

Proliferation of interest groups

Law



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BUSTER**

The concern about special interests is not a new one, as the framers of the Constitution were worried about it too. They feared the power that could be wielded by organized interests, yet they understood that the right to organize was basic to the notion of freedom. This dilemma of freedom versus power was a tough one for them. They knew that if the government was given power to restrain organized interests it would be the same as the power to suppress freedom. This essay tries to answer whether proliferation of interest groups in recent decades a sign that the pluralist view of interest group representation is increasingly accurate or not.

Interest group scholars began to note the proliferation of "outsider" groups at about the same time policy scholars began to question the utility of subgovernment theory. By the mid-1980s, it was widely acknowledged that the number of interest groups in the United States especially public interest groups--had exploded during the 1960s and 1970s (Walker, 1983). Pluralists had addressed the question of group mobilization years before the "advocacy explosion." For example, in his *The Governmental Process*, David Truman argued that interest groups arise from two interrelated processes.

First, societal change precipitates the emergence of new interests. Second, disturbances--political or economic upheavals disrupt stable patterns of interaction between individuals. In short, Truman argued that individuals with shared interests (reacting to social change and/or disturbances) band together (to stabilize relations among themselves, and between themselves and other societal interests) when these interests are threatened. By the late-1960s, Truman's "disturbance theory" had fallen into disrepute.

Interest group scholars, spurred by Olson and drawing heavily upon Clark and Wilson's study of organizational incentives, began to examine how groups overcome the substantial barriers to mobilization. (Dine) While Olson emphasized material benefits, subsequent studies showed that solidary benefits (those derived from association in group activities) and purposive benefits (rewards associated with ideological or issue-oriented goals) also motivate group membership (Cook). Salisbury's exchange theory (which rests upon Olson's cost-benefit framework) is now the dominant paradigm for explaining group development (Cigler).

Yet the basic "exchange theory" framework has a critical flaw: It underestimates the role of external patrons in group studies of group formation suggest that many groups --especially public interest groups --rely heavily upon patron "seed money." For example, Walker found that 89% of (sample) public interest groups received "seed money" from foundations, large donors, the federal government, or corporations. He also found that many public interest groups rely heavily upon patrons for maintenance income. In general, public interest group proliferation has contributed mightily to the dissolution of subgovernments.

There are number of factors that may help to explain both the proliferation of public interest groups and where public interest group activity is most likely. For example, pluralists argue that societal change and disturbances create conditions that foster group mobilization. In contrast, "exchange theorists" suggest that we examine group incentive structures and entrepreneurial activity to explain interest mobilization. In order to better

understand the interest groups representation, one must understand the way the American government runs.

There are many different systems of government structure and organization: representative democracy, pluralist democracy, elitist system, hyper pluralist, and anarchy. The United States is organized much like a typical representative democracy, but in operation, with all factors considered, it is in reality much more of a hyper pluralist society. A state in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization is pluralistic.

When those special interests form large substantial voting blocks, the pluralistic nature of the government becomes more focused on fewer interests, but represented in many areas by larger numbers of individuals. The other question you need to ask is what do mean when you say big or special interest, who and what are you referring to specifically, industries, such as oil or pharmaceutical, ethnic groups such as Hispanic or African-American, social groups such as the elderly or woman, political groups such as Democrats or Republicans or different religious groups.

All of these are special interests, they just might not seem like a special interest group if you are part of them. (Ceaser) Probably the largest big interest group to consider is the political parties themselves. Political parties are the foundation of a representative democracy, acting as a "crucial link between what citizens want and what government does". The party is supposed to represent the needs of its members and use the party platform

to express these opinions. Through public elections, voters elect those people they feel will best represent them.

The Democratic Party and the Republican are the two main parties in the US though other smaller parties emerge occasionally to better represent those who do not feel that they are accurately represented by either of the major parties, usually because of special interests that they have such as environmental or other issues. This structure is typical of a representative democracy in which people are represented by parties and vote for leaders that they feel will work towards their best interests. (Miroff) In reality, the party system is not fully representative or fully functional.

On one hand, part of the democratic process allows for the emergence of new parties to represent the people. On the other hand, if the existing parties accurately represented the people then other parties would not be needed. People however do not believe completely in the process, which is evidenced by poor voter turnout and voter apathy. The United States has an extremely low average voter turnout of only 55%. The Constitution guarantees one vote to each citizen over the age of 18, male or female, black or white, etc.

