

Reform and contentious democracy: presidential-interest group relations in a madisonian system

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American presidential power has grown dramatically, if unevenly, over the past century. Economic crises, international relations, national security imperatives, and the advent of television as the ultimate "bully pulpit" all have contributed to the drift of power from legislative to executive hands, a trend only reinforced by the terrorist assaults of September 11th. Despite the philosophical tensions between executive leadership and democratic politics, ordinary citizens have increasingly viewed the U.S. presidency as a popular office capable of making the government responsive to democratic needs (Lowi 1985; Tulis 1987; Stuckey 1991; Genovese 2000). During the past century, an unprecedented array of organized interests also became active in Washington (Tichenor and Harris 2003). This is especially true of the past three decades, which have accommodated staggering increases in the number, variety, and activities of interest groups engaged in national political life (Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Berry 1999). The modern presidency and national interest group system loom today as dominant elements of the American political system. Remarkably, however, scholars have made little or no effort to investigate their pivotal interactions over time. To adequately assess the future of democratic politics in the United States, it is crucial to analyze the interplay of modern presidents and interest groups. This work is an effort to understand how the relationship between presidents and interest groups influence the character and outcomes of American domestic policymaking in general, and the prospects for non-incremental reform in particular.

Committed democrats have ample reason to view presidential leadership and interest group lobbying alike with deep skepticism, if not hostility. Executive power fosters a passive and deferential citizenry that is ill equipped to sustain the participatory lifeblood of democracy. Critics such as Thomas Paine warned early on that leadership is a "slavish custom" poorly suited for representative systems in which citizens are proprietors in government (Miroff 1993, 2). And to the extent that executive power is a necessary supplement to "rule by the people," it constitutes one of democracy's most glaring embarrassments. Likewise, interest groups are thought to subvert democracy by pursuing agendas that undermine the broader interests shared but poorly articulated by most ordinary citizens. Moreover, the uneven level and effectiveness of interest group representation in the Washington policymaking process at once reflects and reinforces deep-seated democratic inequalities.

Yet both presidential and interest group politics are at least theoretically capable of advancing democratic purposes. According to Woodrow Wilson, one of the principal founders of the modern presidency, the national electorate chooses a president to advance popular programmatic reforms often frustrated by conservative interests and political structures. Convinced that positive government was necessary to check the power of entrenched interests, he believed the president was uniquely positioned to serve as a democratic "spokesman for the real sentiment and purpose of the country, by giving direction to opinion" (Milkis 1993, 28). In sum, the unity and energy of the presidency make it a potentially powerful agent of the people when incumbents attempt to overcome the American polity's many formalistic constraints for the sake of democratic ends. A vibrant interest group system also holds democratic promise. Interest groups are expected to flourish in democracies precisely because they give people the freedom to organize for the purpose of influencing public policy. More significantly, interest groups provide a vehicle for connecting citizens to government. As Jeffrey Berry puts it, "They empower people by organizing those citizens with similar interests and expressing those interests to policymakers" (Berry 1999, 15).

As we shall see, the democratic possibilities of presidential and interest group politics are inescapably bound up together. We begin by introducing a theoretical model of presidential-interest group interactions in national policymaking. Two important variables affect the likelihood that presidents and interest groups will support or frustrate one another in the pursuit of major policy innovation. One is whether powerful organized interests are affiliated or unaffiliated with the president's political party. The other is whether historical circumstances afford the president a broad or narrow capacity to exercise policy leadership. From this model, we identify four distinctive forms of presidential-interest group interactions: collaborative breakthrough politics, adversarial breakthrough politics, collaborative politics-as-usual, and adversarial politics-as-usual. Subsequent sections offer historical case studies that illuminate each type of interactive politics. Along the way, we shall find that presidents and interest groups regularly derail each other's most significant reform ambitions. It is little wonder that conflict and estrangement are recurrent if not inevitable features of presidential-interest group relations concerning domestic policymaking, with each prone to blame the other for frustrating meaningful democratic change.

Contentious elites: A framework of presidential-interest group relations

Ambivalence and contention are sewn into the nature of presidential-interest group relations. Modern executives have numerous reasons either to openly battle with or to keep their distance from organized interests. Although millions of Americans financially support specific interest groups, the general public regularly views organized interests in national politics with a level of contempt and suspicion comparable to that of our wary constitutional architects (Petracca 1992). As the only U.S. officials elected by the entire nation, modern presidents often have cast

themselves as guardians of the common good at war with entrenched special interests. "Fifteen million people in the United States are represented by lobbyists," Harry S Truman liked to say. "The other 150 million have only one man who is elected at large to represent them - that is, the President of the United States" (Deakin 1966). It is a seductive refrain intoned by most modern presidents. Likewise, administrations that seem too closely aligned with particular interest groups risk charges of serving special interests, as George W. Bush learned early in his presidency when his stands on issues such as arctic drilling, arsenic levels in drinking water, and global warming provoked criticism that he was cozying up to well-heeled corporate powers. Presidential aversion to organized interests is accentuated by the fact that entrenched Washington lobbies routinely frustrate the president's programmatic goals.

