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# The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America

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*Rather than striving to measure the influence of groups in the policy-making process this article concentrates instead on the ways in which interest groups are created and the means by which they remain in existence. A survey by mail was conducted during 1980-1981 of all voluntary associations that are open to membership and concerned with some aspects of public policy at the national level. The sample of groups was chosen from the Congressional Quarterly's Washington Information Directory. Questionnaires were delivered to 913 interest groups, and usable responses were received from 564, yielding a response rate of 64.8%.*

*Most studies of groups have concerned the tactics employed by group leaders in attracting and holding their members. This study demonstrates that the origins and maintenance of groups depends even more upon the success of group leaders in securing funds from outside their membership which are needed to keep their groups in operation. Estimates of patronage from different sources are provided as well as data on the congruence between the policy goals of groups and their patrons.*

It is not surprising that huge, concentrated industries such as the automobile manufacturers or the major aerospace contractors have successfully organized to advance their interests in Washington, but it is not obvious that the American political system would inevitably have spawned groups like the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance; the National Council of Puerto Rican Volunteers; the International Center for Social Gerontology; or The Friends of the Earth. Yet all these groups exist, along with hundreds more that crowd the office buildings and congressional hearing rooms of Washington. Most previous investigations of

interest groups have been designed to measure their influence, but have taken their existence for granted. In this article the process will be reversed. I begin by taking for granted that under certain circumstances, interest groups exert influence over legislators, bureaucrats, and the public and will concentrate my attention instead on the ways in which these groups are created and the means by which they remain in existence.

The central question being posed is: why does the current set of groups exist rather than some other set one might imagine, which would represent other segments of society? How can recent increases in the number of groups be explained, and have these increases caused significant changes in the character of interest groups? How do these organizations—some of which have elaborate bureaucracies that rival many small business firms—find money to pay their bills? All organizations must devise a successful strategy for obtaining resources, but what are the implications for the political system of the kinds of strategies that have been devised by successful groups in the United States?

## Theories of Group Formation

David Truman (1951) began the post-World War II dialogue over group theory with the assertion that interest groups arise more or less spontaneously in response to feelings of common interest among individuals who are experiencing some form of deprivation or frustration. Economic or political changes disturb the lives of potential group members, prompting them to interact and become increasingly aware of their shared interests. If this awareness grows and their

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concerns become sufficiently intense, they may form an association to serve as their representative. However, this new organization may itself constitute a social disturbance that affects the interests of other potential groups, and these groups may be stimulated, in turn, to form associations that will represent them. A process of competitive mobilization begins, leading to waves of group formation until social equilibrium is reestablished and the system begins to function smoothly again, awaiting yet another disturbance that will set off another round of group formation.

Truman's central psychological assumption about group formation was challenged by Olson, who asserted that individuals cannot be expected to organize spontaneously once they become aware of a threat to their common interest. As long as individuals are likely to receive the collective goods that interest groups are working to obtain, regardless of whether or not they make a contribution toward the effort, it will be exceedingly difficult, as a practical matter, to spur many of them into action. Olson (1965) showed that the marginal costs of political participation differ greatly among social groups and explained why individual incentives for political action are generally so weak.

Olson's original insights stimulated a large body of theoretical work in the logic of collective action.<sup>1</sup> This body of literature, along with pioneering work by Edelman (1964), Gamson (1975), Lipsky (1970), Salisbury (1969), and Wilson (1973) have clearly demonstrated how difficult it is to organize groups whose members have nothing more in common than an idea or a cause. Associations which attempt to represent socially disadvantaged elements of the society and which depend entirely on their members for financial support in response to mainly purposive incentives typically will be short-lived.<sup>2</sup>

### Design for an Empirical Study

The vigorous theoretical dialogue in this field concerning the personal trade-offs facing prospective group members and the larger social dilemma over the provision of public goods is an excellent point of departure for explaining how the current set of interest groups came into being. Empirical work in this field, however, has not been pursued with nearly as much imagination as the theorists

have displayed.<sup>3</sup> Much of the theoretical work draws upon a small number of well-known case studies. Most descriptive accounts deal either with the history of a single group, or more often, with small clusters of groups in a single policy area. There are almost no comprehensive descriptions of the world of interest groups in America at any historical period.<sup>4</sup> My aim in reporting a small number of facts about a large number of groups is to create a general framework for interpretation that will bring new life to existing case studies by showing just what they are a case of.

### Data

The basis for the descriptive framework I wish to build is a mail survey of a large sample of interest groups conducted during 1980 and 1981. The objects of this survey were all the voluntary associations in the United States which are open to membership and are concerned with some aspects of public policy at the national level.

This somewhat vague working definition was precise enough to exclude two very important components of the national representative structure: trade unions and business corporations. Almost every policy area is influenced by lobbyists for organized labor, and trade unions also provide financial support for many interest groups, such as the National Council of Senior Citizens or the Leadership Conference for Civil Rights.<sup>5</sup> In recent years many business firms also have begun to exert direct influence in Washington either by retaining local law firms to act as their representatives or by opening offices which are dedicated exclusively to government relations. These corporations usually maintain their memberships in trade associations, but operate independently as well. Any study of the exercise of influence would be incomplete if it did not take into account the activities of such massive agencies as the Teamsters Union, the United Auto Workers, U.S. Steel, or American Telephone and Telegraph. This study, however, is not concerned with the influence being exerted by all vested interests in the political system, but only with the origins and maintenance of voluntary associations. Trade unions and business corporations play vitally important roles in the political system, but membership in either is not entirely voluntary,

<sup>3</sup>A useful annotated bibliography of the literature in this field is Smith and Freedman (1972).

<sup>4</sup>An important exception that concerns both the United States and Canada in the 1960s is Presthus (1974).

<sup>5</sup>The two best studies of unions in American politics are Greenstone (1969) and Wilson (1977).

<sup>1</sup>For a comprehensive critique and review of recent work, see Moe (1980).

<sup>2</sup>The apparent contradiction, however, between the explanations of Truman and Olson may be illusory. See the argument developed in Moe (1981).

and their problems of organizational maintenance are entirely different from those experienced by the interest groups analyzed in this study.

