The relationship between political parties and organized interests is critical to understanding democratic politics, yet few scholars have systematically studied this topic in recent decades. In the following essay, I review the American politics literature examining the interactions between parties and organized interests and assess the current state of our knowledge. I then argue that we should make more explicit and systematic use of the understanding of symbiotic relationships from the field of ecology, which is already either explicitly or implicitly used in many studies, to improve our understanding of interactions between parties and organized interests. By applying these ideas, we can better understand the formation and internal dynamics of symbiotic relationships between political parties and organized interests, as well as the larger questions of how party–organized interest interactions help to shape broader outcomes, which I discuss in the conclusion.

Keywords: political parties; interest groups; organized interests; symbiotic relationships; mutualism; parasitism

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The most important difference between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats—however they define themselves—is to be found in the interest groups they identify with.1

*I thank Dave Lowery, Jim Shoch, Clyde Wilcox, and the anonymous referees and editor at Polity for useful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Introduction

The interactions between political parties and organized interests are central to an understanding of American politics, as the proliferation of studies of the relationship between the Republican Party and the Christian Right indicates. This relationship may help explain such diverse phenomena as Congress’s policy agenda, President Bush’s rhetoric and working class support for the Republican Party. Notwithstanding several excellent recent studies of particular party–interest group pairings such as the Democrats and labor, few scholars have systematically studied the interactions between parties and organized interests. This void reflects the common division of labor today within political science: scholars tend to be experts on only one kind of organization, either parties or interest groups. I propose here a framework for studying party–organized interest relationships that can provide a more systematic understanding of these organizations and politics in general.

In the past, scholars such as V. O. Key and E. E. Schattschneider thought extensively about the interactions of parties and organized interests, and their early work has significantly shaped our thinking. For example, Schattschneider’s contention that parties and organized interests compete with one another for power has shaped much of our thinking, but according to Tichenor and Harris this theoretically rich observation has not been well explored empirically. Despite the relative lack of attention to party–organized interest interactions per se, the political party and interest group literatures can be used to develop a solid understanding of party–group interactions. In addition, we can draw broader implications from the studies of particular party–organized interest relationships. Both the wider literature and case studies suggest that while there is the potential for conflict between parties and organized interests in the pursuit of


6. Tichenor and Harris, “The Development of Interest Group Politics in America.”
their goals, organized interests can and often do help parties to achieve their goals, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{7}

This situation clearly parallels the interactions between organisms in nature. Parties and organized interests, like organisms, have incentives to selfishly pursue their own goals. Yet, certain organisms and certain parties and organized interests have overcome these incentives and formed mutually beneficial symbiotic relationships, or mutualisms. Because ecologists have been studying the development of mutualisms for much longer than political scientists, I apply a few broad insights from the ecological literature on mutualisms to the literature on political parties and organized interests. These concepts can help to systematize what we already know about party–organized interest interactions, raise additional questions that can improve our knowledge of them, and help us to understand the aggregate effects of these relationships on outcomes like representation. Political scientists have used some of these concepts, but applying them more strictly will give us a more systematic and richer understanding of the relationships between parties and organized interests.\textsuperscript{8}

The dominant paradigm for understanding party–organized interest interactions, to the extent that one can be said to exist, is that some parties and organized interests exchange useful resources with one another. While this is certainly true, it does not explain why particular parties and organized interests form such relationships, when they do so, or what constraints they face. Nor does it address the complexity of party–group relationships: parties and organized interests may benefit at times from a connection, be harmed at other times by the same relationship, and have only an imperfect ability to exit from such a relationship. Therefore, for a comprehensive understanding of party–organized interest interactions, it is necessary to go beyond exchange theory. Ecological concepts may help us achieve a wider-ranging understanding while also incorporating the useful and familiar exchange paradigm.

Specifically, ecologists have argued that mutualisms between organisms in nature are based on resource exchange and that their formation is also aided by repeated interactions.\textsuperscript{9} These ideas point to two important areas of research that can help political scientists to understand party–organized interest interactions. Indeed, many studies of particular party–organized interest dyads (i.e., a relationship between one party and one organized interest) already examine resource exchange in some detail. The extent to which the political environment and party and organized interest choices structure the frequency of interactions between parties and organized interests, and how this in turn influences the

\textsuperscript{7} Schattschneider, “Pressure Groups versus Political Parties”; Key, Politics.

\textsuperscript{8} Dark, The Unions.

relationships they form, has not been as carefully considered. But together these concepts help us to understand when, why, and how parties and organized interests form relationships. In addition, the ecological concept of parasitism can help us to understand the threats that parties and organized interests face when they are involved in a close, mutually beneficial relationship, and how relationships can change from being mutually beneficial to harmful for one of the organizations over time. Furthermore, as I briefly discuss in the conclusion, these individual-level concepts can also help us to understand broad changes in patterns of party–organized interest interactions over time.

I begin with a discussion of conflict and cooperation between parties and interests. I then discuss the similarities between party and organized interest interactions and relationships between organisms. Next, I discuss ecologists’ views of the formation of mutually beneficial relationships between organisms and apply these concepts to the interactions between parties and organized interests, while also using them to raise questions for future research. Finally, I discuss how these concepts can help us to understand broader changes in party–organized interest interactions.

Conflict and Cooperation Between Parties and Organized Interests

Parties and organized interests are distinct types of organizations that serve similar functions in the political system, such as representation and the formation of policy coalitions. The difference between party and organized interest is not always clear, but most scholars agree that they are discrete entities even if it can be difficult to precisely identify organizational boundaries. The consensus view is that unlike organized interests, parties compete in elections to directly hold office.

