Portait of modern pluralism: A practitioner's perspective on interest group politics and theory.

Mary Ellen Wiederwohl
University of Louisville

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PORTRAIT OF MODERN PLURALISM

A PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE ON INTEREST GROUP POLITICS AND THEORY

By

Mary Ellen Wiederwohl
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who has ever procrastinated on something important for good reason. As a following and related thought, this thesis is also dedicated to all of the people who over the years a) laughed with me about my unfinished thesis, b) encouraged me to finish it, and/or c) directly or tacitly gave me ‘permission’ to continue to delay its completion.
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I am deeply grateful to the dedicated and kind faculty and leadership of the Department of Political Science at the University of Louisville who helped me pick back up this thesis writing task, walked me through getting readmitted, loaded me up with literature to review, patiently registered me every semester that this has dragged along, and stayed ever confident in my ability to finish this. I truly could not have done it without you. You got me to the finish line, and we had fun along the way.

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Love and gratitude to all of you – friends, family, and faculty. I am truly fortunate to have you in my life.
ABSTRACT

PORTRAIT OF MODERN PLURALISM

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April 14, 2020

This thesis presents a practitioner’s view on interest groups and interest group theory based primarily on Mancur Olson’s conclusions that small, organized minority interests have an advantage over the large, disorganized majority interests in the policymaking process; it tests the “why” behind this theory through an examination of a variety of factors, including the influence of money, the power of communications tools deployed by these interests, and the lobbyists’ role. It includes an introduction plus four chapters, including literature review, research methods, participant observations and in-depth interviews, and conclusion. The research methods included primarily participant observation based on a two-decade career as a lobbyist and government official plus a series of interviews with other practitioners and public officials. The thesis finds that smaller, minority interests often do prevail based on their access to and use of resources unavailable or limited to the larger disorganized majority interests.
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INTRODUCTION

I am a steadfast and fervent believer in pluralism. Elected officials and government bureaucracies make the decisions and hold the power, but that power is inherently dispersed in a functioning democracy among many groups seeking to petition the government on behalf of their cause. As a younger student of political science, I fell in love with the classical notion of Group Theory – that people organize themselves around mutual interests and the free and open policymaking process would necessarily distribute “goods” and “power” to these groups based on their relative size, measure of collective good, and effective advocacy. However, two decades of daily engagement in politics has further taught me the influence of rational choice on individuals and by extension the groups they form in the pursuit of their individual or mutual interests. This innate human pursuit of what is good for the first person can only extend to the third person in a group if the first person gets her share. Groups remain a large and vital pillar of the U.S. policymaking process, but not all groups are created equal, and they most certainly do not each get their “fair” share.

Call me an idealistic pragmatist in evolution.

Were this a thesis purely of sociology, psychology or anthropology, this research would focus more on the human propensity to create and join groups. There are certainly biological survival instincts in our brains that tell us to band together to protect ourselves and create joint benefits toward preserving ourselves and our species. As humans evolved into city living, mass agriculture, and higher learning, our understanding of
groups evolved, too. Aristotle opined that “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.”

America’s founding fathers contemplated the influence groups would have on their newly minted democracy. James Madison argued in *The Federalist Papers* that groups were a “necessary evil best controlled rather than eliminated”.

In the more recent application, social scientists began to further classify groups and group behavior in the 19th and 20th centuries in western Europe and the U.S. I remain enamored with the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville as he traveled the new American states and frontier to find a ‘nation of joiners’. He may have actually said, in *Democracy in America*, the following: "Americans of all ages, all stations of life and all types of disposition are forever forming associations," he wrote. "There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. If they want to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling ...they form an association. In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government ... in the United States you are sure to find an association."

Further, the work to be undertaken here is in many ways rooted in Max Weber's foundational script uniting the unholy trinity of any cocktail party or family gathering conversation – politics, religion and economics. Much of the literature on group theory or interest groups crosses between economics and political science.
The modern American interpretation of groups must begin with Arthur Bentley and his work *The Process of Government* published in 1908 and carrying the reins on Group Theory in political science well into the mid-20th Century. David Truman’s *Governmental Process* published in 1951 serves as a significant voice in this timeframe in which it was proffered by academicians that groups naturally and equally sprang from the American democratic process, triggered by various interests or conflicts of the times. Robert Dahl, often cited as the “dean of American political science” was also a noted devotee of pluralism. These early to mid-century theorists failed to recognize or analyze the bias in mobilization across socioeconomic strata and the obstacles to participation in the real business of policymaking in this country.

However, by the 1950s and 60s, it is clear that a more economic model of group analysis was taking hold in Anthony Downs’ *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) and Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). Downs, an early proprietor of applying self-interest and rational choice to politics and voting, assumed that voters would always vote in their economic interest. Olson took the analysis of groups to a new level by applying market concepts to governmental decision making. Olson outlined that groups exist for one or more of the following reasons: perform a function, satisfy a demand, further an interest, or meet a need. This broad definition clearly applies to groups of all sizes, practices, and levels of success. But Olson’s work narrows the focus to the smaller or intermediate sized group with economic motivations and demonstrates the efficacies of collective action for these sized groups. *It is from Olson’s work that I draw my primary thesis that small, organized minority interests will almost always win out over large, disorganized majority interests in the policymaking process.*
Colloquial examples abound. A majority of Americans support health care reform, but President Trump and many Republicans in Congress were partially elected on a “repeal” message. Poll after poll shows that we collectively want more gun control, but the Congress seems intractably wedded to the National Rifle Association. Christopher Buckley's *Thank You for Smoking* and his fictional M.O.D. Squad could easily fit into the literature review for this paper. There is no shortage of popular and obvious examples found on a cursory twizzle of the TV remote through the news channels: environmental issues, pharmaceuticals, subsidies to farmers, regulation and taxation policy on everything from tobacco to imports. The American political system is a rich marketplace of interest groups vying daily in ways that may or may not serve the common good, but most of these interests are certainly serving their collective good and ultimately their individual interests.

Winston Churchill said that “…democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried…” And the American form of democracy is surely the greatest or one of the greatest of all time. Groups are an essential ingredient to this potent form of government, and we should more greatly understand how they function, what techniques bring greater success, and what impact they have on the distribution – equal or unequal – of public goods.

Group theory gained its popularity during the age of liberalism in the U.S., reigning from the early 20th Century into its intellectual heyday from the 1940s through 1970s. The shift of the political spectrum to the right (Reagan in 1980, Thatcher in 1979) paralleled a similar tilt in the field of political science toward greater study of institutions (like Congress). It might also be offered that institutional analysis may be inherently
simpler as groups are varied, complex and represent only one type of influence on decisionmakers.

We live in interesting times. For over a generation, we Americans have frequently decried the influence of “special interests”. President Obama was openly anti-K Street as he took office, and Trump vowed to “drain the swamp” in D.C. But yet interest groups persist. And what makes a “special interest”? Don’t we all think our interests are “special”?

If you ask most Americans to define a “special interest” it would likely include a for-profit entity seeking financial gain at the expense of the rest of the us (a.k.a. the little guy) or “Main Street versus Wall Street”. Frankly, this pedestrian definition fits neatly into my thesis that these organized minority interests are possibly more effective and really are getting one over on the collective good (a.k.a. the disorganized majority). In this paper, I hope to provide a portrait on modern pluralism as seen through a practitioner’s perspective on interest groups and their methods.

I start this work with the following thoughts, which may be proven, disproven, or tweaked as deeper research and analysis proceed:

- A successful strategy for a small or intermediate group relies on many tactics, including PAC and campaign contributions, consistent lobbying, and regular communications.
- Oligopoles likely form the most successful groups.
- Most of the literature focuses on groups with inherent market or economic interests. Analysis of other types of groups, like membership organizations, can result in equally interesting, if possibly different, conclusions.
• Successful interest groups pick their legislative champions wisely (see Denzau and Munger).

• Partisan politics most certainly influence the public policy debate, but I do not believe they figure in the application of interest group theory and the success of organized minority interests; small/intermediate size groups from the left and the right can both exploit their effective size to success.

• Even though big policy issues like gun control, health care policy, and tax reform grab headlines, the influence game is almost always most adeptly played on less publicized fields like professional licensure, tax expenditures, and regulatory matters.

• Every study is a reflection of its time and those that came before. We live in a measuredly more divided time than before. The swing voter is an endangered species.

• Tacit quid pro quo agreements – more commonly known as relationships – rule many non-headline grabbing policy debates.

• Lobbyists range widely in competency and hence impact.

• Lobbyists are most often forbidden from working on contingency, meaning they get paid no matter how successful they are.

• Lobbying success is very hard to measure and failure is easy to forgive in the messy arena of public policy in the U.S. It is easy, and often honest, to find one or many uncontrollable factors to blame for your failure as a lobbyist.

• "Access" is often what a special interest buys.
• The economic theories of Olson and Downs don't fully account for the human "lizard brain" that drives another form of rational decision making (life or death and the political propagation of “fear” or “hate” to achieve a policy goal or election outcome).

• Squeaky wheels almost always get oil even if they fail at other more sophisticated strategies and measures.

• All is not lost for the disorganized but concerned electorate - you still get to vote.

In seeking to prove or disprove the Olsonian thesis, I organized the research around the basic question of why do organized minority interests prevail? And batched the research into the following three big tactical theories:

Is it because of the money?

Is it because these groups are better communicators?

Or is it because of the lobbyists?

From these big theoretical questions, the resulting research organized into several major themes, briefly stated:

Money matters.

Communication is key.

Lobbyists definitely make a difference.

Oligopolies really do have it good.

The problem of the “free rider” is real.

The reality is that when you have a smaller group of people or organizations with a limited number of priorities (i.e., oligopoly), usually driven by financial interest, it’s just easier to get and stay organized. They are willing to spend money to make money:
spending on lobbyists, communications/PR/marketing, campaign contributions. This is a practical and logical conclusion that the research largely bore out.

The research also confirmed that partisan politics do not figure largely into differences in group mobilization or outcomes. Stories of oligopolies and special interests abound on the left and the right. The terms “Democrat” or “Republican” hardly surfaced in the interviews.

The interviews also did not differentiate largely on type of group. While most of the conversation tilted toward corporate or for-profit interests, there were also relevant references to membership organizations, including those that were well-organized and effective and those that were not. The theory held across these different group types.

The beginning thoughts about the role of lobbyists held true throughout the research and conclusions. Coming from this space, I started with a set of self-critical thoughts and theories that I tested and mostly affirmed throughout as I both wrote about my own experience and listened to how my lobbyist colleagues described the work. However, the work of the lobbyist is too maligned. Yes, lobbyists have access; that’s their job. But, the system of checks and balances works. Yes, there will always be examples of excess or bad behavior. But those are the exception, not the rule. Every lobbyist in this paper, including yours truly, will tell you that the job isn’t easy. Every argument you make is met with a healthy skepticism. A long-time friendship or content expertise might get you in the door and into a dialogue on an advocacy topic, but it won’t always win the day. Legislators are honestly interested in what their constituents think. Nowhere is this truer than perhaps at the state level where the State Senators and State Representatives are truly of the people and close to them. The state level also provides a
rich enough policy arena to examine theories about how groups influence the policy making process, with topics running the gamut of the policy spectrum and urban/rural interests or Democrat/Republican differences providing a richness of debate.

At the end of the day, groups are an essential and omnipresent part of the American political system, and depending on the day, the power of groups can be distributed unequally because of the issues identified by Olson and others. The following pages provide views into how group theory evolved and how it plays out annually in a state Capitol through the eyes of a practitioner and her peers.
CHAPTER ONE – LITERATURE REVIEW

I began this project with the assumption that Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* will be the seminal text for my work. It offers the primary thesis that small, organized minority interests will almost always (generally, mostly?) win out over large, disorganized majority interests in the policymaking process.

Olson is an economist first, but equally in tune and aligned to other social scientists. He follows the general thinking of his predecessors and contemporaries that people primarily exhibit rational, self-interested behavior. But his 1965 text turned the group theory and specifically the guiding thoughts around group mobilization upside down. In brief, Olson tells us that not all groups are created equal and size matters. Prior group theory had given us a sort of utopian view into organizational behavior and rosy picture of human nature; we would band together as brothers to fight against or campaign for common interests. However, the reality is that views held by large numbers of people tend to reside in latent groups. Because of the size, challenges, and expense of mobilizing large groups of people behind a cause, it seldom happens or if the group does mobilize, it has trouble with efficacy because there are so many members or potential members that it resembles the old saying about “herding cats”. But if a group exists for a narrow purpose, and contains a smaller number of self-interested people or parties, then it has a much greater chance at success.

In my review of the literature, I have sought to understand both the historical evolution that led up to Olson’s groundbreaking publication and the messier and
somewhat discombobulated state of the field of interest group study under the banner of political science in academia.

Madison provided much of the foundation of American political science theory on interest groups in *The Federalist Papers*. In his essay No. 10 he foresaw the challenges that would arise when citizens of the new country would organize around their common interests. He called them “factions” and worried about the potential threat they would pose to the new popular government as they pursue the innate self-interest of man, and he warned that free men are more likely to try to oppress each other than they are to ‘cooperate for their common good’. He hoped that the rise of competing interests would mete out fair and just solutions. He surmised that the Republic form of government that he had helped construct would ultimately jury these disputes in favor of the common good.

