# The Structure of Opposition in Public Policy Debate

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# Abstract

One bit of conventional wisdom among interest group scholars is that when active conflict is relatively low, organized interests are more likely to affect public policy. This wisdom tends to be based on a presumed linearity between participation and conflict – that is, as participation increases, so too does conflict. But an absence of a large number of participants on an issue does not necessarily imply that advocates face few constraints on their abilities to advance their preferences for policy. In this paper, I argue that opposition is more accurately characterized in terms of five distinct dimensions: who opposes an advocate's interests (*opposition source*), how many actors oppose its interests (*opposition scope*), whether opponents are active (*level of active opposition*), whether there is a lack of interest, effort, or concern from relevant others (*level of indifference*), and whether there are issue-related characteristics and characteristics of the policy process that impede objectives (*type of obstacles*). I also suggest how these dimensions of opposition may vary across groups and issues, and conclude the paper with a description of how I plan to measure and study empirically opposition in public policy debate.

> *"The scope of conflict is an aspect of the scale of political organization and the extent of political competition. The size of the constituencies being mobilized, the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the conflicts people expect to develop have a bearing on all theories about how politics is or should be organized... Nearly all theories about politics have something to do with the question of who can get into the fight and who is to be excluded"* (Schattschneider 1960: 20).

Schattschneider's emphasis on the linkage between participation and conflict has deeply influenced recent efforts to understand interest group participation in national policy debates. Scholars have examined the number and type of participants active in policy areas or on different policy issues; they have found evidence both of issue areas and issues characterized by broad participation and high conflict, and of issues and issue areas where conflict and participation is presumed to be low (Browne, 1990; Gray and Lowery, 1996; Heinz, et al., 1993). Additional research has considered how common both niche and broad participation are (Baumgartner and Leech, 2001), and how the structure of conflict varies across policy domains (Salisbury, et al., 1987). What unites each of these studies is the idea that conflict is assessed primarily through focus on the type and diversity of organizations that are active in different policy areas or on different issues. Neglected in this research are additional dimensions of conflict and opposition that both provide opportunities for and place constraints upon advocates in their efforts to articulate and pursue their public policy objectives.

In this paper, I offer an alternative way of conceptualizing conflict and opposition in policy debates, and I also suggest how the structure of opposition may vary across groups and issues. I conclude the paper with a description of how I plan to operationalize the dimensions of conflict I identify and I also describe a data set that will be used to test my expectations about systematic variation in opposition. Thus, what I present here is a prologue to an empirical study of opposition in public policy debate.

# Interest Group Participation and Policy Conflict

Interest group scholars have increasingly devoted effort to understanding the contexts or environments in which organized interests operate to achieve their goals. This attention comes as researchers work toward accumulating knowledge about the conditions under which groups employ different strategies and tactics, and as they try to assess under what circumstances groups' opportunities for influence are likely to be constrained. As a result, much is known, for example, about how issue salience or visibility complicates groups' efforts to achieve their policy goals (Grenzke 1989; Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Smith 1995), as well as how the lack of qualified, alternative sources of information can advantage organized interests in terms of their abilities to provide information to and shape the interpretations of members of Congress (Hansen 1991; Smith 1984). In addition, recent scholarship has begun to consider the impact of public opinion on groups' abilities to achieve support for their policy goals (Smith 2000) as well as under what conditions groups are able to undertake effectively different advocacy strategies (Gerber 1999; Goldstein 1999; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998, 1999, 2001; Lowery and Gray n.d.). But surprisingly, one important aspect of the context in which groups operate – the conflict and opposition they encounter as part of policy debates -- has received relatively minimal attention. Specifically, most of what is known about conflict derives from inferences that have been made about the number of participants in a policy debate and the level of conflict. That is, when the number of participants in a policy debate increases, the level of conflict is presumed to be high, whereas conflict and opposition are presumed to be lower when participants are fewer in number (Baumgartner 1989; Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Browne 1990; Gray and Lowery 1996; West and Loomis 1999).[1] This linkage of participation with conflict is rooted in Schattschneider's

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[1] This view of opposition extends to empirical studies that attempt to examine how advocacy efforts of groups or sets of groups are affected by the "strength" of their opponents. Organizational opposition is typically measured by the number of opposing groups (Austen-Smith and Wright 1994), dollars of contributions made by opposing groups (Hall and Wayman 1990), or some combination of groups and contributions (Wright 1990). Other survey-based empirical work has tapped conflict and opposition

(1960) contention about conflict expansion.  According to Schattschneider, interests that are on

the losing side of a debate could benefit by attracting additional participants, thus expanding

conflict and altering the stakes in the debate.  In other words, when participation is extensive any

one participating group is relatively more likely to encounter opposition to its preferences, and

face greater uncertainty about the outcome of the debate.  In contrast, when few groups are

actively engaged on an issue, conflict is contained or "privatized" so that participants face

minimal opposition to their policy preferences. Based on Baumgartner and Leech's (2001)

analysis of a representative sample of issues that were of interest to registered lobbyists, it is fair

to say that on most issues, privatized conflict is the norm.

