

## Defining Interests: Disambiguation and the Need for New Distinctions?

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*This article notes the systemic lack of conceptual clarity in the social sciences and attempts to illustrate the adverse consequences by closer examination of the particular example of the interest group field. It indicates the significant ambiguities implicit in the term. Not all policy-influencing organisations are interest groups as normally understood, but because there is a lack of an appropriate label the term interest group is used by default. The article seeks to distinguish between interest groups and other policy relevant bodies—often corporations or institutions. It finds disadvantages in adopting a functional interpretation of the interest group term (i.e. any organisation trying to influence public policy). While the wider range of organisations are crucial in understanding the making of public policy, it is confusing to assume that this wider population are all interest groups. The article instead advances the complementary notions of pressure participant, policy participant and interest group. This slightly expanded repertoire of terms avoids conflating important distinctions, and, in Sartori's term permits 'disambiguation'. The core assumption is that the search for comparative data and exploration of normative questions implies some harmonisation in the interest group currency.*

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With few—if any—exceptions, concepts in the social sciences are poorly defined: indeed most prove popular precisely because they have an imprecision that allows promiscuous application.<sup>1</sup> Though the press and non-specialist political scientists *think* they know when an organisation is, or is not, an interest group, this is an area where more careful scrutiny produces less rather than more confidence. This article 'tests' a very basic 'unit of analysis' crucial to political science, the interest group, and finds that the elasticity of understanding among scholars in the area makes cumulative studies (unnecessarily) difficult. In the absence of definitional clarity, general conclusions about what sorts of groups dominate the democratic system—an important dimension to interest group study—are almost impossible to draw with any accuracy. The core proposition in this article<sup>2</sup> is that different authors cover different types of organisation in the field loosely delineated by the interest/pressure group label. While there is value in Karl Popper's concern that we should not be 'goaded into taking seriously words and their meanings' (Popper 1976, quoted in Gerring 1999, 360), if there are no agreed language-tools there can be no comparison of conclusions.

The justification for indulging in definitional fine print is that such issues need to be resolved. W. J. M. Mackenzie described British interest group research in 1955 as 'wrapped in a haze of common knowledge' (quoted by Richardson 1999, 181). The *ad hoc* practices currently evident in the literature have been a contributory factor leading to the marginalisation of interest group studies within the political

science discipline. Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech (1998, xvii) observed how researchers had come to adopt definitions based on data availability or to invent their own definitions to suit particular case studies. Both these practices make it difficult to weave case-study material together into a coherent picture of the interest group system. Definitions robust enough to support data collection and comparison are required: until researchers start counting the same things when they say they are counting interest groups, conclusions are founded on shifting sands.

This contribution leaves aside the related question as to whether the *label* 'pressure group', 'interest group', 'organised group' or whatever is the best signal of the 'universe'. Sometimes these terms are used as synonyms; sometimes different meanings are imputed to each. The priority in this article is to identify the general field and to introduce a degree of clarity.<sup>3</sup> The definitional boundary problem in the interest group field is most commonly discussed in terms of making distinctions from parties (see definitions cited by Baggott 1995, 2–3), but more common areas of 'blurring' are between interest groups and business or governmental actors.<sup>4</sup> While the pressure group sub-discipline has itself generated terms with remarkable promiscuity (Kimber and Richardson 1973, 1, counted 21), this article does not try to referee the sub-classification area.

Indeed the chaos that Richard Kimber and Jeremy Richardson reported has been reinforced by newer generations of terms such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements (SMs).<sup>5</sup> The latter perhaps signals less formal organisations than the term group but the pressure group literature traditionally included 'unorganised' groups. The distinction between organised = interest group and informal = social movement is questionable. Like the use of NGO, the social movement term seems to suggest a normative approval of the ends of the group rather than denoting a different type of social organisation. While such terms embody important distinctions within particular theoretical frameworks, the groups gestured to by theorists as fulfilling a 'role' or 'function' as an NGO or SM, with their implied impact in terms of democratisation and representation, are a mixed bag of organisational animals. In the absence of an agreed terminology for distinguishing different types, the normative claims for the value of organisations fulfilling the functions ascribed to NGOs and SMs are generalised to a broader range of bodies where the case is far weaker. Describing by implied function, rather than by organisational characteristics, obscures important differences. The interest group terminology needs to be fine-tuned to more clearly identify the animals in the interest group zoo. A more precise definition of interest group-type structures opens up, but does not replace, the normative debate. A stable set of definitions to separate out different types of body currently all referred to as interest groups can co-exist with, even complement, the concepts of SMs and NGOs.

This article is essentially in three parts. The first indicates that this discussion is a specific case of a wider phenomenon of conceptual imprecision. The second part tries to demonstrate that there are serious research consequences in the interest-group area stemming from definitional issues. The final, more contentious, section offers a 'solution' to the problem identified. Inevitably, an attempt to resolve confusion by introducing new terms may be read as adding to the confusion. But the article assumes this risk is worthwhile.

