Collective Action, Interest Groups and Social Movements

Nov. 24
Lecture overview

- Different terms and different kinds of groups
- Advocacy group tactics
- Theories of collective action
- Advocacy groups and democracy
The study of collective action

“There is no agreement among political scientists specifically or social scientists in general about the best ways to study group and social movement politics.”

A variety of terms, a lack of clarity:

- interest groups, advocacy groups, pressure groups
- social movements
- civil society, civil society organizations
- voluntary sector, third sector, non-profit sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- social capital
“advocacy group”

- “any organization that seeks to influence government policy, but not to govern”

In contrast to political parties.

What about corporations, unions, churches, charities, non-profit social service agencies, universities?
“advocacy group”

Can take many forms, including:
- an informal group of two to three people
- citizen groups with thousands of members and/or financial supporters
- industry associations and business lobby groups with large budgets and a small professional staff
- they may be informal, temporary, volunteer-run operations or professionalized, formal institutions with permanent offices
“advocacy group”

At least in theory can be classified as pursuing:
- self-interest of group members (or selective benefits)
- public interest of the community at large (or collective benefits)
“social movements”

- “informal networks of groups and individuals sharing a common vision for social and political change.” – Young and Everitt

- The organizations that are part of a social movement may be advocacy groups but they may also be focused on encouraging broader social change.

- Individuals not organized into groups may identify with (and thus be part of) a social movement.
“social movements”

- Social movements often challenge the traditional boundary between the private and public realms.
- They politicize issues once defined as private.
- Issues of identity and identity formation are often central to social movements.
- Often they address broad, non-material issues.
- Tendency to engage in strategies and tactics that are more radical than interest groups.
- Tendency towards decentralized, democratic forms of organizing.
“civil society”

- the space between the private market economy and the public realm of government;

- democratic cultures are strengthened when civil society is rich in associations that conduct their internal affairs in a democratic and participatory fashion.
“third sector”

- in contrast to public sector (government) or for-profit private sector (business).
- Includes charitable sector
- In recent decades governments have increasingly looked to third sector groups to deliver public services.
- intentionally or not, terms such as the third sector or voluntary sector depoliticize collective action.
- as groups increasingly focus on service delivery for the state, their advocacy role does seem to decline
“social capital”

- “the features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trusts, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”

- When people are active in social networks they develop relationships of trust and reciprocity that sustain a healthy social and political community.
advocacy group tactics

A range of tactics and activities from formal to informal, or traditional to nontraditional:

Formal end of the spectrum includes various forms of lobbying and consultations with government.

Informal end of the spectrum includes rallies and protests, holding sit-ins or engaging in civil disobedience. Ultimately, some groups may engage in violence against private or public property or against people.
“Contentious Politics”

- “Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people...join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities, and opponents” Tarrow (1998: 2).
- “Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities” Tarrow (1998: 3).

“Contentious Politics”

- Repertoires of contention
- “Particular groups have a particular history – and memory – of contentious forms. Workers know how to strike because generations of workers struck before them; Parisians build barricades because barricades are inscribed in the history of Parisian contention, peasants seize the land carrying the symbols that their fathers and grandfathers used in the past” (Tarrow, 1998: 21).
Tactical Innovations within the US Civil Rights Movement

- Bus Boycotts
- Sit-Ins
- Freedom Rides
- Community-Wide Protest Campaigns
- Riots

Theorizing Collective Action

- pluralism
- Marxist theory
- rational choice theory
- resource mobilization theory
- new social movement theory
- political process model
Pluralism

- The classic post-war view of the role of interest groups.
- Assumes that political power is dispersed among various interest groups.
- People have various identities and interests and society is comprised of various cross-cutting cleavages, such that no one is consistently a winner or loser in the political arena and stability is assured.
- The state is viewed as a neutral arena in which groups compete.
Marxist theory

- Views society as comprised of socio-economic classes, based on people’s relation to ownership and control of means of production.
- The primary cleavage in capitalist society is the class cleavage between workers and owners.
- The state is viewed as aligned with the capitalist class and dedicated towards maintaining the conditions for capital accumulation (including, if necessary, through coercion).
Rational choice theory

