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CHOOSING AMONG PUBLIC INTEREST GROUPS:
MEMBERSHIP, ACTIVISM, AND RETENTION IN POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Contemporary scholars who have explored why citizens join organizations have employed assumptions that are untenable for understanding other member choices. An analysis of data on four contrasting public interest groups demonstrates that it is possible to develop a general perspective for explaining member decision-making in organizations. Decisions about which association to join, whether or not to stay, and whether to be an activist or to remain in the rank and file can all be understood as reflections of a process in which imperfectly informed citizens join a group, learn more about it, and subsequently make more knowledgeable choices. The *experiential search* perspective provides a coherent explanation for a host of interrelated citizen decisions.

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INTRODUCTION: TOWARD AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE

Why do people join organized groups? How do potential contributors choose one association over other possibilities? Does this selection process tie in with subsequent decisions, such as the choice to remain in the group and the decision whether or not to be an activist? This series of questions is fundamental for understanding interest group maintenance and success. Standard approaches to citizen decision-making vis-a-vis organizations, however, have lacked an integrated perspective allowing this set of choices to be conceptualized and analyzed jointly. Contemporary scholars have concentrated on the initial joining decision and have assumed that members either have perfect information (e.g., Olson 1965) or have imperfect information but never learn (e.g., Moe 1980). These frameworks yield predictions that are empirically false, such as that few contributors ever leave groups and that members separate themselves into activists and the rank and file immediately after joining.

In a series of papers, a perspective has been proposed that is designed to integrate member behavior: It is labeled *experiential search* (Rothenberg 1988a,b,c,d). Theoretically, it builds on previous work (Olson 1965; Wilson 1962, 1973; and Moe 1980, among others) but incorporates realistic assumptions about imperfect information. What specifically differentiates this framework from the others is the explicit assumption that decision-makers are capable of learning, e.g., by joining an organization (for a somewhat different perspective on the importance of learning, see Dunleavy 1988). They are assumed to be aware of their informational shortfalls and to take them into account in making choices. Citizens 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 in groups—particularly public interest groups (PIGs), which are generally inexpensive to join—provides an especially likely environment for experiential search (on PIGs, see McFarland 1976, 1984; Berry 1977; McCann 1986). Many relevant organizational attributes are *specific characteristics*, which are observable 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.

This viewpoint has been applied empirically to only one group: Common Cause (CC). The initial decision to join, the retention choice conditional upon joining, and the separation of contributors between activists and the rank and file have all been examined (Rothenberg 1988a,b,c,d). The results provide about as much initial evidence supporting the experiential search perspective as is possible, given that only a single case is being investigated.

Examining a multiplicity of associations is one of the prerequisites for pushing the analysis of membership behavior further. The option of picking one organization over another is a central element of the experiential search perspective. It structures both the initial decision process and subsequent membership decisions. In the joining decision, potential contributors must choose among any number of organizations. They are likely to be imperfectly informed about all of them, to one degree or another. After joining, members must determine whether they have made the right choice or another group might have been better; this assessment should structure decisions such as whether to become an activist and whether to stay in the organization.

The present analysis explores the implications of having the option of searching elsewhere. A 1982 mail survey of the members of four public interest groups—the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWV), the Conservative Caucus (TCC), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Common Cause—furnishes the data.[1] These data, despite imperfections, provide an opportunity to explore three issues: (1) the factors motivating individuals to select one group over another; (2) the implications of this choice for subsequent decisions; and (3) the evidence, if any, supporting the viewpoint that citizens are imperfectly informed when they initially sign up, learn about the association after joining, and factor this knowledge into their subsequent choices.[2] The results of the hypothesis tests about contributor behavior will shed light on the applicability of the experiential search perspective for understanding the membership decision process.

Each of these four associations can broadly be classified as a public interest group. The LWV, formed in 1920, lists its principal purposes as the promotion of political responsibility through informed and active participation in politics and action on selected governmental issues. It endorses no candidates or political parties and is especially noteworthy for its over 1,300 local groups, which foster interaction among its 125,000 members. TCC was founded in 1974 as an explicitly conservative group with the avowed purpose of building a grassroots "new majority" lobbying coalition in every congressional district to aid the conservative effort. It is the largest of the four associations studied here, with roughly 400,000 members. The ACLU, also begun in 1920, has approximately 250,000 members. As is well known, it—in conjunction with its tax-deductible arm, the ACLU Foundation—presents itself as a protector of individual rights and is heavily reliant on working through the legal process. Common Cause, initiated in 1970, is purportedly dedicated to making government at the national and state levels more open and accountable. At the time of the 1982 survey, it had roughly 225,000 members. (These descriptions are principally drawn from Akey

1984.)

These groups have several similarities. They offer publications as divisible rewards for membership, and they keep the monetary cost of joining relatively inexpensive (which, everything being equal, ought to encourage potential contributors to "sample" the association by becoming members). But they differ on a number of potentially key dimensions—the issues they address, the positions they adopt, and the way the groups are structured and operate. These organizations, along with other PIGs, provide real alternatives for individuals who want to join a public-regarding association.