My working definition narrowed the field even further by excluding hundreds of nonprofit corporations, public interest law firms, university-based research centers, independent commissions, semi-autonomous advisory committees for federal agencies, operating foundations, newsletters, trade publications, consulting firms, and the lobbying operations of state governments, municipalities, and other public bodies. It also excluded many thousands of membership groups that are devoted to religious worship, recreation, charitable causes, or other nonpolitical activities as well as many groups that are directly concerned with public policy, but confine their activities to individual states, regions, or metropolitan areas. A comprehensive study of representation in American democracy would require a much more inclusive working definition of interest groups, but the data collected in this study are more comprehensive than almost any other conducted so far and will demonstrate important and little understood facts about a central component of the system of representation in the United States.

Even after the field of study was limited, it was still difficult to draw a sample of national interest groups because there is no reliable, comprehensive list of such groups in existence. After checking several sources against each other and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, The Congressional Quarterly's *Washington Information Directory* (1980) was chosen as the source of group names most likely to provide a balanced picture of associations concerned with national affairs. Questionnaires were delivered to 913 interest groups mentioned in this directory, and usable responses were received from 564 (64.8%).

### A Typology of Associations

The first step in this study was to create a new typology that organized the data into mutually exclusive categories that reflect the fundamental social structure of interest groups. All existing classification schemes present difficult problems of measurement, and when most scholars have tried to write comprehensive descriptions of the world of interest groups, they have usually ignored the more complex typologies.<sup>6</sup> Most textbook authors simply subdivide groups into the policy areas in which they operate or the con-

stituencies they claim to represent, with chapters on such categories as business groups, civil rights groups, groups representing the handicapped, and the environmentalists (Ornstein & Elder, 1978; Wilson, 1973; Ziegler & Peak, 1972). There is seldom any theoretical justification supplied for this kind of typology. It is the common-sense usage of most journalists and politicians in Washington, and most scholars have also adopted it, generally without reservations or qualifications.

In order to create an analytically useful typology grounded in a general theory of groups, I began by dividing my sample into 1) those groups that require members to possess certain professional or occupational credentials, and 2) those that are open to all citizens regardless of their qualifications. The basis for mutual interest around which most groups are formed is an occupational specialty, not some broad social cause or abstract idea about the public interest. Almost 80% of the respondents reported that membership in a certain profession or industry was either a requirement for entry into their group or was exceedingly important, leaving barely 20% of the groups open to citizens without special occupational qualifications. This large, unwieldy set of occupationally based associations had to be broken down into smaller, homogeneous groupings if this classification scheme was to have any analytic utility, but the subdivisions had to be based upon important structural features in the data, features that have important political implications.

Several writers have argued that the central cleavage in the American political system is the clash between social elements organized around the business community and those organized around government and not-for-profit institutions in the public sector. As E. E. Schattschneider (1960, p. 118) argued: "the relations of government and business largely determine the character of the regime . . . the struggle for power is largely a confrontation of two major power systems, government and business."<sup>7</sup> These writers imply that there are two distinct realms within the world of groups: one comprises the commercial interests in society which are defending themselves against intrusions by government or searching for government assistance; the other is composed of both the providers and the recipients of public services who are seeking to increase public investment in activities ranging from education for the physically handicapped to the performance of grand opera, which they believe will languish if left to depend upon the market economy.

<sup>6</sup>Typologies abound in this field. For examples, see the work already cited by Wilson and Edelman, along with Lowi (1964) and Hayes (1981).

<sup>7</sup>Also see Lindblom (1977) and Greenstone (1982), and for a thoughtful critique see Elkins (1982).

In order to find whether there was such a great divide between the public and private sectors, the occupationally based groups identified after the first division of the data were divided once more into 1) those whose membership worked predominantly either in private, profit-making enterprises, or if self-employed, were operating on a fee-for-service basis, and 2) a second set whose members worked predominantly in public sector, not-for-profit organizations.

These two passes at the data—first, the division into occupationally based groups and citizen groups, and second, the subdivision of the large occupational category into three smaller classes based on the background of the membership—produced a fourfold classification that will be referred to as the *typology of occupational roles*.<sup>8</sup> The results are presented in Table 1.

Efforts to code the data into these two mutually exclusive classes were generally successful. A distinct set of profit-sector groups emerged which was made up primarily of trade associations designed to represent single sectors of the economy, such as The Mortgage Bankers Association, the National Tank Truck Conference, the National Soybean Producers Association, or the Motorcycle Industry Council. Included along with the trade associations were groups of professionals who operate mostly on a fee-for-service basis or work mainly for profit-making business firms, such as The American College of Apothecaries, the American Dental Association, or the National Association of Life Underwriters.

The grouping of occupationally based public sector associations also was quite homogeneous. It included what might be called public sector trade associations—groups representing a certain type of government agency or nonprofit organization, such as the Association of American Medical Colleges, the National Association of Counties,

or the American Association of Homes for the Aged. It also included professional societies made up mainly of individuals working for nonprofit agencies, such as The National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, or the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

Most groups fit clearly into either the public or the private sectors, but there are 67 groups in the sample—almost 15% of the total of occupationally based groups—whose members' backgrounds are so evenly distributed between the public and private sectors that they did not belong to either category. This mixed sector includes professional societies, such as the American Planning Association, the Society of American Foresters, or the National Society of Professional Engineers, and trade associations, such as the American Hospital Association or the National Association of Broadcasters. Thus the data themselves indicate a natural division into three categories: groups whose members come from the private sector, groups whose members come about equally from both the private and public sectors, and groups whose members are predominantly from the public sector.

As might be expected, the associations referred to as citizen groups in Table 1—those that have no occupational prerequisites for membership—made up the least homogeneous class. The category included, as it was meant to, almost all the public interest groups organized around ideas or causes, such as Citizens for Clean Air, Young Americans for Freedom, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Common Cause. Not all the groups in this category are entirely divorced from somewhat narrow social roles, however; some of the larger, general purpose veterans groups, such as AMVETS or the Veterans of Foreign Wars, were placed among the citizen groups, for example, because they do not require members to be veterans, and many apparently are not. Groups like the National Association of the Visually Handicapped or other general-purpose associations representing the mentally retarded, the aged, or other readily iden-

<sup>8</sup>Those interested in further details concerning the construction of this typology should consult the methodological appendix included in an earlier version of the paper presented at the 1981 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Copies are available from the author.

