Issue Advocacy and Interest-Group Influence

Frank R. Baumgartner
Penn State University
frankb@psu.edu

Jeffrey M. Berry
Tufts University
jeffrey.berry@tufts.edu

Marie Hojnacki
Penn State University
marieh@psu.edu

David C. Kimball
University of Missouri, St. Louis
dkimball@umsl.edu

Beth L. Leech
Rutgers University
BethL@rci.rutgers.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the initial findings of a multi-year, multi-investigator project designed to answer a number of questions about how groups affect public policy and whose interests are most often heard in the halls of government. We provide full documentation and data from our project on our web site: http://lobby.la.psu.edu and encourage readers of this paper to visit the site before or after reading this paper. The paper describes our research program, progress to date, and focuses on some preliminary findings concerning the sources of stability and instability in the lobbying and advocacy process. Many forces act to enforce stability in politics. However, each of our randomly chosen cases of lobbying is at least potentially multi-dimensional. That is, each issue can be understood in many conflicting ways. Predicting how political actors will react to these conflicting underlying dimensions is therefore not so easy. We explore these issues of multi-dimensionality and politics here while introducing readers to our large multi-year research project.

Introduction

Policy advocacy involves making arguments.[1] No matter who the advocate may be, whether government officials attempting to enact a new policy, interest group leaders outside government working alone, or coalitions of insiders and outsiders combined, their main work in enacting new policies or in justifying old ones involves making arguments that others cannot ignore. Of course, it involves more than this, but at the end of the day policies are adopted (or rejected) based on some evidence that they will work, solve some problem, serve some constituency, alleviate some pain, or serve some other public purpose as judged by those government officials making the decision. Government officials are unlikely to support policies that they know will fail, though of course different decision-makers may have different definitions of success. Interest groups, lobbyists, and other policy advocates use their various resources to push policies in ways they prefer by focusing attention on the justifications for their goals.

William Riker (1986, 1996) emphasized the importance of both argumentation and the context in which argument occurs in his discussion of rhetoric and heresthetics. Political actors can sometimes achieve success through the use of persuasive arguments, he noted. Further, they can achieve their aims by structuring or restructuring the decision context, affecting the order of

presentation of proposals, for example, or affecting the parliamentary rules under which votes are taken. In sum, Riker noted that strategically minded policy entrepreneurs, especially those with control over procedural aspects of policy debates, can often have dramatic impacts on outcomes. In this way, the Rikerian world of the strategic policy entrepreneur differs sharply from other accounts of the policy process—more often these have focused on incrementalism, stability, and the powers of entrenched interests protecting the status quo. Riker's heresthetically skilled political entrepreneurs seem able to achieve their policy goals (often dramatic changes from the status quo) with remarkable ease. What do their opponents do? What resources must the entrepreneur control in order to change the structure of an issue debate? What sources of stability counter-balance the potentially unstable world of strategic entrepreneurs? Our large research project focuses on finding the proper balance in understanding the sources of stability in the policy process while also noting the opportunities for dramatic change. We take a broad view of the governmental process as scholars such as Truman (1951) and Dahl (1961) did two generations ago.

In this paper we report on a multi-year, multi-investigator research project designed to answer a great number of questions about lobbying, policy advocacy, and persuasion within government. We describe our procedures, the status of our research to date, and we provide some initial and very preliminary insights into our findings on one broad topic: the abilities of groups to alter the issue-definitions surrounding the policies on which they are active. In future papers we will take up specific research questions and address them in a detailed and quantitative manner; here, we provide only an initial look at a part of our results.

The theoretical issues that concern us in this project center on identifying the substance and nature of the arguments that advocates make as they try to advance their policy goals. In the

last section of this paper we present some very preliminary findings about the difficulties that groups have in redefining issues—difficulties that have important implications for the design of effective research projects on the topic. We think that we may be able to push the literature on dimensionality, disequilibrium, and stability in politics some distance with a better understanding of the efforts and hindrances to destabilizing issue-definitions of the type discussed by Riker (1986).

Our project is much larger than is typical for political science research; we expect to be collecting data for several years, having already been doing so for two years at this writing. It addresses core issues of democratic theory and interest-group influence. And it links the behaviors of groups and lobbyists clearly to the public policy context in which they are active. In this way, we follow up on Baumgartner and Leech's (1998) assessment about the best ways to move the literature on interest groups back to the center of the literature on politics and public policy more generally: large scope, attention to context, and theoretical clarity. Further, we make all of our information available publicly even as we are collecting it (excluding only confidential information or that which would compromise respondent confidentiality). Our web site: http://lobby.la.psu.edu should become a source for teaching and research on groups, policy, and American government more generally.