The results below show that contributors believe, in ways that are intuitively sensible, that each of these organizations has comparative advantages for producing different benefits. Many citizens join the PIG that is "right" for them. Others select the "wrong" organization for reasons other than the association's apparent comparative advantage. Presumably, a good proportion are making "mistakes," choosing groups they would not join if they possessed full information at the time of their initial decision. Those committing mistakes recognize their errors and rectify them, as is demonstrated by their propensity to do less as members or to leave the organization altogether. These findings, in conjunction with the other results of this analysis, provide evidence for the experiential search argument that members are imperfectly informed when they first sign up for the organization but learn over time.

The remainder of this analysis is separated into five parts. The first is an examination of how citizens choose the group they join. The second is an investigation of why members decide to be activists; the third, a consideration of what structures their decision whether or not to stay in the organization during the following contribution period; and the fourth, a joint study of the latter two choices. The final section of this research presents conclusions and a discussion of their consequences for developing an integrated perspective on member decision-making.

HOW DO CITIZENS CHOOSE A GROUP?

The first decision that any citizen faces is which group, if any, to select among the host of potential alternatives. Associations offer various packages of benefits, but imperfectly informed citizens are unlikely to know the precise differences. If individuals are completely knowledgeable, they will pick the organization that gives them the highest benefits relative to costs; if not, they will sort themselves out according to which of these groups seems to provide the best potential match.

It is feasible to determine what precipitates the choice to sign up conditional on choosing one of the four organizations in question. In other words, it is possible to identify both the combination of rewards that new members think their chosen alternative will best supply and the types of individuals for whom the organization is most attractive. It is assumed, however, that cost-benefit calculations are clouded by imperfect information and that decisions are made with the intention to learn with experience.

Whether individuals perceive alternative groups as fulfilling different needs can be examined by looking at members' choice mechanisms across the four public interest groups in the sample. Those surveyed were asked which of the following were important to them: (1) efficacy; (2) citizen duty; (3) ideology; (4) information; (5) political experience; (6) personal interactions; and (7) other

motivations.[3] The first three motivations roughly measure purposive and collective rewards; the next gauges divisible, selective benefits; and the fifth and sixth, solidary returns (see Clark and Wilson 1961 for a description of this well-known benefit typology).

The multiplicity of benefits are measured in two ways: Each contributor was initially asked if the reward in question was important in an absolute sense and then was requested to select which of the seven alternatives was the most valuable. Consequently, two models are specified and estimated, one version incorporating the unranked motivations (the nonprioritized model) and another utilizing the rankings (the prioritized model).

For these two models, dummy variables were created to correspond to each of the benefit types. The experience and interaction measures were combined (only six respondents chose experience in the prioritized version); an affirmative response was scored one and a negative response, zero. In addition, a trio of socio-demographic characteristics—gender, age, and education—all known to be associated with political interest and hence participation generally (Rothenberg 1988b,d) are included in each model as control variables. Gender is measured by a dummy variable scored one for males; age, by a six-fold scale; and education, by a five-fold scale.[4] Data on LWV members are omitted in both models so that the League can be the basis of comparison. The choice of other motivations is also dropped in the second specification so that this selection can be the basis of comparison for the prioritized version of motivations for joining.

Although, making *a priori*, pairwise (between groups) predictions of the relative attractiveness of each factor is impossible, some general expectations can be sketched. TCC, the ACLU, and CC all place greater emphasis than the LWV on a substantive agenda, so efficacy should be less germane for the latter. As principally a service organization, the League might be especially useful for fulfilling a sense of citizen duty. The ACLU and TCC are the more ideological of the four; the League's lack of a strong substantive agenda and Common Cause's explicitly nonpartisan stance, which emphasizes "structure and process" issues, should mitigate their ability to satisfy the ideologically motivated. The LWV, in contrast, should be especially good at offering information and political experience/personal interactions.

While there would be clear expectations about the impact of socio-demographic characteristics if the data were representative of all citizens (e.g., Rothenberg 1988b,d), only two strong expectations stand out for the group member sample. The League, although allowing male members, should be dominated by women; and given its conservative stance, TCC will probably have less educated contributors.

Estimation of these models is less straightforward than it might seem at first glance. The standard technique for estimating a selection model where the decision involves choosing among a limited number of unordered alternatives is multinomial logit. However, this strategy is inappropriate here because a choice-based sample, stratified on the decision to join, is being employed. The probability that a sample respondent is part of a given group is not the same as the likelihood that a citizen randomly drawn from the population of contributors to these four groups would belong to that same organization. Conventional multinomial logit estimation yields

inconsistent coefficients when applied to such data.

A variety of means for coping with choice-based sampling exist (for surveys, see Maddala 1983, Amemiya 1985, Ben-Akiva and Lerman 1985). Given that the real population probabilities are known, the weighted exogenous sample maximum likelihood function (WESML) developed by Manski and Lerman (1977) is the best available. The WESML method involves weighting the sample by the ratio of the real probabilities in the population and the observed likelihood in the sample (it is explained more fully in Rothenberg 1988c,d).[5] Intuitively, this approach makes sense: In a randomly drawn population, the weight is unity; otherwise, the underrepresented are weighted by more than one and the oversampled, by less than one. The derived coefficients are asymptotically consistent when the WESML methodology is applied. WESML is therefore employed in estimating the two models.

