**Pluralism (the interest group theory of politics)**

## Definition

"Pluralism" refers to a political system of multiple pressure points within governing institutions allowing (even encouraging) numerous organized interests to compete over the shape of public policy. The decentralization exists to accommodate the policy demands of a society that is itself fundamentally an amalgamation of large numbers of social and economic groupings of individuals bound together by deeply held values and beliefs, and motivated by these beliefs to engage in political action to further these values and beliefs in public policy. Political competition results between mobilized social and economic groups for power, with competition begetting more competition and thus expanding the scope of political issues and increasing the number of interests mobilized for advocacy. While political pluralism has some antecedents in 19th Century European political philosophy, it is essentially an American theory of politics, and for a brief time in the 1950s pluralism was held up by some as an overarching, unifying theory of politics in the United States. This chapter discusses the intellectual history of pluralism, including how it arose in political science, gained preeminence as a general theory of government, and then declined when several of its assumptions turned out to be flawed.

## Introduction

It is not clear when the term "pluralism" started to be used to describe a political concept. The leading scholars of what came to be called pluralism rarely used the word, which makes it difficult to define it or understand the concept's history because it is not always clear who was a "pluralist." The term started to appeared in the early 20th Century, right at the time political science

was starting to re-make itself as an empirically-grounded science. Scholars in the United States were beginning to believe that the prevailing theory of a unitary, monolithic "State" did not resemble the government and political system they were studying (Garson 1978). Yet there were different ideas as to what about the government was actually "plural." In some cases it was the number of decision and influence points in the government superstructure, for others it was accepting a variety of political and social values and beliefs, and for still others it was the many factions of society mobilized for political advocacy as interest groups. All are related, but pluralism is remembered today as a theory of competitive interest group-based politics (McFarland 2004).

**The Concept of Pluralism**

While views of pluralism differed in the early 20th Century, by the 1950s the term generally referred to a relatively cohesive theory of group politics that was based on four assumptions. First, that societies can only be understood as compositions of group interests. Individuals themselves are products of the social and economic groupings they are born into, live in, and work in. Their "interests," meaning their fundamental beliefs, values, and world outlooks, are defined by the people around them. In this sense, pluralist group theory is similar to the class consciousness of socialism. Unlike socialism, though, people are not shaped by any single, dominant group such as economic class, but by multiple group interests. This means that group interests, unlike a class interest, are not mutually exclusive; people are often embedded in many interest groups. In this sense, the theory of group pluralism better resembles James Madison's concept of the factionalized society he described in *Federalist #10* than the class interest politics of Karl Marx.

The second assumption is that people are aware of the interests they share with others and generally know when these interests are threatened by other people pursuing other interests. Perceiving a threat prompts people sharing the threatened interest to mobilize and form an organization, an "interest group," to resist by pressuring elected political leaders. This leads to the third assumption, that there are few real barriers to interest mobilization beyond the need to scrape together advocacy resources. Because social and economic interests frequently overlap, the actions of one organized interest group to realize its members' desires through government policy frequently threatens other, often unmobilized (or "latent") interests, stimulating them into action. The direct result is wide-spread competition between organized interest groups over public policy and access to public resources. The byproduct of this tendency of interest advocacy to spark more interest mobilization is the ongoing expansion of the scope of interest group competition and conflict in political systems.

The final assumption is not explicitly about interests and groups, but is still essential for pluralist group theory. Rejecting the idea of "the State" as a single, unitary center of power, interest group pluralism assumes that political power is actually decentralized; existing in many different places within governing institutions, each with autonomous jurisdictions over well-defined areas of policy-making and administration. Organized groups whose members perceive a policy as relevant to their interests pressure elected officials on legislative committees with jurisdiction over the policy, lawmakers with whom they often enjoy constituent-based relationships and who serve their interests in return for votes. Since these groups have strong constituent connections, policies enacted by lawmakers on these committees favor these interests at the expense of less well-mobilized, or latent and un-mobilized, interests, lacking such influence with powerful government officials. In other words, a plurality of influence points controlled by a small number of lawmakers

leads to policies reflecting balances of power among interest groups that favor better connected, often wealthier interests at the expense of weaker interests.

