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# Studying Organizational Advocacy and Influence: Reexamining Interest Group Research

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## Abstract

In *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science* (1998), Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech characterized a series of problems in the interest group research published between 1950 and 1995. In this article, we assess whether recent research has become more theoretically coherent, more attentive to context, and broader in both scope and topical focus, all of which are crucial to advancing the systematic study of interest groups and their policy-making activities. Overall, we observe more large-scale and longitudinal studies between 1996 and 2011 than Baumgartner & Leech observed between 1950 and 1995. This newer literature also is much more likely to focus on key issues for students of politics, and to give attention to the context in which organizations operate to affect public policy. However, we see minimal evidence that scholars addressing similar questions within the subfield are operating from one or a few shared theoretical frameworks.

## INTRODUCTION

In *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science* (1998), Baumgartner & Leech evaluated research on interest groups published between 1950 and 1995.<sup>1</sup> They noted that “the behaviors of groups have often been studied in isolation from the complexities of the policy process” (p. 174). In what could be characterized as a call to action, the authors suggested “the next generation of studies should combine the sensitivity to context of the case study and the generalizability of the survey. . . . [N]either approach so far has succeeded in creating a broad view of lobbying activities with sensitivity to political context” (p. 174). Equally important, the authors argued, is the absence of a coherent theoretical framework that would guide research. In this article, we consider how these issues are addressed in scholarship produced since the publication of *Basic Interests*.

In order to set some boundaries for our review, we drew a sample of published work about interest groups. Specifically, we identified articles published in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *The Journal of Politics*, or *Political Research Quarterly*, as well as books published by a major university press or Brookings between January 1996 and July 2011. To be included, the work had to give substantial attention to the activities of organized interests or social movements, or the outcomes of their efforts. These criteria produced a diverse set of 110 books and articles.<sup>2</sup>

For each book and article in the sample, we coded the following information: the topical focus; the number of groups, issues, and policy domains studied; the unit of analysis and dependent variable; the nature of the data and research design used; the time period covered in the analysis; whether and what type of context was considered; and the primary argument and results presented. We use these data to assess whether the work published after Baumgartner & Leech’s (1998) review has become more theoretically coherent, more attentive to context, and broader in both scope and topical focus, all of which are crucial to advancing the systematic study of interest groups and their policy-making activities. We observe some advancement in all areas, but opportunities for further accumulating systematic knowledge about groups and public policy remain.

## THEORETICAL COHERENCE

As our sample of research demonstrates, an impressive amount of interest group scholarship has been completed in the past 15 years. One might expect that this bountiful harvest would yield both empirical work and theory to guide it. Such a presumption, however, is not warranted. Scholars investigating the same topics are not motivated by common sets of questions or shared theoretical outlooks.

Ironically, early in its history the interest group subfield was defined by grand theory (McFarland 2010). By grand theory we mean a framework for understanding the broader political system, not just interest group behavior. Indeed, the debate over pluralism that emerged out of interest group literature in the postwar era washed over the entire American government field. This debate over grand theory—was America a true democracy?—was about the very core of interest group behavior: who had power in America and how that power was organized. Indeed,

<sup>1</sup>Baumgartner & Leech (1998) examined some work published after 1995, but their more systematic assessment of the literature (including their analysis of articles published in the *American Political Science Review*) ended in that year.

<sup>2</sup>The sampled work is listed in the bibliography or, if not cited here, in Appendix A. The sample is also accessible at <http://lobby.la.psu.edu> under “related projects.”

Mills' *The Power Elite* (1956) and Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961) stimulated waves of studies aimed at generating evidence for groups' roles as either impediments to or instruments of democracy.

In the recent interest group literature, there is little to be found in the way of grand theory on the scale of elitism or pluralism. A rare exception is McFarland's *Neopluralism* (2004). Neopluralism focuses on the group dynamics of public policy making without making the normative argument that America is highly democratic. McFarland's "theory of the political process" emphasizes the need to specify the direct connections between interest group advocacy and the formulation of policy by governmental institutions.

In a review of the interest group literature, Lowery & Gray (2004) adopt the neopluralism label to describe a wide swath of the interest group scholarship from the late 1990s. But they describe neopluralism as an approach rather than a coherent theory of interest representation, one that adopts many of the insights of pluralist theory while avoiding the assumption that the outcomes of pluralistic processes will always be normatively advantageous. Lowery & Gray argue that the scholars adopting the neopluralist approach (including much of their own work as well as Heinz et al. 1993; Kollman 1998; Berry 1999; Gerber 1999; Goldstein 1999; and Hojnacki & Kimball 1998, 1999) share an appreciation of the contingent nature of interest group influence and a willingness to consider the interactions and feedback between interest groups and other parts of the political system. And yet, neopluralism in their view remains a "gaggle of models" (Lowery & Gray 2004, p. 168) and far from a single grand theory of interest representation.

Grand theory may be a bridge too far for contemporary scholars. But certainly it is fair to examine whether scholars working in similar areas within the subfield "are investigating parts of the same puzzle" (Baumgartner & Leech 1998, p. 171). In the fashion of normal science, is there theoretical work that provides cohesiveness to related research in the subfield, allowing scholars to build directly on earlier work? To answer this question we look, in turn, at normative theory, formal theory, and empirical theory.

