

Interest Groups. An Updated Survey of the Literature

I gruppi di interesse. Una rassegna aggiornata della letteratura

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Abstract

Interest groups are among the most relevant social actors who inhabit liberal-democracies. Yet, despite their relevance, they are poorly studied. This review explains the reasons for the minor attention that scholars reserve to interest groups. The first part examines the problems faced by scholars of United States (USA) and European Union (EU) groups systems when they study interest groups. The second part is dedicated to the way researchers overcome the problems related to measuring group influence on decision makers. Then is reviewed the literature dedicated to the most important subject addressed by this sub-field of political science, namely the investigation over the biased – or unbiased – character of the system of interests in the USA and EU political systems. The impact of globalization on the group systems is highlighted in the last part of the survey. A final comment is dedicated to the pluralist or elitist nature of the group systems in our democracies.

I gruppi di interesse sono tra gli attori sociali più rilevanti che abitano le democrazie liberali. Eppure, nonostante la loro rilevanza, sono mal studiati. Questa rassegna spiega le ragioni per cui gli studiosi riservano ai gruppi di interesse così scarsa attenzione. Nella prima parte si esaminano i problemi affrontati dagli studiosi dei sistemi dei gruppi d'interesse negli Stati Uniti (USA) e nell'Unione europea (UE). La seconda parte è dedicata al modo in cui i ricercatori superano i problemi relativi alla misurazione dell'influenza dei gruppi sui decisori. Quindi viene presa in considerazione la letteratura dedicata al tema più importante affrontato da questo campo delle scienze politiche, vale a dire l'indagine sul carattere prevenuto – o imparziale – del sistema di interessi nei sistemi politici degli USA e dell'UE. L'impatto della globalizzazione sul sistema dei gruppi è evidenziato nell'ultima parte dell'indagine. Un commento finale è dedicato alla natura pluralista o elitaria dei sistemi dei gruppi nelle nostre democrazie.

Keywords

Lobbying, Interest Groups, Business groups, Neo-institutionalism, Pluralism vs elitism

Lobbying, gruppi d'interesse, gruppi economici, neo-istituzionalismo, pluralismo ed elitismo

Introduction

Interest groups are the most outstanding social actors who inhabit liberal-democracies. And those who, even more than political parties, concur to creating a useful network of links between civil society and the economic world on the one hand and democratic institutions on the other. Interest groups represent the society that organizes itself to present its preferences to public institutions asking for answers.

Yet, despite their relevance, interest groups are less studied than parties or other classic sub-fields of political science. The reasons for the minor attention that scholars reserve to groups derive from the conceptual difficulties inherent in the definition of the object of their research and from the methodological problems related to the need to measure the activity of groups and to assess their impact on the functioning of democratic regimes. These difficulties often discourage political scientists from devoting their efforts to the study of interest groups (Beyers 2008).

The first part of this contribution will examine the problems scholars of United States (USA) and European Union (EU) groups systems face when they study interest groups and the solutions adopted to overcome them. The second part will be dedicated to the way researchers meet the conceptual and practical problems related to group influence on decision makers. Then we will test the qualitative results of the research on interest groups by examining the most important subject addressed by this sub-field of political science, namely the investigation over the biased – or unbiased – character of the system of interests in the USA and EU political systems. The impact of globalization on worsening some permanent distortions of the group systems will be highlighted in the last part of the essay. A final comment will be dedicated to the pluralist or elitist nature of the group systems in our democracies.

Interest groups research in USA and EU

European and American studies on interest groups followed a different path in previous decades. Europeans scholars were mostly interested in policy systems whereas USA researchers studied the tactics of lobbying, the role of money in the political system, or the incentives to collective action. The two scholarly communities operated substantially in separate spheres from the 1970s until the 1990s.

However, in the USA the literature on interest groups marked substantial progress in several areas. The most prominent results have included studies on the biases of mobilization; the collective-action dilemma; the tactics of lobbying; the effects of contextual factors such as laws, government subsidies and institutions on groups mo-

bilization. Closer attention has also been dedicated to roles played by groups in elections and their commitment to campaign finance. Moreover new attention has been given to the dominant role that institutions (cities, regions, universities, etc) have achieved in some interest systems and the competitive dynamics between haves and have nots or between traditional business and social interests (Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Lowery and Gray 2004).

In more recent years research on groups has gained new momentum thanks to an increased methodological awareness on the way searches are carried out, to the greater availability of official-institutional data (relative to the USA and the EU) concerning the population of groups that crowd the decision-making arenas, to more systematic comparative analyses, to the contamination with policy analysis and to the greater attention paid to the institutional context in which groups play their games.

