

POLITICAL SCIENCE 566
POLITICAL INTEREST GROUPS
FALL 2011 – Andrew McFarland

Interest groups are organizations which seek to influence government policy through bargaining and persuasion and means other than offering candidates for election to governmental positions. (The latter organizations are political parties.) Interest groups include organizations whose major purpose is the production of goods and services (corporations), but which seek to influence government as a secondary purpose. Interest groups may employ lawyers or other professional agents to approach governmental officials to influence them. Such acts of exercising influence are often called “lobbying,” the image being that of the influence agent waiting in the lobby to approach a legislator or executive branch official. Interest groups operate at all levels of the federal government; national, state, county, city, and special district. While seeking to lobby both the legislative and executive branches of government, interest groups attempt to influence the judicial system by filing litigation and *amicus curiae* briefs. Obviously interest groups are an important part of government and politics. There are probably more than 100,000 organizations engaging in interest group behavior in the USA. They range from one person outfits with almost no budget, to the American Association of Retired Persons claiming 34 million members, to the world’s largest corporations, capitalized in the tens of billions.

From the standpoint of democratic theory, one is concerned with the structure of interest group power and its effect on representation. One way of examining this is to study the development of the theory of group pluralism in America. The instructor considers this has happened in four stages, from (1) the original theory of group theory of the 1950's, as represented by David Truman’s *The Governmental Process*, for a decade a leading book in the discipline, to (2) the pluralist theory of power of Robert A. Dahl and his associates which flourished in the 1960's, but which actually de-emphasized the role of interest groups in politics, contrary to the conventional way of describing Dahl’s work, to (3) the theory of multiple elitism of the 1970's, centering around the work of Theodore Lowi, Jr., and Mancur Olson, Jr., which stressed the problems of special interest rule, to (4) the neopluralist theory of the 1980's, as exemplified by Jack Walker and James Q. Wilson, which saw possibilities for effective representation of widely shared interests without assuming an equilibrium of democratic and fair representation. This four stage theoretical development is a basis for this class, and is articulated in the instructor’s book *Neopluralism: The Evolution of Political Process Theory*.

In terms of the books assigned for the class, we do not start with *The Governmental Process*, now of interest only to research specialists. Nor can we read Robert A. Dahl’s *A Preface to Democratic Theory* or *Who Governs?* (pluralism stage two), because they put us on the road to the erroneous idea that interest groups do not have much causal impact on politics. Instead, we will have to rely on lecture material from the instructor. However, it is suggested that the student read case study material in *Who Governs?* to see an example of a pluralist analysis of the political process.

Instead I start the class with E. E. Schattschneider’s *The Semisovereign People*. This is a well written political science classic that has stood the test of time. For instance it still influences research by Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and

Henry Brady. Previously I neglected to assign this book in this class, but knowledgeable graduate students would bring it up.

Following the introductory discussion of pluralism, we move on to a consideration of an influential model about the role of interest groups in public policymaking. This might be called the third stage of interest group theory as part of the multiple-elite political process theory. This is well presented in two books of enduring significance, Lowi's *The End of Liberalism* and Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action*. These writers from the standpoint of democratic theory criticized interest group politics by arguing that some groups are easier to organize than others, and that small groups of corporations or other economic producers are easier to organize than consumers, because producers see the costs of organizing as producing offsetting benefits, while each individual consumer has little to gain, and thus will not contribute to the cost of group organizing. This leads to a situation in which specific public policies become controlled by specific, self-interested coalitions of producers, favorable executive branch officials, and friendly members of Congress serving on committees controlling the policy area. This three-sided coalition is popularly known as an "iron triangle," and such coalitions have been observed as dominating specific public policy areas, such as setting prices of sugar or licensing the construction of nuclear power plants. Elected politicians may occasionally challenge such "subgovernments," but they seldom have a continuing incentive to expend their power resources to control policy in issue areas which seem obscure to most voters. Lowi theorizes that elected politicians normally don't even try to control the iron triangles, because they subscribe to an ideological rationalization that control of government by special interests is democratic pluralism. The instructor refers to Lowi's theory, and to other similar theories as "multiple elitism," because Lowi sees American government as controlled by numerous elites, each controlling a particular area of governmental policy. It is elitism, but not control by a single "power elite." The instructor in the past sometimes used the term "plural elitism" instead of "multiple elitism."