### Normative Theory

Interest group scholars are prone to address this central question: to what degree do interest groups represent the actual interests present in society? Directly or indirectly, this question is accompanied by a central normative concern: to what degree *should* the interest groups active at any one time represent existing interests? The difference between groups that are active and groups that should be active so that all interests are fairly represented is the degree of bias in the system. Interest group scholars have been consumed with studying this bias, conceptualizing and measuring it in many different ways. As one example, Strolovitch (2007) uses the concept of "intersectionality" to analyze the representation of disadvantaged groups who fall along cross-cutting demographic dimensions (see also Minkoff 1999; Nelson 2003; Hancock 2007; Frasure & Williams 2009; Weldon 2006a,b, 2011). Her concern is the marginalization of the most disadvantaged when represented in an interest group with other constituencies. In a forthcoming book not included in our sample, Schlozman and her colleagues (2012) relate the bias they have documented in terms of political voice to the treatment of equality in classic western political thought.

Many works in the subfield attempt to understand how the bias in representation may be overcome, or alternatively, to explain why the bias persists. For example, Berry (1999) adapts postmaterialism theory from comparative politics to explain the rise of liberal citizen groups in Washington politics. Goss (2006) considers rational self-interest as a means of understanding why no real gun-control movement has ever risen in the United States. Although these books advance the scholarly study of bias and embody normative concerns about representation, they do not emerge from or develop theories that other researchers can build on.



## Formal Theory

Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) had a profound impact on interest group scholarship. Olson and his many disciples energized the subfield with a rigorous, formal approach to understanding the incentives underlying interest group formation and maintenance. But despite its provocative insights, the theory is limited; it does not fully explain the mobilization of citizen groups. When Olson's book was published in 1965, he could rationalize the small number of citizen lobbies as anomalous. As the number of advocacy groups grew exponentially in the 1970s, such claims became increasingly untenable.

Given the centrality of Olson's work in the discipline, we expected our review to document a strong cohort of formal theorists working in the interest group field. Instead, we found that formal theory has not been greatly utilized in recent interest group research. There is some work, to be sure, but this perspective has not become a driving force within the subfield (see Grossman & Helpman 2001, 2002; Iaryczower et al. 2006; Hall & Deardorff 2006; Ashworth 2006; Godwin et al. 2008). Hall & Deardorff (2006), for example, develop a highly sophisticated model of lobbying as congressional subsidy: lobbyists build relationships with congressional offices and offer support in the form of political intelligence, information, campaign finance, and assistance in building coalitions. Yet it is not clear at this time whether Hall & Deardorff's ideas will become a shared perspective for formal or empirical studies of lobbying. In addition, some scholars working from the Olsonian perspective continue to define lobbying as a transaction whereby campaign contributions or other benefits are provided in exchange for a change in public policy, often one that only benefits a particular industry or company. Examples of "private rent-seeking" include procurement contracts or exemptions from regulation (for recent applications of this approach, see Godwin et al. 2008 and Grossman & Helpman 2001). Yet these studies, well crafted as they are, remain modest in number.

## Empirical Theory

Finally, we turn to something of a catchall category of research built around context and particular empirical approaches. The bulk of interest group research falls into this broad category. Some of this scholarship is best described as policy science, focused on a particular field of public policy and building on research in that topical area (e.g., Weldon 2006a,b; Miller 2008; Moe 2011). Much of the remaining empirical work outside of policy studies is institutional or behavioral. What lobbying tactics are used in what kinds of situations? Who contributes to political action committees (PACs) and what motivates people to give? Beyond such substantive questions is a theory, or a step toward one, that underlies the enterprise.

When we look at the literature that falls into this category, we are impressed by its quality and by how much more we know about groups than we did in 1995. The key question is whether scholars working on similar topics within the subfield—lobbying strategies and tactics, coalitions and networks, mobilization of interests, and the like—are adopting a common theoretical outlook as they address shared concerns. Our review suggests that progress on this front has been limited.

Consider, for example, recent work by Kollman (1998) and Goldstein (1999). Both use interviews with Washington lobbyists as well as other data to examine how interest groups decide to incorporate grassroots efforts into their lobbying campaigns. Kollman develops a theory based on the popularity and salience of policy issues and the stage of legislative process during which the mobilization would take place. Goldstein's theory is rooted in the idea that an organization's strategic objective (i.e., either impacting an election or affecting legislative activity) determines when, where, and whom a group will mobilize. One might expect that these well-executed

studies would serve as a foundation for mobilization research, but that has not yet happened. The reasons are familiar ones: it is difficult to replicate large-scale research projects, and work that is clearly derivative may not receive the professional payoff that would accrue with something more distinctive.

It is encouraging that there is some commonality in the questions asked by those engaged in empirical-based theory. The work on lobbying tactics and strategies does revolve around some basic concerns such as resource allocation, lobbying efficacy, and alliance behavior. There are also some strains of empirical theory building that have moved forward on a normal science track. The work by Gray, Lowery, and their students on the population ecology of interest groups has grown into a substantial array of articles that complement Gray & Lowery's book (1996a) on the subject. Moreover, the study of state interest group populations has been expanding as scholars explore how the initiative process affects interest mobilization (Smith & Tolbert 2004, Boehmke 2005a) and how mobilization affects political and electoral activity (Boehmke 2005b, Hogan 2005). Nevertheless, in looking at topics of study within the subfield, interest group scholars have not been able to bring common, overarching, theoretical questions to bear on ongoing streams of research.

## TOPICS OF STUDY

*Basic Interests* described the interest group subfield in 1998 as having defined itself into a state of "elegant irrelevance" as a result of its near obsession with formal extensions of Olson's work on why people join groups and a disconnection from the policy-making process. It is here, in the topics of work undertaken, that we see the greatest shift since the publication of *Basic Interests*. More than a third of the studies that we consider focus in some way on trying to measure interest group influence in the policy-making process, and another third focus on tactics and lobbying behavior in an effort to understand how interest groups try to achieve that influence. Although studies that in some way consider mobilization or participation in interest groups also comprise about a third of our sample, this literature has evolved and broadened in scope, with very few studies considering individual decisions about membership and many more connecting participation to politics.

