The Impact of Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Social Movement Organizations on Public Policy: Some Recent Evidence and Theoretical Concerns*

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Abstract

This article considers the direct impact of political parties, interest groups, and social movement organizations (SMOs) on policy, providing evidence for a "core" hypothesis and three others that refine or qualify it. The core hypothesis: all three types of organizations have substantial impacts on policy. The other three: (1) when public opinion is taken into account, the political organizations do not have such an impact; (2) parties have a greater impact than interest groups and SMOs; and (3) interest groups and SMOs will affect policy only to the extent that their activities provide elected officials with information and resources relevant to their election campaigns. The source of data is articles published in major sociology and political science journals from 1990 to 2000, systematically coded to record the impact of organizations on policy. The major findings include: political organizations affect policy no more than half the time; parties and nonparty organizations affect policy about equally often; there is some evidence that organizational activities that respond to the electoral concerns of elected officials are especially likely to have an impact.

Everyone who studies democratic politics agrees that political parties, interest groups, and social movement organizations (SMOs) strongly influence public policy. These political organizations define public problems, propose solutions,

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aggregate citizens' policy preferences, mobilize voters, make demands of elected officials, communicate information about government action to their supporters and the larger public, and make relatively coherent legislative action possible. They seem indispensable to democratic policy making; no democratic polity in the modern world is without them (on the role of political parties in the democratic process, see Aldrich 1995; on interest groups, see Hansen 1991; on SMOs, see Tilly 1984).

This article focuses on the most obvious way that political organizations affect policy: by influencing the final stage of legislative activity, when policy changes are, or are not, enacted into law. We consider the direct impact of political organizations on policy change, that is, the impact organizations have after considering other potential influences. This is a common approach to the study of policy change, and impact gauged in this way is what social scientists are most often referring to when they discuss the determinants of public policy.[1]

We begin with what might be called the "core" hypothesis in studies of the direct impact of political organizations on policy; we then present three additional hypotheses that qualify or refine the core hypothesis, and provide evidence relevant to all four hypotheses.

1. The core hypothesis: *Political organizations have a substantial direct impact on policy change.* Effectively, this means that they have a substantial impact even after all other variables commonly included in recent studies are taken into account.

2. *When public opinion on a policy (including opinions about its importance) is taken into account, political organizations' direct impact will decline substantially or even disappear.*

3. *When political organizations have a direct impact on policy, the impact of political parties will be greater (in both frequency and magnitude) than the impact of interest groups and SMOs.*

4. *Interest groups and SMOs will affect policy only to the extent that their activities provide elected officials with information and resources relevant to their prospects for reelection.*

Our evidence is of a somewhat unusual type, in that it has all been provided by others. We have analyzed every article on policy change in the three most prestigious sociology journals — the *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces* — and the three most prestigious political science journals — the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Journal of Politics* — since 1990. But we have not done a literature review in the usual sense. Rather than summarizing the arguments and conclusions of the articles in a conventional narrative, we used each article as a source of data, systematically tabulating the authors' predictions, variables, indicators, and findings, along with information about which policy is-

sues are studied in which countries. These data will be analyzed to show how often research supports each hypothesis, and also, at times, to highlight how little evidence is available and how little we know.

Almost all research about the direct impact of political organizations on policy is based on the core hypothesis. Yet we find that it is consistent with the data only about half the time, and, of this half, in only about half the cases is the impact of political organizations found to be more than minimal. Political parties do not appear to have more impact than interest groups or SMOs. Finally, we note that few studies consider the relative impact of political organizations and public opinion, or the role of interest groups and SMOs as conveyers of political information. The evidence suggests an agenda for future research.

Theory

The Impact of Political Organizations on Policy

It is virtually a truism among sociologists that political parties, SMOs, and interest groups all affect policy. On parties, for example, Hicks and Misra (1993) point out that among those adopting the "social democratic" theory of social welfare policy, "the key . . . proposition is that *increases in left-party government augment welfare effort*" (675, emphasis in original); Huber, Ragin, and Stephens (1993) hypothesize that "the relative strength of parties . . . profoundly shape[s]. . . social and economic policies" (716), Amenta and Poulsen (1996) argue that if Democratic and third-party politicians "take control of state governments. . . . , the resulting regimes are expected to increase social spending" (34, when the political system is democratic and policy oriented). The view on social movements and SMOs is the same; as McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1988) state in their much-cited review article, "The interest of many scholars in social movements stems from their belief that movements represent an important force for social change" (727). Sociologists do not often study interest groups, but when they do, they expect them to influence policy as well (e.g., Campbell & Allen 1994:655).

Political scientists disagree among themselves more than sociologists do on the impact of parties, SMOs, and interest groups on policy (as will be detailed below), but they often do hypothesize that political organizations will indeed have an impact (e.g., on parties, see Blais, Blake & Dion 1993; Tufte 1978; on SMOs, see Tarrow 1994:1; Wald, Button & Rienzo 1996; on interest groups, Austen-Smith & Wright 1994:42).

How much impact are political organizations expected to have? Sociologists and political scientists seldom address this question explicitly. Their language is nearly always that used in the first two examples above, where organizations are

hypothesized to "augment" or "increase" the relevant policy outcome, but they say little about how great the impact is expected to be, even in very general terms. It seems reasonable to infer, however, that authors expect an impact large enough to matter politically. They would hardly find it worthwhile to analyze organizational impacts they expect to be politically inconsequential, even if by conventional statistical criteria they are probably not zero. Most researchers, we presume, want theoretical and substantive answers to the question that forms the title of a recent review article on social movements: "Was It Worth the Effort?" (Giugni's 1998).

Sociologists and political scientists expect the impact of political organizations on policy to be substantial. So pervasive is the view that political organizations have a substantial impact on policy that we treat it as a core hypothesis in the study of democratic politics. Work on the determinants of policy change either argues on behalf of the hypothesis, or responds to it in some way.

