Analysis and Perspectives

READINGS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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Ken Kollman

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

W. W. Norton & Company ■ New York ■ London

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Printed in the United States of America.
First Edition

Editor: Ann Shin
Editorial assistant: Jake Schindel
Production manager: Christine D'Antonio
Project supervised by Westchester Book Group/Debbie Masi
Composition by Westchester Book Group
Manufacturing by Courier Companies—Westford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kollman, Ken, 1966–
Readings in American politics : analysis and perspectives / Ken Kollman.—1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-393-93508-0 (pbk.)
1. United States—Politics and government. I. Title.
JK21.K65 2010
320.473—dc22

2009054276

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110-0017

www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

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READINGS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

PREFACE

This reader makes some of the most important work in political science and the subfield of American politics easily accessible to students in introductory courses.

The selections included here have been chosen to help accomplish several things in a college classroom: introduce students to fundamental concepts in political science and the study of American politics, such as collective action problems, agenda-setting power, ideologies, and the median voter; provide specific insights into the workings of the major institutions and processes of American government; spur discussion on controversial topics, such as affirmative action, gay rights, abortion, and contemporary American foreign policy; and improve students' abilities to digest official government documents like Supreme Court cases and presidential signing statements.

The first chapter, "Fundamentals," introduces students to three crucial problems for understanding politics:

1. *collective action problems* among groups of people and how organizers and leaders of institutions can try to overcome such problems
2. *common resource problems,* which are variants of the standard collective action problem but refer specifically to allocating scarce resources
3. *delegation (or principal-agent) problems* that are ubiquitous in modern, democratic government and that require contract-like arrangements to solve

The material in Chapter 1 is a good foundation for students approaching the rest of the readings. Students reading the classic selections can approach them fresh with knowledge of the "problems." One can read Madison's *Federalist* 10, for instance, with an eye toward common resource problems. Madison was concerned that an overpowering majority interest would oppress other groups, and he favored having many different groups represented in a single government. It is worth discussing the question: Was Madison naïve about collective action problems inherent when many groups compete for common resources? The selection from Jenna Bednar in Chapter 3 offers insights into Madison's views on federalism and specifically about

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how the state governments might provide the checks needed to prevent an over-reaching national government.

Many of the contemporary selections also have one or more of the "problems" from Chapter 1 as backdrop. To take an example from Chapter 5 on Congress, the delegation problem is at the root of the arguments by Cox and McCubbins on how (and why) partisan majorities grant agenda control to party leaders in Congress. And Strolovitch's arguments in Chapter 11 focus attention on the ways leaders of political advocacy groups must appeal to specific types of activists in order to sustain collective action. Students benefit greatly from seeing these theoretical threads in contemporary political science scholarship.

Quite a few of the readings provide grist for lively discussion of current events and policy controversies. Students will gain knowledge of legal arguments about gay marriage and abortion, and will confront arguments about the sustainability of recent trends in American foreign policy.

I use these readings when I teach. I hope you find these readings as useful as I do in understanding politics, and specifically the American political system.

Three people were very helpful to me in assembling this reader. Special thanks to Erin Ackerman, Jake Schindel, and Ann Shin for making it possible for me to pull it all together.

KEN KOLLMAN

ABOUT THE EDITOR

KEN KOLLMAN is professor in the Department of Political Science and research professor in the Center for Political Studies in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His research and teaching focus on political parties, elections, lobbying, and federal systems. He also regularly teaches the introductory American politics course at the University of Michigan. In addition to numerous articles, he has written *The Formation of National Party Systems: Federalism and Party Competition in Canada, Great Britain, India, and the United States* (with Pradeep Chhibber, 2004) and *Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies* (1998). Professor Kollman is currently at work on a book on centralization in federated systems and a new American government textbook to be published by W. W. Norton.

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1

FUNDAMENTALS

1.1

MANCUR OLSON, JR.

From *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*

Olson introduces us to the concept of the collective action problem. This "problem" arises when individuals have incentives to free-ride off the contributions of others, reaping the benefits of some action without paying any of the costs. In describing the collective action problem and how groups or organizations can overcome it, Olson strongly challenges the widely held notion that having common interests is a sufficient condition for a political group to form.

I. A THEORY OF GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS

A. The Purpose of Organization

Since most (though by no means all) of the action taken by or on behalf of groups of individuals is taken through organizations, it will be helpful to consider organizations in a general or theoretical way.[1] The logical place to begin any systematic study of organizations is with their purpose. But there are all types and shapes and sizes of organizations, even of economic organizations, and there is then some question whether there is any single purpose that would be characteristic of organizations generally. One purpose that is nonetheless characteristic of most organizations, and surely of practically all organizations with an important economic aspect, is the furtherance of the interests of their members. That would seem obvious, at least from the economist's perspective. To be sure, some organizations may out of ignorance fail to further their

members' interests, and others may be enticed into serving only the ends of the leadership.[2] But organizations often perish if they do nothing to further the interests of their members, and this factor must severely limit the number of organizations that fail to serve their members.