## The General Problem of Conceptual Imprecision

While some scholars are impatient at the idea of seeking a coherent and consistent language of inquiry, there is a serious academic tradition that would be surprised at the assumption that the sort of hotchpotch of hand-me-down concepts with which we try to investigate the social sciences could be 'right'. Thus Giovanni Sartori (1984, 15) starts his own analysis by quoting Robert Merton (1958, 114): 'a good part of the work called "theorising" is taken up with the clarification of concepts—and rightly so'. Merton was perhaps optimistic. Weber (1949, 105, cited in Gerring 1999, 359) famously argued that it was in the perpetual reconstruction of concepts through which we seek to comprehend reality:

The greatest advances in the sphere of the social sciences are substantively tied up with the shift in practical cultural problems and take the guise of a critique of concept construction.

The article nibbles at the edge of a problem whose core is addressable only through full engagement with the philosophy of language. For example there is, as set out by Sartori (1984, 57), Wittgenstein's idea that 'the meaning of the word is its use in the language'. Sartori's proposition that whatever 'science' is, a preliminary condition resides in the formulation of a *special and specialised language* with distinctive characteristics precisely to correct the defects of ordinary language, is powerful. He says, 'the various sciences ... took off by inventing neologisms [their own technical vocabulary], by reducing by definition the ambiguity of their key terms, and by consistently abiding by syntactical rules'. Sartori continues, 'but a soft social science that bows to Wittgenstein's dictum negates the very possibility of its ever becoming a science'.<sup>6</sup>

Sartori (1984, 59) notes that Popper's proposition that 'precision' may be a false ideal was actually a remark on the precision of mathematical reasoning, but had nothing to do with commending imprecision for natural languages. Sartori says, 'it is a wholesale distortion to call upon Popper to support a crescendo of terminological and logical sloppiness'. The idea is not that language can be frozen, but the specialised language we need for social science discussion needs to be relatively stable.

The discussion of categories and labels in this article sticks to a rather pedestrian dimension that underlines the difficulty of counting and interpreting without agreed metrics, but clearly the problems are reinforced if one pursues discussions of semantics in the rather more ambitious fashion of Sartori (1984). Sartori (1984, 16) notes that what *is not named* largely remains unnoticed and, moreover, that the *naming choice* involves a far reaching *interpretive projection*. One can crudely say he is drawing attention to the consequence of choices of categories and labels. In Sartori's terms (1984, 29) we need *disambiguation*. This article is predicated on the assumption that if we cannot do some micro scale under-the-stairs 'terminological house-clearing' (Sartori 1984, 62) *vis à vis* a simple concept such as interest group, we are unlikely to manage the rambling mansion of the fuller discipline. The assumption is that particular aspects of the subject need to be resolved before realistically attacking a broader front.

Sartori discusses the work of Whorf (1956) who argues that in part language influences (not determines) thinking: in other words thoughts tend to accept linguistic 'givens'. As Sartori (1984, 18) puts it, natural language is 'thought moulding' in a way that vocabulary embodies perceptions and conceptions of reality. While most words are ambiguous, the context can usually clarify meaning, but that is not the case with the terms in this article. He considers semantic terms to have two possible aspects—slicing and interpretative. In political science there is a sort of slicing vocabulary that permits the world to be parcelled up in preliminary fashion. There would be communication difficulties without rough and ready acceptance of a common language of political party, interest group, parliament, etc.

But of course this common language is deceptive in three ways. In the simple way that concerns this article, the boundaries are simply not agreed if one tries to pursue specialist, detailed discussion. Secondly, Sartori notes that the selection of 'slices' is likely to reflect potential use. Thus the famous example of the Eskimos (sic) who did not have a single word for snow, but a dictionary of terms for the specific states of snow, while the Aztecs had one term to cover ice, cold and snow. Thus the argument is that the slices are not reflections of nature but cultural selections. Areas of specialism need a specialist terminology not as jargon or to make matters arcane, but simply because relevant distinctions cannot be captured with categories that are too blunt.

If one is convinced by Sartori then there is a problem of missing literatures. There simply is no discussion along the lines he suggests in the interest group field. On the other hand there is a danger of what he refers to elsewhere (1970, 1033) as logical perfectionism (and consequent paralysis of research). The discussion of terms cannot be the end of the exercise. The clarification of terms is to permit empirical work rather than replace it.

## **The Consequence of Conflicting Images of Interest Groups**

Definitional issues are central to securing efficient reward from the collective effort of the research community. Two very broad styles of interest group definition have evolved. One essentially focuses on the normative (social capital) benefits of individualised voluntary participation. The other is described below as functionally driven.

### ***(i) The Traditional Voluntary Interpretation***

Researchers in the voluntary tradition would probably present groups as *voluntary, democratically accountable and individual-based*. A definition compatible with this interpretation would include *most* of the following features. Interest (voluntary) group stereotype:

- (i) it is organised *only* for a specific collective political end (such as the abolition of slavery);
- (ii) its goal is attainable; the group can be disbanded on realisation of the goal;

- (iii) it is a non-governmental body;
- (iv) it does not seek to form a government itself, but to influence public policy;
- (v) it has a formal, mostly voluntary, membership;<sup>7</sup>
- (vi) the membership has some control over the leadership of the organisation in connection with goals and means (internal democracy);
- (vii) the membership funds the organisation through subscriptions;
- (viii) it is organised to give expression to shared attitudes or pursue shared interests (promotional/sectional) of a given constituency;
- (ix) as membership is seen to reflect a matching of group and individual goals, then it can be expected that members join groups with some long term attachment.

