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Images of an unbiased interest system

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Research Agenda Section

Edited by Michael Blauburger

IMAGES OF AN UNBIASED INTEREST SYSTEM

David Lowery, Frank R. Baumgartner, Joost Berkhout, Jeffrey M. Berry, Darren Halpin, Marie Hojnacki, Heike Klüver, Beate Kohler-Koch, Jeremy Richardson and Kay Lehman Schlozman

ABSTRACT Since political scientists were introduced to the concept of ‘the scope and bias of the pressure system’ by Schattschneider more than half a century ago, we have grappled with the lack of a standard against which to assess bias. Still, scholars have continued to address Schattschneider’s provocative claim. This means that they must have in their minds at least implicit images of the unknown state of an unbiased interest system. We uncover these implicit images in this analysis both for their own intrinsic interest and perhaps as a foundation for more progressive research on biases in interest representation. Ten scholars who have done considerable work on the politics of interest representation were asked to provide a brief description of what he or she would see as an unbiased interest system. After presenting each, we summarize the themes that emerged and discuss possible avenues for empirical research on bias.

KEY WORDS Bias; influence; interest groups; lobbying; representation.

IMAGES OF AN UNBIASED INTEREST SYSTEM

Ever since Schattschneider (1960) introduced the concept of bias of the pressure system, we have grappled unsuccessfully with the question of what an unbiased interest system might look like. How can we ascertain whether the interest system as a whole is both inclusive and representative of the concerns of the public? The central problem in answering this question is the lack of a standard against which to assess bias. To see why this is so, it is instructive to first think about the study of individual participation. Individuals are natural units of analysis whose behaviours are directly comparable. Further, we have a powerful normative standard against which to assess bias in participation – the one person, one vote principle. With natural units of analysis and a strong normative standard, even a frequency table of rates of participation across categories of individuals can tell us something about both the relative and absolute degrees

of participatory bias among individuals. Neither of these conditions holds for organized interests. Interests are human constructs that might address broad concerns or narrow ones, strong concerns or ephemeral ones. And the same is true for organizations. A restaurant seeking a variance on a building code is obviously quite different from British Petroleum with its worldwide operations. And linking interests to organizations is more problematic still if, as Denzau and Munger (1986) make clear, many interests are not represented by organizations because they face so little threat. Given these conceptual problems, it might seem almost impossible to imagine what an unambiguous ideal or standard for assessing bias might be. However, it would, almost certainly, not be a simple one interest, one organization principle.

Yet, we continue to address Schattschneider's (1960) claim, given its serious implications for democratic representation. This means, however, that scholars must have in their minds at least implicit images of the unknown state of an unbiased interest system. We try to uncover these implicit images both for their own intrinsic interest and, more importantly, as a foundation for more progressive research on biases in interest representation. Ten scholars, all of whom have done considerable work on interest representation in advanced industrial democracies, were asked to provide a brief, three-paragraph description of what he or she would see as an unbiased interest system. Five of the scholars work primarily on interest representation in the United States (US) and five others study interest representation in Europe. Six of the eight are quite senior scholars, with four others at or approaching the mid-point of their careers. This is obviously not a representative sample, nor is it a survey on specific opinions among interest organization scholars. Given that our images of an unbiased interest system remain unarticulated, we would not know what questions to ask of such a sample. Rather, this is an effort to uncover concepts and criteria that might be useful in further research based on the informed opinions of a range of scholars whose prior work addresses interest representation. Accordingly, the ten scholars were given few restrictions, being told only that the question might be answered in any number of ways. After presenting the quite varied responses, we summarize the major themes that emerged and discuss possible avenues for empirical research on bias.

Frank R. Baumgartner

A hypothetical unbiased interest group system would be very simple: it would represent the result of a process in which there was no inefficiency in the translation of what David Truman (1951: 34) called a 'potential group' into a group that actually exists. Further, the resources associated with each existing group would be proportionate to the intensity of interest that the group's concerns elicit in society. Bankers and bank depositors have a mathematically equal interest in the money deposited in a bank; in the hypothetical case we are discussing, they would also have an equal place in the interest group world. This is, of course, radically different from what we observe. It would imply, for

example, that consumers and producers would be equally balanced; airline passengers, who perhaps share a great but highly diffused interest in lower fares, lower delays and higher levels of service, would be equally mobilized as large airlines. Mathematically, if producers and consumers of a product are involved in an exchange, each has an equal potential interest, and in this hypothetical unbiased interest-group system, each should have an equal presence in the organizational world. Labour unions, of course, would be much stronger; business organizations would be about the same as they are now. So, those groups that Mancur Olson (1965: 57) called 'privileged' would retain their rate of mobilization, but it would no longer be a privilege; it would be universal.

