

Cue-Taking in Congress: Interest Group Signals from Dear Colleague Letters

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Abstract: *Why do some pieces of legislation move forward while others languish? We address this fundamental question by examining the role of interest groups in Congress, specifically the effect of their legislative endorsements in Dear Colleague letters. These letters provide insights into the information that members use to both influence and make policy decisions. We demonstrate that endorsements from particularly well-connected interest groups are a strong cue for members with limited information early in the legislative process and help grow the list of bill cosponsors. As bills progress, such groups have less direct weight, while legislation supported by a larger number of organizations and a larger number of cosponsors is more likely to pass. Thus, we illuminate the usage of Dear Colleague letters in Congress, demonstrate how members use interest groups in the legislative process, and shed new light on the varying impact of groups on public policy.*

Replication Materials: The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JNEQYJ>.

Members of Congress are routinely asked to make complex policy decisions with limited time and information. They want to make the decisions that will be best for their electoral prospects and result in good public policy. However, the challenges of doing so with imperfect information have been well documented (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). Thousands of bills are introduced each congress, and in an average week, a member may be expected to take positions on legislation in a wide array of policy issues, from foreign policy to water rights. Members work to overcome these challenges by specializing on the issues before their committees and relying on cues to understand the political and electoral implications of a bill (Fenno 1978; Kingdon 1981; Krehbiel 1991). However, some cues are stronger than others. Thus, exploring how members of Congress respond to signals from different groups and at different stages of the legislative process provides a greater

understanding of how the legislative branch lives up to the ideals of pluralism and democratic representation.

We examine the role of interest groups in providing members of Congress with informative signals that help them decide which policy proposals are worth supporting. While we may wish for members to read and understand every piece of legislation that comes across their desk, in reality they simply do not have the time. Even if they read every bill, members cannot be expected to effectively comprehend the implications of complicated legislative text across a broad array of policy issues. When legislation is considered in committee, there are extensive discussions in which members hear from interest groups and other interested parties to gain an understanding of the arguments for and against a particular policy (Arnold 1990). However, members are frequently asked by colleagues, constituents, and interest groups to take positions on legislation outside of their area of

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expertise, before it is considered in committee, or sometimes before it is even introduced. We argue that one of the ways they are able to do so is by relying on endorsements from interest groups, which serve as informative signals for members with limited time and resources early on, just as their committee testimony and lobbying efforts do in later stages of the legislative process (Arnold 1990; Grossmann and Pyle 2013; Hall and Deardorff 2006).

Using a unique data set of nearly 100,000 electronic Dear Colleague letters sent between members of Congress from 1999 to 2010, we identify the interest groups who have endorsed legislation and determine the impact of those endorsements at multiple stages of the legislative process. We combine this novel source of data on signals in Congress with a measure of the social power of interest groups based on their relative locations within a network of collaborative and purposive behavior in which organizations choose to coordinate their advocacy activities (Box-Steffensmeier and Christenson 2014). Doing so provides a new way to document participation in American democracy by interest groups and allows us to consider how members of Congress rely on signals from interest groups to guide their position taking, and which signals are most effective. We demonstrate that members of Congress both utilize and respond to endorsements from interest groups mentioned in Dear Colleague letters. Endorsements from groups that are more well connected within the advocacy community send stronger signals in the earliest stages of the legislative process when there are a large number of bills competing for a member's attention and limited information about their likely impact. By contrast, endorsements from a larger number of groups are better indicators of success later in the process when members need to amass a winning coalition of 218 votes.

Signals as Subsidy

Members of Congress are expected to be knowledgeable about and take positions on a wide array of issues. At the same time, they are limited in both time and resources. Members have always had to make choices about where to allocate their time, choosing which issues to prioritize and relying on their colleagues and interest groups for guidance in other policy domains (e.g., Hall 1998; Kingdon 1981; Matthews 1960). However, the gap between a member's workload and available resources has grown considerably in recent years, as members are elected to represent larger districts, devote more of their limited time to fundraising, and have fewer policy staff to support them.

The expenses of running for office have reduced the congressional capacity for policy analysis as members spend more time fundraising, a necessity not only for members facing a close election, but also for any who aspire to leadership positions (Heberlig 2003; Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006). In 2013, a presentation for newly elected members by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee suggested the "Model Daily Schedule" for a member consisted of one to two hours of meetings with constituents, two hours for committee and floor proceedings, one hour for strategic outreach and press, one hour of "recharge time," and four hours of call time, in which members place fundraising calls (Grim and Siddiqui 2013). Nowhere in this allocation is time for reviewing legislation introduced by other members or any sort of policy analysis.

Instead, members rely on professional staff to do the bulk of this work, supporting the member by studying proposals and recommending which bills are worth supporting (Salisbury and Shepsle 1981). However, staff levels in Congress are declining. Although members represent 200,000 more constituents than they did 30 years ago, the number of professional staff in the House of Representatives declined from 11,537 in 1985 to 7,703 in 2015.¹ At the same time, the Government Accountability Office, Congressional Research Service, and Congressional Budget Office, which were created to provide nonpartisan professional advice on technical issues, lost 37% of their staff, and the Office of Technology Assessment was eliminated (Roberts 2017).

As a result, there has been a steady decline in the number of issues Congress can address and its capacity for gathering the information necessary to create policy (Baumgartner and Jones 2015). A 2016 survey of congressional staff found that while 67% of respondents felt it was important for the functioning of Congress that "members have adequate time and resources to understand, consider and deliberate policy and legislation," only 6% were satisfied with Congress's performance in that regard.² Similarly, only 15% of respondents felt that "staff knowledge, skills and abilities are adequate to support members' official duties," and 11% agreed that "the chamber has adequate capacity and support (staff, research capability, infrastructure, etc.) to perform its role in democracy" (Goldschmidt 2017, 9).

Members cope with these constraints by becoming specialists, focusing their work on the issues before their committees, and using informative signals to guide their

¹This figure includes committee, personal, and leadership staff.

²Respondents were chiefs of staff, legislative directors, communications directors, and state/district directors.

decisions in other areas. These signals may take a number of forms, including memos from party leadership, committee reports, and colleagues' voting decisions (Kingdon 1981). Members also rely on interest groups to provide the information they need to make policy decisions. Interest groups have a long and well-documented history of providing expert testimony in committee hearings, dating back to the Progressive Era (e.g., Burstein and Hirsh 2007; Evans 1996; Goss 2013; Tichenor and Harris 2002–03). They also provide legislators with information on the views of their constituency (Hansen 1991), communicate issue salience (Ainsworth 1993), serve as brokers between other interest groups (Box-Steffensmeier and Christenson 2014, 2015, 2017; Heaney 2006), and help members intervene in agency decisions (Hall and Miller 2008). Hall and Deardorff (2006) reconcile the varying accounts of what interest groups do by arguing that lobbyists form an extension of a member's office, using their expertise to provide policy information and political intelligence to their allies in Congress. This information is invaluable to members making voting decisions.

In this article, we expand the understanding of when and how interest groups influence the legislative process. We argue that endorsements from organizations that are well connected in the larger interest group community provide a quick and highly informative signal to members as they review the thousands of bills introduced each congress to determine which are worthy of support. A single endorsement from an organization with ties to other well-connected interest groups can influence a member's decision to cosponsor a bill. At the same time, endorsements from a larger number of interest groups signal that a bill has broad support, which translates into a larger lobbying team and increased votes.

Members of Congress receive daily requests from colleagues, constituents, and interest groups to cosponsor legislation, as cosponsorship is an important form of position taking and a key element of the winnowing process that determines which bills will be among the approximately 14% that move onto the House floor (Koger 2003; Krutz 2005). In the absence of a committee report or recommendation from the leadership, members rely on the information provided by the bill's sponsor, who has no incentive to warn a colleague of any potential political issues with the bill and little knowledge of his or her colleague's electoral landscape. With limitations on both time and information, members seek out clear political signals regarding the strength or opposition to a proposal (Kingdon 1995; Wright 1995). At the same time, interest groups seeking policy change work to improve the visibility of their issue among policy makers (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Endorsements fulfill the needs of both members

and interest groups, drawing a member's attention and providing a quick and easy-to-process indication that the group supports the legislation in question. Therefore, a member who is concerned with the approval of a particular interest group will know that a bill is "safe" to support if it has their endorsement.

