

Group Theories of Politics

by G. David Garson

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Abstract:

In *Group Theories of Politics*, Garson constructs a history of interest groups as players in the policy process by tracing the emergence, rise and decline of group theories. The primary focus is on Pluralism, with Elitism offered as a competing theory. Garson concludes by making the claim that group theory should be thought of as an orientation within political studies, but not as a “theory” in the sense of predictive science.

Interest groups as policy actors seem most effective in the problem identification, agenda setting, and policy formulation phases of the policy process. Scholars following Garson continue to illustrate the tension between Pluralist and Elitist conceptions of groups. Implications of this tension within a decentralized, democratic government are discussed.

Key Concepts:

Pluralism is defined as a decentralized form of government wherein interest groups engage in conflict and dialogue; group interests are multiple and shifting; and any inequalities of power or access created by disparate resources are resolved by the democratic process of election.

Elitism argues that a small minority, comprised of members of a socio-economic elite and policy hold the most power and influence in politics and policy making.

Book Summary

In *Group Theories of Politics*, G. David Garson constructs a history of interest groups as participants in the policy process. In particular, Garson examines the historical tension between two rival theories of groups in the context of political science: Pluralism and Elitism.

Concluding ultimately that neither provides a holistic view of politics and the policy process, Garson claims group theory loses its place as the dominant frame of analysis because it fails to offer empirical evidence that interest groups are effective participants in the policy process. He advocates for what he calls “the systematic complementarity of the two” (Garson, 1978, p. 206)

Presented as an argument between group theorists, Garson shows two levels of argument: between group theorists as to the proper form and application of group theory, and between group theorists and scholars who disagree with the premise that conceptualizes American policy making in terms of group theory.

Essentially a literature review, Garson surveys all articles and book reviews pertaining to group theories of politics published in the *American Political Science Review* between 1906 and the 1970s. Articles and reviews were considered part of the sample if they (1) discussed the role of groups *as* groups in political science; (2) discussed specific nongovernmental organizations; or (3) discussed classes of such organizations, such as labor unions and church groups.

Garson characterizes early American political theory as a belief in the sovereign power of the State. He suggests that group theories began to develop as a reaction to the Institutionalism of the 19th Century in which normative beliefs elevated political institutions to the level of Platonic ideals rather than contextualized such institutions in terms of their reality. “The group conception removed the veil of rhetoric that obscured the actual operation of government behind abstractions like ‘the national interest’.” (Garson, 1978; pg. 80)

The beginning of group theory is really the acknowledgement that “the State” is composed of actors, both institutional and non-institutional, and these actors are a product of their historical, socio-economic, political and various other contexts. Implicit in this concept is the idea that groups have competing sets of interests and the State acts as a control mechanism. The rise of the study of political theory as a “science” is set within the context of the larger movement of behavioralism in sociology and psychology which brought to the social sciences the idea of empirical evidence being used to describe reality and/or develop predictive theories about non-scientific disciplines. This application of science moved political theory away from the study of the state and government in terms of pure form, into the study of influence and power. (Garson, 1978)

Garson ties the emergence of interest groups as political actors to the late 19th Century rise of organized labor. The labor movement highlighted the contesting claims of the working class and those of corporate interests and led to the rise of “pressure politics” where groups use means to exert pressure on policy-makers. The ability of extra-governmental groups with competing interests to affect the policy making decisions of institutional actors is one of the foundations of group theory. Pluralism at its root stems from power that is decentralized across the branches and levels of government. Pluralism suggests that interest group conflict and subsequent dialogue will lead to a common good that is best for all members of society.

Early Pluralist theorists such as Albion Small (1885), his student Arthur Bentley (1908), James Bryce (1909) and Harold Laski (1917) posit that while politics and decision making are located primarily within the framework of government, there are many nongovernmental groups who can and do use their resources to exert influence on those with the power to make policy. (Garson, 1978) Inherent to this framework are the ideas that no one group has a claim on the

general will, group interests are multiple and shifting, and any inequalities of power or access created by disparate resources are resolved by the democratic process of election.

Pluralism is portrayed as the dominant theory of groups, and each of the other theories are framed as critiques of Pluralist theory. Elitism is shown as a strong rival to Pluralism at several different points during the first three-quarters of the 20th Century. By emphasizing the critiques of each upon the other Garson shows how, while the more dominant theory throughout most of the, 20th Century, Pluralism was neither fully discredited by rival group theories, nor could it completely refute Elitism.