For the purposes of what follows I define the political party as politicians running under the party label, appointed executive branch officials, paid or volunteer staff of the official organization, and activists who provide a substantial amount of their time, money or other resources to the party organization itself or to candidates running under the party label. This is a broad definition but not so broad as to eliminate the distinction between parties and organized interests

10. Key, Politics.
altogether. Several different terms have been used to label organized interests including pressure group, interest group, and interest organization. Organized interest or interest organization is usually preferable to interest group because these terms are more encompassing of the full range of political interests such as institutions like corporations.\(^{13}\) I define an organized interest as the paid or voluntary staff of the organization or activists donating a substantial amount of their time, money, or other resources to the organization. Using these definitions, parties and organized interests are distinct, but overlapping and not mutually exclusive organizations. I place emphasis on political elites and activist members of the mass public in these definitions because it is at the elite level where decisions about relationships between parties and organized interests are made. The preferences of the mass bases of these organizations, however, certainly direct and constrain the options available to elites.

Scholars have long debated the interactions between parties and organized interests, moving from early general claims to more recent studies of the relationship between particular organized interests and parties. Tichenor and Harris argue that there seems to be a dichotomy in our thinking, with some scholars, following Schattschneider’s lead, arguing that parties and groups are engaged in a zero-sum conflict where the success or power of one set of organizations invariably leads to failure or lack of power for the other, and others contending that party–interest organization relations are more cooperative.\(^{14}\) Perhaps Schattschneider’s question has not often been systematically examined because his impassioned writing made it seem so intuitive.\(^{15}\) Observing national politics in the 1940s and 1950s, Schattschneider argued that organized interests were able to fill the power vacuum left by weak parties. He claimed that “if the parties exercised the power to govern effectively, they would shut out the pressure groups.”\(^{16}\) To Schattschneider the weakness of the American parties boiled down to the fact that they were nothing like responsible parties found in many parliamentary systems. The lack of a program meant that organized special interests, rather than parties, determine the government’s agenda, leading to incoherence in policy and a lack of responsiveness to the majority.\(^{17}\)

Schattschneider was for the most part thinking in aggregate terms about competition between party and interest group systems over the control of the


\(^{14}\) Tichenor and Harris, “The Development of Interest Group Politics in America”; Schattschneider, “Pressure Groups versus Political Parties.”

\(^{15}\) In one of the few empirical examinations of Schattschneider’s argument, Morehouse did find that states with strong parties do have weaker organized interests. See Sarah McCally Morehouse, *State Politics, Parties and Policies* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1981).

\(^{16}\) Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 190, emphasis in original.

\(^{17}\) Schattschneider, “Pressure Groups versus Political Parties,” 23.
political agenda and policy, but he also noted that individual organized interests and parties sometimes directly compete for resources. He made this observation when he was critical of even seemingly public-spirited good government or public interest groups because these organized interests "compete with the political parties for the services of the best citizens in the community."\(^{18}\) Although little research has been done on this type of competition, Richardson argues that parties and interest groups compete for the resources of political activists in Europe and finds that countries with large interest group membership increases have seen the steepest declines in party membership.\(^{19}\) Parties and organized interests might also compete for the loyalties of political elites like office-seekers because both parties and interests provide many of the same campaign services like polling and mobilizing voters.\(^{20}\) It is also probable that parties and organized interests compete for the money of wealthy donors.\(^{21}\) Finally, according to Aldrich, parties and organized interests may also compete for the loyalty of politicians because they will be most loyal to whatever organizations best help them achieve their goals.\(^{22}\)

Other scholars have taken the view that party–organized interest interactions are primarily cooperative. For example, Key argued that "a division of labor occurs between political parties and pressure groups" and "the broad tendency is that lobbying on many issues re-enforces the leadership of the party with which the group is allied."\(^{23}\) If true, this would tend to magnify existing party cleavages and could lead organized interests to view strong parties as in their interest. Dark discusses how organized labor lobbied to reform congressional rules and procedures during the 1960s and the 1970s to enable a more programmatic Democratic Party because unions believed this would lead to the enactment of a pro-labor agenda.\(^{24}\) Furthermore, though parties and organized interests can compete for the loyalty of activists, studies have also shown that party and group identification can reinforce and strengthen one another.\(^{25}\)
These non-zero sum relationships exist because some parties and organized interests have partly complimentary goals and can profit from assisting one another. Some party–interest dyads form close mutually beneficial or “symbiotic” relationships. Even Schattschneider was aware of this when he wrote that some interests “operate as if they were auxiliary organizations of one or the other party.” Indeed, at the individual level, there are a few well-known and oft-studied cooperative relationships between the major parties and organized interests in the U.S. An important point to remember is that these relationships were by no means pre-ordained. For example, labor and the Democrats did not always have a close relationship and the closeness fluctuates over time. Similarly, leaders of Christian Right groups were not initially wed to any particular party, and in fact a majority of evangelical voters supported Jimmy Carter in 1976. Thus, the formation and maintenance of such relationships are historically contingent.

Christian Right organizations are examples of what Berry calls a “post-material” group, that is, a group that pursues policies that bestow few or no material benefits on members (and, indeed, probably materially harm them in some cases). Berry documents the growing power of liberal post-material groups since the 1960s in his book *The New Liberalism*. Many, such as the women’s rights or environmental groups, have close links with the Democratic Party and they have been successful at getting issues on the agenda, especially when the Democrats are in power.

