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A Network Approach to Interest Group Politics

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Abstract and Keywords

Interest groups often serve as intermediaries or brokers between formal decision-making institutions and organized subgroups of society. Due to this positioning, key functions of interest groups can be understood in network terms. This chapter addresses five questions about interest groups to which network analysis offers answers: (1) What are the origins of interest groups?; (2) How do they develop, maintain, and change their identities over time?; (3) Under what conditions do groups work together, and how?; (4) How do interest groups relate to other political institutions?; and (5) What influence do they have on politics generally? The discussion highlights various effects of networks on interest group politics, including how new groups are born out of preexisting networks, how they use connections to access information and influence policy, and how they maintain long-term relationships with policymakers. Future research could benefit from greater attention to multiplexity, content analysis, and longitudinal network analysis.

Keywords: social network, interest group, intermediary institution, emergence, identity, communication, coalition, influence

Introduction

An “interest group” is a nongovernmental organization for which a core part of its mission is to advocate its visions of the public interest to various governmental bodies—such as legislatures, commissions, courts, or state agencies—and/or private-sector institutions. Interest groups participate in politics at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels. Interest groups can assume a wide array of organizational forms, which are adapted to their heterogeneous political objectives. Some of the most common types of interest groups are citizen advocacy organizations (e.g., Greenpeace), professional societies (e.g., British Medical Association), labor unions (e.g., Industrial

Workers of the World), and trade associations (e.g., Association of the German Trade Fair Industry).

While interest groups differ markedly in their political purposes and organizational forms, what they have in common is that as *intermediary institutions* they attempt to mediate between formal decision-making institutions and other organized subgroups of society. Thus, a key feature of interest groups is their position in networks: they are located between those with interests and those with the authority to make decisions. As a result, interest groups act as *brokers* in many different political situations; that is, they help to facilitate relationships between actors that would otherwise have difficulty relating to one another. At the same time, groups can connect individuals by stimulating the formation of ties among members, thereby serving as brokers between individuals. In doing so, they sometimes help citizens, firms, nonprofit organizations, and other actors obtain the policy changes they seek. At other times, interest groups may use their brokerage roles in service to the status quo by blocking changes from taking place.

In the process of brokering among decision makers and other actors, interest groups build, use, and transform networks. They build networks by envisioning new ways to represent interests, such as through setting up ad hoc coalitions or permanent advocacy organizations. They use networks by distributing campaign contributions, seeking advice, and spreading gossip. They transform networks by framing issues in ways that force realignments of interests or inspire bystanders to join the political fray.

Given the fundamental relationship between interest groups and networks, it is reasonable to expect that key aspects of interest group politics ought to be understandable in network terms. Prior scholarship has investigated some of these aspects but neglected others. The purpose of this chapter is to further elucidate the politics of interest groups using a network approach. We address five central questions about interest groups to consider how network analysis has or could offer potential answers:

- (1)** Where do interest groups come from? What is their genesis?
- (2)** How do interest groups develop, maintain, and change their identities over time?
- (3)** Under what conditions do interest groups work together? How do they do so?
- (4)** How do interest groups relate to other kinds of political institutions?
- (5)** What influence do interest groups have on democratic politics generally?

In addressing these questions, we review the previous work of scholars, but we also point to gaps or opportunities where prior research has revealed less than it might have. Our discussion of these topics is uneven, as network scholars have given greater attention to questions of how interest groups work together (question 3) and their broader effects on

democratic politics (question 5), since these are areas in which network theories and methods have appeared most readily applicable. Yet questions of interest group origins (question 1), identities (question 2), and interinstitutional relationships (question 4) are also areas in which a network approach is likely to be fruitfully extended.

We view the fields of interest group politics and network analysis as mutually informative. Network analysis has answered—and has the potential to answer—important questions about interest groups that are not answered as satisfactorily using other approaches (e.g., How do interest groups develop reputations for policy influence?). At the same time, the study of interest group politics provides a laboratory to develop and expand the study of networks, such as by exploring the ways that organizations are embedded in dynamic, multiplex networks. This chapter aspires to help set the agenda for both fields by explicating their relevance to one another.

Where Do Interest Groups Come From? What Is Their Genesis?

The question of where interest groups come from has long been at the center of the study of interest group politics (Halpin, 2014). In his seminal book *The Governmental Process*, David Truman (1951) developed a “wave theory” for the emergence of interest groups. For Truman, new interest groups, such as trade associations and labor unions, emerged in waves as disturbances in society (e.g., economic growth, economic depression, war, technological innovation) called for new forms of political organization. In *The Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson (1965) disputed Truman’s claim that interest groups would arise naturally as a result of disturbances. Instead, he saw interests in society as limited by the self-interests of their members, who would prefer to free-ride on the efforts of others rather than contribute personally to a public good. Olson argued that new organizations were possible when their leaders devised ways to offer material incentives to their members (such as group benefits on insurance), which had the potential to incentivize their contributions to the public good.