This optimistic view of the diversity of interests on a level playing field would dominate the thinking around interest groups through the mid-20th century publishing of the subfield’s early researched texts and theories, including David Truman’s *The Governmental Process* (1951) and Robert Dahl’s *Who Governs?* (1961). Truman’s work shares themes with Arthur Bentley’s much earlier work, *The Process of Government* (1908). Truman saw potential interests as equal to declared interests, and posited that the potential interests would rise to combat or moderate any interest that was becoming too powerful. He envisioned a virtual equilibrium among groups. Truman’s nearly utopian view based upon cultural anthropology and social psychology was more of a thesis statement than a well-researched academic work, but yet it held sway in the field of group theory for some time.
Dahl’s 1961 work was based on his study of local politics in New Haven, Connecticut. Dahl observed different groups of people influencing the policy areas of urban redevelopment and public education as well as the political party nomination process. Dahl also rejoiced in the beauty of pluralism and put some of Truman’s theory into researched practice. Dahl offered views into the disparate resources and access afforded the political elites while concomitantly proffering that group politics provided a check and balance on these elites as elected officials and bureaucrats simply must be responsive to a larger number of constituencies.

The 1960s were heady times to be debating, researching, and publishing on group theory in America as the civil rights era and other progressive political activity challenged ideas about who had influence and how. As the 1960s chugged to their end, the baby boomers coming-of-age created a “protest generation” spawned by civil rights, the Kennedys, the Vietnam War, and more. They shepherded a new era of cause-oriented politics and a proliferation of new groups organizing to support issues large and small. In this timeframe, critics such as Jack Walker (“A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy” 1966) and Theodore Lowi’s *The End of Liberalism* published later in 1979 emerged to challenge the idyllic views of pluralism, in part because it seemed to celebrate and perpetuate the status quo.

Theodore Lowi, in his *The End of Liberalism*, offers us the concept of clientelism, and decries the expansion of government bureaucracy resulting from special interests. Lowi argued that interest groups were making government more conservative because interest groups were resistant to change. Lowi didn’t view interest groups as purveyors of a rich arena of debate, but instead the thickening agent in a morass of government that
would ultimately preserve the status quo. Lowi’s work could form an interesting foundation for use in a different thesis to analyze the effectiveness of lobbying and smaller, organized minorized interests on agency or administrative level decisions and/or how the modern day “Iron Triangle” of legislative body, bureaucracy, and interest groups works for or against the collective good.

This “Iron Triangle” has been further explained in the research as a full-on “subgovernment” or further evolved into an “issue network”. Coalition building is an absolute fundamental of lobbying, and coalitions abound at the federal and state levels. Coalitions can function at a basic level with a group of similarly situated entities or companies who are pursuing all or some of the same policy agenda. However, with the accelerated sophistication of federal and state policy in the latter half of the 20th century, coalition building graduated to much more complicated sets of relationships between the regulated and advocate communities alongside their executive and legislative counterparts. The Iron Triangle became a much more complex, 3-D, multi-dimensional model of its prior foundation. These “subgovernments” are profiled throughout the literature with various case studies.

By the late 1970s, political scientists were casting doubt on these subgovernment studies emanating from within these “closed systems” and were seeking a more robust explanation of the interplay between government and these interest groups. Hugh Heclo’s “issue networks” (“Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment” 1978) broadens the view of who and how these influence relationships work. Heclo’s work largely discredited the prior subgovernment model that fantasized the concrete relationship between government officials and their regulated interests; Heclo provided
us a broader, if more imprecise, framework of viewing these important relationships and how they do or don’t function. Heclo correctly surmised that there is not a steadfast consensus around policy between the entities, and that there is regular battle between and within an issue network around a policy outcome. Heclo’s work encompasses the broader policy playing field and allows for the more discrete analysis of the effectiveness of various groups, varying by size and organization under the Olson categorization.

Which naturally leads us to the work of John Heinz, et al., titled *The Hollow Core* (1993). Heinz’s survey research affirmed a large number of adversaries within a given field. There was no single group at the core of an issue or policy area. The notion of a solid iron triangle or functioning subgovernment was clearly dead by this point. With the proliferation of groups, and the complexity of government, the entire playing field of influence in policymaking had grown very complicated indeed.

Issue networks inform this thesis as they relate to communications and how interest groups control the policy debate. Issue networks in some way satisfy our optimistic desires for pluralism by providing a theoretical framework for more voices at the table, but we know that so many voices are still missing for lack of resources or the tall task of organizing a large group of people. In Jeffrey Berry’s *The Interest Group Society* he cites the many touchpoints that large corporations have – a main office with on-staff lobbyists, membership in trade groups looking after their interest, and voluminous business organizations such as Chambers and CEO Roundtables, etc. But who is looking after the interests of workers or the poor? Unions have long held a banner for workers – even non-members – but their pockets aren’t as deep or their reach as broad.
This leads us back again to Jack Walker who worked extensively in this field for over 30 years. Jack Walker went on to complete and publish some of the most significant survey work (1983) completed in this subfield and further affirming the 1960s and 70s as heady days for interest group formation. His “The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America” published in 1983 demonstrated a significant growth in the number of groups lobbying.

In *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions, and Social Movements* (1991), Walker ponders the important questions around adequate representation and inclusion. Drawing upon his extensive survey research conducted throughout the 1980s, he contemplates both the explosion of new groups and specifically how the new citizens groups are influencing policy against the older and narrow for-profit entities that formed the foundation for theories behind iron triangles and issue networks. He writes about the emergence of new social interest groups that previously were too large to organize or lacking the material benefit that drives the formation of so many groups. New groups emerged to represent women, racial minorities, the poor, the environment because of new group of “patrons” willing to pay the freight for these new advocacy operations. While these patron-backed groups have continued and possibly enhanced their presence in the policy-making process, Walker also writes about the inherent checks and balances of this kind of group because the wealthy patrons cannot always function without concern for their own financial interests (their wealth having been gained through other activity more governed by our Olsonian views). Walker’s writings further tie the explosion of new groups to the expansion of government throughout the latter half of the 20th century. As government created new programs, it
inherently spawned new constituencies, and new groups rose up to either perpetuate the
new government funding/action or to oppose it.

Further study of the growth of interest groups was completed by Kay Scholzman
and John Tierney and published in their Organized Interests in American Democracy
(1986); it also records a significant increase in the number of groups lobbying, including
40% founded after 1960 and 25% founded after 1970. Organized Interests reports on a
five-year research program in which the authors interviewed 175 interest groups of all
types and sizes. Their work gives a view into the interest group system of the 1980s and
not only shows the increase in the number of groups but also clearly catalogs the growth
in number and prominence of public interest groups. They also note the decline of unions
and the increase in numbers of prominence of corporations (it was the 80s, after all). All
in all, Scholzman and Tierney give us an interview-based, well-researched book that
doesn’t really provide any satisfying answers on power and influence or how the interest
group variable fits into the complex equation of power, influence and policymaking.

The 1960s also witnessed other research that centered on why interest groups
form. Truman had offered the optimistic view that disruption or disturbance would
challenge people to organize on their behalf and band together with others of similar
situation. But his view fails to account for the differences in the ability of various groups
to organize – lack of resources, disparate geographies, inability to communicate easily or
quickly. Political scientist Robert Salisbury analyzed Truman’s theories and produced a
different conclusion – that leadership was the primary reason for any group to rise or fall
(“An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups” (1969)). Salisbury compares this important
leader or organizer to an entrepreneur and attaches the success of the group to this
leader’s ability to provide attractive benefits to the group members. Salisbury’s research draws upon the typology used by Peter B. Clark and James Q. Wilson in their “Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organizations” from 1961. A quick review of the three (3) types of benefits is relevant because it relates so fundamentally to the economic or self-interest basis of Olson’s theory.

- **Material benefits** – benefits offered by a group that you can use, touch, feel – like a newsletter, or a drug benefit card from the AARP, or a health insurance discount from your Chamber membership

- **Purposive benefits** – benefits associated with an issue or cause; there is no tangible return to the member other than comfort of knowing you helped save the whales, adopt dogs, or eradicate polio in a third world country

- **Solidary benefits** – social benefits available to you by joining a local group with like causes, where you are working together in support of a common agenda, such as the League of Women Voters, or maybe your sorority/fraternity or the Junior League where you do community service projects together with people you like.

Robert Salisbury has published several works that challenge us to think of broader definitions of interest groups. Earlier research had focused almost exclusively on membership organizations or classes of groups or interests motivated by a common outcome. Salisbury expands the scope to various institutions regularly at play influencing the policy arena, including hospitals, local governments, universities, and, of course, corporations.

Another researcher taking aim at Truman’s original group theory is Kay Lehman Schlozman. Her work correctly chronicles the disproportionate influence of those in the
upper socioeconomic ranks in interest groups. In her 1986 work with Tierney, she cites E.E. Schattschneider’s 1960 *The Semisovereign People*, “…the flaw in the (organized interest) heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with an upper-class accent”. While Scholzman and Tierney were analyzing federal activity, similar conclusions are drawn by Harmon Ziegler in his 1983 “Interest Groups in the States”. The bottom line here is that only about 50% of the U.S. population belongs to a union or organization, but of those who do participate, those with higher levels of education, prestigious jobs and high incomes dominate – 63% come from professional technical occupations while only 13% work as laborers (Scholzman and Tierney 1986).

In 1965 Mancur Olson publishes *The Logic of Collective Action* and pretty much tips the apple cart all the way over from Truman’s initial theory. Olson focuses on the material benefit and an economic view, further narrowing his work to pursuit of selective benefits or incentives toward group formation and mobilization. In Olson’s world, there is no rational choice for belonging to and investing in a group unless the member receives a direct and individual benefit. If the benefit accrues to the collective, including nonmembers, then there is no incentive for the member to pay dues, activate, etc. Hence arrives the “free rider” problem of group activity. Olson’s theory is not without its problems. It cannot adequately account for the voluminous number or sustaining power of cause-oriented groups (that might easily fall into Clark and Wilson’s purposive or solidary categories). But, Olson’s promotion of the power of selective benefits and groups organized around them provides a potent basis for a review of the potential disproportionate influence of this smaller, well-organized minority interests within the American democratic process.
As noted in the introduction, after the mid-century publishing of Olson’s work, the field of political science was beset by a fascination in institutions, and the complicated subfield study of sorting out just how interest groups fit in and influence outcomes was somewhat sidelined. Perhaps is this nowhere clearer than the profound influence of David R. Mayhew’s *Congress: The Electoral Connection* published originally in 1974. Like your author here, Mayhew’s work was influenced by his time embedded within the policymaking process (he was a fellow on Capitol Hill). But even Mayhew couldn’t avoid the influence of some of Olson’s economic-based theories about decision-making and influence. Mayhew’s observations largely concluded that our entire system is set up to be self-perpetuating in favor of the incumbent with the incumbents being myopically focused on reelection. Mayhew draws upon some of the similar economic underpinnings (Downs) that parties are selfish (i.e., rational) and use their power to first and foremost perpetuate (i.e., get reelected). Just as bankers (a potent interest group) delight in compound interest, legislators at all levels often delight in self-interest (getting reelected). Even Mayhew’s institutionally focused academic work cannot avoid the influence of interest groups who help perpetuate the reelection cycle in so many ways (favorable legislation, direct campaign contributions, indirect grassroots or ‘astroturf’ support, etc.).

In 1969, while political scientists are turning to a newer view of group mobilization and activity thanks to Olson and others, Harmon Ziegler and Michael Baer publish the first book of its kind, *Lobbying: Interaction and Influence in American State Legislatures*. The book gives a view, largely accurate to present day, into the work of lobbying and the interest group system at the state level. Ziegler and Baer perform a
comparative analysis that concludes that state level lobbyists rely more on personal interactions. True to this time period and the much later work and conclusions by Morehouse and Jewell, the perceived level of effectiveness of lobbyists (i.e., power) was correlated to the level of revenue and expenditures of the lobbied interest (e.g., coal, horse racing in Kentucky). While this work offers many conclusions about the work of lobbying that remain true over the decades, its applicability to this Olsonian-based work is limited, except in the basis that only those well-organized, monied groups will happen to have lobbyists (because they are well-organized minority interests, etc., etc.).