By contrast with the newer post-material groups, economic interests formed the basis of the traditional interest group system. Here, too, the party–group relation may work to the advantage of both. Bibby writes that labor plays a role in the Democratic Party similar to that of the Christian Right in the Republican Party. Unlike these interests, business interests usually have some relationship with both parties. According to many scholars, corporations and trade associations pursue particularistic rather than ideological policies and therefore generally have little concern over which party is in power since these benefits

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27. Dark, *The Unions*.
can be obtained from either party. Some scholars point out that business bipartisanship does not imply equal support and that some business interests are closer to one party, but in general business is bipartisan. At times, however, it does seem that much of the business community coalesces around a particular party. Polsky argues that this is due to the existence of entrepreneurial politicians willing to pay the costs necessary to overcome the collective action problems that normally prevent business unity. This work shows that relationships between parties and interests result from complicated processes rather than simple attempts at influence or control by either organization.

Despite the dangers and the potential for conflict, many organized interests do have close, more or less exclusive relationships with a single political party, and some parties become closely identified with particular interests. Somehow these parties and organized interests overcome the inherent potential conflict and have cooperative relationships. Although we take this situation for granted, it is actually a bit puzzling. From the party standpoint, being tied closely to an organized interest holds the risk of alienating the moderate majority, and therefore party insiders have frequently criticized these connections. For example, some moderate Republicans have grown skeptical of the Religious Right, while leaders of the Democratic Leadership Council have argued that the Democratic Party must distance itself from some of the social groups that have been an important part of the Democratic Party coalition since the 1960s.

From the perspective of the organized interest, too, the utility of forming close cooperative relationships with a party is debatable. Many leaders have questioned whether their organization’s interests are best served by close links with one party, whether they be voices of the Christian Right wary of close relations with Republicans or unionists skeptical of close links with the Democratic Party. In the U.S. especially, there may be relatively little to gain

by pursuing a close relationship with a single party. Parties often have limited control over policy outcomes and party agendas are relatively malleable. Furthermore, due to institutional arrangements such as the separation of powers and federalism, organized interests find numerous venues through which to pursue their favored policies. The system also has numerous veto points for minority interests simply wishing to thwart a particular policy. Finally, forming a close link with a political party generally precludes the possibility of influencing many members of the other party.

**Symbiotic Relationships between Parties and Organized Interests**

Considering the costs and lack of obvious benefits, why do organized interests form exclusive links with one party? To shed light on this question, it is useful to consider a similar process that has been studied for many decades by ecologists. Organisms in nature face many of the same incentives as parties and organized interests in the political sphere, and there are thus many similarities between party–organized interest relationships and those among organisms in nature. This has led scholars to apply ecological terms to the interactions between parties and organized interests. For example, Dark describes the relationship between Democrats and labor as symbiotic, Schattschneider views organized interests as parasites, and Wilcox describes the coevolution of the Republican Party and the Christian Right. Like organisms in nature, parties and organized interests can gain from forming relationships with other organisms, but these relationships also carry potential costs. Given the limited knowledge political scientists have amassed about party–organized interest interactions, it makes sense to apply ecologists’ natural-world insights to the study of parties and organized interests. My goal in making this intellectual link is to help systematize what we already know and raise questions to be pursued.

In laymen’s terms, symbiotic refers to a mutually beneficial interaction, which is what most ecologists refer to as a mutualism. The traditional typology of symbioses is to define an interaction depending on whether it is mutually beneficial (mutualism), beneficial to one organism but harmful to the other (parasitism), beneficial to one but neither harmful nor beneficial to the other (commensalism), or harmful to both (competition). These static typologies have been criticized because they do not account for the empirical fact that the net

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gains and losses to organisms can vary across individuals depending on a variety of contextual factors, or even across time within a particular individual dyad.\footnote{John N. Thompson, “Variation in Interspecific Interactions,” \textit{Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics} 19 (1988): 65–87.} Therefore, they are perhaps better thought of as a continuum rather than four discrete categories of outcomes.\footnote{Judith L. Bronstein, “Conditional Outcomes in Mutualistic Interactions,” \textit{Trends in Ecology and Evolution} 9 (1994): 214–17.} Just as different species of organisms have relations in nature that can result in different costs and benefits, so do parties and organized interests, which can be viewed as different species of political organization. Organisms and organizations form mutualisms to help achieve their respective goals.

