
An Agenda for Research on Interest Groups

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Interest group representation lies at the heart of arguments about the nature of democracy in America. The degree to which people are represented before government by advocacy organizations must be considered in any defense or critique of our system of government. There's much we know about interest group representation and much we don't know. This essay focuses on the latter question--what we don't know, or more precisely, what we know we don't know.

Although studies of interest groups steadily accumulate, it is a relatively small subfield within the discipline. The sheer amount of scholarship on interest groups is considerably less than in other subfields in the area of American national politics, such as Congress, the Presidency, or parties and elections. There is little chance of this changing in the short term as relatively few doctoral students choose to do their work in this area. The latest compilation of dissertations in *PS* lists a total of 117 dissertations completed during the previous year in the categories of American Government or Public Policy. Of these, seven appear to be about interest groups. (Titles can be imprecise, so this is a rough estimate). That's just 6 percent of new Ph.D's, who have at least a short-term commitment to interest group scholarship. When dissertations on social movements are included, the percentage rises to 10 percent (Frankel 1991).

Why is it that the study of interest groups does not attract more disciples? There's no way of objectively evaluating the intrinsic importance of this area in comparison to the other subfields in American government. There are some other factors, however, which have kept the numbers of interest group scholars down. First, scholars, like amoebas, reproduce themselves. Since there are relatively few senior scholars at the major graduate schools who do work primarily in the field of interest groups, it's understandable that few graduate students choose this topic as their specialty. This has not been a cyclical phenomenon--I can't think of any "golden period" of interest group research, when there were large numbers of senior scholars working in the field.

Second, there is little in the way of available data sets which can be utilized as the basis for a dissertation. Most national opinion surveys contain

few, if any, questions about interest groups. The Federal Election Commission's data sets on PACs are a notable exception to this lack of off-the-shelf, ready-to-use data. Consequently, thesis writers wanting to focus on interest groups must either get funding to go to Washington to do field work (difficult to obtain); study state or local groups (logistically easy to do, but professionally problematic since state and local interest group studies do not seem to receive as much attention as studies of national interest groups); or do research that is historical or interpretative in nature.

Third, teaching jobs in American politics tend not to be defined as interest group positions. Departments are much more likely to indicate a preference for an expert on Congress, the Presidency, the bureaucracy, or political behavior. When the subfield of interest groups is listed, it tends to be grouped with other specialties, particularly political parties or social movements. Thus, aspiring American Government scholars may come to see other subfields as more marketable than interest groups.

Yet for the young scholar wishing to pursue research on interest groups, the fact that there are relatively few people working in the area can be seen as good news. It is easy to identify topics that are original and not derivative of existing studies. Let me highlight some of the broad areas which I think deserve greater attention from interest group scholars.

The Internal Organization of Interest Groups. Surprisingly, we know little about how interest groups operate. I say "surprisingly," because some of the richest theoretical work on interest groups relates to their internal operations. Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) revolutionized the way we think about interest groups. Olson's book is a theory of incentives, of why people choose to join interest groups. It has spawned considerable work by formal theorists trying to amplify and fine tune the theory, and by empirical researchers trying to determine how much of it is true (Walker 1991).

Although this research has markedly increased our knowledge of what draws people to interest groups, and from where these organizations draw their financial support, the internal operations of interest groups have not been adequately studied. Olson's seminal work has failed to stimulate a broader examination of the relationship between members and their organization. Most conspicuously, little work has been done on the governance of interest groups. This is an important area, because it is critical to our understanding of how rank-and-file preferences are incorporated into organizational decision-making. What is known is intriguing. Typically, there is not a lot of direct rank-and-file input by members into the deliberations of the interest groups to which they belong. When the members of a lobbying group are other organizations, it is certainly conceivable that leaders are more solicitous of the opinions of their supporters.

The broader point is that there is reason to believe that the relationships between leaders and followers are significantly different among all the major types of lobbying organizations: citizen groups, trade associations,

professional associations, labor unions, PACs, and corporations.¹ We need to determine how they differ and how they are similar in the way that governance is carried out. How is information from followers gathered? What are the formal provisions for participation of members in organizational decision-making? To what degree are decisions over what to lobby on congruent with member preferences? How are conflicts between different parts of the membership mediated?

