


Why are certain interests represented in politics while others are not?

Political Science Mid-Term Assignment
BSc in International Business and Politics
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Feedback recieved:
- Use subtitles for a more clear structure
- Remember to cite people when mentioning their work
(in the conclusion when Dahl is mentioned)

When wanting to change something in a democratic society, one often turns to the political system with a demand. Given the difference in human outlooks and opinions, the political system is supplied with an endless number of demands by the environment. However, far from all political demands turn into political issues which are then processed in the political system. Scholars have different theories about what makes some interest groups successful in obtaining the second dimension of power and thereby getting their special interests on the political agenda. Elitist theories assign great value to political and financial resources and thereby argue that even in democracies there is little competition in agenda setting since the power is vested in an elite who holds these resources (Jochen, 2003). Pluralist theories claim that different interest groups compete to get their special interests on the agenda and that their success depends on more variables than money, network, and history (Holyoke, 2015). *This assignment takes the latter approach and argues that interest groups with greater organizational capacity have the most influence on agenda setting* and that it is the reason why certain interests are represented in politics while others are not. Defining organizational capacity as the enabling aspects that allows an organization to be run and achieve their goals (Yu-Lee, R. T, 2002). In four supporting paragraphs four aspects of organizational capacity and how they help interest groups gain political influence are presented together with real-life examples where each aspect has helped an interest group gain political influence. Furthermore, two opposing arguments with an elitist and Marxist structuralist approach will be fended off subsequently. Finally, a conclusion, with a suggestion as to how additional research could contribute to answering the question further, is offered.

For some interest groups, financial resources is a key attribute of organizational capacity. These types of groups are often characterized by using money as a direct tool to gain political influence. An example of this is in the US where the NRA is actively funding election campaigns for Republican candidates who tend to be more supportive of gun rights (Open Secrets, 2023). By funding Republicans with strong pro-gun profiles, the NRA increases their chances of getting their interests represented in the political system, since the structure of the American electoral system favors candidates with significant financial resources (Ferguson,

Jorgensen, & Chen, 2019). Furthermore, this creates a dependent relationship between the NRA and the candidates that rely on fundraising for their campaigns, which creates a bigger incentive for the candidates to vouch for those who helped them to electoral success if they want to get re-elected. This phenomenon is more common in countries where money plays a big role in getting elected into the political system, since it allows interest groups outside of the political system to play a key role in who gets elected (Ferguson, Jorgensen, & Chen, 2019).

Another valuable aspect of organizational capacity in relation to gaining political influence is having a political network. Suppose an interest group has a strong political network. In that case, they have more direct access to decision-makers, to whom they can present their ideas and advocate for why their special interest should be represented in politics. Groups without direct access to decision-makers are in fiercer competition to get their ideas presented and are likely to be forced to use more human and financial resources to gain political attention. This is well represented in Joshua McCrain's article "Revolving Door Lobbyists and the Value of Congressional Staff Connections", which states that employees with direct or indirect ties to Congress add significant value to lobbying interest groups in the US (McCrain, 2018). This phenomenon is furthermore seen in Japan where companies have a history of employing retired public officials (Mizoguchi & Van Quyen, 2011). This "revolving door" where politicians retire into lobbying and former lobbyists get into politics, makes it harder for interest groups without a political network to gain political influence. If they are not stronger in other aspects of organizational capacity, they face the risk of not getting their interests represented in politics (McCrain, 2018).

While both financial resources and having a political network can be important aspects of organizational capacity in relation to getting one's interest represented in the political system, an interest group's ability to mobilize and engage the public in their cause can also be a crucial asset in obtaining political influence. The challenge with basing one's organizational capacity on that, however, is that mobilizing the public is heavily exposed to collective action problems. Despite from that, there are several examples around the world where interest

groups have succeeded in mobilizing the public and thereby gained political influence. One of them is the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa that started in 1912 and succeeded in 1992 by ending minority rule and introducing free elections (Kurtz, 2009). Another example is the Smiling Sun Movement in Denmark that accomplished to mobilize the public against nuclear power plants in the 1970s, which ended in the decision not to implement it in Denmark in 1985. The political influence of The Smiling Sun Movement was further demonstrated when Danish politicians later pushed for the shutdown of the Swedish nuclear power plant Barsebaeck located just 20 km from Copenhagen which was closed in 1999 (Meyer, 2021). Common for interest groups whose organizational capacity relies on the ability to mobilize the public is that their cause is relevant for a large number of people and that it gives the participants a sense of community around the cause - i.e., giving the individuals a bigger incentive to contribute and thereby overcoming the free-riding problem (Stigler, 1974).

