Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Interest Groups.

**Title:** Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Interest Groups.

**Subject(s):** PRESSURE groups -- United States; UNITED States -- Politics & government

**Source:** Educational Policy, Jan/Mar 2001, Vol. 15 Issue 1, p187, 28p

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**Abstract:** The evolution of theorizing by political scientists about the role of interest groups in U.S. politics is explored in this article. Critiques of pluralism and the problems of measuring power are described. The dynamics of mobilization and refinements to incentive theory are outlined. The changing conceptions of how influence is structured through subgovernments, issue networks, and advocacy coalitions are examined. Models of lobbying and changing conceptions of group-state engagement are discussed. The article concludes with a discussion of the need to reframe conceptions of interest and influence to reflect new economic, political, and social contexts that are better captured by postpluralist and social movement theory.[ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

**AN:** 4029742

**ISSN:** 0895-9048

**Full Text Word Count:** 11668

**Database:** Academic Search Elite

**Persistent Link to this Article:** http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=4029742&db=afh

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**THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING INTEREST GROUPS**

The evolution of theorizing by political scientists about the role of interest groups in U.S. politics is explored in this article. Critiques of pluralism and the problems of measuring power are described. The dynamics of mobilization and refinements to incentive theory are outlined. The changing conceptions of how influence is structured through subgovernments, issue networks, and advocacy coalitions are examined. Models of lobbying and changing conceptions of group-state engagement are discussed. The article concludes with a discussion of the need to reframe conceptions of interest and influence to reflect new economic, political, and social contexts that are better captured by postpluralist and social movement theory.

**INTEREST GROUPS** have played a central role in American politics since the founding of the nation. Political leaders throughout this history have consistently agreed that understanding U.S. politics means understanding the roles, motivations, and effectiveness of organized interests. Political scientists and other analysts have generally agreed on the importance of interest groups; however, they have not always placed groups at the center of their analytic frameworks and theories. Scholarly attention has waxed and waned throughout the years because the study of interest groups holds many analytic pitfalls. Although scholars agree that they are central to the process of representation, there is less agreement on the nature of the dangers they pose to that process. Indeed, many of the analytic challenges facing interest group scholars arise when they attempt to determine...
the nature of group influence in a democratic society. Fundamental differences in assumptions concerning the potential threat to democratic government posed by interest groups are evident in the theoretical perspectives that have dominated interest group scholarship in the United States.

These differences provide the point of entry of the examination of theoretical approaches to the study of interest groups that I undertake in this article. My intention in tracing the evolution in theoretical approaches to thinking about the nature of groups, their roles, and their influence is to offer a conceptual map for readers to use in interpreting the discussions of interest group activity presented in the contributions to this special edition. My intention is also to set out promising conceptual directions to frame a new generation of studies of interest groups in U.S. education. Underlying these changes are varying conceptions of the nature of interest groups and the influence they exercise in democratic politics (Cigler, 1991). In the introduction to this edition, I explored with Catherine Lugg the meaning scholars have given to these conceptions. In this article, I examine the theoretical frames that political scientists have brought to bear on their efforts to understand the nature of interests, groups, and influence in U.S. politics and policy making.

THE PLURALIST APPROACH TO GROUP POLITICS

Our understanding of interest groups in the United States has been significantly influenced by the group approach to politics. The group approach to politics was the first behavioral orientation to analysis of political phenomena that had previously been studied using largely formal and constitutional approaches. Early pluralists such as Ernest Griffith found the dominant formal/legal approach to political analysis lacking in capacity to explain the processes of government. In the late 1930s, Griffith (1939) observed the diversity of individuals involved in whirlpools or centers of activity focusing on particular problems. He concluded that whoever wished to understand the prevailing pattern of our present governmental behavior, instead of studying the formal institutions or even generalizations in the relationships between these institutions ... may possibly obtain a better picture of the way things really happen if [he or she] would study these "whirlpools" of special social interest and problems. (pp. 182-183)

Although Griffith's call for empirical inquiry into the activities of actors inside and outside government challenged the prevailing focus on legal/constitutional approaches to analysis, the interest in groups it reflected was not a new direction in American political science. In his analysis of how interest group theory became the central framework for political inquiry in the United States, David Garson (1978) argues that group theory grew in reaction to the narrow institutional focus of early political inquiry. Group theory drew from a long-standing rejection in the United States of the assumptions about the absolute sovereignty of the state. Such rejection was reported in the early 1900s by Albert Hart who observed that in the early years of the 20th century, American political scientists tended to "accept the theory that all government in America—national, state, municipal or local—springs from one source, the American people as a whole, who choose to exercise their power through a variety of organizations" (1907, p. 558).

The group tradition has been the most important and sustained attempt to resolve two ancient issues of concern, "the effects of groups on policy making, institutions, and outcomes, and the effects of these processes and outcomes on the groups themselves" (Greenstone, 1975, p. 243). Underlying these concerns were fundamental issues of politics: who wields power and influence and whose views are represented in a democracy. Political scientists like David Truman focused their inquiry on the roles and influence of interest groups. Truman's The Governmental Process (1951) posed central questions about the nature of power, voice, and representation. Like other political scientists and sociologists of the day, he attempted to answer these questions by looking at groups and corporations that formed institutional links between the public and government.

Group theory was framed on the fundamental pluralist assumption that a free and active group system was critical in a democracy. Pluralists assumed that the effective functioning of a democracy depended on a balanced, active, and responsive group system. Implicit in these assumptions was a conception of mobilization as a dynamic of equilibrium of political forces. According to Truman's (1951) ideas, groups in society would mobilize for political action whenever it was in their interest to do so. The mobilization of one set of interests could, in the pluralist perspective, set off
countermobilization of those with alternative interests. Key (1964) describes the pluralist conception of equilibrium in the following way:

Political systems may exist in a stable, even static, form over long periods. The holders of power are unchallenged; the allocation of rights, privileges, and benefits remains acceptable to all sides; every man know his place and keeps it. In modern states so serene a balance does not prevail for long. The equilibrium—the balance, the ordered course of affairs, the established pattern—is disturbed from time to time by some change that generates discontent. (p. 40)

CRITIQUES OF PLURALISM

The impression commonly drawn from this pluralist disturbance theory was that the equilibrium was a natural, even fair state of democratic representation. The role of the state was thus to arbitrate among various interests, not to dictate outcomes. Even during the years immediately following World War II when the group approach was most influential, its pluralist assumptions of equilibrium were the focus of considerable debate among political scientists. Analysts differed in their assessments of the extent to which the assumptions guiding pluralism reflected a normative thrust more than a description of governmental processes drawn from empirical analysis. Many critics found problematic both the implicit normative thrust of pluralism and the growing body of evidence that influence was difficult, if not impossible, to describe even through the empirical studies of groups' engagements in political arenas.

