

## **Where is the Public in Public Policy?**

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### **Abstract**

We explore the possibility of public participation in the broader political system through an analysis of the Washington lobbying system. Many scholars before us have noted the biases of the interest-group system. We explore some new issues focusing on the limited agenda-setting potential of most public-oriented interest groups. Citizens' groups, and the public as a whole, face decreasing opportunities to play a role in many Washington debates. One of the central reasons for this is the increasingly crowded nature of the American public agenda. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of a great many new issues on the public agenda, and that agenda is now much more densely packed with issues vying for space and attention. This has increased the cost of pushing issues high to the public consciousness, limiting the abilities of groups to bring important issues to the forefront of public discussion. Public participation in the affairs of government is far from absent; however, our analysis indicates that it is limited to a tiny fraction of the issues that are acted upon each year. Most analyses of public participation in politics focus on elections or community based activities. A complete understanding of public participation must at some point address the linkages, or lack thereof, between the public and the Washington lobbying community. Lobbyists and policy advocates of all stripes constantly appeal to the public in various ways; understanding how the public becomes involved in some policy disputes but not others must be an important agenda item for the future.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The pluralist ideal of fair and equal representation through interest groups has long been seen to be a chimera. Scholars have repeatedly found that the U.S. interest group system is dominated by business and professional organizations at the expense of consumers and social interests (Schlozman and Tierney 1986, Walker 1991, Leech 1998, Baumgartner and Leech 1999b). Most organizations active in lobbying are institutions, not membership organizations (Salisbury 1984), and within the minority of interest groups that include individuals as members, the membership rolls are disproportionately comprised of the wealthier, more educated segments of society who participate primarily by writing an annual check (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 62-64, 340). Even these more well-to-do members are not necessarily heeded by their organizations, as studies have found significant gaps between the views of members and of leaders (Luttbeg and Zeigler 1966, Knoke 1990, Rothenberg 1991). Schattschneider pointed out in 1960 that the heavenly chorus sings with an upper class accent; Olson in 1965 showed mathematically why it would always be so.

Despite the distance between reality and the pluralist heaven, the potential for interest groups and group membership to contribute positively to the democratic process remains. Berry (1997, 1999) and Mansbridge (1992) both note the central role of interest groups as providers of information in the political process. Mansbridge argues that if the information-providing, educational aspects of interest groups could be emphasized, the deliberative process so central to a democracy could be enhanced. Scholars have noted previously that interest groups provide

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information to members of Congress and to the media, essentially subsidizing the political activities of those actors (Bauer Pool, and Dexter 1963, Hecllo 1978, Gandy 1982, Hall 1999, 2000, Hall and Miler 2000). In doing so, they also (directly or indirectly through the media) subsidize information that the public receives about political issues. Interest group representatives are full-time, paid experts in specific policy areas, albeit experts with a particular viewpoint to espouse. Members of Congress, journalists, and the public are much less likely to have the time or the ability to focus on a single area. Information collected by interest groups often informs debate and directs attention to particular problems.

The most important way—as far as public participation is concerned—that interest groups use their informational advantage is through the use of conflict expansion. Some of the greatest changes in post-war policy, such as the civil rights acts of the 1960s and the rise of environmental issues to the forefront of public controversy, have resulted from conflict expansion processes in which issues once absent from the public agenda have become the object of media coverage, social involvement, and finally, government action. Schattschneider's classic work on these processes (1960) remains one of the most important and insightful discussions of the potential role of public participation in American democracy. Schattschneider argued that groups and political parties are central to the ways in which conflicts over public policy are expanded from the restricted set of elites who may follow them professionally, and who often have an important vested stake in the issues at hand, to the broader public, who typically are not involved, but whose attention occasionally may be captured by an issue. When issues expand from the “normal politics” of lobbying, inside-the-beltway deals, and other characteristics of what political scientists used to call iron triangles, to the “grand politics” of electoral campaigns, media slogans, and the arousal of public passions, many things are altered. Most importantly, the

public can become directly involved in the policy process through contacts of public officials and indirectly through the expectations and fears of elected officials anticipating the next campaign.

The public can play an important role in issues that come to its attention, but only on such issues.

It is important to recognize that conflict expansion is broader than a simple mobilization of members. While some survey research indicates that direct requests for political involvement precede fewer than half of the political acts that people undertake (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 137), other research indicates that direct mobilizations by interest groups were a prime factor in mobilizing citizen calls and letters in several national lobbying campaigns (Goldstein 1999). Conflict expansion, however, would include not only direct requests for action (such as writing a letter to a government official or participating in a protest), but also an interest group or groups' efforts to publicize a problem, to introduce it as a topic worthy of public debate, and to spur others (groups, individuals, government officials) to become involved. These are outside lobbying campaigns, broadly construed (see Kollman 1998). Schattschneider (1960) notes that for some participants, expansion helps their cause; for other participants (those who had the upper hand to start), restricting the scope of conflict would be preferable. Schattschneider calls democratic government "the greatest single instrument for the socialization of conflict" (13), and yet notes that conflict in this country often is controlled by keeping an issue "so private that it is almost completely invisible" (7).

