

Political Parties and Policy Demanders in Local Elections

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Abstract: The theory of political parties advanced by Cohen et al. (2008) and Bawn et al. (2012) has stimulated a productive debate about the form, activity, and influence of parties in American politics. So far, however, it has mainly sought to explain the role of parties in U.S. national politics. We propose that studying political organizations in local politics—where we cannot take it for granted that parties will always be active—has great potential to advance our understanding of parties, interest groups, and the relationships between them.

In this paper, we start by presenting descriptive information on the activity of political parties in over 300 municipal governments across the United States. We find that parties are highly engaged in many of the cities, but we also find that their presence is far from universal. We then set out to explain the variation in party activity across cities, showing that they are more active in cities with partisan elections and in cities with a great deal of interest group activity. Importantly, though, we also find that there are many cities where parties are absent but interest groups are still active. It is possible, then, that the parties we do find to be active in local elections are not acting as umbrella groups steered by coalitions of local policy demanders, but instead are just another type of group trying to influence elections, working alongside but not in coordination with local interest groups. We then use these findings as a jumping off point for an extension and revision of some of the theoretical ideas advanced by Bawn et al., arguing that there are conditions under which policy demanders have incentives to work alone—not within party coalitions.

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V.O. Key (1942) famously conceived of political parties as tripartite entities composed of party-in-the-electorate, party-in-government, and party-as-organization. In the last few decades, American politics scholars have developed and tested rich theories of political parties—but mostly with a focus on the first two parts. There is a vast literature, for example, on why individuals affiliate with parties and how party identification shapes voters’ choices in elections (e.g., Bartels 2000; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; MacKuen, Erickson, and Stimson 1989). There is also a large body of work on how parties in legislatures organize the policymaking process by setting the agenda and coordinating members’ votes (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). When it comes to party-as-organization, however, the literature is much thinner. Party organizations were once central to how political scientists understood the American political system (e.g., Schattschneider 1960; Mayhew 1986), but in modern research, they have received far less attention. As a general rule, mainstream work on parties in American politics has thus followed the trajectory of the American politics subfield as a whole: the emphasis has been on voters, elected officials, and political processes—not on interest groups, party organizations, or public policies (see Hacker and Pierson 2014).

In the last few years, a newer theory of parties advanced by Cohen et al. (2008) and Bawn et al. (2012) has begun to change that.¹ This group of scholars has proposed a significant reorientation of the way we understand political parties and has reinvigorated the study of parties as organizations. They offer many important theoretical insights, four of which are especially worth highlighting for our purposes here: First, they conceive of political parties as coalitions of *interest groups and activists*—and not (primarily) the creations of candidates and elected

¹ For more work in line with this theoretical approach to parties, see Karol (2009) and Masket (2009).

officials.² Second, and relatedly, the goals of parties are the *policies* desired by the interest groups and activists that comprise them—and not simply the reelections of the officials who wear the party label. Third, the policy demanders that make up the parties do not limit themselves to lobbying officials for favorable votes on policy but also seek to *nominate and elect* candidates who will support their policy goals. And fourth, these scholars introduce the idea of the *electoral blind spot*: a zone in which elected officials chosen by the parties can take advantage of voter inattentiveness to push for more extreme policies than voters would support.

This new theory (which, for the sake of brevity, we will refer to as Bawn et al.) is a major advance and has stimulated a productive debate about the form, activity, and influence of political parties in American politics. So far, however, it has mainly sought to explain the role of parties in U.S. national politics—particularly in presidential elections (although see Maskett 2009). This is a natural starting point for a new theory; after all, the literature’s existing theories were largely designed to explain voting in national elections and legislative behavior in the U.S. Congress. But we think there is much to be gained by studying party organizations in state and local politics as well. In national politics, parties have been continuously operative since the early years of the republic. Their existence has not varied. When the focus is on national politics, then, it is reasonable to conclude that parties are necessary—and that interest groups and other policy demanders need to form or join them to secure policy gains. In the broader scheme of things, however, this may or may not always hold. Thus, while we heartily embrace the group-based conception of parties advanced by Bawn et al., we propose that studying political organizations in local politics—where we cannot take it for granted that parties will always be

² For the more mainstream theoretical account of parties as primarily creations of candidates and elected officials, see Downs (1957), Aldrich (1995), and Aldrich and Rohde (2001).

active—has great potential to advance and deepen our understanding of parties, interest groups, and the relationships between them.

To pursue this line of research, we have to start by asking whether party organizations are even active in local politics. As it stands, the existing literature has little to say on the subject, in spite of the fact that the United States has almost 90,000 local governments that collectively spend \$1.6 trillion each year and make decisions in a host of important policy areas, such as land use, economic development, housing, public safety, and education. On the one hand, we do know that most local elections are nonpartisan—meaning that the party affiliations of candidates do not appear on the ballot—and research has shown that this Progressive Era reform was somewhat successful in reducing the activity of parties in local elections (Adrian 1959; Lee 1960; Bridges 1997; Trounstein 2008). But this small body of empirical work is either very old or focused on a relatively a small set of cities. It therefore remains an open question whether political party activity is common or unusual in local governments across the United States.

If party activity varies across local governments, though, that variation would present an opportunity to compare local governments with and without active party organizations. Such a comparative approach has been used by numerous scholars seeking to understand parties. In the study of political behavior, for example, researchers have compared turnout and vote choice in contexts with and without party labels on the ballot (Bonneau and Cann 2015; Caldarone, Canes-Wrone, and Clark 2009; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Squire and Smith 1988). Likewise, scholars of legislative organization have compared legislators' votes in partisan and nonpartisan contexts (Anzia and Jackman 2013; Krehbiel 2007; Welch and Carlson 1973; Wright and Schaffner 2002). Like most of the literature on parties, these studies have all been focused on party-in-the-electorate and party-in-government. But this general strategy of comparing contexts

with and without parties also stands to be quite valuable for expanding our understanding of party-as-organization.