As part of a new generation of scholars working on these questions, Elisabeth Clemens (1997) explained in *The People’s Lobby* that citizens’ interest groups were originally forged through the recombination of other successful organizational forms, including business lobbies, women’s organizations, churches, and fraternal organizations. Clemens argued that strategic actors crafted interest groups as a new form of organization to deal with the inadequacy of political parties in addressing people’s problems. Another stream of work on the growth of interest groups modeled it as a function of competition for

limited resources within well-defined geographic areas. Virginia Gray and David Lowery's (1996a) book *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation* inspired a spate of studies on the dynamics of interest group populations in the US states and in other nations.

The extant literature on the emergence of interest groups devotes relatively little attention to the role that networks might play in the rise of new interest organizations. An important exception is a recent book by Jennifer Hadden (2015), *Networks in Contention*, which chronicled the growth of the international movement to stop climate change. She focused on the composition of new coalitions from among existing networks of environmental and other progressive organizations. At the same time, she documented how events and networks within political coalitions create the conditions for the rise of new advocacy organizations, such as "climate camps," which built grass-roots infrastructure for the climate change movement. Nevertheless, the formation of new organizations was a peripheral—rather than focal—element of Hadden's study.

Network analysis offers the potential to shed light on how interest groups emerge over time. In their work on organizational emergence, Padgett and Powell (2012) considered how a wide range of organizations—from early states and markets to communist economies and modern capitalistic enterprises—can be understood as developing through the dynamic concatenation of multiple networks. Padgett and Powell suggested that the formation of organizations can be likened to a biological process whereby subsets of elements break apart during catalysis to create new life. Analogously, Padgett and Powell demonstrated that new organizations arise from folding multiple networks onto one another through processes such as refunctionality, agglomeration, mass mobilization, and robust action.

Akin to Padgett and Powell, we argue that interest group emergence could be better understood by modeling new organizations as the networked product of prior interest groups or other strategic actors. Perhaps the most obvious place to start is with the surprisingly underexamined subject of interest group mergers and splits. "New" interest groups are often a renegotiation of political arrangements by more fundamental actors. For example, the most powerful organization advocating for the interest of the health insurance industry in the United States is America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP), which was born in 2002 from a merger between the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA) and American Association of Health Plans (AAHP) when the overlapping member companies decided that there was too much redundancy between the two associations (Heaney, 2006, 921).

In contrast, some organizations may split from one another when organizational leaders see opportunities for autonomous entities to achieve more than a unified effort could. For

example, in 1997 the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund broke its formal ties to the Sierra Club when it reconstituted itself as “Earthjustice” (Heaney, 2007). In both of these examples, there is a stable, underlying network of organizational elites who strategically draw the boundaries of organizations to modify the way that they pursue their political interests. Indeed, there is evidence that lobbyists themselves may encourage the formation of new groups by persuading members of associations to become independent, at both the state (Gray and Lowery, 1996b) and national levels (Drutman, 2015) in the United States. Scholars could potentially demystify these processes by identifying the key actors and interests below the organizational level. A study of board interlocks or coaffiliation by member organizations could provide insights in this area, much as similar studies have done in the field of business (cf. Mizruchi, 1992).

More could be learned about the creation of new interest groups by closely examining the networks of the political entrepreneurs who founded them. Except for cases of highly prominent interest group founders (such as Ralph Nader), scholars of interest groups and networks have not collected data on the individuals who found interest groups. Much network data could be derived from where these individuals went to school, where they worked before founding interest groups, and sources of funding for new organizations. Such analysis would likely reveal unlikely players in interest group politics, including members of Congress, executive branch officials, foundations, and privately wealthy individuals (though see Walker [1991] for research on patronage of interest groups).

The essence of the network approach to interest group genesis is to envision networks as part of the raw materials that bring interest groups into existence. Interest groups do not spring up mechanically from the mere availability of resources or lack of representation of significant interests. Rather, they enter the political arena when strategic actors draw upon their networks to secure resources, build staff, and articulate agendas. Formal analysis of these networks among individuals promises to broaden the range of interests that are seen as contributing to group formation and bring to light the implications of interest group connectedness. Research along these lines could further the understanding of how organizations develop from networks, as interest groups represent an important, dynamic, and underexamined field using this type of analysis.

How Do Interest Groups Develop, Maintain, and Change Their Identities over Time?

When a new interest group forms, it joins a community of thousands of other interest groups. Amid this sea of competing advocates, one of its key challenges is to craft a

distinctive identity. Identity is what an interest group is known for. Having a well-defined identity reduces the transaction costs for other actors that wish to do business with the group (Browne, 1990). Thus, a clear identity is generally advantageous when an interest group seeks to attract members or other supporters, extract resources from its environment, and establish a demand from policymakers for its advocacy.

