



May 1978

Social Welfare Interest Groups: An Underutilized Resource

Fred Barbaro
Adelphi University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barbaro, Fred (1978) "Social Welfare Interest Groups: An Underutilized Resource," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol5/iss3/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



**SOCIAL WELFARE INTEREST GROUPS:
AN UNDERUTILIZED RESOURCE**

**Fred Barbaro,
Adelphi University School of Social Work**

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need for increased political activity by the professional social work community in order to enhance its own status and to promote the growth of the social welfare institutions required by our clientele. It is not a polemic but an attempt to bare the relationship between social welfare bureaucracies and the political system. The results of a study on interest group behavior are reported. Social workers, as an interest group, can be more effective in advancing the goals of the profession if they have a better understanding of the political process and thereby maximize the impact of their limited resources.

Form has noted that there has been an impressive growth in welfare institutions in America, despite the political reticence of welfare professionals and the political apathy of their clientele.¹ He attributes the growth to worldwide and domestic pressures articulated by many poorly organized groups that recognized that the existing mechanisms could not address the problems facing society. Once the bureaucracies were created to administer the programs, professional social workers validated the services by training their personnel in schools of social work and by staffing the agencies but then proceeded to "strike a neutral pose" in line with traditional norms governing professional behavior.²

A contemporary view of social services in an industrial society equates expanded programs with productivity

increases, and a rise in living standards. Services are not seen as transitory but necessary to the functioning of a modern society.³ In this sense they are supportive of the social and economic order but are nevertheless under attack by conservative groups that purport to have similar goals. In a rapidly expanding economy, social services may keep abreast of expansion in other areas but during periods of slow growth or stagnation, they are prime targets for curtailment. Neutrality at that time may be consistent with one's view of professional role but is it consistent with client need or even professional self-interest? I think not.

This paper addresses the need for political activity by the professional community. It is not a polemic but an attempt to bare the relationship between social welfare bureaucracies and the political system, and to increase our understanding of the role that interest groups play in the process. The latter objective is achieved by reporting the results of a study conducted on social welfare interest groups. While the professional association has increased its political activity of late, some observers have expressed the view that the majority of social workers will not participate. Form shares this view for he believes that the profession "tends to breed a type that is timid, conservative, unimaginative, and easily co-opted by the tough-minded."⁴ At best this view is impressionistic and it is important to keep in mind that the same things were once said about teachers. Few would now characterize teachers and their associations as apolitical and there is no reason to believe that social workers could not change their image if they were convinced that it was in their best interest to do so.

A Pluralist Perspective of the Political System

Zald's contribution to a "sociology of community organization"⁵ is helpful in demonstrating how agencies shape professional practice and how in turn their activities are

curtailed by internal and external events. The political science literature adds to these insights by spelling out the role of bureaucracies in political decision-making which not only includes their clientele but other actors and interest groups as well. From the pluralist's perspective,⁶ the bureaucracies share power with other actors while they continually strive for a state of autonomy. No single elite dominates the governmental or political system. The system is seen as being vigorously competitive with numerous contestants vying against one another for the prizes that are an out-growth of political activity.

Sayre and Kaufman noted that there are a multiplicity of decision centers consisting of two parts: "A 'core group' at the center, invested by the rules with the formal authority to legitimize decisions....and a constellation of 'satellite groups' seeking to influence the authoritative issuances of the core group."⁷ Interest groups are satellite groups, in constant competition or in alliances with each other, pressing their claims on the core groups presiding over the decision centers of the general organs of government.

Utilizing an example of a welfare department in a large city, this pluralistic view of decision-making may be schematically stated as depicted in Figure I.⁸ This paradigm, with a few modifications, can be replicated for other subsystems of the political system like housing or education. While no single elitist group rules over all these subsystems, each subsystem attracts its own elites that specialize in that area of interest. Ordinarily these elites govern without much interference from outsiders. However, when a good deal of conflict is generated over a policy issue, decision-making is opened to public view and new actors become involved. Political actors may have legal authority to intervene or exercise their influence informally. Their roles are modified by the rules of the system which enhance the competition among them and confer advantages to some and not to others. The rules include:

1. State and Federal Constitution
2. State and Federal Agency rules and regulations
3. State and Federal Court decisions
4. State and Federal statutes
5. Customs or informal arrangements.

