

Brand Identity and the Tactical Repertoires of Advocacy Organizations

Maryann Barakso, Ph.D.
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Department of Political Science
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Like corporations, advocacy groups develop distinctive brand identities as a means of differentiating themselves in a highly competitive market for resources. For corporations, branding is intended to attract and retain customers. For advocacy organizations, the resources sought include funding, members, access to the media and to policymakers. Successful branding also allows both firms and interest groups to reduce overhead: groups with highly recognizable brands operate more cost effectively because their identity signals more efficiently to members, for example. Moreover, by promoting loyalty, a familiar and trusted brand identity promotes the financial stability of both firms and of advocacy groups.

Much of the literature on branding (whether in the context of firms or interest groups) defines a brand in the context of symbols (such as logos), and products (such as market or issue niches). One definition notes that a brand is “a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or combination of them, which is intended to define the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (Kotler 1991). Yet, an organization’s brand identity can also be defined, at least in part, by the means it uses to pursue its goals. We can see this today as firms tout their environmentally friendly or “fair trade” products or their commitment to creating open source software. With this in mind, a more suitable definition, still drawn from the realm of marketing but expansive enough to encompass not only image but also an

organization’s methods of operation, is that “a brand is a mechanism for achieving competitive advantage for firms through differentiation... The attributes that differentiate the brand provide the customer with benefits for which they are willing to pay” (Wood 2000: 662).

In this chapter, I consider the extent to which advocacy groups’ tactical repertoires constitute a manifestation of their brands. Employing data documenting the activities of highly influential interest groups (compiled by Congressional Quarterly Press and the Foundation for Public Affairs), I analyze and compare the tactics employed by forty-seven advocacy groups in the environmental and political/governmental process sectors in 2001 and 2006.

Above all, effective branding should prime expectations about what a firm or group stands for and what it does. If tactical repertoires are a manifestation of an organization’s brand identity, we should find that groups choose tactics that reflect a particular orientation (for example, an insider or an outsider orientation). In addition, a group’s tactical orientation should remain stable over time. We would not expect an advocacy organization whose dominant method of operation consists of insider strategies such as legislative lobbying to shift to outsider tactics like organizing demonstrations within the span of a few years.

Brand identities, by definition, serve a differentiation function. A second question this analysis addresses is whether groups’ tactical repertoires serve as a means of differentiation within policy sectors. Advocacy groups competing within a single sector must distinguish themselves sufficiently from others such that they are perceived to be offering a “product” not readily available from other organizations—even as they pursue

similar goals. If a group’s tactical choices represent a means of establishing its brand identity (to the news media, policymakers, members, donors, and the public), we should find that groups specialize in the use of particular methods of operation.

Finally, I examine the relationship between a group’s tactical focus (the use of insider or outsider methods) and its propensity to participate in coalitions. Coalition work is a common tactic used by advocacy organizations, but one that may undermine or dilute an individual group’s brand identity (Spruill 2001). If the cultures, values and goals of participating organizations are incompatible, the repercussions can include coalition failure; lingering ill-will among groups; and intra-organizational discord. Given that participating in coalitions can damage brand identity, what kinds of organizations are most likely to enter into such alliances? It may be, for example, that organizations involved in policy areas linked to a social movement (such as environmental groups) are less likely to risk engaging in coalitions. In particular, when the tactical focus of such groups is on outsider tactics, their brand identities, and resource bases may discourage participation in policy alliances. This study sheds light on the types of organizations most likely to join coalitions, and whether tactical repertoires influence groups’ propensity to do so.

The Relationship between Brands and Tactics

Perhaps because of the explosion in the number of interest groups in the preceding decades, by the late 1990s advocacy groups began seriously applying concepts of corporate branding to their own organizations (Venable et al. 2005).¹ One observer

¹ For example, the first mentions of branding in the journal *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* occur in 1999.

wrote in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* in 2001 that “In recent years, nonprofit groups have embraced few ideas more zealously than one called branding, a marketing practice used widely in the for-profit world to build loyalty among customers and investors and one-up the competition” (Spruill 2001). Increases in the density of all forms of public interest organizations have heightened competition for dollars, members, and media—as well as the attention of policymakers. In response, even nonprofit public purpose organizations that have enjoyed high levels of public confidence and recognition have taken clear steps to “adopt a market culture.” As Lester Salamon (2002: 4) notes,

Nonprofit organizations are increasingly marketing their product, viewing their clients as customers, segmenting their markets, differentiating their output, identifying their market niche, formulating business plans, and generally incorporating the language, and the style, of business management into the operation of their agencies.

