

Gray Agendas: Interest Groups and Public Pensions in Canada, Britain, and the United States. By Henry J. Pratt. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1993. 256 pp. Hardbound \$39.50.

Gray Agendas, by Wayne State University's Henry J. Pratt, is an in-depth and well-structured examination of the historical development of pension policy and its impact on interest groups in three countries over the last century: Canada, Britain, and the United States. It is of interest to political scientists, sociologists, historians, and public policy analysts interested in aging. The book provides detailed analyses of the changing nature of age-active interest groups over time, inspects factors contributing to the growth and decline of specific groups, and refers often to the individuals who were vital to their formation and survival. Considering the past and present growth of the elderly population in Western countries and the increase in the number and influence of age-active interest groups, it is a timely work. The topic is also important considering the rapid changes to old age policy that have occurred over the last several decades in many Western nations. As the author notes, the change has been unidirectional, toward the enlargement of service and increases in budget allocations.

Past studies tended to emphasize the influences that age-active interest groups have on determining government policy. Here, however, the topic is approached by assuming that government policies indirectly determine interest group formation, survival, and the nature of their activity, while interest group activity has subsequent influences which feed back into government. The relationship is then conceptualized to be reciprocal in nature and, compared to previous examinations, viewed as historically more complex.

Rather than relying strictly on a temporal evolution, the analysis takes place within four phases of pension policy. These are phases through which each of the three countries have passed. Phase one begins with initial interest in and enactments of pension legislation in the three countries, which, according to Pratt, was coerced through age-oriented policy in other countries, such as Germany's 1889 adoption of compulsory old age insurance. The following phase is called the 'dismal years,' as age-active interest groups saw a diminution in their ability to influence pension policy debates. It is in

the more recent phases that programs have been widened to a universal basis and policies and benefits have been enlarged, and, consequently, groups such as the American Association for Retired Persons, one of the largest interest groups in the world, have begun to flourish. There is no assumption that countries need pass through the four phases at the same point in time. In fact, the beginning of one phase in a nation may occur years ahead of another. Yet, it is clear from the analysis that the phases do follow, "in the same sequential manner, and with similar consequences for political participation" (p. 9). It is through cross-national comparisons within phases of pension policy that revealing similarities are found. These generally support the central argument that indirect influences are crucial for understanding fluctuations in interest group activity.

The core of the book can be roughly divided into two broad areas of analysis. The first, (chapters 2 through 5), discusses the historical development of interest group formation and activity from the beginnings of pension advocacy around the turn of the century to the most recent decades and the start of phase four. The second, (chapters 7 through 9), discusses the most recent phase in detail for each country separately. Chapter 6 provides a segue between these analyses, giving particular attention to the state of the world economy, the ideological climate, and the prevailing public and elite group perceptions of the elderly at the point of departure between the third and fourth phase.

In the concluding chapter, the author discusses the implications of his analysis and draws comparisons with previous theoretical orientations on interest group development. The argument is made that the present phase of pension policy can be distinguished from previous ones by the lack of sheer survival as a central issue facing age-active interest groups. "[I]nstead, the challenges became those that are typical of stable organizations, mature in their outlooks" (p. 208). The discussion ends on an optimistic note, predicting a maintenance of security programs into the future, with alterations occurring only within a narrow range and interest groups entering an era of 'enlarged autonomy and independence.'

The perspective advanced may provoke criticism by some who favor a more demographic explanation for the expansion of old age interest group activity. That is, rather than government programs providing the impetus for age-active interest group proliferation, it is the steady expansion in the number of persons aged sixty-five and older which best explains the phenomenon. Pratt foresees this argument and, in the closing chapter, provides a short but effective rebuttal against the demographic hypothesis, which he views as 'misleading.' He asserts that the demographic perspective cannot account for the rises and falls in group importance or the periods in which groups are most active. "In sum, the demographic hypothesis tends to over-predict interest group formation in the early part of the century, and to under-predict the rate for more recent decades" (p. 211).

The cross-national historical approach implemented in this book adds much to previous examinations of the subject. It should be noted that there are some obvious similarities among the three nations in terms of language, parliamentary systems of governance (Canada and Britain), and historical and geographical circumstance (Canada and the United States). Despite these resemblances, the three display enough divergency in their social and political structure that the congruencies found in interest group activity is highly significant and in opposition to previous studies which concentrate on 'national exceptionalism.' That there are common forces which influence interest group activity in the nations being analyzed is clear, and Pratt's argument for the nature and rationality behind these congruencies is convincing.

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