That, then, is our approach in this paper. We start by presenting some descriptive information about the activity of political party organizations in over 300 municipal governments across the United States, using original data from a survey of city council and mayoral candidates. We find that political parties are highly engaged in many of the cities, but we also find that their presence is far from universal. We then set out to explain the variation in party activity across cities. Our findings show that political parties are more active in cities with partisan city elections and in cities where interest groups are active as well. But while there is indeed a strong association between the activity of interest groups and the activity of political parties in municipal elections, there are also many cases of cities with significant interest group activity but little or no political party activity. Moreover, when we examine the campaign finance records of a small set of cities, the patterns of contributions do not strongly suggest that interest groups are coordinating their activities through party coalitions. One plausible interpretation of our findings is that political parties are engaged in local elections *alongside* interest groups—not as umbrella groups steered by coalitions of local policy demanders, but rather as just another kind of group trying to influence local elections.

In the final section of the paper, we use these empirical findings as a jumping off point for an extension and revision of some of the theoretical ideas advanced by Bawn et al. If parties are not always active in the local context, and if interest groups sometimes operate without parties, then we can expand our understanding of political organizations by starting from the vantage point of interest groups, asking: under what conditions would an interest group want to join forces with other interest groups and operate through a political party? Under what

conditions would it be better off acting alone? We argue that there are conditions under which an interest group would be just as likely—if not more likely—to secure the policies it favors *without* a party coalition: for example, when the group has large amounts of resources relative to the size of the political context in which it is operating, and when the group faces little direct competition over the policies it cares about. We suspect these conditions are more often met for groups operating in local politics—which likely explains why, in our data, many interest groups are active even when parties are not. But we also think this theoretical refinement is relevant for state and national politics as well. For certain groups on certain issues, interest groups may find it advantageous to work alone, not with a party coalition. In so doing, moreover, they too can take advantage of the electoral blind spot—pressuring for policies different from what voters would support.

Are political parties active in local elections?

Unlike U.S. national politics, where political parties are always engaged, it is not obvious whether we should expect to find party organizations active in local government. Most Progressive Era municipal reformers wanted to eliminate parties from local elections, and if they were successful in doing that—through the spread of nonpartisan elections, off-cycle elections, and other reforms (see Anzia 2014; Bridges 1997; Trounstein 2008)—then we should expect parties to be absent from the local context, except perhaps in the remaining places with partisan elections. Also, if state and national party coalitions are formed by intense policy demanders interested in the policies made by state and national governments, then it is not clear whether those same policy demanders would invest in local politics. As the Progressives often noted, and as Oliver (2012) shows, the most important issues in municipal government are usually different

than those in state and national government. Perhaps, then, we should not expect to find political parties—or at least the two major parties—active in municipal elections.

That said, local governments do still make policies, and thus there are still policy matters to draw interest groups and other intense policy demanders into the local political process. As Anzia (2015) shows, interest group systems in local government tend to look different than those in state and national government—they are most often dominated by developers, chambers of commerce, public safety unions, and neighborhood associations—but with the exception of very small cities, most cities do have some active groups. In those cities, if the interest groups need to work with allies and form party coalitions to secure the requisite majorities for the policies they want, as Bawn et al. propose, then perhaps we *should* expect to find active political parties.³

In principle, it should be easy to sort this out empirically: all we need are data on political party involvement in local elections. Unfortunately, however, such data do not exist. U.S. local government is notoriously difficult to study; even locating and assembling election returns is usually quite challenging. Those attempting to study local group activity on any large scale confront even bigger obstacles, because very few local governments track such information. Thus, the small group of scholars who have pursued this line of research have mostly relied on surveys of local candidates and local officials, asking them about the groups active in their local governments, about what those groups do, and about the influence of those groups on local politics and policy (Anzia 2015; Clark and Ferguson 1983; Cooper, Nownes, and Roberts 2005; Hajnal and Clark 1998; Lee 1960; Moe 2005).

That is the main strategy we adopt here: we rely on data from an internet survey of candidates who ran for city offices in five states in November 2015: California, Indiana, Ohio,

³ By this logic, any parties active in local politics need not be the same ones that are active in state and national politics.

South Carolina, and Washington.⁴ In March of 2016, we contacted 3,772 individuals who ran for either city council or mayor in 784 unique municipal governments, asking them to complete a survey about the activity of political parties and various interest groups in their cities' November 2015 elections.⁵ As Table 1 shows, 451 candidates (12%) from 312 unique cities responded, giving us information about 40% of the cities in our sample.⁶ (In what follows, unless we note otherwise, we handle cities with multiple responses by averaging the survey responses within the city.) While this is by no means a representative sample of cities and candidates, the resulting dataset spans municipalities of different sizes, in different parts of the country, and with variation in their local electoral structures. It is therefore highly useful as a new source of information about political organizations' activity in U.S. municipal elections.

We first asked respondents to rate how active various groups were in their cities' November 2015 elections, including political parties (the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, and other political parties) and 14 types of interest groups. Responses were on a five-point scale ranging from "Not at all active" (coded 0) to "Extremely active" (coded 4). Then we asked them to indicate whether the Republican Party and the Democratic Party "engaged in the following activities during the November 2015 election in your city:" recruiting candidates, giving money to candidates, endorsing candidates, mobilizing citizens to vote, providing

⁴ This is the first of two waves of the survey; we will field the second wave in the early spring of 2017 for candidates who ran for city offices in November 2016.

⁵ The type of contact information we had for candidates varied across the five states. In Washington, the list of candidates provided by the secretary of state's office contained email addresses for almost every city candidate, and in South Carolina, the secretary of state's database contained email addresses for most of them. In California and Ohio, only a few of the counties' candidate lists contained email addresses, so we used those that were available and then (wherever possible) collected the email addresses of winning candidates from the cities' websites after the election. In Indiana, the state's list of local candidates contained no email addresses, so for that state we relied entirely on cities' websites to collect the emails of winning candidates.

⁶ This individual response rate is comparable to those of other elite surveys. See, e.g., Fisher and Herrick (2013). 358 of the candidates who responded to our survey won their elections; the remaining 93 candidates lost.

publicity (such as mailings or yard signs), and campaigning (such as door-to-door canvassing or phone calls).⁷

Table 2 summarizes the responses to these questions. To start, in rows 1 to 3, we present statistics that describe the activity levels of the Republican Party (row 1), the Democratic Party (row 2), and other political parties (row 3) in the elections of these 312 cities. The first statistic for each is the party's average activity rating across all cities. The second is the percentage of cities in which the party is rated "not at all active" or "slightly active," meaning an activity rating between 0 and 1. The third statistic is the percentage of cities where the party is rated as either "very active" or "extremely active," meaning an activity rating of between 3 and 4.

