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## Individual Goals and Senate Party Organization

Nelson Aldrich (R, R.I.) dominated the Senate at the turn of the last century, known, by his admirers as much as his critics, as the “General Manager of the United States.”<sup>1</sup> He held three formal positions of consequence—he chaired the Senate Rules Committee, 1887–93 and 1895–99; he chaired the Senate Finance Committee, 1899–1911; and he sat on the Republican steering committee, 1893–1911—but he never served as caucus chairman or as elected floor leader. Indeed, at least on the Republican side of the aisle, the position of elected floor leader had yet to be invented during Aldrich’s time as a senator. When he announced plans to retire from the Senate, Aldrich told his friends that he had grown tired of being a “pack-horse” for his colleagues. In the recent battle over revisions to the tariff, Aldrich had “labored incessantly, day and night,” the *New York Times* reported in the spring of 1910. “There were innumerable conferences, in which he took part, at his committee rooms, at the White House, and elsewhere. He was always on duty, and the strain was tremendous.”<sup>2</sup>

But the power of any senator in those years, even of Aldrich, was limited. “The public now and again picks out a Senator who seems to act and to speak with true instinct of statesmanship and who unmistakably merits the confidence of colleagues and of people,” Woodrow Wilson wrote in 1885 (213), in his classic book *Congressional Government*. “But such a man, however eminent, is never more than *a* Senator. No one is *the* Senator.” Aldrich’s leadership was at

<sup>1</sup> “‘General Manager’ Aldrich,” *Boston Globe*, Mar. 25, 1904, 6; “The Boston Herald speaks of ...,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 8, 1904, 6; “It was hardly necessary ...,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 4, 1905, A4; “New Political Boss of Rhode Island,” *Boston Globe*, Jan. 22, 1911, 51. See also “Political Gossip,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 1904, E7; A. Maurice Low, “‘Manager of the Senate’—Aldrich of Rhode Island,” *Boston Globe*, Jan. 7, 1906, SM5.

<sup>2</sup> “Aldrich To Retire at End of His Term,” *New York Times*, Apr. 16, 1910, 1.

its greatest on financial issues—even the *Boston Herald*, which appears to have popularized the notion of Aldrich as “General Manager,” confined the epithet to the matters of “trade and commerce and finance”<sup>3</sup>—and he was reminded often of the constraints on his ability to shape outcomes in other realms. In 1890–91, when Democrats launched a historic filibuster to frustrate the Republican effort to pass the Federal Elections Bill, Aldrich announced plans to use majority cloture to end the debate and bring the bill to a vote.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Reed, speaker of the House of Representatives, had already acted decisively to reform his chamber’s rules and to pass the landmark bill protecting voting rights for Black men in the South, and Republican senators, who controlled the Senate, were on record supporting the bill. Aldrich faltered in the effort, and the Federal Elections Bill failed.<sup>5</sup> A decade later, in 1900, in a news story meant to demonstrate his skill in managing the Senate, the *Washington Post* inadvertently exposed the weakness of Aldrich’s position. Titling its story “Mr. Aldrich’s Clever Move,” the *Post* reported how he took advantage of a nearly empty Senate chamber to secure a “‘unanimous’ agreement” that the gold standard bill would be considered to the exclusion of all other business until it came to a vote eight days later.<sup>6</sup> That Aldrich was most effective when he had the chamber largely to himself suggests the challenges he faced in managing currency legislation, let alone the rest of the Senate’s business.

In the 2020s, the power wielded by the Senate majority leader is, in contrast, immense and in public view. It is visible in historic procedural decisions. First Harry Reid (D, Nev.) in 2013, then Mitch McConnell (R, Ky.) in 2017, mobilized their caucuses to end the filibuster and adopt majority cloture for judicial and executive branch confirmation votes, in the face of determined minority obstructionism. That power is visible in unprecedented actions taken to block or confirm nominees to the Supreme Court. When Justice Antonin Scalia unexpectedly died in February 2016, McConnell, on vacation with his wife in the Caribbean, immediately announced that the Senate would not consider any nominee by President Barack Obama. “I had members all over

<sup>3</sup> “General Manager of United States,” *Boston Herald*, Mar. 25, 1904, 6.

