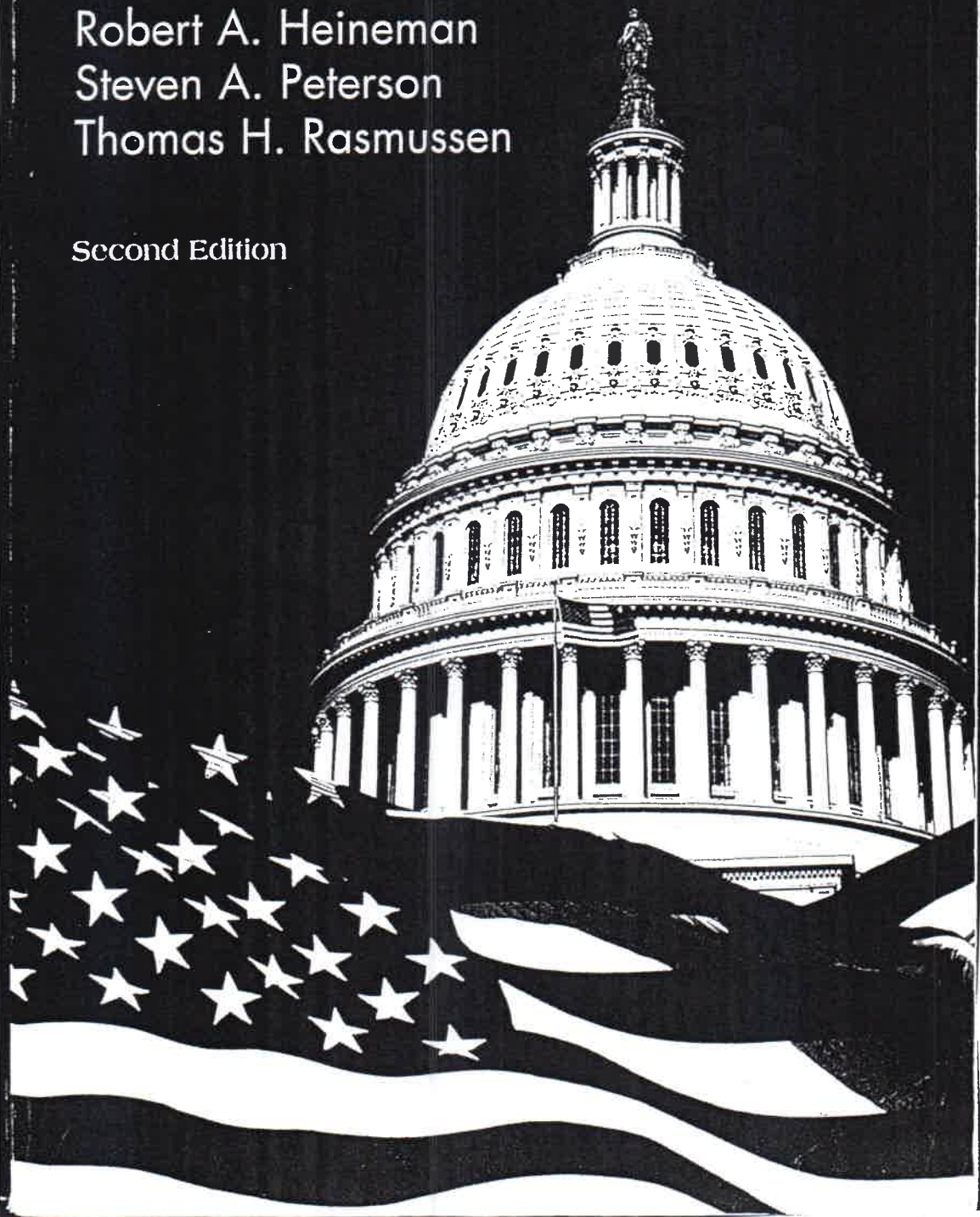


American Government

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CHAPTER 7

Political Interest Groups

In many ways, organized interests have become the dynamic element in the political process in the United States. In the past they have been seen primarily as lobbyists before the legislature or the agencies of the executive branch. Today, however, their influence extends throughout the governmental process—from the election of candidates through judicial decision making. This chapter discusses the ideas that underly the justifications and, more recently, the criticisms of interest-group influence. It then presents some concepts for a better understanding of group behavior, describes common tactics of groups, and provides examples of current groups.