Recently, for example, over 50 mostly small wineries withdrew from the Wine Institute, the lobbying arm of the California wine industry. Conflict between the small wineries and the giant E. & J. Gallo Winery, which dominated the Institute's leadership structure, had been going on for some time without resolution. The small wineries felt that policy was being dictated by the Gallo family, and that they had little say in the organization. A conflict emerged between another large winery, Robert Mondavi, and Gallo over the basic direction for the Institute's advocacy, and Mondavi has withdrawn as well (Fisher 1992). One assumes that it is not unusual to find tension in a trade association between large producers and small producers. Journalistic accounts of how a split within a trade group has hampered its lobbying on a specific issue are common, yet there is very little in the scholarly literature on how trade groups deal with their competing constituencies. We really don't know the answer to the basic question of whether small producers are generally better off with their own trade association, giving up the financial might of their larger brethren, in exchange for an advocacy voice that more narrowly represents their unique interests.

These governance questions are questions about representation. More specifically, they are questions about how well people's views are represented within an organization, and how members' views correspond to what their lobbying organization communicates to government. There is, of course, some valuable work that has been done in this area. Michael McCann's (1986) analysis of participation in public interest groups and Allan Cigler's (1986) study of the internal organization of the American Agriculture Movement are just two examples of interesting research on this topic. What is needed now are systematic comparisons by scholars grounded in organizational theory as well as in interest group politics.

The Impact of Participation on Interest Group Members. After asking to what degree do interest groups allow their members to participate, it is natural to ask how such participation affects members. Do interest groups help to create better citizens? Classical theorists, such as Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, argued that participation changes people's attitudes and leaves them as better, more capable citizens. In such classical theory, the cause-and-effect relationship between political participation and the enhancement of citizenship is built around the expectation that participation will take place in a face-to-face setting. Many contemporary analysts, like Benjamin Barber

(1984) and Jane Mansbridge (1980), see face-to-face interaction as critical in producing new, strengthened forms of democracy.

There is not the same kind of theoretical foundation to guide critical thinking about how participation in interest groups, which does not involve face-to-face interaction, might affect members (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993). Many interest groups offer members little more in the way of participation than the opportunity of writing a check for donations or yearly dues. There is, however, a considerable range in membership activity in interest groups. Face-to-face interaction is possible in local groups, local chapters of national groups, or at annual meetings of an association. Members may also show a high degree of involvement, even though they don't personally interact with other members by donating significant sums of money or by writing letters to policy-makers at the urging of their organization.

One intriguing hypothesis is that participation in some types of interest group may cause people to become more confident about government and their ability to influence it, while participation in other types of organizations may make people more cynical. Cynicism could be a by-product of organizations that do little to solicit membership opinion, are generally unsuccessful in achieving their policy goals, or whose internal communications seem to reinforce people's belief that governmental decisions reflect the dominance of "special interests" over the "public interest." More positive views of the political system might be nurtured by organizations which are more participatory, more successful, or less antagonistic toward the role of government.

Research on membership attitudes in a group can be difficult, because it is likely to require a high level of cooperation by the organization. And evaluating change in attitudes or behavior over time can necessitate expensive research designs. Nevertheless, such research could make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role interest groups play--or fail to play--in promoting a democratic society.

Business in National Politics. For years, the major fault line among those who wrote about interest groups was between those who believed that America was a pluralist democracy, and those who believed that America was ruled by a power elite. The continuing criticism of both models gradually eroded that fault line and, unfortunately, among interest group scholars, the debate over the role of business in public policy-making has withered away.

Exactly why the role of business has not attracted more attention from interest group scholars is unclear. There are, of course, studies of individual industries and some broader work as well (Vogel 1989; Martin 1991). Developments in recent years have raised many new questions about the influence of business groups in national politics. The Reagan era and the ability of big business to seize the preeminent spot on the nation's political agenda is a striking counterpoint to years, when business felt that it was always dealing with somebody else's issues (Vogel 1979).

The explosion in the numbers of business trade groups active in Washington politics, and the increasing numbers of corporations which feel the need for direct Washington representation beyond their trade association memberships, are significant trends that deserve closer scrutiny. The implications of the growing globalization of the economy on the political influence of both American and foreign business lobbies need to be explored as well.

