

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



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doned organized labor. He also tolerated racial discrimination in government, in contrast to his successor, Harry Truman. Instead of offering a nuanced account of FDR's political strategy, the book offers an apologia.

Bold Relief offers a useful and often insightful overview of the origin of and limits to U.S. social policy. But by taking the reformist policies of the late 1930s as the benchmark for U.S. social policy, the author marginalizes the relevance of his own analysis for a broader understanding of U.S. social policy.

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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. 223 pp. Cloth, \$55.00; paper, \$15.95.

Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech summarize and critique the literature on interest groups in American politics. As they aptly demonstrate, the literature has changed its focus and stature several times. At the height of its prominence in midcentury, scholars focused attention on group power, pluralism, and the behavior of lobbyists. The authors argue convincingly that this literature foundered on its ambition and its own internal contradictions. Following Mancur Olson's arguments about collective action, scholars for a time mostly studied the reasons individuals joined or did not join interest groups. The scope of research narrowed, and the behavior of the groups themselves became less frequently studied. Recently there has occurred a resurgence of research on group behavior, partially because of the availability of data due to several large-scale, quantitative studies in the early 1980s. Unfortunately, these studies and the literature spawned by them have failed to return the literature to a central place in the discipline. Instead, we have a "contradictory and noncumulative literature" (p. 176).

According to the authors, this is because scholars have limited the scope of their studies to few groups, have failed to incorporate in their studies the larger political context surrounding interest groups, and have not coordinated on a common set of research questions. In a review of journal articles on interest groups, the authors find that many studies are incomparable and that scholars often make unjustifiable inferences from limited data. The literature on interest groups is less than the sum of its parts and certainly less prominent than its subject matter warrants.

This book is a valuable addition to our discipline. It will be useful for all scholars who study American politics and for most political scientists. Graduate students especially will benefit, not the least because of the many ideas for dissertation topics. The lasting contribution of the book for many readers will be the pointed explanation of the current confusion in the interest group literature. The authors do a good job of relating the trends in this literature to a mix of intellectual and professional constraints on the scholars who produce that literature.

In an otherwise fine book, there are weaknesses. The authors give little space to the contribution of economists like Gary Becker and George Stigler, and virtually none to recent rational choice models of interest groups by political scientists. The quantitative literature on the effects of campaign contributions and lobbying is criticized for contradictory results without a thorough examination of specific studies. It could be that well done studies yield coherent and valuable results, while poorly conducted studies yield contradictory results.

The most glaring omission, however, is apparent in the authors' explanation of the recent failure of the interest group literature to retain its previous glory. A main reason the study of interest groups has not been central to the discipline is the increasing emphasis on the study of institutions in political science. Interest groups are less constrained by electoral, legislative, or administrative institutions than are, say, legislators, candidates, presidents, or voters. Naturally, those who want to understand the effects of institutions will focus on those actors most constrained by them; and relative to other political actors, interest groups operate in a fairly institution-free environment.

This point is related to another omission in the book. For some reason, the interest group literature has not attracted the most technically skilled scholars and graduate students in the profession. These scholars, with formal theoretic and statistical skills, have instead studied Congress, political economy, electoral systems, voting behavior, and international relations. Given the overall trends in political science, this could be a cause of its relatively low status.

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