Removing all inefficiencies from the process of recognizing and acting on shared political interests would have many consequences. Considering them requires playing some well-known theories of interest representation backwards; that is, we must conceive of a world where things worked dramatically differently than they do. Most concretely, there would be no privileged groups to compare with disadvantaged ones (Olson 1965): huge, diffuse and disconnected groups of people with a shared interest in a topic of only marginal interest to themselves would mobilize equally as the concentrated set of individuals who make millions of dollars of profits from them. Cable television companies, meet your customers. Slum lords, meet your tenants.

An unbiased interest-group system, in this hypothetical construction bearing no resemblance to what we observe, could also constitute a reasonable basis for a theory of representational democracy. Representation could more easily take place through groups rather than through elections and individual citizens' connections with elected officials. If interest groups mobilized in proportion to the social importance of the interests associated with them, then the 'group struggle' would indeed constitute a reasonable way of thinking of how to organize government and democracy. The irony in this discussion is that we have seen 'group theories of politics' that come close to a theory of representational democracy through groups, but we have never seen a group system that bears any resemblance, or even begins to approach, the hypothetical world where potential groups are costlessly transformed into interest groups.

Joost Berkhout

My image of an unbiased group system is framed in Schattschneiderian terms. This has three implications. First, it implies that there will be a strong similarity in the bias in the issues a political system deals with and bias in the interests pressuring it. Interest system bias cannot be evaluated independently of the issues at stake. Current policies reflect the outcomes of past power struggles. Conflicts are rarely resolved in a definitive sense, but 'frozen' in policies and institutions (Schattschneider 1960: 73). As interest populations are composed of organizations whose interest 'arises from the conjunction' (Salisbury 1992: 12) of policy-making and collective action, they are part of that freezing process and mobilize around existing policy programmes. This implies that the group

system is likely to be biased towards the participants (mainly the winners) of past policy conflicts and their issues (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009). A correction to such bias would take the form of greater responsiveness of the interest community to changes in interests in society and preferences of constituents of existing groups and less inertia toward policy conflicts their (or potentially new) constituents no longer find important or have changed preferences about. It also means that recent findings of relatively large turnover in group populations are good news (Anderson *et al.* 2004; Berkhout and Lowery 2011). However, we should be careful not to misread the restaging of old conflict as a sign of responsiveness of groups to their constituents.

Second, it implies that both the party and the group system are potential sources of ‘bias’ of the political system as a whole – the party system mainly through limiting the number of conflict dimensions it handles and the group system through the selective mobilization of interests in society. While party system bias spills over into interest group system bias and *vice versa*, for Schattschneider (1960: 41, 57), ‘the big game is the party game’, as exemplified in the US case by the ‘over-all mediating role played by the Republican party’ in bringing together business interests. His concern about the ‘upper-class accent’ of the group system is exacerbated by a similar accent in the organization of political parties and the conflicts in which they engage. An unbiased interest community would correct for this and should be relatively autonomous of the conflict dimensions of party politics. A recent empirical finding of strong interest group–party alignment may, therefore, be bad news (Allern and Bale 2012; Beyers *et al.* 2015). One potential benefit of group politics is that it creates opportunities to address issues that are displaced from discussions in mainstream party politics.

Third, given a Schattschneiderian perspective, the creation of bias through politics is necessary. That is, any political system should be biased in the sense that it should reduce the number of conflicts it deals with. It would otherwise, suggests Schattschneider (1960: 64), be ‘blown to bits’ and deprive citizens of meaningful opportunities to participate. ‘Unbiased’ politics would not deal with all potential conflictual issues. But it might result in the merger, neglect and/or displacement of some issues. Thus, we should evaluate the bias in the group system relative to the policy issues on the agenda of the government and conflicts that are ‘organized into party politics’ (Schattschneider 1960: 69). A group system more responsive to ‘new’, non-*status-quo* issues and operating relatively independent of political parties could increase the pressure on political systems to process conflicts. But the benefits of lower bias must be balanced with the potential costs of the multiplication of the number of issues associated with ‘unbiased’ interest representation.

Jeffrey M. Berry

An unbiased interest system – or more realistically, a less biased system – would need to incorporate at least three important principles. A reasonable measure of

equality in interest group politics requires that there be active and sufficient representation of all significant interests, meaningful access to policy-makers and responsiveness by government. First, a prerequisite for an unbiased system is active and sufficient representation of all significant interests. I include both 'active' and 'sufficient' because there are lots of active interests that have such modest resources that they have little chance of being effective. Thus, there must not only be voice, but enough of a megaphone to be heard. What qualifies as a 'significant' interest is a philosopher's stone that I'll leave unturned here. In a bow to reality, this standard does not demand equality of representation in terms of levels of organizational advocacy or resources. Over time, our group system has become more diverse as new entrants, especially citizen groups, identity organizations, and minority lobbies, have become prominent actors in the interest group system. At the same time, as Schlozman and her colleagues (2012) have shown, an expanding interest group system has not reduced an enduring bias in favour of business representation. Perhaps more disturbing is that the large proportion of the American population that is poor – both working poor and abjectly poor – are woefully underrepresented and do not reach the threshold set here.