Our research has at its core hundreds of interviews with those involved in a random sample of issues that are currently the objects of lobbying activity in Washington. We supplement our interviews with searches of publicly available information from web sites, electronic media databases, the Congressional Record, and other sources. Each issue in our sample, then, becomes the object of an intensive case study based on a combination of confidential interviews with those involved plus a compilation of publicly available statements,

bills, congressional testimonies, and media stories. The interviews are fundamental for two reasons: they allow us to identify a random sample of issues, and they provide us with a wealth of information about strategies, activities, and arguments that we might not get in any other way. In almost every case, however, we find that we can locate publicly available documents in congressional web sites, organizational press releases, organizational directories, FEC reports, news stories, and other sources that are not subject to any confidentiality concerns. This array of information, from both public and private sources, also becomes the object of our systematic analysis. In the case studies we gather information about the groups and advocates we interview, where available, but also about many groups and important players whom we do not interview. The research is therefore an unusual combination of fieldwork and collection of publicly available sources, and we have designed and continue to update an extensive web site to make available information that reflects what we found in the interviews without divulging the identities of any of those whom we interviewed.

Selecting a Sample of Policy Issues

The primary unit of analysis for our project is the policy issue. Our goal in selecting these issues was to obtain a sample that would accurately reflect the full range of issues that attract the interest of national policy advocates at a given point in time. Typically, of course, scholars have not chosen a random sample of issues, so the literature on groups and lobbying is rife with studies of highly visible controversies on the one hand, and obscure issues of administrative detail on the other; how can we reach general conclusions about the process as a whole? We have no way of knowing which type of lobbying is typical, or what proportion of lobbying involves the high salience issues and what proportion is away from the headlines. Of course, it is no easy task to determine what matters of policy comprise the population of policy issues that are

4

of interest to decision makers and other policy advocates. Our strategy was to randomly select lobbyists through a mechanism where the most active lobbyists were most likely to fall into our sample, and then to ask them what they are working on. The result: a random sample of what lobbyists are doing in Washington at a given point in time.

We refer to our initial lobbyists as "issue identifiers" because their first task is to tell us the issue they were most recently working on; subsequent interviews follow up with others involved in that same issue. The sampling frame that we used to select our issue identifiers was constructed using the database created from the Lobbying Reports for 1996 that were filed with the Secretary of the Senate (see Baumgartner and Leech 2001). The representatives of lobbying firms and organizations who file lobbying reports are asked to specify each specific issue on which they lobbied in the previous six months. Some mentioned just a single issue; others, such as the Chamber of Commerce, major labor unions, or the largest corporations such as General Motors, would be likely to mention over 100 distinct issues on which they were active. We weighted our sampling frame by the number of issues that the groups mentioned so that our sample reflects the different levels of lobbying activity among lobbyists as well as the range of lobbyists present in Washington. Once the sampling frame was constructed, we selected at random our sample of organizational issue identifiers.[2]

In-person interviews were then requested with representatives at the selected organizations.[3] During this initial interview the organization representative was asked to select

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[2] We selected the client organization if the lobby registrant was a law, public relations, or public affairs firm, and we excluded from our sample organizations that do not have an office in the Washington, DC metro area, and those that have no in-house Washington representatives.

[3] We identified the specific individual to contact by first looking in the *Washington Representatives*. If only one individual was listed for the organization, that person was selected for contact. If several names were listed we looked for titles such as Government Affairs

the most recent issue he or she had spent time on, and to describe what the organization had done and what they were trying to accomplish on the issue. The issue mentioned then became an issue for our project. So far, we have done interviews with about 200 lobbyists and government officials on over 60 distinct issues. Our sample of issues is available on our web site and consists of everything from the highly visible to the completely obscure. (Visitors to the web site will note that we have listed all our issues even though we have completed our searches for information only on a subset of them; eventually, all the links will be complete.)

Collecting Data About the Study Issues

For each of the issues identified in our initial interviews, we gather a range of information. We are conducting a large number of in-person interviews with policy advocates in and out of government, and we also are doing follow-up telephone interviews with these advocates. During each interview, we ask about the major coalitions and actors involved in the issue, and we then seek personal interviews with leaders of each of these coalitions; these interviews may include organizational representatives, congressional staff, and agency officials. In addition to the interviews, we gather a wide array of documentary evidence, including copies of the legislation and amendments, public statements, press releases, and news coverage. Here we explain the procedures for collecting these data.

Representative, Director of Congressional Relations, Director of Regulatory Affairs, and Washington Representative. If multiple possibilities were available, one individual was selected at random. Armed with a name of a potential contact, we then checked by telephone to see if the individual was still working for the organization. In cases where the individual was no longer with the organization, we asked for the name of the individual who filled the same position. Interview request letters were then sent to each organization representative selected, and we followed up on those letters with a telephone call to schedule the interview.

