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# The Modern Interest Group

*Robert H. Salisbury*

### **Introduction**

There can be no doubt that in the contemporary world of politics, especially but by no means exclusively in democratic systems, there is a vast array of what we call interest groups or lobbies at work, trying to influence what governments do. Sometimes and in some places these organisations seem to dominate the processes that determine who gets what, when and how, while elsewhere they seem more often to be supplicants hoping for a favourable nod or lamenting their lack of success. In general, however, most of both the winners and the losers in the decision-making struggles we call politics are interest groups, non-governmental organisations advocating particular policy preferences and trying to persuade those with official standing and authority to support their position.

This chapter explores the existing literature looking at the development of the modern interest group: their attitudes, opinions and actions. This will provide the setting to the book as its contributors explore the recent development of activism, from the rise of the anti-globalisation movement through to small, Internet-based organisations. Without an understanding of the historical perspective any examination would fundamentally undermined and would be unable to address issues such as whether the actions are ‘new’.

### **Interest Groups**

Throughout the history of democratic politics the impact of interest groups on governmental decisions has been regarded by many as a serious normative issue. The classic statements of democratic theory provided no place for interest groups, standing as they did between individual citizens and governmental authority, the principal components of traditional concern. Apart from the English pluralists of the early twentieth century, groups were generally regarded as divisive forces, allegedly reflecting selfish and

partial views that made it more difficult for policy makers to reach decisions that optimised benefits for the whole society. Journalists and academics alike have looked upon 'special' interests as a major source of corruption of the body politic, not just because they often utilised nefarious techniques like bribery but more generally because they were thought to demean the processes of public debate and decision, reducing them to base considerations of narrow self-interest.

By the end of the nineteenth century business corporations and labour unions had grown to great size and power and, especially in the United States, a host of other organisations had emerged to articulate values and points of view, calling for reforms, regulations, subsidies and restrictions across a vast expanse of potential governmental action. At the same time, the growth of government, at national, state and local levels, had considerably enlarged its impact on people's lives, and had also come to offer opportunities to the enterprising to extract something of value from what public authorities did. Accordingly, at every level of government, scandals were uncovered and reforms demanded, and organised interest groups played major roles on every side of every question.

In many aspects of the American culture this period – roughly from the Gilded Age of the 1870s through the Progressive Era that ended in 1914 or so – evoked what has sometimes been called 'critical realism', as in the novels of Norris, Sinclair and Dreiser, or the 'revolt against formalism', as in the philosophy of William James and John Dewey. Standard formulations of governmental matters had generally been expressed in terms of legal norms and official institutions – and, indeed, continued to be so in textbooks for several decades to come – but in the hands of 'muckraking' journalists like Lincoln Steffens and academics like Charles Beard the 'realities' of political life, past and present, began to receive closer attention. For some this involved looking at psychological factors affecting political behaviour, or at the impact of mobs and crowds that defied the usual 'rational' explanations of how people behaved. In any case, by shifting the emphasis away from the abstract formalities of governmental action and reporting the observable behaviours of people both in and out of office, a fundamental and far-reaching change in perspective and understanding was accomplished. Despite the lively work in the early years of the twentieth century, however, it took several decades for this intellectual sea-change fully to work its way into political science.

One book from this era came eventually to serve as a major inspiration to those interested in studying interest groups and their impact. This was Arthur Bentley's *The Process of Government*. Although the work was published in 1908 it received scant attention from the scholarly community

at the time, and it was not until it had been republished in 1935 that it began to be read. Bentley insisted that groups were the fundamental units of observable action in the political world, and that if they were adequately mapped one would have all that was needed for a full characterisation of the political process. Bentley's groups were not, however, synonymous with pressure groups or any other form of organisation. Rather they were conceptual labels for patterns of all the activity, from whatever source derived, that was directed toward some common purpose or, if you prefer, some interest. Bentley refused to separate the group from its interest; they were simply different aspects of the same phenomenon and defined by the observed activity. All those acting in a common policy direction, regardless of their position or the form of their action, were part of the 'group', and every action – every speech, every vote, every judicial opinion, every newspaper editorial, every academic treatise – that worked toward the same objective represented that interest and was part of the group.