Furthermore, in an era of heightened distrust of “special interests,” the confidence that a brand can inspire among the public is another benefit of this strategy (particularly considering that, unlike firms, advocacy organizations can rarely claim to have single-handedly produced any particular public goods) (Berry 2000; Dixon 1997; Ritchie, Swami and Weisburg 1999: 33). Today, the fact that nonprofit and advocacy organizations stand to benefit from developing, maintaining, and advertising a distinctive “brand” has become conventional wisdom (Ritchie, Swami, and Weisburg 1993).

Typically, an advocacy or nonprofit organization’s brand is equated with its logo, issue niche, and image (Heaney 2006). A frequently significant yet overlooked component of an organization’s brand identity is the means by which it pursues its goals

– its practice. Groups may distinguish themselves by providing services to members (the AAUP offers counsel to university employees); by undertaking direct protests (PETA’s campaign to embarrass those who wear fur); by recruiting and funding women candidates (EMILY’s List); by lobbying legislators (AIPAC’s efforts on behalf of US-Israel relations); and disseminating information to the public (the Center for Responsive Politics' Open Secret project).

In fact, the set of tactics that an organization chooses to employ (as well as those it disavows), or its tactical repertoire, is often an important constituent of its collective identity, and thus, potentially, of its brand. Collective identity can be conceived as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice or institution” (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285). An organization’s collective identity typically represents an organization’s internal, shared culture. A group’s shared culture comprises its values, norms, goals, structure, and preferred modes of operation. The concept of a brand identity overlaps to a certain extent with that of a collective identity, but can be conceptualized as the public face of an organization’s collective identity. In other words, not all aspects of a group’s collective identity will necessarily be expressed, emphasized, or advertised as an important component of its public image.

Discussions of the relationship between identity and an organization’s tactical choices are most commonly found in literature examining the ways in which social movement organizations motivate members to act collectively. Polletta and Jasper (2001: 284) explain the relationship between tactics and group identity this way:

If people choose to participate because doing so accords with who they are, the forms of protest they choose are also influenced by collective identities. Models of strategic choice that had movement leaders selecting among strategies, tactics, and organizational forms by instrumentally assessing environmental opportunities and constraints missed the fact that strategic options may also be intrinsically appealing. They reflect what we believe, what we are comfortable with, what we like, who we are.

Tactical Consistency

Repertoires of contention, then, can represent a central component of an organization’s sense of itself. As such, the family of tactics a group draws upon most frequently to press its causes is typically narrow. Furthermore, while organizations certainly adopt new techniques in response to variations in resource availability or political and economic environments (McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Oberschall 1973), as a rule, groups’ methods of operation remain highly stable (Tilly 1978). Yet, as Holyoke (2003) notes, even when a particular tactic or issue is unlikely to yield results, group leaders or their agents may persist in order to circumvent the dissatisfaction of a board of directors or membership that expects such action. In fact, the “stickiness” of a wide range of established intra-organizational routines and rituals is well documented and is at least in part a result of the close relationship between identity and practice (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Stinchcombe 1965; see also Barakso 2004). By calling into question the continued correspondence between a group’s values and individual supporters’ values, radical changes in tactical choices (say, an inside lobbying

group suddenly organizing a violent protest) are jarring to members, staff, volunteers, and donors (and sometimes to the public as well). Engaging in novel and discordant methods of operation can induce reactions from a group's constituency that range from disillusionment to abandonment (see, for example, accounts in Ferree and Martin 2005). Given the link between organizational practice, organizational identity, and public image, I expect advocacy groups' methods will remain consistent across time.

Differentiation: Insider vs. Outsider Tactics

A strong brand allows an advocacy organization to distinguish itself among others operating within the same policy sector. The benefits of such differentiation are many, and include facilitating the ability to attract outside funding, volunteers and members; attention from news media; and access to policymakers who associate the brand with valuable issue expertise (Browne 1990; Engel 2007; Heaney 2004). As noted above, in a crowded sector, groups can and do seek out "niches" along a variety of dimensions to differentiate themselves (Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Bosso 1988; Browne 1990; Gray and Lowery 1996; Heaney 2006; Wilson 1973). In this view, interest groups may foster their brand and contrast their group with others in their larger issue sector (say, environmental policy) by establishing their expertise in a narrow subset of issues that they seek to be identified with (such as saving a particular endangered species).