During these years, empirical studies reported the development of large national interest groups and industrial corporations and their increasingly active involvement in governmental processes. These studies called into question the pluralist assumptions that American democracy depended on the competition among a myriad of small groups (Karol, 1961). As evidence of the growth of large interest groups accumulated, so did concern with a pluralist theory of representation, which assumed that free competition would ensure that undue influence was not possible. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) suggest that the normative and ideological became confused with the descriptive and the empirical. They observe that although

nothing about the pluralist approach would imply support for huge special interests able to dominate their parts of the political system, the explanation of the genius of democracy through competition was seen as a broad endorsement of a system that included significant disparities in influence, with some very privileged groups exerting great amounts of power. (p. 53)

Critics in the 1950s argued that pluralist theories supported a status quo, which at that time included segregation of the South. Schattschneider argued that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (1960, p. 35). Pluralists like Dahl (1966) countered criticisms by arguing that the fact that equilibrium may exist does not lead to any conclusion about the desirability or fairness of that equilibrium: It could in fact describe a situation of overrepresentation of elites. Dahl's retort did not, however, address the deeper implications of the fundamental assumption that the best outcomes for democratic government can only be achieved through active competition among groups. The descriptive question of whether there were barriers to entry into such competition examined in many empirical studies of the time, therefore, carried normative implications. In these studies, the very possibility of representativeness of interests was repeatedly called into question. Critics like Schattschneider (1950) argued that membership in the group system was so biased by social class that probably 90% of the public could not participate.

In the 1960s and 1970s, political scholars who focused on examining the biases inherent in what Griffith (1939) had called policy whirlpools found closed systems dominated by special interests with very little competition. In his book End of Liberalism, Lowi (1969), one of these subsystem analysts, argued that even if a pluralist conflict was possible, the interest groups involved all sought self-interested goals instead of those in the common interest of all citizens. Rather than providing the mechanism of democratic government, groups were viewed as posing fundamental problems to representation.

A PLURALIST LEGACY: UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMS OF MEASURING POWER AND INFLUENCE

Pluralists, interested in the influence of interest groups on political outcomes in a democratic state, directly encountered the problems of measuring power and influence. The resulting debates among pluralists and their critics emerged from differences in views about "where power was located in the political system and how to recognize when, by whom, and how influence was wielded" (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, p. 59). Pluralists were not unaware of the difficulties of this analysis. Dahl (1961), recognizing the various dimensions of power, concluded that "one who sets out to observe, analyze, and describe the distribution of influence in a pluralist democracy will therefore encounter formidable problems" (p. 90). Despite these acknowledged difficulties, pluralist scholars of the time shared the view that power was widely dispersed.
across many actors. Wide dispersion was ensured through the complexity of the competition among many diverse interests. The dynamics of the complexity created reduced the threat of the monopolistic exercise of power in a democracy. McFarland (1987) argues that pluralism is premised on the assumption that power is the same as causation. Based on this assumption of complex causation, the calculus of pluralism anticipates that if there are many complex causes of a decision, then power must be relatively diffuse. However, this calculus can, in McFarland’s view, result in conclusions that reflect a spurious pluralism. The problem pluralists confronted was that any evidence of diffused power was suspect because there was always the possibility that plural elites limited the parameters of their bargaining to frame the scope of the competition to their interests.

McFarland’s (1987) arguments echo the conclusions reached by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) in which they argued that many important elements of power are potentially unobservable. They pointed out that the most important exercise of political power might well be the exercise of control over agenda setting. This second face of power, the power to limit the scope of political contestation, is not readily measurable. Robert Salisbury (1994) argues that pluralists confronted the problems posed by this face of power because they focused on the question of influence, considering who wins, who loses, and why in political decision making. He suggests that

The trouble is that the game metaphor is profoundly misleading regarding the underlying character of much of the political process. Very often there is no clear resolution, no definite conclusion to the process by which interests are articulated and pursued. “Play” continues, moving from one venue to another perhaps, the tides of success for particular participants ebbing and flowing while the structure of the ‘game’ slowly evolves. As the saga unfolds, individual episodes may be singled out for separate treatment, but unless they are seen in their larger historical developmental context, any particular story, however, melodramatic it seems to be, is likely to generate more misunderstanding than insight. (pp. 17-18)

Some analysts argue that pluralism faltered as a dominating conceptual orientation to the study of politics because it attempted to measure the unmeasurable: power and influence. Others argue that although pluralist assumptions of complex causation were flawed, their concern with questions of power and influence were well placed. Both must be at the center of the study of politics in any domain of public life in ways that are not found in the studies of the problems of collective action that have dominated inquiry into interests groups in the wake of the discrediting of pluralism as normatively and conceptually flawed.

FOCUSBING INSIDE GROUPS: THE DYNAMICS OF MOBILIZATION

By the late 1960s, the larger questions of power and influence in the group system that had occupied a generation of pluralist scholars had been replaced by a new focus by group scholars on the internal dynamics of interest groups. These scholars focused on how groups mobilize for political action, a question not considered of particular importance or interest by pluralists. With the publication in 1965 of his book The Logic of Collective Action, Mancur Olson showed the flaw in this oversight and set the agenda for a new generation of interest group scholarship that continues today. This scholarship stands in sharp contrast to that of the pluralists in its turn from interest in external activities of groups to consider the issues associated with collective action and mobilization.