The effect of Bentleyan analysis was to demystify, even to deconstruct, politics. He argued that the underlying meaning of every political act, no matter what its apparent form might be and however abstract its language, was the representation of some interest, the advantaging of some group and its purposes. At the same time, however, his prescription was not readily adapted to the needs of empirical research. It was all very well to say that everything should be understood as representing particular interests, but Bentley offered little guidance as to what those interests might be or what forms of action might most often be employed in their pursuit. For the generations that came after Bentley the study of interest groups, while deriving some degree of encouragement from Bentley's strictures against the 'ghosts' of formalism, had to draw on other sources for advice about how to proceed.

From the late 1920s on, American political scientists occasionally undertook case studies of interest groups, examining particular organisations like the Anti-Saloon League (Odegard, 1928) and the American Medical Association (Garceau, 1941), or larger arrays of groups (Herring, 1929; Childs, 1930; Schattschneider, 1935; McKean, 1938), but the subject remained on the periphery of professional concern. Not until the publication of David Truman's *The Governmental Process* (1951) were interest groups brought into the core of what political scientists thought important. Truman paid homage to Bentley's work, and his title quite consciously employed the same words Bentley had used. Moreover, Truman was able to find a substantial array of scholarly work, and bring it together to form a coherent, theoretically informed analysis of interest groups in American politics. Despite the linguistic parallel with Bentley, however, Truman was

pursuing a different objective. Bentley had been trying to ‘fashion a tool’ for the analysis of any political situation. He proposed to interpret all forms of observable activity in terms of the interests represented, the groups advantaged. Truman, on the other hand, after offering a theory of his own regarding the formation of groups, went on to describe the ways in which non-governmental associations sought and used access to governmental officials in order to influence their decisions on public policy. Where Bentley proposed a generic way of thinking about politics, Truman offered an analysis of an important, but partial, feature of the process as it worked in the United States.

Truman’s perspective has dominated both the scholarly and the popular conception of the role of interest groups in politics. That is, they are generally understood to be non-governmental organisations that seek *access* – Truman’s key concept – to governmental authorities in order to influence policy decisions. The research agenda that follows from this perspective has focused on such questions as which groups have access and how they get it, to what extent access translates into policy influence, and what alternative sources of influence over policy decisions are at work. To each of these empirical issues there has generally been a normative companion asking whether, whatever the present reality may be, it constitutes an acceptable state of affairs in a democratic polity, and, if not, how improvements might be introduced.

In Truman’s analysis, and in virtually every other discussion of interest groups, it was assumed that groups were a more or less inevitable consequence of the development of what might be thought of as ‘value communities’. That is, as certain sets of people were similarly affected by social or economic developments – farmers, for instance, or railroad workers – they would join together to form organisations to express their common interest, and if that interest was adversely affected by some other group – meat packers, say, or railroad companies – they might try to persuade government to legislate some remedy. This commonsense view of interest group politics seemed to fit the historical record reasonably well, and Truman offered a substantial list of the dynamic factors like technology, war, and various forms of social change that had given rise to the creation of interest groups in the United States and, presumably, elsewhere in the world.

### **Collective Action**

In 1965, however, an economist, Mancur Olson, presented a fundamental challenge to this basic assumption. In *The Logic of Collective Action* Olson

argued that in most cases it was not rational for individuals or firms to join an organisation in order to lobby for favourable governmental action. The benefits that might accrue from that action would not be denied a non-member, and one person would have little effect in determining whether the organisation's efforts succeeded. Thus, farmers, workers, environmentalists, small business owners, and a host of other potential 'groups' could not be expected to organise effectively simply because they had values in common. At the same time it was obvious that there were, in fact, many voluntary associations that had somehow overcome the 'free rider problem'. Olson argued that they had done so by providing members selective benefits, such as cheap insurance or technical assistance, that were not available to non-members. Having recruited members with *selective* benefits, the organisation could lobby for advantageous public policy as what Olson called a 'byproduct' of its membership strength. Olson did not claim that his theory applied to every type of interest group, and it could readily be shown that, although there were many free riders in the world, there were also a good many people who joined interest groups without worrying whether it was the strictly 'rational' thing to do. None the less, Olson had moved the question of why people become group members from the status of assumption to that of a research question.