Interest organizations may also distinguish themselves by their tactical choices.² For example, Earth First!, an environmental organization formed in 1979, explicitly

² See, for example "Catastrophic Health Insurance for the Elderly." Kennedy School of Government, Case # 1278.

advertises how the group’s methods of operation contrast with those used by its “competitors” in that sector. The organization notes that it was formed:

...in response to a lethargic, compromising, and increasingly corporate environmental community. Earth First! takes a decidedly different tack towards environmental issues. We believe in using all the tools in the tool box, ranging from grassroots organizing and involvement in the legal process to civil disobedience and monkeywrenching.³

Earth First!’s tactical orientation draws a robust distinction between insider and outsider methods of operation; it is clear that the group’s repertoire of contention is central to its identity or brand. Yet, many interest organizations prior to Earth First!’s inception and since have used this dichotomy as a means of drawing attention to the ways in which they differ from other advocacy groups in their policy sector. Moreover, the practice of differentiating between these two broad categories of tactics—those that entail the use of conventional tools within political institutions and those seeking to pressure established power sources via extra-institutional means—is common within both the social movement and interest group literatures (see Berry 1999).

Whether an organization relies predominantly on inside or outside tactics appears to depend upon a variety of factors, including a group’s resource base, its size, and level of professionalization (Gais and Walker 1991; cf. Gormley 1982). Other important factors include an organization’s internal culture and governance structure (Barakso 2004) and its ideological orientation (Gormley 1982; Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995). Most relevant to this analysis, larger and more professionalized organizations as well as those more dependent on external funding all appear more likely to engage in

³ “About Earth First!.” <http://www.earthfirst.org/about.htm>. Accessed May 10, 2008.

institutionalized approaches (Gais and Walker 1991). In this study, I examine whether groups appear to differentiate themselves with respect to tactical repertoire within their particular policy sector. For example, groups associated with social movements are more likely to engage in outsider tactics; as a result, I expect to find that organizations comprising the environmental sector will report a higher level of these tactics as compared to groups in the public interest sector.

Coalitions: Threats to the Brand Identity?

Joining coalitions imparts obvious benefits to participating groups, perhaps the chief being the fact that allying with the like-minded may dramatically extend an advocacy organization’s reach and resources in addition to maximizing opportunities for policy success (Hula 1999; Hyde 1997; Sawyers and Meyer 1999). Indeed, scholars have found that the practice has become increasingly central to many groups’ tactical repertoires (Berry 1999; Hojnacki 1997; Nownes and Freeman 1998).

Nevertheless, this course of action poses a dilemma for interest groups seeking to forge and maintain unique identities or brands. Presumably, the more an organization works in coalition with others in its sector, the more challenging it is for that group to differentiate itself among others in that sector, for example.

In addition to diluting an advocacy group’s brand identity, another drawback to coalition participation is that the tactic can ignite significant intra-organizational conflict (Barakso 2004; Hyde 1997; Sawyers and Meyer 1999; Smith 1995). A hastily convened coalition in which the values and governance structures of member groups are at odds can cause defection, the exposure of intra-coalition dissent, and intra-organizational conflict

(Ghosh 2001; Gould, Lewis and Roberts 2004; Staggenborg 1986). Any of these outcomes may jeopardize the coalition’s goals as well as the reputations, the brands, and the resources of all participating organizations. As a result, joining coalitions is not a tactical approach that organizations engage in lightly. Rather, groups typically consider the extent to which the values and goals of their partners correspond to their own, in addition to evaluating how willing they are to compromise (Hathaway and Meyer 1993). In many cases, a substantial proportion of literature suggests, coalitions are formed primarily under conditions of clear political opportunity or when facing clear political threat (Hathaway and Meyer 1993). Alliances are joined for narrowly defined purposes and typically disband once the coalition’s *raison d’être* has either been accomplished or once it becomes clear that the issue’s political moment has passed.

The literature offers contradictory thoughts as far as the types of advocacy organizations that may be particularly drawn to join coalitions. Groups whose repertoires of contention emphasize outsider activities may be less likely to engage in coalitions. Such organizations are often characterized as being smaller, more responsive to individual members’ viewpoints, more ideological and less willing to compromise to work collaboratively with others. At the same time, those groups whose preference is to work extra-institutionally may also have the most to gain from joining forces with others, reaping the benefits of shared financial burdens and of the ability to project force in numbers. In addition, as Hula (1999) found, both liberal and conservative organizations frequently worked in coalitions, suggesting that ideology is not necessarily a useful predictor of coalition participation.