At the same time, interest groups have compelling reasons to concentrate their energies on government institutions other than the presidency. Relative to the Washington establishment's time horizons, presidents are something of political transients. Whereas congressional members and federal bureaucrats typically enjoy long tenures in office, an individual president's hold on power is comparatively brief. Leaving aside the tempos of executive efficacy over the course of a single administration, the average tenure of postwar presidents is less than six years. Furthermore, gaining access to the White House can be a tall order for a lobbyist because of the enormous constraints on the time and attention of presidents and their key advisers. By contrast, the size and specialized work of Congress and federal agencies make them far more accessible to interest groups. As one political insider put it, "There are 535 opportunities in Congress and only one in the White House. Where would you put your effort?" (Light 1999). In short, interest group relationships with congressional members and federal bureaucrats are likely to be longer lasting and more reliable than those with White House officials.

Although the disincentives for close presidential-interest group relations are considerable, rarely can either comfortably disregard the other. Indeed, they do so at their own political peril. Organized interests are significant elements of executive electoral coalitions. In an era of candidate-centered campaigns, interest groups provide money, organizational support, and votes for presidential hopefuls during their primary and general election bids (Wayne 1998). Once in office, modern presidents stake their claim as successful leaders largely on whether they regularly can build supportive coalitions for their policies. Along with political parties, organized interests can offer the White House a potent and efficient means of expanding support for the president's agenda in Congress and other venues. However, presidents must also consider that interest groups can just as surely serve as continuous sources of mobilized opposition.

For their part, interest groups cannot ignore the enormous power modern executives wield over public agenda-setting, policy formation, federal budgeting, and the implementation process. Presidents also have the capacity to alter the prevailing interest group system they encounter. They can encourage the creation of new

organized interests, actively work to demobilize others, and even influence how interest groups frame their preferences in the first place. (Ginsburg and Shefter 1988). In short, the modern presidency presents interest groups with significant structural opportunities and constraints to which they must attend. Whether as allies or rivals, policy-minded presidents and interest groups cannot discount each other in a political system designed to "counteract ambition with ambition" (*The Federalist*, 1787-1788).

Efforts to analyze presidential-interest group relations are hampered by the fact that the presidency and the national interest group system are anything but static. Each evolves in terms of its size and influence. Moreover, these processes of change are not necessarily independent of one another; the presidential establishment plays some role in transformations of the interest group system and vice versa. A truly comprehensive account of contemporary presidential-interest group relations would explore how each modern executive has dealt with interest groups. It would investigate their interplay in election campaigns, party politics, executive appointments, judicial nominations and confirmations, executive orders, major legislation, and other processes. But one way to generalize about the interactions between modern presidents and interest groups - that is, to identify patterns and draw analytical insights about their reciprocal relations - is to focus on two factors that help structure presidential-interest group politics: (1) the relationship of interest groups to the president's party; and (2) the relative opportunities for presidential policy leadership, i.e., the relative strength of the president's hand for designing and implementing policy)

It is an old saw of political science that vigorous political parties and interest groups are fundamentally at odds with one other. (Dahl 1982, 190). In truth, both major American parties are linked to interest groups and both nurture interest-group coalitions that will help its candidates win office and its office-holders govern. "Whether observed in the electoral or lobbying arenas," Mark Peterson notes, "a significant portion of the interest group community reflects ideological positions, takes stands on the issues of the day, or represents constituencies whose orientations are at least compatible with one of the two major parties" (Peterson 1992a, 239-240). While reassuring the general public of their eagerness to stand up to "special interests," modern presidents and their political advisers readily understand the importance of party-affiliated interest groups in constructing successful electoral coalitions and governing majorities. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, established mechanisms by which White House staff members could attend to the groups that his loose New Deal coalition comprised, e.g., organized labor, nationality groups, and small farmers (Pika 1987). Subsequent presidents have followed suit by placing at least some priority on interest group affairs for electoral and programmatic purposes and by institutionalizing presidential liaison with groups through both formal (e.g., the Office of Public Liaison) and informal means (Patterson 1988). Not all interest groups, of course, pursue access to or alliances with the White House. For ideological and strategic reasons, groups unaffiliated with the president's party may advance outsider strategies, such as campaigns to garner media attention and public support.

For the purposes of our analytical model, the relationship of interest groups to the president's party (ranging from closely affiliated to staunchly unaffiliated) is crucial because it takes stock of both *collaborative* and *adversarial* forms of interaction.

What are the implications of collaborative and adversarial relations when the opportunities for modern executives to advance their domestic policy agendas are broad or narrow? Which interest groups fare better - those aligned with executives who dominate the policymaking process for a time or those actively opposed to weaker presidents who possess few chances for policy leadership? Which interest groups fare worse - those opposed to dominant executives or those aligned with politically vulnerable incumbents? Taking stock of variation in presidential leadership capacities allows us to address these compelling questions. Among the most prominent factors shaping presidential opportunities to exercise policy leadership are levels of partisan and ideological support in Congress, electoral margins, public moods, popular approval levels, issue cycles (?), and economic and foreign policy crises (Hargrove and Nelson 1984; Mayhew 1991; Light 1999; Lammers and Genovese 2000). By most accounts, few presidents have enjoyed broad opportunities to dominate the policy-making process and to advance their reform agendas (breakthrough politics). Presidential scholars tend to agree that the political context was exceptionally favorable for Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan (at least for his first two years in office) to exercise policy leadership (Hargrove and Nelson 1984; Lammers and Genovese 2000). Most modern presidents have had to struggle with more challenging leadership circumstances in which their capacities to reshape public policy have been relatively narrow (politics-as-usual).