Mutualisms come in many different varieties, but at minimum scholars agree that a mutualism is an interaction that benefits both species by providing some important resource that helps the organisms to survive, such as nutrition, energy, protection, or transport.\footnote{Douglas H. Boucher, Sam James, and Kathleen H. Keeler, “The Ecology of Mutualism,” \textit{Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics} 13 (1982): 315–47.} The survival goal that “motivates” organisms in nature to form relationships can also be ascribed to parties and organized interests. In general, American politics scholars have assumed that organized interests are policy-maximizers—that is, their primary goal is to achieve favorable public policy—and parties are vote maximizers.\footnote{Jeffery M. Berry, \textit{The Interest Group Society}, 3rd edn. (New York: Longman, 1997); Joseph A. Schlesinger, “On the Theory of Party Organization,” \textit{The Journal of Politics} 36 (1984): 369–400.} In contrast to this view, Lowery convincingly argues that “the most fundamental goal of all organizations must be to survive as organizations. All of the other goals that organizations might have are necessarily secondary to survival.”\footnote{David Lowery, “Why Do Organized Interests Lobby? A Multi-Goal, Multi-Context Theory of Lobbying,” \textit{Polity} 39 (2007): 29–54 at 46–47. One implication of Lowery’s work is that if survival and policy maximization are in direct conflict, the organized interest will pursue survival. This should not be taken to mean that policy is unimportant to organized interests, for policy success can help organized interests survive by attracting more support from members and external patrons.} As formulated by Lowery and the organizational theorists that he cites, the survival priority must also apply to political parties. Yet it seems clear that the Democrats and Republicans are in little actual danger of expiring any time soon.\footnote{Although we tend to think of parties in the U.S. as stable, long-term organizations dedicated to winning elections, only two parties fit this description. Throughout American history, most political parties have been in existence for a limited amount of time and even relatively well-established parties like the Federalists or Whigs have disappeared. There are also minor political parties that have been around for decades in some states and localities with no chance of victory (the Peace and Freedom Party in California, for example).} Thus, it is reasonable for most American political scientists to view parties as election victory maximizers.

Pfeffer and Salancik note that in order to survive and pursue their other goals, organizations need to obtain certain resources, many of which are not under
their immediate control but are instead possessed by other individuals and organizations. Thus, “acquiring resources means the organization must interact with others who control those resources,” with the result being that “negotiating exchanges to ensure the continuation of needed resources is the focus of much organizational activity.”\textsuperscript{45} Parties have control over resources that organized interests need and vice versa, creating incentives for these organizations to cooperate and rely on one another.

Of course, organisms such as plants do not rationally decide to enter into relationships with other organisms; instead these are chance occurrences that are either encouraged or discouraged via the process of natural selection. In some ways this differs greatly from parties and organized interests, whose leaders have an ability to weigh alternative courses of action and reason about different costs and benefits associated with them. I take the position that party and organized interest leaders are actors who try to maximize their most favored goals. However, they face limits in their cognitive abilities and information gathering capacities that prevent them from making fully “rational” decisions and can therefore more accurately be described as “boundedly rational.”\textsuperscript{46} Furthermore, because the major parties and many organized interests are highly decentralized, different leaders and structures within the party and organized interests may, and in fact often will, reach different conclusions regarding what is in their own best interests and in the interests of the organization. Finally, there may also be different courses of action that can produce similar results. All of this causes a great deal of uncertainty in the interactions between parties and organized interests.

Thus, while the process of mutualism formation between parties and organized interests has elements of rationality, it is not fully rational. To this extent mutualisms form through a process of trial and error (to borrow Schlesinger’s use of this term in his description of political parties), a process that resembles natural selection.\textsuperscript{47} In a study of the relationship between the Religious Right and the Republican Party, Wilcox observes that, through a selection process, cooperative relationships that work well for particular parties and organized interests will be rewarded and encouraged, while those that work poorly will be discouraged and eliminated. The links between the GOP and Religious Right are firm because individual candidates with close links to these interests were successful in winning office and gaining power within the Republican Party while Democrats with links to these groups generally were not. Polsky makes a similar argument when he discusses the forging of links between parties and business interests. He writes that some politicians within the party will


produce narratives that appeal to business interests and rally their support, while other politicians will produce different narratives that appeal to other interests. The winners’ narrative holds sway and leads to the forging of links with certain interests. Clearly, all candidates were making boundedly rational decisions about which interest to favor and organized interests were making boundedly rational decisions about which candidates to support, but in many cases they made what turned out to be incorrect decisions and these relationships were selected out of the political system.

The Foundations of Party–Organized Interest Mutualisms

This leads us to the question of why some interests develop an affinity for one party and why some parties (or initially individual partisans) decide to support a particular interest in the first place. From the scholarship on the conditions that lead to the formation of mutualisms, we can conclude that parties and organized interests will form mutualisms when (a) they are able to exchange valuable resources and (b) they have repeated interactions. The first point is intuitive to scholars who study organized interests, where exchange relationships are already an important part of our theoretical understanding of attempts by organized interests to influence policy. The second point deserves more elaboration. Ecological concepts can also help us to understand the internal dynamics of relationships once formed. Specifically, ecologists have discussed how the creation of mutualisms leads to a danger of parasitism, and this has important implications for party–organized interest relationships that I address. Taken together, exchange theory, the idea of cooperative relations evolving out of repeated interactions, and the threat of parasitism present a set of conceptual lenses through which to understand interactions between parties and organized interests and give rise to three broad categories of questions for researchers interested in the interactions between parties and organized interests.

A variety of research approaches could be used to understand these questions, including cross-sectional or longitudinal studies of different types of interests in different settings (such as different congressional committees, the states or localities). Detailed studies of particular mutualisms can also be used to understand the precise causal mechanisms that translate some vague possibility of cooperation into an actual cooperative relationship or to understand the ways that parties and organized interests monitor relationships to prevent parasitism, broker the exchange of resources, and so on.

49. Hoeksema and Bruna, “Pursuing the Big Questions.”
Exchange Theory

Scholars have noted that mutualisms in nature resemble the exchange of goods or services observed in economic markets, and have used economic concepts such as relative advantage and supply and demand to understand the formation of mutualisms. For example, Schwartz and Hoeksema use the concept of relative advantage to understand the evolution of mutualisms. If one species can acquire a resource more cheaply than another, the second species has an incentive to form a relationship with it. If the second species can also offer something more cheaply, then both have an incentive to enter a relationship and a mutualism may form.