Whereas interest group research in the decades immediately following the publication of Olson's book spent a great deal of effort modeling the decision-making processes of individuals, trying to understand why anyone would contribute to collective action, only two of the more current studies take such an approach (Schur et al. 2005 and Lubell et al. 2006; in addition, Shaiko 1999 and Goss 2006 consider the motivations of individual members as part of a larger project). Much of the current mobilization literature draws on social movement theory to explain why and how groups form rather than relying on the Olsonian approach of considering the individual decision in a contextual vacuum (e.g., Banaszak 1996; Skocpol et al. 2000; Crowley & Skocpol 2001; Goss 2006; Weldon 2006a,b, 2011). The shift in approach has two important implications. First, the unit of analysis becomes the group rather than the individual. Second, as a result of asking why a group successfully formed, the researcher's attention turns toward variables measuring social and political context. Thus, Banaszak (1996) discusses how the differing cultural norms and governmental transparency in the United States and Switzerland affected the women's suffrage movement in each of those countries, and Crowley & Skocpol (2001) show how the Civil War and involvement with the Union army increased the growth of civic associations in the postwar decades.

When mobilization is studied at the organizational level, the findings often are relevant to the study of interest group tactics and strategy. Many of the studies in our sample that dealt with mobilization or participation considered interest group decisions to join some larger political



process or to lobby at all (e.g., Gray & Lowery 1996a,b; Lowery et al. 2004, 2008; Gray et al. 2004; Lowry 2005; Leech et al. 2005; Holyoke 2009). When we move beyond individual decision making to consider the conditions under which interest organizations arise or become involved in politics, we reconnect mobilization processes to the political process more generally. Thus, from the work of Gray and Lowery and their coauthors, we learn how political competition and agenda size affect the size of interest group populations; from Leech et al. (2005), we see that congressional attention to an issue contributes to the level of interest group lobbying; and from Baumgartner and his collaborators (2011), we learn that when the president is attentive to an issue, less effort may be devoted to lobbying Congress. This increased awareness of the interconnectedness of political actors and of the feedback processes present in politics is a welcome change to the literature.

In the case of work that measures influence, what was notable about the literature Baumgartner & Leech examined was its heavy reliance on PAC campaign contributions as the sole measure of interest group activities and its intense focus on congressional roll call votes as the behavioral target of groups' efforts. But relatively few organizations contribute to campaigns, and groups do much more than try to influence final legislative votes (Baumgartner & Leech 1996). It is significant, then, that the more recent literature on influence has shifted the focus away from PACs. Only three of the articles we review here use PAC contributions as their sole measure of interest group efforts at influence (Wawro 2001, Fellowes & Wolf 2004, Witko 2006).<sup>3</sup> These newer studies (and other, similar studies that fall outside our sample, e.g., Fellowes et al. 2006) also show a more nuanced understanding of interest group activities. For example, Witko uses both roll call votes and participation in committee as indicators of potential PAC influence. As a result, he is able to show that PACs influence voting on issues that are nonideological, whereas on ideological issues they influence the amount of effort a member of Congress expends in committee. Despite these advances, the basic contradictions pointed to by Baumgartner & Leech back in 1998 still remain. Whereas Witko and Fellowes & Wolf find that PACs have influence under some conditions, Wawro uses panel data to control for preexisting member attitudes and finds no consistent PAC influence. Helpfully, as we describe in the next section, the current literature has at least made efforts to specify the conditions under which PACs, and groups more generally, may or may not be influential.

Studies of interest group influence are also less likely to use roll call votes as the primary dependent variable. Some studies follow in the footsteps of Hansen (1991) and Hall & Wayman (1990) and use attention by policy makers or by the media as the primary measure of success (e.g., Berry 1999, Esterling 2007, Hall & Miler 2008). Others use a researcher-coded measure of policy outcomes (e.g., Evans 1996, Yackee & Yackee 2006, Mahoney 2008, Baumgartner et al. 2009) or a more qualitative assessment of success (Banaszak 1996, Clemens 1997, Mitchell 1998, Sheingate 2001, Rich 2004). Studies of agenda setting remained rare (but see Fellowes et al. 2006). Most of the studies found evidence of at least some interest group influence, although 14 of them focused on the conditions under which interest groups might wield such influence and six of the studies either found no influence or emphasized how very limited that influence was. Unfortunately, this variation may say as much about biases in case selection as it says about the contingencies of group influence. A meta-analysis by Burstein & Linton (2002), looking at all 53 studies of interest group influence published in major political science and sociology journals from 1990 to 2000, found interest groups reported as being influential less than half the time. Burstein & Linton point out

<sup>3</sup>There also is one formal model of PAC influence and five articles that consider the strategies that PACs use. PAC contributions are included as one part of some broader models of policy making (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009). Still, this is a far cry from the 33 studies of PAC influence documented in *Basic Interests*.

that because most journals have a publication bias against null findings, the actual effects of interest group influence are likely even weaker.

The primary focus of research on interest group influence, then and now, is Congress (and occasionally other legislative bodies). A handful of studies have continued the work of Caldeira & Wright (1988, 1990), considering the impact of amicus briefs on Supreme Court decisions (Spriggs & Wahlbeck 1997, Hansford 2004, Collins 2007) and the influence of groups on judicial nominations (Caldeira & Wright 1998). Studies that consider the influence of interest groups on the bureaucracy are even more rare, although there are more now than there were 15 years ago (good examples include Drope & Hansen 2004, Kelleher & Yackee 2006, and Yackee & Yackee 2006). A few new topics arise in the post-1995 studies, including the influence of interest groups on parties (Karol 2009) and on elections (Gerber & Phillips 2003, McDermott 2006).