Olson (1965) showed a critical flaw in the pluralist assumption that all potential groups have an equal chance to participate in a political pressure system. He showed that small, focused groups, particularly those with a business orientation that have greater organizational capacity, were better able to mobilize to exert political pressure in their special interest than were groups with many potential members who sought only benefits for the collective. Olson showed that these latter groups, typically consumers, the poor, the economically disadvantaged, and the jobless, would never overcome the barriers to mobilization. Using a rational actor model of analysis, Olson reasoned that even individuals with a common interest may not be inclined to join groups that try to serve those interests if they can obtain the benefits of being served without incurring participation costs (e.g., time, membership). Olson argued that this “free rider” problem constrained the mobilization capacity of groups that pursue collective benefits.

Based on this constraint, Olson (1965) argued that key to group formation and survival was the provision of selective benefits available only to members. As an economist, Olson was most concerned with material benefits, those tangible rewards for participation in a group such as income or services that have monetary value. He argued that organizations that ordinarily provide such material benefits to members are typically formed for nonpolitical purposes. Examples of such groups are professional associations and unions, which provide memberships that are prerequisites for employment.

Olson’s (1965) analysis created a new agenda for research on collective action that provided a much narrower and more productive framework for inquiry. The effect was to focus scholarly attention on a narrower set of propositions that could be confirmed with greater precision. Collective action scholars focusing in mobilization issues were not stymied by the problems of measurement that pluralists had encountered in their efforts to assess group influence. Olson’s work encouraged the development of theories and research on the relatively narrow set of topics related to the internal
functioning of groups. His notions have resulted in a number of theoretical extensions as well as a number of criticisms, many of the latter coming from an emerging neoplaformal perspective. In the following sections of the article, I review extensions of collective action literature before examining the implications for our understanding of democratic politics of these contrasting conceptions of the role of interest groups.

REFINING INCENTIVE THEORY

Extensions to Olson's (1965) propositions with regard to membership recruitment have focused on the different types of incentives that groups may offer. Incentive theorists, following Olson's rational model, assume that individuals are rational decision makers who wish to maximize the benefits accruing from the use of their time and money to participate in groups by ensuring that those benefits are greater than the costs of participation. Three types of benefits have been widely examined by incentive theorists and others. Olson was most interested in material benefits, those that provide tangible rewards of participation. Extensions to Olson's theory have focused on the capacity of groups to offer other forms of incentives. Most of these extensions are based on the typology of incentives outlined by Clark and Wilson (1961), which distinguishes between three types of membership incentives: material, solidarity, and purposive. Material benefits are the same as Olson's selective benefits. Also significant are solidary incentives, such as status and camaraderie, that provide socially derived, intangible rewards through group participation. Solidary incentives "depend for their value on how the recipient appears in the eyes of others" (Wilson, 1973, p. 40). Solidary benefits such as friendship, enjoyment, and status can be important inducements for membership; moreover, they can often be provided by groups at very little or no cost. Purposive or expressive rewards provide incentives for some individuals to participate in a group that advances a particular cause they support.

In an important article published in 1969, Salisbury applied this typology to Olson's (1965) framework to show how such incentives could help explain group origins and maintenance. In this application, Salisbury refined the incentives typology, showing that purposive benefits are essentially public goods because individuals can support a group advocating for a particular cause without joining that group. To distinguish the dynamics that drew such individuals to membership in the group, Salisbury introduced the concept of a selective or expressive benefit. The dynamics surrounding expressive benefits suggest that individuals join groups that express values that they hold dear.

In this article, Salisbury (1969) also developed another important extension to the problem of incentives. Olson (1965) had initially discussed the use of such selective incentives to overcome the collective action dilemma without specifying who would provide those incentives. Salisbury proposed that individual entrepreneurs create groups by offering potential members selective incentives to join. His exchange theory proposed that, in return, entrepreneurs benefit by being able to control resources and further their political agendas as leaders of groups rather than as individual citizens. The role of entrepreneurs is now well documented by research that has examined group origins and maintenance.

Others have explored the implications of Olson's (1965) assumptions that, as rational actors, individuals have perfect information about membership decisions. Terry Moe (1980a, 1980b, 1981) addressed some of the contradictions of evidence of the capacity of collective action groups to gain members despite the problems of mobilization specified by Olson. Moe found that politically efficacious individuals joined collective action groups because they believed that their participation in the group would contribute to the provision of collective benefits. Moe argued that these individuals overestimated their influence and that if they had more accurate information they would not join the collective action group.

Rothenberg (1988, 1992) has also examined the problem of information about membership decisions. He has shown that because membership costs are often minimal, individuals may join a group without seeking detailed information about the group. Retention of membership, however, typically involves an experiential search process of learning more about the collective goals sought by the group that is distinct from any calculation of material benefits. It appears that membership recruitment and retention are quite distinct processes and that the process of gaining knowledge about collective action is related to a stronger commitment to the group.

Olson (1979) recognized that selective incentives need not be only material; however, he believed that his theory was best applied to economic interest groups and that stretching his claims to nonmaterial benefits would prove difficult to test empirically. Olson's concerns were well placed; however, they did not stop research on the collective action dilemma from focusing on the provision of psychological rather than material benefits. Studies have revealed a variety of ways that nonmaterial benefits are important in overcoming the collective action dilemma. The theoretical extensions offered by Moe (1980a, 1980b, 1981) and Rothenberg (1988, 1992) have supported a variety of new research showing ways in which nonmaterial benefits can be important in overcoming the collective action dilemma. Researchers have shown that members may indeed lead their members to overestimate the importance of their contributions. Similarly, researchers have shown that groups with few material incentives can emphasize to their members the degree to which they are contributing to the achievement of a desired goal. At the same time, many critics agree that explaining decisions to join groups in terms of solidary and purposive incentives place scholars of collective action in the same potential swamp of measurement difficulty.
that detailed an earlier generation of pluralists seeking to describe patterns of group influence. The difficulties arise because solidary and purposeful incentives are difficult to measure and because the concept of purposeful incentives can be expanded to explain virtually every membership decision (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, p. 71). For many analysts, trends to incorporate psychological dimensions into the free rider problems posed by Olson (1965) undermine the capacity of collective action theories to provide researchable propositions and thus verifiable findings.

