

Explaining Interest Group Advertising Strategies: Loose Cannons or Loyal Foot Soldiers?¹

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Abstract

Recent court decisions have fundamentally altered the way in which independent groups may participate in the air wars surrounding elections. Yet beyond spending, existing scholarship on interest group electioneering has yet to answer critical questions about how outside interests affect the content of campaigns. More specifically, interest group advertising may not simply shift the balance of funds, but may also affect the specific issues being discussed. The ability of candidates to set the campaign agenda (as opposed to interest groups) has implications for the extent to which politicians can be held accountable by citizens. There are theoretical reasons to expect that the issue focus of campaign advertising will vary by type of interest group, with likely consequences for both agenda-setting and persuasion. In this paper, we present a new conceptual framework for explaining variation in interest group advertising strategies. Drawing on Wisconsin Advertising and Wesleyan Media Project data, we examine the factors leading different types of interest groups to be loose cannons (diverging from the issue debates among candidates) or loyal foot soldiers (matching the issue debates) both within and across election cycles.

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Independent groups have become heavily involved in recent electoral campaigns in the United States. In 2010, about 15 percent of ads aired in races for the U.S. Senate were paid for by groups other than the parties and candidates (Franz 2010). In many races, over a third of total ad spending was done by outside groups (Fowler and Ridout 2010). And this prominent role for independent groups in funding advertising in political races is only likely to increase in future election cycles. Many point to the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, which built upon its 2007 decision in *Wisconsin Right to Life*, as a significant cause of this increased activity.

Although more and more political campaigns feature significant outside spending, little is understood about the ways in which these groups might affect the outcomes. Two possibilities come immediately to mind. First, spending by independent groups could affect the balance in the volume of advertising aired by competing candidates. A group may swoop in with a flight of ads that help an underfinanced candidate to compete with his opponent, or a group's spending could exacerbate disparities in the resources of competing candidates. A second possible effect of interest group involvement is that its advertising may affect the policy issues being discussed in the race. Instead of reinforcing the agendas of the campaigns, for example, groups might reset the broader campaign agenda by focusing on different issues. To the extent that scholars have examined these possibilities, far more attention has been given to the effect of interest groups on the balance of spending than on campaign dialogue in campaigns.

The extent to which candidates set the campaign agenda (as opposed to interest groups) has implications for the vibrancy of American democracy. Understanding how interest group advertising may shape the issue dialogue during a campaign matters for governmental accountability. If interest groups drive the issue debate away from one preferred by

candidates—and the literature has not established the extent to which this is the case—then it may prove difficult for voters to hold candidates responsible for their actions. As Rozell, Wilcox, and Madland (2005) argue: “Although political scientists disagree strongly about whether policy messages should be shaped by the parties or by candidates, few would argue that interest groups should dominate the dialogue. When interest groups frame the issues, attack the character of candidates, and otherwise run shadow campaigns, accountability suffers. Candidates are not responsible for the claims and attacks in the advertisements, and it is more difficult to hold candidates to campaign promises when those promises are made by interest groups and not by the candidates themselves” (p.163).

Whether candidates and their favored interest groups share an issue agenda also has practical implications. Some have argued that candidates' campaigns, such as that run by John McCain in 2008, are handicapped when they cannot control the messages being disseminated (Plouffe 2010). A campaign's own message on one topic may not be as effective if it is competing with a different message from an interest group, even if that message is favorable to the candidate.

In this research, we analyze campaign advertising in dozens of U.S. Senate races from 2008 and 2010, and we investigate the extent to which the issue focus of interest groups coincides with that of the candidates running for office. More specifically, we argue that the extent to which interest groups converge with candidates during a campaign varies with the characteristics of the group, including whether the group is single- or multi-issue focused and whether the group is membership-based. Although there is a growing focus on the extent to which competing candidates engage in issue dialogue (Sigelman and Buel 2004; Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006; Hobolt, Klemmensen and Pickup 2008; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010),

scholars have yet to examine convergence between candidates and the outside groups advertising on their behalf, which is our explicit focus. We ask: How high is issue convergence between candidates and their interest group allies? What factors affect the level of issue convergence between groups and candidates? What lessons can we draw about the content of campaigns from this analysis? Thus, we advance the first systematic explanation of interest group advertising content and how it varies by factors related to group type and characteristics of a campaign.

Interest Group Involvement in Campaigns

Although there are many reports of how interest groups broadly are involved in campaigns and their levels of spending, there is little research that explores systematically the content of this activity. For instance, we know interest groups are drawn primarily to competitive elections (Franz 2008), but we know very little about how their involvement affects the issue dialogue in a campaign.

One study that has looked at this question for Senate races between 2000 and 2004 found support for the idea that interest groups tend to reinforce the agendas of the candidates (Franz 2007). This study, however, focused on campaigns during the early 2000s, a time during which the legal forms that most groups take on today, such as SuperPACs, were non-existent. This study also did not examine how the characteristics of the sponsor mattered for levels of issue convergence between groups and candidates, focusing instead on convergence between candidates and the ads aired by the entirety of outside groups in a campaign.

