CHAPTER 16

Organizations and Public Policy

The journalistic and scholarly mood about the importance of political organizations has varied from one of fascination with their power to one of amusement at their impotence, but whether reality has changed in accordance with the perceptions is far from clear. The plain fact is that no well-supported and comprehensive rendering of accounts about the impact of organizations on public policy is as yet possible. One of the reasons for this is that the significance of organizations will depend, in ways that are not fully understood, on the nature of both the issue and the institutional process by which it is resolved.

Issues and Organizations

Theodore J. Lowi has proposed a threefold classification of public issues and a set of hypotheses relating the kind of issue to the character of the political process ("arena of power") that it will evoke and to the extent and ways in which organized groups will participate in the decision. A distributive decision is one that provides, or appears to provide, specific benefits to specific groups "without regard to limited resources." Patron-
age is a distributive policy, so are defense contracts, government services to organized business, farm, or labor clienteles, the management of public land, and an item-by-item tariff. A regulatory decision involves a governmental choice as to "who will be indulged and who deprived" on the basis of some general rule: examples include awarding a television license, banning an unfair labor practice, and giving the president discretionary powers over foreign trade. Finally, a redistributive decision involves broad categories of citizens, "approaching social classes," to whom benefits are extended or from whom losses are taken. A progressive income tax and noncontributive welfare programs are important illustrations.1

Each of these policies of government has a characteristic political process associated with it. Distributive policies stimulate activity by small organizations and even by individuals, each seeking a particular benefit on the basis of "every man for himself." The government rewards all such activity so long as it does not appear that the benefits to one party are at the cost of another. "Log-rolling" is common; the legislative result is often called "pork barrel." Regulatory politics, by contrast, deal with "sectors"—industries, occupations, commodities—and thus the political process involves a higher degree of organization and coalition formation than is the case with distributive issues. These coalitions are not based on a desire for mutual noninterference but on shared interests in obtaining or defeating a regulatory proposal aimed at a sector of the economy. The trade association or local union is typically involved in regulatory matters. Regulative policies encourage the activities of peak associations that have a broad, often ideological, interest in representing a social class: the National Association of Manufacturers and the Chamber of Commerce on one hand, the AFL-CIO and allied groups on the other. The "haves" and the "have nots," or the "money-providing" and "service-demanding" groups are decisive on these issues, and their leadership might be described as a "power elite."2

Lown suggests that the pluralist view of politics—by which he apparently means a view that argues that policy is the result of organized group conflict—is generally accurate only for the regulatory arena. This seems to be true for certain kinds of regulatory decisions, especially those that involve the competing demands of organized segments of the economy—such as struggles between labor and management over the definition of unfair labor practices, between wholesalers and retailers over the maintenance of fair-trade laws, or between two firms over the awarding of a television broadcast license. But there is a broad range of other regulatory issues in which group activity is most intense, and the activity that does occur tends to be carried on by unsuccessful opponents. An example of this is the recent wave of consumer legislation. No organized interest can take credit for many of these laws, such as the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 and the 1962 Kefauver-Harris amendments to the Food and Drug Act. Mark V. Nadel, in his study of these and other consumer-protection bills, concludes that the "primary consumer groups are not effective" and that lobbying was far less important than the direct representation within key congressional committees of various points of view.3 Consumer policies were often opposed by organized interests, but supported, at least in the ways that...
proved decisive, by congressmen who were aided by influential newspapermen and, in the case of auto safety, by Ralph Nader.

Lewin's fundamental insight—that the substance of a policy influences the role of organizations in its adoption—seems correct, but the conceptual scheme based on that insight requires modification in at least two ways. First, a distinction should be made between the adoption of a new policy and the amendment of an existing one, and second, the incidence of costs and benefits of a policy should not be obscured by the use of categories ("distributive," and so on) that are hard to define and to purge of misleading implications.

The most important new policies of government are adopted only after there has been a change in opinion or a new perception of old arrangements sufficient to place the public agenda what had once been a private relationship and to clothe a particular program with legitimacy. Organized groups can rarely accomplish unaided such changes in opinion or such redifinitions of what constitutes legitimate public action; instead, these changes are the result of dramatic or critical events (a depression, a war, a national scandal), extraordinary political leadership, the rise of new political elites, and the accumulated impact of ideas via the mass media of communication. New policies born in this fashion include major social welfare measures, such as social security and Medicare, the selective service system, civil rights laws, new regulatory measures aimed at consumer protection, the creation of the Tennesse Valley Authority (TVA), the antipoverty program, the shift from an itemized tariff to a reciprocal trade policy, federal assistance to law enforcement and to education, foreign aid and various mutual security agreements, the federal interstate highway program, and some of the ecology legislation. Whether these measures are regarded as redistributive or regulatory is less important than the fact that they represent major redifinitions of the proper role and powers of government; they were controversial mainly in that people differed importantly over what it was legitimate for government to do. On some of these measures, such as social security, one social class was pitted against another; on others, such as foreign aid and aid to education, ideologies cutting across classes did battle with one another.

