

Legislative Party
Campaign
Committees
in the
American
States



ANTHONY GIERZYNSKI

Comparative Legislative Studies Series

Malcolm E. Jewell
Editor

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Legislative Party Campaign Committees in the American States

Anthony Gierzynski

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Foreword

This volume is the first in the Comparative Legislative Studies Series, which is designed to serve as a focal point for research on legislative studies in the United States and abroad, at national and subnational levels.

Controversy over how campaign funds are raised and spent, and over the sheer cost of elections, is permeating American politics. As state legislatures grow more professional, even legislative elections are becoming expensive in many states.

Anthony Gierzynski describes the development and behavior of campaign committees operated by legislative party leaders or caucuses to raise and allocate funds for legislative candidates. Using data from a number of representative states, he examines the criteria used for targeting districts and allocating funds. Unlike political action committees, which give disproportionately to entrenched incumbents, legislative party committees fund races that are expected to be close and support both incumbents and challengers on that basis. As a consequence, legislative elections have become more competitive, and these committees may actually strengthen legislative party leadership and cohesion.

MALCOLM E. JEWELL

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Introduction

A relatively new development in legislative and party politics is the emergence of the legislative party as an important actor in elections in the form of caucus campaign committees and leadership campaign committees, or leadership PACs. Legislative caucus campaign committees are, as the name implies, committees of the legislative party caucus that are given the responsibility of raising funds and providing assistance to the party's legislative candidates. Leadership campaign committees are used by individual legislators to distribute funds to other legislative candidates. The involvement of these organizations in legislative elections is a development that should generate a great deal of interest among political scientists and political observers, not only because it is new, but also because of the major normative and practical implications such a development holds for party politics, legislative elections, and legislative behavior.

Because legislative party involvement in elections is relatively new, many questions have yet to be answered, including questions of origin and purpose, behavior, and effect. Why did the legislative party become involved in campaigns for legislative seats? What type of organizations are the legislative party campaign committees? Can they be considered party organizations or are they merely political action committees? What exactly are they doing? To whom are they providing campaign assistance, with what, and how much? And what effect are they having on legislative elections, legislative behavior, and party politics?

The answers to these questions have far-ranging implications for legislative politics and political parties. For instance, if legislative

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party campaign committees can be considered party organizations, their existence changes the structure of party organization as we know it. Legislative party committees will have to be included in any delineation of the structure of party organizations, and the characterization of the party-in-government as a component of party organizations concerned mainly with governing will have to be altered to incorporate this new electoral role. Moreover, if these committees are indeed party organizations, then they represent a party response to growing needs of legislative candidates and the increased competition for legislative seats, providing evidence of political parties' ability to adapt to the candidate-centered campaigns that typify current elections.

In terms of legislative elections and behavior, if legislative party campaign committees utilize their resources strategically, they can have a significant impact on legislative elections. If they have an influence in elections, they may also affect the behavior of legislators. For example, legislators may vote along party lines more frequently as a consequence of the assistance they receive from their party's caucus campaign committee. Moreover, as candidates' dependence on interest group contributions is decreased by the campaign resources legislative parties provide, the influence these special interests exert over lawmaking should also decline. Finally, if legislative party campaign committees concentrate their resources on marginal races and make them more competitive, the result would be an increase in representation and responsiveness, thus making legislative elections more democratic.

Thanks to work of scholars such as Paul Herrnson, Gary Jacobson, and David Adamany, a great deal is known about the activities of the legislative caucus campaign committees at the national level—the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), the Republican National Congressional Committee (RNCC), and the Republican National Senatorial Committee (RNSC).¹ The congressional campaign committees, which are now an integral part of the national party organization, were all very active by 1980. The Republican congressional campaign committees began their independent collection of campaign funds in 1976-77; the Democratic committees, on the other hand, did not collect a significant number of funds until the 1980s.² Both arose from the void in congressional elections left by the national committees, which lacked the resources needed to concentrate seriously on congressional elections.