But thinking about conflict and opposition solely as a function of how many different

participants are active on an issue offers only one indication of the obstacles organizations may

encounter as they try to achieve their goals.  Indeed, if we accept the idea that the conflict and

opposition an organization encounters on an issue is a central variable in determining its ability to

achieve successfully its objectives, then a much more comprehensive assessment of opposition

and conflict surely is warranted.  What dimensions of opposition are most central, and how

prevalent are these elements of opposition?  How are the various dimensions of conflict linked to

the issues groups are active on and the character of the groups themselves?

One study that attempts to open up the concept of conflict is the investigation by

Salisbury and his collaborators (1987) of the conflict structures in four policy domains -- health,

energy, labor, and agriculture.  In addition to gauging the number of different organizations that

are active participants in the policy domains, Salisbury, et al. examine domain participants'

perceptions of the stability of issues and coalitions, the scope of public attention to issues within a

policy domain, and the intensity of partisanship and conflict on domain issues.  In addition, they

look at patterns of interaction between different types of participants in each domain in an effort

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through organizations' self-reports of the level of opposition they encounter, either generally or on specific
issues (Hojnacki 1997; Schlozman and Tierney 1986).

to understand the alliance and adversarial relationships that exist. Their work suggests that the types of organizations that compose each domain affect the perceived levels of conflict and partisanship (e.g., the presence of peak associations within a domain tends to polarize conflict), and that characteristics of the domains shape the extent to which different types of organizations tend to ally or not (e.g., actors involved in the low-conflict health domain were relatively less likely to report the presence of opposing groups).

This focus on conflict structures in different policy areas provides a description of the general environment in which organizations seek to achieve their goals. But domain-level conflict offers an incomplete picture of the obstacles a group may encounter on a particular issue. Individual issues may cut across domain boundaries, drawing participants from "issue networks" that are bounded not by policy areas but by some issue-relevant knowledge (Heclo 1978). For example, the issue of reforming managed care blurs the health domain with that of labor in that it raises myriad different questions about which types of health care providers can treat patients, how extensively businesses will provide care for their employees, who patients may sue when there are disputes about treatment and care, and so on. These policy questions are of interest to medical as well as non-medical health care providers, health care consumers, large and small businesses, and trial lawyers. Thus, in terms of both content and participants, it would be difficult to ascribe this issue clearly to a single domain. Moreover, just as Salisbury, et al. (1987) detect varying conflict structures across policy domains, there is likely to be considerable variation in the conflict and opposition advocates encounter on issues within any one domain (e.g., in the area of tax policy, recent debate about the repeal of the estate or "death" tax was rife with conflict, whereas conflict was minimal during the debate in the 106th Congress about how to treat foreign interest expenses for U.S. income tax purposes; in the health area, discussion about alternative approaches to funding Graduate Medical Education provoked a moderate amount of conflict and opposing views whereas the debate about Medicare funding for and coverage of chiropractic services generated substantial disagreements among the participants). For these reasons, it makes

sense to consider the structure of conflict and opposition that organizations encounter at the issue level. Perhaps most important, this shift in the level of analysis makes possible a consideration of how issue characteristics and the characteristics of organizations that take an interest in those issues are linked systematically to different forms of conflict and opposition. In addition, because advocates make decisions to take action or not on specific policy issues, an issue-level analysis is essential for developing an understanding of how opposition and conflict affect participation in policy debates.

## Defining and Describing Issue-Level Conflict

What, then, are the dimensions of conflict that are most important or useful for understanding the constraints (or lack thereof) that organizations encounter on specific issues? I identify here five distinct dimensions of opposition: *source* (who opposes), *scope* (how many oppose, both overall and by source), *level of active opposition* (the presence of active opponents), *level of indifference* (lack of interest, effort, or concern from relevant others), and *type of obstacles* (issue-related characteristics and characteristics of the policy process that impede objectives).