For example, if a member is asked by her constituents to cosponsor a health care bill, doing so might earn her goodwill with these voters. However, she may not know how the bill will affect health care providers or broader populations in her district and does not have the time or expertise to study it in depth. If the bill is endorsed by the American Medical Association or the American Hospital Association, that endorsement sends a signal to the member that the bill has been vetted by a leading industry expert outside the sponsor's office and supporting it will not cause problems with health care providers.

In addition to signaling the policy implications of a bill, there are electoral aspects to interest group endorsements. Groups are selective in their endorsements, providing their name to initiatives they strongly support rather than bills they find merely unobjectionable. A member looking to gain favor with an organization may sign onto a bill that group has endorsed, hoping her support will result in some benefit, whether in the form of a campaign contribution, checkmark on the organization's annual scorecard, or mention in a newsletter.

However, not all endorsements carry the same weight. Some organizations are more influential than others because they have more resources, greater name recognition, or better connections within the interest group community. When legislators are relying on interest group signals to guide their decisions, some signals are inherently stronger than others. An endorsement from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) will tell a member less about the political ramifications of a bill than one from the American Farm Bureau, particularly if the member represents a district with a strong agriculture industry. Furthermore, there is likely less of an electoral benefit from supporting a bill backed by NASPE than the American Farm Bureau, which has a larger network of voters in which to disseminate the information.

How do we determine which groups are likely to be more influential? Scholars have used a number of different metrics for interest group influence, from campaign contributions to hours spent lobbying (see Smith 1995). We focus on the relationships between interest groups, arguing that organizations that are well connected in the interest group community will be more influential in the policy arena. Interest groups frequently work in coalitions, not only when lobbying Congress, but also in other venues, such as the judicial and administrative

branches (Box-Steffensmeier, Christenson and Hitt 2013; Box-Steffensmeier, Christenson and Leavitt 2017; Hula 1999; Nelson and Yackee 2012). Organizations that are positioned at the core of a network of interest groups are seen as more influential, and these “pivotal” organizations are more likely to be recruited to a coalition and attract other groups to join (Hojnacki 1997). The strength of their relationships with other organizations means they are likely to be well known and in a position to influence other groups. Therefore, as a result of the social power gained from their connections within the interest group community, we expect organizations that are well connected will be more influential in the legislative process.

H1: Endorsements from well-connected interest groups provide informative signals to members of Congress reviewing legislation.

Members of Congress are not merely passive receivers of these signals, as legislators and lobbyists frequently coordinate their strategies and mobilization efforts (Ainsworth 1997; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Mahoney and Baumgartner 2015). In interviews with congressional staff,³ the importance of obtaining key interest group endorsements in the early stages of the legislative process was repeatedly emphasized. Members of Congress work to gain the support of stakeholders when they introduce a bill because they expect it will increase the likelihood of success. One staff member described how his boss “likes to build a network of both local and national interest groups because they bring outside expertise and lend credibility and resources.” When asked what members see as the value of interest group endorsements, multiple offices provided answers similar to one legislative director who said, “if you have an industry backing a bill, that’s the easiest way to get cosponsors.” As a result, we expect that well-connected and therefore well-known organizations with high social power will be particularly influential in this early stage. When there are thousands of proposals competing for a member’s attention and limited available information about a bill’s implications, the sponsors can use an endorsement from a prominent organization to make their legislation stand out.

H1a: The value of this signal is stronger in the early stages of the legislative process.

The strength of an organization’s relationships within the interest group network is not the only way we expect coalition strategy to influence the legislative process. We also examine the relationship between the number

of groups endorsing a bill and its success. Coalitions allow organizations to demonstrate broad support for a policy, share resources, and overcome the challenges of many organizations competing for limited attention on the issue agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Esterling 2004; Holyoke 2009). Existing research has found limited empirical support for a direct connection between membership in a lobbying coalition and policy outcomes (Hojnacki 1997; Hula 1999). However, interest groups that endorse the same legislation are not necessarily coordinating their efforts and engaging in traditional coalition strategies, which allows us to examine the effectiveness of lobbying by larger groups of organizations, regardless of whether they coordinate their strategies. Put simply, we expect that when a bill is endorsed by a large number of organizations, the endorsements collectively demonstrate broad support for the policy in question, and that support will translate into greater legislative success regardless of each organization’s social power.

Considering the American Farm Bureau again, in some cases the well-connected overarching organization may not endorse a bill because it involves picking sides among their own members. A proposal may be beneficial to farmers in one part of the country or in a particular industry, but detrimental to another. In that case, a bill may be endorsed by smaller state or industry affiliates, which will send a strong signal to the members who represent the farmers who benefit. As members are typically most concerned with the needs of their own district, an endorsement from the California Farm Bureau will carry a great deal of weight with members from California and have little to no influence on members outside that state. Obtaining endorsements from a large number of less well-connected organizations offers another path to legislative success.

H2: Endorsements from a large number of interest groups provide informative signals to members of Congress reviewing legislation.

When legislation reaches the floor of the House, members have fewer bills competing for their attention and more time to study them. Crucially, the stakes are considerably higher for a member deciding how to vote on a bill than whether to cosponsor one, as cosponsorship decisions can be reversed. Therefore, we expect the influence of a single endorsement from a well-connected organization to be diminished in the later stages of the legislative process, and instead the number of endorsing organizations will matter more. Legislation endorsed by a broad collection of organizations will be more likely to gain the support of the 218 members required for passage because each endorsement will appeal to some segment

³The authors conducted personal interviews with member staff in the House in 2016.

of members for whom that organization or the industry they represent matters to their constituents. An endorsement from the California Farm Bureau will build support among the California members, but that is not enough for a bill to pass. However, a bill endorsed by the state farm bureaus for all of the coastal states is more likely to get the votes needed.

While endorsements still have value as signals in the later stages of the legislative process, the relationship between the number of organizations supporting a bill and its success is driven less by the use of endorsements as a “quick cue” and more by what the endorsements represent. In addition to signaling that a bill has broad support, endorsements from a large number of organizations translate into a larger ground game. One of the ways in which lobbyists subsidize the work of congressional offices is by helping to build a winning coalition of legislators (Hall and Deardorff 2006). When more organizations are directly lobbying members and making a case for why they should support a bill, we expect they will have a greater influence on the outcome of a vote.

H2a: The value of this signal is stronger in the later stages of the legislative process.

In what follows, we test whether interest group endorsements play a role in the decision to cosponsor legislation and a bill’s success in the House of Representatives. Heretofore, this perspective have been missing from consideration due to both data limitations and substantive considerations. Foremost, a comprehensive measure of the relative strengths and reputations of interest groups is difficult to come by. Second, data connecting interest groups to specific bills in the U.S. Congress have not been previously available. Third, prior literature has focused most heavily on the final outcomes of bills, largely neglecting the role of interest groups at the earlier, though critical, stages of the legislative process. Our work benefits from a measure of interest group strength, new data on interest group endorsements, and a focus on the role of interest groups at multiple stages of the legislative process to provide a better understanding of interest group cues in Congress.

Dear Colleague Letters as Signal Transmitters

To better understand the role of interest group signals in the legislative process, we must first identify a source in which endorsements of legislation by organized interests can be systematically identified and that is regularly

received by members of Congress and their staff. We do so using Dear Colleague letters, the official correspondence among members of Congress, used to promote and build support for legislation (Peterson 2005).