Elitism argues that groups need a high level of resources and the support of patrons to be able to contend for influence. Proponents of Elitism criticize the Pluralist conception of interest groups as failing to acknowledge the reality that disparate resources create unequal access to power, and class and economics play a large part in a given group's access to power. The class of ruling elites preserves their interests through policies that result in an unequal distribution of wealth and resources.

One of the later conceptions of Elitism is presented at stratification theory. In stratification theory, the group process is auxiliary to prior elite patterns of conflict and accommodation. Another of the Elitist critiques is the idea that Pluralism could not explain the unequal distribution of social outcomes from a system marked by a pluralist political process. These critiques are noteworthy in their implications upon democracy. If no group can speak for all interests, and an elite ruling class presses their interests, then group conflict within the elected government and various levels of bureaucracy becomes a defining characteristic of democracy. (Garson, 1978)

In the 1950s, a group of neo-pluralists came onto the scene. For E.E. Schattschneider, group theory and specifically Pluralism are evidenced by the transference of private conflicts into the public domain. Robert Dahl also talks about the fragmentation and conflict of public and private interests. While no group will ever be able to speak to interests of society as a whole, Dahl believed that groups can be coordinated through a centralized positive state, and that consensus could emerge from the group process. (Garson, 1978)

By the 1960s, group theories of politics were beginning to fall out of scholarly favor. For one thing, at the time this book was written, some policy areas had historically been all but immune to group interests. Foreign policy is such an area: for much of US History, only the President, a few key advisors, and the military were thought capable of understanding the nuances of international politics. The major failing of group theories, so opponents believed, was their inability to predict actions of the players within the policy process. Garson concludes by making the claim that group theory should be thought of in terms of a research area, or as an orientation within political studies, but not as a “theory” in the sense of predictive science.

Assessment

Ultimately, Garson finds group theories of politics lacking the empirical rigor that they were born under, concluding that group theories, in particular Pluralism and Elitism are useful as frameworks for analysis, or as descriptions of the policy process, but not as a predictive “theory” of government that prescribes the roles of policy makers. I am not sure thinking of group theory in terms of its ability to predict the actions of policy makers is altogether useful given the explosion of interest groups from the late 70s until now. I think if Garson were writing his book today, he would acknowledge the idea that groups do play a significant part in the policy process

and that empirical evidence of this does exist. The usefulness of Garson's work in a discussion of interest groups is the explanation of the evolution of group theories.

While perhaps not all-encompassing theories that thoroughly explain American political science, group theories are useful as analytical tools. I think Garson was right in that we are not a society of pure Elitism or Pluralism, but a blending of the two. This seems to me to be the intent of the Framers of the US system of government. Or if not intended, it is perhaps the logical outcome of the system of checks and balances written into the Constitution. Subsystems exist within the structure of the State because of the way power is fragmented across the different branches and levels of government. (Meier, 1985) Matthew Cahn talks about the tendency of groups in a democracy to factionalize in order to maximize their influence as they exercise their right to press their interests. (Cahn, 1995). In *Federalist Papers 10*, James Madison suggests that it is best to allow many competing factions to prevent any single faction's domination within the political system. (Madison, 1788) Pluralism by definition involves multiple centers of power that exert force upon each other. Interest groups, then, are collections of individuals interacting on the basis of shared attitudes or beliefs, exerting claims on other groups (Truman, 1971).

The decentralization of power Garson so clearly explains as indicative of Pluralism is a common theme in many of the Theodoulou and Cahn readings. In addition to being the structure of government itself, decentralization is exhibited within each branch and by the nature of division of powers between the Federal and state governments. Further, decentralization occurs within each state, as we see with the division between governors, state legislatures, and the state court system. What does not fall under the purview of the Federal government, or the states, is left to many other government and quasi-governmental agencies/organizations such as local

governments, neighborhood associations, state-run universities, transportation boards and even school districts.

Theodoulou and Kofinis illustrate the effect of multiple players on the policy process. In addition to elected officials and the courts, they show how staff, bureaucracy, the public, interest groups, lobbyists, media and think tanks range from less influential to very influential at each stage of the policy process. (Theodoulou and Kofinis, 2004) I would argue that interest groups have the most strength in the problem identification, agenda setting, and policy formulation phases of the policy process.

It is important to consider election politics in a discussion about interest groups and their effect on the problem identification and agenda setting phases of the policy process. This is particularly true of the legislature. The lack of term limits for congress means a particular member of congress could essentially make a career out of the position. Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond and Ted Kennedy are examples of career congressman. Desire to keep winning elections has an effect on legislators' performance in the policy process. (Fiorina, 1989; Mayhew, 1974) A member of congress only has so much time in a day, and with the goal of re-election in mind, must make strategic use of daily appointments. Such appointments are used primarily to meet with individuals and groups who can help fund a campaign, or whose backing is symbolically important. (Cahn, 1995).