Any body with (or assumed to have) most of the sorts of qualities listed above would be defined as a pressure/interest group by almost any source. When asked for examples of interest groups most students and others cite Oxfam, trades unions, Greenpeace—individual cases that (roughly) fit the ‘voluntary’ interpretation. Moreover it is membership-based voluntary organisations (or to be more pedantic, those that are *assumed* to have members)<sup>8</sup> that are at the heart of the central debate in the group literature. How do groups address the ‘logic of collective action’ issue? How do such groups encourage participation in groups unless by selective incentives?

These characteristics also reflect many expectations about the political system and its reliance on groups: groups are seen as replacing political parties as vehicles of democratic participation. If the wider population of groups in practice lack most of the characteristics of these examples, then commonly held views on the legitimate basis of group participation in policy-making and governance are undermined. If group influence in policy-making is to be normatively acceptable, then they are probably expected to demonstrate the ‘representativeness’ and internal democracy at the heart of the above portrait (Grant 2001, 348).

However, many other bodies regarded as groups in important sources in the literature, predominantly in the United States, *lack many of these features*. (Below these sources are discussed as being ‘policy studies centred’.) For example: (i) for some important interest groups political activity may not be their primary activity; (ii) civil servants, government departments, firms, etc. can be perceived as having a policy interest and influence; (iii) some groups take little trouble to recruit members; (iv) internal democracy may be largely symbolic;<sup>9</sup> (v) a group may be funded by its supporters or patrons rather than its formal membership; and (vi) groups may be collective structures for ‘organisations of organisations’ rather than individuals. Many important groups are collections of institutions—companies, local authorities or other non-individuals (Salisbury 1984).

Graham Wilson’s *initial* interpretation of an interest group reflects the ‘stereotype’ version above. He noted (1990, 6),

some organisations are clearly what we should understand an interest group to be. Such organisations recruit members with the explicit promise that the organisation will pursue certain public policy goals. People who join the League Against Cruel Sports in Britain or Common Cause in the

United States are clearly joining together to support an organisation which is obviously dedicated to certain relatively well-defined public policy objectives.

While Wilson's examples match the above stereotype, he warns, 'Few organisations commonly regarded as interest groups are like the League or Common Cause'. In line with Wilson this article asserts that *the organisations that are most significant in particular policy processes tend not to conform to the stereotype that best approximates a pressure/interest group. The paradox is that the most influential organisations are in fact highly likely to be the bodies furthest from the pressure group stereotype set out above.* In other words, studies by David Lowery and Virginia Gray (1995) and by other authors show (in a language suggesting interest group activity) the dominance within the political process by corporations and business 'organisations of organisations' rather than individual-based groups that the term 'interest group' popularly suggests. The most influential types of interest groups, as defined in public policy studies, are most distant from the core of the image of interest groups as deployed by many dedicated interest group researchers. It is this divergence in expectations amongst interest group and public policy researchers that underscores the importance of agreeing what is studied when interest groups are studied. It may be that 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori 1970, 1034) is inevitable, but the stretched term is not synonymous with earlier formulations.

### ***(ii) The Policy Studies Use: Pressure Group by Function?***

In line with the previous section, Heinz et al. (1993, 29) note that, 'for years scholars presumed that interest groups meant voluntary associations, Truman's (1951) magisterial work deals entirely with such organizations, and they are the focus of Mancur Olson (1965) and those who have followed his lead. Most of the abundant case studies of interest group activity also examine groups whose members choose, more or less freely, to support the group'. However Heinz et al. note the transformation of the field of inquiry: 'subsequently, the analysis of interested activity was explicitly extended to include organizations that had long been active in seeking to advance their interests ... business corporations, universities, state and local governments' (emphasis added). This extension of the scope of coverage in the policy field is justifiable in a policy studies context, but it reads oddly for those who regard the central interest group issue as being about mobilising individuals for collective action (the Olson paradox).

The policy studies literature tends to accept as a pressure/interest group any organisation that is seen as being active in the policy process with the *function or aim of influencing policy outcomes*. The conclusion implied by this line of argument is that a pressure group may be defined by *function*: any body that seeks to influence policy is a pressure group. *The most important consequence of this approach is the fact that in this light an individual company can be seen as an interest group.* Yet companies, as will be outlined below, are different organisational animals. They do not have members, which means they experience none of the collective action issues foreshadowed by Olson, and they lack the potential to imbue the political process with higher levels of citizen participation in decision-making.

This functional sort of definition extends the term interest group from the core coverage of groups like the British Medical Association to include not only companies but also bodies such as a government ministry or department, public corporation or local authority. Robert Salisbury (1984, 64) showed how organisations of the stereotypical 'pure' style might be numerically few and politically marginalised in policy processes. He noted the policy-making importance of state and local governments, corporations, think tanks and lobbyists; for some authors these are now part of the interest group terrain. The public policy perspective of policy-active organisations has slipped across into general definitions of interest group.