Moreover, recent developments suggest that the European and American studies on interest groups have begun to converge on some common research programs (Mahoney and Baumgartner 2008). Today scholars are more likely to share their research through publication in international journals and participating in international networks, and these networks increasingly incorporate USA as well as European scholars. This increased convergence of research on interest groups is evidenced by the common assumption, shared by scholars studying groups both in Washington and in Brussels- Strasbourg, that a co-evolution of groups and the state activity exists. Looking both over time and across issue-domains, groups are more active when and where the state is more active. A significant amount of research from the USA confirms that groups and the state co-evolve at the national level and with important implications at lower levels of government as well. Similar patterns have been detected in the EU. As the EU's competencies expanded the number of groups increased as well.

A second point of convergence concerns the impact of government structures on the locus of advocacy. Originally explored in the USA context, multi-level governance structures in European settings have led to consideration of the concept of venue-shopping elaborated by Baumgartner and Jones (1993). The EU interest group literature looks explicitly at interest group activity at multiple tiers of governance, while the USA literature considers advocacy at the federal, state and local levels. In both cases researchers investigate which groups seek out and engage with levels of governance that are more favorable to their cause, and try to detect the difficulties that could arise in moving from one tier to the other as consequence of the assets of resources held by each group.

The third point of convergence is related to the impact of government structures on groups behavior. Research both in USA and in the EU show how groups in both systems adjust their lobbying strategies to their political context. Scholars have in-

creasingly recognized that lobbying behavior varies not just by organization but that the same organization will behave differently in different contexts as determined by the institutional structure and by the characteristics of a particular issue (Mahoney and Baumgartner 2008: 16). Whether operating in a centralized system or the highest tier of a multi-level system, the tactics and argumentation of advocates will differ from those employed at lower levels of governance. Similarly, the nature of the issue – its degree of political salience and conflict potential – is central to the decision-making of lobbyists when they devise their lobbying strategy.

Scholars across Europe and the USA are increasingly sensitive to the questions discussed above. This awareness could advance more convergence of research on interests groups and improve the chances for well qualified comparative studies. However there are some obstacles that need to be overcome before transforming the convergent perspectives into a factual collaboration between the two sides of the Atlantic. This is particularly true for European researchers.

Limits and perspectives of research on interest groups in EU

The scholarship on EU interest groups is published in few specialized journals. The authors constitute a rather larger community of scholars, but prefer single authorship over collaborative work. Research is mostly conducted by European scholars, with few American scholars interested in the field. This result confirms that, despite the convergent perspectives (*supra*), the two communities have developed for most of the time in parallel without any consistent transatlantic dialogue (Bunea and Baumgartner 2014). Research is strongly embedded in the EU policy-making context and characterized by descriptive analyses and qualitative case studies. Moreover, it shows some shortcomings in methodology and theory building; and in the exiguity of issues investigated. Despite these limitations research on EU interest groups has made some important steps forward in recent years thanks to the links established with concepts such as multi-level governance and Europeanization that have fed back into the comparative study of domestic politics as well as to the general comparative study of interest groups (Beyers, Eising and Maloney 2008).

Therefore, it is worth joining the wish expressed by Bunea and Baumgartner at the end of their demanding examination of the limits found in the studies on interest groups at EU level. “The very recent scholarship suggests that there is an increased and serious interest and commitment on behalf of scholars to engage significantly much more into systematic, theory testing, large research projects of EU lobbying” (2014: 1430).

Indeed, this is the goal that a group of European scholars is trying to pursue by promoting greater coordination of research and by collecting basic data on interest groups operating in several European countries. To this purpose they launched in 2016 a Comparative Interest Group Survey for mapping and surveying the interest groups associations operative in various European countries. The research work is going on with some first results available on their web site www.cigsurvey.eu. It is desirable that this initiative, together with others of the same kind, could help to build comparative projects that will allow to overcome the methodological weaknesses of the past and promote the cumulativeness of knowledge.

Conceptual and practical problems in the study of interest groups

Interest groups are organizations of individuals who may come from homogeneous social sectors, (for example, employees of metalworking companies), or from heterogeneous social realities, as is the case with citizen associations that pursue diffuse interests. Associations of banks that try to influence policy-makers who regulate the financial sector are also considered interest groups, as are university consortia asking governments for more investments to support higher education. Neither should be neglected those single industrial or financial companies asking policy-makers for specific measures in favor of their individual business. Interest group is, in other words, a label that can be applied to a large and heterogeneous population of social and economic actors; and to institutions. The abundance of contents strives to be included within the same concept of interest group, so much so that it is expressed in a wide range of words. Besides, many of these words are “ ‘tied’ to specific areas of research going hand-in-hand with specific approaches and normative assessments” (Beyers, Eising and Maloney 2008: 1106). The heterogeneity of nouns and objectives hinders the cumulability of results. This often results in a fragmentation of research into non-communicating niches that produce several non-comparable case studies (*ibidem*).