This begs the question, are some interest groups part of an elite whose interests are met by better access to the agenda setting phase of policy making and how does that effect democracy? The fact that money constrains the ability to access those positions of power and influence has for much of our history meant that a particular socio-economic class has

functionally served as the institutional actors of government. These people have also functioned as the most likely groups to gain access to institutional policy makers.

On the one hand, the unequal access to the agenda setting phase exhibited by the preference given to some groups and their issues over others seems to suggest interest groups are detrimental to the democratic concept of government. On the other hand, it can be argued that democracy is maintained because for every special interest group with one agenda, there are other organizations pressing for alternatives. (Berry, 1989) In this framework, policy making becomes about compromise, or about finding solutions that are best for a majority of groups. While the danger to slide into Elitism is real and there are myriad examples of Elitism in our history, more and more we are a society moving away from information asymmetry, so that average citizens have the ability and resources to become well-informed on any conceivable issue, opening for them a variety of access points to the policy process, from organizing into grassroots movements like MoveOn.org, to becoming experts within an issue network, to outright seeking public office.

To some degree, the Media are a check on inequalities between interest groups in the policy process. An interest group in their own right, they also provide another avenue for groups to access the problem identification and agenda setting phases of the policy process. (Iyengar & Kinder, 1989) Interest groups that may be resource-poor but have strength in the scope and breadth of their membership are able to use media outlets to present their issues to a much broader audience. Strength in numbers is a key component of pluralist group theories. (Garson, 1978)

The reality of the modern world is that it is impossible for legislators, the president, and each member of the judiciary to be knowledgeable of every issue area. Under all of these people

exists a specific Bureaucracy, each with varying interest group affiliations and a knowledge base ranging from general knowledge to highly specialized, issue-based knowledge. (Fiorina, 1989; Light, 1984; Wilson, 1975) This has implications about the effect of groups upon the policy formulation. Many of the institutional players in policy making are not democratically elected, and the more specialized their knowledge, the more likely it is that their decisions reflect smaller interest subsets of the public and “distort our purpose because national interest is not always the sum of all our single or special interests”. (Berry, 1989)

In his discussion of Issue Networks, or shared knowledge groups focused on some aspect or problem in public policy, Hugh Heclo talks about a form of intellectual Elitism he labels Technocracy. In a Technocracy, the decision makers in the bureaucracy of government and other organizational systems are chosen because of their skills and qualifications, rather than on the basis of how much money or political capital they hold. People are advanced by reputation, in a milieu where often only people with their same specialization are qualified to judge their knowledge of the issue(s). (Heclo, 1978) I would argue that an elite class of rulers based on knowledge as opposed to class and wealth, or cronyism, is more pluralistic in spirit.

Some critics of interest groups charge that a discrete response to the policy issue at hand without an overriding philosophy can lead to incrementalism in policy making, which has the effect of distorting the concept of “general will”. Hugh Heclo suggests that making policy in an environment “already crowded with public commitments and programs” increases the chance that one policy will have multiple and indirect impacts on others. (Heclo, 1978). Then, too, taking into account so many disparate interests often has the effect of gridlock on the policy process.

Gridlock is not necessarily a negative impact of interest groups. It can be, as evidenced in the development of the San Francisco Mission District, where there is a marked need for low and moderate-income housing. Traditionally, such development has been blocked because interest groups have the ability to sway county supervisors who must approve any such development. Boggled down in interest group politics, the San Francisco Armory building sat empty for years, development stymied by neighborhood gentrification, by associations that didn't want more low-income residents in that area, by developers looking for profit instead of seeking a public good. But even this form of gridlock can be seen as both pluralist and democratic.

Perhaps, as Garson concludes, group theories cannot "predict" the actions of policy makers but such theories do help us to better understand the tensions inherent in the policy process. The most interesting aspect of Garson's work, for me, is the tension illustrated between the plural and elite conceptions of interest groups, and the way this tension plays out in the policy process. Many of our readings focus on the ways in which interest groups play a part in the policy making process. While there is debate between scholars about which group theory seems most descriptive post-Garson, none deny that interest groups inhabit an essential role in policy making. It is clear that the historical tension between Pluralism and Elitism illustrated in Garson's description of the evolution of group theories has carried over into modern policy making.

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