Table 1. Typology of Occupational Roles

	Percentage	N
Occupational		
profit sector	31.7	179
mixed sectors	11.9	67
nonprofit sector	36.6	201
Nonoccupational citizen groups	20.7	117

tifiable elements of the society also were designated as citizen groups because they regard themselves as general-purpose, public interest groups open to all persons, regardless of professional or organizational affiliations.

The citizen groups are often filled with professionals whose work has brought them into contact with the issues around which the group is organized. Environmental groups, for example, are naturally attractive to many people who work in the recreation industry, forestry, wildlife management, or some other relevant occupation. The data from the survey indicate, however, that most citizen groups have a mixed membership that does not come predominantly from either the public or the private sector. Schattschneider was right in believing that a great political divide exists in American society between government and business, a divide that provides structure for the world of interest groups, but the lines are blurred and many groups are successful in straddling the boundary.

### The Recent History of Group Formation

The data in Table 1 provide a portrait of the group structure in 1980, but the past 20 years represents one of the most unsettled periods in American political history. Newspapers have been full of reports of the formation of new associations, and political leaders have complained loudly about unreasonable pressures from "single interest groups."<sup>9</sup> These reports imply not only that the number of groups is increasing, but that the number of citizen groups is growing more rapidly than all other types, creating a trend away from the predominantly occupational basis of the interest group system.

Despite all the reports in the press, however, there are no comprehensive historical data available that document recent historical trends in group formation. One is forced to rely upon scattered estimates by observers from different periods. Herring (1929, p. 19) estimated that there were "well over 500" lobbies at work in Washington. Fifty years later, in 1977, the reference book *Washington Representatives* (1981) estimated that there were approximately 1,300 Washington-based associations, and in 1980 this estimate was increased to 1,700. These estimates are not strictly comparable because different definitions of

groups were being used, and all of them are probably low because of the difficulty of tracking down many of the smaller groups at work in the city which employ part-time staff members or rely heavily upon volunteers, but they lend plausibility to the claim that there are more groups in existence now than there were several decades ago.

There is no doubt that the number of citizen groups has grown rapidly during the past twenty years in several policy areas. Recently published histories of the women's movement describe in detail the sharp increase during the 1970s (Boles, 1979, Chapter 3; Carden, 1974; Freeman, 1975; Gelb & Palley, 1982, Chapters 2-3 and 8). The environmental movement experienced much the same kind of expansion at roughly the same time (Fox, 1981), and beginning in the late 1950s there was an unprecedented flowering of groups representing the elderly (Pratt, 1976). When J. L. Freeman (1969) wrote his classic study of the sub-government surrounding the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1960, only about 16 interest groups were in operation with any concern for public policies toward American Indians. During the next 20 years the number grew steadily to a total of at least 48 operating in 1980.<sup>10</sup>

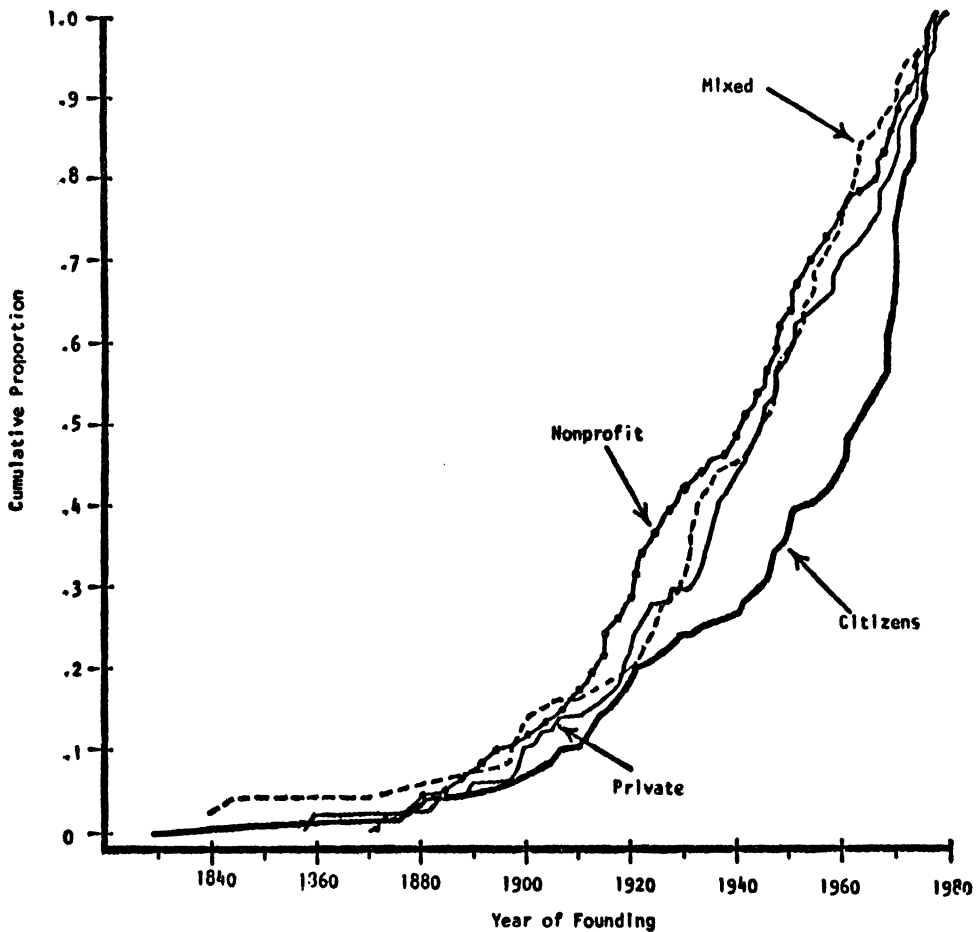
Evidence of recent growth in the interest group structure also exists in the data from my survey. All respondents were asked to report the founding dates for their associations, and these data were assembled cumulatively in Figure 1 for each of the categories in the typology of occupational roles. The data demonstrate that the first occupational groups were founded in the middle of the nineteenth century, and that it took almost another century to create the first half of these groups. The remainder of the occupational groups in my sample were founded since World War II. In contrast, the first half of the citizen groups did not come into existence until 1960; then, during the next 20 years, there was a period of explosive growth during which citizen groups multiplied at twice the rate of all types of occupationally based groups.