To overcome these limits, the literature on interest groups needs a definition able to circumscribe its field of application, but taking into account the many diversifications that the object of research may assume. The task is not easy because there are, as we have seen, significant differences between the groups. Among the most important differences, the one that cuts the population of interest groups longitudinally is the distinction between organizations with membership and those without membership. The first includes those interest groups that are real associations formed by individuals or organizations (local authorities, churches, universities, hospitals, companies) in

which members argue for reaching common positions to be presented to their counterparts. To this kind of associations the literature on interest groups has paid much attention, developing some of its classic topics as those referred to the recruitment of potential membership and its aggregation on shared objectives, to the organization as a vehicle for political participation, to the long-term political alliances established by groups with political parties, and to lobbying activities. The interests that fall into the second category are not associations of individuals or organizations. They are single organizations that in some situations play lobbying, but to which are unknown all the other activities concerning interest groups with membership.

This, however, does not mean that this second type of interests – which can be labeled as *organized interests* to distinguish them from interest groups with membership – may be overlooked, because they usually consist of municipalities, regions and states (the latter in federal systems). In addition, the business community is part of this category of interests, as well as all other organizations that are usually more present and active in the most important policy networks.

To better define and limit the scope of research on groups, it is also necessary to distinguish interest groups from political parties, to identify their customary ways of political initiative and their political targets. To this end it may be useful to propose the following definition: “Interest groups are formal organizations, usually based on individual voluntary membership, which seek to influence public policies without assuming government responsibility” (Mattina 2011: 1219-20).

This definition states that interest groups, unlike political parties, do not try to acquire the direct control of the public offices through electoral competition. Instead, interest groups limit their commitment to influence policy-makers. The main purpose that interest groups try to achieve is that the policies approved by public actors are in tune with their preferences. It is worth emphasizing that the approval of favorable public policies is the main objective of the groups activity, because in this way it is possible to limit the scope of action of the groups in a sectoral, or sub-sectoral, dimension. This makes it easier to delimit the number of groups to be considered from time to time in relation to the specific issue that is under examination. This definition also encourages linking the study of groups’ political behavior to the sub-field of policy analysis. Moreover, it suggests not to limit research to the mobilization process and the lobbying activities of groups but to give attention also to the groups’ conduct during the implementation of policy making.

Interest groups influence

The above definition points out that group activity is exercised through influence. This is the most important qualification of interest groups and at the same time is their most controversial distinctive feature because it is difficult to make a reliable empirical measurement of the degree of influence that each group can exercise within the decision-making process. This problem discourages research on groups because it is never fully ascertained how really effective groups are in the policy-making. Research on groups tries to circumvent the obstacle inherent in measuring influence by focusing attention on *access* and *lobbying* in the attempt to give credibility to the sub-field by presenting convincing empirical evidence.

Influence is a form of indirect power, exercised through persuasion, which aims to change the conduct of individuals without apparent external signs. Influence is difficult to distinguish clearly from political power because the latter can also be exercised through persuasion (Friedrich 1950). Political scholars, therefore, run into the difficulty of neatly circumscribing the perimeter of these two political processes. Moreover, it is difficult to measure now the influence now the power because neither one nor the other are easily measurable (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 58-61). With regard to influence, in particular, it seems impossible to quantify a political process involving certain groups and the behavior of rival groups, politicians, public authorities, bureaucracy and public opinion (*ibidem*: 13-14). In fact, any attempt to identify the real impact of the influence exerted by groups is unsatisfactory (Dür 2008: 1216-19) because the observation of negotiations among the relevant actors in the policy-making does not allow to identify with certainty all the really important issues at stake (Mc Farland 1987). Often certain items are not even included in the political agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Other factors, for example other legislators, party leaders, the legislators personal convictions, the media, can influence to an even greater extent the policy choices of policy-makers (Kingdon 1981; Schlozman and Tierney 1986).

Access and Lobbying

Faced with the problem of measuring influence, scholars on interest groups shifted their attention to access and lobbying. Both became a proxy of influence for investigating the groups' impact in the policy-making.