To maintain a degree of autonomy in this highly competitive atmosphere, bureaucratic officials seek allies to temper the intrusion of other actors (especially those in the executive and legislative branches) in their internal affairs. Rourke states:

A first and fundamental source of power for administrative agencies in American society is their ability to attract outside support. Strength in a constituency is no less an asset for an American administrator than it is for a politician, and some agencies have succeeded in building outside support as formidable as that of any political organization. The lack of such support severely circumscribes the ability of an agency to achieve its goals, and may even threaten its survival as an organization.⁹

The clientele of an agency, that is, groups whose interests are strongly affected by an agency's programs¹⁰ are natural sources of support and opposition. Interest groups sometimes prefer to work in the bureaucratic rather than the legislative arena where they may have less influence. Bureaucrats also have discretion in administering their programs due to the ambiguous language of some legislation and the discretionary powers specifically granted to agency officials by the legislature.¹¹ Therefore, groups that are interested in the implementation of programs must have influence at the bureaucratic level.

While the administrative power evolves from technical knowledge, expertise, and sources other than mobilized interest groups, these groups do provide a unique source of support. Sharkansky describes interest group aid as follows:

....First, the group can take a position on an issue which coincides with a position held by administrators, but which administrators cannot take publicly because it would offend their chief executive or important members of the legislature. Second, interest groups can support an agency's request for funds or statutory authority with the executive and the legislature or can help the agency resist undesirable directives from the executive or the legislature. An interest group can make an argument and build public support for a position that cannot be articulated by an administrator who is currently the target of executive or legislative hostility."¹²

Study Design

A definition of terms is essential before one embarks on a study of interest groups. According to Truman, an interest group "refers to any group that, on the basis of one or more shared attitudes, makes certain claims upon other groups in the society for the establishment, maintenance or enhancement of forms of behavior that are implied by the shared attitudes."¹³ This definition is broad and designed to be consistent with his attempt to explain everything that happens in the political system in terms of groups. If "shared attitudes" become the significant criteria, then everyone can be theoretically affiliated with an interest group - government officials, elected leaders, the unorganized, and the like.

Eckstein calls this approach to the study of political behavior metaphysical:

As used by its more extravagant exponents, group theory tends indeed to come nothing more than a language, based on the plausible but arbitrary metaphysic that in politics the ultimate "real", the component alike of individuals and institutions,

the unit which really "acts" and underlies ideas, is the group - not individuals, interactions, institutions, or larger political systems. Nothing can escape the clutches of this metaphysics if only one stretches it far enough, but precisely because of this nothing is illuminated by it either.¹⁴

Schattschneider agrees with this assessment and attempts to set boundaries or limit the scope of the subject in order to distinguish it from other subjects. He begins by differentiating between public and special interests. The former "refers to general or common interests shared by all or by substantially all members of the community."¹⁵ This is consistent with the "community of interest" thesis, a requirement of a democratic society. The implication of special interests is that only a few people or a faction of the community share that interest.¹⁶ If this distinction is not made and attempts are made to explain everything in terms of special interests, the subject loses its boundaries and could lead to the conclusion that people have a special interest in the public interest.

The next step is to limit the subject even further. Schattschneider suggests that the field of study should be the organized, special interest groups and "leave the rest to someone else."¹⁷ The advantages of this approach are obvious; they are known, identifiable and recognized and they are all exclusive. The study of the subject becomes manageable if the researcher focuses on those groups with a demonstrated interest in politics evidenced by formal organizations having memberships, bylaws and officers.

This view does not attempt to explain all political behavior nor does it assume that all interests are articulated. Pressure group politics "makes sense only as the political instrument of a segment of the community. It gets results by being selective and biased; if everyone

got into the act the unique advantages of this form of organization would be destroyed, for it is possible that if all interests could be mobilized the results would be a stalemate."¹⁸

It is possible to further refine the definition of interest groups by distinguishing them from pressure groups and attempting to classify them by objective characteristics or by shared attitudes. This exercise may prove productive in other studies but not this one. The focus suggested by Schattschneider - the formally organized, special interest group - was the unit of observation in this study.

Arriving at a definition of interest groups, it now became necessary to observe their political activity. The years between 1968 and 1972 in New York City were chosen. Four issues with educational and broad social welfare concerns were selected and each conflict was contested in a different arena (e.g., the legislature, the courts). The issues remained on the public agenda for a long period of time, thereby giving groups an opportunity to become involved if they chose to do so.

In keeping with Schattschneider's suggestion, the interest groups chosen for study had the following characteristics:

1. They were formally organized and exhibited a degree of stability and cohesiveness over time (at least one year). Ad hoc groups were not considered.
2. They all demonstrated an interest in the issues based on past behavior.
3. They were citywide organizations.