Browne (1990) developed the first detailed theory of how interest groups craft their identities. Drawing on evidence from the agricultural policy domain, he argued that interest groups differentiate themselves from other groups by forming increasingly narrow issue niches. According to Browne, each group is motivated by the desire to have a monopoly over some issue area in order to be the one, unique group working on a topic. As more groups crowd into a policy domain, interest groups mutually accommodate one another by forming—and accepting—a narrower scope of control. Browne (1990, 480) referred to this process of identity formation as “balkanization” (see also Laumann and Knoke, 1987). Browne’s work was a major advance for the field of interest group studies, providing a theoretical connection among how groups define themselves, the issues that they work on, and their standing among their peers.

Building on Browne’s insights, Heaney (2004, 2007) sought to generalize the theory of interest group identity. Where Browne saw identity as focused on issues, Heaney argued that identities are created in multiple dimensions, including representation, issues, issue positions, ideology, and tactics (see also Jacobson, 2011). For example, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has an identity based on working on US-Israeli foreign policy (an issue niche), but is also identified based on the idea that it takes a specific issue position in this niche (which is pro-Israel). Similarly, the rise of J Street as another interest group in the US-Israeli foreign policy niche has reconfigured identities in this area based on ideology, such that J Street occupies the relatively liberal/progressive position, and AIPAC occupies the relatively conservative position. Seeing Browne’s study of agricultural policy as a special case, Heaney further claimed that groups may sometimes prefer to establish broad issue identities rather than narrow ones. In general, Heaney’s work validated Browne’s emphasis on identity as a key concept in interest group politics, but suggested that the processes of identity formation are broader and more complex than Browne proposed.

Over the past decade, interest group scholars have explored the implications of identity in a wider range of group behaviors. Most notably, Engel (2007) demonstrated how interest groups’ identities can shape their selection of the venues in which they pursue their policy objectives. Jacobson (2011) showed how organizational identities guide the way that the AFL-CIO, the Sierra Club, and the Christian Coalition have shifted their positions on immigration issues, thus reinforcing the view that interest group identities

may be prior to—and not necessarily derivative of—issue positions. Halpin and Jordan (2009) pointed to identity as a guiding principle that interest groups use in adapting their organizational forms in the wake of threats to their survival (see also Halpin and Daugbjerg, 2015).

Political scientists investigating interest group identities have generally ignored or deemphasized the potential connections between identities and intergroup networks. Yet there are numerous ways in which these phenomena might plausibly be connected. Networks might guide groups to identify potential competitors and therefore the dimensions on which they define their groups' identities. As a group chooses to emphasize representation, issues, ideology, tactics, or other dimensions of its identity, it may look to other groups to which it is connected in making this decision. For example, a group may explicitly seek to differentiate itself from its close network contacts—especially on the dimensions on which they most readily identify—if the group's leadership believes that external audiences may conflate the groups because of their network ties. For example, the US Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) have close network ties and often work together in coalitions. Because they represent business interests broadly, their identities are sometimes confused; in fact, in 1976 the two organizations seriously considered merging (Waterhouse, 2014, 86). Since the failed merger, they have been especially careful to differentiate their identities, with NAM representing only manufacturers and the Chamber representing all classes of business interests. Under such conditions, interest group identities would be, in part, a function of preexisting social networks.

Conversely, a group may choose its network contacts in part based on alignment or dealignment with their identities, as Anand, Joshi, and O'Leary-Kelly (2013) established in a nonpolitical context. For example, an interest group may wish to create a portfolio of network contacts with a particular identity configuration. In making such choices, the group may prefer to have contacts with homophilous identities on some dimensions (e.g., partisanship or ideology) and with heterophilous identities on other dimensions (e.g., industry or geography). Under these conditions, interest group identities would be, in part, a function of preexisting social networks. Thus, the causation from identity to networks may run in either or both directions.

In light of possible bidirectional causation, empirical evaluation of the possible links between interest group networks and identities would require careful, longitudinal observations of interest group tie formation. It would be critical to observe the choices that groups made when forming new relationships with groups with which they did not have previously existing ties. The network structure of existing coalitions should also factor into such an analysis, as groups would likely be influenced by the preexisting alignments of their potential new partners. When a new interest group connects to a

preexisting coalition of groups, are there conditions under which members of the coalition need to adjust their identities in response to the presence of the new partner? For example, if the new partner is very similar along some dimension, does that prompt the group to further differentiate itself based on that dimension? Information to evaluate these possibilities could be gathered from coalition web pages and online membership lists, which could be mined for data on identities and interorganizational ties.

Examining the relationship between interest group identities and networks could potentially yield insights valuable for the study of political networks more generally. Scholars of social network analysis have neglected questions of network *content* in favor of examination of network *structure*. Yet the types of alters that an actor chooses may be just as consequential as the structure of the relationships between those alters. Interest group identity in networks is a good example of a type of network content that is politically important and would afford the opportunity to weigh the relative contributions of structure and content to the effects of social networks. For example, examining what roles particular groups may fulfill within coalitions of multiple interest groups might shed light on which coalitions groups choose to join (or not).