The nonprioritized model results are roughly congruent with expectations (Table 1). All three groups are more attractive than the LWV for those seeking to be efficacious, and the coefficient for CC is the largest. There are no statistically significant results with respect to civic duty— although the coefficients for the ACLU and CC are negative and approach levels of significance— ideology, or miscellaneous benefits. Selective and solidary returns, according to expectations, are perceived by contributors as the province of the LWV.

(Table 1 about here)

The two strong *a priori* expectations about socio-demographic characteristics are also borne out: Women are more likely to join the League, and the relatively poorly educated have a preference for TCC. CC and TCC also attract older members for reasons that are not intuitively obvious. In addition, more educated persons choose the ACLU, which may reflect a preference for the organization among lawyers given its heavy reliance on the legal process; 68 percent of ACLU members label themselves as professionals, compared to 39 percent of the LWV, 27 percent of TCC, and 45 percent of CC.[6]

When the principal reason individuals join is substituted for the nonprioritized information, the findings are slightly weaker (Table 2). In a few instances—efficacy with respect to the ACLU, divisible benefits with regard to TCC, and solidary rewards concerning TCC and the ACLU (only 23 persons chose either experience or interactions as their principal motivation, so the standard errors tend to be enormous)—the results are now insignificant. One somewhat surprising finding is that the LWV members are apparently more motivated by ideological concerns than CC contributors.

(Table 2 about here)

Taken together, the findings for the two models demonstrate that contributors discriminate between organizations. Decision-makers distinguish among these groups in ways that largely make intuitive sense. Yet, it is hard to paint an absolutely clear picture of why individuals select one interest group over another, since some sign up for reasons other than those for which the association seems to have a comparative advantage. This finding lends credence to the argument that citizens join groups without full knowledge about them; if they are capable of becoming better informed,

they will recognize these mistakes and act on them.

That many initially contribute for curious reasons can be seen more clearly if individuals' principal motivations for joining are classified according to whether they are "correct" or "incorrect" (Table 3). Exactly half of all respondents joined for what is labeled to be the wrong reason. It must be emphasized that this classification is rough and makes sense only if individuals are imperfectly informed but are capable of learning. If contributors are either perfectly informed or incapable of learning, there is no such thing as a potentially rectifiable mistake.[7]

(Table 3 about here)

The LWV has the highest percentage of people in the correct group and TCC has the largest proportion of misfits. If not an artifact of the coding scheme, this distribution across groups may reflect how well they are known by citizens before joining and variations in the real cost of membership. The LWV's sponsorship of public forums such as televised presidential debates gives it a visibility that the other organizations in this analysis probably cannot match. By contrast, it is likely that TCC is the least known of the four organizations, which may partially explain why its members are most likely to make a mistake. The LWV's emphasis on member participation may also make the real price of joining much higher than for the other associations. This has two consequences for potential contributors. The high price of membership provides an incentive to invest in learning about the group before joining, in much the way that consumers invest more heavily in acquiring information before making a major purchase than before buying something inexpensive. It also furnishes an incentive for members who think they might have made a mistake to leave quickly rather than to stay and learn more. Both of these processes should lead to the empirical observation that the LWV seems to match its members well.

It is possible to debate back and forth whether it is reasonable to classify a given decision as correct or not. There is only one ultimate test of this scheme's utility: whether this dichotomy explains subsequent behavior. If it does so even with its imperfections, the results will represent strong support for the experiential search perspective. If not, another viewpoint on organizational decision-making may be in order.

ACTIVISM AND EXPERIENTIAL SEARCH

One of the key follow-up choices that contributors face is how much of a commitment to make. If experiential search is a reasonable means of thinking about member behavior, it should help explain activism. It ought to be possible to integrate the initial membership choice with the level of commitment selected.

More specifically, this perspective yields a number of expectations about activism. Obviously, the discussion above implies that a good match between respondents and their chosen group should precipitate activism, everything else being equal. Long-time contributors should be more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to be active because a rational membership strategy is for citizens to join the association, learn about it as rank and file members, and then become active if they like what they learn.[8] Another expectation is negative in tone: Initial predispositions toward activism should

be significant but hardly overwhelming predictors.

Finally, in previous work (Rothenberg 1988c), it was discovered that a key factor distinguishing Common Cause activists from the rank and file is whether contributors feel that their participation gets results. Rather than being purists, activists even in a public-regarding group like Common Cause are, broadly speaking, concerned about benefits that accrue exclusively to them. Over time, they learn whether increased participation yields returns that are worth the quantum leap in costs that getting deeply involved entails.

These expectations and previous findings imply that a model of activism should include measures of whether respondents (1) made a mistake in their selection of groups; (2) acquired organizational experience; (3) entered the association with an initial disposition toward activism; and (4) possess a belief that their efforts will yield results.