In all, nineteen organizations¹⁹ were chosen that could be categorized as civic, educational, religious, civil rights, ethnic or economic groups. Some would fit comfortably under more than one designation. Attempts were made to

get a broad representation of organizations, but it is not known if they are truly representative of all interest groups in the city. If the selection of a representative sample was attempted, important groups who were intimately involved in the incidents being studied may have been eliminated.

The data were gathered from interviews with the staffs of the interest groups which usually involved more than a single visit to each agency and more than one staff member being interviewed. In addition, interviews were conducted with businessmen, staff members of public agencies, union officials, lobbyists, attorneys, city employees, and members of the state legislature. An unstructured open-ended schedule was used. Additional data were gathered by reviewing agency reports, memoranda, pamphlets, and press releases.

Questions

Questions that were explored in the study include:

Do interests inevitably lead to political activity? Under what circumstances do groups become involved or refrain from becoming involved in issues? What are the determining factors that lead groups to work in one decision-making arena as opposed to others? Why do some groups specialize while others choose targets of opportunity? What is the nature of their relationship with other groups and how does the new association affect their autonomy? What tactics do groups use to gain access to decision-makers and decision-making centers? With what frequency and degree of intensity? What factors determine the tactics? Is the activity of any group roughly proportional to its stake in the issue? Do economic groups tend to promote their interests with greater intensity and frequency than ideological groups?

Findings

A summary of the findings follows:

Determinants of Interest Group Activity

Table I lists the nineteen interest groups and their involvement or lack of involvement in the four incidents studied. Involvement here is judged to be significant activity. Effectiveness is not a criterion, but a press release or letter to a legislator is not enough to qualify.

A quick glance at the table suggests certain patterns developing. Only half the groups were involved in any one of the incidents under study. But these are not significant factors in themselves, and additional probing is necessary to give meaning to the table. It is clear, however, that no one factor determined the course of participation for all groups, and the decision to become involved or to refrain from such involvement was based on many factors that will be explored below.

Economic interests engendered a stronger response than educational or civil rights concerns among the interest groups.

A case could be made for almost all groups having an equal stake in the issues based on their professed aims as organizations. But obviously intervening factors curbed the activities of some of the groups. Nevertheless, the economic groups overcame the barriers barring participation of other groups and made it their business to become involved.

Interest groups intervention is determined by the nature of the issue as perceived by the group and a desire to maintain a consistent organizational self-image.

One of the factors that depressed activity was the nature of the issue. If conflict was inevitable, and disruption possible, and the issue is perceived in that manner, some groups remain on the sidelines. They do so for the following reasons:

First, there is the problem of controversy. Some groups

established themselves as alternatives to conflict groups and resist all pressures to become "militant" or take a stand on controversial issues. They feel that their effectiveness is compromised when they are perceived by their target groups as being controversial. Their aim is to gain concessions from the system as it is and to take advantage of the changes brought about by other groups.

Second, there are groups that are not repulsed by controversy as such but who have few of the tools with which to affect the outcome of a contest. This is not a matter of resources but a choice of operating styles.

Internal conflict over an issue limits both an organization's ability to respond and the intensity of its activity.

The amount of organizational resources had little impact on a group's decision to become involved in an issue.

Resources are generally considered to be a major determinant of interest group activity. But the evidence here indicates that the lack of resources had little impact on the decision to enter or not to enter the fray.

Intensity of activity is determined by whether a group is a single purpose or multi-purpose organization and whether its posture is defensive or offensive.

Single purpose and multi-purpose groups could be seen as synonyms for primary and secondary interests, and in a sense they are. However, the concept of objective interest as opposed to perceived interest comes into play. Objectively most of the groups had a primary interest in the issue, but they did not all see it that way. Those organizations that perceive the issue as one of many curtailed their activity, and the intensity with which they participated accordingly.

Intensity of activity is also related to whether groups are offensive or defensive. The defensive groups felt

they were under attack and protected their interests in every arena.

The choice of arenas by interest groups is determined by an organization's operating style and its desire not to break with traditional roles; the dominance of one professional group with its selective perspective on issues and strategies; and lack of leadership sophistication in more than one arena.

Interest Group Tactics

The choice of tactics is directly related to a group's influence in the political system as well as other factors like leadership sophistication, organizational style, rules of the arena, and resources.

Many of the factors that determined group involvement in particular arenas have a bearing on the tactics used by groups. An organization will use tactics that are consistent with its self-image. The lack of resources will eliminate some options. Some arenas will curb the use of tactics that are acceptable in other arenas. And leadership sophistication will account for the variety and effectiveness of the tactics used.

