Neopluralism

Definition

"Neopluralism" describes a form of political representation based on advocacy by interest groups. It shares much with classical "pluralism," a theory of politics in the United States, but is more circumscribed in its assumptions and predictions regarding group power. It assumes that societies naturally divide into large numbers of interests. So intensely felt are these interests that people will often mobilize for political advocacy to defend them when they believe their interests are threatened. Neopluralism, however, recognizes that political threats are not always sufficient to mobilize people; other incentives are often required, and larger environmental contexts, such as economic opportunity, changes in values, and the number of lobbying opportunities available, may also limit the number of mobilized groups. Furthermore, centralizing forces such as political parties, significant executive power, and institutional rules and norms limit the number of access points in governing institutions where interest groups can be influential, advantaging some groups over others. This, in turn, stimulates the development of new advocacy tactics. This chapter explores how neopluralism, while not yet a complete theory, grew out of classical pluralism, and how the flaws in pluralism have become some of its fundamental principles.

Introduction

Classical pluralism (see chapter on pluralism) was a theory prominent in the United States in the 1950s and 60s holding that the best and most meaningful form of political representation was through interest groups because group interests were the fundamental building blocks of society. This theory of group politics was originally proposed by Arthur Bentley in 1908, but

reached its fullest development in works by David Truman (1951) and Robert Dahl (1956). They argued that competition between mobilized interest groups drove the political process, with policy largely reflecting balances of power among them. Moreover, latent group interests tend to mobilize for political advocacy when they recognize their interests as threatened by others. Pluralism, however, withered under attacks from a variety of directions, the harshest being Mancur Olson's (1965) argument that it was irrational to assume individuals would always contribute to interest groups defending their interests when they could free ride on the efforts of others instead.

As pluralism declined, scholars started to doubt its most fundamental assumption – that interest groups compete to influence policy on behalf of their members. By the 1970s, scholars were arguing that the very structure of legislative institutions made group competition unnecessary. Groups, they argued, coalesced around the parts of political institutions with jurisdiction over the policies important to them and the people, organizations, or businesses they represent. Legislative committees enjoy relatively autonomous jurisdictional authority over discreet policies, and are populated by lawmakers whose constituents benefit from these policies, constituents who also tend to be members of the small number of relatively similar interest groups lobbying these committees. Because the demands of these interest groups for benefits can all be satisfied with policy without hurting other mobilized interests, and because lawmakers on one committee respect the jurisdictional autonomy of other committees, there is little need for interest groups to compete with each other. As long as the policy benefits flow, everyone is satisfied, and everyone has an incentive to keep group competition at a minimum. Journalists and scholars developed names for these constellations of quiet, mutually beneficial relationships and policies such as "subgovernments" and "iron triangles" (e.g., Cater 196). With this conclusion, pluralism was dead as an important theory.

The study of interest groups, though, never disappeared from political science. Too much research documented the large, and growing, size of the interest group system in the United States to dismiss them as significant actors in the political process (e.g., Peak and Zeigler 1972; Greenwald 1977), especially given their new involvement in using campaign financing to influence elections (e.g., Sorauf 1992). But research on interest groups divided, with one direction becoming a robust line of research on how and why groups mobilize, which came to embrace social movement mobilization as well. The other direction regarded whether groups really compete with each other and how they wield political influence. Only by the 21st Century did scholars conclude it made no sense to believe that mobilization had no connection to influence, and started to think about a new pluralism, or *neo*pluralism.

Recognizing Interest Group Diversity

Just as the seeds of pluralist theory's downfall emerged as it was gaining prominence, so were the seeds of its return planted as the idea of subgovernment politics, pluralism's antithesis, took hold. While unlikely that a theory of a political system driven entirely by group competition would ever again aspire to dominance, there is a growing belief among scholars that interest groups, social movements, and their lobbyists, exist in numbers so large they cannot possibly all be pushing for policy benefits without threatening the interests of others. No government can accommodate them all. Nor can private, material benefits be the sole explanation for the existence of every interest group.

