

The Organization of Factions: Interest Mobilization and the Group Theory of Politics

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Abstract Theories of interest group mobilization are central to political science but current research on interest organizations has not proven useful for scholars in related fields. I argue that, by adapting organizational theory to account for the particular function of interest organizations, scholars can build a widely applied theoretical framework. The key step is an analysis of the role that organizations play in the mobilization of influence: they are intermediaries, reliant on their constituents and their lobbying targets. Reviewing research on ethnic politics and political economy, I demonstrate that this intermediary view of interest organizations encourages theoretical ideas to travel between subfields.

Keywords Interest groups · Factions · Intermediary organizations

Political scientists once believed that they could construct a general theory of political competition. Research on interest group mobilization and conflict was the proposed starting point. The questions of politics were “Who gets what, when, and how?” and the answers were to be found by studying how social groups mobilize to influence political institutions.¹ To see how our aspirations have narrowed, one need only contrast the statements of interest group scholars about their subfield’s past with their predictions about its future. “Forty years ago,” Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech recently wrote, “the group approach to politics was so dominant that it virtually defined the contemporary approach to political science” (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998, xv). Allan Cigler illustrates how the expectations have changed: “I suspect our knowledge of representative issues dealing with organized interests will always be fragmentary, and scholarship will continue to lag rather than anticipate changes in the primary trends of national politics” (Cigler, 1994, 35). The interest

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¹ Lasswell (1958) outlines these broad theoretical goals. Truman (1951) presents an early interest group theory of politics.

group subfield's fortunes declined as its scholars shifted from a broad theoretical concern with interest aggregation in democratic societies to an empirical focus on the behavior and impact of policy advocacy organizations in Washington, DC. Just as exemplars of the purposive lobbying organizations envisioned by theory became more widespread, the theoretical weight attached to interest group research in the discipline declined. Current reviews of the field bemoan the lack of discipline-wide interest in this empirical work given the wide acceptance of the original theoretical goals (Cigler, 1991; Baumgartner and Leech, 1998).

Elsewhere in the discipline, researchers of particular constituencies (e.g., ethnic, religious, and economic groups) and particular forms of mobilization (e.g., political parties and protest movements) pursue distinct theoretical frameworks rather than using interest group theory as a unified model of interest mobilization. Case studies of mobilization by individual groups or of political competition within individual policy areas could contribute to a broader theory of interest aggregation. Regrettably, the discipline separates research programs into arbitrary categories and scholars rarely seek to compare across groups or policy areas. This research strategy limits the state of our knowledge, privileging specialization at the expense of theoretical advancement. To see the results, take two examples from widely differing literatures: ethnic politics and comparative political economy.

In studies of the political activity of American ethnic groups, scholars study individual opinion dynamics and social interaction along with the aggregate effects of political opportunities and organizational resources. In the mass behavior section of the literature, scholars debate how neighborhood context affects political activism, how shared ethnic identity and perceptions of common fate affect individual mobilization, and how ethnic candidates affect perceptions of representation.² At the institutional level, scholars study the support of churches in protest movements, the openness of the Democratic Party to internal challenges, and the effect of policy success on grassroots activity (see Frymer, 1999). These studies each contribute to our understanding of mobilization but they proceed without an analysis of why ethnic mobilization is categorically distinct from political action by other social groups. Do evangelical Christians, environmentalists, or small farmers mobilize different resources, react to different political opportunities, and pursue different political strategies than American ethnic groups? There are few insights to be found in the ethnic politics literature for answering these questions and no large-scale comparisons are available from generic studies of interest groups. The point is not that less time should be devoted to studying ethnic mobilization but that more thought should be given to the general applicability of mobilization theories that are inducted from these case studies.

The same limited importation and exportation of theories about interest mobilization is evident in the unrelated field of comparative political economy. This field is concerned with economic policy differences across countries. Policies are studied as the outcome of socioeconomic structure and institutional design and as the primary determinant of economic and political development (see Alvarez et al., 1991). Different segments of the political economy subfield disagree about the primary drivers of this process but all agree that the causal arrow runs both ways: economic groups affect policy outcomes and policy affects how economic interest

² For a discussion of context effects, see Bledsoe et al. (1995). For a review of identity and participation, see Shingles (1981).

groups develop.³ Current topics of scholarship include how union organizing and institutions for collective negotiation affect wage policies (Alvarez et al., 1991), how the competitive structure of major industries determines trade policy (Cerny, 1994), and how religious heritage and party competition affect social welfare policy (Esping-Andersen, 1990). All of these questions relate the interest group structure of a nation to its policy outcomes; the implicit causal mechanism is the interest mobilization process within political institutions. Are similar processes at work in generating these economic policies as those producing abortion policies across countries? Do unions face similar challenges as church groups or the elderly in policy negotiation? These questions are not considered in the literature. Political economy scholars do not establish a clear basis for believing that the influence process for economic policy differs from any other and yet we do not see attempts to apply theories to other kinds of policies. Despite acknowledging that non-economic groups affect economic policy (see Esping-Andersen, 1990), there is also no attempt within political economy to distinguish among the mobilization patterns of economic groups and other constituencies. Scholars in this area are explaining critical policy differences but they are underutilizing generic theories of influence to answer their empirical questions and they are not attempting to generalize and adapt their theories to broader questions about interest aggregation.

