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6.5. INTEREST GROUPS IN LOCAL POLITICS

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Even though reference to local groups is rarely made in general texts on American interest groups (see, for example, J. Berry 1997, Browne 1998, Hrebenar 1997, Nownes 2001), there is an increasing body of research on local group activity. In conjunction with work on national and state groups, this research helps to provide a more complete picture of group activity in the United States and can be used to test and advance explanations about interest group activity in general. Furthermore, because local groups are more accessible than state groups and national organizations, they offer perfect opportunities for original research, including interviewing group personnel and members and conducting participant observation and survey research (see chap. 15). For those not familiar with the dynamics of local group activity, a good starting point, including an overview of the local group universe and the nature and dynamics of group activity, are the works by Brian Jones (1983, chap. 7) and Christensen (1995, chap. 10). An alternative perspective on the importance of local groups (and parties) is provided by Paul Peterson (1981, chap. 6) and referred to later in this entry. The overview provided in these books can be supplemented by the following review of main sources, of explanation of the major trends in interpretation, and of the principal schools of thought on local interest groups.

The Pluralist School and Its Critics

Over a century after Tocqueville's (1835/1840) observations about the centrality of voluntary associations in communities in the United States,

pluralism emerged as the dominant theory of urban politics. Orthodox pluralists (e.g., Dahl 1961; see also section 3.2.) argued that cities contained many organized groups representing diverse interests and that unorganized interests were easily mobilized into politically effective groups. From the pluralist perspective, power was distributed widely among groups, and group participation facilitated democratic governance.

An extensive body of research questioning this pluralist description of local group politics soon emerged. Following Floyd Hunter (1953), elite theorists acknowledged the role of civic groups but argued that economic influentials, not a heterogeneous array of ordinary citizens, dominated such groups. Other analysts argued that groups that might challenge dominant interests were inhibited from becoming active due to a "mobilization of bias" (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; see also section 3.3.) and that such "protest" groups that did emerge usually fared poorly in political struggles (Lipsky 1970).

A number of research projects sought to synthesize pluralist and antipluralist depictions of local group politics by estimating and explaining differences in the influence of various types of groups in a wide range of American cities (Abney and Lauth 1985). These studies typically showed that business interests were more organized and influential than such "countervailing groups" as unions, neighborhood groups, and civil rights organizations and that differences in political institutions explained little variance in group influence (Getter and Schumaker 1983).

During the 1980s, the debate between pluralists and their opponents subsided, and a number of other models of local politics emerged. According to the "state autonomy model," city officials act on the basis of their own interests independent of the demands of organized interests (Gurr and King 1987). Even more influential have been models stressing the dependence of cities on economic factors in formulating development policies. According to Paul Peterson (1981), local politics "is groupless politics," because group influence is confined to relatively unimportant issues involving "housekeeping services." Such models reinforced the findings of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay City Council Research Project that stressed the "irrelevance" of interest group activity for urban policy making (Zisk 1973, 151).

Four Major Interpretations of Local Interest Group Politics

As a result of these developments and challenges to the pluralist school, at least four strands of urban research continue to stress the importance of local interest groups: (1) revisionist pluralism, (2) the growth machine model, (3) studies of ascendant groups, and (4) regime theory.

Revisionist pluralists continue to stress group influence, but unlike orthodox pluralists, they employ empirical research to determine whether (and the conditions when) groups contribute to democracy or are treated

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fairly by democratic procedures (Schumaker 1991). According to Waste (1986), group politics can take deviant forms, ranging from "privatized pluralism"—in which interest groups appropriate public authority for private purposes—to "hyperpluralism"—where interest groups raise many competing demands and make coherent governance impossible. Perhaps the most consistent revisionist thesis is the prevalence of "stratified pluralism," where urban governments exhibit "systematic biases" against minority groups and other disadvantaged citizens (Pinderhughes 1987).

The growth-machine model (Logan and Molotch 1987) views urban politics as dominated by a coalition of groups—developers, realtors, financiers, construction interests, and others—who benefit from the enhanced "exchange value" of land that occurs if cities experience extensive economic and population growth. This model holds that the policies of the growth machine can be opposed by neighborhood organizations, environmentalists, NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard groups), and others who are concerned with the "use value" of property. One offshoot of this model has been research on antigrowth groups and movements (e.g., Castells 1983).

A third focus of recent studies has been on newly prominent grassroots organizations (Boyte 1980), especially neighborhood groups. According to Dilger (1992), residential community associations have become prominent in affluent suburbs, fencing themselves off from the broader community and privatizing government functions. However, most neighborhood associations seek better municipal services and protection from disruptive forces. The organizational characteristics, representativeness, and effectiveness of neighborhood groups have been widely studied (e.g., J. Thomas 1986). Jeffrey Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) have concluded that neighborhood groups have furthered democratic practices in a number of cities in the United States.

Regime theory is perhaps the most influential strain of recent thinking on urban interest groups. While previous urban research viewed group politics as competitive, regime theory sees group politics as more cooperative. When no group has enough power to act alone, local politics involves groups forming cooperative regimes that produce social power and solve community problems. Economic-development regimes (Stone 1989), progressive regimes (DeLeon 1992), and human-resource regimes (Stone 1998) are just some of the different coalitions that have been identified and analyzed.

With the exception of the pioneering study by Putnam (1993), few studies have examined Tocqueville's belief that local voluntary associations play a critical role in developing civic-minded Americans who contribute to effective self-government. Comparative research on local groups in other countries suggests that Americans may be no more involved in local organizations than citizens of other Western democracies (Balme, Becquart-LeClerc, and Clark 1987) and that American groups are no different from those in most countries in that they usually

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promote and protect narrow interests at the expense of broader community interests.