

Polarizing Pluralism

Chapter 5

"Issue Partisanship and Incentives to Polarize"

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Abstract

Earlier in this book, we have demonstrated that interest group positions on congressional legislation polarized, but only *after* Congress itself did so. Our theory holds that in the era of insecure congressional majorities (c.f., Lee 2016), legislators increasingly concerned with maintaining their party brand demand the same from interest groups seeking access to them. To do so without compromising their core objectives, groups take party-consistent positions outside their core issue areas. Empirically, however, our tests have yet to establish that party competition—and not other, contemporaneous changes in American politics—is responsible for this diversification. We thus move to the group level, where we hypothesize that interest groups diversify differentially, according to the nature of their “core” issue area. In particular, we argue that as a group’s core issue area becomes more partisan, the group will more aggressively diversify their position-taking with partisan-consistent positions. We test these expectations using our dataset of approximately 200,000 interest group positions on congressional legislation between 1973 and 2018; furthermore, we measure the politicization of issue areas with both legislator speeches and partisan voting. Results are generally consistent with our expectations: group agenda diversification has increased markedly over time; the groups that have most diversified are those whose core issue areas are more partisan; and when groups take positions outside their core issue they tend to do so on votes that clearly divide the parties in Congress.

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In previous chapters, we have documented a trend of increasing polarization among organized interests. A significant portion of this polarization has occurred following the rise of so-called “insecure majorities” (c.f. Lee, 2016), suggesting that interest groups as a whole did not initiate the partisan polarization that characterizes contemporary American politics. In doing so, many “special” interests today exhibit programmatic rather than parochial position-taking behavior, taking positions on a wide array of bills in issue areas often outside of a group’s obvious core interests. In doing so, groups’ preferences have become more reliably characterized by a single left-right dimension that also characterizes members of Congress. These patterns stand in stark contrast to traditional depictions of special interests as parochial, pragmatic, and opportunistic. More than a simple empirical trend, however, the implications of this dynamic are potentially quite alarming. Indeed, as we discuss at greater length in Part III of this book, if interest groups are driven to align with a single party, their roles may shift from one of moderation and pragmatism to one that *reinforces* trends of party extremity and primacy in American politics (Pierson and Schickler, 2019). But while many groups’ positions are today consistently more polarized than in previous administrations, this polarization is neither universal nor random among interests. In this chapter, we posit and test a theory for why some organized interest groups become partisan and programmatic, while others do not.

Previous research on interest group partisanship suggests that such decisions are driven either by groups’ involvement in party organization or by party leader strategy. That is, activists driven by coherent group interests may themselves make the parties’ operational bases, forming coherent and independent factions within the party organization (Bawn, Cohen, Karol, Masket, Noel and Zaller, 2012; Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller, 2009; Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016). This suggests, in a sense, interest groups “are” the party, and that the ability to win political power arises from the effectiveness with which group interests aggregate into durable coalitions. Just because a coalition is durable, however, does not mean that it is fixed. Indeed, party leaders may seek to incorporate additional group interests (and, in some cases, interest groups) into the existing party coalition. Doing so promotes several party goals, including making connections to key constituencies (Walker, 1991; Krimmel, 2017; Zoorob, 2019) or promoting policy gains by mobilizing aligned groups—thereby expanding the scope of interest group conflict (Fagan, McGee and Thomas, 2021). Despite these powerful means by which groups may become, or stay, aligned with a party, this depiction contradicts the traditional notion of parochial “special” interests making alliances with individual legislators sharing particular interests and objectives (Hansen, 1991; Hall and Deardorff, 2006). Furthermore, extant theories of group partisanship have difficulty accounting for variation in groups’ tendency to behave like programmatic partisans, either across groups or over time. We address

both of these limitations, offering a theory of interest group partisanship that explains how contextual factors shape the decisions of some groups to align with parties while others do not.

To do so, we build upon the theory of interest group partisanship as a response to party competition articulated in previous chapters. More specifically, we argue that groups whose primary interests lie in “politicized” issue areas, where the parties are competing by differentiating their respective brands, will feel the *most* pressure to signal alignment to one party or the other. Doing so allows the group to be seen as a responsible partner in that party’s “brand maintenance.” We then test three primary implications of this theory. First, that intense party competition (as exhibited in the decades since the 1990s Gingrich Revolution) incentivizes higher levels of diversity in interest group position-taking, suggesting that such groups are behaving more like programmatic partisans rather than parochial special interests. Second, that groups whose core issue becomes politicized are more likely to take positions outside of their core issue (so as to signal partisan loyalty without compromising the group’s core interests). Third, for this purpose, groups select “off-core” bills that are most likely to successfully differentiate between the party coalitions in Congress. To conduct these tests, we rely on a new dataset of over 200,000 interest group positions on congressional legislation over several decades, as well as a novel measure of issue politicization grounded in inter-party differences in rhetoric across issue areas and over time. Throughout these tests, we find strong support for our explanation, suggesting that interest groups respond strategically—and only to the extent they believe necessary—to legislators’ demands for public demonstrations of partisan alignment.

A Theory of Issue Competition and Interest Group Partisanship

Here, we present a theory that generates expectations about the conditions under which individual interest groups will behave more like programmatic partisans than parochial special interests. In short, we argue that policy-maximizing organizations working in eras of high party competition face a trade-off between access to one of the two major parties, and that this trade-off is “sticky” because it requires costly signalling of shared preferences to one party or the other. One type of costly signal takes the form of public position-taking on issues beyond a group’s core interests, leading groups engaging in it to exhibit more diverse issue agendas. Thus, we expect that in periods of intense party competition, groups will exhibit higher diversity in the issues addressed by bills on which they take positions. This will be particularly the case for groups whose core issue interests lie in a policy area subject to intense party competition and brand differentiation. Finally, in selecting bills for such off-issue positions, interest groups will prefer bills that clearly distinguish the major party coalitions from one another.

We start from the assumption that organized interests seek to maximize their influence on legislative development and policy outcomes. This influence can take many forms but crucially depends on the target of influence, in this case a legislator, believing that a group shares their policy preferences (Schnakenberg, 2017; Hall and Deardorff, 2006; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Hansen, 1991). One implication of this assumption is that factors increasing a legislator's perception of preference alignment with a particular organization will in turn give that organization more access to that legislator, all else equal.

Next, we assume that while legislators condition their relationships with interest groups on preference alignment, they have only imperfect information about the alignment of particular organizations' preferences with their own. Instead, they rely on signals from groups in order to update their beliefs about which groups align with their preferences. One implication of such scenarios (e.g., Lupia and McCubbins, 1998) is that signals of preference alignment are more credible to the extent they are costly to transmit. We take this as an additional assumption: to be credible, a signal of policy agreement must impose costs on the signalling organization, or at least create obvious potential to do so. In classic, relational depictions of interest group lobbying, organizations pay these costs *selectively*, on a *legislator-by-legislator* basis. Campaign contributions are perhaps the most obvious example of such signals (Hall, Van Houweling and Furnas, n.d.), but lobbying expenditures and the development and targeting of legislative subsidies (c.f., Hall and Deardorff, 2006) similarly entail costs on the organization and are delivered to legislators individually. Critically, according to classic models of group-legislator relations, only the legislators targeted by these cost expenditures are likely to observe them. Because these types of costly signals are delivered individually, they permit legislators to form individual beliefs about their preference alignment with particular organizations.