In this newer literature, a great deal of attention is focused on the tactics and strategies that interest groups use. Thirty of the articles in our sample take tactics and strategy as their primary focus, and many more of the articles on mobilization or influence spend substantial time on the topic as well. As a topic of research it has the advantage of being political relevant while avoiding the extremely difficult problem of how to measure influence. Hojnacki (1997, 1998), Hula (1999), and Holyoke (2009) consider the conditions under which interest groups decide to join coalitions; Kollman (1998) studies why interest groups decide to use grassroots campaigns rather than inside lobbying; and several studies analyze which policy makers interest groups decide to contact and why (Hojnacki & Kimball 1998, 2001; Goldstein 1999; Carpenter et al. 2004; Heberlig 2005; Naoi & Krauss 2009). The attention to the ways in which interest groups lobby is especially important because it leads to changes in how we formulate future quantitative models of success. Analyses of tactics and strategies have led to some of our most important theoretical extensions of recent years, including the idea of lobbying as subsidy and the collaborative nature of lobbying (Hall & Dearthoff 2006, Baumgartner et al. 2009), the importance of distinguishing between private and public goods sought by groups (Hansen et al. 2005, Godwin et al. 2008), and the importance of the status quo (Hojnacki & Kimball 1998, Baumgartner et al. 2009).

Finally, among the more dramatic changes in the topics taken up since 1995 is a more pronounced focus on comparative work. Our sample of literature includes ten contributions with a comparative focus, ranging from general studies of lobbying effectiveness in the United States and the European Union to studies of individual-level group involvement across European democracies; labor unions in Argentina; business influence; gender violence; agricultural politics; and trade policy (see Banaszak 1996, Mitchell 1998, Sheingate 2001, Bowler et al. 2003, Iaryczower et al. 2006, Weldon 2006a, Mahoney 2008, Woll 2008, Naoi & Krauss 2009, Yadav 2011). Of course, the comparative literature is much broader than this, since much of it is published in other countries and therefore in journals not included in our systematic review [a special issue on the state of the interest group subfield in *West European Politics* (November 2008) provides a good sense of the burgeoning research in this area]. Importantly, much of the newer comparative scholarship engages directly with theoretical trends and findings in US-based work as well as that done elsewhere (Mahoney & Baumgartner 2008). In this way, it offers opportunities for consideration of the contextual effects of lobbying, as institutional designs differ dramatically in comparative perspective.

## ATTENTION TO CONTEXT

When Baumgartner & Leech (1998) surveyed the landscape of research on lobbying and PAC contributions, they were critical of inconsistencies in this body of work that left the subfield with little conclusive to say about the political behavior and influence of organized interests. One of the



central reasons for this uncertain state of knowledge, they argued, was a lack of attention to the context in which organizations were operating. That is, rather than trying to determine “whether interest groups are ever influential,” researchers should have been investigating “when, why, and to what extent they are powerful on what types of issues” (Baumgartner & Leech 1998, p. 134).

The question we consider in this section is to what extent scholars have become more attentive to variation in context in their efforts to learn about organized interests and their place in the policy-making process. Such attentiveness could conceivably yield big gains. Efforts to systematically observe groups in the environments in which they develop, make decisions, and take action, and in a way that recognizes the variation in those environments, could advance not only our understanding of groups but also our understanding of politics and policy making more generally.

It is good news, then, that our sample of the post-1995 literature shows considerable progress. Overall, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the sampled research takes into account the conditions or contexts under which groups and interests operate. Although the type of context that is considered by researchers varies a great deal across the 70 studies that attend to it, some elements have drawn the attention of a relatively substantial number of scholars. **Table 1** shows the main categories of context that we identified. Here we describe how scholars have taken context into account, focusing on the types of context that are considered in at least 10% of the studies in our sample.

As **Table 1** indicates, interest group scholars are especially likely to consider how characteristics of the policy issues that groups are active on, as well as characteristics of the groups themselves,

**Table 1** Types of context incorporated in the literature on interest groups, 1996–2011<sup>a</sup>

Type of context (examples)	Number of studies	Percent of studies
Group (group type, goals, member support)	29	26.4
Issue (salience, issue type, opposition)	25	22.7
Institutional environment (ballot initiative, electoral system, institutional friction)	16	14.5
Political environment (party competition, ideological climate, legislative professionalism)	12	10.9
Network/collaborative environment (coalition characteristics, network location, participation of allies)	11	10.0
Group environment (strength, diversity, and size of interest group community)	10	9.1
Governmental environment (public sector spending, government activity; support from government officials)	10	9.1
Stages of the process/time (committee versus floor, socialization of generational cohorts, access versus messaging)	8	7.3
Economic environment (state of the economy, market regulation, market competition)	6	5.5
Other (patron support, prior policy success, incentives for joining a group)	6	5.5
Any context incorporated	70	63.6

<sup>a</sup>There are 110 studies in our sample of the literature. Two of those studies are excluded from this examination of context because they review existing research (Lowery & Gray 2004 and Levi 2003).

affect their behavior and their prospects for achieving their policy goals. About a quarter of the studies in our sample incorporate at least one of these two types of context.