Sometimes political organizations assist in this process of agenda setting, as when trade unions struggled to obtain legal sanction for their conception of collective bargaining, when the NAACP demanded a federal role in civil rights, and when the Anti-Saloon League mobilized support for temperance. At other times, the new departure represented the activities of policy entrepreneurs who, by combining personal skill, strategic institutional position, and fortuitous circumstance, managed to obtain consent for a new policy departure. The development of the Economic Opportunity Act, the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), the Safe Streets Act, the tax reform act of 1969, the Model Cities program, revenue sharing, the TVA, the unsuccessful Brannan Plan for agriculture in 1949, the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, and the Consumer Credit Protection Act ("truth-in-lending") are illustrative of an essentially nonorganizational policy-development process.

The political locus of the key actors in these innovative policies varies. In general, legislation in the realm of social welfare and foreign policy has tended to originate in the executive branch, but consumer-protection legislation has tended to emerge from the initiatives of congressmen and their allies.

Revisions to existing policies follow a different pattern that in turn depends on the extent to which the initial policy decision settled the ideological and normative issues and on the incidence of costs and benefits entailed by the program. Most of the new or enlarged powers acquired by government are soon taken for granted, and the debate over their propriety, if not their success, is stilled. Social security, most civil rights laws, regulatory policies, and the progressive income tax are no longer thought to be illegitimate extensions of public authority, though their administration and their efficacy are frequently questioned. Other programs retain for longer periods a controversial status and remain or become the objects of organized struggles. Welfare support of the unmarried mothers of children is one example; in the minds of many, it continually presents issues of morality and equity. Other programs remain controversial until an accommodation is reached with the groups whose interests they threaten to harm. The cessation of controversy over the TVA resulted from the adjustment of that agency, first to the organized farmers and land-grant colleges and then to the private power groups in adjacent regions.

The extent and nature of organizational activity in an issue area will also depend on the incidence of costs and benefits. A cost may be widely distributed (as with the general tax burden, or with generally rising crime rates, the widespread practice of some objectionable act such as the sale of obscene literature) or it may be narrowly concentrated (as with a tax or impost paid by a particular industry or locality or a highway construction program that destroys a particular community). Similarly, a benefit may be widely distributed (as with social security and
unemployment compensation payments or national defense) or narrowly concentrated (such as a subsidy paid to a particular industry or occupation, a tariff on a particular product, prestige conferred on a person or group, or a license to operate a television station). Note that costs and benefits may be intangible as well as tangible and that a widely distributed benefit may or may not be what economists call a "collective good"—that is, something from the enjoyment of which no one can feasibly be excluded. All collective goods, such as national defense, are a widely distributed benefit, but not all widely distributed benefits, such as social security payments, are collective goods. Policy changes can be crudely classified on the basis of whether the cost and benefits are widely distributed or narrowly concentrated from the point of view of those who bear the costs or enjoy the benefits.

DISTRIBUTED BENEFITS AND DISTRIBUTED COSTS

Policies that both confer benefits on, and spread the costs over, large numbers of persons will tend to become easily institutionalized and to produce increases in benefit levels without significant organizational intervention. In a democratic society, elected legislators have an incentive to raise the value of widely distributed benefits, especially if those benefits are material. Social security payments are usually increased in election years without the necessity of any lobbying effort; in time, Medicare benefits may also experience more or less automatic increases, as will income maintenance payments under FAP if it is ever adopted. The initial debate over FAP has been cast in moralistic and philosophical terms; subsequent reviews will be debated, if at all, in terms of economic and political benefits. The interstate highway program is for similar reasons now financially noncontroversial, though insofar as its construction involves land clearance it imposes high, localized costs that render this aspect of it most contentious.

Whether a policy has a widely distributed benefit may not always be clear, especially if the benefit is not received in the form of individual cash payments or the equivalent. National defense may be seen as a great benefit at some periods and as a modest benefit, or no benefit at all, at other times. Increasing the number of officers in a police department may be thought to provide a greater degree of public safety even though crime rates may in fact show little sensitivity to any feasible change in the size of the police force. When the benefits are in the form of cash or of readily observable public services, such as street cleaning, governmental decisions about their magnitude rarely depend on impor-

tant organizational activity. Public opinion is generally assessed directly by officials, and the electoral process generally ensures that legislators will have ample incentive to support publicly desired increases whether or not voluntary associations take an interest in the matter. Perhaps the major organization that becomes involved in issues of this type is the political party that seeks out and endorses programs with distributed benefits; cynics often call these policies "motherhood" issues.