Scope, source, and active opponents. To be sure, knowledge about the number of organizations participating in a policy debate is an essential bit of information for understanding the level of any conflict on an issue. This proxy for conflict and uncertainty, which has been the focus of so much research, provides a useful first step for thinking about the difficulties organizations may encounter on an issue. But numbers of participants alone do not convey the full nature of the conflict that an organization encounters. For one, participant counts do not necessarily speak to the actual amount of opposition on an issue, as much as they speak to the *potential* for opposition on an issue. If one hundred groups are active on a particular issue, it is theoretically possible (albeit unlikely) that the participants will offer one hundred different perspectives on the matter. However, it is also quite possible that many of those one hundred

groups are in general agreement about the outcome they most prefer. Whether these one hundred

groups represent one, two, three, or more different viewpoints is an open question. Similarly, if

there are only five active groups on an issue, those five groups might be in complete agreement

about the outcome they most prefer, or they may disagree about the best outcome for a particular

issue. Absent additional information, it is not possible to know whether conflict is greater on the

issue with five participants or one hundred participants. But, it is fair to say that a relatively

greater number of potential issue definitions could emerge on the issue with one hundred

participants if one assumes that each participant *could* view uniquely the relevant issue. Whether

those viewpoints actually emerge and conflict with rather than complement one another is another

matter. A comparison among some contemporary policy issues helps to illustrate the imprecise

connection between conflict levels and number of participants. Most observers would agree that

abortion is among the most contentious of policy issues. The number of organizations that

participate actively in the debate on this issue is about 25. Although this number is higher than

the median of 15 participants per issue identified by Baumgartner and Leech (2001), there are

other issues -- tax cuts and managed care reform -- that attract more than twice as many

participants as abortion.[2] Thus, the participant figures clearly distinguish abortion, tax cuts, and

managed care reform as higher than average conflict issues. However, it would seem to be

inappropriate to claim that tax cuts and managed care reform are more conflict-ridden than

abortion.

Moreover, because advocates come from different parts of the political system, a

numerical assessment alone – especially one that focuses only on participating organizations --

cannot capture adequately who is opposed to a group's interests. In any policy debate, opponents

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[2] The participant counts for abortion, tax cuts, and managed care reform are based on data gathered as part of the Advocacy and Public Policymaking Project that I describe below. The figures for abortion are based on participants who were active in the debate about contraception coverage, and participants active in the debate about late-term abortion (both sets of participants were nearly identical). The figure for managed care reform comes from the debate on that issue in the 106th Congress, and the estimate of participants in the debate about tax cuts comes from efforts in the 106th Congress to eliminate the estate tax.

may include other organized interests, members of important committees in Congress, other members of Congress, administration officials, unorganized individuals, and so on. The constraints imposed by these opponents and the uncertainty their opposition introduces for an organizational advocate is highly variable. For instance, opposition from members of Congress who do not sit on relevant committees is likely to be perceived as less of a constraint to achieving objectives successfully than is opposition from the party leadership. In addition, a group that encounters opposition from other organizations but no government decision makers could have an easier time advancing its preferences than a group that faces opposition from government decision makers. Similarly, information about the diversity of sources of opposition that an organization encounters provides additional information about the conflict and uncertainty an organizational advocate is likely to face. Just as more participants signal more *potential* opposition, more numerous sources of opposition increase the possibility that the stakes in the policy debate will be subject to change. This dimension of the opposition encountered by organizations is similar to Salisbury, et al.'s (1987) ideas about the types of adversaries groups tend to face within a policy domain. However, while they are attentive to variation in opponents, they focus specifically on different types of organizational adversaries (e.g., peak associations versus professional associations versus externality groups). Many studies that characterize conflict in terms of numbers of participants also consider the types of organizations that are participating on different issues. Baumgartner's (1989) classification of participants, however, includes specialists and generalists within *and* outside of government.

Although a focus on sources of opposition and their diversity are important extensions of the concept, these additional dimensions of opposition retain an emphasis on opposition that is tangible or active. Active opposition is the form of opposition that most readily comes to mind. It is the hostility or disagreement an advocate may encounter from other individual and group participants in an issue debate. Active opposition is present in a policy debate whenever one advocate mentions an organizational advocate, government decision maker, or the public as

mobilizing or being likely to mobilize in opposition to its preferences. This type of open conflict between different sets of organized interests, their supporters, and various congressional advocates can be observed on an array of issues including those involving global trade (e.g., membership in the World Trade Organization, the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, and Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China), as well as those invoking cultural and social values (e.g., same sex marriage, late-term abortion).