We believe that party competition disrupts this classic, relational depiction of lobbying. While parties may coalesce around any number of bases—personal ties, geographical, cultural, or racial identity, aligned policy preferences, etc.—a consequence of the shared party label is that members of the same party have electoral fates at least somewhat tied to one another (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). To protect their party's collective reputation and public brand, rank-and-file party members vest party leaders with procedural powers that allow them to control the legislative agenda, even at the expense of their individual ability to engage in policy entrepreneurship (Cox and McCubbins, 2005; Cann, 2008; Koger and Lebo, 2017). This dynamic became particularly pronounced in the wake of the 1990s Gingrich Revolution, after which party competition intensified and congressional majorities have become less durable (Lee, 2016; Theriault, 2013; Crosson, Furnas, Lapira and Burgat, 2021). During this time, as Lee (2016) forcefully underscores,

parties intensified their focus on party messaging, understanding that a clear and healthy party brand may aid in their fight to retain or regain the majority. Taken together, the transition to an era of high party organization and competition in Congress over the last few decades may alter the considerations individual legislators weigh as they grant access to and influence over the policymaking process, the benefits organizations receive from their doing so, and the strategies organizations employ in response.

These developments have significant implications for interest group strategy. When party competition is less intense, organized interests may rely on classic relational lobbying, paying costs to transmit signals of policy agreement—and thereby gaining credibility, access, and influence—on a legislator-by-legislator basis. As party competition intensifies, legislators face incentives to prioritize the preservation of their party's collective reputation as they consider the interests with which they will partner. Moreover, because legislators are rewarded and punished for their partisan loyalty by members of their own party (Cann, 2008), it is not merely the individual legislator's beliefs that affect their perception of an organization's partisanship. Rather, it is their beliefs about *their co-partisans'* beliefs that do so. This, in effect, conditions an organization's access to and influence with individual members of a party on its broad reputation for partisanship among other legislators. Put differently, a member's likelihood to meet or cooperate with an interest group depends on more than just shared policy objectives between group and district: rather, it depends in part on a group's viability as a *partner* in the broader competition over majority control. In these cases, private signals on a legislator-by-legislator basis are not enough. Instead, it is necessary, if not sufficient, that an organization's signals be transmitted publicly, observed by legislators collectively, and foster the belief that the organization is not just parochial or even ideological, but that it is explicitly loyal to a party.

This raises an important question: what behaviors can make an organization look publicly partisan? The individuals comprising the interest group may have party affiliations, and the group may explicitly hire on the basis of such affiliations (Furnas, Heaney and LaPira, 2019). However, we focus here on groups' support of a party's broader legislative agenda as important public signals of partisanship.

Like other types of signals, public positions must be credible to be effective, and credibility can come from the costs incurred by the organization transmitting those messages. Of course, the act of publicly declaring a position imposes trivial direct costs (e.g., the cost to update an organization's website or issue a press release). But the *public* nature of such acts can have a series of costly downstream effects. Organizational maintenance strategies are themselves tied to advocacy strategies (Walker, 1983; Crosson, Furnas and Lorenz, 2021; Walker, 1991), so adopting a partisan advocacy strategy can constrain the types of orga-

nizational maintenance strategies an organization can pursue.¹ As a hypothetical example, a gun owners' organization may try to signal its partisanship to a socially conservative political party by taking a position opposing a legal right to abortion. In doing so, however, they may find themselves unable to attract and retain grassroots members who are gun owners but oppose the organization's stance on abortion—or who simply are not interested in social policy. This in turn may reduce the ability of the organization to engage in membership-based grassroots advocacy on issues related to gun ownership, and force them to rely on other strategies and means of fundraising. Thus, though public position-taking is not immediately costly, it can imply future costs to the organization.

Beyond the potential to alienate an organization's membership, public position-taking also sends a signal to many political elites simultaneously. An organization that publicly takes positions on legislation provides an opportunity for many legislators to update their beliefs about that organization. To the extent that an organization's public position-taking is consistent with a party's legislative priorities, members of that party may increasingly believe the organization shares their collective, as well as individual, interests—and on that basis decide to work with the group. They are more likely to draw such inferences, however, when party competition is higher. That is, because as members of *opposing, competitive* parties also observe public position-taking by an organization, these signals of alignment with one party imply *opposition* to the other. For members of the other party, such organizations will appear much less likely to share interests and thus seem less worthy of access. Thus, by publicly creating conditions that effectively cause themselves to forego access to members of one party, interest groups incur a cost to their overall level of effectiveness that makes the signal of their alignment to their would-be partisan allies more credible.

In this way, interest groups seeking to use public position-taking to signal partisan alignment face something of a dilemma. This dilemma arises when an interest group's need to engage in partisan signalling conflicts with its own issue priorities. Many organizations are founded on specified shared policy interests and lobby on those interests once they become active. For such organizations, this leads them to lobby initially within a narrow range of issue areas, giving rise to consistent if not impermeable policy networks (Heinz, Laumann, Nelson and Salisbury, 1993). To continue lobbying solely on those issues, even if their preferences are or become concordant with the legislative priorities of one of the major parties, gives little additional information about the *partisan* valence of their preferences: they can be viewed as continuing to advocate for the interests they have been pursuing all along. Thus, when party competition intensifies and organizations' access depends on the partisan character of their signals to legislators, we would expect

¹For an application of this logic in the realm of campaign finance, see Li (2018).

groups to lobby *outside* of their core interests. Such “off-core” position-taking would, in effect, broaden the set of issues on which an organization is lobbying. We therefore expect party competition in a group’s core issue area to encourage the diversification in the set of issue areas where that group takes public positions.²

Nevertheless, while diversification may allow groups to engage in partisan signalling without compromising their core interests, it remains a costly strategy. Thus, one would expect groups to avoid these costs if possible, and to diversify only to the extent necessary to gain access to legislators and thereby to influence lawmaking. Here, we return to the principle that more intense partisan conflict creates stronger incentives for interest groups to signal partisan alignment. While the overall level of national partisan conflict varies across time and has been increasing in recent decades, it need not affect all groups *equally* at any given point of time. In particular, interest groups may face different pressures to signal party alignment depending on the core issue within which they work. As described above, interest group lobbying is embedded within issue networks—i.e., the policymakers and stakeholders with interests in that issue area—that vary in the degree to which various types of actors are involved as well as the frequency and primary venue (i.e., legislative, executive, judicial, international, federal, state/local, etc.) of policy enactments within them (Grossmann, 2013; Heinz et al., 1993). Issue areas are also a primary locus for partisan conflict over control of government in the modern era of insecure congressional majorities; at any given time some issues are more a focus of party conflict than others. When a particular issue area becomes “politicized” in this way, parties are especially attentive to preservation of their party brand on that issue and differentiating it from that of the other party (Lee, 2016). These goals encourage legislators to more intensely monitor, and more strongly punish or reward, their co-partisans’ effects on their shared party brand on politicized issue areas where the parties are actively differentiating from one other. We posit that, to demonstrate loyalty and contributions to party brand maintenance in these politicized issues, legislators more strongly condition access-granting to interest groups on public signals of exclusive party loyalty.

