Reflections on Political Involvement

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A while back, one of my colleagues asked me how to become involved in advocacy. Upon some reflection, I recommended that she begin by making contributions to the causes in which she believed. Making donations is step 1 in almost any “how-to” manual on advocacy, and many of us are familiar with requests for donations from political parties and candidates for office. However, many Americans are unfamiliar with another entity to which we can contribute: political action committees (PACs). These organizations are poorly understood and are sometimes vilified in the media. However, they play an important role in the American political process, and this article is written to dispel some of the misconceptions surrounding them and to explain why it is worth our time and money to support them.

PACs raise private funds to support individuals running for elected office in the United States. They base disbursements on a candidate’s views regarding the issues affecting the PAC’s agenda. The 2 basic kinds of PACs are “connected” and “nonconnected” PACs. Both committees may receive funds only from individuals who may lawfully contribute in a United States election. The primary distinction is that connected PACs receive operating support from an incorporated membership organization (union, corporation, etc) and may solicit funds for political disbursement only from members of that organization. Two other categories are super PACs and leadership PACs. They function differently than the aforementioned PACs and are beyond the scope of this article.

Federal regulations govern both how much money an individual may contribute to a PAC and how much money a PAC may contribute to a candidate. There are also strict regulations regarding the transparency and reporting of contributions. However, there are no restrictions regarding how many PACs a person may support or how many candidates a PAC may support.

PACs have recently been the target of much criticism, some of it accurate, some of it not. One popular reproach is that PACs allow special interest opinions to have a disproportionate influence on policy. In some cases, this may be a valid concern, but it is not necessarily a bad thing. The political process is designed to serve everyone, and almost everyone supports a cause that others would consider a “special interest.” Moreover, democracy thrives when all sides are heard. As such, it is imperative that all individuals have the ability to advocate for the causes in which they believe, and PACs ensure this ability.

Another problem is that PACs may support candidates who take positions that are contrary to those of potential donors but are in policy areas outside of the PAC’s purview. As an example, a dog-catchers PAC may donate money to a pro–dog catcher candidate who also supports free trade. Consequently, dog catchers who oppose free trade may be reticent about donating money to their own PAC. This paradox arises because candidates typically run on broad issue platforms, whereas advocacy is based on advancing narrow or even single-issue agendas that are important to a specific group of people. In the case of medicine, these issues may include graduate medical education funding, research funding, or efforts to address the flawed sustainable growth rate formula used to determine physician payments in the Medicare program, just to name a few. Effective political advocacy requires this laser-type of focus, and as such, it is important to understand that contributions to PACs support the agenda of the PAC, not every conviction of those to whom the PAC contributes.

The importance of the issue-specific focus of PACs cannot be overstated. This characteristic of PACs distinguishes contributions to them from contributions to a candidate or political party, where the impact of the money might get diluted across issues that do not matter as much to the contributor. Moreover, PAC contributions can efficiently communicate your views to elected officials. Candidates are aware of how PACs operate and which issues top their agenda. They can also easily ascertain how many of their...
constituents donate to any particular PAC and in doing so learn what issues are most important to their constituents.9,10

Finally, there is a misconception that small contributions to a PAC do not make a difference. Nothing could be further from the truth! Percentage participation—what percentage of a PAC’s eligible donation group that makes contributions—is a key metric that lawmakers can use to evaluate the relevance of a PAC.1,2,10 This variable helps determine if a PAC truly speaks for the people whom it claims to represent. As an example, the impact of the message of a PAC with 90% participation will be larger than that of one with only 30% participation. Even minimum contributions will add a contributor’s name to the PAC’s roster; consequently, while large contributions are important, small contributions can be equally valuable to a PAC’s effectiveness.

In conclusion, PACs exist for the same reason as any other political organization: to help individuals coalesce around a common cause and communicate their wishes to political leaders. When used legally and ethically, they provide a stronger voice for those who might otherwise have a difficult time being heard and can be an effective conduit through which voters and advocates can influence the political process.1,2,10

In no way should any of the information presented in this article be misconstrued as a solicitation for funds or advocacy for any particular PAC or political agenda.

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7. 2 U.S.C. § 441b.