Under What Conditions Do Interest Groups Work Together? How Do They Do So?

As the population of interest groups has grown steadily over time, the nature of cooperation among groups has become correspondingly more important, both substantively and theoretically. When there were only a few peak interest groups representing broad sectors of society (e.g., agriculture, medicine, labor, and manufacturing), each group could plausibly stand on its own vis-à-vis the government, at least for most matters. As groups in each sector proliferated—agriculture divided its representation into wheat, corn, soybeans, sugar, and so forth—the ability of groups to collaborate formally through advocacy coalitions and to work together informally by sharing information and resources became all the more critical to the success of their advocacy. Thus, questions of which groups worked with one another, who shared information with whom, and to what effect, became more integral to understanding the activities of interest groups. These questions are, at their heart, about the operation of political networks. Research on these questions has factored not only into the development of interest group studies, but also into the modeling of interorganizational networks of all types.

The first study to offer a systematic network analysis of interest group cooperation was *The Organizational State* by Edward Laumann and David Knoke (1987). It examined multiple networks (i.e., communication, influence, events, and issues) that connect interest groups in the health and energy policy domains. In doing so, it revealed the dominant role that nongovernmental organizations play in national policymaking in the United States relative to policy experts and other ephemeral actors. It elucidated the relevance of networks to how groups worked together to identify problems, share information, exchange resources, and exercise influence. While these findings represented a critical advance in interest group studies, Laumann and Knoke also provided an exemplar of how to study interorganizational relations among complex institutions.

Numerous scholars continued to pursue the trail blazed by Laumann and Knoke. Most notably, a series of articles by Carpenter, Esterling, and Lazer (1998, 2003, 2004) reanalyzed Laumann and Knoke's data. Carpenter et al. (1998) showed how interest groups that formed weak ties with many groups tended to have an informational advantage over groups with fewer weak ties. Carpenter et al. (2003) revealed, however, that groups tend to place a greater emphasis on forming strong ties rather than weak ties, since each tie is costly to maintain (i.e., the bandwidth constraint), they have more precise information about their strong ties, and they are more likely to derive the type of asymmetric information that produces political advantages from strong ties. Carpenter et al. (2004) demonstrated that sharing information in these networks is a function of preference similarity (i.e., homophily) and third-party brokerage. Collectively, these studies were essential in uncovering the strategic political behavior latent in the ways that interest groups communicate with one another when working together.

With the rise of exponential random graph models (ERGMs) as an approach to network analysis (Lusher et al., 2012), scholars have become increasingly interested in how interest groups choose specific network partners. The ERGMs have the advantage of allowing the researcher to model the formation of ties as a function of endogenous network structures, as well as actor-level independent variables that are traditionally included in regression models. An excellent example of work in this vein is Leifeld and Schneider's (2012) investigation of thirty advocates in the German toxic chemicals policy domain. They asked whether similarity in policy preferences determined which advocates share information with one another. They found that transaction costs and the opportunity to have contact in social settings had a greater impact on information sharing than did preferences.

Moving beyond information sharing, two recent studies by Box-Steffensmeier and Christenson (2014, 2015) focused on how groups worked together on common policy

goals. In particular, they looked at how interest groups collaborate on the authorship of amicus curiae briefs before the US Supreme Court. Amicus briefs are statements that advocate for a particular outcome in a case, filed by outside parties with a stake in the court's decision. They found a dominant pattern of brief authorship in which large, well-endowed groups tend to coauthor with a large number of smaller groups. They also found that political homophily among groups based on industry area, budget, sales, and membership was critical in determining which groups worked together. In comparing networks across organizational types, they found that religious, labor, and political organizations tended to differ from business, civic, and professional groups.

The extant literature on cooperation is rich with respect to questions of information exchange. We know a great deal about who communicates with whom and why. However, we know relatively little about the substance of what is communicated among groups. What explains variations in the level of sensitivity of information that is communicated? Why does information sometimes get transferred quickly and at other times experience significant delays? Does information transfer depend on the subject at hand? Making significant advances in this area is challenging, because it would require the collection of new types of data that are more fine-grained and detailed. If such information were to be collected through traditional interview and survey techniques, it would place substantially increased burdens on informants when reporting data. Extracting data from email and social media databases may be an alternative solution to this problem. In the short term, data from such sources are likely to be unrepresentative of the population of groups, due to the limited number of organizations that might be willing to share such data. In the longer term, possible advances seem much more promising as suitable data become more widely available, provided that logistical and ethical concerns can be addressed satisfactorily.

