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Party Politics 1998 4: 275

DOI: 10.1177/1354068898004003001

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PARTY-ORCHESTRATED ACTIVITIES FOR LEGISLATIVE PARTY GOALS

Campaigns for Majorities in the US House of
Representatives in the 1990s

Robin Kolodny and Diana Dwyre

ABSTRACT

Recent efforts by the congressional campaign committees (CCCs), the party organizations charged with electing candidates to the US House of Representatives, have been unusually proactive in pursuing House majorities. The CCCs convinced other party-related actors, such as the national committees, political action committees (PACs) and members of Congress, to help achieve majorities in the House. These *party-orchestrated* activities are notable for their focus on the *legislative* party's goals, rather than on the party's presidential candidate. The cooperative efforts of the CCCs with their respective national committees, their attempts to induce cooperation from the PAC community, and their outreach for assistance from their own office-holders are explored. These initiatives in the 1990s reflect a significant shift in tactics. They are a reaction to changes in the level of electoral competition, concurrent with the presence of party entrepreneurs who convinced other political actors to view the party's House electoral success as consistent with their own goals.

KEY WORDS ■ campaigns ■ elections ■ party orchestration ■ political parties ■ US Congress

The organization of the American party system mirrors the American political system's separation of powers. Since the 1860s, American parties have had separate organizations to support the election of presidential candidates and the election of candidates to the lower chamber of the national legislature, the House of Representatives. Once passage of the 17th Amendment to the Constitution in 1913 required direct election to the upper chamber, separate organizations also formed for the election of Senators. Thus there

are six national party organizations: the Republican National Committee (RNC), the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC). Each party's committees have had little incentive to cooperate during election campaigns for several reasons. First, terms of office of the different branches do not coincide. The president is elected for a 4-year term, with a limit of two terms. Members of the House of Representatives are elected for 2-year terms, and members of the Senate for 6-year terms, with no term limits imposed for either. A second significant difference is the nature of victory: the presidency is an all-or-nothing proposition while elections to the legislature are geared toward attaining majority (or controlling) status in the chamber. These differences have often created an environment for conflict rather than cooperation between the various campaign organizations of each of the two major US parties.

We examine recent efforts initiated by the congressional campaign committees (CCCs), the party organizations charged with electing candidates to the House of Representatives (i.e. the NRCC and DCCC). In the 1990s, the CCCs have made unusually proactive efforts to secure House majorities and convince other party-related actors, such as the national committees, political action committees (PACs), and sitting members of Congress, to assist the CCCs in achieving majorities in the legislature. These *party-orchestrated* activities are notable because the *legislative* party's goals became the central electoral focus, even for the national committees (NCs) that are charged with creating a favorable environment for the party's presidential candidate. The Republicans began legislative-party-orchestrated efforts for the 1994 elections, followed by similar initiatives from the Democrats for the 1996 contests.

We contend that this innovative CCC activity in the 1990s represents a significant shift in the orientation of party organizations and other party-related actors toward the competition for House majority status as equal to, if not above, the goal of winning presidential elections. Further, we believe this represents a major reorientation in American electoral practices and not simply a momentary organizational rearrangement. Changes in three fundamental conditions of American politics caused this reorientation: the legislative party became more autonomous from the presidential party; there was a fundamental change in the nature of the competitive electoral environment for legislative elections; and these shifts were exploited by party entrepreneurs and party-related actors who saw opportunities for their own political advancement in a more competitive legislative electoral environment.

The increasing autonomy of the legislative party from the executive party is the first change. Sorauf and Wilson (1990: 202–3) argue that the legislative parties have achieved greater autonomy due to 'the legislators' discovery of the fundraising leverage of their incumbency, their electoral

invincibility, and their making of public policy'. They believe such legislative autonomy makes the integration of electoral strategies across institutions difficult. We find that in the 1990s, legislative autonomy moved to a higher level. The legislative parties convinced other electoral actors that legislative majority status would serve their own interests. This is a truly unique circumstance because it involves not just an alteration in the behavior of party organizations but in the behavior of extra-party actors as well, especially PACs. Furthermore, there was also a change in the focus of House candidates from pursuing strictly individual goals to adopting collective party goals.

The second factor is the significant change in the nature of two-party competition in House elections. Several indicators suggest that the competition for House seats increased substantially in the 1990s: a change in the magnitude of the incumbency advantage for members of the House and the nature of partisan competition in the nation; reapportionment (automatic redrawing of district lines every 10 years to account for population shifts) after the 1990 census; a change in the partisan configuration in the South; the large number of newly elected House members defending their seats; and the unpopularity of the incumbent Democratic president. First, the percentage of incumbents re-elected with 60 percent or more of the two-party vote declined after reaching its post-war high of 89 percent in 1988: in 1990, 76 percent of incumbents won with such large margins; in 1992, only 66 percent did so; and in 1994, the rate was 65 percent (Ornstein et al., 1996: 67). Moreover, Jacobson (1997: 151–2) has shown that 'the competitive balance between the parties had undergone a fundamental change' since 1990, so that the Republicans now win about 42 more seats than they had under similar national conditions (i.e. the economy's performance and presidential approval) in the 1946–90 period. Changes in voter behavior in the 1990s also contributed to heightened competition. Jacobson (1996: 7) notes that most of the seats switching from Democrat to Republican in 1994 were in districts that favored Republicans in presidential elections, so that party-line voting increased, particularly in the South. Indeed, the percentage of districts with split results, where the voters supported a presidential candidate of one party but elected a House member from the other party, declined after 1984. The percentage of districts with split results was 44 percent in 1984, 34 percent in 1988 and 23 percent in 1992 (Ornstein et al., 1996: 70). This suggested that the Republicans' success on the presidential level could be translated to the congressional level.