The more recent work of Baumgartner and Leech (Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and Political Science) has provided perhaps the best larger-scale summary of this subfield within political science through its publishing in 1998. This book is probably the single best comprehensive work on interest groups. It truly attempts to review and cite the totality of thinking, publishing, and disagreeing in the world of political scientists trying to understand interest groups. It honestly appraises the challenges of working in this space – cataloging all of the variables that can impact both group mobilization and efficacy and tackling the truth about how you cannot accurately view any of these variables in isolation. Their review of Olson nicely summarizes how his work forced the pluralists to think about something they had taken for granted: how groups mobilize and maintain themselves (p. 65). They also do a nice critique of Olson by pointing to examples such as the environmental and civil rights movements, wherein large numbers of people successfully mobilized in support of a benefit beyond their myopic self-interest (p. 73).
Baumgartner and Leech also provide extensive citations to various studies and data about just how much Americans are joiners. They cite the General Social Survey that approximately 70 percent of us have membership in at least one group (p.90). Sidney Verba’s work from 1995 shows membership as high as 79 percent with 61 percent reporting that their membership organizations take stands on political issues at the national or local level (p. 90). The data would seem to indicate we are still a nation of joiners, but the data does not indicate the intensity of participation in the groups. Many people belong to a group by way of occupation or perhaps an annual fund contribution for a cause close to our hearts. But how often are we actually petitioning the government on behalf of that organization’s cause? Baumgartner and Leech do point out the possible hypocrisy of our situation by noting “…Americans complain about the roles of interest groups in politics, but they participate massively in national and local associations involved in many elements of public life” (p. 90).

Baumgartner and Leech devote a chapter to the “Dynamic of Bias” and how to measure if the collective action dilemma has been overcome? How much is enough to claim victory on this point? They ultimately settle on a comfortable if somewhat dystopian conclusion that the explosion in the number of groups has been a good thing, but that the barriers to group mobilization/collective action invariably leave some voices un- or under-represented in the cacophony of policymaking. In the end they also attempt to catalog all the prior research on other variables influencing decisions, including PACs and lobbying tactics. They conclude that while the research on interest groups can seem “discordant” (p. 188), they are satisfied with it in cumulative form while affirming the importance of groups in our political process.
*The Interest Group Society* by Jeffrey Berry, originally published and researched in the 1980s and in its third edition by 1997, provides a nice review of the evolution of the work through the latter chapter of American politics in the 20th century.

I really enjoyed and related to Alan Rosenthal’s *The Third House, Lobbyists and Lobbying in the States* (Second Edition) published in 2001, which for me was somewhat a walk down memory lane with its significant reliance on interviews with state level lobbyists in several states. The work effectively highlights the various techniques employed by lobbyists, including building coalitions, grassroots mobilization, public relations and media, as well as direct lobbying. Through his interviews with lobbyists, he correctly emphasizes the importance of relationships. Lobbyists are the ultimate communicators; they are persuaders, and they often become friends to policymakers after serving together for years. A good lobbyist always provides good and timely information – even if it’s information the policymaker doesn’t want to (but needs to) hear. Yes, campaign contributions and other techniques of influence matter, but there is no substitute for the personal and long-term relationship building that good lobbyists do. And, then, the effective lobbyists ultimately draw the effective clients who often happen to be the smaller, more organized interests. Rosenthal offers several conclusions from his work that your author/practitioner agrees with.

- Lawyer-lobbying firms aren’t as successful because it’s not just about writing/influencing the law; lawyer-lobbying firms can work when the focus is on the relationship.
• The ‘good ol’ boy’ system is on the decline due to many factors (term limits in some states, increasing sophistication of lobbying, increasing diversity of lobby corps, including more women).

• Larger groups can be stymied by difference of opinions among members (often seen in Chambers or business or other large membership organizations who need to reach consensus before taking a position).

• A lot of lobbying is “playing defense,” which is easier than playing offense – i.e., killing a bill is easier than passing one; and true to the Olsonian theories, the smaller, organized minority interests are more adept at defense.

• States have seen a parallel increase in the number of groups as witnessed at federal level, which translates into nearly every issue having some level of opposition.

• In states without term limits, legislators establish closer, longer-term relationships with lobbyists; in states with term limits, the relationship is more transactional and perhaps more lopsided because the longer-serving lobbyist knows the history and the shorter-term legislator may become dependent on the lobbyist for information.

• Legislative structure and processes are set up to support the more powerful – and often “more organized minority interests” through leadership control of committees.

• Partisanship and political parties absolutely play a role, but it just means that different interests might have more power – not that small versus large interests benefit.
• Lobbyists of special interests (often the smaller, organized minority interests) are perceived as “winners,” and everyone wants to be with a winner.

• Money does influence the process, but it’s complicated. Money can be an amplifier for an issue/client; it can turn up the volume or distort the perception of who cares about an issue or how much.

• Grassroot efforts tend to work better when you’re playing offense because you need time to plan/implement.

• Media/PR and advertising do work, and 75% of lobbyists are using these communication tools to further their causes; these also are more effective and more common on offense campaigns because they take time and money to implement.

Rosenthal further cites work by Ziegler and Baer that “the narrower the scope of a piece of legislation, the greater the lobbyists’ opportunity to intervene.” This further affirms the Olson views about smaller interests’ greater ability to influence.

Further research on interest groups in the states has been completed by Anthony Nownes and Patrician Freeman at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Their “Interest Group Activity in the States” published in *The Journal of Politics* in 1998 includes a comprehensive survey of lobbyists and state organizations in an attempt to better understand the types and effectiveness of techniques used by interest groups and the activity of types of groups across the states. Nownes and Freeman do a beautiful job of cataloging the types of activities undertaken by groups and their lobbyists, including monitoring, PAC giving, grassroots lobbying, media/communication strategies, and “schmoozing” (yes, they actually call it “schmoozing” in the research). Your practitioner-
author largely agrees with their conclusions throughout, including a summary “that no
group appears to be “shut out” but “that money allows a group to advocate more and see
more policymakers” (p. 105). If I was writing a thesis on how to be an effective lobbyist,
this would likely be a seminal text.

In 2003, Sarah Morehouse and Malcolm Jewell published their second edition of
State Politics, Parties, and Policy. Both authors had previously studied how Governors
emerge from the party system, and they both firmly subscribe to the belief that political
parties are an integral part of the governing process. While their work is not central to
the evolution of interest group theory, their work provides valuable insight because it is
more recent, attempts to take a multi-faceted view of policymaking influences, and
focuses on the state level (where your author-practitioner has had the majority of her
experience). The book is also interesting because Malcolm Jewell was a professor at the
University of Kentucky and wrote extensively on the evolution of the Kentucky
legislature.

The Morehouse-Jewell work draws conclusions through analysis of education and
welfare expenditures. By limiting the policy fields, they have also limited the seemingly
endless variables for consideration of a causal relationship in how a policy decision gets
made or influenced. Morehouse and Jewell hold fast to their assertion that political
parties are the “single most important actor in state politics” because they are “the only
organization that can mediate the demands of interest groups” (p. 54). They cite the
survey work of Gray and Lowery (1993b and 2000) to demonstrate that while not-for-
profit organizations grew faster between 1980-1990, the profit-oriented interests caught
up with them from 1990-1997. “The traditional dominance of profit-oriented
organizations is 74 percent of all interests” (Morehouse p. 54). With three-quarters of the interest groups coming from these interests, which tend to more likely be the smaller, more organized minority interests, it’s easy to see how the interests of the disorganized majority or the collective good could get shouted down.

The book even has occasional references to Kentucky politics, including the alliance of leaders representing the major industries of horse racing, liquor and coal-mining. There are similar references throughout the literature to the 20th century dominance of single or a handful of industries in specific states and how those monopolies or oligopolies influenced policy. Morehouse and Jewell note that states that are not as economically developed have stronger interest groups because their smaller economies can be more easily controlled by dominant interests. More developed state economies have more competition among interest groups and hence a more even playing field. They also cite regional differences that clearly follow the timeline of the expansion of the states. The older, more established northeastern economy begets a more balanced interest group system whereas the southern and western states, many of whom still have dominant industries, still demonstrate interest group hegemony by a few over the many. However, most all states have now benefited from economic diversification to the point that these larger industries do not hold the sway they once did. Their research also provides evidence that poor people tend to do better in the more developed states where no single group or small set of groups (i.e., industries) dominate.

Morehouse and Jewell in their review of interest groups and political power come to a very Olsonian conclusion that “the more powerful organizations are those that are
unified and have ample resources” (p. 74). They also provide us indicators of a strong interest group system at the state level:

- Legislative committees are dominated by members who belong to the groups/professions/policy within its jurisdiction.
- Lack of organized or significant opposition groups (unless a proposed policy had significant impact on state or local taxes).
- The power of opposing interest groups in a particular policy area leads to the groups seeking compromise (with the legislator(s) largely along for the ride as the two sides draft the compromise (p.96)).

Interestingly, despite many of the their findings at the state level being compatible with Olson’s views on the likelihood of group mobilization and efficacy, Morehouse and Jewell’s research does counter one of Olson’s later theories; Olson had theorized that the increase in the number of groups would stifle economic growth and potentially lead to even the failure of American democracy, the U.S. economy or both. Clearly, that didn’t happen, and the authors here confirm that at least at the state level, their research affirms that a greater density of interest groups actually produced positive efforts on redistributive policies (arguably more collective goods for all!) (p. 102).

The work of Virginia Gray and David Lowery in the measurement of state interest group activity cannot be understated. Their work since 1986 provides some of the best data available at the state level. Their early work actually sought to test the Olson theory that the proliferation of interest groups at the national level would retard economic growth, which they disproved. There does not exist a demonstrable causal relationship
between the number of interest groups and economic growth/decline. Their work went on to measure the growth of interest groups and activity at the state level. With Gray/Lowery as inspiration, Morehouse/Jewell conclude in their research that income is distributed more equally when there are many interest groups and the parties are strong in a state; the competition of more interest groups drives better outcomes in their conclusion.

Gray/Lowery’s research also reminds us that not all interest groups are created equal. In Truman’s original theory, he relied on the structure of membership organizations for the core of his thoughts. His entire thought process was governed by the mobilization of individuals into the collective for pursuit of common interest. Gray and Lowery’s 2000 work reminds us that membership organizations account for only one-fifth of the groups in state, and that includes large groups like the teachers unions and other labor groups. Gray/Lowery further confirm that the most secure and resilient interest groups are institutions due to their deeper pockets and narrower interests. Membership groups are harder to maintain and more difficult to wrangle as the needs and interests of members may be constantly changing or evolving.

Thomas and Hrbenar provide some interesting, if less than valuable, research from their 1998 update to their base study on interest group power in the states (published in 1999). Thomas/Hrbenar asked political scientists in each state to rank the effectiveness of interest groups. The full ranking shows forty different interest groups; thirteen are highlighted as the most effective across a majority of states. Not surprisingly, groups with interests across multiple policy areas (e.g., chambers of commerce, health care, municipal leagues) tended to pop up to the top. The authors were also able to
compare their results from their earlier survey and conclude that groups’ power ranking rose or fell based partially on the topical policies being debated at the time in state capitals.

Robert Dahl makes another entrance to the literature in 1991 with his attempt to measure the power and influence of interest groups; his *Modern Political Analysis* attempts to measure the power relationship among actors in the political system through five (5) major areas: resources, skill in deploying them, incentive to use them, the domain in which the actors achieve their power, and the extent of the actor’s power. In sum, size matters; more members = more votes = more power. Dahl’s analysis isn’t wrong; it just isn’t complete, as he struggles to continue to find research to support the underpinnings of a “majority rule” version of pluralism. His analysis as it relates to the use of resources and the value they bring could easily be translated to a more Olsonian view of smaller, organized interests prevailing.

Arthur Denzau and Michael Munger offer mind-bending research in “Legislators and Interest Groups: How Unorganized Interests Get Represented” published in the *American Political Science Review* in 1986. They correctly conclude that interest groups will seek out legislators whose voters do not have strong feelings about the policy sought by the interest group. This of course differs from other research (Morehouse and Jewell) that shows interest groups finding success in committee or with sponsors who intimately know their issue (i.e., who better than to sponsor your insurance legislation than the Chairman of the Banking and Insurance Committee who is himself an insurance broker?). But Denzau and Munger are more elated in their conclusion that unorganized or latent interests have indeed found their outlet in the process. The interplay of elections (and the
fixation on reelection) with the interest group system providing, in their minds, a satisfactory outcome for the large, disorganized interests that Olson leaves behind.

Geoff Lorenz in his “Prioritized Interests: Diverse Lobbying Coalitions and Congressional Committee Agenda-Setting” (2020) analyzed thousands of bills in Congress from 2005 to 2014 and found that those supported by diverse coalitions had a greater chance at committee markup. Legislators rely on a diverse group and broad cross section of voters to get elected and reelected. This translates into agenda-setting; legislators seek and lobbyists provide legislation with broad support. However, there is some indication in his data that the larger the group gets, the less successful it is. Lorenz might really be more of an affirmation of Mayhew or the coalition building research of Kevin Hula in *Lobbying Together: Interest Group Coalitions in Legislative Politics* (1999) and Marie Hojnacki’s “Interest Groups’ Decisions to Join Alliances or Work Alone” (*American Journal of Political Science*, 1997), but he does a really thorough job of isolating and ruling out variables such as PAC contributions.

A student of interest groups will want to keep a current copy of the regularly updated volume of *Interest Groups* by Cigler and Loomis now in its Ninth Edition, which through individual papers of topical interest take the work into a more current era and set of issues (2016) and will hopefully continue to be an anthology of the more recent research and theory on how interest groups continue to evolve and influence the legislative and rulemaking processes.

