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**THE ROUTE TO ACTIVISM IS THROUGH EXPERIENCE:
CONTRIBUTOR MOBILIZATION IN INTEREST GROUPS**

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Abstract

Why members are organizational activists has received little attention, despite its obvious importance for many associations. In this analysis, a theory of experiential search is applied to the activist decision calculus of Common Cause members. Most such volunteers join an organization as members of the rank and file, learn about the group and its operations, and then decide to become activists. They are largely motivated by what they learn about those benefits that accrue exclusively to activists. Their actions also may suggest a tendency toward organizational oligarchy—but one that is strongly tempered by the presence of other factors shaping the conditional decision calculus.

THE ROUTE TO ACTIVISM IS THROUGH EXPERIENCE: CONTRIBUTOR MOBILIZATION IN INTEREST GROUPS

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Introduction: Organizational Maintenance, Internal Democracy, and Member Activism

Member activism is a key to political success—and to organizational survival—for a myriad of interest groups. It is especially vital for organizations lacking a large financial base, like the vast majority of public interest groups. But almost all leaders who wish to sustain their associations must pay attention to the decision-making calculus motivating activists. An inability to mobilize members in the hinterlands will mitigate a group's influence over public policy: No matter how sophisticated a Washington lobbying operation, without a base of support in congressional districts an organization is likely to be frustrated in achieving its policy goals (Kingdon 1981).

What prompts activism also has implications for internal democracy. It is often asserted that the "iron law of oligarchy" (Michels 1966) creates inherently conservative organizations. Associational goals are obscured by institutionalization as organizational leaders increasingly monopolize the decision-making process. Yet this proposition has been disputed because of the discovery of groups that exhibit higher levels of internal democracy than the Michelian hypothesis would lead one to expect (Schlozman and Tierney 1986). Determining what motivates activists and how they view their organizations can help reconcile these discrepancies.

Why members choose to be activists is poorly understood. Data on the correlates of volunteerism (i.e., activism) in political parties exist, but the results are largely inconclusive (for a survey, see Eldersveld 1982). Despite the obvious importance of activism, students of group participation have devoted little time to explaining it.

This omission may seem surprising. It undoubtedly stems, however, from the difficulty of acquiring data to test theoretical propositions. Studying activism requires both an understanding of why members choose it over alternative paths—i.e., an integrated theoretical perspective from which joining, quitting, activism, and other choices are comprehensible—and information on a sufficient number of activists to permit a thorough analysis. Analyzing the latter, in turn, frequently presents methodological problems that necessitate the utilization of complicated econometric techniques.

Only with an integrated theoretical perspective and a rich data source can activists be compared to other group members and specific hypotheses about alternative motivations for activism be tested. More generally, two different motivations might precipitate contributors to move up the organizational hierarchy and become activists. One obvious scenario is that members make such a commitment because they are passionately devoted to the group's ideals. This is certainly the popular image of activists in public regarding groups. In their study of party activists, Abramowitz

and Stone (1984) label this the purist model. An alternative, more in the spirit of narrower, utility-maximizing models such as Olson's (1965) and Moe's (1980), is that benefits accruing exclusively to activists drive some to participate. Even if individuals do join an organization for seemingly altruistic reasons, it might be argued that selfish motivations will separate activists from other contributors because of the quantum leap in the cost of activism relative to simply joining.

This research provides the basis for examining activism and distinguishing between these two scenarios in a group for which it is crucial: Common Cause (for a detailed associational case study, see McFarland 1984). This organization is the most prominent of the consumer groups that burgeoned in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its political agenda has focused on "good government" issues such as regulation of lobbyists, campaign financing, sunshine laws, and ethics legislation. It relies on "insider-outsider" lobbying (McFarland 1984) by employing professional Washington representatives in conjunction with voluntary networks in over 300 congressional districts. In addition to its national organization, state associations have proliferated to fight similar battles at the subnational level.

In late 1981, over 1,200 Common Cause members responded to a mail questionnaire.¹ A stratified design oversampled Common Cause-designated activists. Three hundred of these members, who provide leadership for congressional or state organizations, responded; and more than 100 others reported engaging in lesser activist behavior. Contributors were queried about a variety of concerns: membership and its benefits, personal attitudes, previous history in Common Cause, and the internal politics of the organization, to name a few. These data permit a rare opportunity to analyze the activist decision conditional upon membership.

This research unfolds in three steps. The first part of this analysis specifies an experiential search theory of member behavior. This model is then tested to determine its utility for understanding the conditional activism choice. The final section of this research presents conclusions about activism and its consequences for decision-making by individual members and for organizational democracy.

Theoretical Perspectives: Activism and Experiential Search

The *experiential search* perspective has been introduced elsewhere (Rothenberg 1987). It builds on the work of Olson (1965), Wilson (1962, 1973; see also Clark and Wilson 1961) and Moe (1980), among others, and incorporates realistic assumptions about imperfect information.² What differentiates this framework from the others is the explicit assumption that decision-makers learn through experience, e.g., by joining an organization. They are assumed to be aware of their informational shortfalls and to take them into account in making choices. They recognize that acquiring information is costly and strive to become knowledgeable efficiently. If the price of learning through experience is small and a mistake is easily rectified, experiential search can be the optimal strategy.

Membership and activism in groups provide an especially likely environment for experiential search, since many relevant organizational attributes are *specific characteristics*, which are observable only by participating, and not *general characteristics*, which can be viewed without joining. When evaluating specific qualities is relatively cheap, prospective contributors will tend, *ceteris paribus*, to join, accumulate knowledge, and then decide whether to learn more through continued participation. Since a reasonable assumption is that one accumulates knowledge more and more slowly over time, the effect of experience on members' decision calculi should diminish temporally.

Activism is a good deal more expensive than joining, so many contributors will choose to learn about it while remaining in the rank and file. Others may opt to engage in a limited amount of activist behavior to gain valuable experience, and then decide whether or not to advance to a higher level of activism.