Some organizations that represent groups for which the costs substantially exceed the benefits, such as some business and taxpayers' associations, will oppose increases in widely distributed benefits, though usually ineffectually unless they can acquire as an ally an important officeholder, such as the president or a governor, who has a stake in maintaining a general budget constraint. From time to time, the distributed costs of certain programs are seen as exceeding the value of the distributed benefits. This usually happens when there has been a sudden, sharp rise in costs—for example, large tax increases to support escalating school or welfare budgets. These increases will be felt by many persons as an insupportable new burden, the "straw that broke the camel's back"—precisely the sort of perception that offers ample opportunity for the organizational entrepreneur to create a new association. Its emergence is often described in the media as a "taxpayers' revolt." It is rarely successful because the same force—a sudden, adverse change—that stimulated the formation of the anticoast group will lead to the formation of a probenefit group should politicians try to cut the budget sharply. Most officeholders, knowing that they cannot really reduce the education or welfare budget by any significant amount without precipitating an organized counterattack, rarely try very seriously to do so. Meanwhile, the anticoast organization will attempt to minimize the threat it poses to the potential opposition by concentrating its fire on some budget item that can be plausibly described as a "frill." Though this may help neutralize the opposition, it rarely leads to large savings.

CONCENTRATED BENEFITS AND DISTRIBUTED COSTS

Programs that benefit a well-defined special interest but impose, or appear to impose, no visible costs on any other well-defined interest will attract the support of the organizations representing the benefited group and the opposition of none, or at least the hostility only of purposive associations having no stake in the matter. Of course, all programs that help a defined sector impose costs on somebody, but if the costs are
widely distributed, usually in the form of generally higher taxes or prices, but the benefits narrowly concentrated, the beneficiaries will have an incentive to organize and will be able to mobilize effective political support for the policy. Veterans' benefits, agricultural subsidies, oil import quotas, and tariffs on many commodities are all examples of such programs.

Programs of this kind facilitate the emergence of voluntary associations that enter into a symbiotic relationship with the agency administering the program. There are any number of familiar examples—the National Rivers and Harbors Congress and the Army Corps of Engineers, the American Farm Bureau Federation and the Department of Agriculture, and veterans' organizations and the Veterans Administration. Some associations of this kind are in fact created by the agency or as a consequence of the agency's formation: the Soil Conservation Service stimulated the formation of the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts, and the Rural Electrification Administration helped bring into being the National Rural Electrification Cooperative Association.

Some government agencies never acquire a supportive political association (the State Department is usually cited as the leading example). By the same token, some important political associations never acquire a client agency. The NAACP, for instance, has helped pass a number of civil rights bills, but these have not led to the creation of an independent agency or bureau that the NAACP could regard as its bureaucratic counterpart. Similarly, the American Council on Education (ACE) has lobbied with some success on behalf of financial aid to colleges and universities, but there is no “Department of Higher Education” in the executive branch of government with which the ACE could enter into a mutually sustaining relationship.

DISTRIBUTED BENEFITS AND CONCENTRATED COSTS

When a specific, easily identifiable group bears the costs of a program conferring distributed benefits, the group is likely to feel its burdens keenly and thus to have a strong incentive to organize in order that their burdens be reduced or at the very least not increased. The politics of Medicare may be different from that of social security for just this reason: doctors feel that they are being asked to shoulder many of the burdens of the program (in the form of bureaucratic red tape, real or threatened control of fees, and the overcrowding of hospital facilities), and thus they fought its creation and continue to press for its modification. The automobile manufacturers felt they were being asked, unfairly, to bear the burdens of auto safety, and other industries feel they are paying the burden of various ecological programs. Whether such objections persist, of course, will in part depend on how successful an affected group is in passing its costs on to others. Auto safety raises the prices of cars, but because all manufacturers are required to conform, all can pass the cost on to car buyers. On the other hand, a public utility required to bear the burdens of pollution control may find it difficult to pass along all the costs because the consumer has the option of substituting other forms of energy, for example, by buying more natural gas and less electricity.

Because of the organizational and tactical advantages conferred by a concentrated cost and the corresponding disadvantages imposed by a distributed benefit, it is easy to suppose that policies with these characteristics will rarely, if ever, be adopted. In fact they are, and perhaps with increasing frequency. The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906, and the Public Utility Holding Companies Act of 1935 are early examples; the 1962 drug amendments, the auto safety act, and the various clean air and clean water bills are recent ones. Each represented, not the triumph of an organization but rather the successful mobilization of a new, usually temporary, political constituency. On occasion this was made easier by a dramatic crisis that put the opponents at a hopeless disadvantage—for example, the Depression, the thalidomide disaster, or the investigation of Nader. On other occasions the mobilization required no crisis but only the successful appeal, often through adroit use of the mass media, by a policy entrepreneur to a mass public in ways that made the goal being sought appear incontrovertibly good and the groups being opposed seem utterly self-serving. Once such legislation is adopted, however, the defeated opponents, still in being as a political association, may work hard to “capture” the agency administering the law while the victorious but unorganized supporters may turn their attention to other matters.