Both the historical evidence and the data from my survey provide powerful circumstantial evidence of recent growth in the interest groups structure, but neither constitutes conclusive proof that such growth has actually occurred. It is possible, although unlikely, that citizen groups in areas ignored by historians were declining in numbers during the 1960s and 1970s, thus cancelling

<sup>9</sup>There were hundreds of complaints about undue pressures upon government during the past two years. See Carter (1981) and the series of articles following the career of freshman Congressman Michael L. Snyder, first-term Representative from Oklahoma. See especially Roberts (1980).

<sup>10</sup>See Freeman (1965) and Barbrook and Bolt (1980, pp. 150-159). The estimate of the total number of Indian groups was produced by a survey of groups listed in *The Encyclopedia of Associations* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1980).

Figure 1. A Cumulative Count by Founding Date of All Groups in this Survey Sample Divided by Sector Types from the Typology of Occupational Roles.



out the reported gains. The analysis of founding dates of the groups in my survey is suggestive, but it may be only a statistical artifact, because I have no data on the number of groups that were formed in earlier years but went out of existence before 1980, when the survey was conducted. If citizen groups have a higher mortality rate than occupational groups—which is likely—an analysis of founding dates at any period would always indicate that more of the existing citizen groups were founded within the recent past than the longer-lived occupational groups. Without reliable estimates of both the birth and death rates of different types of groups it is not possible to reconstruct history conclusively with data from a cross-section survey. Furthermore, even if the number of citizen groups grew more rapidly during the past 20 years, this growth may have

been part of a cycle that is rapidly coming to an end. Several observers in the late 1970s reported increases in the formation of associations representing business interests, so the trend toward larger proportions of citizen groups may already have been reversed (Shabecoff, 1979; Wilson, 1981).

Despite these reservations about each source of data, all available evidence points in the same direction, namely that there are many more interest groups operating in Washington today than in the years before World War II, and that citizen groups make up a much larger proportion of the total than ever before. This transformation may not be as large or dramatic as the data suggest, or as some journalists and political leaders have implied, but there are good reasons to believe that far-reaching changes took place during the past

two decades in the system of interest groups in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

### Recent History and the Theory of Group Formation

How can these recent changes in the interest group system be explained? The work of Olson largely undermined Truman's theory of the spontaneous generation of groups, and yet, despite the power of Olson's analysis, at first glance recent increases in the number of groups suggest that Truman has the data on his side. After reading about the many obstacles that must be overcome before groups can be formed, one would not expect to find that so many new ones have been created during the past 20 years, and especially citizen groups, the type most affected by the collective goods dilemma. These trends in group formation raise serious questions about the predictive utility of the line of theory founded by Olson.

An increase in the number of groups, by itself, would not disconfirm Olson's theory. Faced with these data, an observer who accepted Olson's analysis might immediately suspect that the citizen groups were offering some new kind of desirable benefit in exchange for membership that was not available to nonmembers. If these selective benefits were desirable enough, groups might attract large numbers of members and become rich enough to employ a large and talented staff, even though many of their members might actually disagree with the group's goals. The twin groups of the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA) and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) are included in my study and classified as citizen groups, since they have no occupational prerequisites for membership.<sup>12</sup> In 1965 the combined membership of NRTA/AARP stood at approximately 750,000, and by 1979 it had grown to 13 million members, making it one of the largest voluntary associations in the world. The secret of this phenomenal growth, however,

was not the attractiveness of the policies being advocated by the group; rather, it was the special medical insurance policies available to older people only through membership, the tours and vacation trips conducted by the groups with the special needs of the elderly in mind, the commercial discounts and many useful personal services available for retired persons through membership. In Olson's terms, these two groups grew because of their ability to provide selective material benefits for their members, not because of the devotion of their members to the common interests of the elderly.

The NRTA/AARP is an important voice in the national dialogue over policy toward the aged, but the data from my survey suggest that its reliance on selective benefits is also quite *unusual*. Only about 15% of the citizen groups in my sample even offer insurance as a benefit to their members, and of those who do, over one-third believe it to be an unimportant part of their benefit package. Even fewer citizen groups offer discounts on consumer goods, and only 30% of these groups sponsor trips for their members. Where benefits for members are concerned, citizen groups are hardly distinguishable from groups in the occupational categories. In fact, occupational groups built around relatively small communities of professionals or small groups of firms with common commercial interests can provide selective benefits in the form of friendships, professional contacts, and in-service training that most citizen groups can provide for only a small segment of their memberships, if at all. Publications are provided by groups of all types and universally thought of as among their most important benefits, but citizen groups have no unique advantages where publications are concerned. My data show that citizen groups receive a smaller proportion of their total revenue from publications and conference fees than any of the other types of groups. Citizen groups, on the average, also report that only about 1% of their total revenues are derived from insurance commissions or direct services to individuals.

If the availability of selective benefits will not explain recent changes in the group structure, an observer following Olson might suspect that group leaders had somehow managed to find ways to coerce new members to join against their self-interest. Olson demonstrated persuasively how legal forms of coercion contributed to the creation and maintenance of American trade unions. Without closed shops and mandatory payment of dues through payroll deduction, union membership would almost certainly plummet as many workers dropped out to become "free riders," fully expecting to receive the same benefits from their employers that were granted to union mem-

<sup>11</sup>This conclusion is shared by all recent observers. See Berry (1977), Broder (1980), Gunther (1976), Hecl (1978), Hrebienar and Scott (1982), McFarland (1976), Schlozman and Tierney (1982), and Wilson (1981).

<sup>12</sup>This group began as an association of retired teachers and thus would have been categorized as an occupational group within the not-for-profit sector, but after its merger with the AARP, all occupational prerequisites were dropped so that it has clearly become a citizen group. For a description, see Pratt (1976), pp. 119-213.



bers (Olson, 1965, pp. 66-97).

Even though trade unions were not included in this study, interviews with group leaders have convinced me that a few of the groups in my sample are able to exercise subtle forms of coercion which may have inflated their membership rolls during this period. For example, certain trade associations sponsor the creation of codes meant to govern the specifications of goods produced by their industry. Uniform sizes of components or safety standards established in these private codes are often accepted by government or private purchasing agents as minimum requirements and may sometimes be written directly into state or local statutes, thus taking on the force of law. Many small firms may feel compelled to join trade associations to protect themselves from arbitrary changes in such codes which might suddenly render their products unmarketable or require them to make large investments in new tools or equipment (Wines, 1981).

