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The Vitality Of Common Cause

As it begins its fourth year, Common Cause, John Gardner's self-styled "citizens lobby," is enjoying the fastest membership growth since its early months and is contemplating a political future that could make it an even more potent — and controversial — force than it has been.

Already, it has developed a degree of muscle unusual for a reform group. Its reported spending tops that of any other lobby on Capitol Hill, and its impact has been felt in congressional battles ranging from the attack on committee secrecy and seniority to the passage of end-the-war and stop-the-bombing resolutions. Its lobbying and lawsuits have been instrumental in lifting the shroud of secrecy from campaign contributions.

But during most of the time Common Cause has been waging these fights, its membership level has been static. The organization hit 230,000 members on its first birthday, in the fall of 1971, and it had 220,000 members at the beginning of this past summer.

In the past three months, however, it has shot up past the 270,000-member mark and is gaining 20,000 additional members per month, at \$15 apiece. "It's pure Watergate," said Gardner in an interview this week.

Why should people be joining Common Cause when polls show them less willing than ever to identify with either the Democratic or Republican Party? "Unfortunately," said Gardner, "the impact of Watergate is hurting all politicians and parties . . . We have tried to make people see that politics is the only game around — unless you want to shoot it out — but there is a disgust with the public process, and we're identified more than any other group with cleaning up the public process."

Whatever the cause of its resurgent growth, Common Cause shows a vitality that neither of the old parties possesses. Its headquarters is thronged with volunteers, and throbs with purposeful activity that simply is not duplicated at either the Republican or Democratic national committee offices.

Under the prodding of Jack Conway, an organizer who was for many years the top aide to the late Walter P. Reuther, Common Cause is assembling a grass-roots field organization that rivals that of the old parties. Since last November, "steering committees" have been established in about 350 of the 435 congressional districts, with some 8,500 of Common Cause's more activist members involved. The local steering committees are linked to national headquarters, by "the Washington Connection," a volunteer corps of workers who keep their counterparts at the grass-roots alerted to the latest Capitol Hill developments by mail and leased phone lines.

But even as this system is being tested, Conway is moving beyond it to build state-level "Program Action Committees (PACs)" to mobilize pressure on legislatures and on statewide elected officials. Only four states have PACs now—financed by a \$5 surcharge on the \$15 national membership dues—but that number will double by the end of the year and "accelerate rapidly" in 1974, Conway says.

"By next fall," he vows, "we're going to be in every single congressional district and in every Senate race, on our reform issues, and we'll be felt."

Obviously, the question arises as to whether—or when—this formidable organization, backed by a publicity machine that mails 1.8 million pieces a month and provides weekly radio commentaries to several hundred stations, will challenge the old parties directly by endorsing or putting forward its own candidates.

Chairman Gardner says flatly "there isn't any" pressure to move in this direction. Gardner says, "I recognize the importance of getting good men and women into office, but it's so much harder to change the system they work in, that I want us to stay where we are."

But one doesn't have to go farther down the Common Cause leadership ladder than President Conway to get a different view.

"Wherever I go," he says, "I'm asked by our members 'Why can't John Gardner be President?' My answer is, 'Neither party will nominate him.' That leads to a lot of talk about why the parties are so closed, and then they say, 'Why don't we run him ourselves?' And my answer is, 'Our charter forbids us to endorse candidates.'"

Then Conway pauses a moment, smiles, and says: "You may have noticed in our September newsletter we are asking our members to vote on a change in our charter. It's purely a technical thing, to eliminate some language from our days as the Urban Coalition Action Council, and make the new language conform. But we're going through this now, so if we ever want to amend out the nonpartisan requirement—if the members ever decide they want to endorse candidates—we'll know how."

"We're not at that point now," Conway says, "and it may never come. It depends on how the parties react." Meantime, this 3-year-old powerhouse is building.