Groups focusing on insider tactics, on the other hand, may be able to join coalitions with ease, but perhaps feel less urgency to do so—groups working insider strategies are typically thought to enjoy more stable finances, staff, and access to sources of power. Additionally, Gais and Walker (1991) note that groups more dependent on external funding are more likely to join coalitions.

I expect both environmental and political process organizations will report that they participate in coalitions. However, I hypothesize that because environmental groups are under greater pressure to differentiate themselves within their sector, they will join coalitions to a lesser extent than those in the political process sector.

In the following section, I outline the data and methods I use to examine the extent to which advocacy organizations’ tactical choices reflect the qualities that characterize a brand. I evaluate whether groups’ tactical choices are consistent across time and whether groups’ repertoires of contention serve to differentiate them from others within their policy sector. Finally, I examine whether group participation in coalition work, an activity that presents many potential challenges to groups’ brand identities, varies according to tactical repertoires and policy emphasis.

Analyzing Advocacy Organization Tactics

The groups included in this study are selected from *Public Interest Group Profiles* 2006-2007, which contains data compiled by Congressional Quarterly Press and the Foundation for Public Affairs (PFA). This reference work provides information on 255 organizations. The criteria for inclusion consist primarily of four factors: influence on national policy; frequency of inquiries about the group; news coverage; and “the

representative nature of the group in its field of interest and activity” (XV). *Public Interest Group Profiles* divides the profiled organizations into fourteen sectors. I chose to analyze two of these sectors: Environmental and Political/Governmental Process (hereafter ‘political process’). Together, these sectors comprised 55 organizations: 28 environmental (examples include Greenpeace USA, Natural Resources Defense Council, The Nature Conservancy, Friends of the Earth) and 27 political process groups (such as the Center for Public Integrity, League of Women Voters of the United States, Project Vote Smart, American Conservative Union). I selected these sectors because they vary in terms of how narrowly or broadly their purposes are defined, a distinction that may influence how strongly groups feel the need to differentiate themselves. The goals of the environmental sector are narrower and perhaps more easily defined than those of the political process sector. Environmental organizations may therefore find it more challenging—and yet more imperative—to differentiate themselves among their peers, since they are all “selling” essentially the same “product.”

The two sectors also differ in that the environmental sector is strongly linked to a social movement, whereas the political process sector is not. This variation in terms of ideological orientation allows us to test whether groups associated with a social movement are impeded from joining coalitions (an activity that, as noted above, can be troublesome for a group working to maintain brand identity) in their tactical repertoires.

I coded both sectors according to several criteria; of central importance for this study was the coding of every tactic that each organization reported using. Data on these tactics (*Profiles* calls these ‘methods of operation’) are drawn from a questionnaire sent by the PFA to each of 255 organizations. Each group was asked to specify which tactics

they use from a standardized list; they were permitted to select as many tactics as they engaged in. Groups in the environmental and political process sector reported using a total of forty different tactics, including campaign contributions, organizing conferences, maintaining information clearinghouses, and issue libraries, engaging in international activities, media outreach, and voter registration. For this analysis I excluded tactics that were used by only one organization (land purchasing), those used by almost all groups (media outreach), membership communications (email alerts), grantmaking, and those whose target is indistinct (mediation).

Ultimately, I narrowed the list to eleven tactics. A factor analysis of these eleven revealed that they loaded on two separate dimensions that appear to capture insider and outsider approaches. Insider tactics included those aimed at influencing government through institutionalized channels by participation in regulatory proceedings, lobbying, legislative/regulatory monitoring, congressional vote analysis, lobbying at the grassroots level, litigation, and grassroots organizing. Grassroots organizing also loaded on the second factor, which captured outsider tactics; also loading on this factor are direct action tactics, demonstrations, and boycotts. A list of these factor loadings can be found in Table 1. I used the factor analysis to generate factor scores for each group along these two dimensions. Each score is a standardized measure with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Higher scores on these measures indicate that the group used more of the tactics loading on those factors. Finally, I also coded whether or not the group reported that it participated in coalitions.