Issue ownership theory might provide a vantage point from which to begin theorizing the issue behavior of independent groups. Issue ownership (Budge and Fairlie 1983, Petrocik 1996,

Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen 2003) suggests that parties—and by extension the candidates running under their labels—have reputations for being able to handle specific issues well. In other words, the parties own specific issues. Thus, competing candidates should diverge on the issues they discuss, with Republicans discussing issues owned by the Republican Party and Democrats discussing issues owned by the Democratic Party. Competition, then, is more about setting the issue agenda—deliberatively priming voters to think about those issues when deciding for whom to vote—rather than positioning oneself closer to the median voter on salient issues. Under this theory, interest groups would want to reinforce the issue agendas associated with the parties of the candidates they support because that would provide the most "bang for the buck," and thus groups' issue agendas would coincide with the issue agendas of the candidates.

But one need not buy into the theory of issue ownership—and many do question the extent to which the theory works in explaining contemporary American campaigns (Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006)—in order to reach the expectation that groups will converge with the issue agendas of the candidates they support. Independent groups may echo the issue agendas of the candidates they support in order to reinforce the candidate message, thereby not distracting and confusing voters with multiple messages. Moreover, echoing the candidate issue agenda would seem to be a low-cost strategy as, presumably, the campaign's strategists have polling data and other expertise to support that particular issue focus. In this sense, a convergent issue focus is both low cost and strategic as it bolsters – not competes with – the candidate's message.

On the other hand, there are also reasons to suspect that the issue agendas of independent groups and the candidates they support may diverge somewhat. For one, interest group entrepreneurs are not legally allowed to coordinate messages with candidate allies, which might

make it, at least from a practical standpoint, more difficult for the two actors to talk about the same issues as opposed to pursuing their own issue agendas. Second, independent groups, although certainly motivated to get their preferred candidates elected, may also have another goal: getting candidates to address the issues important to the group by putting those issues on the public agenda.

These ideas establish two competing hypotheses: the first predicts that interest groups will act “as if” they were candidates, converging with candidate allies in their campaign advertising issue-focus—what we term the “loyal foot soldier” strategy. If an interest group supports a particular candidate, and all else equal that candidate will do better if the issue agenda plays to his or her personal strengths or party reputation, then we should expect to see more convergence between the interest group and favored candidate than we do between candidates. The second hypothesis expects interest groups to act more as “loose cannons” that introduce issues into the debate regardless of whether their favored candidate is talking about that issue or engaging on that issue with the opposing candidate. The result, then, would be a low degree of issue convergence between groups and their favored candidates.

In an era of burgeoning interest group activity, however, it is clearly not the case that all groups are alike or that we should have the same expectation for each group. Whether a group acts more as a “loose cannon” or “loyal foot soldier,” is likely a function of the way the group is organized. More specifically, we expect variance in group activity depending on both the number of issues a group concerns itself with and whether the group has a membership base to which it is accountable. Interest groups primarily concerned with single issues should be more likely to diverge from candidate dialogue, focusing instead on their own set of issues and generally neglecting the issues talked about by candidates and parties. The National Rifle

Association, for example, may air ads on the issue of gun control regardless of what the two candidates are discussing, and perhaps in spite of whether the issue is even debated in the campaign. This is in contrast to groups with a wider issue focus, who can more readily adopt the issue agenda of parties and candidates. MoveOn.org, for example, has no real constraint on the issues on which it can focus, and it may therefore focus its ads on whatever issues would be beneficial to its preferred candidate (perhaps, but not necessarily, those issues owned by the candidate's party).

The interest group literature has long differentiated groups based on their issue focus into two main types (although we might also conceive of the dimension as a continuum): those interested in single issues like the National Rifle Association and United Seniors Association and those with a wider issue focus like MoveOn.org and American Action Network (Rozell, Wilcox, and Madland 2005). The extent to which an independent group varies on this dimension should be an important predictor of what type of advertising strategy the group will pursue, with single-issue groups being less sensitive to the campaign-specific atmosphere and multi-issue groups looking more like a political party, attacking on whatever issues are most likely to resonate with the public. In other words, we expect single-issue groups to behave more like "loose cannons" and multi-issue groups to behave more like "loyal foot soldiers."

A second theoretically important factor is the membership status of an interest group. In particular, we expect that groups with formal members will have constituencies they need to please, which will constrain the types of issue on which it can advertise. For example, a membership group such as the Club for Growth might risk losing support from the members who support it financially if it departed from its focus on small government and low taxes in favor of social issues such as abortion or gay marriage. Thus, membership groups would seemingly be

more “locked in” to their issues agendas, leading to more loose cannon behavior than groups such as Karl Rove’s Crossroads Grassroots Policy Strategies, which (in spite of its name) does not have members per se, and thus has more freedom to reinforce what its preferred candidates are talking about.