In-Person Interviews

The data collection for each issue begins during the issue identification interviews. Specifically, aside from describing what he or she has done and what the organization is trying to accomplish, we ask our respondents to narrate the appeals they make when they speak with others about the issue, to specify with 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. Among the most important pieces of additional information we seek is a description of the other actors involved in the issue debate—we ask them to describe those inside and outside of government who represent the various positions on the relevant issue. Subsequent interviews are then conducted with a subset of the individuals identified by the issue identifier, namely the main actors representing each of the distinct perspectives. The individuals interviewed include organization representatives, agency personnel, and congressional staff. The content of the subsequent interviews is identical to the issue identification interviews except that these interviews do not involve the identification of a new issue. In each interview, we continue to ask who else is involved, so that when we complete all the interviews for a given case we can be confident that we have a complete picture of the range of coalitions and interests concerned. Issues that involve few unique views, then, require only one or two additional interviews. Issues on which there are many distinct viewpoints require as many additional interviews as there are perspectives so that we obtain a full set of information about the advocacy activities undertaken on the issue, the policy appeals used, and the targets of those appeals.

Among the issues for which interviews are completed, the number of interviews conducted ranges from 15 interviews on managed care reform to two interviews on eight of our issues. On average across approximately 60 issues, we have conducted approximately three

interviews per issue to date, and our response rate has been approximately 88 percent. When the project is complete, we expect to have about 500 interviews on approximately 120 issues.

For issues involving Congress the interview set typically includes one or two organizations representing each distinct perspective, and one or two legislative staff who work for either the committee(s) of jurisdiction or the Member(s) most involved in moving or opposing the issue. For issues that involve only an executive branch or independent regulatory agency, the typical set of interviews include one or two organization representatives and a relevant staff member at the agency. Most of the issues for which we have completed only two interviews have, at present, no opposition. Under these circumstances, we interview one organization representative and one person in government. If follow-up interviews (see below) reveal a previously unknown source(s) of opposition, we will complete additional interviews at that time.

Telephone Follow-ups
Because of our interest in understanding how the advocacy efforts on these issues unfold, we also are conducting follow-up interviews by telephone with some of our respondents. The follow-ups have been (and will be) conducted periodically at roughly eighteen months after the initial interview is completed. The follow-up interviews will be 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. To date, six follow-up interviews have been completed; we expect that a number of our issues will require a follow-up at the end of the current session of Congress.

Supplementary Data From Public Sources

We supplement our interviews with information from a diverse array of secondary sources. These supplementary data are located through keyword searches of the *Thomas* web site (thomas.loc.gov), the web sites of the House and Senate, relevant agency and organization web sites, and *Lexis-Nexis* for each issue. Through the searches we are able to identify (as relevant) the status, content, sponsors, and committee jurisdiction for issue-related bills introduced in Congress; committee reports and congressional testimony; statements made on the House and Senate floor; press releases and other information released by Members of Congress; agency reports; press releases and issue briefs issued by organizations; and stories appearing in major newspapers and magazines. Most organizations we have identified have extensive web sites on which they include information about their legislative activities. We search not only the web sites of the organizations we interview, but also any other groups that are mentioned. Since groups and agencies may update their web pages periodically, deleting coverage of these issues as time goes by, we copy the full set of our findings on our own computers.

We also gather information about the contribution and lobbying activities of the organizations that are active on each of our issues, regardless of whether they were part of our interview sample. In particular, we gather information about the Political Action Committee (PAC) contributions made by each organization from the contribution files of the Federal Election Commission (FEC). These data will be gathered for the 1997 to 2003 time period. In addition, we plan to obtain the lobbying reports filed by each organization with the Clerk of the House to gather information about how much money the active groups expended on lobbying. Finally, because court cases and rulings are relevant or potentially relevant to a small number of our issues, we also identify whatever court documents (e.g., briefs, rulings) are made public.

As a review of our list of study issues makes plain, this additional data collection varies dramatically in scope from issue to issue. Issues like managed care reform and Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for China are the subject of a voluminous amount of material both from government sources and outside organizations. In contrast, other study issues such as tax concessions related to electric utility restructuring, preventing needlestick injuries, and Medicare payment rates for clinical social workers are the subject of relatively little published material.