<Table 1 about here>

To supplement the data from 2006-2007, I coded the same information for the groups reported in *Public Interest Profiles, 2001-2002*. Supplementing the data with information from 2001 allows me to determine not only whether groups differentiate themselves with regard to tactics but also whether they maintain consistency over time in their tactical repertoires. Six groups were dropped because there was no information for them in the 2001 volume of *Profiles*; two additional groups were omitted because they did not report either a 501c(3) or 501c(4) tax status. This left 47 organizations in the analysis.

Findings

Consistency

To capture whether groups maintained a consistent mix of insider and outsider tactics, I calculated the Euclidean distance between groups' location on the two dimensions in 2006 compared to 2001. This information is presented in Table 2. Most organizations proved to be exceptionally consistent in terms of their tactical repertoires. Of the 47 groups, 19 did not change their tactical mix at all. Moreover, only seven organizations moved more than one standard deviation from their tactical repertoires in 2001. Four of those were environmental groups, three of whom increased their insider activity between 2001 and 2006.

<Table 2 about here >

Differentiation

Figure 1 plots each group according to the mix of outsider and insider tactics it uses. (Environmental organizations are represented by the letter E and political process

groups are represented by the letter P.) Groups from both sectors appear dispersed along the insider dimension fairly similarly, with most organizations falling within a standard deviation of the mean. However, environmental organizations show greater variance in their propensity to use outsider tactics. To the extent that environmental groups do differentiate themselves more than political process organizations, they do so through their use of outsider tactics. In particular, environmental groups distinguishing themselves on the outsider dimension include Earth First!, Earth Island Institute, Friends of the Earth (FoE), Rainforest Action Network, and the Sierra Club. All of these organizations are more than one standard deviation above the mean in their use of outsider tactics. Far fewer political process organizations distinguish themselves through outsider activities, (those that do include the League of Women Voters, National Women’s Political Caucus, and U.S. Term Limits) and even these are still far less likely to use outsider tactics. As expected, groups in the environmental sector are more likely to differentiate themselves by tactical choice than those in the political process sector.⁴

Coalitions

As expected, groups in both the environmental and political process sectors engage in coalitions. Contrary to my expectations, however, I find essentially no difference in coalition participation between the environmental and political process sectors. In fact, the majority of groups in both sectors reported coalition work (69% of environmental organizations and 67% of political process groups).

⁴ It is important to note that for both sectors and on both dimensions, tactical choice was not correlated with the number of paid staff or the percent of income derived from individuals.

I do find that organizations that report engaging in *both* insider and outsider tactics at high levels are also more likely to participate in coalitions. Figure 2 illustrates coalition formation among groups in 2006 across the insider-outsider dimensions. (C represents a group that participated in a coalition; N represents a group that did not indicate that it engaged in any coalition work.) The three groups that were among those reporting the highest number of both insider and outsider tactics all participated in coalitions; all are environmental organizations: the Sierra Club, Earth Island Institute, and Friends of the Earth. Each of these three groups reported engaging in an above average number of tactics compared to others in their sector. Overall, these findings suggest that any adverse effects of coalition work on brand identity are mitigated by the fact that groups joining such alliances typically engage in a large number and wide variety of tactics overall.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examine whether advocacy organizations’ tactical repertoires are distinctive enough to justify thinking about them as constituent elements of their brand identities. The results of the study suggest that they are. I show that advocacy organizations are typically highly consistent in term of the tactics they employ, and that groups may differentiate themselves from others in their sector according to the extent to which they utilize outsider tactics. Finally, the benefits of joining coalitions appear to outweigh the potential costs (such as the dilution of or damage to groups’ identities) for the vast majority of advocacy organizations in this study. Nevertheless, environmental organizations that participate in coalitions are particularly likely to report engaging in

higher than average numbers of both insider and outsider tactics: these groups’ diverse repertoires may act as a hedge against the pitfalls of coalition work.

In a recent study examining perceptions of nonprofit organizations, Venable et al. found that “...across nonprofit classifications (health, environment/rights, and arts/humanities), there are distinct personality differences” (2005: 308). Respondents were able to discern differences among organizations with respect to qualities such as integrity, nurturance, sophistication, and ruggedness. For example, the perception of Greenpeace’s integrity was low compared to other nonprofits studied (Venable, et al. 2005: 304). What factors drive respondents to such conclusions? In this paper, I argue that how interest organizations go about their work—the tactical choices they make—represents an important component of their brand identity. Explaining public impressions of Greenpeace becomes more straightforward when we consider the organization’s repertoires of contention. Though the environmental organization is committed to non-violent direct action,

Greenpeace occupies a precarious position between two opposing camps.