Combining the issue focus and membership dimensions leads us to four basic types of interest groups: 1) the single-issue membership group (e.g., the Sierra Club and National Rifle Association), 2) the single-issue non-membership group (e.g., Campaign for Working Families and the First Amendment Alliance), 3) the multi-issue membership group (e.g., MoveOn.org and the Chamber of Commerce), and 4) the multi-issue non-member group (e.g., Let Freedom Ring and American Future Fund). Indeed, while we expect both issue focus and group membership type to influence the groups’ degree of issue convergence with the candidates’ issue agendas, we also anticipate an interactive effect as well. Namely, single-issue membership groups should be more likely to focus on the group’s stated issues-focus than a single-issue non-membership group (which does not have a constituency to respond to, other than the public or potential donors) or a multi-issue membership group (whose members expect the group to pursue wide ideological goals). In other words, single-issue membership groups should be most likely to exhibit loose cannon behavior, diverging at times from their preferred candidate, whereas multi-issue non-membership groups should be most likely to exhibit loyal foot soldier behavior, matching their preferred candidate issue agendas.²

² One caveat is that, though much scholarship has focused on identifying and categorizing interest groups, there no real consensus even on how to define interest groups (Baumgartner and Leech 1998, 22-3). As Boatright (2007) notes, many groups airing ads in contemporary American politics are best thought of as quasi-parties or extensions of a party network. The multi-issue, non-member groups highlighted above are good examples of this problem. Many of them are 501c4 organizations that ostensibly advocate for public policy issues, but in fact do no lobbying in Washington or state capitols. They do not fit naturally into any clear definition of an

One complication is that both single-issue and membership groups—for which we expect lower levels of candidate issue convergence—might self-select into races in which their preferred issue agendas are being discussed by a candidate. For example, if a candidate in a race is focused on discussing education, then a single-issue group or a group with a known “brand” on the issue of education might enter the dialogue at a later point in the campaign. In a sense, the candidate’s own advertising could act as a signal to interest groups that the candidate shares their issue priorities. If this is true, then the issue agendas of single-issue groups and membership groups should be more likely to converge with those of their preferred candidates at points late in the campaign.

In addition to our expectations of group convergence based on organization characteristics, we might also expect to see variance in group issue ad focus based on characteristics of the campaign itself. More specifically, when candidates themselves converge on discussion of the same issues during a campaign, we might expect interest groups to bolster that debate with ads on those same issues. In other words, interest group convergence may be more likely in campaigns where candidates are convergent than in campaigns where candidates focus on different issues.

Data and Measurement

To measure the issue focus of both candidates and interest groups, we rely on advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project in 2008 and the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP) in 2010. Both projects coded and tracked political advertisements in all 210 media markets in the

interest group as laid out by the extensive scholarship (Baumgartner and Leech 1998, 25-33). This does not prevent one from comparing the results across group types, or even laying out clear expectations, but it does mean we are often comparing apples to oranges.

United States.³ The unit of analysis in these data is each airing of a political advertisement. The data record the date and time of each airing, as well as the media market it aired in, and the television network and show during which it aired. Coders assessed each unique ad on a variety of characteristics, as well as noting each unique issue mention. We examined only ads aired by candidates (including party coordinated spots) and interest groups in Senate races and examined only ads that aired in the final eight weeks of each campaign.

The Wisconsin and WMP data also contain extensive information about the issues addressed in each advertisement. Project staff were given a list of 60 issues grouped by type (e.g., economic policy issues, social issues, law and order issues, social welfare issues, foreign and defense policy issues, environment and energy issues) and asked to identify all of the issue references made in the advertisement. In both years, the number of issue that coders could record for each ad was unlimited.

We measure the level of issue convergence between interest groups and their preferred candidates. We combine candidate-sponsored advertising and ads paid for by party/candidate coordinated expenditures into one category, excluding party independent expenditures. In addition, we measure issue convergence in two week blocks, and only in weeks during which both candidates/parties and interest groups aired ads. We take this approach for two reasons. First, by calculating a measure of issue convergence during each two-week period we increase the number of observations we have (though doing so likely results in lower measures of convergence than had we calculated one score for the entire campaign). Second, our measurement strategy allows us to capture changes in advertising strategy over the course of the

³ The data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project are available to scholars for a minimal processing fee at <http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising>.

campaign, as we had hypothesized more issue convergence later in the campaign once groups had had a chance to scope out the issue agendas of the candidates.

We measure issue convergence in a way similar to recent scholarship. Like Sigelman and Buell (2004), we measure issue convergence directly as the level of issue discussion on the same set of topics. They critique work on issue ownership for its operationalization of issue dialogue (p. 652), arguing that previous work only examined the extent to which candidates talked about certain issues, not the extent to which candidates talked about issues *at the same time or during the same campaign*. Like Kaplan, Ridout and Park (2006) we use televised political ads to measure convergence. Specifically, we use the frequency data from the Wisconsin and Wesleyan projects to measure the issue environment and the level of issue engagement by relevant political actors. Previous studies, including Sigelman and Buell (2004), have relied on campaign issue coverage in newspapers.⁴

Because each ad is coded on every issue mention from a list of about 60, we aggregate the political ad data up to the level of the campaign, two-week period, and sponsor. We then calculate the proportion of total ads aired by each campaign/group in each issue area during each time period. Using a method advocated by Sides (2007), we also weight ads that contain more than one issue mention to reflect the number of mentions. In other words, for an ad with only a single issue mention, that mention is coded as 1. For an ad that mentioned, say, both health care and education, each issue is coded as 0.5. The mean number of issue mentions per ad airing in the 2008 Senate data was 2.2. Issues listed on both the 2008 and 2010 coding sheets are included as Appendix A. We assess issue overlap as follows:

⁴ Kaplan, Ridout and Park (2006, p.729) report that when they calculate a convergence score for the 2000 presidential election using television ads, it comes very close to the estimate produced by Sigelman and Buell (2004) using coverage in the press.

$$1 - \sum \{ | I_{iC} - I_{iIG} | / (I_{iC} + I_{iIG}) \}$$

where I is the proportion of ads in a given week about an issue area i ; C is the candidate, IG is an interest group, and t is a two-week time period.