Researchers investigating the congressional campaign committees have found that they, among other things, focus their resources on marginal races; recruit candidates; provide services such as polling, media facilities, campaign consultants, and fund-raising; introduce candidates to major contributors; and provide a mark of legitimacy to challengers, helping them raise funds from individuals and PACs.³ Although the reported value of their assistance still represents only approximately 10 percent of all funds raised in congressional elections, the undervaluation of in-kind assistance, the use of "soft money," and the fact that the committees influence the contribution decisions of other major contributors means that these committees have come to play a key role in congressional elections. Herrnson reported that this is reflected in attitudes of congressional candidates and staff.⁴

Unfortunately, our knowledge of legislative party campaign committees and where they fit into our party system is incomplete because very little is known about the legislative party campaign committees at the level of state politics. Other than Malcolm Jewell's work, which brought the existence of legislative party campaign committees at the state level to our attention, most of the work is focused on a single state and/or deals exclusively with the distribution of campaign committee funds.⁵ These works provide some evidence that legislative party campaign committees concentrate their resources in competitive elections, and they offer bits of evidence suggesting that the committees may vary their strategies over time in accordance with partisan trends. They do not, however, provide us with any picture of what these committees are like in terms of organizational structure and practices, and they lack the comparative and theoretical approach necessary to make firm conclusions about the practices of legislative party campaign committees.

The purpose of this book is to report on research that was designed to expand our knowledge of the electoral activity of legislative parties by focusing on legislative party campaign committees at the state level. The research consists of a comparative study of legislative party campaign activity, with empirical analyses of campaign finance data in ten states and qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with legislative leaders and key staff on legislative caucus campaign committees in eleven states. The results lead to a number of important findings regarding the organization, practices, and behavior of legislative party campaign committees. The findings suggest that, in the services they provide and the way they distribute their resources,

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most legislative party caucus campaign committees have developed into organizations that are more akin to political parties than to PACs. Leadership PACs, on the other hand, resemble political action committees, but the way they distribute their funds, more often than not, counters the effect of PAC contributions. Such conclusions obviously have major implications for the study of legislative politics.

This book is organized so that the major questions of interest regarding the legislative party campaign committees are addressed in separate chapters. Chapter 1 examines the context in which legislative party campaign committees developed—the history of legislative elections and the role played by political parties throughout that history—in order to arrive at some understanding of why and how legislative parties became involved in elections. Chapter 2 develops a theoretical framework for the comparative study of the involvement of legislative parties in elections. The framework focuses the research and provides specific assumptions for the development of testable hypotheses; such an approach has been conspicuously absent in the literature on campaign committees. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the finances of legislative party campaign committees at the aggregate level, allowing for some state-to-state comparisons and an initial look at the distribution of resources. The qualitative analysis of interviews begins in chapter 4, where the results of the interviews are used to determine what these committees are like: the organizational structure of caucus committees, the assistance they provide candidates, where they get their resources, and the functions that they perform. Chapter 5 looks at the actual distribution of caucus committee and leadership campaign committee resources in terms of the marginality of the race and the types of candidates supported i.e., incumbents and nonincumbents. The differences between caucus committees and leadership PACs are explored in the chapter 6. Chapter 7 explores the question of refined strategies that take into consideration the legislative party's status in the legislature and national and state party trends. The conclusion provides a discussion of the implications of the findings and offers a look into the future.

1

Legislative Elections and Political Parties

A suitable starting place for this inquiry is an examination of the factors that may have inspired legislative parties to become involved in elections. The reasons for the development of legislative party campaign committees are evident in the recent history of legislative elections. Changes such as the decline in party loyalty, the phenomenal increase in the cost of campaigns, and the increase in party competition for control of state legislatures generated a demand for assistance that only a political party organization could provide. The state and national central party organizations, as well as the local party organizations, were in no position to help, having never fully recovered from the impact of the progressive reforms and the changes that occurred in the nature of political campaigns. It is in this environment that legislative caucus campaign committees emerged, and it seems apparent that the reason they emerged was to fill this void. In fact, this was a common theme among many of the legislators and staff who were interviewed for this research. Senator Charles Pray, president of the Maine Senate, for example, stated that the Democratic Senate Caucus Committee was "started in 1978 because we were getting very little help from the party." Mark Ausmus of the House Democratic Campaign Committee in Missouri indicated that in the 1980s the Democrats "didn't have a strong state party," and that was the "reason why the speaker started it [the HDCC]."

The reason for the development of leadership PACs can be found in the increasing amount of money in legislative campaigns and, more important, in the unequal distribution of that money. PACs and individuals tend to contribute more to incumbent candidates who are