All of these factors can be operationalized with the available data. The reasonableness of the member/association match is measured with a dummy variable, indicating whether individuals made the right choice of an organization, as reported in Table 3. Organizational experience is gauged by two dummy variables tapping whether the contributor has been in the organization for two to five years and more than five years. Predispositions toward activism are measured by whether respondents claim that either political experience or solidary returns were their principal reasons for joining. Similar to previous results, only a small percentage of members actually seemed to have joined to get actively involved (about 5 percent).[9] The perception that activism has an impact on the production of collective goods is tapped by a series of dummy variables comparing those who believe that decisions in the group are made by the members, or by the interaction between the members and the leadership/staff, or who do not know how they are made, with those who think that the leadership and staff are in control. Finally, as a precaution given the data limitations, each of the three previously discussed measures of political interest are included in a second model.

Activism itself is measured dichotomously, with the roughly 20 percent who identified themselves as activists scored one and all other respondents scored zero.[10] As expected, the LWV has far more self-proclaimed activists (43 percent) than the other groups (TCC, 21 percent; the . ACLU, 14 percent; and CC, 11 percent).

Expectations for each factor in the activism models are straightforward with one exception. Naturally, those who had a positive initial disposition should be more likely to become activists. Those who made the correct decision to join who have been in their groups longer and therefore learned more, and who discover that the organization is responsive to activist behavior should be more likely to be active because they learn about the organization and find that it is an appropriate match for them. Only how members with no opinion about associational responsiveness should behave is uncertain. The more politically interested members, i.e., male, educated, older contributors, should be more willing to incur the costs of being an activist. It is likely, however, that these measures of political interest will be irrelevant for the conditional activism choice given the truncated nature of this sample.[11]

These models can be estimated with standard, limited dependent variable methods rather than WESML, because sampling is not based on the choice in question. Probit is therefore employed here. Examination of the intercorrelations reveals no problem of multicollinearity, and a

pooling test suggests that it is possible to combine the responses of the four groups' members.

The probit results (Table 4) bear out the expectations regardless of whether model I or model II is used. Initial predispositions are significant, but so are a variety of other factors. Most importantly, the experiential search perspective is validated by the finding that individuals selecting the right association are more prone to be activists. Members who learn that their chosen organization is wrong for them are unwilling to incur the higher costs associated with activism.

(Table 4 about here)

The effect of organizational experience is in the predicted direction and significant at least for those in the association more than five years. Contributors tend to become activists only once they have had time to learn about the organization and what being an activist entails. In line with the previously discussed findings, those believing that contributors can have an impact in their group by getting involved are also more likely to be active. Those not knowing how the group operates are actually less prone to get involved than those viewing the organization as dominated by its leadership and staff. This finding underscores the key importance of information. Some presumably believe that only activism can make the leadership and staff respond, and therefore they become active; while those without information will simply not enter the fray.

Of the three control variables in model II, none is significant and in the expected direction. Gender is significant but in the wrong direction, i.e., women are more likely to be activists. This reflects the propensity of members of the LWV to rate themselves as activists.

Except for this idiosyncratic finding about gender, these results provide considerable support for the experiential search perspective. Initial dispositions are not all that counts for the activist decision calculus. Judgements about organizational responsiveness, which are presumably learned after joining (otherwise they would be calculated into the predispositions and should be insignificant by themselves), also matter. So too does organizational experience. Most interestingly, members who make what seems to be a mistake in choosing a group tend to remain in the rank and file.[12]

THE DECISION WHETHER TO REMAIN

From the time that they join, members have the option of being activists. Periodically, they also have the right to leave and either search elsewhere or become inactive. This second choice, which is called here the retention decision, is crucial for organizational maintenance (Rothenberg 1988a).

If individuals have either perfect information or are imperfectly informed but never learn, specifying a successful retention model would be impossible. In other words, the implications of previous perspectives on decision-making is that once a member, always a member; only unanticipated exogenous shocks should precipitate some to leave. The experiential search perspective, by contrast, implies that quitting is explicable. Individuals update their information, gradually making more informed choices about whether their organization is worthwhile or other alternatives are more appealing. One test of the experiential search perspective is simply whether it

can explain the retention decisions.

Two other tests of the search framework stand out. One is that contributors choosing the right organization should be more likely to update their information positively and stay in the association. A second is that those who have been in the association for a considerable time should tend to stay. It is unlikely that the additional increment of information garnered from remaining in the group for another period will change their decision.

Many of the other factors that are posited to drive activism should also structure the retention choice. The one exception is that initial dispositions toward activism are unimportant by themselves for the retention decision: Rather, whether members are activists should have a positive impact on their willingness to retain their membership. Findings from the previous Common Cause research also lead to the expectation that the ability to have an impact should be less germane for staying than for activism. Contributors incur the comparatively small cost of membership without necessarily having an impact far more willingly than they assume the greater price of activism.

