

PAC POWER
Larry J. Sabato/W.W. Norton/\$15.95

Richard Jensen

Political Action Committees—PACs—have burst on the scene in recent years, and they frighten people. “The role of PACs in our system of campaign finance has become nothing short of scandalous,” wrote Morris Udall in a fund-raising letter. “I’m talking about the dangerous and corrupting influence of the outrageous sums of money—campaign contributions—which have become a paralyzing *obscenity*.” Thanks to the diligent interviews and data collection of University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato in his new book *PAC Power*, we now have a comprehensive overview of what PACs are, how they operate, and what impact they are having on politics.

The first PAC, and still one of the largest and most influential, was COPE—the Committee on Political Education set up by the CIO in 1943 to avoid restrictions on direct political activity by labor unions. COPE played a critical role in mobilizing labor support for the last hurrahs of the New Deal in 1944 and 1948. It also was a favorite target of Republican attacks as an insidious threat to democracy, particularly in 1946 when the GOP won control of Congress by large margins. Unions continued to set up new PACs: 201 were operating in 1974 and 378 in 1983. In 1982 they spent \$35 million, largely in the form of direct contributions to liberal Democrats seeking reelection. Thus Senator Howard Metzenbaum (D-Ohio) received \$227,000 that year. Although this sum constituted only 7 percent of his war chest, it was deeply appreciated.

Business PACs account for the greatest growth in “PAC power” in recent years. They became legal in 1974 in the wake of Watergate revelations that the Nixon campaign had shaken down corporations for millions of dollars in illegal contributions. For the first time a system of legal business contributions to politics, with full disclosure, became possible. Some 1,467 corporate PACs operated in 1982, with budgets totalling \$43 million. Their money comes from voluntary

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contributions by about one fourth of a given company’s managers and white-collar employees, and control is exerted through public affairs offices. Business PACs give about equally to the two parties, and favor incumbents, especially those who represent districts with a factory or branch office. Sabato notes that a remarkable 65 percent of the chief executive officers of large corporations now travel to Washington every two weeks or so; ten years ago, only 15 percent did. Clearly the decisions that affect their corporations are made in Washington, and they need access to the decision-makers in Congress. Cash opens the doors—but not much is needed, for their average contribution is only \$657.

Trade associations of realtors, physicians, dentists, builders, gun dealers, and the like are more concerned with specific legislation and regulatory rules than with the general access that corporations seek. Their 628 PAC operations (which spent \$42 million in 1982) are separate from their much more elaborate lobbying operations. Congressman Andrew Jacobs (D-Indiana), who refuses all PAC money, says “the only reason it is not considered bribery is that Congress gets to define bribery.” Sabato disagrees, finding that the lobbyists have much more influence in Congress than the money givers. PAC contributions have a small effect on congressional voting. Only on relatively minor items of special interest to a few associations but not in the national spotlight can fancy statistical tests detect the influence of PAC money on roll call votes. On the other hand, congressmen often demand money from the PACs; they are especially keen on filling the tables at their \$250-a-plate Washington fundraisers.

The most controversial PACs are the independent ideological operations that fill our mailboxes every week with dire warnings against the evildoers about to seize the government from the hands of the people. “Right-wing extremists dominate the Senator. . . . Throw the rascals out!” Between the bogeymen Tip O’Neill and Teddy Kennedy or James Watt and Jesse Helms,

everyone right or left is supposed to become scared enough to send money. In practice only two or three percent of the people solicited by direct mail respond, and they usually give no more than ten or twenty dollars. Conservative operations, such as Terry Dolan’s NCPAC, have raised four times as much money as their liberal counterparts, but little of this money goes to candidates because of the enormous cost of direct mail solicitation. Of course, even people who do not contribute may be affected by the contents of the letters. When NCPAC does spend funds on independent campaigns against a liberal, the sure response is to denounce agitators from out of state. In 1982 NCPAC spent \$228,000 against liberal Senator John Melcher of Montana, a veterinarian. Melcher ran commercials showing two cows watching suspicious looking men descending from an airplane with NCPAC briefcases stuffed with money. “Have you heard what they’re saying

about Doc Melcher? Looks like they’ve been stepping in what they’ve been trying to sell.”