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 shows a hypothetical and simplified example of a campaign in order to illustrate how issue convergence was calculated. Here we use only five issue areas instead of the approximately 60 used in the actual calculations. In the example, the candidate avoided Issue 1 and focused on all four other issue areas. In contrast, interest groups mentioned Issue 1 in 60 percent of their ads that week but did not raise Issue 2 in any ad. Note that issue focus may overlap partially; imagine one ad about Social Security and Medicare, and another about Medicare and government spending. Medicare overlaps, but the other two do not. The weighting helps discount the importance of an interest group ad with six issue mentions, but for which only one overlaps with a candidate issue mention.

The third row in the table shows the absolute difference in proportions. The greater the summed difference (across all issue areas) the less issue overlap. We divide the summed difference in proportions (third row in the table) by the total candidate and interest group proportions (the fourth row in the table). The resulting number is the percentage of issue *divergence*, and so we subtract that from 1, to obtain issue *convergence*.

We also needed to classify each group as membership-based or not. This dimension is not easily operationalized, in part, because the idea of group membership might vary from group-to-group. Some groups may have members from the broader public who pay dues and receive certain benefits, like the National Wildlife Federation or National Rifle Association, and some may be unions, professional associations, or trade associations where membership is not as

comparable or widely accessible. Moreover, some groups may identify their “members” merely as those who donate to the organization, regardless of whether this brings a particular or clear benefit. For the purposes of this analysis, however, such distinctions may not matter a whole lot. If a group is accountable to what it terms a “membership base”—as discussed more below—it may be more constrained in the kinds or range of issues it can emphasize in its publicly broadcast political messages.

To determine whether a group was membership-based or not, we visited each interest group’s website, noting whether the group indicated at any point that it had “members.” This classification is crude, but it allows for a group-level determination, not one based on tax filing status or FEC classifications. If a group describes itself as having “members”—and we looked explicitly for this word—we coded it as such. We did not code a group as having members if it merely encouraged web visitors to sign up for emails or RSS feeds, or if a group claimed an “active donor” base.⁵ Sometimes membership was clearly stated on a group’s “About Us” page, while sometimes it was a little more difficult to assess (i.e., in its “yearly report” archived as a pdf).⁶

To categorize each group as a single-issue group or focused on multiple issues, we consulted the group’s website and coverage in the press.⁷ If our measure of single-issue groups

⁵ Groups with no websites were coded as non-membership groups on the theory that a group that does not even have a website in this day and age would not be seeking out support from members. This only accounts for a handful of groups in our analyses, however.

⁶ We also recorded whether a group provided certain benefits for membership in the group, whether members paid yearly dues, and whether membership in a group could take on more than one type (as a consequence of different donation sizes, for example). In the future, we will examine the effects of some of these other ways of operationalizing whether a group is membership-based or not.

⁷ Here the operationalization is admittedly a bit squishy, as what constitutes a single-issue group is not always clear. For example, a group might focus on several issues that are related in a rather tight way. For example, we coded the National Education Association as a single-issue

is valid, we would expect groups we classified as single-issue to mention fewer issues than groups we classified as multi-issue, and the data confirm this expectation. In 2008, our coded multi-issue groups mentioned, on average, 2.56 issues per state/market/week in which it advertised. Single issue groups made note of 1.99 (difference: $p < .000$). In 2010, multi-issue groups mentioned nearly 4 issues, on average, compared to 2.63 for our single issue groups ($p < .000$). Appendices B and C list the groups involved in Senate races in both years along with our coding of the membership and single-issue dimensions.

Analysis

To provide a baseline of levels of issue convergence, Figure 1 shows the distribution of convergence scores between candidates and their interest group allies in both 2008 and 2010, calculated separately for each two-week period.

[Figure 1 here]

The figure clearly shows a wide distribution of issue convergence, with some groups not discussing any of the same issues as their preferred candidates (indeed, the modal value is 0) while other groups have perfect convergence with their preferred candidates, though the numbers here are small. The mean level of issue convergence across both years is 0.21. By way of comparison, mean convergence between Democratic and Republican candidates is 0.24 in 2008 and 0.22 in 2010.⁸ In the aggregate, then, interest groups are not necessarily echoing what their preferred candidates say, but there is great variation in the degree to which they do so.

group because of its focus on education. However, in advocating on such issues, the group might weigh in on matters relating to jobs and employment, entitlements and health care, etc. Because such categorizations are difficult, we might expect any impacts of the single-issue variable to be underestimated. Groups that are singularly focused on only one issue—and not a cluster of even highly-related issues—should be far less likely to converge with candidates.

⁸ These scores are considerably smaller than those calculated by Kaplan, Ridout and Park (2006), who find a mean convergence of 0.44 between Republican and Democratic candidates in the

So can interest group type help to explain this variation? We have previously outlined three expectations:

- Single-issue groups should be less likely to talk about the same issues as their preferred candidates (more like loose cannons) than multi-issue groups.
- Groups with a membership base should be less likely to talk about the same issues as their preferred candidates than groups without a membership base.
- Single-issue groups with members should be less likely to talk about the same issues as their preferred candidates than single-issue groups without members or multi-issue groups with or without members.