Notably, a new kind of interest group emerged in significant numbers in the 1970s, the years immediately after pluralism's collapse. They were established precisely to compete with older, more established interest groups, especially corporations and their trade associations.

Unlike associations, which exercised almost complete control over well-defined and exclusive memberships, Jeff Berry (1977) and Andrew McFarland (1984) described these new citizen (or public interest) groups as having open memberships and claiming to lobby for the public interest rather than just a collection of private, personal interests. Moreover, many of these organizations also appeared able to recruit members because they offered opportunities to express political passion, not because of membership packages full of private benefits. Lobbying for abstract causes such as the environment, consumer protection, civil rights, and even for the interests of the poor and homeless, their emergence contradicted the arguments made by pluralism's critics, especially those of Olson.

Nor was this the only evidence that competitive group systems existed. Tighter government registration requirements for interest groups and lobbyists, and the availability of that data, made it easier for scholars to study the size and diversity of group systems. In the United States, data available under the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 revealed thousands of interest groups lobbying in Washington, DC, with many issues attracting hundreds, even thousands of groups using pressure tactics to shape policy (Baumgartner and Leech 2001). Far more organizations and policy demands than can be accommodated by subgovernment arrangements. Similar research revealed large and diverse interest group communities in the American states as well (Gray and Lowery 1996), with about 53,000 lobbying in state capitols by 2015 (Holyoke 2019). New interest groups databases in many European nations, and at the European Union level, inspired scholars to question the old corporatist model of political party control over interest groups, leading to a significant burst of research on the large, diverse, and often competitive interest group communities existing in many advanced, democratic nations (e.g., Beyers et al. 2014).

At the beginning of the 21st Century, scholars were suddenly conducting research again on interest group systems that were assumed to be large and competitive. Holyoke (2011) and Grossmann (2012) started re-combining research on group mobilization with lobbying influence techniques within frameworks of interest group competition to create more sophisticated versions of pluralism. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (2004) and Baumgartner et al. (2009) published large studies describing not just competitive advocacy by interest groups, but showed how it was often done through large coalitions of groups on different sides of contentious issues. How and why hundreds of interest groups would set aside significant differences in member and policy disagreements to work in coalitions has become a major topic for scholars in both the United States and in Europe (e.g., Heaney and Leifeld 2018; Junk 2019).

This vibrant new research re-embraces many of the underlying assumptions of pluralism. While it is more sophisticated than in the 1950s, many contemporary assumptions and findings fit comfortably with the arguments of Truman and Dahl, both of whom are still regularly cited in contemporary interest group studies. Perhaps the clearest sign that pluralism has been undergoing a revival is the final conference paper (sadly unpublished) of renowned interest group scholar Robert Salisbury titled "Bentley Was Right!"[1] In the paper, he urged scholars to take another look at Arthur Bentley's belief that people are defined by groups and groups are the real key units of analysis for the study of politics and society. Nonetheless, before pluralism is re-embraced, its limits must be understood. In other words, "neopluralism" needs to be a less naïve form of pluralism.

Neopluralism in Broad Strokes

A few scholars, most notably Lowery and Gray (2004) and McFarland (2004), have started sketching out what such a theory might look like. Neopluralism would still be an interest group theory of political representation, but one better recognizing the limits of group influence in politics. Where it would resemble the old theory is a recognition of the large number of interest groups active in national, state, and (most likely) local politics, taking on a number of different organizational forms and representing a broad diversity of interests. Yet it would recognize that not all affected interests have mobilized, and some of those that are active did not necessarily get that way by inspiring their members with opportunities to express political passions. Also recognized would be the frequency of competition between mobilized interests, often turning into conflict, but also sometimes overcoming competition to form coalitions. Finally, it would better recognize other forces in the political arena that limit and channel interest group influence, exacerbating it at some points of access while limiting or blocking it at others.