Salisbury (1969) shifted the argument, suggesting that individuals joined associations in response to incentives offered by 'entrepreneurs' who, having invested the necessary capital, presented them with a combination of three types of incentives: material, solidary, and expressive. Olson had focused on the use of material incentives such as cheap insurance or marketing advantages, but neglected the potential appeal of social interaction among group members and, especially, the willingness of people to pay the cost of group membership in order to express support for a cause they believed in. The latter might well involve issues of public policy so that, in effect, the members of expressive groups would, *contra* Olson's position, be joining in order to support an effort to secure government action; often, indeed, an action from which they personally would derive no direct benefit. Salisbury's formulation left considerable room for leadership initiative in determining what policy-related actions to take. The relationship between group leaders and their members was seen as problematic, with the leadership constrained but by no means always controlled by the policy preferences of group members. The latter could thus be viewed as constituents who might sometimes exercise their 'voice' within the organisation and sometimes choose instead to 'exit' (Hirschmann, 1970).

Salisbury's emphasis on entrepreneurial initiative as necessary for the establishment of a voluntary association called for attention to be given to

the conditions under which entrepreneurs would emerge, raise their initial investment resources, appeal to a 'market', and institutionalise a stable support base. Truman's broad historical sweep had provided some leads, suggesting, for example, that many organisations were formed in a kind of 'wave-like' sequence. The effects of war, say, or technological change might destabilise a system of economic relationships, creating an imbalance of bargaining power. New structures would be created to counter this change and create a new equilibrium. This 'homeostatic' hypothesis seemed roughly appropriate to the late nineteenth century rise of big business organisations and the countervailing emergence of labour unions and farm organisations. An alternative, though not mutually exclusive, hypothesis of interest association formation stressed the 'proliferation' of organisations when increasing social and economic complexity generated more and more differentiated values and policy concerns that could serve as bases for voluntary associations. Jack Walker (1991) emphasized another factor, calling attention to the importance of cross-organisation subsidies in providing start-up capital for new associations. In particular, Walker showed that the substantial upsurge of non-profit 'citizens' organisations after about 1960 had received vital assistance from wealthy donors and charitable foundations.

This intellectual evolution has led to the recognition that voluntary associations are not some sort of spontaneous formation springing up out of shared values, but rather are created by organisers who invest money and effort in formulating a set of benefits that they hope will attract enough members to establish a viable enterprise. Within this framework there are a number of important empirical questions to be raised regarding any particular association. Who are the organisers, and where do they come from? Where do they get their initial investment capital? What is their market of potential joiners? What benefits are offered and with what success? Notice, however, that these same questions might be asked about any voluntary group regardless of whether it had ever been involved in the political process. A local quilting society can be examined within the same framework as Common Cause or the Anti-Saloon League. For a political scientist, therefore, an additional question must be raised. Why did a particular group get involved in the processes by which public policy decisions are made: that is, in politics? Before we speak further to that issue, however, we must look beyond the ranks of what interest group scholars traditionally took as their primary field of action: voluntary associations.

In 1984 Salisbury pointed out that in fact many of the organisations actively seeking to influence public policy were not voluntary associations but what he called institutions: organisations that did not need constantly

to recruit members or defer even nominally to the policy preferences of their 'members' but whose leadership could operate with a longer time horizon and take a more flexible view of what political strategies to adopt. Thus business corporations, hospitals, universities, local governments and religious institutions are all active participants in the effort to influence what government does, and any sensible conception of interest group politics must obviously include them. Like voluntary associations, however, not all institutions try to affect political outcomes, so we return to the issue of why organisations enter the political arena.