When they sign up, first-time joiners have a poor idea about what it means to be either a member or an activist. Over time, they will learn about the costs and benefits of each and behave accordingly. Costs may be pecuniary or nonpecuniary. Following previous research (e.g., Clark and Wilson 1961, Wilson 1973, Moe 1980), three types of benefits are distinguished: selective, solidary, and purposive. *Selective benefits* are tangible returns that have monetary values and are derived from contributions. They either may be *divisible*, private rewards or may emanate from members' impacts on the level of *collective* goods provided to everyone. *Solidary benefits* stem from associational interactions, while *purposive benefits* are intangible rewards garnered from contributing to the group because of its stated goals. In truth, it is frequently difficult to distinguish between purposive and collective rewards in large groups; what differentiates them is probably how much contributors know about the organization and its impact (Rothenberg 1987).

In a world of perfect information or one where imperfectly informed contributors never learn, most members will be either activists or nonactivists from the time they join. Only exogenous shocks might motivate a change in their status in subsequent periods. The initial intention to be an activist—assuming it is accurately measured—would be the principal explanator of the level of involvement.

If organizational experience matters, only those with very high estimates of the benefits of volunteerism join with the immediate intention of becoming an activist. Other contributors should initially opt for a rank-and-file position (with its lesser associated costs), learn what membership and activism offer, and then decide whether to become more involved.

Experience will improve individuals' ability to evaluate the pros and cons of being an active versus a passive member. Members will discover that the costs of activism are different from those of rank-and-file status. The price of simply joining is largely monetary, whereas activism primarily entails time commitments. While the one thing known with certainty before signing up is the dues level, potential activists may be quite uncertain about the costs of greater involvement.

Organizational members will also learn whether some divisible, selective benefits are reserved for activists. These benefits must be denied to the rank and file to be a motivating force for activism, just as returns must be denied to noncontributors to encourage membership. Because divisible rewards usually accrue to all members, such benefits will play a lesser role in precipitating activism than in stimulating membership unless leaders create a multitiered hierarchy with

corresponding privileges.

A few selective rewards may simply be by-products of volunteering. Most notably, activism can be a channel for personal advancement (Schlesinger 1966, Eldersveld 1982). Organizational membership by itself will be a poor vehicle for the upwardly mobile; activism should be an essential ingredient.

Contributions to collective goods may be a strong factor in precipitating activism even in large groups. In the standard Downsian (1957) decision calculus, such motivations have two facets: the probability of having an impact and the resulting benefits given an impact. Members may contribute their time and energies if they feel that they, either individually or jointly with other group members, can influence the production of collective goods or if they highly value the benefits being produced.³

Learning about collective goods should have two corresponding elements. Members will discover whether they can have an impact. This assessment can be a function of a number of factors: whether they feel efficacious within the larger political system and whether they feel efficacious within the group, for example. These components will largely be learned over time.

They will also arrive at conclusions about how much they value the benefits that the group produces. Even if they know before joining what concerns are on the association's agenda, new members are frequently ignorant about the organization's positions on those issues (Rothenberg 1987). Over time, they will determine how much they value these collective benefits.

Members will gather additional information about whether the organization makes the proper purposive statement and matches their broad policy preferences. This evaluation, combined with how strongly they are motivated by purposive incentives, might stimulate activism. However, such returns may be less germane in precipitating activism than in stimulating initial membership, since many of the rewards will be reaped by joining.

Conversely, activism should be especially important for those who value rewarding interactions. Members desiring solidary returns—or who find them a pleasant by-product of contributing—will discover whether the association offers what they are seeking. If it does not, they are likely to leave (Rothenberg 1987); if it does, they should be prone to become activists.

This discussion of the costs and benefits of volunteerism underscores the relevance of organizational experience. Individuals will enlist in groups intent on overcoming informational deficiencies. A few will immediately become activists, but others will only join the cadre later on. The impact of experiential learning will reflect diminishing marginal returns. After a certain period, the additional effect of another year in the organization for contributors who remain in the rank and file is likely to be quite small.

One specific piece of information about the organization that would seem particularly relevant for the activist choice is whether members judge the group to be oligarchic. Perceptions of oligarchy might have either of two opposite effects for those remaining in the association. Members may think more poorly of the group and be unwilling to make the commitment that activism entails—and either stay in the rank and file or leave the association altogether—or they may determine that accomplishing anything within the organizational context requires getting intimately involved in its politics.

To summarize: The conditional activism choice is hypothesized to be a decision process in which members join, update their information, and decide whether they prefer to remain in the rank and file, join the activist core, or leave the organization. The conditional decision to be an activist (i.e., once one is a member) should be structured by one's initial intention upon joining and whether one plans to learn about activism by volunteering or as a member of the rank and file; the opportunity cost of activism relative to passive membership; the additional divisible, collective, purposive, and solidary benefits accruing from activism; the effect of learning; and perceptions of oligarchy.

An Empirical Test: Common Cause, Activism, and Experiential Search

It is posited here that activism is a rational response by imperfectly informed decision-makers who determine that its net benefits are positive. The cross-sectional hypotheses⁴ that can be tested with data on Common Cause members can be classified in three categories: One pertains to premembership intentions toward activism; a second, to its costs and benefits; and a third, to organizational experience. Findings for the first two can possibly be reconciled with alternative theoretical frameworks, such as those based on assumptions of perfect information or bounded rationality; the third unambiguously distinguishes the experiential search hypothesis.

An initial experiential search hypothesis is that while a premembership disposition might be relevant for activism, its importance ought to be overshadowed by what contributors learn. A second set of hypotheses is that (a) the varying costs of organizational activism will be important determinants of activism; (b) although divisible benefits exclusive to activists could be germane, they will be unimportant relative to other factors because few will exist, unless the leadership makes a concerted effort to produce them; and (c) purposive benefits will be of overriding importance if members are strongly driven by purist tendencies; otherwise purposive rewards will be of minimal consequence, solidary benefits will be very germane, and collective rewards will fall somewhere in between. The third group of hypotheses is directly related to experiential search: (a) Descriptively, activists will take considerable time after joining the organization to get involved; (b) organizational experience will be extremely relevant; (c) the impact of experience will exhibit a pattern of diminishing marginal returns; and (d) the overall predictions from the model will display a similar pattern of diminishing marginal returns.

