

## INTEREST GROUPS

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### Summary

This article deals with interest groups from two angles: theoretical and empirical. The theory of interest groups starts with a description of the enjoyment, importance, complexities, and difficulties involved in the study of interest groups. It goes back to its origin, attempts definition of major concepts such as interest, group, and association and examines the history of theorizing on interest groups and contemporary fields of study. Finally, it discusses future directions in the study of interest groups. The author emphasizes different perspectives shared by different regions in the world and presents five promising frameworks for the future study of interest groups: social modernization model; spatial model; political institutional model; globalization model; and cultural norm model.

The empirical section would like to present a concrete configuration of interest groups in politics. The author focuses not on the interest groups but on the interest association, because the former is a functional concept, which cannot be operationalized for empirical study. While there are few worldwide comparative studies of interest groups available, the section considers the realities of interest associations, on the basis of the author's comparative study of Japan, the United States and the Republic of Korea. It should become clear, to some extent, what interest associations are like, which is hard to grasp because of their informal nature.

The author examines the density and composition of interest associations, and analyzes their historical formation and resources in respective societies. Based on this understanding, the author presents an explanation of actor relations and political functions with regard to interest associations.

### 1. Introduction

This article is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the theory of interest groups. It starts with a description of the “enjoyableness” of, importance of, and complexities and difficulties involved in, the study of interest groups. It goes back to their origin and attempts a definition of major concepts, examines the history of theorizing on interest groups and contemporary fields of study, and discusses future directions in the study of interest groups.

The second section is an empirical analysis of interest associations. Few worldwide comparative studies of interest groups have been conducted. The section considers the realities of interest associations, on the basis of the author's comparative study of Japan, the United States and the Republic of Korea. It should become clear, to some extent, what interest associations are like, which is hard to grasp because of their informal nature. Let us start with the complexities involved in the study of interest associations.

## **2. Theory of Interest Groups**

### **2.1 Complexities and Difficulties involved in Interest Group Studies**

#### **2.1.1 Complexities: The Object of Study that is Interesting, Important, and Troublesome**

In the contemporary world, especially after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of socialism, the ideas of liberalism and democracy and the liberal democratic political system have been able to enjoy legitimacy (see *Democracy, Liberalism*). In a liberal democratic political process, the main actors are groups engaged in free action. Contemporary politics can also be called mass politics. This owes to the fact that between early and mid-twentieth century, the masses that obtained universal suffrage in many societies formed organized groups and articulated their interests through them. In practice, groups become also increasingly more important in political systems other than liberal democracies. Groups were important, and are important, in authoritarian systems; they were important in certain socialist systems before their collapse. This is because universal suffrage and large-scale political systems necessarily require the functions performed by organized groups composed of individuals and organizations.

Thus groups are indispensable to contemporary political process. They are called interest groups in the parlance of political science. Actors other than organizations inherent to politics (such as states, alliances of states, governments, and political parties) belong to the category of the interest group, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the study of them constitutes contemporary political science itself (see *Political Parties*). Probably few fields of study are as interesting as the field of the study of interest groups. The reason for this is that it tries to answer directly the “why” and the “how” of political decisions. Political commentators talk about the personalities of politicians, conflicts among them, and how they are linked to which groups. There is good reason for doing so. Groups form the core of the political process, and most major actors involved in the political decision-making process are groups. Through the study of interest groups, which actor attempted to represent which interest, and to have which interest reflected in decision making, can be clarified purposefully.

Interest groups plausibly include all intermediary bodies that form the substance of state and society. They mobilize voters in elections, influence the representative process, provide people with various opportunities for participation, disseminate various kinds of information, exert influence on policy making and implementation, and attempt to have favorable information and opinion reflected in decision making. Baumgartner and Leech are right in saying: “Groups are a difficult set of institutions to study in a systematic way because their activities are so varied and their implications so broad. It is this very breadth, however, that makes it important for political science to pay more attention to groups. Group interests are basic to the practice of politics; interest groups must be basic to the study of politics as well.” The study of interest groups is an indispensable core of modern political analysis.