The obvious answer is that they believe there is something of value to be obtained from the exercise of authority by the institutions of government. That something may be positive or negative, getting a good or blocking a bad, and it may result from governmental decisions at any level or jurisdiction. It may involve some direct material advantage such as a contract, tax break or subsidy, or it may be more indirect, involving the kind of future potentialities created by a change in the rules governing bankruptcy or naming a new justice to the Supreme Court. The stakes at issue may be more symbolic than material, involving the expression of moral values, ethnic or religious group attachments, or some other matter that people care about deeply enough to seek governmental action to further the cause. What is critical is that groups perceive some form of governmental authority as a relevant means by which to advance the valued objective.

This seemingly obvious point has an important consequence; namely, the volume of interest group activity in a democratic society depends upon the range and scope of governmental authority. The bigger the government, the more extensive the interest group activity. And there is a reciprocal point: the more extensive the group activity, making demands for assistance and defending gains already achieved, the larger the scope of governmental authority is likely to be. The growth curve is not infinite. There are groups whose advantage is served by reducing the scope of public policy. But the vast array of organised groups abounding in the modern democratic state must be explained in part, as both cause and effect, by the expansion of state authority.

It is vitally important that we recognise the differences among institutional arenas in their potential for affording advantages to particular groups. In a democratic society, interests with little wealth but broad popular support may well expect that their votes can overcome the resistance of the economically powerful, and so the 'have nots' of society have often turned to political action to redress their economic distress. But in a predominantly middle class society it is not at all clear that the poor have a broad enough base, and what numerical advantages they might have are

seldom effectively mobilised. They may do better to call for a consumer boycott or conduct a campaign on college campuses to change public sentiment. Shifting the strategic emphasis from economic bargaining or campaigning intended to change societal attitudes to political action is rarely an easy or obvious decision, and in fact many groups, to the extent that they can muster the necessary resources, try to advance their claims wherever they can. Nevertheless, the points of effective access and leverage vary according to the institutional targets chosen, and so also do the resources of greatest value: numbers, money, social prestige, verbal skills, organisational efficiency and so on.

### **The Arenas of Politics**

The arenas of politics themselves present important differences that affect the strategies and tactics employed by interest groups. In the United States the combination of federalism and the separation of powers creates an extraordinarily complex array of institutional targets, differing in their authority to make meaningful decisions and in their responsiveness to various types of group efforts to persuade. For some groups – builders and property developers, for example – local governments are the arenas of primary importance as they control matters of zoning and construction requirements; building trade unions may similarly emphasize local politics. In the steel and auto industries, on the other hand, both corporate and labour interests give more attention to national politics. These organisations operate throughout much of the country and engage in nationwide economic bargaining, and the main governmental decisions affecting their interests are made by Congress and the president. Some industries, such as oil and gas, are heavily involved in politics because they are affected in virtually every phase of their business by governmental decisions, while furniture companies and jewellery makers are not. Groups involved in education have been primarily concerned about what happened at the state and local levels of government, where the main decisions affecting funding, teacher training and curricula are made, and are more peripherally involved in national politics.

Interest groups may find that they have a comparative advantage in one governmental arena as compared to another. Until the 1960s, for example, civil rights groups found themselves unable to make any headway against state or local segregation policies in the South and, given the strength of Southern members of Congress, were frustrated at that level also. They turned to the courts and, by skilfully mustering persuasive constitutional arguments, gradually secured more favourable policies. The Supreme Court

ruling that racial segregation was unconstitutional gave civil rights groups better leverage in other institutional settings, so that protest marches and sit-ins could more effectively bring about change at every level. Groups may of necessity focus their lobbying efforts on institutional arenas where they have the greatest likelihood of success, but they must also recognise that some of those arenas have far more power than others to bring about the desired result. College students opposing American involvement in Viet Nam or apartheid in South Africa protested on the campuses because, even though the universities had only the most marginal influence over national policy, that was where protest could be effectively mobilised.