Second, there must be meaningful access to policy-makers. In simplest terms, there must not only be voice and a megaphone but also an ear that is listening. This is no easy standard to define. Government would quickly be overloaded if it had to take time to provide access to all who want to directly interact with it. As reported by Baumgartner *et al.* (2009), a large segment of the group community is, at any one time, just trying to get its foot in the door so it can initiate discussion on a problem. Fortunately, there are many access points in government, and lobbies gravitate to allies among policy-makers who want their support. Cities are very impressive in the access provided to all segments of their population (Berry and Portney 2014; Portney and Berry 2014). In contrast, the federal government is beset by a much denser universe of groups and is not as open. One worries that the *Citizens United* decision will exacerbate inequality of access in Washington.

Third, a democratic system must be characterized by a responsive government. Although a government can listen in earnest and hear what is said, it can still choose not to act. There is not enough money in government budgets at any level to meet the demands of all who ask for its help. The real standard should be some proportionality in policy outcomes. Interest group sectors that are systematically advantaged against all others reflect inequality in the system. The most recent research by Martin Gilens (2012) indicates that we are a long way from reaching any kind of proportionality.

Darren Halpin

Analyses that enumerate interest populations inevitably make reference to 'bias' as a motivation. Many studies, starting with Schattschneider's (1960) retort about the 'heavenly chorus,' are cited to underline the consistent finding of

the numerical dominance of business in national group systems. I find the group theory inspired position – in the US referred to as majoritarian pluralism (Gilens and Page 2014) – an important anchor point. Put crudely, the position suggests that the group system ought to mirror the socioeconomic structures or fault lines in a given society. But how can we define this underlying – and inevitably unrealized – map of the unbiased group system?

My starting point in deriving expectations as to what the group system ‘should’ look like is to contrast latent versus realized interests (and interest groups). The early group literature often discussed the world as though there were a set of latent interests that were undetectable until such time as changing conditions (‘disturbances’ and/or emergence of ‘social problems’) transformed them into realized interests, which then became the focus of efforts at collective organization (Truman 1951). So for me, ‘bias’ is about a dynamic process – whereby the expectation is that the map of organized interests adjusts and responds to changes in the interests/constituency structure of the society in question as disturbances occur triggering realized interests and interest organizations. This points to a need to make assessments of ‘bias’ against the ideal whereby all ‘authentic’ and politically salient interests/constituencies in a given polity are organized at a given point in time, and thus have their *own* political voice (see the discussion of authenticity in Offe [1998: 130]).

The implications of this perspective are considerable. For one, it admits that not all possible constituencies or objectively identifiable interests ought to be organized at any one time. Rather, we need to look at the politically salient categories of economic, social and cultural life that have meaning and see how these are organized. Moreover, not all groups should stick around – interests emerge and they dissipate. Context will drive mobilization, after which the well-known contingencies of organizational formation and institutionalization kick in. This means – in relation to empirical work – connecting analysis of the emergence of ‘social problems’ (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) with the lack of responsiveness of group systems. What might we expect to find? Here, the outcomes might be to decide if emerging interests (a) are ‘absorbed’ by extant groups, (b) mobilize the ‘formation’ of new groups, or (c) are ‘displaced’ to other forms of political organization (parties, think tanks or the voluntary sector). Of course, some emerging interests might simply fail to find an organizational manifestation. This is the emergence end, but what about expectations of ‘dissipation’? We might ponder the longevity of sets of interests or constituencies. Which interests persist and for how long? And why? This discussion of bias is entered into knowing full well that defining an unbiased systems is incredibly difficult and that any empirical attempts to test if it has been achieved will almost certainly reveal that the ideal scenario that all interests ought to be voiced and organized is going to be consistently violated. But despite its difficulties, I cannot imagine the field without the concept of bias. The challenge is in developing ways to operationalize it that do not oversimplify the task nor skate over the important qualification that numbers do not equal influence or power.

Marie Hojnacki

An ‘unbiased system’ is one providing interests a level playing field upon which they have some say about matters that affect them. Producing an equitable playing field for interests is contingent on three variables, all of which would seem difficult to achieve. The first concerns the relative number of different types of organizations in the system. Business, corporate and professional interests dominate the universe of organizations in Washington; very few groups represent the disadvantaged or those within the middle class (Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Schlozman *et al.* 2012). So an obvious place to begin in levelling the playing field would be to add more groups that represent the under-represented. How many of each type of group – or even the full complement of types – is impossible to know. Even if we could determine exactly which types should be included, it would be challenging at best to devise a method to determine the necessary number of organizations per interest needed to eliminate bias (see Schlozman [2010]). Nevertheless, a more heterogeneous mix of interests than currently exists would represent a move in the right direction.