Thus, the degree to which groups are loose cannons, pursuing their own issue agendas because they are constrained by membership preferences and group reputations, or loyal foot soldiers, following the lead of their preferred candidates, should vary considerably by the characteristics of the group.

Table 2 tests these expectations, showing the impact of both group issue focus (single-versus multi-issue) and membership on issue convergence. The most important finding, which is revealed by comparing the two columns of data, is that multi-issue groups are more likely to converge with the issue discussion of the candidates than are single-issues groups. Mean convergence is 0.218 for multi-issue groups in 2008 versus 0.134 for single-issue groups in that same year. In 2010, mean convergence is 0.257 for multi-issue groups as opposed to 0.176 for single-issue groups. Both of these differences are statistically significant. Thus, we find support

1998, 2000 and 2002 Senate elections. The primary reasons our scores are smaller are multiple: our calculations are based on two-week periods, not the entire race; we aggregate figures up to the market and state, as opposed to just the state; and we weight issue mentions as described above. When we re-calculated issue convergence between candidates for the entirety of the fall campaign at the level of the state, the mean convergence score in 2008 was 0.35, still lower than Kaplan et al, but higher than our more disaggregated totals.

for our hypothesis that multi-issue groups have more freedom to address the issues that the candidates are addressing--which are presumably issues that provide them with an electoral advantage--than do single-issue groups. The evidence suggests that single-issue groups are more likely to focus on the issues the group promotes, instead of branching out to advertise on a diverse set of issues. In other words, single-issue groups are least convergent and most like loose cannons.

[Table 2 here]

We also expected to find differences in levels of issue convergence depending on the membership base of the group. Our data, however, only support this expectation in 2010, when member-based groups converged at statistically lower levels than non-member groups. There was no difference between the groups in 2008.

One possibility that we raised earlier is that the effects of membership may only be evident for single-issue groups. Multi-issue groups, regardless of their base of support, may have the freedom to adapt their own issue agenda to those of the candidates. This suggests an interactive effect: levels of issue convergence should be lowest for member-based, single-issue groups. Our data seem to support this hypothesis for both years. Indeed, average issue convergence between candidates and groups of this type is just under 0.08 in both years, far lower than levels of convergence for all other group-types. Indeed, the effect of membership is quite clear in looking at the single-issue column of Table 3. Convergence for membership groups is half the total of non-member groups in 2008 and one-fourth the total in 2010. Membership seems to matter a lot less for multi-issue groups, who have higher levels of convergence but less difference within the column in both years.

To better understand that factors that lead to issue convergence between a candidate and a supportive group, we estimated a model predicting the degree of issue convergence between candidates and groups across all issues, combining years. The dependent variable is the convergence score between an interest group and its preferred candidate in a media market/state/week. The model's predictors included:

- An indicator of whether the group is a membership group
- An indicator of whether the group is a multi-issue group
- An interaction term between the multi-issue and membership dimensions
- Weeks to election, with 1 indicating 7-8 weeks, 2 indicating 5-6 weeks, 3 indicating 3-4 weeks and 4 indicating the two weeks prior to Election Day. We hypothesize that convergence may increase as Election Day draws near, and as groups are better able to understand the issue foci of candidates and potentially self-select into races with candidates talking about their issues.
- Candidate convergence: the degree of issue convergence between the Republican and Democratic candidate
- The number of ads aired by the candidates, to control for a heavy ad campaign
- The number of ads aired on behalf of the candidates by independent groups
- Indicators of whether the Democratic or Republican candidate is an incumbent
- An indicator of competitiveness, with 1 indicating a race ranked by CQ as leaning toward one candidate or too-close-to-call.
- An indicator of the year 2008 (as opposed to 2010).

Table 3 shows the estimates from the model predicting issue convergence between the group and its preferred candidate. We hypothesized that there would be less convergence

between candidates and the group when the group was single-issue and/or membership-based. We do not find evidence to support either of these hypotheses on their own. The coefficient for the multi-issue indicator is correctly signed but insignificant, and the membership-based indicator coefficient is incorrectly signed but also insignificant. However, we also hypothesized that single-issue membership groups would be most like loose cannons, and this hypothesis is strongly supported by the negative and statistically significant interaction term, indicating that such groups are least likely to converge on the issues discussed by their favored candidate.

[Table 3 here]

Figure 2 displays the predicted convergence scores for each of our four group types along with the respective confidence intervals. As is clear from the figure, single-issue membership groups are most likely to exhibit loose cannon behavior, diverging from their favored candidate's issues in favor of their own issue agenda. Single-issue non-membership groups are also less likely to converge relative to multi-issue groups; however, the difference when we pool over 2008 and 2010 is not statistically different from the multi-issue groups, primarily due to the lower levels of convergence of single-issue non-membership groups in 2008.

[Figure 2]

One caveat that was noted earlier is that all groups might wait to converge until later in the campaign after observing the issue debates ongoing between the candidates. This might be especially true for single-issue groups, but our findings suggest there was no significant relationship between timing and levels of convergence.