I also reviewed contributing texts from authors’ Kenneth Meier (*Politics and the Bureaucracy, Policymaking in the Fourth branch of Government*), John Kingdon (*Agenda, Alternatives, and Public Policies*) and William Riker who write on political
coalitions and conclude a similar thesis that big ones fail or do not last long – summarized more eloquently, the beauty of pure pluralism fails in the practical pursuit of the collective good. These authors no doubt would have enjoyed a dinner party discourse with Olson and shared in many of his economic/market-based thinking.

There is also an entire body of research around the impact of money on policymaking. Much of this work dabbles in interest group theory because it is generally about the groups spending the money. In my reading for this thesis, I briefly fell down the rabbit hole of the ‘buying policy’ subfield. The issue of availability of financial resources and the effective deployment of them is inextricably intertwined with both group mobilization and efficacy. However, as this is only a thesis and not a dissertation, I will leave the deeper dive on money politics to another writer-researcher-practitioner.

I cannot leave this brief literature review without some mention of Harold Laski, who while further left in the political spectrum than this writer or thesis can support, does provide some important fundamental thoughts about pluralism.

As I wind down this literature review, I close with the desire for more recent and compelling front-line research. While the continuously updating anthology by Cigler/Loomis/Nownes provides a satisfying recency, its framework is not comprehensive (nor meant to be). I hope that there are or will be political scientists who will continue to attempt larger scale analysis of the impact of interest groups on the policymaking process, particularly at the state and local levels.

We are living in times of decreasing federalism, with the federal government retracting from its 20th century supremacy positions and devolving or abdicating authority and funding to state and local levels of government. This merits closer scrutiny on how
interest groups and practitioners will impact a more diffuse, and often less regulated system. Will smaller, more organized groups continue to prevail in such a system? Research and conventional wisdom would seem to indicate “yes” – but could a governmental decision-making system closer to the people (i.e., state and local) actually produce a more balanced influence system wherein the larger, disorganized majority interest has greater chance as they will be closer to see, hear, smell what’s happening to them in contrast to the Washington, D.C.-based infrastructure? Olson argues for some decentralization of government as one of the best attempts to obtain the collective good; he bets on the multi-layered system of American government as a way to ensure that a jurisdiction could be neither too small nor too large to potentially manage and distribute the collective good (p. 171-2).

Could the explosion of groups and a political system drunk on campaign money at all levels have fundamentally changed the way Olson views the prowess of smaller groups? Following the Citizens United ruling on groups ability to spend, and presuming that business interests will almost always be the more monied interests, how could that impact Olson’s theory? Surely the wealthy business owners will continue to exert their “self-interest” and attempt to manipulate outcomes that may not be in the common and collective good.

Your author is currently content to return to the practitioner role but remains hopeful that others in the research realm will monitor, study, and publish work examining these questions fundamental to the understanding and sustainability of American democracy.
CHAPTER TWO – RESEARCH METHODS

As a 20+ year interest group purveyor and practitioner in the legislative process, I relied primarily on participant observations. I started my career as a legislative aide to the Senate Majority Leader for the Kentucky State Senate. I was the person who all the interest group lobbyists had to come see to get their bill onto the floor. It was more than interesting at any age but particularly enlightening and occasionally amusing at the ripe old age of 23. I moved from that role across the “triangle” to lead legislative and public relations for a Kentucky state executive branch agency. I was now the “bureaucrat” – both peddling the interests of my agency and also still the recipient of interest group lobbying to the agency. My next role will likely figure most prominently in this research – I was a member of a “M.O.D. Squad” of sorts; I was the hired gun. I was a contract lobbyist for almost a decade on behalf of numerous clients seeking support at local, state and federal levels from both legislative bodies and administrative agencies. Over that decade, I represented almost 100 clients ranging from over a dozen Fortune 500 companies to statewide membership organizations to the smallest of nonprofits and issues across the entire policy spectrum. Over the last eight years, I have returned to the public sector as a senior administrator in city government. I have traversed the Iron Triangle and scaled the picket fence of federalism.

In my findings I combine the ruminations of my experience in this field together with in-depth interviews to complement and contradict the first-person view. I have interviewed several of my former lobbyist colleagues as well as legislative and executive
branch decision makers to gain their perspective on the impact of interest groups and the various techniques they employ.

In the definitions of the research method generally known as “observation,” there is a spectrum running from complete nonparticipation all the way to complete membership. In the middle of these extremes there are variations including complete observer, observer-as-participant, moderate or peripheral membership, participant-as-observer, active participation, active membership, and complete participation. There is also differentiation for the overt and covert. (“Observation: A Complex Research Method” Baker 2006). Observation is an ethnographic research method that dates to at least Aristotle. It is inherent to the sister social science of anthropology, and the father of sociology, Auguste Comte, listed it as one of the four core research methods. Observation as a technique relies on the five senses to collect data, and in politics, I would submit the “sixth sense” is equally at play as the participant in political games must rely on her “Spidey sense” and trust the messages from her gut or the hair on the back of her neck. Regardless of your specific role as a research observer, you are studying and understanding people within their natural environment (Baker). As participant observer, I have been immersed in those environments, including the Kentucky State Capitol during every regular legislative session since 1996, the daily work of the Kentucky State executive branch, the 24/7 life of the Commonwealth’s largest municipal government (Louisville/Jefferson County), and occasionally Congress and federal agency actions. The review of the various types of “observation” available to researchers led to some amusing thoughts; some observers have dabbled in what Adler and Adler call “peripheral membership” (“Observational techniques in Denzin and
Lincoln *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 1994). In this “moderate” approach to observation, the observer has to strike a balance of being enough of an insider to gain accurate and complete information while remaining an outsider; examples of criminal justice research with prostitutes and drug dealers are provided, which made me both glad I didn’t have to make those kinds of “participant observation” choices and also wonder if some who read this will draw parallels between these illegal activities and negative perceptions of lobbyists…Regardless, I never broke any laws or needed to as a lobbyist or a participant observer for this thesis! One of the unusual aspects of my level of observation as a participant or “member” is that I wasn’t in any way “undercover” or covert. I was an active participant in the process for years and always transparent. In all my roles, I have either been a public employee or a private sector actor whose activities were reported to and monitored by public agencies (i.e., Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission, Executive Branch Ethics Commission, companion federal lobbying oversight organizations). I wasn’t a “trained” observer per se; I was a member of small, mostly misunderstood and often maligned groups – those in government service and those who are paid to influence government.

My years and diversity of experience in the field allow me to view and report at both a macro scale and a micro level. My depth of experience allowed me to gain very candid interviews with current practitioners, including some of the top lobbyists in the business in Kentucky. The interviews were conducted over a series of months and each lasted 60-90 minutes each. Each interviewee was given a brief description of the research and methodology. All interviewees consented to having their interview recorded and with knowledge that their responses would be included in anonymized fashion.
Interview subjects are noted with brief description of their experience and relevance to this research. Interviews were conducted from a standard questionnaire that differed only slightly between typology of interviewee. The questions were open-ended, and the resulting conversations were rich, often eliciting grand stories of days’ past or specific circumstances that one likely won’t find in the free press. Interviewees expressed their views in regard to the big question of this research: why do organized minority interests tend to prevail? And the sub-questions dove into topics around the influence of money in politics, the use of communications channels and devices, the role of lobbyists, the “free rider” problem, monopolies/oligopolies, and lobbying strategies like coalition building. Questions also probed into situations where this prevailing theory about small, minority interests maybe didn’t play out, including discussions of situations where more than one “narrow/organized interest” squared off against another, as is often noted in occupational and professional matters. Some interviews progressed into deeper discussion of specific policy areas and how each may lend itself more or less to support of the underlying thesis question.

All of the interviews were conducted in private settings with only the researcher and interview subject present. The interviews were all comfortable and candidly harkened back to some of my experience as a lobbyist/participant observer – both settings require you to be an active listener!

The beauty of this research is the rich combination of my personal experience together with the insights from the interviews. As a note and preface on this point, I am writing primarily in the first person and any comments not directly attributed to one of the interviewees are my own.
CHAPTER THREE – PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In the course of this research, I want to further explain why do organized minority interests prevail?

Is it because of the money? Does the strategic deployment of PAC contributions, professional lobbying services, and spending on other organizational resources contribute to the success of a group or its policy agenda?

Is it because these groups are better communicators? Have they figured out methods to cut through the noise of the traditional lobbying process to sound a resonant tone with legislators? Do they more effectively deploy multi-modal strategies (mass media, earned media, social media, direct marketing, grassroots campaigns) that lead to success?

Or it is because of the lobbyists? Do you really get more success if you pay for a hired gun? And does the amount of resources dedicated to lobbying matter?

And, of course, all of these questions exist under the primary thesis that small, organized minority interests will almost always win out over large, disorganized majority interests in the policymaking process. Do these tactics – money, communication, lobbyists – further the success of the small, organized minority interest?

At the outset of my research, and included in this paper’s introduction, I offered the following observations, which I hoped to prove, disprove, or otherwise elaborate upon as my research and analysis progressed:
• A successful strategy for a small or intermediate group relies on many tactics, including PAC and campaign contributions, consistent lobbying, and regular communications.

• Oligopolies likely form the most successful groups.

• Most of the literature focuses on groups with inherent market or economic interests. Analysis of other types of groups, like membership organizations, can result in equally interesting, if possibly different, conclusions.

• Successful interest groups pick their legislative champions wisely (see Denzau and Munger).

• Partisan politics most certainly influence the public policy debate, but I do not believe they figure in the application of interest group theory and the success of organized minority interests; small/intermediate size groups from the left and the right can both exploit their effective size to success.

• Even though big policy issues like gun control, health care policy, and tax reform grab headlines, the influence game is almost always most adeptly played on less publicized fields like professional licensure, tax expenditures, and regulatory matters.

• Every study is a reflection of its time and those that came before. We live in a measuredly more divided time than before. The swing voter is an endangered species.

• Tacit quid pro quo agreements - more commonly known as relationships - rule many non-headline grabbing policy debates.

• Lobbyists range widely in competency and hence impact.
• Lobbyists are most often forbidden from working on contingency, meaning they get paid no matter how successful they are.

• Lobbying success is very hard to measure and failure is easy to forgive in the messy arena of public policy in the U.S. It is easy, and often honest, to find one or many uncontrollable factors to blame for your failure as a lobbyist.

• "Access" is often what a special interest buys.

• The economic theories of Olson and Downs don't fully account for the human "lizard brain" that drives another form of rational decision making (life or death and the political propagation of “fear” or “hate” to achieve a policy goal or election outcome).

• Squeaky wheels almost always get oil even if they fail at other more sophisticated strategies and measures.

• All is not lost for the disorganized but concerned electorate - you still get to vote.

After substantial reading, interviews, and reflection of my own experience, I wouldn’t change a single thing on this list. But I will prioritize some of these concepts in this chapter, primarily as a result of the interviews with current and former practitioners. I can also now provide substantial examples and anecdotes behind several of these points. Following are a more concise and limited set of “themes” that arose from the interviews and colored by my own participant observations and experiences over the years. This extensive chapter will explore each theme separately, but there is little doubt that each of these thematic areas overlaps like a Venn diagram with its companion themes. For example, the influence of money in politics is inextricably linked to the effective use of
communications tools (most of which cost money) and the employment of lobbyists (who usually cost a lot of money).

**Theme 1 – Show Me the Money!**

**Theme 2 – Can you hear me now? Communicate, communicate, communicate**

**Theme 3 – The M.O.D. Squad reigns – Lobbyists matter**

**Theme 4 – Oligopolies really do have it best – and why**

**Theme 5 – The problem of the Free Rider persists, and may be getting worse...**

**Theme 1 – Show Me the Money!**

The influence of the almighty dollar in modern politics cannot be overstated. But how does it affect modern pluralism? Short answer: a lot and in a lot of ways. Money and the accumulation of wealth have long played into human culture and our organizations of civil society. Some of humanity has made wealth an absolute marker of influence and power, such as in the case of monarchies or a caste system. Modern democracies are nearly as influenced by money, but perhaps more complexly. The reality is that it is very hard to have status or power in politics without money. Sadly, gone are the days of Paul Wellstone and his retired school bus campaign. Even today’s most populist candidates (e.g., Bernie Sanders) raise millions of dollars and run nearly identical campaign strategies as their more establishment or “corporate” peers. But the purpose of this academic work is the focus on why well-organized minority interests prevail over a disorganized majority, and, yes, one of the reasons is the moola. One of my interviewees, a former long-time legislator, even referred to money as “the tail wagging the dog” of today’s public policy debates and the political game in general. One of the reasons it is so prolific (beyond the Citizens United case that broke down the door,
stormed the castle, and burned to the ground any rational system of campaign finance reporting and transparency) is that money can buy you just about anything you need to win.