Similarly, many associations of professionals in both the public and private sectors have managed to gain significant influence over licensing procedures, and several serve as accrediting agencies for educational programs in their professional specialties. Until a decision by the Supreme Court in 1978 prevented the practice, many associations required any person wishing certification in the field to hold membership in the group—a direct form of coercion—but even now that this practice has been made illegal, many professionals apparently regard membership in their professional society as a hedge against decertification.<sup>13</sup>

These practices are consistent with Olson's theory, even though they affect a relatively small number of groups, but they will not serve as a satisfactory explanation for the maintenance of citizen groups since they are not able to employ either tactic in order to gain membership. These coercive practices have been employed for many years, and in fact, action by the government and the courts during the 1970s significantly reduced their usefulness as spurs to group formation and membership growth. Our conclusion must be that neither Truman's nor Olson's theories offer convincing explanations of the changing composition of the group structure in the United States. The political system is beset by a swarm of organizational bumblebees that are busily flying about in spite of the fact that political scientists cannot explain how they manage it.

## Toward a New Theory of Group Origins and Maintenance

### The Origins of Groups

There was no single explanation for the increase in the number of groups operating at the national level in American politics. Long-term improvements in educational levels provided a large pool of potential recruits for citizen movements; the development of cheap, sophisticated methods of communication, such as the new direct mailing systems or the WATTS long-distance telephone lines, allowed leaders in Washington to reach members in all parts of the country; a period of social protest that began with the civil rights demonstrations of the early 1960s called many established practices into question, created concerns about the future stability of the American political system, and provided a powerful impetus for change. Once these mutually reinforcing factors led to the creation of massive new government programs in social welfare, education, health care, housing, and transportation, newly created government agencies and foundations began to foster voluntary associations among the service providers and consumers of the new programs. During this period the new regulatory legislation in civil rights, consumer protection, environmental preservation, pollution control, and occupational health and safety prompted business groups to organize in self-defense—as Truman would have predicted—to protect themselves against the authorities who were charged with enforcing these broad new legislative mandates.

These complex changes in American politics and public policy during the past 30 years, and the fundamental transformations in the political environment they generated, go a long way toward explaining recent changes in the structure of interest groups. So many influences have been at work, however, that the fundamental character of the group formation process has been partially obscured. This study shows that during recent years, group leaders learned how to cope with the public goods dilemma not by inducing large numbers of new members to join their groups through the manipulation of selective benefits, but by locating important new sources of funds outside the immediate membership.

The first problem facing would-be interest group organizers is to bring their groups into being and to keep them going until revenues are large enough to meet operating expenses. Profit-sector groups that emerge from relatively small and closely knit occupational or industrial communities can often begin their activities on tiny budgets and can continue operations for several years without a professional staff. In the not-for-

<sup>13</sup>The Supreme Court decision is: *National Society of Professional Engineers v. U.S.*, 435 U.S. 679, 98 S. Ct. 1355, 55 L. Ed. 2 637, 1978.

profit sector, groups often come about at the urging of federal officials who need to have regular contact with administrators of state or local agencies receiving aid from some new federal program. There is a need to share information, develop standard administrative practices, create model bills for adoption by cities or states, and of course, work to expand support for their programs in the Congress. Members of most public and private sector occupational groups are able to charge their travel costs to their firms or agencies and can easily agree to meet together periodically to exchange information and to work out common positions on outstanding questions of public policy.

Citizen groups face an entirely different set of initial circumstances. Their potential membership is extremely large and, in most cases, unknown to one another. There is no ready-made community waiting to be organized, no readily available sources of money, and often not even a clearly articulated common interest in creating an organization. Citizen groups must begin with a fairly large staff, or they will have little chance of reaching enough of their far-flung potential membership to create a stable organizational base.

Because of the organizational problems facing citizen groups, they must almost always gain financial assistance in order to launch their operations. All respondents in my survey were asked whether their group had received any form of financial assistance from an outside source at the beginning of its history, and as reported in Table 2, 89% of the citizen groups reported that they had, whereas only 34% of the occupationally based groups from the profit sector had received financial aid.

Not only were the nonprofit and citizen groups more likely to receive aid at the initial stages, but further analysis of the data shows that access to outside funding has increased in recent years. In Table 3, all groups in my sample which were founded before 1945 are contrasted with those founded after 1945. The end of World War II is a convenient point for dividing the data because it breaks the sample almost exactly in half, and the postwar period also was marked by the increasing prominence of citizen groups and the growth both

in the number of private foundations and activist administrative bureaus in the national government, two of the most important sources of patronage for political action.

Emerging from Table 3 is a picture of the evolution of funding sources that have produced the group structure of the 1980s. The entries report the percentage of groups founded in each period that reported receiving start-up funds from four different sources: individuals, foundations, other associations, and government agencies. Large gifts from individuals have been highly important sources of funds in all four sectors and have been steadily rising in importance, especially for the citizen groups, but the sharpest changes have occurred in the three other funding sources. First, the group structure in the mixed, nonprofit, and citizen sectors has been elaborating itself as associations have helped to spawn new ones in order to build larger networks of groups around volatile issues like civil rights or around constituencies like the elderly or the handicapped.

Second, both government agencies and private foundations have steadily become more important patrons of interest groups in the mixed, nonprofit, and citizen sectors. Both government agencies and foundations are active in sponsoring groups built around professional specialties in areas like health care, education, welfare administration, mass transportation, scientific research, and other program areas that depend heavily on federal funds. Government agencies and foundations both made contributions to the founding of a few groups in the profit sector, but their efforts are clearly concentrated in the mixed, nonprofit, and citizen sectors. After 1945 the government supplanted foundations as a source of start-up money for groups in the nonprofit sector, while foundations shifted more of their attention toward the citizen groups.

