Canadian Interest Groups Essay, Research Paper

Interest group representation in Canada identifies society’s influence on the governing body and the policies decided upon in the legislative setting. The composition of interest groups has evolved over time and has lead to study of three distinct approaches to the power the representational groups have. The growth and change of interests in the Canadian state are dependent upon the structure between societal and government values.

An interest group refers to “a group of individuals bound together to excerpt pressure upon the government to achieve a common goal and acquire a common benefit.” The Canadian government can not deal with the immense responsibility, which is delegated to it without interacting with every “major sector of national institutional structure.” The interaction gives interest groups a great deal of power because they provide the organization and the knowledge required by the government to oversee the numerous demands and then present the issues back to the government in an easily understandable process.

Single issues or individual influence groups are the basic building blocks of modern pressure groups. Every interest is “seen as expressing a combined purpose” of individuals that have come together to achieve certain objectives. These groups have limited organizational skills and lack the knowledge of government to succeed in the few specific issues on their objective. Single issues interest groups usually have a fluid membership base, which use the media and extreme action to obtain their goals. The groups usually are fighting for a change in private or public policy they find unfair of

unjust. These groups tend to disband when they reach their goals (or concede defeat). Although single interests groups are not completely ineffective, their “tendency towards fanaticism” makes them not well liked in the beacratic community and in turn do not stay around for to long. The main key to success for these groups lies within their effectiveness to appeal to public opinion.

If the single interests group is around for enough time either by succeeding or refusing to give up they usually band together with other similar single interest groups to carry on the fight. Groups such as this are referred to as organizational interest groups and usually contain a higher degree organization than the single interests groups. Joining two or more groups with attention on “structuarl interests” can attracts a wider membership base that in turn provides a larger financial support to work with. With more money the group can take hire small staff of experts including lawyers, public policy experts, and public relations staff to help meet the changes in the government. The structure and basic goals of the organization do not change after the merger it simply becomes more complex. Organizational groups tend to avoid excessive behavior in the name of the cause and the use of media to gather public attention. Instead, the groups use formal briefs to get their point across to the general public. The organizational groups are competent in the political arena but are not as effective as the institutional groups.

Institutional groups or “superorganizational” groups have an extensive membership basis that allows for a stable membership of like-minded people. Everyone within the institutional group does not partake in the same specific interest; the members are required to share the information with others in the group to act in a common fashion. The groups have considerable resources to carry out their “concrete and immediate objectives.” The resources include a highly trained staff that has extensive knowledge of the government that effects the appropriate government officials and can communicate easily with them. Unlike the single interests or organizational groups, institutional interest groups have the skills and knowledge needed to act as a “go between, keeping the political process going” among the disagreeing agencies. They have the ability to evaluate policy and develop opinions outside of party discipline. Institutional group’s members follow an unwritten code of conduct that prohibits action that would make the group unfavorable to the higher up members in government.

The need for minority representation in government is the substructure of interest groups. In a pure democracy a “society consist[s] of a small number of citizens who assemble and administer the government in person” by a majority vote. The uncertainty lies in the fact that there is no protection for the smaller and weaker sections of society. The purpose of interest groups in a democratic system is to represent their members’ views against the groups whom share conflicting views, even when the opposition is the majority government.

The theory of pluralism is based upon four fundamental principles. The first is equal access to the “political process and to the policy making arena,” everyone should have an equal right to have their voice heard. Secondly, there must be a conflict between the government and the people which makes it necessary for there to be different interest groups representing different ideas. The third factor is that there must be “fragmentation within society,” without which Canada would be made up of like-minded people and there would be no need for minority representation. Finally there must be “neutrality of the State,” the government should not show any bias for the interest groups vying for their attention. Pluralism explains the more interest groups there are in a political system, the more likely those groups are to neutralize each other’s strengths to make sure the state is to run for an elite few. Instead, the large number of interest groups in a system creates a society for the common good of all citizens.

Government is unlikely to ever agree to an issue interest groups desire to change if it threatens to change the economic system of the country, raising the real minimum standard of living for the poorest Canadian. Those in power are less inclined to deal with highly controversial issues that would result in the party losing voter support – elimination of the restrictions in the prejudice against gay and lesbian rights. Interest groups are often thought the group should be a “legitimate, wealthy, coherent interest, having access to legislative process [tend to be more influential than the] less legitimate, poor, diffused interest, having few sources of access to the legislative process.”

The government is able to manipulate groups by determining which groups to listen to and which groups receive funding no matter how closely interest groups follow the proposed keys for success. Since government controls which interest group will be heard, it is in the best interests of the groups to share the opinions of the current government.

Interest groups weigh the needs from their own sector in order to decide which proposals to present to the government, in hopes of obtaining legislative support for grants and proposed policies through the policy community. Almost every area of government has its own special lobby association looking out for the interest in that particular field of policy making. Interest groups are the commanding view in a specialized field of public activity in policy communities. Everyone with a direct or indirect interest in a policy area shares a “common policy focus” and attempts to influence policy outcomes.

Those whom share in a policy communities’ interests are divided into two small groups – sub-government and the attentive public. Sub-goverment includes government agencies, businesses, and institutional interest groups, both of which represent the companies and groups that receive automatic inclusion on advisory committees and panels for policy issues. The attentive public is not as plainly defined because it varies depending on the policy field. It includes the media, organizational groups, single interests groups, and other individuals affected by or are interested in the policy at hand and want a chance to try and change the situation.