Published research on the determinants of coalition formation among groups is much less developed than is the case for information exchange. This gap exists partly because of heterogeneity in the nature of interest group coalitions. First, there is considerable variation in the level of formality attached to coalitions. Some coalitions are merely ad hoc assemblies of groups, while others erect elaborate formal institutions. Second, coalitions differ in the scope of their objectives and, concomitantly, on their intended permanence; some coalitions have targeted goals, leading them to exist only for a short period of time, while others tackle more enduring policy issues, leading them to persist for decades. Third, coalitions vary in the extent of their public visibility, with some broadcasting their existence on the web and others lurking only in the subterranean worlds of elite lobbyists.

Advancing the analysis of coalition networks would require addressing the heterogeneity in what constitutes a network tie. Indeed, scholars may benefit from focusing added

attention on the theoretical justifications for studying the particular types of ties they choose to observe (Krackhardt, 1992). For example, how is analysis to be conducted when different groups are united by different *types* of coalitions that involve different forms of relationships between members? This issue could be viewed as a problem for analysis, or it could be approached as central to what we would like to know about interest group coalitions. Network analysis could prove to be especially valuable if it not only uncovered who allied with whom, but also what did or did not happen within these coalitions.

Clearer analysis of how interest groups work together is needed to present a more complete picture of how these institutions engage in advocacy. Progress in this area will require better theoretical integration of the formal sides of collaboration (e.g., coalitions) with the informal sides (e.g., communication, trust). Research that illuminated how formal and informal ties among interest groups are compatible or incompatible could distill the mechanisms through which interest groups convert their loose affiliations into collective action.

Further network analyses of interest group cooperation could prove relevant for understanding interorganizational cooperation beyond advocacy organizations. Although interest group cooperation differs from cooperation among other types of organizations (e.g., firms, nonprofit organizations, government agencies), it shares many of the same features, such as the uncertainty attached to which partners may be good collaborators and which may not. Thus, analysis of interest group cooperation may yield findings that are of general interest to network scholars, such as about how alliances evolve over time. Such information may be more readily available about interest groups than about other types of organizations, to the extent that the public-interest dimension of interest groups makes them more likely than other types of organizations to disclose to scholars details about their collaborative behavior. As a result, the world of interest group politics likely will continue to be a desirable laboratory for the study of interorganizational collaboration.

How Do Interest Groups Relate to Other Kinds of Political Institutions?

Interest groups develop relationships not only with one another, but also with actors in the myriad types of institutions that they attempt to influence. These relationships may yield intelligence, trust, and resources that are critical to the ways that interest groups do their work. Relationships may be manifest by the transfer of staff through the

revolving door between government and the private sector, the sharing of expertise and policy consultations, and the direct exchange of resources through political contributions. Although networks are a crucial part of these activities, scholars have only occasionally approached these topics from the perspective of network analysis. In this section we discuss applications of network analysis to interest group relationships with legislatures, bureaucratic agencies, and political parties.

Lobbying the legislature is perhaps the most common, as well as the most studied, aspect of interest group behavior. Classic texts in this area include works by Herring (1929), Milbrath (1963), and Baumgartner and Leech (1998). This tradition has focused on questions such as (1) How do interest groups choose their lobbying strategies and what strategies do they choose?; (2) Whom do interest groups choose to lobby?; and (3) What tactics do interest groups use when lobbying? These studies tended to place a greater emphasis on the groups or their targets, without seeing these patterns as part of a larger network.

Recent studies have articulated a rationale for viewing network position as a critical variable in modeling lobbying activity. Mahoney and Baumgartner (2014, 205, 214) explained: “Lobbyists are not lone actors trying to influence officials in a vacuum; they are embedded in an issue context that involves other actors who agree with them and still others who do not.... Rather than pick an individual lobbying organization and count up its resources, we need to recognize that lobbyists, like wolves, work in packs” (see also DeGregorio, 1997). Fully implementing these issues in empirical analysis would require a shift in the way that political scientists typically study lobbying.

An exemplar of work in this new tradition is LaPira and Thomas’s (2014) analysis of “revolving door” lobbyists. Drawing on data disclosed pursuant to the requirements of the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, they investigated lobbyists that have moved between staff positions on Capitol Hill and lobbying (i.e., “revolvers”). Among current lobbyists, they found that former congressional staff members who were promoted up the hierarchy of Congress tended to attract a more economically diverse set of lobbying clients than did those who left Congress before moving up the ladder. This research hints that the movement of actors between government and the private sector may correspond with building networks rich in “structural holes”; that is, when contacts are drawn from distant parts of a network rather than forming redundant contacts that are closely connected with one another (Burt, 1992).

