Parties are more likely to form coalitions with groups that are like them and show loyalty, but not those that are rich.

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Forming coalitions with interested groups is an integral part of the American political system. But how do parties decide who to include in their coalition? In new research which uses the transcripts of Democratic Party policy platform hearings, **Jennifer Nicoll Victor** *finds that groups which are closer to the party ideologically, and who show loyalty, are more likely to be brought into the Democrats' coalition.*

Political parties play an important role in healthy democracies. Parties engage in a natural and constant competition that is meant to produce useful outcomes for voters and candidates. In order to achieve their goals, parties also form coalitions with interests, organizations, and segments of the population.

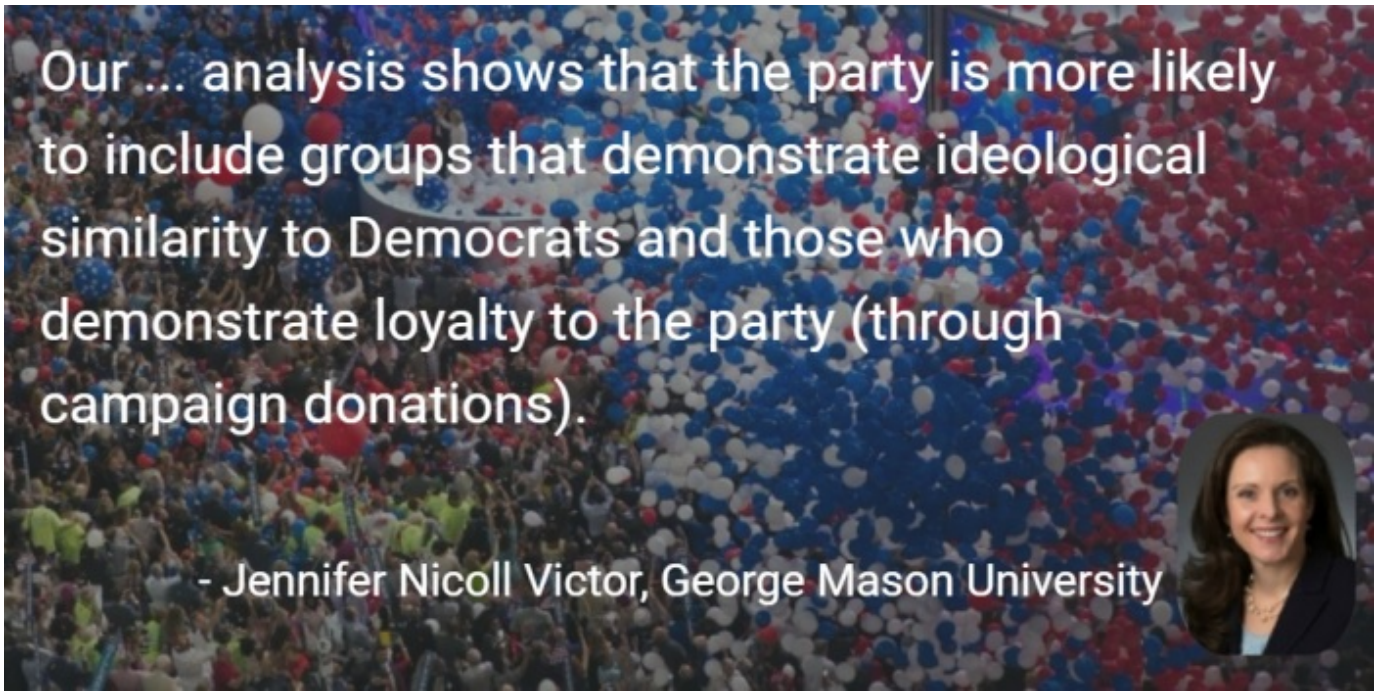
The make-up of a party coalition can tell us a lot about the party's goals and priorities, but the process by which this occurs may seem mysterious or opaque. American parties no longer operate in smoke-filled back rooms, but when it comes to identifying their inner circles the process may appear hazy.

In research that Gina Yanitell Reinhardt, of the University of Essex, and I conducted, we shed light on the way parties decide who to invite to their coalition, finding that Democrats are more likely to include groups that are ideologically similar to them, and those who show loyalty to the party via donations.

We begin our work with the observation that parties and organized interest groups have different goals, but need one another. Parties seek to elect candidates, and groups seek to obtain their preferred policies (or gain attention, or raise awareness about a topic—groups have diverse goals). There is a reciprocal nature to the relationship between groups and parties. Typically, groups need to work with parties to achieve their goals, while parties need groups to help identify strong candidates and mobilize voters.

The roles that parties and organized groups play in politics have become so entwined that many scholars now think it is appropriate to define parties by their coalition partners. The groups *are* the party. After all, groups are made up of citizens and voters, as are the parties. But the relationship between these entities is complex.

Political parties and organized interests are engaged in a never-ending dance. Each time the music stops (e.g., an election happens), the party forms its coalition by including particular partners that it calculates will help it win elections. The calculus by which parties select these partners, and how the partners get noticed and chosen is an important aspect to this dance.



In our research we hypothesized that parties would be more likely to include groups that have three types of characteristics. First, we expected parties to include groups that are ideologically near the median of the party. Second, we expected parties to include groups that show loyalty toward the party. Third, we expect parties to favor groups that have many resources. Each of these characteristics, ideological proximity, loyalty, and resources, are advantageous to parties who seek to attract voters in an election.

We test our hypotheses using a unique source of data. We obtained the transcripts of hearings that the Democratic Party held in 1996, 2000, and 2004 during their platform drafting process. Every four years the major parties draft platforms that outline their policy priorities and preferences for that election cycle. The Democrats held hearings and invited groups to provide written and oral testimony before the party drafted the platform. Groups came to tell the party what they wanted the platform to say. Analytically, we compared the content of the groups' requests to the content of the final platform and asked the question: did groups get what they asked for? Statistically, we can determine whether groups that have the hypothesized characteristics were more likely to have their preferences reflected on the final platform.

An important caveat to our research design is that in the US, it is not entirely clear that party platforms are particularly meaningful. Candidates are not beholden to their party platforms, and it is not at all clear that there are major consequences for an elected partisan who defects from a platform. However, the major parties in the US take the process seriously and expend considerable resources on the process. For parties, the platform represents the only time they make a unified, public, and national expression of ideas and priorities. For groups, platforms are an opportunity to make a case for inclusion in this major public document, regardless of whether it impacts the policy process.

Our analytical approach treats the text of the platform and group testimony as raw data. We develop a measure of congruity between the two and attempt to predict group inclusion in the platform based on group ideology, loyalty, and resources. Our statistical regression analysis shows that the party is more likely to include groups that demonstrate ideological similarity to Democrats and those who demonstrate loyalty to the party (through campaign donations). We do not find support for the expectation that the party rewards resource-rich groups. In short, money cannot buy platform planks.

Parties build coalitions strategically and dynamically. The process is constantly on-going in an organic mass negotiation between partners who have complementing, but not identical goals. Understanding the nature of this

process and its determinants helps us to better understand essential democratic functions.

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This article is based on the paper, "Competing for the platform: How organized interests affect party positioning in the United States", in Party Politics.

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