Closely related to the ability to mobilize the public, another valuable aspect of organizational capacity is strong communication. If an interest group is successful in creating broad public awareness about their cause, it makes it easier to put pressure on decision-makers and thereby put one's interest on the political agenda. While the opportunity to spread awareness about one's cause historically has been limited by the interest groups' financial resources and connections within the media industry, the development of social media has been an important equalizing factor in that context (Rohlinger & Earl, 2017). An example of the power of strong communication through social media in relation to creating public awareness is the #MeToo movement. The movement started as a local grassroots and became a global movement with great political influence, mainly because of the social media efforts in the viral hashtag #MeToo. Research suggests that the movement increased the interest in political participation in the US, enabling the interest group to put more pressure on decision-makers which put their interest on the political agenda (Castle, Jenkins, Ortballs, Poloni-Staudinger, & Strachan, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, scholars with an elitist approach to agenda setting would refute the pluralist idea that there is true competition between interest groups and argue that the political agenda is controlled by a political or economic elite. They would very likely argue that the value of financial resources and having a political network presented in this assignment would support that claim. To that argument, it is critical to remark that while this paper doesn't deny the advantages that financial resources and having a political network can provide an interest group with, it also gives examples of cases where other aspects of organizational capacity became pivotal powers in the process of turning interest groups' political demands into political issues¹. This supports the pluralist theory of agenda setting as a competition between interest groups where every actor has a real opportunity to obtain political influence and can do so through strengthening aspects of organizational capacity less reliant on financial resources and political network - as strong communication and mobilization of the public.

Another counterargument against the pluralist approach used in this assignment can be found in the Marxist theories of the structural power of businesses. From a Marxist perspective, the given structures of the capitalist economy give businesses significant advantages in that the state is relatively dependent on them for generating taxes and jobs in order to keep the economy running. This dependence, Marxists would argue, disrupts the concept of true opportunity for other interest groups to gain political influence (Culpepper, 2015). However, if this dependence made it impossible for other interest groups to gain political influence, it would be hard to explain why most democracies have regulations on businesses that e.g., protect consumers and wage-earners. The strict regulations protecting the labor force in France - whose economy is dominated by industries that rely heavily on labor as a resource² - further support the pluralist argument that competition for political influence exists. Along with this, the value of the ability to mobilize collective action as an aspect of organizational capacity is also underlined in the example of the French labor unions, whose leverage in

¹ The success of the Smiling Sun Movement, the abolishing of apartheid in South Africa and the #MeToo movement

² Top industries in France are Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate (Market share of 42%) and Services (Market share of 32%) (Hit Horizons, 2023).

gaining political influence is greatly vested in their ability to mobilize the French wage earners in strike (S.P., 2014).

In conclusion, this assignment argues that the organizational capacity of interest groups is crucial in relation to gaining political influence. While the assignment acknowledges the value of financial resources and having a political network, it also argues that other aspects of organizational capacity - such as mobilizing the public and strong communication - can be pivotal in getting one's interest represented in politics. A notion to be made of this assignment is that the basis of the assumed competition for political influence between actors varies depending on the political system in which the interest groups are operating. This means that while the assignment states that the competition for influence exists in all political systems characterized by Dahl's eight attributes of democracy, some political systems might favor some aspects of organizational capacity - for example financial resources - making some actors more advantaged than others. Additional research expanding the knowledge on how the institutions of a political system might favor some aspects of organizational capacity in relation to agenda setting, could contribute further to explaining why some interests are represented in politics while others are not.

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