Sabato is highly critical of both NCPAC and its leftist counterpart PROPAC. He sees them as loose cannons on the ship of state, contemptuous of parties, and taking guidance from no one but the one or two entrepreneurs who operate them. They mislead contributors, who do not realize that only a few pennies out of every dollar they contribute goes to the cause. Worst of all, by undercutting the parties they are destabilizing and counterproductive. On the other hand, conservative populists defend them as necessary. “This campaign to kill the PACs is snobbish, elitist, antidemocratic, and un-American,” writes Patrick J. Buchanan. “Destroy the PACs and you constrict the voice of small business, and restrict the political access of the millions who support them—enhancing the clout of Big Media, Big Business, Big Labor

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and their ilk who can afford to maintain permanent lobbying representation in [Washington]."

One important group of PACs escapes Sabato's usually thorough coverage: the pro-Israel organizations like National PAC. In 1984 \$9 million went through these groups, primarily to defeat Senators Charles Percy and Jesse Helms and other "enemies" of Israel. Helms proved much more successful than his opponent in raising money. Percy lost in good measure because of the defection of Jewish voters in Chicago.

The best news Sabato presents is that PACs have helped the national party organizations to become powerful forces for the first time. The Republican party has been the chief beneficiary. The \$215 million it raised in 1982 (and much more in 1984) funded an elaborate program of polling, training of candidates, computerized issue files, data banks of voters and constituency characteristics, direct mailings, TV ads, and \$20 million in direct aid to candidates. This has given Republican senatorial candidates a decisive edge in close elections. Of the 29 close races in 1980, 1982, and 1984, the Republicans won 21 and lost only 8, thus accounting

for the GOP control of the Senate.

The bottom line is that PACs are probably a force for the good. By providing the "United Way" for citizens to contribute money, they have enlarged the scope of popular support for the political process. By mandating detailed disclosures, the PAC system has largely eliminated the illegal under-the-table contribution. The parties have successfully responded to the PACs by treating them like another set of interest groups to broker, and by strengthening their own party services. PAC money accounts for only a small fraction of the money in politics—their total spending is less than the advertising budget of Procter and Gamble. PACs have much less influence on legislation than do lobbies or the parties themselves. Finally, they have helped tilt the political dialogue in America to the right. Ronald Reagan in 1983 said he was "a little amused that suddenly our opponents have developed a conscience about political action committees. I don't remember them being that aroused when the only ones you knew about were on their side. Now they're on our side and they want to do away with them. Well, they're not going to do away with them." □

FALWELL: BEFORE THE MILLENNIUM

Dinesh D'Souza/Regnery Gateway/\$14.95

Malcolm T. Gladwell

"In a rare and inexplicable moment" when Jerry Falwell was but a child, his father put his hand on his son's head and said: "This one will be my preacher." And when, in his early twenties after a wild and high-spirited youth, Falwell was born again, his mother "merely smiled to herself, as if she had expected it all along."

These were the portents of Falwell's youth, the signs he added up at the beginning of his ministry that made him sure, so very sure, that he was right with God. Others have paused, agonized, unsure of God's purpose, before accepting a vocation. But not Falwell. He charged headlong into the ministry with the same brash determination that was later to assure him that his followers were moral and in the majority. As a boy he was the prankster, the

sports hero, the life of the party. He was reckless and daring because, in the end, he had complete confidence in himself. That brashness made him popular, made him king of his class, but when he brought it to do the Lord's work was it out of place?

Certainly to those of us schooled in the studied humility of the older churches—of a Catholic priest, of an Anglican curate—Falwell, his attitude, his *chutzpah* come as a shock. Are the deeply religious to be so competitive, so driven? Should they gloat, as Falwell does, that "I have always been full of ambition"? Falwell compares himself to his contemporaries, and says he's at the top because he works harder than *anyone* else. As a young pastor "there was something obsessive" about the way Falwell went about. "Few of the other preachers were as hungry for souls" as he was, and it is that hunger that has made him what he is.