In a pluralistic, democratic society where freedom of association is encouraged and where individuals join groups for a variety of reasons, it is to be expected that political interest groups will proliferate. The important issue for the student of politics today is the extent to which the increase in group power can be balanced by a government that can serve as a stable framework for policy and for consideration of the national welfare.

Group Theorists

Early Theorists—Madison and Calhoun

Recognition of the importance of groups in the political process extends back at least as far as James Madison's discussion of the "mischief of factions" in *Federalist 10* (1787–1788). Although, he said, the numerous divi-

sions in American society were dangerous to a healthy republic, the expanse of the country and the institutions of government would operate to prevent any one interest from gaining dominance in the nation. Later, in his *Disquisition on Government* (1848), John C. Calhoun drew attention again to the importance of diverse interests with his description of the idea of the "concurrent majority." Attempting to protect southern interests from control by the North, Calhoun argued that proper policy decisions required more than a numerical majority. They required acknowledgement of the integrity of the interests affected. This could be accomplished through use of a "concurrent majority," a procedure whereby a majority of each interest would have to agree to a decision before it could be made.

Arthur F. Bentley

Perhaps the most thorough statement of the group explanation of the political process was made by Arthur F. Bentley in *The Process of Government* (1908). In this work, Bentley argued that everything in the political process could be explained by group behavior. Many of Bentley's concepts are still used to explain group behavior. These received more modern treatment in *The Governmental Process* (1951) by David B. Truman.

Robert Dahl

Robert Dahl's concept of pluralism, based on his study of decision making in New Haven, has been an important modification of the ideas of the group theorists. Dahl suggests that the political process can best be understood in terms of the groups that become involved in a decision.¹ Obviously, many decisions are of little or no interest to particular groups. Only those decisions which affect them will cause groups to become involved politically, and only on those decisions will the groups have some influence. Thus, from Dahl's perspective, American democracy is not a rule by numerical majority but a rule by combinations of groups. On a given issue, the important determinants of the outcome will be the groups involved in that controversy.

The New Deal Approach

Interest-group organization gained official sanction under the New Deal, which tried to attack the effects of the Great Depression by fostering organization in business and labor. The New Deal efforts to assist economic interests illustrate E. E. Schattschneider's view of government as the "socialization of conflict."² In this interpretation, governmental policy is seen as a response

to the appeals of groups disadvantaged in their competition with other groups. The consequences may not be favorable to those groups which originally asked for government intervention, however, because appeal to government increases dramatically the number of those involved in the issue; that is, it socializes the conflict. When this happens, the issue can easily be removed from the control of the original protagonists.

Proliferation of Programs and Groups under the Johnson Administration

The New Deal approach received further impetus during Lyndon Johnson's presidency. As noted in Chapter 3, the Johnson administration greatly increased the number of grant-in-aid programs providing funds to states, localities, and the private sector. These programs invariably engendered associations to obtain and protect their share, or stake, in the funds available.

However, the Johnson administration moved beyond simply increasing domestic funding. Through regulations requiring citizen consultation and representation in the implementation of many of its programs, it deliberately sought to encourage the organization of those who had previously not been politically active. These efforts and the civil rights and antiwar movements led to a large increase in citizen groups concerned about the welfare of the disadvantaged and other social issues in addition to those newly created groups receiving direct economic benefits from the programs instituted under the Johnson administration. Because many of the groups organized during the 1960s were liberal, their activities in turn stimulated an increase in conservative groups in the 1970s.³ This proliferation of organized political interests, combined with greater sophistication in organizational techniques and methods of media manipulation, has caused some thinkers to raise serious questions about the role of interest groups in politics generally.

Recent Critics

Theodore Lowi has been widely credited with formulating a thorough critique of the development and effects of interest-group power on democratic policy processes.⁴ Lowi sees contemporary America dominated by "interest-group liberalism." In his opinion, government efforts to encourage group organization have resulted in groups controlling government policy in their areas of interest. Lowi fears that government is losing its legitimacy as an authoritative source of rule making and that interest-group power has reached a stage where it seriously impedes coherent government policy. By refusing to legislate definitive standards and clear goals for programs, Congress bears much

of the blame for encouraging interest-group manipulation throughout the policy process. This policy ambiguity by Congress fosters interest-group bargaining down to the level of the "hearing examiner, the meat inspector, the community action supervisor, and the individual clients with which they deal."⁵ The government stalemate engendered by such pervasive group influence may in turn threaten the stability of democracy itself.