Regardless of the amount of information available, our graduate and undergraduate assistants have begun systematically to collect and maintain these data in our web site. For each study issue, the site provides (or will provide, when complete) a narrative overview of the issue that introduces the central appeals and arguments made, the nature of the opposition, the venues of activity, the participants, the advocacy activities, as well as other information. In addition, the site will allow easy access to all of the data we are collecting from public sources. By way of example, consider the issue of how the Medicare program reimburses participating HMOs for treatment of Medicare beneficiaries (part of the "Medicare+Choice" program). This issue is the subject of tremendous importance to those involved, though some of the details are financially complex. Essentially, the issue concerns the problem of reimbursing at a flat rate per patient enrolled, which caused HMOs enrolling primarily healthy populations to earn enormous profits while those serving a more elderly or ill population lost millions of dollars. Congress directed the executive branch to develop a "risk adjuster" mechanism that would more fairly reimburse the participating HMOs for the populations of patients they actually serve, thus avoiding any incentives for the companies to "cream" only the healthiest patients, leaving the sicker ones only in the traditional Medicare program. A visitor to the project web site can read an overview of the

issue, look at the text of twenty-five competing bills on the topic that were introduced, read

fifteen different statements by Members of Congress taken from their web sites or from their

statements in the Congressional Record, read dozens of press releases and documents from the

Health Care Financing Administration explaining the issue, and see statements from a wide

assortment of interest groups ranging from the Urban Institute to the Kaiser Family Foundation

to the American Academy of Actuaries. Our objective in making these data easily accessible is

that they will be a tool for teaching about advocacy and the policy making process, and a tool for

researchers who seek comparable information about the debate and advocacy efforts that

occurred on any one or more of our issues. Students and scholars alike will be able to make their

own comparisons from this full set of lobbying materials about a random sample of issues.

Having explained the process that we are going through, as well as our initial success in

getting responses from those we have sought to interview, we turn in the next section to a brief

discussion of some themes that are emerging from our initial assessments of our interviews. We

focus only on the topic of issue-definition here; in the future we expect to provide more complete

coverage of these issues as well as to discuss a much broader range of issues related to our study.

Some Preliminary Findings on Issue Definition and Lobbying

When this project is complete we expect to code and systematically analyze the numbers and

types of arguments and the kinds of evidence that policy advocates bring to bear on our sample

of issues. We will examine not only how material resources, staff expertise, and lobbying

connections affect advocates' efforts to shape policy outcomes but also how these forces

compare with appealing arguments and evidence in support of one's position. In this section we

present some preliminary notes concerning the question of dimensionality, based on our first

experiences in the construction of these cases. Some of the results are surprising and may affect

how we and others design projects to assess the importance of ideas and dimensionality in the policy process.

Making a decision along a single dimension of choice involves a simple process; one seeks to push the decision to a point as close as possible to one's preference ideal. Making a decision where two dimensions of choice are involved is slightly more complicated, since one's ideal point may be close to a proposal on dimension A, but more distant on dimension B: how does one make the trade-off? Decision-making where many dimensions of choice are in play inevitably involves differential weighting, or paying more attention to one dimension than another. There is little reason to think that individual policymakers change their preferences along single dimensions of choice, at least in the short term. However, they can change the level of attention that they pay to the various dimensions of debate, especially when others around them are doing the same. With these changes in the levels of attention that they pay to different dimensions, their willingness to agree to a given policy proposal may also change. Any instability in issue-definitions, then, can be related to instability in policy outcomes. This is why Riker correctly pointed to the multidimensional nature of most policy debates as a potential source of instability in politics. We have little information, especially of a systematic nature, about how common it is in politics for previously discounted dimensions of discussion to become more prominent, or for outcomes to shift in response to changes in the levels of attention paid to the various dimensions of discussion (cf. Riker 1988; Jones 1994). We hope to provide some of this here.

We can state at the outset two sharply contrasting facts relating to policymaking and lobbying. First, every one of our issues, and probably all issues in government, is at least potentially multi-dimensional and therefore at least harbors the possibility of a destabilizing new

argument. On the other hand, the various dimensions, or elements of debate, are widely known

by all participants and they are typically not subject to dramatic redefinitions at any given time.

In other words, heresthetic maneuvers described by Riker (1986) are not common, despite the

fact that virtually all public policies appear to be potentially multi-dimensional. Why is this the

case? Are institutional procedures the only things that stand between us and a chaotic cycling of

policy preferences? In fact, there are a great number of sources of stability in politics; some of

them institutional but others noninstitutional. We discuss several in turn.

Sources of Stability

Existing programs: The first source of stability in issue-definitions in public policy is very

simple: Almost all lobbying takes place concerning the expansion, restriction, or modification of

an existing government program. Coalitions line up almost automatically based on their support

or opposition to the program in question, and these coalitions are rarely new. Rather, previous

supporters of the program argue for an expansion of it, and opponents continue their opposition;

a great proportion of the cases we have studied involve the expansion or the contraction of an

existing program. This is the trench warfare of the lobbying process, and it is not the stuff of high

rhetorical flourish. Rather, it concerns the long-term and repetitive efforts to establish a case.

Over the long term, that is, across the decades, many of these issues may well be the object of

dramatic redefinitions, but in any given Congress most of the coalitions of support and

opposition are simple recreations of the coalitions that existed the last time.