Wilson (1990, 7) asked, 'are we to conclude that any organisation which seeks to any degree to influence public policy is therefore to be regarded as an interest group?' His (and for the policy studies sources generally) conclusion was a broad 'yes'. He noted that many studies of interest groups defined the term narrowly, and have focused only on membership organisations: 'such a narrow definition of interest groups would have the peculiar effect of excluding large businesses such as ICI or Du Pont from our view, surely a strange and unwelcome development'. For Wilson (1990, 8) an interest group is an organisation which has some autonomy from government or political parties and that tries to influence public policy. This is conspicuously distant from the 'voluntary' stereotype outlined above. Charles Lindblom adopted a similarly wide-brush approach (1980, 84–85):

the study of interest groups now also identifies government officials, their associations, and their departments or agencies as playing interest-group roles.

This led Lindblom (1980, 85) to 'stake out' the broadest use of the term in that:

we mean by interest-group activities all interactions through which individuals and private groups not holding government authority seek to influence policy, together with those policy-influencing interactions of government officials that go well beyond the direct use of their authority.

The consequences for comparability of some researchers working with such a different tool are obvious. Jeff Berry's (1989, 191) work confirms that many key policy-relevant organisations are not interest groups but corporations. In practice Berry (1989, 20) accepted a broad use of the term interest group. He saw it as embracing 'corporate offices, trade associations, farm groups, labor unions, political action committees, law firms and public relations firms'. Similarly, data used by Gray and Lowery (1992) on measuring the diversity of interest groups was based on the number of groups (sic) 'registered to lobby in the state legislatures'. This data was used because of its reliability and accessibility but the lists used 'include membership organization (e.g. unions, professional associations, civil rights groups), corporations, trade associations, churches, and governmental representatives. *Thus, organized interests is a more appropriate term than interest groups since institutions and non membership organizations are counted as well as voluntary associations*' (emphasis added) (see similar use in Lowery and Gray 1995). While this reservation is made clear by Gray and Lowery, nonetheless the findings percolate into the literature as statements about interest groups. Likewise the availability of data from

lobbying registration appears to have driven as a matter of scholarly convenience a particularly broad group interpretation in the United States.

There are however collective costs to the discipline in pursuing an *ad hoc* pattern of labelling regardless of how well the terms are defined by individual researchers. Firstly, there is an obvious tediousness if we must relearn terms anew in every context: the purpose of a professional language is precisely to ease communication by building up a stock of transferable terms. Secondly, the possibility of comparison is seriously affected if non-standard definitions are adopted. Thirdly, characterising an interest group on the basis of an *observable* policy-related function obscures key differences in the internal dimension of activity. That is, it inhibits researchers examining whether the (internal) organisational and collective action issues of the group are similar or different, existent or non-existent.

It should be obvious that the thrust of this argument is not that corporations are not relevant to the policy process. It is to say they are not relevant *as interest groups*. If a student essay answered a question on interest groups by discussing, for example, Shell, foreign currency markets and British Airways, would there not be a rather significant 'hole'—the collective action issue? This article tries to give us the facility to distinguish the issues raised in the complex interaction of institutions in modern policy-making with the field of collective action issues signalled by Olson and others. The first are interesting problems that must be addressed in political science, but why call them interest group problems?

### Groups as Membership Bodies?<sup>10</sup>

The central tension here is that there are two interest group literatures. That dealing with membership and intra-group issues tends to use as a starting point the voluntary stereotype. 'Interest group-ness' in such sources sees the mobilisation of members as the key issue. Such a position is different to the policy studies view that primarily sees aspirations to *policy influence* as the key requirement for interest group status. Salisbury (1992, 41) notes that 'a corporation, a local government, most churches, and even universities are different, not totally but in crucial ways, from our *conventional* notion of interest groups' (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> Among the important differences he records is the fact that interest group members have the possibility of 'exit' as a means of influencing organisational leaders. He says, 'institutions are managed organizations ... membership groups must look far more carefully to the desires of their members, both of assure political legitimacy and to keep their supporters happy' (ibid., 43). If, as Salisbury claims (ibid., 36), there are important empirical differences between a system driven by membership groups and one in which institutions occupy centre stage then there must be adverse consequences in uses of the term interest group that run together.<sup>12</sup>

In dealing with the issue of interest group numbers and growth, Baumgartner and Walker (1988, 908) note, 'the first step in discovering how many members the American group system actually has must be to insure that our sources of information are reliable'. Their study is of 'membership of voluntary associations'. The definitions used and the scope of the study are clearly set out and again the issue is not about weakness in its own terms, but to note that their discussion of 'the



changing shape of the interest group system' is very different from the Lowery and Gray (1995) terrain because the scope of the interest group term is very different.<sup>13</sup>

Their sort of definitional assumption about the multi-member organisation seeking collective ends ties in with the debate on the logic of *membership* (Olson, 1965). Pressure/interest groups in such an interpretation are only those bodies which attempt to influence policy *and are multi-member organisations seeking collective ends*. This 'seam' of work, in contradistinction to the policy studies approach, sees the membership issue as crucial. Jack Walker (1991, 4) noted,

my principal focus is limited to functioning associations in the United States that are open to membership and are concerned with some aspects of public policy at the national level.

Walker is also clearly a 'group as collective phenomenon' source as opposed to a 'group by function' author. He noted that,

by focusing on groups that admit members, I excluded the public affairs divisions of private corporations such as Ford Motor Company, Sears, Roebuck and Co, General Electric, or Xerox.