Another commentator, Mancur Olson, has approached the question of the deleterious effects of interest-group power somewhat differently, although his conclusions are equally serious.⁶ Olson argues that in a democracy, economic interests soon learn that it is easier and more profitable to utilize government for protection than to engage in competition with each other. Government eventually becomes the protector of economic interests that are unwilling to be flexible in giving up their subsidies and other advantages even though new economic developments may make them obsolete or inefficient. Olson concludes that freedom of association and access to government in a democracy must invariably lead to economic stagnation and crisis that, in turn, threaten the stability of the political system.

Group Organization

Because it is so dynamic and heterogeneous, American society at any given moment contains an enormous variety of interests. Many of these interests never organize and thus remain latent interest groups. It is organization that provides the threshold for group identity and effectiveness as an interest group. Some interest groups may be primarily political interest groups (for example, a local taxpayers association); others may have little interest in political activity or engage in attempts to influence government only occasionally (for example, Bonsai Clubs International). The catalysts for interest organization also vary widely. Interests may organize because they become aware of common concerns that can be enhanced through organization, as with local bird watchers or stamp collectors. Other groups may appear in reaction to perceived abuses by or threats from existing organizations. Occasionally, investigative exposures, such as Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*⁷ or Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*,⁸ which stimulated organization of consumer groups and environmental groups, respectively, lead to greater interest organization. In the last several decades, government activity itself has encouraged group organization, as interests served or regulated by government have organized to advance their views or to protect themselves. Among groups that have been relatively stable and which have more than a handful of members, identifiable common principles that govern their internal workings tend to develop.

Leadership

Over time, a group's leadership tends to become more distant from its membership, and the leaders find it difficult to consider returning to their former occupations. Thus leaders in groups take care not to move mavericks, or those who may dissent from their views, into leadership positions. Only those group members who demonstrate the proper attitudes are encouraged to move up in the ranks. Typically, in the highest group offices there is a succession from vice president to president-elect to president or some similar sequence to ensure that no rapid change in leadership occurs. Additionally, the leadership usually closely controls the nomination and election procedures for officers, discouraging, for example, nominations from the floor of a convention. In this the leadership is aided by its control of funds and communications—often in the form of a journal or newsletter—with its members. Group leadership also can now keep in daily contact with members through the use of computer networks that provide continual updates on group activities and policy issues.

Because of the political environment within which they must operate, most groups make serious efforts to maintain a semblance of democracy in their proceedings. Internal procedures that appear democratic give legitimacy to the group's leaders and their negotiations in the policy process. An exception to this approach was the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, whose leaders simply sat around a table and selected a president. However, in 1991, after three of their last five presidents had been sentenced to prison, the Teamsters, under the watchful eyes of government overseers, for the first time held an open convention in which several candidates ran for the presidency.

Cohesion

An exceptionally important goal of a group's leadership is the maintenance of cohesion among group members on issues of importance to the group. The loss of cohesion and rise of conflict and division within a group pose a threat to the leadership and weaken the group's ability to present a united front to government officials whom it hopes to influence. Thus group leaders often will not take positions on issues that can be expected to divide the membership, or they may use the group's newsletter to give the impression that there are no contrary positions or views among the membership on an issue. Leaders also will try to incorporate as much of their members' lives as possible within the group framework, providing units for children or spouses, for example.

Closely tied to the concept of cohesion is that of intensity. A group can be fairly small in terms of number of members, but if its members are cohesive

and intensely involved in an issue, the group can have far greater political influence than larger, less committed groups.

Structure

Organizational structure can be an important determinant of how a group will approach an issue. Two common forms of organizational structure are unitary and federative. The unitary approach has a central office and membership that communicates directly with that office. The federative model often parallels the federal governmental system, although it need not, as with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which has individual unions as its most powerful components. Under this approach, component units deal directly with the membership and report to a national office. In many ways a federative organizational structure makes maintaining cohesion more difficult because the constituent units within the group, owing to geographic or other variations, tend to institutionalize variety within the group. On the other hand, the federative approach may strengthen the group at local levels.

A more encompassing form of organization is the peak association. This kind of organization is essentially an organization of groups. The National Association of Manufacturers is an example of a peak association. Many groups combine organizational forms by allowing both organizations and individuals to become members.