This empirical analysis of activism proceeds in two steps. The first surveys the costs and benefits of activism in Common Cause to provide the proper context for explaining this decision. The second tests hypotheses about why members volunteer their time and energy.

Being an Activist at Common Cause

Activists are essential for Common Cause to be successful. Organizational maintenance has a variety of prerequisites: recruitment and retention of members, fund raising, production of publications, oversight of state and local organizations, development of issue positions, a host of administrative duties, and fighting political battles. These tasks cannot all be performed by Common Cause employees. In mid-1987, the organization had a small, if professional, staff of around 80 to manage a group with more than 300,000 members.

While volunteers perform a myriad of tasks, their most important role is mobilizing Common Cause members for transmitting the direction and intensity of the rank and file's preferences to political decision-makers, usually through letter writing. The organization has developed an intricate, congressional district-based, grassroots lobbying network, which is arguably its most valuable resource in influencing public policy. (Almost every state also has a lobbying system.) Political success hinges on the efforts of unpaid personnel.

Headquarter volunteers regularly keep in contact over the telephone with congressional district coordinators and other leaders of the local organizations. Several times a year, all district coordinators are asked to mobilize the participants in the complete local telephone chains; many other times, subsets of the association—networks in specific congressional districts or all activists, for example—are asked to get involved.

This description suggests that Common Cause has three classes of members. The *rank and file*, which constitute 85 percent of the membership, contribute money and may be the objects of mobilization efforts (for example, 27 percent reported that they had been contacted in the last year through Common Cause to write their senators or congressmen). *Core activists* are the 4 percent of members who are leaders of local congressional or state organizations (McFarland 1984); these are the Common Cause-designated activists who are overrepresented in the stratified sample. The remaining 11 percent are *occasional activists*, who are not part of the leadership group but engage in what would be considered activist behavior. They may be involved in their congressional district or state organizations or perform a variety of other tasks.⁵

What are the costs and benefits of being an activist? The costs are the time devoted to the organization and to dealing with requests for it: The occasional activist reports spending slightly less than four hours per month; the core activist, more than eight. These substantial costs should lead many to learn experientially in the rank and file before committing themselves.

Conditioning factors might make this price less burdensome for some. Those with higher wages may find devoting time to an unpaid political position less attractive due to greater opportunity costs.⁶ Similarly, the relative price of volunteering at Common Cause rather than being active in alternative groups might vary because of the specific responsibilities involved. Most notably, activism in Common Cause primarily entails telephoning and letter writing. For geographically isolated individuals, volunteering at Common Cause will be easier than in associations where direct interactions are more integral.

As mentioned at the outset of this analysis, two scenarios of the factors that motivate Common Cause activism can be outlined. One is that benefits from activism—particularly in a public regarding group such as Common Cause—stem from member passion and devotion to associational ideals. This process would be reflected in a high valuation either of what are traditionally labelled purposive rewards or of collective returns concerning what the organization tries to achieve, rather than how effective it is.

An alternative possibility is that more selfish rewards, broadly defined, are key. Individuals are activists because they believe that they or the group are especially effective in producing collective goods or because they think that the association offers valuable divisible and solidary benefits exclusively to activists.

At Common Cause, no formal perquisites are furnished exclusively to activists, although volunteers may believe their involvement will advance them up the political opportunity structure. While some political aspirants become dissatisfied with Common Cause and quit altogether, others move up the organizational hierarchy to better themselves.⁷ Activists are an ambitious lot: 31 percent of core activists and 24 percent of occasional activists report that they would like to hold a political party position, public elective office, or public appointive office, as compared to only 18 percent of the rank and file. Still, in the overall scheme of things, divisible rewards ought to be relatively unimportant in the activist calculus.

Collective rewards from activism are potentially much more important. Members who see themselves or the organization as having a substantial impact on the amount of collective goods produced or who highly value these goods may be considerably more active.

However, solidary returns ought to be the strongest motivating force. Interpersonal interactions are perhaps the key distinguishing feature between being an activist and belonging to the rank and file. Solidary benefits are undoubtedly less important for Common Cause than for organizations such as the League of Women Voters that rely more heavily on face-to-face interactions. Some Common Cause members will find that the organization does not offer the type of interaction they are seeking, since much of its business is transacted over the telephone. But others will discover that the opportunities for solidary rewards match their preferences.

The entire discussion of the costs and benefits of being a Common Cause activist highlights the relevance of experience for determining whether to become an activist if individuals are imperfectly informed but able to learn. The impact of information updating should be especially great if activists are principally motivated by factors other than broad purposive returns. A very few will immediately volunteer; some will join, like what they learn, and become part of the core of activists; others will opt to get involved but to a lesser degree; and most will remain in the-rank-and-file. The impact of experience should diminish with time; rank-and-file or activist status will gradually become less malleable.

Examining the Conditional Activism Decision

Common Cause members join an organization about which they are largely uninformed (Rothenberg 1987), and most exhibit little inclination to be active. In a stratified sample in which 31 percent of the respondents are either core or occasional activists, only 11 percent claim that the opportunity for participation was a principal reason for joining.⁸ Of this 11 percent, only 47 percent are activists (13 percent are occasional activists; 34 percent are core activists). Whether the remaining 53 percent are former activists who returned to the rank and file is unknown, but 83 percent of all activists did give other reasons for initially joining.

These data are inconsistent with either perspectives based on perfect information or those grounded on assumptions of imperfect information where contributors fail to learn. Is there an alternative means of conceptualizing membership decision-making that can reconcile this discrepancy between initial intentions and activist behavior?

The answer advanced here is affirmative and centers on the belief that experience is the key: The average activist minimally takes three years after becoming a member to graduate to activism; only 16 percent become activists within one year of joining.⁹ Twenty-two percent of the latter claimed that the opportunity for participation was of principal importance in deciding to join Common Cause, compared to only 14 percent of those taking more than a year. These findings confirm the descriptive experiential search hypothesis that future activists will take their time getting involved. More convincing evidence for the importance of experience requires estimation.

Measurement

Conditional activism is measured trichotomously: Rank-and-file members are scored zero; occasional activists, one; and core activists, two.