Indifference and obstacles. But groups face other constraints that manifest differently than the opposition that derives from other participants in the policy process. There are more passive forms of opposition that derive from the unwillingness, inability, or indifference of others to engage or consider an issue. Indifference may be present as relevant others – decision makers and allies – opt not to allocate time, resources, or effort to an issue because they have other priorities. In some circumstances, this lack of engagement may reflect a practical decision by an organized interest or a decision maker to allocate their limited resources only to their highest issue priorities despite their interest in other issues. Consequently, if an advocate has difficulty engaging others and bringing together a coalition to press its demands, it may be difficult to get the attention and interest of those in government. In other circumstances, the indifference may be rooted in a desire (conscious or unconscious) on the part of groups or decision makers to ignore those problems and matters of policy that would have adverse consequences for their preferences and interests if they did become part of the public agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Cobb and Ross 1997). Whenever a presidential campaign approaches, issues that serve neither party's interest are effectively left out of the campaign rhetoric (e.g., reforming social security). But this indifference also may be more pernicious, such as when a lack of willingness to engage a problem serves to marginalize the concerns and interests of a particular segment of society. An obvious example is the failure on the part of policy makers to deal effectively in proposals related to health care, housing, and income support with the idea that there is likely to be a portion of the public who are not now nor ever likely to be employable. By ignoring this group, decision

makers and organized interests can develop policy and allocate limited resources in ways that serve their interests (e.g., setting time limits on receiving income support, devising plans for health care assistance that are rooted in employment or the filing of tax returns) without having to address complicated, longer term solutions and an unpopular use of resources.

In addition, there are obstacles that result from the nature of the issue itself and from the structural features of the policymaking process. Obstacles may arise if the issue of interest is so complex that it defies simple explanation to those in government who are charged with implementing or not the group's policy preferences. Issues also may be linked to stigmatized or otherwise unpopular target populations whose interests, for whatever reason, are relatively easy (or politically acceptable) to ignore. Advocates who are interested in achieving parity in coverage for mental health problems often speak about the difficulty of drawing attention and resources to problems that impact a group that many people confront only indirectly and in a negative context (e.g., via news coverage of workplace shootings). Aspects of the policymaking process also may intrude to create difficulties for advocates, such as when unclear jurisdictional boundaries make it difficult to determine precisely who should deal with (or who is likely to be most supportive of dealing with) a particular problem. As Baumgartner and Jones (1993) illustrate, the venue of activity has important implications for the tone and level of attention an issue receives. Advocates also may encounter difficulties that arise when coalition building strategies are shifted by election outcomes. For instance, making progress on any issue in recent Senate sessions requires the ability to put together a bipartisan coalition of support, an ability that is unlikely to be equal across advocates or issues.

In all of these circumstances, an advocate is unable to receive serious agenda consideration for matters of concern to its interests. Although there may be no active conflict, advocates facing indifference, or issue- or process-specific obstacles most certainly perceive these as impediments to achieving their goals. This opposition simply presents itself as an obstacle or as indifferent. But from the perspective of an advocate, it is likely to constrain greatly its abilities

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to achieve its objectives. Indeed, obstacles and indifference may be especially important in preventing issues from becoming part of the public agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, Cobb and Ross 1997). Importantly, these forms of opposition would not be detected by most studies of conflict and opposition in that they typically consider only those issues that are already under consideration by Congress or regulatory agencies. The lack of an active target also may constrain considerably the tactics advocates use to make progress toward their goals.

As may be apparent, the five dimensions of opposition I identify are not entirely orthogonal. Active opposition will exist whenever there is at least one source of opposition, and the degree of active opposition will depend on the scope of opposition that exists. Indifference and obstacles, however, may be present or not regardless of what other dimensions are observed. But despite some overlap, each dimension provides distinctive information about the opposition characterizing a policy issue and the opposition perceived by advocates who take an interest in the issue.

## Variations in the Structure of Opposition: Some Expectations

In order to understand how opposition affects advocates' efforts to achieve their goals, it is necessary to consider how the dimensions of opposition I have identified are related to the issues groups are active on, the character of the groups themselves, and the choices they make for advocacy. For instance, is the scope and source of opposition that exists on an issue related to the scope of proposed change associated with that issue? Are recurring issues less likely to evoke indifference? Are citizen groups and other non-economic interests especially likely to meet with indifference to their objectives? Is the scope of opposition relatively greater on partisan issues? How does the nature of opposition vary depending on whether advocates challenge or defend the status quo? In this section, I sketch out some preliminary expectations about when different

dimensions of opposition are likely to be observed and how they are likely to affect advocates' efforts.

Type of interests. A considerable volume of literature has examined the relative advantage of business interests in politics (Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Gerber 1999; Lindblom 1977; Schattschneider 1960; Smith 2000). Although there remains some disagreement about the nature of that advantage as well as the extent to which that advantage exists (Berry 1999; Smith 2000), scholars often attribute to business groups and economic interests an ability to pursue their objectives successfully by crafting narrow demands that are unlikely to impinge, at least explicitly, on the interests of others. In this form of niche politics, conflict is minimized because other organized interests are effectively uninterested in the issue debate or unable to muster sufficient resources to engage with economically-focused groups on all issues. Thus, one can anticipate that active organizational opposition to business and economic interests will be minimal.