Dear Colleague letters came into common use in the early twentieth century and were initially distributed through the official House internal mail system.⁴ In 1998, the Dear Colleague listserv was established, allowing members to distribute letters by e-mail. Paper letters remained the most common means of distribution initially, but the popularity of the electronic distribution system has grown steadily since its introduction. In August 2008, the House streamlined the distribution process by creating a web-based “e-Dear Colleague” system. According to an official with the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the House, “The vast majority [of Dear Colleagues] are sent electronically these days. You have a few offices that cling to paper delivery, but the House has cut mail delivery so it’s not as efficient. With e-Dear Colleagues, they’re easier to compose, easier to incorporate outside data — everything about the electronic system is easier.”⁵ This account fits with the finding of Straus (2012) that 93% of House members used the e-Dear Colleague system in 2009.

The volume of Dear Colleagues sent points to the important role these letters play in the legislative process. Our data show that during the 111th Congress (2009–10), 31,994 electronic Dear Colleagues were sent, a 20.8% increase over the 26,494 letters sent during the 110th Congress (2007–8), and a 106.7% increase over the 15,477 letters sent during the 109th Congress (2005–6). Calculating the average rate of letters sent per legislative day shows a similarly increasing trend, from 23 letters per day in the 107th Congress (2001–2) to 70 letters per day in the 109th Congress and 112 letters per day in the 111th Congress.⁶ Some of this growth can be attributed to members’ shifting from paper to electronic letters over time, but it also reflects the increasing ease of sending Dear Colleagues. In the 108th Congress (2003–4), while fewer Dear Colleague letters were sent than in later years, all but 12 members

⁴There is no single repository for older letters, but examples can be found in the personal archives for individual members. The degree to which each member preserved the letters sent by his or her office is highly idiosyncratic, preventing the creation of a comprehensive archive of letters sent prior to 1998.

⁵The authors conducted personal interviews with member and CAO staff in the House in 2013.

⁶To manage the volume, each letter is tagged by the sending office with up to three of 32 possible issues, which allows for the filtering of messages so legislative staff only receive the Dear Colleagues relevant to their portfolio.

signed letters sent via the Dear Colleague listserv, further demonstrating its widespread usage (Craig 2017).

Although there has been little systematic study of Dear Colleague letters due to the difficulty of tracking letters prior to the introduction of the Dear Colleague listserv, members have repeatedly cited their use and importance. Craig (2016) demonstrates how the letters provide previously unavailable insights into policy collaboration in Congress. In interviews with legislative staff, the letters are described as a key communication tool. In his account of his efforts to pass legislation, Representative Daniel Lipinski describes his use of Dear Colleague letters to gain cosponsors, to stake a claim on an issue, and to alert members to a planned amendment (Lipinski 2009). Koger (2003) quotes an anonymous member of Congress who describes how he or she used Dear Colleague letters to publicize the cosponsors of their legislation and send a signal to other members that it was a good bill. In the cosponsorship and legislative effectiveness literature, Dear Colleague letters are repeatedly mentioned as one of the tools by which members build support for their policy proposals (Campbell 1982; Krutz 2005). They are an essential and relied upon mechanism for communication in the modern Congress.

As described by a former legislative assistant in a 2013 staff interview,

The Dear Colleague system serves as a way to quickly get the best information about your legislation distributed to congressional offices. It can be a crucial factor in building support for legislation, as it is a great way to disseminate what outside organizations are supporting legislation and to get pertinent facts and figures in front of the staffers who advise the members what they should be supporting.

The importance of Dear Colleague letters as a source of information for members of Congress and their staff demonstrates their validity as a tool for identifying the signals that members receive. The ability to quickly sort incoming messages by issue area makes them a valuable information shortcut for legislators who face constant demands on their time and attention. With over 12,000 bills introduced in the 112th Congress, members rely on Dear Colleague letters to know what legislation has been introduced and quickly assess why they should support or oppose a bill. As we will demonstrate, the inclusion of interest group endorsements in a letter significantly strengthens the signal.

Data and Methods

Our full data set is a comprehensive archive of the electronic Dear Colleague letters sent between members of the House of Representatives from the 106th Congress through the 111th Congress.⁷ The data set consists of 93,967 nonunique letters that we have archived in e-mail form.⁸ The letters serve multiple purposes and cover a variety of issues, with soliciting cosponsors for legislation as the most common purpose.

Figure 1 shows an example letter, sent by Congresswoman Laura Richardson (D-CA) asking members to become original cosponsors of the Equal Rights for Health Care Act, which was introduced on June 9, 2009, as H.R. 2744. The letter was sent June 5, 2009, indicating that Congresswoman Richardson secured endorsements from three interest groups prior to introducing her bill: the National Minority Quality Forum, Families USA, and the Family Equality Council. Additional examples of Dear Colleague letters are provided in the supporting information and show typical variation across the types of letters.

Looking at the first session of the 111th Congress, Straus (2012) finds that over half of the letters sent in the House are seeking cosponsors. Our data show that over multiple congresses, 44% of the letters sent are soliciting cosponsors; 12% of letters are used to gather original cosponsors, or members who sign onto a bill prior to its introduction. Another 12% of the letters sent are urging members to support a bill, an amendment, or other action on the floor, whereas 5% ask members to oppose a floor action. Additionally, 16% of the letters are invitations to members and staff to attend briefings, receptions, or other events.⁹ These are the types of letters most likely to include interest groups.

Letters serve other purposes that are not as likely to involve interest group endorsements. Fourteen percent of the Dear Colleague letters are from members asking their colleagues to sign a letter to the administration, committee chairs, or congressional leadership. Although one might expect interest groups to be as common in these

⁷Corresponding years are 1999 to 2010.

⁸Members frequently send multiple copies of the same letter in a given congress.

⁹The classification of letters by purpose is based on a sample of 4,656 letters that were hand-coded by a team of research assistants. The research assistants read each letter in the sample and, based on its content, classified its purpose as one or more of the following: gathering cosponsors, gathering original cosponsors, gathering signers to a policy letter, inviting members to an event, urging support for legislation, urging opposition for legislation, providing general information on an issue, recruiting caucus members, providing administrative information, and other.

FIGURE 1 Dear Colleagues Letter Example: Equal Rights

Support Equal Rights for Health Care!

Deadline to become an original co-sponsor THIS MONDAY, June 8th at 12 noon

Endorsed by the National Minority Quality Forum, Families USA, and Family Equality Council

Original Co-Sponsors: Corrine Brown (FL), Steve Cohen (TN), Donna M. Christensen (USVI),
John Conyers (MI), Bob Filner (CA), Carolyn C. Kilpatrick (MI),
Carolyn Maloney (NY), Eleanor Holmes Norton (DC)

Dear Colleague:

Please join me in becoming an original co-sponsor of legislation that I believe should be part of the fast-approaching healthcare debate.

As a fundamental right, all Americans should be guaranteed **equal access to healthcare**, and it is unfortunate that this issue has not yet been adequately addressed. I urge you to join me in reaching a solution by becoming a co-sponsor of the Equal Rights for Health Care Act- Title 42. Inspired by Title IX, the goal of this legislation is to ensure that all Americans are treated equally when obtaining healthcare treatment.

As you know, Title IX was passed in 1972 and created federal law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education activities. Title IX has attracted much attention by leveling the playing field in athletics, but it has also had a tremendous impact on gender equality in all educational activities. Similarly, my legislation will expand upon the belief that Americans should receive equal treatment in all areas of their lives from education to healthcare. Specifically, this legislation will prohibit discrimination in Federal assisted health care services and research programs on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability status.

With the introduction of this legislation we are taking a step toward equal access to healthcare, and I urge you to become an original co-sponsor the Equal Rights for Health Care Act- Title 42. For further information or to be added as an original co-sponsor please contact Mariel Lim at x5-7924 or Mariel.Lim@mail.house.gov.