Empirical Expectations

Based on this dynamic, we believe that three empirical patterns should have developed within interest group advocacy over the past several decades. The first derives from the observation that, within the

²Though they propose a different theoretical logic, grounded in party strategy of Schattschneiderian conflict expansion pulling groups into what we would call off-core issues, Fagan, McGee and Thomas (2021) find that among contemporary groups that both give campaign contributions and take public positions, issue diversity is higher among organizations whose campaign contributions more lopsidedly favor one party over the other. This importantly demonstrates that more strongly-allied groups exhibit higher issue diversity in the bills on which they take positions. Here, we offer and test an explanation grounded in interest group strategy.

past few decades, the insecurity of legislative majorities, and hence the intensity of party competition, has increased monotonically over time. This increased competitiveness is reflected in roll-call records more polarized by party and characterized by a single dimension of ideological conflict between them (Poole and Rosenthal, 1984; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2016), ongoing replacement of incumbent legislators with more partisan newcomers (Theriault, 2013), increased party competition and emphasis on communications staff in party leadership (Lee, 2016), and decreasing frequency of bipartisan legislative cosponsorship coalitions (Harbridge, 2015). Given this, we posit that the average interest group's position-taking portfolio should have diversified over time. As a condition for access to majority-seeking legislative offices, more and more interest groups have faced pressure to broaden their public issue advocacy, leading to a general broadening in groups' position-taking activities.

H1: Groups operating in more recent Congresses will take public positions on a more diverse set of issues than interest groups operating in earlier Congresses.

Beyond these broad temporal trends, however, our theory also generates expectations about *which* groups will diversify and the implications of the goals they are serving in doing so. If our depiction of advocacy in a partisan era is correct, groups whose core issue areas are most subject to partisan differentiation will face stronger incentives to align with one of the major parties and to signal that alignment to lawmakers from that party. Because taking positions on off-core issues allows such groups to signal partisan alignment without directly compromising core issues, we expect groups whose core issue area is more of a focus of partisan conflict will face the strongest pressures to diversify the issue areas in which they take positions.

H2: Groups whose core issue areas are a focus of partisan politicization and competition will take positions on bills across a more diverse set of issues.

Finally, we expect groups' selection of off-core positions to reflect the goal of serving as a costly signal of partisan alignment. While by no means the only such signal, taking positions on *party unity votes*—those characterized by a large percentage of members of one party voting opposite a large percentage of members of the other (Layman, Carsey and Horowitz, 2006; Bond and Fleisher, 2000; Stonecash, Brewer and Mariani, 2018; Roberts and Smith, 2003)—accomplishes this goal. Party unity votes differentiate the two major parties, and thus are a key locus of partisan issue competition. Compared to less-differentiating bills, taking a position on a bill that generates a party unity vote is unambiguously aligning the group with one party *and against the other*; thus, the costs (in access to the other party) paid to take positions on bills that generate party unity votes are higher than on those that do not. Because costlier signals are

more credible and thus more useful for securing access to party-conscious lawmakers, we therefore expect groups taking off-core positions for the purpose of signalling partisan alignment to prefer selecting bills for such purposes that generate party unity votes.

H3: When groups take positions on bills outside of their core issue area, such bills are more likely (than bills within the group's core issue area on which they take positions) to better differentiate between the two major parties.

Measurement and Data

In order to assess whether interest groups have diversified their position-taking along these lines, we require measurements of three main constructs. First, we must devise a means for capturing the “core” issue area of interest for a given interest group. Without this measure, one cannot examine how issue dynamics have differentially encouraged diversification among various interest groups. Beyond this basic measure, however, we must also measure position-taking diversity itself—in a fashion that is comparable both across legislative chambers and over time. Finally, modeling differences in issue diversification according to our theory requires a metric for summarizing the “partisan” or “politicized” nature of an issue area.

Measuring Interest Groups’ “Core” Issue Areas

While many interest groups lobby on a variety of issue areas, nearly all groups are most directly motivated by a single core issue area. In fact, it is this issue focus that has traditionally served as the dividing line between “special” interests and broad, programmatic political parties. Thus, in order to understand which special interests have been most subject to diversification pressures over time, we must first delineate which issue area most clearly motivates a given interest group.

Generally speaking, researchers have typically used external classification schemes to place interest groups into categories (e.g., the Center for Responsive Politics’s adaptation of the North American Industrial Classification System). Though useful in many applications, such classifications are limited in their ability to test our expectations regarding issue politicization and position-taking diversity. First, from a conceptual perspective, such classification schemes typically categorize interest groups according to institutional form rather than issue focus. As an example, the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) classifies NARAL Pro-Choice America as an “Ideological/Single-Issue Group,” rather than as a civil rights or women’s health advocacy organization. Similarly, groups such as Americans for Tax Reform also count as single-issue groups, rather than as groups primarily interested in tax policy. Given that our expectations

center on the role of individual issues in building a party's brand, such non-issue-focused codes are not directly useful for testing our hypotheses.³ Thus, we instead rely about groups' own *behaviors* to reveal their core legislative issues.

