

One

Some Background on State Legislative Campaign Committees

An appropriate place to begin the examination of the new relationship between state legislative campaign organizations and traditional party units is with a brief look at the former. What are legislative campaign committees (LCCs), and what do they do? What difference do they make in state politics? This chapter sketches the short history of these new organizations.

WHAT ARE STATE LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN COMMITTEES?

Legislative campaign committees are appendages of the legislative caucus, created to support and manage state legislative campaigns. Fashioned after the four national congressional campaign committees, they provide a centralized pool of resources and expertise for reelection, open-seat, and challenge candidates. They may be active during election periods or the entire legislative cycle. In some states—primarily ones with professional legislatures—LCCs provide extensive campaign services, such as candidate seminars, survey research, media production, direct mail, and computerized targeting. In these states they have become dominant players in legislative elections. In other states their services are more modest, generally limited to cash contributions.

State legislative campaign committees have been active since the late 1970s in New York, Illinois, Wisconsin, California, and Minnesota. They have recently (during the late 1980s) taken hold throughout the nation. Forty states now host LCCs. Figure 1.1 highlights where they are currently located. Factors contributing to their growth and dispersion will be discussed in detail.

In states which have LCCs, there are generally four units—one for each party in each house of the legislature. For example, in Illinois

Table 1.1
States with Legislative Campaign Committees

	Yes	No		Yes	No
<i>Northeast</i>					
Connecticut	X		Vermont	X	
New Hampshire	X		New Jersey	X	
Maine	X		New York	X	
Massachusetts	X		Pennsylvania	X	
Rhode Island	X				
<i>Midwest</i>					
Illinois	X		Kansas	X	
Indiana	X		Minnesota	X	
Michigan	X		Nebraska		X
Ohio	X		North Dakota		X
Wisconsin	X		South Dakota	X	
Iowa	X				
<i>South</i>					
Delaware	X		Kentucky		X
Florida	X		Mississippi		X
Georgia	NA		Tennessee	X	
Maryland	X		Arkansas	X	
North Carolina	X		Louisiana	NA	
South Carolina		X	Oklahoma	X	
Virginia	X			X	
West Virginia	X		Texas	X	
Alabama		X	Missouri		
<i>West</i>					
Arizona		X	Utah	X	
Colorado	X		Wyoming		X

	Yes	No		Yes	No
California	X		Alaska	X	
Idaho	X		Hawaii	X	
Montana	X		Oregon	X	
Nevada	X		Washington	X	
New Mexico	X				

Source: Gierzynski 1992 and Simon-Rosenthal 1993

there are the House Republican Campaign Committee, the Republican State Senate Campaign Committee, the Illinois Democratic Majority Committee, and the Committee to Reelect a Democratic Senate.¹ Legislative campaign committees of the same party (in the same state) generally operate independently of one another—thereby limiting their activities to campaigns in their branch of the legislature.² As such, when we speak of the LCCs in a given state, we are referring to four organizations operating in two election arenas.

In some states, LCCs are legal subdivisions of the state party committee. In Florida and New York they are formally linked with the state party committees. The distinction between legal edifice and practice, however, is often pronounced. Jewell and Olson note: “In New York the legislative campaign units are legal subdivisions of the state party committees but in practice are as autonomous as possible” (1986, 222). Gierzynski found *all* of the LCC officials in his study, noting “state party organization exercised no control over their activities” (1992, 49).³

Legislative campaign committees should be distinguished from leadership political action committees, which are used to transfer funds to state legislative candidates. Here caucus leadership collects and allocates money according to need, support for the leadership, or any other criteria (Gierzynski 1992, 101). There are no organizational structures or staff. Although leadership PACs are important financial variables in legislative campaigns, have implications for leadership and party discipline (Jewell and Olson 1988; Salmore and Salmore 1989), and are no doubt interesting, new players, the remainder of the work primarily centers on legislative campaign committees. The objective here is to uncover the linkages and interactions between the activities of the legislative campaign units and traditional parties. The latter plays no role in leadership PAC activities. As

such, leadership PACs might be best viewed within the context of either party-in-government, election finance, or candidate-centered campaign studies.

HOW ARE LCCS ORGANIZED?