The second concerns the interests organizations represent. The participating organizations would need to truly reflect the varied interests of their clientele or supporters. This is less common for organizations whose interests and preferences fall outside of the mainstream, differ from the majority or are not among the alternatives that are plausible to the median voter (Frymer 2010; Marchetti 2014; Strolovitch 2007). There are many reasons why organizations choose to represent more mainstream interests despite their claims to represent the marginalized. In some cases, they take up issues and make claims that have a greater chance of success in majoritarian politics, or that are unlikely to offend supporters or financial patrons. In others, organizations may lack an appreciation for or fail to understand their clientele’s priorities (e.g., white, upper-middle class leaders of a group that seeks to define and represent the interests of poor persons of colour). If issues of concern to an organization’s clientele or supporters are not articulated, then the voices heard in a policy debate no longer reflect the full array of affected interests and bias persists within the system.

The third concerns the resources available to organizations. Even if we had the ‘right’ mix of groups and they all represented the interests they claimed to, adequate resources would be necessary to give equal voice to all within policy debates. It is not at all clear, however, exactly what constitutes adequate resources. And some will obviously have an easier time than others in acquiring the requisite resources to be active players in the policy process. Moreover, it would be difficult to compare and assign value to different types of resources (e.g., money and members), as well as to determine whether those with broadly defined interests merit more resources than do organizations with narrower goals. Absent a way to redistribute resources or to make them irrelevant, some interests will participate in more policy debates than others (Baumgartner and Leech 2001). Thus, while adjusting these variables can contribute to more

equality within the system, anything approximating a level playing field is highly unlikely to emerge in our political system. Moreover, and importantly, we can learn more about interest representation and bias if we consider how the perspectives advanced through the community of organizations are given additional support or challenged by advocates in government.

Heike Klüver

Studying interest groups is often connected to normative claims about bias in politics. Even though groups are considered as important intermediary organizations that aggregate and articulate societal preferences, scholars often raise normative concerns about the impact of lobbying on democratic representation. Most often, scholars argue that lobbying biases political outcomes towards a few powerful economic interests while less resourceful societal interests have a difficult time to make their voices heard by policy-makers. For instance, Schattschneider (1960: 35) famously argued that the ‘flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.’ In order to evaluate whether such a bias in interest group representation truly exists, I argue that it is necessary to consider two different dimensions. The first *input dimension* refers to a potential bias with regard to the interest group population, while the second *output dimension* refers to a potential bias with regard to interest group influence on policy outcomes. I posit that to properly understand whether interest group lobbying truly leads to bias in democracies, both dimensions have to be analysed simultaneously.

The first *input dimension* considers bias at the level of interest group populations. An unbiased system corresponds to a democracy in which all societal interests, both economic and non-economic, are represented by interest groups. If societal groups seek to effectively shape policies in line with their preferences via an interest group representing them *vis-à-vis* policy-makers, mobilization becomes a necessary condition for successful interest representation. In an ideal, unbiased world, all political interests in a society should, therefore, be represented by at least one interest group that lobbies for their cause. However, as Olson (1965) had pointed out already in the 1960s, not all societal interests have the same opportunities to engage in collective action. Business interests, for instance, find it rather easy to get organized as they represent primary economic interests of a small, clearly circumscribed group of actors. Diffuse interests, by contrast, typically find it very difficult to get organized, since they represent mainly secondary interests of a large, diffuse group of actors and, therefore, suffer from severe collective action problems. Bias in an interest system can, therefore, occur owing to different collective action capabilities, as some societal interests may not be able to organize at all. And scholars of interest group populations have shown that the number of interest groups varies considerably across policy sectors (e.g., Gray and Lowery 1996; Messer *et al.* 2010). However, the sheer number of groups does not necessarily say anything about whether a political system is biased towards a certain group type. For instance, only a single

interest group may represent an economic sector. But this may actually be strength. Such an interest group would be able to unite all firms in the entire sector, and it would, therefore, be able to speak with a single voice for the entire domain and could credibly threaten policy-makers with economic pressure from that sector. Hence, the number of interest groups in a policy domain does not automatically increase or decrease the bias in a political system so long as there is at least one interest group ensuring the representation of a societal interest.