It requires boldness to provide start-up funds to an untested political entrepreneur or to patronize a cause that might create controversy. My data demonstrate that among all the patrons studied, private individuals are the most likely to provide backing for new organizational ventures, far outdistancing foundations and government agencies in their willingness to take risks. Table 4 shows

Table 2. Percentage of Groups by Sectors that Received Financial Aid from any Outside Source in Order to Start Operations

Sector	Percent receiving aid	N
Profit	33.9	174
Mixed	56.1	66
Nonprofit	60.0	190
Citizens	89.0	115

**Table 3. Percentage of Groups Receiving Financial Aid at Time of Founding from Four Sources of Funds by Sector Type, 1840-1945 and 1946-1980**

Funding Sources	Time Periods	
	1840-1945	1946-1980
Profit sector groups		
Individual Gifts	19.1	19.8
Foundation Grants	1.1	2.3
Other Associations	6.7	3.5
Government Grants	3.4	5.8
N =	(89)	(86)
Mixed sectors groups		
Individual Gifts	25.0	28.1
Foundation Grants	3.1	15.6
Other Associations	12.5	25.0
Government Grants	6.3	12.5
N =	(32)	(32)
Nonprofit sector groups		
Individual Gifts	26.0	20.9
Foundation Grants	21.2	32.6
Other Associations	12.5	17.4
Government Grants	10.6	31.4
N =	(104)	(86)
Citizen groups		
Individual Gifts	65.7	68.4
Foundation Grants	17.1	39.2
Other Associations	5.7	22.8
Government Grants	8.6	10.1
N =	(35)	(79)
Total N =	(260)	(283)

**Table 4. Timing of Support from Three Types of Patrons of Political Action as a Percentage of All Groups Reporting**

	Government	Foundations	Individuals
	%	%	%
Start-up funds: patron acting alone	12.8	15.7	41.7
Start-up funds: more than one patron	17.2	34.4	22.1
Maintenance support	70.0	49.9	36.2
N	(210)	(189)	(257)

that only 13% of the groups that received government support got it in the form of start-up money when the government agency was acting as the sole source of patronage. Another 17% of the groups that received government support received it as start-up funds when the government agency was acting in league with other patrons, but 70% of the groups reporting support from government received it solely for maintenance of their operations, only after they were successfully launched and had established a record of performance. Foundations are more likely than government agencies to sponsor new groups, but the data show that the most adventurous patrons are clearly private individuals. Of the groups who reported receiving support from individuals, 42% got it to

help establish their operations when individuals were acting as their only patrons, and another 22% received start-up support when individuals were joined by other types of patrons. Patronage for political action from large institutions has increased in importance in recent years, but wealthy individuals are still a crucial source of the venture capital needed by aspiring political entrepreneurs.

### The Maintenance of Groups

Once groups have been brought into being with the aid of a patron, in most cases the patron continues to support the group once it is a going concern. New groups sometimes are weaned from

**Table 5. Average Percentage of Revenue Obtained by Groups from Each Source in 1980 Budgetary Year by Sector Type.**

	Sector Type			
	Profit %	Mixed %	Nonprofit %	Citizens %
Routine contributions from members or associates				
Dues	76.8	47.7	45.7	36.3
Publications	5.3	14.2	8.8	8.8
Conferences	7.1	11.9	8.8	2.3
Subtotal	89.2	73.8	63.3	47.4
Nonrecurring contributions from nonmember institutions and persons				
Individual gifts	1.0	3.8	3.5	17.2
Foundations	0.2	3.2	4.2	12.8
Government	1.2	9.3	14.6	8.9
Other associations	0.5	2.3	1.9	4.0
Subtotal	2.9	18.6	24.2	42.9
Miscellaneous recurring and nonrecurring contributions				
Investment income, commissions, sales, fees	6.9	6.9	10.8	7.6
Loans	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.6
Other	0.7	0.7	1.4	1.5
Subtotal	8.0	7.8	12.6	9.7
Total	100.1	100.2	100.1	100.0
N	(154)	(54)	(169)	(90)

dependence on other associations as a source of continuing support, although there is a positive tau-b correlation of .21 between the receipt of start-up funds from other associations and the receipt of continuing support from them. Groups evidently find it even more difficult to become independent of reliance on grants from individuals, private foundations, and government agencies. The tau-b correlations between the receipt of start-up funds from a source and the continuing receipt of support for maintenance from the same source are .37 for government agencies, .43 for foundations, and .44 for individuals. These figures indicate that once groups come into being with support from a patron, they tend to maintain financial connections of some kind with these sponsors throughout their existence.

All groups in the survey were asked to describe their current budgets; the results are displayed, according to the typology of occupational roles, in Table 5. The patterns of support that were evident in the data on group origins appear once again in this table, which presents the financial situation as it was in 1980. Citizen groups received less than half of their support from member dues, the sale of publications, and conference fees in that year, whereas profit sector groups received 89.2% of their funds from these sources. The government

was an important patron for groups of professionals in both the mixed and public sectors, and the combination of private individuals and private foundations together provided 30% of the funds available to citizen groups.

Table 5 provides much valuable information about the maintenance of interest groups, but it is slightly misleading in two ways. First, although dues are shown to be an important source of revenue for groups of all kinds, it must be remembered that they are not, in every case, voluntary contributions from individuals who have made a rational decision to join a group in the hope of advancing some ideological or personal goal. Many individuals in both the private and public sectors are allowed by their employers to charge the cost of their dues, publications, and travel to association meetings to their agency budgets. Without those subsidies, many of these individuals would not participate in group activities. The data reported in Table 5 on the support from dues for both private and public sector groups, therefore, include an unknown, but probably substantial, amount of indirect patronage from the budgets of government agencies or private corporations.

Besides providing indirect patronage to private sector groups by subsidizing the memberships of their employees, many large private corporations provide a second form of patronage to trade

associations by making extraordinary contributions that are labelled as dues. Most trade associations employ sliding scale or "split" dues schedules under which a small number of large firms contribute much larger amounts than the rest of the members, much as Olson suggested they would in his discussion of "the exploitation of the great by the small" (Olson, 1965, pp. 3, 27-32, 34-36). McKean (1949, p. 489) reported that in the 1940s, 5% of the membership of the National Association of Manufacturers contributed approximately 50% of the funds needed for the group's maintenance. The average dues payment in 1981 from the 215,000 members of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce was approximately \$265, based on a sliding scale that ranged from \$100 to more than \$75,000 for a handful of major corporations. Most of the Chamber's member firms are small—91% have fewer than 100 employees—yet the Chamber's Board of Directors is overwhelmingly dominated by the large national and multinational corporations that make the maximum dues payments (Richman, 1982). Arrangements of this kind apparently are typical in cases where a single firm (such as Ralston Purina in the feed manufacturing business) or a small number of large firms (as in the production of agricultural chemicals) account for most of the sales in the industry.