Public participation, of course, cannot occur on policy issues that are invisible, and so the process of conflict expansion is central to the involvement of the public in public policy and central to our discussion in this paper. Of course interest groups are not the only political actors with the desire or ability to expand conflict, but in practice they are virtually always inextricably bound up in these processes. It therefore is crucial to consider the circumstances under which

many interest groups are active in the policymaking process and those on which few groups, or only a solitary group, are involved. When there are few groups, conflict can be constrained and politics can be conducted out of view of the public eye. When there are many groups, conflict and at least some public discussion are all but inevitable. In this paper we therefore explore the impact of public participation on the broader political system through an analysis of the Washington lobbying system. We will show the limited agenda-setting potential of most public-oriented interest groups because of the increasingly crowded nature of the American public agenda, and demonstrate how few of the issues on which organized interests are involved in Washington actually involve any public awareness, let alone any public participation.

### **Representation and Participation through the National Group System**

Political scientists since the turn of the century have repeatedly noted the vast proliferation of interest groups in Washington, and in recent decades it has become common to refer to the interest group “explosion” of the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Schlozman and Tierney 1986, Walker 1991, Berry 1997, and for a discussion of earlier interest group booms, Petracca 1992, 11–13). An overall growth in the number and type of groups in the system does not necessarily lead in an increase in pluralist balance, however. Browne (1990) and Gray and Lowery (1996) have found that despite the proliferation of groups, on some issues there is much less interest group activity—indeed, interest groups may gravitate toward issue niches in which no other organized interests are active. This finding has significant anti-democratic implications. A narrow interest group that is active on an issue that attracts other interest groups, media coverage, and public attention will find it difficult to wield any influence unless its position is a popular one. On the other hand, an interest group that finds a quiet policy corner in which to request the

insertion of a few lines of legislative language may find that its influence is quite substantial, regardless of whether its wishes are in the public interest.

This power through restriction of conflict is the dominant theme running throughout the subgovernment literature of past decades (e.g. Maas 1951, Cater 1964, Freeman 1955, Fritschler 1975). The relationships within subgovernments are by definition symbiotic: what is good for the interest groups is also good for the congressional committees and the agencies involved. Any conflict that exists is suppressed because participants fear that the beneficial relationships could disappear if the Congress as a whole or the broader public became involved in the dispute. Scholars operating within the subsystem perspective routinely described the interest groups involved as powerful and successful at achieving their goals; studies of political campaign donations have been much less likely to conclude that interest groups wielded significant influence (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998, Chapter 7). Of course a significant difference between the two traditions is that conflict was restricted in virtually all of the cases considered by the subsystem researchers, while many of the cases considered by the PAC researchers involved significant expansions of conflict. Not surprisingly, interest groups that give PAC donations seem to be more successful when the case is of low salience—that is, when the general public is not involved in the dispute (see Evans 1986, Jones and Keiser 1987, Neustadt 1990).

The idea that organized interests that represent businesses are far more prevalent than interest groups that represent citizens is well established in the literature. What is not well-established is how often issues do in fact involve interest group competition and conflict expansion compared with how often a lack of competition and niche or subsystem-type politics is the case. There have been a few attempts to address this question. For example, Walker (1991) asked respondents to his 1980 survey whether there were any other groups with which the

respondent group “finds itself in disagreement or opposition?” More than 70 percent of the citizen groups and groups representing the profit sector said yes (as opposed to about 40 percent for the nonprofit sector and mixed-sector groups). Of course, we still cannot tell what proportion of policymaking in Washington is subject to interest group competition, since most of the groups that answered yes to Walker’s question would likely face opposition on some types of issues but not others. Browne (1990, 1995) found that the agricultural groups he studied tended to choose niche issues that were followed by few other interest groups and virtually none of the public. Browne challenged the assumption that a greater number of interest groups necessarily leads to any sort of pluralist equilibrium across issues. His research found that 92 percent of the 402 issues he studied “affect only ... a specific commodity, product, or stage in the food and fiber delivery process” (1990, 488) and that most groups focused their energies on these narrow issues and attempted to avoid conflict. These findings are provocative, and prompt one to ask whether they may be generalized to other policy domains. Agriculture, after all, is a policy domain that, like defense, is unusual in that most of the participants share a basic ideological outlook—that is, that agricultural programs and payments are beneficial—rather than facing the more divisive ideological splits that one might find in labor or health policy.

Of course, maximum public involvement on all issues may not be the best system of policymaking; we live in a representative democracy, not a direct one. In addition, public attitudes can be affected by spending, media and public relations campaigns, and other behaviors (see Gerber 1999), and studies of outside lobbying campaigns have often pointed to cases in which grassroots campaigns led to outcomes of questionable policy benefit (e.g. the Catastrophic Health Insurance debacle of 1989, described in Kollman 1998, 28-33). But if the interest group system is dominated by business and occupational interests and those with higher socioeconomic



status, as all surveys of interest groups and mass participation indicate that it is, then certainly more transparency and more public attention rather than less is desirable. Kollman's (1998) study of fifty interest group's lobbying activities on seventy-seven policy issues indicates that groups are more likely to wage outside lobbying campaigns—that is, to expand the arena of conflict—if general public opinion is on their side. This is still not a process unbiased by resources (the groups with more resources are also more likely to wage such campaigns), but it is a process that at least begins to involve the public.

