



Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science; Groups, Interests, and U.S. Public Policy; Dollars and Votes: How Business Campaign Contributions Subvert Democracy

Review Author[s]:

Anthony J. Nownes

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so that the events are quite accessible to readers who know little about the nuances of nuclear power or California government. The work is extensively annotated—70 pages of notes, representing nearly a third of the book, document sources used by the author.

The book also provides a fascinating look at how one state challenged established national dominance in one policy area (nuclear energy). Here, the state asserted its right to regulate nuclear power not on safety issues, but on economic ones. The court recognized the state's right to provide economical energy to its citizens and, thus, supported the state's position to regulate power plants over the federal government's position that it held the upper hand in developing the country's energy resources.

In sum, each of these books add to a richer understanding of environmental policy, either through the consideration of a movement (deep ecology) or grassroots participation. Students of the policy process may find that *Democracy, Dialogue, and Environmental Disputes* provides a helpful framework for understanding why people seem to "talk past each other" when developing environmental policy. *Critical Masses* offers readers a close look at why California prevailed in the nuclear energy debate, while *Deep Environmental Politics* describes the extent to which deep ecology permeates political discussions.

Denise Scheberle, *University of Wisconsin–Green Bay*

Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science.

By Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. Pp. 223. \$55.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

Groups, Interests, and U.S. Public Policy. By William P. Browne. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998. Pp. 276. \$79.95 cloth, \$25.50 paper.)

Dollars and Votes: How Business Campaign Contributions Subvert Democracy. By Dan Clawson, Alan Neustadt, and Mark Weller. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998. Pp. 271. \$59.95.)

Interest groups used to be at the center of American political science. In fact, the list of "group scholars" contains some of the titans of the discipline: Robert Dahl, V. O. Key, Theodore Lowi, Grant McConnell, Mancur Olson, E. E. Schattschneider, David Truman, and of course, the granddaddy of American political science, Arthur Bentley. As late as the mid-1970s, people still wrote and talked about the "group approach" to politics. No more. As Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech point out in their impressive new book *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science*, interest groups are now the red-headed stepchildren of political science—always maligned, often ignored, seldom understood. This is ironic. As attention to interest groups waned in the late 1960s and early 1970s, interest groups themselves became more prolific and more active than ever.

As is the convention in reviews like this, I will begin with what these books have in common. First, all three books (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) encourage us to redouble our efforts to understand the role of interest groups in American politics. To summarize: more people should study interest groups. Second, all three books demonstrate (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not) the pitfalls of doing research on interest groups. To summarize: it ain't easy. Third, and perhaps most important, all three books are "good reads." If you study interest groups, you should read these books.

Despite these commonalities, these are three very different books. William Browne's *Groups, Interests, and U.S. Public Policy* is a quirky, brassy, and personal account of the place of interest groups in American politics. Browne covers a lot of ground. Seamlessly synthesizing and summarizing decades of empirical and theoretical work on interest groups, Browne examines what interest groups are, what they do, how they operate, and how they influence public policy. At the core of Browne's book is this insight: for better or worse, interest groups "fit" American politics; like Americans, says Browne, interest groups are a diverse, brash, and frankly, obnoxious lot. Overall, Browne's tone is quite positive. In fact, Browne sounds a lot like a good, old-fashioned pluralist. Consider, for example, this passage:

Public policy may be—and certainly is—hard to enact. That may indeed be discouraging to advocates. At least, however, there's nothing about the American political process that prevents nearly any group, even an occasionally odd one, from finding someone somewhere who will champion its views. Any value in America can become a political issue and usually does, just not always a likely one to win. (25)

Later, Browne is a bit more cautious, but the message is the same: "The policy process seems to accommodate nearly anyone who plays hard and represents the political mainstream or the generally conventional. Multiple and varied interests really fit, each in their own ways" (55). Still later, Browne concludes: "Nearly everyone gets represented in America by someone, more or less" (167). None of this is to say that Browne is naive. His book contains a thorough treatment of the problems of collective action. It also outlines a provocative framework for explaining why some interests win while others lose. Success, Browne argues, comes from having a good issue and practicing good advocacy.