These two research areas are not exceptions; they are exemplars of the balkanized scholarship on interest mobilization in the discipline. From game-theoretic treatments of “veto players” in legislative policymaking⁴ to postmodern critiques of democratic theory,⁵ there is renewed attention to group mobilization and its affect on political decision-making. Even in international relations, the traditional site of the assumption that states act as unitary actors, there is a surge in interest in the role of the internal coalitions of interest groups that support a government’s current leadership (see Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2002). Throughout political science, there is mounting data about the processes of group mobilization and policy competition but there is little attempt to place studies within the broader context of a theory of political influence.⁶

These wide-ranging analyses would benefit from a coherent and cumulative theoretical study of the dynamics of interest mobilization and influence that includes comparison across groups and political contexts. The traditional home of theory about political mobilization and interest aggregation is the interest group subfield

³ Some scholars (e.g., Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1984) argue that economic class structure generates policy outcomes and these policies in turn create class alignments. Neoliberal scholars (e.g., Friedman and Friedman, 1962) argue that economic competition and global markets generate domestic constituencies that affect policy but also argue that government intervention can create additional constituencies. Other scholars, following the work of Polanyi (1944), argue that politics is constitutive of the economy: the political process determines the groups than then compete for policy influence.

⁴ Tsebelis (1999) uses this concept to argue that scholars should pay attention to all groups or individuals in the political system that can block legislation.

⁵ Wolin (1993) reviews the similarities and differences between traditional pluralism and its more recent counterparts.

⁶ For further examples, see studies of social movements (e.g., McAdam et al., 2001), international non-governmental organizations (e.g., Brechin, 1997), corporatist systems (e.g., Lehmbruch, 1984), and public policy (e.g., Fernandez and Gould, 1994).

but the primary work of that subfield is now esoteric reports on the empirical structure and strategy of Washington interest organizations. To be useful to outsiders, scholars in this field must specify how empirical work on interest organizations contributes to theoretical developments that speak to the questions of other fields. What do studies of the Sierra Club say about the determinants of environmental policy? How do discussions of interest group fragmentation inform the debate over party decline? Why might differences in political mobilization across industries affect multilateral trade agreements? Questions like these implicitly ask what role interest organizations play in political competition. If we begin to discover answers, studies of interest organizations can be made relevant to current debates across the discipline.

Within the interest group subfield, there is a growing convergence toward a theoretical perspective that combines traditional group theory, often called “pluralism,” with an understanding of organizational dynamics.⁷ The trend in the literature is to accept the basic structure of traditional group theory and focus on the role of organizations in structuring influence mobilization. Interest groups scholars argue that their work has broader relevance because influence requires some type of organization and the organizations they study represent archetypes of the successful structuring of influence activities. Scholars outside the subfield often respond by belittling the importance of the lobbying process in comparison to broader social developments such as economic growth and inequality, ethnic and religious fragmentation, and political disinterest. Comparativists point out the relative scarcity of similar organizations in other nations. To move forward in our understanding of interest aggregation, interest group scholars must acknowledge that the organizations they study have a limited role in a wider process of interest mobilization. Likewise, scholars from other fields must accept that the study of interest organizations is an important locus for the general study of political influence. Generating agreement on a cumulative research agenda will require a specification of the role that interest organizations play in relation to other actors in the political system.

To attempt to meet this need, interest group scholars have imported wide-ranging ideas and methods from organizational theory, a multidisciplinary research program concentrated in sociology, business, and economics. This conceptual borrowing, however, has not featured a project of differentiation that clarifies the unique role of interest organizations in comparison to other types of organizations. Fortunately, what differentiates interest organizations from other organizations also defines their relevance to the broader study of interest aggregation. The *raison d’être* of interest organizations is the mobilization of interests to influence government. In what follows, I rely on this straightforward explanation of the role of interest organizations to help fill the theoretical gap in our research. Put simply, the organizations that interest group scholars study function as intermediaries in mobilizing influence. By focusing on this task and the relationships it necessitates with other parts of the political system, I clarify the relevance of organizational research to other fields. Scholars can place empirical research on interest

⁷ Recent analyses of American interest groups combine organizational research with traditional group theories of politics (e.g., Truman, 1951). Gray and Lowery (2004) label this research agenda the “neopluralist perspective.” Andrew McFarland (2004) also suggests a reformulation of interest group theory under the moniker “neopluralism.”

organizations within the widely shared struggle to understand “who gets what, when, and how?” Theories of interest mobilization and political competition can regain their usefulness and prominence in the discipline.