Regards,

Laura Richardson
Member of Congress

letters as in bill cosponsorship requests, our data show a negative correlation between whether a Dear Colleague lists interest groups and whether it is seeking cosigners to a letter.¹⁰ The remaining letters fall into miscellaneous categories. Six percent of the letters provide information on an issue such as a news article or report without a specific request for action. Three percent of the letters are used to request some other action not included in the above categories, such as joining a congressional caucus, speaking on the floor, or hosting an event in their district. Finally, 3% of the letters are administrative, used by the Chief Administrative Officer or other House officials to provide information about House procedures to members and staff.

¹⁰The lack of interest group mentions in Dear Colleagues seeking letter cosigners may be due to the quick turnaround of these letters. A letter to an agency or a congressional committee typically has a short two- to three-week turnaround time from when the letter is drafted to when it is sent.

Table 1 breaks down the letters associated with bills sent in the 111th Congress by issue area. Issue areas are determined by the member's office and are included in the subject header of the e-mail so staff can easily sort incoming Dear Colleagues to the appropriate legislative assistant. Early Dear Colleagues had wide variation in the listed issue areas. Some offices would list broad topics, such as health care or appropriations, whereas others favored more specific issue areas like Medicare or tort reform. For letters sent after August 2008, members could select up to three issues from a predefined list of 32 topics, which are those listed in the table.

Our focus is on interest group endorsements of legislation, and so we limit this study to the Dear Colleague letters that are associated with specific bills and use the bill itself as the unit of analysis. Of the bills with associated Dear Colleague letters in our data set, 27% had letters sent that mention interest groups by name. The relatively small percentage of bills that are explicitly supported by interest groups makes an endorsement a stronger signal.

TABLE 1 Dear Colleagues by Issue Area in the 111th Congress

Issue Area	%	Issue Area	%	Issue Area	%
Health Care	22.1	Energy	8.0	Science	2.9
Economy	14.4	Labor	7.9	Trade	2.7
Family Issues	13.2	Natural Resources	7.9	Social Security	2.6
Judiciary	13.0	Foreign Affairs	7.2	Appropriations	2.5
Taxes	12.5	Consumer Affairs	6.2	Budget	2.4
Education	11.8	Small Business	5.9	Elections	2.0
Environment	11.4	Transportation	5.9	Rules	1.2
Finance	10.2	Homeland Security	5.6	Intelligence	1.2
Armed Services	9.1	Civil Rights	5.5	Ethics and Standards	0.8
Government	9.1	Agriculture	4.4	Administrative	0.0
Veterans	8.6	Technology	3.8		

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because letters frequently include more than one issue area.

Obtaining interest group endorsements for legislation is neither simple nor costless. Members of Congress and their staff have to reach out to organizations they think may be interested in supporting the bill, provide them with the legislative language prior to introduction, wait for the organization to review the bill, and make any changes the group requests.¹¹ In many cases, the members may decide this process is not worth their time, they may not be willing to acquiesce to the group's requests, or the group may choose not to oppose the bill rather than explicitly endorse it. If nearly every bill introduced was endorsed by an interest group, the value of those signals would be significantly weakened, both for the member seeking to use the endorsement to make his or her bill stand out and for the interest group that does not want to be seen as willing to put its name on anything.

As each member's office writes its own Dear Colleague letters, variation in its content and formatting is the rule rather than the exception. This provides a challenge for the coding of the letters; however, we were able to extract the necessary information, from each letter using a python script that read each letter and scraped key information, including the congress during which the letter was sent, the sender of the e-mail, the date sent, and the subject line of the e-mail.¹² The subject line of each e-mail was then parsed into the letter title and the issue area(s) of each letter. The script also identified any bill

numbers in the title or body of the letters and any listed interest group endorsements.¹³

Using the bill numbers for referenced legislation, we merged our data set with the Congressional Bills Project data, which provide information on every bill introduced in the House and Senate between 1947 and 2016 and include details on the progress of legislation, including the number of cosponsors and whether it passed out of committee, passed on the House or Senate floor, and was signed into law (Adler and Wilkerson 2015). This also includes data on each bill's sponsor, such as seniority, party, leadership positions, committee membership, and ideology. These data are incorporated into our model to test whether interest group endorsements serve as signals to busy members of Congress deciding which proposals are worth supporting. We merge the letters by bill number and focus solely on those referencing specific legislation. The result is a data set consisting of 6,633 bills that were the subject of a Dear Colleague letter urging support for legislation between 1999 and 2010.¹⁴

¹³Bill numbers were identified by searching for the syntax used to denote legislation in Congress (e.g. H.R., H.J.Res.) and scraping the subsequent numbers. Interest group endorsements were identified by searching the letters for the names of the 11,019 organizations in the Amicus Curiae Networks Project. To account for organizations that endorsed legislation but did not sign an Amicus Curiae brief between 1930 and 2010, the authors reviewed the letters for the 6,633 bills with associated letters by hand and added any missing organizations.

¹⁴We limit our analysis to the bills that were the subject of a Dear Colleague letter for three reasons: (1) As indicated by interviews with congressional staff (2016), members send Dear Colleague letters for bills they are actively working to promote and advance, as opposed to those messaging pieces or claims on particular issues. (2) Our hand-coded subset of 4,656 letters validates our assumption that when a letter is sent on a particular piece of legislation, the bill number is included in that letter, so we are not concerned with

¹¹Alternatively, a group may endorse legislation because the organization wrote the bill and provided it to the member to introduce, but a member reviewing a Dear Colleague letter is unable to distinguish between an endorsement that a member solicited and an interest group that solicited a sponsor for its proposal.

¹²The sender of each e-mail is typically staff rather than a member of Congress.

To examine how interest group endorsements help members of Congress make decisions with incomplete information, we use three measures of legislative progress as our dependent variables. *Cosponsors* is a count of the total number of members who signed on as cosponsors of a bill in that congress. *Reported house* is a dichotomous variable representing whether a bill was reported out of a House committee. *Passed House* is another dichotomous variable indicating whether a bill passed on the House floor. Data for all three dependent variables were gathered from the Congressional Bills Project and represent only bills, excluding amendments and resolutions. Ultimately, the legislative goal of members of Congress is to see their bills signed into law; however, only a small proportion of bills introduced will ever be signed into law, and members of Congress are aware of this. As argued by Volden and Wiseman (2014), “While [new laws] may be the ultimate goal, members may be effective at moving their proposed legislation through key committees and to the floor of the House. Yet, even if they fail to gain passage of their bills on the floor, such members have demonstrated a level of effectiveness that will serve them well on other issues or in later Congresses.” Furthermore, legislation may not show as signed into law in the legislative record because it was incorporated — in part or in whole — into other bills, which is more likely when a member has been successful in building early support for his or her policy proposal (Wilkerson, Smith, and Stramp 2015). By examining legislative outcomes at three key stages of the legislative process, we provide a more comprehensive and nuanced view of the role of interest group signals in the legislative process than whether an endorsed bill is one of the 3% of those signed into law (Anderson, Box-Steffensmeier, and Sinclair-Chapman 2003).