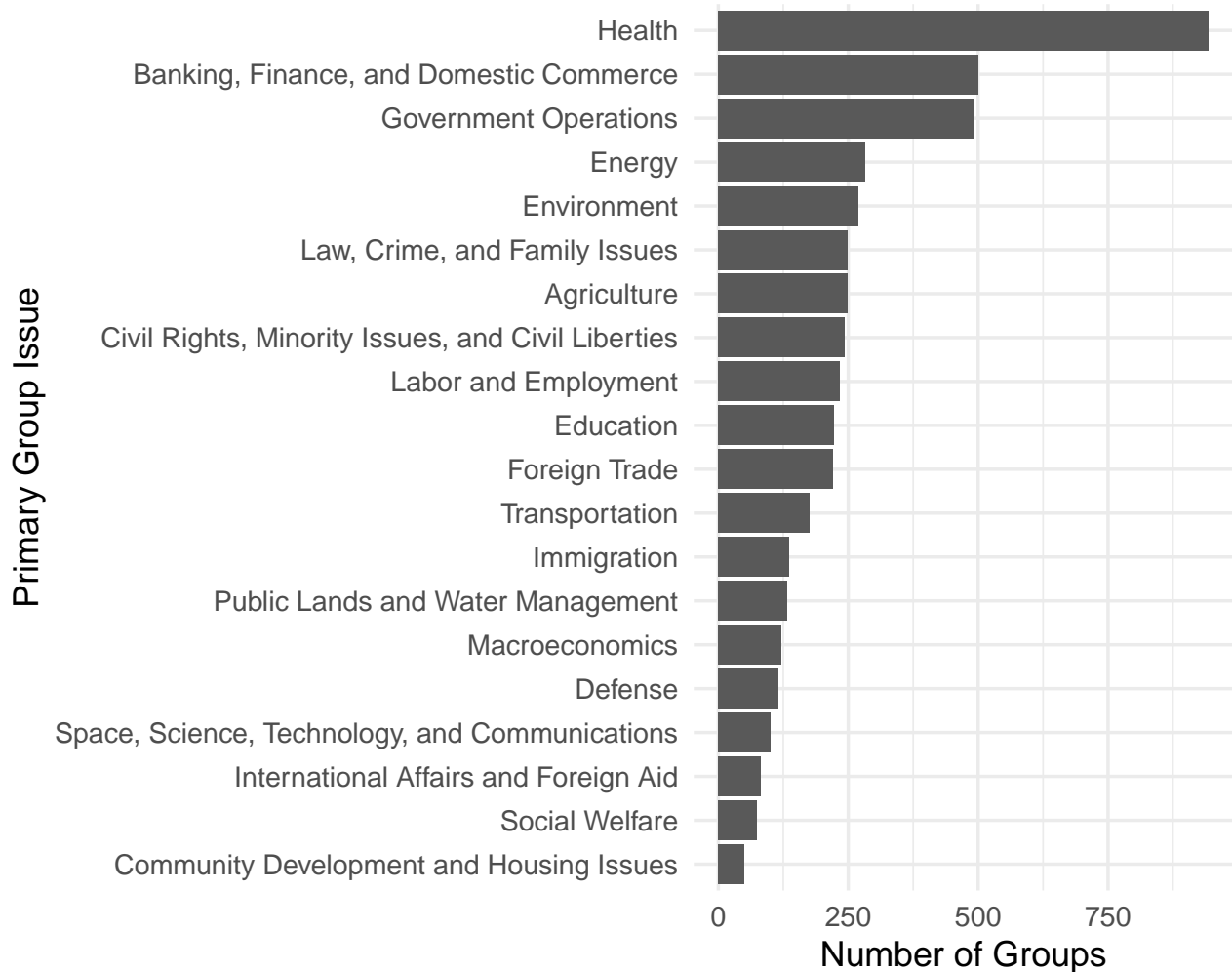
More specifically, we use our main dataset of interest group positions on congressional legislation as our means for identifying interest groups' core issues. As we detail in previous chapters, our data come from a broad set of sources, ranging from direct interest group communications with Congress to legislator speeches and press releases. The breadth and depth of these data allow us to base our classifications on a strong sample of interest groups' public activities. Perhaps even more crucial than the size of these data, however, is their explicit legislative focus. That is, because Adler and Wilkerson's Congressional Bills Project has classified legislation dating back to 1973 according to the Comparative Agendas Project's (CAP) issue topic codes, we are able to connect interest groups directly to individual policy topics. Indeed, by simply merging Congressional Bills Project data with information on groups' position-taking activity, we are able to generate a straightforward measure of interest groups' issue priorities: we measure an interest group's core issue area as the *modal* CAP code on which the group took positions. Using these data, we measure the core policy interests for 4,893⁴ unique interest groups from the 93rd (1973-1974) through 115th (2017-2018) Congresses.

Measuring groups' core issues in this fashion generates top-line summary statistics that comport with widely held beliefs about the population of interest groups in Washington. As Figure 1 indicates, for example, the modal issue category for a large number of groups is healthcare. As LaPira, Thomas and Baumgartner (2014) and others have underscored, and several ambitious presidents have (often painfully) learned, health policy is among the most interest-dense topic areas in American politics. Conversely, issues related to the economically disadvantaged—such as those fitting in the Social Welfare and Community Development/Housing categories—do not occupy the core focus of many national interest groups (c.f., Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012). Taken together, we believe these core-issue measurements provide the information necessary for us to examine which groups have historically felt the most pressure to diversify their position-taking over time—and when they may have felt this pressure. We turn next, then, to our measurement of issue diversification among interest groups over time.

³On a more practical note, it is worth noting that such classification schemes are of limited use as a means for joining multiple kinds of data, such as bills and legislator communications. Not only is their "institutional" focus not directly applicable to other aspects of the policymaking process, but manually assigning these codes to new units is time-consuming and highly subjective.

⁴Our data actually include 23,820 unique groups total; however, we restrict our analysis to groups that took at least 5 public positions.

Figure 1: Number of interest groups taking at least 5 positions, by the “core issue” (most-common issue)



Capturing Position-Taking Issue Diversity Over Time

In order to capture whether or not interest groups have diversified in the issues they appear to pursue, our theoretical expectations require a measure to exhibit a series of key features. First, the measure must capture activities that are *public* in nature, in order to serve as a credible commitment to the party’s brand. Indeed, absent some sort of public commitment, issue diversification by an interest group is of far less use—and serves as a far weaker signal—for a legislator embedded in a system of partisan warfare. Second, and more practically, our measure of issue diversification must relate to tangible, actionable items, such that the units of diversification are comparable over time.

The data we have presented in this book provide an excellent means for examining precisely this kind of issue diversification in interest group activities over time. First, because our position-taking data focus

on legislation and roll call votes, they provide a clear and identifiable basis upon over time for detecting changes in an interest group’s issue portfolio. That is, as we note earlier, all bills in our data are coded according to CAP topic codes. These codes enable us to build a measure of position-taking diversity that is straightforward to measure and compare over time. Second, because the positions we collect in our data are public in nature, they provide exactly the sort of costly commitment to party brand that lies at the heart of our theoretical account.

Using the CAP Major Topic Code associated with each of a instance of position-taking in our data, we measure the diversity of interest group g ’s position-taking during time t using the Simpson’s inverse diversity index, D_{gt} , defined as

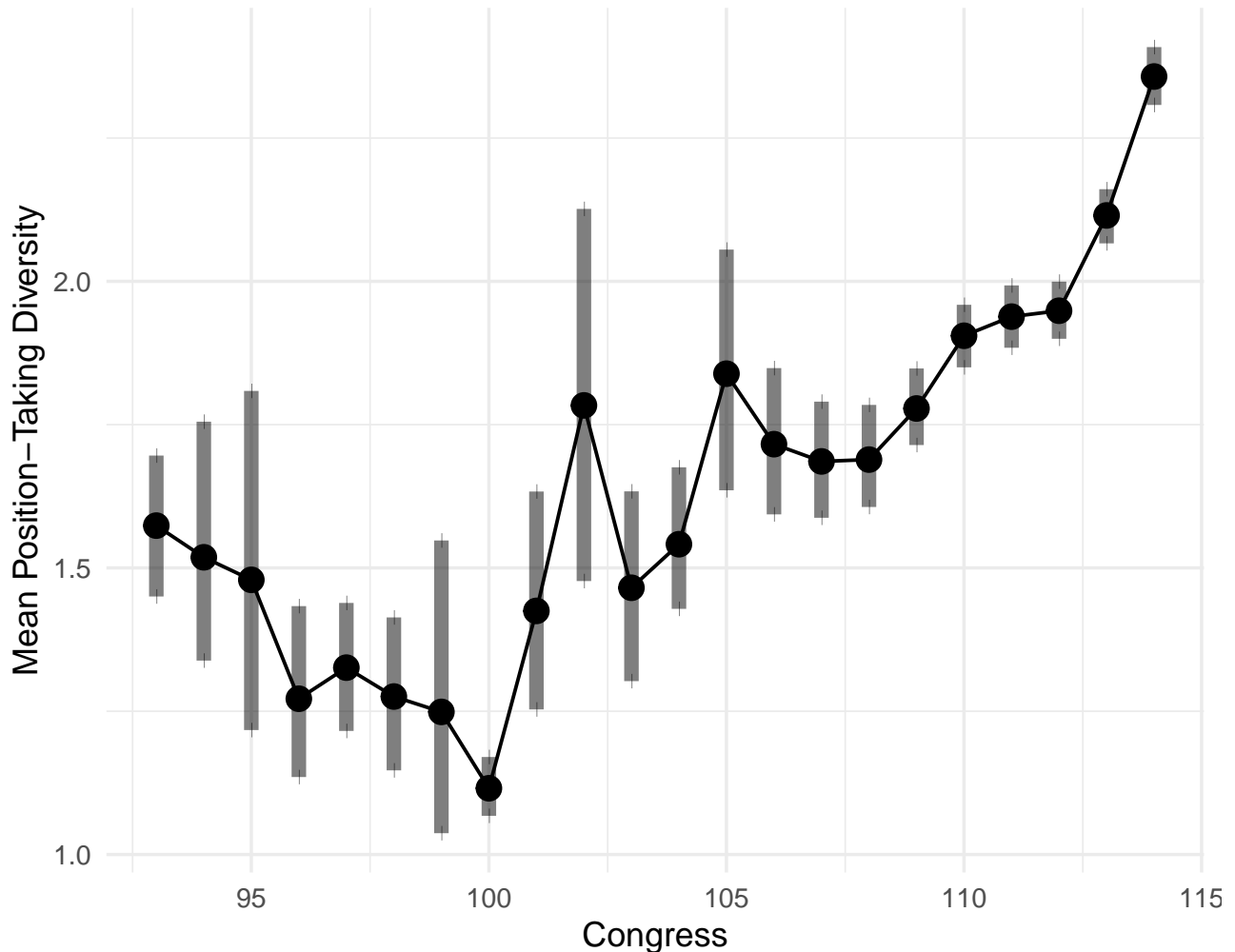
$$D_{gt} = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^R p_{igt}^2}$$

