

# Introduction to the American Political Process

## Class 4: Collective Action and Interest Groups

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## 1. Readings

Olson, “The Logic of Collective Action”

Kollman, “Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies”

Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, “The Unheavenly Chorus”

Strolovitch, “Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender”

## Readings

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Olson, “The Logic of Collective Action”

The traditional view: groups are “ubiquitous, and... this ubiquity is due to a fundamental human propensity to form and join associations.”

- Pluralists (e.g. Truman 1955; back to James Madison): small competing factions are the essence of democracy

Olson: rational individuals pursue their self-interest  $\nRightarrow$  groups naturally act in their collective best interest. **Why not?**

- Key insight: the fruits of political action are a public good, and therefore subject to **free-rider problems**
- Public goods: **nonrival** and **nonexcludable**, e.g. a clean apartment, knowledge, the search engine
  - **Nonrival**: My consumption of the good does not reduce what is available for you to consume.
  - **Nonexcludable**: Nobody can feasibly be denied access.
- **Diffuse benefits** but **concentrated costs**  $\Rightarrow$  underprovision

## Discussion questions:

1. Is the analogy between competitive economic markets and political action useful? What common features do they share? What are the key differences?
2. What are some empirical implications of Olson's theory?
3. Can Olson's theory account for major protest movements, e.g. Black Lives Matter? What does it miss?

## Readings

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Kollman, “Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies”

**Outside lobbying:** mobilizing the public in favor of issues to then pressure policymakers

- “*Socialization of conflict*”: taking private conflicts into the public sphere (Schattschneider)

Purposes served:

1. **Information:** demonstrating that a policy is salient
2. **Conflict expansion:** making the policy more salient

Thus groups play an important role in mobilizing the wider electorate.

**Discussion question:** Do Kollman’s arguments imply any redeeming features of the pressure system? Is this a story of *mobilization* or *manipulation*?



## Readings

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Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, “The Unheavenly Chorus”

*“The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (Schattschneider 1960).*

Purpose of the reading:

1. Identify expressions of “political voice”
2. Demonstrate inequalities in these dimensions of political voice in the U.S. context

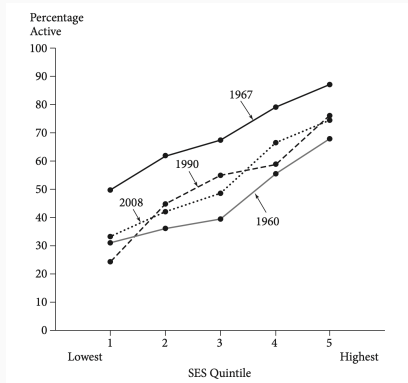
Political voice includes:

- Voting, contributing to campaigns, responding to surveys, protest, advocacy, calling your legislator, canvassing, posting political content on social media...

Political voice plays dual roles: **informational** and **accountability**

But unequal representation in nearly all aspects of political voice → unequal responsiveness

# Schlozman, Verba, and Brady



The data are based on five measures of activity: working in a political campaign, contributing to a candidate or campaign, contacting a government official, belonging to a political organization, and working with others on a community issue.

**Discussion question:** Are these problems to some extent intrinsic to democracy, or are they particularly pronounced in the U.S. context? Are there institutional remedies?

## Readings

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Strolovitch, “Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender”

**Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989):** multiple overlapping axes of disadvantage: gender, race, sexuality, income...

- *“Theories of intersectionality tell us that these many disadvantages are **not static or rankable** and that they **do not operate along single axes in additive ways**. Instead, these systems are dynamic and create inequalities that define, shape, and reinforce one [an]other in ways that constitute the relative opportunities and positions of different members of marginalized groups. **Those situated at the juncture of multiple forms of disadvantage** are subject to injuries that are exponential and **unique products which are different from and greater than the sum of their parts** (Crenshaw 1989).”*

Implication: there are further hierarchies of advantage within groups that advocate for the disadvantaged

Theoretical predictions about interest group behavior:

## **Downsian:**

- Organizations lobby for issues that have the broadest impact on their members
- Symmetric prediction about narrow issues that affect the relatively advantaged and disadvantaged

## **Intersectional:**

- Organizations lobby for the narrow interests of the relatively advantaged



A typology of issues:

1. **Universal issues:** affect the population as a whole
2. **Majority issues:** affect the majority of the interest group equally
3. **Advantaged subgroup issues**
4. **Disadvantaged subgroup issues**

TABLE 1 Specific Policy Issues Used in SNESJO Questions, by Organization Type and Issue Category

Organization Type (N; percent of Sample)	Majority Issue	Advantaged-Subgroup Issue	Disadvantaged-Subgroup Issue	Universal Issue
Asian Pacific American (7; 3.9%)	Hate crime	Affirmative action in government contracting	Violence against women	Social Security
Black/African American (15; 8.4%)	Racial profiling	Affirmative action in higher education	Welfare	Social Security
Latino/Hispanic (12; 6.7%)	Census undercount	Affirmative action in higher education	Welfare	Social Security
Native American/ American Indian (6; 3.4%)	Tribal sovereignty	Affirmative action in higher education	Violence against women	Social Security
Civil rights—general (18; 10.1%)	Hate crime	Affirmative action in higher education	Discrimination against LGBT people	Social Security
Immigrants' rights (4; 2.2%)	Green-card backlog	Availability of H1B visas	Denial of benefits to immigrants	Social Security
Labor (32; 17.85%)	Minimum wage	White-collar unionization	Job discrimination against women and minorities	Social Security
Economic justice (31; 17.4%)	Welfare	Minimum wage	Public funding for abortion	Social Security
Public interest (8; 4.5%)	Campaign finance reform	Internet privacy	Environmental racism	Social Security
Reproductive rights/ women's health (8; 4.4%)	Late-term abortion	Abortion coverage by insurance/HMOs	Public funding for abortion	Social Security
Women's rights/feminism (37; 17%)	Violence against women	Affirmative action in higher education	Welfare	Social Security

**TABLE 4 Mean Level of Activity on Each Issue Type, by Type of Organization**

Organization Type	Mean Level of Activity, 1–5 scale			
	Majority Issue	Advantaged-Subgroup Issue	Disadvantaged-Subgroup Issue	Universal Issue
Asian Pacific American	3.71	3.00	2.43	1.57
Black/African American	4.13	4.53	3.71	2.07
Latino/Hispanic	4.58	4.25	2.92	2.08
Native American/American Indian	4.00	3.76	2.92	1.67
Civil rights—general	3.32	2.86	2.68	1.64
Labor	3.84	4.00	3.48	2.91
Economic justice	3.37	3.39	1.16	1.90
Public interest	3.25	2.38	2.13	1.75
Women's rights/feminism	3.61	3.39	2.88	2.09

Source: SNESJO.