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interest groups

The U.S. Constitution designated voting as the primary link between citizens and government, yet it also protected the politically salient rights of free speech, a free press, free assembly, and the right to petition. This framework recognized a broad arena of political activity outside of formal governmental institutions—one that would be funneled through individual voting in periodic elections to select legislators and presidential electors. Yet even before the Constitution was adopted, commentators were well aware that citizens' political activity with formal government was not likely to be limited to the casting of ballots. In Federalist Paper number 10, James Madison famously warned of the dangers of faction, by which he meant "a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interest of the community."

The Problem of Faction

Faction was not defined by the character of the group but by the relationship of its interest or passion to the rights of others or to the public good. Under Madison's formulation, a majority could constitute a faction and, therefore, protections against the tyranny of the majority were also protections against these large factions. Although one could not extinguish the causes of faction without extinguishing liberty itself, Madison argued that a system of representative government within a large republic offered the best protection from the dangers of faction, a protection that would be impossible in a pure democracy. Consequently, the lineage from Madison's "factions" to contemporary interest group politics is entwined with a succession of efforts by citizens, firms, and all varieties of organized interests to influence decisions made by representative institutions and executive agencies.

interest groups

New Forms of Group Politics

The historical development of interest group politics may be traced by following each element of this threefold name: *politics* is modified by *group*, *group* by *interest*. By extension, *group politics* differ in some important way from other kinds of politics, just as *interest groups* are distinct from other sorts of social groups. The emergence of recognizably modern interest group politics required the mobilization of groups outside of electoral politics, the development of methods by which such groups could influence policy outcomes, and the legitimization of these interests as recognized elements of a political system that extended beyond the boundaries of the formal political institutions themselves. Although the presence of organized interests near to government has steadily expanded throughout American history, opinions differ over whether these groups support democracy by expanding citizens' access to politics or undermine it by allowing representatives of narrow interests to control policy making.

For the first half century of the nation's existence, much political energy focused on the invention of "group politics." One important stream of developments gave rise to political parties; another produced the distinctive breed of "private organizations with public purposes" that are the ancestors of the modern nonprofit sector. Yet, as discussed by Alexis de Tocqueville, voluntary associations were particularly intriguing as a vehicle for "shadow government" and for the shaping and mobilization of political opinion. Tocqueville arrived in the United States in 1831, when such large-scale voluntary associations were a relatively novel phenomenon. Fueled by religious revivals, large-scale missionary movements had forged a new "confessional politics" in which individual sins were linked to the sins of the nation. Focused on moral issues from the protection of the Sabbath through temperance and, most consequentially, abolition, this fusing of religious revival to national policy created a powerful template for doing politics not only outside of formal institutions but also outside political parties. Even where the specifically religious impulse was muted, such popular movements made use of the protected freedoms of speech, press, petition, and assembly to mobilize popular support and bring pressure on elected representatives. These new forms of "group politics" remained controversial, exemplified in the 1830s and 1840s by congressional refusal to accept petitions in support of the abolition of slavery.

The People's Lobby

While the abolitionist movement itself eventually entered party politics, for the remainder of the nineteenth century, mobilized groups continued their efforts to influence the outcomes of formal governmental processes. Often, the most direct path led directly into electoral politics, so state and local campaigns saw periodic insurgencies by new parties

that championed the concerns of labor, of farmers, of anti-Catholics, or of anti-Masons, along with many other causes. "Group politics" could become "third-party politics" with relative ease, but there was not yet a model for a stable, legitimate, nonelectoral alignment of extrapartisan groups with formal governmental institutions.

That model was elaborated at the turn of the twentieth century, in part by activists who were veterans of the failed third-party efforts of the 1870s and 1880s. While the Populist Party led another surge along the path from social movements to political parties, fusing with the Democratic Party in the elections of 1896, other organized groups explored different kinds of alignments with legislatures and government officials. Some of these efforts centered on influencing those who ran for office, notably by supporting the introduction of primary elections and then seeking to "pledge" candidates to support specific policies if elected. Incumbents were also subjected to new forms of accountability as labor and agrarian groups developed the technology of "roll call vote" scoring, a process that required a group to determine which issues were specifically in its interest and then to identify the precise vote that would provide the most meaningful evidence of a candidate's position. To accomplish this, labor unionists, clubwomen, and agrarian activists immersed themselves in the intricacies of parliamentary rules, recognizing that seemingly obscure procedural votes were often the most consequential ones. As pledges were extracted and votes tabulated, organized movements would then make use of speeches and publications to educate their members about which politicians were most worthy of support and which should be opposed.

This educational component of popular politics did not end with elections. As organized groups became more familiar with the process of policy making they also recognized the advantages of expertise that could be used in the context of legislative hearings or as support for drafting bills. The intensification of interest group activity is evident in the numbers of groups testifying in congressional hearings. According to Daniel Tichenor and Richard Harris, the number of interest groups and private corporations grew almost fourfold in the first decade of the 1900s, from roughly 800 to 3,000. Beyond the growth in numbers, the differences between corporation and interest group representatives was also striking: corporations tended to present narrow, local concerns while other groups were more attuned to broad policy issues. Even with the growing presence of trade associations representing industrywide concerns, various kinds of citizens groups and trade unions continued to account for roughly half of congressional appearances through 1917.