The Structural Consequences of a Unique Organizational Role

Interest group scholars are in the business of explaining organizational behavior. As a result, they import concepts and hypotheses from every major variant of organizational theory. For example, scholars use network theories of organizations to analyze communication patterns among organizations and professional ties among individual lobbyists (Laumann and Knoke, 1987; Heinz et al., 1993). Sociological institutionalism, the study of taken-for-granted standards of appropriateness that is common in studies of organizational development, makes its way into studies of how interest organizations generate resources from supporters and how they develop status among policymakers (Lowi, 1979; Walker, 1991). The population ecology of organizations, a literature on how shared resource constraints limit organizational populations, is prominently applied to interest organizations in state lobbying communities (Gray and Lowery, 1996). Other authors apply concepts from the economic literature on principle–agent relationships and transaction costs to the behavior of interest organizations.⁸ In each case, however, there is no coherent discussion of what distinguishes interest groups from other types of organizations and no analysis of how the study of organizations relates to the overall task of understanding group mobilization for influence on political outcomes.

There is a stark contrast between the high level of attention that public administration scholars pay to differentiating public agencies from private organizations when importing organizational theory and the haphazard application of disparate ideas in the interest group subfield. Scholars in public administration integrate ideas from organizational theory while elucidating important differences between public and private organizations.⁹ Bozeman’s (1987) spectrum of “puplicness” and the multidimensional public-private typology offered by Perry and Rainey (1988) offer scholars of government agencies options for adapting generic theories of organization to their field. The differentiation approach of public administration scholars has two advantages. First, it enables scholars to use the parts of each variant of organizational theory that are most useful to their field rather than to recreate wider theoretical debates with different empirical referents. Second, it specifies the common features of the environments of public agencies and then uses environmental variation to explain differences in agency behavior. By identifying differences in the use of outside contractors, the distribution of policymaking versus administrative responsibilities, and the breadth of policy area responsibilities over time and across agencies, for example, the literature provides explanations for policy developments. This style of organizational research makes the public administration literature more relevant to scholars of legislatures and public policy. None of the descriptions of organizational distinctiveness in the literature on public organizations, however, capture the relationship of interest

⁸ For an example, see Salisbury (1992). For an overview, see Moe (1984).

⁹ See Denhardt (1981); Bozeman (1987); Waldo (1987); Gortner et al. (1997).

organizations and government. In comparison to the organizations commonly studied in research on the sociology, administration, and economics of organizations, the links between interest organizations and social groups, economic markets, and the political system are unique.

Scholars must build a distinctive theory of political organizations for use in analyzing group mobilization for political influence. Despite the diversity of organizational assumptions made by different interest group researchers, agreement on the distinct function of the organizations under study is not out of reach. Even without explicit acknowledgment, the field shares ideas about the common features of interest organizations. Scholars attempt to compile insights on the activities of many types of organizations, from corporate policy offices to public interest groups to federated associations. Interest group theorists are interested in these formal interest organizations, however, only as representatives of democratic factions: social, ideological, and economic groups with shared ideas about politics. The problem of translating these groups into organized and effective political actors is the focus of research. The hope for differentiating interest organizations lies in focusing on these uniquely political tasks; the similarities among dissimilar organizations correspond to their role in mobilizing influence. In their relationships to public factions, interest organizations all create clienteles and amass resources. In their interactions with policymakers, interest organizations all advocate on behalf of selected interests, represent particular sectors of society, and negotiate with political leaders. These unique relationships to public factions and government actors produce a field of organizations that is dependent on both their constituents and their government targets. Like all organizations, interest groups deploy resources, coordinate activities, process information, and make decisions. These actions are of note to scholars, however, only as they relate to the organizations' political opportunities and their efficacy in interest mobilization.

Given these common tasks among this population of organizations, we should seek to understand their interdependency with other actors and to explain their behavior by analyzing variation in their relationships with outsiders. To capture the contingent relationships of interest organizations, we can use an analogy to V.O. Key's famous tripartite division of the political party. Key (1964) sought to distinguish three inter-related aspects of political parties: the party in government, the party as organization, and the party in the electorate. This theoretical frame still defines the structure of the study of political parties and the debate over their potential decline. It has the advantage of relating research on political parties to research agendas in the study of political institutions and mass behavior. It also allows the role of party organizations in broader political theory to be better understood in relationship to other political actors. Interest groups can similarly be thought of as having three components: (1) social, economic, or political groups with shared interests or concerns, (2) sectors of organizations which seek to represent those interests before government, and (3) factions within government that seek to advance the same agenda.

Truman (1951) viewed these parts of the interest group as distinct but intertwined. In *The Governmental Process*, he included sections on "groups in society" and "groups in government" along with a discussion of interest organizations. Truman also argued that the task of the organization is to produce influence from its base of social support. We lost this basic insight as the "community power" debates over pluralism and elitism divided scholars and public intellectuals in bitter

disputes.¹⁰ The idea of interest mobilization through organized groups was also de-emphasized as the collective action framework, based on the work of Mancur Olson, became dominant.¹¹ Given that some readers approach any “pluralist” ideas with skepticism, let me say only that the organizational theory of influence proposed here does not idealize the American state or pretend that every group is equally equipped to pursue policy influence. Instead, the group basis of politics is an analytic starting point; it describes politics as the process of fractured interest aggregation through organized attempts to influence government.