Thus far, LCCs are noted as appendages of the legislative caucus, organized to provide help during elections. Scholars of parties have, for some time, pointed to the importance of the structural dynamics of party organizations. By understanding how a unit is arranged, it is argued, insight is gained into its behavior and objectives. Speaking of traditional party organizations, Eldersveld writes:

Parties came into existence to perform certain critical functions for the system, and derived their basic form in the process of implementing these functions. If one is interested in understanding the tasks presumably fulfilled by parties, it is necessary to analyze the party as a functional structural subsystem (1964, 164).

This is certainly no less true for state legislative campaign committees.

An important, yet rarely cited, distinction within LCCs is the difference between the "official committee" and the "operations unit." The *official committee* refers to the organization *within* the caucus that makes up the campaign committee. The variety of these structures is vast. In some states official committees are composed of the entire membership of the party caucus. Others have actual committees consisting of a chair and several members appointed by leadership. Various positions, such as finance director, distribution chair, or voter registration officer, may be divided among the committee members. A third type is where legislative leaders form the entire committee; examples are in Oregon and Wisconsin. Finally, a few official committees include individuals who are not members of the legislature. The House Democratic Campaign Committee in Maine includes the state treasurer and state auditor, in addition to the caucus leadership. Illinois and Indiana have similar arrangements (Gierzynski 1992, 46–47).

The exact locus of control within official committees is difficult to discern. Does it always follow that "committees" have dispersed oversight, and are therefore more democratic, than units with cen-

tralized decision-making structures? Do rank-and-file members have a greater say in committee-based LCCs? The answer to this query (more generally) has puzzled scholars for some time. Francis (1985), for example, found that, in roughly one-half of state chambers, party caucus leadership was the principal instrument for expressing control, regardless of structural dynamics.⁴ We might suggest, at the very least, that official committee control would parallel other internal dynamics. That is, in those states with strong leadership structures or a tradition of aggressive caucus leaders, the LCCs will fall under the same rubric. The exact number of rank-and-file members seated on official committees will say little about who controls their activities.

Gierzynski (1992, 50) found it useful to place control of LCCs along a continuum—ranging from an inclusive arrangement where all members have input (far left) to an exclusive structure where only caucus leadership influence decisions (far right). This analysis, based solely on official committee structure, suggests that most of the LCCs lean toward the right side of the continuum. From his *interviews*, however, he finds nearly all of the respondents mentioned that party leadership controls the activities of these organizations. Although the wishes of members were considered, final decisions were made by legislative caucus leadership.

It is also perhaps no little matter that caucus leadership generally raises the lion's share of LCC resources. As argued in the next chapter, a core impetus behind the development of these new units has been the explosion of special interest money at the state level during the past decade. Rather than contributing to rank-and-file members, much of this money is channeled to caucus leadership because of its position of power. Rarely concerned with their own reelections, it is used by leadership to pursue other goals, including the augmentation of the size of the caucus. It stands to reason that if leadership raises most of LCC money, it will have control over that unit's activities.

When we speak of legislative campaign organizations, then, we are referring to the electoral strong-arms of the legislative caucus elite. To view these units as collectives, or aggregates, of member goals implies a decision-making process which may be inaccurate. Legislative leaders do pay attention to their members; few would remain so if they did not. But neither are LCCs simply democratic, committee-based organizations. They are structures used at the discretion of the caucus leadership, with input from the rank-and-file membership, to pursue their goals and objectives.

Operations units are the vehicles through which services are provided to state legislative candidates. Professional campaign staff generally form the core of these organizations, particularly those in states with full-time legislatures. They may be employed on a yearly basis or only during campaigns; most LCCs have both. Personnel hired only during campaigns are generally employed with the state legislature during the "off season." In New York, for example, Democratic operatives in the Assembly work either directly on the Speaker's staff or indirectly as part of "Communications Services," and Republican LCC staffers work for Minority Leadership or "Minority Research."

In many ways, operation units are similar to campaign consulting firms. Several have sophisticated computer and media resources at their disposal, run year-round direct mail programs, and have ongoing polling units. Paid operatives are not necessarily members of the party or even enrolled voters in that state. Many view themselves as campaign or marketing professionals rather than traditional party hacks.