### **The Increasingly Crowded Public Agenda**

The public agenda today is increasingly crowded; many interests have been successful in pressing issues onto the agenda of the federal government. This has many implications for governance, as controversies are more common and a greater number of issues attract the attention of a greater number of federal, state, and local authorities. However, it also has great implications for public involvement; the public is at once more involved in a greater number of issues and less involved in the typical issue before government. We will explain this connection in a later section. First, we document the rise of new issues and the crowding effect on the public agenda, using data from Baumgartner and Jones' Policy Agendas Project (complete documentation for these data, as well as downloadable versions of the datasets themselves, are available at: <http://depts.washington.edu/ampol/agendasproject.html>).

A simple way to document the rise of new issues is simply to count the number of issues that gain some minimum amount of attention per year. The Policy Agendas data are organized by nineteen major topic areas (macroeconomics, civil rights, health care, agriculture, labor, energy...) and each of these major topic areas is further subdivided into a number of more

precise subtopics. In all, we have 225 subtopics. Figure 1 shows the number of subtopics that were the subject of at least five hearings in each year from 1947 to 1993.

(Figure 1 about here)

Beginning in the mid-1960s, congressional attention expanded significantly in to a great number of issue-areas that had previously not been the focus of much official attention. Before that date, only about sixty of the 225 subtopics were the object of five hearings in any given year; by the 1980s, over 120 were regularly the object of at least that amount of attention. (Some of this increase is certainly due to the greater number of congressional hearings over the years. This increase in institutional capacity is itself a reaction to the press of new issues, however, so we report the raw numbers rather than percentages. However, even the percentages show a similar if not identical trend, as we will show below.) If one considers that five hearings on a given topic represents a rough indicator that that issue is on the government's agenda, then by this measure the size of the government agenda roughly doubled from the 1960s to the 1980s. Other measures of the agenda provide slightly different estimates of exactly by how much the agenda has grown, but all show an increase in its size.

Not only are more issues on the public agenda now than there were two generations ago, but these issues cover a more diverse set of topics: The agenda is bigger and more diverse at the same time. Using the Policy Agendas datasets, we can construct a simple indicator of the concentration of attention across issue-areas. Dividing attention into nineteen major topics of attention rather than the 225 subtopics as in Figure 1, we can show the increasing spread of attention over time. Figure 2 shows the increasingly diverse nature of the agenda by showing a Hirsch index of concentration. Low numbers on the index indicate a concentration of attention in a small number of the nineteen topic areas; higher numbers indicate a more even

spread of attention across all the topics. The figure shows data for stories in the CQ Almanac (weighted by the length of the story); congressional hearings (weighted by the number of days for each hearing); *New York Times* stories (including only those stories mentioning government actions or public policy issues, about one-third of all stories); and public laws (excluding commemorative statutes). The four series show a similar pattern: from an early post-war pattern of great concentration of attention in just a few issue areas, attention in each dataset became more evenly spread across all the issues over time. (Figure 1 shows a characteristic saw-tooth pattern relating to the tendency of Congress to hold more hearings in the first year of a two-year term than in the second; in order to smooth these out we present the data by Congress rather than by year in Figure 2. The two figures present data covering the same time period, however.)

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure 1 showed the rise of many new issues in the congressional hearings dataset. Figure 2 shows clearly that four different indicators of the diversity of the public agenda over the entire post-war period exhibit the same trends: from an early post-war period of concentrated attention in just a few issue-areas, attention and activities have increasingly been spread more evenly across the full range of topics we have traced. Considering just the dataset on public laws gives an idea of the underlying data that result in the trend shown in Figure 2: More than 60 percent of all non-commemorative laws in the 80<sup>th</sup> Congress were in the areas of public lands (29 percent of the total), government operations (14 percent), and defense (18 percent); the remaining sixteen major topics of attention accounted for less than 40 percent of the total legislative output. By the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, the three largest categories represented only 45 percent of the total; attention was spread much more evenly across the areas—the result of increased levels of activity in a great number of areas such as health care, transportation, energy, the environment, and business

regulation that were previously not the subject of extensive governmental activity. (For a similar analysis based on hearings rather than statutes, see Baumgartner, Jones, and MacLeod 2000.)

Using the datasets on congressional hearings, we can show the rise of new issues quite clearly; these data correspond closely to what the statutes datasets also indicate. Figure 3 shows the rise of four new issues on the congressional agenda. Environmental regulation, domestic commerce, health care, and foreign trade have grown from representing 10 to 15 percent of the congressional agenda as measured by hearings in the first decade after World War II to a situation where today they combine to account for almost 40 percent of the congressional agenda. Health care alone has grown from 1 or 2 percent in the early years to about 10 percent of the total.