Political Organizations and Public Opinion

The most direct challenge to the core hypothesis is provided by political scientists' work in democratic theory. Beginning with Downs' *Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) over 40 years ago, many political scientists (and some economists) have argued that electoral competition frequently forces elected officials to enact policies consistent with public opinion. Officeholders usually strongly want to win reelection, and believe that failure to do what the public wants will mean defeat (see Arnold 1990; Dahl 1989; Mayhew 1974). This argument has major implications for our expectations about the direct impact of political organizations on policy. When a majority of the public favors a policy, both parties in a two-party system, and all major parties in multiparty systems, will respond, and the policy is likely to be enacted regardless of what the party balance is. The direct impact of party, as conventionally measured, will be zero (see also Erikson, Wright & McIver 1993 for a good explication of this argument). This will be especially likely when the public is intensely concerned about an issue, because it is then that elected officials can be most certain that their actions will influence citizens' party choice. When the public is relatively indifferent, parties and elected officials may have more freedom to act on the basis of differing ideologies; then the party balance may matter (Arnold 1990; Jones 1994).

A similar argument applies to SMOs and interest groups. When a majority of the public wants particular policies enacted, it would be foolish for officeholders to respond to the wishes of SMOs and interest groups, especially when the public's level of concern is high. Lohmann (1993:319) states this view especially bluntly, but her opinion is fairly widely shared among political scientists: "[i]t is puzzling that rational political leaders with majoritarian incentives would ever respond to political action" by SMOs or interest groups. Burstein (1999:9) sums up this

argument in what he calls "the direct impact hypothesis": "the greater and more persistent the majority favoring a particular policy, and the more important the issue to that majority, as perceived by legislators, the smaller the direct impact of interest organizations [i.e., SMOs and interest groups together] on legislative action."

Thus, in opposition to the core hypothesis is what might be called the *public opinion hypothesis: When public opinion on a policy (including opinions about its importance) is taken into account, political organizations' direct impact will decline substantially or even disappear.*

Parties vs. Interest Groups and SMOs

Neither the core hypothesis nor the public opinion hypothesis distinguish among types of political organizations. Many political scientists would argue, however, that political parties differ from the other two types of organizations in a critical way: unlike interest groups and SMOs, parties actually control the government. It is easy to imagine (for many political scientists, at least) that elected officials would ignore interest groups and SMOs when their reelection is at stake, but the dynamics with regard to political parties are more complicated. Many party activists are likely to have gotten into politics because they are strongly committed to relatively extreme ideological views, and, when their party wins power, may be torn between the need to follow public opinion and their desire to transform their own ideologies into policy. Even elected officials most strongly oriented to reelection, and therefore to public opinion, may find it difficult to ignore party activists holding relatively extreme views. Activists' support may be crucial for winning nomination, and their time and money may be essential for winning the general election as well (Aldrich 1995). Thus, the internal dynamics of parties and the electoral system may combine to give substantial power to those in both parties who are relatively reluctant to follow public opinion on the issues that matter most to them. When this happens, the parties may espouse quite different policies, and a change in the party balance may lead to substantial policy change.[2]

In addition, and consistent with the public opinion hypothesis, elected officials may feel it relatively safe to ignore the public on issues it cares little about (though they must always be concerned that issues not salient now may become so during the next campaign). When officials feel this way, all three types of political organizations may affect policy directly; but parties' control of the government may enable them to turn their preferences into policy more quickly and effectively than interest groups and SMOs can.

Thus, a first refinement of the core hypothesis, which we might call the *relative impact hypothesis:*

When political organizations have a direct impact on policy, the impact of political parties will be greater (in both frequency and magnitude) than the impact of interest groups and SMOs.

How Interest Groups and SMOs May Affect Policy

Those who study SMOs and interest groups have come to realize that their success depends on both the resources they deploy and the context of their struggle for influence. For example, both Fording (1997) and Amenta and Poulsen (1996) argue that organized action directed at enhancing welfare policies will be more successful in states that have more open and democratic political systems; Huber et al. (1993) contend that the nature of government institutions "clearly shapes the potential for economic interests and organized groups to influence policy" (713).

Sociologists have tended to begin their studies of organizational impact by focusing on the organizations and bringing context into account only later. The "resource mobilization" approach, which focuses on organizational resources, preceded the "political opportunity" approach, which focuses more on context (Giugni 1998). Political scientists, in contrast, have tended to begin with what sociologists think of as context, namely the motivations and needs of elected officials, often using their understanding of such officials as a guide to studying political organizations (Hansen 1991).

Sociologists and political scientists may be seen as converging on an important idea: that if we are to understand the impact of organizations on policy, we need to think carefully about how particular organizational resources potentially influence the organizations' targets, given the targets' own needs. Amenta and Poulsen, and Fording move in this direction when they match the motivations of the targets of influence with the nature of the influence attempts. Officeholders, they argue, are most likely to pay attention to groups when those groups have the vote and are able to participate in politics without restriction. Under those circumstances, the groups' dissatisfaction with officeholders may lead to the officeholders' defeat, which would not be the case if the dissatisfied groups did not have access to the political process.[3]

Many political scientists have come to argue that what politicians want and need most is essentially *information* about *electorally relevant resources*. When an organization makes demands of elected officials, the officials want to know what the organization wants, and how meeting its demands will affect the officials' electoral prospects. Does the organization have many members or few? Can it mobilize them to vote? Will their decisions about how to vote be affected by what they hear from the organization? Can the organization provide resources — money, campaign workers, access to media — that can help the elected officials win re-election? (e.g., Hansen 1991; Wright 1996). Considering relationships between

organizations and officeholders in great detail, Lohmann (1993, 1994) goes a step further, arguing that it is *new* information that will be most relevant to elected officials. Adopting an approach somewhat analogous to the rational expectations approach in economics, she contends that at any given time, politicians will have considered a great deal of information about their political environment, including the demands of interest groups and SMOs, the resources available to them, and so on. Thus, they need pay little attention to routine communications, very often just enough to see whether the environment is changing in any potentially significant way. What it takes to influence them is dramatic, attention-getting changes in the political environment, such as exponential increases in protest activity.