Modern analyses discuss the intermediary placement of interest organizations without explicitly noting this intellectual heritage. Salisbury (1984), for example, argues that the task of representation of interests before government creates commonalities among organizations. Similarly, Berry (1989) points out that the environment of an interest organization always includes government actors, public subpopulations, and other interest organizations. To advance these basic insights, I argue that interest organizations are unable to completely internalize their primary source of inputs, their social constituency, or the primary target of their outputs, the government; they are therefore dependent on outside feedback from two sets of actors for which they are intermediaries. As many interest groups scholars implicitly recognize, the task of interest organizations is to effectively mobilize influence given these constraints. If we make these relationships and their associated constraints explicit, we can better explain organizational behavior and make the discussion relevant to the broader study of political influence.

Attention to the dual environment of interest organizations will also make each application of organizational theory more useful. As scholars import sociological institutionalism, social network analysis, and population ecology into the study of interest groups, the field can benefit from the strengths of each research program by focusing on the commonalities among interest organizations rather than splitting into competing factions by relying on different organizational assumptions. The challenge is to specify what each approach offers and to suggest how to modify their assumptions to the particularities of interest organizations.

Institutional perspectives on organization provide an explanation for how interest organizations achieve stability and success despite their dependence on government and constituents. In the traditional exposition of institutional theory, Phillip Selznick argues that organizations try to infuse themselves with value beyond what they actually produce.¹² According to Zucker (1983), organizations become stable only as outsiders come to take their existence and their functions for granted. Raymond Bauer, Ithiel De Sola Pool, and Lewis Anthony Dexter adopt this approach in the interest group domain, arguing that interests attempt to become representatives of stakeholders that are universally recognized as legitimate policymaking participants: “The power of the pressure organization seems to be that it is recognized as the voice of its supporters... Its power lies in that slight aura

¹⁰ For an early review of this literature, see Polsby (1963).

¹¹ The collective action framework became prominent in many areas of social science despite its widespread failure to explain the behavior of American interest groups, the empirical terrain from which it was originally inducted. For a review of the empirical results in contradiction with the theoretical work, see Baumgartner and Leech (1998).

¹² Selznick (1957) identifies many of the mechanisms that were later instantiated in the institutional theory of organizations. The classic theoretical statement is from Meyer and Rowan (1977).

of legitimacy, not in having any capability for persuasion or coercion" (Bauer et al., 1972, 374). The creation of a set of formal interest organizations is the institutionalization of a generalized social concern in an organized attempt to gain influence. Salisbury (1984) adds that lobbying organizations also develop as an outgrowth of existing social institutions, such as businesses, churches, governments, and charities.

Sociological institutionalism also explains how populations of interest organizations take similar form in their relation to the state. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell develop three mechanisms for what they called organizational "isomorphism" within a field, the increasing similarity of organizations with similar tasks: the "coercive" control of organizational development by regulators, the "mimetic" copying of organizational behavior by organizational leaders, and the "normative" diffusion of ideas about proper organization by professional administrators (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 147). In parallel, Jack Walker (1991) cites three processes that create similarities in the interest organization field: (1) the state acts to create interest organizations directly, (2) interest organizations arise as replicas of ideologically opposed groups or as spin-offs of parent organizations, and (3) foundations and professional associations normalize a particular form of representation that becomes the dominant style of organizing. Walker and his colleagues argue that the rise in formal interest representation in Washington is due to the appearance of new institutional "patrons" that help generate resources and legitimize activity. Interest organizations are therefore engaged in two related forms of institutionalization that correspond to their two environments: they must become the legitimate representatives of a public or institutional faction and they must become legitimate participants in the policy debate.

Similarly, applications of social network analysis to interest group research can help clarify the structure and contingency of relations between interest organizations and other political actors. Laumann and Knoke (1987) show that government actors are likely to be centrally placed in the policy network across issues, even though each policy domain contains different alliance structures among interest organizations. Social network models that do not take the function of links into consideration risk conflating directed lobbying activities with the internal alliance structure of sets of organizations working toward the same goals. Wright (1996) outlines the particular functional relationship of Members of Congress and interest organizations; he argues that the information needs of legislators force them to rely on interest groups. Wright also reports that interest organizations gain influence by establishing better links to their constituents than legislators can achieve directly. The network connections that organizations achieve with government actors are thus dependent on their networks of supporters.

We can specify three functionally distinct varieties of networks necessitated by the intermediary role of interest organizations: (1) a set of actors with shared targets of influence (e.g., organizations that regularly issue comments on a particular type of regulatory proceeding), (2) a self-referential network of actors who regularly interact to coordinate on influencing policy (e.g., a weekly meeting of telecommunications company lobbyists), and (3) networks of individual supporters and supportive social organizations for intermediary political organizations. These networks correspond to the tasks of interest organizations rather than merely their communication patterns. Interpersonal networks without political purpose (e.g., Washington softball leagues) may also affect the composition of these functional networks but scholars should not treat them as equivalents.