The idea that organizations or associations exist to further the interests of their members is hardly novel, nor peculiar to economics; it goes back at least to Aristotle, who wrote, "Men journey together with a view to particular advantage, and by way of providing some particular thing needed for the purposes of life, and similarly the political association seems to have come together originally, and to continue in existence, for the sake of the *general* advantages it brings."[3] More recently Professor Leon Festinger, a social psychologist, pointed out that "the attraction of group membership is not so much in sheer belonging, but rather in attaining something by means of this membership."[4] The late Harold Laski, a political scientist, took it for granted that "associations exist to fulfill purposes which a group of men have in common."[5]

The kinds of organizations that are the focus of this study are *expected* to further the interests of their members.[6] Labor unions are expected to strive for higher wages and better working conditions for their members; farm organizations are expected to strive for favorable legislation for their members; cartels are expected to strive for higher prices for participating firms; the corporation is expected to further the interests of its stockholders;[7] and the state is expected to further the common interests of its citizens (though in this nationalistic age the state often has interests and ambitions apart from those of its citizens).

Notice that the interests that all of these diverse types of organizations are expected to further are for the most part *common* interests: the union members' common interest in higher wages, the farmers' common interest in favorable legislation, the cartel members' common interest in higher prices, the stockholders' common interest in higher dividends and stock prices, the citizens' common interest in good government. It is not an accident that the diverse types of organizations listed are all supposed to work primarily for the *common* interests of their members. Purely personal or individual interests can be advanced, and usually advanced most efficiently, by individual, unorganized action. There is obviously no purpose in having an organization when individual, unorganized action can serve the interests of the individual as well as or better than an organization; there would, for example, be no point in forming an organization simply to play solitaire. But when a number of individuals have a common or collective interest—when they share a single purpose or objective—individual, unorganized action (as we shall soon see) will either not be able to advance that common interest at all, or will not be able to advance that interest adequately. Organizations can therefore perform a function when there are common or group interests, and though organizations often also serve purely personal, individual interests, their characteristic and primary function is to advance the common interests of groups of individuals.

The assumption that organizations typically exist to further the common interests of groups of people is implicit in most of the literature about organizations, and two of the writers already cited make this assumption explicit: Harold Laski emphasized that organizations exist to achieve purposes or interests which "a group of men have in common," and Aristotle apparently had a similar notion in mind when he argued that political associations are created and maintained because of the "general advantages" they bring. R. M. MacIver also made this point explicitly when he said that "every organization presupposes an interest which its members all share."[8]

Even when unorganized groups are discussed, at least in treatments of "pressure groups" and "group theory," the word "group" is used in such a way that it means "a number of individuals with a common interest." It would of course be reasonable to label even a number of people selected at random (and thus without any common interest or unifying characteristic) as a "group"; but most discussions of group behavior seem to deal mainly with groups that do have common interests. As Arthur Bentley, the founder of the "group theory" of modern political science, put it, "there is no group without its interest."[9] The social psychologist Raymond Cattell was equally explicit, and stated that "every group has its interest."[10] This is also the way the word "group" will be used here.

Just as those who belong to an organization or a group can be presumed to have a common interest,[11] so they obviously also have purely individual interests, different from those of the others in the organization or group. All of the members of a labor union, for example, have a common interest in higher wages, but at the same time each worker has a unique interest in his personal income, which depends not only on the rate of wages but also on the length of time that he works.

B. Public Goods and Large Groups

The combination of individual interests and common interests in an organization suggests an analogy with a competitive market. The firms in a perfectly competitive industry, for example, have a common interest in a higher price for the industry's product. Since a uniform price must prevail in such a market, a firm cannot expect a higher price for itself unless all of the other firms in the industry also have this higher price. But a firm in a competitive market also has an interest in selling as much as it can, until the cost of producing another unit exceeds the price of that unit. In this there is no common interest; each firm's interest is directly opposed to that of every other firm, for the more other firms sell, the lower the price and income for any given firm. In short, while all firms have a common interest in a higher price, they have antagonistic interests where output is concerned. This can be illustrated with a simple supply-and-demand model. For the sake of a simple argument, assume that a perfectly competitive industry is momentarily in a disequilibrium position, with price exceeding marginal cost for all firms at their present output. Suppose, too, that all of the adjustments will be made by the firms already in