This exclusion, of course, is precisely the sort of policy-influencing body that Schlozman and Tierney, and others in the field with a policy studies orientation, *included*. Kay Schlozman (1992, 818), in her review of Walker (1991), makes the point that 'Walker has no data about the thousands of organizations active in Washington (e.g. corporations, universities and think tanks) that have no members in the ordinary sense'. The consequence of the definitional scope adopted by Walker is that while his work is still of compelling importance, one cannot generalize from the pattern of interest groups he discusses to make arguments about the weight of business pressure in the political process. His map (deliberately) leaves out those many policy-relevant companies acting on their own account. This is a strength if one's focus is membership organisations, but a weakness from a public policy perspective concerned with explaining influences on policy outcomes.

## Groups: Individual-Based?

Even if the 'interest group' label were restricted to membership bodies, some would want to make further restrictions to it being used to apply to 'organisations of individuals' (in line with the stereotype described at the outset of this article) rather than 'organisations of organisations'. Joseph LaPalombara (1964, 18) defined an interest group as 'any aggregation of interacting individuals who manifest conscious desires concerning the authoritative allocation of values'. Berry's (1984, 5) definition of an interest group is 'an organized body of *individuals* who share some goals and who try to influence public policy' (emphasis added).

These sorts of definitions exclude the 'organisations of organisations' such as business groups and thus connect with the bulk of the literature about the rationality of membership which on the whole concerns membership decisions by individuals. But though the issues of membership are different for organisations of individuals and collectivities of other institutions, the mainstream use of the term does

not confine itself to looking at organisations of individuals. In practice, Berry himself accepted that trade associations and other bodies were interest groups. That his formal definition is narrower shows the power of the Olson paradigm about individuals and collective action in shaping the way we look at groups. Berry's practice is more commonly followed than his definition. Such an extension of the membership issue from individuals to all organisations seems irresistible, because as a broad generalisation it appears that the most powerful groups in the policy process are *not based on individual members*. The stereotype is again defective. The influence of private sector firms and their organisations is probably greater than that of consumers and their groups. Studies of politics would not want to ignore the former.

The membership issue for companies is, however, *different* than for individuals. One cannot assume that discussions of the membership of companies in trade bodies (numerically a large percentage of the bodies conventionally regarded as interest groups) are analogous to the decisions made by individuals about membership of cause or sectional groups. But nonetheless a definition restricted to individuals is too narrow.

### **Must Groups be Organised?**

Clive Thomas and Ron Hrebenar (1990, 124) defined an interest group as 'any association of individuals, *whether formally organized or not*, which attempts to influence public policy' (emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> At first sight this coincides with the Berry definition (above) with its stress on individual membership, but in fact there is an important difference which again underlines the fact that care is needed in reading across the literature. They include in their interpretation groups of individuals that lack formal organisation. Many other sources accept the 'either organised or not' character including Geoffrey Alderman (1984, 21). Thomas and Hrebenar are self-consciously explicit in their work. The issue is that even if everyone else was as clear in their separate and defensible definitions (and they are not) the *overall literature* would be unsatisfactory. If there is not a common currency of terms then it is difficult—and even dangerous—to generalise across the literature. Different sources are discussing different phenomena. If unorganised associations of individuals are 'interest groups', then the idea of some kind of census or map is made more difficult, if not impossible. There is thus no deep agreement on whether groups must be organised to fit the field of study—or what groups are considered to be part of the category of organised interests. The notion of the non-organised group spreads the definitional ambiguity into the zone of social movements.

### **New Terms, New Focus? Distinguishing Policy Participants and Pressure/Interest Groups**

This part of the article reinforces that there are very different interpretations subsumed by the interest group label (and therefore real difficulties in addressing the literature as a whole as there are so many definitional uses), and then offers a new 'slicing' in Sartori's terms. As signalled earlier, this section is required only if one

assumes the existing repertoire of terms is imperfect. And the picture of imperfection can remain valid even if this redrawing of zones is unconvincing.

As we have seen above, the broad *functional approach* assumes that if an organisation (even a corporation) is involved in the policy process, it is (de facto) a pressure/interest group. In practice the 'de facto' qualification becomes ignored. Richard Rose (1985, 247, see also Baggott 1995, 11) resists this slippage from interests to interest groups and complains that because the word 'group' is a very general term, writings about pressure groups sometimes treat every political institution as a manifestation of pressure politics. He argues that the 'definition by function' is a *reductio ad absurdum* because it blurs all distinctions between those responsible for exercising the powers of government and those groups that seek to influence government but not hold public office. However it is precisely the thrust of those who pursue the functional argument that the formal boundaries are misleading and that parts of the administration *are* in group-like competition with other sections of the bureaucracy. Often the groups outside will share aims and tactics with 'patrons' in the civil service.

The argument in this article is that the real confusion is not caused by assuming that almost any kind of organisation will attempt to exert influence, but in *labelling* every organisation engaging in pressure politics as a pressure group. If all bodies attempting to affect outcomes in the 'pressure system' are given a generic name such as *pressure participant*, there is no need to call every policy-influencing body an interest/pressure group. There can be a broad equivalence in functional policy terms between different types of policy-influencing bodies without them all being lumped together. In Sartori's language (1984, 30) this is a denotative definition: it establishes the broad boundary of the class.