In order to assess the bias of an interest system, one also has to pay attention to the actual influence that represented interests exert. It could in theory be the case that an economic sector is represented by a large number of well-endowed interest groups, but these groups are hardly able to exert any influence. For instance, in the European Union, business interest groups dominate the interest group system; they are much better represented than trade unions or interest groups fighting for environmental protection or human rights (Berkhout *et al.* 2015; Wonka *et al.* 2010). However, when it comes to influence on policy-making, previous research has shown that business groups are not systematically more influential than trade unions or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Klüver 2013). The *output dimension*, therefore, goes further by requiring that decisions are responsive to the demands voiced by different societal interests. In an unbiased ideal world, all societal interests must have the opportunity to shape policy-making. This does not mean that they all have to be successful all the time, as not all societal interests can achieve their preferences simultaneously. But all societal interests must have an equal chance to make their voices heard. If there are some societal interests in a democracy that constantly win while others constantly lose, this would lead to serious bias undermining the democratic legitimacy. Hence, an unbiased interest group system is a political system in which, first, all societal interests are represented by at least one organized group (input dimension) and in which, second, all societal interests have an equal chance to influence policy outcomes (output dimension).

Beate Kohler-Koch

When we start thinking about a system of unbiased representation, it may be easy to become trapped in an almost impossible task. But that task might be more tractable if we break it into smaller parts. To illustrate my position, I will shy away from discussing an unbiased interest system in society as a whole and concentrate instead on a smaller part of reality: the representation of business interests in the European Union (EU). How can we define an unbiased system of business interests, and what conditions have to be met to make it real? Political actors and many scholars take a shortcut to answering these questions by arguing that the inclusion of European associations provides for an unbiased interest system where representativeness is defined in terms of territorial inclusiveness. This is a shortcut because it makes several underlying assumptions concerning the relevant delineation of the system, the

identification of the relevant interests and the appropriateness of a principal–agent model of representation.

There are three open questions in developing a better answer to the question of unbiased representation. First, how do we draw the boundaries of the interest system? Are we not now trapped in methodological nationalism/Europeanism? Does it make sense to limit business interests to the territory of the EU member states and, if so, should it include only enterprises with legal domicile and/or production sites in the EU? What about stakeholders residing in other countries but highly dependent on the EU market and EU economic regulations? Is it fair to discard their interest, and does doing so correspond to reality? Second, how do we define the relevant distribution of interests? When we assess the quality of representation, we have a certain (mostly implicit) comprehension of the distribution of interests. But how do we know and how can we measure the distribution of ‘real’ and/or legitimate interests? Is such determination not always contested and fluid? The official EU consensus with regard to business interest is that, within a given sector of economic activities, interests differ between EU member states. Accordingly, the number of national associations in a European federation becomes the benchmark for determining representativeness. Any further differentiation by economic weight, competitiveness, market structures and so on is not officially recognized. It is striking that most scholars share the same approach. Third, is the traditional transmission-belt image of associations a realistic approximation to reality? Even when we take into consideration that agents have their own agenda, the basic idea is still that interests are articulated and/or mobilized at the grass-roots level, that they are translated into positions of interest groups, and interest groups then lobby decision-makers (and the public). European business groups claim that their positions reflect the interests of their members. But on closer scrutiny we see that opinion formation is a matter of arguing and bargaining and, consequently, a power game that develops in the shadow of factual and normative belief systems.

My conclusion is that a concept of unbiased representation has to spell out the relevant boundaries of the system, define the interests at stake and point out not just the mechanisms that translate the interests of a multitude of actors into the positions of interest groups and efficient lobbying strategies, but also the mechanisms of social validation. We should know more about how relevant these issues are and whether or not they can help us to evaluate the legitimacy of claims of representation (Trenz 2014). More generally, this suggests that we should approach the general question of unbiased representation by focusing on smaller substantive foci where a narrower menu of questions might be more readily raised and answered.

David Lowery

There is considerable variation across advanced industrial democracies in the diversity of interest systems. In large part, this variation is a function of both how economies of scale in economic production are translated into economies

of scale of interest representation (Lowery *et al.* 2005) and how responsive different kinds of interest organizations are to policy agendas and political uncertainty (Lowery and Gray 2014). Given this underlying process, an interest system might be biased in several respects across the four stages of the influence production process and how biases in earlier/later stages might feedback or condition which organizations are present in interest systems (Lowery and Gray 2004). Each is discussed below.

The first two stages address most directly who is present in interest systems. At the mobilization stage, the central problem concerns Olson's collective action problem (Olson 1965). I discount its severity. While organizations surely operate in a world that is profoundly influenced by propensities to free ride, especially so in terms of their internal structures, more than four decades of scholarship have highlighted the many means they employ to overcome collective action threats (Lowery 2015). The next stage is the population stage where interest organizations compete for survival. The central problem at this point concerns especially crowded interest systems in which further growth is limited by density dependence. Interest systems already at their carrying capacity might suppress the entrance of organizations representing emerging political interests. Yet, research in the United States (Lowery and Gray 2001) and the European Union (Berkhout and Lowery 2011) indicates that there is considerable churning of interests in these very dense interest systems. In sum, and very much contrary to conventional wisdom, I believe that there is relatively little bias introduced directly into interest systems in these first two stages.