Money can often be a substitute for other strategies you would normally deploy to win a policy debate. Another interviewee, a true Kentucky political sage who has held leadership positions in state executive and legislative branches, managed campaigns, and lobbied, told me a story about how he needed the money to buy attention to an issue for an out-of-state corporation to supplement for the lack of Kentucky employees who would otherwise be speaking up for said corporation’s interests if they were local. All of the interviewees used significant and superlative terms when describing the modern role of money in the influence game, and all noted that it had increased substantially and seemed to be continuing to do so. One prominent lobbyist referred to money as “all encompassing” in the process, and that without it you would be fighting with “one arm tied behind your back”; he went on to say that “money allows you to use the full toolbox” in lobbying an issue. However, the same lobbyist also caveated some of the money talk by saying “It’s a must, but it’s not a silver bullet,” and he noted that all the stuff you can buy to support your cause is in many cases just a substitute for the personal connections you would rather you or your client have, which “still matter the most.”

Another successful lobbyist talked about the money part of the game through example of some of Kentucky’s more prominent family names in business – and subsequently those in the political business. In the continued interest of as much anonymization as possible, I won’t name the prominent families of the example, but I will note that they are from the construction/contracting and real estate industries. You
might equate their industry positions to our American version of a caste system. They have money, which tends to naturally equate in our country to an elevated social status. Then the money buys you “access” to decisionmakers who need the campaign contributions and crave access to your other wealthy friends in your elevated social circle. In discussing the “value” of campaign contributions, political action committees (PACs), and other political campaign fundraising, the interview conversations were harmonious but wide-ranging. All of the interviewees were cautious to not connote too much importance to campaign contributions – i.e., you can’t just buy your way to influence by legally contributing the maximum amount and gathering some of your friends to do the same. But the cumulative effect of doing so year after year does have a measurable impact. One lobbyist referred to this as a “tipping point” in a relationship wherein the monied and influential family or interest has established a true relationship with the legislator and may now be able to buy more than “access” – they might actually be buying an outcome in the legislative process because they have built a lengthy and deep connection of importance to a legislator or legislative leader (who might be doing fundraising for his/her caucus or other legislators). The lobbyist further elaborated that this was in no way a “quid pro quo” but rather the establishment of a true personal and social relationship, no different than we establish every day in our lives. But instead of being built on a common interest or activity at work, worship, or community, it’s built on a political nexus of interests.

The sage of my interviews used equally elaborate terminology when describing how much money can advance the cause of the well-organized minority interest. He used
terms such a “huge factor,” “more important than ever,” and “out of control.” A former legislator also noted that money’s influence was most certainly “not new.”

Olson wrote *The Logic of Collective Action* in 1965, which was a fascinating era of change, upheaval, and policy debate. Throughout his economic model of politics, he writes of the corporate monied influence, and all the things that money can buy in 1965. But he could not have foreseen the explosion to the current day landscape of money. It’s not only that direct campaign contributions have gone up; it’s the proliferation of so many entities crowding the space to influence the votes. Some of these entities are “interest groups” in a traditional sense, but many of them are not. Some of the entities spending money to influence a vote or public policy change are mere shells or fabrications, often formed for the sole and narrow purpose of influencing a specific issue for a limited timeframe. Coalition building used to mean working to bring together standing groups, corporate entities, membership groups, and other lobbying interests in pursuit of a common goal. Traditional coalitions could be long-standing or issue-driven. Today, what looks like a “coalition” could be an “Astroturf” (i.e., fake grassroots) entity formed entirely online with no members, no corporate filings, and nothing more than a website address. It looks, sounds, and feels real, but its funders may be impossible to find in the dizzying array of 527, 501(c)(4) or 501(c)(6) organizations that may or may not have to report who they are, what they are doing, and where the money comes from. I outline all of this to demonstrate the vast number of ways that a monied (and often well-organized minority interest) can spend money to influence policymakers directly and/or influence us (i.e., voters) to in turn influence our policymakers.
In addition to the PACs and other legal entities that fund candidates or issue campaigns, there are myriad other ways to spend money in the public policy arena. I’ll go into more depth in the next two Themes about the voluminous ways to dispense the dough in Communications and Lobbying. But as a teaser, I asked two of the lobbyists interviewed, if they had $100,000, how would they spend it. Their answers were similar. One opined that he would dedicate 40% to hiring a lobbyist to quarterback the client’s needs, 25% to PAC contributions, 25% to a digital “campaign” with social media, IP targeting, and some earned media, and the final 10% to ginning up grassroots phone calls. The second lobbyist had a very similar example of 50% to the hired gun/lobbyist, 30% for communications efforts for direct mail, generated phone calls, and the remaining 20% to some Republican-led campaign committee (e.g., leadership PAC, Party, or conservative leaning 527/501(c)).

Curious to know more about how all this money gets spent? Thought social media was “free”? It’s not. And what in the world is “IP Targeting”? Yep, you’re being targeted every moment you’re online. All of your questions will be answered in the following two Themes where I will tell you how lobbyists and their employers are spending sometimes large amounts of money to get you and your policymakers to think and vote their way...

I promise to answer your questions, but I can’t commit to allay any concerns. Candidly, I’ll likely just engender a whole bucket of additional worry...

**Theme 2 – Can you hear me now? Communicate, communicate, communicate**

In search of affirming or disproving my Olson-inspired theory around organized minority interests prevailing against the disorganized majority interest, I asked my
learned practitioners about the impact of communications. In brief, were these organized minority interests/groups just better communicators? Again, the short answer is a resounding yes. The underpinnings of this affirmation include both the groups’ access to the financial resources generally available to them (and less so to the disorganized majority voice) and a level of sophistication in this realm that only comes from years of regular practice and access to the best purveyors in the space. Some lobbyists are themselves public relations experts, and a few lobbying firms are actually attached to public relations firms. There are also some lobbyists and other public affairs specialists who came from the campaign side of the politics business and remain close to the PR experts who run electoral battles. A public policy “campaign” is really no different from a campaign for elected office. In fact, in the states, public policy debates and elections share another attribute – they are almost always finite and time limited. In Kentucky, for example, regular legislative sessions are set by Constitution to be a set number of days and must conclude by a date certain – just like an election. If you are running a public policy “campaign” you can time your communications to the date of the committee hearing or floor vote, and you know you will be done – win or lose – by March or April depending on the odd or even year!

Mastering the communications game with legislators runs the gamut of possible inputs depending on the kind of issue you are lobbying. One of the lobbyists I interviewed noted that several of the issues he has worked actually benefitted from “flying under the radar;” he noted that he was able to work several relatively obscure issues better when there wasn’t a lot of extra attention on them in the media. He noted a bill related to radon and how his client was impacted by state regulation of property and
casualty insurance. Was there a disorganized majority interest of us home and property owners who should have cared about the bill? I don’t know because I don’t know anything about radon, and you the reader probably don’t either. But if a reporter had written a story about the bill, would I have decided that maybe I should care? The lobbyist was perfectly happy for the issue – whether it was an issue of concern to me the insured – to stay comfortably debated within the confines of the legislative process and not in the free press. In fact, it may be true that the majority of work done by the “hired guns” (i.e., contract lobbyists) is the kind of work that never gets debated in the press or in any public way. So much of the interests are minor or parochial that they never rise up to the interest of the media or even the wild west of social media (where everyone can be a reporter or editorial commenter).

Only slightly above the “no extra communications, please” style, would be the basic communications to known impacted stakeholders and the low/no dollar grassroots campaign to have all these stakeholders phone their legislators. In Frankfort, for years, advocates of all stripes and level of compensation have known the value of “green slips.” These “green slips” are literally pieces of green paper that are generated from a bank of telephone operators who answer a toll-free line during legislative sessions and record your opinion about an issue or specific bill on a green slip that goes to your State Representative and/or State Senator. For years, and before the explosion of other new media and the regular use of e-mail, green slips could rule the day, and one of your jobs as a lobbyist was to generate as many green slips as possible for/against the issue to advance your cause. It was common occurrence for me, and the lobbyists I interviewed, to have examples where legislators would say something like “I’d love to be for you, but
I’ve got only a handful of green slips on your side, and a stack yea high on my desk against ya.” You can imagine that “yea high” was always quite tall. In their heyday, green slips were the ultimate straw poll as an issue heated up and headed toward a vote.

Green slips took on the role they did partly because Kentucky has legislative sessions that essentially sequester state legislators in Frankfort for the better part of the first three months of each year. And with a state that can take nine hours to drive end to end, and Frankfort sort of near the middle, it means that many legislators, particularly those from the rural edges, would only go home on weekends, and some of them wouldn’t even go home every weekend. The only way they would hear from constituents would be the phone calls or a random special visit from a constituency group from home.

All of my interviewees emphasized that personal connections remain far and away the most effective communicators. Whether it’s a close friend, the local optometrist, a member of your Sunday school class, or the high school principal, when a lobbyist can get someone from home, who has a personal relationship with the legislator, and/or stature in the community to engage on behalf of your issue, it’s as good as gold. Sometimes this engagement can be a simple phone call, or perhaps an email (or at least the outreach could start that way). But there remains no substitute for in-person, face-to-face engagement. A former legislator told me how much it mattered to him that people would come up to him at the grocery store to express their opinion on a pending policy matter in Frankfort; he also noted that organizations that meet regularly, like a local Rotary, Kiwanis, or Optimist Club, could also be places where he might gain perspective from constituents. This second example points back to our success of the organized minority interest because the members of that interest group are probably more likely to
be members of local charitable organizations and more likely to be perceived as peers to a legislator. The shared membership in organizations gives the organized interest “access” and grants him/her a certain respected status. These shared memberships and local connections are especially important in smaller towns and more rural areas, and this definition applies to more members of the Kentucky legislature than not. A State Representative represents around 40,000 people and a State Senator just over 100,000. They rely on their personal and professional connections at home in multiple ways, and it is intensely personal. One of the lobbyists remarked on the “aftermath” of the recent legislative clashes with teachers over public school funding and pensions. While conservative and/or Republican legislators may have voted their ideology, when they got home to their districts, where for the vast majority of them the school district is the largest employer, there were personal consequences. The lobbyist told me the story of legislators’ wives being ostracized from social gatherings and groups by long-time friends who were teachers or others at home who sympathized with educators.

So, we have established that the best communications are personal, and if you can generate enough phone calls or other personal contact from constituents, you can win over a legislator to your side. But also beware, a fair amount of this is manufactured. You would expect that the Kentucky Association of XYZ would send out an e-blast to its dues-paying members asking them to call legislator in support of HB 100; that sounds a lot like Truman’s utopian function of groups. People banding together around a common interest and voicing their collective opinion. But increasingly, the feedback to legislators, is bought, coerced, or otherwise created. There are firms who specialize in “key influencer” programs wherein a public affairs professional is paid to call his/her
friends/relations to get them to call their legislators about the issue du jour. The paid public affairs professional knows who the “movers and shakers” are, and he/she probably has a good sense who State Senator X is going to take a call from. It’s part of the “Astroturf” version of grassroots work, and sometimes called “grasstops.” In this part of the work, it’s not the quantity of calls you generate, it’s the quality. As a public affairs pro, you’re either spending time and money to ensure that the influential people who should care, know about the pending issue, and inspire them to get involved by calling their state legislator, or you are convincing an influential person that it is worth his or her time (and political “chit”) to make a call to their legislator friend on the subject.

I distinctly remember sitting in a lobbyist training conference for a pharmaceutical company client wherein a senior level executive of the company was explaining to lobbyists from multiple states not only the amazing merits of their whizbang drug that essentially cured a chronic illness but also how it cost a zillion times more than everything else on the market and wasn’t it worth it to spend Medicaid and Medicare (i.e., taxpayer) dollars on this magnificent and wildly expensive drug because just exactly what was a life worth? We state contract lobbyists exchanged worried glances at each other across the room, all wondering who of us would raise our hand to question this clumsy offense. But before any of us could figure the best way to question this devoted trainer, he made it worse. He then started drawing on his flip chart a crude depiction of whatever he thought a political “chit” looked like, and he told us that the company expected us to cash our “chits” and those of others on their issue. At least he couldn’t have been clearer…and the drug really was wonderful for those who could afford it…but I can no longer watch an episode of 60 Minutes without thinking about that
moment and the grotesque system of life-saving drugs for the highest bidder in this country. No wonder we spend 20% of our GDP on health care. Olson would have loved this example because this company – through its organization, depth, and experience – was clearly getting one over on us the taxpayers. I don’t need to name the company because it’s an example that is repeated time and again in the pharmaceutical drug arena on all sorts of drugs and diseases.

This pharmaceutical story is but one of many that any public affairs professional could tell from experience. Drug companies have nearly endless resources. And they often band together with non-profit organizations to get their message out. When Merck brought to market the amazing vaccine that should basically all but end cervical cancer, the public health community was as or more energized as the company; but the company also had the deep pockets to fund advertising campaigns, send advocacy and educational materials to every medical professional who could spread the word, and it all worked to create a massive and broad-based campaign that saw most states adopt mandatory vaccination. This is a mixed example of the theory of this paper because while the outcome clearly benefitted the disorganized majority (generations who would no longer worry about getting HPV or cervical cancer), and the company’s financial largesse allowed for the message to be quickly and expertly deployed, the organized (and minority) interest of the vaccine maker was also well served.