A population ecology approach can also provide important information on the mobilization process if it is attentive to the unique function of interest organizations. In the most prominent application of population ecology to organizations, Hannan and Freeman (1977) argue that organizations are dependent on environmental resources; organizations that do not conform to the capacities of their environments will not survive. Gray and Lowery (1996) extend this approach to interest organizations; they focus on birth and “death” rates within populations of registered lobbying organizations. This approach is useful but sometimes inattentive to the multiple ways that organizations compete. All interest organizations do not always compete in one environment. They compete for support within a field of organizations representing similar constituents and they compete for the attention and support of policymakers among a field of organizations representing different stakeholders in a policy debate.

One contribution of population ecology could be to distinguish among organizational fields, the communities of organizations that compete over the same resources. There are three types of fields that could be important to interest representation but do not involve networks: (1) policy area fields (i.e., every organization active in a particular policy domain), (2) policy opinion fields (i.e., every organization on a particular side of a policy issue), and (3) interest group fields (i.e., every organization acting as a representative of a particular constituency). With these functional distinctions, scholars could analyze what resources are at stake in each type of competition. Organizations within each kind of field likely compete for different resources. Policy area fields may promote competition over media attention, policy opinion fields may have competition over legitimacy with policymakers, and interest group fields may compete over membership. Population-level dynamics are important to the process of influence mobilization but scholars must be clear about what fields organizations are competing within and what kinds of resources they are competing over.

The current use of organizational theory in interest group research thus fails to live up to its theoretical potential. Attention to the particular task of interest organizations and their functional connections to the rest of the political system would allow each sector of organizational theory to be more usefully applied. When looked at through this lens, the theoretical approaches look complementary rather than competitive. All can improve our empirical and theoretical work but we must acknowledge the small part of the puzzle of organizational behavior that each theory explains and the limited analysis of influence mobilization that each makes possible.

Group Mobilization and Interest Aggregation in Political Analysis

Scholarship on the behavior of interest organizations in the United States cannot answer broad questions about interest aggregation and political competition without connecting effectively with research and theory in other fields. Interest group researchers often defensively argue that the organizations they study play the primary role in mobilizing political influence (see Berry, 1989; Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Walker, 1991). Disclaiming this idea, however, could enhance the credibility of the subfield’s links between its theoretical and empirical research. Focusing on the intermediary role of interest organizations and their reliance on other actors can help interest group scholars in their outreach to other fields and help outside scholars put interest group research in broader context.

The importance of research on how the characteristics of the interest mobilization process affect policy outcomes is not contingent on a demonstration that interest organizations are decisive actors. Instead, the focus on organizations is justified by evidence that the constraints of interest organizations and the patterns of their behavior provide information about the key dynamics in the broader process of interest aggregation. Other actors in the political system perform analogous tasks to those attributed to interest organizations. Legislators, administrators, protest organizers, or party leaders can all serve to mobilize allied public groups and to produce strategies for lobbying government actors. In terms of the objectives of interest group theory, these instances show that attention to how interest organizations respond to their environment given their objectives is more, not less, important to general theories of political competition. Though these examples do not involve the same types of organizational structures, they still require organizing constituencies to influence government. Insights derived from studies of highly institutionalized intermediary organizations can be exported to instances in which other kinds of actors may take the lead. Clarifying the role of these organizations and the contingencies of their behavior allows outside scholars to better import theory inducted from organizational cases.

A limited perspective on the role of organizations in interest mobilization allows interest group theory to better travel over time and space. Because the dynamics of organization in interest mobilization are present in many institutional settings, the observation that formal interest organizations are recent creations does not suggest that interest group theory is inapplicable to historical political development. Modern interest organizations have less institutionalized precursors in attempts to mobilize sectional, racial, social, and economic interests throughout American history (for example, see Sanders, 1999). Attention to the tasks and contingencies of modern organizations can lead scholars to understand the additional complexities involved in earlier influence activities. The appearance of fewer formal interest organizations outside of the United States also does not provide evidence that theories developed on American data are not transferable; rather, it speaks to the need of comparative scholars to find where and how these functions are performed analogously in other democracies. Intermediary role-players serve to structure relations between government and social groups, to institutionalize stakeholders in the policy arena, and to propose and promote policy options in democratic negotiations. These roles and their contingency on features of a political system are widely pertinent beyond the empirical domain of American interest organizations. Before cross-national differences can be usefully addressed, we must advance a useful general theory of interest mobilization and political competition.

As a first step, the view of interest organizations outlined here can help connect interest group scholarship to two closely related research agendas, studies of social movements and political parties. Social movement scholars typically focus on resource mobilization, the activation of social grievances through mobilizing frames (i.e., arguments for political action), and the “political opportunity structure,” or institutional acceptance of the mobilization (see McAdam et al., 2001). The contingent relationships of interest organizations parallel those of social movements; in both cases, the leadership serves as an intermediary aiming to mobilize a public group to influence government action. Research on how organizations react to different political structures and different constituent pressures will be valuable to both subfields. Social movement scholars have recently integrated studies of “social

movement organizations” into their literature but organizational operations are secondary in their work. Scholars of interest groups and social movements are often analyzing the same organizations but emphasizing different aspects of their tasks; social movement studies focus on constituency mobilization while interest group studies spotlight government relations. Interest group scholars should import theory on grassroots mobilization but social movement scholars should be more attentive to organizational dynamics and the competition to influence government.