The arguments by these political scientists have important implications for how we should conceptualize and measure the resources and activities of political organizations. According to this logic, organizations are most likely to influence policy when they change their activities in ways that attract legislators' attention, and when the attention-getting activities in turn lead legislators to worry that if they do not respond to the organizations' demands, their chances of reelection will suffer (see also Piven & Cloward 1977:28-32). Routine activities are unlikely to have much impact; neither are resources as such, unless there is evidence that they are being deployed in some new way.

Here, therefore, is a second refinement of the core hypothesis, which we might call the *information-and-resources hypothesis:*

> *Interest groups and SMOs will affect policy only to the extent that their activities provide elected officials with information and resources relevant to their prospects for reelection.*

Concretely, this means that organizational resources, such as numbers of members or size of budgets, are unlikely to strongly influence policy change. Organizational activities are more likely to matter, but even here the effect may be small. For example, if organizations wanting a particular policy change routinely carry out protest demonstrations, the demonstrations are unlikely to have any continuing impact — they have already been taken into account. More likely to have an impact will be dramatic changes in activities, particularly if linked to realistic electoral promises or threats.

A look at how organizations' involvement is measured in studies of policy change shows many studies likely to find organizations having little impact, if this hypothesis is correct. Organizations' resources are taken into account more often than their activities, and their routine activities more often than new activities. For example, Allen and Campbell's (1994) indicator of labor organization is a measure ("union density") of how much of the labor force is unionized — a measure of resources alone; similarly, their indicator of business organization is based on the annual budgets of the National Association of Manufacturers and the Chamber of Commerce. Other studies that rely on similar measures of resources include

Amenta, Carruthers and Zylan (1992; union density); Grattet, Jenness and Curry (1998; presence or absence of an organization in a state); Huber, Ragin and Stephens (1993; union membership); Skocpol et al. 1993 (number of organizations). When organizations' activities are considered, they tend to be routine, or not directed at electoral politics in any straightforward way, or at any particular issue; examples include strikes (Cauthen & Amenta 1996; Hicks & Misra 1993; Huber et al. 1993) and protests (Santoro 1999). If most studies of organizational impact rely on such measures, and if the hypothesis is correct, we might wind up finding very little evidence of interest group and SMO impact on policy. This would not mean that the organizations have no impact, only that current ways of describing their activities are poorly linked to theory.

Data

Data Source

Rather than collecting new data to test our hypotheses about the impact of political organizations on policy, we decided to draw on the work of others. But we did not want to do a conventional literature review, because such reviews are not typically oriented to hypothesis testing as reports of research are. We have chosen a hybrid approach, using the results of others' research as data for our own. Their output serves as our input. We created a data set by carefully coding reports of others' work, and then used the new data to test our hypotheses. In doing so, we had to make decisions about which studies to include in our data set, how to code the variables, and which data to include.[4]

Any review of past work is necessarily selective, and those interested in policy change have limited the scope of their reviews in a variety of ways, often unconsciously in response to the traditions of their disciplines. One way is to focus on particular independent variables. There is a vast number of studies seemingly interested in policy change, but in fact focusing only on how particular variables are related to policy; such studies are far too numerous to list, but widely cited examples include Page and Shapiro (1983, including public opinion but no political organizations); Erikson, Wright and McIver (1993, including public opinion and parties, but not interest groups or SMOs); Amenta, Carruthers & Zylan (1992, including parties and SMOs, but not public opinion or interest groups); and Wright (1996, including interest groups but not public opinion, SMOs, or parties). This is a strategy pursued even though everyone knows, at some level, that excluding some variables from an analysis makes it likely that estimates of the impact of the variables included will be inaccurate.

A second way to limit the scope of a review of past work is to focus mainly on work in one's own discipline while paying little attention to work in others; Burstein (1998b) has recently shown, for example, that sociologists studying policy virtually

ignore a vast amount of relevant work in political science. And a third way is to analyze a particular policy, rather than to focus on policy change more generally.

We, too, have limited the scope of our review, but in a somewhat unusual way. We have analyzed all relevant articles in the three most prestigious sociology journals and the three most prestigious political science journals from 1990 through September 2000. There were 53 such articles, 22 in sociology journals and 31 in political science. Table 1 summarizes these by issue, discipline, and country studied. (The Appendix provides a complete list). Thus, we limit ourselves by time and place of publication, but not by independent variable or policy, and we have been sure to draw on work in more than one discipline. The focus on the best journals means that the articles reviewed meet the highest standards of each discipline; by including only recent work, we have, hopefully, excluded articles with theoretical or methodological flaws that have been discovered and overcome in recent years.

The articles we examined were those that tried to explain policy decisions, or the results of policy decisions, while seeing the decision maker or decision-making body as influenced by public opinion, parties, interest groups, or SMOs in a democratic political system. For the most part, it is obvious what this means. For example, Hicks and Misra (1993), Huber, Ragin and Stephens (1993), Bartels (1991), Brown (1995), and Blais, Blake and Dion (1996) were included because they analyze the determinants of government expenditures in particular policy areas; Skocpol et al. (1993), Grattet et al. (1998), Jenkins and Brents (1991), Amenta and Parikh (1991), and Leicht and Jenkins (1998) analyze the enactment of particular laws; and Allen and Campbell (1994) and Quinn and Shapiro (1991b) examine the determinants of tax rates.