Some other results are also worth noting. First, when the candidates engage on a similar set of issues, the convergence between the candidate and interest group allies is also higher, suggesting perhaps that groups are more loyalist when candidates engage each other a set of

issues. Neither the number of candidate nor interest group ad totals are related to convergence, but we do find less convergence overall in 2008 compared to 2010.⁹ Democratic groups have much lower convergence scores than do Republican groups. Republicans tend to have better message discipline compared to Democrats, whose groups frequently cover a wider range of issues, which make coordination harder in the first place. Finally, groups tend to converge with their preferred candidate more when the candidate is an incumbent, and this holds whether that incumbent is a Republican or Democrat. We find no difference in convergence due to competitiveness, but several other variables (incumbent indicators and candidate issue convergence) may be accounting for competitiveness.

Discussion and Conclusion

All told, we find evidence that variation in interest group behavior relative to candidate issue dialogue is explainable by characteristics of the group's organization and, more specifically, whether a group is single- or multi-issue and whether a group has a membership base or not. Groups are, by and large, more loose cannons than loyal foot soldiers. Specifically, issue convergence scores between groups and candidates are quite low, though assessments such as this are admittedly relative. Groups might be considered only moderately loose cannons given

⁹ The reasons for this are unclear, but it is important to note that convergence was higher in the first post-Citizens United election. With groups now freer to advocate directly for preferred candidates, as opposed to shading their intentions as "issue advocacy," interest groups may have been more likely to advertise on issues also mentioned by their preferred candidate. More research both pre- and post-2010 is needed to determine whether this can be attributed to the landmark court case.

that the degree to which they discuss the same issues as their preferred candidates is not that much lower than convergence between competing candidates.¹⁰

More important than explaining interest group activity in the aggregate, however, we have theoretical reasons to expect wide variation in convergence by group type. The bulk of the evidence suggests that single-issue groups are less likely to converge with the candidates they support, a finding that fits in with our expectations. In addition, membership seems to matter most for single-issue groups. In particular, single-issue membership groups are least likely to converge with candidate issues compared to all other types. Multi-issue groups are much more likely to converge with candidates regardless of their membership status. Regardless of the degree of convergence, however, outside groups seem to be doing a lot of agenda setting.

Normatively, it is difficult to adjudicate whether this is a good or bad state of affairs. On the one hand, in a pluralist system we want a diversity of views and a diversity of issues to be discussed. To the extent that interest groups raise new issues that the candidates do not want to address, that is a good thing. On the other hand, we know that many of the groups that advertise represent very narrow, elite interests who happen to have more resources, and we could think of them as "hijacking" the issue agenda for their own pet issues instead of taking the lead of the candidates. From the candidate's point of view, this is not a desirable situation. Candidates want to be able to focus on their own messages and not have the electorate be distracted by an alternative message (or three) coming from groups with no long-term stake in the process.

There is a silver lining in all of this. Most democratic theorists would be more comfortable with membership-based groups helping to set the political agenda than groups

¹⁰ Although we have not looked at party independent expenditures directly in this piece, we suspect that they would be act more like loyal foot soldiers than loose cannons. To what extent party independent efforts differ from allied interest groups is a topic for future research.

funded by a few large check-writers. And according to our findings, it is these membership groups that are most likely to steer campaign dialogue away from what the candidates want to discuss, leaving the big check-writers to echo the agendas of the candidates as opposed to “hijacking” the political agenda.

Table 1: An Issue Convergence Exercise

	Issue 1 ads	Issue 2 ads	Issue 3 ads	Issue 4 ads	Issue 5 ads	Total
<i>Sponsor</i>						
Candidates (c)	0	.25	.40	.15	.20	1
Int. Gps (IG)	.60	0	.30	.10	0	1
$ I_{IC} - I_{IG} $.60	.25	.10	.15	.20	1.30
$(I_{IC} + I_{IG})$.60	.25	.70	.25	.20	2
Convergence						1-(1.30/2) 35%

*There are over 60 issues areas for the actual estimation; only five are shown for this example.

Table 2: Issue Convergence by Group Type

2008		Multi	Single	Total
Nonmember groups	Mean	0.228**	0.150	0.181
	StDev	0.023	0.024	
	N	80	119	
Member groups	Mean	0.215**	0.075	0.194
	StDev	0.014	0.023	
	N	199	34	
Total	Mean	0.218**	0.134	0.188
2010		Multi	Single	Total
Nonmember groups	Mean	0.240	0.301	0.251^^
	StDev	0.016	0.033	
	N	147	45	
Member	Mean	0.280**	0.077	0.213
	StDev	0.023	0.016	
	N	117	57	
Total	Mean	0.257**	0.176	0.234

**Difference of means across the columns significant at $p < .05$

^^Difference of means compared to row below significant at $p < .10$

Unit of Analysis is a group in a Senate race/market/two-week period

Table 3: OLS Regression Model Predicting Candidate-IG Convergence

	Coef.	S.E.	t
Single-Issue Group	-0.024	0.024	-1.020
Member Based	0.010	0.020	0.500
Single-Issue*Member	-0.130	0.033	-3.920
Weeks to election (1-4, w/ 4 last 2 weeks)	0.009	0.008	1.110
Candidate convergence	0.140	0.048	2.930
IG ad count (1000s)	-0.023	0.063	-0.360
Candidate ad count (1000s)	-0.009	0.010	-0.870
Pro-Democratic Group	-0.048	0.016	-2.920
Dem incumbent	0.035	0.020	1.760
GOP incumbent	0.089	0.029	3.120
Competitive (0-1, 1=lean or too-close-to-call)	0.022	0.031	0.710
Year=2008	-0.119	0.025	-4.830
Constant	0.191	0.047	4.100
N	654		
R-squared	.130		