#### **2.1.2 Difficulties in the study of interest groups**

But, or rather, therefore, the study of the complicated entity that is the interest group faces formidable difficulties. That is, there is conceptual confusion in the study of interest groups, and there are difficulties in defining them. Various definitions have been put forward, but no consensus has been achieved. Consider pressure groups, lobbies, interest associations, interest groups, social groups, civil associations, social movements, nonprofit organizations, non-governmental organizations, large corporations, multinational corporations, industry associations, concessions, privilege, business associations, labor unions and federations, neighborhood associations, sectionalisms, policy networks, administrative agencies, corporations enjoying special legal status, local governments, the influentials, ideological organizations. Which should be included in the object of study?

According to Baumgartner and Leech, in the United States, the following ten definitions are used in the study of interest groups:

- social or demographic categories of the population (e.g., farmers, women, African-Americans)
- membership organizations, membership associations, associations
- any set of individuals with similar beliefs, identifications, or interests
- social movements
- lobbyists registered in legislatures (American institution)
- political action committees (American institution)
- participants in rule-making or legislative hearings, interested parties
- institutions, including corporations and government agencies
- coalitions of organizations and institutions
- prominent individuals acting as political entrepreneurs or lobbyists

Even if one of the above categories is adopted, what fit it will vary enormously, and it will be hard to identify unambiguously the object of study. Each category constitutes a field of study by itself, and numerous books have been written on it.

Furthermore, each is politically quite important and significant. And its significance and importance cannot be understood by looking at it in isolation.

Finally, each involves value judgments. Words such as concession, pressure group, and lobbyist have negative connotations and involve criticism. Many entities referred to by such words are, unlike formal political institutions such as elections and political parties, informal institutions and organizations, and are frequently regarded as dubious things. On the other hand, they are sometimes evaluated positively as involving popular participation and citizen initiative. Thus they are evaluated both positively and negatively, and therefore misunderstanding is apt to occur and reasoned discussion becomes difficult.

To conclude, it is necessary to understand an odd assortment of numerous significant, amorphous entities that involve value implications systematically, objectively, and without looking at each in isolation from the others. Is such a thing possible? Let us go back to the origin of the study of groups in political science.

## **2.2 The Origin of the Study of Political Process: Arthur F. Bentley and his significance**

It was Arthur F. Bentley, the founder of modern political science in the early twentieth century, which claimed “when the groups are adequately stated, everything is stated....The complete description will mean the complete science, in the study of social phenomena, as in any other field.”

In 1908, he authored a major book called *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures*. The book marked the starting point of the study of political process. During the period of transition in the United States from populism to progressive mass movement, from the settlement of the West to urbanization and industrialization (i.e. between the 1890s and the 1920s), he completed the book after starting out as an institutional economist, and working as a journalist. He was a unique student of politics, who subsequently moved from the study of public policy and political forces to the study of the methodology and philosophy of the social sciences gradually. In order to revitalize “a dead political science” having at its core the nineteenth century style study of formal institutions, he criticized “a formal study of the most external characteristics of governing institutions” and systematically analyzed for the first time “group activity” that was “the raw material” of politics. He thought that understanding “interest groups” was the primary task of a scientific study of society. His focus was on “a study of the interests that work through government” and claimed that “no interest group has meaning except with reference to other interest groups; and those other interest groups are pressures; they count in the governmental process.” He distinguished between “underlying groups” and “political groups,” and, further, distinguished among the broadest, the narrowest, and the intermediate senses of “government.” In the broadest sense, government was “the process of the adjustment of a set of interest groups,” without state actors’ intervention in a genuinely social process. In the narrowest sense, it was “a differentiated, representative group, or set of groups (organ, or set of organs), performing specified government functions,” “a certain [governmental] network of activities.” He placed emphasis on the intermediate sense. Government in the intermediate sense was the so-called political phenomena; it was group “phenomena that are specialized with reference to the government,” or, interest group activity centering on government.