Second, reapportionment after the 1990 census also altered the dynamics of competition in many House districts. Perhaps the clearest illustration that reapportionment created more favorable conditions for Republican House candidates was the creation in 1990 of minority-majority districts. House districts with great concentrations of African-American voters were established to increase the chances of electing African-Americans to Congress. Neighboring districts were therefore more white, and consequently more

Republican, especially in the South. Third, southern and southwestern states gained seats in the 1990 reapportionment, and these regions are generally more Republican in their voting habits than the Midwest and the Northeast, which lost seats (Jacobson, 1996: 19). Fourth, Republican candidates challenged a large number of potentially vulnerable Democratic first-term members elected in 1992. Lastly, in 1994, Democratic President Bill Clinton was extremely unpopular, giving all Republicans a common national figure to run against. This added to the trend that the party of the president has lost House seats in all but one of the mid-term elections (the congressional election held between presidential elections) since the Civil War in the 1860s.

The mid-term election of 1994 presented Republicans with a competitive opportunity they had not encountered for decades. In 1994, 27 Democratic incumbents reacted to the changed environment by retiring, leaving open many seats that had leaned Republican in previous presidential elections (Jacobson, 1996: 10). Moreover, in 1994 the Democrats left more seats uncontested than the Republicans for the first time since the Second World War. The presence of competition, we argue, motivates partisan political actors, particularly those in government, to mobilize their party organizations. Like Aldrich (1995) and Schlesinger (1991), we are convinced that the most important condition necessary for ambitious politicians to turn to parties for pursuit of their goals is the presence of true competition. It is this enhanced competitiveness that enabled Republican entrepreneurs to convince other political actors that attaining majority status in Congress was not only possible but also in their own interests. We contend that parties have responded to this changed environment and have moved into a new role of 'party as orchestrator' of electoral activities.

Lastly, we find the catalysts for this dramatic reorientation of goals in the actions of political entrepreneurs and the willingness of party-related actors to alter their behaviors. Herrnson and Menefee-Libey (1990: 6, 26) have argued that party organizational transformation depends on two factors: an environmental crisis or critical event, such as new electoral competition, and a political entrepreneur. In the 1994 and 1996 elections, the environmental change was enhanced competitiveness, and a number of new political entrepreneurs worked together to pursue legislative majorities. We argue that these two factors are necessary though not sufficient conditions for party innovation. This is because a political entrepreneur cannot be effective unless other actors, whose behavior he or she wishes to alter, view such alterations as in their own interest. Therefore, we add a third factor to Herrnson and Menefee-Libey's model: the inclination of electoral actors to adjust their previous practices is a necessary condition for innovation in party electoral strategies. The significance of this third factor is demonstrated in this article. Each political actor had to see how their interests would be served by assisting legislative party efforts. For example, relationships between the CCCs and the NCs were facilitated when the NC leaders saw legislative

electoral success as beneficial to their presidential electoral mission and agreed to provide funds to the CCCs (Cotter and Hennessey, 1964: 175). Additionally, the CCCs appealed to PACs for contributions by showing them that they could have access to a new majority more in consonance with their ideological predispositions, efforts that had not been as successful in the past (Sorauf and Wilson, 1990: 196). Finally, incumbent House members gave time and money to help attain the collective party goal of majority status. Similar appeals had been made of incumbent members in the 1980s, but with no significant cooperation from the membership (Jacobson, 1985/86: 616–8).

Each of these interested actors entertained the possibility that majority status in Congress was not necessarily fixed. This suspension of the belief that the Democrats would permanently enjoy majority status in the House of Representatives is critical to understanding why the CCCs altered their strategies so substantially. As a result, the NRCC no longer pursued a strategy focused primarily on retaining incumbents (as had been its past practice) but instead sought to elect *more* Republicans in the hope of achieving majority status. This meant increased emphasis on non-incumbent candidates, whose resource needs are generally greater than those of incumbents. During the 1994 House elections, Democrats assumed that their party would retain majority control even though Republicans were expected to increase their numbers. Once the Republicans won the majority in 1994, it became clear that there was a new status quo: electoral competitiveness instead of Democratic hegemony. The restoration of electoral competitiveness in House elections stimulated a wider party-orchestrated effort by the CCCs. The Democrats recognized this only recently, for they had to experience the loss of majority status in 1994 before they would adjust to the new competitive environment. Accordingly, the Democrats initiated party-orchestrated efforts for the 1996 elections.