This discussion implies that the estimated model of retention should again include whether members have made the right choice, have been in the group for a considerable time, and think that their participation can have an impact. Whether contributors are activists should also be relevant—this is tapped with the dummy variable measuring whether an individual is active that was used as the dependent variable in the previous section. Again, as a precaution, surrogates for political interest are included in a second estimated model. Expectations with respect to making the correct choice, organizational experience, and organizational responsiveness are analogous to those for activism, with the caveat that the ability to have an impact should probably be more germane for activism than for retention. As mentioned, activism should also be a positive determinant of retention.[13]

The likelihood of membership retention itself is measured trichotomously. Those claiming that they will renew their membership in the next contribution period—about 83 percent of all respondents—scored a two; those stating they don't know if they will stay or go were assigned a one; and those saying that they are planning to quit were given a zero. LWV contributors are most prone to claim that they will remain in their organization (90 percent), presumably for the same cost-based reasons that they are most likely to be well suited to their association, although members of the ACLU are not far behind (87 percent; only 67 percent of TCC respondents and 80 percent of CC contributors responded affirmatively). Once again, intercorrelations demonstrate little problem with multicollinearity, and pooling tests suggest that the data on the four groups can be combined. Probit is again utilized for estimation.

The results (Table 5) provide additional support for the experiential search perspective. Retention is explicable; it is possible even to explain the behavior of those comprising the extremely homogenous sample considered in this analysis.[14]

(Table 5 about here)

The ability to learn is key. This is highlighted by the evidence about those choosing the correct association, those deciding to be activists, and those acquiring experience. Members selecting the right organization are more likely to make a positive retention decision in the next period, and those learning they made a mistake try to rectify it. Activists, who have presumably learned about the organization and decided it is worthwhile, also exhibit a much greater tendency to stay. The learning process explains why those who have been in the organization a long time are far more likely to stay as well—they approach the full informational ideal.

By contrast, assessments of who makes organizational decisions are unimportant. Individuals do not weigh these judgements heavily in their retention calculus. They are probably content, given the small costs of being an organizational member, to make a purposive or policy statement that is in accord with their own beliefs. Of the three socio-demographic surrogates for political interest included in model II, only education is relevant. Other findings are substantially the same whether either model I or model II is considered.

To summarize: These findings support the supposition that members are imperfectly informed but learn over time. Even an extremely truncated sample of society like the one examined here yields evidence buttressing this perspective. What is especially noteworthy is that contributors eventually recognize when they join the wrong organization and attempt to rectify the situation. The matching of members and groups in the initial joining decision feeds into the retention calculus both directly and indirectly through the activist choice. These results, along with the findings about the impact of organizational experience on retention, provide validation for the experiential search perspective as a means of integrating all membership decisions. Those sampling a group and finding that it is wrong for them tend either to stay in the rank and file or to quit altogether—presumably to try another association or return to private life.

ACTIVISM AND RETENTION AS A JOINT COMMITMENT DECISION

It has been assumed up to this juncture that activism and retention are *sequential* choices. At first sight, this specification seems unassailable. Activism is a choice that is continuously made by contributors once they sign up; retention is a decision that is made at prespecified periods, frequently annually, after joining. By definition, activism temporally precedes retention.

However, it might be countered that the retention decision—although observable at designated intervals—is also made continuously. Well before the designated time for announcing one's retention choice, contributors may have decided to let their membership lapse when it comes up for renewal. The difference between retention and activism might only be an inability to observe the former except at designated times. Activism and retention might be conceptualized as a *joint* decision about commitment level: whether to be active, to form part of the rank and file, or to quit.

To examine what effect this alternative perspective might have on the previous findings, the activism models were rerun with a dependent variable measuring the level of commitment. Activists planning to renew were scored a four, rank and file members intending to stay were given a three, rank and file members who were unsure if they would remain were scored a two, and rank and file

contributors planning to quit were given a one. Ordered probit was then employed to estimate these models.

The results (Table 6) are strong and generally consistent with the sequential choice results.[15] The only difference is that predispositions toward activism are no longer significant. The findings for making the correct choice, for organizational responsiveness, and for organizational experience all remain strongly significant. Males are again slightly more likely either to stay in the rank and file or quit altogether.

(Table 6 about here)

The joint model in Table 6 can be compared to its sequential analogue to determine which depiction of the decision-making process is more accurate. The sequential process is estimated with a conditional specification. Contributors first decide whether or not to be an activist or not and then, conditional upon being in the rank and file, choose whether or not to stay in the association.[16] A log-likelihood ratio test comparing the sequential and joint specifications demonstrates that the latter is superior (on this test, see Vuong 1988). Activist and retention choices are apparently made simultaneously by contributors who decide upon their commitment level after updating their information.

The more general point to draw from this section of the analysis is that the overall findings of this study are robust whether these decisions are made jointly or sequentially. The results reveal that decision-makers are following an experiential search strategy: Members learn if they have made the right choice, if the group is responsive, and if the association matches their preferences, and act accordingly.

CONCLUSIONS: AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE ON MEMBER DECISION-MAKING

Despite considerable data limitations, this analysis has demonstrated that it is possible to develop an integrated viewpoint of the initial joining decision and subsequent membership choices. Citizens join organizations intent on learning more about them. Some inevitably choose groups that are wrong for them. Many remedy their mistakes once they learn more about the association.

The examination of the initial membership decision shows that each of the four groups examined have comparative advantages. However, many members choose these organizations for other reasons. While some of these contributors select the association that is best for them, the results for activism and retention indicate that others make mistakes and act to rectify them.

