest groups better *equipped* post-2010 to object to the party organization's consensus if they want to, but they are more

*effective* when they do so. This heightens the latent threat posed by interest groups.

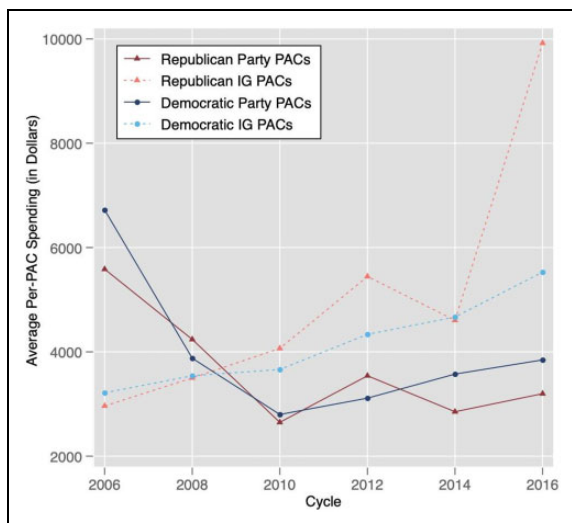
Table 2 also demonstrates that there are differences among the parties; the latent threat on the Republican side may be more potent than it is for the Democrats. The threat for Democrats seems to have come about only after the advent of super PACs and has weakened in the two cycles since 2012. Republicans seemed to have pushed back against this trend in 2014 after a poor showing by the party organization in 2012. But even this somewhat low number of instances in which interest groups successfully defeating the party organization can have profound consequences for the types of candidates who see a new path to competitiveness in primaries.

Figure 6 illustrates the impact of a small number of interest groups—sometimes it is just one group—who defect from the consensus of an interest group coalition. When a smaller number of interest groups outspent a larger number of interest groups, the larger number of groups tended to win before the advent of super PACs. As I discussed earlier, super PACs were introduced in 2010 but really had not matured until the 2012 cycle. Prior to 2012, a smaller number of interest group PACs outspent a larger number of groups 17 times, winning six and losing 11. From 2012 onward, when it became much easier for a smaller number of groups to outspend a larger coalition, this occurred 34 times, with the smaller number of groups winning 18 contests and losing 16. In other words, the Supreme Court and D.C. Circuit Court gave the individual members of the extended network a tool to defect from the consensus if they have the means and desire to do so; those





**Figure 6.** Frequency of a smaller number of interest groups outspending a larger number of interest groups, 2006–2016.



**Figure 7.** Ratio of PAC contributions plus independent expenditures to the number of unique PACs, 2006–2016. PAC: political action committees.

groups have used that tool to challenge broader coalitions 34 times and winning over half the time despite it not being a given that they would choose to use that tool at all.

Finally, Figure 7 displays the ratio of PAC contributions plus independent expenditures to the number of unique party and interest group PACs by cycle. Although the number of party and interest group PACs involving themselves in primaries has remained relatively constant since 2006 for both parties, interest group PACs have begun to significantly outspend party PACs since the advent of super PACs. For Republicans, an average of 1244 interest group PACs spent an average of \$4,345,413 from 2006 to 2010.

From 2012 to 2016, an average of 1212 Republican interest groups spent an average of \$7,691,691. On the Democratic side, 1302 groups spent \$4,500,727 from 2006 to 2010, on average. From 2012 to 2016, those figures were 1648 and \$7,842,293, respectively. Moreover, these numbers offer a conservative estimate of the effect of super PACs. I exclude from my analysis independent expenditures that are coded by the FEC as opposing a candidate, a tactic which interest group PACs have been much more likely than party PACs to utilize in primaries. Even in this conservative formulation, the data suggest that interest groups have had a significantly increased influence in primaries.

### *Consequences of interest groups as a latent threat*

What are the consequences of interest groups acting as a latent threat to party coalitions in primary elections? While we should be careful about drawing broad conclusions from a small sample size, I will present evidence that there are three apparent consequences. First, there is a boost for women candidates on the Democratic side and a limitation for Republican women candidates when interest groups are empowered in the primary process. From 2006 to 2016, Democratic party PACs and interest group PACs united behind a candidate in an open seat House primary on 145 occasions. Democratic party and interest group PACs united behind a woman in only 53 of those cases. However, in the 21 times that a small number of interest groups defected from the party and interest group PAC consensus, the group(s) defected to a woman 12 times.

Of the 114 times that Republican Party PACs and interest group PACs united behind a candidate, only 20 of those candidates were women. And when interest groups defected, only 6 of 53 interest group-supported candidates were women. With interest group PACs more empowered, it is likely that there will need to be a push from similar groups on the Republican side dedicated to recruiting and supporting women to run for office if the party is to enhance descriptive representation among its party nominees.

The second consequence is that experienced Democratic candidates and inexperienced Republican candidates are advantaged, but these effects are less stark than the effects for women candidates. When Democratic party PACs and interest group PACs coordinated, they supported a candidate who has previously held elected office 69.6% of the time. Defecting interest groups supported experienced Democrats 76.1% of the time. I had expected interest groups to be more likely to support inexperienced candidates with no solid record of public service who would perhaps be more malleable in their policy positions. On the other hand, this could be related to Democratic interest groups' support of women candidates; Jennifer L Lawless and Richard L Fox (2010) show that women are more likely to run for office when they feel as though they are qualified.