Despite these concerns, the evolution of thinking on the dilemmas of mobilization outlined previously is noteworthy in the larger literature on interest groups by the theoretical developments that have accrued. In general, research testing Olson's (1965) hypotheses has supported his prediction that large groups pursuing collective goals will not organize to their full potential. The research has also shown that Olson's explanation that individuals join collective action groups because of selective material benefits does not explain the motivations of all individuals who join such groups. Olson's initial focus on an individual member's calculus of joining a group led a new generation of scholars to examine contradictions and extensions as they applied the theory to different contexts and problems. Resulting refinements have underscored how the membership calculation outlined by Olson is altered by group leaders offering services to potential members (Moe, 1980a; Rothenberg, 1992).

THE LEGACY OF MOBILIZATION THEORY: TURNING TO THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Most scholars agree that Olson's (1965) insights offer important but not complete explanations of the puzzle of collective action. Tarrow (1994) comments on the puzzle revealed by research that has followed the path laid by Olson by noting that collective action occurs even though it is difficult to bring about. Yet that puzzle is a puzzle—and not a sociological law—because, in many situations and against many odds, collective action does occur, often on the part of people with few resources and little permanent power. (p. 6)

Other political scientists have reached similar conclusions. Rothenberg (1993) writes, "exactly how associations fit into the political world remains somewhat mysterious" (p. 1167). Baumgartner and Leech (1998) suggest that, in part, the gaps in our knowledge about interest groups are around the kind of big questions about influence that past generations of pluralists attempted to address. Olson (1965) set a direction for research on demand aggregation that focused the attention of political scientists on how groups overcome or are affected by the collective action dilemma. Their efforts have advanced our understanding of group mobilization; however, they have also shown that not all groups are affected by collective action difficulties.

Many questions remain unanswered about the relative importance of different types of incentives. Even more important questions remain about why the central conceptual problem framing collective action—the distinction between privileged groups and disadvantaged groups—appears to be largely irrelevant to many political conflicts. For decades, researchers have shown that many political debates involve different privileged groups. Those framing their research around collective action dilemmas have addressed the problems of bias and diversity in the interest groups system through exploration of narrow questions around the various ways that groups overcome the problem of mobilizing their potential members. As such, they have focused on individuals largely to the exclusion of consideration of the broader social forces that provide a context for individual behavior. Collective action scholars have shown some of the causes of bias in the groups system but have not shown how severe the problem of bias is or what consequences it has.

These latter issues are of concern for a new generation of political scientists who have begun to turn away from the narrow focus on individual calculus taken by Olson (1965). Some, focusing specifically on problems of membership, have found that individual membership is only one form of organizational capacity. Jack Walker's (1983, 1991) surveys of membership interest groups revealed that such organizations received important support from patrons. Walker's analysis showed that both profit sector organizations and citizen groups received large contributions from foundations, government grants, corporations, and wealthy individuals. He concluded that an increase in such patronage was the main reason for the growth in the number of interest groups active during the 1980s and 1970s. Walker was among those scholars who have pointed out that group formation cannot be explained solely by the individual level variables that Olson focused on. Walker (1991) turned attention beyond the internal dynamics of mobilization by revealing in his surveys the importance of "the incentives, constraints, and opportunities" (p. 49) created by governmental, economic, and social institutions. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) explain that major social legislation typically involves mandates for government agencies to support the creation of citizen advisory groups and sustain their engagement in public policy debates. Findings suggest that large institutional patrons of political action including government agencies themselves affect the abilities of groups to mobilize. Walker's (1983, 1991) studies of membership associations revealed that these broad-based organizations tend to arise after major social legislation is passed that creates bureaucratic patronage for the service providers. They, in turn, form organizations that lobby for interests such as children and the poor, who Olson's theory suggests would not be expected to mobilize on their own.
Like Walker, other researchers who have turned the focus of their inquiry away from the calculus of individual membership in interest groups have found that organized interests manifest themselves in multiple ways that turn attention again to the larger context of the political engagement. Salisbury (1964, 1994) points out that in addition to the clientele groups serving various social groups, many organized interests representing their purposes to government such as think tanks, local governments, and corporations are not constrained by collective action problems. Analysts have found that this new context is framed not only by competition. Hardin (1982) and Axelrod (1981, 1984, 1986) both point out that situations involving collective action typically involve continuing relationships that create norms of reciprocity and cooperation.

These and other scholars of interest groups focus on the broader social environment within which groups operate. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) conclude that although we do not have a single unified theory of mobilization of interests, "we can see substantial progress in enunciating a perspective combining attention to individual behaviors, internal group dynamics, and the broader context of the group's social and political environment" (p. 19). In doing so, they return our attention to focus on issues of bias and diversity in the interest group system.

SIZE, DIVERSITY, AND BIAS IN THE INTEREST GROUP SYSTEM

One constant observation made by researchers at different periods of time and of different orientations is that the size of the American interest group system is increasing. Alternative explanations of the nature and effect of this growth have been offered. Mancur Olson claimed in his 1965 book Logic of Collective Action that difficulties of overcoming the collective action dilemma would ensure that a nation's interest group system would follow a pattern of increasing bias against the general interest. He argued in a later book, The Rise and Decline of Nations (1982), that special interests will mobilize at a higher rate than collective interests, ultimately leading to economic decline as the political system is overcome by special interest group demands.

Other analysts argue that although the size of the interest group system has increased, there also is evidence that the system has changed internally but not in the direction suggested by Olson (1982). Although there is evidence that business and professional associations represent the largest sectors of the interest group system, many analysts argue that different sectors of the interest group system have grown at variable rates at different periods of time (Walker, 1983, 1991). They claim that any bias that exists is unstable. The set of interest groups active varies across time, issue, and political arena. For example, in their analysis of state-level interest group activity, Gray and Lowery (1993, 1996) found evidence showing that contrary to the claims of Olson (1982), wealth was not related to the diversity of interest group systems, although the economic size and diversity of the state was. Moreover, these researchers found that larger interest group systems are not necessarily more diverse. Gray and Lowery (1996) also found that interest group populations tend to be fluid. Groups made up of organizations with institutional bases such as universities, hospitals, and school districts are able to move in and out of active engagement in lobbying. In contrast, membership-type organizations may cease to exist when they drop their lobbying efforts.