Still, indirect bias might develop via the last two stages of the influence process if biases there feedback to suppress mobilization or entrance into the interest system. The third stage concerns access. American and British political institutions are very open, something that is less true for European national systems or the European Union. For the former, lingering elements of corporatism might restrict access to policy discussions for those not privileged by inclusion in corporatist arrangements. And the European Commission has a strong preference for talking to only European-wide interests. However, research indicates that, at least for the latter, the distribution of different kinds of organizations active on major issues before the Commission is extremely similar to the distribution of all interests active in the more open European Parliament (Berkhout *et al.* 2014). Finally, at the influence stage, access to especially powerful tactics by well-endowed organizations might discourage the less privileged from even trying. This is especially the case in the US, where campaign finance plays an outsized role in the influence toolbox. Yet, interests lobby for more reasons than influence (Lowery 2007), money is not the only thing that matters (Berry 1999) and its influence is far from certain (Lowery 2013; Wright 2004). Still, we have little evidence yet on whether the 'power' of money actually discourages entrance by the less endowed. Thus, this is perhaps the greatest potential source of bias in the US system. So, what would an unbiased interest system look like? Surely contrary to the

expectations of many and with the last potential exception, I think that it would look a lot like what we now have.

Jeremy Richardson

The interest group world has changed since earlier scholars, such as Samuel Finer (1958) in *Anonymous Empire*, described the British policy process as rife with behind the scenes influence, small policy communities and, quite often, policy capture. While there is no such thing as a totally unbiased interest system *at any given time*, the policy process is now crowded, contested and quite dynamic, with most policy games now long running. In this context, an unbiased interest system would first have, as its starting point, *equality of access*. No one group or set of groups would have privileged access to centres of policy-making, either because of either superior resources or the preferences of policy-makers. Second, no one group or set of groups should always win in terms of policy pay-offs. The decision rule should be '*win a few, lose a few*'. There should be no interest group 'establishment' or an *élite* that *consistently* wins. The developed interest systems of modern democracies generally meet these requirements.

My optimistic view on the first is based on a belief in regulated markets. David Truman (1951: 31) highlighted the concept of a 'potential group', arguing that, if a policy disequilibrium occurs, new groups may restore balance. Later, James Q. Wilson (1980) emphasized the role of countervailing interests in the policy process and found that the regulatory process was not entirely dominated by producer interests. McFarland later reformulated Wilson's ideas in terms of a 'power triad' of economic producer groups, countervailing groups, and state agencies (see McFarland [1987: 146]; Richardson [1993: 9]). These writers grasped the idea that groups beget more groups (Heinz *et al.* 1993). The literature is now legion with studies documenting massive group mobilization over the past half-century. The policy game is now replete with players on the pitch. As Grant Jordan (1993: 66) noted, the image of a recontested policy market is now more accurate than the picture previously painted by corporate pluralists. Thus, *access* does not look to be much of a worry.

Access, however, does not mean influence. The many players who have now gained access alongside older established groups may be engaged in a process Finer (1958: 97) called 'sham consultation', with final decision-making confined to a few groups that 'matter'. To be sure, this does happen. However, the policy process is generally not a one-off game. Most policy-making addresses problems created by previous rounds of policy-making (see Richardson [2012: 349–51]), hence my belief that influence ebbs and flows on the 'win a few, lose a few' principle. Regulation in the EU is a case in point. Much is made of the alleged business dominance of the EU. Yet, the EU is a regulatory state of some kind (Majone 2002). To be sure, business interests appear to have had some success in slowing down the march of Euro-regulation. But it has been a

rearguard action trying to reverse previous policy losses. For the EU at least, battles over regulation seem to have no really consistent winners, and everyone is engaged in a game with uncertain agendas, shifting networks and complex coalitions (Richardson 1994). In fact, *promiscuity* is now the norm (Mazey and Richardson 1993); promiscuity ‘helps prevent the creation of permanent winning or losing coalitions’ (Richardson 2012: 356). What we see at the EU level is no different to what we see at the national level. Corporatism – the ultimate form of bias – was never much evident in the wild. The massive increase in group mobilization, exploitation of multiple venues, use of new lobbying techniques, clever use of ideas and framing by newer entrants, and, not least, the willingness of governments to govern (Richardson 2000) means that the ‘heavenly choir’ has mostly been drowned out by the voices of the masses.