Indeed, if members never commit errors, initial dispositions would completely explain the activist choice, and quitting would be inexplicable altogether given the decision to join in the first place. Yet, neither of these statements is true: Contributors are activists for reasons other than predispositions, and quitting is understandable. Members become group activists to have an impact, and if they learn that they chose the wrong organization, they stay in the rank and file or leave the group. Those making a mistake in their associational selection quit more frequently once they update their information. Contributors who have been in the organization for a long time tend to stay because they know more about the group and it is more likely to match their preferences. They

approximate Olson's perfectly informed contributor. These findings are robust when activism and retention are concepualized as a joint decision about commitment level.

The results of this analysis are necessarily tentative. Yet, taken together, they indicate that it is essential to rethink how member decision-making has been conceptualized over the last several decades. They provide reason to believe that an integrated perspective weaving together explanations for a host of interrelated citizen decisions can be developed; scholars' fixation on the initial joining decision is unnecessary and damaging if the purpose of the research endeavor is to gain a general understanding of the interest group process.

NOTES

1. These data were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and were originally collected by Constance E. Cook of Albion College. Neither the collector of the original data nor the ICPSR bear any responsibility for the analysis presented here. The data were collected through a mail questionnaire sent to 250 members of each organization in the state of Michigan. A total of 562 of those surveyed responded: 137 from the LWV, 126 from TCC, 146 from the ACLU, and 153 from CC.

   In her published analysis of these data, Cook (1984) employs a series of frequency distributions to examine members' motivations for joining and their satisfaction with the association. She subsequently uses crosstabulations to investigate the bivariate relationship between satisfaction and renewal, and then to examine the bivariate relationship between activism and (1) motivations for joining; (2) interest in local, state, or national issues; (3) satisfaction; and (4) length of membership. She did not conduct any multivariate hypothesis tests of the type that will be carried out here.

2. The questionnaire was designed to take only five minutes to complete and is lacking many desirable features. Among the more notable omissions is the absence of even a rudimentary measure of political preferences, e.g., party identification or liberalism/conservatism, or any factors that might structure costs (except perhaps education). Nor were respondents asked whether they had ever been contacted by any of the organizations in the survey (on the potentially key role of contact, see Rothenberg 1988b,d). Much of the unexplained variance in the model of initial membership choice undoubtedly reflects the lack of any indicator of contact.

   It would also be nice to know whether the membership of the four groups overlap. In the survey of Common Cause members utilized for the earlier research, about 23 percent stated that they were also LWV members. However, given that in the four group survey individuals were asked what specifically appeals to them about the organization under which they are classified, it is unlikely that any overlap would damage this analysis.

   Finally, any study of membership behavior should optimally take a temporal perspective and incorporate information on nonmembers. For example, a complete analysis of contributor behavior would include samples of the national population and of those who joined organizations and opted to leave them either to become inactive or to search through membership in another association. Panel studies that follow members over time would represent a large improvement over cross-section analylses.

3. Respondents were asked (yes or no) whether they joined the organization to (1) make a difference in the political process; (2) become involved in the political process because of a sense of responsibility and feeling of civic duty; (3) work on issues that I believe in; (4) receive the information that is sent to members; (5) gain political experience; (6) be with people who share my interests; and (7) for another reason. They were then asked, "What was the one single reason that was most important to you when you joined this organization?" Possible responses

corresponded to the seven benefits listed above.

4.   The categories for age were (1) under 30, (2) 30-39, (3) 40-49, (4) 50-59, (5) 60-64, and (6) 65 or over. Education was also continuously measured as follows: (1) grade school; (2) high school; (3) some college, vocational or technical school; (4) college degree; and (5) graduate school. These categories reflect data limitations and not the truncation of more continuous information. In the Common Cause-specific research comparing members to the national population, age and education but not gender are found to motivate membership (Rothenberg 1988b,d).

      Unfortunately, it is impossible to tap whether the differential costs of being a member in these organizations makes a difference in choosing between associations, since measures of the ability to pay, e.g., income, were omitted from the four group survey. Some reassurance is provided by the finding that for CC at least, income levels are unimportant for either joining the organization or staying in it (Rothenberg 1988a,b,d).

5.   It is assumed that the population is national group members despite the fact that the sample was conducted exclusively in Michigan, because the former is the population of interest. This decision turns out to be trivial: The actual weights employed for the WESML estimation would differ only marginally if the Michigan population were substituted (the largest differential involves the ACLU, which is 21 percent of the four groups' population in Michigan and 26 percent of the U.S. total), so the impact on the estimates of substituting one set of weights for another is minimal.

      It might also be argued that TCC is not comparable to the other three organizations whose members were surveyed, since the latter are essentially liberal in orientation while TCC is, by definition, conservative. However, given that multinomial logit is being employed, including TCC does no damage because each group in question is compared only to the excluded organization; pooling tests justify merging the members of all four organizations for the subsequent examinations of activism and retention.

6.   The occupational variable is based on a measure in which respondents classify themselves as (1) student, (2) homemaker, (3) professional, (4) manager-business, (5) clerical-sales, (6) blue collar, (7) retired, or (8) unemployed.