We must recognise that the structure of authority and rules of procedure governing the political process *always* give advantage to some groups and work against others. The degree of centralisation or decentralisation will be a factor in interest group success. Enhancing the power of legislative leaders to control the agenda will work to the benefit of some groups and not others. And, as we noted above, the extent to which the courts play a significant role in determining who gets what from government can be a major factor. Moreover, any significant reform of the prevailing institutional arrangements will alter the pattern of group advantage, which is why reform proposals are controversial. There are groups on both sides with interests at stake.

We tend sometimes to think of interest group activity as primarily a matter of demand, of groups seeking (or trying to block) some kind of policy from government. We should also recognise that once policies are enacted they generate interests, establishing advantages that groups will seek to defend (or alter) as time goes on. Thus when a programme of national defence establishes military bases and acquires weapons systems, it creates interests in the districts where those bases are located and the weapons are manufactured. Elected officials from those areas are alert to defend the maintenance and growth of the programmes, which quickly take on the characteristics of vested interests and become difficult to change politically. Similarly, programmes of support for scientific research provide funds for the leading research universities, and while those institutions organise to defend their largesse, other, less prestigious, schools try to expand the scope of scientific support in order to attract some of the funds. In an era when American governmental budgets have reached trillions of dollars, there is an enormous array of interests vested in established programmes, but at the same time alterations, even at the margins, constitute appealing targets of opportunity for groups throughout the society.

As we have said, the enormous expansion in the scope and impact of modern government is both a cause and an effect of the growth of interest

groups in both numbers and influence. That relationship is not a simple one, however. A number of other factors are involved. One is the increasing complexity of society as economic and social differentiations divide people into more and more combinations with distinct concerns. Another is affluence, which has enabled more organisations to attract members and to invest more heavily in efforts to affect public policy. Improved means of communication, from the coming of the railroads and the mass media to jet travel and the Internet, have enabled people to join together more readily and to mobilise in support of causes they believe in. And since interest representation succeeds in part as a result of effective techniques of advocacy, the growth and diffusion of professional expertise in these arts over recent decades of lobbying experience have contributed to the prominence of interest groups in every facet of public life.

### **The Actions of Interest Groups**

Let us now look more closely at what interest groups actually do. What kinds of activity do they undertake? The question might seem a simple one, and indeed there is a rather simple answer, but before long it leads us to more complicated considerations. The simple answer is that interest groups advocate particular proposals for governmental action. They try to persuade public officials to support their position and offer reasons for so doing. The methods may range in form from abstract philosophical discourse to bribery, from arcane statistical analysis to *quid pro quo* bargaining, from appeals to moral sentiment to threats of mob reprisals. The kinds of reasons offered may reflect the values of a group's membership. An organisation like Common Cause, supported by well-educated middle-class citizens committed to the values of 'good government', would hardly countenance watching its representatives engaging in the earthier forms of vote trading. But arguments must also conform to the rules and expectations established by the institution in which they are presented. What is suitable before a congressional committee might not work either in a courtroom, on the one hand, or in a party convention, on the other. Much of what interest groups do, therefore, is to formulate the arguments they will present in their efforts to persuade officials to do one thing rather than another.

It is often assumed that the policy agenda advocated by an interest group is derived more or less directly from the desires of its members. While there is usually a connection between member preferences and group advocacy, it is often quite complicated. For one thing, as Olson pointed out, many people join interest groups to enjoy benefits that have little to do with

the public policy positions the group may endorse. Furthermore, many of the specific policy objectives pursued by interest groups are developed by the leadership or staff as political circumstances produce changing threats or opportunities that affect organisational values. The members may know nothing about these matters, and group agents spend much of their time monitoring the governmental process and figuring out what positions to espouse. They may need to inform their members and persuade them to support the chosen position, a process sometimes called 'farming the membership'. Interest group advocates thus face in two directions at once: toward the officials who are the primary targets they must try to persuade, and their own members whose support is necessary to make their advocacy credible.