Size

Size can be one of the more misleading indicators of group effectiveness. Groups with large memberships appear impressive as potential voting threats, but group leaders may be unable to mobilize their membership in particular elections. Group membership is difficult to move across party lines, and thus a group may become essentially the captive of a party. Group leaders can, however, encourage their members to sit out an election, and that can have a serious impact on a party that has enjoyed their support in the past.

An important factor weakening the influence of large groups is the inability of members in these groups to see that they make much difference or that their individual activity will gain them much. This is part of what has been aptly labeled the "free rider" problem.⁹ In smaller groups it is more obvious that individual activity and support are important and that shares of benefits achieved, such as market subsidies, will be larger. Thus smaller groups tend to be more intense and active in the pursuit of group goals. But in larger groups, the rational group member pursuing his or her own self-interest may well ask why put forth much effort for the group since he or she will benefit from the

group's success regardless. Groups face this problem in terms of building membership as well. Individuals may refuse to join a union and will still benefit from the higher wages and improved conditions that union activity achieves. To help to offset this problem, many groups offer members incentives other than group goals. These might include reduced rates on insurance, access to important information, or social activities. Despite these efforts to induce membership and membership activity, the free rider problem seems to be an inherent limitation on the political effectiveness of large groups and on the size of groups formed to pursue goals not directly rewarding the self-interests of their members.

Group Strategies: Access and Influence

Access

Without question, the primary goal of any political interest group is access to policy decisions, which means, in essence, access to those who make these decisions. The rule of thumb is that the earlier access is achieved, the more effective it is. Thus, in the electoral process, those who supported a candidate before the primary in which he or she was nominated tend to have more influence with that person than those who threw in their support just prior to the general election.

In its simplest form, access can be broken down into three steps: (1) locating the point of decision, (2) establishing contact with those involved in the decision, and (3) persuading those involved in the decision.¹⁰ Although this appears clear-cut, it may be less so in practice. For example, locating the point in an agency at which the actual decision is made on an issue can be fairly involved. Agency heads may merely ratify recommendations made by staff people below them, and the group aiming at effective influence needs to move beyond the ostensible decision maker to those actually responsible for the decision. Moreover, it is inaccurate to envision access in terms of influence that narrowly focuses on specific votes. Lobbyists agree that effective access results from long-term social and political relationships with policy people—relationships that allow group representatives to develop a climate of interaction within which decision makers are favorably inclined in general to listening to their views.

Lobbying

Effective access can be achieved through the time-honored practice of lobbying on a person-to-person basis, and this remains in many ways the best approach to decision makers. The lobbyist who has built a reputation for integrity and knowledge on issues can be an important resource for public off-

cials and often will be granted a hearing when others will not. Interest groups also may utilize a more indirect approach by trying to create a favorable image at the grass-roots level. This may involve fairly sophisticated subliminal efforts or more blatant appeals to influence voters' opinions in the hope that they will in turn communicate with their representatives. Some organizations, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), are exceptionally well organized and do not hesitate to rate candidates at election time for their membership or to produce avalanches of constituent mail on issues of concern to the members. Others, such as the pro-Israel lobby, are more subtle in their portrayal of their cause, aiming at creating a generally sympathetic attitude toward it among the public.

Differential Access

Important to understanding interest-group influence is the idea of differential access. Some interests have an inherent advantage in influencing particular public officials or agencies. Thus, Democratic presidents will naturally be sympathetic to the concerns of organized labor. The Veterans Administration will be expected to be responsive to veterans' organizations. Other interests can have access to policy decisions in these areas, but they will be at a disadvantage if they intend to oppose the positions of those possessing the benefit of differential access.

Group Influence in the Processes of Government

Group Influence in the Electoral Process

In the electoral process, interest groups are most effective in a supportive role. They can offer a tremendous amount of assistance to a candidate in terms of financial aid and human resources. Obviously, the smaller groups do not have the numbers to equal the work force of a labor union, but they can provide funds. Organizations the size of labor unions, however, can contribute both funding and willing hands to do the phoning, door-to-door campaigning, and election-day activities that help ensure a large turnout for the candidate. Organizations can give mailing lists to candidates and publicize candidates' positions in their newsletters. Such organizations also may be able to furnish assistance with publicity, polling, and other areas that require some expertise. If their candidates win, they may further supply office staff in the home offices or in the capital.