Access is the attempt made by groups to come close to or inside the public venues where relevant decisions of their interest are taken. However, "whenever they have a 'seat at the table', access does not necessarily translate into influence. Opposing

groups may have equal access and political actors can reject the demands made by interest groups. Public actors may even use access as an instrument to co-opt societal interests. Taking access as a proxy for influence thus is likely to lead to erroneous results” (Dür 2008: 1213-14). Moreover, access to one governmental body could not be enough for exercising a real influence in a decision-making process that requires the intervention of several institutional bodies, as is the case of the Federal government in USA and in the EU.

Lobbying is generally “understood as one or more face-to-face meetings between representatives of an interest group and legislators, sought by the former so as to influence the decisions of the latter in a way that benefits the group’s preferences. [...] In its broader form lobbying involves a wide range of initiatives including contacts with bureaucratic bodies, the premier’s office, the courts and parliament, the use of mass media, preparation of memorandums, the forging of links with individual functionaries and so forth” (Mattina 2011: 1226).

Researches on lobbying suffer the same methodological weaknesses found on the study of access. Scholars often tend to use their own methods for measuring the impact of lobbying without any comparison with instruments used by their colleagues. Moreover, scholars often start their research with the optimistic assumption, derived from the pluralistic literature (Dahl 1956), that lobbying would always have some real impact on public decisions, underestimating the fact that in the real world groups face several obstacles derived by the peculiarities of the political contest in which lobbyists operate as the predispositions – receptive or resistant – of the public decision-makers or the political salience – more or less conflictual – of the issues on which lobbyists concentrate their efforts. This optimistic bias inevitably leads to overestimating the effectiveness of lobbying. Finally, scholars usually identify lobbying with a proactive action of *pressure*, while it is a fact that lobbyists spend most of their time monitoring the work of different policy actors (Heinz, Laumann, Nelson and Salisbury 1993: 380), to try to obtain the inclusion of their proposals on the political agenda.

More generally, lobbying studies suffer from the absence of a shared theoretical basis, while narrow analytical perspectives have been adopted that have led scholars to not to build on the results obtained from the work of others colleagues and, accordingly, to make little use of comparisons (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 126-137).

Lobbying in Washington and Brussels: A biased group system

Several limits found in the research on lobbying were surmounted by a new wave of studies carried out in the United States since the second half of the eighties. Those researches have been able to count on a better quantity and quality of institutional data, on a greater methodological awareness, as well as on a higher attention by scholars to the political-institutional context in which groups decide to favor a lobbying strategy rather than another.

These changes allowed the pursuit of important research on lobbying at the federal level and in the states of the federation that increased the knowledge of the way in which lobbying is made (Berry 1999; Gray and Lowery 2000; Schlozman, Verba, Bravy, Jones and Burch 2008). However, despite this progress, researchers were not able to find an effective assessment of lobbying, accepted by the entire community of scholars.

The methodological and analytical problems encountered by USA scholars have been more evident among European scholars of interest groups. Research on lobbying is less developed in Europe than in USA because European scholars have displayed less interest in the topic, due to the importance attributed in interest group literature to the neo-corporatist approach. Neo-corporatist scholars take for granted that there is an inertial collusion between policy-makers and the representatives of the main economic interests while they largely ignore the lobbying activities of non-economic groups. However, a downturn occurred over the last two decades mainly generated by the greater political importance assumed by the EU and its institutional system, based on multilevel governance, which offers many direct access points for individual groups and national associations. The greater powers acquired by the EU imposed on national interests the need to promote their causes by working both on the domestic and on the supra-national arenas. And the research on interest groups increased accordingly by recording steady growth in the quantity of surveys devoted to investigating lobbying in the EU.

An intriguing exemplification of the difficulties faced by scholars in detecting groups influence and of progress found in overcoming them is given by researches dedicated to the study of the system of interests in the USA and the EU, to which we will now turn our attention. The issue concerning the functioning of group systems presents important normative implications because it calls into question the quality of liberal democracies and raises the question of their legitimacy. It is therefore a topic that imposes a serious challenge to scholarship, whose good reputation depends to a large extent on the ability to give an empirically based answer to the following question: Does the group system favor a balanced access within institutions

to interests operating in society and an equal ability to influence policy-making, or are institutions more attentive to the demands of the few at the expense of the interests of the many?

The issue of the functioning of the group system has been addressed by several researches dedicated to access and lobbying in the USA and in the EU. The results of research on access indicate which are the dominant groups in a certain political arena, ie the groups that are physically and permanently present in a given policy network. The results of the research on lobbying aim to go one step further because they do not take for granted that the dominant groups are also the most influential. Several factors, as we have seen above, can prevent even the groups permanently present in the policy-making venues from exercising real influence on policy-makers. Studies on lobbying must therefore be considered as the attempt closest to the identification of influence that the research on groups has so far managed to devise. So let's see what the groups most present in Washington and Brussels are and then move onto the examination of results obtained from groups who lobby elected representatives and bureaucrats.