Regarding mobilization, pluralist theory actually did not give a lot of attention to questions of how and why new interest groups mobilize and evolve. Truman suggested that the mobilization of one interest might prompt others with threatened interests to do so as well, but only gave it modest attention in his book. A great deal of subsequent scholarship, however, has gone into crafting a better understanding of the kinds of incentives needed to convince people to join, including offering opportunities to express political passion for policy change (e.g., Clark and Wilson 1961). A significant advance in the study of group mobilization was the work of Virginia Gray and David Lowery (e.g., 1996). They find that interest group formation is not only driven by group leaders and entrepreneurs finding the right mix of incentives to attract people; larger, macro-level forces, such as economic conditions, also matter because they provide the raw materials necessary for group formation (see also chapter on population ecology). Group

mobilization, they concluded, is a complex phenomenon that must be understood as both a consequence of individual decisions and the environmental contexts in which these decisions are made. Their work not only stimulated population-level research in the United States, but in Europe and other nations as well (e.g., Beyers and Kerremans 2012; Fraussen and Halpin 2016).

Neopluralism would also recognize the emergence of new strategies for influence. Classical pluralism largely described interest group advocacy as involving quiet, private meetings between lobbyists and legislators, at times with regulators, and occasionally going to court. This is what is sometimes called "direct lobbying." Political scientists in the 1990s portrayed lobbyists and policy-makers in such meetings as engaging in "information exchange," developed as the information theory of lobbying where valuable constituent, policy, and tactical information held by well-connected lobbyists was exchanged with lawmakers for influence over policy (Wright 1996). But by the 1960s, scholars started to become aware of alternative methods of advocacy being used to influence government policy.

For instance, in the 1970s, American interest groups gained the legal ability to influence elections by making financial contributions to campaigns for office, including the presidency. By contributing money through affiliated organizations called political action committees (PACs), interest groups could gain access to lawmakers by promising money for their campaigns, helping keep their elected allies in office (Sorauf 1992). For a growing number of interest groups, spending in elections has become a method by which they can reshape entire governing institutions (McKay 2010). Increasingly, many interest groups have contributed money to gain enough influence in the United States Senate to control the ideological disposition of appointees to the judicial branch (Caldeira, Hojnacki, and Wright 2000).

Grassroots advocacy and social movement protest, in the real and virtual (social media) worlds, has also become a common tactic of both group mobilization and political influence in democratic nations. Not only does engaging a membership (and other supporters) by encouraging them to personally contact government offices in large numbers, or march in the streets, put pressure on policy-makers, it also helps to mobilize even more members driven by their passion for political change (e.g., Kollman 1998; Dür and Mateo 2016). The powerful visual images of protests, especially when protesters are assaulted by law enforcement, often encourage even more people to support the group or movement, and shame policy-makers into bending to protester demands. It means that shaping public opinion has become an important advocacy strategy (Rasmussen, Mäder, and Reher 2018), pushing competing groups to shape public perceptions of contentious issues (often by influencing how they are framed by the media) to their advantage (Binderkrantz 2020).

Whether it is lobbying by strategically providing information in exchange for influence, or exerting pressure through campaign contributions and grassroots protests, these new tactics have made interest group politics far more contentious. Indeed, newer tactics emerged *because* group politics has become so competitive, with aggressive interest group leaders searching for new, more effective tools of influence. These changes, though, are also the consequence of other forces restricting access to government policy-making opportunities.

Political parties for instance. For neopluralists, parties need to be recognized in a new light. As Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) find, some political parties, such as the Democratic Party in the United States, can be seen as amalgamations of interest groups, many competing with each other to influence the positions of the party. Not so the Republican Party, which, they argue, is more of a cohesive organization often trying to subordinate interest group priorities to its own

agenda. More importantly, the power of political parties in many nations has grown so much that party leaders have been able to exert greater control over the legislative and executive branches, reducing the number of points in these institutions where the most significant decisions are made. To some extent, neopluralist scholars are coming to understand that interest group influence is often conditioned on the support of political parties, and often it is lawmakers who are pressuring the lobbyists (Holyoke 2011; Lucas, Hanegraaff, and DeBruycker 2019).