Focusing first on the top two rows, the average activity ratings for the Republican Party and the Democratic Party—1.38 and 1.43, respectively—suggest that as a general rule, parties are between slightly and somewhat active in city elections in these five states. More importantly, though, we find that there is considerable variation in party activity across cities. In 22% of the cities, the Republican Party is highly active in local elections, and for the Democratic Party, that figure is 23%. Yet respondents in 52% of the cities say that the Democratic Party is not at all active or only slightly active in their city elections, and that figure is even higher—55%—for the Republican Party. Moreover, when parties *are* active in municipal elections in these five states, it is almost always the Democratic or Republican Party (or both): in row 3, we show that the average activity rating for other parties is a mere 0.17—and that nearly all respondents indicated that other parties are not active in their cities.

Of course, most local constituencies are probably more homogenous than state and national constituencies, and so many cities might feature far more activity by one party than the other. Thus, to get a sense of whether at least *some* party is active in each of these cities, we

⁷ This list of activities is similar to the one used by Moe (2005) in his survey of school board candidates.

present (in row 4 of Table 2) the same three statistics for whichever party is rated most active in each city. There, we can see that in 36% of the cities in this dataset, at least one party was rated very or extremely active in the November 2015 election. But still, even with this more generous measure of party activity, 40% of the cities' elections featured little to no party engagement.

Finally, in row 5, we summarize candidates' responses to the questions about whether the major parties engaged in six specific activities in their cities' November 2015 elections. For each of the six activities, we coded a city as 1 if at least one respondent within the city indicated that some party engaged in that activity. We find that parties recruited candidates in 34% of the cities and that in 40%, they contributed money to candidates. Moreover, parties endorsed candidates in 50%, mobilized voters in 40%, provided publicity in 39%, and campaigned in 30%. When we add up these six indicators, creating an index ranging from 0 to 6, we find that parties engaged in an average of 2.3 activities per city (see Table 2). But again we find considerable variation in this index across cities. In 78 of them—roughly a quarter of the sample—parties were heavily engaged, participating in 5 or 6 activities. By contrast, in 34% of the cities, political parties were not engaged of any of the electoral activities.

In this set of local governments, then, the amount of party electoral activity varies widely. We cannot assume that just because most cities have nonpartisan elections that party organizations are absent from city elections. But we also cannot assume that parties will always be active, because in 30-40% of the cities in this sample, local candidates report that they are not. Thus, there isn't a simple "yes" or "no" answer to the question of whether party organizations are active in municipal elections. The answer, based on this sample, is that it depends.

Explaining variation in party activity across cities

If political party activity in local elections is conditional, then what are those conditions? As of now, we do not know—and there is no political science theory that directly attempts to answer that question. That said, there are some theories we can draw upon to generate hypotheses: theories of local electoral politics, theories of institutions, and of course the Bawn et al. theory of political parties.

One sensible place to start is with the cities' institutions, in particular whether they hold partisan or nonpartisan elections. This is a source of variation that gets considerable attention in quantitative empirical work on local electoral politics (e.g., Caren 2007; Hajnal and Trounstein 2005; Gerber and Hopkins 2011), and as we discussed earlier, nonpartisan elections were heavily pushed by Progressive Era reformers who hoped that they would weaken the influence of party organizations in local politics. If this institutional choice did in fact have a negative impact on party involvement in local elections, then perhaps we should see lower levels of party activity in modern-day nonpartisan local elections than in partisan elections. We can test this possibility using our survey data, which (by design) contains a mix of cities with partisan and nonpartisan elections. Specifically, all cities in Indiana have partisan elections, all cities in Washington and California have nonpartisan elections, and South Carolina and Ohio have a combination: two of the 31 South Carolina cities and 37 of the 112 Ohio cities in our dataset have partisan elections.⁸

There is also the theory of political parties advanced by Bawn et al.: If policy demanders need to form party coalitions with other policy demanders to secure the necessary majorities for making policy gains, then we should expect to find a positive association between interest group

⁸ Most of the information on partisan/nonpartisan elections for South Carolina and Ohio came from the lists of candidates provided by the secretary of state (for South Carolina) and the county elections offices (for Ohio). We also cross-checked this information with two other sources: a question on our survey asking respondents whether party labels appear on their city election ballots, and the 2011 ICMA Form of Government Survey.

activity and political party activity in city elections. To test this expectation, we create a measure of interest group activity using respondents' ratings of the electoral activity of 14 different types of interest groups sometimes active in city politics.⁹ As with the party activity variables, these 14 variables range from 0 (not at all active) to 4 (extremely active); we add them together for each survey respondent and then (for cities with multiple respondents) average that number within cities. In our data, the resulting index ranges from 0 to 47 with a median of 9.5 and a mean of 11.

We also test whether city size has a positive relationship with political party activity, as suggested by Oliver's (2012) theory of local electoral politics. It is possible that formal political organizations are less necessary in small towns where residents tend to know each other, where people often know the candidates personally, and where it takes less effort and fewer resources to turn out voters. In bigger cities, by contrast, political parties may have an important role to play in organizing elections (Oliver 2012). Of course, these same factors may also make interest groups more common in larger cities, and here we are accounting for interest group activity separately.¹⁰ Even so, it is worth exploring whether city size has any effect on party activity above and beyond that of interest group activity. Thus, in our dataset, we use logged city population from the 2010 U.S. Census as a measure of city size.

To test these hypotheses, we regress four of the five party activity measures from Table 2 (all but the "other party" measure) on these three main independent variables—an indicator for partisan elections, the index of interest group activity, and city size—using OLS with standard

⁹ The groups are as follows: chambers of commerce, real estate developers, retail businesses, building trade unions, police unions, firefighter unions, miscellaneous municipal employee unions, neighborhood associations, environmental organizations, anti-growth or preservationist organizations, ethnic or racial minority organizations, taxpayer organizations, Tea Party or conservative organizations, and senior citizens' organizations.