However, in these circumstances, it is possible that business interests will encounter obstacles toward the achievement of their goals that stem from issue complexity, the legislative calendar, and disagreements about the appropriate forum to resolve the matter (e.g., disputes about committee jurisdiction, reluctance on the part of Congress to address what they determine to be a regulatory matter). Indeed, although these and other structural obstacles of the policy process may be encountered by all types of advocates, they are expected to be a relatively common form of opposition encountered by business and economic interests. The rationale underlying this expectation is that if business interests are able to carve niches effectively (and frequently) in an effort to satisfy their objectives, then it is unlikely that the opposition they encounter will be broad in scope or active.

Relatedly, the type of opposition business interests encounter is unlikely to come from other organizations because business opponents, which include citizen-based, labor, and social welfare organizations, are unlikely to have the capacity to counteract business on issues that do

not have direct and explicit implications for their clientele. At the same time, business interests are unlikely to will turn on one another in their efforts as there is evidence that "producer interests" in all policy domains tend to avoid adversarial relationships (Salisbury, et al. 1987). Less clear is how likely business and economic interests are to face active opposition from government officials – in Congress, in the administration, and in various federal agencies. Although Lindblom (1977) suggests that government officials anticipate and act to advance the preferences of business, there is evidence that business does not always achieve its goals (Berry 1999; Smith 2000). Given the absence of organized opposition to business on issues before Congress (Baumgartner and Leech 2001), it is reasonable to expect that government officials will, at least some of the time, oppose economic interests. How often this occurs, of course, is an empirical question. Overall, then, the most common type of opposition business and economic interests will face are the hurdles that result from nature of the policymaking process (e.g., lack of a legislative vehicle, unclear jurisdictions to address policy concerns). They are unlikely to face obstacles that arise from unpopular target populations, or a sense that the issue is relatively trivial. The most common source of opposition will be government decision makers but how frequently this is likely to occur is not clear. Of course, business interests will face numerous opponents in and out of government on some especially salient issues. These circumstances of high active opposition, however, are expected to be relatively rare for business interests given the frequency with which they are engaged in issues that draw in few additional participants (Baumgartner and Leech 2001).

What then of citizen groups and other organizations that represent the more expressive interests of their clientele? The frequency with which they encounter the different dimensions of opposition that are described here is expected to differ considerably from those of business and other economic interests. By virtue of the interests they represent, expressive groups are much less likely to be able to craft their demands in ways that do not explicitly impinge on the interests of others. Thus, these groups will be engaged in issue debates that have the potential for

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opposition of fairly broad scope and for a diverse array of opponents who are actively in conflict with their policy objectives.

In addition, unlike business interests, there are reasons to expect that a relatively common form of opposition that citizen groups and other expressive interests are likely to encounter is the opposition that manifests as indifference to a group's priorities and objectives. Relative to groups that represent primarily expressive interests, the costs of maintaining an organization is lower for business interests (Walker 1983). These interests need not expend effort to demonstrate or justify to their clientele that their actions on policy issues are important in terms of pursuing the overall objective of the group. In comparison, expressive groups generally must work harder to keep the public and decision makers focused on their concerns. Expressive concerns are unlikely to be perceived as having the same immediacy or agenda priority that economic interests tend to have. As a result, expressive groups may have difficulty placing effectively their concerns on the public agenda. At least some advocates, then, will encounter an opposition that is best characterized in terms of the minimal support that is generated by indifference. In these situations, the obstacle an advocate faces derives not from active disagreement from a group, member of Congress, or the public but rather from a perception that the issue at stake is not sufficiently important to address, or sufficiently deserving of a full mobilization of government and/or organizational resources. This expectation is consistent with two observations: citizen interests tend to participate less extensively on issues before Congress than business and other economic interests, and when citizen interests are active, there tends to be high conflict. But it is unlikely that the issues on which they are observed to participate represent the entirety of their policy concerns. Rather, it is quite probable that the nature of the opposition they encounter on many other issues of interest – indifference, insufficient mobilization, and obstacles that derive from the nature of the issues they prioritize – operate effectively to keep these items off of the public agenda.

Overall, then, relative to business and economic interest organizations, citizen groups and other expressive organizations are expected to encounter greater active opposition. Expressive

groups also are likely to encounter opposition of broad scope that may come from organizations, government, and others. In addition, citizen groups and other expressive interests are expected to encounter relatively greater indifference and lack of interest from other groups and decision makers.

My emphasis on the differences in opposition that may be observed between citizen-based and other expressive interests and business and economic interests is not intended to suggest that other types of organizations – such as professional associations and institutions – are uninteresting. Rather, the distinctions between business and citizen groups are expected to be the most pronounced, and it is expectations about business and citizen groups that flow most transparently from extant work on participation and conflict.