Budget scoring: The second source of stability, strongly related to the first, is that Washington

policy debates are dominated by budget scoring done by the Congressional Budget Office

(CBO), the Joint Committee on Taxation, or others. Members of Congress are centrally

concerned with constructing the federal budget. Immediately upon presentation of an idea,

Members begin to talk about the costs, and many will react to the issue based solely on this dimension. Costs are narrowly construed, however, to include only costs to the federal budget, and often only to the costs to the part of the federal budget under the jurisdiction of a given committee. Costs to the private sector, to the states and localities, to individuals, or even to other federal programs may or may not become part of the debate; similarly benefits or savings to those groups may or may not be discussed. The one certainty is that budget analysts will estimate the impact of the proposed policy change on the anticipated federal surplus. Obviously, many costly items are accepted, but it can be a daunting legislative task to overcome the initial hurdle of cost.

An example comes from one of the first cases we completed regarding the Medicare payment rate for clinical social workers providing mental health services in nursing homes. For some time, this was a niche service for clinical social workers in that they were more likely than psychiatrists and psychologists to work in nursing homes. Moreover, relative to other potential service providers, the clinical social workers provided the services more cheaply because their Medicare reimbursement rate was less than that of the other potential providers. But language in the 1989 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) and the 1997 Balanced Budget Act (BBA) combined to make it difficult for clinical social workers to continue to be reimbursed by Medicare for the services they provide in nursing homes. Several Members of Congress, administrators at the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) who oversee the Medicare program, clinical social workers, and even psychologists and psychiatrists (the other potential service providers) agreed that the provision of mental health services in nursing homes could be adversely affected by the changes resulting from the language in the BBA and OBRA, and that reductions in service conflicted with the goals of the Medicare program. But when a proposal to

remove the service provision barriers to clinical social workers was presented in Congress, budget scoring had a considerable impact on the decision.

The budgetary dimension of discussion is automatically structured into the process, whereas other elements, such as social benefits must be pushed into the debate through a process that is anything but automatic. Budget analysts ignore the benefits of increased health and well-being to nursing home residents—those have no impact on the budget. Further, they ignore the savings to Medicare from having clinical social workers provide the services rather than psychologists and psychiatrists who are reimbursed at higher rates; the models they used in this case did not include consideration of who provided the service (and at what cost), only whether or not the service was provided. Perhaps most important, they report the proposal as imposing a cost increase on the government (via Medicare) because treatment that is not being provided as a result of the OBRA and BBA legislation would be provided if the change were made. A sick person not receiving needed (and Medicare-covered) treatment poses no costs to Medicare. We can be certain, in other words, that in a case like this (and we have several in our sample), costs will be automatically included; benefits may or may not be. The job of the advocates in and out of government who favor the change is more difficult as a result. Often what they need to do is to raise the visibility of the issue (more on that below).

In the case of the clinical social workers, this group had some success in raising public and congressional awareness of the benefits of the mental health services they provide to the elderly, and they made a strong case that the current exclusion of their services was the result of an inadvertent error in the previous legislation. (Staffers had taken a list of service providers from legislation dealing with hospitals and included it here in legislation dealing with nursing homes; no one from the clinical social work community was involved or aware of this change at

the time.) Despite some success in raising awareness of their issue, and in spite of the admission by congressional staff that the policy probably was adopted in error, the social workers were still faced with the problem of overcoming the problem of the budget scoring.

No new arguments: Third in our list of reasons for policy stability is that Washington is full of policy experts, staff members, and advocates who already know the ins and outs of many programs in government. There are few novel arguments to those in the know. Redefinition occurs when groups not previously aware of the program, or not as familiar with it, begin to take an interest. This means, as Schattschneider (1975) made plain, that agenda-setting and raising awareness of issues to new constituencies is fundamental to the process of issue-definition. But attracting the attention of new groups of policymakers is itself a difficult task, far beyond the lobbying capacities of many groups. So another source of stability is simply that those involved in the program are not novices; they already know the arguments. Moreover, they interact regularly with other policymakers and organizational advocates who also know the arguments.

Expectations matter: Policymakers and lobbyists alike prefer to spend their time on issues where their involvement may make a difference. Therefore, any widely perceived perception that an issue is "not going to move" can be a self-fulfilling prophecy; this is our fourth source of stability (and fifth source of potential instability, below). Groups must be prepared to lay the ground-work for change over the years, but they must also understand that important allies with many potential issues to work on will choose or be forced to work on those issues that are "moving." If all the Washington policymakers are basing their behaviors on the expected behaviors of others, then two outcomes are possible. For most issues, most of the time, there will be no reason for any but the usual suspects to get involved, and the issue will be stable. By the same token, for some issues at any given time, there may well be a perception that the issue is

"moving" and a rapid succession of new participants may suddenly get involved. This cascade of new involvement can be of two types, however. It may either be a cascade of enthusiasm for change that will sweep away an established way of thinking about the issue, or it may be a counter-mobilization of defenders of the status quo who recognize that their issue is under serious attack. We observe both responses to the observation that others are getting involved in the issue; generally this works to reinforce stability, but we will also revisit this process in the section below on instability and dramatic change.