As Table 1 illustrates, four types of interactive politics emerge when we consider together the relationship of interest groups to the president's party (affiliated or unaffiliated) and the relative capacity of a president to exercise policy leadership

Table 1: Presidents and Interest Groups: A Model of Interactive Politics

President's Capacity to Exercise Policy Leadership:	Relationship of Interest Groups to the President's Party:	
	AFFILIATED	UNAFFILIATED
	(COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES)	(ADVERSARIAL STRATEGIES)
BROAD (BREAKTHROUGH POLITICS)	Collaborative Breakthrough Politics <i>Roosevelt's New Deal for Labor</i>	Adversarial Breakthrough Politics <i>Reagan's Assault on Liberal Citizens Groups</i>
NARROW (POLITICS-AS-USUAL)	Collaborative Politics-As-Usual <i>G.H.W. Bush, Clean Air, Rights of the Disable, and the Competitiveness Council</i>	Adversarial Politics-As-Usual <i>Clinton and Health Care Reform</i>

(broad or narrow)¹. One might expect collaborative breakthrough politics to be the most advantageous for interest groups based on the assumption that presidents with broad leadership capacities will handsomely reward their group allies. But one will often find that this is often not the case. The logic of presidential dominance dictates that the fortunes of allied interest groups are contingent upon and subsumed by White House priorities. When the reform agendas of strong presidents and supportive interest groups closely overlap, groups are indeed likely to win important policy achievements. But they are just as likely to be marginalized when their goals are either contradictory or peripheral to presidential priorities. Where there are creative tensions, presidents trump group allies. The relationship of dominant executives to closely aligned interest groups also can entail significant White House sponsorship and control, resulting in a profound transformation of group identities and preferences. As the case of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the labor movement will illustrate, co-optation is often the price interest groups pay for their engagement in collaborative breakthrough politics.

As much as collaboration with strong presidents is less rewarding for interest groups than often presumed, opposition to executives with enormous political capital is often less punishing than one might expect. To be sure, interest groups that challenge dominant presidents may struggle to guard favorable policy outcomes of the past and they are almost certain to find their longer-term goals banished to the political wilderness. Oppositional interest groups may face formidable White House assaults. Yet the costs of adversarial breakthrough politics for oppositional interest groups are typically limited because of the fragmented structure of the U.S. political system. Even when confronted by powerful White House antagonism, adversarial groups often find alternative sources of support in Congress, the courts, or the

bureaucracy. Indeed, White House antagonism may inspire sympathy for a threatened cause that groups can use to attract new supporters and to draw fresh resources. As we shall see, Ronald Reagan's largely unsuccessful campaign to demobilize liberal citizens groups concerned with the environment, consumer protection, civil rights and other policy issues aptly captures these dynamics.

Breakthrough presidencies are of course the exception to the norm. Most modern presidents do not possess broad capacities to exercise policy leadership and must carefully ration their modest political resources (Neustadt 1990). Collaborative politics-as-usual poses a number of dilemmas for presidents and their interest group allies. Constrained presidents have particularly strong incentives to move to the political center to secure policy achievements and an independent public image. This movement to the center frequently means offending affiliated groups. Presidents who pursue this tack may presume that, as captives of the president's party, affiliated groups have few alternatives but to maintain at least tacit support for the administration. While this political calculation is often sound, it does involve key risks. Affiliated groups may in fact take the dramatic step of openly breaking with an administration perceived as inattentive to its interests, as several prominent interest groups did when they supported insurgency campaigns late in the Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush presidencies. But the costs of estrangement for presidents are usually more subtle. For example, when the Clinton White House alienated organized labor by successfully championing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), one of the repercussions was that union chiefs refused to commit significant resources to help Bill Clinton secure his health care reform package. By contrast, if constrained presidents attempt to shore up support from their ideological base by advancing policy initiatives endorsed by affiliated interest groups, they face heavy criticism for betraying the public good on behalf of entrenched special interests. One may safely predict that collaborative politics-as-usual will usually be inhospitable to affiliated groups seeking major policy innovations and more opportune for those content with incremental policy favors from a friendly administration. In a revealing case we shall examine below, the Bush presidency ran afoul of many conservative allies when it endorsed popular centrist initiatives for improving air quality and ensuring stronger civil rights protections for the disabled. Tellingly, attempts by Bush officials to appease disgruntled business groups by softening the regulatory burdens of these reforms were thwarted after intense resistance from the media, interest group opponents, and Congressional Democrats. Collaborative politics-as-usual is typically less rewarding for allied groups and more challenging for ordinary presidents than is often assumed.