<sup>4</sup> “With Partisan Aims Only,” *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1890, 5; “The Cloture Talk,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 24, 1890, 1; “From Washington—The ‘Gag Law’ Change Introduced in the Senate,” *Baltimore Sun*, Dec. 24, 1890, 1; “The Cloture Rule Is In,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 24, 1890, 1; “Mr. Aldrich’s Gag Rule,” *New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1890, 1; “Fight at Hand,” *Boston Globe*, Dec. 30, 1890, 1; “Will Mr. Morton Do It,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 1891, 1; “By Aid of the Chair,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 1891, 2; “To Close the Debate,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 26, 1891, 1; Frederic J. Haskin, “The American Congress: IX. The Force Bill and Cloture,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 1, 1909, 4.

<sup>5</sup> “Black Eye to Cloture,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 27, 1891, 1; “May It Rest in Peace,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 27, 1891, 4; “A Constitutional Gossip,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 28, 1891, 4; Frederic J. Haskin, “The American Congress: IX. The Force Bill and Cloture,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 1, 1909, 4.

<sup>6</sup> “Mr. Aldrich’s Clever Move,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 7, 1900, 4.

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the country and all over the world. I didn't want to deal with 52 different opinions when we got back about how we were going to handle it," McConnell explained later. "And so I decided to lay down a marker and hope that people would fall in line. And with few exceptions, they did."<sup>7</sup> Four years later, in 2020, when Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died six weeks before the November elections, McConnell also acted swiftly, declaring that the Senate majority would confirm a nominee by President Donald Trump. And that power is visible in legislation—as Reid in 2009 worked "behind closed doors," in his office, to determine the final shape of the Affordable Care Act and build support from the 60 Democrats whose votes he needed to pass the bill without minority support; as McConnell in 2017 brought a handful of senators into his office and helped manage the negotiations that led to massive changes in the tax code, with the bill passing by a 51–48 vote; and as Charles E. Schumer (D, N.Y.), "the cordial collaborator who always keeps his flip phone nearby to start a new discussion toward sealing the deal," negotiated, over many months and in secret, with Joe Manchin (D, W.Va.) to secure passage of a historic climate package, the Inflation Reduction Act, in the summer of 2022 by a 51–50 vote.<sup>8</sup>

Leadership of the Senate was an afterthought at the Constitutional Convention. It took more than a century's time before senators began to find an enduring solution to that problem. The Constitution, of course, provided the Senate with a leader—"The Vice President of the United States shall be President of the Senate"—but "president" in this case simply meant presiding officer, and it was a presiding officer without a vote (except in cases of ties) and a leader imposed on the Senate from the outside, neither chosen by senators nor accountable to them. The framers of the Constitution assigned presiding officer duties to the vice president to give vice presidents something to do with their abundant free time, not to empower the Senate to govern itself. For its first hundred years, as we will show, the Senate struggled with a variety of organizational challenges and experimented with various institutional solutions: granting powers to the presiding officer, inventing party caucuses, organizing an array of ad hoc caucus committees, and establishing powerful campaign committees, committees on committees, and steering committees. Only in 1890 did senators in the Democratic caucus create a position that would become the ancestor of the modern posts of majority and minority leaders,

<sup>7</sup> Tyler Olson, "What Mitch McConnell Did in the Immediate Aftermath of Justice Scalia's Death," *Fox News*, Sept. 18, 2020. See also Burgess Everett and Glenn Thrush, "McConnell Throws Down the Gauntlet: No Scalia Replacement Under Obama," *Politico*, Feb. 13, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Kessler, "History Lesson: How the Democrats Pushed Obamacare Through the Senate," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2017; Paul Kane, "Schumer Isn't Harry Reid or LBJ: How His Style Helped Land Democrats a String of Wins," *Washington Post*, Aug. 9, 2022. See also Jim Tankersley and Alan Rappeport, "How Republicans Rallied Together to Deliver a Tax Plan," *New York Times*, Dec. 19, 2017.

and it was a position that was not adopted by the Republican caucus until 1913. Republicans, after all, had Aldrich and the Republican steering committee. Elected floor leadership developed late in the Senate's history, fitfully, in the shadows.