Lowi is an intuitive, unsystematic theorist, but the rigorous *The Logic of Collective Action* by Mancur Olson provides a systematic rationale for the theory of multiple elitism. Olson argues that there is an inherent bias in the system of interest group organization, because groups with a small number of substantial stakeholders in some public policy will organize, while groups with a large number of persons with diffuse interests (e.g. in lower defense budgets, in consumer safety, and so forth) will not be organized. The result is a logic of "the few defeating the many." This imbalance occurs because it is irrational to contribute to the attainment of a public good—one such that if one person in an area has it, then all must have it—if one can get the public good for free as a "free rider." A reduction in air pollution is gained by everyone, whether or not they contributed to an environmental lobby. On the other hand, a few corporations seeking government subsidies will organize, because the contribution of each makes a substantial difference in the attainment of the subsidy to the group.

Before the publication of *Lobbying and Policy Change* (2009), Jack Walker's *Mobilizing Political Interests in America* (1991) was best book about interest groups in America in its general outlook and in the data it presents. Walker, like many other interest group researchers in recent years, rejected the positions of the first two stages of pluralist theory, but also rejected the third stage, the multiple elite position. This is because he found that many citizen lobbies have organized to challenge and limit the power of the iron triangle. In his view, Olson does present a good model explaining the difficulty of organizing interest groups to lobby for widely shared

interests, but that such interests often organize with the assistance of patrons. These include government agencies, foundations, wealthy individuals, and even preexisting groups which supply money and skills to those seeking to organize new interest groups, including citizens groups. Consequently, there is more countervailing power to subgovernmental coalitions than Lowi or Olson would have us believe.

In relation to the multiple-elite hypothesis, a political development of great significance has been the appearance of “public interest groups” (loosely defined) or what Walker terms “citizens groups.” Such groups attempt to provide countervailing power to the tendency to form the subgovernmental elitist coalitions. The instructor has been known for his research on public interest groups in the 1980's, but my book *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest* is now somewhat dated. For a recent treatment of such groups, we read *Environment, Inc.* by Christopher Bosso, a book which presents the history of environmental organizations and data about fluctuations in their contributions and membership.

The instructor will lecture about the theory of social movements and how this relates to interest groups, lobbying, and the neopluralist theory of the political process (McFarland, Ch. 5). Students who wish to read on this topic may peruse the standard work by Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, or Sidney Tarrow's *Power in Movement*, or the edited volume by Anne Costain and Andrew McFarland, *Social Movements and American Political Institutions*.

We move on to consider over two weeks *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* by Frank R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball, and Beth L. Leech. This is the definitive study of interest groups and lobbying in Washington. It generalizes from 98 case studies, a sample of all Washington issues, during the four years of 1988, 1989, 2000, and 2001. The main point of the book is that in our system of governance, there are many veto points, and hence it is easier to veto changes in the status quo, than it is to change the status quo. This is a familiar idea, but the new point is that minority veto of policy change often outweighs greatly disproportionate money and other resources wielded by the side seeking policy change. This lobbying study fits well with public policy theories that find policy change to be ordinarily incremental, but that major changes in the context of policy bring about significant “punctuations” in the nature of a policy. While business is described as the most powerful category of interest group in the case studies, this observation probably should have received more extensive treatment.

From this point, we go to considering Anthony Nownes book *Total Lobbying* which overlaps with an urban and local government concern. Previous scholars had neglected the pervasive role of lobbying for contracts and land use permits at the local level, a major portion of the overall lobbying activity in our society. Nownes discusses such local lobbying, as well as giving a textbook treatment to lobbying the national government.

After this the instructor will lecture about the corporatist theory of interest groups, a topic from the comparative politics field. Political scientists sometimes characterize developed, largely democratic political systems as pluralist (fragmented groups), statist (government tends to dominate groups), or corporatist (nationally federated groups cooperate with the state to make macroeconomic decisions).