Privileged access in Washington

The literature on groups dedicated to the USA case registers a bias of access in favor of business and professional groups. The vitality of civil society in the USA, which in recent decades showed signs of contraction (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003), does not move mechanically into the sphere of political society. As we know from Olson (1965), groups representing diffuse interests meet more problems in mobilizing than economic groups. The latter are able to access federal and state institutions more easily than the former. In particular, the predominant presence of the business community groups in Washington was already asserted by Elmer Schattschneider, in the late fifties of the last century with scathing irony addressed to the then prevailing pluralist approach.¹ Later researches by Walker (1983) and Scholzman and Tierney (1986) showed that about three-quarters of the groups represented in the mid-eighties in Washington were associated with economic and professional interests. Particularly, in the twenty years between 1960s and 1980s, the presence of large individual companies in Washington grew tenfold (Ryan, Swanson and Bucholz

¹ "The system is skewed, loaded and unbalanced in favor of a fraction of a minority....The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (Schattschneider 1960: 35).

1987); and increased significantly even at the state level (Gray and Lowery 2000; Nownes and Freeman, 1998).

The subsequent surveys, related to the first decade of the 2000s, carried out by Scholzman, Verba, Brady, Jones and Burch (2008) on data concerning nearly 14,000 organizations registered in the 2006 Washington Representative Directory, found a significant increase in the total number of interest groups accredited at the Congress in comparison to the previous two decades. But they confirmed the persistence of a bias in favor of business and professional groups, although the presence of institutions also increased, especially representatives of state and local governments, universities and hospitals. Public interest groups, unions and groups representing the poor were the most penalized. In the last 25 years their modest capacity for access to Congress has been stagnant or worsened. Regarding the difficulties of access by USA unions, they depend on the more general weakening of the organizations of USA workers whose membership in the private sector fell between 1981 and 2006, from 20.1 to 7.8 percent (*ibidem*: 34). Resuming Schattschneider, the persistence of the bias led Scholzman et al. to the conclusion that, although in Washington the pluralist choir became larger, neither its accent nor the assortment of the voices that composed it changed (*ibidem*: 40).

Dominant groups in Brussels

The findings derived from research carried out in the USA are confirmed to a large extent also for groups active in the EU. In fact, the results of available research indicate that business and professional associations are those who benefit the most from the opening of accesses by the EU (Schneider and Baltz 2003; Rasmussen and Carrol 2013). The increased presence of these associations – which represent around 80% of the organizations present in Brussels (Eising 2007: 393) derives from the type of legislation passed by the EU that favors the economic actors that have interests at stake in cross-border transactions (trade, investment, production, distribution) (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1998). In other terms, the development of the EU's regulatory activity and the presence in Brussels of economic interest groups go hand in hand. This trend took root to the detriment of diffuse interests that often turn to the European Parliament to politicize certain issues (environment, health, consumption). On the contrary, business groups prefer to deal with these issues through an exclusively technical approach within the committees that support the work of the European Commission and the Council (Beyers 2004; Shepard 1999). A survey carried out on the components of a sample of 124 expert committees assisting the work of the European

Commission found that 72% of the representatives of the groups participating in the activity of the committees were representatives of business and professional associations (Mahoney 2004: 450).

Among the business groups, multinational companies took a dominant position within the euro-groups, i.e. the European associations that group and represent the highest cross-sectorial national associations; without however renouncing individual access (Coen 1998; Eising 2007). The considerable availability of organizational and financial resources, as well as international experience and expertise, have enabled multinational companies to gain an advantage over euro-groups and national trade associations representing similar interests (van Schendelen 2002: 193; European Parliament 2003: 13-16). Multinationals have therefore become the privileged referent of the Commission to which they offer “good” information for the preparation of legislation, which is preferred to the other generated in recent years by the increase in the number of groups present in Brussels (Broscheid and Coen 2007: 25-29).

The bias over access in favor of large business groups is not, however, uniformly spread across all policy arenas. It is greater in some but less pronounced in others because the disjointed nature of the EU decision-making process does not create a cumulative advantage for the groups that prevail in some policy networks and leaves open the opportunity to many others to find the proper venue to promote their causes (Mazey and Richardson 2001: 234). The imbalance in access would therefore be mitigated by the pluralism of the institutional system of EU.

Who lobby in Washington and Brussels

Are dominant groups present in the most important policy arenas also the most influential? To answer the question, the literature on groups concentrated its efforts, as we have seen, on the study of lobbying. Now we will examine the work of USA and European scholars that carried out the most accurate researches by the number of cases examined, comparative references to the works already available, and statistical accuracy.