Researchers studying changes in the interest group system over time have shown that different types of groups grow at differential rates. They have not, however, agreed on the significance of these differences. Although many researchers have documented the growth of new types of interest groups emerging from social movements, Schlozman and Tierney (1986) argue that the business interests are at an advantage in the federal pressure system because "if anything, the distribution of organizations within the Washington pressure community is even more heavily weighted in favor of business organizations than it used to be" (p. 388). Other researchers disagree, suggesting that the evidence of the increase in business dominance since the 1960s is limited (Baumgartner & Leech, 1996). Walker (1983, 1991) offers the strongest evidence of a change in the nature of the U.S. group system based on two surveys of membership organizations. Using a simple typology of four groups—profit sector, nonprofit, citizens, and mixed—Walker showed how citizens' groups grew dramatically in the 1960s—tripling in size by 1985, whereas other types of organizations had the strongest periods of mobilization earlier. Indeed, when Olson wrote the Logic of Collective Action in 1965, trade associations and other professional groups dominated the interest group system in Washington. Since then, other types of organizations, including those that Olson predicted would have difficulty mobilizing, have multiplied rapidly.

Political scientists recognize that evidence showing that changes in the numbers of different types of interest groups active in Washington may not explain fully the problem of bias. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) point out that "there is no guarantee that the gross typologies into which scholars typically classify interest groups represent important analytical categories or real political cleavages" (p. 118). They argue that tracing elements of bias in an interest group system to the sources and professional backgrounds of the groups will not explain the details of political conflict or capture the full context of representation. Bias can be shown by studies of mobilization, but they tell less about the forms, extent, and consequences of this bias as it impacts public policy. In seeking to understand these larger questions, political scientists have turned to conceptual approaches that enable them to analyze the dynamic elements that underlines bias in the U.S. interest group system. I turn now to examine the roots of some of the new approaches to understanding interest groups that are moving our focus back to larger questions of policy influence.

http://web7.epnet.com/citation.asp?tb=1&ug=dbs+0%2C1%2C2%2C3+ln=en%2DUs+sid+7C1A313C%... 12/19/200
Larger questions concerning bias were of central concern to the early pluralists who framed their analyses on the assumption that bias could be overcome by the countervailing power of groups organized to oppose the interests of oligopolistic corporations. The flaws of this assumption were shown by Olson's (1965) analysis that a few well-organized groups will defeat the many less well-organized politically. Emerging from this critique in the 1970s, a new theory of pluralism argued that power in the United States was dispersed into the hands of multiple separate elites, each tending to control or capture a particular area of public policy. McFarland (1998) observes that this frame of pluralism assumed that multiple elites ruled particular areas of public policy as a "subgovernment" or an "iron triangle" (p. 9). Multiple-elite pluralists assumed that particular policy areas, such as trucking or specific areas of acquisition of military equipment, were under the control of a separate minielelite.

Research in this tradition depicts a symbiotic relationship between a small, often friendly group of legislators, bureaucrats, and interest group representatives. The focus of inquiry in subsystem studies has typically been broader than on groups alone; however, influence is a key concept. It is achieved not by lobbying and conflict but is seen as operating through the close working ties groups have with governmental actors and through the policy subsystem as a whole. Some subsystem analysts view autonomy from political interference as a sign of powerful interest groups operating within a powerful subsystem. Other analysts disagree about how open policy systems are and the degree of conflict involved. Some argue that although subsystems are not as rigid as implied by the commonly used term iron triangle, they do reflect the stable structure for the existing relations among interests (Redford, 1969). Subsystem analysts focused on the strategies used to avoid conflict, publicity, and outside influence. Many of the subsystem studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s focused on ongoing policy domains rather than on issues on the national political agenda. The result was a depiction of a pluralism of multiple elites that attempted to show the power of vested interests widely embedded in diverse areas of government policy making.

The subsystem model of interest group influence framed on multiple elite pluralism proved unable to explain the dynamics that followed the deregulation of many of the policy areas in the late 1950s or those that emerged around new policy areas such as environmental regulation. The resulting increased economic diversity and the conflicts that stemmed from that diversity led inevitably to the breakup of previously powerful policy subsystems in a number of issue areas. In an influential article published in 1978, Hugh Heclo argued that the conception of rigid subsystems no longer captured the role of groups in policy making:

The notion of iron triangles and subgovernments presumes small circles of participants who have succeeded in becoming largely autonomous. Issue networks, on the other hand, comprise a large number of participants with quite variable degrees of mutual commitment or of dependence on others in the environment; in fact, it is almost impossible to say where a network leaves off and its environment begins .... Rather than groups united in dominance over a program, no one, as far as one can tell, is in control of the policies and issues. (p. 102)

In this context, previous conclusions about group system bias have been questioned. Berry (1989) observed that the interest group explosion of the 1970s did not simply lead to bigger subgovernments but to a more complex system in which the likelihood of conflict among coalitions increased but so did the opportunities for the kind of broad-based participation favored by pluralists. Research in the 1980s has shown that conflict among interests is now much more complex than it was previously (Mawhinney, 1953; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). These conflicts create opportunities for less powerful interests to find allies with greater resources and to increase the representation of their interests through alliances and coalitions. Some studies have also shown that subsystems vary in their degree of openness and that this openness is not constant across time and issue. A few theoretically oriented domain studies have documented important variations in relations among subsystem actors and between subsystem and system policy actors (Heinz, Laumann, Nelson, & Salisbury, 1993; Laumann & Knake, 1987). Other analysts have tracked subsystems over time, revealing that the degree of openness of a system varies with, for example, a consensual system suddenly facing controversy (Hansen, 1991; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

Questions concerning the relative openness of various policy areas are of central concern because of the implications they have for democratic representation. A new generation of neo or postpluralists is concerned with larger questions of group power such as, "What characteristics of a policy arena enhance the autonomy of those with a vested interest? What encourages interest group power; what mitigates it?" (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, p. 125). McFarland (1998) suggests that questions such as these frame a postpluralist concern for how new issues get on the political agenda. Postpluralism is less concerned with the relative power of different interest groups than with questions such as, "Which interest groups behave in which ways and under what circumstances? When do they succeed in influencing policy, and when do they fail?" (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, p. 127). As I describe next, studies of interest group lobbying activities have provided some findings to inform the question of tactics and strategies used in various circumstances.