This logic has obvious relevance to studies of interactions between parties and organized interests, as many scholars have observed that these resource exchanges are very apparent in well-known mutualisms such as that between the Democrats and labor. We are already well acquainted with the idea that organized interests exchange resources to achieve their political goals. For example, organized interests provide money, volunteers, endorsements, and such intangibles as legitimacy to candidates and parties. Interest organizations also often possess specialized information (e.g., about either the substantive or political effects of policy) that could be valuable to parties. This is by no means an exhaustive listing of resources that organized interests can provide to political parties, but these are among the most frequent and useful. Because some resources can be most easily obtained from organized interests or in some cases can only be obtained from them (e.g., endorsements), parties rely on organized interests and must interact with them.

Exchange theory has not been extensively applied to American political parties because we tend to view organized interests as external agents attempting to influence the party, but it is clear that parties also provide resources to organized interests. Most obviously, because of parties’ influence over the legislative policy agenda and member behavior, such as roll call voting, they can

help organized interests directly obtain favored policy outcomes. Parties can also provide money to allied interests via their control over the purse strings or public policy. Walker writes of the importance that government funds have for the creation and maintenance of certain types of organized interests. The Democrats used federal grant programs to establish welfare beneficiary advocacy groups; Republicans have funneled money to the Religious Right in a similar manner. Parties can also create and pass laws that enhance the ability of interests to raise revenue from other sources. For example, closed shop laws force individuals to pay union dues. Although courts have ruled that individuals cannot be forced to support the union’s political activities, the dues money helps maintain the union’s financial security, which in turn enables political activity. There can also be more direct aid. Wilcox writes that wealthy Republicans were instrumental in providing large donations to struggling Christian Right groups in their infancy. Given that many organized interests struggle to survive, this material aid is probably very important.

Just as organized interest endorsements can help candidates and parties to achieve their goals, party endorsements of the preferences of particular organized interests can also help them to achieve theirs. If party leaders are viewed as actively advancing the agenda of a particular organized interest, the interest appears effective, making it easier to attract resources such as new members and money. The exchange of policy itself may not be necessary. As Wilcox notes, many observers argue the Christian Right has received little in terms of substantive policy benefits from its relationship with the Republican Party. Yet the verbal and symbolic endorsement of the religious conservatives’ agenda is probably very important for the maintenance of Christian right groups.

We often think of the power of organized interests as partly stemming from information, but party leaders also possess valuable information that is not generally available, such as the true preferences of the party caucus and the short-term party agenda. This information would obviously be tremendously valuable to organized interests attempting to influence policy. Dark demonstrates that organized labor received important information about the legislative process by virtue of its close relationship with party leaders, making it possible for unions

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57. Wilcox, “Of Movements and Metaphors.”
to craft a more effective lobbying strategy.\textsuperscript{59} In politics, information is power and organized interest–party relationships can provide it.

Key stated that there was a division of labor between parties and interest groups, with each organization being better at certain types of activities.\textsuperscript{60} It does seem clear that parties are better at obtaining some resources and organized interests better at obtaining others, and therefore there are incentives for parties and organized interests to engage in some sort of trade of these resources. While scholars have focused on the exchange of money for policy, there are many more resources that organized interests and parties exchange that scholars should study.

A perennial practical question for party and interest group leaders is what they get from their relationships with one another, but this question is also of theoretical interest to social scientists. For example, there is a long-running debate about whether organized labor has gained concrete policy benefits from its relationship with the Democratic Party. But this may be missing the point. We also need to analyze the success of mutualisms from the standpoint of the organized interest and party involved. If Lowery is correct that organized interests are primarily interested in survival, then substantive policy benefits may or may not be critical to the existence of a mutualism between a party and organized interests. The party certainly must advocate favorable policies for the interest. Less clear is whether the party must actually deliver, if the Christian Right and the Republican Party is any indication,\textsuperscript{61} although in recent years President Bush has certainly pleased this interest with his conservative court appointments. Rather than advancing the group’s policy agenda, a relationship may be successful if it enhances the odds of an organized interest’s survival. From this standpoint, the relationship between the Christian Right and the Republican Party has been successful for many groups.

From the perspective of parties, money seems to be a particularly valued resource in today’s capital-intensive politics. Money has obviously been an important part of the long-term relationship, to take two familiar examples, between labor and the Democrats and between business interests and the political parties.\textsuperscript{62} Because of its unequal distribution, the importance of money as a resource for the formation of relationships with parties is very important. If money is valued above other resources, this would tend to benefit wealthy interests like businesses in forming close relationships with the political parties. Indeed, business interests have an almost unique ability to form relationships with both parties.

\textsuperscript{59} Dark, \textit{The Unions}.
\textsuperscript{60} Key, \textit{Politics}.
\textsuperscript{62} Dark, \textit{The Unions and the Democrats}; Ferguson, \textit{Golden Rule}.
Obviously, parties also need activists to labor on behalf of the party, and actual voters to vote for them, so the importance of group members seems clear. However, it is interesting to consider the relative weight of groups that provide different resources within the party. It seems that in some cases, parties are more responsive to moneyed interests with which they have relationships. For example, it can easily be argued that financial interests remain supreme within the GOP despite the importance of activists from the Christian Right to recent electoral success. These types of questions are clearly of enormous normative and theoretical importance.