Washington

With regard to the USA, the important researches by Baumgartner and Leech (2001), Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball and Leech (2009), Drutman (2015), carried out on a vast series of empirical data (referring to the last twenty years), allow a

satisfactory answer to the question of the possible correspondence between the dominance of certain groups in policy arenas and their influence. The accurate research by Baumgartner and Leech (2001) on the quarterly reports that companies involved in lobbying must submit to Congress in accordance with the law, allowed the detecting of the greater presence in Washington of the entrepreneurial and professional groups that together represent 65% of the total compared to 10% represented by non-profit groups, citizens' associations and trade unions. The examination of the reports also allowed Baumgartner and Leech to distinguish between a limited number of conflicting subjects discussed in some policy-networks that attract a large number of groups and more than 50% of the total issues examined that are not contentious and on which is focused merely 3% of lobbying. The entrepreneurial and professional groups were active both in the crowded and contentious policy-networks as well as in the non-contentious ones, where it is sufficient to suggest the inclusion of a few lines to exert a substantial effect on the outcome of the policy. In contrast, trade unions and groups representing widespread interests were active mainly in the first type of policy-network. Moreover, the significant position of the business and professional groups in the Congress policy-making was confirmed by the amount of money spent on lobbying. The data collected by Baumgartner and Leech (2001: 1197) show that entrepreneurial groups and professional associations spent nine times more than non-profit groups and citizen associations, for an amount equal to 85% of total expenditure in the time span considered by the research. In particular, large companies alone spent more than half of the total money invested on lobbying.

In conclusion, the research by Baumgartner and Leech (2001) shows that entrepreneurial and professional groups are the most present and active in the Congress, where they have the most contacts with the decision-makers. Moreover, they invest much more financial resources than the other groups on lobbying, they are the best distributed in the policy-networks, they enjoy the advantage of protected positions within different "niches", and they find in the status quo a powerful ally for the protection of their interests (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball and Leech 2009). Finally, these data may not be exhaustive to establish unequivocally the greater influence of the business community in decision making in Washington although they show clear evidence of that.

Brussels

The results of research on the EU offer more discordant indications than those reported by research carried out in the USA. Some authors believe that in Brussels,

much more than in Strasbourg, the business community exerts a significant influence on the institutions of the EU. Others cast doubt on this greater ability to influence.

With regard to the first, since the beginning of the 1990s, several authors have asserted that the EU decision-making system favored business interests. More recent researches confirm the evaluations of the authors of the previous generation (Bunea 2014; Hermasson 2016). And they identify in the expert groups that assist the European Commission in the preparation of legislative proposals an effective vehicle through which the business groups, in most cases, have more opportunities to see their preferences reported in the final text of the policy proposals (Chalmers 2014). The bias in favor of the effectiveness of business groups in the decision making process through expert groups seems confirmed to some extent by the results of a recent European Parliament inquiry concerning the censurable omissions of the European Commission, exploited to their advantage by the automotive companies, in monitoring the implementation of European regulations aimed at reducing harmful emissions of carbonic acid gas into the atmosphere (European Parliament 2017).

Other authors, also belonging to the new generation of scholars who examine the activity of interest groups in the EU, propose, as we have said above, a more problematic assessment of the ability to influence Brussels and Strasbourg by business groups. According to some, business groups can play an important role in drafting the reports that the European Parliament sends to the Council only when the European business federations present unitary positions to the most important parliamentary committees, and on issues that have little political salience (Rasmussen 2015). In any case, business groups often face coalitions of interests that include groups representing diffuse interests, the European Commission and the European Parliament while businesses find alongside them as allies most of the member states. The outcome of such confrontations is usually a compromise that is often beneficial to the coalition to which diffuse interests belong (Dür, Bernhagen and Marshall 2013).

Therefore, the most recent research on the influence of interest groups on EU policy-making is dissonant on the assumption that the business groups have a decisive influence on European legislation. How to explain the divergent interpretations? Certainly, in the case of the EU there are greater difficulties than in the United States for the collection of large and well-documented data sets. These difficulties in the USA – as regards the federal level – have largely been overcome thanks to the mandatory registration of lobbying activities. Scholars of groups active in the EU must instead rely on inadequate data sets to produce shared results. On the other hand, scholars still tend to use different methodologies for data processing. The time series used are also different.