Browne's book is most problematic where it is most controversial. Scholars of collective action might be somewhat troubled by Browne's contention that Olson's free rider problem is not really *that* difficult to overcome. Scholars of group influence might be troubled by Browne's treatment of "good" and "bad" issues, which seems a bit cursory. And interest group critics may be troubled by Browne's rather uncritical portrait of lobbyists as hardworking, decent people who are just doing their jobs. If nothing else Browne provides a convincing counterargument to those who would blame interest groups for all the ills of the Republic.

The middle chapters of *Groups, Interests, and U.S. Public Policy* are the best. They deal with lobbying. No one has ever done such a good job in such a short space of describing what interest groups do and how and why they do it. Browne is particularly effective at evoking the atmosphere of capital lobbying—an atmosphere that is exciting, pressure packed, and fast paced. Interest groups, we learn, target not just policymakers, but the public and the media and other interest groups as well. The enduring image is one of interest groups desperately seeking certainty in an uncertain and complex environment. Of course, their efforts are often fruitless as the policy process churns and twists and turns. But they are not *always* fruitless. This is why interest groups continue doing what they do.

It's hard to believe that Dan Clawson and his colleagues are talking about the same things Browne is. Their book, *Dollars and Votes: How Business Campaign Contributions Subvert Democracy*, is a tendentious tome with the following simple premise: business campaign contributions to candidates and parties in the United States allow corporate America to exercise disproportionate influence over public policy outcomes. Despite the title of the book, Clawson and company do not actually empirically explore the topic of group influence. They point out that most studies of interest group influence miss the point because they fail to consider the second and third “faces of power.” Because “power” and “influence” are so difficult to operationalize and observe, Clawson et al. essentially conclude that searching for a “smoking gun” that irrefutably demonstrates corporate hegemony is frivolous. This is the primary weakness of the book: It asks us more or less to *assume* that business money significantly affects who gets elected, what issues reach the political agenda, and what policy decisions are made. *Proving* all this is exceedingly difficult. So the authors don't really try. Another problem with the book is its explicit leftist ideological orientation. This disposition is most obvious when the authors quote Karl Marx approvingly: “Capital,” Marx argues, “therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so” (98). When I read this I couldn't help but think about the words of John Lennon, who in “Revolution” sang: “But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao/You ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow.” To put it bluntly, quoting Karl Marx in a book about campaign finance in the United States in the 1990s is probably not a very good idea.

Still, there's a whole lot to like about *Dollars and Votes*. First and most important, the book does a first-rate job of describing the ridiculous and loophole-ridden system of campaign finance in the United States. No book that I know of goes into as much detail about how the system works as this one does. The book examines everything from “soft money” to issue advertisements to *faux* nonprofits. Second, the book contains an original and insightful preliminary analysis of recently released campaign finance data. Most significant here is the authors' analysis of “soft money.” The vast majority of “soft money,” *Dollars and Votes* shows, comes from business contributors who give to both parties and who are not shy about asking government officials for favors. Third, the book

presents further evidence that business interests are more pragmatic than they are ideological. Finally, the book convincingly argues that we should think of business contributions as “gifts” designed to solidify long-standing social bonds, reduce political and economic uncertainty, and foster instant access. *Dollars and Votes* has one other great virtue: it presents up-to-date, comprehensive data on the outrageous sums of money that are floating around in American politics. Rather than just wringing their hands about big money politics, the authors thoroughly document the rise of campaign costs and business interest group spending. It’s hard not to agree with the authors’ conclusion that all this money is buying *something*, even if we cannot say for certain exactly what it is.