The justification for including several of the studies might seem a little less obvious, because the outcomes are not the direct result of actions by elected officials. Alvarez, Garrett and Lange (1991) analyze the determinants of the unemployment rate, which is not itself a policy. Quinn and Shapiro (1991b) and Williams (1990) analyze the determinants of interest rates, seemingly under the control of the Federal Reserve Board, which is not elected. Mishler and Sheehan (1993) and Stimson et al. (1995) consider decisions by the Supreme Court, whose members, like those on the Federal Reserve Board, are not elected. These are included because many social scientists argue that theories of democratic responsiveness apply to macroeconomic outcomes (including unemployment), monetary policy, and judicial decisions, as well as to direct legislative and executive policymaking; they provide considerable evidence to support their claims (see the cited articles and also Burstein 1991). It turns out that the outcomes in these studies respond to public opinion and organizational activity the same proportion of the time as in the other studies; thus, including these studies does not bias the results. Articles that analyze decision making by individual legislators are not included,

TABLE 1: Issues and Countries Studied

A. Issues Examined in Articles on the Impact of Political Organizations, 1990-2000

	Number of Articles			Number of Measures of Impact		
	Sociology	Political Science	Total	Sociology	Political Science	Total
Social welfare	14	7	21	75	15	90
Taxes	2	6	8	19	26	45
Other economic	1	6	7	4	25	29
Rights, discrimination	4	1	5	9	7	16
Labor	1	0	1	1	0	1
Other domestic	1	12	13	1	42	43
Defense/foreign	0	3	3	0	6	6
Total number	22[a]	31[b]	53	109	121	230

[a] One article (Akard 1992) addresses two issues: labor and other domestic; it is entered both times in the issue rows, but only once in the total.

[b] Two articles address three issues each: Su, Kamlet, and Mowery (1993), social welfare, other domestic, and defense; and Radcliff and Saiz (1998), social welfare, taxes, and other domestic; each is entered three times in the issues rows, but only once in the total.

B. Countries Examined in Articles on the Impact of Political Organizations, 1990-2000

	Number of Articles			Number of Measures of Impact		
	Sociology	Political Science	Total	Sociology	Political Science	Total
U.S.	15	23	38	73	95	168
6-20 developed countries	5	8	13	31	26	57
21+ developed countries	2	0	2	5	0	5

unless the decisions are aggregated and used to describe decisions of the legislature as a whole.

Our unit of analysis is the *effect* of a predictor on a dependent variable, that is, a measure of the relationship between the activities or resources of an organization, and a policy outcome. Thus, if a particular author analyzes the impact of five political organizations on each of two policies, that would be ten relationships. The 53 articles include estimates of 230 effects.

Variables

The coding of some variables, such as what issue or country is being studied, is obvious. But the coding of some others must be explained.

Impact

Researchers most often describe the impact of independent variables in two ways: in terms of statistical significance and substantive significance. The first is by far the more common in these articles. The advantages of this measure are its apparent precision, objectivity, and utility. It is difficult to argue with, except on highly technical grounds, and provides an answer to what is often the key question in a piece of research: did a variable have an impact?

Statistical significance is, however, a very limited guide to an understanding of the impact of one variable on another (see Gill 1999; Lieberson 1992; McCloskey 1998:ch. 9). It tells us whether there is a relationship (with some degree of uncertainty), but not how strong the relationship is, and, in particular, it says nothing about how much the relationship matters in policy terms. Thus, when tabulating the findings presented in the articles, we took into account both statistical and substantive significance. We coded the impact of each political organization as: (1) not significantly different from zero; (2) statistically significant, substantive significance not discussed; (3) statistically significant, substantive significance discussed and found to be of little policy importance; (4) statistically significant, substantive significance discussed and found to be of considerable policy importance; and (5) ambiguous, sometimes statistically significant and sometimes not.

Many relationships fell into category (2): the statistical significance of the relationship was described, but nothing was said about what this meant substantively. Authors sometimes used adjectives such as "strong" to describe statistical relationships when their only criterion was the significance level; these descriptions, meaningless in statistical and substantive terms, were ignored.

Some of the research findings were not described statistically; six of the articles were wholly or party qualitative (Akard 1992; Amenta, Carruthers & Zylan 1992; Amenta & Parikh 1991; Jenkins & Brents 1991; Quadagno 1990; Wood 2000). Their findings about particular relationships were categorized in ways that seemed most consistent with the authors' own interpretation. All discussions of substantive significance (categories 3 and 4) were phrased in terms relevant to the particular policy setting. For example, when Fording (1997) examines the impact of insurgency on state AFDC recipient rates from 1962-80, he concludes that "Where blacks comprise 30% or more of the population, every act of insurgency is predicted to have increased AFDC growth by at least 500 recipients per million population" (22). In similar fashion, Skocpol et al. (1993:694) argue that women's group endorsements speeded up the enactment of mothers' pensions laws by four to ten years, and Bartels (1991) concludes that shifts in the party balance had an impact of $.31 billion on U.S. defense expenditures in 1982.

How did we decide whether such policy impacts were little (category 3) or considerable (category 4)? Here we decided to reflect the authors' own

(or at least better judges than we might be). There is inevitably some subjectivity in such judgments, and some authors may have been inclined to over- or underestimate the importance of particular organizations in accord with their theoretical predilections. Our very careful reading of the articles led us to believe that the authors were always reasonable in their judgments (even though one might imagine disagreeing with them in some cases). Accepting their judgments seemed preferable to substituting our own.

The final category, "ambiguous," was for instances in which relationships were sometimes statistically significant and sometimes not, in ways unpredicted by the authors. For example, Hicks and Misra (1993) found that increases in the power of parties of the left sometimes increased welfare effort, and sometimes did not, in ways contrary to predictions. Not included in this category are relationships that are sometimes statistically significant and sometimes not, when the authors predicted this (Ramirez, Soyosal & Shanahan 1997).

Types of Political Organization

Political scientists divide all nongovernmental political organizations into three types: political parties, interest groups, and social movement organizations. Sociologists generally agree with this division (see the review in Burstein 1998a). Initially, we hoped to distinguish among the three and examine the impact on policy of each one separately. We did not do so, however, for two related reasons, one theoretical and the other practical. Theoretically, many scholars distinguish between parties and the other two types of organizations by predicting that the former will affect policy more strongly than the latter; but few if any scholars distinguish between interest groups and SMOs in a comparable way — they simply hypothesize that both will affect policy. As a practical matter, almost half the nonparty organizations whose impact was being examined were not categorized at all, so we do not know whether the authors considered them to be interest groups or SMOs; we were reluctant to categorize them ourselves because recent work (Burstein 1998a; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 1996:27) argues that the distinction is often difficult to make, with different observers fairly often categorizing the same organization in different ways.[5] Thus, we therefore categorize organizations as either political parties or nonparty political organizations.