Finally, adversarial politics-as-usual predictably affords oppositional interest groups extensive opportunities to frustrate the policy designs of politically constrained presidents by mobilizing grassroots resistance, exploiting alliances with supporters in other branches and levels of government, and pursuing other forms of veto-politics. When the White House does not dominate the policy-making process, we also may anticipate that oppositional groups will play a significant role in helping to set the public agenda and to shape new policy initiatives. Under these

circumstances, constrained presidents may decide to follow the lead of unaffiliated interest groups championing popular causes. Significantly, the most prominent and ambitious policy reforms of presidents possessing ordinary leadership resources are usually dispatched with ease within this environment of adversarial politics and fragmented power. As discussed in the pages that follow, the monumental demise of Clinton's health care reform plan affords a powerful illustration of adversarial politics-as-usual and the propensity of modern presidents and interest groups to frustrate each other's policy designs.. Let us now turn to four case studies that help capture these distinctive patterns of presidential-interest group interactions.

Roosevelt and industrial unionism: collaborative breakthrough politics

Interest groups are often attentive to new political openings for their policy goals. During the 1930s, organized labor could not resist linking its fortunes to the activist presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and his ambitious New Deal agenda. Labor leaders such as John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers (UMW) particularly welcomed opportunities to translate New Deal legislative and administrative initiatives into growth for their unions, hoping to organize unskilled industrial workers who had been largely neglected by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In 1933, the Roosevelt administration invited a large number of organized interests - including business and labor groups - to participate in drafting the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Labor activists such as W. Jett Lauck, a Lewis lieutenant, persuaded the White House to include a vague provision in NIRA, Section 7(a), that recognized the right of workers to bargain collectively. Although corporate leaders were reassured by their lawyers that the provision included no administrative mechanism for enforcement, Lauck reported to Lewis that Section 7(a) "will suit our purposes." After NIRA sailed through Congress, Lewis and other union organizers aggressively exploited the popularity of Roosevelt and NIRA to attract more miners to the UMW. "The president wants you to join the union," UMW literature and speakers told workers (Zeiger 1988). Tens of thousands of miners signed union cards and formed lodges with names such as "New Deal" and "Blue Eagle." After only one year of invoking the celebrated names of Roosevelt and the New Deal, the UMW's membership rolls had swollen from 150,000 to more than 500,000 (Leuchtenburg 1963, 106-107).

Lewis and other labor organizers orchestrated a dramatic break with the AFL in 1934, forming the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to represent millions of unskilled industrial workers (Leuchtenburg 1963). Publicly, CIO leaders professed unwavering support for Roosevelt and the New Deal. In private, they noted the aloof posture assumed by the White House when Senator Robert Wagner (D-NY) championed legislation that would fundamentally protect unionizing efforts. Roosevelt tepidly endorsed the Wagner Act of 1935, organized labor's "Magna Carta," only at the eleventh hour (Miroff 1993). Although he understood that organized labor was a crucial element of his electoral and governing coalitions, the president took pains to publicly assert his independence of both labor and business

interests. During major strikes, for example, Roosevelt was known to tell reporters that labor activists "did silly things" and he often sounded centrist tones in urging both employers and disgruntled laborers to embrace "common sense and good order" (Miroff 1993, 260-262).

Lewis and the CIO recognized Roosevelt's lack of enthusiasm for union radicalism. But they also appreciated that labor reforms such as the Wagner Act and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) were powerful catalysts for union organizing and collective bargaining. In 1936, Lewis, David Dubinsky, George Berry, Sidney Hillman, and other labor activists entered an electoral marriage of convenience between the CIO and the Democratic party to reelect Roosevelt. CIO unions contributed significant financial and logistical support to the president's reelection campaign (Lewis's UMW was the Democratic party's largest financial benefactor in 1936). In forming the Labor Nonpartisan League, however, Lewis hoped that union votes could be marshaled in future elections to support whichever party or candidate best served the CIO's interests (Leuchtenburg 1963).

After his landslide victory, it became clear that Roosevelt expected organized labor to follow his lead and not the reverse. Like other presidents who have dominated the policy process, Roosevelt intended to dictate the terms of any White House-interest group alliances. Amid labor confrontations with "little steel" in 1937 and 1938, Roosevelt stunned many labor supporters when he commented on the killing of ten steelworkers who were demonstrating in Chicago against Republic Steel Corporation. Denouncing management and unions alike as sponsors of senseless violence, Roosevelt declared "a curse on both your houses." In a Labor Day radio address to millions of listeners, Lewis responded with a seething rebuke of the president: "It ill behooves one who has supped at labor's table and who has been sheltered in labor's house to curse with equal fervor and fine impartiality both labor and its adversaries when they become locked in deadly embrace" (Zeiger 1988, 105-106). By the end of the 1930s, Lewis and a few other CIO leaders were convinced that the NLRB, the courts, and the White House were limiting the labor movement's larger aims. During the 1940 election, Lewis worked in vain to derail FDR's reelection, fearing that it would bring about American entry into war and the concomitant demise of labor's agenda for progressive change. After vain efforts to launch a third party challenge and to back the Republican candidate Wendell Willkie in the 1940 election, Lewis stepped down as CIO president (Landy 1985; Zeiger 1988).