We now turn to an exploration of the cooperative efforts of the DCCC and the NRCC with their respective national committees, their attempts to induce cooperation from the PAC community, and their outreach for assistance from their own office-holders. We believe the initiatives by the CCCs in the 1990s reflect a significant change in tactics from those undertaken previously and are a reaction to changes in the level of electoral competition, concurrent with the presence of effective political entrepreneurs able to convince other political actors to view the party's House electoral success as consistent with their own goals.

Party Strategy and Message

One of the most unusual recent party-orchestrated activities was the presentation of a party agenda as an electoral strategy. Previously, the platform written by the party's national committee specifically for the presidential

election was the only public campaign agenda. The Republicans' *Contract With America* in 1994 and the Democrats' *Families First* agenda of 1996 offered a party message to voters as a tool to help secure majority control of the House. While not all House candidates utilized these party themes in their campaigns in similar ways, candidates had an additional resource in a heightened competitive environment and a collective referent not previously available. We consider each party's use of a unified party agenda in turn.

House Republicans and the Contract With America

After 1992, the Republican Party saw a wholesale change of its party organizations' leadership. The RNC, which runs the presidential campaign, had just lost its electoral effort with the defeat of President George Bush. Since the RNC did not have another presidential election for 4 years, new RNC Chairman Haley Barbour was receptive to establishing a working relationship with Republicans in the House for the upcoming mid-term elections. Though the RNC had more of a reputation for ignoring congressional Republicans than for helping them, a strategy was forged between several new party entrepreneurs: Barbour, new NRCC Chairman Bill Paxon, and House Republican Whip Newt Gingrich. Together, these entrepreneurs constructed an integrated party message in the hope of achieving majority status in the House in 1994.

The main part of the strategy Gingrich, Paxon and Barbour wanted to pursue for the 1994 House elections was a common, public agenda for candidates, especially non-incumbent candidates.¹ Sensing an opportunity to gain a significant number of seats, House Republicans agreed to develop legislative proposals for a potential Republican majority, an idea Gingrich had long espoused. He believed that a Republican majority could enact an historic program, similar in form to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal agenda, in 100 days. In 1993 and 1994, Republican leaders surveyed their first-term, challenger and open-seat candidates about what issues they would like to see on a Republican majority's 100-day agenda. The results were tabulated and the most common answers became the foundation for the specific items in the *Contract With America*. In the summer of 1994, 11 task forces of House Republicans hammered out the specifics of the *Contract* (Gillespie, 1996). They used information from focus group studies conducted by the RNC and NRCC concerning the phrasing that should be used in various *Contract* items as well as reaction to the whole concept. Once the *Contract* was completed, the NRCC and RNC arranged for an elaborate unveiling. On 27 September 1994, over 300 Republican candidates assembled to sign the *Contract*. Although the assembly made for an impressive media event, most observers (and even a good number of event participants) did not take the possibility of achieving majority status or enacting the *Contract* seriously. News of the *Contract* quickly died out in the national media and the remainder of the general election continued

to be reported on the basis of race-by-race dynamics, not in terms of a national Republican agenda.

Still, the RNC assisted the NRCC in promoting the *Contract*. Indeed, the RNC spent \$400,000 on advertising it (Barnes, 1995). In addition, several key members of the RNC staff were involved in the development of the document from the time it was formally initiated in the spring of 1994 to its debut in September 1994. The RNC also paid for the production of the paperback book version (Boyer, 1995). This cooperation dates to early 1993, when Barbour created a new Office of Congressional Affairs at the RNC. Barbour intended this office to parallel the work of the Republican Governors' Association, which he explained 'has strengthened our relationship with our GOP [Republican] state chief executives' and so hoped that the Office of Congressional Affairs would 'coordinate strategy and message with Republicans in Congress' (Republican National Committee, 1993: 9). Indeed, Barbour stated in his 1993 report that 'there is nothing we can do to help elect a Republican president in 1996 that is nearly as important as winning a big Republican victory in 1994' (Republican National Committee, 1993: 12).

Republican candidates used the *Contract* in a variety of ways. Most senior incumbents made little use of it or ignored it entirely because they had campaigned successfully for their own re-election in the past and believed they needed no additional help from the *Contract* (Kolodny, 1996). Previous research on congressional elections suggests that non-incumbents generally run more issue-orientated campaigns than incumbents, who tend to emphasize their records of service (Abramowitz, 1995). The general feeling by incumbent and non-incumbent candidates alike was that the Republican Party would gain seats in the 1994 elections, but that belief stemmed more from the historic trend of a president's party losing seats in mid-term elections than from the power of the *Contract* itself. Non-incumbent candidates found the *Contract* more useful. Without the benefit of previous electoral success to the House of Representatives, or in many cases any electoral experience whatsoever (Ornstein and Schenkenberg, 1995), challenger and open-seat candidates were more receptive to the idea of using the *Contract* as a campaign tool. NRCC officials conceded that few non-incumbents used the notion of a party agenda for a potential majority party in their campaigns. Rather, non-incumbents used specific elements in the *Contract* to localize national issues (Dwyre, 1996a; Jacobson, 1996). Non-incumbent candidates used it as a resource for campaign issue themes, choosing from the balanced budget amendment, welfare reform, legal reform, and so forth as it suited their needs.

