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# The **GREENING** Of **Capitol Hill**

**More money from environmental PACs can help candidates win, but too much can backfire.**

BY MARY C. RIDDEL

Environmental political action committees (env-PACs) contributed nearly \$650,000 to Senate candidates during the 1996 and 1998 election cycles. The contributions were made to further the interests of the environmental movement, but does this money translate into increased environmental advocacy in the U.S. Senate? Or does env-PAC money diminish a candidate's chances of success by branding him or her as an extreme candidate?

Env-PACs donate to Senate candidates for two different — yet complementary — objectives. First, PACs make campaign contributions in exchange for promises of increased support on key Senate environmental bills. PACs may seek a candidate's help in preventing important bills from reaching a final vote, in introducing new bills, or for environmental coalition-building within the Senate (Chappell 1982; Grenzke 1989). Alternatively, if a PAC is assured of support from a particular candidate, PAC contributions may be intended to ensure that the candidate is elected. Although campaign dollars are important for purchasing media time and paying campaign expenses, the primary benefit from env-PAC money may stem from labeling the candidate as environmentally friendly.

A statistical model based on env-PAC contributions to Senate candidates for the 1996 and 1998 elections provides insight into the relative influence of "support-buying" and "eco-labeling" in determining to whom, and how much, env-PACs contribute. The 1998 election con-



sisted primarily of incumbents running for re-election. Including the 1996 election cycle allows examination of PAC donation behavior in an open-seat race as well as a predominantly incumbent race.

The model boils down to two important themes. First, env-PACs make contributions to candidates with specific environmental profiles and a reasonable chance of being elected. Those same characteristics, together with env-PAC funding, influence the election success of a Senate candidate. Second, env-PACs act rationally when choosing to whom, and how much, they contribute. Candidates with strong pro-environmental platforms generally receive less money than those who are undecided on environmental issues.

The study also revealed that env-PAC donations put an "eco-label" on Senate candidates. Generally, eco-labeling is beneficial, and env-PAC support increases a can-

didate's chance of winning an election, thereby heightening environmental support within the Senate. In a few instances, however, env-PAC funding can have a deleterious effect. Candidates who receive the maximum level of support available from environmental organizations are actually less likely to win a Senate election.

### Modeling Env-PAC Donations and Electoral Success

Models that seek to analyze the consequences of PAC donations face special problems. PAC contributions influence electoral success and electoral success often brings more PAC contributions. The results presented here ask simultaneously how PAC donations are determined, and what impact the donations have on electoral success. The model assumes that other factors, such as seniority and party affiliation, remain constant.

If it is to be accurate, the model must take into account the environmental ideology of the candidate. An accurate measure of "ideology" is challenging because views differ on the definition of an environmentally friendly candidate. The measure used here is an index developed by the League of Conservation Voters (LCV). It reflects the interests of the majority of env-PACs. For candidates who actually take office, the LCV index relies on Senate voting behavior on environmental issues. Those not elected are indexed with reference to their party affiliation and the percentage of public land in their state. The

percentage of public land is included to capture the regional variation between the major parties concerning environmental issues.

Data on total campaign spending for each candidate comes from the Federal Election Commission. In addition to actual campaign contributions, the model includes information on candidate characteristics such as party affiliation, environmental advocacy position, senate committee membership, total campaign contributions received for that election, and seniority.

### Which Candidates Receive Support from Env-PACs?

Env-PACs exhibit significant savvy in their candidate choices. Environmental campaign donations to incumbents are \$867 higher than donations to non-incumbents, on average. This reflects the political