My original expectation did hold up on the Republican side. When the party organization and interest groups coordinated, they supported experienced candidates 69.2% of the time. That number dropped to 62.3% among defecting interest groups.

And third, candidates who end up making it to Congress are less likely to be moderates. Of course, the sample size shrinks even more here as candidates who win their primaries are not guaranteed victory in the general election. Among instances of Republican defection, the party organization's preferred candidate was eventually elected to Congress 16 times, while the interest group(s)' preferred candidate was elected to Congress 12 times. The average NOMINATE score for party-backed Republicans is 0.572 and the average score for defecting interest group-backed Republicans is 0.611, indicating that groups may be more likely to defect to more ideological candidates.<sup>15</sup> On the Democratic side, the average score for the seven party organization-backed Democrats who made it to Congress is -0.337. The average score for the 10 interest group-backed Democrats is -0.458, which is an even starker trend away from nominating moderates than that of Republicans.

## Conclusion

This article set out to test the efficacy of policy demanding interest groups and the formal party organizations at electing their preferred candidates in congressional primaries. The results show that when both sets of actors coordinate between and within their segments of the party network, they can have a profound effect on the fortunes of a candidate even when controlling for candidate characteristics. However, the post-2010 latent threat of small number of groups being able to outspend a broader coalition should at least encourage us to take the power of party networks with an asterisk.

I show that Democratic interest group and party actors are more effective than Republican groups at nominating their preferred candidates. This observation alone presents no *prima facie* problem for a theory of party network strength. It does, however, suggest that the ultimate role of voters is underexplained. It is certainly possible that the differences I observe between the parties reflect a Republican Party that is more divided at the elite level, but it could also be that Republican primary voters are simply less receptive to elite cues than Democratic voters. Future research should explore this question.

Moreover, I show that a small number of groups can boost the fortunes of a candidate largely rejected by the vast majority of the party network. This ability not only changes the types of candidates ultimately entering Congress, it also can change the types of people who choose to run for Congress in the first place. Although the incentive to run in congressional primaries for "traditional"

candidates who can appeal to a broad coalition of the party network remains, there is increasingly an incentive for outsider candidates friendly to a specific group with deep pockets to run for Congress. This incentive might manifest in an amateur candidate recruited by the Club for Growth seeing a viable path to victory in a Republican congressional primary and deciding to run. Or on the Democratic side, it may encourage more candidacies of people from underrepresented groups who are recruited and financed by groups dedicated to increasing descriptive representation. In either case, this latent threat should not be overlooked when considering the influence of broad coalitions within the party network.


## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Cory Manento  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6865-548X>

## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online

## Notes

1. Contributions data were compiled from bulk data files provided by the Center for Responsive Politics, retrieved from [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org).
2. Prior to *Citizens United*, independent expenditures could not be used for "electioneering communications"—overt campaigning for or against a specific candidate—within 30 days of a primary election or 60 days of a general election, and corporations and unions were banned from electioneering communications altogether by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002.
3. According to the DW-NOMINATE scale developed by Poole and Rosenthal (1997), Radel's NOMINATE Score is 0.702. Ideological rankings retrieved from: <https://voteview.com/congress/house/text>.
4. Radel was caught buying cocaine from an undercover federal agent, entered rehab in November of 2013, and resigned from Congress in January of 2014 (Sherman and Isenstadt, 2014).
5. My data set builds on the work of Stephen Pettigrew et al. (2014), who collected district- and candidate-level data on primary election candidates from 1956 to 2010. I updated the data set through 2016 and added several candidate-level variables.
6. Compiled using Brookings Institution, 2018. "Vital Statistics on Congress: Data on the U.S. Congress (Updated May 2018)," table 2.7. retrieved from: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vitalstats\\_ch2\\_tbl7.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vitalstats_ch2_tbl7.pdf).

7. I coded whichever candidate received a higher contribution total from party political action committees as the party's choice on the two occasions in which there was a tie.
8. This precise question will require further testing in future studies.
9. It is important to note that "clearing the field" is mainly about preventing unwanted candidates from reaching the ballot in the first place. The party disparities in my study are by definition among those candidates who appeared on the primary ballot. Although these are both measures of party strength, the comparison is not quite exact.
10. Regardless, Figure 2 suggests that those measures are highly correlated.
11. Since the 2012 cycle, California and Washington both utilize top-two multiparty primary ballots in which candidates from all parties (and unaffiliated candidates) run on the same ballot and the top two vote-getters advance to the general election. I include a multiparty ballot dummy variable in every model because otherwise the dependent variable (vote share) would be affected by the number of candidates from other parties appearing on the same ballot.
12. I also ran versions of models 1 and 2 in which I excluded uncontested primaries in the event that such cases were skewing the results. The resulting coefficients were very similar to and well within the confidence intervals of the coefficients of the original models. The gender variable, however, did reach statistical significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level for both parties in the directions observed in the original models.
13. Compiled by the author using bulk contributions data from the Center for Responsive Politics, retrieved from [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org).
14. Super political action committees (PACs) supported 21 of these 23 winning candidates (91%). Of the 22 interest group-backed candidates who lost, 11 of them were supported by super PACs (50%).
15. See Poole and Rosenthal (1997), NOMINATE scores compiled from: <https://voteview.com/congress/house/text>.

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## Author biography

**Cory Manento** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Brown University, specializing in American politics. His research interests include political parties, congressional elections, public opinion, and legislative process.