Organizations with sufficient resources may attempt to ensure access by providing aid to candidates from both parties, although not necessarily to those candidates competing for the same position. However, interest groups dependent on voting support for their influence tend to be less flexible in their abil-

ity to straddle the two major parties. Voters do not change their party preferences easily, and thus they do not respond readily to suggestions from their group leaders that they modify their voting habits. The danger to groups in this situation is that they can easily become prisoners of the parties. Black voters, for example, have given Democratic candidates a very high level of support, and it is unlikely that many of them could be persuaded to switch their support to Republican candidates readily. Thus, in a sense, Democratic candidates can take the black vote for granted, with their major concern being to get these votes to the polls on election day.

The most important recent development in the relationship between elections and interest groups has been the appearance and proliferation of political action committees (PACs). PACs were encouraged by the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 and its amendments of 1974 and 1976. As a result, any interest of consequence has a PAC for providing funds to candidates, and through the use of PACs, the larger and wealthier interests have had a significant effect in campaigns. The result has been an increase in the influence of special interests in campaigns in relation to the influence formerly exercised by party organizations, which had been the primary source of funds for many candidates. The fragmentation caused by interest-group influence in the policy process may now have moved into the electoral process, and this, in turn, may lead to an increase in electoral volatility. (For additional discussion of PACs, see Chapter 6.)

Group Influence in Congress and the Executive Branch

Several of the interest-group approaches to Congress and agencies have already been discussed. The reader should remember some basic principles of this process. Person-to-person contact remains the most effective form of persuasion. Resources that can be utilized by interest groups include money, expertise, and labor. Use of these resources in a supportive fashion appears to be the more common approach to obtaining influence and the one that provides the most potential for a long-term beneficial relationship. Computer technology has improved the response time and increased the impact of grass roots appeals to Congress and agencies. Through computer networks and the use of fax machines, interest-group leadership in Washington can activate members affected by policy proposals in a very short time.

The construction of long-lasting relationships that are of mutual benefit has enabled interest groups to link congressional and agency policy through what are called iron triangles, cozy triangles, or subgovernments. (These are described in more detail in Chapter 10.)

Although they often pass unnoticed, the cozy triangles have a tremendous influence on national policy. In many different policy areas, they have formed

entrenched relationships that enable their members to resist change vigorously. Supported and protected by their related interest groups and congressional committees, agencies can significantly limit a president's ability to effectively direct the federal bureaucracy. They can also exert pressure on the budget by continually advocating increased spending for their programs. Presidents may oppose an agency's request for additional funds, but interest-group activity in Congress can encourage the relevant committees to provide additional funding regardless of the chief executive's position.

Congressional committees and subcommittees tend to be supportive of the agencies they oversee because such committees are "stacked" with individuals favorable to those programs. Concerned about their reelection, members of Congress naturally try to become members of committees that will enable them to build support in their home districts. Thus, representatives or senators from rural areas will tend to see appointment to the Agriculture Committee as politically important. The stacked characteristic of congressional committees increases their sensitivity to the concerns of affected interests.

One of the most powerful and long-lived cozy triangle relationships has developed around the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' work in water resource management. The Corps' authority to build dams, reservoirs, harbors, and canals enables it to provide members of Congress with water-resource projects for their constituents. The House and Senate Public Works Committees authorize these projects and use this power to enhance their members' political positions within Congress. Contractors and local government officials organized in such associations as the National Rivers and Harbors Congress work closely with both the Corps and members of the Public Works Committees. Everyone in this subgovernment benefits substantially, although the taxpayers at large must foot the bill for the costs involved. Aroused by what he considered the marginal value of many of these rivers and harbors projects, President Carter, early in his administration, attempted to eliminate funding for a number of them. Congress was outraged at this effort at presidential intervention, and although some projects were cut, the loss in congressional goodwill for the president undoubtedly far outweighed any benefits he gained from cost cutting in the name of the taxpayer. Effective cozy triangles operate quietly outside the attention of the institutional presidency, and attempt to interfere with these established relationships can be very costly to a president.¹¹

Group Influence in the Judicial Process

The formalities of the judicial process place important constraints on the techniques that interest groups can use to influence policy in this area. Nonetheless, over the years, some groups have been very successful in their

use of the courts. These groups—the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is perhaps the prime example—have often used the courts as their principal area of activity. For groups advocating unpopular or minority causes, lack of support in the politically responsive branches of government may leave them with no recourse but the courts.