(Figure 3 about here)

The rise of new issues results from a complex process that typically includes popular pressure, interest group activism, and broad political campaigning. For the most part, the rise of new issues on the governmental agenda has not been at the expense of those issues Congress has always dealt with: agriculture, defense, public lands, and government operations. Rather than displacing these items on the agenda, the agenda has simply been expanded. Government has grown more complex, Congress has added staff and committees, and a number of other institutional changes have taken place in order to accommodate the crush of new issues onto the public agenda. Figure 4 provides a comparison of the proportion of the hearings in Congress accounted for by each of the nineteen major topic areas. It shows a simple pie-chart for the first five Congresses in the dataset, and the last five. A simple glance at the two figures suggests the degree to which the agenda has grown more diverse.

(Figure 4 about here)

The public agenda at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was substantially larger and more diverse than it was after World War II. This was the result of the growth of many important social movements and was accelerated and sustained by the growth of government itself. The very size and diversity of the public agenda has important implications for the nature of public involvement, however. We turn to these questions in the next section.

### **Public Participation On and Off the Agenda**

Many new issues are the objects of government attention. Where does the public fit in?

Paradoxically, the rise of new issues, which occurred in large part because of the efforts of diverse social movements to force government to pay attention to their needs and demands, may make it harder for the public to have an impact on public policy, either directly through broad national debates or indirectly through groups or elected officials who may represent them. As the governmental agenda has become ever more crowded with issues, an ever-smaller proportion of those issues are the subjects of serious national debates. This increasing crowded agenda has helped spur even greater interest group formation, creating a crowding effect that seriously compromises the ability of any one group to push an issue to the forefront of public discussion. And despite the oft-cited “explosion” of citizen- and consumer-oriented groups in the 1960s and 1970s, the vast majority of interest groups at both the state and national levels represent business and professional interests. In fact, we will show here that public-oriented interest groups are in the distinct minority even on those issues that are the object of much public discussion, but they are almost completely shut out of the policy process on less publicized issues. These more private issues constitute the vast bulk of the instances of lobbying in Washington.

Here we make use of Baumgartner and Leech’s Lobbying Disclosure data set. The Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 required enhanced reporting of lobbying activities by interest

groups, closing many of the loopholes that had existed with all previous attempts to require lobbying registrations on a national scale. We obtained a full set of reports for the December 31, 1996, filing period, comprising more than 19,000 reports from lobbying organizations active during the last six months of that year (see Baumgartner and Leech 1999a, 1999b, 2000 for fuller discussions of this data source). The overall levels of business bias and skew that we find in these reports are similar to but stronger than what has been found in previous studies. Others have previously made the point that lobbying activities are skewed by the sector of the economy from which a group comes: public interest groups, citizens' groups, social movement organizations, and labor unions are vastly outnumbered by business and occupational interests. Rather than reiterate this point, we note here how lobbying activities and participation in the policy process are skewed by issue: A tiny fraction of the issues elicit the vast majority of the lobbying. The small number of issues on which hundreds and thousands of lobbyists sometimes get involved are the same ones that become the subject of mass media and public attention. On these issues, the public has the potential to have its voice heard, though certainly no guarantee that its views will carry the day. However, most issues are not the objects of much lobbying activity, and on the vast bulk of issues on which some lobbyists are active, public-oriented lobbying is virtually absent. Let us turn to the data.

Figure 5 presents the distribution of lobby registration reports across a randomly chosen sample of 142 issues. Each lobbying organization that registers under the Lobby Registration Act is required to list the issues on which it was active. In the 19,692 reports, lobbying organizations listed 29,892 separate issue-mentions (note that this is not the same as 29,892 issues, since each issue may be mentioned many times within the list). We randomly selected 200 issues from this long list of issue-mentions. This sampling procedure ensured that we would have a sample of

lobbying issues weighted by the amount of lobbying that took place on those issues. That is, an issue that was mentioned 100 times by many different groups would be in our sampling frame 100 times and would therefore have that many more chances of being included in our sample than an issue that was mentioned only once by a single group. Our sample, therefore, consists of a random selection of cases of lobbying activity.

For each issue that was chosen, we identified the nature of the issue by finding it in the *CQ Almanac* or through a legislative search in the Library of Congress' Thomas web site. This led to the creation of a list of keywords and search strings, including bill numbers and regulation numbers. We used these search strings to scan our database to identify all other registrants who also mentioned being active on that issue. After deleting duplicate entries (that is, where the same issue appeared more than once in our sample of 200 issues), we were left with a sample of 142 issues. Below we report information on the nature of participation on this sample of issues (we present more detail on this in Baumgartner and Leech 2000, including the full list of issues in our sample).