On a happier note of communications and storytelling, a former legislator reminded me of an issue that is largely in our policymaking past: AIDS. When it first burst onto the scene, there was confusion and fear. And as the deadly disease first became known through the gay male culture, it was further castigated and dismissed. It
wasn’t until a young man named Ryan White from Kokomo, Indiana sadly received the disease through a blood transfusion that the narrative on the disease and the attention it should get started to shift. This is an excellent example of personalizing a story and offering an unexpected “face” for an issue. Unusual and unexpected narrators are one sure way to change a storyline. We are all victims of our own prejudices; we all fall prey to what we know, or what we think we know. But when you can bring forth a different and sympathetic voice to an issue, you can sometimes get policymakers to change their minds. In this particular example, you could say that Ryan White became the face and the voice for the disorganized majority. He was one young man from a middle class family in the Midwest who was a terrible victim. But he had a tremendous impact on public policy that helped millions.

Other keys to successful communication are tried and true. My interviews all reminded me of the importance of repetition, communicating on an 8th grade level (or as one lobbyist put it “Keep It Simply Smart,”) and always employ your passionate supporters with a message that resonates on an emotional level. You have to have your facts straight, but a personal or otherwise “tug at the heartstrings” emotional message will always win.

The other modes of communication employed by lobbyists and their employers get more sophisticated and expensive as you move up the spectrum.

Earned media is still some of the best communication available. Why? For starters, it’s free. Earned media is the kind of media that public relations firms specialize in placing. Either the topic/issue you’re working on has enough of a profile that the media naturally want to cover it, or you’ve done a good enough job as a public affairs
professional of ‘pitching’ the story to a local reporter/media source that they decide it’s worth their time to cover. You could argue it’s not really “free” if you need a public relations firm or similar to coerce media coverage, but it is different from “paid media” forms like traditional advertising and some of the newer (and sneakier) story placements that run all the way from clearly notated “advertorials” to stories that look like they came from a reputable news source but didn’t. Other than its cost, earned media holds rank in the media universe because it comes from an “independent” source, thereby contributing to its veracity. According to my interviews with a couple of older folks in the business (interviewees who both entered some role in Kentucky politics in the 1970s), these earned media opportunities were particularly golden in the days before cable news and the internet. The local newspaper, radio station, or in larger markets, broadcast television, held enormous sway in public policy debates. So, getting a favorable story, or even better, a kind editorial was an absolute core part of any legislative strategy. I can attest to this even from the earlier days of my career in the 1990s and early 2000s. Those days have largely faded or tarnished. Cable news took the first chink out of the armor as households now had more than their local broadcast channels to turn to for their news and information, and more options to distract or take them away from the local news. The advent and proliferation of the internet substantially changed everything. People now get their news and information from more sources than you can list. And, particularly in this day and time, there is increased suspicion of the news being handed out by broadcast networks and even some cable outlets. Accusation of liberal bias in the media is nothing new, but Roger Ailes actualized his theory and interest into the behemoth that is now Fox News, creating an entire alternate platform of news that is more or less unabashedly
conservative leaning. Then comes along MSNBC in response, and then like gasoline on fire, the internet spawned “news” platforms like rabbits in mating season. In perhaps the final blow to what most of us knew or appreciated as journalism, President Trump has accused it all of being “fake news.” There’s no doubt the American people would question what they hear and read.

This troublesome evolution is particularly important to understand in test of our Olsonian theory here in this paper. If the well-organized (and resourced) minority interest had a leg up in the 20th century policy debates because they had PR machines placing stories, publicists cranking out draft editorials, and advertising firms (a la Mad Men) spending thousands or millions on advertising, imagine the potential advantage available to them today when they still have all these things, plus the disorganized majority may have lost the last counterbalance to all these communications empire – the fourth estate (a.k.a. the free press). Researchers and theorists across the quad in the Journalism Department have to be in absolute freak-out mode because the modern rhetorical playing field has been upended. In the past, as a member of the majority, if I was suspicious that cigarettes might be bad for me, despite the bombardment of ads, the glamorous people in them, and the tobacco executives under oath before Congress telling me that everything was just fine, I could merely turn to really good investigative journalism on a reputable broadcast channel to find out that maybe they were all lying. The proprietors of power in this country have been doing their best of late to discredit the last check and balance they had against them.

How does this play out in a small state like Kentucky? In the interviews with the local practitioners, they noted the erosion of the power of the newspapers that once held
sway on public opinion and ultimately the public policy debate. The Louisville Courier-Journal used to have statewide distribution, and it now barely covers anything outside a one hour’s drive of the city. The Lexington Herald-Leader, while never having quite the reach of the C-J, has also seen its role diminish significantly. Both papers also used to have formidable editorial boards; those days are long gone. As the national drumbeat against “liberal media bias” loudened, it backwashed against these famously liberal leaning boards, and quickly a favorable editorial or endorsement from one of them was no longer a cherished item in the debate to pass or kill a bill. This shift also coincided with Kentucky’s shift from a blue state to a purple state to one of heavily red hue with blue spots.

My interviewees also pointed out important distinctions in the use of earned media in rural versus urban settings. In many of Kentucky’s smaller places, the local paper or local radio station is still a very big part of local life; the publication or station may even still be locally owned. If either or both of these platforms decide to engage with opinion on a public policy issue (which is admittedly rare), they could easily influence the hometown legislator’s vote. However, this local influence could work either way – for the organized minority or against. In small towns, everyone knows everyone else and a large part of their business. More importantly, their economies are very interdependent. Those newspapers and radio stations survive off of local ad sales and subscriptions. It would be rare, and perhaps really bad business, for them to take regular or loud opinions that differed from the majority view. Even in Louisville, there are regular letters to the editor of the Courier-Journal proposing to end one’s subscription
because of something from the Forum page or other content that the writer/subscriber deemed too left or too right.

All of these examples – whether at the macro scale of U.S. media in general or the small town paper point to the influence of media in our very loud and messy democracy.

The media continues to take assaults from all directions (not just the White House). The proliferation of social media, online ads, IP (internet protocol) targeting, and the kinds of news peddling we are only beginning to understand from the investigations of the 2016 presidential race, are dramatically reshaping how we get our information – and ultimately how we make our decisions. And the folks who want to influence our vote are hard at work using and creating these platforms. In fact, Louisville, right here in the heartland of America, is home to one of the largest and most sophisticated IP targeting companies. There is very little difference between how advertisers target you online to get you to buy the next whizbang gadget that everyone has to have versus how a candidate or issue campaign targets you to either get our vote or get you to contact your legislator to express your opinion. And, once again, enter the lobbyists. As they are crafting a plan for a client’s issue, they will almost certainly recommend some kind of spend on an online campaign. It’s relatively inexpensive to target to a legislator’s home or office (or the entire Capitol building). IP targeting can also send very detailed messaging to certain constituents. Want to send a message about a legislator’s position on an issue to every Democrat or Republican who has voted in the last three out of five general elections? Voila! It is done! The next time you go online to check out your daughter’s Facebook page, or to see if those pants at Talbots have gone on
sale yet, there’s a pretty banner ad telling you that your State Senator is for or against some issue and you ought to call him/her and let him/her know how you feel about that.

However, there are plenty of examples on the scrapheap of public policy where all the money and access to communications channels still didn’t work. One of Kentucky’s most enduring and unresolved policy issues fits this category: expanded gaming. Kentucky’s horse industry has tried for years to get the General Assembly to permit some kind of casino-style gaming at or associated with Kentucky’s existing gaming industry. The earliest efforts likely date to 1994, and the idea persists to this day when the recently elected Governor actively promoted it during his campaign. Kentucky horse owners, breeders, racetracks and other related interests have run extremely well-funded and coordinated campaigns. They’ve succeeded in changing the nomenclature; no one calls it expanded gambling any more. Expanded gaming has had the support of the majority of Kentucky Governors for the last 25 years, and opinion polls consistently showed that most people were for it as well, as casinos opened regularly in most of the border states in the 1990s and early 2000s. Expanded gaming interests had an entire gaggle of lobbyists and created an entirely separate association just to promote the cause. But to this day, no vote has passed both chambers of the General Assembly, and with both houses firmly in Republican hands, it’s hard to envision a path to passage. So, how does the Olsonian view overlay with this example? The majority interest, verified via numerous polls, was definitely on the side the horse industry, which also happened to be a very organized yet minority interest. But the other minority interest in this case was the religious right. Less than a third of Americans attend church regularly, but yet the religious vote is highly coveted and seldom betrayed. There is certainly a line to be drawn between those who
attend church regularly and those who vote regularly. But in the last three decades of American politics, there is no doubt that evangelicals and others who identify as the religious right have held disproportionate sway in public policy debates. Perhaps I should have written a section on the communications methods of the church? It’s much more than the Sunday Bulletin many of us knew…

The length of this section speaks to the enormousness and importance of communications in today’s influence business. The weakening of the free press and the diversification of the “channels” available for message delivery have further deepened the role and power of Olson’s organized minority.

Theme 3 – The M.O.D. Squad reigns – Lobbyists matter

Admittedly, your author has been a true “lobbyist,” and she is an advocate at heart. Hence, I have tested myself throughout this thesis process to ensure I did not connote too much authority or importance to the role of the lobbyist. For the purpose of this academic pursuit, a “lobbyist” is someone paid to advocate for or against a particular public policy or issue. In a more general sense, we are all lobbyists, or can be. But to test the Olson theory, we need to look at those who are professional purveyors of the craft and paid (well in most cases).

Frankfort is full of lobbyists of all stripes and types. As of December 2019, the Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission reported 590 registered lobbyists on behalf of 729 employers. Kentucky has one of the most elaborate lobbying reporting systems thanks in large part to a federal bribery scandal that rocked the capital in the 1990s. “BOPTROT,” as the investigation was known, saw several legislators dethroned and a few imprisoned. It was a measure of how money influences the process as most of the
bribes were mere hundreds of dollars. Following this scandal, Kentucky enacted the strongest legislative ethics code in the nation, and it largely stands to this day. Kentucky has in its law a “no cup of coffee” rule that forbids registered legislative agents (a.k.a. “lobbyists”) from paying for anything of value for a legislator, including even the slightest food and drink and definitely no gifts. Lobbyists are also forbidden from donating to legislators or legislative candidate campaigns, and lobbyists’ employers and PACs are forbidden from giving during legislative sessions (to further discourage an actual or perceived “quid pro quo”). There is also a provision that forbids a legislator from becoming a legislative agent until at least two (2) years have passed since they left office. The legislature enhanced rules in new legislation in 2014, and the legislature’s actions have recently survived a federal court challenge, affirming once more one of the strongest and best legislative ethics laws in the country.

In addition to the items and actions forbidden to lobbyists and their employers, the law also mandates significant reporting by same. Regular reports during the legislative sessions and throughout the calendar year require employers and their agents to list the bills and issues they lobbied, amounts paid to lobbyists, and other disbursements made in pursuit of their agenda.

A look back at the last twenty (20) years of annual reports from the Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission gives us a high-level view of lobbying activity in the Commonwealth. In 2001-2002, the Commission reported 483 employers and 600 legislative agents. Five years later, in their 2006-2007 report, the employer number had grown to 637 while the number of agents had only increased to 638. Five years after that
(2011-2012), there is very little change with 632 employers and 596 agents. The 2016-2017 report, sees a jump to 711 employers and agents at 611.

With the last reporting (December 2019) showing 729 employers and only 590 agents, we can draw a small set of conclusions from this data. First, the increase in the number of employers far exceeds any naturally occurring or statistically insignificant fluctuation (going from 483 in 2001 to 729 present day); this rise in employers mirrors the increase measured in the literature around increased group activity at the state level. In Kentucky – a state that historically suffered from limited economic activity controlled by a handful of large industries – this proliferation of employers (a.k.a. “groups”) also signals an economic maturation and important diversification of economy and interests. No matter your view of group theory (Truman or Olson), more groups is generally held as a healthy and good thing. Second, the relatively static number of registered legislative agents creates a somewhat surprising scenario. If the number of employers/groups has grown so markedly over the last two decades (roughly 50% growth), why hasn’t the number of agents/lobbyists also increased? The number has hovered around 600 (plus or minus) for most of this same time period. Without analyzing every single report, and scouring the names of lobbyists year over year, your practitioner author can easily surmise that the answer lies in the contract lobbying corps, which candidly does not change much. Many of the same personalities and most of the same lobbying firms are still the same as they were twenty years ago. And it appears that the new employers who have arrived on the scene have largely entered the market by employing the well-known, tried-and-true contract lobbyists with stable addresses in Frankfort.
And, when you look at the list of top spending employers of lobbyists in 2019, you find nothing surprising. Number one on the list is the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce followed by Altria (Phillip Morris) in second place. Others in the top ten include the Kentucky Hospital Association, the Kentucky Bankers Association, CSX Corporation (railroad), Anthem, Inc. (health insurance), and the Kentucky Justice Association (trial lawyers).

The changes made in 2014 to the legislative ethics laws required employers of legislative agents to report the cost of advertising placed during a legislative session related to the legislation the employer supported or opposed. The law was crafted broadly to apply to spending not only directly by the employer, but also spending by the lobbyist and any other person or organization affiliated with the employer. Advertising could be in print, on TV or radio, through the mail, or online. This new requirement emphasizes the importance of three (3) of the primary themes of this thesis: money, communications, and professional lobbying. For example, according to filings made to the Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission, during the 2019 Regular Session, employers of lobbyists spent $294,117 on advertising. The “top 10” list of spenders included everything from professional licensure groups to for-profit corporations and think tank-style policy groups. The issue that received the bulk of the advertising dollars related to advance registered nurse prescriptive authority (i.e., nurses seeking greater prescriptive authority) with $94,639 spent on this issue alone (about one-third of the total spending on advertising).