Defense and support of the status quo. Political participants as well as political observers recognize that advocates who defend the status quo typically have an easier time achieving their objectives than do those who challenge it. Why challengers face difficulties tends to be explained by the fact that change requires a relatively greater mobilization of support from within and outside of government. But why is this mobilization so difficult? One possibility is that some of the difficulty lies with the nature of the opposition status quo challengers encounter. In particular, defenders of the status quo are unlikely to risk engaging in active resistance. To do so is essentially to lend legitimacy to the claims being made by the challengers by drawing attention to their concerns (even if attention is limited to observers in Congress or within the community of organizations in Washington). The preferred strategy – at least initially – for the status quo defenders will be to oppose challengers' efforts as invisibly as they can. Legislators who are opposed to changing current policy can sit on bills that are referred to their committee, and they may opt not to hold hearings on an issue. Administrative agencies may, in some cases, simply choose not to act on matters brought to their attention, especially when there is no outside pressure from Congress to do so. Organized interests that oppose change may initially choose not to engage on an issue unless they sense movement from decision makers. For example, prior to

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the 106th Congress, speech and hearing groups had been pressing Congress to make hearing screenings mandatory for infants. Insurance interests, observing no movement on this matter in multiple sessions of Congress, said and did nothing in response to these efforts to expand coverage. Only when approval emerged for pilot projects and data collection about hearing screenings did insurance interests and their supporters begin to raise concerns about hearing screenings as an unfunded federal mandate to states.

Of course, if challengers to the status quo begin to build momentum (as the previous example suggests), status quo supporters will be forced to allocate resources to actively oppose their efforts. But at earlier points in the policy process, it is likely that challengers to the status quo will be met by indifference from status quo supporters, and tepid support from allies, except those who see benefits from being part of the vanguard on the issue.

Scope of policy change and issue salience. When an issue has the potential to alter substantially current policy, there is reason to expect that a wide array of groups and individuals will take an interest in the debate, and seek to weigh in on the alternatives and proposals that are being discussed (Baumgartner 1989; West and Loomis 1999). Most simply, when the scope of proposed change is relatively large, it is more likely that the policy changes, budgetary changes, administrative changes, and the like will have implications for, and relevance to a greater number of groups and individuals (Schattschneider 1960). The same is often expected when an issue is especially salient. With greater salience comes an increasing potential for the attention and involvement of a large number of interested parties, including ordinary citizens who are likely to have preferences on salient issues (Smith 2000). For those who view conflict through the lens of participation, there is indeed an expectation that the scope of opposition, the source of opposition, and the level of active opposition will be relatively greater on issues that are highly salient as well as on those issues that involve considerable change to current policy.

However, there is some evidence, particularly from studies that examine multiple issues, that issue scope and salience may not fully explain the number and type of interested participants

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(Baumgartner 1989; Caldeira, et al. 2000). But, when scope and salience are linked – as is often the case for issues that attract researchers' attention – issues tend to show high levels of active opposition and conflict (West and Loomis 1999). Thus, the number of opponents and sources of opposition are likely to be relatively greater when an issue is highly salient. The level of active opposition also is likely to be relatively higher when issues are salient. But if a policy issue is highly salient to only a relatively particularized population, then there is less reason to expect high levels of conflict. Relatedly, when an issue has the potential to change significantly current policy, the number of opponents and sources of opposition also are likely to be greater, and active opposition is expected to be greater as well.

By definition, indifference should be relatively uncommon on salient issues and those of broad scope. Yet because salient issues and those involving major policy changes are relatively rare (Baumgartner and Leech 2001), advocates in policy debates may frequently encounter opposition in the form of indifference.

## Next Steps : Measuring Concepts and Testing Hypotheses

Ultimately I am interested in determining whether my expectations about conflict and opposition can be supported empirically. Indeed, because most of the dimensions of opposition that I define above have not been explored systematically in the past, I am also interested in how frequently these dimensions are observed in different contexts. Are certain types of opponents present on all issues whereas others appear less often? How common or uncommon is it to encounter indifference as an advocate? Are partisan issues linked with particular forms of conflict? Although an empirical assessment of opposition is only forthcoming at this point, I describe here my ideas for measuring the five dimensions of opposition defined above, and I also explain a unique data set that will allow me to observe empirically dimensions of opposition that have not been visible to most researchers. For present purposes I describe these data as a prelude to explaining how the dimensions of opposition that I have identified here will be measured.