The instructor will then present his concept of “cooperative pluralism,” the concept of a hybrid between neopluralism and corporatism within the American political context (the book *Cooperative Pluralism: The National Coal Policy Experiment*). Political processes are both conflictual and cooperative within group interactions; the cooperative dimension needs to be considered both empirically and normatively, and from the standpoint of policymaking. Cooperative and conflictual pluralism can be considered from the perspective of the sociological method of graphing social networks. At this point, unless presented earlier, the instructor will present his theory of conflict and cooperation in American public policymaking: “Interest Groups and Political Time: Cycles in America.”

After this, we will consider the last sections of *Neopluralism*, essentially recent developments in the study of interest groups and the study of the political process. In particular, we consider how concepts of issue definition and issue framing, advocacy coalitions, interest-group niches, punctuated equilibrium, regime theory, and social movement theory might be applied.

If there is time, at this point summary material about interest group lobbying of American state governments and of the American judicial system will be introduced. Summary statements about the role of PACs and contributions to electoral campaigning will also be introduced. If previously neglected, a few generalizations from the study of lobbying will be made. In the last class, we may want to consider summaries, conclusions, and items of interest that have not been mentioned earlier in the class.

The Oxford Handbook of American Political Parties and Interest Groups, edited by L. Sandy Maisel and Jeffrey M. Berry, Chapters 3, 22-30 contains an article about interest group theory by the instructor and other summary material. As this book is useful for studying for Ph.D. examinations, it is frequently checked out of the Daley library.

Class requirements for grade

A first requirement is a 15 page paper, applying some of the theory from the class to an interest group of the student’s choice. This paper is not expected to be definitive, or up to the level of one given at the Midwest Political Science meeting, although a student may want to extend and to refine the paper after this class. The choice of topic has to be cleared with the instructor; e-mail communication often can work for this. Comparative or international topics can be considered, but since these may be more difficult in the context of this class, discussion of the topic with the instructor is more important.

The student is expected to submit a three page prospectus for the paper at the fifth class, September 21, to describe the interest group and the scope of the paper. The entire 15 page paper is due on November 9, two weeks before Thanksgiving. The next class, November 16, will be given over to student presentations of their work.

There will be an out-of-class final, covering the class lectures, and the reading, which is treated in the lectures. The final will consist of an eight page paper answer to a general question (or questions) posed by the instructor. There will be a strict deadline for the submission of the out of class final. The due date for the final will be the Wednesday of exam week, December 7.

The final will count 50% of the grade; the paper will count 40% of the grade; the other 10% will reflect class participation and other activity, and essentially bears on the question of a B+ or A-.

For class I will come with prepared lectures, which ordinarily will be distributed by e-mail after the class. I hope that students will interrupt lectures with questions and comments.

Instructor Contacts

My office is 1123 BSB. I am on campus almost every afternoon. E mail amcfarla@uic.edu
Office phone 312-413-3776; Mailbox 1102 BSB; Office hours 1:30 to 3:30 on Tuesday.

Schedule

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| August 24 | Introduction. Description of interest group behavior in America. Pluralist theory as cultural folklore. |
| August 31 | Continuation of the above. <i>Neopluralism</i> , Chs. 1-3. E. E. Schattschneider, <i>The Semisovereign People</i> |
| 10-11. | Recommended, numerous copies in library: Robert Dahl, <i>Who Governs?</i> , Chs. |
| September 7 | Multiple elite theory. Read <i>The End of Liberalism</i> but skip the first two chapters as not relevant. Be sure you have the revised, 1979 edition. |
| September 14 | Finish discussion of Lowi. Begin discussion of Olson. Start reading <i>The Logic of Collective Action</i> for this class. |
| September 21 | Paper prospectus due. Consider <i>The Logic of Collective Action</i> . Begin reading Walker's book. |
| September 28 | Neopluralism. Read Walker's <i>Mobilizing Interest Groups in America</i> . <i>Neopluralism</i> , Ch. 4. |
| October 5 | Public Interest Groups. Read Christopher Bosso, <i>Environment Inc.</i> |
| October 12 | Social movement theory (lecture). <i>Neopluralism</i> , Ch.5. Begin reading <i>Lobbying and Policy Change</i> . |