Scarcity of agenda space: It is clear from much of the above that if a proponent of change can draw sufficient attention to their issue, pushing it out of the confines of those habitually involved in making decisions in this area, then many of the sources of stability listed here may not apply. Participants (or the general public) may not be so familiar with previously used arguments or their faults, attention may not focus just on a particular program, but on the issue more generally, and budget issues may be overshadowed by attention to social problems that need to be solved. But getting to the top of the political agenda is easier said than done. Many of our cases involve situations where relatively poorly organized or organizationally weak professional communities would likely prevail if their issue were suddenly catapulted to the nation's newspapers. But this process is neither easily controlled nor inexpensive to manipulate. Further, it is not a guarantee of success, as noted in the discussion of the expectations of others above. Sometimes, increased attention brings a counter-mobilization by opponents that in the long term could be more harm than good. In any case, Baumgartner and Leech's (2001) study of 137 cases of lobbying activities showed that the top 5 percent of the issues accounted for more than 45 percent of the lobbying, whereas the bottom 50 percent of the issues accounted for less than 3 percent of the total. Most cases of lobbying fall well below the high public agenda. The simple scarcity of the

agenda constitutes our fifth source of stability. One lobbyist for a major trade union described to us how, against their wishes, they had spent about half of their total lobbying resources over three years working to oppose just three issues in Congress: China Trade, FastTrack trading authority, and NAFTA. With so many resources being expended on just one issue each year, it is clear that remaining resources were stretched thin; resources that could have been used to push more labor-oriented issues to the fore if they had been available.

Procedural controls: A sixth important finding is that efforts at redefining issues can be squelched by government leaders with control over procedural issues. The President and the leaders of the House and Senate are often able to structure legislative debates in such ways as to avoid certain arguments, or to make them more difficult for their opponents to make credibly. As those who can set and control the rules of play, these governmental leaders have many advantages; for a lobbyist, the value of having close relations with the highest leaders of government could not be clearer (see Arnold 1990; Shepsle 1979). A simple example comes from the China trade disputes in the last Congress. China's admittance to the World Trade Organization (WTO) was out of Congress' hands in any case; Congress regularly passes MFN status in its annual votes; supporters present the idea of granting PNTR to China in several important ways. First, since China is expected to gain entry into the WTO, to vote against PNTR is to fight a battle that has already been lost or which in any case does not involve the US Congress; China's involvement in the world economy is inevitable; the vote for PNTR is simply a part of that. Second, since MFN status passes by large margins, the movement to PNTR is consistent with most Members' previous votes and avoids a costly, time-consuming, and potentially damaging annual ritual. Much of the value of these arguments comes from proper timing. The administration first worked in international institutions and multilateral trade

organizations concerning China trade and then only after that was accomplished did the

legislative battle begin. By controlling the timing of the debates, supporters of PNTR were able

to make the debate seem superfluous. Of course there are counter-arguments, but our

respondents among the environmentalists and the labor unions opposed to PNTR expressed their

frustrations at the powerful agenda-setting tools at the disposal of the administration and the

leaders of Congress. Control of procedures and rules can be a powerful in promoting the issue-

definitions that government leaders prefer; this may or may not work to enhance stability,

depending on the preferences of those in positions of institutional control, of course (Riker 1986;

Shepsle 1979).

Redefinitions take time: One last element concerning stability is simply that redefinitions may

not typically occur within the time frame of a single year or a single Congress. Intervening

elections often change the set of gate-keepers. In any case, while change may occur at any rate,

the longer one's time frame the greater one's chances of observing more examples of successful

redefinitions.

Having discussed a preliminary set of reasons why we observe so much stability in

government, let us turn to some reasons why this does not tell the entire story.

Sources of Instability

Every issue has the potential for redefinition: First, each of our cases is multi-dimensional.

There is no case in our sample, and probably none in government, where all agree that there is

only a single way of describing what is at stake. This fact alone means that issues will constantly

be the objects of serious argumentation and that, occasionally at least, new pieces of evidence,

changing social mores, journalistic investigations, political campaigns, or even old fashioned

political leadership may lead to dramatic shifts in how we justify our policies and therefore which policies are justified.

Participation is not set in stone; Elections (sometimes) matter: A second element of potential change in policymaking is that, even if most of those involved in a policy debate are long-standing experts in the area, change does occur. New interest groups grow and assert themselves, powerful groups from other areas find a reason they should become involved in the issue, etc. Most importantly, elections that change the levers of power in the executive or legislative branch can lead to dramatic changes as committee chairs rotate and administrative departments are staffed by different sets of individuals. If nothing else, these individuals often have a desire to find a policy—any policy—that sets their regime apart from that of their predecessor.