These units are physically and structurally removed from the legislative caucus. In some states they are housed in the state party headquarters, but in most they are located elsewhere.

A rough abstract of the lines of authority in operation units consists of directors, regional coordinators, and foot soldiers. The directors oversee the entire workings of the units and report directly to the caucus leadership. Regional coordinators oversee several legislative districts or counties and make recommendations regarding LCC involvement, i.e., which races to target. During campaigns they either supervise one or a small set of races. In some instances they become the candidate's campaign manager, while in others they serve as persons who coordinate activities. Foot soldiers, as the name implies, remain either at the central headquarters helping to provide general services (such as running telephone banks or stuffing envelopes) or are sent to one of the targeted campaigns to do general scutt work, such as putting up posters and canvassing. In very few instances are they sent to work directly for the candidate or his/her campaign manager. During the final phases of campaigns, remaining foot soldiers are sent to close races to help with last minute projects—such as literature drops and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) drives.

The balance between legislative work (e.g., state business) and campaign activities has been a sticky issue for LCCs. As noted, the professionals who run the operations units are often also legislative

employees. Gierzynski found it "frequently and strongly emphasized that, though the staff used for the operation of the campaign committees often came from regular legislative staff, they were hired separately on their own free time" (1992, 47). In Illinois, however, every professional legislative staff position is partisan, and most staffers are deployed by party leadership to work with the LCC during elections (Salmore and Salmore 1989, 198). This practice is by no means unique to Illinois.

Legislative campaign committee operatives in New York were accused of conducting their activities while on the state payroll. In the Fall of 1987 Manfred Ohrenstein, Minority Leader of the New York State Senate, was indicted on 564 counts of conspiracy, grand larceny, and related charges. The prosecution argued he had used state employees solely for the purpose of running campaigns.⁵ One of the counts claimed operatives were paid up to \$10,000 per month of state monies while conducting campaign activities. Ohrenstein argued that the indictment violated the line between legislative and executive affairs and that no law had been passed limiting such practices. Although this claim carried little weight in the lower courts, it was supported by the New York State Court of Appeals in the Fall of 1990. The Court said that, while hiring employees for campaign activities represented a gray area of ethics, there had been no laws forbidding it. Both houses of the New York State Legislature have since passed resolutions banning the hiring of operatives *solely* for campaign activities. Ohrenstein continued to serve as Minority Leader and oversee Senate Democratic election activities until 1993.

At the very least this arrangement, termed *tandem jobs* by *The New York Times* (September 19, 1990, 33), allows LCCs to contract the services of high-priced campaign professionals at a fraction of their salary. In most states these people are removed from the state payroll for the final month (or so) of the election and paid by the LCC. Whether they are involved prior to this point only on their own time is debatable. In any event, this practice affords candidates considerably more resources than mere disclosure information (the heart of recent LCC studies) would suggest. Even the most modestly funded LCC is able to utilize cutting-edge professionals. Without this arrangement, the impact of LCCs would clearly be less significant.

Beyond the scope of this work, the extent to which this type of cross-over activity occurs, its legality, legitimacy, and impact on campaigns is an important development in state politics. One perspective might hold that the parties have found a new way to provide patron-

age positions to loyal party workers. Those supportive of strong party organizations might find reason to condone, if not applaud, this practice. On the other hand, tandem jobs may be part of a centralizing, professional movement in party politics, and bode poorly for traditional local parties. Either way, this activity is yet another important dimension of LCCs which has not received close scholarly attention.

The relationship between the official committees and the operations units is another foggy area. Domineering legislative leaders may be directly involved in the oversight of their operations unit. They may provide instructions on every aspect: where, when, how, and on whom to spend resources. This appeared to be the case in Ohio, for example, where Democratic House Speaker Vern Rife had a strong hand in all his unit's activities. In other cases the committees may defer to the director of the unit. They may give broad directives, such as win more seats, but, on the whole, leave the operatives to choose which races to assist and distribute resources as they see fit. This type of arrangement exists for both majority party LCCs in New York.