**Pluralities and Groups**

The origin of the theory of interest group pluralism is difficult to pin down, partially because many scholars in the early 20th Century who were identified as "pluralists" did not all understand the concept in the same way. Nor were they all concerned with organized interest groups. What largely united them was a desire for a way to study the U.S. government that was more realistic than idealistically describing it in terms of the Constitution, or by applying theories of unitary state American scholars inherited from European political philosophy (Garson 1978). Perhaps the most prominent advocate of a new, pluralist approach in the early 20th Century was Harold Laski. In a number of books, but especially his 1917 *The Problems of Sovereignty,* Laski criticized the prevailing political science discipline as merely descriptions of institutions based on idealized readings of the Constitution, not from carefully studying how the government actually worked (Ellis 1920). Rejecting the ideal monolithic state holding all power, Laski and other pluralists argued that the government was actually composed of many centers of power, a plurality of decision-points (McFarland 2004, 15). Interest groups were important players in his view, and hundreds were known to exist, but they were hardly the only wielders of political power.

Pluralism as a group theory of politics, however, has its origins more in the work of the American sociologist Arthur Bentley. In his 1908 book, *The Process of Government,* Bentley argued that, broadly speaking, groups were everything. They were all that mattered because they were all that existed. All of society, the political process, the economy, and even the government, he claimed, could only be understood as manifestations of group interactions. Even people could

only be understood within their group contexts. Their beliefs, values, ideologies, and general outlooks on the world were entirely defined by the groups they lived and worked in, and which constituted their "interests." Since interests often conflicted, government became a means for negotiating and adjusting group claims for social resources. Yet even government institutions themselves, such as legislatures and courts, were for Bentley simply other groups, or composites of groups, pursuing interests. Empirical political science, he argued, should be the systematic study of group interactions and their consequences; everything else in politics was window dressing.

Bentley's ideas were highly original. Indeed, it is not entirely clear what his intellectual influences were. Several eminent scholars are discussed at length in *The Process of Government,* but mostly so he could criticize their approaches to social theory. Given what is known of him, it is likely that Bentley was probably influenced by the social psychologist John Dewey (with whom he co-authored a book), and the less well-known 19th Century German sociologists Rudolph von Jhering and Ludwig Gumplowicz, all of whom emphasized the study of humans in social groups and the linking of human actions to their social interests (Bentley 1908, Chapter 1).

**A Grand Theory of Politics**

For all of his originality of thought, Bentley appears to have made almost no impression on political scientists and the earliest versions of pluralism in his own lifetime. Possibly because he spent most of his life working for Chicago newspapers rather than teaching in universities. Even other scholars who developed similar arguments regarding the importance of groups in politics did not cite him (e.g., Dickinson 1929). Yet his arguments gained traction forty years later

with the emergence of much more refined versions of interest group pluralism. Specifically, his ideas - that society was composed entirely of groups and that groups were the only political players that mattered - were front and center in Earl Latham's 1951 book, *The Group Basis of Politics*. It was David Truman's book, however, *The Governmental Process* (1951), that really became the definitive work on interest group pluralism. Yet while acknowledging Bentley as the progenitor of the group approach to politics, Truman rarely actually engaged Bentley's theory. In fact, what Truman presented was not a theory at all, but a description of how interest groups operated, lobbied the three branches of the American government, and provided political representation to factions of the public. Nor did he try to make the same case as Bentley, that group interests are the fundamental unit of analysis for political scientists. While Truman specifically situated his work within the pluralist framework, what he essentially offered was a textbook of American politics and government where the most influential players were interest groups, and competition between groups was what pressured lawmakers into making policy.

Where Truman started to approach theory was in terms of predicting group mobilization. Interest groups lobbying for policy, he argued, would be a catalyst for mobilizing other interests for political advocacy. More precisely, when people holding a common, but latent (meaning unrealized or unmobilized) interest come to perceive that they are threatened by other, mobilized interest groups, they will be stimulated to mobilize in resistance.[1] Furthermore, since most advocacy by existing interests to influence policy ends up threatening, and thus mobilizing, latent interests, the total number of interest groups active in politics will always grow over time. Consequently, the diversity of interests represented in the political system should increase overtime, along with the number of issues lobbied and the aggregate level of competition and conflict among them. Government too, he knew, could stimulate the mobilization of new interests,

citing numerous examples of trade association and farm group organization at the urging of several presidents.

Through the later 1950s and 60s, the theory of pluralism continued to exert a strong influence over political science even as it continued to evolve. Charles Lindblom (1977) drew attention to group power in economic markets, which favored strong business interests, and Robert Dahl argued that inequalities among organized interest groups was almost inevitable (see also chapter on Robert Dahl). Indeed, Dahl's version of pluralism, which appeared in his 1956 book *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, has been held up by many as the clearest statement of pluralism as a theory of power and government. Here Dahl articulated clear postulates regarding the role of interest groups and their relative power in representative political systems. What is remarkable is that Dahl steps beyond the regular bounds of scholarship to argue that disproportionately greater interest group influence could be good, and should be embraced rather than feared. Since interest groups and their lobbyists represent highly motivated constituencies, who care more about specific policy outcomes because they believe themselves to be more heavily affected by those outcomes, they ought to have a greater say regarding those policies than the rest of the unmobilized and uninterested public.