We further merged our data set with data on interest group coalitions drawn from the Amicus Curiae Networks Project, which provides a list of all the interest groups that have signed onto amicus curiae, or “friend of the court,” briefs before Supreme Court cases. Groups that have signed onto the same brief are considered tied in the network. Although the amicus curiae network is a

demonstration of relationships intended for the judicial branch, Box-Steffensmeier, Christenson, and Hitt (2013) and Box-Steffensmeier and Christenson (2014) argue it is an appropriate measure of interest group connectivity across the branches of government. Qualitative evidence supports the idea that interest group coalitions arise naturally in the pursuit of shared political interests and persist across multiple political arenas. In interviews, group leaders emphasized that if they reached agreement with another organization on an amicus curiae brief, they were likely to agree on other issues before the Court as well as across political institutions, including the legislative arena (Box-Steffensmeier and Christenson 2014; Box-Steffensmeier, Christenson, and Hitt 2013). As reported by the interest groups themselves, the relationships demonstrated by the cosigning of an amicus curiae brief before the Court do not disappear when those groups are lobbying Congress.¹⁵

The amicus curiae network is the only currently available measure of purposive and coordinated relationships between interest groups that captures anywhere near the breadth of organizations that participate in the process. To cosign a brief, interest groups must negotiate and agree on the language, which requires effort on the part of individual organizations in the network and cooperation between the organizations to express a precise and shared opinion (Box-Steffensmeier, Christenson, and Hitt 2013; Box-Steffensmeier and Christenson 2014; Box-Steffensmeier, Christenson and Leavitt 2017). In contrast, the interest groups that have endorsed a bill and are listed together on a Dear Colleague letter may not have any interaction. Legislation may originate from a coalition of interest groups, but it is just as likely that the listed endorsements were pulled together by a member’s office. In our 2016 interviews with congressional staff, several offices recounted how their boss secured the support of multiple organizations prior to bill introduction: “If you can build a coalition prior to introducing [a bill], that’s

missing endorsements. (3) As our argument is that interest group endorsements in Dear Colleague letters serve as an informative signal to members of Congress, it makes more sense to compare bills that were the subject of a Dear Colleague letter than all bills introduced. That said, an analysis of the role of interest group endorsements over all bills introduced in the 111th Congress is available in the supporting information and shows similar substantive results. While 2% of letters were written in opposition to legislation, nearly all of these were focused on the later stages of the legislative process, when a bill was scheduled for floor consideration within the week. We removed these letters from the data set and focused only on letters in support of legislation.

¹⁵We do not assume that interest group behavior is identical in the judicial and legislative realms. Some organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union and other justice-oriented organizations, will naturally be more active in the amicus curiae network than in endorsing legislation. Likewise, some organizations, such as veterans groups, are more likely to focus on legislative strategies. However, the signing of amicus briefs is not limited to organizations with interests in the judiciary. While Schlozman and Tierney (1986) find that only two-thirds of interest groups use a legal strategy, more recent scholarship has documented a sharp increase in the number of amicus curiae briefs, filed and the diversity of organizations that sign the briefs (Caldeira and Wright 1998; Collins and Solowij 2007). We expect that in the context of the interest group community as a whole, behavior in the legislative process is analogous to the signing of amicus curiae briefs, and the relationships between interest groups persist from one branch of government to another.

where you're going to get the best bang for your buck." In this case, each interest group makes an independent decision on whether to endorse the member's bill, and although they may be influenced by other organizations that have provided their endorsement, there is no coordination between groups.

Thus, we use the *amicus curiae* network over other measures of interest group influence in legislative politics because it reflects the importance of relationships between organizations. Interest groups frequently do not work alone, and a network-based measure accounts for the simple fact that interest groups gain strength and influence from their relationships. Indeed, Whitford (2003, 46) states that "as recent studies suggest, the network aspects of group coordination — the specific interconnections between groups — may be as important as whether participation occurs at all." Interest groups with strong connections to other prominent and well-connected organizations have a great deal of social power within the interest group community.

We apply tools of network analysis to measure the social power of interest groups. More specifically, we examine the relative locations of interest groups within a network of collaborative behavior. To illustrate the connections within a given network, we examine the egocentric networks—that is, all of the first-order connections of a single group—for a few groups within the data. Figure 2 shows the egocentric networks of four organizations mentioned in Dear Colleague letters: the American Heart Association (AHA), the American Soybean Association (ASA), the National Education Association (NEA), and the National Organization for Women (NOW). The node sizes are scaled by their egocentric eigenvector centrality score (discussed below), and colored black for the egocentric organization and gray for their cosigners. Examining the names of the connected organizations (not shown) suggests these groups network with others that share issue areas as well as ideological positions.

Looking at the networks, we find two midsize networks, the AHA and ASA, with 160 and 121 cosigners, respectively. The NEA is a bit larger with 465 cosigners while NOW is the largest at 946. Comparing the network structures, we also find some differences. The ASA primarily works as part of a small team or clique, though it also serves in a leadership capacity, connecting two small cliques. The other three egocentric networks are much larger and all seem to act more as leaders than teammates, connecting multiple cliques of large sizes that are not connected to each other but for their relationship to the egocentric node. Indeed, NOW has an egocentric density of .18, suggesting that many of the groups in the egocentric network are not directly connected to

each other. Similarly low are the AHA at .24 and the NEA at .22. The ASA's egocentric density, however, is quite large at .85, confirming the high connectivity within the egocentric network. Of course, while density provides an overall picture of how connected all of the members in a network are to each other relative to how well they could be, our hypotheses require a measure of each organization's social power relative to one another.

To operationalize social power, we calculate the eigenvector centrality score for each interest group in the data set. Eigenvector centrality weights nodes according to their connections with other central groups, thereby capturing the idea that it matters which groups an organization is connected to and not just how many.¹⁶ An organization that is connected to other well-connected interest groups will have a higher eigenvector centrality score than one that is connected to a larger number of less well-connected organizations and therefore is not as well positioned within the network. Thus, eigenvector centrality is a global measure of connectivity in the network, in contrast to purely local measures, and is frequently used as a proxy for power in a network because it tells us who is connected to the best connected in the network (Bonacich 1972, 2007).

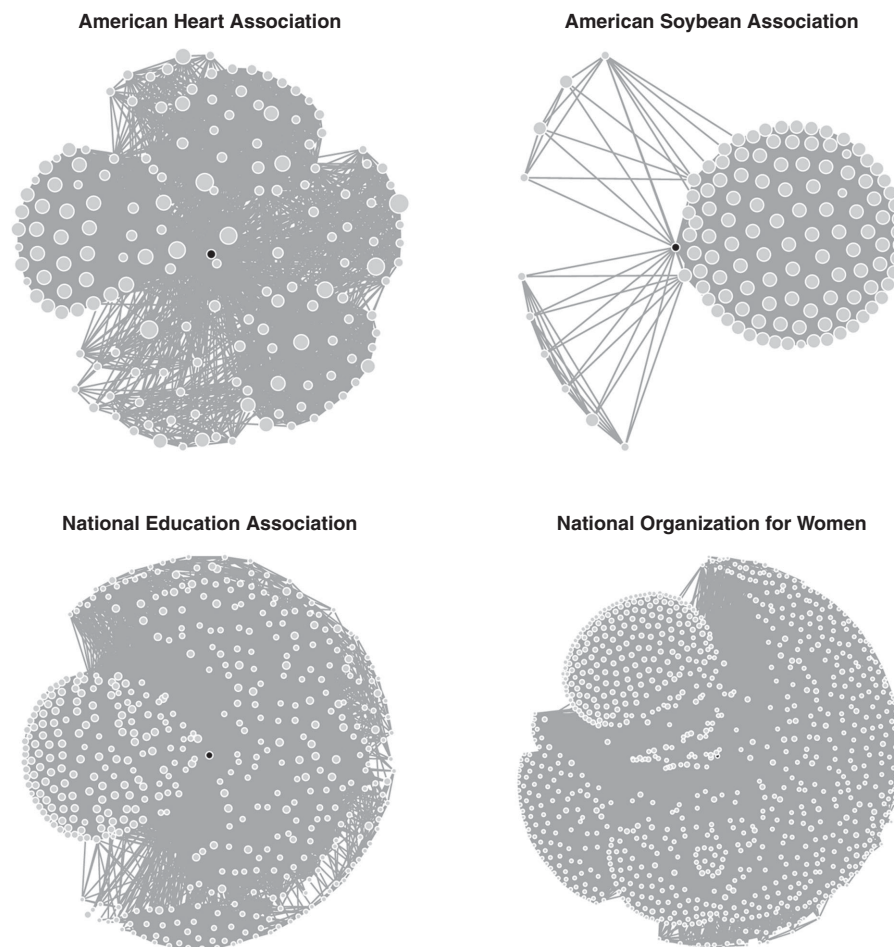
Looking at the four interest groups used to create the networks in Figure 2, the eigenvector centrality score for the NEA is 2.6653, for the AHA is -0.1095 , for NOW is 8.2962, and for the ASA is -0.2053 .¹⁷ We argue that NOW has more social power than the other three organizations, and therefore an endorsement from them is going to send a stronger signal to the average member of Congress than one from the ASA, which is not well positioned within the network. Interest groups that appear in Dear Colleague letters but do not appear in the *amicus curiae* network are given the minimum standardized eigenvector centrality score of -0.2053 , equivalent to an interest group in the *amicus curiae* data that never signs a brief with another organization.¹⁸

Table 2 shows the standardized eigenvector centrality scores for the 10 organizations that most frequently

¹⁶The eigenvector centrality of a group is $\lambda x_i = \sum_{j=1}^n a_{ij} x_j$, where $a_{ij} = 1$ if the groups have a connection and 0 otherwise, λ is the largest eigenvalue of the adjacency matrix, and x is the group's centrality.