Over the years some groups have developed relationships with governmental bodies that have resulted in consultation rights. These groups by and large do not feel estranged from the system. But the sixties saw the introduction of new groups to the political system whose interests were not always represented before. These groups did not share the confidence implied by the behavior of other groups regarding the system's responsiveness. Therefore, their tactics were designed to gain access to decision centers barred to them in the past or to attempt structural changes that would not perpetuate their inferior political status.

In response to the civil rights street demonstrations,

government provided the resources to enable new groups to be formed, thus revealing a sometimes overlooked relationship between interest groups and decision-making centers. Interest groups are instrumental in establishing new policies and new policies lead to the formation of new interest groups.

Non-governmental interest groups do not constitute a countervailing force to governmental interest groups.

The non-governmental interest groups were not a significant political force on major issues. Although they collectively possessed greater resources, they were too fragmented to be effective. As autonomous units they are dealt with individually and easily handled. Acting alone, they are overly conscious of their lack of resources when seeking to influence a multi-billion dollar agency or a prestigious legislative body.

The big issues are therefore left to the big actors - the United Federation of Teachers, the large bureaucracies, City Hall, and the State Legislature. The blacks and Puerto Ricans found themselves in this company only because their existing groups coalesced, and they opened up participation to the unaffiliated. This move gave them parity in street demonstrations, but they were less successful in other arenas.

Almost without exception the groups were led by intelligent, sophisticated people who worked long hours and were committed to organizational goals. They ranged programmatically from those who dabbled in everything to those who were so planful that they could not react organizationally to changing situations. The expectation was that each of the little projects that consumed their time and resources were cumulative and that together they affected larger policy areas. That conclusion cannot be drawn from the evidence gathered in this study, but one thing is clear, non-governmental interest groups did not constitute a

countervailing force to governmental interest groups, either in New York City or in Albany. Their activities can be justified in any number of ways, but the field is controlled by the big actors.

Conclusion

For our purposes, interest groups can be seen as falling into the following categories:

- a. Public and private agencies
- b. Social welfare educators
- c. Social welfare professional organizations
- d. Client groups
- e. Groups whose main interest is other than social welfare

Political activity by social workers usually involves the first three categories but the latter two are less frequently utilized. The findings in and by themselves do not offer a blueprint for interest group mobilization, but they do offer clues concerning their behavior that agency executives can exploit.

This strategy is not without its perils. There is a legitimate concern that control over agency programs or the appointment of key personnel will be lost in exchange for interest groups support. Some agency executives have relinquished some control or have granted interest groups veto power over the appointment of some personnel²⁰ but the preponderance of evidence indicates that administrators dominate these relationships.²¹ While any strategy is accompanied by risks, inaction can hardly be considered void of hazards. Year after year aspiring politicians advance their careers by attacking welfare and social service programs while agency administrators stand alone in the political arena whispering their denials. Both agencies and clients lose under these conditions.