Many private sector groups receive patronage from large corporations through the unequal sharing of financial burdens by their membership, but it was not possible in this survey to obtain reliable estimates of the number of such groups or the patterns of dues support they employ. However, these systems of unequal contribution constitute a form of corporate patronage that closely resembles the subsidies from government and foundations that are extended to groups in the public sector. If accurate data could be assembled on all forms of financial assistance, it would surely show that many profit sector groups are heavily dependent upon patronage from private sources.

### Patrons and Public Policy

Financial support is usually provided to groups for a purpose, since patrons expect to receive benefits in return for their aid, but these benefits do not always involve public policy. In many instances patrons are mainly interested in enlisting the support of associations in reaching broad economic, scientific, or administrative goals. Beginning with efforts to improve agriculture at the turn of the century and continuing through the War on Poverty in the 1960s, most American social policies have been highly elaborate cooperative efforts involving many levels of government in the federal system, along with both private and

public corporations. Federal agencies have an interest in encouraging coordination among the elements of these complex service delivery systems and in improving the diffusion of new ideas and techniques. Groups like the American Public Transit Association or the American Council on Education, both of which receive extensive patronage from federal agencies and foundations, serve as centers of professional development and informal channels for administrative coordination in an otherwise unwieldy governmental system.

Besides their administrative and professional functions, however, groups obviously also play an important political role, and most patrons are fully aware of this role when they agree to provide financial aid. There are many types of patrons, each with a distinctive interest in public affairs. One of the chief reasons that business firms join trade associations, for example, is their desire to secure sympathetic public policies or to mount effective defenses against government regulation. Government agencies organize their constituents not only in order to improve coordination in the federal system, but also to lobby the Congress and the presidency on their behalf. The social movements and political upheavals of the 1960s prompted many individuals and foundations to act as patrons for a variety of challenging groups. Several of the country's largest foundations only began serious operations in the 1950s and were in search of a meaningful role in American life.<sup>14</sup> Foundation officials believed that the long-run stability of the representative policymaking system would be assured only if legitimate organizational channels could be provided for the frustration and anger being expressed in protests and outbreaks of political violence during this period.<sup>15</sup> Another important form of patronage came from already established interest groups, which assisted in the creation of new groups in their fields, especially if these new organizations promised to perform services or reach constituencies that had not yet been exploited by existing organizations. Public policy concerns may not always be the primary consideration when assistance is granted, but patrons are not likely to support groups for any purposes that do not share their general approach to social policy.

A graphic illustration of the close match between the interests of patrons and the general attitudes of the groups they patronize is provided by the data in Table 6. All respondents in the survey

<sup>14</sup>For a review of recent history see *Foundations, Private Giving and Public Policy* (1970), Goulden (1971), and Nielsen (1972).

<sup>15</sup>The best study of early foundation thinking is Maris and Rein (1973).

**Table 6. Relationship between Receipt of Government Financial Aid and Support for Increased Government Intervention in Society.**

Receipt of government funds	Desired level of government intervention			
	More	Present Level	Less	
Yes	46.1	30.9	23.0	= 100%
No	21.4	16.6	62.0	= 100%
	N=319		tau-b	= .32

were asked whether, in general, they favored more, less, or the present level of government provision of social services. They were also asked whether the policy of their associations called for more, less, or the present level of regulation of business and industry. The responses to these two questions were combined to produce a three-point scale measuring the respondent's overall preference for governmental intervention in the society.<sup>16</sup>

Most groups take a practical view of general questions of this kind. They would favor increased services if it seemed to be in their interest to do so and would oppose any increases that seemed opposed to their interest. Many groups refused to answer these two questions on the grounds that they had no general attitude toward the role of government, but a majority of the respondents did answer at least one of the two questions. The resulting scale reflects their general predisposition toward the role of government in society.

The strong relationship in Table 6 speaks for itself. Groups receiving money from government

agencies are much more likely than those not funded to believe that an expansion of governmental activity would be desirable. This relationship holds, furthermore, even within sector type, as illustrated by the positive correlations shown in Table 7. This pattern of correlations provides strong circumstantial evidence that government agencies are unlikely to sponsor groups that do not share their fundamental political sympathies. Government agencies make grants or issue contracts to improve the training of professionals, to increase citizens' understanding of public policies, or to encourage local bureaucracies to employ the most effective administrative practices, but while carrying out these more or less neutral programmatic and administrative tasks, the agencies are also furthering their own political objectives.

### Patrons of Political Action and the Theory of Groups

Patrons of political action play a crucial role in the initiation and maintenance of interest groups.<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that Olson's emphasis upon the incentives facing likely interest group members is misplaced, or that Salisbury's ideas about the importance of entrepreneurial leadership are wrong. Our attention certainly should not shift entirely away from groups toward the motives and activities of patrons. This analysis

<sup>16</sup>The exact wording of the two questions was: "In general, do the policy positions of this association tend to call for: much more government provision of social services, some additional government provision of social services, present level of services, less government provision of social services? In general, do the policy positions of this association tend to call for: much more government regulation of business and industry, present level of regulation, less government regulation of business and industry, much less government regulation of business and industry?"

<sup>17</sup>Sociologists have come to much the same conclusion concerning the rise and fall of social movements. See McCarthy and Zald (1978), Marx (1979), and Oberschall (1973).

**Table 7. Rank-order Correlations for the Relationship between Receipt of Government Financial Aid and Support for Increased Government Intervention in Society, by Group Sector.**

Total sample	Group Sectors			
	Profit	Mixed	Nonprofit	Citizen
tau-b = .32	.33	.28	.21	.21
N=(319)	(114)	(34)	(116)	(55)

points, however, to another important method, beyond the provision of selective benefits and the use of coercion, which groups have employed to cope with Olson's dilemma of collective action.