The contingent relations of political party organizations can also serve to promote theoretical unification with the interest group literature. Kitschelt (1994), for example, argues that the characteristics of internal party coalitions determine the strategic flexibility of the party organization for reacting to changes in the electoral arena. The party organization serves an intermediary role that is conditioned by the actions of the party in government and the party in the electorate. Interest group scholars should aspire to the high level of cross-national comparability in the political parties literature as well as their structural explanations for organizational tactics. Party scholars, however, should understand that party organizations are often higher-level intermediaries between constituencies and political leaders; they must engage in the same activities of interest organizations while mobilizing other intermediary organizations to influence elections and policy.

The intermediary view of interest organizations also helps unite scholarship on political institutions and interest groups because it highlights their mutual dependence. First, any literature on legislatures or the bureaucracy that identifies differences in behavior across issue domains or across time could also predict differences in interest organization behavior. The interdependence of these institutions on their interest group environment should also invite attention to cross-sectional and time-series variation in interest group structure. Second, the literature on coalition strategy by legislators (see Arnold, 1990) could concentrate more on the dynamics of coalition formation among broader political factions, especially if interest group studies clarify how external coalitions are connected to partners within government. Third, public policy research, which is already attentive to how the political environment differs across issue domains, can use studies of interest organizations to clarify how the results and potential ramifications of policy changes lead to action by affected interests. Differences in influence activities across constituencies and competitive structure across issues should prove fertile ground for explanations of outcomes across policy areas or across time.

The reformulated version of interest group theory suggested here can also help link several areas of research on mass political behavior to research on outcomes in political institutions. First, studies of legislative responsiveness to public opinion would benefit from attention to the intermediary steps that affect the conversion of public will into organized advocacy. Policymakers are obviously responsive to some parts of the public some of the time. The real question is to whom are they attentive and under what circumstances; interest group theory provides a way to address this question. Second, interest group theory can help expand public opinion research beyond its focus on the determinants of attitudes and electoral outcomes. If characteristics of demographic subpopulations and issue publics influence intermediary organizations, then cross-sectional differences in public opinion may affect policy outcomes through many indirect routes, rather than merely elections. Public survey evidence could be useful for analyzing legislative outcomes if it can be tied to group-level competition. Attention to the potential effects of constituency character-

istics on intermediary organizations can help bridge the gap between institutional and behavioral research.

The intermediary view of interest organizations in the United States can also help internationalize interest group scholarship. Interest group theory can better address research on policy outcomes across states and international organizations. First, the literature on European interest groups focuses on the presence of corporatist structures, institutionalized linkages of interest organizations to governing institutions and constituencies. My analogous specification of the role of interest organizations in the United States allows cross-cultural comparison and theoretical integration. It also alerts scholars of European groups to the many complexities in translating constituency support into institutional influence; it can help further the goal of moving away from a single corporatist dimension to a specification of the types of factional interaction and mobilization present in each nation.¹³ Corporatism could be seen as an ideal type of interest group mobilization and competition and differences in organizational behavior based on variation in constituency and government relations can serve as a better starting point for cross-national evaluations of interest group structure. Second, studies of international policymaking can more productively import literature based on the American system by analyzing the differences in the environments of domestic and international organizations. Studies of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can adapt domestic analyses by specifying the differences in mobilizing transnational and domestic constituencies and by clarifying the unique circumstances brought about by appealing to international institutions.¹⁴ If interest group theory were sufficiently attentive to environmental differences, it could connect with the literature on how states, corporations, and NGOs interact to create international standards. As we gather information on how states respond to domestic constituencies, scholars should be able to escape the problems brought about by reliance on the unitary actor assumption in international relations.

To bring home the point about the broad applicability of a reformulated version of interest group theory, we can return to the two disconnected fields that I began by critiquing: ethnic politics and political economy. Rather than answer specific questions that specialists continue to debate, I hope to spark their interest in considering broader theories of mobilization and political influence in their work. For scholars in other fields, my discussion aims to stimulate ideas about possible analogous applications of interest group theory.

Researchers of racial and ethnic politics draw on public opinion survey data and historical case studies. This approach has yielded descriptive and explanatory success but also isolated its research from the rest of the discipline. An opportunity to speak to basic questions of democratic mobilization, inter-group negotiation, and connections between mass and elite politics has thus far been lost. For example, the literature on individual incentives for ethnic mobilization is curiously disconnected from its more generic equivalent. Shared group identity, perceptions of common fate with one's ethnic group, and beliefs about government responsiveness are all said to influence ethnic issue perspectives and political mobilization (see Shingles, 1981). Should these ideas be incorporated into a general theory of social group collective action? Do they correspond to the instrumental, solidary, and purposive

¹³ For an articulation of this goal, see Lehbruch (1984).