¹⁷Eigenvector centrality scores have been standardized to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

¹⁸Most of the groups that fall into this category are organizations such as the American Community Gardening Association, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Alliance, and the Lance Armstrong Foundation, none of which we expect to be influential a priori. Furthermore, any error introduced as a result of this decision will result in underestimating interest group influence, which, while not ideal, is preferable to overstating it.

FIGURE 2 Egocentric Networks of Central Interest Groups

Note: Egocentric networks of four interest groups with node size scaled by their egocentric eigenvector centrality score. Black nodes refer to the egocentric organization and gray nodes to their cosigners.

endorse legislation in the Dear Colleague data. All of the groups listed are well-known organizations that would be expected to play an active role in the legislative process, but with varying eigenvector centrality scores, indicating that some organizations like the NEA and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) have more social power than the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) or the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW).¹⁹

From the eigenvector centrality score of each organization, we derive an explanatory variable of interest,

¹⁹While the NEA and AFL-CIO engage on a number of issues and build broad coalitions as a result, the VFW and MOAA are highly focused on veterans issues and repeatedly engage with the same small collection of organizations. Therefore, it makes sense that they would have less social power. However, this does illustrate that organizations can be influential without engaging in coalition strategies.

Interest Group Social Power, which is the largest standardized eigenvector centrality score of the interest groups that have endorsed a bill. We use maximum eigenvector centrality rather than the sum or average of scores because we are most interested in the effect of endorsements from well-connected interest groups. Our argument is that in the earliest stages of the legislative process, an endorsement from a well-connected group will carry more weight than that of several less-prominent organizations. Using an additive index of interest group social power scores would favor bills with a larger number of endorsements, even if they are from groups that are poorly positioned in the network. Average interest group social power would dilute the potential effects of an endorsement from a “big name” interest group such as the American Heart Association. That is, maximum eigenvector centrality allows us to examine whether members are swayed by a single

TABLE 2 Eigenvector Centrality for Top Endorsing Interest Groups

Interest Group	# of Endorsements	EVC
National Education Association	97	2.6653
Veterans of Foreign Wars	78	-0.1994
American Legion	73	-0.2037
U.S. Chamber of Commerce	67	-0.2032
American Medical Association	65	0.0649
AFL-CIO	55	0.8824
Consumers Union	55	-0.1549
National Association of Manufacturers	50	-0.2035
Military Officers Association of America	49	-0.2029
Service Employees International Union	47	0.3540
Median Organization	1	-0.2020

endorsement from a powerful interest group, as we expect they will be.²⁰

In the later stages of the legislative process, while members still contend with constraints on their time and resources, the pool of legislation they deal with is significantly smaller, limited to bills before their committee or the few that have survived the winnowing process to reach the House floor. Here, we expect that a broad coalition of endorsing organizations will be a more influential signal. To capture this, we include a measure, *Interest Group Count*, that is the total number of endorsing interest groups listed by name in the letter. Both *Interest Group Social Power* and *Interest Group Count* are included in all three models to allow for alternative explanations: that coalition size drives support in the early stages of the legislative process, and that endorsements from well-connected groups affect legislative success in the later stages.

In addition to our two key independent variables, we include controls we expect may affect both interest group endorsements and legislative outcomes. One possible

explanation for a relationship between endorsements and outcomes is that certain bills are more prominent than others. Appropriations bills, agency authorizations, and major policy initiatives such as the Affordable Care Act are more likely to both draw the attention of interest groups and progress through the legislative process because they are seen as either “must-pass” legislation, as in the case of appropriations, or a top priority of the leadership. To account for this, we include a measure of *Hot Bills*, which represents the major legislation considered in each Congress as designated by the Secretary of the U.S. Senate. The “Hot Bills List” published by the Senate Library highlights contentious legislation and major policy initiatives along with agency authorizations and appropriations bills. For example, in the 111th Congress, the “Hot Bills List” includes the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and legislation to raise the debt ceiling, to block congressional pay raises, and to reauthorize the USA PATRIOT Act. We expect legislation designated as a “hot bill” is more likely to pass the House and be signed into law.²¹

Similarly, we include a measure, *Commemorative*, to represent legislation that is commemorative in nature. This is drawn from the Congressional Bills Project, which designates legislation such as Congressional Gold Medals and the naming of federal buildings as commemorative. We expect that these bills will be more likely to attract cosponsors, as they are generally uncontroversial, and they are more likely to pass the House.

Finally, we include member-level controls drawn from the Congressional Bills Project to account for how the sponsor of a bill may affect its success. It may be that more powerful members of Congress, who are well established as more successful in advancing their legislation, are also better at securing interest group support. We capture a member’s power in the House through several common measures: *Majority* represents whether the bill’s sponsor is a member of the majority party, *Seniority* represents the number of congresses a member has served, *Referring Committee* is a control for whether the sponsoring member sits on a committee to which the bill was referred, and *Committee Chair* and *Ranking Member* indicate whether a member has a leadership position on any committee and represent institutional power. Consistent with the cosponsorship and legislative effectiveness

²⁰In the supporting information, we examine the effects of average and total eigenvector centrality and find no change in significance for our key explanatory variables.

²¹Aside from the annual appropriations bills and program reauthorizations, whether a bill is “hot” may be determined after interest groups have endorsed it. To ensure the robustness of our findings, we also estimate our models without the “hot bill” covariate. The results, available in the supporting information, show a stronger relationship between legislative outcomes and our key explanatory variables; however, the model fit is poorer, so we do not report those findings here.

literatures, we expect members of the majority party and those who serve on the relevant committee will be more effective at advancing their legislation. We also control for *Ideological Extremity*, which is the absolute difference between a member's first-dimension DW-NOMINATE score and the chamber median, which we expect will have a detrimental effect on legislative outcomes. Because our data are drawn from multiple congresses, we include fixed effects by congress to account for congress-level variation in cosponsorship and bill passage patterns.²²

The Value of Interest Group Signals

We estimate a series of models on the relationship between our measure of an organization's social power and several stages of the legislative process. In Table 3, we provide the results of a negative binomial model testing whether interest group endorsements are effective signals for members of Congress deciding what bills to support.²³ Much of the work of soliciting cosponsors is done early in the legislative process, prior to committee hearings, and as a result there is unlikely to be constituent pressure or media coverage unless there is a powerful interest group, working to stir up support. Interest group endorsements are therefore one of only a few cues that members have when deciding whether to sign onto a bill.

Substantively, both *Interest Group Social Power* and *Interest Group Count* have a marked effect on the number of cosponsors on a bill. Figure 3 plots the number of cosponsors on a bill predicted by the social power of an interest group, with all other variables held at their means or medians in the case of categorical variables. The average bill with endorsements only from unconnected organizations with a social power score of -0.2053 is estimated to have 33 cosponsors. An endorsement from a single interest group with an eigenvector centrality score of 2.51, such as the Anti-Defamation League, increases the predicted number of cosponsors to 38. An endorsement from one of the most well-positioned interest groups in the network, such as Planned Parenthood, with a score of 7.66, increases the predicted number of cosponsors to 51.