Our account in this book is largely new and original. The course of Senate party development—including the origins of caucuses, steering committees, other caucus committees, and floor leadership—has long been obscure. Before we began this research, no accurate lists of early floor leaders or caucus chairs existed. The standard narrative identified the 1920s as the moment when recognized floor leaders appeared in the Senate. Until recently, in fact, when it drew on early drafts of this book to update its records, even the Senate Historical Office reported on its website and in its reports that “the positions of party floor leaders . . . developed gradually in the 20th century,” identifying 1920 (for Democrats) and 1925 (for Republicans) as the date when each party first named a formally designated leader.<sup>9</sup> But that timeline was off by a generation. We will show that the origins of party floor leadership, including formal caucus designation, came in the 1890s—when Maryland senator Arthur Pue Gorman led the minority Democrats in their successful effort to defeat the landmark Federal Elections Bill of 1890, the last serious effort by Congress, until the modern civil rights era, to protect Black voting rights in the South.

The majority and minority leaders of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are, first and foremost, party leaders. Unlike the president, elected by a nation-spanning electoral college, and the speaker, chosen by the full membership of the House, the Senate leaders are selected in caucus, designated by members of their party to lead them on the chamber floor. In the early years that this position was created, few understood its significance. It was simply one among many party institutions with which senators were experimenting. But by the 1930s, it was well established that the majority and minority leaders of the Senate were consequential, and the significance of these positions has only grown in recent decades.

Our main concern is to understand Senate party development. What are the problems that individual legislators encounter in the absence of leadership? How do they set out to solve problems of coordination and collective action? How do they assign members to committees, organize campaigns, and set legislative agendas? At which moments do individual legislators decide to delegate some of their powers to a collective group of legislators and, ultimately, to a single leader? How and when, over time, do they decide to grant that single leader greater authority? Because the invention of entirely new party structures in the Senate stretched over a century's time, from 1789 to the 1890s—and the powers of floor leaders have then been elaborated over the

<sup>9</sup> As we go to press, both the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* and various websites maintained by the Senate have been updated to incorporate the research reflected in this book: see, for example, U.S. Senate Historical Office (2024a, 2024b).

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course of more than another century, from the 1890s to the 2020s—the U.S. Senate offers an outstanding laboratory for answering these questions. Time after time, senators have turned to new institutions and new forms of party organization, which gives us multiple opportunities to ask what distinguishes those moments.

Our answer, and our central argument, focuses on three factors: *party competition*, *factionalism*, and *entrepreneurship*. In the Senate, where leadership and institutional organization rest in the two parties rather than in the presiding officer, members adopt innovative structures when parties are most closely balanced. It has been at those moments when parties are battling for control of the Senate, often just after a shift in majority control, that one party (or both) adopts organizational innovations. New institutions are the products of tenuous majorities and hopeful or disappointed minority parties. But these innovations are adopted not only in response to moments of party competition but to address factionalism within parties. Factions often seek organizational and procedural changes within parties to gain an advantage. Moreover, divided parties and unified parties demand different forms of organization. And entrepreneurship matters. Whether it was Thomas Hart Benton (D, Mo.) and Henry Clay (W, Ky.) in the 1840s, Aldrich and Gorman in the 1890s, Charles Curtis (R, Kans.) and Joseph Robinson (D, Ark.) in the 1920s, Robert Taft (R, Ohio) and Lyndon B. Johnson (D, Tex.) in the 1950s, or Schumer and McConnell in the 2020s, individual entrepreneurs are the ones who take the lead in constructing new institutions in response to competitive parties or factionalized coalitions.

