

POLITICAL SCIENCE 566  
POLITICAL INTEREST GROUPS  
Spring 2009 – 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.

At this time we will read sections of *Organized Interests and American Government* by David Lowery and Holly Brasher to get a factual basis for discussions of the role of interest groups in American government, since this class is largely theoretical. While most of the material focuses on American government, some of it applies to comparative politics and to international political processes, and the instructor does not exclude comparative/international references in class discussion or in the preparation of student papers.

Following the introductory discussion of pluralism and the consideration of factual material, 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

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difference in the attainment of the subsidy to the group.

Jack Walker's *Mobilizing Political Interests in America* seems to me to be the best book about interest groups in America in its general outlook and the data it presents. Walker, like many other interest group researchers at this time, rejects the positions of the first two stages of pluralist theory, but also rejects the third stage, the multiple elite position. This is because he finds 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*.

At this point we will for a while depart from the American context to consider transnational social movements and interest groups, in a discussion developed from a leading study *Activists Beyond Borders* by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink. The instructor argues that the political process theory, developed in the study of American politics, can be applied to some international phenomena, at least as a descriptive framework.

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).

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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.

The instructor will present (if not done before) his current research interests in unusual forms of political participation, which overlaps with interest group theory. The paper "Creative Participation and Civic Innovation" will be distributed.

If time, at this point summary material about interest group lobbying of American state governments and of the American judicial system will be introduced. If time, 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.

### Requirements

Students are asked to write two short papers and an out-of-class final.

On March 5, the eighth class, students are to turn in a 5-7 page paper, applying some aspects of the theory in the first part of the class to some interest group of the student's own choice. Similarly, on April 9, the twelfth class, students are to turn in a second 5-7 page paper, applying additional theory to some interest group. The second paper may be a continuation of the first paper (but must have new theory), or it might treat a second interest group. Comparative or international topics may be considered, but the student should consult with the instructor, as this may be difficult, especially in the case of the first paper. The student is expected to give a 15 minute oral presentation of a paper on April 16.

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The handbook *Research Guide to U.S. and International Interest Groups*, Clive Thomas, editor, is available in the library. This may be helpful in writing papers.

An enormous amount of case study material about interest group activity in America can be accessed at <http://polisci.la.psu.edu/faculty/Baumgartner/welcome.htm#research>

The final exam will be out-of-class, consisting of an 8 to 10 page essay addressing some general topic to be picked by the instructor. The essay must consider material read in the class, and it must be turned in on time, with about ten days to work on it. The final essay will largely determine the class grade (about 60%), but attention will also be paid to class participation in the case of B+ final essays. The due date for the final exam is May 7, the Thursday of finals week.

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Office hours: TBA

### Schedule

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| January 15  | Introduction. Description of interest group behavior in America. Pluralist theory.  |
| January 22  | Labor Day holiday.  |
| January 29  | Continuation of the above.<br><i>Neopluralism</i> , Chs. 1-3.<br><i>Organized Interests and American Government</i> , Chs. 1, 4, 5, 6.<br><br>Recommended, numerous copies in library: Robert Dahl, <i>Who Governs?</i> , Chs. 10-11. |
| February 5  | Multiple elite theory.<br>Read <i>The End of Liberalism</i> but skip the first two chapters as not relevant. Be sure you have the revised, 1979 edition.  |
| February 12 | Finish discussion of Lowi. Begin discussion of Olson. Start reading <i>The Logic of Collective Action</i> for this class.   |
| February 19 | Consider <i>The Logic of Collective Action</i> .<br><i>Organized Interests and American Government</i> , Ch. 2.<br>Begin reading Walker's book.   |
| February 26 | Neopluralism.<br>Read Walker's <i>Mobilizing Interest Groups in America</i> .<br><i>Neopluralism</i> , Ch. 4.   |

- March 5            Catch-up class/to be announced.  
**First paper due.**
- March 12          Public Interest Groups.  
Read Christopher Bosso, *Environment Inc.*
- March 19          Social movement theory (lecture).  
*Neopluralism*, Ch.5.  
Begin reading Keck & Sikkink.
- March 26          **Spring break.**
- April 2            Transnational social movements and interest groups.  
*Activists Beyond Borders*, Margaret Keck & Kathryn Sikkink.  
Work on your second paper.
- April 9            Comparative politics and interest groups. Corporatist theory.  
*Neopluralism*, Chaps. 6, 7.  
  
**Second paper due.**
- April 16          **Student presentations of interest group papers.**
- April 23          Recent neopluralist research and future research directions.  
Research on innovative political participation.  
“Creative Participation and Civic Innovation,” book chapter in press  
*Neopluralism*, Chaps. 8-10.
- April 30          Lobbying the judiciary. Lobbying state government. Political Action  
Committees. Whom to lobby? Possible regulatory reforms.  
  
Distribution of out-of-class final exam question.  
  
*Organized Interests and American Democracy*, Chs. 3, 7.  
“Organized Interests and the Decision of Whom to Lobby in Congress,” Marie  
Hojnacki and David C. Kimball, *APSR*, V.92, 1998, 775-790.
- page seven
- Civic              Theda Skocpol, “Voice and Inequality: The Transformation of American  
Democracy, *Perspectives on Politics*, March 2004; 3-20  
  
*Organized Interests and American Democracy*, Ch. 8.

May 7

**Final exam paper is due at 5:00 P.M.**  
This is Thursday of exam week.