Kay Lehman Schlozman

What would an unbiased pressure system look like? Recognizing that political inputs may not beget proportional influence, I follow Schattschneider (1960) and focus on the input side: the representation of citizen interests. Assessing the extent of participatory bias is rarely simple, even when it comes to political activity by individuals. For one thing, the democratic principle of one person, one vote, which obtains for the casting of ballots, is violated when the expression of political voice takes a form – most notably, contributing to campaigns – that allows activists to multiply the volume of their input. However, several factors – among them, that political associations are organized around multiple dimensions and that the majority of political organizations are not composed of individuals – imply that it gets much more complicated when it comes to organizations. Although nearly all scholars do so, it is not sufficient just to count the number of organizations (see Schlozman and Tierney [1986: 63–5]; Schlozman *et al.* [2012: 271–5]). For example, among the most important actors in Washington are membership associations that represent people on the basis of their relationship to work and, if employed, how they make a living. In an unbiased system, all occupations would be represented – whether surgeons, school teachers, or Walmart associates – as well as people who are unemployed or home-caring for dependent family members. But universal representation by organizations is not enough. Although food service workers are more numerous than hedge fund managers, the latter have, on average, deeper pockets. Therefore, to account for differences in both numbers and resources, in an unbiased pressure system, the organizations representing individuals on the basis of their relationship to work would have access to resources proportional to the number of people in the potential constituency. Note that, just as the appropriate baseline for measuring the representativeness of the voters who actually go to the polls is the set of eligible voters, the appropriate weight is the number of individuals in the constituency, not the members of the organization.

Matters become even more complex when we recall that the organizations are arrayed around multiple dimensions. Another important set of membership

groups represent different and often conflicting perspectives on issues engaging broad public interests – for example, advocates of the right to bear arms as opposed to advocates for gun safety. According to these principles, both sides would have organizational representation, and the organizations on either side would have resources proportional to their support in the public. But, in order to avoid tyranny of the majority, should an unbiased pressure system make allowances for intensity of opinion? And how should the amount of space devoted to conflict over gun rights compare to that devoted to occupational interests? If there is proportional representation *within* each domain, do we need to be concerned that the organizational representation of occupational interests far outweighs the representation of conflicting points of view with regard to gun rights and gun control? Further, in a controversy engaging competing public interests, how does an unbiased pressure system account for the organizational representation of the privately interested with a selective interest at stake – for example, handgun manufacturers in the case of gun control?

Compounding the difficulties of defining, even in the abstract, what an unbiased pressure system might look like is the fact that only a small minority of organizations in national politics – 11 per cent in 2011 – are associations composed of individuals. The majority, 56 per cent, are memberless organizations such as universities, hospitals and especially corporations. Another 14 per cent are associations of such memberless organizations. The multiple stakeholders of memberless organizations have both overlapping and competing interests. However, it seems impossible to ascertain which of those stakeholders is being represented when a memberless organization is involved in politics. Is it the administration, faculty, staff, students or alums of a university? Is it the management, shareholders, employees, customers or surrounding community of a corporation? Until that knotty problem is solved, it will be impossible to specify what an unbiased pressure system would look like.

EXPLORING CONDITIONS OF AN UNBIASED INTEREST SYSTEM

Before considering possible avenues for further research on bias, we must first note that there is clearly one broad area of agreement among the contributors. Despite the very open-ended character of the question posed to them, all of the responses focused on the *conditions* that would have to obtain to achieve an unbiased interest system. Indeed, they identified seven different conditions.

- The first, and one occurring even before interest organizations are mobilized, is that interests in society be articulated in a meaningful manner. Darren Halpin, for example, calls for the mapping of interests onto ‘authentic’ disturbances in society, a concern echoed in Joost Berkhout’s contribution. And Beate Kohler-Koch addresses this issue in a more specific way by

noting that ‘interests’ in the European Union are ill-defined with respect to emerging patterns of economic activity.

- A second condition is that groups must be mobilized to reflect these interests. Here, the ghost of Mancur Olson (1965) plays an outsized role. David Lowery discounts problems of collective action. Frank Baumgartner sees such problems as central to the understanding of bias. Heike Klüver, in contrast, takes a more intermediate position by noting problems of collective action. But she then suggests that some interests might be as well represented by a single organization as another by many.
- A third condition was that the interest organizations that are mobilized must actually represent the interests of those they purport to represent, something that is more often assumed than demonstrated. Marie Hojnacki is especially concerned about this criterion in regard to the interests of the disadvantaged. But Beate Kohler-Koch raises a very similar concern in regard to economic interests.
- A fourth condition – ‘fair’ representation in the interest community via a mix of interests – drew perhaps the most attention from the contributors, if often obliquely. Only two contributors offered something of a standard that might be comparable to the one citizen, one vote principle on individual level participation by which to assess such fairness. Heike Klüver offers a rather minimalist rule, suggesting that an unbiased interest system is one in which all societal interests are represented by at least one organized group. Frank Baumgartner offers a more maximalist standard where ‘there was no inefficiency in the translation of what David Truman (1951) called a “potential group” into a group that actually exists’. But several others noted potential problems in applying such rules. Kay Schlozman’s contribution, especially, highlighted the difficulty of determining an appropriate balance in representation given the multi-dimensionality of interests. And Darren Halpin and David Lowery note the importance of the dynamic character of interest populations – patterns of entrance and exit – is assessing potential bias.
- A fifth condition concerns access. Jeffrey Berry noted that governments would be quickly overwhelmed if access were universal. But he is still optimistic given the many different kinds of access points most governments provide, as is Jeremy Richardson in his discussion of countervailing interests. Others were less optimistic. Two contributors – Beate Kohler-Koch and David Lowery – highlight a special concern for the European Union in this regard, given its privileging of interests represented by European-wide associations. And both Lowery and Richardson noted that corporatist systems are clearly biased via privileging access for only a favoured few.
- A sixth condition concerns resources. Kay Schlozman’s suggests that the balance of resources should be proportional to the number of people in a potential constituency, a criteria echoed by Frank Baumgartner and Heike Klüver as additional and necessary requirements for their competing rules on the relative numbers of different kinds of organization that are represented to be meaningful. Marie Hojnacki is especially pessimistic about our