Eager to marginalize and defuse Lewis-style CIO militancy, the Roosevelt White House embraced moderate "labor statesmen" like Sidney Hillman, the president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America who helped form the CIO. Hillman, in contrast to Lewis, was an unflinching Roosevelt loyalist. He would oversee the creation of the CIO's Political Action Committee, which further cemented ties between organized labor and the Democratic party.

After Pearl Harbor, war imperatives called for extraordinary industrial production and coordination. Labor leaders such as the new CIO president, Philip Murray, and Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers proposed "industrial councils" that would facilitate efficient wartime production while giving organized labor real influence - along with business and government - in supervising industries and the workforce. The Roosevelt administration eschewed such ideas. In the end, the AFL, the CIO, and other unions agreed to a "no-strike pledge" during the war and merely hoped that war agencies would exercise their robust power over industrial workers benevolently (Brinkley 1995). "Instead of an active participant in the councils of industry," historian Alan Brinkley notes, "the labor movement had become, in effect, a ward of the state" (Brinkley 1995, 212). As the war drew to a close, Lewis's vision of an independent labor movement engaged in militant activities was overshadowed by broad CIO and AFL support for a more conciliatory posture. Heartened by the gains and protections secured during Roosevelt's administration, leaders of organized labor increasingly pinned labor's hopes to a permanent alliance with the Democratic party.

Presidents with broad opportunities to shape domestic policy are unlikely to leave the interest group system the way they found it. Given their ample capacities to remake American politics and governance, it is hardly surprising that these executives are equally capable of reconstructing the interests that are close to them. Although Roosevelt did not explicitly favor union expansion or the meteoric rise of the CIO, his influence in these developments was unmistakable. Organized labor and benefited a great deal from its ties to a president blessed with an exceptional opportunity to advance major policy changes. Roosevelt, however, exercised enormous control over the terms of their alliance and the nature of reform. Cooptation was the price of labor's programmatic collaboration, as union militancy and independence gave way to an increasingly moderate and bureaucratic style of labor organization.

Revolution and stasis: Reagan's assault on liberal citizen groups: adversarial breakthrough politics

Ronald Reagan, the first conservative modern president with abundant political capital, declared war on liberal advocacy groups early in his administration. Reaganites made no effort to conceal their disdain for liberal interest groups that they viewed as "a bunch of ideological ambulance chasers" who profited from bloated government and stood in the way of "regulatory relief." (Greve 1987). Government retrenchment, the Reagan White House resolved, would require a concerted effort to decrease the resources, size, and influence of liberal advocacy groups concerned with the environment, consumer protection, civil rights, poverty, and other policy issues. According to Peterson and others, the Reagan administration set out to demobilize its interest-group opponents in 1981 by cutting government programs favored by liberal groups, limiting their access to important federal agencies, and eliminating federal grants and contracts supporting their activities (Peterson 1992a).

The Reagan offensive was devastating for some advocacy groups, especially antipoverty organizations. The administration's social welfare budget cuts of 1981 spared programs aimed at the elderly, thereby neutralizing senior citizens lobbies that might have served as powerful allies to advocacy organizations for the poor. Instead, Reagan's effort to "defund the left" by eliminating government grant programs that supported liberal groups took its heaviest toll on a small cluster poor people's lobbies (Imig 1996). Nevertheless, even as many antipoverty organizations shifted their energies from political advocacy to providing services, a number of groups concerned with the homeless made the Reagan administration's assault on the welfare state the focal point of contentious politics. Organizations associated with the emerging homeless movement of the 1980s engaged in confrontational anti-Reagan protests, building shanty-town "Reaganvilles" and staging demonstrations that drew extensive media attention casting the White House as insensitive to the poor (Imig 1998). Ironically, the Reagan administration's constriction of older antipoverty organizations dating back to the Great Society opened the door for new poor people's groups to challenge the president's agenda. Presidential antagonism inadvertently served as an impetus for liberal interest-group formation.

Beyond its effective assault on a handful of antipoverty organizations, the White House plan to enervate liberal groups failed. Reagan strategists largely ignored the possibility that resourceful oppositional groups might transform the open hostility of a powerful conservative president into a catalyst for liberal organizational growth. National environmental groups, for example, prospered during the 1980s. Although denied access to once friendly federal agencies, environmental organizations launched an effective counter-mobilization that included aggressive fundraising, publicity, and coordinated action with congressional allies (Peterson and Walker 1986).. As private donations to these groups increased markedly, environmental leaders quipped that Reagan's unpopular anti-conservation Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, was the "Fort Knox of the environmental movement" (Greve 1987). The membership rolls of organizations like the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club watched their membership rolls doubled in size between 1980 and 1985 (Waterman 1989; Bosso 1995). Finally, environmental groups drove from office two prominent Reagan appointees (Watt and Environmental Protection Agency Director Anne Gorsuch) and mounted a successful challenge to the administration's plans for environmental deregulation. Reagan's struggle with liberal citizens organizations highlights the resiliency of many oppositional groups even when they are under assault from breakthrough presidents. More precisely, adversarial breakthrough politics can present oppositional groups with opportunities for organizational expansion and influence when they enjoy strong mass-based constituency and alternative sources of support within government.