Many environmentalists see Greenpeace as too radical, and its direct actions, which include positioning activists between harpooners and whales, parachuting from the tops of smokestacks, and floating a hot-air balloon into a nuclear test site, as too confrontational (Vohryzek-Bolden, et al. 2001: 163).

It is likely that Greenpeace’s tactics, which tend to garner significant media attention, raise concerns among the public that the organization behaves unfairly with respect to its targets (Japanese whalers, for example). Nevertheless, while many may disapprove of

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Greenpeace’s methods of operation, those techniques clearly appeal to its resource base.

Furthermore, the group’s tactical repertoire also allows it to operate within its own niche in the environmental policy sector.

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Table 1: Factor Loadings of Tactics on Two Dimensions

First Factor	Factor Loading	Second Factor	Factor Loading
Insider Strategies		Outsider Strategies	
Congressional Testimony	.707	Boycotts	.655
Congressional Vote Analysis	.286	Demonstrations	.770
Grassroots Organizing	.524	Direct Action	.642
Grassroots Lobbying	.667	Grassroots Organizing	.490
Legislation/Regulation Monitoring	.486		
Litigation	.632		
Lobbying	.750		
Regulatory Proceedings Participation	.627		
Eigenvalue = 3.165		Eigenvalue = 1.572	

Note: Variables only shown under a factor if they loaded at .25 or above.

Table 2: Change in Groups’ Tactical Repertoires, 2001-2006

Euclidean Distance	Environmental Groups	Political Process Groups
No difference	11 (42.3%)	8 (38.1%)
Between 0 and .5	5 (19.2%)	2 (9.5%)
Between .5 and 1	6 (23.1%)	8 (38.1%)
Over 1	4 (15.4%)	3 (14.3%)
Total	26 (100%)	21 (100%)

Note: Euclidean distance is the distance between the group’s position on the two dimensions in 2006 and 2001.

Figure 1: Tactics Used by Groups, 2006

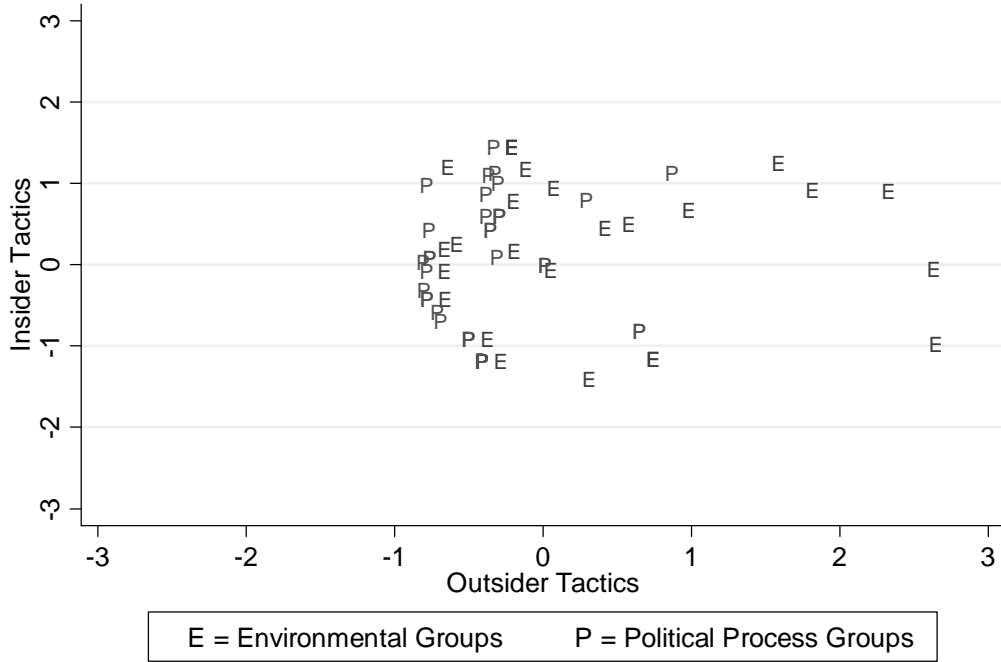


Figure 2: Coalition Formation Among Groups, 2006