While LaPira and Thomas’s (2014) work represents a notable advance in the field, it only scratches the surface of network analysis that could possibly be conducted using data derived from the Lobbying Disclosure Act and other sources, such as congressional staff directories. The ability to track the movement of employees over time from Congress to

the private sector—and back—raises a number of intriguing possibilities for network analysis. Careers of lobbyists and congressional staff bring them in contact with multiple networks based on the different groups of people and organizations they work with, such as other lobbyists, other congressional staff members, members of Congress, congressional offices, and lobbying firms. From following the movements of individuals through the revolving door, it is easy to imagine mapping networks among lobbying firms, congressional offices, and lobbyists/staff themselves. Analyses of these networks could, for example, prove invaluable in following the diffusion of lobbying tactics, cooperation among lobbyists, and the flow of sensitive information. Such research could borrow from related work by Nyhan and Montgomery (2015), which deals with diffusion of campaign tactics.

Relationships matter in the ways that interest groups relate to other kinds of institutions, too. One of the most promising areas for formal network analysis is the study of group interactions with the bureaucracy. Although they do not include formal network models, Daniel Carpenter's (2001, 2010) books on the political development of federal bureaucratic agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration, narrated elaborate patterns of network formation and decay among interest groups attempting to influence policies in these areas. Similarly, research on interest group involvement in regulatory rule-making has suggested the value of formal network analysis, but has not undertaken it. For example, the analysis in Nelson and Webb Yackee's (2012) article on coalitions of interest groups active in rule-making could have been adapted using a network approach by examining how the membership composition of coalitions working on rule-making overlap with one another. Such an approach might reveal which interest groups exert influence across debates on numerous rules through their coalition involvement.

Perhaps the greatest barriers to conducting network analyses of interest group-bureaucratic interactions are the organizational complexity of the bureaucratic agencies and their insularity from public view. Organizational complexity presents a conceptual challenge to network analysis, because it may be difficult to specify what nodes and links should be included in an analysis. For example, it may be insufficiently specific to say that an interest group has a tie with "the US Department of Education" without also stating something about the office within which the contact is made (e.g., Civil Rights, Postsecondary Education). But naming an office may also be misleading, since the contact may be more meaningfully with a *person* than with an *office*. In short, the analyst may have trouble specifying the proper unit of analysis. Moreover, the insularity of agencies from the public may make it difficult for researchers to contact and interview the key players that make contacts and forge networks. The real decision makers may be

buried under layers of bureaucracy that are difficult for an outside researcher to penetrate.

Even accounting for common obstacles, there are many unexplored possibilities for investigating interest group-bureaucratic networks. The presence of interest groups on advisory commissions, comments by groups on regulations, and the revolving door of staff from interest groups to the bureaucracy (and back) present ways to identify and measure nodes and links in a manner that is amenable to formal analysis. Analysis of these ties could help to disentangle how variations in the content of network ties matter to political relationships by combining content analysis with network analysis. For example, the texts of regulatory comments could be content-analyzed for the level of expertise that they convey, thus allowing for comparison of the relative effects of expertise and network position on their influence over policymaking. Examination of the long-term movement of staff between groups and agencies could trace out long-term patterns of influence that are not apparent in analysis conducted over shorter time periods. Finally, network analysis allows the investigator to capture the nonuniformity and multilayered nature of bureaucratic organization in ways that other types of analysis are unable to do, thus allowing for studies reflecting greater realism in how interest groups intersect with agencies.

Examining interactions between interest groups and political parties is another area in which a network approach holds some unexplored promise (Fraussen and Halpin, 2016), though there have already been notable network studies on this topic. Grossmann and Dominguez (2009) mapped out multiplex party-group ties that cross-cut legislative and electoral politics, drawing on data from networks of campaign endorsements, legislative coalitions, and financial contributions. They found that interest group ties mirror party coalitions in electoral—but not legislative—arenas. Heaney et al. (2012) also found isomorphism between the structure of party coalitions and interest group comembership among party activists. In the area of social movements, Heaney and Rojas (2007, 2015) pointed out that activist networks similarly are closely aligned with partisan coalitions.

A promising next direction for understanding interest group-party networks is to pay closer attention to how they affect the unfolding of political processes. Heaney and Rojas (2015) suggested that these connections tend to serve parties to a greater extent than they serve social movements. Does the same advantage hold for parties over interest groups in legislative debates? How do partisan ties among interests groups affect their ability to exert leverage over policy outcomes? One way to understand the effects of these networks may be to look at how interest groups work together in coalitions (Heaney and Lorenz, 2013). For example, how is the strength of an interest group coalition affected by the strength of its networks with political parties? Coalitions with strong partisan ties may be able to marshal the procedural might of the party on their behalf, but may also be

beholden to the party's fickle nature. In contrast, coalitions with weak ties to parties may find it harder to obtain access to the legislative agenda, but may also be able to sustain the coherence of their positions over longer periods of time. Research along these lines could provide insights into the extent to which group-party interrelationships matter to legislative outcomes.