The importance of government officials (procedural controls revisited): A third element of potential instability deals with the same procedural controls that we discussed in the section on stability. Where government officials themselves are part of the coalition pushing for change, then these procedural can be put to use. Close connections between lobbyists and the leaders of the major congressional committees, the leadership of the House and the Senate, and within the executive branch are therefore important potential resources in any lobbying campaign. These procedural controls can be used to push for change just as they can be used to work against it.

The importance of government officials (agenda-setting revisited): If we discussed in the section on stability how difficult it is for groups to set the agenda, it is relatively easy for certain government officials to do so; our fourth source of instability. Of course none works fully alone and all would like to see their policies successfully enacted, so few desire to raise issues that have no chance of success. Still, the activities of certain government leaders are considered newsworthy and the prominent support of a committee chair, party leader, or cabinet official can

be enough to push an issue up on the agenda. Certainly, getting the attention and support of these officials can be easier said than done, but for those groups who have close connections with government officials themselves, their resources and effectiveness can be multiplied many fold.

One lesson of these two last points is the importance of close connections between lobbyists outside of government and those inside. Lobbyists themselves have little ability to set the agenda, and none to affect the procedural rules of Congress or the executive branch. With allies in leadership positions within government, on the other hand, coalitions can be extremely powerful. Studies of interest groups cannot overlook the activities of their allied governmental coalition partners (see Hall 2000).

Expectations matter: A fifth, and perhaps the most important, element that provides the possibility for dramatic change is that much of what lobbyists choose to do is based on their expectations of how others will behave. It is difficult to underestimate the importance to the behavior of one policymaker of that person's expectations of the reactions of others. A good example comes from a recent EPA decision to enact new, tougher, standards for the sulfur content of gasoline. There was little to indicate that EPA would adopt a particularly tough standard on this issue a few years ago. However, research increasingly showed that cleaner burning engines could be made most efficiently if the fuel recipe were changed dramatically to lower the content of sulfur. Advocates for the change, including an odd alliance of environmentalists and the automobile industry, laid the groundwork for change by getting key Members of Congress to signal to the EPA that they would support a change. EPA officials were not convinced that this should be the issue that they would focus on, but after seeing the technical evidence and the demonstrations of a strong coalition of support in Congress, they decided to make it a major environmental thrust. President Clinton signed the regulations in

December 1999 lowering the sulfur content in gasoline to one-tenth the previously accepted level. There were debates, of course, but the interesting thing about this issue is that virtually no one was aware of the importance of sulfur in gasoline just a few years before. Environmentalists did not focus on it particularly, and industry researchers had not developed a consensus that it mattered more than other things. When this research came to light, however, environmental groups were careful to build a strong coalition by convincing each other first that this fight was winnable; only by convincing others that there was a strong possibility of success would others find it useful or worthwhile to become involved. The expectation of success created a self-reinforcing process that quite rapidly led to a large coalition of environmentalists, and the support of the automobile industry changed the dynamics in Congress dramatically. From the perspective of EPA as well, these developments also signaled that Congress would not raise a massive fight on the issue, and any administrator should be anxious to provide popular and successful reforms for which the President can claim credit. From a little known issue a few years ago, this case led to a dramatic reform. Further, the petroleum industry strongly opposed the issue, and one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington appears to have been a clear loser here. The process of policy change resulted from many things, but of particular importance here seems to have been the expectation of success. Lobbyists prefer spending their time on issues that may really be going somewhere. (Even in losing, expectations mattered; the oil industry did not fight this issue as strongly as it might have. Perhaps they knew they had a losing issue here and made the strategic decision not to waste resources on a fight that was not likely to be won.) Thinking about these considerations of expected success helps explain why issues in Washington can suddenly become "hot."

Expectations of success matter greatly to members of various Washington constituencies. When first faced with the PNTR battle, labor union lobbyists explained that their most immediate problem was to overcome an expectation that they had no chance of victory. Because the annual vote on China's Most Favored Nation (MFN) status was typically lopsided, and because many of those they hoped would oppose PNTR had a record of supporting MFN, they first had to explain that one was not a precedent for the other. This was both in terms of the logic of the vote, so no individual Member would appear to be inconsistent, but also and at least as importantly, in terms of the expected outcome. If people expected that the vote would be lopsided, they would not want to waste their efforts in a losing battle. It takes a lot of resources, and a lot of coalition-building, for a group to demonstrate that an issue is going to be close. Once others know it is going to be close, the dynamics can change dramatically.