Without ignoring the divergent evaluations that come from the most recent research on the influence exerted by business groups on the EU institutions, it is perhaps possible to consider them as discordant interpretations of a relationship that evolved over time and that presents dynamic characteristics. This assessment can be proposed by elaborating the statement of Scharpf (2001) according to which business groups were among the main protagonists of the institutional evolution of the EU, which took place with the adoption of the Single Act (1986) and the Maastricht Treaty; and those who benefited most. However, the regulatory process through which the EU after Maastricht established the ways of regulating the business groups – particularly in relation to consumer rights and environmental protection – involve costs for the business community that it often refuses, at least in part, to support. It is therefore not infrequent that attempts to obtain approval of its requests are frustrated.

To conclude, there is a bias, both in Washington and in Brussels, in the system of interests that derives from the dominant position held by the economic groups neighboring on the institutional places relevant for policy-making. This position frequently translates into greater ability of the business community to influence the decisions taken by political actors. This trend is more pronounced in Washington and less in Brussels.

The privileged position of business groups in democratic regimes

Moving from the results of empirical analysis to the theoretical contributions, the literature on interest groups explains the causes of the bias in the group system distinguishing between political and structural power of the business community.

The first discloses itself through greater availability of money, expertise, and financial and organizational resources, that make easier both access and lobbying. The structural power of business groups is, instead, their ability to decide when and where to invest. For this reason, according to Lindblom, political authorities strive with all the means at their disposal to support large companies, with the consequence of guaranteeing them a privileged position within the policy-making (Lindblom 1977).² Claus Offe (1977) also comes to similar conclusions, although he adopts a neo-Marxist approach that is alien to the liberal tradition to which Lindblom belongs. According to the German scholar political actors can enjoy substantial autonomy from the domi-

² However, the privileged status of business groups appears to Lindblom incongruent with the founding principles of liberal-democracies: “The large private corporation fits oddly into democratic theory and vision. Indeed, it does not fit” (Lindblom 1977: 356).

nant economic groups, but are forced to establish privileged relations with the capitalists because, not having their own resources, they have an interest in supporting the economic conditions of reproduction of capital which constitutes the material basis of public finances.

The strength of structural conditioning exercised by business groups on political actors risks causing serious consequences on the functioning and legitimacy of liberal democracies. According to Dahl and Lindblom, “Businessmen play a distinctive role in polyarchial politics that is qualitatively different from that of any interest group. It is much more than an interest group” (1976: xxxvi). Going further into speculation, Dahl (1985) concludes that the influence entrepreneurial groups exert on public institutions affects the outcomes of the democratic process, creating social and political inequalities that nurture one another, reduces the possibilities for citizen participation, and prevents implementation of redistributive policies while renewing the influence of the business community on political life.

The drastic judgments of Dahl, echoed by Lindblom and Offe’s observations, are linked by the idea that public institutions have little chance of countering business groups’ preferences. Indeed, these groups and the entrepreneurs may threaten to suspend investments, in protest against high taxation or restrictive regulatory policies of the free enterprise. However, these positions are questioned by scholars who refer to the neo-institutionalist approach to the study of interest groups, and on which it is therefore appropriate to focus attention in the next section.

Groups and institutions

The main assumption of historical institutionalism is that institutions are over-ordered to interest groups and shape their ability to exercise influence on the policy-making (Hall and Taylor 1996; Immergut and Anderson 2008). For example, Coen and Richardson (2009) argue that EU institutions substantially shape the patterns of lobbying. This tendency derives from the fact that institutions can impose institutional constraints, more or less relevant, deriving from their history and their practices settled over time (the path dependency of Paul Pierson), from their internal articulation (the more or less large number of veto institutional players involved in the decision-making) and, last but not least, by the greater public legitimacy they enjoy compared to the interest groups. Based on these assumptions, historical institutionalism distances itself from a certain indeterminacy with which pluralists often describe the characteristics of the state in liberal-democracies and rejects the assumption of neo-marxists who classify the state as an instrument at the service

of the ruling class. The state is instead conceived as an actor who can operate in a totally autonomous way in the decision-making process (Skocpol 1985) and who is able to adopt independent choices in times of economic crisis to react to a negative conjuncture (Gourevith 1986).

Therefore, when important institutional changes occur within a political system, interest groups adapt their strategies to the new conditions deriving from institutional transformations (Steinmo 2008). Instead, norms and institutions are particularly permeable to the influence of groups when they are not adequately equipped to regulate sectorial pressures. This is the case, according to Hacker and Pierson (2010) of the United States institutional system that discourages the formation of disciplined political parties at federal level, offers many channels of access to public institutions, is articulated in autonomous central institutions which often compete with each other. The institutional system also allows an endemic parliamentary obstructionism. The combination of these institutional characteristics allowed the groups of the business community, better organized and endowed with considerable financial resources, to engage successfully in promoting a highly unequal tax legislation for the benefit of 0.1% of the population while preventing the approval of laws that effectively would protect workers in the workplace and savers from the risks of stock market speculation. Otherwise, in other cases (France and Sweden), when institutions favor the formation of autonomous governments from the conditioning of interest groups, they can encourage the launch of important reforms – such as health care reform – which, despite the opposition of medical associations, create a public service that benefits the entire population (Immergut 1992).