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REFRAMING MODELS OF INFLUENCE: LOBBYING SEEN IN CONTEXT

Scholars attempting to understand how interest groups behave under certain circumstances have distinguished between the tactics and strategies that they use. Milbrath (1963) suggests that tactics are those external activities in which groups engage, such as meeting with legislators. Strategies involve a combination of tactics and imply a means of using that combination to influence in a particular situation. Groups have many tactics available, but their strategies for lobbying will depend on the context, the nature of the issue, the strategies used by others, and the orientation taken by the decision maker. Berry (1977) used a similar distinction in describing four different types of interest group strategies used as part of a long-term approach to lobbying. One strategy uses the law by adopting tactics of litigation and administrative interventions. A second strategy of confrontation includes tactics of protest, whistle blowing, public relations, and releasing research reports. Berry describes a third set of informational strategies, which include tactics such as releasing research reports, making presentations to government agencies, and providing congressional testimony. A fourth strategy involves constituency influence, using tactics of mobilization by letter writing, publicizing voting records, and making campaign contributions. Berry argues that the choice of strategy for lobbying depends both on the internal group characteristics and the external political context. Groups will design the strategy to fit the nature of the issue of concern and their internal organizational capabilities.

Other researchers have distinguished between tactics in insider and outsider strategies. Gais and Walker (1991) found that groups inside the political process used tactics of legislative lobbying, litigation, and electioneering. Those groups outside the political process used tactics of protest and sponsoring conferences and other forms of grassroots lobbying. These researchers conclude that the choice of use of insider or outsider strategies depends on the internal resources of the group, the nature of its membership, its sources of financial support, and the degree of conflict faced. They found that citizens’ groups and groups that rely on patrons tended to use outsider strategies. Profit groups in contrast tended to use insider strategies. High levels of conflict in a policy issue were associated with higher levels of all lobbying. These models suggest that group resources are important and highlight the importance of the context of the lobbying situation if we are to answer questions about how interest groups behave and, more important, when they succeed and when they fail in their efforts at influence.

Critics observe that the problem with research on interest groups has not been that these questions have been ignored, although certainly they have become more important as analytic interest has shifted from issues of mobilization back to broader concerns with influence in recent years. Rather, the problem is that scholars adopt different approaches to what constitutes influence and how it can be measured. In their analysis of quantitative studies that have examined the influence of direct lobbying and of political action committees, Baumgartner and Leech (1998) find that although most consider the activities of very few groups in influencing a limited number of issues and votes, they do so without a common frame of assumptions with regard to influence. Many of these studies adopt narrow conceptions of the lobbying process, focusing on the interaction between lobbyists and legislators at the point immediately before floor votes occur. These quantitative studies ignore the informal agenda-setting influence activities that occur as a result of the long-term relationships that are forged between agency personnel and members of congressional committees during the course of their committee interactions. As a result, many quantitative studies of lobbying fail to examine the parts of the policy process where lobbyists are most likely to be influential.

Baumgartner and Leech (1998) argue that new models must guide the study of lobbying that take into account both direct and indirect forms of lobbying. Groups may spend time convincing legislators to influence other legislators. They may also lobby for their particular interest within a coalition to which they belong. Studies that do adopt such context-sensitive parameters report a more complex dynamic at play, one that encompasses the social nature of lobbying. Decisions to lobby and decisions to listen to lobbyists are both dependent on the calculus of potential for success of the desired outcome. Taking into account that lobbying is largely an assurance game, these models look for evidence of mimicry, cue taking, and bandwagon effects (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). The implications of this model of lobbying suggest that researchers should look at the context of lobbying in which lobbyists and legislators who make decisions with reference to the calculus that each undertakes makes for determining the potential success of the outcome sought.

The influence of context on the nature of lobbying is particularly evident when comparing findings of research on interest group involvement in the court system with findings of research on group involvement in legislative processes. The court system regularizes and regulates the involvement of interest groups in a way not possible in legislative contexts. In contrast to the personal contact that characterizes lobbying contacts in the legislature, direct lobbying of the courts is done through suits and filing amicus briefs. Commonly used longitudinal case-study research on single-policy issues or groups has allowed researchers to look at issues over time, comparing different issue contexts (Epstein, 1991). One important area of research has focused on determining the circumstances under which interest groups choose to use the courts to achieve their policy goals and what strategies they use when they do so. Scheppke and Walker (1991) created a model assessing the effects of characteristics of groups and of the external circumstances of the situation. They found that interest groups used multidimensional legal strategies but also that, counter to popular assumptions, disadvantaged groups are less likely to turn to the court system than are active, well-endowed, older groups that are facing structured
These findings point to important new directions for inquiry into interest groups' engagements in the courts. Such engagement, however, represents a small part of the lobbying efforts reported by a small number of interest groups. In contrast, most groups report lobbying efforts focused on agency officials within the bureaucracy. Much research undertaken by subsystem scholars has described and theorized about the interactions between interest groups, agencies, and congressional committees in particular issue areas. Some interest groups scholars have focused on the regulation and implementation issues in particular interest group-agency interactions. Some important theoretical developments have been drawn from longitudinal case studies. Wilson (1989) concludes that there are four types of group-agency relationships: client politics, entrepreneurial politics, conflictual interest group politics, and majoritarian politics. Heinz et al. (1993) addressed questions concerning the nature of interest group-agency interactions during several regulatory events. On the whole, however, relatively little is known about the role of interest groups in administrative policy making, despite the fact that by law all federal agencies must inform interest groups of regulatory changes and provide opportunities for comments. Studies examining such submissions would provide important insights into interest group argumentation during the rule-making processes that define the institutional context of policy making.