Here already presented are the basic concepts and the object of study in the contemporary study of interest groups. That is to say: underlying groups in the civil society, political groups, governmental (policy) network, and mutual relations among interest groups.

Bentley’s seminal work emerged in the early twentieth century: the period of the rise of full-scale mass society and mass politics, and it was the precursor of the American political science that subsequently developed. His book literally became the point of origin from which flowed three currents: group theory and pluralism, study of political process and study of political systems, and positivist quantitative political analysis and behavioral science of politics. This was because he systematically theorized, from a political perspective, groups and processes for the first time. He also raised for the first time questions such as how dependent politics, political decision making, and the implementation of political decisions are on groups, who the actors are in processes that contravene formal institutions, and how democracy is possible in an age of group dominance.

Interest groups have a firm existence at the base both of conflicts and compromises over political decisions and of historic changes in political systems. Thus all persons interested in politics recognize their importance. But they are hard to study, and are enigmatic entities of which academic study has, in fact, not been sufficiently done. This article approaches interest groups and the structure of the political process from multiple angles, and will consider how one can understand entities belonging to this broad category that have so far eluded explication. As comprehensive comparative study of interest groups is unfortunately underdeveloped, discussion here will be based mainly on, and use examples from, Japan, the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Europe.

### **2.3 Definition of Concepts and Object of Study**

The author has explained, in one dictionary, the concepts of interest group and interest association as follows.

#### **2.3.1 Descriptive Explanation: Interest Groups, Interest Associations, and Pressure Groups**

“Interest group” is a social group, particularly one with permanent organization, which attempts to realize its interests by exercising influence, in the broad sense, over politics and society. Any group performing the “function” of realizing group interest is an interest group. That is, not only interest associations but also groups without organization, organizations with purposes other than exercising influence such as corporations and universities, and even local governments, corporations with statutory basis, and also sub-units of government could be interest groups. “Interest association” refers to an organization created specifically for the purpose of exercising influence. For example, a business corporation can be an interest group, but is not an interest association. Industry associations and peak economic associations are interest associations. The Prefecture of Tokyo can be an interest group, but is not an interest association. Both “interest association” and “interest group” are analytical constructs, and they are not names entities use to call themselves. Entities that actively attempt to exercise influence over members of parliament and administrative agencies in the policy-making and implementation process are sometimes called pressure groups or lobbies. In the United States, where the Congress dominates the legislative function, lobbyists representing interest groups and interest associations have become special professions. They are required to register with the Congress. And agents of foreign interests (foreign lobby) are required to register with the Department of Justice.

Historically, the first interest associations were business, labor, agricultural, and professional associations. In the 1960s, in the developed countries, interest associations concerned with public issues such as environment, consumer protection, education, welfare, international cooperation and etc. (“public interest associations”) began to emerge. In Japan, in the 1960s, citizens’ and neighborhood protection movements emerged, and in the 1980s the activities of nonprofit organizations and non-governmental organizations became salient. And the 1990s, what is referred to as the citizen lobby has also become active. But compared with Europe and the United States, business associations still carry great weight.

In terms of political theory, interest groups and interest associations have a high affinity for pluralism and corporatism. Pluralism theorizes on their interest articulation activities, and corporatism theorizes on their integrative and cooperative participation in policy making. In the case of Japan, since the 1980s, close relations between interest associations and policy process have been analyzed using the concept of the developmental state (C. Johnson) or that of the network state. In the 1990s, the structure of interest associations and their relations with politics and society have been changing, owing to the restructuring of the public and private spheres.

The above description takes into account conditions in Japan and the U. S., but requires additional explanation. As mentioned above, there are conceptual variety and confusion with regard to interest groups and associations. Is it possible to come up with a definition that can be universally agreed upon?

### 2.3.2 Definitions of the concepts

The following is one plausible set of definitions.

**Interest:** active concern, based on values and desires, with public policy making and implementation mainly by the state but not restricted to it; and such values and desires themselves.

