Theories of Interest Group Politics

Understanding the debate over whether honest lobbying—and interest groups in general—create problems for government in America requires an examination of three important theories. **Pluralist theory** argues that interest group activity brings representation to all. According to pluralists, groups compete and counterbalance one another in the political marketplace. In contrast, **elite theory** argues that a few groups (primarily the wealthy) have most of the power. Finally, **hyperpluralist theory** asserts that too many groups are getting too much of what they want, resulting in government policy that is often contradictory and lacking in direction. The following sections will examine each of these three theories with respect to interest groups.

**Pluralism** rests its case on the many centers of power in the American political system. Pluralists consider the extensive organization of competing groups evidence that influence is widely dispersed among them. They believe that groups win some and lose some but that no group wins or loses all the time. Pluralist theorists offer a group theory of politics, which contains several essential arguments.

- Groups provide a key link between people and government. All legitimate interests in the political system can get a hearing from government once they are organized.
- Groups compete. Labor, business, farmers, consumers, environmentalists, and other interests constantly make competing claims on the government.
- No one group is likely to become too dominant. When one group throws its weight around too much, its opponents are likely to intensify their organization and thus restore balance to the system. For every action, there is a reaction.
- Groups usually play by the “rules of the game.” In the United States, group politics is a fair fight, with few groups lying, cheating, stealing, or engaging in violence to get their way.
• Groups weak in one resource can use another. Big business may have money on its side, but labor has numbers. All legitimate groups are able to affect public policy by one means or another. Pluralists would never deny that some groups are stronger than others or that competing interests do not always get an equal hearing. Still, they can point to many cases in which a potential group organized itself and, once organized, affected policy decisions. African Americans, women, and consumers are all groups who were long ignored by government officials but who, once organized, redirected the course of public policy. In sum, pluralists argue that lobbying is open to all and is therefore not to be regarded as a problem.

**Elites** are impressed by the vast number of organized interests, elitists are impressed by how insignificant most of them are. Real power, elitists say, is held by relatively few people, key groups, and institutions. They maintain that the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves. Elitists critique pluralist theory by pointing to the concentration of power in a few hands. Where pluralists find dispersion of power, elitists find interlocking and concentrated power centers. About one-third of top institutional positions—corporate boards, foundation boards, university trusteeships, and so on—are occupied by people who hold more than one such position. Elitists see the rise of mighty multinational corporations as further tightening the control of corporate elites. A prime example is America’s giant oil companies. When they come up against the power of these multinational corporations, consumer interests are readily pushed aside, according to elitists. In sum, the elitist view of the interest group system makes the following assertions:

• The fact that there are numerous groups proves nothing because groups are extremely unequal in power.
• Awesome power is held by the largest corporations.
• The power of a few is fortified by an extensive system of interlocking directorates.
• Other groups may win many minor policy battles, but the corporate elites prevail when it comes to the big decisions. Thus, even honest lobbying is a problem, say elite theorists, because it benefits few at the expense of many.

**Hyperpluralism** is also critical of pluralism. Theodore Lowi coined the phrase interest group liberalism to refer to the government’s excessive deference to groups. Interest group liberalism holds that virtually all pressure group demands are legitimate and that the job of the government is to advance them all. In an effort to please and appease every interest, agencies proliferate, conflicting regulations expand, programs multiply, and of course, the budget skyrockets. If environmentalists want clean air, government imposes clean-air rules; if businesses complain that cleaning up pollution is expensive, government gives them a tax write-off for pollution control equipment. If the direct-mail industry wants cheap rates, government gives it to them; if people complain about junk mail, the postal service gives them a way to take their names off mailing lists. If cancer researchers convince the government to launch an anti-smoking campaign, tobacco sales may drop; if they do, government will subsidize tobacco farmers to ease their loss.
Hyperpluralists’ major criticism of the interest group system is that relations between groups and the government have become too cozy. Hard choices about national policy are rarely made. Instead of making choices between X and Y, the government pretends there is no need to choose and instead tries to favor both policies. It is a perfect script for policy gridlock. In short, the hyperpluralist position on group politics is that:

- Groups have become too powerful in the political process as government tries to appease every conceivable interest.
- Interest group liberalism is aggravated by numerous subgovernments—comfortable relationships among a government agency, the interest group it deals with, and congressional subcommittees.
- Trying to please every group results in contradictory and confusing policy.

Ironically, the recent interest group explosion is seen by some scholars as weakening the power of subgovernments. As Morris Fiorina writes, “A world of active public interest groups, jealous business competitors, and packs of budding investigative reporters is less hospitable to subgovernment politics than a world lacking in them.” With so many more interest groups to satisfy, and with many of them competing against one another, a cozy relationship between groups and the government is plainly more difficult to sustain.

**pluralist theory** A theory of government and politics emphasizing that politics is mainly a competition among groups, each one pressing for its own preferred policies

**elite theory** A theory of government and politics contending that societies are divided along class lines and that an upper-class elite will rule, regardless of the formal niceties of governmental organization.

**hyperpluralist theory** A theory of government and politics contending that groups are so strong that government is weakened. Hyperpluralism is an extreme, exaggerated, or perverted form of pluralism.