The data that I will use to describe opposition and test the expectations I outline above

has been collected as part of a broad, collaborative research project on advocacy and public

policymaking.[3]  The primary data being collected for the project comes from over 300 interviews

with Washington, DC-based policy advocates (e.g., representatives of organized interests,

congressional staff, agency personnel) active on approximately one hundred randomly selected

policy issues.[4]

The issues included in the study were identified by a set of organizational advocates (i.e.,

the issue identifiers).  These issue identifiers were selected at random from the list of organized

interests that registered to lobby Congress in 1996, the last year for which these registration data

are compiled in a usable format (see Baumgartner and Leech 1999).  During the interviews, the

issue identifier was asked to select the most recent issue he or she had spent time on, and to

describe what he or she had done and what the organization was trying to accomplish on the

issue.  Specifically:

> *Could you take the most recent issue you've been spending time on and*
> *describe what you're trying to accomplish on this issue and what type of*
> *action are you taking to make that happen?  The issue we talk about*
> *doesn't have to be associated with a particular bill, rule, or regulation,*
> *and it doesn't have to be an issue that's been receiving coverage by the*
> *media—whatever issue you've most recently spent a significant amount*
> *of time on is fine so long as it involves the federal government.*

The use of this question means that the issues included in the study need not be part of or

prominent on the public agenda, making possible an observation of forms of opposition that may

differ from those typically described in the literature.  Interviewees also were asked to narrate the

appeals and arguments they make when they speak with others about the issue, to specify with

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[3] The principal investigators are Frank Baumgartner, Jeff Berry, Beth Leech, David Kimball, and me.  The project website is (http://lobby.la.psu.edu).

[4] In addition, for each issue included in the study, we obtain from public sources relevant congressional floor statements, bills, hearing testimony, print and broadcast news stories, organizational press releases, and other similar items.  The research, then, is a combination of fieldwork and data collection from publicly available sources.  The latter information for each issue is available on the project web site.

whom they are talking about the issue, to describe the type of opposition they face, and to provide a variety of other information about their organizations.

Subsequent interviews were conducted with the main actors representing each of the distinct perspectives on the identified issues. Some issues (e.g., policies about funding for graduate medical education) involve many additional interviews whereas other issues (e.g., postal service modernization) involve very few. These personal interviews typically are followed up by short telephone interviews several months later. The telephone interviews are used to determine whether any changes or developments have occurred in the appeals used, objectives sought, and targets selected by advocates. Attention also is given to the passage or definitive rejection of a policy action or proposal.

For the purpose of studying the opposition that advocates identify as affecting their efforts to achieve their issue-specific objectives, I focus on responses to the following question:

*What impediments do you face in achieving your objectives on this issue*
*-- in other words, who or what is standing in your way?*

In order to classify systematically the opposition that advocates identified, my collaborators and I identified several potential obstacles as well as different forms or levels of opposition from various sources. Potential obstacles include linkage with a stigmatized or unpopular target population, lack of supportive data, and an unfavorable budget score. Different forms of opposition from different sources include whether active opposition has occurred, whether active opposition was expected, whether insufficient resources were allocated or there was inadequate mobilization, and whether it was difficult to get recognition or attention from each of several sources (i.e., organized interests, the public, congressional leaders, leaders of relevant committees, leaders of relevant subcommittees, members of relevant committees, rank and file members of Congress, federal agencies, the President or administration, and others).

In addition to these data, my collaborators and I also have identified and defined each of the distinctive perspectives or outlooks on each issue, and for each participant active on each

issue, coded the perspective they support. These perspectives or issue viewpoints are defined in

terms of the objectives sought so that, by definition, participants associated with one perspective

have goals that differ from participants associated with any one or more of the other perspectives.

With these data in mind, I have developed the following measures to reflect the five

dimensions of opposition that are outlined above:

> *Source of opposition* is tapped through a series of indicators that specify whether each of
> the potential opponents noted above (e.g., organized interests, leaders of relevant
> committees) are mentioned by an advocate as being actively hostile toward their
> objectives on the relevant issue. A similar series of indicators are used to indicate which
> potential opponents were indifferent or unwilling to commit resources or pay attention.

> Three measures are used to tap the scope of opposition. One measure of scope reflects
> the *diversity of sources of active opposition* by distinguishing between advocates based
> on the specific combination of active hostility they experience (e.g., whether they
> encounter no opposition, active opposition only from organized interests, active
> opposition only from Congress, active opposition from organized interests and the public,
> active opposition from all sources). The second measure of scope reflects the *diversity of
> sources of indifference* by distinguishing between advocates based on the specific
> combination of indifference they experience

> A third measure of scope indicates the *number of major participants active on the
> relevant issue* whose objectives differ from that of the advocate. As I explain above, we
> did not interview every group and government actor that was interested in each of our
> issues. Instead, we interviewed at least one advocate associated with each distinctive
> outlook or objective. However, as part of our interviews, advocates were asked: "So who
> else is involved in this issue both inside and outside of government?" Those mentioned –
> interest groups, members of Congress, individuals in the administration, and the like –
> were considered "major participants." For each advocate, then, it is possible to identify
> the number of participants associated with other objectives, and it is also possible to
> determine the overall number of major participants on each issue.