Baumgartner and Leech’s *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science* is not about interest groups per se. Rather, it is about the *study* of interest groups. Baumgartner and Leech provide a thoroughgoing history of interest group research. Their overall conclusion will not surprise anyone who has studied interest groups: Despite a ton of research attention, we still know relatively little about the role of interest groups in American politics. To be sure, there has been progress. Clearly, for example, we now know a lot more about the processes of group mobilization and maintenance than we did even 20 years ago. We also know a lot more than we used to about the shape of the interest group universe, how groups attempt to affect policy outcomes, and the contours of policymaking communities. Progress, however, has been accompanied by failure, avoidance, and confusion. *Basic Interests* suggests that interest group scholars have failed to provide answers to some of the field’s most important questions. Among them are the following: What are the impacts of various lobbying techniques and in which circumstances are they most useful? How do the roles of interest groups differ when dealing with issues on and off the political agenda? How do groups redefine issues to achieve their policy goals? How and to what extent are unorganized interests represented vicariously in the political process? How do contextual factors such as political conflict, economic conditions, and government subsidies and regulations affect group mobilization patterns? How do contextual factors affect group influence? (12). The most important unanswered question of all is this: What is the nature and extent of interest group influence?

Baumgartner and Leech argue that among these unanswered questions are some of the most important questions that interest group scholars ask. The question of group influence, for example, is at the very center of ongoing debates about the nature of American democracy. How did we get here? Why do we know so much about group development and so little about group influence and a number of other things? The answer, according to *Basic Interests*, lies in confusion and avoidance. In an astounding chapter entitled “Barriers to Accumulation,” Baumgartner and Leech show just *how* confused we interest group scholars are. Here’s a summary: We can’t agree on what constitutes an “interest.” We can’t agree on what constitutes an “interest group.” We can’t agree on what constitutes

“lobbying.” We can’t agree on what constitutes “membership.” We can’t agree on what constitutes a “policy issue.” Do you think we can agree on what constitutes either “power” or “influence”? Please!

It isn’t just definitions and concepts that confuse and divide us. Interest group scholars also use an astonishing variety of theoretical and methodological approaches that augur against scientific accumulation. What we are left with is a literature that is much less than the sum of its parts. The solution? Baumgartner and Leech make several suggestions. First, they suggest we conduct more ambitious large-scale studies. Too often, they note, interest group scholars study one issue, or one group, or one point in time. Second, the authors suggest we pay much more attention to the context in which interest groups operate. Inattention to context, Baumgartner and Leech demonstrate, acts as a barrier to generalization, as one case study after another presents conclusions that are accurate but do not travel well. Finally, Baumgartner and Leech suggest that we all go “back to the drawing board” and attempt to formulate a broad unifying paradigm for studying interest groups. Theoretical unity, after all, is what led to scholarly progress on the topic of group development. Overall, I agree with virtually all of Baumgartner and Leech’s conclusions. Nonetheless, I am not optimistic about the possibility of developing a “unifying paradigm.” The concepts of “interest” and “interest group” are so central to so many disciplines and subdisciplines that unity is unlikely. Remember that it took an economist (Mancur Olson) to get us on the right track about group mobilization and maintenance. And we continue to benefit from a rich and diverse sociological literature on social movements and interest groups.

Baumgartner and Leech show that studying interest groups is not for wimps. If you are the kind of researcher who likes simply to order away for a CD-ROM that contains lots of nice and clean and easily accessible data, interest group research is not for you. Likewise, if you are the kind of researcher who simply *must* have neat and clean and definitive conclusions, study something else. Studying something else, it seems, is an option that many political scientists have embraced in recent years. Thankfully, however, we have people like William Browne, Dan Clawson, Alan Neustadt, Mark Weller, Frank Baumgartner, and Beth Leech around to make sure that interest groups get the attention they deserve.

Anthony J. Nownes, *University of Tennessee*

Secrecy: The American Experience. By Daniel Patrick Moynihan. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. Pp. 262. \$22.50.)

Daniel Patrick Moynihan is one of the most remarkable individuals of our time. For five decades he has been a noted scholar and public official, including service as an adviser to presidents of both parties, ambassador to India and the United Nations, and a popular Democratic senator from New York. (He is 71 and