Organizational Resources and Activities

As discussed above, some theorists contend that the impact of SMOs and interest groups will depend on the extent to which they are able to provide information or resources to elected officials that are relevant to the officials' electoral prospects. We have categorized organizational resources and activities as follows: (1) resources only (e.g., numbers of members, size of budget); (2) organizational activity not

directed at electoral politics (e.g., strikes); (3) activity directed at electoral politics, but not at the specific issue being analyzed (e.g., support for Huey Long [Amenta & Poulsen 1996]; working class and middle class protest interpreted as trying to win parties' attention [Hicks & Misra 1993]; Latino protest [Santoro 1999]); (4) activity focused on the specific issue, but seemingly routine, not providing new information, such as lobbying on issues of continuing importance by groups whose views are already known (e.g., candidate endorsements by Townsend clubs [Amenta et al. 1992]; endorsements by women's groups [Skocpol et al. 1993]; and (5) activity providing new information to candidates or elected officials. Examples of activities providing new information would include congressional testimony on a new issue (meaning that legislators would have little information about public or organizational preferences; Segal et al. 1992); activities by organizations not previously involved in the policy process on a particular issue, including newly formed organizations; activities that suddenly change greatly in frequency or magnitude, such as a wave of sit-ins or demonstrations (Lohmann 1994); activities of unexpected type or magnitude that confound expectations (as when the 1963 March on Washington, expected to involve 100,000 demonstrators and a high potential for violence turned out to include 250,000 demonstrators and to be almost totally peaceful; Branch 1998:132-34); lobbying by organizations taking positions contrary to what might be expected (as when President Reagan's plan to end affirmative action through executive order was opposed not just by civil rights groups, which would be expected, but by major corporations as well; Fisher 1985). We also coded whether the organizational resources and activities were measured in terms of *levels* of resources and activities, or *change* in the levels; arguably change would matter more.

Measures

As already noted, our unit of analysis is the effect of an independent variable (organizational resources or activity) on a dependent variable (a policy measure). For the sake of brevity, we will call these "coefficients," although a few are qualitative measures. But which relationships should be included? Many quantitative analyses present a number of models, with the magnitude of particular relationships varying, depending on which other variables are in the model and sometimes on other factors.

Here, as elsewhere, we have chosen generally to reflect the authors' point of view, coding the relationships from what they often call their "final" model. But there is a major exception to our general practice. Often authors find initially that particular variables have no impact on the dependent variable, and drop the variables from subsequent analyses, leaving them out of the final model (indeed, sometimes they are only referred to in footnotes). These

TABLE 2: Impact of Political Organizations on Policy

	Type of Organization		
Impact	Political Party	Nonparty	Total
None (%)	42	50	46
Ambiguous (%)	9	6	7
Statistically significant, policy importance not discussed (%)	32	13	23
Statistically significant, little policy importance (%)	2	1	2
Statistically significant, substantial policy importance (%)	15	31	22
Total number	123	107	230

findings, while negative, are findings nevertheless, and we include them. If we did not — if we included only the statistically significant findings in the final equations — we would greatly overestimate how often political organizations affect policy.[6]

It is necessary to point out that inconsistencies among authors affect the coding. For example, if two authors measure the activities of an organization two different ways, one author may include both measures in the final equation, while the other may combine them into a single-variable index. We do not second-guess authors on this; in the absence of complete standardization of indicators, there is no way to avoid this problem, and we do not try.

Results

The Impact of Organizations on Policy

The core hypothesis is that all three types of political organizations have a substantial direct impact on policy.[7] How much support do the data provide for this hypothesis?

It is not easy to answer this question. There are widely accepted criteria for deciding whether a particular effect is greater than zero, but not for deciding whether an effect is substantial, or for reaching conclusions about how the credibility of a hypothesis is affected by patterns in a large set of effects (Lieberson 1992). We do not want to set the standard so high that few sets of sociological findings could meet it, or so low that just about any set of results could do so. It seems to us that in order to conclude that political organizations have a substantial direct on policy, their impact should be statistically significant most of the time (not

TABLE 3: Impact of Political Organizations on Policy, When Public Opinion Is and Is Not Taken into Account

Impact	Public Opinion Included?		Total
	No	Yes	
No (%)	51	38	50
Yes (%)	49	62	50
Total number	192	21	213

Note: The 17 relationships whose impact was ambiguous are not included.

pinning ourselves down in advance as to what "most" means), and substantial perhaps half the time. Putting this another way, we would allow for the complexities of social science research by agreeing that the evidence is consistent with the hypothesis when half the effects are *not* substantial and a fair proportion are not even statistically significant.

By this standard, the findings do not provide strong support for the hypothesis. It would be difficult to argue that most of the coefficients are statistically significant. Forty-six percent are clearly not (Table 2), and another seven percent are ambiguous. Of the not quite half that are definitely statistically significant, not quite half — 22% of all effects — are seen as substantial by the authors (first column, last row of percentages). Twenty-three percent of the coefficients were statistically significant but not discussed in substantive terms. It is possible that some of these might represent substantial impacts on policy, but that is not how the authors describe them; they cannot, therefore, be said to support the core hypothesis.

Organizational Impact and Public Opinion

The public opinion hypothesis stated that political organizations will not have a substantial impact on policy because legislators are more strongly influenced by public opinion than by organizations. A recent review (Burstein 1998b) presents some evidence consistent with the hypothesis, but it looked at studies as a whole, not at particular coefficients. What do our data show?