This definition places importance on the point at which public policy and the desires and values of private actors intersect. Many attempts have thus far been made to define interest on the basis of objective existence and material motivation. Since non-materially motivated interest, which certainly exists, needs to be covered by the definition, then the above definition should be adopted.

**Group:** collectivity made up of persons and organizations that are not makers of public policy: in other words, generally, a set of persons and organizations that belong not to the state apparatus but to the societal sector.

**Interest Group:** group, possessing interest in the above sense.

**Interest Association (Organized Interest):** associational interest group. Interest group with permanent organization, although employing very few of its members (in distinction from a business enterprise or a bureaucracy) (see *Bureaucracy*).

**Interest Group Activity (Lobbying):** activity performed, based on interests, to influence actors involved in public policy making. The purpose is to protect and enhance values and desires on which the interests are based.

The above definitions are plausible. But are they useful to scholars aiming at general study of interest groups that transcends differences in culture and society? In this context, distinction between “interest group” and “interest association (organized interest)” is especially important. The reason is that “interest group” can refer to any organization in the political process. Should units inside the bureaucratic machinery, various levels of local government, numerous enterprises, and offices providing

professional services (lawyers, accountants, tax accountants, judicial scriveners, etc.) all be accepted as object of study? What about medical corporations and educational foundations? They are groups having interest in influencing public policy; they are interest groups. But they are not interest associations as defined above. Deciding to study only interest associations is one possible approach. But there is as yet no consensus on this in the world of political science.

## 2.4 History of Theorizing on Interest Group Politics

### 2.4.1 Waves of Group Emergence in Politics

As in most areas of social science, there have been waves in the study of interest groups. As mentioned above, the study of interest groups was established in the modern nation state as organized groups emerged in the political process. Generally, new groups tend to emerge with new names, accompanied by new political concepts. As ideas such as constitutionalism, liberalism, representative democracy, and participatory democracy became integrated in the modern nation state, there occurred the need for the articulation of opinions, demands, emotions, and identities through groups. Such articulation has not necessarily led to democratic participation. There have been cases where it led to control from above through political parties, bureaucracies, and local governments. There even have been cases in which it developed into totalitarianism (see *Democracy, Authoritarian System, Legislature, Decentralization and Local Politics, Nationalism, Religion and Politics*).

According to one historical hypothesis, emergence of a new political system or major changes of the system take the form of emergence of new groups and associations. It is clear that the birth of the study of interest groups was concomitant to the politicization of groups (as evidenced by the emergence of labor and farmers' movements, the birth of cooperatives, the restructuring and modernizing of trade associations, and the birth of fraternity associations, and women's movements, organizations based on international solidarity, all in the late nineteenth century) and the rise of mass democracy.

Many would agree that, historically, the wave of interest group study has arrived every quarter of a century; that is, in the late nineteenth century, the 1920s, the 1950s, 1970s/1980s, and today. The waves have synchronized with the waves of democratization in the world discussed by S. Huntington. Another important question for historical hypothesizing is how democratization of regimes (regime change in non-democracies) relates to the problematization of interest groups in advanced societies.

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## Biographical Sketch

**Yutaka Tsujinaka** is professor in political science at Institute of Social Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Japan. He holds an LL.M. from Osaka University and LL.D. from Kyoto University and was a Fulbright

and ACLS scholar at Cornell University (1989-91). Tsujinaka is the author of many books and articles that include *Interest Group Politics in Japan* (Tokyo University Press, 1988, Japanese and Chinese editions), *Pressure Groups in Postwar Japan* (co-author, Toyokeizai Publishers, 1986), *Defending the Japanese State* (co-author with Peter Katzenstein, Cornell East Asia Program, 1991), and *Comparing Policy Networks* (co-author, Cambridge University Press 1996). He is currently directing projects both on comparative civil society organizations and interest groups and on comparative analysis of global environmental policy networks among several countries. He is also the editor of *Leviathan*, the most prominent journal of political analysis in Japan.