THE UNDERSTUDIED SENATE

The longstanding individualism and informality of Senate proceedings have limited scholarly interest in the development of Senate party leadership and organization. Both the contemporary Senate and the historical Senate have been underexamined by scholars. Most major studies of Congress have been studies of the House of Representatives, and the House speakership alone has been the subject of several books. Traditionally viewed as a less rules-bound body, with weaker leadership and more powerful individual members, the Senate has languished in congressional scholarship from the nineteenth century until the present day. In the 1970s, Jones (1976, 19–20), reflecting on the modern Senate, made the uncontroversial observation that “strong substance-oriented policy leadership by party leaders is neither possible nor desirable in the United States Senate.” The rules of the Senate, it has been commonly observed, protect the rights of senators to debate and offer proposals on the floor of the Senate and grant few special privileges to its presiding officer or to the leader of the majority party. And Senate rules rarely change from Congress to Congress.

The few existing studies of Senate party development present competing accounts of when and how centralized parties emerged. A set of studies from

the 1960s and 1970s, three published and two unpublished, offer outstanding examples of this scholarship. The three published accounts have had a lasting impact on congressional studies, yet their main features are difficult to reconcile with one another. Rothman's *Politics and Power* (1966), the most important book-length study of the Senate's institutional development, focuses on the collective governance structures, dominated by senior senators, that emerged in both parties in the late 1890s—institutions that Rothman regards as the foundation of modern, disciplined Senate party organization—but Rothman's account focuses on the turn of the last century, failing to note that these oligarchical institutions did not survive the early 1910s. Munk, in a dissertation (1970) and published article (1974), emphasizes an entirely different institution, the position of floor leader. In her dissertation, she lays out a nuanced, gradual process of institutional change, examining the ascendancy and collapse of the Republican oligarchy in the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s, alongside the steady development of the floor leadership position from the 1890s to the 1960s—remarkably similar to the account in Kravitz (ca. 1971), an unpublished book manuscript. However, in refining her argument for publication, Munk argues that floor leadership remained a primitive position until 1913, when John W. Kern (D, Ind.) became the Senate's first widely recognized majority leader. "The existence of majority and minority floor leaders," Munk (1974, 23) contends in her article, "can be traced with assurance only back to the second decade of the twentieth century." That crisp contention, rather than the subtle argument of her dissertation, had lasting resonance for subsequent scholarship. Meanwhile, Riddick (1971), drawing directly on surviving minutes of the two Senate caucuses, which exist for the Democrats since 1903 and the Republicans since 1911, concluded from his research that designated floor leaders emerged only in the 1920s.

The tensions between these accounts create obvious challenges for generating and testing theories of institutional change in the Senate. These scholars, each a careful student of Senate history, disagreed on which institutions, whether the Republican oligarchy of the 1890s or the floor leaders of the first decades of the twentieth century, best reflected a centralized structure of Senate party organization. For those emphasizing the role of floor leaders, they disagreed on timing—whether this was a gradual process of development, a dramatic break in 1913, or a new institution in the 1920s. Consequently, as they and subsequent political scientists sought to explain the rise of party institutions in the Senate, their efforts were hobbled by the elusiveness of their dependent variable.

Careerism, for example, has been cited by scholars as critical to Senate party development, but they disagree about the role careerism has played. Rothman (1966) contends that the centralization of Senate parties in the late nineteenth century resulted from the increasing number of senators who regarded Senate service as a career and owed their advancement to state party organizations. Yet Ripley (1969b) insists that, until the 1880s, careerism slowed the

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elaboration of Senate party organization and central leadership posts because career-minded senators, unlike less career-oriented members of the House, were unwilling to tolerate strong central leaders. And Brady et al. (Brady, Brody, and Epstein 1989; Brady and Epstein 1997) assert that it was the dominance of “noncareerists” in the Senate that facilitated the centralization of power in the late nineteenth century in the Aldrich oligarchy.

The Senate’s workload and size are natural candidates as factors that shaped party organization. McConachie (1898, 313–21) observes in the 1890s how the Senate’s increasing workload compelled adjustments in procedure and practice. Similarly, Baker and Davidson (1991, 2) argue that the independent power of committee chairs eroded sharply in the 1910s when the Senate reorganized its affairs to respond to the Great War and to an increasingly powerful president. Looking at the development of new party leadership positions in the Senate in this era, they conclude that the new conditions “necessitated a coordinated Senate leadership quite beyond the capacity of individual committee chairmen.”<sup>10</sup> A war effort, domestic emergencies, a large policy agenda, or even new forms of press coverage may create new demands for coordination, particularly from within the majority party, which is likely to be blamed by outsiders if the Senate fails to act on desired legislation.