The factors posited to structure a member's decision calculus are as follows:

- (1) The *premembership disposition for activism* is measured by a dummy variable indicating whether members cited the ability to participate as a principal reason for joining in response to the previously discussed, open-ended question.
- (2) *Costs* are gauged by the financial sacrifices of devoting time to activism, measured by family income, and by the comparative cost of being an activist at Common Cause relative to other public interest groups, tapped by the percentage of a respondent's congressional district that is urban.¹⁰
- (3) *Divisible benefits* are measured by a dummy variable tapping whether or not members have political aspirations.
- (4) *Collective benefits* are gauged by whether respondents (a) agree with the position of Common Cause on key issues; (b) consider the leadership effective in providing collective goods; (c) believe they are efficacious within the group; and (d) think that they are efficacious vis-a-vis the larger political system.¹¹

- (5) *Purposive benefits* are tapped by whether respondents feel an obligation as good citizens to participate and whether they care about the group.¹²
- (6) *Solidary benefits* are measured by whether members value the interpersonal interactions Common Cause provides.¹³
- (7) *Learning* is measured by organizational experience, operationalized to capture the hypothesis of diminishing marginal returns with both a logarithmic and a linear term of the number of years in the organization. Incorporating logarithmic and linear terms is a standard means of measuring diminishing marginal returns (e.g., Maddala 1977).

Organizational experience acts as a surrogate for the respondents' level of information and their knowledge about a host of factors, which is correlated with time. Members gradually learn how a group functions and slowly develop an understanding of its issue positions (Rothenberg 1987). They should also become more certain about the value of the many benefits the association offers. A big advantage to employing years in the organization as a measure of experience is that it is continuous, which makes it feasible to test the hypothesis of diminishing marginal returns.

- (8) *Perceptions of oligarchy* are indicated by whether contributors believe that most members have little role in the group's internal politics.¹⁴ [This measure is not the sole indication of whether the organization may be oligarchic: If motivations for activism include self-aggrandizement by obtaining divisible benefits and enjoying solidary rewards, then leaders have a situation that is ripe for obscuring associational goals in the Michelian sense.]

Examination of the intercorrelations among the independent variables reveals no evidence of multicollinearity. Predictions about each factor are straightforward, with two exceptions: The impact of costs should be negative; the influence of all types of benefits, the initial disposition for activism, and the logarithmic learning term should be positive; there are no preconceptions regarding the linear learning term or perceptions about oligarchy.¹⁵

As mentioned previously, another expectation is that the premembership disposition for activism, if properly measured, would be a crucial test of any model that does not incorporate learning. However, especially since it is known a priori that only a small fraction of activists actually gave such responses, it might seem that a straw man is being set up; other benefits might also be reflecting initial intentions. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to expect that if either individuals fail to learn or learning is not important, premembership disposition should be quite important and organizational experience should be inconsequential.

A final expectation stems from the entire model. *Overall* predictions should exhibit a pattern of diminishing marginal returns: The predicted probability of being either an occasional or a core activist will increase with experience but at a diminishing rate.

Estimation: Dealing with Choice-Based Samples

This model cannot be estimated with standard techniques for analyzing limited dependent variables because the sample is endogenous to the choice being studied. A random sample the size of the Common Cause survey would contain, on average, about 1,050 rank-and-file members, 135 occasional activists, and 50 core activists. The stratified sample yields a six-fold overrepresentation of core activists and a 20 percent underrepresentation of occasional activists and rank-and-file contributors. Any model that is estimated without adjusting for this fact will produce inconsistent estimates.

The solution to this problem lies in the use of choice-based probability models (for surveys, see Maddala 1983, Amemiya 1985, Ben-Akiva and Lerman 1985). The weighted exogenous sample maximum likelihood function (WESML) proposed by Manski and Lerman (1977) in particular is appropriate because the actual probability that an individual belongs to Common Cause is known.¹⁶

The intuition behind the Manski/Lerman solution is straightforward. If both the real world proportions of the groups in the sample [$Q(i)$] and the sample proportions [$H(i)$] are known—which they clearly are in this case—the sample can be treated as if it were exogenously selected, except that each observation should be weighted by $Q(i)/H(i)$. Besides this weighting, the maximization of the WESML function is identical to that of an exogenously chosen sample. In a random sample, $Q(i)/H(i)$ equals one; in others, underrepresented choices are more heavily weighted. The derived coefficients are not generally asymptotically efficient, but they are consistent; this makes WESML a very satisfactory solution in reasonably large samples.

More formally, for each $i \in C$, where C is the choice set, it is possible to define the function $w(i)$ by $w(i) = Q(i)/H(i)$. Assuming $Q(i)$ is known and $H(i)$ can be calculated directly from the data, $w(i)$ is known. Consider then the weighted exogenous sampling likelihood function

$$W_N(y, \theta) = \sum_{n=1}^N w(i_n) \log P(i_n, z_n, \theta) + \sum_{n=1}^N w(i_n) \log g(z_n), \quad (1)$$

where z_n is a vector of attributes, θ is a parameter vector, and $y = (i_n, z_n)$. It is possible (although complicated) to show that (1) yields coefficients that are strongly consistent and asymptotically normal. The resulting covariance matrix is

$$V = \Omega^{-1} \Delta \Omega^{-1}, \quad \text{where} \quad (2)$$

$$\Omega = \left[-E \left[\frac{\partial^2 w(i) \log P(i, z, \theta)}{\partial \theta \partial \theta'} \right]_{\theta'} \right],$$

$$\Delta = \left[E \left[\frac{\partial w(i) \log P(i, z, \theta)}{\partial \theta} \right]_{\theta'} \left[\frac{\partial w(i) \log P(i, z, \theta)}{\partial \theta'} \right]_{\theta'} \right].$$

and the expectations E operate over i and z with respect to the distribution given by $\lambda_c(z/i)H(i)$, where $\lambda_c(z/i)$ is the likelihood of drawing z conditioned on drawing a decision-maker who has selected i .