Interest in this institutional context of interest group activity has returned in the wake of new awareness of the need for a more complete approach to understanding the relations of groups to government agencies. Although this is not a return to the assumptions that led early pluralists to frame their disturbance models, it does emphasize larger questions of the role of the state in the group system. The parameters of this approach can be seen in Walker’s (1983) conclusion that

a pressure model of the policy-making process in which an essentially passive legislature responds to petitions from groups of citizens who have spontaneously organized because of common social or economic concerns must yield to a model in which influences for change come as much from inside the government as from beyond its institutional boundaries. (p. 403)

Attention to this institutional context is not new; in fact, it has remained a constant focus of inquiry in group approaches to the study of comparative politics.

**CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF GROUP-STATE ENGAGEMENT**

Group approaches to the study of comparative politics became dominant in the 1950s and 1960s, the same time that pluralists dominated the study of American politics. At that time, interest in understanding the functioning of democracies around the world led American research institutions such as the Social Science Research Council to support research on how groups relate to the state in different countries. Almond’s "Comparative Study of Interest Groups" (1958) and Eckstein’s (1966) Division and Cohesion in Democracy were among early comparative politics studies that examined how different countries really worked by studying group-state interactions. Subsequently, although the group approach was replaced by scholarly interest in theoretical issues surrounding problems of collective action in the United States, it continued to have an influential role in the study of comparative politics. Comparative studies of political systems elaborated on findings of studies such as Almond and Verba’s (1965) five nations’ study of relative strength of a civic culture as evident by the potential for citizens to participate in a network of organizations. More recently, Robert Putnam (1993,1995) has followed this tradition in using organizational affiliations through interest groups as the basis for his analysis of the strength of working democracy in Italy and the United States. Indeed, some political scientists conclude that the role of groups in relation to state officials is more central to current comparative study of public policy making than it is in the scholarly study of American politics. The field of comparative politics has consistently been preoccupied with debates concerning the nature of the relations of groups with government officials (see Kesler, 1987; Pal, 1993; Smith, 1993; Wilson, 1987).

Much of the work in comparative politics has focused on the historical development of the "role of the modern state, in particular its key position as the major catalytic agent of social transformation" (Cairns & Williams, 1985, p. 13). This neoinstitutional approach reflects agreement that the state is more autonomous in its actions and its policies. American scholars of neoinstitutional historical analysis such as Skocpol (1985) have shown that the American state can generate goals independently from the demands and interests of social groups. She concludes that the autonomy of the state is a variable feature because its bases can vary with time and across systems. She cautions further that "one of the most important facts about the power of a state may be its unevenness across policy areas" (Skocpol, 1985, p. 17).

Skocpol’s (1985) perspective is modeled on the 19th-century work of Alexis de Tocqueville:

In this perspective, states matter not simply because of the goal-oriented activities of state officials. They matter because of their organizational configurations, along with their overall patterns of activity, affect political cultures, encourage some
kinds of group formation and collective political actions (but not others), and make possible the raising of certain political
issues (but not others). (p. 21)

Skocpol calls this "macroscopic" analysis, a process of analysis which stresses how states "unintentionally influence the
formation of groups and the political capacities, ideas, and demands of various sectors of society" (p. 21).

A Canadian political scientist, William Cairns (1986), in his formulation of neoinstitutional state theory in Canada, draws no
hard distinction between the state and civil society. Instead his conception is one of embeddedness, a simultaneous
process wherein the state increasingly penetrates and organizes civil society while itself becoming increasingly bound and
constrained in its capacity to maneuver. Cairns argues that the state should thus be seen as "the sum total of the
programs it administers" (p. 57) and that civil society is thus shaped by past decisions and old policies. This does not imply
that the state can be viewed as a single entity; rather, Cairns views the state as fragmented in Canada by its federal-
provincial divisions, and this leads to societal fragmentation. Although Cairns views the state's power as attenuated
because of this fragmentation, he shares Skocpol's Tocquevillean approach in claiming that the contemporary Canadian
state is busy refashioning the collective identity of its citizens to reflect the changed ethnic realities of the Canadian polity.
Neoinstitutional theorists taking this perspective conclude that the "societal role of the state"—management of an
increasingly diverse, rights-conscious, and particularistic society based on ethnicity, gender, language, age, and race—"will
not abate in the future" (Pal, 1993, p. 34).

Indeed, the project for analysis of the problem of the autonomous state must address key consequences such as the
enhanced interest its structural autonomy gives the state in shaping civil society and in deliberately constructing and
regulating the normative order. Such analyses must take into account the paradox of autonomy: The more autonomous
the state is, the more frequent will be attempts to capture portions of it and use it in "non-autonomous ways for special
interests" (Pal, 1993, p. 40). Neoinstitutional analyses are thus based on the assumption that "the institutional networks
affecting state action extend well into society, in such a way as to expose the state again to society influences. The state
appears as a network of institutions associated with society and the economic system" (Hall, 1986, p. 17).

DISCUSSION: REFRAMING CONCEPTIONS OF INTERESTS AND INFLUENCES IN NEW ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

The concept of the embedded state has important implications for the reframing of our conceptions of interests and
influences in the context of new economic, political, and social conditions. In this concluding discussion, I examine the
implications of these changes by contrasting the conceptions of the role of interest groups in democratic politics
previously reviewed in the article.

Two traditions persist in current approaches to framing our understanding of the role of interest groups in U.S. politics.
Decades of research and analysis have modified these views; however, central themes differentiating them remain. One
view emphasizes the increasing diversity of interests in the federal government policy circles and the positive role that
groups have in the development of better citizens of the state. Another view sees the interest group system as biased in
the favor of powerful economic interests and those special interests that make particularly focused pleadings for
governmental favor.

The first tradition has a long history in political theorizing on governing in the United States. In this tradition, scholars and
political observers view the diversity of interests active as evidence of a capacity for generating broad representation of
members of U.S. society. This view is most strongly evident in the arguments of pluralists in the 1950s and 1960s.
Truman's analysis in The Governmental Process (1951) framed the mobilization of interest groups as a response of any
potential group facing a problem requiring governmental redress. Truman's distributive theory argued that each large
disruption in a political system leads to the creation of new interest groups to defend a group facing a threat. Although
Truman (1951) showed that business interests predominated in the lobbying community of Washington, because he
focused on the abilities of latent groups to mobilize to protect their interests, he viewed business group dominance as
temporary and unproblematic. This view was shared by other pluralists such as Milbrath (1963) and Key (1964), who
focused on the diversity of interests present rather than the barriers of participation some face or the bias of this system of
interest representation.