      The standard error for the TCC coefficient is so large for other motivations because only one respondent chose this option.

7.   Given the findings in Tables 1 and 2 and the distribution of the motivations for joining across each group, respondents were considered to have made the right choice if (1) they choose the LWV and claimed it was because of duty, information/experience, or solidary returns; (2) they selected TCC to be efficacious; (3) they chose the ACLU for reasons of ideology; or (4) they selected CC to be efficacious. To reiterate, this is a crude classification.

8.   Organizational experience is a surrogate for a host of factors that are correlated with time. Members gradually learn about how a group functions and develop an idea about its positions. They should also become more certain about their subjective valuation of the variety of benefits that the group in question offers.

9. If individuals were fully informed, initial dispositions—if accurately measured—would presumably be the only explanator of activism necessary. Still, given the obvious measurement problems, it is probably setting up a straw man to maintain that any findings that other factors are important falsifies the perfect information hypothesis.

10. Respondents were asked, "Are you one of the more active members of this organization who contributes more than the average amount of time and/or money?" Given that the relevant comparison is between the respondent and the average member, about half of each group's members should reply affirmatively. Yet, the aggregate numbers are far under 50 percent for each group. Apparently, members were relying upon more conventional definitions of activism in which the vast majority are assumed to be part of the rank and file and activists represent the small percentage who are most strongly committed to the organization.

   Another potential problem with this activism measure is that it may confound time and money commitments. This confuses those giving extra money—perhaps as a consequence of having higher incomes—with those sacrificing their time. Temporal contributions are probably what is conventionally meant by activism, and it is likely that what determines the cost of this behavior differs considerably from what determines the cost of giving extra money, such as ability to pay (Rothenberg 1988c). It is also probable that time commitments are what the respondents have in mind. LWV members are twice as likely to claim that they are activists than contributors in any other organization; this undoubtedly reflects the higher probability that LWV members give time as well as money.

11. Given these strong expectations, one-tailed significance tests are employed for all indicators except for the dummy variable measuring whether individuals respond that they do not know how the organization operates.

   As mentioned, Cook (1984) measured member satisfaction with the group and tested the bivariate relationship between it and activism. Satisfaction, however, is almost certainly endogenous to this latter choice. Given the lack of appropriate data for creating instruments, including satisfaction in the Table 4 specifications is unwise. If satisfaction is incorporated, it is a strong predictor of activism although, interestingly, it does not have a large impact on the other factors in the models. Only the significance of organizational experience changes. Furthermore, many of the other independent variables prove to be significant determinants when put into a model to explain satisfaction, i.e., if the result that satisfaction caused activism is valid, it just pushes the analysis back one step further.

   In addition, like the examination of the initial organizational choice, it is not possible to differentiate among those for whom activism might be more or less costly. An implicit assumption is that the different opportunity costs of getting deeply involved are not doing violence to the findings in Table 4.

12. As will be discussed shortly, contributors' decision to remain in the rank and file may be a prelude to dropping out of the association altogether.

13. Although activism is included, only about one percent of activists actually reply that they are considering the exit option. Again, one-tailed significance tests are employed for all indicators except for the dummy variable measuring whether individuals respond that they do not know how the organization operates.

14. Cook (1984) also investigated the bivariate relationship between retention and satisfaction. However, the incorporation of satisfaction into the retention calculus makes little difference to the other substantive results, although the variable is statistically significant, despite the likelihood of endogeneity.

15. To estimate this model, the four activists who were considering quitting were excluded.

16. The trichotomous retention variable used previously is again employed. Also, activists who doubt whether they would stay in the group are again excluded. Finally, since only rank and file members are examined in the second equation, the activism variable in the original retention model is necessarily excluded.

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TABLE 1   *Determinants of Initial Membership Choice, Nonprioritized Model*
(WESML Estimates Comparing Groups to League of Women Voters)

Variable	TCC	ACLU	CC
Constant	1.011	−2.326**	−1.958
	(1.440)	(1.186)	(1.202)
Motivations for joining			
(Not prioritized)			
Efficacy	1.241**	0.939**	2.268*
	(0.615)	(0.420)	(0.482)
Civic duty	−0.120	−0.560	−0.621
	(0.524)	(0.379)	(0.391)
Ideological commitment	0.181	0.334	−0.433
	(0.499)	(0.374)	(0.379)
Information	−1.063**	−0.855**	−0.007
	(0.509)	(0.381)	(0.408)
Experience/interactions	−2.531*	−2.105*	−2.700*
	(0.695)	(0.402)	(0.453)
Other	−9.935	−0.173	−0.922
	(145.142)	(0.770)	(0.934)
Political interest			
Gender (male)	4.292*	3.204*	3.187*
	(0.571)	(0.428)	(0.448)
Age	0.469*	−0.036	0.293*
	(0.160)	(0.110)	(0.116)
Education	−0.726*	0.655*	0.098
	(0.262)	(0.218)	(0.212)

Number of cases = 538
−2xlog likelihood function = 956

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

Note: Each coefficient represents the maximum likelihood estimate; standard errors are in parentheses. Weights are [.13158/.25090], [.42105/.21190], [.21053/.26950], and [.23684/.26770] for the League of Women Voters, the Conservative Caucus (TCC), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Common Cause (CC), respectively.