Studies on interest group relationships with other types of institutions may be informative for interinstitutional network analysis more generally. Interest groups connect with myriad organizations in society, thus raising the possibility that interest group networks reveal aspects of how these organizations operate. For example, Lee Drutman's (2015) book *The Business of America Is Lobbying* documented how many corporations become members of a panoply of trade associations; the overall patterns in these relationships could be examined as two-mode networks. Given the breadth of institutions with which interest groups connect, analysis of their networks presents significant potential for appreciating interorganization networks generally.

What Influence Do Interest Groups Have on Democratic Politics Generally?

Political scientists and sociologists have long sought to understand what types of actors influence the outcomes of government decisions. Early writings by scholars such as Dahl (1961) analyzed which elites exerted the most influence (see also Hunter, 1953; Laumann and Pappi, 1973; Polsby, 1960). Schattschneider (1960) argued that under some conditions, interest groups were among the influential elites—especially when the issue was narrow in scope and not very visible to the public. As this tradition continues, recent research by Gilens and Page (2014) found that interest groups that represent businesses are likely to have a substantial, independent impact on policy over time, although interest groups representing citizens and other mass-based interests have little detectable influence.

Network studies have made major contributions to deciphering which interest groups exert influence and how they do so. The extant literature on interest group networks demonstrates convincingly that the ability to influence policy outcomes is at least partly a function of their ability to exploit connections and positions in networks. This conclusion is supported by studies conducted in various nations, examining different types of policymaking institutions and employing diverse approaches to network analysis (Varone, Ingold, and Jourdain, 2016).

The seminal study on this topic, by Laumann and Knoke (1987), examined the development and distribution of networked reputations for influence based on in-depth interviews with elites in the health and energy policy domains. Laumann and Knoke found that interest group influence depends, in part, on the nature of the issues at the top of the agenda in the policy domain, the presence or absence of government decision-making elites, the degree of consensus among those elites, and the closeness of their positions to the center of the network. Importantly, they observed the presence of a “hollow core” within the networks of policymaking elites, meaning that there are no “core” actors that uniquely broker among the issues of a policy domain. This finding cemented their image of the organizational state as fragmented and balkanized. This key result was verified in *The Hollow Core*, a related book by John Heinz, Edward Laumann, Robert Nelson, and Robert Salisbury (1993), which similarly found hollow cores among networks of advocates in the agriculture, health, labor, and energy policy domains (although research by Heaney [2006] and Grossmann [2014] has questioned the persistence of hollow cores).

Research that followed in the Laumann-Knoke tradition focused on how the influence of interest groups depends on their ability to leverage positions in networks. Of particular interest is the extent to which network structures might enable interest groups to act as brokers among other competing interests. Fernandez and Gould (1994) concentrated on brokerage between groups and government actors. They found that the capacity to exert influence depends on the type of brokerage role played, such as whether the organization is a representative, a liaison, or an itinerant broker (see also Gould and Fernandez, 1989). Heaney’s (2006) study of health policy elites investigated the capacity of groups to broker across party lines. He found that crossing party lines in communication networks is associated with stronger reputations for policy influence among congressional staff and other lobbyists. However, crossing party lines in coalition networks was associated with stronger influence reputations among other lobbyists, but not among congressional staff.

A new direction for this work has been to parse the micro-components of influence. Along these lines, Heaney (2014) argued that interest group reputations for influence are formed as they interact with one another in multiplex networks. That is, representatives of groups form opinions about who is influential in part through their direct communication with other groups, comembership in coalitions, and coinvolvement in issues. Drawing on data extracted from interviews in ten Swiss policy arenas, Fischer and Sciarini (2015) raised the concern that these reputations may be inflated by efforts of interest groups to engage in self-promotion and from misperceptions formed in personal relationships among informants in network studies.

Other recent studies of network influence have broken out of the Laumann-Knoke tradition by introducing new approaches to measuring networks and their influence.

Grossmann (2014) derived the structure of policy networks (which included interest groups) from a massive content analysis of scholarly books written about policy change. His measure of interest group influence was based on the attributions that the books' authors made about who shaped legislative outcomes. He found that networks of interest group influence are highly centralized, with some ideological polarization. According to Grossmann, interest group networks vary considerably in structure and influence over the policy process, with interest groups recognized as especially relevant in the areas of civil rights and liberties, criminal justice, labor, and immigration.

Moving outside the legislative arena, Box-Steffensmeier, Christenson, and Hitt (2013) transferred the investigation of interest group networks to influence over the US Supreme Court by considering the impact of *amicus curiae* briefs filed by interest groups. In examining *amicus* briefs from 1946 to 2001, Box-Steffensmeier and her colleagues found that in competitive cases (i.e., where brief totals were similarly matched for each side), *amicus* briefs were powerful signals for judges. Groups that were more connected with other groups via *amicus* briefs, and groups that were connected with well-connected groups, were more successful in influencing court decisions.