A second tradition of interest group analysis has focused on these barriers and the resulting biases in representation. The
scholars in this tradition have been concerned with the influence of the growth and development of the interest group
system in the United States on the processes of government. Many have concerned themselves with the problem of bias
resulting from special interest group pressures on governmental actions. Arguments taking different tones but sharing
similar concerns can be found in Griffith's (1939) Impasse of Democracy, Lowi's (1969) The End of Liberalism, Olson's
(1969) theory of special interests, the argument is that special interests, through their capacity to mobilize at higher rates than collective interests, have the potential to overwhelm a political state by their pleadings for concessions and supports. Threads of this argument are evident in many conceptualizations of the interest group system. A common view is that the interest groups draw government officials away from making decisions in the public interest. Moreover, increasing diversity of American society compounds the tendency of special interests to overwhelm the agenda of public interest in governmental policy making. Commonly described solutions to the increasing powers of special interests include strengthened political party system, enhanced power of government agencies, and a more authoritative judicial system.

That these two traditions persist today can be seen in the articles in this special edition. Each view has been modified by decades of research and new theorizing, although central themes remain. At the same time, trends are evident in the relative attention political analysts have given to the positive and negative aspects of the problem of representation posed by interest groups. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) argue that during the 1940s and 1950s, a period they describe as more socially quiescent, scholars were more likely to focus on the capacity of groups to represent the interests of all with an interest in governmental action. The social movements and riots of the 1960s discredited this focus, leading political analysts like Schattschneider (1960) to make more critical assessments of pluralist conceptualizations of the representative capacity of the U.S. interest group system in governmental processes. During this period, political analysts could not ignore the fact that so many important social groups that were active were also left outside the mainstream system of representation depicted in the pluralist conceptualization. The claims of pluralists that focused on the value of a diverse set of groups actively representing all possible views through persistent negotiation to government were largely discredited by analysts following Olsen’s (1965) critique of the assumption of the potential of unfettered organization by all interests.

In the years that followed the turmoil of the 1960s, this questioning led to conceptualizations of interest group activities framed more specifically on the problems of bias. Concern by political analysts with shared interests, bias, and consensus among the self-interested led them to conceptualize policy-making systems as iron triangles and policy subsystems. Ultimately, however, political analysts could not ignore the delayed effect of the social movements of the 1960s. Many of these movements eventually spawned new interest organizations and focused, for example, on civil rights, women’s issues, and environmental issues. Moreover, political analysts observing the effects of the social movements in the 1960s began to recognize that although the interest group system is biased, it was also diverse and much more dynamic than supposed in the conceptualizations of those who worried about its bias.

At the same time, although recent analyses have shown that social movements have spawned the creation of interest organizations active in advocacy coalitions and issue networks, other analyses have reported that the structure, strategic position, and interconnection of interest groups in the United States have changed dramatically, and in ways that rewrite the concerns for bias. In the latter case, some political scientists claim that the economic environment is now dominated by large multinational corporations, often based in the United States. Bayes (1982) argues that these corporations have not only increased their power in relation to the state by expanding beyond its boundaries but they have also increased their own domestic political independence and reduced or eliminated traditional bonds of accountability in a variety of ways. These concerns are not new, but those who raise them argue that government and business activities have become increasingly intertwined in ways that reflect the dynamics of embeddedness of the state in civil society (Cairns, 1986).

At the same time, postpluralists like McFarland (1998) argue that sources of countervailing power do exist to oppose the interests of oligopolistic corporations. McFarland acknowledges that earlier pluralists mistakenly implied that countervailing power was organized almost automatically to balance the excessive power of oligopolistic organization. Postpluralism acknowledges the difficulty of organizing political groups on an equal basis and recognizes the appearance of subgovernments as a problem in U.S. politics. The problem, however, is mitigated by the appearance of countervailing power, often appearing in fragmented ways within separate areas of political action as a result of opposing interests of economic groups. McFarland argues, however, that social movements are a particularly important source of countervailing power to subgovernments. He claims that new theories of social movements are helpful frames of analysis of the dynamics of this countervailing power. These theories focus on how movements enter the political, legal, and public policy processes. For example, McAdam (1998) argues that the political process itself may provide varying political opportunities for movements to develop and to exercise countervailing power, particularly in putting new issues on the political agenda.

For those of us who wish to understand these dynamics in the politics of education, the legacy of social movements has been more than representation to government of the special interests of women, minorities, religious fundamentalists, and others. Recalling de Tocqueville’s observations that interest groups active in American life not only provide representation for a broad range of view, many political analysts now argue that they also perform an important educational role in fostering a civil society. Wuithnow argues that "Tocqueville recognized that voluntary associations make an important contribution to the cultural health of a nation" (1991, p. 4). This view is shared by other political analysts (see Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).
These arguments inform some of the normative questions concerning the role of interest groups in a democracy that have been taken up by other analysts. For example, Robert Putnam (1993, 1995) describes how the social fabric of society is strengthened through the enhanced opportunities for working together that citizens gain through the participation in groups. Moreover, when focused on representation of their interests, groups of individuals must develop skills of communication and collaboration. Through participation in local and national associations, citizens experience the sense of political efficacy on which their support for democratic processes of government is being built. Similarly, Jane Mansbridge (1992) has focused on the normative questions of the role of interest groups in a democracy. She argues that groups play important roles in democracy by encouraging deliberation among their members. In addition, by explaining, discussing, and airing these deliberations, interest groups provide both government and the public with information on current issues.

In this concluding discussion, I have shown that political scientists view groups as both a means for individuals to exercise their freedom to join with others to make demands on government and a threat to the democratic principles of representation of interests in such demands. These divergent views of the potential danger to democratic representation posed by interest groups have remained unchanged and can be found in the assumptions framing the articles in this special edition. However, I have shown in the article that in political science, the salience of either perspective as a defining focus for political inquiry changed during the 20th century. The changes reflect the evolution of conceptual approaches to analysis that have been brought to bear on studies of interest groups in the United States, and they set the agenda for a new generation of inquiry into the dynamics of influence.

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