

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 4: Collective Action and Interest Groups

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Overview

1. [Logistics](#)

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2. [Readings](#)

[Olson, "The Logic of Collective Action"](#)

[Schattschneider, "The Scope and Bias of the Pressure System"](#)

[Kollman, "Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies"](#)

[Strolovitch, "Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender"](#)

Logistics

Readings

The traditional view: that *“private organizations and groups are ubiquitous, and that this ubiquity is due to a fundamental human propensity to form and join associations.”*

Olson, Mancur, Jr. In *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Harvard University Press, 1971. © Harvard University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

- Pluralists (e.g. Truman 1955; back to James Madison): small competing factions are the essence of democracy

Olson: rational individuals pursue their self-interest \neq groups naturally act in their collective best interest. **Why?**

- **Free-rider problems** in the provision of public goods
- Key insight: the fruits of political action as a public good
- Public goods in economic life: **nonrival**¹ and **nonexcludable**², e.g. a clean apartment, knowledge, the search engine
- **Diffuse benefits** but **concentrated costs** \implies underprovision

¹My consumption of the good does not reduce what is available for you to consume.

²Nobody can feasibly be denied access.

*The achievement of any common goal or the satisfaction of any common interest means that **a public or collective good has been provided for that group**. The very fact that a goal or purpose is common to a group means that no one in the group is excluded from the benefit or satisfaction brought about by its achievement.*

*It is of the essence of an organization that it provides an inseparable, generalized benefit. It follows that the provision of public or collective goods is the fundamental function of organizations generally. **A state is first of all an organization that provides public goods for its members**, the citizens; and other types of organizations similarly provide collective goods for their members.*

Discussion question: What are the implications of Olson's framework for political life?

1. *Pressure politics is essentially the politics of small groups.* (Olson)

- Empirically, a small number of people participate in interest group politics; heavily skewed toward business. (1960)
- *“The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent. Probably about 90 percent of the people cannot get into the pressure system.”*

2. These groups are able to exert outsized influence over the political process.

- *“If everybody got into the act, the unique advantages of this form of organization would be destroyed, for it is possible that if all interests could be mobilized the result would be a stalemate.”*

3. Politics as *“the socialization of conflict”*: *“conflicts become political only when an attempt is made to involve the wider public.”*

4. The system is poorly designed to serve diffuse interests.

Outside lobbying: mobilizing the public in favor of issues to then pressure policymakers

- Schattschneider's *socialization of conflict*: taking private conflicts into the public sphere

Purposes served:

1. **Information:** demonstrating that a policy is salient
2. **Conflict expansion:** making the policy more salient

Thus groups play an important role in mobilizing the wider electorate.

Discussion question: Does Kollman's framework imply any redeeming features of the pressure system?

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989): multiple overlapping axes of disadvantage: gender, race, sexuality, income...

- *“Theories of intersectionality tell us that these many disadvantages are **not static or rankable** and that they **do not operate along single axes in additive ways**. Instead, these systems are dynamic and create inequalities that define, shape, and reinforce one [an]other in ways that constitute the relative opportunities and positions of different members of marginalized groups. **Those situated at the juncture of multiple forms of disadvantage** are subject to injuries that are exponential and **unique products which are different from and greater than the sum of their parts** (Crenshaw 1989).”*
- Implication: there are further hierarchies of advantage within groups that advocate for the disadvantaged

Theoretical predictions about interest group behavior: **Downsian** vs. **intersectional** approaches

Downsian:

- Organizations lobby for issues that have the broadest impact on their members
- Symmetric prediction about narrow issues that affect the relatively advantaged and disadvantaged

Intersectional:

- Organizations lobby for the narrow interests of the relatively advantaged

A typology of issues:

1. **Universal issues:** affect the population as a whole
2. **Majority issues:** affect the majority of the interest group equally
3. **Advantaged subgroup issues**
4. **Disadvantaged subgroup issues**

Name a few examples: immigration, women's rights, civil rights

TABLE 1 Specific Policy Issues Used in SNESJO Questions, by Organization Type and Issue Category

Organization Type (N; percent of Sample)	Majority Issue	Advantaged-Subgroup Issue	Disadvantaged-Subgroup Issue	Universal Issue
Asian Pacific American (7; 3.9%)	Hate crime	Affirmative action in government contracting	Violence against women	Social Security
Black/African American (15; 8.4%)	Racial profiling	Affirmative action in higher education	Welfare	Social Security
Latino/Hispanic (12; 6.7%)	Census undercount	Affirmative action in higher education	Welfare	Social Security
Native American/ American Indian (6; 3.4%)	Tribal sovereignty	Affirmative action in higher education	Violence against women	Social Security
Civil rights—general (18; 10.1%)	Hate crime	Affirmative action in higher education	Discrimination against LGBT people	Social Security
Immigrants' rights (4; 2.2%)	Green-card backlog	Availability of H1B visas	Denial of benefits to immigrants	Social Security
Labor (32; 17.85%)	Minimum wage	White-collar unionization	Job discrimination against women and minorities	Social Security
Economic justice (31; 17.4%)	Welfare	Minimum wage	Public funding for abortion	Social Security
Public interest (8; 4.5%)	Campaign finance reform	Internet privacy	Environmental racism	Social Security
Reproductive rights/ women's health (8; 4.4%)	Late-term abortion	Abortion coverage by insurance/HMOs	Public funding for abortion	Social Security
Women's rights/feminism (37; 17%)	Violence against women	Affirmative action in higher education	Welfare	Social Security

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