

Public Interest Advocacy

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PUBLIC INTEREST ADVOCACY

Public interest advocacy is performed by organizations that exist primarily to promote a common good that extends beyond the narrow economic or sectarian goals of their members or supporters. Organizations in this domain typically address such issues as consumer protection, free markets, the environment, taxation, peace, fiscal responsibility, campaign finance reform, civil rights, and social welfare. Prominent examples include the American Civil Liberties Union, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Common Cause, the National Taxpayers Union, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Peace Action, and Public Citizen. Public interest advocacy groups make up less than 5 percent of the total interest-group universe in Washington, D.C., which is heavily dominated by corporations, business associations, and occupational groups. Public interest groups are disproportionately visible, however, allowing them to draw more attention from the media and spots at congressional hearings than their numbers alone would suggest.

A precise delineation of which organizations are engaged in public interest advocacy is difficult to establish. First, the term “public interest” is fundamentally ambiguous. One person’s public interest may be another person’s special interest, and vice versa. All organizations have an incentive to frame their concerns in terms of the public interest, even if they are motivated principally by

private interests. Second, economic interests are increasingly using the facade of public interest advocacy to conceal their private political agendas from the public. For example, in the late 1990s, the pharmaceutical industry established “Citizens for Better Medicare” as a front organization to stop the enactment of prescription drug legislation that would have been adverse to its economic interests. Third, many traditional public interest advocacy organizations are assembling portfolios and boards of directors that bear closer resemblance to the for-profit sector than to the not-for-profit sector. As a result, classifying a group as a public interest advocacy organization requires probing beneath the surface of its stated mission and goals to discover its sources of financial and political support.

Ambiguities of classification aside, public interest advocacy organizations play a major role in representing otherwise neglected constituencies. They are often able to overcome the free-rider problems inherent in the provision of collective goods by offering selective incentives for individuals to contribute to their organizations, by using informal pressures distributed through decentralized social networks, by attracting generous patrons, and by latching on to new areas of government involvement. Their tactics include lobbying, testifying at congressional hearings, submitting regulatory comments, mobilizing grassroots constituents with public rallies and letter-writing campaigns, buying media advertising, filing amicus curiae briefs with appellate courts, and sponsoring class-action or other lawsuits. They most readily influence public policy when they raise new issues on the public agenda, establish reputations as experts on policy issues, demonstrate the ability to reliably mobilize constituencies important to politicians, become connected as key brokers within issue networks, or reframe issues to change a debate in favor of their concerns.

Public interest advocacy has had a major impact on the formulation of environmental legislation, such as the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1970, which made uniform national emissions standards a goal of national public policy. More recently, public interest advocacy was instrumental in passing the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, which banned unlimited “soft money” contributions to national political parties. These campaigns benefited from the charismatic leadership of political entrepreneurs such as Ralph Nader, who founded (or helped to found) more than a dozen public interest advocacy organizations (such as Public Citizen and the Public Interest Research Groups) over the course of his lifetime.

The dramatic rise of public interest advocacy organizations, following largely from the mass social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, has significant implications for the nature of civil society in the United States. First, their rise reflects, and helps to drive, a shift in advocacy away

from material concerns (such as rising wages) toward post-material concerns (such as environmentalism). Second, their growth leads to a shift away from organizations based on the active participation of their members and toward organizations that rely on their members only to pay dues or provide financial support (“checkbook” members). Because these organizations are generally managed by paid, middle-class professionals rather than by citizen-activists, they may mute efforts toward genuine civic engagement.

Political pressures sometimes undermine the willingness of organizations to engage in public interest advocacy. Not-for-profit organizations are often discouraged from undertaking advocacy efforts because of concerns about losing their tax-exempt status under federal law. Not-for-profit organizations are permitted to engage in lobbying if it is not a “substantial” part of their activities. However, lack of clarity about how much activity meets the substantial threshold leads many not-for-profit executives to worry that the Internal Revenue Service could construe any level of political activity as a violation of the law. As a result, the not-for-profit sector as a whole pursues less public interest advocacy than is permissible under current law.

The range of public interest advocacy is limited not only by the external political pressures on an organization but also by its internal political dynamics. Advocacy organizations frequently do not represent all the constituencies within their purview equally. Leaders are more likely to direct their attention to the concerns of advantaged subgroups within their memberships in lieu of working on issues important to disadvantaged subgroups. When working on advantaged-subgroup issues, leaders tend to frame the issues as if they affect the majority of the organization’s constituents, even if the advantaged subgroup in fact is a minority. Conversely, when talking about disadvantaged-subgroup issues, leaders tend to frame the issues as if they affect a minority within the organization, no matter how large the actual population. The consequence of these tendencies is that groups that are intersectionally marginalized—that is, they have more than one marginalized status, such as black women—are the least represented by public interest advocacy organizations.

The increasingly partisan nature of American politics leaves the future of public interest advocacy organizations in question. The more that all advocacy is viewed as following from predetermined partisan or ideological points of view, the harder it is for some observers to accept that any organization legitimately advocates for an unbiased public interest. While the number of public interest advocacy organizations continues to grow robustly, the general political environment surrounding them threatens to reduce their relevance.

SEE ALSO *Campaigning; Collective Action; Collectivism; Free Rider; Interest Groups and Interests; Politics; Private Sector; Public Interest; Public Sector; Social Welfare Functions*

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PUBLIC INTEREST ANTHROPOLOGY

SEE *Anthropology, Public*.

PUBLIC OPINION

In democratic societies, governments are widely expected to respond to citizens’ preferences. This implies that an accurate process for measuring these preferences exists. However, the capacity to measure public opinion scientif-