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# Review of Matt Grossman's, *The Not-So-Special Interests: Interest Groups, Public Representation, and American Governance*

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*The No-So-Special Interests: Interest Groups, Public Representation, and American Governance.* By Matt Grossmann. (Stanford University Press, 2012.)

By employing a wide variety of evidence including survey data, extensive content analysis, and interviews with policy stakeholders, Matt Grossmann systematically addresses two fundamental questions about the interest group universe: which factions in society gain extensive representation by organized interests and, among those groups, which become the most prominent and influential representative agents in the policymaking arena. To answer these questions Grossmann presents two rigorous theoretical frameworks for understanding the representative role of interest groups: behavioral pluralism and institutional pluralism.

The portion of the book devoted to behavioral pluralism begins with a clear data-driven definition of the population of study, namely advocacy organizations purporting to speak on behalf of societal groups or issue perspectives in a representative capacity. With this population defined, Grossmann's behavioral pluralism theory maintains societal factions consisting of individuals exhibiting, on average, a high degree of social capital will gain greater interest group representation relative to factions with low political efficacy, political participation, and civic engagement or, in other words, low social capital. While the analysis in Chapters 2 and 3, reveals surprising diversity in the number of constituencies receiving some degree of representation (approximately 466 societal groups are represented by at least one organization out of more than 1,600 of the identified advocacy organizations), it also demonstrates there is great variation in the resources and activities of various advocacy groups. The innovative use of survey data paired with content-analysis of print media and a wide range of government records to track group policy-influencing activities effectively enables Grossman to integrate theories of mass political behavior with group theory and to offer constructive critiques of previous studies. One weakness of the analysis is a few constituencies, such as environmentalists and neoconservatives, are defined

using only one question from the General Social Survey (1972–2004). In some instances whether the question comprehensively delineates the constituency remains dubious. While this data limitation in no way undermines this macrolevel theory—since a majority of constituencies are well defined—it bares mention for scholars who are interested in the results for particular constituencies.

The next question Grossmann addresses is why very few advocacy organizations working on behalf of these groups rise to great prominence as public representatives and as the most sought-after policy experts. The theory of institutional pluralism predicts advocacy organizations with particular characteristics will become institutionalized political leaders in these ways. Chapters 5 and 6 offer myriad tests of “organizational prominence”—representing another theoretical contribution made by the author to the field's conceptualization of influence. Grossmann finds established organizations with a sizable number of political staff members promoting a broad-issue agenda are the most likely to receive mention in the media and are the most likely to be involved in government policymaking venues as measured by an extensive content analysis of congressional, court, presidential, and agency documents. The consistency of the results across activities makes a persuasive case in support of this theory.

That being said, a linchpin of the theory of institutional pluralism is that institutionalized organizations, such as the NAACP or NRA, do not engage in many strategic decisions once they become “taken-for-granted” by policymakers and the media as the primary public representatives of particular constituencies. However, his theory discounts the role of resources too quickly because the key characteristics he convincingly identifies as strongly indicative of organizational success—organizational age, internal staff size, and agenda breadth—are directly tied to the financial capacity of the organization and for this reason could be an important part of the institutionalization story.

The explicit connections between certain facets of behavioral pluralism and institutional pluralism also merit further development and exploration. Do the preferences of constituencies as connected to the form their social capital takes in turn affect their likelihood of gaining a prominent organization to represent them in the long run? Are bankers more

likely to attain such an organization than supporters of legalized marijuana? Although the study does an excellent job documenting why some groups might be advantaged over others in the media and in policymaking venues, it does not fully address how groups gain prominence overtime to become part of the chosen few.

Finally, while this study clearly lays fruitful ground for many avenues of future research, the most obvious extension would be to employ the concept of institutionalized prominence to identify the elite set of interest groups in the electoral arena. An electoral analysis would require an examination of a different set of interest group activities such as endorsements and independent advertising. The changes to campaign finance laws occurring after the time period of this study—the various datasets range from 1992 to 2006—provide another justification for this extension. Many of the prominent groups Grossman identifies, such as the NRA and NARAL, have been quick to adopt new tactics such as

forming Super PACs and engaging in independent spending to influence federal elections. Granted this kind of extension is somewhat at odds with the theory's emphasis on institutional stability, but regardless it would be interesting to determine if the prominent groups in the policymaking arenas maintain their dominance as a voice for particular constituencies in the public debates taking place during elections.

Rather than highlighting true shortcomings, the reflections offered here and the proposed extension of these theories to electoral politics definitively demonstrate the utility of this work to advance our knowledge of interest group representation even beyond its impressive set of findings. From its rigorous theoretical frameworks to its comprehensive and diverse data analysis, this book represents the gold standard to which interest group studies should aspire.

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