- the individual seeks to maximize personal utility;
- Rational choice theorists try to figure out how collective action is even possible among individuals guided by narrow self-interest.
- Basically, they assume that collective action is generally unlikely to happen. Individuals are not naturally inclined to sociability or group politics (unlike pluralist view), collective action must be explained rather than assumed;
- contrasts public goods that everyone benefits from and private goods that are restricted only to some;
Rational choice theory

- individual has little incentive to pursue a public good; problem of free-riding, free-riders;
- problem of collective action is solved by ‘selective incentives’ benefits restricted to members of the group;
- groups most able to offer selective incentives are most likely to successfully form; politics will be defined by narrow groups that are most able to offer selective incentives; narrow ‘special interests’ are more able to form and organize,
- pessimistic view of collective action, collective action considered a problem for democracy; group claims are undemocratic as they favour special interests over the (undefined) general or public interest;
Social movement theories

- Resource Mobilization Theory
- New Social Movement Theory
- Political Process Model

These theories were developed specifically by social scientists trying to comprehend the social movements of the 1960s and afterward.

They address the question - How and why do social movements form?
Resource Mobilization Theory

- Emphasizes the importance of internal group resources.
- Focus on questions of resources such as organization, money, leadership, allies, expertise.
- Social movement activities are not spontaneous and disorganized and social movement participants are not irrational.
Resource Mobilization Theory and US Civil Rights Movement

- African-American churches and emerging middle-class leadership

Organizations:
- NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1909
- CORE: Congress of Racial Equality, 1942
- SCLC: Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1957
- SNCC: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1960
New Social Movement Theory

- Focuses on identity and culture in movement formation and activism
- Collective identity formation and cultural struggle; redefining and challenging ideas, identity and culture
- Identities are constructed, they are a process, they are fluid.
- All collective action needs to be understood at least in part in terms of identity formation. The practices of collective action shape identities and the formation of identities shapes practices of collective action.
New Social Movement Theory

- NSMT reflects theories of post-materialism, post-industrial society, movement beyond classic class politics.
- rise of new middle class, new knowledge workers, carriers of post-materialist values, emphasis on quality of life, cultural or social recognition, respect, participation.
- Influenced by experience of the 1960s, when many of the social movements, such as peace movement, student movement, women’s movement, gays and lesbians, did not correspond to classic Marxist accounts of class struggle.
- These movements were depicted as being middle-class movements rather than working class movements.
Political Process Model

- includes analysis of external environment.
- combines elements of both theories RMT and NSMT along with a focus on the broader political environment that facilitates (or not) the development and success of movements, or the "political opportunity structure".
- Political Opportunity Structure: “consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent or national – dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics” (Tarrow, 1998: 19-20).
Political Process Model

Tarrow identifies at least five key dynamic components of the POS:

1. the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system;
2. the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity;
3. divided elites;
4. the presence or absence of elite allies;
5. and the state’s capacity and propensity for repression.
Political Process Model

Political opportunity structures can constrain or expand the field of collective action in four ways:

1. they expand the group’s own opportunities;
2. they expand opportunities for others;
3. create opportunities for opponents
4. and create opportunities for elites
Political Process Model

- “contentious politics is produced when political opportunities broaden, when they demonstrate the potential for alliances, and when they reveal the opponents’ vulnerability” (Tarrow, 1998: 23).
Political Process Model, Political Opportunity Structure and US Civil Rights Movement

- the defeat of Nazi Germany, emerging international human rights discussion
- Cold War, American depiction of itself as the ‘land of the free’ – leader of ‘free world’
- post-war anti-colonial struggles
- dawn of the television age
- changing electoral base of the Democratic Party, electoral calculations, needing and seeking support from Black voters
Tarrow argues that people engage in movements for a wider range of motives, a desire for personal advantage, group solidarity, principled commitment to a cause; desire to be part of a group.

Perhaps important to remember that “For people whose lives are mired in drudgery and desperation, the offer of an exciting, risky and possibly beneficial campaign of collective action may be a gain” (Tarrow, 1998: 21) rather than the unattractive option that Olsen describes.
Interest Groups and Democracy

- How do interest groups contribute to or facilitate a democratic system?

- How do interest groups undermine or inhibit a democratic system?

- How do the various theoretical approaches address these questions?