Understanding these nuances and variations, along with other organizational factors such as legal restrictions and available resources, provides an important glimpse into LCC goals and activities. We might speculate, for instance, that LCCs with greater membership participation would focus more on reelection strategies than on open- and challenge-seat campaigns. These LCCs might be used as merely a caucus resource.⁶ On the other hand, committees controlled by leadership might be more willing to concentrate on close elections—including open and challenge races. Other variations in strategies might be seen by looking at the difference between well-funded and less affluent organizations. Minority party LCCs, generally with less financial resources than majority party organizations, might spend more time on challenge- and open-seat races than on reelection campaigns.

Each of these subtleties may also provide telling information pertaining to the relationship between these new units and traditional party organizations. For instance, we might expect traditional party leaders to hold a closer, more positive working relationship with members of the official committee than with operation unit professionals. The latter's directives (to win legislative elections) are narrow and may not completely parallel party objectives—that is, support for a ticket or platform may be of little concern to LCC operatives. As such, LCCs with independent, aggressive operation

units (directors) may have sparse interactions with party committees. This appears to have been the case with the Democratic organization in the Plattsburgh Special. Official committee members (legislators), on the other hand, may hold an affinity for, or be the product of, local party organizations. They may share the full range of concerns as party leaders. Nevertheless, as suggested above, their role in LCC decisions and activities is generally limited.

In summary, the structural characteristics of state LCCs provide important, yet limited, insight. Even Gierzynski's (1992) constrained rationality model—where organizational forces are combined with an individual rational choice perspective—may underplay the role of caucus leaders and other actors. Studies which link the activities of LCCs exclusively to either legislative leaders, the party caucus, non-legislative officials, or party agents—rather than a complex interaction between these players—may be misguided. Just as scholars eventually rejected the fixed, hierarchical model of American party organizations in favor of stratarchy, more work needs to be done to fully understand the structural nuances and interplay of forces within LCCs.

Perhaps state LCCs are in a stage of development where structural typologies are premature. Each state's political history, environmental constraints, and individual influences will surely make organizational generalizations difficult.⁷ Yet, as Eldersveld appropriately notes: "Too much party research in America has had to settle for partial images of political reality" (1964, 2).

THE ROLE OF LCCS IN STATE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

The principal service performed by early state LCCs was to collect money from political action committees (PACs) and channel it, on a fairly equal basis, to all caucus members (Johnson 1987). They were designed to protect incumbents and maintain the party's share of seats in the legislature. Members were free to spend the money with little interference from the committee. Thus, original state LCCs were mere financial conduits—similar to leadership PACs today.

It soon became apparent that there were limits to this practice. First, giving cash directly to members did not ensure its most effective use. There were few guarantees that the member would spend it wisely (or at all), and a clash between old styles of campaigning and new techniques emerged. Why would a LCC provide scarce resources

to a member, only to have it spent on bumper stickers and refrigerator magnets instead of more proven vote-getting tactics? Second, direct contributions are limited by statute in some states (Alexander 1992, 138). Even in the states which do not limit donations, reporting requirements often created problems; few candidates wish to be seen as a pawn of the party or the caucus leadership. In-kind contributions or services would better mask LCC support. Third, although cash contributions might help secure incumbent reelections, it did nothing to *expand* the seats held by the caucus. Finally, a vehicle was needed to establish priorities of resource allocation, e.g., safe seats versus marginal ones.

Over the past decade the services provided by LCCs and the types of candidates receiving this help have changed considerably. In addition to helping incumbents, they now assist challengers and open-seat candidates. There has also been a shift from direct contributions to support services; only a few still exclusively provide cash. Most LCCs now furnish extensive high-technology campaign assistance—such as survey research, computer data base facilities, direct mail services, electronic media production, candidate seminars, and the use of experienced campaign operatives. During the 1984 election the Republican House and Senate committees in Illinois, for example, raised about \$1,027,000 and spent 90 percent of it on behalf of candidates; only 10 percent was contributed directly (Jewell 1986, 11).

By centralizing support services, LCCs have found a means to minimize per-candidate costs and provide help throughout the entire election cycle. Services also allow these committees to have more control over activities and, in turn, make campaigns more professional. Similar to their national level counterparts, they have adapted to modern campaigning by becoming brokerage organizations (Hernson 1988).