Finally, according to historical institutionalism, institutions have different characteristics from one case to another, but always influence the behavior of interest groups. The general assumptions of historical institutionalism seem, however, inadequate to grasp the adaptation paths that the business community groups made in the recent past, in various national contexts following the transformations introduced by globalization. Let's take a closer look at this topic in the next section.

How the international environment feeds the structural bias

Globalization has now reduced the powers of the territorial state in contemporary democracies and increased the conditioning powers of the business community towards governments. In particular, the integration of financial markets generated a huge increase in funds raised on the international capital market and increased the ability of companies to collect and transfer capital across national borders. For territorial states

it has become a priority to prevent, by providing incentives and facilities to the business community, private investments from migrating to more attractive shores. As a result, while firms' ability to influence governments has increased greatly, national states have increasingly been forced to promote tax and labor policies that benefit companies and penalize large sectors of the population (Crouch and Streeck 1996; Strange 1986).

Therefore it seems appropriate to reconsider the relationship between state and groups overcoming the rigidity of the neo-institutionalist assumptions. To this end, it is worth mentioning Wolfgang Streeck (2010), according to whom the weakness of the neo-institutionalist approach derives from a static vision of political change, which is imagined as a set of occasional fluctuations that leave unchanged the institutions and the relationships between them and the protagonists of capitalist development. On the contrary, Streeck encourages the idea that the change fueled by the transformations induced by contemporary capitalism can generate radical changes.

Streeck's criticism of the neo-institutionalist approach finds an empirical foundation in the research that has critically controlled the assumptions of the literature dedicated to the "variety of capitalism". As is well known, this literature pays special attention to the various institutional solutions adopted by liberal democracies to structure economic policy (Hall and Soskice 2001). Nonetheless the empirical findings of the comparative research made by Baccaro and Howell (2011) showed that the permanent divergence in existing institutional solutions, in different countries, in the relationship between capital and labor, proved to be perfectly compatible with the increase of discretionary choices by entrepreneurs in the workplace. In other words, the business community everywhere gained power over salaried workers, regardless of the institutional set-up existing in the different countries while governments have not been able to play their traditional role as a "neutral" actor promoting balanced labor policies, compatible with the preferences of the various stakeholders.

It remains to be noted that the greater indulgence of political actors towards business groups risks causing the overthrow of a basic principle of democracy according to which people have acquired the right to welfare benefits (establishment of public services in several sectors such as health care, transport, water, health, and schools) by virtue of their status as citizens and not because they could buy them on the market (Crouch 2004).

Is the interest groups system pluralist?

Do the conclusions reached by the most recent social research allow us to believe that the pluralist structure of the group system has been replaced by a system with a strong elitist connotation?

The results of several researches carried out by scholars who identify themselves with the neo-pluralist approach do not authorize such a drastic statement because they show that the interest system in advanced democracies offers many opportunities for groups to organize; and institutions still offer many places to access (Berry 1999; Goldstein 1999; Lowery and Gray 2004). Furthermore, the associations of diffuse interests and trade unions show a good capacity for mobilization when the issues on the table present a strong political salience because they concern issues that affect large sectors of the community and arouse strong passions based on opposing ideological preferences.

However, the pluralism of the group system presents a clear elitist inclination because the most important decision-making arenas (industry, finance, technology, international trade, agriculture, and so on) are poorly populated by associations who represent diffuse interests. Moreover, the elitist tendency, as we have seen, has increased in the last three decades following the weakening of the state's prerogatives vis-à-vis multinationals and large financial groups. On the whole, the logic of pluralistic competition helps the dispersion of power together with the opening of the political system but it cannot guarantee for all groups equal opportunities to influence public decisions.

The possibilities of successfully influencing public policies depend to a large extent on the different endowments of resources – economic, organizational, educational, expertise, prestige – which citizens possess before entering the circuit of pluralistic competition. The problem had already been highlighted by Dahl and Lindblom many years ago: “We cannot move closer to greater equality in political resources without greater equality in the distribution of, between other things, wealth and income” (1976: xxxii). In other words, democracies should offer all citizens some form of substantive equality, because mere equality of opportunities offers only the equal opportunity to become unequal (Scharr 1967).

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