The cost of utilizing the WESML estimator for studying activist behavior is that taking advantage of the ordinal nature of the dependent variable is currently beyond the available technology. Econometricians have failed to develop an ordered WESML estimator. Activism is necessarily treated as if it were measured nominally, and the resulting confusion from utilizing two sets of coefficients as well as the loss of information must be tolerated.¹⁷

Results

The WESML estimates of the experiential search model comparing occasional and group activists to the rank and file are shown in Table 1, while information about the relative impact of each factor is displayed in Table 2.¹⁸ These results demonstrate both that the model does a good job of explaining activism and that the relative impacts of the various factors are consistent with the predictions. Strong support is provided for the experiential search perspective and for the inference that members are searching over personal returns. The results are stronger for core than for occasional activists; this finding undoubtedly reflects both that more core activists were surveyed and that being a core activist requires a greater commitment.

(Tables 1 and 2 about here)

As expected when the average activist takes three years to get involved, the initial propensity for participation is a highly imperfect predictor.¹⁹ Although such predispositions are significant for core activists, there is no evidence that members either join with perfect information or never learn about the value of activism. Group members who were inclined to volunteer are only 1.5 percent more likely actually to be activists.

It may be that there are two types of activists: those believing that the net benefits of activism are sufficiently high that they volunteer immediately and learn as activists, and those who will only volunteer after acquiring experience in the rank and file. A priori intentions should translate more directly into activism for the former group. With this in mind, the experiential search model was rerun on a dichotomous variable scored one if activists chose that option in a year or less (107, or 37 percent of the 298 activists) and zero if they took more time. The results (not shown) reveal few differences between those becoming activists immediately and those taking more time, but there is some indication that belief in participation makes more of a difference for the former ($t = 1.9$).

Costs of activism are important for all members. Contributors with greater opportunity costs are 1.8 percent and 1.5 percent less likely to be core and occasional activists. Writing checks is one thing; making substantial time commitments is another. Being from an urban area—where it is easier to substitute other groups for Common Cause as a means for volunteerism—is also negatively related to the choice to get involved for some activists. Isolated, rural areas produce Common Cause

Table 1. Determinants of Activism
(WESML Estimates)

Variable	Occasional Activist	Core Activist
<i>Constant</i>	-11.285***	-11.407*
<i>Reason for Joining</i>		
Belief in Participation	0.543	0.704***
<i>Costs</i>		
Opportunity Cost	-0.191***	-0.196*
Urban Residence	0.711	-1.485*
<i>Divisible Benefits</i>		
Political Aspirant	0.621*	0.656***
<i>Collective Benefits</i>		
Agreement with Group's Positions	-0.004	0.008
Assessment of Leadership's Achievements	0.074	-0.047
Feel Efficacious re: Group	0.230***	0.392***
Feel Efficacious re: Political System	0.079	0.126***
<i>Purposive Benefits</i>		
Citizen Duty	0.110	0.008
Care about Group	0.180***	0.118***
<i>Solidary Benefits</i>		
Value Interactions	0.524**	0.842***
<i>Learning</i>		
Organizational Experience	-0.209	-0.275***
Ln Organizational Experience	1.792**	3.011***
<i>Perceptions of Oligarchy</i>		
Internal Politics Oligarchic	-0.006	0.094
Number of Cases = 911		
-2x log likelihood function = 930		

*** $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$ * $p < .10$

Note: Weights for the WESML estimator are $\left[\frac{.8500}{.6757} \right]$, $\left[\frac{.1100}{.0871} \right]$, and $\left[\frac{.0400}{.2372} \right]$ for rank and file members, occasional activists, and core activists, respectively. Each set of coefficients reflects the comparison of that type of activist to the rank and file. All tests are one tailed except for those relating to the linear organizational experience measure and perceptions of oligarchy, about which there were no a priori predictions.

Table 2. Probability of Activism

Variable	Percentage Change in Probability of Activism	
	Occasional Activist	Core Activist
<i>Reason for Joining</i>		
Belief in Participation	0.9	1.5
<i>Costs</i>		
Opportunity Cost	-1.5	-1.8
Urban Residence	1.0	-1.3
<i>Divisible Benefits</i>		
Political Aspirant	1.5	1.8
<i>Collective Benefits</i>		
Agreement with Group's Positions	-0.4	0.7
Assessment of Leadership's Achievements	0.5	-0.4
Feel Efficacious re: Group	1.5	4.4
Feel Efficacious re: Political System	0.8	1.7
<i>Purposive Benefits</i>		
Citizen Duty	1.2	0.0
Care about Group	2.0	1.4
<i>Solidary Benefits</i>		
Value Interactions	1.4	3.0
<i>Learning</i>		
Organizational Experience	-2.7	-3.9
Ln Organizational Experience	6.1	23.1
<i>Perceptions of Oligarchy</i>		
Internal Politics Oligarchic	-0.1	1.2

Note: Percentages are changes in the probability of being an activist assuming (1) an increase of one standard deviation from the mean of the variable in question and (2) all other independent variables are set at their respective means.

core activists in disproportionate numbers.²⁰

Activism also offers differential benefits for contributors. The one divisible return, political aspirations, stimulates voluntary behavior. Ambitious members who decide that Common Cause is a reasonable tool for advancing become activists. This result makes intuitive sense: Membership will only be a means of climbing the political opportunity structure for activists. Being in the rank and file will not facilitate contributors' careers. Nevertheless, because the group's leadership offers the same benefits to all contributors, the relative importance of divisible rewards for activism is small. Members with stronger political aspirations are only 1.5 percent and 1.8 percent more likely to be occasional and group activists. Still, the fact that aspirations have an impact provides some initial evidence that even in an organization like Common Cause, activists are motivated by narrow returns.

The effect of collective returns on activism reveals an interesting dichotomy that buttresses this proposition. Benefits stemming from collective returns, as measured by issue agreement and leadership approval, are unimportant. These would presumably be the type of factors that would drive activists if they were purists. But the probability of affecting the production of collective goods, as tapped by feelings of efficacy toward the group and the political system, is germane. Members with higher assessments of their associational and systemic efficacy are 1.5 percent and 0.8 percent more likely to be occasional activists and 4.4 percent and 1.7 percent more likely to be core activists. When it comes to the impact of collective returns on activism, results are apparently more important than passion about the issues involved.