²²Model results without fixed effects are available in the supporting information and yield the same substantive conclusions. We also estimate a separate model for each congress and do not find a systematic pattern, that is, *Interest Group Social Power* has a greater influence in some congresses, and *Interest Group Count* has a greater influence in others.

²³We use a negative binomial model because our dependent variable is an overdispersed count of the number of cosponsors on a given bill. Our *Cosponsors* variable has a mean of 39.44 and a variance of 2,955.03, indicating that a Poisson model would not be appropriate for this data.

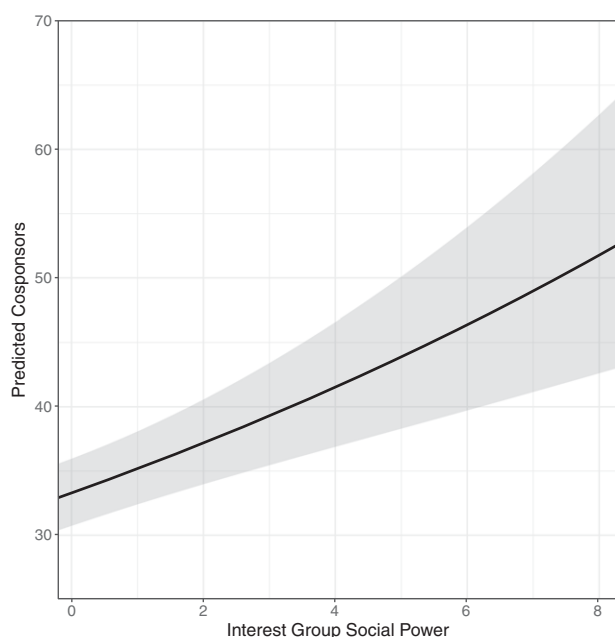
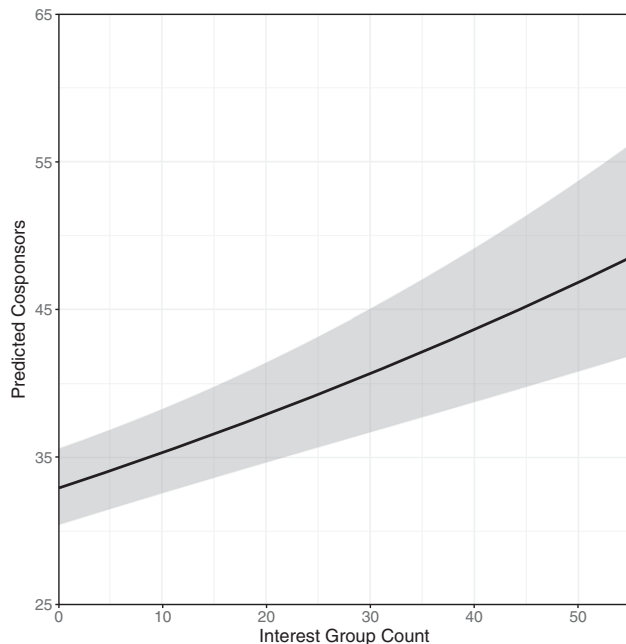
TABLE 3 Negative Binomial Regression Predicting Number of Bill Cosponsors

	Cosponsors
Interest Group Social Power	0.055*** (0.011)
Interest Group Count	0.007*** (0.001)
Hot Bills	0.365*** (.078)
Commemorative	0.842*** (.070)
Majority	0.108 (.074)
Seniority	−0.021*** (.004)
Ideological Extremity	−0.061 (.096)
Referring Committee	0.153*** (.030)
Committee Chair	−0.147* (.059)
Ranking Member	0.050 (.076)
Constant	5.830*** (.411)
Fixed Effects	✓
N	6,597
α	1.377
AIC	60,835.04
Log-likelihood	−30,400.52
χ^2	771.93
$\Pr > \chi^2$	0.000

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

We see a similar trajectory in Figure 4, which displays the relationship between the number of interest groups endorsing a bill and its predicted number of cosponsors. The average bill with no endorsements is estimated to have 33 cosponsors. But in order to reach the same substantive weight as a single endorsement from a moderately well-connected interest group like the Anti-Defamation League, a member of Congress would have to build a coalition of 19 organizations that are not as well positioned within the network. It takes 61 endorsements from interest groups with no more than the average eigenvector centrality score to match the 51 cosponsors predicted for a bill endorsed by one of the groups with the greatest social power, such as Planned Parenthood. Both increased social power for individual interest groups and a higher number

FIGURE 3 Predicted Number of Cosponsors by Interest Group Social Power**FIGURE 4 Predicted Number of Cosponsors by Interest Group Count**

of organizations endorsing a bill provide an added value to a member seeking cosponsors for a piece of legislation. However, for a member seeking “the most bang for the buck,” securing an endorsement from a single socially powerful organization is the best strategy to build support

for his or her legislation, as well-connected groups are more influential and their endorsement sends a stronger signal.

We also find that both the substance of legislation and characteristics of the sponsoring member contribute to the number of cosponsors on a bill. “Hot bills” and commemorative legislation both attract more cosponsors. On average, the bills deemed significant attract an additional 15 cosponsors, and commemorative legislation draws an average of 78 cosponsors, compared to the 33 cosponsors on a noncommemorative bill. In the case of commemorative bills, we attribute this to the largely noncontroversial nature of the legislation, whereas “hot bills” benefit from the additional attention they receive both from the media and within the House. The characteristics of the sponsoring member matter as well, in particular seniority, whether the bill sponsor sits on the referring committee, and whether he or she is a committee chair. Bills sponsored by more senior members and committee chairs tend to draw fewer cosponsors, likely because those members put less emphasis on gathering cosponsors. The chair of the Ways and Means Committee has less of a need to attract cosponsors to demonstrate support for his or her bill to the leadership than a second-term member. At the same time, bills sponsored by members of the referring committee attract, on average, an additional six cosponsors, which is consistent with the perception of committee members’ possessing expertise on the issues under their jurisdiction.

Next, we turn to our models for the later stages of the legislative process: whether a bill was reported out of a House committee, and whether it passed on the House floor. The first model in Table 4 is a logit model using *Reported House* as the dependent variable. The second model is also a logit but uses *Passed House* as the dependent variable. In both models, we have added the dependent variable from Table 3, *Cosponsors*, as an independent variable to capture our expectation that *Interest Group Social Power* has an indirect effect on legislative success in the later stages of the legislative process. We expect bills with more cosponsors will be more likely to pass, both in committee and on the floor.

As expected, *Interest Group Count* is positive and statistically significant in predicting whether a bill passes the House, demonstrating the importance of broad support in the latter stages of the legislative process. Bills supported by a larger number of interest groups are more likely to survive the winnowing process and pass on the House floor, regardless of whether an influential interest group is among the endorsing organizations. At the same time, neither of the models in Table 4 show statistically significant effects of *Interest Group Social Power*. As