This article acknowledges that there are many bodies active on most policy fronts but, like Rose's work, resists (in spite of Jordan and Richardson 1987) the idea that all these bodies are thereby interest groups. While the list of policy-relevant active organisations can be captured by a term such as pressure participant, within that category a distinction can be made between *policy participants* such as companies and a more restricted conception of *interest or pressure group*. This new term (policy participant) is needed to signal that not all bodies seeking to influence policy are sensibly lumped into the pressure group box. Attempting to influence public policy as a pressure participant does not make all such bodies 'pressure or interest groups'. This in the Sartori scheme is a 'precising definition'.

It is less confusing to see the use of the term 'pressure participant' for the wider conception and reserve the terms 'pressure/interest group' for (normally) *multi-member, politically oriented bodies* of individuals (in this case both citizens and companies as business group members), and 'policy participant' for bodies such as a company, lobbyist or agency active in the political system. If 'interest group' is allowed to take the wider meaning, it causes confusion for students who are directed to the Olson-type literature on the internal life of groups: such issues do not arise for all pressure participants. This 'rule' allows a distinction between the (collective) trade association with companies in membership (such as the Confederation of British Industry or the Federation of Small Businesses) from own-account lobbying by individual companies (whether through hired lobbyists

or in-house public affairs teams). Both might attempt to influence relevant legislation, but the single company does not have the membership/policy problems that are at the heart of mobilisation-centred interest group studies. Companies in their policy-influencing role are pressure participants in that they are active in the policy process, but they can be categorised as *policy participants* rather than considering them as interest groups simply on the basis they are seeking to alter policy.

From a policy studies perspective it is important to examine firms both in the (collective) pressure groups that they join and as 'own-account' actors. However, many interest group studies have as their primary goal investigation of the *collective action* paradox. For these studies the focus will not be on organisations acting politically on their own account but acting, for example, through the trade association or the Eurogroup. A study of all policy-influencing bodies would not require to distinguish between the firm and the collective business pressure group. Both would be pressure participants.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up again, the policy studies literature effectively homogenises all 'political organisations' who seek policy influence, and appropriates for them the label pressure/interest group. This is reflected in the label pressure participant—which can be subdivided into collective action interest groups and policy participants. This confirms what interest group scholars have long acknowledged, which is that all groups are not the same and that underlying their policy function is a heterogeneous array of organisational and representative functions. A language is needed to capture the distinctions.

### **Memberless Groups: an Exception to the General Argument?**

The main thrust of the interest/pressure group definition advocated here is that it is a *multi-member* body attempting to influence policy. However a second sort of interest group making explicit policy-influencing efforts can be identified—the *policy-centred group*. Such bodies have few members (and hence no real politics of membership), and *exist only to influence policy* and would seem to meet most commonsense interpretations of 'pressure group'. Even though such organisations do not face the politics of collective policy-making associated with 'pressure groups', it would be strange to *exclude* this kind of body from the pressure group category as pressure is its *raison d'être*. In line with this proposition Michael Hayes (1986, 133) argues that,

interest groups are typically portrayed as organizations that seek to mobilize members to influence public policy. Numerous groups formed in recent years, however, do not conform to this traditional conception of the mass-membership group. Many have no members at all ... some organizations are composed of nothing but staffers in Washington and are funded entirely by sources such as private foundations.

Accepting Salisbury's argument that interest groups are distinctive because members (or supporters for that matter) can potentially exercise control of leaders through 'exit', the memberless group is a sort of affront to that logic, but the policy-

centred organisation—with its main priority of influencing public policy—does seem worth including under the interest group banner. Thus organisations like the Campaign for Lead Free Air (CLEAR) in Britain, who campaign for the removal of lead from petrol (see Wilson 1983), are included as interest groups even though they are not a membership organisation. *Essentially the policy-centred group is a political (non-collective) organised group. It is an organisation set up with the express purpose of influencing policy.*

### **Pressure Participant, Interest Group or Policy Participant Status**

The underlying image of the political process adopted here is one where policies emerge from the interaction of parties, bureaucrats, companies, membership-based groups, trade bodies, groups with few members, competing elites and public opinion. This view was captured by Lindblom (1979, 523) when he presented policies as being the result of mutual adjustments. This interaction may be described as between pressure participants (or stakeholders) rather than between widely defined (functional) pressure or interest groups. Pressure participants are bodies attempting to influence outcomes. Thus a university is normally regarded as 'political' only in the very broadest sense when it is engaged in the delivery of core education; it is however a pressure participant when, for example, it intervenes on its own account in the political process if there is a cut in the level of resource allocated. In line with the argument above, the university can at that point be termed a policy participant—an apolitical body that sometimes acts in ways that from a functional perspective make it appear *as if* it is a pressure group. That political science treats organisations such as the Church of Scotland as 'political pressure groups' simply proves that there is nothing better to hand. Similarly, once the new terminology is adopted, a business corporation (e.g. British Petroleum) which has its own government affairs section need not be seen as a pressure group—even when it seeks to intervene politically—but it is undoubtedly a pressure participant (and more narrowly policy participant). In the UK, the Caravan Club is primarily an organisation to provide members with access to quality camping sites and facilities. Were it to act politically, say to lobby for planning changes to open up new areas for camping facilities, it would be a pressure participant. To distinguish the politically active university, a company such as BP or the Caravan Club from other pressure participants (of the interest group type) they can be labelled *policy participants*.