where p_{igt} is the proportion of group g ’s total position-taking during time t on bills in issue area i . This metric is particularly desirable for interpretation, as it is bounded by 1 (when all of a group’s position-taking is on a single issue), and by the total number of issues if a group splits its position-taking equally across all issues.⁵

Figure 2 depicts changes in average position-taking diversity for the time period covered by our data (1973 - 2018). As the figure shows, the average position-taking diversity of groups in our data increases substantially over time, consistent with our expectations. While it is certainly the case that the total number of collected positions in our data has increased substantially over this time period, it is worth underscoring some of the notable ebbs and flows in issue diversification over time. For example, interest groups in the 1980s exhibited notably lower levels of issue diversity than groups in the 1970s. To be clear, our theory does not necessarily explain these high-level ebbs and flows, but their existence does appear to indicate that the observed increase in diversification is not merely an artifact of our data collection procedure. In fact, this sort of variation underscores the need to understand when and under what conditions *individual* groups choose to diversify, beyond observing general diversification trends over time. We therefore turn next to our measurement of issue politicization, which we argue drives interest groups to diversify their position-taking.

⁵It is also worth noting that this metric has also been used in political research previously, to capture the “effective number of parties” used to measure party concentration in multi-party systems in comparative politics Laakso and Taagepera (1979) and to capture the “attentional diversity” of actors across issue areas (Boydston, Bevan and Thomas III, 2014).

Figure 2: Average Position-taking diversity over time for all groups that take at least 5 positions total. 95% Bootstrapped CIs



Defining and Measuring Issue “Politicization”

According to our primary hypothesis (*H2*), we expect that when an interest group’s core issue area becomes increasingly tied to party branding, that group will take positions on a larger diversity of policy issues. Key to capturing this phenomenon, however, is clearly identifying what we mean by what we have called issue “politicization.” Given our general argument that the rise of insecure legislative majorities has engulfed interest groups into the all-encompassing majority-seeking ethos in Washington, our measure must capture the central theme of majority-seeking activities according to Lee (2016): partisan *differentiation*. That is, our aim is to track over time the extent to which a given issue area has not only become part of a party’s agenda, but a dimension along which it seeks to distinguish itself from the opposing party.

Fortunately, we are not the first to set out to measure such a construct. In a recent study on the partisan

behaviors of specific business industries, Barber and Eatough (2020) develop a measure of industry politicization using partisan-relevant mentions of industries in major newspapers. Barber and Eatough find that an industry's level of politicization, measured by close semantic ties, has notable consequences for groups' PAC donation patterns: namely, that PACs in politicized industries are far less likely to pursue bipartisan "access-seeking" donation strategies. In spite of the clear conceptual similarities between their politicization measure and our construct of interest—and despite the fact that the authors' findings are, in our view, quite consistent with our overall theory of interest group behavior in the era of insecure majorities—Barber and Eatough's measure does not quite provide the information necessary to test our hypotheses. In addition to differences in temporal coverage (1999 to 2014 for Barber and Eatough and 1973 to 2018 for us), Barber and Eatough focus on *industry* politicization rather than the *issue* politicization that is central to our account.

In their study of historical polarization in Congress, Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy (2019) offer an alternative means for using textual data to quantify the partisan content of political actors' speech. Here, the authors use a sophisticated scaling methodology to predict the partisanship of speakers based solely on their selection of bigrams revealed to discriminate between Republican and Democratic speakers. Gentzkow and coauthors then use their measure to track the polarization (or "policization," in Barber and Eatough's terminology) of individual speech topics over time. That is, after using topic models to classify speeches according to broad issue areas, the authors track which issue areas feature speeches most adept at distinguishing between Republican and Democratic speakers. Similar to Barber and Eatough's, this measure contributes useful conceptual and methodological progress for measuring issue politicization; however, it also stops short of providing all of the information we need. More specifically, although Gentzkow et al. generate data for an impressively long time-series, their topics are a function of the speeches themselves and do not map well onto other issue classification schemes like CAP's. As a result, the scores do not allow us to capture the politicization of a group's core issue area as we have measured it.

For these reasons, we opt to generate our own, original measure of issue politicization, based on CAP's Major Topic codes. Our measure is methodologically inspired by Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy (2019), and it builds upon the fully parsed text of the *Congressional Record* (CR) made available in their replication materials. Similar to their measure, we use legislators' selections of particular bigrams to examine how well a statistical model can predict the partisanship of the speaker. Unlike Gentzkow et al., however, we begin by first connecting individual speeches to CAP topic codes directly. More specifically, we applied a custom

regular expression⁶ to detect mentions of all topic-coded bills in the Congressional Bills Project. We then link CAP issue codes to each of these speeches, assigning the topic of the mentioned bill to the speech in question. In total, this procedure generated 229,876 issue-coded speeches.

Because the partisanship of the speakers is known, these linked speeches allow us to identify a separate corpus of text, C_{it} , for every congress t and for each issue, i . We then remove stop-words and extract the counts, $N(R)_{kit}$ and $N(D)_{kit}$, of how many times Republicans (R) and Democrats (D), respectively, utter bigram $k_{it} \in C_{it}$ (i.e. phrase k from the issue i and Congress t corpus). This procedure yields a set of counts for 484,800 unique phrases across the congresses in our data.