In the 1996 cycle, Republican members used the slogan 'Promises Made, Promises Kept' to describe the success Republicans had in bringing all *Contract* items to a vote, even if many of the measures never became law. The RNC continued cooperative efforts with the NRCC, wishing to preserve Republican majorities while promoting their presidential candidate Bob

Dole. The dynamics in this election were different in important ways from 1994: President Clinton was popular, while House Speaker Gingrich was not; and a number of inexperienced freshmen were expected to defend their seats. As the new majority party, House Republicans needed less assistance from the RNC. Yet the RNC produced 70,000 pamphlets entitled 'What Would a Democrat Congress Look Like? Look LEFT' and distributed them through its network of state parties (Eilperin, 1996). One clear example of the strong legislative electoral focus was demonstrated by the NRCC's media campaign late in the election cycle, which asked voters not to give President Clinton a 'blank check' by electing a Democratic Congress. Though such an appeal obviously did not help Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole, the NRCC did consult with the RNC about their plans and received their tacit consent (Cino, 1996).

The Democrats' Families First Agenda in the 1996 Elections

Not surprisingly, the Democrats were stunned not only by their new minority-party status in the House of Representatives (the first time in 40 years) but also by the success of the *Contract*, for the Republicans were able to bring all of its items up for a vote in the first 100 days of the legislative session, as their campaign rhetoric had promised. Democratic members' initial response was to blame each other, resulting in challenges for every major legislative leadership post in late 1994. Although the incumbent leaders were re-elected, the Democratic Minority Leader Richard Gephardt created more channels for communication within the House Democratic Party by establishing task forces for specific issue areas and two dozen new leadership posts (Prucker, 1996). The expanded leadership team worked through early 1995 to come up with responses to the Republican's *Contract With America*.

The existence of the *Contract* virtually mandated that the Democrats compose their own legislative agenda for the 1996 elections. Such a campaign tool was expected by political observers and the media, so when the *Families First* agenda was unveiled, its appearance seemed anti-climactic (Johansen, 1996). House Democratic leaders presented a 21-point program on 23 June 1996. The agenda was dubbed 'modest, moderate and achievable' by House Democratic leaders who said: 'We do not want to replace the extremism of one party with the extremism of another' (Koszczuk, 1996: 1859). The agenda included many ideas and strategies already championed by Republican moderates (such as welfare reform and balanced budget proposals). Polling data gathered by Democratic leaders indicated that the public reacted badly to the Republican claim that voters delivered a mandate to enact the *Contract*, though the public was supportive of the substance of the *Contract's* more moderate proposals.

Families First also differed from the *Contract With America* in its binding provisions. Whereas the *Contract* was literally a 'contract' to bring certain pieces of legislation up for a vote, and was signed by over 300 Republican

candidates, *Families First* did not ask Democratic members and candidates for such promises. The party leaders wanted to stay away from the 'blood oath' aspect of which the Republicans seemed so proud. Instead, their focus was on saying something positive about what a Democratic Congress would do for average people and giving candidates a set of popular national issues for use in their 1996 campaigns (Johansen, 1996). Nevertheless, the *Families First* agenda had little impact on the momentum of House campaigns in 1996. Most candidates focused on attacking the Republican majority. According to the Washington, DC newspaper *Roll Call*, in the days following the introduction of *Families First*, the paper received hundreds of press releases from Democratic House candidates attacking Speaker Gingrich and Republican activities, but only one candidate sent a press release supporting the Democratic agenda. At the time of the announcement, neither the DCCC nor prominent Democratic campaign consultants had any intention of promoting the agenda intensely, choosing instead to highlight specific issues (as Republican candidates did with the *Contract* in 1994) or to attack Speaker Gingrich (Sheffner, 1996). Though President Clinton endorsed *Families First*, it was not developed in coordination with the DNC in the way the *Contract* was with the RNC.

The DNC, however, did assist the DCCC in its efforts to regain control of the House in 1996. In addition to monetary assistance, the President invited House candidates to join him during campaign appearances. Still, the DCCC had a sense that the President was ambivalent about a Democratic Congress and worried more about his own re-election. That the DNC money decisions were made by the President's deputy chief of staff and not DNC officers is evidence of this (Kondracke, 1996). The DNC did, however, mount a large grassroots organizing drive to reinvigorate the party at the precinct level, focusing on 50,000 precincts in 20 targeted states. While this effort concentrated primarily on the accomplishments of the Clinton administration, it was also intended to boost the campaigns of all Democratic candidates in the targeted areas (Balz, 1996).

In the case of both the *Contract With America* and *Families First*, party leaders took the initiative to construct a party message for all House candidates to use. The NRCC appealed to the RNC for assistance in making a big effort to promote the *Contract*. In 1996, the DCCC did not ask the DNC to assist in a major promotional effort, but the DNC helped in other ways. The Republicans did not present a new *Contract* for the 1996 elections. They contended that some of the issues were not enacted into law, therefore their agenda remained unfulfilled.

Campaign Finance Strategies

Since the 1970s, both parties' national and congressional campaign committees have raised and spent substantial funds for congressional elections.