As I interviewed my former lobbyist colleagues, they painted a complex picture of how lobbying works – it’s far more than the money spent. A good lobbyist knows the
people and the process. Just as you would hire a good lawyer if you’re going to court, you would want to hire a good lobbyist to go to Frankfort (or Washington) for a legislative battle. As one lobbyist remarked to me, a good lobbyist can’t sell a bad or unpopular idea, but he/she can buy you some instant credibility and get you audiences with key decision makers. A good lobbyist will also see more than one path to success. Two of my interviewees used football analogies when describing their work; they likened the lobbyist to a clever running back. Running backs hardly ever get the benefit of a straight path; they must get creative, scramble, go around, work with a team to block/tackle, and manage obstacles – known and unexpected. A good lobbyist, like a quarterback or running back with the ball can see the play developing on the field and think several steps ahead. As one of Frankfort’s sage political reporters once remarked, some state capitol players play checkers and others play chess. The winners are almost always those adept at the latter.

All of the interviewees also remarked on the wide range of competency in Frankfort’s lobby corps and the reality that you usually get what you pay for (as with many things in life). When you pay more for a lobbyist you are getting experience and expertise. Some employers of agents will pay a premium for “brand name” lobbyists – i.e., a former elected office holder or recent senior staffer who has departed the public sector for greener pastures. But the best lobbyists almost always tend to be those with some longevity and those who work on a team. Lobbying at its core is a relationship business. I was taught very early on that the only thing you have in Frankfort, at the end of the day, after you strip away all the titles and fancy friends, is your word. If you don’t have your word and a reputation as a credible, honest source, you ultimately have
nothing. Your success as a lobbyist is built over years of working on myriad issues, in the trenches with legislators, staff, and other lobbyists. Legislators quickly glean who is knowledgeable and who can be trusted. As a former legislator told me in an interview, the good lobbyists are the ones who will tell you the whole truth. This is a challenging rhetorical feat. You have to practice it. You go in to meet with a legislator. You have your one-pager and your best pitch prepared. You tell him or her all the reasons why they need to support/oppose your issue. You provide data, sources, and passion. And then you have to tell them what the other side is going to say. It’s a little painful, but it’s almost always the best course of action. Sometimes, the legislator will even ask you before you can finish your pitch, “so tell me, what is your opposition going to say about all this?” And you need to know, be honest about it, and then you can do your own counter argument! Once you accomplish the art of pitching your point of view and your opponent’s, you are also recognized as an expert on the policy topic in addition to being trusted. And then you do it over and over again. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

The value of the personal relationship can extend beyond the prototypical contract lobbyist. A former state executive branch senior official recounted the tale of passing the high school graduation bill. Prior to this legislation, you could drop out of school at age sixteen with very little consequences (except of course for the vast repercussions of being an uneducated individual in an increasingly skilled workforce). Despite the obvious advantages to finishing high school, and reams of data proving the benefit to individuals and society as a whole, it took years to change the law to increase the age to eighteen and create a system in which students were given every opportunity to complete the high school diploma. Many legislators viewed the ability to drop out of high school as
something akin to a civil right or liberty. Others simply had a practical view that there were some students who just weren’t cut out for school, and they should be given the right to drop out. To bring these naysayers along, the executive branch backers of this education reform did what any smart lobbyist would do – they went to the donor lists of those legislators and got their backers to call them; they went to the legislators’ employers and the largest employers in their districts and got them to make calls. They worked the relationships that mattered most to those legislators to gain advantage. The major donors, who were also in many cases representative of major employers, needed those kids to graduate with high school diplomas and either come work for them or go on to college and then come back to work for them. Those relationships were key to securing the votes to pass the bill.

The lobbyists who work as a team always have an added advantage. Picture one of those wildlife specials on public television where David Attenborough is narrating amazing footage of a pack of lions hunting their prey. Lobbying isn’t nearly that graphic, but it’s an apt metaphor for how a team works – every lobbyist on the team exercising their best relationships, playing their best angles. The hunting pack is almost always more effective than the lone wolf.

The ability of the well-organized, usually minority interest to hire this skilled advocate or team of advocates gives the interest an inarguable leg up. The lobbyist advocate knows which legislators have the ability to move a bill, and she knows how to move them because she knows them and they know/trust her. She’s practiced and accepted. She has something that the disorganized majority interest might have trouble creating in short order = access. At the end of the day, when an entity hires a lobbyist,
that entity is really buying access. They aren’t buying a result, but they are buying access into the decision makers and level of the game that not everyone can get.

One interviewee retold a story of a special kind of access that helped a client get a leg up on an executive branch issue. A state agency was releasing something related to a bond allocation on a first come, first served basis (this paper won’t debate the merits of that from the state agency perspective). The lobbyist by nature of his position had an official state badge affording him access into the state office building where the first come, first served activity would open to all the next day at 8 a.m. in a sort of Black Friday-esque event. So, the lobbyist brought a folding lawn chair from home, entered the building the night before, slept in said lawn chair, and was indeed first in line the next morning as the other bankers’ and financiers’ representatives struggled in through security! This is perhaps an extreme and perverse example of “access” but a true story nonetheless!

**Theme 4 – Oligopolies really do have it best – and why**

What is an “oligopoly”? The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “a state of limited competition, in which a market is shared by a small number of producers or sellers.” We are all familiar with the notion of a monopoly, but federal laws and their requirements for market competition make monopolies all but impossible. But functional oligopolies have become commonplace. One only need to ponder briefly to come up with some we suffer from regularly as a consumer – cell phone providers, cable/broadband services, airlines. Many examples, such as the aforementioned, have their roots in previous monopolies or heavily regulated industries, but the lingering result is an oligopoly. Oligopolies tend to continue in industries that remain heavily regulated and are also typified by a high cost to
entry, such as airlines or telecommunications, which have significant upfront capital investment requirements. The hospital business presents another example with heavy initial investment and a significant regulatory component. Not only do hospitals and related health care providers have to comply with myriad licensure and payment requirements, in some states, some of the facilities still have to obtain a “Certificate of Need” or “CON” to even be able to open. The ‘weaponization’ of the CON became the perfect example of how well-organized minority interests could manipulate the system. The CON began as a seemingly noble attempt to control rising health care costs; if a state could control the number of expensive facilities providing hospital services or similarly expensive services like MRIs, then the logic held that the reduced capital expenses would translate to lower patient costs. Unfortunately, it also meant that the incumbent or well-heeled newcomer could either buy their way into a CON, or, worse yet, use the legislative or executive branch approval processes to their advantage. As health care reform initiatives have advanced, the CON has largely fallen to the wayside in favor of a more consumer-based approach, but the legacy of the system remains in the relative oligopolies – and hence limited competition – of our health care delivery system.

Utilities have long enjoyed either a monopolistic or oligopolistic system. In Kentucky, everyone resides in an electric service provider region, and unless you are a very large industrial user, that is the only choice you get for power and usually gas to your home or small business. There were efforts twenty plus years ago to deregulate the electrical grid and delivery system. Those efforts did end up changing some rules around power generation and distribution. But in large part, the retail side, particularly in Kentucky, did not change. The regulatory system is set up in state law and governed by
the Public Service Commission. It is a perfect example of how the well-organized interest – the utility – has established their own functional regulatory fiefdom. The recent debate in Kentucky over how solar energy would and would not be incentivized gave a clear view into how these battles play out with the big utilities and their experienced lobbyists pursuing a bill that would lower the incentive to install solar, the small number of solar installers banding together to fight for their livelihoods, and the silent majority of consumers left largely on the sidelines trying to figure out what the proposed legislation did and did not do. Spoiler alert to those who haven’t installed solar – the bill passed and now it’s a lot less financially attractive to install solar panels on your home. While the solar bill was front page news for several legislative sessions, there are battles like this on a regular basis at the Public Service Commission (PSC) where the utilities must go to get approvals for rate increases, major capital investments, and other costs. The utilities are guaranteed a fair “rate of return,” and the PSC is the arbiter of same. The Attorney General has a division that advocates for ratepayers, and anyone can intervene in a rate case. But it is a specialized area of expertise, and the average consumer would be lost. While the system has safeguards for the representation of the large majority interest, it is more naturally a space for the proliferation of the minority by nature of its structure and specialization.

Because of the heavy regulatory nature of many oligopolies, there are many in the “sin” or “vice” industries; they are literally creatures of the law: examples include alcohol, horse racing, and casinos, which only exist because a local, state or federal law has directly permitted it and controls nearly every meaningful action within the industry and hence the individual companies. Kentucky’s most sterling example is our beloved
booze business. As everyone should know, 95% of the world’s bourbon is made in Kentucky, and the other 5% is counterfeit (no, I do not have a citation for this data). But despite the Commonwealth’s love affair with the fine corn whiskey, the state’s alcohol regulatory system long stood in the way of the proliferation of the industry. Kentucky is one of several states that still has a “three tier” system of alcohol regulation: the producer, the distributor, and the retailer. The genesis of the three tier system dates back to the post-Prohibition era wherein states sought to both have the most control over the production, movement, and sale of alcohol as well as the taxation of same; with multiple entities touching the goods, the state could also apply a multi-layered tax, one at each level. To this day, about half the cost of a bottle of alcohol is taxes. On the political and regulatory side of this issue are multiple embedded, well-organized minority interests who have become creatures of the system. In other states, some producers distribute themselves or through wholly owned subsidiary distribution networks. In Kentucky, those distributors have to be separate, and those distributors lobby effectively to maintain their mere existence. Of course there are pros and cons on all sides of the arguments about the three tier system, but there is no doubt that it is maintained and navigated by its very participants, with legitimate debate about where the disorganized majority interest is heard or served.

In recent years, and with the rise of the bourbon and distilling industry, the state legislature has passed common sense amendments to state laws that allow consumers to buy a small amount of product at a distillery as well as enjoy signature cocktails on site. But other battles within this oligopoly remain, including the lingering issue of whether or not Kentucky will ever allow the sale of wine in grocery stores. Today, wine and
distilled spirits must be sold in separate liquor stores with a different kind of licensure. Beer or malt beverages can be sold in grocery stores. If you are a consumer of wine or otherwise supporter of generally free enterprise, I’m going to boldly offer that we are the disorganized majority interest who would love to be able to pick up a bottle of sauvignon blanc along with the salad makings at my local grocer like most people in most states can. However, year after year, the grocers fail to be able to get past the well-organized minority interests who want to keep the wine sold next to the distilled spirits. This issue has also created some interesting rifts in the lobbying world; a lobbyist reported to me that a large grocery chain had dropped its membership in local and state chambers of commerce when the chambers sided with the distilling industry and against wine in grocery stores. Evidence again that oligopolies may truly have it best…

**Theme 5 – The problem of the Free Rider persists, and may be getting worse…**

The troublesome concept of the “free rider” is common across the social sciences but originated in the economic theory of public goods. The term is ultimately self-descriptive as it connotes a person or entity getting a “free ride” on an issue or benefit that others have paid for in some way. The theory’s basic application persists across multiple venues, including collective bargaining, distribution of public goods and services, and financial markets. As a taxpayer in a democratic society, one can quickly conjure examples, such as using parks and public amenities in other cities when we travel. But for the purposes of this paper and its application in group theory, it’s a much narrower and potentially nefarious thing. Concern around the free rider troubled Olson a great deal, and it was one of his main complaints against the nearly utopian pluralism of the original group theorists. If you take an economic approach to group mobilization and
success, you have to be concerned about those along for the (free) ride. The problem of the free rider also emphasizes the power of the very tightly organized minority interest. If the group is small enough to keep all of the potential players engaged in pursuit of their interest, then you can avoid the free rider. But as the group gets bigger, and individual members or potential members start to weigh the cost of group participation versus benefit, they may calculate that they can get the same benefit while standing on the sidelines and ‘riding’ on the efforts and expenditures of others.

Staying on the bourbon theme provides us an easy example in Kentucky. The Kentucky Distillers’ Association (KDA) is an old and venerable membership group for the signature industry; the KDA provides multiple membership benefits and advocacy services. As the famous corn whiskey gained rapidly in popularity in recent times, the KDA transformed itself from a relatively sleepy and small membership organization into a vociferous advocate and multi-platform promoter of bourbon. It established and trademarked the now famous Kentucky Bourbon Trail and brought the industry together to both teach the world how to drink bourbon and encourage all to visit Kentucky. During this same timeframe, and due to differences unimportant to the academic pursuits of this paper, one of the industry’s largest players decided to drop its membership in the KDA. In so doing, they lost all the “member” benefits and are also not on the actual Kentucky Bourbon Trail (though most tourists fail to comprehend that difference). But in perhaps the most obvious example of the free rider, this former member received all of the benefits of myriad state law changes pursued by the KDA that made the production, storage, distribution, and promotion of bourbon easier and more lucrative for all companies. Granted, this individual company employed its own lobbyist who generally
supported the KDA’s actions, but it was the heft of the entire industry, minus one, that
was carrying the legislative water on those changes. And because of the size of this one
company that left, they would have undoubtedly paid more in membership fees into KDA
than they paid to the individuals they hired to join the bourbon chorus. Your author is not
making any sort of judgment call on said company’s decisions, only pointing out the
example as evidence of Olson’s free rider threat.