The importance of the expected behavior of others in determining the behavior of so many policymakers should make clear that when redefinitions do occur there will rarely be one heroic individual responsible for the policy change. Riker (1986) describes the case of Warren Magnuson, a senator from Washington State who opposed the Defense Department's plans to move nerve gas from an overseas base to his state, and he notes with respect how Magnuson was able to convince his colleagues that the issue at stake was not which state gets the nerve gas, but rather the Senate's right to ratify treaties. His research into the issue showed him that bringing this material back from the overseas base where it had been stored was in fact a change in the nature of the treaty relationship with that country, and he pointed out to his colleagues that the administration had not properly consulted with the Senate on this issue. Now obviously the expected outcome of a group of senators voting on their own prerogatives to ratify treaties is quite different from the expected outcome on a vote concerning the first issue, and Magnuson

may be remembered for this brilliant heresthetic maneuver. But how common are such dramatic arguments in the legislative process? Our study is leading to a conclusion that the short-term redefinition of an issue during legislative debate is exceedingly rare. Redefinitions occur, but they take longer and are rarely the result of one heroic entrepreneur. Rather, they are more often the result of widely shared and widely viewed changes in how entire policy communities view a given issue.

Conclusion

We have found in our preliminary look at our random sample of cases of lobbying activities that even if all our issues harbor the possibility of debates over their most proper issue-definitions that such debates are rare. More precisely the debates may well occur, but they are time worn and rarely subject to dramatic change. When change occurs, it often comes from a large-scale revision on how the entire Washington community thinks about the issue. Further, when it does occur, the results can be dramatic and long lasting. In any given Congress there may be few, if any, issues that are the objects of dramatic changes; most lobbying efforts, most of the time, involve "three yards and a cloud of dust." Over the longer term, however, there are a great number of changes in Washington understandings of various policies, and the continued efforts by those involved to gather support, to generate statistics, and to build a coalition for their way of thinking of things can have dramatic consequences. We hope in this project to demonstrate the limits and the possibilities of lobbying and persuasion. To note that there are many sources of stability in politics is not new. We hope to bring the study of the content of the arguments that lobbyists and policy advocates use back to the center of what we collectively analyze. Though there are a great number of sources of stability in the policy process, we need to understand what causes them as well as what causes the possibility of dramatic restructurings in some few cases

each year. These rare but fundamental processes should not be our exclusive focus of attention: they are quite atypical after all. However, a complete understanding of lobbying and advocacy must explain both the typical and mundane aspects of lobbying for the status quo as well as those more extraordinary cases where dramatic redefinitions occur.

Our challenge in this research project is to understand the forces that constrain and facilitate interest groups' efforts to redefine issues and to affect government policy in a random sample of issues. Many scholars have noted the importance of issue-definition in explaining policy change, but few have studied how it is done (for an exception see McKissick 1997). Our collective knowledge about the interrelationships among lobbying, issue-definition, and policy change is sparse. As is appropriate in such a circumstance, our project has cast a very wide net in the search for information about the importance of evidence and argument in the lobbying process. We are using interviews, documents, and the public record to begin to map out the relative attention paid to various arguments and pieces of evidence in our sample of issues. Some of these issues are highly visible public controversies (trade with China, health care reform), while others are very small in scale, involving little or no controversy or opponents (one of our issues, retention of a particular defense-budget line-item, involves so few players that we cannot be more specific about it without revealing the identity of our issue identifier). Our resulting data sets will allow the systematic comparison of the use of evidence and arguments in the lobbying process across both groups and issues.

This project is feasible in part because five researchers agreed to work together to complete it. Political scientists are much less likely to collaborate on large research projects like this one than are scientists in many of the physical sciences, or scientists whose work requires them to share research sites (e.g. archeologists). But we believe that the field of political science

would be the richer if more colleagues agreed to work together on larger-scale projects. The field of voting behavior would certainly look much different if not for the largest of the large-scale political science projects, the National Election Studies. While interest group scholars certainly cannot replicate that particular model, large-scale projects on a more modest scale are feasible. Our project could not reach its expected scope with fewer primary researchers to conduct interviews, oversee the collection of data from secondary sources, and supervise student coders. With two years of the project under our belts and with approximately half of our initial interviews completed, we are more convinced than ever that such a large project can work smoothly.

The databases resulting from this project will fuel not only our own research, but that of others as well. By making each of the case studies as well as a summary set of statistical indicators available over the Web, we hope to generate more interest in the study of lobbying behavior and to provide the empirical backbone on which much further research can be based. We also expect that these case studies will prove useful as teaching tools, used to illustrate concepts about advocacy and policymaking. We hope to demonstrate not only that one can study issue-definition, argumentation, and the substance of the work done by lobbyists and policy advocates in Washington in a systematic manner, but also that research in many areas of political science can be done in a larger scale and in a more collaborative manner than has typically been done in the past. Along the way we hope to bring the study of groups back to the core of the study of politics and public policy, where it belongs.

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