Table 1. Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC) disbursements to House candidates, 1980–94

	<i>Incumbents</i>			<i>Challengers</i>			<i>Open-seat candidates</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Total (\$)</i>	<i>Average (\$)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Total (\$)</i>	<i>Average (\$)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Total (\$)</i>	<i>Average (\$)</i>
DNC									
1980	16	18,430	1,152	6	16,814	2,802	1	2,000	2,000
1982	18	19,728	1,096	47	36,498	777	29	22,550	778
1984	12	20,500	1,708	18	46,750	2,597	10	33,000	3,300
1986	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1988	10	54,998	5,500	11	65,000	5,909	7	40,000	5,714
1990	5	25,882	5,176	2	6,150	3,075	1	2,500	2,500
1992	89	706,446	7,938	18	114,414	6,356	10	93,075	9,308
1994	8	42,448	5,306	2	10,000	5,000	3	20,000	6,667
RNC									
1980	16	117,732	7,358	90	860,412	9,560	31	273,926	8,836
1982	79	611,628	7,742	96	764,519	7,964	45	415,984	9,244
1984	24	149,501	6,229	64	518,869	8,107	19	158,200	8,326
1986	22	122,700	5,577	20	91,738	4,587	21	106,609	5,077
1988	21	82,730	3,940	27	130,250	4,824	13	98,500	7,577
1990	12	53,185	4,432	21	110,043	5,240	10	72,350	7,235
1992	49	614,821	12,547	85	531,472	6,253	50	448,511	8,970
1994	154	56,619	368	173	3,444,209	19,909	46	1,605,442	34,901

Source: Compiled by authors from Federal Election Commission, *Reports on Financial Activity*.

The CCCs have become increasingly strategic in their distribution of funds over the years, giving more to non-incumbent candidates with a chance of winning and to incumbents in marginal races than to safer incumbents (Dwyre, 1994). The NRCC has generally raised far more money than the DCCC, yet the Republican committee entered the 1994 election cycle with a large debt. As the next sections detail, both parties have looked for new and more efficient ways to assist their targeted candidates in the 1990s. The presence of real competition for control of the House has stimulated increased party fundraising, motivated more coordination between different committees of each party, facilitated outreach to other electoral actors, and encouraged both parties to develop new strategies for spending those resources.

One of the noticeable trends in party support of House candidates is the extent to which the parties' national committees (the DNC and the RNC) have directed funds to them in the 1990s. Consistent with the separation of powers in the governmental structure, the DNC and RNC are most concerned with promoting the parties' presidential nominees and assisting state party organizations, while the parties' CCCs devote their energies to electing individual legislators to the House. Thus, extensive coordination between the national committees and congressional campaign committees is unusual. Table 1 shows DNC and RNC disbursements to House candidates from 1980 to 1994. Although the national committees (especially the RNC) had generally given some assistance to House candidates in the 1980s (with the striking exception of the DNC in 1986), their donations were small, constituting a minor portion of what a candidate needed to wage an effective campaign. What is unusual is the increased level of national committee support of House candidates in 1992, 1994 and 1996 after years of token assistance.

The DNC was most generous in 1992. Yet most of the money was spent on incumbents (77.3 percent), who generally have little trouble raising campaign funds on their own. The RNC increased its contributions to House candidates over previous election cycles in 1992, giving slightly more to incumbents than to non-incumbents. Perhaps this assistance from the national committee helped Republicans make unusually large gains in a year when the party lost the presidency. Yet the greatest RNC support came in 1994, when the RNC donated over \$5.1 million to Republican House candidates, almost all of which (98.9 percent) went to non-incumbents. This large transfer of campaign dollars to candidates who generally have difficulty raising funds helped Republican challengers in particular wage serious campaigns against Democratic incumbents.

In 1994, the RNC and NRCC divided up the country, each taking responsibility for assisting House candidates in different states. This coordinated party effort was sorely needed in 1994, because the NRCC started the election cycle with a \$4.5 million debt. The RNC made short-term loans to the NRCC and covered other expenses such as rent and direct mail costs (Barnes, 1995: 476). The RNC estimates that in 1994 it spent 'more than twice as much as it ever spent on a midterm election cycle' (Barnes, 1995:

474). Such party coordination is quite unusual, given the structure of these party committees and the nature of their historic relationship, which has not normally been cooperative (Kolodny, 1998). Note especially the increased national committee spending on candidates by both parties during the 1992 presidential election, when one might expect the national committees to focus solely on their presidential candidates. In 1996, President Clinton helped the DCCC raise millions of dollars by attending fundraisers in several major American cities. Clinton also directed the DNC to forward an additional \$2 million to the DCCC during the 1996 election (Angle, 1996; Kondracke, 1996). The RNC helped Republican House candidates in 1996 by assisting the NRCC in spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in 'soft money'.

The expanded use of 'soft money' is a significant development in congressional campaign financing. 'Soft money' refers to funds raised by parties outside of the limitations and prohibitions of the regulations governing donations to candidates for national office (otherwise known as 'hard money'). It includes direct contributions to parties from corporations and labor unions, which are prohibited under hard money regulations, as well as donations from PACs and individuals beyond the statutory hard money limits. Soft money cannot be used in connection with federal elections, although both parties' congressional campaign committees have used soft money in ways that help House candidates (Dwyre, 1996b). For example, in the mid-1980s, the DCCC raised and spent millions of dollars in soft money to help pay for a new communications center, office renovations and party-building activities. In 1992 and 1994, the DCCC spent soft money to cover overhead expenses, fundraising costs and building improvements. Using soft money for such expenses frees up scarce hard dollars for spending directly on candidates. This 'substitution effect' is a particularly valuable consequence of soft money spending for the Democrats, who have traditionally raised far less hard money than the Republicans.