Another new element of LCC activity involves fund-raising assistance. While few provide direct cash contributions, LCCs often help candidates solicit PAC and special interest monies. Individuals and groups anxious to gain favor with legislative leaders, or perhaps change the partisan makeup of the legislature, look for guidance. In order to make the best use of their contributions, one strategy is to use it where it will make a difference—in other words, on close races (Cassie, Thompson and Jewell 1992; Sorauf 1988, 307–317; Redfield and Van Der Slik 1992).⁸ The Indiana House Democrats, for example, sit down with interest groups to discuss which races to target (Gierzynski 1992, 55). Willy Brown, Democratic Speaker in the Califor-

nia House, conducts similar meetings. This process is, of course, often a self-fulfilled prophecy; targeted races become close races. Simply put, PACs are guided as to where to spend their money, and candidates are instructed as to where they might find it.

It should be noted this matchmaking service does not mean candidates are given free reign over the use of the contributions. Targeted races are closely supervised, and new funds rarely escape the committee's notice. The money simply is combined with the larger pool of resources often under the purview of the LCC.

Closely targeting races suggests another important distinction between incumbent reelection committees (LCCs of the past) and modern LCCs. Although their first priority may be still to protect caucus members, growing resources and incumbent security have allowed LCCs to move beyond these races to challenge- and open-seat campaigns. In some instances incumbents receive no assistance whatsoever (Dwyer and Stonecash 1990, 26). Campaigns are targeted carefully; resources are provided to close races rather than sure winners or sure losers (Jones and Borris 1985; Stonecash 1988; Giles and Prichard 1985; Johnson 1987; Jewell and Olson 1988, 219–22; Gierzynski 1992, 71–92).

Focusing resources on close races allows LCCs to be key players in state legislative elections, while at the same time providing only a small percent of all campaign funds. By selecting as few as ten per election, they can infuse each with unprecedented resources. A few examples may give an idea of their impact: In 1986, the California Assembly Democratic Committee spent \$725,000 on one Sacramento-area open seat (Salmore and Salmore 1989, 193); and during that same year the Illinois Republican Senate Campaign Committee doled out \$100,000 in support of its candidates in *each* of five districts (Johnson 1987). In 1992, the Ohio House Democrats spent nearly \$100,000 on just three campaigns during the final days of the election (Ohio Secretary of State 1993).

It might be argued that this practice—choosing candidates based on their ability to win rather than simply incumbency—suggests these organizations are partylike. In fact, this is precisely what Gierzynski (1992) suggests. Several studies have found parties more likely than PACs or individual donors to contribute to close elections rather than to safe incumbents (Jones and Borris 1985; Gierzynski and Breaux 1991). Whether or not such a modest criteria can alone distinguish these units as party oriented is debatable. In any event, the days of block grants, equally distributing funds to all incumbents,

are over. Members now must demonstrate their perceived vulnerability in order to get LCC help—often a difficult task.

This strategy appears to be shared by both Democrats and Republicans, and there is little variance between regions or levels of party competition. Recent works have shown there are, however, strategic differences between majority and minority party LCCs (Dwyre and Stonecash 1992). The former tend to support close incumbent races to a larger degree than minority LCCs. The logic seems to be that, if you already control a body, you need only secure the seats you have. On the other hand, minority LCCs spend a larger portion on competitive challenge- and open-seat races than majority party LCCs. The idea is similar, but in reverse; to control the perks of majority status, additional seats must be won.

Another important characteristic of LCC disbursements, and perhaps more directly related to our concerns, is their candidate-specific nature. The services provided by these new organizations can be extensive but are generally geared toward legislative candidates only. Little effort is made to support other candidates under the party banner. In their study of Illinois LCCs, Redfield and Van Der Slik (1992) found only two percent of expenditures going to nonlegislative candidates. The same can be said about broad-based party activities. Only four of the thirty-two LCCs in Gierzynski's sample noted they conducted party building projects, such as get-out-the-vote drives (Gierzynski 1992, 50–56).