The free rider problem is a common discussion item in union labor debates. The
concept of the “closed shop” was offered to specifically negate any free riders because
everyone is required to join. A true closed shop is a rare thing to find anymore as most
states allow employees the ability to “opt out”; those employees who do that often enjoy
the same wage/hour and other benefits of the dues-paying union members and are hence
free riders. However, after years of decline, union membership has stabilized and is
growing in some areas. One of the individuals I interviewed has a long history in the
union organizing field and noted that after the recent teacher protests, membership in the
teachers’ union had grown.

On the business side of the aisle, a similar free rider problem can be seen where
some companies spend tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to support the
local or state chamber of commerce, which advocates for the interests of all business. If
the chamber is successful in lowering the unemployment insurance rate or curtailing
workers compensation costs, all businesses will benefit regardless of how much they
spent, or didn’t, on chamber dues.

One of Kentucky’s most epic examples of interest group activity has been the
years-long efforts by the really well-organized optometrists to expand their scope of
work. An entire paper could be written on their comprehensive, well-funded, and largely successful efforts over the years. Their usual adversary was the much less organized group of medical doctors, generally ophthalmologists. In an excellent and stark example of the consequences of group mobilization, one lobbyist who had worked on these issues for years told me that around 70% of doctors in Kentucky are not members of the Kentucky Medical Association (KMA), the regular lobbying arm for the profession, whereas 85% of optometrists are members of the Kentucky Optometric Association (KOA). The KOA was able to organize their members very effectively around their narrow interests. The KMA, despite relative wealth and strong organizing principles, could never galvanize its members as effectively, and its ‘free riders’ ultimately paid the price as the effective KOA steamrolled over them in Frankfort debates about the scope of an optometrist versus an ophthalmologist.
CHAPTER FOUR – CONCLUSIONS

As the curtain begins to fall on this exercise, I find myself with many anecdotes left untold. An appendix of stories and quotes without attribution could just as easily form the conclusion! For humor and joy, I will include some here:

- Said by a legislative leader of past who shall remain nameless, “I’ve got so much trust in my local optometrist that I’d vote to allow him to do brain surgery.”

- From a sage, white-haired lobbyist, “Money isn’t as important as reelection.”

- A wistful pun/play on words from a former gaming lobbyist in referring to the multiple attempts to bring casino-style gaming to horse racing tracks: “All the money in the world, but no dice.”

- Lots of sports quotes and analogies like this from a highly successful contract lobbyist, “Politics is a full contact sport, and 51% wins.”

I’m also struck by the long list of policy battles past and present that either didn’t or only barely made these roughly hundred pages, including pharmaceutical lobbying, the behemoth of agriculture and farming interests, and the other headline topics of our political epoch like abortion, LGBTQ rights and gun control.

Also left unsaid is the increasingly troublesome retrench of the judiciary as a check and balance against an executive or legislative branch overly influenced by special interests and run amok. In a democratic society, from at least the Magna Carta to recent times, any minority interest (good or bad depending on one’s policy position) can be
safeguarded against the tyranny of the majority by the judiciary. Will this remain the case?

And what remains largely to be seen and determined is the long-term impact of social media on the activation of interests, large and small. Social media platforms and the diversification of news delivery have wildly altered how we learn and communicate with each other. How will this change the way groups mobilize and communicate? Will these inexpensive platforms provide greater balance and power to the “disorganized majority”? Maybe…

As I write this conclusion, I have recently registered, once again, as a legislative agent. I am no longer the hired gun of contract lobbying fame or a regular member of some metaphorical “M.O.D. Squad”. I am the promoter of state legislative interests for the city of my birth and that which I love, Louisville. We are a messy disorganized group of more than 770,000 residents with lots of different opinions and views to share. And, in the parlance of this work, we are also a “special interest” and mostly well organized. There are days in which I feel like I represent the “minority” and days on which I’m sure that I am adding my voice to the cacophonous majority. In reality, and due in large part to experience, I am probably a bridge between those two worlds. And that makes me hopeful.

The review of the literature and interviews with other craftsmen of advocacy did not alter my fundamental views. I still think Olson’s economic theory of collective action is largely instructive to what we see occurring in our local, state and national marketplace of policy debates. The basics of pluralism are also alive and well as people continue to organize around ideas and activities central to their interests or beliefs. I do
not lie awake at night worrying about America bowling alone. We convene and organize
differently in the internet age, but at our core, we love the collective pursuit of what
moves us.

As citizens of the greatest democracy ever tried that hasn’t failed (a rough
paraphrase of a quote attributable to Winston Churchill), we remain vigilant against the
gross amount of money in our democratic system and those who would use our
information sources (i.e., the internet) against us. As they say, “Money is the mother’s
milk of politics,” but it cannot be the only nutrition that sustains it. Our government and
political system need real people, real ideas, and tireless minding as if we were all
kindergarten teachers raising our precocious charges.

We must all participate because if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.
Again, like the teacher of five year olds, we cannot carelessly turn away from our
political process, no matter how ugly it can be to watch somedays. Whether we engage
collectively or individually, we must do so to keep that delicate balance of minority and
majority interests that our founders knew to be so critical.

Olson’s theory holds best on the narrower issues debated largely out of view. By
contrast, major policy debates enjoy groups large and small at the influence table and
splashed across the evening news or Facebook. For example, AARP is huge, full of “free
riders”, but Social Security and Medicare are preserved year after year and challenging
them is akin to grabbing the third rail of American politics.

Madison in Federalist 10, claims that there is “no way to control the ‘mischiefs of
factions’ but yet factions are sown in the nature of man.” In reality, is there any “public
interest” versus “special interests”? Why is your interest more special than mine? If all interests find their way into the debate, then the public is indeed well served.

The system isn’t closed to anyone, but it may be unequal. At the outset of this work I posed questions for research around why the organized minority might be succeeding at the cost of the disorganized majority:

Is it because of the money?

Is it because these groups are better communicators?

Or is it because of the lobbyists?

My research affirmed my belief in all three answers. Money, communications, and lobbying all further the organized minority interest, and the research indicates that the influence of money and communications may be increasing. At its core, the inequality of the system is perpetrated by the money often held by the organized minority interest. However, my research also affirmed on several examples that just as money can’t buy you love, money also is not an outright predictor for success. Groups can be successful in advocating for their interests in many different ways, and interest groups remain a critical component of our democracy.

The themes that coalesced following the research of the top theoretical questions seem timeless in modern application:

Money matters.

Communication is key.

Lobbyists definitely make a difference.

Oligopolies really do have it good.

The problem of the “free rider” is real.
It is hard to imagine a day in the recent or coming decades when these conclusionary simple thematic sentences won’t remain true and equally profound. There are some voices from the edges of the philosophical spectrum who are calling for revolution as of the date of this thesis publication (the rancorous year of the Presidential election of 2020 and now the COVID-19 global pandemic), but the truer theory of slow evolution is more likely true. The primary texts underpinning this thesis – whether in agreement or discord – date to the mid-twentieth century and remain relevant and supported by academic work well into what is now the dawn of the third decade of the twenty-first century.

I found the closing words of Baumgartner and Leech’s work so compelling, I want to cite their final three sentences here in their entirety: “Groups are a difficult set of institutions to study in a systematic way because their activities are so varied and their implications so broad. It is this very breadth, however, that makes it important for political science to pay more attention to groups. Group interests are basic to the practice of politics; interest groups must be basic to the study of politics as well” (p. 188). I hope that political science will pay closer attention to groups, even if the study is challenging. The study of interest groups is inherently cross-functional both within political science and across the social sciences. You cannot study institutions without acknowledging groups and vice versa. This paper is based on an inherently economic theory and cites economists, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists alike. Perhaps it is the complexity and intricacy that make the study and application of interest groups so compelling? And perhaps these complexities scare away too many researchers and hence account for the relative brevity of the research base. Perhaps the study of interest groups
is more equal parts from our social science brethren across the quad and just got office space in the hall of political science because it simply fit slightly better there than anywhere else? I pose these academic questions both as theories to the relative lack of heavy research as well as a proposal for how we could do more in this subfield of interest groups by opening our minds further to its cross-functional complexities and embracing its breadth rather than trying to cram it into an unnecessary and stifling narrow depth.

As a mid-career practitioner, I hope to spend more of the second half of my working years as both academician and practitioner. I may never have the patience or chops for the tediousness of doctoral level research, but I hope to continue to practice in the field (however loosely defined) and advocate for the deeper study and understanding of the importance of interest groups in our American democracy because I feel so very strongly about its importance, and I want more students of all fields of study to appreciate and then participate in groups.

I close with a story from early in my career, and it is a story that I have long used to conclude any advocacy training that I have led. At the end of an advocacy training, and particularly if you are new to the conversation, most people are feeling much more informed and generally overwhelmed. The American system of democracy and the state corollaries are inherently accessible, but the details of how to organize around an agenda and truly make a difference gets expensive and complicated fast. Many people give up. But one person can make a difference. Enter one grieving mother, Gail Minger, who tragically lost her son in a dormitory fire at one of Kentucky’s regional universities. I only met her in passing, but I will never forget her face or what she did. She is the living embodiment of the inspiring story of how one person, one mother can make a difference.
despite all the theories or conclusions about money, power, and influence. I know she had allies at heart, but she often walked alone in the halls of Frankfort. Her determination, and often single actions, changed the rules for fire safety in residence halls and living quarters at higher education institutions in Kentucky. Because of her efforts, and seemingly against the odds of a single person carrying the weight of the majority interest, now every student lays his or her head down in a campus bedroom with sprinkler systems and full fire safety systems. Thanks to Gail and her unwavering commitment to her son, his memory, and all the sons and daughters of the world. May we all be advocates in her spirit and footsteps.

As I finished the penultimate draft of this thesis and conclusion, I found myself misty eyed and verging on weepy. At first, I thought I might have just been overwhelmed by the near completion of such an enormous task. But as the emotion washed over me and lingered, it became a duality of joy and significance. The depth of the emotion this writing has elicited is no doubt a mark of the passion I feel for this work. I am an advocate. I am more sure of that than ever, and it is my joy and pride in the work of advocacy that drives the emotion. What a wonderful gift to have found joy in work and a calling to answer in profession. And what a special gift for me that I have had such wonderful jobs/roles, colleagues, mentors, and causes in my twenty-two plus years as an advocate. I am so grateful and humbled to have had the opportunity to influence policy in multiple forums and across the topical spectrum. I remain a fierce advocate for pluralism; while she may be a messy business, full of competing interests, group behavior and misbehavior, and occasionally drawn to the solicitous devils of money and ‘special’ interest that betray the common and collective good, pluralism as defined by the basic
definition of multiple groups, regardless of size or influence, advocating for their positions, maintains an important role in the perpetration of civil society. We are a nation of individuals, and we are a nation of individuals who advocate and speak largely as members of groups. And that is a good and healthy thing.

Margaret Mead, the American cultural anthropologist said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

America’s system of pluralism may be raucous, expensive, occasionally ugly, and unequal. But it is not unforgiving. And I say amen to that and for everyone who goes to fight every day for what she believes is right and true.
REFERENCES


CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Mary Ellen Wiederwohl

ADDRESS: 2419 Dundee Road
          Louisville, KY 40205

DOB: Louisville, Kentucky – May 26, 1974

EDUCATION & TRAINING: B.A., Music Major, Political Science Minor
University of Louisville
1994 – 1996

Music Education studies
Morehead State University
1993 – 1994

Architecture studies
University of Cincinnati
1992

AWARDS: Business First Woman of Influence
2019

Telugu Association of Kentuckiana Women’s Empowerment Champion
2019

University of Louisville Department of Political Science Outstanding Alumni Award
2017

Urban Land Institute Rose Fellowship
2013

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Louisville Metro Government
Chief, Louisville Forward and President, Metro Development Authority
April 2014 – Present

Louisville Metro Government, Mayor’s Office
Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief of Strategic Initiatives
July 2012 – April 2014
MML&K Government Solutions, a division of McBrayer, McGinnis, Leslie & Kirkland
Assistant Director, January 2006 – July 2012
Manager of Government Relations, February 2003 – December 2005

Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB)
Director, Division of Legislative and Public Relations, August 2000 – January 2003
Legislative Liaison, April 1999 – July 2000

Legislative Research Commission
Legislative Analyst, January 1999 – April 1999
Legislative Assistant, Senate Majority Office, January 1998 – January 1999

NATIONAL MEETING PRESENTATIONS:

Frequent speaker locally and nationally on metro economies, planning and development trends, including participation on panels and making presentations at meetings hosted by Urban Land Institute (ULI), International Economic Development Council (IEDC), Brookings Institution