¹⁴ Brechin (1997), for example, has begun to outline how forestry organizations are dependent on their ability to adapt for successful social mobilization and inter-governmental relations.

incentives for individual action identified in the interest group literature (see Wilson, 1995)? If organizational research focuses on what general incentives produce different kinds of constituency support (for example, monetary contributions, protest participation, and legislative lobbying), we might determine whether these incentives differ for ethnic constituencies and other groups. We could connect the ethnic mobilization data to a general theory of mobilization. Ethnic politics researchers could provide case studies to test general theories of how subpopulations generate political representation. Ethnic politics researchers are already making important advances in examining context effects based on the opinions of neighbors and local ethnic institutions (Bledsoe et al., 1995). If interest group theory addressed questions about how local social networks and institutional support affect mobilization, these insights could be more easily applied to other political activity.

The ethnic politics literature also could contribute to a theory of how social groups generate different forms of mobilization such as protest movements, party factions, or lobbying organizations. All three forms are common in ethnic political advocacy but the degree to which each form is dominant has changed over time and differs across groups. The current literature features analyses of the evolving relationship between African-Americans and the Democratic Party, the strategic choices of social movement and lobbying organization leaders, and the results of protest activity and lobbying (see Frymer, 1999; Lee, 2002). A reformulated theory of interest mobilization could address which characteristics of political institutions and constituencies produce each form of mobilization. We could then ask how the history of ethnic politics fits this framework. Comparisons across constituencies and time will only become more important as the ethnic politics literature shifts its focus to minority groups other than African-Americans. Latinos or Asian-Americans may organize more like religious, ideological, or economic groups rather than African-Americans after the civil rights movement. Without ethnic case studies that are integrated into broader theories of interest mobilization, we cannot hope to know. Interest group theory will play a productive role in answering these questions only if it clarifies how the behavior of the organizations it studies speak to the political options and choices that social groups face.

The organizational dynamics of the mobilization of influence are just as central to analyses of political economy. A new framework for understanding the mobilization of political influence can help fill in important details in the broad outlines of policy differences across countries in the political economy literature. The implicit causal mechanism in discussions of how economic structure influences policy choices, after all, is the aggregation of the interests of economic groups in government institutions. In place of general interest group theory, scholars often use historical and cross-cultural comparisons based on either normative views of appropriate economic policy or antiquated structural theories of politics.¹⁵ The benefit of this work is that it identifies key economic constituencies in different countries and attempts to discern their interests and strategies for policy influence. The difficulty is that it uses broad idealizations such as corporatism, class-based economic voting, and left-right party competition that do not always capture the details of interest group systems,

¹⁵ For an account based on normative goals, see Esping-Andersen (1990). For a class-based account, see Chaudhry (1993). These perspectives are welcome, as are evaluations of current economic-political systems. This work could benefit, however, from empirical theory on how groups attempt to affect policy outcomes.

political organizing experiences, and policy negotiation that are found in case studies.¹⁶ A reformulated interest group theory could provide the conceptual vocabulary and tools of analysis to make scholars attentive to the details of the process of interest mobilization and to better fit theory to experience.

A political economy literature that was connected to interest group theory would provide for a productive mutual exchange. Several examples show that current political economy debates relate directly to generic equivalents in interest group theory. First, studies of the contingencies of corporate and labor organizations in negotiations over wage and competition policies (see Immergut, 1992) should be of high comparative utility for research on competition over other policy outcomes. Comparisons of policy resolution in administrative agencies, legislatures, and supervised negotiations (see Rhodes, 2001), for example, could provide nuance to debates over venue selection and lobbying strategies in the American context. Second, research on how economic policy affects performance and how the results feed back into the political system (see Alvarez et al., 1991) should be valuable for the general study of policy feedback and adaptation. Connecting the class-based comparative analyses of policy feedback to in-depth research on the effect of policies on mobilization by particular groups (see Campbell, 2003) would provide a more coherent picture of plausible policy development scenarios. Third, comparative scholars pay careful attention to the role that international competition plays on domestic policy choices and the relation of domestic constituencies to international economic policymaking (see Keohane et al., 1996). The U.S.-based literature on interest groups should be more attentive to international considerations but the political economy literature often uses broad categories to denote interests in international policy that do not correspond to actual political organizing.¹⁷ If political economy researchers were attentive to the multi-step process that connects shared social interest to organized political influence, these structural theories would correspond better to the facts on the ground.

Political economy scholars believe that they are responding to long-running debates about the current and proper relationship between politics and economics, rather than engaged in a study of the details of political mobilization and competition. The questions of interest, however, require an understanding of the generic processes of political mobilization, organized competition, and policy influence. We cannot hope to understand what forms of government are compatible with capitalism or whether politics or economics is constitutive of the actors in the other social system, for example, without understanding how economic actors mobilize to influence political decision-making. Connecting generic interest group theory to research on political economy will help scholars make progress in answering their questions even as it helps place these debates within a discipline-wide understanding of the political process. Political economy scholars already import organizational theory but it is typically used to elaborate and justify the distinction between political and economic actors, rather than to understand the

¹⁶ For an example of a case study of economic policy that is not sufficiently addressed by common theories in political economy, see Johnson (1982).