Efforts to form new groups and associations have occurred in every decade of the past century, but Truman was surely correct in arguing that the propensity to form groups increases during periods of general social upheaval, as in the 1930s and 1960s, when challengers to the established order may ride upon great outbursts of protest and the political leadership is divided (Gamson, 1975; Goldstone, 1980; Jenkins & Perrow, 1977). No matter what propensities exist, however, large amounts of capital are needed to form most interest groups. The key to success in these efforts usually is the ability of group organizers to secure both start-up funds and reliable sources of continuing financial support from patrons of political action. Furthermore, now that a decade has passed since the turmoil of the 1960s it is clear that most of the groups founded in the wake of the civil rights and peace movements that were unable to secure adequate patronage have disappeared. The much-publicized effort during this period to organize college students, for example, failed in large part because no patron could ever be attracted who was willing to back the effort; or, as in the case of the National Student Association, one of the patrons that was secured proved to be so unpopular with the potential membership that its sponsorship seriously damaged the group's credibility. The NSA almost collapsed in 1967 after revelations that it had been receiving financial aid for years from the Central Intelligence Agency (Meyer, 1980).

The stormy history of the Students for a Democratic Society illustrates the importance of patronage in the maintenance of challenging groups. SDS began in 1959 as an effort to challenge the conservative political consensus prevailing on American college campuses during the Eisenhower years. The group began as an affiliate of the League for Industrial Democracy, a small socialist organization that had itself been supported for several decades mainly by private gifts. After a bitter controversy in the early 1960s in which the LID threatened to withdraw its support over supposed Communist infiltration, the SDS quickly grew from the dedicated band of 150 activists who gathered in Port Huron, Michigan, in 1962 to ratify its manifesto into a vigorous organization with over 20,000 dues-paying members in 1966. Besides its campus activities, SDS employed more than 300 full-time field workers engaged in grass-roots community organizing in several large industrial cities. Dues and private gifts were important sources of funds during this period, but the principal income of SDS was a series of grants

from the United Auto Workers Union to conduct the SDS campaign of community organization and much of the group's publishing and issues research.

Factional infighting intensified in the late 1960s as the group became a kind of revolutionary vanguard rather than a broadly based student movement. Despite warnings from some of its leaders, SDS soon took itself beyond the political and ideological reach of the UAW, which finally terminated its grants. This withdrawal of patronage led almost immediately to a collapse of the group's staff and organizational center. Having drifted beyond the normative boundaries of the political system as defined by the values of its principal patrons, the SDS soon disintegrated into brawling factions of extreme radicals, and finally into the terrorist fantasies of the Weathermen, whose activities eventually were financed primarily by robbing banks.<sup>18</sup>

Most groups formed during this period, however, did not force their way in from outside the system; they were brought into being at the bidding of the patrons themselves in a form of political mobilization from the top down. More than half of the 46 groups representing the elderly in my study were formed after 1965, the year of the great legislative breakthroughs of Medicare and the Older Americans Act. Many other groups in fields like education, mass transportation, and environmental protection also sprang up *after* the passage of dramatic new legislation that established the major outlines of public policy in their areas. In all of these cases, the formation of new groups was one of the *consequences* of major new legislation, not one of the *causes* of its passage. A pressure model of the policymaking process in which an essentially passive legislature responds to petitions from groups of citizens who have spontaneously organized because of common social or economic concerns must yield to a model in which influences for change come as much from inside the government as from beyond its institutional boundaries, and in which political entrepreneurs operating from bases in interest groups, from within the Congress, the presidency, or many private institutions, struggle to accommodate citizen discontent, appeal to emerging groups, and strive to generate support for their own conceptions of the public interest.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>For the history of the SDS see Newfield (1966), pp. 83-108; Adelson (1972), Barbrook and Bolt (1980), pp. 274-280; and for a similar account of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, see Carson (1981).

<sup>19</sup>Much recent scholarship suggests that political leaders often play a largely autonomous role in policymaking. For illustrative commentary see Nordlinger (1981) and Walker (1977).

Changes in the structure of the interest group system cannot be understood only through the study of shifts in public opinion or the clever tactics of innovative leaders. The success of efforts to create and maintain political interest groups also depends upon such legal and institutional factors as the provisions of the tax code governing the ability of business firms to claim deductions for the expenses of lobbying, subsidies in the form of reduced postal rates for not-for-profit groups heavily dependent upon direct mail solicitation, the availability of financial support from regulatory agencies for groups that wish to testify at administrative hearings, the rules concerning the registration of lobbyists and the financial disclosures they are required to make, legal restraints on the accessibility of foundations, and many other policies and actions by government or other patrons that either stimulate or inhibit the process of political mobilization. Since the number of interest groups and their rate of growth is so heavily influenced by the incentives, supports, and opportunities created through public policies and legal provisions, most governments choose to promote the mobilization of their allies, as the Johnson administration did through the War on Poverty, Model Cities, VISTA, the Older Americans Act, and many other programs of social reform; or to frustrate or demobilize its antagonists as the Reagan administration seems to be doing through budget cuts in the discretionary programs of the Great Society, raises in postal rates, and challenges to the not-for-profit status of several groups and publishing enterprises (Babcock, 1982; Mackenzie, 1981; Peterson, 1981; Seabury, 1982; & Stanfield, 1981).

The energy that drives the process of group formation may come from below in the form of social movements arising out of widespread popular discontent, or from individual political entrepreneurs operating largely on their own. Initiative may also come from above in the form of efforts by trade unions, government agencies, private corporations, churches, and other large organizations in the public and private sectors sponsoring groups that they believe will further their interests. Wealthy individuals and private foundations often take the lead in promoting groups designed to mobilize large segments of the public in support of controversial causes. Without the influence of the patrons of political action, the flourishing system of interest groups in the United States would be much smaller and would include very few groups seeking to obtain broad collective or public goods. If all sources of patronage suddenly disappeared, the interest group system would immediately shrink until it included only a small set of highly unstable insurgent groups that would remain in existence only as long as they

were able to command the loyalty of some aroused segment of the public, and another set of more stable associations that represented only small, tightly knit, commercial, occupational, ethnic, or religious communities, those groups able to draw successfully upon the resources of their members to meet their operating expenses.

The findings of this study lead to the principal conclusion that the number of interest groups in operation, the mixture of group types, and the level and direction of political mobilization in the United States at any point in the country's history will largely be determined by the composition and accessibility of the system's major patrons of political action. The American system of political patronage has grown dramatically and become more diversified during the past 30 years so that many new opportunities have arisen for aspiring political entrepreneurs of both liberal and conservative persuasions. As the patronage system has grown, so have the number and variety of interest groups. The key to the origins and maintenance of interest groups in the United States lies in the ability and willingness of the patrons of political action to expand the representative system by sponsoring groups that speak for newly emerging elements of society and promote new legislative agendas and social values.

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