Repeated Interactions and the Evolution of Cooperation

All parties and organized interests have some resources and therefore exchange theory alone may not be enough to help us to understand why particular parties and dyads form relationships. For this purpose, it is useful to consider another approach to the formation of mutualisms based on work by Axelrod and Hamilton (made familiar to political scientists through Axelrod’s subsequent work on cooperation). They sought to explain why, within the context of the Darwinian struggle for life, different organisms would cooperate in providing resources to one another. The seemingly optimal approach for a self-interested organism should be to receive resources and then refuse to supply resources in return. However, by using the iterated prisoner’s dilemma, Axelrod and Hamilton showed that with repeated interactions cooperation (the tit for tat strategy) becomes efficient. Other scholars have criticized and reworked the iterated prisoner’s dilemma model, but the intuition remains similar in later models.

Some of the likely patterns of interaction may inhere in the different types of parties and organized interests themselves. For example, as exchange theory predicts, ample money clearly aids the ability of business interests to form relationships with both parties. We should also recognize, however, that this ability to form relationships with both parties stems from the normal constituent–representative relationship that exists between members of Congress and important individuals and interests in their districts. The everyday interactions of members of Congress with their important constituents will lead to some relationship with business interests in any district where business interests are

politically active (in other words, basically everywhere). Therefore, even relatively radical campaign finance reforms that some critics favor as a means of limiting business influence are unlikely to curtail the ability of business to wield considerable influence on policy. In contrast, other interests are more geographically concentrated. Organized labor tends to be strong in urban-industrial districts, limiting its ability to form relationships with Republicans who currently tend to represent rural or exurban districts without heavy union presence.

In nature, the frequency of interactions between organisms can be structured by geological features such as mountain ranges, which prevent interaction of some organisms, or watering holes, where animals must congregate to survive. Key features of U.S. political institutions—for example, the separation of powers, federalism, and district-based elections—likewise shape the frequency of interaction between parties and organized interests. In general, the institutional structure of the United States, and especially the division of governing authority inherent in federalism and the separation of powers, discourages the repeated interactions of particular organized interests and particular parties because it is unlikely that a single party will control all areas of governing authority of importance to organized interests.66 In a parliamentary system with a unitary government, we would anticipate that organized interests attempting to influence legislation would necessarily interact more frequently with the majority party and thus make mutualisms more likely.

Other aspects of American institutions encourage repeated interactions between parties and organized interests, however. The U.S. system of representation ensures that parties and interests that are both based in certain geographic areas are more likely to form mutualisms because they will interact more often simply as a result of normal patterns of constituent representation. Consider this example: despite their apparent conservatism, Southern business elites seem to have supported Franklin Roosevelt’s 1936 reelection to a greater degree than their counterparts in other areas of the country.67 If this claim is correct (and some have disputed it), it can probably be explained by the fact that Southern businessmen wishing to maintain good relations with government necessarily interacted with Democratic political elites on a regular basis.68 Similarly, prior to FDR’s use of patronage to dislodge the Republican machines in certain industrial areas, local machine politics caused labor to split in its partisan loyalties.69

The current relationship between the Republican Party and the Christian Right, moreover, is enabled by the fact that both types of organizations have strength in the same geographic regions. Republicans are dominant in the South partly because of the presence of and the strength of the relationship with the Christian Right. But the relationship between the two should not be treated as foreordained. Quite the contrary, the South was the home of conservative Christians long before the Republican Party was important there. Further, many scholars argue that the South’s shift toward Republicanism was not driven by the moral-values issues so central to the Religious Right. To appreciate how these two potent political forces—the GOP and Christian conservatives—came together, we need to better appreciate the importance of their repeated interactions for mutualisms.

The geographic dispersion of parties or interests and features like federalism can be viewed as exogenous to the political system in the short term. It is also interesting, however, to consider how the ability of political actors to create new institutions or restructure existing institutions may influence the extent to which particular interests and parties interact, and therefore begin or cement a mutualism. Aldrich describes parties as endogenous institutions that can be changed depending on the preferences of elites; the same is true of organized interests. In recent years, the Republican Party has used informal institutions to attempt to make the normally bipartisan “K Street” lobbying community subservient to the Republican Party. Essentially, lobby groups were forced to work through the Republican Party to achieve their goals, increasing interactions and ultimately creating a close relationship between the Republican Party and organized business interests. Wright argues that in the 1970s the Democrats reformed the subcommittee system partly to force corporate interests to interact with Democratic members, leading to an increase in business campaign contributions.

Moreover, direct regulation of the activities of both parties and organized interests in the United States can influence the extent to which the former and latter interact. Party and organized interest elites have the ability to directly establish or influence the laws by which they are regulated. Such laws have important implications for the interactions between parties and organized

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interests, shaping the resource needs and the resources at the disposal of both. In
some states, seemingly following Schattschneider's teachings, campaign finance
reformers have sought to limit the alleged negative effects of "special interests" by
limiting the ability of these interests to contribute directly to candidates, instead
using parties to channel money from organized interests to candidates.75 Under
these conditions, which insert the party between interest and candidate, one
would expect more mutualisms to form between parties and groups because they
will necessarily interact more often. Scholars have not generally considered
how the regulation of politics influences interactions between parties and
organized interests.