The perception that mobilization is effective separates volunteers from the rank and file. While students of voting participation have debated whether the "p" in the decision calculus should be incorporated (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974, 1975), for organizational activism it is the inclusion of the "b" term that must be questioned.²¹ Activism reflects the belief that involvement in the hierarchy will get things done.

These findings can be contrasted with Hirschman's (1970) supposition that members resort to voice as well as exit in reaction to deteriorating organizational performance. Voice is relevant not for diminished performance—as evidenced by the unimportance of assessments of leaders' job performance—but for beliefs about whether a group delivers. Learning that an organization and the political system generally is responsive to the activists results in voice, i.e., adjusted perceptions of how the association operates can lead to voice.

The results regarding broad purposive returns are not nearly as strong as the purist model would lead one to expect. This suggests that monetary contributions furnish virtually all of the purposive rewards deriving from membership in either the rank and file or activist cadre. It also reinforces the notion that activists are utility maximizers who adopt an efficient information-gathering strategy. Citizen duty is unimportant for separating out activists and members, although caring about group issues is relevant.

Despite caveats specific to the Common Cause example, solidary benefits are strongly tied to activism for both occasional and core activists. If solidary rewards are central for promoting activism at Common Cause—which offers relatively few opportunities for face-to-face interactions—then they should be crucial for virtually any organization offering few divisible rewards exclusively to volunteers.

Specific costs and benefits still tell only part of the story: The effect of organizational experience looms large. An increase of three and one-half years of organizational experience increases the probabilities that the average member (who has been in the group more than seven years) will be an occasional or a core activist by 1.9 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively.²² Moreover, these numbers in some sense understate the effect of experience because the marginal returns associated with it diminish temporally. Members are more likely to participate over time, but if after a few years they are still in the rank and file, chances are they will remain there.

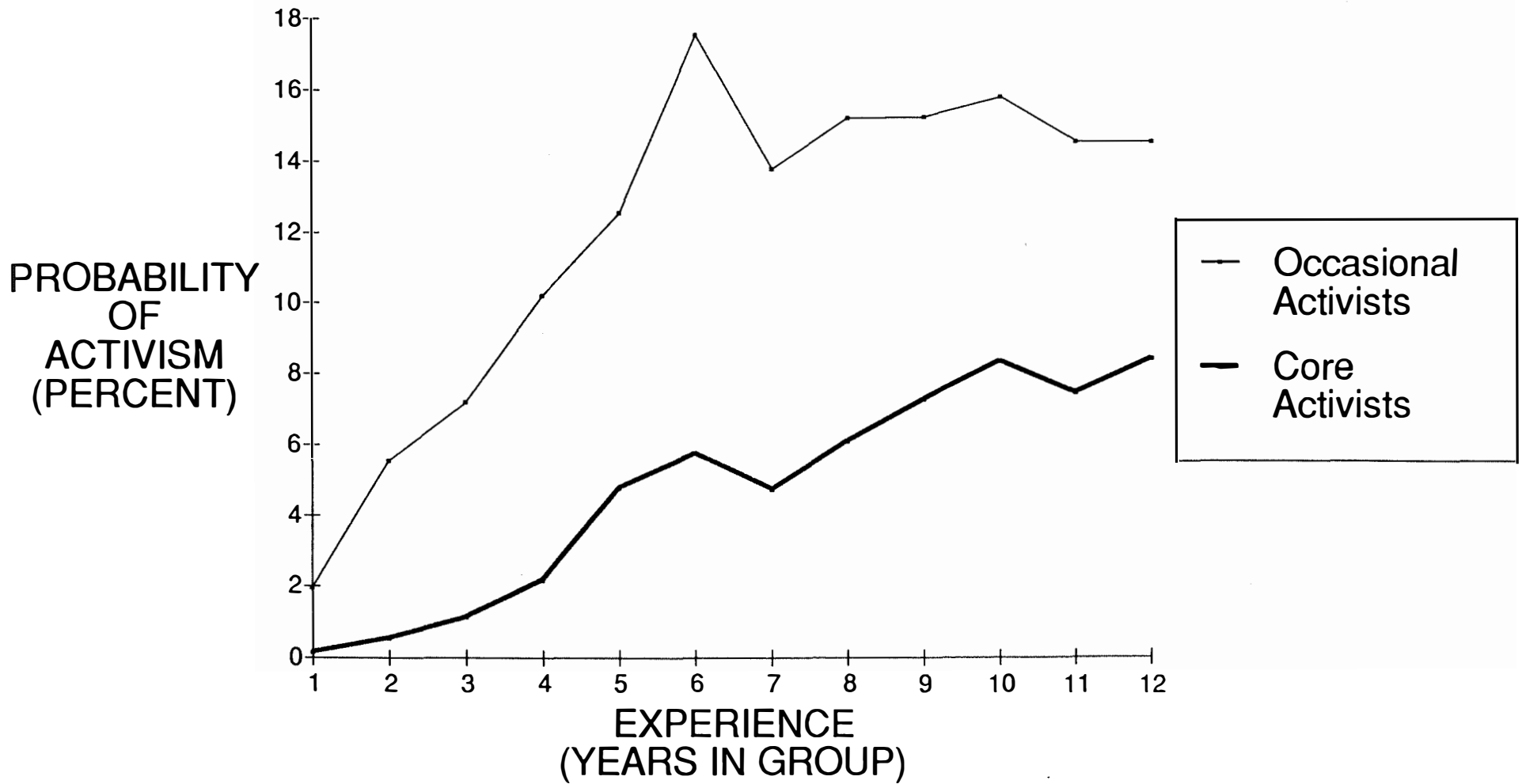
A similar pattern of positive but diminishing marginal returns is found if the overall predicted probabilities of being either an occasional or a core activist are broken down by year (Figure 1). The likelihood of being either type increases with time, but the size of the upward change decreases. The predicted probabilities of activism in the first year in the organization are miniscule; by the fifth year, the likelihood exceeds the population (of group members) average. For occasional activists, after five years, additional time in the organization has almost no impact on the probability of contributing, while the likelihood of being a core activist continues to creep slightly upward. One possible explanation is that contributors learn about occasional activism more quickly. An alternative is that this discrepancy may reflect the fact that roughly the same number of members are entering the occasional activist group from the rank and file as leaving it to step up into the core cadre. Only a panel study, however, could actually test whether such a transition process is occurring.