Within the issue context category, the vast majority of studies examine issue salience and how it affects organizations' participation in policy debates (Caldeira et al. 2000, Baumgartner & Leech 2001, Hansford 2004, Strolovitch 2006, Baumgartner et al. 2009), the level of their lobbying efforts (Hojnacki & Kimball 1998, 1999; Holyoke 2009), their ability to achieve favorable policy outcomes (Smith 2000, Witko 2006, Collins 2007, Mahoney 2008), and advocates' choices of tactics (Caldeira et al. 2000, Mahoney 2008, Baumgartner et al. 2009, Holyoke 2009). Overall, these studies lend strong support to the ideas that more organizations are actively engaged in debates over more salient issues and that advocates on these issues tend to expend greater effort (e.g., lobbying more members of Congress). Importantly, in the case of participation, no study has tried to suggest that there is a clear and unidirectional causal link between salience and participation. Rather, it makes sense to assume that there is a feedback loop in which salience increases as more organizations take an interest in an issue, which in turn attracts the interest of more participants (Mahoney 2008, Baumgartner et al. 2009). Hypotheses about the interplay between issue salience and participation, as well as ideas that draw on Schattschneider's claims about participation, visibility, and conflict, can be tested in studies that incorporate measures of issue salience.

Whether and how salience affects advocates' tactic choices and policy success is a bit less clear. In the case of tactic use, both Baumgartner et al. (2009) and Caldeira et al. (2000) find no evidence that different tactics are used in the case of more or less salient issues. However, Mahoney (2008) reports that the use of outside lobbying and coalition membership is more common among advocates working on salient issues in both the United States and the United Kingdom. In the case of salience and outcomes, it is a bit more difficult to sort through the findings of the few studies that consider this link because each study has a different unit of analysis (e.g., a legislator, court cases, a set of advocates who share policy goals) and seeks to explain a somewhat different outcome variable (e.g., committee participation, roll call votes, Supreme Court opinions, whether advocates' policy goals were achieved) with a different range of independent measures. Taken together, these studies probably say less about the "true" relationship between salience and outcomes than they do about the potential importance of public opinion and the stage of the policy process as intervening variables in that relationship [see Smith (2000) on the relationship between success, salience, and public support and Witko (2006) on the relationship between salience, success, and stage of the policy process].

The other studies that take issue context into account have not concentrated on a single characteristic as has been the case with salience. Somewhat surprisingly, only a handful of studies consider either how the presence of opposition from organizations and government officials (Hojnacki 1997, 1998; Holyoke 2003; Holyoke et al. 2007; Mahoney 2008; Baumgartner et al. 2009) or how competition with other organizations (Godwin et al. 2008, Holyoke 2009, Young 2010) affects group behavior and success. Overall, both competition and opposition tend to limit organizations' behavior and policy success, and there is increasing evidence that government officials can serve as formidable constraints on groups' efforts to take action and succeed as advocates (Mahoney 2008, Baumgartner et al. 2009).

In contrast to the studies that incorporate issue context, the work that gives attention to group-specific context includes a very heterogeneous set of measures. In fact, of the 29 studies that account for group context, only nine focus on the same characteristic—group type. Among this group of studies, most are directed toward explaining variation in the patterns of participation among different types of groups (Gais 1996, Baumgartner & Leech 2001) or the advocacy activities they undertake (DeGregorio 1997, Hojnacki 1997, Apollonio & La Raja 2004, Hansford 2004). The evidence presented in this work supports the idea that member-based groups reflecting the



nonoccupational interests of citizens do indeed make different choices relative to business-focused interests, including those with members and those without. It appears, for example, that citizen groups' relatively more limited resources require that they be more selective and consider the visibility of their efforts when they embark on an advocacy campaign (Baumgartner & Leech 2001, Hansford 2004). It is also possible, irrespective of resources, that citizen groups are drawn to issues of broad scope and visibility because they do relatively well in this type of context. That group type and salience might interact to explain organizations' participation in policy debates and their policy success is consistent with Gerber's (1999) evidence that citizen groups are relatively effective at passing ballot initiatives—a visible type of advocacy—but less successful than economic interests at blocking passage of a measure or in pressuring the legislature to act in lieu of placing a measure on the ballot.

In addition to studies that consider how differences across types of groups shape behavior and success, there are five that take organizations' goals into account (Goldstein 1999, Hojnacki & Kimball 1999, Mahoney 2008, Baumgartner et al. 2009, Young 2010); three each that consider the preferences of group members (Strolovitch 2006, 2007; Holyoke 2009), organizations' support in legislative districts (Hojnacki & Kimball 1998, 1999, 2001), and organizations' affiliations with PACs (Hojnacki & Kimball 1998, 1999, 2001); and two that focus on the age of organizations (Apollonio & La Raja 2004, Holyoke et al. 2007). At least 15 other types of group context—e.g., a group's ideological orientation, its degree of centralization, its access to policy makers—are measured by only a single study (Banaszak 1996, Hojnacki 1997, Shaiko 1999, Hula 1999, Hojnacki & Kimball 1999, Holyoke 2003, Hansen et al. 2004, Rich 2004, Strolovitch 2006, Holyoke et al. 2007, Woll 2008, Naoi & Krauss 2009, Karol 2009, Young 2010). To be sure, the diversity characterizing these efforts to tap group-specific differences can steer scholars to new dimensions of difference that may shape advocacy. However, the high degree of diversity evident in this work does not help the subfield accumulate knowledge about when advocacy behavior and policy outcomes are likely to reflect differences in the population of advocates under study.

Although conditions related to groups and issues have received the vast majority of scholars' attention, institutional arrangements are another category of context considered by researchers in recent years. As shown in **Table 1**, 16 of our sampled studies (15%) consider how institutions affect the character and development of advocacy communities (Clemens 1997, Skocpol et al. 2000, Smith & Tolbert 2004, Boehmke 2005a, Lowry 2005, Boehmke & Bowen 2010, Weldon 2011), the participation of organizations and the tactics they employ (Hula 1999, Heitshusen 2000, Smith & Tolbert 2004, Hogan 2005, Mahoney 2008, Woll 2008, Godwin et al. 2008, Naoi & Krauss 2009, Yadav 2011), or their success (Sheingate 2001). Nearly all the studies that account for institutional context consider one of two questions. Some ask how the characteristics or structure of government and governing institutions (e.g., the degree to which policy-making or governing power is centralized, the accountability of decision makers to citizens) affect organized interests and their involvement with and success at policy making (Hula 1999, Heitshusen 2000, Sheingate 2001, Mahoney 2008, Woll 2008). Others examine how the presence and use of the initiative process affects organizational communities and their behavior (Smith & Tolbert 2004, Boehmke 2005a, Hogan 2005, Lowry 2005, Boehmke & Bowne 2010). Given the increase in comparative research described above, it is quite possible that research exploring how group systems and group activity are affected by the structure and type of government institutions will become more prominent in the future.