Figure 1: Distribution of Issue Convergence Scores in 2008 and 2010

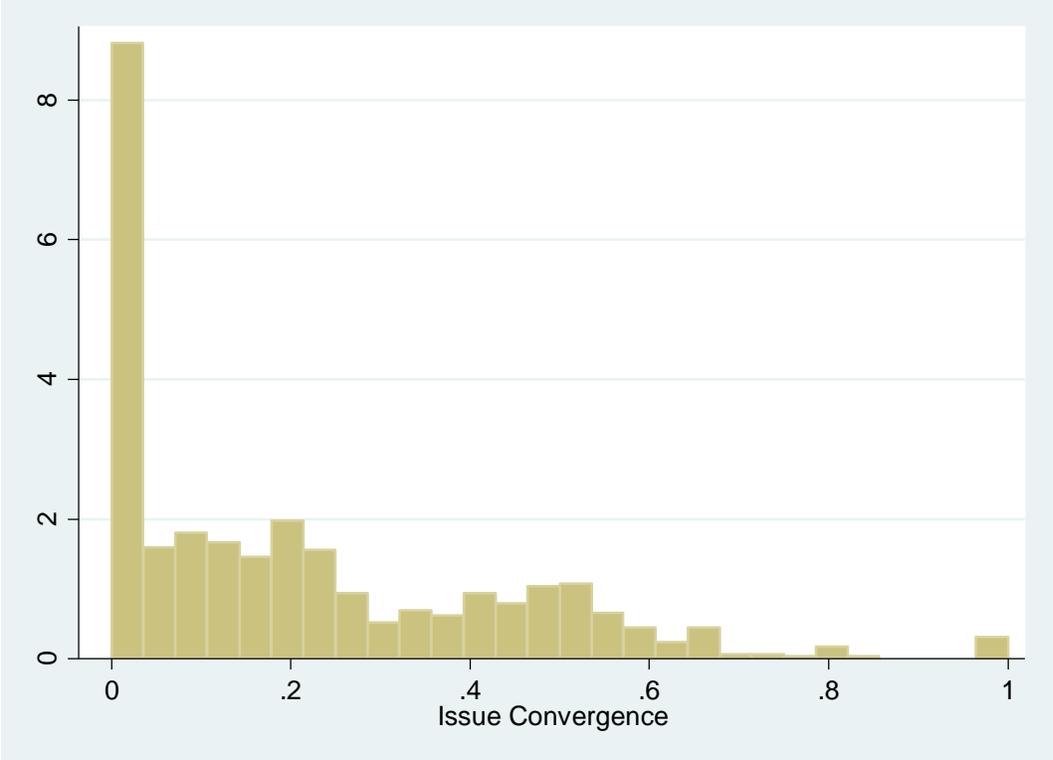
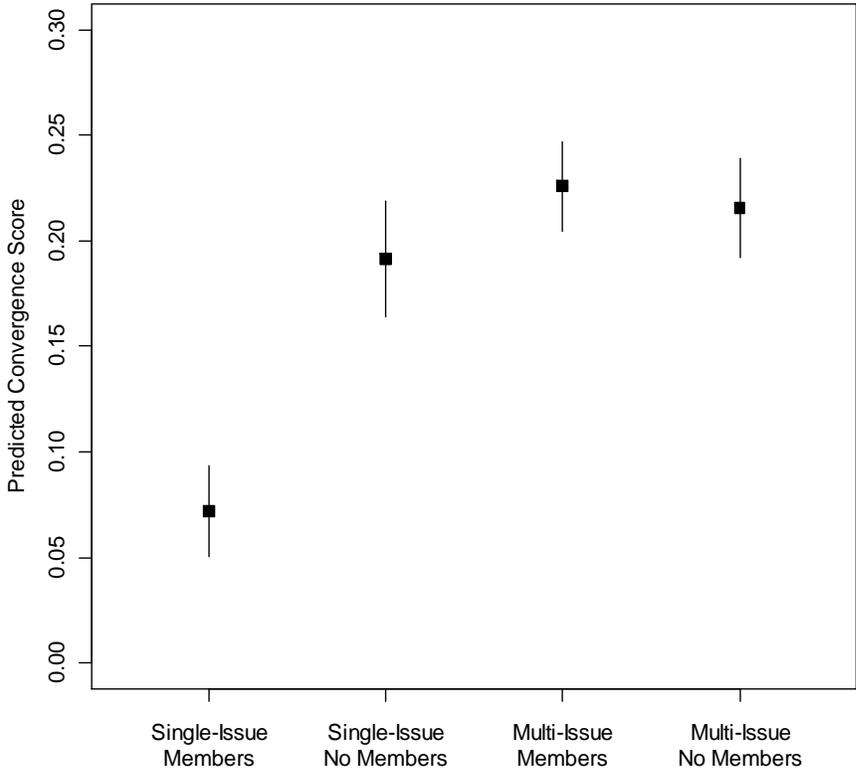