(Figure 1 about here)

To summarize: Initial predispositions for activism are not the only reason why contributors volunteer. Costs and benefits are far more impressive predictors of activism, and they work in the expected directions. Activists are largely motivated by returns exclusive to activists. These findings are consistent with the experiential search perspective, if perhaps reconcilable with alternative scenarios of the activist process. What confirms the search perspective and falsifies contrasting frameworks is the finding that organizational experience is extremely important for the conditional decision process.

Finally, perceptions of organizational oligarchy do not seem particularly important for activism. There is some slight evidence that such perceptions precipitate core activism ($t = 1.4$). If this result is valid, it implies that a tendency toward organizational conservatism may reflect a process in which those who believe that the association is oligarchic and that members of the rank and file are inefficacious get involved, while those who consider the association democratic stay out of the fray, *ceteris paribus*. If perceptions of oligarchy or internal democracy are correlated with normative beliefs in them—a leap of faith upon which this analysis can shed no light—then there will be a conservative bias built into the group process.

FIGURE 1:
PROBABILITY OF ACTIVISM AND
ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCE



Conclusions: Contributor Mobilization and Experiential Search

The key issues of this analysis can be summarized by examining three questions: What motivates contributors who move up the organizational hierarchy? Is there a theoretical framework for conceptualizing activism specifically and citizen decision calculi in organizations generally? Can these theoretical and empirical findings shed any light on the assertion that "who says organization, says oligarchy" (Michels 1966, p. 365)?

The archetypal image of an activist in a public regarding group such as Common Cause is of an idealist. The findings in this study dispute this belief. A seemingly perfect match between member and group will not precipitate activism; devotees to stated group goals, for example, are frequently willing to remain in the rank and file.

Benefits that are broadly construed as exclusive to activism and organizational experience are fundamental. Those rewards that are the province of activists alone—conditioned by the differential costs involved—are more relevant than zealotry about organizational objectives. Career aspirations; the feeling that it is possible to have a large impact, either personally or through the organization, on the provision of collective goods; and solidary returns outstrip devotion to the cause in importance. Beyond these costs and benefits lies organizational experience, which diminishes the uncertainty surrounding activism. Few enter the group intent on becoming activists. Individuals join organizations and learn about them and then decide how to proceed. For those who conclude that the group is a suitable match—in terms of efficacy, personal advancement, interpersonal interactions, costs, and the like—activism may be the next step. After a few years, however, the impact of organizational experience fades.

The activism calculus can be characterized as an experiential search process. Observed behavior bears out the theoretical expectation that imperfectly informed contributors initially separate themselves into two groups: those who become activists and then learn about its costs and benefits and the vast majority who wait and decide whether activism is worthwhile. Paying the \$20 annual dues and learning more about the net benefits of activism is generally a superior information-gathering strategy than incurring the high costs from the start. If contributors decide to stay in the rank and file for more than a few years, though, they are likely to remain there.

Experiential search offers a general theoretical perspective for understanding citizens' decision calculi in organizations. Imperfectly informed individuals attempt to overcome their deficiencies in an optimal manner. This proposition is true whether the calculus involves the decision to join the association, to stay in it, or to become an activist, to name a few.

Finally, is it true that who says organization, says oligarchy? The somewhat speculative answer to this question is that there may be a tendency toward oligarchy, but it is hardly an "iron law." Previous research may dispute the iron law of oligarchy because of an extreme simplifying assumption by those who have examined the issue that only whether a group is oligarchic matters for how the group functions.²³ The present analysis indicates that the elite—assuming activists are partially representative—have a host of possible motivations including, but not limited to, self-aggrandizement through acquisition of divisible benefits and the consumption of interpersonal interactions.

The efficacy of the organization and whether people care about it are also important to activists. Moreover, perceptions of oligarchy do not necessarily lead to activism even for those remaining in the group. These findings suggest that organizations are going to look less oligarchic than Michels suggested. An organization perceived to be unresponsive may be able to recruit some activists, but it probably is not feasible for an association such as Common Cause to obscure totally the group's stated goals.

There is a crying need for additional data to explore further the assertions made in this analysis. Time series data, in particular, are required. Panel studies that follow both rank-and-file members and activists would be invaluable. Only then can the intertemporal paths that contributors take to and away from activism be unequivocally traced. Until additional data are collected, the findings in this analysis and other research that draws temporal conclusions from cross-sectional data must be accepted cautiously.

Notes

I would like to thank Rod Kiewiet, Morgan Kousser, and Barbara Rothenberg for helpful comments and Jeffrey Dubin for econometric and programming assistance beyond the call of duty. Responsibility for all mistakes remains with the author.

1. The Common Cause survey was conducted in the fall of 1981 by the political science department of Stanford University. It was funded by grant SES-8105708 from the National Science Foundation to Professor Heinz Eulau in support of research by Jonathan Siegel. Many thanks to Mr. Siegel for generously furnishing these data to the author.
2. The spirit of this approach owes much to economic theories of search, although it differs from standard sequential models by emphasizing the importance of experience (for a general overview of search theory, see Mortensen 1986).
3. Contributors' responses to questions that tap their perceptions about having an impact on the production of collective goods probably reflect their perceptions of the group's, and not their personal, impact on the provision of such benefits (Rothenberg 1987).
4. As will be discussed in more detail, the ideal means of studying activism would of course be through a panel study, but such data are not currently available.
5. McFarland (1984) also distinguishes between activists and the occasionally active, but his beliefs about the latter group are based on conjecture. In the present research, occasional activists are defined as any respondent who was not designated by Common Cause as an activist but who claimed to be (a) active in a Common Cause state organization; (b) active as a steering committee coordinator in a congressional district; (c) active as a telephone network coordinator or activator; (d) active as a telephone caller; (e) active as a speaker before other groups; or (f) involved in other activist activities. Rank and file members formed 69 percent of the stratified sample; occasional activists, 8 percent; and core activists, 23 percent.
6. On the other hand, it is conceivable that those with lower incomes may garner more utility from a smaller monetary increment.
7. There is some indication that those with political aspirations leave Common Cause for greener pastures (Rothenberg 1987). The inference drawn is that most members decide that Common Cause is a poor place for career advancement. The flip side of this story is that aspirants who do believe that the organization is a good way to advance become activists.
8. These figures are based on an open-ended question asking respondents their principal reason for joining. In reality, many members gave several answers. As long as one response was broadly participatory, the contributors were considered to have an initial predisposition toward activism. Nevertheless, only 11 percent met this criterion.
9. Rather than asking how many years they have been activists, members were requested to choose one of five categories: (a) 8-10 years, (b) 6-7 years, (c) 4-5 years, (d) 2-3 years, and (e) 1 year or less. The three-year estimate is conservative; it is based on the most years possible—10, 7, 5, 3, or 1—that participants might have been involved relative to the number of years they have been in the group. If the means of the above categories were substituted for the upper bounds, less than 9 percent of activists would be classified as having become activists within one year of joining.