¹⁰ Anzia (2015) argues that larger cities are more likely to feature interest group activity for two reasons: because there is greater need for formal groups to organize elections, and because the policy stakes are greater.

errors clustered by state. In addition to these three independent variables, we control for the percentage of the city's two-party presidential vote that went to Barack Obama in 2012, expecting it to be positively associated with Democratic Party activity and negatively associated with Republican Party activity.¹¹ We also include an indicator equal to one for the 88 cities in our dataset where all survey respondents ran unopposed, because political parties might be less active in noncompetitive races. Finally, we include state fixed effects because certain characteristics of the states, such as political culture, may contribute both to local electoral rules and interest group activity as well as the activity of political parties.

The results of these models are presented in Table 3. We find that there is indeed a strong association between the appearance of party labels on the ballot and party activity in local elections: in all four models, we estimate positive, statistically significant coefficients on *Partisan elections*. In terms of magnitude, these coefficients suggest that party activity, whether it is the Republican Party (column 1), the Democratic Party (column 2), or the most active party in the city (column 3), is nearly a point higher on the 0-to-4 activity scale in partisan elections than in nonpartisan elections—which we can think of as being the difference between “somewhat” and “very” active. We find the same pattern in column 4, where the dependent variable is the six-point index of specific party activities. On average, parties engage in 1.8 more political activities in cities with partisan elections than in cities with nonpartisan elections. While unpacking the causes of this positive association would require additional research,¹² this

¹¹ In California, the state government provides presidential election returns by city. For Ohio, South Carolina, and Washington, we calculated city-level presidential results using precinct-level returns. We were unable to acquire precinct- or city-level returns for Indiana, so for that state, we use the figures from the parent county of each city. In addition, there are 26 cities in Washington and one in Ohio for which we could not create city-level figures using the precinct data, so for those, too, we use the returns for each city's parent county.

¹² It is worth noting that the state fixed effects account for cross-state variation in the historical strength of state parties, a factor that probably influenced whether the state adopted partisan or nonpartisan local elections. Thus, the coefficient estimates on *Partisan elections* in Table 3 leverage the within-state variation in electoral institutions in Ohio and South Carolina. Still, going forward, in order to address the endogeneity concern that cities with active

is at least a productive starting point: we find that city council and mayoral candidates do perceive significantly more party activity in cities with partisan elections.

We also find that greater political party activity tends to go along with greater interest group activity, as shown by the positive coefficients on *Interest group activity* in all four models. In particular, a one standard deviation shift up the interest group activity scale (8.82) is associated with a half-point increase in the 0-to-4 activity scale for the Republican Party. For the Democratic Party activity variable and the maximum party activity variable, the effect of a one-standard-deviation increase is a tenth of a point larger—0.6. Similarly, increasing interest group activity is associated with party engagement in a larger number of specific activities, as shown by the positive, statistically significant coefficient on *Interest group activity* in column 4. Clearly, then, political parties are more likely to be active in cities where interest groups are active, consistent with the idea that these interest groups are working within party coalitions.

As for the other independent variables, our findings are mostly as expected. On the one hand, we find only a weak relationship between city size and party activity: in column 4, the coefficient on logged city population is positive and significant, but in columns 1 to 3, the coefficients are insignificant at the 5 percent level (although still positive). Likewise, in the model of specific party activities (column 4), we find that unopposed races attract less party activity, but the same significant negative relationship does not emerge in columns 1 to 3. As expected, we do find that cities that lean Democratic see more local electoral activity by the Democratic Party and less activity by the Republican Party: the coefficient on *Democratic presidential vote* is negative in column 1 and positive in column 2. However, from columns 3

parties pressure officials to adopt partisan elections, it would be helpful to do some historical research on why some cities in South Carolina and Ohio adopted partisan elections while others did not.

and 4, we conclude that the partisan leanings of a city have no effect on the overall activity of political parties.

This analysis is very simple, but it reveals a great deal that is new. We learn that parties have not been entirely eliminated from local elections, nor are they inevitable. Rather, party organizations are involved in some cities' elections but not in others, and thus there is potentially much to be learned—about parties, interest groups, institutions, and elections—from exploring that variation. We have taken initial steps in that direction, drawing from existing theories to set out conditions that are likely to be associated with greater party activity. Our empirical analysis shows that party activity is indeed greater in city elections where party labels are on the ballot, to some extent in larger cities, and in cities where elections feature more interest group activity.

Exploring the link between party activity and interest group activity

The positive association between interest group activity and political party activity is especially worth highlighting, because it is broadly consistent with the Bawn et al. vision of political parties. That is, if political parties are coalitions of interest groups and other policy demanders—formed because policy demanders need allies to secure majorities—then it *should* be true that interest groups and parties are operative in the same cities. But it is also important to raise and discuss another possibility: that interest groups and parties just happen to be active in the same kinds of cities—and that even where they coexist, they operate on separate tracks, largely independent of one another. Can we say something more, then, about how interest groups and parties relate to each other in local elections?

The literature provides little guidance on these questions, but there is at least some work—much of it very old—to suggest that the “separate tracks” model is worth considering. For example, in his typology of nonpartisan elections, Adrian (1959) explains that many

municipal governments feature interest groups operating in the absence of political parties, and moreover that many local governments feature a mix of parties and interest groups—all nominating slates of candidates, operating alongside each other rather than as a hierarchy of groups. One simple but important insight implied by Adrian’s discussion is that interest groups can perform many of the same electoral functions as political parties, including nominating candidates.¹³ Thus, to the extent that we see parties and interest groups active in the same cities, it may just be that both happen to have something at stake—not that one type of group is the engine of the other.

Importantly, though, in order for this alternative “separate tracks” model to hold, interest groups would at least sometimes have to decide *not* to form and work within party coalitions. While Bawn et al. do consider this possibility in the set-up of their model of party formation, because their focus is primarily on nominations, they quickly move past it. Specifically, they explain that the hypothetical policy demanders *could* choose to nominate and support their own candidates, but if they each did that, the result would be a race with many candidates—and thus a low probability that any single policy demander would successfully elect a favorable officeholder. In their model, then, working alone turns out not to be an appealing option for policy demanders, because it yields a low probability of policy success. Instead, when the focus is on nominations, the incentives for policy demanders are heavily in favor of forming party coalitions: a successful coalition allows them to coordinate on the nomination of fewer candidates and increases the likelihood they will elect policymakers friendly to their interests.