With these counts, we then calculate the degree to which partisans deploy each bigram k_{it} distinctly from one another, comparing counts $N(R)_{kit}$ and $N(D)_{kit}$ to the total count of bigrams used by legislators of each party on issue i in congress t . For each bigram k_{it} we use a chi-square test to examine how the partisan distribution of the phrase's use differs from the partisan distribution of total bigrams for issue i in congress t . The final bigram-specific measure of partisan discrimination is $p_{k_{it}}$, defined as the p -value from this chi-square test. We then arrive at a total issue politicization score for issue i in congress t by taking the weighed average of 1 minus this discrimination score over all bigrams in C_{it} , where the weights, $w_{k_{it}}$ are the proportional abundances of each bigram (based on counts).

Formally, we calculate issue politicization scores, \mathcal{P}_{it} , for all CAP issues i and congresses t as:

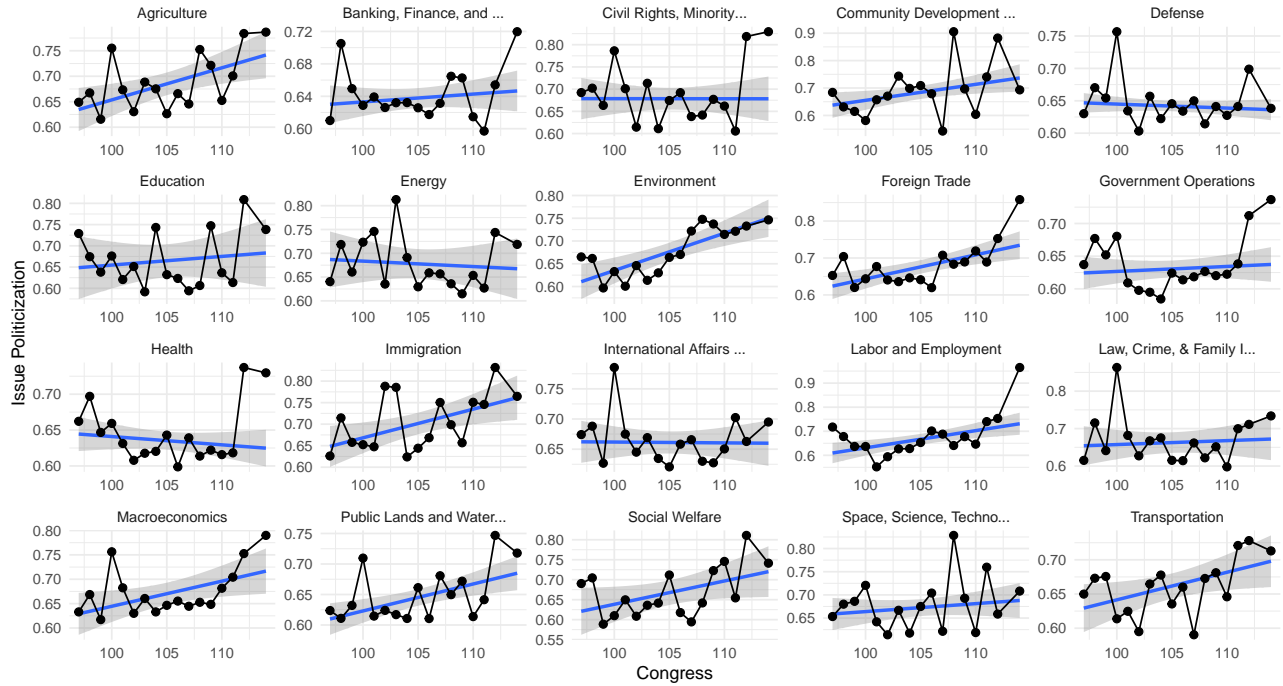
$$\mathcal{P}_{it} = \frac{\sum_{k_{it}=1}^{K_{it}} w_{k_{it}} (1 - p_{k_{it}})}{\sum_{i=k_{it}}^{K_{it}} w_{k_{it}}}$$

which ranges from 0 to 1. As constructed, $\mathcal{P}_{\square} = 0$ would indicate that a bigram drawn at random from the speeches on issue i in congress t is uttered by partisans with the same frequency as all other bigrams in that topic and issue. Conversely, values closer to 1 indicate that a randomly drawn bigram is used more differently by legislators of different parties.

Figure 3 depicts these scores by issue and over time. As the figure indicates, there is substantial cross-issue variation in the rate of politicization over time. However, as the figure also unequivocally shows, most issues demonstrate stark increases in politicization during our period of measurement. While these broad trends are consistent with our expectations (particularly $H1$) we leverage this cross-sectional variation to put our claims about issue politicization and issue diversification ($H2$) to the test.

⁶We used the following regular expression, deployed in production at ProPublica and kindly shared by Derek Willis: `/(?![a-zA-Z])(?:S?|H?|HJ|SJ)(?:*J?|*R?|*Con?|*)(?:*Res?)*+/(?![a-zA-Z])/i.`

Figure 3: Politicization by topic over time.



While we believe this measure of issue politicization closely tracks our target construct, one may reasonably caution that both our primary independent variable (politicization) and much of our dependent variable (public position-taking) come from similar underlying data sources. Moreover, it may be possible for legislators to *speak* in a polarized fashion while nevertheless *acting* in a consensual one (such as, for example, on foreign policy). If so, savvy interest groups would likely see through such strategic communications and would not necessarily alter their position-taking behavior. For these reasons, to examine the robustness of our results, we also utilize a secondary measure of issue politicization, based on roll call vote data from Crespin and Rohde (2019).

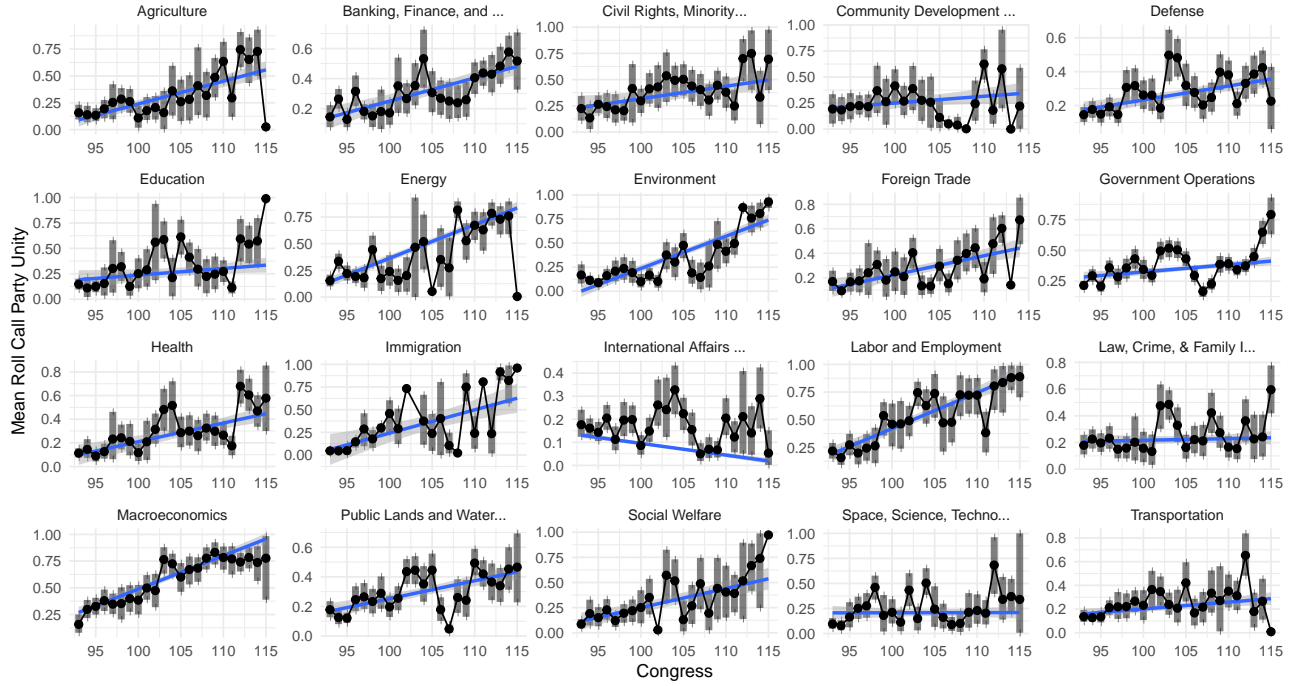
To measure issue politicization with these data, we begin by calculating a party unity score for each each roll call, using a modified version of the metric introduced by Rice (1925).⁷ More specifically, we calculate