Bush, centrist reform and the competitiveness council: collaborative politics-as-usual

Presidents with narrow opportunities to exercise domestic policy leadership often have strong political incentives to embrace centrist reforms. By moving toward the political center, these presidents can gain credit among voters for advancing popular bipartisan initiatives. In the process, however, they may alienate their party's core interest-group allies. George H.W. Bush's endorsements of popular bipartisan measures on the environment and civil rights illustrate this tradeoff.

Bush's policy leadership capacities were severely limited when he became president in 1989. His party held only 175 seats in the House of Representatives, the fewest of any modern president at the start of a term. Operating within this constrained political environment, the Bush administration hoped to prove its capacity to govern by introducing major environmental reform legislation that would draw considerable congressional, media, and popular support. During his 1988 election campaign, Bush pledged a "kinder and gentler" America and promised to be an "environmental president." As he proclaimed on the campaign trail, "Those who think we are powerless to do anything about the 'greenhouse effect' are forgetting about the 'White House effect'" (Holusha 1988).

Once in office, Bush stayed on the environmental bandwagon; like Nixon before him, Bush hoped to outmaneuver - or at least keep pace with - congressional Democrats on an issue of enormous popular concern. In July 1989, he sent to Congress an ambitious clean air bill. After successful negotiations with Senate majority leader George Mitchell (D-ME) in early 1990, the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990 were enacted. The bill proved to be Bush's most significant policy achievement. (Cohen 1992; Vig 2000). But along the way, the Bush administration was required to marginalize traditional Republican interest-group allies in business and industry.

At about the same time, the Bush White House endorsed another major centrist reform, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), solidly supported by the public and by liberal political actors but dreaded by many in the business community. The ADA sought to add the disabled to the groups protected against discrimination by the 1964 Civil Rights Act. At the urging of a broad coalition of interest groups associated with the disability, civil rights, and labor movements, the ADA also required that new or remodeled facilities be made accessible to disabled persons seeking jobs or hoping to make use of public accommodations; existing facilities were to be made accessible whenever "readily achievable." The potential financial costs arising from ADA requirements were enormous, and Bush officials attempted to dampen the blow on business interests by pressuring legislators to eliminate language from the bill permitting aggrieved parties to sue for damages. Congressional Democrats refused to make any concessions to the administration and passed the ADA unaltered. With

polls indicating overwhelming public support for civil rights reform on behalf of the disabled, Bush signed the ADA into law (Mervin 1996).

Conservative critics assailed the Bush administration for approving the Clean Air Act Amendments and the ADA (Harris and Milkis 1996). Business groups and other conservative organizations warned administration officials that, at the start of a recession, new regulatory burdens placed "significant drags on the country's economic recovery" (Mervin 1996). Troubled by those attacks, Bush hoped to appease business groups outside the gaze of media attention by limiting the regulatory reach of the Clean Air Act, the ADA, and other initiatives in the implementation process. To this end, Bush created a Council on Competitiveness within the Executive Office of the President, chaired by Vice President Dan Quayle, and charged to review regulations issued by bureaucratic agencies and to make them less burdensome for relevant industry. "The president would say that if we keep our hand on the tiller in the implementation phase," recounted a member of the Council, "we won't add to the burdens of the economy" (Harris and Milkis 1996, 289).

In closed-door meetings, the Competitiveness Council focused on agency regulations that industry representatives complained were excessive. When the Department of Housing and Urban Development issued ADA-related regulations on how to make apartments more accessible to the disabled, for instance, the Competitiveness Council pressured the agency to ease the regulations at the behest of construction and real estate interests. As Jeffrey Berry and Kent Portney found, "The new rules were more sympathetic to the industry, and lobbyists for the home builders claimed that hundreds of millions of dollars would be saved each year in aggregate building costs" (Berry and Portney 1995, 320).

The success of some business groups in winning regulatory relief from the Bush administration illustrates perhaps the most promising strategy for interest group allies of practically constrained presidents to achieve incremental policy gains. Avoiding the glare of television lights, interest groups are most likely to benefit from collaborative politics-as-usual by mobilizing White House pressure on federal agencies for friendly implementation of existing laws. The Competitiveness Council, however, was ultimately unable to operate in secrecy. Its activities became increasingly hamstrung by liberal public interest groups, media scrutiny, and congressional opponents (Berry and Portney 1995). As the Bush years suggest, the relationship between politically constrained presidents and the interest-group coalitions of their party is often strained and unproductive. Tellingly, liberal interest groups closely aligned to the Democratic party also were frustrated during the Clinton administration when popular centrist reforms were on the table. Clinton's support for the North American Free Trade Agreement (alienating organized labor), the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (alienating antipoverty and civil rights groups), and the Defense of Marriage Act (alienating gay and lesbian groups) underscores the significant incentives for constrained executives to associate themselves with centrist initiatives even when they estrange interest group allies.

Adversarial politics-as-usual: Clinton and health care reform

Shortly after his unexpected 1948 election, Harry S Truman launched an aggressive campaign to secure national health insurance. Hoping to make the most of his modest political opportunity for programmatic leadership, Truman vigorously nurtured popular support for his ambitious health proposal. The American Medical Association (AMA) and other groups that viewed national health insurance as anathema to their interests launched an intense public relations campaign designed to depict Truman's plan as Socialistic and corrosive of quality medical care. Spending what was then an unprecedented \$1.5 million for its publicity counter-offensive, AMA ads forebodingly portrayed how national health insurance would place government bureaucrats between patients and their physicians. Already constrained by the slim Democratic majorities in Congress and by strong resistance from the conservative southern wing of his party, Truman was helpless to save his health plan when public support dwindled (Starr 1982).

