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“Six Myths about Environmental Interest Organizations”

Over the last 40 years, the number and influence of environmental interest organizations has grown around the world. Almost nonexistent in the mid-1960s, they now have an enduring presence within the political systems of all advanced industrial democracies. In popular images, the upstart environmental Davids courageously hold back the polluting Goliaths of big business. Under-funded, under-manned, and all too often ignored, they struggle to at best contain powerful economic interests who care little about the environment. Surprisingly, much of this popular image is wrong. Many of the things that we think we know about the mobilization, lobbying, and influence of environmental organizations are myths that are not supported by research on interest representation.

Myth 1: Large economic organizations opposed to environmental protection pose a threat to environmental interest organizations. At best this statement is only partially correct. Large economic interests with a stake in weak constraints on polluting might be opposed to the policy interests of environmental organizations. They do not, however, threaten their existence as organizations. In fact, numbers of environmental organizations, the size of their memberships, and their levels of activity in politics are all positively related to the number of polluters within political jurisdictions and the severity of pollution problems. Threats to the environment promote the mobilization of pro-environment organizations. Lacking such threats, there would be no need to mobilize. Paradoxically, and all other things equal, environmental interests might be most secure in settings in which there are few active environmental interest organizations. They are not there because they don't need to be.

Myth 2: Environmental interests are best promoted when represented by one or a few large environmental organizations and weakened when environmental interests are fragmented. While being united in collective action might sound attractive, unified action can be very difficult. The problem is that there are many environmental interests. Do we protect wetlands first or watersheds? Should we focus on air or water pollution? Is atomic energy a problem or a solution? Should we influence policy via conventional politics or by “stunts” designed to draw attention to threats to the environment? Resolving these and many similar conflicts within a single environmental organization consumes time and resources. Indeed, such conflicts can paralyze generalist interest organizations. In small jurisdictions, however, there may simply be no choice but to rely on a single generalist interest organization given insufficient numbers of potential members to support more specialized groups. But in larger jurisdictions, specialization promotes nimble and focused environmental groups capable of cooperating when possible, but willing to go it alone when necessary.

Myth 3: Environmental interests are most threatened when business interests are united. When united behind a policy proposal, economic interests certainly have many resources that might be usefully brought to bear in politics – money, expertise, and media attention. But when business interests are united, it is also almost always the case that the issue is

one that is prominently discussed in the media and highly salient to voters. These tend to be the big societal issues in which business is pitted against consumers, labor, or environmentalists. More to the point, the business position on these issues is often unpopular in a way that brings into play the one resource that business lacks – votes. Despite frequent cynicism, the truth is that Democratic politicians rarely vote against the interests of their constituents when they are paying attention to an issue. Thus, the kinds of issues that unite business interests are typically those that are most likely to create a popularity-salience bias in favor of environmental interests. In contrast, business interests are most successful when pursuing narrow goals of concern to only a few businesses and not drawing a great deal of public attention.

Myth 4: Money buys votes, and environmentalists don't have a lot of money. This myth, of course, is closely related to the previous one. But it merits special attention given the corrosiveness of this charge for public confidence in democratic politics. It is true that environmentalists don't have a great deal of money. But after years of looking, most students of campaign finance have concluded that money does not buy votes. If it did, environmental interests would spend all of their money on pro-business legislators and business interests would give all of their money to environmentalists. It doesn't work this way. Rather, the votes of constituents buy the votes of legislators. Again, legislators rarely vote against the interests of their constituents when aroused and attentive. So, why is there so much direct and indirect money in politics? What is it purchasing? While money only rarely shifts votes, it can well shift a legislator's allocation of time and effort. Senator Barbara Boxer of California, for example, will always vote for environmental, consumer, and education bills considered by the U.S. Senate. Her constituents strongly support active government in all these policy domains. But where will Senator Boxer spend most of her time and energy promoting new legislation, persuading colleagues to vote like her, and ushering policy ideas through a complex legislative process? A campaign contribution, as one form of lobbying, can make a difference here by signaling not how Senator Boxer should vote but where her strongest electoral return or payoff might be generated from investments of scarce time and energy. Paradoxically, then, much of lobbying activity (including campaign activity), entails the “friends” of a legislator competing with each other



for a legislator's time and energy. The severest competition of an environmental organization for scarce legislative time and energy does not come from polluters, but from the consumer and education groups that a legislator also supports. Direct lobbying by environmental interests against polluter interests for the vote of single legislator is, in fact, quite rare and usually restricted to the very end of the legislative process as organized interests look for a few last votes.

Myth 5: Think globally, but act locally. While one of the favorite slogans of the environmental movement, this is almost certainly bad advice. Indeed, both sides of the claim are wrong. While people may have a diffuse, positive concern for the global environment that predisposes them toward supporting efforts to maintain environmental integrity, local issues are far more effective in actually mobilizing individuals to engage in political activity. Environmental organizations interested in securing more members should identify local threats to groundwater supplies, watersheds, or air quality. These are highly salient concerns that encourage participation. But

acting on such issues locally is almost always difficult. Environmental protection usually entails tradeoffs, such as loss of employment or recreation opportunities or higher taxes to support environmental cleanups. These tradeoffs are especially evident locally where the same people who might benefit over the long term from, for example, restricting unsustainable fishing practices must pay an immediate cost in terms of unemployment. Environmental interests usually benefit, then, by pursuing issues at higher jurisdictional levels than ones in which such local tradeoffs are so apparent and difficult. They gain diffuse support for a popular issue among those who will not be asked to pay the immediate costs of environmental protection. So, environmental interests are most likely to be successful when thinking locally, but acting globally.

Myth 6: Environmental interests are the Davids of the lobbying world struggling against corporate Goliaths. Environmental interest organizations find this a useful image. But when compared to almost any other interest or cause, environmental organizations by almost any measure – numbers of organizations, members, or policy success – are one of the great lobbying success stories of the last half century. From a standing start, they have reshaped public policy across the world. This does not mean, of course, that they have accomplished enough. Nor does it mean that they are always effective. Indeed, environmental organizations are often ineffective after laws are passed and the details of implementation are discussed. Still, most other interest movements would gladly trade positions with environmental organizations. The reason is simple – environmental protection now has broad diffuse support across advanced industrial democracies. When environmental issues are made salient, this translates into the most important currency in democracies – votes. It is also worth remembering that David walked away from his meeting with Goliath while Goliath did not. □

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