TABLE 4 Logit Regression Predicting Legislative Success

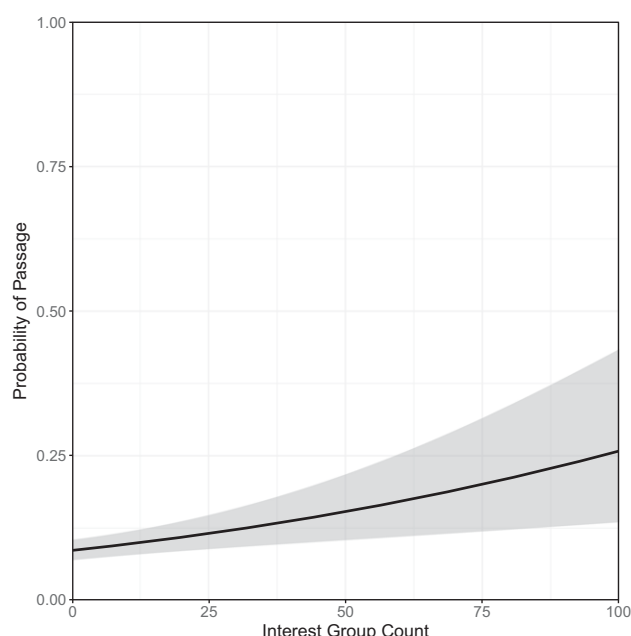
	Reported House	Passed House
Interest Group	0.020	−0.035
Social Power	(.031)	(.032)
Interest Group	0.004	0.013***
Count	(.003)	(.004)
Cosponsors	0.002**	0.004***
	(.001)	(.001)
Hot Bills	1.486***	2.428***
	(.150)	(.161)
Commemorative	0.161	1.386***
	(.212)	(.150)
Majority	1.146***	1.353***
	(.240)	(.220)
Seniority	0.000	0.005
	(.011)	(.010)
Ideological	−0.593	−0.015
Extremity	(.309)	(.282)
Referring	1.204***	0.894***
Committee	(.094)	(.085)
Committee Chair	0.930***	1.047***
	(.130)	(.127)
Ranking Member	0.058	0.328
	(.316)	(.268)
Constant	−3.026**	−3.965***
	(1.147)	(1.095)
Fixed Effects	✓	✓
N	6,597	6,597
AIC	3,917.33	4,341.65
Log-likelihood	−1,941.67	−2,153.83
χ^2	936.43	1,177.30
$\text{Pr} > \chi^2$	0.000	0.000

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

expected, an endorsement from a single well-connected organization is no longer enough in the later stages of the legislative process. Members have fewer bills competing for their attention, they are receiving input from more sources as multiple interest groups engage in direct lobbying, and the stakes are higher, as a “wrong” vote is more politically dangerous than a “wrong” cosponsorship. Members hear arguments from a variety of sources by the time a bill reaches the floor and no longer rely on the quick cue of an endorsement to make decisions.

Our findings also support our assertion that there is an indirect relationship between *Interest Group Social*

FIGURE 5 Probability of Bill Passage

Power and legislative success, as we find a positive and significant relationship between the number of cosponsors on a bill and whether it is reported out of committee and passes on the House floor. This is in contrast with Wilson and Young (1997), who find limited evidence of a relationship between the number of cosponsors on a bill and its progress through the legislative process and no relationship to whether a bill passes the chamber. We posit two possible explanations for this distinction. First, whereas Wilson and Young examine all bills introduced in a single congress, our analysis covers a period of 12 years. Second, and more importantly, our analysis focuses on the bills that are associated with Dear Colleague letters, which is an indication that members sought to build support for their legislation among their colleagues. When members of Congress seek to build support for their legislation in the form of cosponsors, interest group endorsements are a powerful tool to do so, and that increased support translates to a greater likelihood of legislative success.

Figure 5 shows the predicted probability plot for *Interest Group Count* in our bill passage model. In substantive terms, the probability of a bill with no interest group endorsements passing in the House is 0.09, reflecting the difficulty members face when trying to advance their legislative agenda. A bill endorsed by 10 groups has a slightly increased predicted probability of passage at 0.10, whereas a bill supported by 75 organizations has a predicted probability of passage of 0.20. When it comes to increasing the likelihood of bill passage, it is the number of groups

supporting a bill that matters rather than the social power of an endorsing organization within the broader interest group community.

Finally, we note that our control variables are generally in line with our expectations. “Hot bills” and those introduced by members of the majority party are more likely to pass out of committee and on the floor. Members of the referring committee have more success getting their legislation out of committee and through the House, presumably because they are well positioned to lobby their colleagues, with an added benefit to a committee leadership position. Commemorative bills are not more likely to pass out of committee, but they do see greater success on the floor, which is unsurprising as these bills frequently bypass committees and are brought up on the floor under suspension of the rules.

Conclusion

Cueing members of Congress by mentioning the support of well-connected groups leads to an increase in the number of cosponsors on a bill. In the earliest stages of the legislative process, bills that are vetted by an outside organization of high social power send a strong signal that they are worth considering, and that supporting them may reap legislative or electoral benefits. However, these same endorsements from powerful groups do not appear to have a direct effect at the end of the legislative process. Instead, it is the breadth of groups involved that helps determine whether a bill passes the House. Indeed, it takes a relatively large list of groups to have a substantively meaningful effect on the probability of passage.

However, we also observe an indirect effect between support from socially powerful organizations and whether a bill passes in the House, insofar as legislation with more cosponsors is more likely to pass and the mention of socially powerful groups in Dear Colleague letters leads to more cosponsors in the first place. This provides an explanation for why members work to secure interest group endorsements early in the legislative process—so they can use those endorsements to build support among their colleagues. As described by one legislative director in a 2016 interview, “When we drop [a bill], I’ll contact friends I know in outside groups . . . and say we’re doing this and we think you’ll be really interested. If you know any offices that have expressed interest in this area, can you flag it for them.”

Our results demonstrate the power of interest group endorsements for members of Congress who must make decisions about legislation with incomplete information. Legislators are risk averse and seek to avoid taking

positions that may jeopardize their reelection prospects or result in bad policy. Yet the electoral benefits of position taking mean members cannot (always) avoid making decisions when there are limited resources. Interest groups fill the need for easily digestible, reliable signals regarding the potential benefits or pitfalls of supporting a bill through their endorsement. Not only does an endorsement make a bill stand out from the thousands introduced each congress, but it also provides an assurance to the member that the bill has been vetted, typically by at least some of the organizations it would affect.

Interest group endorsements can serve as informative signals, yet not all signals carry the same weight. In a representative democracy, interest groups represent a wide variety of issues and take positions across the ideological spectrum. Ideally, the result of a large number of groups competing for attention is that most people are represented by organized interests and that the winners and losers in the political process fluctuate. However, in reality, some groups win more often than others, and as we demonstrate here, the organizations that build stronger connections and are better positioned within the interest group community are more influential, particularly when legislators’ time and information are the most scarce.

The results have clear implications for members of Congress seeking support for their legislation. While members put significant time and effort into securing interest group endorsements and informing their colleagues of that support, they should be targeted in doing so. How those endorsements matter differs at each stage. Legislators in search of cosponsors would be wise to find a particularly well-connected group to note in their Dear Colleague letters. Members of Congress appear to be sympathetic to endorsements from socially powerful groups when making cosponsorship decisions. But such endorsements have little effect on success in the long run, which depends more heavily on the appearance of broad support.

While intriguing and in line with our expectations from theory, the complex nature of these results and the availability of these data open up new questions about the role of Dear Colleague letters and the interest group endorsements therein. What is the role of interest group endorsements when considered in conjunction with resources spent on direct lobbying? Can an organization with limited resources use social power to compensate for disadvantages they might face in the policy process? One might expect that endorsements from some organizations are polarizing, whereas others promote bipartisanship, which can now be studied empirically to address long-standing questions on whether interest groups foster partisan gridlock.

The questions addressed by this research are implicitly tied to important debates about competition between factions for favorable policy outcomes—debates that date back to the founding of our country and the Federalist Papers, and discussed in the seminal works of the field (Dahl 1957; Schattschneider 1960; Truman 1951). A focal point for this debate in modern times is the nature of interest group influence on the legislative process. Understanding which interest groups win and why some groups succeed more often than others in the legislative arena remains a fundamental concern of the study of democracy. Ultimately, our results suggest mixed support for the pluralistic ideals in normative democratic theory. Particularly well-connected interest groups are disproportionately powerful at generating cosponsors, thereby serving as gatekeepers early in the legislative process. However, broad support from multiple interests is necessary for bill passage, suggesting that pluralism, or at least the appearance of it, is alive and well in the end. In sum, the power of factions throughout the modern legislative process is more complex than previously acknowledged, yet it provides a plethora of reasons to remain concerned about the power interest groups wield.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A: Sample Dear Colleague Letters

Appendix B: Robustness Checks