As noted, much of the group advocates' time must be spent in monitoring the complex processes of government. Patrolling the corridors of power and touching base with critically positioned actors is part of this; perusing the vast amounts of relevant literature, ranging from the daily press to technical studies and official documents, is another part; checking up on the activities of allies and adversaries is yet another necessary component. But intelligence gathering is not enough. Interest group representatives must also devote time and resources to the formulation of policy positions and the crafting of arguments in support of those positions. They must stipulate the provisions of law or the appropriation of funds they seek or support, and present reasons that not only justify their position but, they hope, persuade others to agree with them. Moreover, they must develop plans and strategies by which to negotiate their path through the institutional mazes of government: making acquaintances, cultivating contacts, and building coalitions. Much of this work, we should note, takes place well away from the lobbies of governmental authority, in organisational offices and conference rooms.

Often, of course, both the policy goals and the patterns of interest group support and opposition have been clearly established. Even so, however, there may be much uncertainty as to the precise strength of the contending forces, and group representatives must keep close watch on the process so as to spot both dangers and opportunities. Part of this uncertainty stems from the complexity of the process. In the United States the authority involved in making public policy decisions is highly fragmented, with the divisions among the different branches and levels of government compounded by further subdivisions of power and complexity of procedure within each branch. The need to know how this system works, as well as what policy substance is at stake, creates imposing challenges to interest group representatives, and they must learn how best to conduct their

business. Accordingly, as one major study found, those who advocate group interests tend to be veterans of the policy wars, serving the same organisation for twelve years on average (Heinz *et al.*, 1993). Further, that study showed that while it is helpful to have personal contacts within the government, it is more important to have command of the substantive issues. And because so many different units are typically involved in making policy decisions, lobbyists must maintain contact with several different parts of the governmental apparatus.

There are occasional examples of dramatic lobbying campaigns in which new stratagems are employed or highly focused pressures are brought to bear, and now and then a sudden entry of previously inactive groups may capture attention. The broader trend, however, has been for interest groups to establish a more or less continuous presence close to the seats of governmental power, bringing to bear all the techniques their resources will allow. If one organisation pioneers with grassroots mobilisation of support, as the US Chamber of Commerce did in the 1970s, others soon follow if they can afford it. In 1939 the NAACP established the Legal Defense Fund under Thurgood Marshall as a non-profit organisation to pursue legal challenges on behalf of civil rights. More recently, conservative groups have followed that example on the other side of the issue. Interest groups learn over time, growing more sophisticated and skilful and generally avoiding the cruder forms of pressure. Groups tend to employ whatever techniques they can and try to establish sympathetic working relationships with officials throughout the political system. At the same time, of course, no organisation brings unlimited resources in money or personnel to the fray, and at any particular point in time competing groups may not be fully equal in talent either. As a consequence of these inequalities the outcomes of most public policy contests continue to be uncertain.

## **Finance**

We cannot disregard the potential significance of interest groups' financial contributions to political parties and candidates for office. Groups are not the only sources of political money, to be sure, but in the aggregate they contribute very large sums to what is thought, by almost every observer, to be an outrageously vast amount of election spending. The question, of course, is what the groups get for their cash. The general assumption is that, at the least, they buy access: a receptive and friendly ear to receive their complaints and demands. Accordingly, a large proportion of campaign contributions goes to incumbents, officials whose past electoral success and accumulated power indicates that they are particularly worth talking to.

Other groups, however, devote most of their money to candidates who agree with their positions and, if successful, will support those interests in office. Some groups are quite pragmatic in their use of campaign money while others are driven by partisan or ideological commitments. And, just as the pattern of interest group giving displays motivational diversity, so does the impact of that investment.

There has been extensive research into the question of how much influence campaign contributions have on policy outcomes, and the answers are very mixed. There is no doubt that interest group political action committees (PACs) have helped make campaigns the occasions for heavy spending, but whether that spending has greatly distorted the policy decisions of governmental officials is not so clear. Most officials are eager to serve their constituents, not only to get re-elected but because that is what democracies expect them to do. Interest groups are composed of constituency segments, sometimes quite small ones but sometimes representing broad components of the public. If somehow all the organised groups were eliminated from the political process, it is not at all obvious that the resulting patterns of public policy would more accurately represent values approved by popular sentiment. In any event, the groups are there, they make contributions, they seek access, and they hope for influence. The chances of group success vary from one issue to another, from one electoral period to another, and from one group to another. Any generalisation regarding interest group influence must be phrased with great caution.