Figure 2: Predicted Convergence Score Based on Group Type



Appendix A—Issue Codes for 2008 and 2010

Economic Policy

Taxes
Deficit/Budget/Debt
Government Spending
Recession/Economic Stimulus
Minimum Wage
Farming (friend of)
Business (friend of)
Union (friend of)
Employment/Jobs
Poverty
Trade/Globalization
Housing/Sub-prime Mortgages
Economy (general)

Social Issues

Abortion
Homosexuality/Gay & Lesbian Rights
Moral/Family/Religious Values
Tobacco
Affirmative Action
Gambling
Assisted Suicide/Euthanasia
Gun Control
Civil Liberties/Privacy
Race Relations/Civil Rights

Law and Order

Crime
Narcotics/Illegal Drugs
Capital Punishment
Supreme Court/Judiciary

Social Welfare Issues

Education/Schools
Lottery for Education
Child Care
Health Care (not prescription drugs)
Prescription Drugs
Medicare
Social Security
Welfare
Women's Health

Foreign/Defense Policy

Defense Military (not Iraq)
Foreign Policy (not Iraq)
Veterans
Foreign Aid

Nuclear Proliferation

China

Middle East

Iran

Afghanistan

September, 11th (2010 only)

Terror/Terrorism/Terrorist (2010 only)

Iraq/War in Iraq (2010 only)

Israel (2010 only)

Other Issues

Environment Specific (not Global Warming)

Environment General (not Global Warming)

Global Warming

Energy Policy

BP Oil Spill (2010 only)

Campaign Finance Reform

Government Ethics/Scandal

Corporate Fraud

Term Limits

Pledge of Allegiance (restrictions on use of)

Hurricane Katrina (2008 only)

Local Issues

Other

None

Appendix B—Group Involved in 2008 Senate Race

Name	Single Issue	Membership	Ads Aired
Campaign Money Watch	1	1	1547
Vote Vets	1	1	766
National Education Association	1	1	656
League Of Conservation Voters	1	1	495
National Federation Of Independent Businesses	1	1	206
The National Right To Work Committee	1	1	39
Defender Of Wildlife Action Fund	1	1	10
Trust & Small Business PAC	1	1	9
America's Agenda Healthcare For Kids	1	0	6748
American Rights At Work	1	0	1403
Alaska Conservative Voters For Clean Government	1	0	714
Coloradans For Employee Freedom	1	0	306
Oregonians For Employee Freedom	1	0	292
Kentuckians For Employee Freedom	1	0	282
Mississippians For Employee Freedom	1	0	253
Mainers For Employee Freedom	1	0	197
Health Care For America Now	1	0	45
U.S. Chamber Of Commerce	0	1	13743
Americans For Job Security	0	1	4632
Patriot Majority	0	1	3730
American Medical Association	0	1	1341
Club For Growth	0	1	527
SEIU	0	1	373
AFSCME	0	1	317
Republicans Who Care Fund	0	1	182
Freedom's Watch	0	0	7292
Majority Action	0	0	2464
Citizens For Strength And Security	0	0	2428
Foundation For A Secure And Prosperous America	0	0	829
Alliance For A Better Minnesota	0	0	304
Right Change	0	0	186
American Future Fund	0	0	165
2020 Action Fund	0	0	24
Colorado First Project	0	0	1

Appendix C---Group Involved in 2010 Senate Race

Name	Single Issue	Membership	Ads Aired
National Rifle Association	1	1	4011
NEA Advocacy Fund, Commonsense Ten	1	1	904
Public Campaign Action Fund's Campaign Money Watch	1	1	563
Vote Vets Action Fund	1	1	521
National Nurses United for Patient Protection	1	1	414
Citizen Link and Susan B. Anthony List	1	1	325
Taxpayer Network	1	1	180
NEA Advocacy Fund	1	1	173
Humaine Society Legislative Fund	1	1	134
The National Right to Work Committee	1	1	39
The American Chemistry Council	1	1	29
National wildlife federation	1	1	1
The First Amendment Alliance	1	0	1187
Americans for Tax Reform	1	0	912
Campaign for Working Families PAC	1	0	416
Ending Spending Fund	1	0	44
VoteKids Action Fund	1	0	24
U.S. Chamber of Commerce	0	1	12409
Patriot Majority	0	1	3498
Club for Growth Action	0	1	1941
AFSCME	0	1	758
Republican Jewish Coalition	0	1	446
Americans for Job Security	0	1	408
SEIU Cope	0	1	302
MoveOn.org Political Action	0	1	270
American Principles in Action	0	1	157
Campaign for Liberty	0	1	95
Crossroads GPS	0	0	24003
American Action Network	0	0	1094
Women's Voices Women's Vote Action fund	0	0	763
Citizens for Strength and Security Action Fund, Inc	0	0	719
Commonsense Ten	0	0	564
Citizens United Political Victory Fund	0	0	409
Americans For Limited Government	0	0	195
Senate Conservatives Fund	0	0	135
National Republican Trust PAC	0	0	70
Our Country Deserves Better PAC/ TeaPartyExpress.org	0	0	50

Let Freedom Ring	0	0	24
American Future Fund	0	0	9
Committee for Truth in Politics	0	0	3

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