The NRCC gave \$1.7 million in soft money to state party organizations in 1992 and asked that the state parties give hard money contributions to targeted House candidates in close races with a good chance of winning. The state parties that received NRCC soft money directed over \$1.1 million to 91 Republican House candidates, 73 percent of them in close races (Dwyre, 1996b). In 1994, the NRCC gave far less soft money to state parties (only \$100,000 in 1994; \$1.7 million in 1992) and instead worked with the RNC to ensure that all the party's targeted House candidates received the maximum allowed contributions.

Soft money is difficult to spend because of the legal restrictions on its use, but in 1996 the parties found a new way to spend it. They each spent over \$20 million on 'issue ads' – advertisements on TV and radio that do not call explicitly for the election or defeat of a particular candidate. Since these are considered legislative or issue advocacy and not electioneering (despite the fact that they are run only during the election campaign and in targeted districts), parties can use unrestricted soft money to pay for them. There was

a great deal of coordination between both parties' national committees and their congressional campaign committees to raise the money to pay for these advertisements. Parties can also use soft money to pay for party-building activities that promote the party or its candidates as a class without mentioning specific names, such as voter registration, get-out-the-vote activities, and generic party media campaigns. The use of soft money in such creative ways allows the parties to enhance their financial influence in House elections.

Another important source of campaign money for parties and candidates is PACs. The PACs, which are generally the money arms of interest groups that lobby Congress, mostly support incumbents over challengers and open-seat candidates, reflecting their desire to secure access to legislators and to avoid 'offending powerful incumbents by supporting their opponents' (Sorauf, 1988: 103). This incumbent-focused distribution strategy differs significantly from the strategies the parties pursue, for the parties generally give larger donations to non-incumbent candidates than to incumbents, and primarily to candidates in close races in an effort to maximize the number of seats held in Congress (Dwyre, 1994). Yet, while PACs continued to give over 70 percent of their contributions to incumbents in 1994, PAC contributions to Republican candidates began to resemble the Republican Party's distribution strategy rather than the conventional PAC distribution strategy (Dwyre, 1996a). Indeed, 1994 PAC giving to Republican challengers was up 48 percent over 1992 (Federal Election Commission, 1995: 2). Even business PACs began to give slightly more of their Republican contributions to non-incumbents in 1992 and 1994, indicating a departure from the 'access' strategy and movement toward a seat-maximization strategy similar to that pursued by the parties. Democratic non-incumbent candidates received a slightly larger share of PAC contributions to Democratic House candidates in 1996, but the shift was not nearly as significant as it was for the Republicans in 1994.

Parties have long urged PACs to give to party-targeted candidates but with little previous success (Sorauf and Wilson, 1990: 196). PACs have relied on the CCCs for campaign information, but they have generally used that information only to identify close races where they do not want to miss an opportunity to assist a potential future incumbent. Both parties' CCCs have long employed certain staff solely to encourage PACs to direct their funds to candidates targeted by the party, generally non-incumbent candidates in close races. Nevertheless, it was not until the 1990s that PACs began to shift funds away from electorally secure incumbents. In 1996, the Republicans convinced PACs to give to vulnerable incumbents that the party preferred them to support. For instance, the NRCC hired staff and conducted fundraising seminars after the 1994 elections to assist the large number of newly elected members in identifying potential donors, especially PACs (Maraniss and Weisskopf, 1995: A8; Salant and Cloud, 1995: 1058).

Some PACs align themselves more vigorously with one party or the other. For instance, labor unions have always been closely aligned with the

Democratic Party, and the AFL–CIO (the national labor federation) independently conducted a \$35 million campaign to end Republican control of Congress in 1996. The union ran TV advertisements that ‘slam Republicans for votes on a range of issues, from Medicare to the minimum wage’ (Weisskopf, 1996: A23). These were shown primarily in the districts of Republican freshmen, because first-term legislators are thought to be vulnerable to defeat. Republicans urged their business allies to help respond to the AFL–CIO’s advertisements. In 1996, the US Chamber of Commerce (an association of business interests) organized 33 business and trade interest groups sympathetic to Republican causes to finance a counter-attack (Stevenson, 1996: D1). Their TV and radio advertisements ran in over 40 districts targeted by the AFL–CIO.