It is important to recognise that, while there are notable and sometimes dramatic exceptions, most policy issues do not just suddenly appear on the public agenda. Many are perennial, involving essentially the same disputes over authority and appropriations every year. Others, like farm policy, may recur only every three or four years but are matters of constant attentive concern from the groups affected and the officials with jurisdiction over the programmes. This means that monitoring and advocacy are ongoing and, as we noted earlier, this makes it advantageous to have experienced and knowledgeable people in place to represent group interests. It also means that over time groups will seek out and develop cooperative relationships with other like-minded organisations, sharing information and often collaborating in the planning and execution of influence strategies. Some of these connections have evolved into formal coalitions with names and office suites, while others remain more informal as working groups. A particularly vigorous policy dispute, such as the struggle over the Clinton health care proposal in 1993, may trigger the appearance of ad hoc alliances to sponsor TV campaigns and coordinate the lobbying effort, but many networks of group interaction are durable players in the policy process and

lend a degree of simplifying structure to the cacophony of contemporary advocacy that results from the presence of so many thousands of interest group representatives.

In advancing their claims and justifications for governmental support interest group advocates produce an enormous amount of verbiage. Written and oral testimony, legal briefs, advertisements, research studies, editorials and a host of other materials compete for attention along with more mundane items such as lavish entertainments or campaign contributions. Many have argued that, in addition to the 'social noise' generated, the net effect of all this activity is to bias the processes of government in favour of those interests with the greatest resources. Schattschneider's formulation (1960) is the best-known version of this position. He contends that interest groups make claims on behalf of constituencies that are narrow in their policy concerns and ignore the interests of the large but unorganised portions of the public. Political parties, on the other hand, in order to win electoral majorities, must appeal to a broader range of interests and thereby pay more heed to the unorganised and the less affluent segments of society. It is certainly true, almost by definition, that interest groups, taken one at a time, appeal to rather narrow segments of the political spectrum. It is not so clear, however, that in the aggregate groups are more inclined to 'sing with an upper class accent'. The concerns of society's 'have nots' are surely represented more eloquently by organised groups like the Children's Defense Fund than by political party platforms. And if we include under the heading of interest groups all the non-governmental advocates of particular policies – the editorialists and media commentators, the think tanks, the academic experts and so on – there may still be substantial bias in the system, but the overall balance is not entirely obvious, and its calculation is certainly not simple.

## **Conclusion**

Interest groups are often perceived primarily as the bringers of pressure upon officials. They have their policy demands and they try to persuade those with the power of government to accede to them. Obviously, there is much truth in this image, but it is far from a full picture. For one thing, although the general outline of its priorities may be reasonably constant, many of the policy specifics on an interest group's agenda emerge as the days and weeks of each political year reveal new implications and possibilities, new threats and necessities. Indeed, it is the need to recognise in a timely way these emergent concerns that makes it so important for groups to monitor closely the policy processes.

The image of groups as instruments of pressure is misleading in another way also. To a substantial extent they are better understood as the bearers of information, conveying to policy makers the needs and concerns of their members and reporting to their members the developments in the policy world that might affect them. This two-way flow can clearly be of great importance in building a foundation of rational understanding for both policy makers and group members. The difficulty arises when the group universe is too small and the information flows too restricted. Thus the impressive growth in recent decades of citizens' groups has arguably expanded democratic potentialities far more than traditional electoral processes alone could have done. In any case, it is difficult to see how in a democratic society the shortcomings of interest group politics can be addressed except by means of expanded interest group activity.

Much of the existing literature does not address this growth and impact of new citizens' groups. This book, by bringing together various perspectives from across the academic, business and activist communities is an attempt to redress this current imbalance. If these groups are to remain a part of democracy then they have to be more fully understood – both their actions and motivations. If western democracies continue to witness a decline in electoral turnout then the future may well be dominated by interest group activity.

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b box

f figure/illustration

n note

t table

bold extended discussion or  
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