Under the Lobbying Disclosure Act, groups active in lobbying on a given issue must file a report for their own activities in each of 73 different issue-areas as defined by Congress. In addition, any public relations or lobbying firms that an interest group has hired must file separate reports in each category on the group's behalf. Therefore, the same group can sometimes have multiple mentions of the same issue. We treat these multiple mentions as a rough indicator of the intensity of lobbying in each case: in cases with only a few reports filed, we know that the issue did not attract the attention of many lobbyists. In those cases with hundreds of reports filed, we can be sure that not only were there many different groups involved, but also that a subset of these groups also hired professional lobbying firms to help them and devoted many staff

members to the issue, increasing the likelihood that they would file multiple reports on the same issue. Figure 5 presents the number of lobby registration reports filed in each of our 142 issues.

(Figure 5 about here)

Figure 5 shows that two issues (defense appropriations and the Budget Reconciliation Act) attracted more than 1,000 lobby registrations; that seven issues (including health care reform, Superfund, and the Small Business Protection Act) attracted more than 500 registrations; and in general the figure shows a pattern of extreme skew in the distribution of lobbying across issues. In fact, the top 5 percent of the issues attract 40 percent of the lobbying activities; the top 10 percent of the issues, 58 percent of the lobbying; and the top 50 percent of the issues, 97 percent of the lobbying. (Counting the number of lobbyists rather than the number of registrations shows a similarly skewed pattern of participation across the issues; for full details see Baumgartner and Leech 2000.)

Lobbying in the cases where hundreds of other lobbyists are involved differs in many ways from lobbying alone. First of all, public attention is much more likely to focus on the cases of active involvement of so many lobbyists: these are the objects of newspaper coverage, public pronouncements by major political leaders, and active public pressure to push policy in one direction or another. How would we characterize lobbying in the majority of cases, however? In these cases, not only are members of the public rarely concerned or knowledgeable, which should come as no surprise, but their interest group representatives are absent as well. Table 1 shows the types of lobbying organizations involved in our 142 cases, showing the types of lobbying organizations present by the total number of lobbyists active on the issue.

(Table 1 about here)



Whether we look at numbers of interest groups or the numbers of registrations, clearly, the distribution of lobbying activity across our sample of issues is quite skewed. The vast majority of the lobbying occurs in a tiny fraction of the issues. Conversely, in the vast bulk of the issues on which interest groups are active, they have the grounds relatively to themselves. Twenty-two cases were mentioned only by a single interest group. In nine of those cases the issue could be characterized as particularistic—for example, obtaining permission for a client to do business in China. The remaining thirteen cases were significantly broader, however, including such substantive issues such as how to handle cesium waste and wildlife refuges for non-game animals. Even issues such as a proposal to lift export limitations on some types of Alaskan crude oil, changes to the student loan system, and a proposal to reorganize the federal home loan banking system attracted just three to five registered interest groups in 1996.

Several features are clear from Table 1. Most important, the data show that business advantage, while great overall, is even more striking in the cases where few lobbyists are active. In the 32 cases where only one or two interest groups were involved in the issue, participation was almost wholly limited to businesses, trade associations, and the intergovernmental lobby. These data paint a striking picture of the lack of conflict that can often accompany the relatively secretive lobbying process where few are involved. Businesses, trade and professional groups, and representatives of states, cities, and other government institutions appear to be involved in all types of lobbying activities. Unions, nonprofits and citizen groups are more likely only to be involved in the relatively more open and conflictual processes involving more participants.

Of course, following Schattschneider (1960), there is ample reason to suspect that the involvement of unions, citizen groups, and other non-profit sector organizations may be the cause of conflict in the lobbying process and the reason why some issues attract the attention of

hundreds of interest groups while others involve only a handful. By focusing our attention on high-profile cases of lobbying activity, we gain understanding of how these conflictual issues are handled and how important the lobbying process can be in such cases. But we should not overlook the more secretive and more troublesome elements of lobbying alone. When this type of activity occurs, it is generally in the absence of many types of groups, in particular representatives of labor, citizens, and the nonprofit sector of the economy. General Motors often lobbies alone; the Sierra Club, almost never.

In a larger project focusing on interviews with a sample of Washington lobbyists that is currently in the field, some of our respondents have described a process remarkably similar to the one we have noted here (Baumgartner et al. 2000). A lobbyist for a major labor union noted, for example, that half of his union's lobbying staff had been working for over a year on the sole issue of whether the United States should grant China permanent normalized trade relations. Before that, he noted, they were similarly focused on NAFTA, FastTrack, and the Clinton health care reform effort. In sum, for the past several years, this major union had been devoting a large proportion of its total lobbying efforts to just one issue at a time. Of course, he noted, hundreds of issues are of concern to them; the massive investment of time and resources into a small number of issues is not uncommon in Washington, however. Many of our respondents have mentioned a similar focus of energy. When a major legislative reform takes shape, groups have no option but to become involved. With limited resources, inevitably this means that other issues will have to be ignored. Organizations with larger lobbying staffs and the resources to hire professional lobbying firms do not need to make these hard choices as often. These greater resources are much more often associated with businesses than with citizen groups (Leech 1998).

Overall, these patterns assure that the public is absent from the vast majority of discussions of public policy, even through its interest-group representatives.