Bawn et al. therefore make a compelling case for why interest groups and other policy demanders would not each nominate their own candidates—and a compelling case for groups’

¹³ Parties and interest groups can also compete with each other in national politics; see, e.g., Clemens (1997), Hansen (1991) and Heaney (2010).

incentives to form coalitions. When it comes to nominations, an interest group really does only have two choices: it can cooperate with other groups (and join forces to nominate a single, mutually acceptable slate of candidates), or it can compete with them (and nominate its own slate of candidates that will compete with those of other groups). But nominating candidates is only one of the ways interest groups can influence elections; they can also endorse candidates, contribute money, mobilize voters, provide publicity, and campaign. For these electoral activities, an interest group's choice set is not limited to cooperating with other groups or directly competing with them. It can also wait to see which candidates emerge and then independently put its resources behind the candidate it deems most likely to support its policy goals. This might sometimes put it in indirect competition with other groups; for example, developers might choose to support a different candidate than the local police union, pitting those two groups against each other. But the developers and the local police union could also decide to support the same candidate—and not because they coordinated in their decisions about whom to support, but because their independent decision-making just happened to lead them to the same candidate.

Our point is not that interest groups would never want to join coalitions. It is simply that while there are good reasons for interest groups to try to coordinate at the nomination stage, interest groups could also wait to see which candidates emerge and then work to elect the one most likely to support their policy agenda. And in the post-nomination electoral stage, the incentives for interest group coordination stand to be much weaker. At least some interest groups might decide to work alone rather than with a party coalition. And once we consider working alone to be a reasonable option for interest groups, we have part of a theoretical rationale for the “separate tracks” model of local group relations.

But it is still only part of a theoretical rationale, for if interest groups are acting independently of parties in local races, then why would political parties get involved at all? It would have to be the case that parties have their own motives for getting involved in local elections—motives that are unassociated with the policy goals and activities of local interest groups. One possibility is that the local clubs and committees of the two major national parties sometimes have genuine policy interests in local elections, driven by the interests of the policy demanders that make up their national coalitions. For example, the Democratic coalition includes unions and environmental groups, and those interest groups might push local Democratic clubs to take part in local elections where there are labor and environmental issues at stake. Likewise, the Republican coalition at the national level includes big business associations and taxpayer groups—groups that might push local Republican Party committees to intervene in local elections where the business climate and taxes are salient issues. This first possibility, then, is that parties get active in local elections at the urging of some of their national-level coalition members who see their own high-priority issues in play at the local level.

A second possibility is that the national parties have non-policy reasons to get active in local elections. Party leaders presumably have to groom candidates to run in future state and national elections, and perhaps helping their up-and-comers win local elections plays an important role in that effort. Moreover, parties have to maintain their organizational infrastructure at the state and local levels, even between national elections. It may be that encouraging and nurturing the engagement of local party clubs and committees is essential for maintaining networks of volunteers and keeping databases of supporters up to date. More generally, parties might derive a number of organizational advantages from staying active in

local politics—which could help to explain why major parties would be active in local elections even if local interest groups are not coordinating with them.

This discussion is merely meant to raise the possibility of—and provide some theoretical logic for—the “separate tracks” account of party and interest group activity in local politics. As of right now, we cannot say whether the association between interest group and political party activity shown in Table 3 is driven by coordination between the two types of organizations or some factor that just happens to make both more likely to be active in the same kinds of places. And while our survey data have been helpful for describing the lay of the land and for testing some basic conditions of political party activity, they are less helpful for adjudicating these competing accounts of local political party and interest group relations.

We can, however, highlight a few interesting empirical patterns that suggest that the “separate tracks” model may be on-target. First, as part of the survey, we asked respondents to evaluate the importance of six specific group activities in influencing elections in their cities; the response options for each activity ranged from “not at all important” (coded 0) to “extremely important” (coded 4). As before, the first activity is recruiting candidates—an activity at the nomination stage. The other five activities come later in the electoral process: giving money to candidates, endorsing candidates, mobilizing citizens to vote, providing publicity, and campaigning. The candidates’ responses show that group efforts to recruit candidates are indeed somewhat important in influencing local elections; the average is 1.93. But they also show that four of the five post-nomination electoral activities are even more important: the average for endorsing candidates is 2.07, for mobilizing voters is 2.5, for providing publicity is 2.35, and for campaigning is 2.62. Only giving money (1.67) is rated less important than recruiting candidates. One implication is that when studying local elections, it is especially important to

focus on what groups do *after* the candidates have entered the race. Another is that, if the incentives for policy demanders to form party coalitions are weaker in the post-nomination stage than in the nomination stage, then in the local context, if activities in the post-nomination stage are more important, policy demanders might generally have less incentive to form and work within party coalitions.

The second empirical pattern worth highlighting is one that is easy to overlook given the strong positive association between interest group activity and political party activity: in the survey data, there are many cities where candidates say that interest groups are active but political parties are not. To see this, we first create an indicator called *Some party activity* equal to one if the city's average overall party activity rating (on a scale from 0 to 4) was greater than 1; it equals 0 if the rating is less than or equal to 1. Then we create a variable called *Some interest group activity* equal to 1 if the maximum activity rating given to the 14 interest groups in each city is greater than 1, zero otherwise. Table 4 presents a cross-tabulation of these two binary indicators. There, we can see that 51 cities (nearly all of which are very small) report no interest groups or political parties, 170 cities report having both types of groups, and a select few (with mostly partisan elections) have active parties but no interest groups. The remaining 73—nearly a quarter of the sample—report at least one active interest group but no active political parties. In these cities, then, it appears that interest groups are acting on their own, without forming or working with party coalitions.

A third set of patterns that lend support to the “separate tracks” account come from a different dataset: a compilation of candidates' campaign finance records from a small sample of municipal elections in California and South Carolina.¹⁴ One advantage of analyzing local

¹⁴ We are in the process of collecting campaign finance records from a larger number of cities in California and South Carolina, as well as from cities in Washington.

campaign finance records is that they tell us what interest groups and political parties actually did in local elections—not just what candidates say they did. Another is that they make it possible to analyze which groups gave to which candidates, something potentially quite important when looking for evidence of coalitions. The major disadvantage of relying on campaign finance data is that collecting, entering, and coding such data for local governments is time consuming and expensive; most cities do not provide the data on their websites, and even when they do, it usually is not in easily analyzable digital format. Also, according to the candidates who responded to our survey, giving money is not the most important way that groups can influence local elections. Even so, looking at some campaign finance data does help to round out the analysis, because it is another source of information on group activity in local elections, and because it may suggest evidence on the presence or absence of party coalitions.