The Senate’s size, too, may create coordination and collective action problems that can be addressed by party organization, including the creation of formal leadership positions. For decades, social scientists have emphasized the importance of *group size* as a factor that influences the severity of the collective action problem and the effect of individual efforts to address it. The larger the group, the smaller the contribution of the individual, the greater the incentive to be a “free rider,” the greater the transaction costs, and the more inefficient the pursuit of collective interests. Members of small groups tend to recognize the importance of their individual contributions to their personal interests and make an effort to achieve collective goals (Olson 1965; Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Young 1971). In the case of the Senate, the addition of states to the Union led the Senate to grow from 48 seats in 1821 to 66 seats in 1857, to 88 seats in 1889, and to 96 seats in 1911. It may seem more than coincidental that leadership emerged when the Senate approached 90 members.

In practice, we seldom find that increases in workload and size, by themselves, stimulate organizational innovation. While size and workload surely set the context for the activities of Senate parties, we rarely find that increases in size and workload per se are mentioned by senators as their motivation for organizational innovations. Nor does either workload or size change sharply in the short term. Instead, when more directly partisan or political factors

<sup>10</sup> This perspective stands in sharp contrast to the argument of Brady and Epstein (1997, 33), who assert that the 1910s was a period “in which the House and Senate became more committee- and less party-oriented and leadership style changed from command to bargaining.”



motivate senators to improve their organizational effectiveness, workload and size may condition the form that innovation takes. For example, a sizable workload makes effective floor leadership important, particularly for the majority party, but the emergence of floor leadership occurred first in the minority party and was a by-product of the need for a coordinated strategy rather than an increase in the Senate's legislative workload or size. Moreover, the free-rider problem is not severe in Senate parties. They are neither very large nor very small. They are large enough to make building coalitions and other legislative activities expensive in time and other resources. But the Senate remains small enough that the efforts of individual senators and factions can make a difference.

In her account, Munk argues that modern Senate floor leadership was the product of President Wilson's need for a lieutenant to push his program through a factionalized, filibuster-prone Senate (Munk 1974). With a small Democratic majority behind him in 1913 and a large legislative program, Wilson recognized that his chances of success were undermined by having a party divided between progressive and conservative forces. In the House, the speaker was the recognized party leader and a ready-made champion of the president's cause. But the Senate majority party, without a central leader, promised to be ineffective. Wilson's obvious solution, according to Munk, was to endorse a senator for a leadership role who shared his views on key issues and then rely on that senator to represent administration interests. Subsequent presidents then followed Wilson's example, giving the floor leadership a distinctive role as a partner to the president. Relations with the president are one of the main responsibilities of Senate floor leaders, but, as we contend below, it is one of several duties attached to this position, and a focus on this one aspect of the position fails to account for the substantial development of this position in the years before the Wilson presidency and in realms beyond executive relationships.

Other scholars point out that an influx of new members can drive institutional change (Davidson and Oleszek 1977; Evans and Oleszek 1997; Fenno 1997). According to this perspective, new members have no vested interest in the existing institutional arrangements and may even perceive a mandate to change the way their chamber and party operate. Large numbers of new members, too, can upset preexisting balances within or between the parties. As we lay out our own theory below, we draw on this insight too, considering how changes in the membership of the two parties can give rise to new forms of party organization.

Finally, a large body of legislative research argues that the influence of central party leaders over the policymaking process is related to the extent of ideological or policy differences between the parties (Cooper and Brady 1981; Sinclair 1983, 1995; Brady 1988; Brady, Brody, and Epstein 1989; Smith and Deering 1990; Rohde 1991; Aldrich and Rohde 1997, 1998; Brady and Epstein 1997; Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 2002). This perspective holds that congressional parties are preeminently policy coalitions of varying degrees of



cohesiveness and polarization (Aldrich and Rohde 1997, 1998). When intra-party cohesiveness is high and the distance between the parties is great, legislators are eager to license aggressive party leaders who will coordinate strategy in their interest. Members of internally divided parties, in contrast, tend to distrust strong leaders and prefer a more decentralized, committee-oriented policymaking process. The argument, usually termed “conditional party government,” was developed for the House of Representatives but has been extended to the Senate.

