

### The Interest of a Group

The term *interest* constitutes the heart of the notion interest groups. Common interest is considered the constituent element of a group. According to one of the founding fathers of the pluralist approach of collective action, David B. Truman, social groups are the origin of politics. The group socializes the individual and offers the prism through which the individual perceives the world. Latent or unorganized groups mobilize when their members' interests are concerned, which guarantees that no group can exercise its domination forever. Thus, the groups control and neutralize each other. This approach faces at least two problems: First, it implicitly assumes that all interest groups have the same probability to emerge, and second, that to create an interest group, a common interest must exist. Mancur Olson's work opposed the second assumption particularly: Instead of leading to collective action, the existence of common interests leads to common inaction. Based on the hypothesis of a rational actor, Olson shows that the free-rider phenomenon applies to every collective action. To create interest groups, Olson proposes the appeal to incentives, positive and negative. Negative incentives are understood as costs imposed on actors in the case of noncompliance. This can be the refusal to exercise one's profession, as in the case of the British Dockers if they are not trade union members. Positive incentives concern the offer of economic and social advantages such as a guaranteed assistance of a lawyer in case of work problems.

## INTEREST GROUP

In its broadest definition, an interest group can be understood as an entity whose aim is to represent the interests of a specific section of society. More specifically, an interest group can be defined as an organization searching to influence public policies. Although the first definition allows us to conceive interest groups as actors influencing political actors and other interest groups or public opinion in general, the second definition insists mainly on the link that exists between political actors and interest groups, which refers more specifically to the term *pressure group*. These two understandings show the challenges a definition of interest groups faces, in particular in systems that move from government to governance. Three terms are central in this respect: interest, organization, and influence on political actors.

### The Group as Organized Entity

The second element that needs a closer look is the notion of an organized group. In this sense, interest groups are voluntary associations of joiners. They have members, either formal ones who sign up or informal supporters who routinely show up to assist their organization. Thus, an organized group is distinct from a movement or a latent group. However, it is important not to overestimate this organizational principle. Empirical research has shown that social movements or latent groups can be organized and hierarchically structured and are therefore only distinct from interest groups by name. It is important not to overestimate the

rigor, the transparency, and the foreseeable nature of interest group behavior. The organizational structure must be placed on a continuum of more or less structured situations. Thus, a certain number of transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are organized as real enterprises.

### To Influence Public Policy?

Finally, interest groups influence public policy in using a certain number of action repertoires, such as strikes and protests, expertise, and institutionalized consultation. This element is usually put forward to differentiate between interest groups, searching to influence public policy, and political parties, searching for political power. This distinction also allows us to differentiate between interest groups and bureaucracy. Thus, interest groups should be nonstate or private actors. However, these distinctions pose a number of challenges, particularly in systems of governance.

First, an interest group can be tempted to institutionalize its structures to influence public policies and to gain political power, as shown by the developments of labor, environmental, or agricultural movements in Europe that were transformed into political parties. The second differentiation—between bureaucracy and interest groups—poses similar problems. The police officers' or teachers' strikes are only two of numerous examples. These groups play the role of an interest group while being administrative actors. The national or international bureaucracy also can be considered an access point for interest groups, but can become an interest group itself.

Thus, to define an interest group, it is necessary to understand what a group is authorized to do and what role it is expected to play in a system of governance. Therefore, a firm or a bureaucracy can play the role of an interest group in using specific action repertoires linked to interest group behavior. The firm's attempt to influence public policy at the national or international level transforms it temporarily into an interest group.

### Action Repertoires

The action repertoires of interest groups are not neutral but, rather, correspond to a number of subjective

elements, influenced by the national or international context in which interest groups emerge, the specific policy field, the role an interest group plays in society, its financial resources, social capital, its organizational structure as well as the group's political or social aims. In general, action repertoires can be differentiated into four ideal-types: negotiation and consultation, expertification, protests and strikes, and juridiciation.

Negotiation and consultation are action repertoires used by groups invited by political actors to participate in the policy formulation and implementation process. These action repertoires also lead to lobbying strategies when interest groups are not directly contacted by political actors, but nevertheless want to represent their interests. Expertification refers to an action repertoire widely used in governance systems. Political actors increasingly often call on expertise in the policy-making process. Interest groups providing expertise therefore possess strategic advantages in representing their interests. Protests and strikes are usually linked to governmental but less to governance systems because they aim to exercise societal pressure on a specific government. Governance structures are, on the contrary, rather horizontal, and no clear target for societal pressure can be identified. Finally, juridiciation refers to the use of law by interest groups. They appeal increasingly to national, supranational, and international courts to make their claims be heard.

Today, interest groups are considered increasingly important actors in international and regional governance systems such as the European Union. Transnational interest groups intervene regularly in international affairs as global governance relies on various transnational networks linking together state and nonstate actors and, thus, often generate private governance regimes parallel to state-centered and ruled regimes.

—Sabine Saurugger

*See also* Association; Civil Society; Collective Action; Corporatism; Governance; Incrementalism; Interdependence; Network; Nongovernmental Organizations; Organization Theory; Pluralism; Social Movement Theory; State Capture

**Further Readings and References**

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