In what follows, we rely on data hand-entered from the campaign finance forms of city council and mayoral candidates in 77 different local races in 17 cities, three of which are in South Carolina and 14 of which are in California. For some of the cities, the data span multiple elections from 2008 to 2014, whereas for others we have a single recent election year. Much of the money in these races comes from individuals, but most races feature contributions from non-individuals as well. For every contribution made to a candidate by a non-individual, we coded the contribution using a detailed list of possible contributor types.

In Table 5, we present basic information on the most common categories of group (non-individual) contributors in these 77 local races. The first column shows the number of races (and the percentage of all races) in which each category of group contributor gave money; the second column shows the total dollar amounts contributed across all of the races. We can see from the table that some of the most active group contributors in these local races are businesses with an

interest in development, land use, real estate, and construction: this type of group was active in 82% of the races and contributed a total sum of \$368,769. Other businesses—meaning those without an obvious stake in land-use and development policies (including banks, retail businesses, and law firms)—were nearly as active as development interests, also giving in 82% of the races and contributing \$385,506 in total. After development interests and other businesses, labor groups were the next most active contributors, with public safety unions contributing in 42% of the races, construction unions in 34%, and other unions in 40%. Most importantly for our purposes here, however, political parties are far less active in their giving than these interest groups. The low contribution rate of Republican Party groups (5% of the races) is not surprising given that most of the cities in this dataset are in California, but even Democratic Party groups contributed in only 24 races—or 31%. Moreover, the overall contributions of Democratic Party groups were relatively small: only \$7,079 in total, which is low in comparison to the \$57,353 from public safety unions and the \$109,700 from construction unions. Thus, the most active types of interest groups in local elections are far more active than party groups. In *most* of these races, interest groups gave money even though parties did not.

It of course remains possible that these interest group contributions are somehow being coordinated through party coalitions even if the contributions aren't actually coming from party groups; unfortunately, we cannot tell from these data whether parties are active in the background. But when we home in on the 32 candidates who *did* receive contributions from Democratic Party groups, it does not look as though the other groups that gave to those same candidates are typical members of the Democratic Party coalition. In Table 6, we show that for the 32 candidates who received money from Democratic Party groups, the most active category of contributor is development-oriented business, and the second most active is non-development

business—neither one of which is usually viewed as a coalition member of the Democratic Party. Labor unions are of course a strong Democratic Party constituency, and each type of labor union listed in Table 6 did contribute to roughly a third of the 32 local candidates. Even so, the overall pattern in the table does not align with the standard account of interest groups in the Democratic Party coalition: groups commonly associated with the party (like environmental groups, LGBT groups, and pro-choice groups) are barely active, and other groups (like business associations) are very active. Instead, the picture that emerges is one of candidates who just happen to get money from the Democratic Party and a variety of other groups.

In sum, we cannot conclude that just because interest groups and political parties tend to be active in the same cities that interest groups are forming and working through party coalitions. Here we have laid out a theoretical logic for an alternative explanation: that interest groups and political parties are both just groups that get active in local elections for their own reasons. We've also presented three sets of empirical patterns that suggest that this alternative account may be on-target. First, candidates running for local office report that post-nomination activities like endorsing candidates and mobilizing voters—for which we've argued there is less incentive for policy demanders to form party coalitions—are more important than recruiting candidates. Second, there is evidence that in a sizeable number of cities' elections, interest groups are active even though parties are not. And third, by studying a small set of local campaign finance records, we find that interest groups are much more active contributors than parties, and also that the interest groups that give to candidates supported by Democratic Party groups are not all typical coalition members of the Democratic Party. Together, these patterns suggest that in local elections, interest groups and parties may be operating on separate tracks.

A general implication: Interest groups can work alone

In addition to shedding light on the little-explored world of party activity in modern local politics, our analysis points to an important implication for how we understand policy demanders and political parties more generally—not just in local politics, but in state and national politics as well. That is: interest groups can choose to work alone—without parties. What is needed, then, is an extension of the Bawn et al. theory that carefully considers the conditions under which interest groups might *not* work with a party coalition.

As we explained earlier, it is not as though the Bawn et al. theory ignores this possibility. To the contrary, Cohen et al. (2008, 31) write:

“Few if any groups of intense policy demanders are big enough to get what they want working alone. So they seek allies. But in joining party coalitions, groups do not put the good of the party ahead of their own goals. Parties are a means to an end, and the end is the group’s own policy agenda. Groups cooperate in party business only insofar as cooperation serves their interests.”

In this important passage, the authors acknowledge that there may be scenarios in which interest groups would *not* join party coalitions. But because their main focus is on nominations, and on explaining how we should understand *parties*, they do not explore the full set of options available to the *policy demanders*. And once we turn our focus to the policy demanders, it becomes clear that they do have a viable alternative to working within a party: working alone.

The idea that interest groups can work outside of parties is not entirely new, of course. In his 1967 textbook, Dahl explained that political movements have four broad options for trying to influence policy: a movement can “organize a separate political party of its own,” it can “form a new coalition party by combining with another group or movement that has similar, overlapping, but not identical objectives,” it can enter “into one of the existing parties,” or—most importantly for our argument here—it can “remain neutral between the two major parties” and “act as a

pressure group to secure favorable legislation and the nomination and election of sympathetic candidates” (Dahl 1967, p. 429). But when will a policy demander choose this final option?

Fully fleshing out a theory that answers this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but we can at least lay out a few core ideas and point to some of their implications for our understanding of political influence and policymaking. The above quote from Cohen et al. provides a useful jumping off point: if “groups cooperate in party business only insofar as cooperation serves their interests,” then when might cooperation *not* serve their interests? First, we argue that if a particular group anticipates that it will be just as likely or more likely to secure the policies it favors working outside of parties—meaning the benefits (policy success) of joining a party are zero or even negative—then we should not expect to find the group working with the party. Second, any policy benefits of joining the party coalition must outweigh the costs. When a group joins a party, it must contribute some of its resources (money, members’ time) to other coalition members’ goals. If the policy benefits of joining the coalition are lower than these costs, then the group’s best option may be to work alone.