TABLE 2   *Determinants of Initial Membership Choice, Prioritized Model*
                     (WESML Estimates Comparing Groups to League of Women Voters)

Variable	TCC	ACLU	CC
Constant	−0.217	−2.203***	−0.940
	(1.855)	(1.186)	(1.202)
Motivations for joining			
(Prioritized)			
Efficacy	2.985**	1.101	1.832*
	(1.388)	(0.733)	(0.776)
Civic duty	0.677	−1.085	−1.109
	(1.408)	(0.729)	(0.785)
Ideological commitment	0.706	−0.203	−1.525***
	(1.411)	(0.706)	(0.790)
Information	−0.043	−2.051*	−0.733
	(1.631)	(0.864)	(0.833)
Experience/interactions	−9.793	−11.866	−2.943***
	(195.662)	(86.528)	(1.539)
Political interest			
Gender (male)	4.598*	3.169*	3.301*
	(0.575)	(0.363)	(0.397)
Age	0.395*	−0.074	0.245**
	(0.163)	(0.108)	(0.112)
Education	−0.777*	0.587*	0.028
	(0.265)	(0.205)	(0.201)

Number of cases = 518
−2xlog likelihood function = 941

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

Note: Each coefficient represents the maximum likelihood estimate; standard errors are in parentheses. Weights are [.13158/.25090], [.42105/.21190], [.21053/.26950], and [.23684/.26770] for the League of Women Voters, the Conservative Caucus (TCC), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Common Cause (CC), respectively.

TABLE 3   *Classification of Initial Decisions by Group*
                 (Column/Row Percentages)

Organization	"Incorrect" Choice	"Correct" Choice	Number of Cases
League of Women Voters	18.5/38.1	30.2/62.0	137
The Conservative Caucus	27.8/61.9	17.1/38.1	126
American Civil Liberties Union	27.8/53.4	24.2/46.6	146
Common Cause	26.0/47.7	28.5/52.3	153
Number of Cases	281	281	562

TABLE 4   *Determinants of Activism*
       (Probit Estimates with Standard Errors in Parentheses)

Variable	Model I	Model II
Constant	−1.391*	−1.221*
	(0.245)	(0.455)
Predisposition toward activism	0.776*	0.724**
	(0.393)	(0.358)
"Correct" choice	0.252**	0.247**
	(0.143)	(0.145)
Organizational responsiveness		
Members decide	0.751*	0.511**
	(0.222)	(0.240)
Interaction with leaders	0.375**	0.297**
	(0.175)	(0.179)
Don't know how operates	-0.919*	-1.074*
	(0.185)	(0.303)
Organizational experience		
Two to five years in group	0.138	0.154
	(0.233)	(0.240)
More than five years in group	0.330***	0.311***
	(0.223)	(0.230)
Political interest		
Gender (Male)		-0.355**
		(0.154)
Age		0.033
		(0.048)
Education		–0.009
		(0.075)
Number of cases	490	486
−2xlog likelihood function	423	413

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

TABLE 5   *Determinants of Retention*
(Probit Estimates with Standard Errors in Parentheses)

Variable	Model I	Model II
Constant	0.692*	0.058
	(0.196)	(0.433)
Activism	0.694*	0.703*
	(0.247)	(0.250)
"Correct" choice	0.264**	0.240*
	(0.141)	(0.143)
Organizational responsiveness		
Members decide	0.036	0.031
	(0.275)	(0.285)
Interaction with leaders	0.185	0.176
	(0.179)	(0.182)
Don't know how operates	0.074	0.124
	(0.185)	(0.193)
Organizational experience		
Two to five years in group	0.650*	0.684*
	(0.172)	(0.178)
More than five years in group	1.240*	1.224*
	(0.189)	(0.198)
Political Interest		
Gender (Male)		–0.052
		(0.151)
Age		0.036
		(0.047)
Education		0.131***
		(0.071)
Number of cases	507	502
–2xlog likelihood function	489	474

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

TABLE 6   *Joint Determinants of Activism and Retention*
(Probit Estimates with Standard Errors in Parentheses)

Variable	Model I	Model II
Constant	0.868* (0.182)	0.629*** (0.366)
Predisposition toward activism	0.288 (0.329)	0.263 (0.331)
"Correct" choice	0.291* (0.114)	0.280* (0.115)
Organizational responsiveness		
Members decide	0.557* (0.194)	0.417** (0.207)
Interaction with leaders	0.348* (0.145)	0.306** (0.147)
Don't know how operates	-0.287*** (0.160)	-0.337** (0.166)
Organizational experience		
Two to five years in group	0.500* (0.167)	0.531* (0.172)
More than five years in group	0.820* (0.164)	0.778* (0.170)
Political interest		
Gender (Male)		-0.216*** (0.121)
Age		0.040 (0.039)
Education		0.065 (0.061)
Number of cases	431	427
−2xlog likelihood function	801	788

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