Interest groups can be more effective in the judicial process than individuals because they have the funding and organization to carry a case through to its conclusion. Two important devices for groups using the judicial process have been the test case and the class-action suit. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Jehovah's Witnesses used these with great success in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The test case is a case in which facts favorable to a group's position are so closely intertwined with a legal issue at stake that the courts will have difficulty separating them. Groups have the ability to select the case that fits these criteria and guide that case through the courts. If possible, the test case is litigated as a class-action suit, meaning that it is pursued on behalf of all individuals similarly affected. This is particularly appropriate in civil rights cases. If an interest can litigate a test case to the Supreme Court and receive a favorable decision, it has changed the law of the land in its favor, because decisions rendered by the Supreme Court are the supreme law of the land. Thus, concentration on the legal process can be an effective way of expanding rights claimed by an organized interest.

In the 1980s and 1990s, interest groups have become more heavily involved in the appointment of judges to the federal courts, especially the Supreme Court. The struggle over the nominations of Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas to that court illustrate graphically how interest groups can use the Senate and the Judiciary Committee and its staff to insist that their views on a judicial nominee be taken into consideration. The Bork nomination battle also demonstrated the effectiveness of group alliances in advocating positions at the national level. In that case, liberal organizations coordinated their efforts for maximum effect in influencing public opinion, using the media, and appearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee. At the same time, the Reagan administration, responding to other interests, was reasonably successful in placing ideologically conservative judges on the lower federal courts.

Group Legitimacy

Up to this point, the discussion of group tactics has assumed the ability of an interest group to operate within the policy process. Some interests have lacked sufficient legitimacy, however, to be able to engage in even the most

rudimentary form of policy activity. Their challenge has been to achieve sufficient social and political status to have their issues considered on the policy agenda. At one time or another, blacks, homosexuals, and women have all found themselves on the outside of the policy process trying to get in.

Organization has been an essential first step in moving such groups to a point where they could begin to make policy gains.¹² Often organization has been followed by use of the courts to insist that certain inequities be corrected. In the current era, some groups also have tried to change social norms and attitudes. They have undertaken direct action activities such as marches and sit-ins to bring public attention to their positions and have tried to restructure fundamental public perceptions about them. This latter effort has focused on the use of language—for instance, use of the words “black,” “gay,” and “Ms.”—and on revising historical accounts to give greater status to the activities and accomplishments of members of a particular group.

Types of Interest Groups

Economic Groups

Although the numbers and kinds of interest groups have increased in the past several decades, the interest-group world remains heavily dominated by economic groupings, particularly business groups. There are general business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers. Other organizations represent specific business interests from florists to truck-stop operators to the automobile industry to the coal and steel industries. No business activity seems to be without an association to represent and protect its interests in governmental policy circles.

Labor also, of course, has a variety of organizations representing its interests. Typically, these are unions, but there is tremendous diversity among unions. There are craft unions, mass production unions, clerical unions, private-sector and governmental unions, and professional sports unions. In this respect, one of labor's most effective political action forces for years has been the Committee on Political Education (COPE) of the AFL-CIO.

Along with business and labor groups, agriculture is a member of the so-called big three in organizational power. Again, there are organizations representing particular areas of agriculture, such as milk producers. But there are also more broadly based associations, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers Union, and the National Grange. These organizations have given farmers political power beyond their numbers, but it would be fair to say that even effective organization is no longer sufficient to protect the farmer from continued decline in political clout.

Also in the economic area are a range of professional associations. The American Bar Association and the American Medical Association are leaders in this respect, with such others as the American Association of University Professors trailing far behind in terms of political influence.

Public Interest Groups

Since the 1960s, in particular, organizations aiming at speaking for the public interest have been reasonably successful in terms of influencing public policy and managing to survive. Typically, these groups are not vital to the economic interests of their membership. Because they are not organized to promote the immediate self-interest of their members, they are sometimes labeled altruistic groups. Salient among these is Common Cause, which works hard at making government more responsive and honest. Ralph Nader's public interest groups also have exerted continual pressure on government, primarily in the interests of the American consumer. Somewhat more difficult to label are the various environmental groups—the Audubon Society, Friends of the Earth, and the Sierra Club—and the ACLU.

These advocacy groups claim to speak for a public interest in particular policy areas, although on many issues it is not clear that the public would agree with their positions. This is particularly true with regard to many of the most recent groups. Sophisticated direct mail techniques now enable a small number of people in Washington to target citizens interested in their causes and to raise sufficient funds through the mail to maintain offices in the nation's capital even though they have no appreciable grass-roots support compared to the older, better-organized interest groups.