**Undercutting Pluralism's Assumptions**

Even as pluralism grew in importance as a theory, it began to wither under a number of attacks. No serious questions arose about its most basic assumption, that there were significant numbers of mobilized interest groups active in the American political system. Too much good empirical research had been done by Pendleton Herring (1929), V.O. Key (1942), Lester Milbrath (1961), Harmon Zeigler (1964), and Lewis A. Dexter (1969) documenting the sheer number of

groups to doubt it. Questions were raised, though, regarding assumptions that latent groups would, or even could, perceive threats to their interests, or that latent groups would always mobilize if they did perceive such threats. Moreover, doubts were raised that interest groups really competed with each other over policy, or were even important players in the American political system.

For instance, while accepting the pluralist argument that political competition expands the number of interests organized for political advocacy, and even raises the profile of new issues and problems, E.E. Schattschneider (1953) argued that pluralists still could not claim this led to a group community so diverse that it began to reflect all group interests in society. Famously, he quipped that for all the growth in the number of mobilized interest groups in American politics, it still resembled a "heavenly chorus" singing with an upper-class accent. Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) argued that it was wrong to even assume members of latent groups could always perceive their interests as threatened (see also chapter on power). Too often mobilized interest groups publicly framed issues and policies as so benevolent and beneficial to all of society that it was almost impossible for anybody else to see the harm these policies did to them. Thus, latent interests were often tricked into remaining quiet rather than mobilize to defend themselves in the political arena.

Even sharper critiques came from left-leaning sociologists, who argued that pluralism's whole focus on interest group competition missed the real holders of power and influence in the American government. Group competition, C. Wright Mills (1956) argued, was largely a façade created by the relatively small number of corporate executives, military leaders, and senior politicians who used government to keep a tight grip on American economics and society. Arguing that pluralists like Dahl were dangerously naïve, William Domhoff (1967) went even further than Mills by claiming that the United States was ruled only by a small, secretive, upper-class, corporate

clique which cultivated the illusion of group competition to disguise their grip on power. Other harsh critiques came from socialist intellectuals who challenged Bentley's belief that group identities were meaningful to people rather than just a kind of false consciousness (e.g., Manley 1983).

While some of these critiques may have been overly driven by personal ideologies and conspiracy beliefs, it was clear by the late 1960s that pluralism was too broad, too vague, and missed too many important aspects of the political process to be considered a strong theory of politics and government. Furthermore, it had no clear application to representative systems of government beyond the United States. Certainly not to many European parliamentary systems where power tended to be concentrated, with interest groups incorporated into governing structures (see chapter on corporatism).

Yet what proved to be the hardest blow against pluralism came from economics rather than political science or sociology. Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) showed it was irrational to assume that people who perceived threats to their interests would then choose to join organizations in resistance. If people are assumed to be rational decision makers, and interest groups lobbied for policies whose benefits cannot be limited to just group members, then there is no reason for individuals to pay to join groups for advocacy because they receive the benefits of the group's advocacy anyway. Since this must be true for all people, nobody should ever choose to join an interest group, even when they believe their interests are threatened. Instead, Olson concluded, people only join advocacy groups because the organizations offer them valuable, tangible membership benefits they cannot easily get anywhere else.

**Conclusion**

If Olson could reduce group interests to bundles of specialty products for consumers, and dismiss political advocacy as a byproduct of what were essentially commercial transactions (because nobody was joining interest groups to support their advocacy efforts), then pluralism's fundamental assumptions were too weak to support a theory. It certainly could not stand as a grand, unifying theory of politics. A handful of scholars still argued for the value of recognizing a crucial role for interest groups in the design and implementation of public policy, including Dahl (1982) who still pushed his ideas regarding "polyarchy," or rule by groups in society that felt most intensely about how policy affected their interests. New political science research emerging in the 1980s and 90s, though, re-emphasized the importance of the structures and functions of governing institutions, and how institutional rules and norms guided and restricted the behavior of political actors, not the great power of interest groups and their lobbyists. The golden age of the pluralist theory of groups had passed. Yet because interest group influence in representative political systems has only grown over time, many of pluralism's ideas have re-surfaced as the basis of a new theory of "neopluralism."

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[1] While many scholars refer to this as "Disturbance Theory," Truman himself more modestly referred to them as "disturbances."