Finally, inequality in interest group representation needs to be better understood by would-be neopluralists. Classical pluralists, of course, never claimed that political representation by interest groups was fair and equitable for all of society's interests. Truman acknowledged that some groups had greater resources and, consequently, influence, than others. Dahl was more explicit about it, claiming that policies were going to, and perhaps even ought to, favor stronger, better mobilized interests, even if this came at the expense of the unorganized public. Research by Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012) finds evidence of fairly extensive biases in interest group systems, often favoring wealthier and business-oriented interests. While neopluralists are right to acknowledge the important role interest groups have carved out for themselves in democratic politics as representatives of highly motivated minorities, they need to grapple with the inequalities seemingly inherent in a political system dominated by organized interest groups.

Towards a Definition of Neopluralism

All of the new research on interest groups and lobbying needs to be carefully fit with other theories of the political process, meaning neopluralism is part of a larger whole rather than a free-standing theory. Neopluralism's greatest problem today is that it is still more of a vague collection of ideas and research agendas than a coherent theory, which makes a clear definition difficult to

provide. Yet given the broad structure of classical pluralism, and reflecting on all of the advances in interest group research since then, one can be at least sketched. Therefore, "Neopluralism" fundamentally refer to societies that are very diverse in terms of the political interests held by their citizens, so much so that large organizations, such as political parties, cannot provide meaningful representation for people hoping to influence government policy, though parties may act as mediating organizations between interest groups and political leaders. It recognizes that the social and economic diversity of interests has led to the mobilization of large number of interest groups because people, organizations, and businesses believe that such organizations, where member interests are fairly similar, are more meaningful forms of political representation than through elected officials and parties where constituent and members interests are diverse and often clashing. Neopluralists, though, also believe that group members mobilize for a variety of reasons, which may be opportunities to express political passions in response to threats to member interests (real or perceived) from other entities, but are encouraged to mobilize by a perceived willingness of government to accommodate their demands through one of its many institutional access points, as well as incentives attracting individuals for reasons other than political advocacy.

Furthermore, neopluralism recognizes that while interest groups are important players in the political system, their influence is limited, and even funneled, by these governing institutions and other organizations in the political arena. In other words, the vast mobilization of the many interests inherent in the public does not end up dominating the political system. Instead, a growing centralization of political power in the hands of legislative and executive branch leaders limits the utility of other access points, such as legislative committees and executive branch regulatory agencies. Other institutional structure and norms of behavior may do so as well. Consequently, it is harder for individual interest groups to be as influential as classical pluralists assumed. This

pressure, in turn, inflames group competition, but also pushes group lobbyists into forming larger coalitions where interests are negotiated and compromised. It also means mobilized interests must interact more with party organizations. It means neopluralists must realize that any new group theory is important, but only a piece of a larger model of governing.

Finally, while neopluralism embraces competition among mobilized interests for political influence, ongoing difficulties in mobilizing some latent interests, and inequality in interest coherence and available resources, means that this competition is inherently unequal. As Dahl suggested, the greatest influence will go to the best organized and most powerful interests, which means that the most powerful interest groups representing the wealthiest interests in a society can, very often, over-power weaker, poorer interests. This, in turn, means that negotiated compromises among groups to form advocacy coalitions requires weaker coalition members to give up more of their members interests in order to be included, or otherwise risk being entirely shut out of policy discussions. In sum, the group competition inherent in neopluralism remains an unequal contest, and one that political scientists need to pay attention to in order to know where and how real power is being wielded in any representative democracy characterized by the mass mobilization of organized interest groups. All of these points, and probably more, will need to be brought together and tested before there is a true theory of neopluralism.

References

Baumgartner, F. R., J. M. Berry, M. Hojnacki, D. C. Kimball, & B. L. Leech. (2009). Lobbying and policy change. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Baumgartner, F. R., and B. L. Leech. (2001). Interest niches and policy bandwagons: Patterns of interest group involvement. Journal of Politics 63(4): 1191 – 1213.