Occasionally, LCCs at the national level have engaged in general party promotions—such as the National Republican Campaign Committee “stay the course” program in 1982 and their pro-Republican/anti-Tip O’Neill media campaign prior to the 1984 election.⁹ But, as Gary Jacobson has noted, “Republicans were sufficiently disappointed with the results of their national effort in 1984 to redirect their efforts into strengthening local campaigns; in 1986, for the first time in a decade, Republicans had no common campaign theme” (1987, 85). What is more, Richard Fenno’s (1978) notion that members of Congress run for Congress by running against Congress suggests broad, party-oriented expenditures may be ineffective and potentially harmful to candidates. Appeals, such as “stay the course,” run the risk of binding candidates to adverse national trends and loathsome institutions (Herrnson 1992, 65). Broad-based programs run counter to the growing reliance upon local issues, a development highlighted by Fenno, Morris Fiorina (1977), and David Mayhew

(1974), among others. There is no reason to speculate why state LCC leaders would perceive their political environment differently.¹⁰

Do patterns of LCC expenditures imply anything about the objectives of these organizations? Perhaps. Gierzynski (1992) suggests that there are three sets of actors who may be involved in LCC decisions: individual legislators, legislative leaders, and the legislative party. Each has primary goals and pursues them rationally: legislators are concerned with reelection; legislative leaders with winning reelection, majority status, and party discipline; and the legislative party with maximizing the seats held, party cohesion, and the enactment of party policies. Allocation patterns, he argues, parallel the wishes of the legislative party. Resources are used to maximize their impact on close elections, the party's share of seats in the legislature, and legislative behavior. This explains their shift from incumbent-centered organizations to general campaign units. Again, seats are not added by the former. Candidate-specific activities underscore the objectives of the legislative party; promoting a full slate of candidates may not help, and may, at times, hurt the party's desire to gain more seats.

This perspective is, nevertheless, too broad and overly optimistic. If the legislative party is *also* concerned with policy, as Gierzynski suggests, the candidate-specific activities of the LCCs may be irrational. It requires consent from two branches of the legislature, as well as support from the executive, to enact policy. Do house committees assist senate races? Do senate campaign committees help gubernatorial candidates? Again there is little evidence that such cross-over support occurs. We may feel more confident arguing that the principal objective, and perhaps sole objective, of LCCs is to maximize the number of seats held. This limited goal concurs with patterns of LCC activities and the objectives of both legislative leaders and caucus members. Any notion of a policy-based motivation of LCC activity is questionable. A comment by former Wisconsin House Speaker, Tom Loftus, regarding the objectives of his LCC is illustrative: "Our only test is that the candidate is in a winnable seat and he or she is breathing, and those two requirements are in order of importance . . ." (Tom Loftus 1985, 109–110).

Along similar lines, there is little evidence to suggest LCC resources are used as a reward or punishment for legislative behavior. In fact, conflicts may arise between the wishes of LCC operatives and the party caucus regarding certain issues. If a legislator's vote is perceived by the operatives as potentially harmful, they may wish that member to vote against the caucus—or, at the very least, "take a

walk." Recall LCC professionals are generally granted a narrow mission: to win elections.

Discord over policy stances occurs frequently in states such as New York and Illinois, where the caucus holds heterogeneous constituencies. One issue that often divides the Democratic caucuses in New York is gun control. Legislators from New York City seek stronger limits, while Upstate Democrats have a difficult time supporting such measures. In fact, the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee has sought the support of the National Rifle Association for several of their Upstate candidates. Needless to say, this alliance was upsetting to many of the more liberal members from the City. They have also mailed letters to sportsmen throughout the state strongly criticizing the gun control policies of the governor (Cuomo, also a Democrat). The language of these mailings is surprisingly confrontational and aggressive. In a roundabout way, LCCs may be contributing to the *decline* of the party in government. For LCC operatives, maintaining/augmenting the caucus is an end in itself. Policy enactment or intracaucus harmony may be either irrelevant or antithetical to their mission.

If we are to draw an overarching conclusion from this review, it might be that these units are complex new organizations. Our knowledge of their internal dynamics, goals, objectives, and activities is limited. While several scholars have sought to answer these questions within a single state, comprehensive works are scant. Legislative campaign committees are effective, and similar organizations will undoubtedly arise at lower levels. Much more needs to be done to understand their place in the political process.