

### Interest Groups

This week's readings spent a lot of time discussing how and why interest groups might form and maintain themselves. Schattschneider started off this discussion by noting that interest groups tend to be small, as they are "ill-designed to serve diffuse interests" (35), and biased toward the upper class. However, he notes that these small, exclusive groups can widen the conflict by taking their case to the public, which changes the balance of power in an argument. I was a little unclear about whether the "audience" in this discussion was specifically the government or if it was the wider polity, as seemed to be implied in some cases. If Schattschneider was referring to the latter, I think Olson raises some good questions about whether the wider polity would do anything about such a conflict, even if it was in their interests to care who won. It is, as he points out, irrational to engage in such a conflict when your actions are irrelevant to the outcome. The earlier question, which both Schattschneider and Olson raise, is whether there might be any (small and exclusive) interest group that would exist that could initiate a conflict likely to result in beneficial outcomes for the public. Olson ends his piece on the depressing note that "unorganized groups, the groups that have no lobbies and exert no pressure, are among the largest groups in the nation" (165). Schattschneider estimates that 90 percent of the public is not involved in any way with the "pressure system" (35).

Walker's piece on interest group formation and maintenance painted a somewhat rosier picture. He noted that private patrons—including the government, foundations, and wealthy individuals—have been critical in initiating and supporting a wide range of interest groups, including citizen groups. Olson explained that the start-up costs for large, latent groups (such as Walker's citizen groups) are typically preventatively high. In a small group, interested parties know each other and may not need an organization to maintain themselves (especially if one or more participants have an incentive to support the group interest on their own). In larger groups, on the other hand, initial efforts must be taken to identify those who might be interested, organize a subset to form the group, and convince people to deny their individual interest in free riding to gain relatively small collective gains. If, as Walker found, private patrons can fund this initial start-up cost (and, potentially, any selective incentives the group could offer to attract members), it may be significantly easier to bring together latent groups. I did wonder—as Walker himself pointed out—if he was studying a particular time when there was increased interest in promoting citizen group power, based on the contemporary success of Ralph Nader, for example.

A final depressing note came from Lowery and Gray, who found that interest group density is defined by environmental factors. While they were looking within specific industries, rather than across the wide range of potential interest groups, their findings suggest that there might be an overall limit to the number of groups a system can hold. If that's the case, and small, moneyed interests are easier to form, it seems entirely plausible that we'll reach our limit before we get to any latent groups that might be able to organize and maintain themselves in the absence of such environmental constraints.

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