¹⁷ One example is the coalitions proposed in the insider-outsider theory of unemployment by Lindbeck and Snower (1988). Based on presumed interests, these scholars imagine two large policy advocacy coalitions.

necessity of organized influence to political life. Interest group theory could serve as the basis for more agreement in the political economy literature about how the economic, social, and political systems connect. Imported research agendas from political economy, meanwhile, could enable interest group theory to speak to broad debates about the development of differing economic and governing systems.

Conclusion

If directed toward fundamental questions of political mobilization and interest aggregation, interest group theory has the potential to inform debates throughout political science. The primary barrier to theoretical advancement is the inability to place empirical research on interest organizations within a broader theoretical framework that is accessible to scholars outside the subfield. The theoretical frame proposed here begins to address this barrier. It helps accomplish three goals. First, it makes better use of organizational theory in interest group research. Second, it demonstrates how controversies in studies of interest organizations relate to research on other political actors. Third, it provides examples to stimulate importation of interest group theory into other fields of research.

The effort to connect empirical studies of interest organizations to the theoretical goal of understanding interest aggregation in democratic societies can only be successful if scholars articulate the role of organization in interest mobilization. This requires integrating insights from organizational theory but not haphazardly importing all of its concepts and debates without specifying the issues of particular concern to interest mobilization. Interest group scholars can take better advantage of their progress in applying organizational theories from other fields by distinguishing interest organizations as an organizational category: interest organizations are intermediaries between public factions and political decision-makers. This differentiation involves an important admission. Rather than insisting that interest organizations are the central actors in the political process, it directs attention to their contingency on other political actors: government institutions and constituency groups.

Given this specification, we can emphasize the aspects of each part of organizational theory that provide the most insights for questions about interest mobilization. With sociological institutionalism, scholars can assess the degree to which organizational leaders have institutionalized themselves as representatives of social factions and as legitimate stakeholders in policy debates. With network analysis, we can analyze the constituency-level patterns of interaction and communication that make mobilization possible and separately consider policy networks of organizational leaders engaged in coalition building and lobbying. With population ecology, we can describe competition over particular requisite resources within specific fields. This theoretical importation can clarify the significance of the interest group subfield's empirical work to the discipline's theoretical goals by generating clear theory about how organizations affect the process of interest aggregation.

Advancements in interest group theory do not have to be limited to arcane debates that only interest group scholars read. Identifying the shared environmental constraints that make interest organizations unique has the benefit of allowing empirical work on interest organizations in the United States to speak to the concerns of many other prominent areas of research. Specialists know more about how interest group theory may relate to their area of expertise. I have tried only to

provide several disparate examples of fields that could benefit from theoretical importation as well as export more of their findings to help answer generic questions about mobilization and political influence.

In ethnic politics, for example, researchers knowledgeable about a reformulated interest group theory will be better equipped to compare forms of interest mobilization and chronicle the relationship between policy change and individual mobilization. If the ethnic politics literature is placed in a broader theoretical framework, more of its insights on the role of local mobilization networks and institutions, beliefs about out-groups, attitudes toward political institutions, and the actions of partisan and social movement leaders could be brought to bear on other groups and contexts. In comparative political economy, a newly articulated interest group theory could be used to move beyond corporatist ideal types and limited analysis of a few broad classes to better analyze differences across states and time. In the process, extensive cross-national data on mobilization patterns and influence on important economic policy areas would be brought to bear on basic questions of interest aggregation.

The goal of building a more transferable version of interest group theory is not limited to assisting scholars in disparate fields with their idiosyncratic questions. It is part of a broader effort to combine insights from behavioral, institutional, and comparative literatures rather than continue on a path of fragmentation. The barrier to building a general theory of political competition is not lack of data or lack of theoretical imagination but the belief that any subject can be studied in isolation with a separate set of assumptions, questions, and concepts. To be part of the solution, interest group scholars cannot claim that the organizations in their empirical research are the central site of political activity; they must claim instead that the organized mobilization of influence on decision-making is a basic process of politics. With organizations as intermediaries in this broader process, the focus may shift to the large constituencies studied in research on mass behavior or the particular opportunities for influence in the institutions studied by comparative researchers. Only when we enable the combination of insights from many policy areas, constituency groups, and institutions will we approach a general theory of political competition. Group theory once served this global integrative role flexibly and fruitfully but it was discarded without a useful replacement. A reformulated version of group theory that focuses on the intermediary position of interest organizations and the contingency of their behavior offers a new opportunity to link theory and research across subfields. We should acknowledge the limited role of empirical debates about particular organizations, constituency groups, or policy domains but we should raise our expectations about contributing to general theories of political competition. With that approach, we can reconstitute wide agreement on the importance of interest mobilization in politics and the central role of a theory of interest aggregation in political science.

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