### **The Difficulty of Generating Public Discussion**

If we take seriously the proposition, and our findings here, that most issues of public policy are the object of little public discussion, and that the public agenda is increasingly crowded by hundreds of new issues not previously the object of government decision-making, then how does the public get involved? Certainly, public debate does center on important questions of public policy at many times. The current electoral campaign features prominent discussion of education policy, health-care costs, prescription drugs, the future of social security, tax policy, gun control, abortion-rights, and other substantive issues of concern to millions of Americans. We have no findings that the public agenda has gotten smaller; on the contrary, the increased number of media outlets and the growth of government probably mean that the nation's ability simultaneously to attend to issues has probably grown over time (see Baumgartner and Jones forthcoming). However, no matter how much the carrying capacity of the American public agenda may have grown over the past decades, the rise of new issues has been even faster. A smaller and smaller proportion of issues can break out of the relative obscurity of the Washington policy process.

Schattschneider taught us to look for efforts by policymakers to expand public conflicts; Riker and others noted that advocates do this by redefining issues (see Riker 1986; Cobb and Elder 1972; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Redefining an issue so that its importance to the public becomes clear is easier said than done, however. With an ever-greater number of issues being debated simultaneously in government and with an ever-greater number of media outlets that may or may not follow similar patterns of coverage, only a smaller and decreasing proportion

of issues can be the subject of widespread public discussion. Our interviews with Washington lobbyists as part of a larger project now in the field indicate that few lobbyists have the opportunity successfully to push an issue to the broad public agenda. Rather, this process depends on coalitions, deep political and financial resources, and the willingness of governmental allies to help. Governmental officials themselves are usually in a stronger position to focus public discussion on one set of issues rather than another than are most other policy advocates.

### **Studying Public Involvement**

Most analyses of public participation in politics focus on elections or on community-based activities. A complete understanding of public participation, however, must at some point address the linkages, or lack thereof, between the public and the Washington lobbying community. Lobbyists and policy advocates of all stripes constantly appeal to the public in various ways; understanding how the public becomes involved in some policy disputes but not others must be an important item on our future research agendas.

Recent analysis by Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson (2000) indicates that classic American citizen groups were not typically tiny entities disconnected from the national government, but rather were often interconnected in a federal pattern that mirrored U.S. governmental structures. Likewise, mobilization a century ago was not always characterized by localized grassroots efforts. For more than a third of the voluntary associations studied, state-level organizations were established in the majority of states before the organizations were successful in recruiting a substantial membership at the local level. The findings of Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson are suggestive for our purposes in this paper in that they remind us that participation in American is not only a bottom-up phenomenon, but very often may be stimulated by elite activity. There is no

reason to think that public involvement can or should only be at the local level. Millions of people are members of thousands of groups that participate in the national policy debates on hundreds of different issues in a given year. Real public involvement seems to come only when a small proportion of those issues are the subjects of significant media coverage and public discussion. Elections play a role in this, but groups and public officials can do much more in fostering such public discussion of issues even during the inter-election periods where occasionally we find ourselves, even in America.

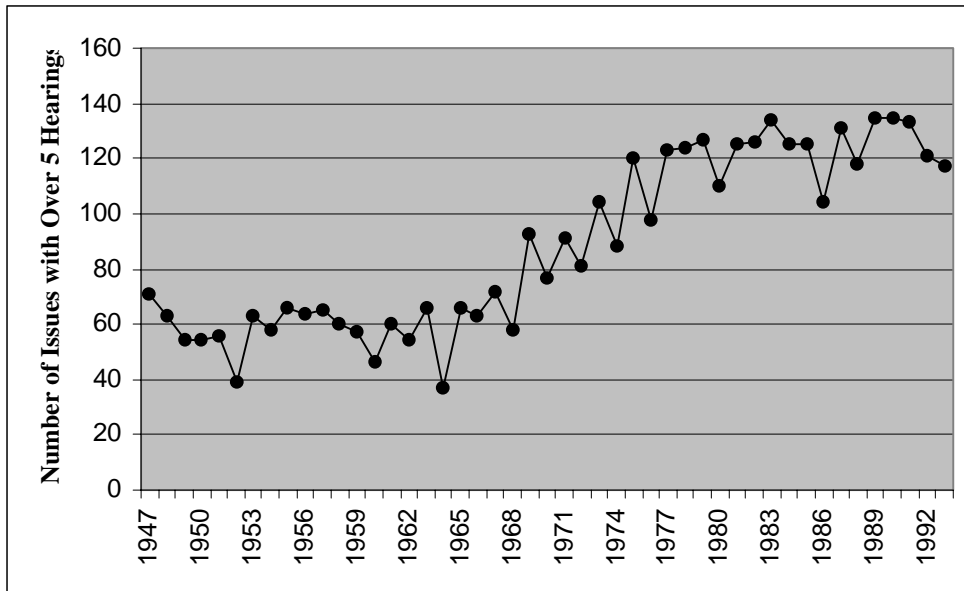
Conflict expansion processes are well understood. What has been rarely understood in the literature on lobbying is how commonly or uncommonly these types of processes occur. The distribution of interest groups across a sample of issues, as we have laid it out here, helps shed light on this question. Perhaps the most troubling finding from this distribution is that the great majority of the issues seem to involve not too many interest groups, but too few. For in the cases where few interest groups are involved, we can be almost certain that few representatives of labor, citizens, or the nonprofit sector are heard. The vast size of the professional and business lobby in Washington insures that trade groups, corporations, and those that represent them will be present in almost every issue being discussed in government. Unions, nonprofits, and citizen groups will sometimes make their voices heard, but will very often be absent.