These are worldly virtues Falwell has

brought to preaching. It is said that in his frantic soul-saving Falwell "seemed to need measurable indices of his success: ten more students this week, four people accepting Christ after a service, etc." For Jerry Falwell it is "as important to count new heads as it had been for his father to count income at the end of a workday." Falwell has a genuine business sense. It is he who is credited with starting "saturation evangelism" which means he didn't just preach on Sunday, or just have a radio ministry, or just have people witnessing door to door—he did everything, all at once, so that if he didn't get you at home, he got you on TV, or in your car, or in a shopping mall. Falwell brought the ministry into the twentieth century. He crossed the line from religious to secular and brought back all kinds of new ideas. So much so, in fact, that when you look at Falwell and his TV show, his mailing lists, and his outreach programs, you know that in the end he isn't so much a preacher for the Lord as he is a salesman.

How much has religion changed Jerry Falwell? Has it left any imprint on him at all? When Falwell was young and wild, he would skip Sunday school and scorn religion "as something women did." Now, though, now that Falwell has accepted Christ, he insists that "Christ wasn't effeminate. Christ was a he-man." Could Falwell, the high-school star once invited to a St. Louis Cardinals tryout, only accept a God as manly as himself? Today he has a "theology of sport"; he calls his congregation to be "champions for Christ," and at his Liberty Baptist College moral admonitions rank up there with the construction of a new gymnasium. If Jerry is a jock, does his Jesus have to be one too? In short, did Christianity change Falwell or was the reverse true? Did Falwell himself change the effeminate religion of his youth to fit his own masculine dimensions? So it seems fair to ask when Falwell says that "I have always liked what I do, whether it is sports or being a minister," whether he sees a difference between the two, and if he doesn't, whether that means, in the sum of all Falwell's contradictory parts, he is more a creature of the secular world than the kingdom of God.

That is a question Dinesh D'Souza doesn't answer in *Falwell: Before the Millennium*. This is a case of the right dealing with one of its own, and despite the book's subtitle—"A Critical Biography" (which one assumes to be ironic)—it never pretends to be anything but a defense of Falwell. To his credit, D'Souza treats his subject with grace and thoroughness, and turns what could easily be shrill justification

into a genuinely good read. But in the process he steers clear of the implications of Falwell's move into the political arena. D'Souza doesn't seem to want to acknowledge that the Falwell who once held to the fundamentalist orthodoxy that Christians were not called upon to "wage wars against bootleggers, liquor stores, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, racketeers . . . or any other existing evil as such," and now does precisely that with his political lobby group Moral Majority, is no longer in the great tradition of fundamentalist preachers from Dwight Moody to Billy Sunday and Billy Hargis. D'Souza doesn't want to believe that Falwell's secular activities have tainted him and pushed him in any way from the traditional fundamentalist pattern. Wasn't Falwell's move into politics simply a natural outgrowth of the old fundamentalism? Isn't Falwell's constituency those whose beliefs have made them the political and social outcasts of the last fifty years? And weren't they, D'Souza asks, those who were laughed out of the Scopes trial in 1925, and whose convictions for a moral and upright America were mocked and violated in the sixties and seventies? The Bible says to turn the other cheek, but sometimes even for the very Christian enough is enough. D'Souza says that Falwell simply realized that getting the Christian message across in the eighties required moving to a higher stage and regaining some respect for Christian beliefs. That was a change of style, but not of content. With the Moral Majority, the book tells us, Falwell pursues the same evangelical goals of putting morality back into everyday life and bringing America closer to fundamentalism that underlie his ministry at Thomas Road Church in Lynchburg.

This is a beguiling thesis, especially because it so closely correlates with the Falwell of liberal legend—the man imposing his religious beliefs on the rest of America. But I wonder. If Falwell is so bent on bringing America closer to the fundamentalists, then why has his primary achievement been to do exactly the opposite? Why has Falwell's most significant contribution to his faith been in making it more aware of and more compatible with the outside world? It is Falwell who has led the fight in his own church, and later in fundamentalist churches throughout the South, for an end to segregation. Now "he speaks of race almost in the vocabulary of civil rights leaders." It is Falwell who, with his gentle wit, has mocked the strictness of his followers, urging each of them to "worry a little less about the length of your son's hair." It is Falwell whose vigorous support of Israel has confronted much of fundamentalism's

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