

Interest Groups. In Paul Barry Clarke and Joe Foweraker, eds., *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

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Interest groups have been variously defined by scholars in economics, history, political science, sociology, and in other fields. Generally speaking, interest groups are relevant to democratic thought and practice when they interact with government. Therefore, political scientists typically distinguish between social or demographic groups, such as women, and organized interest groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). Sociologists often distinguish between *social movements, which sometimes have no organized character, and social movement organizations (SMO's), which are interest groups. Other terms often used, generally synonymously with interest groups, include 'pressure group,' 'organized interest,' and 'lobby.' Truman, in his classic work on the topic (1951), distinguished between 'potential groups' and 'manifest groups.' Almost any conceivable social, professional, or demographic category constitutes a potential group in the sense that it could be mobilized for political action. Interest groups, in current usage, are what Truman called 'manifest groups'—those potential groups that have actually become active in political life.

Interest groups have long been central to the academic and to the popular study of politics, as well as to philosophical perspectives on democracy. Montesquieu was leery of any 'intermediary bodies' coming in between the citizen and the state. Rousseau worried that the general will would never be realized through an aggregation of particular wills, and was therefore hostile to the press of particular wills on government through groups. Madison considered the 'mischiefs of faction' to be a fundamental concern, though he argued in The Federalist Papers that they were better controlled than eliminated. Groups have long been seen as a threat to democratic practice because their unfettered mobilization could exacerbate social and

economic inequalities. At the same time, they have also been seen as a guarantee of individual rights because any individual sharing concerns with like-minded individuals should be free to organize to demand redress from government. Curing the ‘mischief of faction’ by somehow limiting the freedom to form and support interest groups could be to provide a remedy that is far worse than the disease. Individual rights like free speech, freedom to associate, and freedom to petition government lead to a generally understood freedom to organize into interest groups. Groups, then, are central to philosophical perspectives on how citizens relate to government.

Groups have long been central to studies of governmental operation and to political science in general. In the immediate post-World-War-Two period, especially in the United States, a ‘group approach’ to politics became especially pronounced. Rather than study only the constitutionally defined powers of various institutions, political scientists turned to the ‘real workings’ of government through an analysis of interest groups. Here, they were guided by previous studies such as those done by Bentley (1908), Odegard (1928), Herring (1929), Schattschneider (1935), and Griffith (1939) who had begun studying the informal relations between government officials and communities of technical experts (or ‘pressure groups’) even earlier. By the 1950s, ‘group theorists’ dominated American political science: Truman’s The Governmental Process (1951) reviewed the entire American political system, from voting to the courts and bureaucracy, through the lens of group activities. Dahl’s Who Governs? (1961) similarly put groups at the center of the process of governance.

Groups were not only important in American political science, but in the study of comparative politics as well. Whereas the study of individual countries such as Britain, France, or Italy was affected by the ‘group approach’ just as studies of American politics were, most comparativists followed a slightly different track (but one that also put groups near the center of

things). Those studying Scandinavian countries noted the more ‘corporatist’ nature of the relations between organized interests and the state. Formalized, routine interactions between state officials and representatives of major social categories—interest groups—make a corporatist system especially manageable, but also quite different from a pluralist one. *Pluralist systems were seen to involve more conflict and less control by the state over outside interests. In any case, the study of group-state relations remains a major element of comparative politics; various countries (or sectors within them) are variously described as ‘corporatist,’ ‘pluralist,’ ‘*consociational,’ or ‘statist’ (for reviews of this literature see Richardson 1982 and Schmidt 1996). Putnam’s recent and influential work on Italian (1993) and American politics (1995) places interest-group participation at the center of an idea of civic engagement, harking back to the pioneering comparative work of Almond and Verba (1965) in their five-nation study of political participation. Comparativists as well as those interested in single democracies have long focused their attention on the actions of interest groups.