More than four decades later, Bill Clinton, another Democrat constrained by limited political capacities to remake domestic policy, made universal health care coverage the centerpiece of his administration's reform agenda. He ran effectively on the issue during the 1992 election, receiving a warm reception from large numbers of voters who agreed that the health care system was in crisis. After a lengthy policy-planning process, Clinton unveiled his much-anticipated Health Security Act in late 1993, employing language intended to associate his proposal with one of the federal government's most popular programs, Social Security. In substance, the Act called for a new public-private partnership involving "managed competition" and employer mandates (Hacker 1997). Politically, it made important concessions to large companies and health care insurance providers to win their support, while promising universal coverage and checks on soaring medical costs to attract the elderly, consumer groups, unions, religious organizations and groups representing women, children, and minorities. When the AMA, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and several large employers voiced support for key features of the Health Security Act, the Clinton administration seemed to have assembled a powerful Left-Right coalition of unions, big business, health-care providers and the elderly.

By mid-1994, Clinton's crusade for sweeping health care reform was dead. Critics point to the plan's eye-glazing complexity, resistance from Democrats on key congressional committees, Clinton's failure to streamline his policy agenda, his unwillingness to work with reform-minded Republicans, high levels of public distrust in government, and other explanations (Schick 1995; Skocpol 1997; West and Loomis 1999). For our purposes, however, it is useful to concentrate on the significant role that Clinton's interest-group adversaries played in derailing major health care reform.

Initially, the strongest group opposition to the administration is health care package came from two national organizations with large grassroots constituencies: the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA) and the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB). The HIAA represented midsized and small health insurance companies, many of which would go out of business if the Health Security Act were passed. Similarly, although large employers stood to benefit from the Clinton plan, small businesses represented by the NFIB found intolerable the proposal's mandate that employers pay 80 percent of employee health premiums (West and Loomis 1999, 78-82). The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PRMA), representing drug companies that stood to lose profits under the Clinton scheme, also joined the cause. Then, late in 1993, Republican strategists led by William Kristol of the Project for the Republican Future began to persuade a broad set of conservative interest groups to mobilize in opposition to the Health Security Act. Anything but an all-out effort to defeat health care reform, Kristol argued, would seriously compromise the political future of the Republican party and its interest-group coalition. Passage of the Clinton plan, he insisted, would "relegitimize middle-class dependence for 'security' on government spending and regulation" and thereby revive the Democratic party's appeal "as the generous protector of middle-class interests" (Skocpol 1997, 143-146). Before long, the Christian Coalition, antitax groups, and variety of other conservative interest groups devoted new resources to kill health care reform, coordinating their activities with the HIAA, NFIB, and PRMA.

Clinton's interest-group adversaries devoted considerable resources to advertising. The HIAA spent approximately \$14 million on its public relations blitz, which included the famous stories off "Harry and Louise" television ads promoting middle-class angst concerning the Clinton proposal. The PRMA devoted roughly \$20 million to its political advertising campaign. The anti-reform advertising crusade was designed to minimize public concerns about a health crisis while arousing fears that the Health Security plan would compromise the quality of medical care, eliminate individual choice of health care providers, encourage bloated government, and dramatically increase taxes to cover the cost of universal coverage. For its part, the 600,000-member NFIB focused on grassroots mobilization, including direct mail and phone bank assaults on the Clinton plan. Against this backdrop, the White House received only modest support for its health care initiative from traditionally Democratic interest-group allies. The AFL-CIO and other labor groups, for example, had already expended considerable resources fighting one of Clinton's treasured centrist achievements, NAFTA (West and Loomis 1999, 80-85).

Adversarial politics took its toll on public support for the health care reform, which drifted downward from 67 percent in a September 1993 Washington Post/ABC News poll to 44 percent in February 1994 (West and Loomis 1999, 92-93). Assured of defeat, the Health Security Act was never put to a vote in either the House or the Senate. The failure of Clinton's major domestic policy initiative presaged the Republican takeover of Congress in November. Many analysts trace the demise of health care reform in 1993-1994 to strategic missteps by the Clinton administration,

of which there were many. Placed within the context of our theoretical model, however, Clinton's failure to achieve major health care reform reflects the formidable challenges faced by politically constrained presidents who pursue large-scale policy change. It also illustrates the enormous opportunities for interest-group adversaries to block the programmatic ambitions of modern presidents in periods of politics-as-usual.