The CCCs, however, did not take past PAC allegiances for granted. In fact, given the new fluidity of the contemporary campaign environment, both parties’ CCCs have sought to maximize PAC contributions to candidates they favor. Republican leaders have taken several aggressive initiatives to stimulate PAC giving. One party leader attacked business lobbyists for supporting Democrats, while another launched a project to block PAC contributions to Democrats, and the NRCC chairman established a steering committee of 30 PAC managers representing major industries to help the NRCC raise funds (Maraniss and Weisskopf, 1995: A8). Moreover, the NRCC compiled a list of the top 400 PACs with the amount they gave each party from 1993 to 1995. One party leader showed the list to lobbyists, indicating whether their interest group was considered friendly or unfriendly by the Republican Party now in control in Congress (Maraniss and Weisskopf, 1995: A8). It appears that this strategy worked, for the Republicans raised record amounts of PAC money for the 1996 elections. These extraordinary efforts were a response to the PAC community’s historic tendency to favor Democrats, since they had controlled Congress, and because most of the PAC community is not monolithic. That is, while labor PACs have traditionally been affiliated with the Democrats, most business, association and non-connected PACs have not been as universally affiliated with one political party. So Republicans felt that they had to take aggressive steps to court PAC money, while Democrats worked to stop the flow of PAC money to the other side (Rintye, 1996). The increased competition for majority status has led the PAC community to take great care not to anger either party, since control of Congress remains up for grabs. Such changes in strategic behavior could have long-term effects on congressional campaign finance as well as on congressional policy making.

Member Reinvestment Strategies

One of the more remarkable new trends in party campaigning in the 1990s is the extent of legislators’ involvement in other candidates’ campaigns and

their support of their parties' efforts to win elections. The Republicans began their quest for control of Congress in earnest at the conclusion of the 1992 election. NRCC Chairman Bill Paxon and Republican House Whip Newt Gingrich pressed the obvious point that helping other candidates' campaigns would bring their party into (or close to) a majority, thereby benefiting all members. Though this seems like an intuitive strategy, members in both parties had been reluctant to devote scarce resources (namely their time and money) to other candidates, believing they needed these resources for their own candidate-centered re-election efforts (Mann, 1978). In early 1993, when the NRCC was in debt and had no resources to offer, party leaders turned to their own members as resource providers. They argued that members' involvement was the only way Republicans would achieve majority status. Members contributed money either to the NRCC or to other candidates directly. Additionally, members campaigned for other candidates and assisted them with fundraising (Rintye, 1996).

While members have given to their colleagues in the past (Wilcox, 1989), Republican members' personal efforts toward winning a majority were the most comprehensive and substantial ever undertaken. Indeed, a former NRCC chairman expressed great respect for Paxon's ability to enlist members' support, especially in fundraising, saying that this was something he would not have been able to do during his tenure (Vander Jagt, 1995). One of the most noteworthy accomplishments was the insistence by the NRCC that incumbent members contribute money out of their own campaign funds for use by challenger and open-seat candidates. The argument, of course, was that the collective goal of majority status was more valuable to these incumbents than the extra few thousand dollars would be. Members donated \$6.7 million to House candidates in the 1994 cycle and \$9 million in the 1996 cycle. Even more astonishing were members' contributions to the NRCC. In 1994, members gave a total of \$6.2 million but increased their giving to \$20.2 million in 1996 (Cino, 1996). In addition, the NRCC created 'Victory Accounts', whereby members were encouraged to raise money in their home states for the NRCC. The NRCC credited that state's 'Victory Account' with the contribution and used these funds to support other candidates in that state (Cino, 1995).

The Democrats, meanwhile, had difficulty in getting rank-and-file members to contribute any resources to the cause of maintaining their majority in 1994. Of course, Democratic House leaders made campaign appearances and assisted candidates in fundraising, but other Democratic members did not get involved. In fact, few members believed the Democratic majority was at risk. In the absence of a perceived threat to their majority status, office-holders are not likely to turn to their party to achieve their goals (Aldrich, 1995). Additionally, these members were consumed with their own electoral difficulties in 1994. In any event, it is clear there was little coordinated partisan effort among Democratic members in 1994. This situation completely reversed in 1996. Minority Leader Gephardt worked

to induce members' cooperation, even announcing member contributions at Democratic Party gatherings. Gephardt's intent was to apply peer pressure so that more members would contribute to the party effort. In 1996, the goal of *regaining* the majority motivated Democratic members to contribute resources, as the Republicans had done in 1994 (Johansen, 1996; Tippens and Jurkovich, 1996). Democratic members gave over \$1 million to other House candidates in 1996, and some incumbents gave as much as \$50,000 to the DCCC from their campaign funds (Angle, 1996).

The Republicans were in a rather new situation in 1996. They defended many vulnerable incumbents (specifically the 71 first-term members seeking re-election) as a first priority and dealt with new challenger and open-seat candidates as a secondary consideration; this was a rational strategy for it would have been foolish to lose seats already held in an effort to gain more. They institutionalized the practice of requiring members (by their seniority and institutional position) to contribute to the Incumbent Support Fund, a separate NRCC account used to assist incumbent members who were electorally vulnerable.² Of course, the NRCC increased its incumbent retention services to accommodate the needs of the freshmen. Famous first-term members, such as former singer and songwriter Congressman Sonny Bono, and former star athletes Congressmen J. C. Watts and Steve Largent, were encouraged to visit the districts of vulnerable first-term incumbents.