In Canada interest groups lobbying has been happening since before Confederation. It dates back to the sixteenth century when French and English fur traders propositioned the Sovereign Council to lift the decree prohibiting giving intoxicant to Aboriginal peoples in order to barter for a better price on furs and were successful. The fur traders would give the Aboriginal peoples alcohol and then cheat them out of good price on the furs when they were inebriated. The ban lasted four years. The traders were able to influence the British Crown of the benefits of the money that was saved purchasing the furs from drunks outweighed the expense to the Aboriginal peoples.

The number of interest groups, especially those groups promoting social change, has steadily increased during the 1970s. Many factors may have contributed to the rise of interest groups including the expansion in the population of minorities, the increase of federal funding by the government to interest groups, or it could be due to the rise in social movement that has gone on in the last forty years. Many people whom study interest groups give considerable consideration for the rise of new social movements to the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982. Interest group activities are more visible and have more media attention since the introduction of the Charter, giving an increasing number of single-issue groups a chance to participate. The Charter allows groups that lack the resources the ability to influence government to “obtain important victories in court.” The judiciary aid interest groups in stopping or starting government action through litigation as well as helping the interest groups gain public attention to rally behind a certain cause.

Another contribution for the rise is interest groups come from the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Loritie Commission). The commission examined the decrease in party representation has lead to an increase participation in interest group activity. Parties are likely to concentrate on “short-term electoral goals and neglect the long-term policy development. Since the increase in partisan politics, many Canadians have refocused their attentions towards private organizations, such as interest groups, for the development of important policies.

The policy community is affected not only by conditions in civil society and structures in the economy but they also have a potential constraint on self-sufficient sector-level activities. The four activities with the biggest impact are the degree of stateness, the position of corporatist or pluralist state, the position of business interest, and the impression of globalization.

Canada being such an extensive landmass with a diverse population would be considered a weak state. Citizens show “less tolerance for government intervention” because of the many divisions in Canadian society. Canada, however, must have some degree of being a stronger state because as in all liberal democracies, the “majority of decision making and policy formation” resides with the legislative and executive branches of the government. The government in Canada has the final say over which policy proposal will be heard from which interest groups.

Although Canada does exhibit some degree of pluralism, Canadians are far from a perfect pluralistic society. Fundamental pluralism, as discussed earlier, does not exist. It is unrealistic to think that each interest group has the same resources be it economic, levels of education, or the power the members hold. If all interest groups do not stand equal then there will be parts of society (minorities, the poor, etc.) which are underrepresented. Then only the elite will be making the demand for change in society but it will be change only for a select few and not for the masses. Also, there is evidence that governments do favor some groups over others and favoritism causes governments to hear the need of the preferred group over another.

The theory of cooporatism attempts, like pluralism, to describe the actual relationship between interest groups and government. This relationship is described as cooperative between some interest groups and government with the goal to be providing “stability in the development and implementation of policies.” In theory, the government of a fascist state essentially forcefully controls state corporatism.

Neither pluralism nor corporatism seems to fit with the Canadian system. A theory of “corporate pluralism” fits better in with the system of government. Corporate pluralism allows the government to grant the power to certain interest groups to speak and negotiate for their sector. Secondly, it involves the intervention of government in the economy and society to achieve certain goals or policies.

Businesses in Canada are the major political supporter for political parties. In 1999, business and commercial organizations contributed over 12.7 million dollars to the different parties in Canada and it is not too suprising the top recipient of the business worlds generosity was the Liberals receiving more and six million over what any other party received. Politicians listen and comply with those whom pay the bills. Not all business demands will be accommodated just because of large campaign contribution, especially if there is a conflict of interest between two contributing business groups. .

Business concerns are dealt with at the highest levels of government and have nation wide significance. Businesses are courted by parities to ensure both groups get what they want. Parties will guarantee favors or business contracts once elected to office, is a contribution is made. Businesses buy access to the people in power. The large monetary gifts ensure the government will be willing to a least listen to the problems of the business community. The government will usually grant business requests if they are reasonable and within the governments power.

If business feel strongly about a specific desision regarding a particular issue, individual business will lobby together and form a coalition. In November of 1981 a business coalition was formed in protest of the MacEachen budget. The outrage of the business community caused the government to issue an economic statement, detailing a new budget seven months after the first budget was released. Big business does get their way. When technical issues are involved government usually follows the advise of businesses because the goverment needs an explanation on the impact new technology has on society and whom better to answer than those whom designed it.

Although globalization does influence Canadians, the effects are minimal compared to the rest of the world. Canada is a nation of immigrants, with origins reaching all corners of the globe. The character of the country represents peoples with varying interests, goals, and resources. Globalization does change the organization of interest groups but the effects are immeasureable because of the country is one of the most “international of nations” and will likely deal with global issues in the confines of government policy.

Interest groups in Canada have been dependent on the three levels of analysis that separate interests groups. Organizational interest groups have been gaining great momentum in Canadian politics which “conditions [political party] groups from the outside.” The interest group community is becoming a huge force within all policy communities. The constraints placed on interest groups at the sector level has helped interest groups to organize their resources and enabled them to project their view to government more efficiently.

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