Table 1. Business Predominance on Large and Small Lobbying Issues.

Type of Groups Lobbying	Number of Interest Groups Involved in the Issue								Total for All 142 Issues	
	1 or 2 organizations involved (32 issues)		3 to 10 organizations involved (27 issues)		11 to 50 organizations involved (43 issues)		50 or more organizations involved (40 issues)			
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Business	50	17	31	49	42	442	42	3,592	42	4,101
Trade	15	5	15	23	20	209	16	1,396	17	1,633
Government	18	6	8	13	9	95	12	1,052	12	1,166
Professional	9	3	12	18	11	112	6	555	7	688
Institutions	3	1	13	21	7	69	10	823	9	914
Citizen groups	3	1	13	20	7	71	8	732	8	824
Unions	0	0	5	8	2	21	2	186	2	215
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	313
Total	100	34	100	156	100	1,052	100	8,612	100	9,854

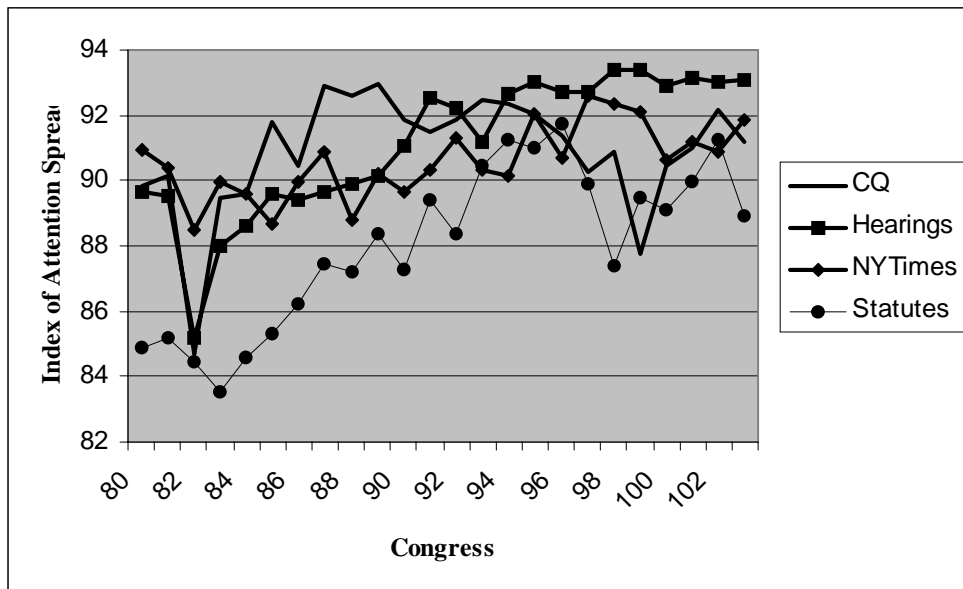
Source: Baumgartner and Leech 2000.

Figure 1. The Rise of New Issues in Congress, 1947-1993



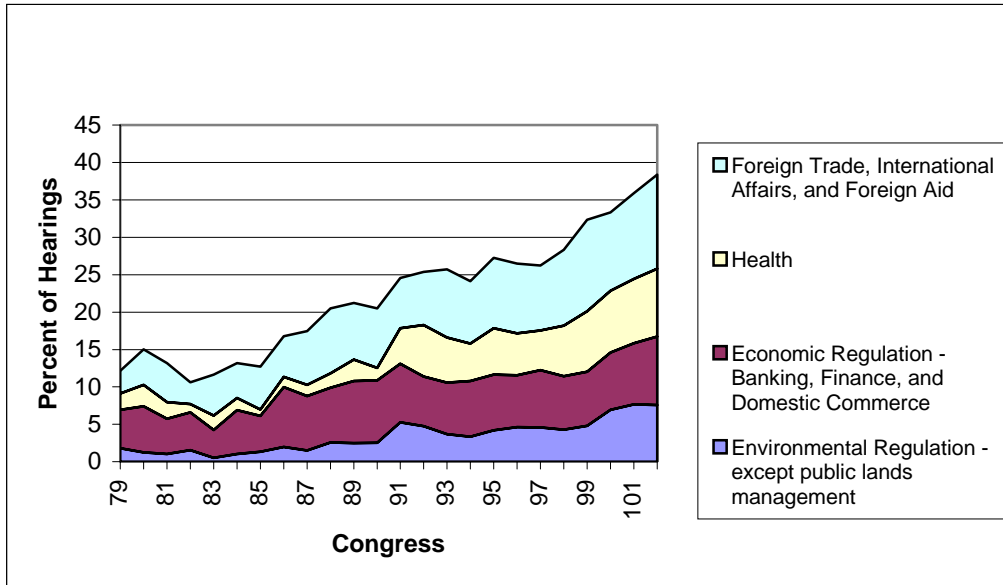
(Source: Policy Agendas Project.)