the industry rather than by new entrants, and that the industry is on an inelastic portion of its demand curve. Since price exceeds marginal cost for all firms, output will increase. But as all firms increase production, the price falls; indeed, since the industry demand curve is by assumption inelastic, the total revenue of the industry will decline. Apparently each firm finds that with price exceeding marginal cost, it pays to increase its output, but the result is that each firm gets a smaller profit. Some economists in an earlier day may have questioned this result,[12] but the fact that profit-maximizing firms in a perfectly competitive industry can act contrary to their interests as a group is now widely understood and accepted.[13] A group of profit-maximizing firms can act to reduce their aggregate profits because in perfect competition each firm is, by definition, so small that it can ignore the effect of its *output on* price. Each firm finds it to its advantage to increase output to the point where marginal cost equals price and to ignore the effects of its extra output on the position of the industry. It is true that the net result is that all firms are worse off, but this does not mean that every firm has not maximized its profits. If a firm, foreseeing the fall in price resulting from the increase in industry output, were to restrict its own output, it would lose more than ever, for its price would fall quite as much in any case and it would have a smaller output as well. A firm in a perfectly competitive market gets only a small part of the benefit (of a small share of the industry's extra revenue) resulting from a reduction in that firm's output.

For these reasons it is now generally understood that if the firms in an industry are maximizing profits, the profits for the industry as a whole will be less than they might otherwise be.[14] And almost everyone would agree that this theoretical conclusion fits the facts for markets characterized by pure competition. The important point is that this is true because, though all the firms have a common interest in a higher price for the industry's product, it is in the interest of each firm that the other firms pay the cost—in terms of the necessary reduction in output—needed to obtain a higher price.

About the only thing that keeps prices from falling in accordance with the process just described in perfectly competitive markets is outside intervention. Government price supports, tariffs, cartel agreements, and the like may keep the firms in a competitive market from acting contrary to their interests. Such aid or intervention is quite common. It is then important to ask how it comes about. How does a competitive industry obtain government assistance in maintaining the price of its product?

Consider a hypothetical, competitive industry, and suppose that most of the producers in that industry desire a tariff, a price-support program, or some other government intervention to increase the price for their product. To obtain any such assistance from the government the producers in this industry will presumably have to organize a lobbying organization; they will have to become an active pressure group.[15] This lobbying organization may have

to conduct a considerable campaign. If significant resistance is encountered, a great amount of money will be required.[16] Public relations experts will be needed to influence the newspapers, and some advertising may be necessary. Professional organizers will probably be needed to organize "spontaneous grass roots" meetings among the distressed producers in the industry, and to get those in the industry to write letters to their congressmen.[17] The campaign for the government assistance will take the time of some of the producers in the industry, as well as their money.

There is a striking parallel between the problem the perfectly competitive industry faces as it strives to obtain government assistance, and the problem it faces in the marketplace when the firms increase output and bring about a fall in price. *Just as it was not rational for a particular producer to restrict his output in order that there might be a higher price for the product of his industry, so it would not be rational for him to sacrifice his time and money to support a lobbying organization to obtain government assistance for the industry. In neither case would it be in the interest of the individual producer to assume any of the costs himself. A lobbying organization, or indeed a labor union or any other organization, working in the interest of a large group of firms or workers in some industry, would get no assistance from the rational, self-interested individuals in that industry.* This would be true even if everyone in the industry were absolutely convinced that the proposed program was in their interest (though in fact some might think otherwise and make the organization's task yet more difficult).[18]

Although the lobbying organization is only one example of the logical analogy between the organization and the market, it is of some practical importance. There are many powerful and well-financed lobbies with mass support in existence now, but these lobbying organizations do not get that support because of their legislative achievements. The most powerful lobbying organizations now obtain their funds and their following for other reasons.

Some critics may argue that the rational person will, indeed support a large organization, like a lobbying organization, that works in his interest, because he knows that if he does not, others will not do so either, and then the organization will fail, and he will be without the benefit that the organization could have provided. This argument shows the need for the analogy with the perfectly competitive market. For it would be quite as reasonable to argue that prices will never fall below the levels a monopoly would have charged in a perfectly competitive market, because if one firm increased its output, other firms would also, and the price would fall; but each firm could foresee this, so it would not start a chain of price-destroying increases in output. In fact, it does not work out this way in a competitive market; nor in a large organization. When the number of firms involved is large, no one will notice the effect on price if one firm increases its output, and so no one will change his plans because of it. Similarly, in a large organization, the loss of one dues payer will

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