There is also a need for broad-based theory. The commonly accepted model of business and government cooperating to protect the status quo, exemplified by Lowi's classic, *The End of Liberalism* (1969), does not seem to capture the dynamic nature of a highly competitive international economic environment. More sophisticated models of how business coordinates its "classwide" interests would also be useful (Useem 1984). How big business converts its financial resources into political resources is another area which has not been well researched (Wilson 1981).

The broadest question, of course, is whether business power is increasing or decreasing. Robert Salisbury has written that the increasing number of interest groups has destabilized the policy-making system and has weakened interest groups overall: "these groups have come to Washington out of need and dependence rather than because they have influence" (1990:229). Paul Peterson (1990-91) has argued similarly that the overall power of interest groups has declined in recent years. Neither analysis specifically compares business to other sectors of the interest group community. If the influence of interest groups has indeed waned, has the influence of business declined at the same rate as that of other types of interest groups?

Policy Making in Dense Interest Group Environments. The sharp rise in the number of interest groups has been examined by many scholars. The interest group explosion led to the collapse of many subgovernments and the formation of larger issue networks. The nature of issue networks is just now beginning to receive attention, and the work by Salisbury and his colleagues has helped us to understand the interrelationships among network participants (Salisbury et al. 1987; Heinz et al. 1990). The porous boundaries and shifting coalitions of issue networks make them considerably more difficult to analyze than the policy making systems of the not-too-distant past. When a small number of interest groups dominated policy making in their area, the implications for democratic theory seemed much clearer.

The sheer number of groups active in a single major policy area can be staggering. A recent report identified 741 health care organizations represented in Washington (Pear 1992). Interest group scholars need to develop explanatory frameworks to improve analysis of how policy-making takes place when there are so many actors involved. Issue networks are highly conflictual, but political scientists have not yet created satisfactory models that incorporate high levels of interest group conflict as a norm (Berry 1989).

There are signs that government has made some adaptations to policy-making environments, where there is a high degree of conflict and large numbers of participants. A prime example is the increasing use of negotiated regulations ("reg-negs") during the administrative rulemaking process. The Negotiated Rulemaking Act of 1990 has given an increased impetus to such proceedings. Reg-negs appear to be successful in bringing long-standing adversaries to the bargaining table and getting them to agree to compromise their differences. Agencies give up some of their autonomy but get binding agreements in return and avoid having their regulations held up by years of litigation. Such structured negotiations may actually make policy-making more democratic by opening up the political process and ensuring that all relevant actors are included in the bargaining (Berry 1993). Steven Kelman (1992) goes as far as to argue that what he calls "cooperationist institutions" will deliver policy decisions that are more public-spirited. Research is needed to test whether these optimistic assessments are valid.

Structured negotiations are just one way agencies have responded to the rising numbers of interest groups and chronic conflict within their policy making environment. There are surely other relevant adaptations they have made, but little research has been done on how the relationship between administrative agencies and interest groups have changed over time. The executive branch has grown significantly since the 1960s--how has this affected interest group politics? For example, four federal agencies currently oversee policy on the narrow issue of privately owned wetlands (Kriz 1991). How common is it for interest groups to have competing agencies to plead their cases to? Likewise, the overlapping committee jurisdictions and multiple referrals that are so common these days in Congress may have important consequences for interest group advocacy.

The four research areas examined in this paper provide by no means a comprehensive review of the state of interest group scholarship. Valuable research on interest groups and agenda building has been done by Anne Costain (1992), and by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (1991). John Mark Hansen's (1991) study of the farm lobby is an excellent example of thick, historical analysis of a changing relationship between advocacy groups and policymakers. Also focusing on agricultural groups, William Browne (1990) utilized niche theory to explain how increasing numbers of groups in a policy area are able to maintain themselves. The study of interest groups is progressing, but there is much to be learned and there are great opportunities for new people entering the field.

Notes

1. Even though corporations are not membership organizations, the question is still relevant. Corporations have various constituencies, both internal and external. We know little

about how these distinct--and sometimes competing--constituencies are incorporated into the decision-making process.

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