Mutualism and Parasitism

Mutualisms are by definition beneficial to both participants, but in nature it
often appears that one species benefits more from a relationship than the other
species, and mutualisms can become parasitic.76 A parasitic relationship exists
when one organism benefits while the other is harmed by the interaction.
Symbioses that do not involve mutual net gain should perhaps be less common
than mutualisms in the political world because humans arguably have a greater
ability to recognize and therefore limit interactions that are harmful. Yet, in
human interactions, determining net benefits and costs requires monitoring, and
ending a mutualism after a long relationship may be difficult if the party and
organized interest have become integrated. Furthermore, there is path
dependence in relationships between organizations because continuing the
same relationship reduces uncertainty for participants.77

Schattschneider broadly applied the concept of parasitism to the interactions
of parties and organized interests when he wrote that "the pressure group is
definitely a parasite living on the wastage of power exercised by the sovereign
majority."78 From his vantage point, the main problem with the major parties is
that the local organizations that politicians were reliant on had little concern with
a policy program, and this allowed organized interests to control policy outcomes
on the issues that mattered most to them. According to Schattschneider this led to
c policymaking by organized minorities rather than the majority, an argument that
Lowi later echoed and elaborated upon.79

75. Larry J. Sabato, "Parties and PACs," in Money, Elections, and Democracy: Reforming Congressional
Campaign Finance, ed. Margaret Lotus Nugent and John R. Johannes (Boulder, CO: Westview Press,
1990).

76. Bronstein "Conditional Outcomes in Mutualistic Interactions"; Hoeksema and Bruna, "Pursuing
the Big Questions About Interspecific Mutualism: A Review of Theoretical Approaches."

77. Pfeffer and Salancik, The External Control of Organizations.

78. Schattschneider, Party Government, 190.

At first glance, when we think of conflict between parties and groups, we might think of organizations with diametrically opposed agendas such as labor and the Republican Party. In Schattschneider's view, however, an organized interest that has a policy agenda entirely hostile to the party would not undermine the party and, in fact, would probably strengthen the party by making its policy preferences clearer and unifying the party in opposition to it. Instead, the greater threat comes from parasitic organized interests with policy goals that at least partly coincide with some members of a particular party. For example, while there is currently agreement on many issues, some Republicans believe that close links with the Christian Right will hurt the party in the long run; similarly, in his excellent study of African Americans and the parties, Frymer shows that many Democrats view an association with black interests (though not necessarily organized interests) as electorally damaging.80

Organized interests also face potential costs for being associated with a single party. In general, when they are closely tied to one party, organized interests risk being taken for granted or, to use Frymer's language, “captured.” Frymer thinks that African-American voters have been captured by the Democratic Party, implying that these voters and the organized groups representing African Americans are providing important resources to the party but not being repaid with beneficial policy.81 Although he argues that because African Americans' votes are not wanted by the other major party their situation differs from that of many other groups, leaders of other organized interests have felt as though they are being taken advantage of by one of the major parties and spurned by the other. At various times many union leaders complained about casual treatment at the hands of the Democratic Party, while many leaders of Religious Right groups argue that the Republican Party is taking them for granted. As Polsky writes of partisan regimes, “given that a coalition will reach working agreement on only a narrow set of issues, some promises will go unfulfilled and some regime participants will feel abandoned or betrayed.”82

Clearly, parasitism is made possible only by the existence of a close, mutually beneficial relationship. Thus, while certain factors promote close ties between parties and organized interests, we should be aware of the limits of even the most cooperative relationships. No matter how cooperative, interests never truly converge, and each mutualism bears the seeds of its own destruction. Organizations must devote considerable resources to monitoring their relationships with other organizations to ensure that they are receiving a return on their

81. Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances*.
exchange.\textsuperscript{83} Scholars have considered the possibility of long-term relationships between organized interests and single politicians, but this problem is vastly more complicated when we are thinking of political parties that are comprised of hundreds of office holders.\textsuperscript{84} The most creative attempt by a party to monitor its relationships with a set of interests in recent years was the aforementioned K Street Project, through which the GOP sought to install Republican loyalists as the heads of business lobbying organizations.\textsuperscript{85} This unprecedented effort shows the importance of monitoring relationships between parties and organized interests. In this instance, the Republican Party essentially tried to take over the interest organizations.

Mutualism further suggests that even well-defined, coherent organizations can be changed through their interaction with each other. Close relationships have consequences for the organizations involved, with important implications for representation. If, as Key argued, a division of labor develops between parties and groups, this should change the mix of tasks that each organization performs and may even alter what parties and organized interests see as their primary tasks and interests and even their organizational structure.\textsuperscript{86} In this sense, parties and organized interests may be said to coevolve as a result of forming a mutualism. There is a debate in the ecological literature over whether mutualisms necessarily lead to coevolution, but it seems clear that in some cases the close relationship between organisms results in physical or even genetic changes.\textsuperscript{87}