$$PU_P = \frac{V_{YP} - V_{NP}}{V_{YP} + V_{NP}}$$

where V_{YP} denotes the number of *Yea* votes by members of party P and V_{NP} denotes the number of

⁷The original Rice score featured absolute values in both the numerator and denominator. However, since vote directionality is ultimately of importance to our measure of partisan “distinctiveness,” we remove the absolute values.

Figure 4: Party Unity of roll-call votes by topic over time. 95% CIs



Nay votes by members of party P . This score ranges from -1 if a party is unified in voting *Nay*, and 1 if the party is unified in voting *Yea*.

Thereafter, we then calculate an overall party *differentiation* score for a given *roll call* vote as

$$\frac{|PU_D - PU_R|}{2}$$

Put differently, for each roll call, we measure how distinctly Republicans and Democrats vote from one another (rather than just how consistently members from a single party vote together). This allows to generate issue-congress metrics for partisan differentiation by simply averaging across all rollcalls in CAP code i during congress t :

$$\mathcal{P}_{it}^{(RC)} = \frac{1}{R} \sum_{r=1}^R 0.5 * |PU_D - PU_R|$$

where R represents the total number of roll call votes taken on issue i and in congress t . This metric also ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represents total unanimity on all roll-call votes and 1 represents Democratic and Republican legislators *always* voting against each other.

Figure 4 depicts this party-unity measure of issue politicization for each CAP code over time, with

bootstrapped 95 percent confidence intervals. As with our text-based measure, we observe substantial cross-issue variation with general trend of increasing party unity or politicization over time.

In addition to the methodological advantages of this measure as a robustness check, we use these vote-specific unity scores to test *H3*. More specifically, because we argue that positions taken outside of groups' core areas serve as costly partisan signals of alignment with partisan legislators, off-core position-taking is of special interest to this empirical exploration. As we discuss below, we examine the partisan content of off-core position-taking by examining party unity on off-core bills specifically.

Results

We test our first hypothesis with two fixed effects regression models, one for each operationalization of our primary independent variable. We estimate these models on group-congress panels using two-way fixed effects and group-clustered standard errors. In both models, our dependent variable of interest is the diversity of a group's position-taking. Model 1 features politicization of a group's core issue measured according our text-based metric. Model 2 substitutes this text measure for our roll-call party unity score for each group's core issue.

The application of the group fixed effect in these models absorbs time invariant propensities for some groups or group types to take more diverse positions generally. Likewise, the congress fixed effects capture aggregate temporal differences in diverse position-taking. The congress fixed effects are of particular importance here, as the depth of coverage of our position-taking data varies substantially over time. Including congressional fixed effects ensures that our results are not driven by our data collection patterns over the covered time period. To ensure that *group-level* differences in diversification are not an artifact of our ability to collect data for particular groups, however, we also include as a control variable the total count of positions that we have captured a given congress across all issues for each group. We estimate all models on all groups that took at least total 5 positions in our dataset.

As Table 1 summarizes, we find strong evidence consistent with our claim that the politicization of a group's core issue encourages the group to diversify its position-taking. Importantly, this relationship is robust to our choice of politicization measure. Substantively, since both measures of core issue politicization range from 0-1, interpretation of effect sizes is relatively straightforward and reveals associations between politicization and diversification that are substantively significant. According to Model 1, for example, a group whose core issue experiences the highest level of politicization in our observed data ($\mathcal{P} = 0.96$) is expected to have a position-taking diversity that is 0.24 units higher than a group in the least politi-

Table 1: Groups diversify their position-taking activity when their core issue becomes more politicized

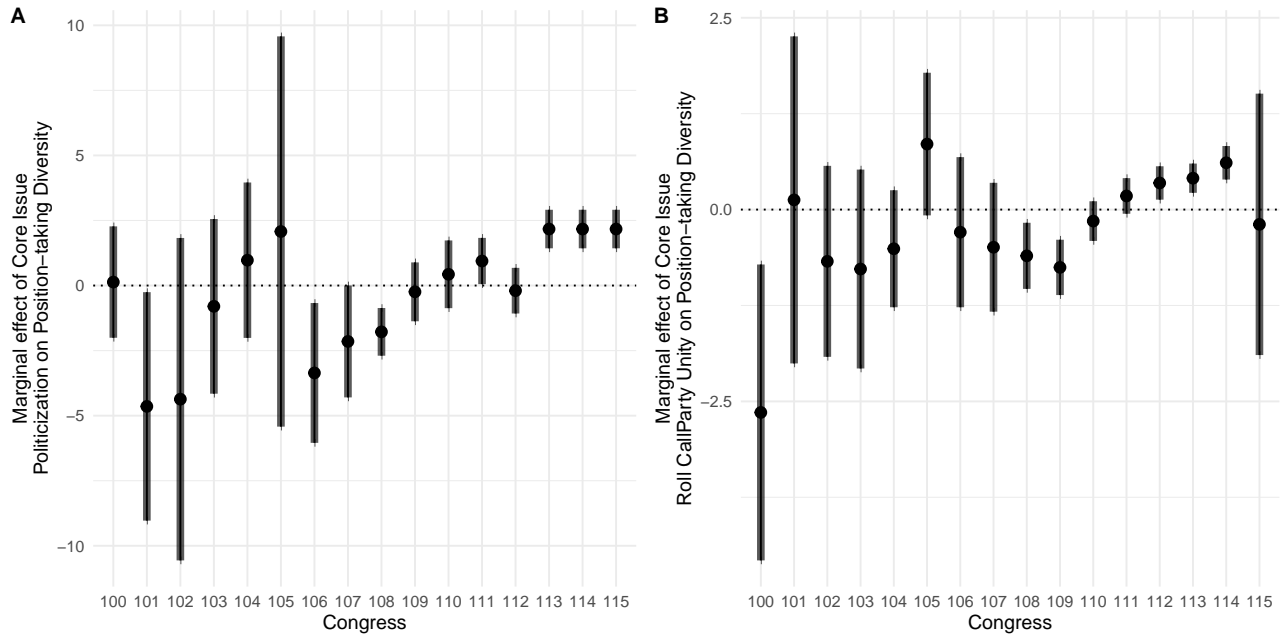
	Model 1	Model 2
CR Politicization on Core Issue	0.578* (0.230)	
Roll-Call Party Unity on Core Issue		0.217*** (0.061)
Number of Positions	0.031** (0.010)	0.035*** (0.010)
Num.Obs.	17 644	21 991
R2	0.662	0.647
R2 Adj.	0.534	0.546
R2 Within	0.128	0.148
AIC	53 737.7	65 800.0
Std.Errors	Clustered (group)	Clustered (group)
FE: congress	✓ (17)	✓ (23)
FE: group	✓ (4,848)	✓ (4,891)