Think Tanks

Related to the public interest groups are the research policy groups, often called think tanks, that have proliferated within the past 20 years. Some of these groups, or institutions (such as the Brookings Institution, which was founded in 1916), have existed for many years. More recent are the Heritage Foundation (1973); the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (1960); the Cato Institute (1977); and the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace (founded as the Hoover War Library in 1919 but reinstated as the Hoover Institution after World War II). Although some of the think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute, accept the need for government intervention as a policy technique, most appear to be conservative in orientation in that they are critical of expansive government and favor private-sector solutions to social problems. These groups see themselves as educational in orientation and spend much of their time and money

hosting conferences and workshops on issues and supporting research on policy. Conservatives in particular have been active in establishing think tanks at the state level. In the early 1990s there were state-level policy study institutes in over 30 states. These provided analyses of state policies and a network for a national conservative agenda at the grass-roots level.

Governments

Governments have also become involved in the lobbying game. These efforts have taken a variety of forms. First, there are associations of governments—the National League of Cities—and of government officials—the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Second, the states have established offices in Washington to represent their interests at the national level. Third, some larger metropolitan areas—New York City, Chicago, New Orleans—have set up shop in the nation's capital to make certain that their positions within their states are accurately represented. Fourth, to protect their programs, agencies at the national level have been known to encourage mobilization of interest-group support on their behalf. Direct financing of such efforts appears to run counter to federal regulations, however, as the Department of Energy learned in 1987 after it had provided funds to bring clientele groups to Washington to lobby against congressional attempts to ban nuclear testing.

Single-Issue Groups

Single-issue interest groups have already been mentioned at several points. They are characterized by rigidity on policy; are usually noneconomic in orientation, tend to have the characteristics of movements, and are often seen as threats to coherent policy-making. Perhaps the best-known of these groups are those associated with the antiabortion movement. Another might be the National Rifle Association (NRA). These types of groups can be seen as shading over into more ideological associations, such as the Moral Majority, or into movements advocating the rights of particular groups, such as blacks or women. All these groups tend to focus heavily on noneconomic issues such as moral beliefs or individual rights and thus make compromise on issues more difficult. This, in turn, makes life very uncomfortable for politicians on whom their attention is brought to bear.

Issue Networks and Alliances

Another way of describing the activities of group organization in the policy arena is to categorize groups according to substantive policy areas such as health, law enforcement, and education.¹³ In these areas, what Hugh Heclo

has termed "issue networks" may develop. These networks bring together groups from a range of backgrounds to support or oppose particular issues. These networks, or alliances, are becoming more common because of the greater complexity of the problems with which government deals.

When government proposes to act in one of these areas, a variety of influential organizations immediately become interested in a fashion that illustrates Dahl's group interpretation of the policy process, discussed earlier in this chapter. In the area of health care, for example, the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association, the National League of Nursing, corporations (which may be required to provide more extensive health benefits), health consumer groups (such as those representing the elderly), and state governments can be expected to be vocal on many issues. Similarly, with regard to proposals aimed at dealing with poverty, labor, civil rights, welfare, and church groups might insist on becoming involved.

Issue networks can also develop around legislation and programs that at first glance appear to have little relevance to many of the groups that make up the network. The interstate highway program provides an example of this phenomenon. As James Q. Wilson has pointed out, the original legislation of 1956 simply provided funds for building an interstate highway system. But the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, which continues authority for the interstate highway system, adds over "20 new goals and constraints." Wilson lists some of these as "preserve historic sites, reduce erosion, encourage the use of seat belts, control outdoor advertising, hire Indians, reduce drunken driving, use recycled rubber in making asphalt."¹⁴ What has happened here, as with other federal programs, is that numerous interests wanting a variety of goals have tied into the interstate highway construction program and now act as another layer of interests on top of the agency-construction industry-congressional committee triangular relationship that originally powered the efforts to build the interstate highway system.