10. Income was measured with an eight-fold variable according to whether the respondent's family income was: (a) under \$10,000; (b) \$10,000-\$20,000; (c) \$20,000-\$25,000; (d) \$25,000-\$35,000; (e) \$35,000-\$50,000; (f) \$50,000-\$75,000; (g) \$75,000-\$100,000; (h) over \$100,000. Respondents' income and wage rates would have been more appropriate, but these data were not furnished. Urban residence was measured using information from the *Congressional District Data Book* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1973).
11. Position agreement is measured as $-1[\sum_{i=1}^5 (X_{ip} - X_{ic})^2]$, where X_{ip} and X_{ic} are, respectively, contributors' personal preferences and views of where Common Cause stands on the following issues: an amendment limiting government spending, sunset legislation, campaign finance laws, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and lobby disclosure laws. Leadership assessment is an additive index combining five-fold responses to questions about the legislative success of Common Cause and an explicit rating of how well the leadership and staff do their jobs. The efficacy measure vis-a-vis the group combines the responses to two parallel questions on how important to the success of Common Cause individuals think (a) their own contributions and (b) their own political activities are. The indicator of efficacy relative to the political system is an additive measure tapping whether respondents feel that they can (a) help get a law passed or defeated in Congress; (b) get people to contribute money to a political campaign; (c) persuade a local newspaper editor or reporter to give publicity to a worthwhile cause; and (d) state their views at a public hearing on some issues they care about.
12. The former is an additive index of the importance assigned to membership in Common Cause as a means of (a) fulfilling the responsibilities of citizenship, (b) supporting leaders like John Gardner and Archibald Cox, and (c) helping to ensure good government. Caring is an additive scale of member interest in each of the five issues used to construct the position agreement scale.
13. This is a five-fold response to a question on the importance contributors attribute to meeting interesting people and making new friends.
14. Perceptions about oligarchy are tapped by combining contributors' responses about whether (a) members of Common Cause are given a large role in determining its policies; (b) only a small minority of members take part in Common Cause decision-making; (c) most members agree with Common Cause positions; and (d) sometimes a small minority of members prevents Common Cause from taking a position supported by the majority.
15. One-tailed significance tests are therefore utilized for all independent variables except the linear learning term and perceptions of oligarchy.
16. If the real world probabilities are unknown, then—theoretically at least—there is a solution developed by Manski and McFadden (1981).
17. This constraint may also lead to some specification error. To test this, an analogue to the model specification test developed by Hausman (Hausman 1978, Hausman and McFadden 1984) was derived for the WESML estimator to help determine whether Common Cause contributors really make trichotomous choices with respect to activism. This exercise involved testing the three-fold specification against the alternative of viewing the activist decision as a series of dichotomous choices. Members initially decide whether or not to be active and subsequently

select the degree of commitment (occasional versus core). The results lead to the rejection of the null hypothesis that the slopes are equal. This finding suggests that the assumption concerning independence of irrelevant alternatives is being violated; the damage this causes to the derived estimates is uncertain.

18. Data on changes in probabilities like those shown in Table 2 must always be seen as suggestive rather than definitive. Table 2 serves as a rough guide for assessing the relative impacts of different features on activism.
19. It would be ideal to have panel data that would permit the identification of those who became activists immediately and then went back to the rank and file.
20. An alternative way to think about costs might be largely in terms of time available for public service. Individuals with fewer work and family obligations—those who are not in the labor force or who have relatively undemanding jobs and who do not have children living at home—might be more likely to have the time to be activists. Unfortunately, the Common Cause data contain only information on marital status and not on family composition; also, they only report job status and type of job rather than hours worked per week. When dummy variables for marital and job status are incorporated into the previously estimated equation, the results tend to disconfirm this perspective on costs: Married individuals are actually more likely to be activists, and job status is irrelevant.

It might also be speculated that Common Cause's dependence on telephone calls rather than face-to-face interactions might be less threatening than volunteering elsewhere and hence more appealing to older persons and women. To test this, the model was again rerun with a series of dummy variables tapping age groups and an additional dummy variable for sex. The results reveal that gender has no impact and that the effect of age is very erratic.

21. This discussion refers to the assumption (Downs 1957) that citizens participate if the returns—the probability of having an impact times the accruing benefits—exceed the costs:

$$R = PB - C,$$

where R is the citizen's action (voting, becoming an activist), B is the potential benefit from the action, P is the probability that benefits will accrue if the action is taken, and C is the cost of taking the action. The unimportance of the potential benefits in the present analysis may reflect the homogeneity of Common Cause members. The dispersion of policy preferences is far greater among the American electorate than among the universe of associational members.

22. These numbers are based on changes in the probabilities of activism as a result of simultaneous shifts in the values of the linear and logarithmic measures of organizational experience; they are not shown in Table 2.
23. For others, perceptions of oligarchy may prompt departure. When a previously specified model of member exit (Rothenberg 1987) was reestimated with oligarchy included, feelings that the group is oligarchic were found to be positively related to quitting ($t = 1.8$). Membership experience may lead to the same evaluation but result in different reactions: Some exit and others become active in organizations they believe are oligarchic.

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