As reported in **Table 1**, two additional types of context are given attention by at least 10% of the studies in our sample: political context and the context created by either coalitional activity or the networks in which organizations are active. Unlike the studies that focus on the contexts created by groups and institutions, these relatively small categories share common focal points.

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But given that less than half the number of studies that give attention to either group- or issue-related context are focused on political conditions or coalitions, the knowledge gained through the common foci is probably best treated as preliminary and only suggestive of conditions that affect organizations' efforts in the policy process.

Among the 12 studies that consider the implications of political context on groups, six focus on either the degree of partisanship characterizing an issue and its implications for groups' policy success (Baumgartner et al. 2009) or how interest mobilization is affected by the extent of partisan competition in states (Gray & Lowery 1996a,b; Crowley & Skocpol 2001; Lowery et al. 2004, 2008). The mobilization studies consistently show that party competition is associated with higher levels of interest mobilization. The logic underlying this linkage is that partisan competition creates greater uncertainty in the political environment, providing potential opportunities for new interests and threatening the interests of those who benefit from the status quo. Other studies that consider political context give attention to how organizations' participation, advocacy strategies, or success are affected by variables such as legislators' preferences on policy issues, election outcomes, the ideological climate, legislative professionalism, and the strength of social movements (Tauber 1998, Hogan 2005, Smith 2007, Miller 2008, Holyoke 2009, Baumgartner et al. 2009, Weldon 2011).

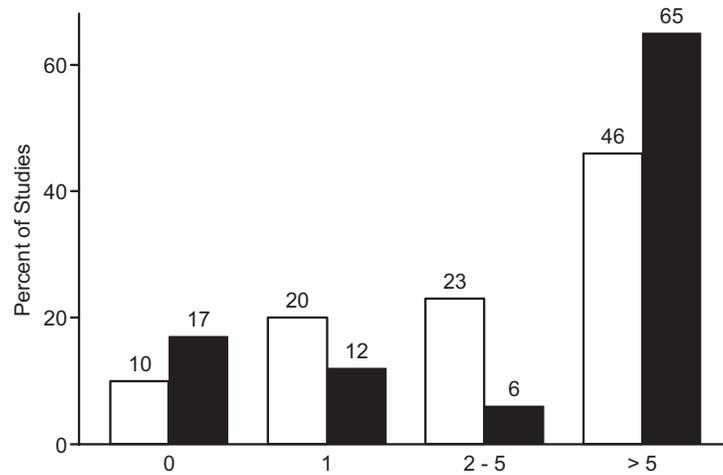
The 11 studies that examine how coalitions and networks affect the participation and policy-making activities of organizations focus primarily on one of three coalition-related conditions: how membership in an alliance affects organizations' contact with policy makers (Hojnacki & Kimball 1998, 1999, 2001; Holyoke 2003; Holyoke et al. 2007), how organizations' interactions with others are affected by the characteristics of their collaborative relationships or network positions (Hojnacki 1997, 1998; Carpenter et al. 2004; Leach & Sabatier 2005), or how experience with coalitions or other associations facilitates participation in alliances or organizations (Hojnacki 1997, Hula 1999, Crowley & Skocpol 2001). Overall, these studies provide solid evidence that organizations' advocacy behavior is very much affected by their interactions with others and the nature of the associational ties they share. Newly emerging work (much of which is not included in our sample) that explicitly analyzes organizations' network affiliations, including the strength of their ties within broader partisan networks (Heaney 2006; Heaney & Rojas 2008, 2011; Koger et al. 2009, 2010), has the potential to contribute important information to a systematic understanding of groups' policy-making activities. Similarly constructive are studies that consider both organizations and policy makers as collaborators in advocacy (Mahoney 2008, Baumgartner et al. 2009).

Have scholars become more attentive to context in the time since Baumgartner & Leech's (1998) analysis? Our review of the sampled work indicates they certainly have. But it remains difficult to say whether this heightened attention has moved (or has the potential to move) the field forward. On the positive side, salience has been established as an important variable for researchers to consider when studying organizations' participation and advocacy efforts. In addition, accumulating evidence has begun to show how partisanship affects interest mobilization and how groups' collaborations with other political actors affect their behavior as advocates. On the negative side, our review also makes clear that a significant amount of the attention to context in the sampled work is specific to individual research projects. Consequently, our knowledge of the conditions that matter most for understanding the policy-making efforts of organizations remains incomplete.