Unfortunately, the 53 articles provide an example of the sometimes striking gap between theory and research. Although sociologists do not consider public opinion an important determinant of policy, and so could not be expected to include it in their studies, the same is not true of political scientists. Public opinion is at the heart of their work on democracy (even those who think it is unimportant see themselves as participating in a controversy), and much of their theoretical work argues very strongly that policy change cannot be understood unless

public opinion is taken into account. Nevertheless, very few of their studies include public opinion. When we divide coefficients into those that signify organizational impact and those that do not, leaving out the ambiguous cases, we find that only 21 of 213 coefficients were in equations in which public opinion was included (Table 3); and not a single study included a measure of the salience of the issues to the public, despite the great importance attributed to it theoretically (Jones 1994).

In those equations that include a measure of public opinion, it has a significant impact on policy in every one. Yet, as Table 3 shows, organizations are *more* likely to have an impact when public opinion is taken into account, not less — the opposite of what Burstein (1998b) found in his less-sophisticated review, and contrary to our hypothesis. We would not want to make too much of this finding — the number of coefficients on which it is based is very small. Nevertheless, it suggests that a much broader review should be conducted, and much more research carried out, before anyone can hope to make any strong statement about how public opinion and organizational activity affect policy.

The Relative Importance of Different Types of Organizations

According to the relative impact hypothesis, political parties will have more impact than interest groups and SMOs on policy. With the data available here, we can estimate how often each type of organization has an impact, though not its strength. Forty-nine percent of party coefficients were clearly significant (not zero or ambiguous), compared to 44% for nonparty organizations (Table 2). We use no tests of significance ourselves (the data do not represent a sample of anything), but it would be fair to say that the difference is slight. There is little support for the relative impact hypothesis.[8]

Organizational Resources and Activities

According to the information-and-resources hypothesis, nonparty organizations will be most effective when they provide elected officials with information and resources relevant to the officials' reelection. Organizational resources not used, or used in other ways, are not likely to affect policy.

This argument raises two issues for this review. The first, and more obvious, is whether the hypothesis is correct. The second is how attention, or lack of attention, to this hypothesis might affect data collection in studies of policy change. If researchers ignore the hypothesis and its theoretical underpinnings, the data they gather on political organizations might be on variables especially *unlikely* to affect policy. For example, if the hypothesis is correct, researchers who collect data on organizational resources, but not on how those resources are used to meet the needs of legislators, will find no relationship between their measures of organizational resources and policy. They might then conclude

TABLE 4: Impact of Political Organizations on Policy, by Measure of Resources or Activity

A. Impact by Measures of Organizational Resources and Activities, Nonparty Organizations

	Measure of Organizational Resources or Activity					
Impact?	Resources Only	Activity Not Directed at Electoral Politics	Electoral Activity, Not Directed at Specific Issue	Activity Directed at Specific Issue, No New Information	Activity Providing New Information	Total
No (%)	56	80	100	40	0	53
Yes (%)	45	20	0	60	100	47
Total	69	5	4	20	3	101

Note: the 17 relationships whose impact was ambiguous are not included.

B. Impact by Whether Organizational Variable was Measured in Terms of *Change*, All Organizations

Impact	Change Measured?		Total
	No	Yes	
No (%)	50	50	50
Yes (%)	50	50	50
Total number	201	12	213

erroneously that the organizations were not affecting policy, when in fact they were. Theoretically problematic decisions about operationalization could have a serious impact on substantive conclusions.

In fact, most of the authors' data about organizational resources and activities is of the sort least likely to show a relationship with policy, according to the hypothesis. Two-thirds of the measures (69 of 101, first and last columns of last row, Table 4A) are of organizational resources alone, incorporating no activity at all. There were almost no measures of activity intended to provide elected officials with new information — information that would cause them to pay special attention to the organization — and for all organizations (parties as well as nonparty organizations) there were only twelve indicators that gauged change in organizational activity rather than levels (Table 4B).

The findings are in line with the hypothesis. Forty-five percent of measures of resources alone had a statistically significant impact on policy, but activities

directed at specific issues (the second and third columns from the right) together had a significant impact 65% of the time. (Whether the resources and activities were measured in terms of change makes no difference, however.) Because so few data were collected about organizational activities directed at elected officials, the findings can be no more than suggestive — but one suggestion would be that further research, using new measures of organizational activity, would be warranted.

Conclusions

Virtually all sociologists and political scientists publishing in the top journals hypothesize that political parties, interest groups and SMOs influence public policy, and it is safe to assume that they generally expect the impact to be substantial. This hypothesis is not as well supported by the data as we might expect. The impact of political organizations is significantly different from zero, by conventional statistical tests, only about half the time, and important in policy terms (as assessed by the authors) in just over a fifth. There is little evidence that parties have more impact than other organizations.

Why do sociologists and political scientists persist in hypothesizing that political organizations influence policy, possibly strongly, when their own findings suggest that this is often not the case? Though we cannot definitively answer this question, we can suggest three factors that might contribute to their persistence. First, the theories predicting that there will be such an impact are so plausible and so widely accepted that contrary evidence is not noticed. Second, scholarly conventions about data analysis and presentation lead many authors to leave negative findings out of their final models, having relegated statistically insignificant results to very brief discussions in the text or footnotes. This may lead authors as well as readers to believe that sets of findings are stronger than they really are. And third, no one has reviewed the literature as we have, tabulating every effect of organizations on policy in such a wide range of publications.

Up to this point, our conclusions have been based on authors' reports of their own findings, as presented in the best journals. The findings must be seen as among the most credible available in the study of policy change. Nevertheless, we believe it important to mention three things that might render the findings suspect.

First, our estimates of the frequency with which organizations directly affect policy might be too *high*. Theoretical work in political science suggests that political organizations will have little impact when public opinion is taken into account, especially on issues the public cares about. Public opinion is included in very few of the studies we reviewed, however. Had it been included, we might find that many

relationships that are significant now would disappear. There might be even less support for the core hypothesis than we have found.[9]

Second, our estimates of direct organizational impact may be too *low*. Theoretical work suggests that organizations are most likely to influence policy when their activities are directed at providing elected officials with information and resources helpful to reelection. Our review has provided a bit of evidence in support of this view. Yet very few researchers gather data on these sorts of activities; instead, they usually rely on information about organizational resources (whether or not the resources are used). If theory is correct, these measures (relied on for very practical reasons) are the ones least likely to show organizations having a significant impact on policy. Were more appropriate measures to be used, there might be more support for the core hypothesis.