cized issue ($\mathcal{P} = 0.54$). This difference constitutes an increase equal to approximately 1/8th of the mean position-taking diversity value in our data (1.96), or a shift of .16 standard deviations. Similarly, groups whose core issues exhibit the highest roll-call party unity (0.99) have 0.22 units higher position-taking diversity scores than those with core issues with the lowest roll-call party unity (0) according to Model 2, equivalent to a .15 standard deviation shift.

Together, these results provide strong support for our primary hypothesis, $H2$: as a group's core issue becomes more politicized, that group will tend to take positions on a more diverse set of issues. To further interrogation our results, however, we also investigate whether and to what extent this relationship has changed over time. To do so, we interact the congress fixed effect with our measures of core issue politicization and roll-call party unity. Because of instability caused by relatively small position-taking sample sizes in earlier congresses, we truncate our analysis to only Congresses 100-115 (1987-2019). Estimation is identical in all other respects.

Figure 5 plots the estimated marginal effects of our independent variables of interest by congress. Subplot A shows the estimated marginal effect of politicization using our CR text measure, while subplot B shows the estimated marginal effect using the roll-call party unity measure. In both cases we observe a negative or non-significant relationship between politicization and position-taking diversity from the 100th to 110th Congresses, and largely a positive and significant relationship in subsequent Congresses.

Figure 5: The effect of core issue politicization (subplot A) and roll call party unity (subplot B) on groups' position-taking diversity. 95% CIs



To be clear, this is suggestive evidence that the relationship we observe in the aggregate models is being driven primarily by more recent activity. Still, it is difficult to delineate here between “true” effects and artifacts of changing data availability. It is notable, perhaps, that the era of positive and significant estimated effects that we observe coincides with the election of Barack Obama, and heightened partisan tensions following the Tea Party wave election.

In our final analysis, we interrogate the dynamics suggested in *H3* by capturing more directly some of the “differentiation” dynamics underlying our theory. More specifically, we examine the party-unity scores of the specific roll-call votes on which interest groups take positions. To reiterate, our theory suggests that one of the primary purposes of off-core-issue position-taking is to signal partisan/coalitional alignment to legislators that have conditioned access on groups’ behavior as good members of the party team. In other words, more than simply taking positions on additional issues beyond a group’s primary policy concerns, the selected issues should ideally provide evidence to legislators that associating with the group in question will help to clarify and maintain the party brand. If this dynamic is in fact at play, we should expect groups to be strategic about *which* off-core issues they take positions on. Put simply, if off-core issue position-taking is supposed to signal party-alignment, groups should do their off-core issue position taking on votes for which the parties are split. If groups take positions on votes that fail to distinguish between the parties, it is not clear in that case that the act of issue diversification is tied to insecure majorities and

Table 2: Positions that groups take outside their core issues are on bills with more partisan roll call votes

	Model 3
Off-Core Issue	0.016** (0.005)
Num.Obs.	34 688
R2	0.527
R2 Adj.	0.385
R2 Within	0.001
AIC	9808.5
BIC	77 754.4
Log.Lik.	3132.773
Std.Errors	Clustered (group)
FE: congress	✓ (23)
FE: group	✓ (7,995)
FE: PAP Topic	✓ (20)

partisan competition as hypothesized.

To test these expectations, Table 2 presents Model 3, a fixed effects regression estimated on all interest group positions for which we have associated roll-call party unity scores. It is important to note that this excludes all interest group positions on bills or amendments that did not receive a roll-call vote. In this model, we regress *Off-Core Issue*, an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the position taken is on a vote outside the group’s core issue area and 0 if the position is on a vote in group’s core issue, on the party unity score of the vote in question using a fixed effect ordinary least squares regression.

As with Models 1 and 2, we estimate Model 3 with fixed effects for group and congress, and we add fixed effects by topic. In line with our expectations, our findings are consistent with the claim that when groups engage in off-issue position-taking, they do so on votes on which the parties are more divided than when they take positions within their core issues. This suggests that these positions are particularly useful to signal partisan alignment.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, we examined differences in interest groups’ responses to increased party competition and insecure congressional majorities. Our theory holds that the modern era of insecure congressional majorities has caused legislators to prefer granting access, and thereby influence, to interest groups that publicly send costly signals of loyalty to their party. Here, we examine how party issue-competition and differ-

entiation encourages groups to differentially signal loyalty to one party over the other—and, ultimately, to become more consistently ideological and programmatic in their position-taking. We show first that in the modern era of insecure majorities where lawmakers are most likely to grant access on the basis of demonstrable partisan loyalty, groups have diversified their position-taking. We further show that this is likely due to partisan pressures by analyzing new data on interest groups' position-taking and making use of a novel issue-area- and period-level measure of issue politicization. We find that groups whose core issue area becomes more partisan are more likely to diversify their position-taking, and in doing so strategically take positions on bills outside of their core issue area that provide especially clear signals of alignment with one party and opposition to the other. This suggests that to some extent, interest groups' increasing tendency to resemble programmatic parties more than parochial special interests is driven by the partisan issue context in which groups operate.

This leaves us with several possible avenues for further examination. First, one could examine whether other potential signals of party loyalty are more common among groups whose core issue area is more politicized. These might include a partisan election-oriented PAC giving strategy (Fagan, McGee and Thomas, 2021) or changes in more publicly-oriented issue advertising, for example. Second, while we have focused on partisan issue differentiation here, there are other ways in which issue politics differ, such as the degree of congressional involvement (Grossmann, 2013) or the extent of parties' issue ownership (Egan, 2013). These factors may further condition how interest groups with different core issues respond to legislative incentives to signal partisan loyalty. Further investigation could clarify how these and other dynamics interact with party issue differentiation in shaping interest group strategy.

Having examined how the external context surrounding a group's core issue area incentivizes it toward greater partisan attachment, however, we turn next to internal factors. Beyond issue attachments, a group's resources may give it alternative means for signalling shared preferences. Its personnel may carry professional partisan attachments that permeate the character of the organization. Its audience might be more or less willing to tolerate off-core positions or just partisanship generally. Its mission may be more or less amenable to inclusive definitions of what counts as a "relevant" bill. To the extent that these internal organizational factors enable, encourage, or constrain a group's ability to signal partisan loyalty, they make that group more or less likely to become, by intention or as by-product, partisan loyalists.

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