Figure 2. The Increased Spread of Government Attention, 1947-1993.



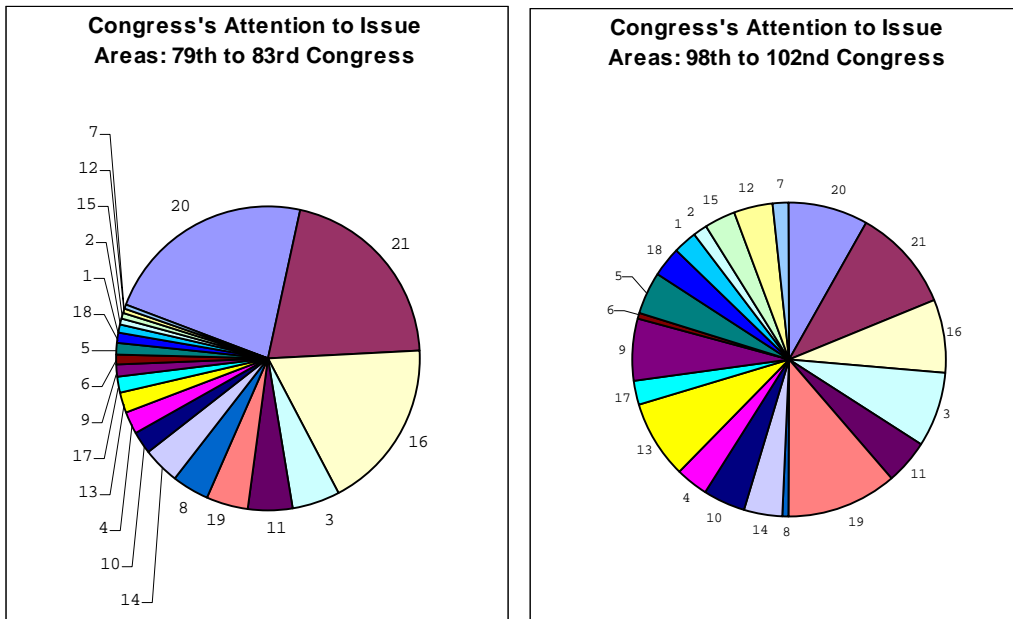
(Source: Policy Agendas Project)

Figure 3. The Rise of New Issues in Congress.



Source: Policy Agendas Project.

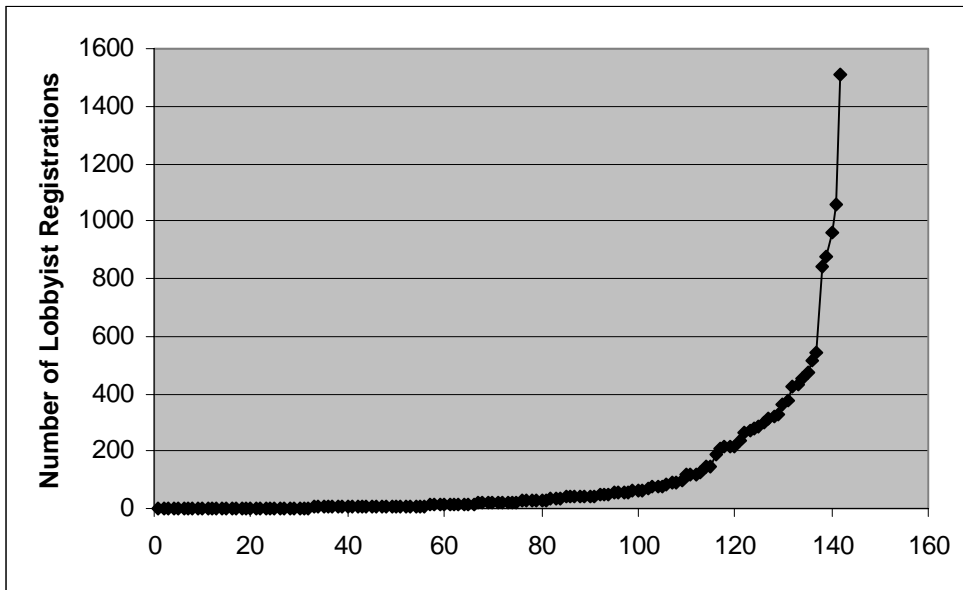
Figure 4. The Congressional Agenda in the Early Post War Years Compared to the 1990s.



Source: Policy Agendas Project.



Figure 5. The Distribution of Lobbying Activities Across a Sample of Issues, 1996.



(Source: Baumgartner and Leech 1999b)

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