Finally, our estimates of the impact of organizations may simply be biased, in either direction, because extant research focuses on so few issues and countries, and on so narrow a slice of the policymaking process. A quarter-century ago Gamson ([1975] 1990) argued convincingly that our ability to understand SMO success and failure had been limited by researchers' focus on SMOs that had been unusually visible or successful. What we had was a tiny, biased "sample" of SMOs that provided a poor basis for generalization. The same logic applies to legislative policymaking, and, indeed, Wittman (1995:ch. 13) claims that many scholars' conclusions about policymaking are wrong because of what he calls "arbitrary choice of samples" of issues (p. 182; cf. Mishler & Sheehan 1993; Page & Shapiro 1983); like those studying SMOs, those who study policy change tend to focus on issues that are especially visible.

Almost no one, in the 53 articles or elsewhere, has applied Gamson's logic to the study of public policy, by analyzing, for example, a random sample of issues in a sample of countries. (The sole exception we found is Wiggins et al. 1992; they looked at a random sample of bills in three state legislatures.) The range of issues studied is quite narrow. Two-thirds of sociologists' articles focus on social welfare policies (see Table 1A and the Appendix), and while political scientists study a wider range of issues, it is not difficult to think of important issues that have not been the subject of a single study published in the top six journals during since 1990, including the environment; discrimination against women or racial and ethnic minorities in employment, housing, education, or other areas[10]; immigration; drugs; abortion; technology; transportation; health; trade; and criminal law (except for Grattet 1998 on hate crimes, which we thought should really be categorized under civil rights/discrimination).[11]

The geographical focus of the studies is narrow as well (Table 1B), sociologists and political scientists roughly equally so. Almost three-quarters of both articles and coefficients are based on studies of the U.S. (a fair number of them on states, cities, or counties). Almost all the rest analyze policy in what is essentially the same set of industrialized democracies (with a little variation from study to study). There are no studies of any individual country other than

the U.S.; the studies of industrialized democracies do not include any countries in Asia other than Japan, any countries in Latin America, or Israel; and the only studies on a wider range of countries can hardly be expected to provide a sense of the policy process beyond the two very specific issues they examine, same-sex relations (Frank & McEneaney 1999) and women's suffrage (Ramirez, Soysal &Shanahan 1997).[12]

It must also be pointed out that most of the studies focus on only the final, and most visible, stage of the policymaking process, when laws are enacted and implemented. Few examine what has been called the "pre-policy" part of the policy process, starting with the initial entry of a policy proposal onto the legislative agenda (on this point, see Edwards, Barrett & Peake 1997:547; Smith 2000:80). If organizations have more impact earlier in the process than later, or if some have more impact at the earlier stages than others do, conclusions based on current work may very well be mistaken.

Because the range of issues and countries studied is so limited, and the parts of the policy process analyzed so narrow, we cannot have much confidence in our capacity to generalize about the impact of political organizations on policy change. Were a wider range of issues and countries, and more of the policy process, to be studied, our conclusions could change substantially.[13]

Our most striking result — that the likelihood of a political organization directly affecting policy is only around 50-50 — indicates that researchers should not take organizations' direct influence on policy outcomes for granted. Not only is this result the product of a decade's worth of articles in the best journals, but there are plausible theoretical arguments quite consistent with it as well.

This result should also prompt caution in thinking about the indirect impact of political organizations on policy: the impact they might have by getting issues on the political agenda, influencing how issues are framed, affecting public opinion, and so on. Many social scientists assume that the indirect impact of political organizations on policy must be very substantial, and perhaps it is. But if the direct impact is less than many surmise, the indirect impact may be less as well.

Our next step should be to improve the design of future research in order to better understand when, how, and under what circumstances, political organizations influence public policy. This would mean including measures of public opinion and issue salience in future studies, improving the measures of organizational activity in ways consistent with the theories addressed above, and thinking about how to sample the issues and polities to be examined. Doing so would greatly enhance our understanding of policy change.

Notes

1. Of course, political organizations influence policy in a variety of indirect ways as well; they raise public awareness of issues, affect how issues are framed, provide information, influence public opinion and other nongovernmental organizations, and so on. The studies we review here do not assess the impact of these indirect influences on policy, however, so, like the authors of those studies, we limit our discussion to the direct impact of political organizations' activities on policy change.

2. This is an ongoing aspect of American presidential politics, where Democratic candidates may have to win the support of the left wing of the party to win nomination, and Republicans candidates may have to win the support of their party's right wing; but the stances taken to win such support may reduce the chance of winning the general election.

3. It should be emphasized at this point that although the emphasis here is on direct, and not indirect, effects, that does not mean that authors ignore the possibility that the direct effect of one variable may be contingent on other variables; quite a number of authors take interaction effects into account, including Alvarez, Garrett, and Lange (1991); Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan (1992); Amenta and Poulsen (1996); Berry and Berry (1992); Boix (1997); Brown (1995); Fording (1997); Hicks, Misra, and Ng (1995); and Mishler and Sheehan (1993).

4. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) and Burstein (1998b) provided models for our approach, but our analyses of previously published work are more systematic and detailed than theirs. We do not do a formal metanalysis because such analyses are most effective when the studies being reviewed are fairly similar in design, and, in the case of non-experimental studies, when the statistical models are well specified. There is so much variation among the studies reviewed here, and so many leave out theoretically important variables (such as public opinion) that metanalysis is not warranted (see Cooper & Hedges 1994).

5. Sociologists (e.g.. Gamson 1990:141-43) occasionally suggest that interest groups, as political insiders, would have more impact than SMOs, which represent outsiders. This suggestion has not been formalized as a hypothesis, however; among the 53 articles, only one (Amenta, Carruthers & Zylan 1992) makes a theoretical distinction between SMOs and interest groups, and none explicitly considers how the impact of one differs from that of the other.