This is indicative of a representative democracy in which each adult citizen has an equal say in how the government should be run. If voters do not vote, then the level of representation becomes skewed and the system is not fully representational. (Dine) People associate with not the candidate but with groups that represent their thinking and a special interest. A perfect example

of this would be the NRA. Voters might not have a lot of opinions but they might have one on gun control.

Instead of voting for the person who best reflects his ideas, he votes for the one that the NRA endorses, which in turn makes the NRA an extremely powerful interest group, and can influence congressional votes. In elections, political parties frequently send out mailers to voters that show which candidates running for office, or which of the Senate and House members receive financial support from the NRA. This suddenly reduces the value of every member of Congress to whether or not they have accepted money from the National Rifle Association.

This is in turn translated into an assumed meaning on their stand on gun control, while all other issues and stands that they have on those issues are suddenly made unimportant. Their total worth relates to their assumed position on guns. The government in this case is reflecting the will of the big interest even though it's a single issue. A politician who might reflect very little of his community's values, can be elected by that community by receiving the support of a single-issue influence group. (Berman, Murphy)

So the question becomes is this single issue the interest of a big group or the common goal of the majority? Who is pressing the issue and which way is the government going. If large oil companies are "buying" officials with large contributions to campaigns, are they actually influencing the government or merely a handful of officials and do they actually dictate policy or just have a louder voice in the debates that affect their companies. Misinformation seems to be the guideline of all campaigns now so it becomes almost

impossible to figure out just what the goal is of the candidate that you are voting for.

Because of that, the elected officials sometimes don't have a true feeling on what the voters wanted him to do. The power then slides back to the inner circle, which includes advisors who have their own individual desires, and those who paid for his campaign and therefore have vast influence. (Muller) Special interest groups appear to have a great deal of influence in campaigns and in political activities. Campaigns are extremely expensive: in 1992, the average winner of a House election spent \$550, 000 on his/her campaign; the average Senator who won a race spent more than \$4 million. (Dine) Presidential campaigns run into the hundreds of millions. Eight years later those numbers are significantly higher. Major contributors to election campaigns are corporations and interest groups. While some people believe certain industries or interest groups "buy" candidates through election contributions, it is not that simple. Those candidates heavily funded by the Sierra Club or groups that are concerned with environmental protection, will vote in support of environmental conservation - they will vote to reduce logging and not to save the jobs of the individual loggers who did not vote.

This is a sort of paradox because the elected leaders are representing those who voted for them and helped them into office, but this group is a large group of special interests rather than the individual citizens who probably did not contribute and did not even vote. When viewed in this way, the US electoral system does not seem to be fully representative of the people and is again reflective of a more hyper pluralist society. A system of government

labeled as hyper pluralist, means that there is a rapid proliferation of interest groups, all competing for influence over policy.

The interest groups tend to overshadow the interest of individuals. The interest groups are powerful and influential, but there are also interest groups for both sides of most issues. In their battle to win the political coups they each seek, there develops a competition in which the interest groups try to influence politicians to vote for their side. The result is that there are a number of politicians supporting each side of an issue, there are overlapping concerns that related to other interest groups, and the outcome is political gridlock.

Usually at this point, for anything to happen, concessions must be made with the end result that if any law is passed, it has little real effect one way or the other. The other possibility is that neither side will make concessions or give up any power in which case there is still nothing accomplished. This is very much the system that we have today. Again, gun control laws are a very good example. Congress goes back and forth arguing the pros and cons of gun control. The NRA is a very powerful interest group that does not want any form of gun control.

There are many other interest groups that fight to ban assault weapons, others that want a total ban on guns of all types, some only want handguns banned. The feuding between the different groups is played out through the politicians and very little has been accomplished. Even when a bill is passed, it is often later overturned. All special interest groups find this ying and yang to the system. There is no large interest that doesn't have a competing self-

interest. Abortion has choice. Industry has the Sierra Club and other environmental groups.

The NRA has anti-gun groups. Most of all, Republicans have Democrats. There might be the illusion that the government has been taken over by the special interests and that they control everything, but as we have looked into it we see that the basis of the questions revolves around who exactly is the special interests. It seems to me that they are us. (Peters) And thus we come to the contradictory conclusion that pluralist view of interest group representation is not increasingly accurate.

While the public's perception might be that special interest groups are robbing them of their rights, and in a narrow sense, when it comes to a particular interest that affects them, they may be justified, what the public doesn't usually understand is that the activity of interest groups is in fact acting out in the interest of them or their fellow citizens. The public further misconceives that special interests influence government, overlooking the fact that special interests are formed, as often as not, as a response to government and not in anticipation of it.