## SCOPE OF RESEARCH

Accumulation of knowledge about interest group behavior and influence also depends on research having a broad scope, including multiple groups, issues, and venues. Such broad-based research

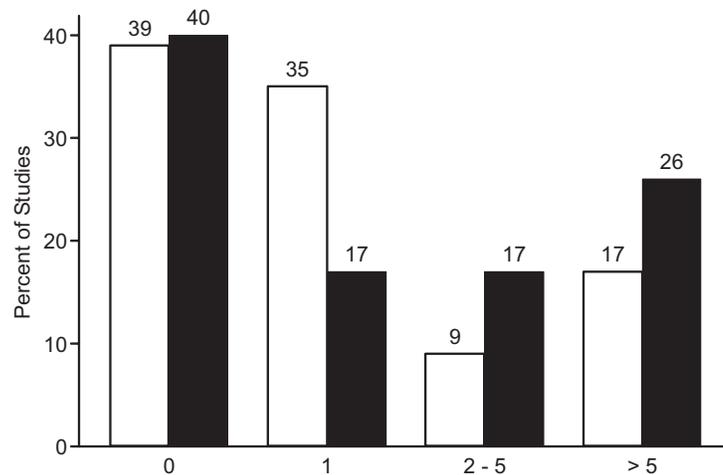




**Figure 1**  
Number of groups analyzed by interest group studies in 1950–1995 (white) versus 1996–2011 (black).

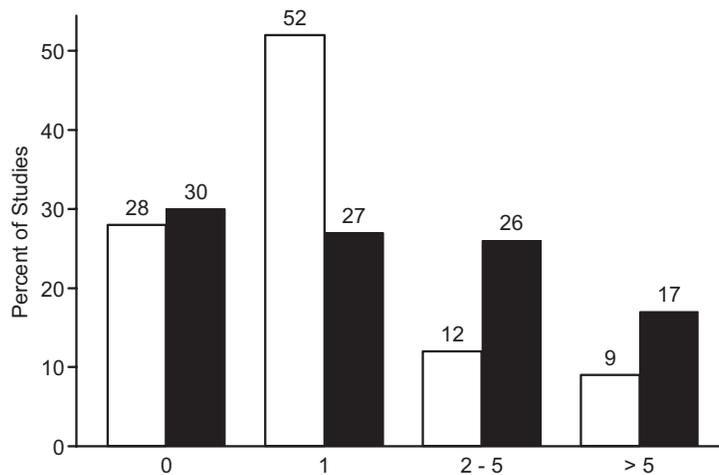
designs tend to allow a closer examination of the many contingencies of interest group influence. In considering the scale of recent interest group research, we focus on studies that tested theoretical propositions. Our findings about the number of groups, issues, and policy domains examined in those studies, along with the findings originally reported by Baumgartner & Leech (1998, p. 175), are presented in **Figures 1** through **3**.

Approximately 15 years ago, Baumgartner & Leech lamented the limited scope of interest group research during the period 1950–1995. They observed a large number of case studies that analyzed a single issue or policy domain. Furthermore, fewer than half of the articles they assessed included



**Figure 2**  
Number of issues analyzed by interest group studies in 1950–1995 (white) versus 1996–2011 (black).





**Figure 3**

Number of domains analyzed by interest group studies in 1950–1995 (white) versus 1996–2011 (black).

observations of more than five interest groups. In sum, they described a fractured interest group literature without much accumulated knowledge. How does the interest group literature look now?

Although we do not observe a seismic shift in the scope of research, there is clearly a move toward more ambitious, broad-based studies. **Figure 1** compares the number of groups analyzed in studies published during the earlier and more recent periods. Almost two-thirds of the studies published in the past 15 years examine more than five groups, a notable improvement over the 1950–1995 period. There remains a substantial share of recent studies that do not analyze the behavior of any specific interest groups, but many of these studies examine broad features of the interest group system, such as the shift in economic framing of policy debates (Smith 2007), interest group membership (Boehmke & Bowen 2010), and the impact of groups on the positions of political parties (Karol 2009). Moreover, many of these studies have other features, noted below, that add to their generalizability.

Another positive trend is that single-issue or single-group case studies appear to be less common in the more recent period than they were prior to 1996. Only 14 of the studies in our sample include case studies as one component of their analysis, and almost all of these studies include multiple cases that allow some comparison—albeit limited—across groups, issues, time periods, and governments (Banaszak 1996, Mitchell 1998, Tauber 1998, Shaiko 1999, Barakso 2004, Esterling 2004, Goss 2006, Weldon 2006a, Miller 2008, Woll 2008, Goss & Heaney 2010, Young 2010, Moe 2011, Yadav 2011). The case studies included in these projects typically are just one component of a more extensive and often quantitative analysis.

We see additional signs of the expanding scope of interest group research when we compare the number of issues and domains covered in the studies. In the past 15 years, roughly one-fourth of interest group studies focused on more than five issues, an increase over the 1950–1995 period (see **Figure 2**). Finally, more than 40% of recent studies examine multiple policy domains, double the share found in the earlier literature (see **Figure 3**). The shift toward a wider scope of study comports with efforts noted above to examine the group and issue context of interest group behavior.

Several studies stand out as examples of the payoff to be gained from a research design with a broad scope. Karol (2009) examines several issues and policy domains in his study of changing

party positions. As a result of his research design, he uncovers different mechanisms for party position changes depending on the type of issue; some issues include a more prominent role for organized interests. For example, party leaders appear more likely to change their issue positions to incorporate new groups into their coalition or to accommodate the changing demands of their interest group supporters. Consequently, interest groups are more likely to influence the policy-making process when they are a real or potential constituency of one of the major parties.

As another example, Miller (2008) gathers a wide array of data from news reports, government hearings, lobbying disclosure reports, and interviews to examine interest group involvement in the framing of crime policy debates at the local, state, and national levels. Through her comparison of debates and participation at different levels of government, Miller uncovers patterns that are at odds with Schattschneider's (1975 [1960]) claim that expanding the scope of conflict tends to benefit disadvantaged groups. She observes that when crime policy moves from the local to the state and national levels, the number of mobilized interests contracts, and debate is dominated by policy alternatives related to police, prisons, and harsher punishment rather than the quality-of-life issues that concern advocates at the local level. Federalism, it appears, constrains the representation of group interests.