6. We include variables that authors eliminated from their models because they had no impact; when authors eliminated variables because they were very highly correlated with alternative measures of the same concept, we followed their lead. No measures of public opinion were dropped from final analyses by the authors of the articles.

7. Although some authors were open to the possibility that particular organizations might not affect policy, they were rarely willing to make an actual prediction to that effect; just ten coefficients out of 230 were predicted to be zero.

8. Thirty-eight coefficients estimated the impact of organizations identified relatively clearly as SMOs by authors of the articles, 17 the impact of interest groups. Of these, SMOs had a statistically significant (nonambiguous) impact 37% of the time, and interest groups 35%.

9. The data presented in Table 3 show the impact of organizations stronger when public opinion is taken into account, not weaker. We tend to discount this result, because the number of coefficients involved is so small and the measures of public opinion so poor (none taking salience into account). Nevertheless, were more and better studies to confirm this finding, support for theories that emphasize the primacy of public opinion would be undermined.

10. Wald, Button and Rienzo (1996) examine gay rights ordinances, Grattet, Jenness and Curry (1998) hate-crime laws, and Santoro (1999) English-only laws.

11. A few studies (e.g., Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson 1993; Radcliff & Saiz 1998) use a dependent variable that is an index of policy change across many issues — measures of what they call "policy liberalism." The breadth of what they take into account lends some weight to their findings, but does not deal with the question of whether the impact of political organizations is uniform across issues.

12. Issues and countries not addressed by the 53 articles are no doubt the subject of studies published elsewhere, and such studies should eventually be included in analyses like this one. Nevertheless, recent articles in top journals play an extremely important role in social scientists' understanding of what is known in particular areas, and it is clear that our understanding of the impact of political organizations on public policy is based on the study of a narrow range of issues and countries.

13. It may be difficult to include multiple issues or countries in any one study, but it would surely be possible for those who publish in the major journals (or hope to) to analyze issues and countries that have been neglected until now.

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APPENDIX: Articles on the Determinants of Public Policy

A. Articles published in the *American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology,* and *Social Forces,* January, 1990–September, 2000

Authors, Date	Policy	Nations
Akard 1992	Taxes, labor, consumer protection	U.S.
Allen & Campbell 1994	Tax rates and progressivity	U.S.
Amenta & Parikh	Social security	U.S.
Amenta, Carruthers & Zylan 1992	Old-age pensions	U.S.
Amenta, Dunleavy & Bernstein 1994	WPA spending	U.S.
Amenta & Halfmann	WPA wages	U.S.
Amenta & Poulsen 1996	Pensions, WPA wage	U.S
Campbell & Allen 1994	Tax rates	U.S.
Cauthen & Amenta 1996	Welfare	U.S.
Frank & McEneaney 1999	Same-sex relations	84 countries
Grattet, Jenness & Curry 1998	Hate crimes	U.S.
Hicks & Misra 1993	Welfare effort	18 industrialized democracies
Hicks, Misra & Ng 1995	Income security programs	15 industrialized democracies
Huber, Ragin & Stephens 1993	Social security, Government revenue	17 industrialized democracies
Huber & Stephens 2000	Welfare state employment, expenditures	9-16 industrialized democracies
Jenkins & Brents 1991	Social security	U.S.
Leicht & Jenkins 1998	Public venture capital program	U.S.
Pampel 1994	Spending on aged vs. children	18 industrialized democracies
Quadagno 1990	Family assistance plan	U.S.
Ramirez, Soysal & Shanahan 1997	Women's suffrage	115 countries
Santoro 1999	English-only laws	U.S.
Soule & Zylan 1997	Work requirements for welfare	U.S.

APPENDIX: Articles on the Determinants of Public Policy (Cont'd)

B. Articles published in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and the *Journal of Politics*, January, 1990–September, 2000

Authors, Date	Policy	Nations
Alvarez, Garrett & Lange 1991	Economic change	16 industrialized democracies
Barrilleaux	Policy liberalism	U.S.
Bartels 1991	Defense	U.S.
Bernhard 1998	Central bank independence	18 industrialized democracies
Berry & Berry 1992	Taxes	U.S.
Berry & Berry 1994	Taxes	U.S.
Blais, Blake & Dion 1993	Public domestic spending	15 industrialized democracies
Blais, Blake & Dion 1996	Central government spending	18 industrialized democracies
Boix 1997	Capital formation by government, education spending	17 industrialized democracies
Brown 1995	Welfare effort	U.S.
Clark & Hallerberg 2000	Money supply; national debt	OECD countries
Fording 1997	AFDC recipient rates	U.S.
Hicks & Swank 1992	Welfare effort	18 industrialized democracies
Mishler & Sheehan 1993	Liberalism of Supreme Court decisions	U.S.
Mooney & Lee 2000	Death penalty	U.S.
Quinn & Shapiro 1991a	Tax and interest rates	U.S.
Quinn & Shapiro 1991b	Taxes	U.S.
Radcliffe & Saiz 1998	Social welfare; taxes; other domestic	U.S.
Segal, Cameron & Cover	Judicial nominees	U.S.
Skocpol, Abend-Wein, Howard & Lehmann 1993	Mothers' pensions	U.S.
Smith 1999	Policymaking favorable to business	U.S.
Sparks & Walniuk 1995	Mothers' pensions	U.S.
Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson 1995	Policy liberalism	U.S.
Su, Kamlet & Mowery 1993	Defense, entitlements, Domestic controllable outlays	U.S.
Teske 1991	Telecommunications	U.S.
Therien & Noel 2000	Foreign aid	16 industrialized democracies
Wald, Button & Rienzo 1996	Gay rights	U.S.
Wiggins, Hamm & Bell 1992	Random sample of bills	U.S.
Williams 1990	Money supply, interest rates, other economic policies and outcomes	U.S.
Williams & Collins 1997	Tax rates	U.S.
Wood 2000	Budget surplus/deficit	U.S.