Potentially an *already* organised body with no prior political orientation could become politically involved. That is, it could shift from being a potential pressure participant to a pressure participant. Whether it is an organised, collective group (a club or society) or an organised, non-collective body (e.g. firm) it is a policy participant. These are discussed by Robert Dowse and John Hughes (1977) as 'sporadic interventionists'. An example of this type is the National Coursing Club (NCC) in Britain. This collective body had minimal political relevance until the controversy of the hunting debate refocused public attention on the practice of hare coursing. The term policy participant allows discussion of such organisations as relevant to the policy process—without having to grant them 'honorary' and tempo-

rary status as interest groups. They are not interest groups, but adopting a role acting as if they are. Such interventions can be politically very significant, but not interest group phenomena.

The Countryside Alliance—created for the sole (political) purpose of influencing related legislation—is a pressure group, while the NCC are acting *as if* they are a pressure group. The NCC's political activities are additional to its other activities and are likely to be ephemeral (i.e. they will not become a permanent feature). It is *possible* to label the clubs as temporary pressure groups. Such groups are, more precisely, intermittent/occasional policy participants. But this is a difficult boundary: some would accept the collective body which is temporarily politically active as a pressure group—even though that is not its primary purpose. In the terms of this article though it is regarded as a policy participant. It is a virtue of these terms that one does not have to use the label 'pressure groups' to cover both collective groups such as the Friends of the Earth and a local amenity club forced to act defensively, and temporarily, in the realm of politics on a particular issue.

Policy histories confirm that business organisations are particularly important political actors. They are often politically relevant—both when acting through trade associations (which would make them subject to conventional pressure/interest group interpretations) and when acting on their own account (e.g. through government affairs departments). As argued in this article they are policy participants when acting on their own account. The major point is that the range of influence-seeking organisations that would be of relevance in a study of policy outcomes is different from the range of bodies that are usually (but not always) considered as pressure/interest groups. The latter are (primarily) characterised by the need to overcome the free rider problem and to settle on collective policy goals.

### **Implications for Research: Working with these Categories**

The literature is littered with idiosyncratic deployments of the term interest group. The article prefers to reserve this term for dedicated politically relevant organisations (normally with members or supporters) and use policy participant for organisations not primarily dedicated to political activity. The sum of these two categories is the pressure participant category. All pressure participants are equivalents when captured by the functional view dominant in public policy studies.

So what is the benefit of these new categories? They remind us about the diversity within the pressure participant category as documented in public policy studies. Deployed as suggested we may be able to retrieve, from what has been up till now referred to as 'interest group literature', those conclusions that are relevant to what we refer to as interest groups and what are relevant to policy participants. This organising language can potentially allow us to squeeze more from our existing research efforts. As such they may assist in addressing the criticism, made by some prominent interest group scholars, that inconsistency in research frameworks has thwarted attempts to generate solid and enduring conclusions about interest group activity. Perhaps most importantly, they remind us that questions about interest groups, such as the asserted dominance of business, should not be answered by

data on pressure participants. Similarly, the categories remind us that only a minority of what have been in the past termed 'interest groups' are actually in a position to even *potentially* enhance political participation. The contribution to direct citizen participation in democracy is not enhanced through policy participants. Likewise, the social capital development capacity may be small when policy participants are withdrawn from the 'interest group' category.

The use of the labels advocated does imply additional work for researchers. This is primarily because the *names* of groups do not immediately assist us in the categorisation task. A particular danger, with a capacity to corrupt data gathering, is the fact that some organisations have retained the language of mutuality when they have de facto become service industry firms—for example roadside assistance motoring organisations. Other commercial organisations use terms such as membership but the 'membership' confers nothing other than a right to use facilities—e.g. gymnasia. The additional work involved in assessing how groups fit into these categories, combined with the proliferation of policy participants, makes for a large-scale task, but surely one that is routine for researchers trying to come to grips with their subject. This type of classificatory task is a necessary prerequisite for deriving conclusions that carry beyond the case.

## Summary

Confusion has been caused by the policy studies practice of labelling everything that attempts to influence policy as a pressure or interest group. The practice arose for good reason: there is a common ground between all policy-influencing organisations in a functional sense. However, it has had the repercussion of treating all policy participants as though they had the same levels of flexibility, decision-making processes informing their policy behaviour, autonomy and resource generating capacity as one another. This article argues that common ground can be recognised by terming all these bodies *pressure participants* (a term that picks up some of the early use in the literature). Within that general category the unitary interest *policy participant* is distinct from the collective *interest or pressure group*. The differences between the phenomena are too great to sensibly combine. The costs of failing to make distinctions are too great to ignore. The new approach offers the opportunity for worthwhile comparative work that is denied if *ad hoc* definitions generate data sets with no portability.

John Gerring (1999, 357) argues that 'good' concepts are not synonymous with clarity or the product of a particular formative process, but that they are a trade-off among many desirable dimensions (familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility and field utility). Whether the terms introduced in this article meet this kind of test can be debated: that the terms used unthinkingly fail these tests is beyond dispute.