> The measure for *level of active opposition* sorts advocates into one of three categories:
> those who mention organizations or government actors who are actively opposed to their
> interests on the issue; those who anticipate that organizations or government actors might
> be actively opposed to their interests on the issue; and those who offer no indication that
> organizations or government officials are (or are expected to be) actively opposed to their
> interests.

> In order to distinguish advocates who encounter *issue-specific obstacles* from those who
> do not face such obstacles, I classify in the former category any advocate who reports one
> of more of the following as an impediment to achieving their objectives:  association with
> an unpopular target population; a negative public image; an unfavorable budget score; a
> lack of data to support the advocate's position; the existence of data supporting an
> opponent; an unfavorable issue definition; issue complexity; a perception among relevant
> actors that the issue is a hopeless cause; a perception that the issue is too trivial or small;

and division among coalition partners or allies. Advocates are counted as having faced *process-specific obstacles* if they mention any one or more of the following as impediments to their objectives: venue or jurisdictional disputes; the lack of a legislative vehicle; the difficulty of moving an issue in an election year; a crowded congressional schedule; or, a need for bipartisan support.

The measure for *level of indifference or unwillingness* distinguishes advocates based upon whether they could not mobilize or otherwise get the attention of relevant actors; whether they could not get relevant actors to prioritize the issue or commit sufficient resources to it; or whether neither lack of mobilization or insufficient resource allocation was mentioned.

The decision to view conflict and opposition from the perspective of organizational advocates participating in a policy debate is not intended to suggest that opposition and conflict are exogenous. Consistent with Schattschneider's (1960) claims and more recent work on groups' actions as advocates, organized interests often are proactive in their efforts to restrict or expand the scope of conflict (Kollman 1998), and to shape the ways in which an issue comes to be understood (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; McKissick 1995; Smith 1984). But while groups may work proactively to alter the context they encounter, they do not approach an advocacy situation as an open canvas. Rather, for a variety of reasons -- issues often are recurring, legislators and other policy makers have general views and preferences about policy, allies and adversaries often are well-established and well-known – advocates describe and have expectations about opposition and other obstacles. Moreover, efforts to expand the scope of conflict to achieve a desired result may be met with resistance and counter-efforts by others (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

## Implications and Concluding Thoughts

One bit of conventional wisdom among interest group scholars is that when active conflict is relatively low, organized interests are more likely to affect public policy. This wisdom tends to be based on a presumed linearity between participation and conflict – that is, as participation increases, so too does conflict. But an absence of a large number of participants on an issue does not necessarily imply that advocates face few constraints on their abilities to advance their preferences for policy. There are different dimensions of opposition and conflict

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that exist regardless of the number of actors involved with or interested in an issue. Specifically, for any advocate interested in a particular issue, we can consider: who opposes its interests (*opposition source*), how many actors oppose its interests (*opposition scope*), whether opponents are active (*level of active opposition*), whether there is a lack of interest, effort, or concern from relevant others (*level of indifference*), and whether there are issue-related characteristics and characteristics of the policy process that impede objectives (*type of obstacles*). To focus only on a subset of these dimensions is to risk misrepresenting the challenges and opportunities advocates encounter as they work to achieve their policy objectives.

Indeed, although researchers have begun to recognize that salient issues involving large numbers of actors are very atypical, most studies about the policymaking process continue to rely on the presence or absence of active opposition as a yardstick for assessing the ease or difficulty advocates face as they work toward achieving their goals. In other words, what we understand about atypical issues structures how we think about and characterize all debates about all issues. But by looking beyond the numbers of advocates and types of organizations actively participating in issue debates, we can learn more about how and why some debates never evolve to include government decision makers or the public. In addition, if we adopt a broader view of what constitutes opposition, we gain an appreciation of the strategies that may be available to some advocates – including those defending the status quo – that are likely to impede coalition building efforts so that the issue priorities of some advocates never gain traction. Moreover, only by recognizing that there is a broader range of the opposition and obstacles that advocates face is it possible to understand the choices they make about taking action or not on their policy priorities as well as the tactics that are likely to be most effective in engaging the attention of supporters in government and among the public. Most broadly, a more comprehensive view of opposition and conflict suggests that while policy outcomes may be shaped greatly by who gets into the fight, they also may be affected by how the fight is waged.

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