Bentley, A. F. (1908). The process of government: A study of social pressures. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Berry, J. M. (1977). Lobbying for the people. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Beyers, J., A. Dür, D. Marshall, & A. Wonka. (2014). Policy-centered sampling in interest group research: Lessons from the INTEREURO Project. Interest groups & advocacy 3(2): 160 – 173.

Beyers, J., and Kerremans, B. (2012). Domestic embeddedness and the dynamics of multilevel venue-shopping in four EU member states. Governance 25(2): 263-290.

Binderkrantz, A.S. (2020). Interest group representation and framing in the media: A policy area perspective. Journal of Public Affairs 20(1), **https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2009**

Caldeira, G. A., M. Hojnacki, & J. R. Wright. (2000). The lobbying activities of organized interests in federal judicial nominations. Journal of Politics 62(1): 51 – 69.

Cater, D. (1964). Power in Washington. New York, NY: Random House.

Clark, P. B. & J. Q. Wilson. (1961). Incentive systems: A theory of organization. Administrative Science Quarterly 6(3): 129 – 166.

Dahl, R. A. (1956). A preface to democratic theory. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dür, A., and G. Mateo. (2016). Insiders versus outsiders: Interest group politics in multilevel Europe. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fraussen, B., and D. Halpin. (2016). Assessing the composition and diversity of the Australian interest group system. Australian Journal of Public Administration 75(4): 476-491.

Gray, V., and D. Lowery. (1996). Interest representation in the American states. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Greenwald, C. S. (1977). Group power: Lobbying and public policy. New York, NY: Praeger.

Grossmann, M. (2012). The not-so-special interests: Interest groups, public representation, and American governance. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Grossmann, M., & D. A. Hopkins. (2016). Asymmetric politics: Ideological Republicans and group interest Democrats. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heaney, M. T. & P. Leifeld. (2018). Contributions by interest groups to lobbying coalitions. Journal of Politics 80(2): 494 – 509.

Holyoke, T. T. (2011). Competitive interests: Competition and compromise in American interest group politics. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Holyoke, T. T. (2019). Dynamic state interest group systems: A new look with new data. Interest Groups & Advocacy 8(4): 395 – 416.

Junk, W. M. (2019). When diversity works: The effects of coalition composition on the success of lobbying coalitions. American Journal of Political Science 63(3): 660-674.

Kollman, K. (1998). Outside lobbying: Public opinion and interest group strategies. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lowery, D., & V. Gray. (2004). A neopluralist perspective on research on organized interests. Political Research Quarterly 57(1): 163 – 175.

Lucas, K., Hanegraaff, M., & DeBruycker, I. (2019). Lobbying the lobbyists: When and

why do policymakers seek to influence advocacy groups in global governance? Interest Groups & Advocacy 8(2): 208–232.

McFarland, A. S. (1984). Common Cause: Lobbying in the public interest. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.

McFarland, A. S. (2004). Neopluralism: The evolution of political process theory. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

McKay, A. (2010). The effects of interest groups' ideology on their PAC and lobbying expenditures. Business & Politics 12(2): 1 – 21.

Olson, M. (1965). The logic of collective action. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rasmussen, A., Mäder, L. K., & Reher, S. (2018). With a little help from the people? The role of public opinion in advocacy success. Comparative Political Studies 51(2): 139-164.

Sabatier, P. A., and H. C. Jenkins-Smith. (1993). Policy change and learning: An advocacy coalition approach. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Schlozman, K. L., S. Verba, and H. E. Brady. (2012). The unheavenly chorus: Unequal political voice and the broken promise of American democracy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sorauf, F. J. (1992). Inside campaign finance: Myths and realities. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Truman, D. B. (1951). The governmental process: Political interests and public opinion. New York, NY: Knopf.

Wright, J. R. (1996). Interest groups and Congress. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

Zeigler, L. H., and G. W. Peak. (1972). Interest groups in American society, 2nd

edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

[1] While unpublished, I have a scan of the paper that I am happy to share on request.