CONCENTRATED BENEFITS AND CONCENTRATED COSTS

Programs that benefit a well-defined group but at a cost to another well-defined group generate continuing organized conflict. Revisions and amendments and interpretations are endlessly contested and sometimes efforts are made to repeal the initial policy. The struggle between labor and management over control of the National Labor Relations
In a political system where power is fragmented, the steps of the way by the organized opponents usually have structured lessons, and the key elements of congressional structure and organization:

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The role of the political system in the development of policies within the context of governmental, organisational, and political rules.
organizational politics, not only by spawning new associations but by giving an advantage to associations, or factions within associations, that seemed to rely on purposive incentives. In both political parties, the amateur and the ideologue made substantial gains at the expense of the “old politics”; in civil rights, purposive groups such as SNCC and CORE made (briefly) gains at the expense of the NAACP; and in industry, ecological and consumer groups gained at the expense of firms and trade associations.

If purposive organizations became more important—indeed, in a period of heightened discontent, of decisive importance—then leaders capable of producing concerted action on the basis of ideas became more influential. But only a few such leaders will succeed in institutionalizing their influence, because only a few will be able to create an enduring organizational base for their claims. Their importance in politics will thus be episodic and limited to those few policy areas that can be made the target of aroused passion. Meanwhile, other associations with their allied government agencies, immune for the moment from passion or purpose, will continue to maintain control over policy domains in ways designed to enhance, if not the interests of their constituencies, then at least those of the organizations themselves. One who wishes to describe the “policy-making process” will be free to choose the language of stasis or turmoil, interest or ideology, depending on where he allows his gaze to fall.

In evaluating this selectively described process, American scholars have pronounced it good or bad depending on the political coloration of what they took to be the dominant challenge to interest-group politics. In the 1950s, McCarthyism, extreme conservatism, and nativism appeared to represent the modal likely form of mass politics, and thus scholars, overwhelmingly liberals in their outlook, stressed the values of stability, bargaining, moderation, and pragmatism they found in interest-group politics. Even those who disliked the conservatism of such organizations would concede that the threat of “contemporary right extremism” might require the maintenance of some form of interest-group politics as a barrier against “irrational mass movements.” When in the late 1960s the principal forms of mass politics turned out to be liberal or even radical in impulse, scholars lost no time in joining in a chorus of denunciations of group politics: it was seen as a barrier to desirable changes and an impediment to the advancement of mass movements that were now described as liberating rather than irrational and as having an impatience with bargaining that was wholesome rather than parasitic.

The scholarly fears of both chaos and impotence have proved exaggerated, but the evaluative problem will remain. There is not and there cannot be any wholly satisfactory solution to the problem of how best to aggregate political preferences and thus, as the changing opinions of American scholars should by now have revealed, we cannot expect any easy verdict on the American political system. All will depend on whose ends are being served at the moment, and scholars have their own cherished ends like everybody else.

The politics of organizational representation and interest bargaining—the politics, that is, of mobilizing small constituencies, the politics of “pluralism”—assures that organized affected parties will be heard, that the intensity of revealed preferences will be taken into account, and that the consequences of policy will be debated. But such a process also means that unorganized groups will often be neglected and that the resultant policies may reflect benefits sought by easily organized sectors rather than by broader, harder-to-organize constituencies, and perhaps only those sought by associational activists at that. The politics of mass mobilization, of mass appeals and social movements, and of ideologies and personal followings will often produce a wider, public-interest debate, place new issues on the public agenda, and call into question accepted but perhaps morbid institutional arrangements. But such a process can also be the arena of the demagogue, of left or right, and can result in programs that do not work well, or work at all. And regardless of whether policies result from active organizations or mobilized publics, the adoption of any policy will in the long run usually prove easier than the modification of a policy once in effect.

NOTES


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4. Daniel P. Moynihan has referred to this as the "professionalization of reform" in his article of that title in The Public Interest (Fall 1969), pp. 6–16. Not all the individuals who are influential as policy initiators are professionals in the strict sense, however.


13. The greater cohesiveness of many state as opposed to national legislative parties results in part from the power of state legislative leaders to appoint committee chairmen free of a seniority rule.


18. Ibid., p. 551.


20. Ibid.


22. Seymour Martin Lipset (manuscript, Department of Government, Harvard University).

23. By "liberal elite" I mean those persons ranking high in income, occupational status, and schooling who favor enlarging government-directed efforts to social melioration. They are that (I think growing) fraction of the well-to-do whose income and status have not produced political conservatism.