The results of alliances formed to deal with specific issues can sometimes make for unconventional ad hoc coalitions, such as when the automobile manufacturers and the United Auto Workers cooperated to delay automobile emissions standards in 1976 or when Common Cause joined with conservative groups in 1987 to oppose attempts to provide for walk-in voter registration on voting day. The 1993 battle over approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was another instance in which alliances on both sides of the issue featured cooperation among interests with fundamental ideological differences. The opposition of Jesse Jackson, Ross Perot, and Patrick Buchanan to the agreement gives one indication of the extent of this ideological diversity. These kinds of group alliances differ from issue networks in that

typically they form only temporarily to respond to a question of common concern; issue networks are composed of individuals and groups with longer-term interests in a program.

Regulation of Group Activity

In response to critics of the interplay of interest groups in the political process, group theorists have argued that group competition contains its own mechanisms of control. First, they assert that overlapping memberships of individuals in several groups will limit the claims and behavior of any one group. Thus, factory workers who are both union members and active in environmentalist groups will tend to moderate the positions of both interests. Second, group theorists have posited the existence of a latent interest in society that is concerned with keeping interest-group activity within the rules of the game. These rules might include ethically and legally responsible behavior. When these bounds are overstepped by groups, the theorists argue, the latent interest in fairness will actively organize to offset and regulate group behavior more closely. In some respects, the legislation that has been enacted to regulate interest groups has been a response to perceived abuses by them.

Attempts to regulate interest-group political activity have invariably encountered two formidable obstacles: the reluctance of legislators to act vigorously, and the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of speech and the right to petition the government. Consequently, when Congress has roused itself to act to regulate lobbying activity, the Supreme Court has, in turn, limited the application of the legislation enacted.

The 1946 Regulation of Lobbying Act utilized the principle of publicity to provide some limits on interest-group activity. It provided that individuals lobbying Congress directly had to file quarterly forms providing information on whom they represented and the amounts of money expended in this effort. In 1954, the Supreme Court limited the application of this statute by interpreting it to apply only to those whose "principal purpose" was to influence Congress.¹⁵

As noted earlier, the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended in 1974 and 1976, stimulated the formation of PACs. These statutes allowed unions and corporations to establish PACs and to contribute to campaigns. Limits are set on how much an individual can contribute to a PAC and, in turn, on how much a PAC can contribute to a candidate, but there are no limits on how many candidates a PAC may support. Moreover, there are no limits or reporting requirements on the amounts that a PAC may contribute to political parties as opposed to specific candidates. The courts have further limited the

scope of this act by holding that PACs without a direct connection to a campaign may spend as much as they wish in support of a candidate or cause.¹⁶ This allowed conservative PACs, separate from the Reagan campaign, to spend enormous sums in support of his two election efforts.

Finally, some attention should be given to the 1978 Ethics in Government Act, which attempts to limit the revolving door of government officials, corporate officers, and lobbyists. It prohibits former government officials from representing interests before agencies in which they have worked, and it establishes a waiting period of one year before a former high-level official may contact the agency for which he or she worked. The law is aimed at preventing conflicts of interest in which departed government employees sell their influence to interests.

Today the influence of interest groups is pervasive in the policy process, and these groups provide a powerful dynamic element in the formulation of public policy. Federal law has encouraged their financing of campaigns, and the use of sophisticated public relations techniques enables them to have influence at the grass-roots level of politics. In the policy process, they have often helped to form cozy triangles to strengthen their positions, and increasingly they have affected the making of judicial policy. The primary internal goal of group leaders is the maintenance of cohesion, and the primary external goal is effective access. The emergence of single-issue groups appears to have increased the intensity of the group struggle. The question raised by many students of American politics is whether the institutions of government are capable of producing coherent national policy in the face of intensified interest-group pressures. Certainly these pressures seem to have increased the problems of governmental fragmentation, and efforts to regulate interest-group activity through law have been quite limited.

The prevalence of interest-group activity provides strong support for the pluralist interpretation of American politics. The variety of interest groups undermines an elitist view of the policy process because of the difficulty in locating any single group of people or combination of groups that appears to control or direct that process, although it is true that the internal politics of individual groups often are elitist in character. At the same time, interest groups contribute to a modified version of democratic theory. They replace the concept of the citizen who carefully calculates his or her best interests with organizations that serve as surrogates for that citizen in the policy process. In the interest-group universe, those without the funds or knowledge to organize tend to be excluded, or at least disadvantaged. But even here, organiza-

tions have formed to speak for those who have not been able themselves to organize effectively.

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Chapter 8

1. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, April 13, 1985, p. 687. *CQ* notes that part of this discrepancy can also be attributed to the fact that some Democrats are elected from urban districts that have very low voting turnout.
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