Probably the single most influential book on interest groups since those of Truman and Dahl is not really about groups, but about why some groups do not form. Olson’s argument in The Logic of Collective Action (1965) was telling, and it had a dramatic impact on the study of interest groups: because some groups seek private goods, but others seek public goods (which will be provided to all, member of the group or not), certain types of groups are much more likely to mobilize to their full potential than others. Groups that seek public goods such as clean air, abolition of the death penalty, lower consumer costs, public access to beaches, or any other good that cannot realistically be withheld from those who do not contribute to its achievement are unlikely ever to mobilize to their full potential. Many people who share the goals of the group will simply be ‘free riders,’ hoping to benefit from whatever success the group may have,

but contributing nothing. On the other hand, groups that seek private selective goods that are made available only to their members will mobilize closer to their full potential, since those who do not contribute can be excluded from whatever benefit the group may gain. With this simple argument, Olson delivered a killing blow to any theory that would rely on the mobilization of citizens through groups to ensure an equitable and pluralistic representation of interests to government. Some types of groups will be chronically undermobilized, he argued, whereas others will suffer from no problems of mobilization. The resulting group system could not be considered to be fair or democratic. Olson's enunciation of the public goods problem and how it affects group mobilization has led to an enormous literature in which scholars have noted the various ways by which groups do indeed mobilize their members (see especially Scholzman and Tierney 1986; Walker 1991; Heinz et al. 1993; for a review see Baumgartner and Leech 1998, chapter 4).

Besides a significant focus on how groups mobilize their members, attention has been perhaps more fruitfully spent on assessing how groups go about affecting government decisions. Large numbers of studies have been done detailing the types of relations that groups develop with government officials. Studies of 'issue subsystems' have given way to studies of 'policy networks' as scholars have noted that cosy subsystems with only a few specialized experts involved have often been replaced by more complicated systems where participants come and go, where conflict among participants can be quite common, and where policy influence depends on the actions and views of many other participants. Significant studies of the policy role of groups have included those of Hecl (1978), Walker (1991), and Heinz et al. (1993) in the United States; Wilson (1987) and Schmidt (1996) in France; and Richardson and Jordan (1979) in Britain (for a review see Baumgartner and Leech 1998).

American scholars interested in the roles and impact of groups have been affected by the Federal Election Campaign Act. This requires contributors to election campaigns for federal offices to report their contributions publicly. Further, it limits the amount of money individuals and organizations can give, and requires the formation of *Political Action Committees (PACs) for those organizations wishing to play an active role in campaign contributions. The requirement that these contributions be made public (along with the massive amounts of money spent) has led to a large literature in which scholars have attempted to link PAC (interest group) spending on elections with impacts on election outcomes or on the voting decisions of sitting legislators. To date, this literature has been quite inconclusive (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998, chapter 7 for a more complete review). While it is clear that interest groups affect both elections and voting decisions in legislatures through their lobbying and campaign contributions, demonstrating this effect empirically while controlling for the efforts of groups on the opposite side of the conflict has proven extremely difficult. One recent and well organized study (Berry 1999) noted how public- and consumer-oriented interest groups were often able to push their issues onto the political agenda. Increasingly over the past three decades, Berry found that such groups could put wealthy business organizations on the defensive. Of course, measuring influence is difficult, so studies of lobbying have had difficulty determining the impact of various lobbying activities. Still, Berry showed quite conclusively that money is not the only thing that counts (see also Kollman 1998; for a contrary view see West and Loomis 1999).

Interest groups have played and will continue to play fundamental roles in all democratic systems. While the term is often used with a pejorative connotation, most understand that many unassailably beneficial groups are nonetheless 'interest groups.' Charities fighting for more money to cure heart disease are 'special interests' just as much as auto manufacturers lobbying

for increased smog emissions allowances. One's view of what is a 'special interest' and what is a 'public interest group' often depends on the groups to which one belongs. All can agree, however, that no understanding of democratic politics can be complete without a full understanding of the roles of interest groups.

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See also: consociationalism, pluralism, Political Action Committees, social movements

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