Conclusion

Political interactions between presidents and national interest groups are a recurring and important feature of contemporary American political life. Studying presidential-interest group relations in light of executive leadership opportunities and the partisan and ideological affiliations of interest groups permits us to draw comparisons and to recognize patterns across time, much as Stephen Skowronek's emphasis on regime cycles enables us to analytically link together presidents from different historical periods facing similar political circumstances (1993)]. The existing scholarly literature tends to underscore the recent development of the institutional resources and political strategies with which the White House can deal with the interest group system. These valuable empirical insights sometimes have led students of the presidency to perceive all modern presidents as being equally well-situated to orchestrate successful relations with organized interests. According to Peterson, for instance, "modern presidents have the institutional means, and have demonstrated the willingness, to influence the interest group system to their own advantage" - including considerable resources to punish opponents and reward allies in the interest group community (1992a, 237). Our model of interactive politics offers a decidedly different portrait of presidential-interest group relations, one in which modern executives are frequently confounded in their efforts both to coax allies into supportive coalitions and to thwart opposition groups. Except for rare moments of presidential dominance, interest groups engage in their own orchestration of effective strategic politics.

Presidents with transformational policy aspirations but ordinary leadership opportunities have routinely found interest-group relations to be trying. Oppositional groups are usually well-situated to frustrate the president's most ambitious programmatic goals, as Clinton's ill-fated crusade for health care reform illustrates. Nurturing and aiding interest-group allies can also prove difficult for politically constrained presidents. These executives have strong incentives to endorse popular centrist measures where enactment allows them to point to tangible policy achievements. In the process, however, they routinely alienate affiliated interest groups, as Bush and Clinton learned from his support of the Clean Air Act Amendments and ADA. Indeed, the political allure of such popular centrist initiatives frequently saps the ability of politically constrained presidents to build strong coalitions behind their more partisan measures. During politics-as-usual periods, executives instead may quietly provide succor to their interest-group allies through administrative means. But the intense scrutiny devoted to White House activities by the media and organized opposition, means that such efforts can rarely remain secret.

When publicized, they may subject the president to charges of catering to special interests, and may be contested by interest-group adversaries in federal courts and Congress. Although most interest groups allied to presidents with constrained leadership opportunities receive fewer tangible benefits than many assume, oppositional groups often find the adversarial politics that prevail during such presidencies to be hospitable to vibrant and effective activism. As interest groups opposed to Clinton's Health Security program discovered in the 1994 mid-term election, counter-mobilization can have surprising transformational possibilities.

Obviously, interest groups are most rewarded for collaborative relations with the White House during those fleeting periods when breakthrough presidents dominate American governance. Yet breakthrough presidents set the terms of collaboration, and allied interest groups whose goals may jeopardize more important White House objectives find themselves marginalized in the policy process. Even when the transformational goals of breakthrough presidents and allied interest groups are nearly the same, as was the case with Roosevelt New Dealers and labor activists in the 1930s, cooptation is typically the price these groups pay to secure dramatic gains for their constituencies. It is also telling that the most recent breakthrough president, Ronald Reagan, dominated domestic policy-making for only a year and that his interest-group adversaries prospered during most of his tenure. The scale and variety of the interest group system during the past quarter-century has been greater than ever before. This important development, as Graham K. Wilson argues, forces presidents today to contend with "a thicker structure of constraining institutions (in this case, interest groups)" (1996, 231). Thus, the promise of strained relations between modern presidents and interest groups is more certain than ever. As our investigation of presidential-interest group relations suggests, the most significant and enduring bias of the American political system is its hostility toward non-incremental reform.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution could not have anticipated the unprecedented scope and content of presidential and interest group politics today, but it is a good bet that few would be troubled by the extra-constitutional checks that have accompanied their expansion. James Madison was only the most celebrated constitutional architect to express profound ambivalence about executives and outright disdain for organized interests, which he called factions. Although he ultimately endorsed an energetic presidency because he thought it necessary to check potential legislative tyrannies and to promote national security, Madison still worried that executive power and leadership posed substantial perils for the future of representative government (suspicions that later hardened during the Federalist administrations of George Washington and John Adams). He also expressed great disdain for selfish organized interests whose policy goals often proved costly or harmful to other groups. While recognizing that official restraints on the narcissistic pursuits of interest groups were "worse than the disease," Madison hoped to control the "effects" of factions via an extended sphere, separation of powers, checks and balances, and other innovations of modern political science.

The fact that the modern presidency and national interest group system now regularly bedevil one another is in many respects a most appropriate development for a national polity designed at the outset to fragment government power and to frustrate dramatic change. In short, contemporary presidential-interest group relations represent a substantial Madisonian victory. The democratic meaning of these extra-constitutional checks, however, is more troublesome. The U.S. political system's bias against non-incremental reform can be viewed as a triumph of American democracy when it derails the perilous designs of tyrannical majorities, delays the most ill-advised whims of impetuous masses, or tempers the most dangerous ambitions of organized political elites and minorities. Yet inasmuch as these barriers to reform also reinforce oppressive inequalities for the nation's most disadvantaged members and often make government seem remote and unresponsive to middle-class Americans, they remain one of our most tenacious sources of democratic failing.

Endnotes

¹ For an excellent typology of interest group liaison (governing party, consensus building, outreach, and legitimation), see Peterson 1992b.

² The best review of this literature is offered by Pika 1999.

³ It is telling in this regard that Peterson focuses on the political activities of Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, presidents with exceptional opportunities to advance policy breakthroughs (Peterson 1992a, 237).

Biographical Note

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