Wilcox applies the concept of coevolution in detail to the relationship between the Republican Party and the Christian Right, which he views as subspecies of the same organism.\textsuperscript{88} I think it makes more sense to take the view that these organizations are actually distinct species of organization, but the implications are the same. He shows that the long-term mutualism between these two types of organizations changed each organization in some important ways. It is counterintuitive to see socially conservative Christian organizations take positions on issues like the balanced budget or the estate tax, but these positions make more sense when one realizes that leaders of these organizations have self-consciously adopted the Republican Party line on many issues to gain favor with the party to advance their primary agenda. Too, Christian Right groups were fully mobilized into electoral politics by the Republican Party.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{83} Pfeffer and Salancik, \textit{The External Control of Organizations}.
\textsuperscript{85} Hacker and Pierson, \textit{Off Center}.
\textsuperscript{86} Key, \textit{Politics}.
\textsuperscript{88} Wilcox, "Of Movements and Metaphors."
\textsuperscript{89} Ryan Sager, \textit{The Elephant in the Room: Evangelicals, Libertarians and the Battle to Control the Republican Party} (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2006); Wilcox, "Of Movements and Metaphors."
This relationship with the Republican Party fundamentally changed what and who the Religious Right organizations represent while also transforming the party. If the Christian Right adopts standard Republican economic issue positions as a result of its close relationship with the Republican Party but does not see much of its social agenda advanced, has the representation of social conservatives been improved or has it merely been parasitized by the Republican Party? But it is not only the organized interests that may find themselves swallowed up by the interest–party association. Applying the concept of parasitism to the parties, parties would be parasitized by a single interest when they are reliant on that interest for a preponderance of their resources. This forces the party to adopt the organized interests’ goals, imperiling its own anterior independent goals (seeking majority popular support). Some charge that the Terry Schiavo incident was an example of the GOP overzealously promoting a single organized interest at the expense of its broader appeal to the public. If an organized interest is parasitized by a party, its interests will be routinely ignored, undermining representation of that interest. If a party is parasitized by an organized interest, an important means of mass representation and governmental responsiveness is potentially lost. Therefore, how parties and organized interests prevent parasitism is a fundamentally important question.

The three concepts discussed in this section help us to make sense of party–organized interest interactions and also suggest areas of research that may be pursued in the future. While exchange theory contributes much to the study of party–organized interest relationships, that theory alone cannot fully explain how these relationships are created and evolve. Using the additional ecological concepts discussed here adds to our understanding of party–organized interest interactions. Rather than market actors simply trying to maximize their utility, party and organized interests evolve by trial and error, a process with strong parallels to evolution. Furthermore, decisions are highly constrained by institutions that limit patterns of interaction that individual parties and organized interests often have little control over. Finally, while it is irrational for an organization to ever allow another organization to take more than it gives in return, this undoubtedly happens. How organizations attempt to prevent this from happening is an important question.

Conclusion

The relationships between parties and organized interests are extremely important for an understanding of American government, yet seldom have they been studied systematically. Notwithstanding the rich theoretical work of Schattschneider and Key, little attempt has been made to examine the variation in interactions between parties and organized interests either over time or cross-
sectionally. Despite this, the question that Schattschneider initially posed, and that Key later addressed, about the nature of the relationships between parties and organized interests remains compelling. Are parties and organized interests competing or complementary organizations? We have seen from the review of the political science literature that they both compete and cooperate, depending on the specific organizations and the political context in which these organizations act.

To a greater degree than the political science literature has recognized, interactions between parties and organized interests strongly resemble interactions between organisms in nature that have long been studied by ecologists. The literature on symbiotic relationships suggests that these mutually beneficial relationships will form when organisms have important resources to offer one another and when they come into frequent contact. However, ecologists also have demonstrated that these mutualisms can be risky for the organisms involved as a close mutually beneficial relationship can turn parasitic. The ecological literature helps to synthesize what we already know about party–organized interest interactions and provides many interesting questions for future scholars regarding the formation of relationships and the consequences of those relationships for representation and political power. Specifically, more research into exchanges between parties and organized interests and how the patterns of interaction lead to mutualism would help improve our understanding of party–organized interest relationships. I also suggested that we might better understand the internal dynamics and activities of organizations involved in such relationships by focusing on the threat of parasitism. Organized interests and parties in mutualisms must devote considerable resources to monitoring their relationships with one another, yet there is little research into this.

Ecological concepts apply to the formation of relationships between individual parties and organized interests, but individual party and interest actions also aggregate to shape broader patterns of politics and political outcomes. It is clear that the interactions between parties and organized interests have changed greatly in recent decades. In a highly complex, interactive process, party leaders and partisans have found it in their interest to more closely identify with particular interests, and many organized interests have found it useful to form relationships with one of the parties. As parties have been strengthened, party leaders have had an easier time forcing organized interests to interact with and support them. On the other hand, organized interests also have played a key role in encouraging parties to pursue an ideological agenda.90 Not only are there now more mutualisms between parties and organized interests than in the past,

but, broadly speaking, two competing blocs of political parties and organized interests have formed.91

These changes have led to an approximation of the responsible party government model that Schattschneider favored. Each party has a clear set of interests with which it is identified, and parties are now more unified and disciplined. In contrast with Schattschneider’s expectations, however, strengthened parties have probably not led to a weakening of organized interests. Rae argues that interest group activists have more power over party politics now than they did before these changes took place.92 Thus, the strengthening of the parties has led to a strengthening rather than a weakening of certain interests. Given the arguments above, this outcome should be expected for those interests involved in mutualisms with the major parties. What has changed is that interests aligned with parties now have a greater stake in seeing those parties elected to a majority than in the past. But since parties need the resources interest groups can supply, parties have been unable to entirely subordinate organized interests to their own agendas as Schattschneider hoped they might.

I have focused on American politics, but these ecological concepts can be applied to parties and organized interests in any country, although institutional differences will lead to different types of party–interest group relationships. For example, the corporatism that Schmitter and others describe, with centralized interests bargaining with centralized party and bureaucratic actors, is probably much more likely to emerge in a unitary system lacking separation of powers in which party actors have an enhanced ability to make and keep promises.93 Understanding how very different institutional structures across nations shape relationships between parties and organized interests would teach us a great deal about the politics of particular countries, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of different institutional structures for promoting the representation of organized interests and the unorganized mass public.

92. Rae, “Be Careful What You Wish For.”