

[Note: This is the proposal that led to the publication of *Basic Interests* (Princeton: Princeton University Chicago Press, 1998).]

Organized Interests in Political Science

Proposal to Princeton University Press
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A complete understanding of the origins, functions, and effectiveness of interest groups is an essential component of any broader understanding of a nation's political system. This was once the subject of consensus in political science; scholars routinely looked at the roles of groups in their efforts to explain politics. Groups were seen as fundamental elements in the representative process; they may have enhanced or distorted that process, but they were central to it in any case. Increasingly, beginning in the 1960s, the study of interest groups has been pushed from the center of political science to its margins. Group scholars once wrote books on broad themes of who governs America and what forces determine the actions of our government. Those writing on the political system generally devoted considerable space to the roles of groups in government. Today, group studies are more likely to be preoccupied with narrow questions of lobbying tactics or with certain puzzles of collective action. Similarly, broad studies of the functioning of our national institutions pay less attention to the roles of groups than they once did. In sum, the discipline has stopped looking to the study of group behavior as a lens through which to observe broader processes of the functioning of our democratic institutions.

In this book we attempt to explain how the literature on interest groups in American political science has developed from a new perspective on the political system, to dominate the study of politics, then to recede from such a prominent position. We note the various methodological, conceptual, and research problems that have beset the field and the reasons for the decline of the group approach. We pay particular attention to the resurgence of studies of lobbying and group behavior in the 1980s and 1990s, and we discuss the research difficulties that must be addressed if the study of interest groups is to be central to our collective understanding of politics, as it should be. We end with a discussion of how to organize research projects that will lead to substantive conclusions about the roles of groups in politics across a broad range of contexts. We believe that such projects will lead to a greater understanding not only of the roles of groups, but of our political institutions generally.

The book reviews a great deal of literature in thematic rather than chronological order. As the list of chapters below makes clear, we give coverage to all the major literatures and approaches to the study of groups in recent decades. A graduate student or professional in the field should be able to use this book for a complete overview or for an introduction to the research problems in many particular areas. We review the historical importance of the field going back to the turn of the century and discuss the rise and the demise of the group approach to politics in the 1950s and 1960s. We give considerable attention to the development of the Olsonian perspective and

subsequent literature on collective action. We discuss both the large-scale surveys of interest groups conducted in the 1980s and the myriad studies of group lobbying efforts, PAC contributions, and other lobbying tactics based on smaller scale projects. The book reviews formal, statistical, and qualitative works in political science, as well as samplings of works from sociology and economics. In sum, we cover a lot of ground. This breadth of coverage is designed to provide the perspective needed for a reader to reach conclusions about the state of the literature.

In each of these discussions, we base our analysis generally on the works of scores of authors. We ask what the approach has contributed to our accumulated base of knowledge, what questions have not been addressed, what questions effectively have been put to rest, what questions remain the subject of controversy, and what explains the choice of each generation's research agenda. In general, our assessment corresponds with those of others who have attempted to review the state of the field: Interest-group studies have not lived up to the hopes of their authors in providing a perspective that could inform our understandings of the broader political system. Older works suffered from a variety of methodological problems; newer works often focus on issues that are so narrowly defined that they sacrifice importance for tractability. Even the accumulation of dozens of lobbying studies in past years has not improved our understandings of important questions about group tactics and influence because the studies have been designed with little concern for generalizability or comparability.

Our assessment is based on a broad review of published research in a range of fields and on the judgments of others who have published reviews of parts of this literature. We attempt to explain not only what is the current state of the art, but also how it got this way, and most importantly what should be done about it. Within studies of lobbying and government relations, we note the inability of scholars to design projects that combine attention to many groups with attention to many instances of group lobbying. The result has been either broad surveys of group behavior in general, or highly specific studies of group behavior in potentially idiosyncratic cases. We discuss the means by which scholars in the field can organize research projects in a more fruitful manner.

The book is designed for an audience of professionals working in the field and for graduate students and others seeking a broad review of the literature associated with interest groups. It may also be useful for advanced undergraduate students whose instructors are willing to have their students think about how literatures develop, how scholarly research agendas are set, and what impacts these agendas have on the state of knowledge and eventually the impact of a given field. The presentation is discursive; there are few tables or figures, though on several occasions we make use of examples from publicly available datasets to illustrate points. The bibliography is extensive and should be a useful resource by itself. The book should be especially useful for graduate students considering topics for research or for professionals in the field considering the organization of new research projects. We hope that our broad literature reviews and our analyses of strengths and weaknesses in the field will cause those active in the field to think seriously about how future projects should be organized.