In addition, in a study of 98 issues over several years, Baumgartner et al. (2009) uncovered patterns in the advocacy process that would have been difficult to detect in a smaller-scale study focused on a single point in time. For example, although entrenched political power in Washington favors the status quo, when advocates for policy change do succeed—an outcome that often occurs only after years of trying—policy tends to change significantly. In addition, because groups' policy success depends a great deal on the preferences and priorities assigned to issues by the White House and allied government officials, the timing and outcomes of elections emerge as important factors that shape interest group influence.

We also see signs of progress in other areas of research design. Whereas much of the research published between 1950 and 1995 involved cross-sectional designs, we identify 33 studies that include a more ambitious historical or longitudinal examination of interest groups. Many of these studies give researchers leverage in understanding the development of groups and the interest group system, as well as how development affects activity and behavior.

For example, Smith's (2000) finding that business interests depend on public support for some of their policy successes emerges from an investigation of the myriad issues the Chamber of Commerce has acted on over time and the extent to which those issues resonated with the public. In later work, Smith (2007) points to relationships that developed between the Republican Party and conservative think tanks after 1970 to explain the GOP's success in framing policy debates in economic terms that led to more positive public assessments of the party's management of the economy. As another example, Berry's (1999) longitudinal analysis of national-level citizen groups allows him to observe that between 1960 and 1990 liberal citizen groups shifted the congressional agenda toward more postmaterial issues.

Relatedly, a number of studies in our sample look to history to explain group mobilization, formation, and activity over time (Clemens 1997, Skocpol et al. 2000, Crowley & Skocpol 2001, Young 2010). For instance, working from the perspective of American political development, Young (2010) argues that the organizational structure and leadership established during a group's founding affects its ability to reposition itself in response to changing political circumstances. Consequently, he explains how the National Federation of Independent Business shifted from an organization primarily aligned with Democrats in Congress to a stalwart supporter of the Republican Party.

When considering the scope and research design of recent interest group studies, we see reasons for optimism. Our data reveal that the scope of interest group research has expanded in

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the past 15 years. Indeed, there are many examples of large-scale and longitudinal research that have improved the empirical testing of theories of interest group behavior.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Our goal in this review has been to assess whether the research on interest groups has become more theoretically coherent, more attentive to context, and broader in both scope and topical focus than it was when Baumgartner & Leech wrote *Basic Interests* (1998). Our working assumption is that improvement in each of these areas is essential to advancing the systematic study of interest groups and their policy-making activities. Generally speaking, our assessment offers reasons to be optimistic about advancement in the subfield. The more recent work includes more large-scale studies than did the literature before 1996, and many more of these projects are designed to examine interest groups and their activities over time. Moreover, this broader scope has been accompanied by a substantively important shift in the topics scholars address.

This newer literature is much more likely to focus on key issues for students of politics—interest group influence or the tactics and strategies that organizations employ in their efforts to achieve it. We also observe considerable improvement in scholars' attention to the context in which organizations operate to affect public policy. Researchers today are indeed trying to understand the conditions under which interests mobilize, engage in different advocacy activities, and achieve their goals. These developments go a long way toward improving our understanding of groups and their activities. But, as we note above, there remains a lot we do not know about the contingencies of groups' policy-making activities and the impact of their efforts. Accumulation of knowledge is difficult when much of the work that attends to context does so in a way that is very specific to individual projects. In addition, our sample of post-1995 research offers minimal evidence that scholars addressing similar questions within the subfield are operating from one or a few shared theoretical frameworks. Given our evaluation of the recent literature, we offer here a few ideas about how researchers can maintain the progress made and take steps to address the remaining limitations observed in our sample of research.

The first suggestion is a practical one that was previously endorsed by Baumgartner & Leech (1998). Interest group researchers should collaborate more than they currently do. The difficulties of acquiring appropriate data to investigate group activity, along with the myriad contingencies of interest group influence, creates hurdles for scholars who are interested in the types of questions that can move the subfield forward. Working with others will not eliminate the hurdles—to that we can attest. However, collaboration enables projects of broader scope. Additionally, collaboration has the potential to improve our understanding of how context affects the political behavior and influence of organized interests. The research-specific contingencies that we observe in our sample of recent literature could, in combination, provide researchers with greater leverage in understanding the conditions that affect what groups do and how they affect public policy.

A second suggestion is that greater effort should be made to link the study of groups to the study of policy making and politics in general. For example, systematic attention to the degree of partisanship that characterizes the environments in which groups operate, to the opposition they encounter from both within and outside of government, and to the characteristics of institutions that constrain and facilitate their efforts provides interest group researchers with opportunities to link their findings to those in other subfields. Work that consciously imbeds interest groups in the environments in which they develop, make decisions, and take action advances not only our understanding of groups, but also what we know about the broader political and policy-making processes.

Our third suggestion is also tied to issues of generalizability and relevance beyond the subfield. Scholars should consider what is known about bias and inequality in the group system in terms



of implications for public policy—i.e., whether and how upper-class bias affects the policies that emerge from government, shapes the agenda of issues that government considers, affects the preferences and priorities of the public, and the like. One very clear benefit to connecting inequities and bias in the group system to outcomes is that doing so allows interest group scholarship to enter into the broader scholarly dialogue about representation, much of which neglects groups. Indeed, scholarship on representation typically focuses on the extent of government responsiveness to public opinion, or individual legislators' responsiveness to constituents, with nary a mention of whether and how interest organizations might affect the degree of representation we observe. Taken together, these suggestions offer a preview of how scholars studying groups and advocacy can extend the progress that has been made in building knowledge about the activities of groups and the outcomes of their efforts, and broaden the impact of interest group scholarship by relating this knowledge to our general understanding of the policy-making process.

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### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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