***The candidate most likely to receive contributions from env-PACs is one who is involved in a close race.***

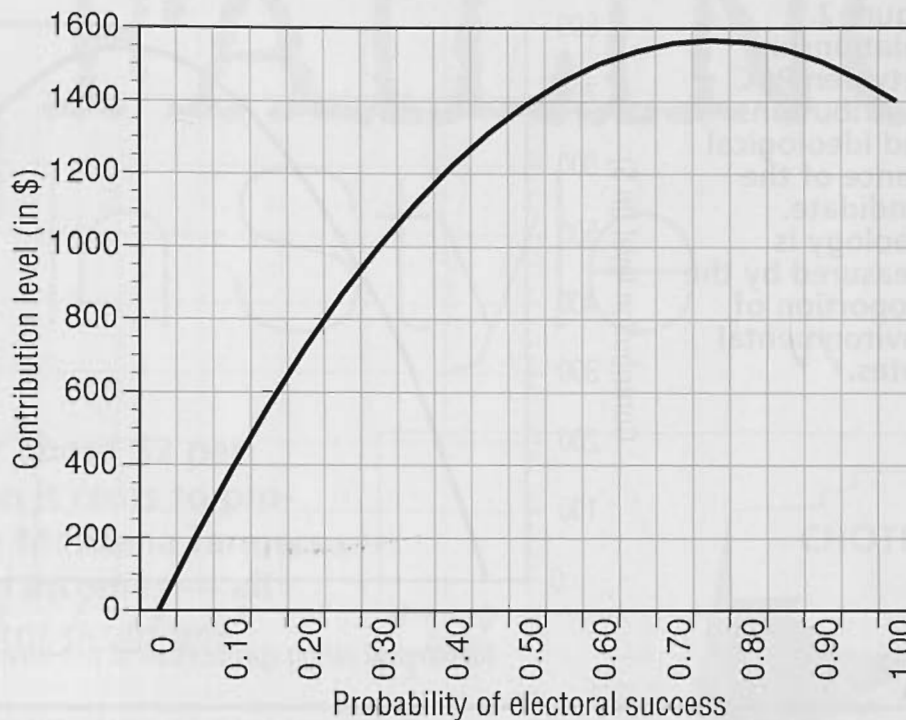
strength of incumbents relative to Senate newcomers. The incumbency premium is offset somewhat by a hesitancy on the part of env-PACs to fund senior Senate candidates. Donations fall by \$39 for each year of seniority. This may be because senior candidates are more constituent-driven than their junior counterparts and have an established agenda, so they are unlikely to be swayed by PAC contributions.

Candidates who are unlikely to win are also unlikely to receive PAC funding. As the probability of winning increases, funding increases until reaching a maximum funding level at \$1,550 when a 70 percent chance of winning is attained (see Figure 1). When the probability that the candidate will win the election exceeds this level, campaign contributions from env-PACs begin to fall. Apparently, env-PACs think strategically and do not offer campaign contributions to candidates who have little chance of winning. Env-PACs recognize the clear front-runners in the race and do not allocate additional funds to those candidates. When electoral margins are tight, PAC support may help decide the election. The candidate most likely to receive contributions from env-PACs is one who is involved in a close race. The results paint a portrait of sophisticated PACs that carefully scrutinize each candidate's potential as they make their donation decisions.

The candidate's ideology plays an important part. An ideology position of zero (the candidate voted "no" on all of the environmental issues), means that the candidate will receive no funding from env-PACs. As their environmental voting record improves, funding increases until the candidate has voted favorably on five of eight issues (see Figure 2). Funding begins to fall after this five-of-eight threshold, suggesting that candidates who are already voting in favor of environmental issues receive fewer donation dollars than those who sometimes vote no. Env-



**Figure 1.**  
Relationship  
between  
environmental  
PAC donations  
and the  
probability of  
a candidate's  
electoral  
success



PACs supply give the most of their support to candidates who are undecided on environmental issues.

### Env-PAC Donations and Electoral Success: Look For the Eco-Label

What influences the candidate's chance of winning the election? Others have shown that PAC money, general campaign contributions, experience, and ideological stance are important determinants of success. This study offers further insight into how environmental advocacy organizations have influenced recent Senate elections.

Formal studies as well as conventional wisdom show that campaigns with strong financial support have an edge in an election. This study showed that campaign spending has a strong influence on the election outcome. The first \$1,000,000 in campaign contributions from all sources increases the chance of winning by nearly 6 percent. Additional dollars have a diminishing impact. After \$5,000,000 of total campaign contributions, another \$500,000 increases the chance of winning by less than one percent.

Campaign spending is not the last word. Many elections have been lost by over-funded candidates who fail to gain voter support. Voter support depends on the public's perceptions of the candidate, which in turn is formed through local and national media, past political behavior, and through the support of special interest groups. The