This second consideration (about costs) seems straightforward, but the first (about policy benefits) deserves more explanation. Under what conditions might we expect an interest group to be just as successful or even more successful working alone as opposed to with a group? Many considerations stand to be relevant, but we argue that two are especially important. The first has to do with the amount of resources the group has relative to the context in which it is operating, and the second is related to the amount of direct competition the group faces over the policies it cares about. We consider each of these in turn.

First, we argue that groups with large amounts of resources relative to the size of the political context in which they are operating will be less likely to join coalitions than groups with

fewer relative resources. Some groups have many members, many supporters to call upon, or a great deal of money to use for political purposes. Other groups have small networks and little money. If resources are positively associated with policy influence, then all else equal, we should expect resource-rich groups to work alone more often than resource-poor groups. But the size of the political context likely matters as well. In national politics, as Cohen et al. note, it is relatively difficult for any group to exert influence on its own. In local politics, by contrast, groups and individuals can access policymakers much more easily (Berry 2010); the resource requirements for having an impact on policy are lower. Thus, we expect that groups with considerable resources or operating in smaller environments (or both) should be more likely to work alone than groups with lesser resources and groups operating in a larger context.

The most obvious implication is that interest groups will generally be less likely to work within party coalitions in local politics than in national politics. It may not take enormous sums of money or thousands of active members for groups like developers, chambers of commerce, and neighborhood associations to influence local policy. And if these groups can elect friendly officials and secure favorable policies acting alone, why would they pool their resources with other groups? In the state and national context, by contrast, it is more difficult for groups to go it alone—although presumably not impossible. In the Gilded Age, the railroads had considerable political power, and they did not always work within a party. Many of today's large business associations and industry groups probably stand a reasonable chance of influencing elections and policymaking on their own. And certain groups, such as the National Education Association, have millions of politically-engaged members spread all across the United States (Moe 2011), making it imaginable that they could successfully push for some policy gains on their own, without their partners in the Democratic Party coalition.

The second variable that stands to be important is the amount of competition a group faces on the policy issues it cares about. Some policy areas are prone to intense conflict, with organized interests and engaged voters active on both sides of the issue (Schattschneider 1960). Other policies have concentrated benefits and diffuse costs (or vice versa), leading to imbalanced interest group structures with powerful organized interests on one side and few organizations or voters activated to oppose them (Wilson 1995). This one-sidedness can be greatly enhanced, moreover, when issues are highly technical and difficult to understand, such as financial regulation. For groups working in these policy areas, we suspect there are lower policy returns to joining and working with party coalitions. In the face of little direct competition, these groups may fare just as well if not better acting alone.

As an illustrative case, consider firefighter unions—one of the most active interest groups in city politics (Anzia 2015). Firefighters face little direct competition over the main city policies their members care about: larger budgets for fire departments, better compensation for firefighters, staffing requirements, and the like. While some of their proposals might face resistance from taxpayer groups or small government groups, there is no explicitly anti-firefighter group. Why, then, would firefighter unions want to join a party coalition with other interest groups—when local candidates generally want the endorsements, campaign contributions, and other forms of electoral support that firefighter unions have to offer? The answer, we argue, is that they probably wouldn't.

As with the relative resource argument, it is probably more common for interest groups to face low levels of direct competition in local politics than in state and national politics. But we also suspect that there are many areas in state and national politics where interest groups face little direct competition and choose to act alone rather than within a party. Consider the issue of

public employee pension benefits—a highly technical issue of great importance to government employees and their unions, and one on which they faced little competition until recently. It is true that public sector unions overwhelmingly align with the Democratic Party. But Anzia and Moe (forthcoming) show that on the issue of public pension benefits, prior to 2009, public sector unions did not limit themselves to building support among Democratic Party legislators—they persuaded most Republican legislators to vote for benefit increases as well.¹⁵ Thus, when a group faces little competition in a particular policy area, it may well fare just as well or even better working alone than within the confines of a party coalition.

This implies, moreover, that parties probably do not have a monopoly on what Bawn et al. refer to as the electoral blind spot. By the Bawn et al. account, the blind spot is a tool of the political parties: an area in which officials can make policies favorable to interest groups in their party's coalition that voters—if they knew about them—would not support. But there is no reason why policymakers couldn't take advantage of the blind spot to try to please interest group supporters who are *not* working with party coalitions. Indeed, as Anzia and Moe (forthcoming) point out, that seems to have happened with public sector unions on the public pension benefit issue. Put simply, if an interest group helps to elect a candidate, that candidate may look for policy opportunities to be responsive to that group even if the group is not working with a party. By this logic, Bawn et al.'s concept of the electoral blind spot may have even broader relevance than they intended—and is not reserved for the exclusive use of political parties.

Our most basic point, though, is that not all policy demanders need allies to win majorities. Some have sufficient resources to exert considerable political influence on their own, either because they have tremendous resources, or because they care about policies made in

¹⁵ For another example of how interest groups can build support on both sides of the aisle, see Heaney's (2006) account of the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003.

small political contexts where it is relatively easy to have influence. Some face little direct competition, either from voters or from other organized groups. As a general rule, these conditions are probably more likely to hold in local politics than in national politics, where there tends to be less money in elections, where there are fewer people to mobilize, and where there are fewer groups overall—and therefore lower probability that any one group will face a direct competitor. But these insights are relevant for state and national politics as well. For some groups, and on some issues, there might be much to be gained from working outside of political parties.

Conclusion

For the last few decades, most of the theoretical and empirical work on political parties in American politics has focused on either the effects of party-in-the-electorate (on turnout and vote choice) or the effects of party-in-government (on roll call votes, legislative organization, and agenda control). Much has been gained as a result of that research. But without further study of party-as-organization, our understanding of political parties—what they are, what they do, and how they influence politics and policy—will remain incomplete.

In developing an alternative theory of political parties, Bawn et al. have taken a hugely important step in that direction. Their work offers a number of important theoretical insights about parties as organizations, and their contributions have provoked a vibrant and productive discussion—in political science and beyond—about how party organizations work, how they affect the political process, and how they shape policy. Going forward, political scientists should continue to build on the foundation they have laid, revising their theory where necessary, extending it in productive directions, and furthering our understanding of political organizations.