House Republican leaders, especially the new House Speaker Newt Gingrich, campaigned for and contributed to House members' re-election efforts. During the 1996 elections, Gingrich appeared at events in most Republican candidates' districts, and the majority leader visited 122 districts in 41 states. One journalist remarked that this 'pace far exceeds the campaign itinerary of Democratic leaders during the four decades that their party controlled the House' (Cohen, 1996: 1474). Gingrich was also at the heart of a fundraising windfall for the Republicans' 1996 campaigns. He has been given credit for raising at least \$65 million for the NRCC, the RNC, state party committees, individual candidates, and his own re-election campaign (Cohen, 1996: 1475). Republican leaders also asked incumbents in safe seats to contribute to the party's TV advertisements that were aired in various House districts. Speaker Gingrich and two other party leaders led the way in this effort, each giving \$250,000 to the RNC (Yang and Marcus, 1996: A8).

Discussion

We have chronicled the activities of the congressional campaign committees in recent election cycles, showing that both parties' legislative committees have orchestrated stronger party efforts to succeed in the newly competitive electoral environment. We believe that this trend is the result of a return to two-party competitiveness in elections for the House of Representatives, the

autonomy of the legislative party from the executive party, and the efforts of party entrepreneurs. The Democrats' hold over the House of Representatives for the past 4 decades had bred complacency (Johansen, 1996; Tippens and Jurkovich, 1996). The persistence of Democratic majorities in the House, especially since both the Senate and the White House did not clearly belong to one party, led the Democrats to believe that the public were quite satisfied with the status quo. Democrats concluded that their incumbency advantage was not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition to sustain control of the House of Representatives.

In addition, Democratic dominance led to the view of many House Republicans that the fight for majority status was a futile one at best, discouraging Republicans from pursuing a particularly aggressive electoral strategy that might have endangered their role as the loyal opposition (Connelly and Pitney, 1994). Because members considered it unlikely that the majority party would change, they focused on their own individual re-election. They had no incentive to think that an investment of their personal resources could change their party's numerical status and therefore improve their personal fates. Of course, if one were a Democratic member in the majority, there was even less incentive to devote time and money to other candidates. Further, there was little reason to empower either CCC to commit its energies to projects involving other actors such as the national committee or the PAC community.

In the early 1990s, many factors converged to give Republicans an incentive to assemble an aggressive strategy. The newly competitive electoral climate made it easier for entrepreneurial party leaders in the House to convince their national committee leaders, their fellow members, and many in the PAC community to contribute to the push for majority status. House Republican leaders sought the assistance of the RNC to construct a unified party message and to help fully fund viable candidates. The NRCC also experimented with creative uses of soft money to direct substantial resources to candidates. And although parties have always tried to influence PAC giving, the PACs themselves sensed the changing climate and were convinced by Republican leaders to shift their giving.

Had the Republicans remained a minority after the 1994 elections, such NRCC-orchestrated efforts might have been called fruitless, as they have been in the past (Coleman, 1994), and the aggressive strategy of favoring non-incumbent over incumbent candidates probably abandoned for the following election cycle. However, the fact that Republicans won control of Congress validated the efforts they undertook in 1994 as important for attaining a majority. Such a statement begs the question of whether or not changes in the political climate alone are sufficient to reverse the arrangement of parties in office. In other words, would the Republicans have won a majority if the NRCC had not changed its tactics? Clearly, the Republicans worked to maximize resources in potentially winnable districts. While no one can definitively assess whether the NRCC's actions made the difference between victory and defeat in any single race, the sheer number

of races won by Republicans in 1994 gave many observers of both parties reason to believe that CCC efforts had been effective. Most importantly, both returning and new members credited the NRCC with facilitating the emergence of the Republican majority.

The Democrats were jarred by the loss of majority control in 1994 and in 1996 adopted many of the strategies employed by the Republicans. Having lost the majority, Democratic members focused on their collective rather than individual needs. The Democrats offered their own policy agenda to give candidates proven issues on which to run. The party stepped up its fundraising efforts and experimented with new methods of spending soft money. Party leaders worked to stem the flow of PAC dollars to the Republicans, and organized labor mobilized a \$35 million effort to help the Democrats regain the majority. Perhaps most significantly, Democratic members, who in the past had done little to support the party effort, gave more of their time and resources to fellow members and to the DCCC. Had the Democrats not lost the House in 1994, they probably would not have mounted such a high-pitched party effort in 1996.

The 1996 Democratic efforts were more modest than the Republicans', reflecting in our view the Democrats' relative lack of resources, their belief that 1994 may have been an exceptional circumstance, and their sense that they could return to power in 1996. Since the Democrats now remain in the minority, we may see significant new efforts by the DCCC. We believe that the electoral environment for House elections will remain competitive for some time, making the circumstances ripe for continued party-orchestrated campaigning and for a continued emphasis on the CCCs as the pivotal party organizational actors.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 29 August–1 September, San Francisco, California. The authors would like to thank Leon Epstein, David Farrell, Glen Gaddy, Joe Picard and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

- 1 For a fuller discussion and analysis of the *Contract With America*, see Kolodny (1996).
- 2 The amounts required differ by the position held by House Republicans: \$2500 = Freshmen; \$5000 = Regular; \$6500 = Subcommittee Chairmen; \$7500 = Party Leaders and Committee Chairmen (Cino, 1995).

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Paper submitted 30 November 1996; accepted for publication 10 June 1997.