During the Progressive Era, a wide variety of groups developed new methods for influencing political outcomes, both through new provisions for primary elections and direct democracy (initiative,

referendum, and recall), and by inserting themselves within legislative investigations and deliberations. The rise of this seemingly new kind of “pressure politics” was linked to the declining role of political parties. This popular mode of policy making reached a zenith with the adoption of constitutional amendments establishing prohibition and enfranchising women. Yet for all these accomplishments, the legitimacy of these extrainstitutional interventions in political decision making was far from established.

The Problem of Legitimacy

Madison’s original definition of the term *faction* turned on the issue of whether collective pursuit of interests or passions was “adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interest of the community.” Even movement activists had hesitated in the face of this concern; in 1892, for example, the California State Grange explicitly rejected a proposal that the convention consider proposed amendments to the state constitution and that it inform the state’s farmers of where their interests lay in these matters. Such matters were to be left to the consciences of individual voters who, at least according to republican theory, were to vote for “the best man” who would then make legislative decisions in light of the common good rather than in terms of the consequences for his own constituents. Organized groups were thus reluctant to move into pressure politics, particularly when they could not make encompassing moral claims grounded in moral virtue or national destiny. The efforts of individuals and companies to secure favorable legislative action were often enmeshed with the “old lobby” of the nineteenth century, which later commentators portrayed as a web of corruption and, at times, seduction. Not surprisingly, some legislatures responded by adopting policies to limit these extralegislative influences, often appealing to the *Trist v. Child* (1874) ruling in which the Supreme Court declined to enforce a contractual claim for a contingency fee for lobbying Congress for relief related to the Mexican-American War. By the late nineteenth century, some state legislatures began to adopt laws requiring lobbyists to register and regulating campaign contributions, indeed prohibiting such contributions from corporations in some cases.

By the early twentieth century, facts on the ground had outrun theory. Political scientists were staking a disciplinary claim to “group politics,” arguing, as Arthur F. Bentley did, that “if a law is in question, we find that our statement of it in terms of the group of men it affects . . . we can state its actual value in the social process at the given time in terms of the groups of men for whose sake it is there: a group of politicians and a number of groups of voters holding the prominent places.” Others distinguished the “new lobby” from the old, noting, as E. Pendleton Herring expressed it, the “Washington offices of the associations, societies, leagues, institutes, boards, and

federations organized on a nationwide scale to-day for the great lobbies in the capital. By comparison the representatives of corporations, the patronage brokers, the ‘wire-pullers,’ the crows of old-style lobbyists pale in significance. The men with the power are these spokesmen of organized groups.”

As business relationships with the federal government were increasingly mediated by industry associations, the lineages of group politics and the business lobby began to merge into what would come to be labeled *interest group politics*. With the intensification of the federal government’s role in the economy, driven by both Depression-era regulatory politics and mobilization for World War II, these ties would grow still stronger. They inspired new labels such as “iron triangles” and President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “military-industrial complex” (which, in its first formulation, was the “military-industrial-congressional complex”).

Yet, if political scientists had begun to normalize this development, these groups still drew considerable condemnation. Congressional efforts to regulate lobbyists repeatedly failed and their numbers continued to multiply to an estimated 6,000 by the late 1930s. This “small army,” in the words of journalist Kenneth Crawford, was “busy in Washington burning the bridges between the voter and what he voted for.” This contrast between interest groups that advanced selfish corporate interests and those that promoted public interests bedeviled the efforts of post-war political science to develop a general theory of interest group politics.

Following the Second World War, political scientists mounted repeated efforts to document both the population of organized interests and their implications for democratic politics. These studies addressed questions of which interests became organized and which remained latent, which techniques were used by organized groups to influence policy outcomes, and whether such efforts actually had political consequences. Particular attention focused on if and how the expansion of government led either to increases in the numbers of organized interests or changes in their character. Although the precise magnitude of these changes depended heavily on the sources and methods used by researchers—directories of groups headquartered in Washington, D.C., or records of congressional testimony—there was consensus that the numbers of organized groups were increasing. One analysis found that the total (listed) population of associations had increased from 5,843 in 1959 to 23,298 in 1995. Within this total, trade associations had accounted for 39 percent in 1959 but only 18 percent by 1995. In the interim, categories such as those of public affairs and social welfare had increased their share of the total interest group population. Studies also explored the consequences of organized business interests, large membership organizations, and advocacy organizations for policy formation. Policy domains were documented as distinctive networks of

elected officials, public agencies, organized interests, and private organizations.

The diversity of organized interests, as well as the divergent assessments of their role in American democracy, remains an obstacle to the development of either systematic evidence or theoretical consensus. The relationship between interest groups and political decision making continues to be closely—and often ineffectively—policed, with new variations on lobbyist registration, limits on campaign contributions, and time-limited prohibitions on former officials lobbying their own agencies or one-time colleagues. Yet because the constitutional framework of elections and legislatures provides no institutionalized access for “faction”—mobilized groups with shared yet less than universal interests or passions—interest group politics will continue to function as an “extralegal” mode of political activity.

See also campaign law and finance.

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