There are no similar books in the area. David Garson's 1978 book comes perhaps the closest in style since it included a review of a huge range of studies. Our book is similar in its critical and

analytic approach, but we propose a positive set of solutions to the problems that we note. The readership of this book should be broader than that of Garson as well, since we attempt to discuss some broad disciplinary trends, explaining not only what the problems are but why the literature developed as it did. Jeffrey Berry's textbook on interest groups reviews some material similar to ours, as does John Wright's recent book on groups in Congress, but ours is much less concerned with an overview of what groups do and much less suitable as an undergraduate text. Rather than focus as Berry does on what groups have done in politics, we focus on what political scientists have done with the study of groups. Jack Walker's or Kay Schlozman and John Tierney's books combined the reporting of a broad survey of group activities with a treatment that allowed their books to be used as texts as well. Ours has no original data collection associated with it as those books do, but rather focuses exclusively on a discussion of the state of the literature.

The book concludes with a discussion of the need for research projects that combine attention to the activities of large numbers of groups with attention to the contexts of their behaviors. The purpose of the book is not to present this new research approach, but to demonstrate the need for it through a substantial review of what has been tried, what progress has been made, what questions have been avoided, and what contradictions remain in the literature. Some of our comments have been presented in conference papers (1996 Midwest meetings; 1996 APSA meetings) and in an exchange published in the 1996 AJPS. The book goes well beyond those previous works in its scope. It differs from the AJPS exchange in four important ways: It covers a much broader range of issues dealing with the study of groups; it focuses on no single author or set of authors in particular; it deals with works of all methodological approaches, discussing the merits and drawbacks of each approach; and it proposes remedies for the difficulties that we note in the literature.

We expect this to be the first of two books in this area. The second book, based on Beth Leech's dissertation, should be available in approximately two years, and will report on the results of a survey of Washington interest groups that Ms. Leech has been conducting with National Science Foundation support during the 1995 to 1997 academic years. That book will put into practice many of the elements that we propose here. We envision this set of two books to have some impact on the future research agendas of scholars working in the field, and we hope to convince others that our proposals to link the study of lobbying with the collection of data on a range of contexts of lobbying are not only improvements on the state of the art, but are entirely feasible as well.

Chapter Outlines

Ch. 1. Introduction. This chapter reviews the roles of interest groups in politics and in political science, notes the contradictory philosophical stances that scholars and thinkers have taken towards the roles of groups in politics, and reviews the current state of the field. This review relies largely on the efforts of others, but organizes their collective interpretations to divide the field into three areas: Areas of advance, where substantial progress has been made; areas of avoidance, where for various reasons not much research has yet been done; and areas of confusion, where substantial efforts have not led to the type of consensus in conclusions that one might hope. We summarize with a puzzle: How

can a literature grow without accumulating? After laying out the puzzle, we discuss our solution: The organization of research projects that include systematic attention to the context of group behaviors.

Ch. 2. Barriers to Accumulation. This chapter reviews a series of surprising ambiguities in the study of interest groups. Scholars have not agreed on even the simplest of definitions: What is an interest? What is an interest group? What is membership? What is lobbying? What is influence? What is an issue? What is the normative concern? We conclude with a discussion of the lack of theoretical coherence that has led to the diverse usages we note in the chapter, and we note how these divergent interests make it unlikely that the literature will accumulate on its own.

Ch. 3. The Rise and Decline of the Group Approach. This chapter reviews the dramatic rise and the precipitous decline of the “group approach to politics.” It notes the build-up of the pluralist and group-centered approach to the study of politics; the progress that this literature represented over previous literatures based on constitutional formalism; and goes through the reasons for the demise of the approach. These include disputes about its character as either a normative or empirical enterprise; its status as a theory or as merely a school or perspective; increasing criticisms that it was empirically inadequate as social movements rose in the 1950s and 1960s; problems of measuring power and influence; and findings of limited group impact in surveys of groups in the 1960s.

Ch. 4. Collective Action and the New Literature on Groups. This chapter reviews the development of a new literature on groups in the wake of the decline of the pluralist perspective and with the publication of Olson’s *Logic of Collective Action* in 1965. We review the importance of Olson’s work both in providing a critique of the previous perspective and in providing a set of new research questions for others to answer. We note characteristic elements of research conducted in the Olsonian perspective, including a tendency to focus on individual behavior rather than on social contexts or groups; an ambiguous point of reference that rendered many empirical questions unanswerable, such as whether a given level of mobilization constitutes support or a challenge to the theory of collective action; and a tendency to isolate group lobbying behavior from its social context. We review the range of applications of the collective action approach in political science and the range of solutions that authors have noted. We conclude with a discussion of the trade-off between tractability and the accumulation of results in a literature. The new literature on groups has focused on designing projects with considerable analytic clarity, sophisticated measurements and analysis, but with less attention to external generalizability or comparability. These trends help explain the difficulties in drawing conclusions from the mass of accumulated studies that we noted in chapter 1. Scholars collectively have been engaged in a form of collective action dilemma of their own: Each would benefit from others adopting designs that ensure comparability, but each notes that their own projects are easier to organize without such concern.