This attention to variation in party polarization influences our approach, but we diverge in emphasizing the creation and development of party institutions—caucuses, steering committees, leadership positions, and other forms of partisan organization—rather than how leaders make use of their powers, as is the focus in studies grounded in the conditional party government perspective. We also, of course, are examining a legislative body that lacks the majoritarian features of the House. In the House of Representatives, the speaker is selected by the full chamber and a simple majority controls the agenda, so, as power in the majority party becomes more concentrated, power within the House becomes more concentrated. But in the Senate changes within a party caucus, even within the majority party caucus, do not translate automatically to shifts of power within the chamber.

A theory of Senate institutional development requires understanding how Senate parties and leaders help solve the problems of collective action and coordination for their membership, problems long recognized by social scientists as basic to understanding human organizations and leadership (Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Young 1971; Calvert 1987; Rohde and Shepsle 1987). Senators require means to coordinate activities such as setting the agenda, drafting legislation, mobilizing majorities, assigning members to committees, and winning elections. When senators’ political interests are differentiated by party, as they were from the early years of the Congress, solutions will be organized by party. But what form those party-based solutions take—and at what moments in time—is what needs elaboration.

#### INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE GOALS

In developing a theory of institutional change in the Senate, we begin with the premise that legislators have goals not only as individuals—reelection, good public policy, and influence (Fenno 1973; Bullock 1976; Smith and Deering 1990)—but also as members of an organized party. Each of the individual goals has a correlative collective goal:

1. As individuals value *reelection*, the party values a favorable *reputation*.
2. As individuals value *good public policy*, the party values the *ability to shape legislative outcomes*.
3. As individuals value *influence*, the party values *majority control* of the chamber.

The collective goals are grounded in the individual-level goals. Legislators seeking to enact certain policies are advantaged if their party wins majority control of Congress, its committees, and scheduling mechanisms. Legislators seeking reelection are advantaged if the public has a favorable view of their party's legislative record and their party's reputation. For parties, these collective goals are central to their creation and development, they justify the elaboration of party organizations, and they motivate the strategies of party leaders.

There is no one-to-one correspondence between individual and party goals. To be sure, we would expect changes in the relative importance of reelection and policy goals among party members to be reflected in a party leader's priorities. Critically, however, the electoral and policy goals of the party are interdependent. A party's reputation influences its electoral success, its electoral success influences its legislative record, and its legislative record influences its popularity. Winning elections helps a party create the coalitions necessary for passing or blocking legislation, and a legislative record helps generate the desired reputation essential to winning elections. The interdependence of party goals, whatever their origin in senators' goals, requires that party leaders be attentive to a full array of party goals. In this way, the emergence of new party institutions, like the caucus and steering committees, and the creation of leadership positions all represent non-incremental changes in Senate party organization.

Interdependence of goals means that parties will pursue all three goals even if one of the personal goals that underpins them loses some of its importance to rank-and-file senators. Conversely, it means that party leaders will continue to pursue all three goals even if one of the personal goals gains greater importance for senators. In fact, an even stronger argument can be made: *leaders will pursue all three party goals even if rank-and-file senators are motivated exclusively by one of the personal goals*. Thus, the priority given to any of the party goals by party leaders will show more stability than variation in the importance or compatibility of individual goals might suggest. Even if we treat legislators as individually motivated by the desire to see their policy preferences reflected in law, fellow partisans would share an interest in both enacting their common policy interests and in maintaining or securing majority party status. They would care about the electoral fortunes of other party members. Consequently, they might be willing to exchange some of their policy aspirations for the electoral benefit of their party as a whole. It is precisely such exchanges that each party must address collectively, doing so by taking into account the broad electoral environment and expected behavior of the other party.

#### OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING PARTY GOALS

Party efforts to acquire public goods—that is, to achieve collective party goals—are subject to collective action and coordination problems (Baumol 1952; Coase 1960; Olson 1965; Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Young 1971). The *collective action problem* arises when the successful achievement of party