NOTES

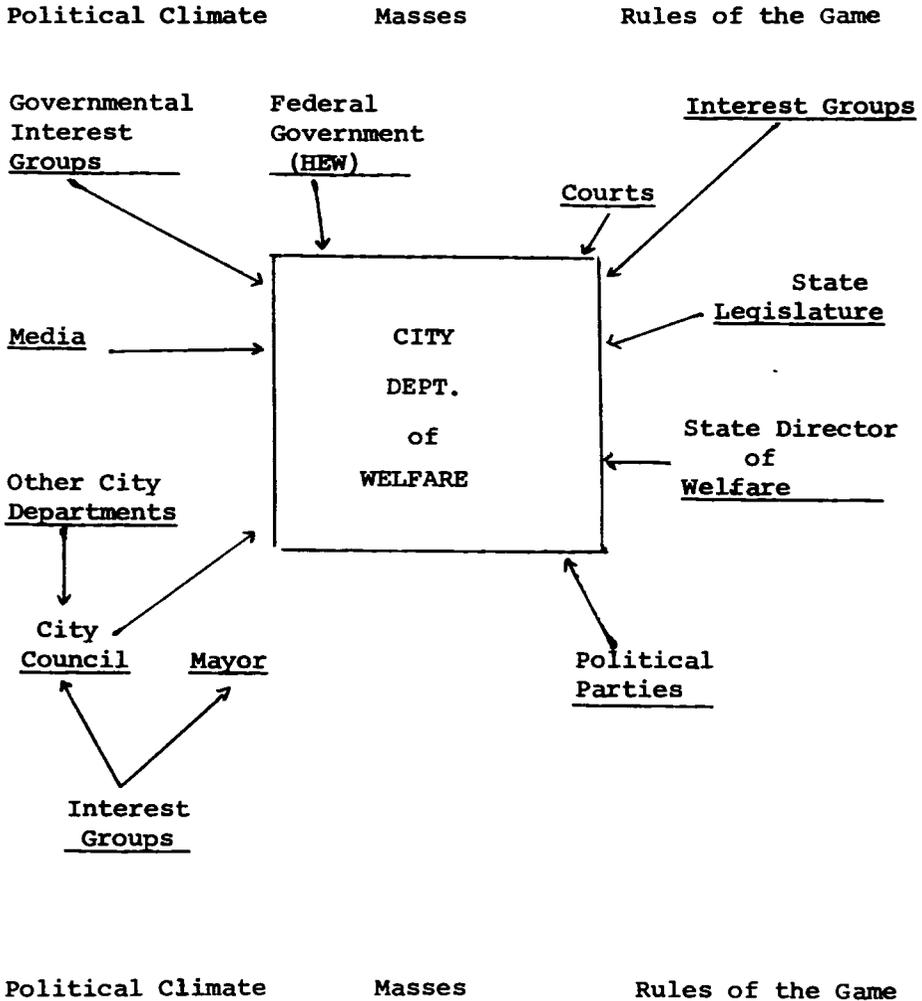
1. William H. Form, "Social Power and Social Welfare" in Robert Morris, ed., Centrally Planned Change (New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1964), p. 87.
2. Form, "Social Power and Social Welfare", p. 86 and Joseph Hefferman, Jr., "Political Activity and Social Work Executives," Social Work, 9, (April 1964), pp. 18-23.
3. Alfred J. Kahn, Social Policy and Social Services, (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 14.
4. Form, "Social Policy and Social Welfare", p. 89.
5. Mayer N. Zald, "Organizations as Politics: An Analysis of Community Organization Agencies," Social Work, 11 (October 1966), p. 56.
6. Adherents of this view include Wallace S. Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, Governing New York City (New York: W. Norton & Co., 1960) and Robert A. Dahl, Who Governs (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961). Dissenting views can be found in Floyd Hunter, Community Power Structure (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), Grant McConnell, Private Power and American Democracy (New York: Knopf, 1966) and Michael Paul Rogin, The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967).
7. Sayre and Kaufman, Governing New York City, p.710.
8. See Figure I in Appendix I
9. Francis E. Rourke, Bureaucracy, Politics and Public Policy (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969) p. 11.
10. L. Harmon Zeigler and G. Wayne Peak, Interest Groups in American Society, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972) p. 163.
11. Ira Sharkansky, Public Administration (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1970), p. 182.
12. Sharkansky, Public Administration, p. 184
13. David B. Truman, The Governmental Process (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 33
14. Harry Eckstein, Pressure Group Politics: The Case of the British Medical Association (Stamford: Stamford University Press, 1960), p. 153.

15. E.E. Schattschneider, The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realistic View of Democracy in America (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 23.
16. Schattschneider, The Semi-Sovereign People, p. 24.
17. Schattschneider, The Semi-Sovereign People, p. 29.
18. Schattschneider, The Semi-Sovereign People, p. 35.
19. The Organizations are listed in Table I in Appendix II.
20. Rourke, Bureaucracy, Politics, and Public Policy, p. 22.
21. Sharkansky, Public Administration, p. 189.

APPENDIX I

Figure 1

A PLURALIST VIEW OF DECISION-MAKING



APPENDIX II

Table 1

INTEREST GROUP INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC ISSUES

<u>Organizations</u>	<u>Issue</u>	<u>Issue</u>	<u>Issue</u>	<u>Issue</u>
	<u>I</u>	<u>II</u>	<u>III</u>	<u>IV</u>
Anti-Defamation League	No	No	Yes	No
American Jewish Committee	No	No	No	Yes
American Jewish Congress	No	No	No	No
ASPIRA	No	No	Yes	Yes
Citizens Committee for Children	No	Yes	No	Yes
Community Service Society	No	Yes	No	No
Council Against Poverty	Yes	Yes	No	No
Brownsville Corporation	Yes	No	No	No
Haryou-Act	No	Yes	No	No
MEND	Yes	No	No	No
United Bronx Parents	No	Yes	No	No
Council of Supervisors and Administrators	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense Fund-Legal Action Center	No	No	Yes	No
New York Civil Liberties Union	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Puerto Rican Forum	No	No	No	Yes
Puerto Rican Educators	No	Yes	No	Yes
Public Education Association	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
United Federation of Teachers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
United Parents Association	Yes	Yes	No	Yes