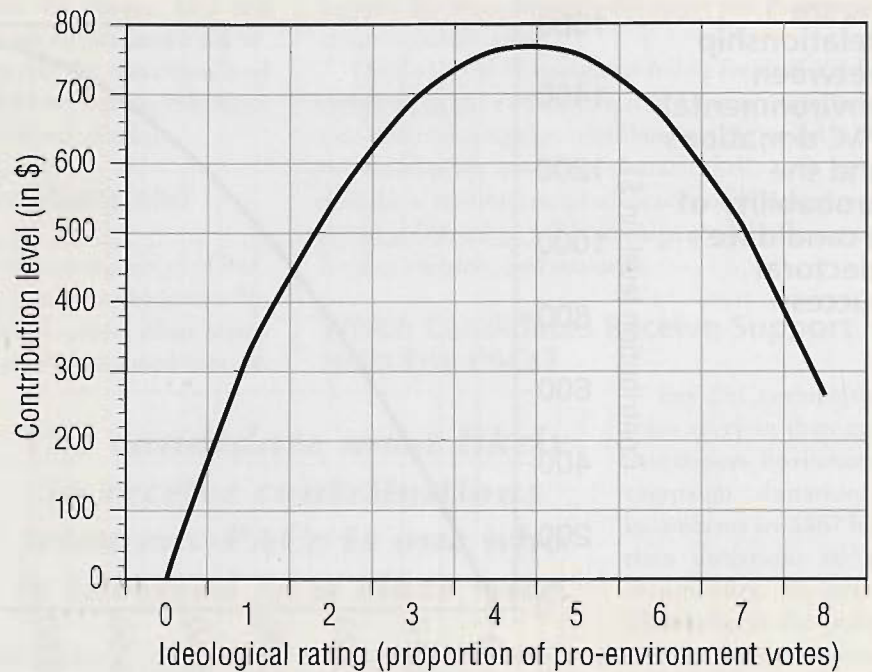
support of a well-known advocacy group, such as the Sierra Club or the League of Conservation Voters, may serve to label a candidate as environmentally friendly. Thus, campaign contributions from an env-PAC may act as an eco-labeling device.

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Eco-labeling has a strong, but not necessarily advantageous, impact. Env-PAC donations of less than \$2,500 improve electoral success by as much as 10 percent for the average candidate. Over 90 percent of env-PAC contributions fall in this category. Surprisingly, the remaining 10 percent of the env-PAC donations, those that exceed \$2,500, are actually associated with a lower likelihood that the candidate will be elected. The negative impact from large contributions may originate from two different sources. One possibility is that large PAC donations mark candidates as strongly pro-environment, which may be a disadvantage in some races. Another possibility is that env-PACs make large donations to help pro-environment candidates who are on the verge of losing an election. Nevertheless, the investigation shows that env-PAC contributions appear to improve electoral success in the majority of instances.

The change in success rate delivered by environmental campaign contributions, whether up or down, is not proportional to the dollars spent. It takes \$500,000 in general campaign contributions to increase the chance of electoral success by one percent. In contrast, an env-PAC contribution of \$1,500 increases the electoral success rate

**Figure 2.**  
**Relationship**  
**between PAC**  
**contributions**  
**and ideological**  
**stance of the**  
**candidate.**  
**Ideology is**  
**measured by the**  
**proportion of**  
**environmental**  
**votes.**



by 10 percent. The overwhelming impact of env-PAC contributions probably comes from the eco-labeling attached to the contribution. Env-PACs use contributions to signal voters about the advocacy positions of candidates. Voters use the signals to elect or reject candidates based on their opinion of the environmental organization itself.

A negative impact from eco-labeling conforms with other evidence that a strong pro-environmental stance did not benefit candidates in the 1996 and 1998 elections. The labeling carries a positive impact for candidates who are expected to vote pro-environment up to 66 percent of the time. The labeling impact becomes negative for candidates expected to vote pro-environment more than 66 percent of the time. Extreme candidates are less likely to win elections than those taking a moderate position, so as the environmental stance of a candidate becomes more extreme, the likelihood of winning falls.

Voters appreciate some interest from candidates on environmental issues, but they are wary of candidates who are perceived as being too narrowly focused on environmentalism. Voters appear to reward some support from environmental organizations, but lose interest in a candidate who is perceived to be "owned" by environmental interests.

### **New Strategies for Pro-Environment Candidates**

Environmental concerns are important in the market for political favors. Data show that env-PACs act in a rational manner by targeting senators who are likely to support the organization's goals. These PACs also carefully weigh the impact they may have in their funding decisions.

Candidates who have little chance of winning are unlikely to receive env-PAC campaign contributions.

The eco-labeling of candidates suggests that rational candidates, though even if strongly pro-environment, may be wise to temper their environmental position near election time. By doing this, they gain financial support from env-PACs and voter support because of their moderate stance. A large body of research has shown that the best way to win an election is by moving to the middle of the political spectrum. Apparently, this observation also applies in the environmental policy arena.

### **For More Information**

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