Ch. 5. Bias and Diversity in the Interest-Group System. This chapter changes focus to note the efforts of scholars to evaluate the group system as a vehicle for popular

representation. We review findings of studies at both the mass level, based on surveys of the public, and at the elite level, based on reviews of the types of groups active in Washington. We discuss the degree to which scholars have noted important biases in participation through groups, as well as the remarkable diversity of organized interests that have been found.

Ch. 6. The Dynamics of Bias. This chapter notes that efforts to evaluate bias and diversity in the group system, introduced in chapter 5, must be tempered by a realization that these vary dramatically over time, across policy domains, and from issue to issue. We note the growth and changes in the Washington lobbying community through a review of groups listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, in Jack Walker's surveys in the 1980s, and in books attempting such enumerations in the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s, and 1980s. We review the evidence on surges and declines in business advantage in Washington and we note how important changes have affected the composition of the group system over time. Next, we discuss the trend toward an increasingly complex group system, as issue networks and advocacy coalitions have become more common, replacing the previously more stable policy subsystems. Finally, we note the degree to which efforts at evaluating the bias and diversity of the group system must be based on individual cases of policymaking. The broad generalizations that we make concerning who is represented may or may not reflect what goes on as particular issues are debated in government.

Ch. 7. Building a Literature on Lobbying, One Case-Study at a Time. Interest-group lobbying behavior has been studied primarily in two ways: Broad-based surveys (the subject of Ch. 8), and studies of particular policy issues. In this chapter we review studies of groups in particular issue contexts, both those based on qualitative description and those based on statistical analyses. We cover a wide range of studies, and note two common problems that prevent us from reaching firm conclusions about interest-group behavior. First, the cases are difficult to compare for reasons discussed in Ch. 2: There is no common theoretical framework; definitions of basic variables are subject to dispute; and measurement techniques are inconsistent across studies. Second, the search for analytic simplicity has led to wildly unrealistic models, in which Washington is populated by two lobbyists and a legislator. We discuss the importance of coalitions, mimicry, and signaling in the world of lobbying, and why these require more complex models than are often offered. We review the difficulties in drawing conclusions from the case-study literature on lobbying caused by these problems of generalizability and realism.

Ch. 8. Generalizing About Lobbying Behavior. In this chapter we review the series of broad-based surveys of interest groups and lobbyists that have followed Lester Milbrath's ground-breaking survey in the late 1950s. Although the study of lobbying behavior is fraught with contradictions, many of the findings from these surveys have proved quite robust, both across time and across sampling frames. One of the points of agreement is that groups generally use many tactics and are active in many different issue areas. This finding, ironically, makes it difficult to conclude much more about lobbying behavior based on survey research. Most surveys ask groups to generalize about their activities across a number of issues. Since groups are active in many areas and in many issues,

considerable information about their strategies of influence is lost in surveys that do not ask about the contexts of political action in particular cases. The surveys have taught us much about internal group characteristics and about their lobbying activities in general, but not much about how groups adopt their lobbying strategies to particular issues. The case study literature, reviewed in the previous chapter, suffers from an inability to generalize from case to case. Only a few studies combine the generalizability of the broad surveys with the sensitivity to context that is possible in the case literature. We note the strength of these studies and provide examples of how these have been done.

Ch. 9. Conclusion. In the final chapter, we lay out the design requirements for research projects that would allow our knowledge about interest groups to accumulate rather than only grow. At a minimum, projects must be designed with variation both across groups and across policy issues. One way of doing this is to use a survey design that asks respondents to answer questions regarding particular issues, rather than asking them to generalize across their experience, as such surveys usually do. This technique was used to great advantage by John Kingdon in his study of congressional voting behavior. Most important, studies must be designed to gather information systematically not only about the behaviors of groups, but about the contexts of these behaviors as well. Case studies of particular issues and of particular groups can take us only so far; the hypotheses suggested by these case studies must be tested using data covering many types of groups and many types of issues. We review a short list of studies that have already succeeded in doing just this, and suggest ways in which scholars may organize research projects to build on these in the future.

Each chapter is between 20 and 30 double-spaced pages. An Appendix provides a list of all articles published on interest groups in the *American Political Science Review* from 1945 to 1995. The bibliography is substantial, listing hundreds of books and articles by a wide range of scholars. The entire manuscript runs just short of 300 pages, including the appendix and bibliography.

A draft of this manuscript has now been the subject of comments by several scholars, and the authors expect to have revisions complete by March 1, 1997.