collective ability to define what a 'fair' distribution of resources might entail and how it might be measured.

- A seventh and final condition – influence on outcomes – was identified by Heike Klüver, Jeffrey Berry, Jeremy Richardson and David Lowery. Joost Berkhout's observed that governments cannot respond to all policy demands. Still, Klüver, Berry and Lowery noted that even if all of the prior conditions are satisfied, governments may still respond more to some, even if they sharply disagree about the relative influence of relatively over-represented interests. Darren Halpin suggested that mapping such responsiveness would entail the type agenda analysis discussed in Frank Baumgartner's contribution. But in doing so, Berkhout and Marie Hojnacki caution us that representation via interest organizations is but one means of securing influence. The party system provides another channel of influence, and its complex links with patterns of organizational representation need to be assessed carefully. And Jeremy Richardson and Heike Klüver note that doing so requires looking at outcomes over time under a 'win a few, lose a few' criterion.

Cataloguing these conditions constitutes the most immediate contribution of this exercise to uncover the implicit images we hold about unbiased interest representation. They provide an informed checklist by which to assess bias. Clearly, however, the contributors did not weigh these conditions equally. Nor did they evaluate how well they are satisfied in the same manner. Still, in regard to the latter, Marie Hojnacki and Kay Schlozman were especially pessimistic about whether their necessary conditions for an unbiased interest system could be realized, although most of the other contributions surely leaned toward this view. And only Jeremy Richardson and David Lowery remain unrepentant pluralists, noting that the criteria they highlighted are, in fact, now realized in approximation in advanced democracies. However, our sample of scholars was a purposive one designed to uncover a range of conditions that might plausibly be used to determine if an interest system is unbiased. It should not be used to suggest how a more representative sample of students of interest representation – especially those working outside of advanced industrial democracies – might weight them and/or assess how well they are satisfied. But our checklist should provide a good foundation to start such an analysis.

More importantly, further empirical analysis of the conditional requirements should, in many cases, be feasible. This is especially the case for the conditions on mobilization, relative representation by different kinds of organizations, access and resources. Two avenues of empirical analysis would seem especially useful. The first is driven by the comments of Joost Berkhout, Darren Halpin, and Jeremy Richardson on the dynamic character of representation. This would entail greater attention to Truman's underutilized concept of 'disturbances' in society that might be used as an interrupted time series analysis to map how patterns of mobilization, access and resources respond to politically meaningful events. If they do not respond in the manner expected by democratic theory, this would suggest that these conditions for unbiased interest

representation are poorly satisfied. A second would entail more comparative analysis. While the transatlantic community of scholars now broadly shares a common methodological approach to a core set of mid-range theories on interest representation, we do very little actual comparison, with Christine Mahoney's (2008) *Brussels Versus the Beltway* one of the few exceptions. Comparisons of patterns of mobilization, access and resources across systems are needed to assess relative bias. And in terms of empirical probing of the two candidate rules proposed under the 'fair representation' condition, we could compare policy outcomes across systems that approximate the minimalist criterion suggested by Heike Klüver with those that at least somewhat better approximate Frank Baumgartner's maximalist rule. If outcomes do not differ, this would suggest that the former would be sufficient to secure unbiased interest representation. If they differ markedly, then the tougher standard would provide a higher hurdle to unbiased representation.

The others – mapping interest organizations onto 'real' disturbances in society, assessing whether these organizations actually represent those interests, and determining whether governments respond to interests in a fair and balanced manner – would seem more difficult on their face to expose to direct empirical validation. But analysing these latter conditions might be amenable to pushing the thought experiments presented here back to an even earlier stage of the influence production process via imagining what 'real interests' should be addressed in democratic polities in comparison to those that now comprise actual policy agendas or imagining what 'real interests' should be represented by organizations in comparison to their current issue portfolios. But despite the obvious limitations on direct temporal or comparative analysis that might apply here, useful empirical analysis of even these conditions might be possible via more thoughtful, narrower comparative analyses of the type suggested by Beate Kohler-Koch in her discussion of European economic interests.

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