The insights accumulated by recent research on this topic suggest the need for a deeper and more varied approach to understanding interest group influence in future research. Approaches that rely on reputation-based measures of influence have become standard. Yet reputations for influence may differ in significant ways from actual influence, as reputations may persist long after real capacities change. Alternatively, the Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2013) and Grossmann (2014) studies demonstrated the utility of approaches that rely on content analysis. Still, content analysis may neglect to incorporate inside information from elites that is intrinsically a part of the reputational approach. Balancing these considerations suggests that future work may benefit from attempting to triangulate on estimates of influence by combining the reputational and content-based approaches. Future work that utilized both approaches would be more labor intensive for scholars, but could also generate evidence on the conditions under which the two approaches confirmed or contradicted one another.

Accumulated knowledge in this area points to the benefits of looking further at the implications of multiple, interacting networks. Heaney (2014) modeled interactions among four networks (influence, communication, coalition comembership, and issue coactivity), yet the Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2013) and Grossmann and Dominguez (2009) articles suggested the relevance of still other networks, such as legislative endorsements and *amicus curiae* cosigning. As the availability of data on diverse, interlinked networks expands—and as statistical methods for looking at the simultaneous interaction of networks improve (Lusher, Koskinen, and Robins, 2013)—new projects would be well-

served to pay greater attention to modeling the interaction of multiple networks. Such analysis should extend beyond seeing different networks as having separate causal effects on influence—analogueous to independent variables in a regression model—to seeing them as genuinely interactive with one another. That is, an effect of a tie between two interest groups in network A may be greater if they are also tied in network B. Previous empirical research has made only modest efforts to look for such effects when studying influence, but deeper analysis along these lines could contribute richly to unpacking the mechanisms of influence.

While interest group influence is in some ways unique to the political universe, researchers in many areas of study—public health, information sharing, and business, to name a few—are concerned about how network structures matter to institutional decision making. Thus, analyses on interest group politics that combine multiple ways to measure this type of outcome could also be suggestive of approaches to assessing the consequences of networks in nonpolitical contexts.

Conclusion

Interest group action is embedded in social contexts that are rich in multiple, overlapping, and interacting social networks. Networks reflect the underlying political coalitions that support and oppose interest groups, patterns of information flow, and access to information. Thus, viewing interest group politics through the lens of social network analysis has produced important insights into the ways that interest groups and networks work. For example, from Hadden (2015) we see how new interest groups are born out of preexisting political networks. From Laumann and Knoke (1987) and the scholars who followed in their footsteps we learn how interest groups use interorganizational networks to access reliable information and influence the policy process, as well how their efforts map onto larger patterns of relationships among political elites. From Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2013, 2014, 2015) we discover how interest groups work together on *amicus curiae* briefs and what effects they have on judicial decision making. From LaPira and Thomas (2014) we see how the revolving door affects which clients lobbyists choose to work with. From Heaney (2006, 2014) we appreciate the consequences of multiple, intersecting networks for legislative and policy outcomes.

At the same time, there is more to learn from and about interest group networks. A first strategy for doing so would be to pay greater attention to the many ways that interest group networks are linked to one another, including through communication, coalition comembership, event coparticipation, campaign contributions, cosigning *amicus curiae*

briefs, board comemberships, and regulatory comments. Toward this end, it would be valuable for researchers to consider the ties between networks that exist at different levels of analysis. For example, it could be valuable to explore the interpersonal networks that underlie interorganizational networks. Scholars should examine not only how these networks matter separately, but also how they operate in conjunction with one another.

A second strategy would be to explore new kinds of data, especially texts that are amenable to content analysis. Grossmann's (2014) innovative content analysis of books on policy change is an excellent example of how new sources of information can be mined to extract relational data. Another potentially fruitful source of data is state-level lobbying disclosure records, which have yet to be fully examined for insight on lobbyist-client dyads and dynamics. In general, the study of social networks could benefit by seeking more synergy with advances in content analysis (cf. Grimmer and Stewart, 2013).

A third strategy would be to lengthen the period of time over which interest group networks are investigated. Interest group network studies have typically relied on surveys or interviews, which have been conducted over short periods of time, usually not more than a few years. Scholars may have planned research designs with these limited time horizons because of the high financial costs associated with using these methods. However, it is conceivable to conduct longitudinal studies of interest groups or lobbyists that are analogous to the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Work in this vein may allow scholars to uncover network effects on phenomena such as interest group emergence and identity development, which have been difficult to assess in studies with shorter time periods. This strategy may also help to more clearly address questions of causality, which are endemic to network studies (Fowler et al., 2011).

Given that the politics of interest groups are inextricably bound to their positions in networks, the study of networks and interest groups ought to be closely integrated. This chapter reviews much of the excellent scholarship that has striven toward this goal and points to opportunities for future research to expand upon it. An expanded agenda for the study of interest group networks could provide deeper insight into the emergence and evolution of interest groups, as well as their collaboration, communication, and influence over political processes. New research may be able to achieve these goals by combining network analysis with content analysis and expanding the timeframe over which networks are examined.

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