New terminology is introduced with reluctance. As Felix Oppenheim argued (1975, 307) there are advantages in the specialist discussion of politics remaining reasonably close to ordinary language, but he went on to quote J. L. Austin's (1970, 185) advice, 'ordinary language is *not* the last word; in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it is the *first*

word' (original emphasis). Gerring (1999, 362) notes deviations from ordinary language impose costs, but they are necessary departures. The coincidence that the ideas required are those inherited from general language is too unlikely. It would be remarkable if a general conversational use of the term pressure group satisfied the needs of political science. The distinction between pressure/interest group, pressure participant and policy participant might then be useful.

There may be criticism that to focus on definitional clarity amounts to 'pickiness'. We disagree. The motivation is that the profession is currently making do with ill-defined concepts that hinder the extraction of gains from our collective research efforts. Indeed, contra to objections that this is 'too much', more realistically this should be viewed as preliminary to a more thoroughgoing attempt to develop more robust and theoretically informed categories. The valid criticism of this article is not that it overly complicates analysis, but that it is too modest a start on what should be a bigger reconceptualisation of the tools of the sub-discipline.

Richardson (1999) asked why British work on groups and parties had so little impact and did the 'haze of common knowledge' obscure? This piece suggests it does. If we have no international language then our studies of groups in Britain are in effect unintelligible outside their locality. He quotes Mackenzie's call for theories and concepts that can be utilised in different national contexts. Yet again Mackenzie beat our generation to the punch. The sort of impressions we have about the relative power of interest groups are dependent on the way in which 'interest group' is defined and how it is operationalised. Noting the bias to middle-class participation in groups, Schlozman (1984) has picked up Schattschneider's well known observation about the interest group system being congenitally biased in a middle-class way and asked, 'what accent the heavenly chorus?'. At least in part the answer depends on who is conducting the research and their conceptual interpretations—because that determines who is counted as singing.

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### Notes

1. For example, governance, corporatism, globalisation.
2. This is based on a British Interest Group Project Working Paper, G. Jordan, W. Maloney and A. McLaughlin, 'What is Studied When Pressure Groups are Studied' (1992).
3. As Salisbury (1975, 176) puts it, "Those scholars who continue to employ "pressure group" as their generic term mean by it the same as those who prefer the emotively more neutral term "interest group"".
4. The distinction between interest groups and New Social Movements is discussed in Jordan and Maloney 1997, chapter 2.
5. A range of labels are used almost interchangeably to refer to NGOs which makes an authoritative definition hard to find. These labels include Nonprofit, Voluntary, Social Economy, Third Sector



- Organisations, Community Organisations, Community Sector Organisations and Civil Society Organisations (Lyons 2001, 8–9).
6. Sartori actually suggests Wittgenstein is correct in saying that meaning and context are interwoven, but there is a different question of how meanings are treated in the specialised vocabularies (languages) that each science constructs. Sartori also notes the extension of the Wittgenstein fallacy to say that meaning is revealed by context only, 'the more meanings that must be surmised by contextual investigation, the less we are dealing with a scientific kind of knowledge'.
  7. The distinction between individuals and businesses is blurred when it comes to organisations representing small businesses. The businesses may be individuals.
  8. Important campaigning examples may well not have the stereotypical arrangement of formal membership and rights within an organisation. Thus it would be unfortunate if our conception of campaigning group did not include Greenpeace—which lacks formal members.
  9. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, for example, argues that they make policy not by responding to their postbag but through 'proper, structured, unsolicited surveying, which allows us to make the right decisions' (*Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1994).
  10. Salisbury (1992, 43) also sees membership as a crucial dimension.
  11. Salisbury (1992, 44) also refers to 'conventionally defined interest groups'. Arguably the stereotypical definition given in this article is near to what he had in mind.
  12. Mitchell (1990) uses the corporation rather than the interest group as his object of study and therefore is able to pursue Salisbury's distinction between the institutional and group representation. In fact in real life there are more 'membership' groups than membership groups. Many groups that look superficially to be member-based are in fact supporter-based with regular financial contributors rather than members with rights within the organisation.
  13. Salisbury (1992, 57) says, 'Business corporations are sometimes considered, sensibly enough, among business interests, but the profound differences in organizational structure and motivation between, for example, General Motors and the Chamber of Commerce have not been remarked, nor has the implication these differences have for interest group theory'. The position in this article is that in policy studies terms the differences may be comparatively unimportant, but if one is interested in the mobilisation issue that has dominated interest group studies since Olson (1965), then the differences are vital and the corporation cannot be usefully subsumed within the interest group umbrella.
  14. See also, 'those units, *organised or not*, of the democratic process which have a set purpose or set of purposes, but which are nonetheless neither political parties nor formal agencies of government' (Alderman 1984, 21, cited in Baggott 1995, 3, emphasis added). Grant (1995, 6) suggests that 'Jordan and Richardson (1987, 14–18) are correct when they argue for a broad definition of pressure group that accepts companies and corporations as such groups'. In the passage alluded to by Grant, Jordan and Richardson cited the miners' strike of 1984–1985 to show that in policy studies sense it is easy to subconsciously, and defensibly to consciously, stretch the group concept. See also discussion by Salisbury (1984, 64). This article obviously does not follow the Jordan and Richardson policy-based view.
  15. Cigler and Loomis (1991, 385) note that 'because non group, special interest actors increasingly enter the fray as well, the term *organized interests* may well be more applicable and make more sense today than the term *interest groups*'. In other words, the line of argument of this article is already in the literature in a low-key way.

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