In this paper, we have taken the Bawn et al. theory as a starting point and pushed outward in what we think are three potentially promising directions. First, we moved beyond the context of national politics to explore what party organizations do in a very different political environment: local elections. Unlike national politics, where parties are always active, we found that local politics features considerable variation in party activity. That discovery led us to try to explain that variation, where we learned that city features such as partisan elections, the amount of interest group activity, and (to a lesser extent) city size are positively associated with party activity in city elections. Perhaps the most important takeaway from this analysis, though, is the general one: that party activity in American elections is *conditional*—and therefore that in the future, we need to do more to try to explain the conditions under which party organizations will be more or less involved in elections.

Second, in trying to unpack the positive association between interest group and party activity in city elections, and in building a theoretical case for a “separate tracks” model of local group relations, we shifted the emphasis from the nomination stage of an election to the post-nomination stage. Bawn et al. persuasively explain that most policy demanders do not want to wait until elections are over to try to influence policy; instead, they try “to get a genuine friend nominated and elected to office” (Bawn et al. 2012, p. 575). One way they can do this is to nominate a friend—and that is the method emphasized by Bawn et al. But another way is to help *elect* a friend, which may or may not necessitate getting involved in the nomination stage. In particular, policy demanders could wait until the various candidates emerge and then put money and volunteers behind whichever candidate convincingly promises to support the group’s preferred policies. The incentives for policy demanders to join coalitions are probably weaker at this later stage than at the nomination stage—and according to candidates who responded to our

survey, these later-stage activities are actually more important in local elections. This provides some theoretical reasoning for why interest groups might *not* want to work within party coalitions—and instead might work alone. And in pointing out the large number of cities where interest groups are active but parties are not, and by exploring party and interest group campaign contributions in city elections, we find empirical patterns that suggest this is a possibility.

Finally, in the last section, we turned the focus from parties—entities that are coalitions of interest groups—to interest groups—entities that may or may not join parties. We argued that an interest group’s decision about whether to work alone or within a party coalition should depend on the costs of joining the coalition and the policy benefits of doing so. As for the policy benefits, we laid out two sets of conditions that stand to shape whether an interest group will realize positive policy benefits from joining a party coalition: the amount of the interest group’s resources relative to the context in which it is operating, and the degree of competition it faces from other groups and voters over the policies it cares about. When interest groups face strong direct competition, have relatively few resources, and operate in large political environments, they will be more likely to form and work within party coalitions. But in local politics, and even in many situations in national politics, interest groups may find that they have enough resources and face sufficiently little opposition to pursue their policy objectives more successfully on their own. By considering the full range of plausible scenarios, and by further developing the core ideas we have outlined here, there is great potential for political scientists to broaden and deepen our understanding of the activity and influence of political organizations in the United States. The result will be a more complete picture of how American politics works—and a more accurate account of how groups influence public policy.

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Table 1: Number of individual respondents and cities

	Candidates	Cities	Cities, <10K	Cities, 10-25K	Cities, 25-50K	Cities, 50-100K	Cities, >100K
Number in sample	3,772	784	496	152	80	40	16
Number in response dataset	451	312	158	72	49	21	12
California responses	47	27	3	7	7	8	2
Indiana responses	77	51	24	10	10	4	3
Ohio responses	159	112	53	36	19	3	1
South Carolina responses	45	31	18	7	2	2	2
Washington responses	123	91	60	12	11	4	4
Response rate, all states	12%	40%	32%	47%	61%	53%	75%

Table 2: Political party activity in municipal elections, descriptive statistics

	Average	% Not active or slightly active	% Very active or extremely active
(1) Republican Party (0-4)	1.38	55%	22%
(2) Democratic Party (0-4)	1.43	52%	23%
(3) Other Party (0-4)	0.17	96%	2%
(4) Most Active Party (0-4)	1.87	40%	36%
(5) Party Activities Index (0-6)	2.32	34%	25%

Notes: In row 5, % not active or slightly active is the percentage of cities in which parties were engaged in 0 of the 6 specific electoral activities, and % very active or extremely active is the percentage of cities in which parties were engaged in at least 5 of the 6 electoral activities. N=312 cities.

Table 3: Explaining political party activity in municipal elections

	<i>Republican Party</i>	<i>Democratic Party</i>	<i>Most Active Party</i>	<i>Party Activities Index</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Partisan elections	0.936** (0.033)	0.867** (0.073)	0.85** (0.061)	1.799** (0.247)
Interest group activity	0.056** (0.007)	0.068** (0.006)	0.071** (0.004)	0.054** (0.007)
Ln(city population)	0.122 (0.055)	0.08 (0.075)	0.152 (0.068)	0.491** (0.082)
Democratic presidential vote	-1.626* (0.372)	1.804* (0.436)	0.296 (0.426)	0.096 (0.548)
All races unopposed	-0.255 (0.132)	-0.001 (0.097)	-0.063 (0.111)	-0.411** (0.079)
R-squared	0.42	0.42	0.44	0.45
Observations	310	309	312	312

Notes: Standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. All models include state fixed effects. Hypothesis tests are two-tailed. *p<0.05; **p<0.01.

Table 4: Number of cities by interest group and political party activity

	No party activity	Some party activity	
No interest group activity	51	17	68
Some interest group activity	73	170	243
	124	187	311

Table 5: Campaign contributions by the most active interest groups and political parties

Contributor type	Number of races contributed to (and % of all races)	Total contributions (\$)
Development interests (e.g., developers, contractors, construction)	63 (82%)	\$368,769
Businesses and business associations (non-development)	63 (82%)	\$385,506
Public safety unions (police and fire)	32 (42%)	\$57,353
Building trades unions	26 (34%)	\$109,700
Other unions (private or public)	31 (40%)	\$85,104
Democratic Party	24 (31%)	\$7,079
Republican Party	4 (5%)	\$1,800

Table 6: Interest group contributions to candidates who received money from the Democratic Party

Contributor code	Number of candidates	Total contributions (\$)
Development interests (e.g., developers, contractors, construction)	21	\$29,575
Businesses and business associations (non-development)	18	\$17,575
Public safety unions (police and fire)	9	\$5,200
Building trades unions	13	\$11,650
Other unions (private or public)	10	\$6,450
Environmental groups	2	\$200
LGBT groups	3	\$650
Pro-choice groups	3	\$750