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Book Review: Political Organizations by James Q. Wilson

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BOOK REVIEW

POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS. By James Q. Wilson. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973). Pp. 359.

What ever happened to interest groups? They have disappeared from professional journals, replaced by paradigms, mathematical models and sophisticated voting studies. The mysterious disappearance was undoubtedly prompted by the indignities imposed upon the poor pressure group during the past decade: declared immoral by David G. Smith, reduced to communications agent by Milbrath and Co., and finally accused of utter ineffectuality by Lewis Dexter—the interest group simply crawled off center stage, abandoned to the less prestigious roles still open in the daily paper, popular journals, and the doctoral dissertations of young scholars who didn't know better. Indeed, recent research debunking traditional group theory has been accepted by most orthodox political scientists. Those few scholars awaiting the Second Coming of those omnipresent, muscular pressure groups described by Earl Latham and David Truman may be watching in vain.

Those whose expectations are somewhat more modest may be satisfied with *Political Organizations* by James Q. Wilson. Although Wilson clearly questions the recent denigration of group influence and laments the declining professional concern with organizations in politics, he does not so much refute the emerging conventional wisdom as sidestep it. Do organizations determine public policy? "Some do, some do not." Instead of developing another interest group theory of politics, which he candidly admits would be a step in the wrong direction, Wilson sets for himself a more modest goal. Since organizations seem to be a permanent feature of the political landscape, one must at least develop an explanation for their political activities. Thus, Wilson takes the organization itself as his central problem.

Wilson is above all preoccupied with the problem of organizational maintenance; survival is obviously a prerequisite for influence. The way group leaders solve this perpetual problem will have important implications for other aspects of organization life. The question of how organizations recruit members and keep them involved has vital ramifications for others: How are officials selected and what constraints do they face? How do organizations cope with the external environment composed of other private groups and public agencies? To these questions Wilson

brings a decade of analysis and insight into the functioning of public and private organizations.

In Part I the author addresses the maintenance problem, focusing on individual incentives. Accepting in part Mancur Olson's argument in *The Logic of Collective Action* that most members of politically active groups join for nonpolitical reasons, Wilson rejects Olson's emphasis on economic incentives as the major source of organizational attraction. Refining the now classic Wilson-Clarke taxonomy of material, purposive, and solidary incentives, he insists that the motivations for joining organizations are as varied as individuals themselves. Nevertheless, the predominant incentive structure will usually condition organizational size, leadership discretion, and the political strategies open to the group.

In one of the most provocative sections of the book Wilson outlines the conditions affecting the appearance of organizations. The "market" for the benefits "offered" by groups is determined primarily by the social structure. Middle and upper-class citizens possess the financial resources, organizational skills and psychological attributes needed to maintain a rich organizational life. A predominantly lower-class society will be characteristically devoid of much organizational life. Although the social structure may determine the general market for organizational memberships, the political structure will also affect the general availability of incentives. This structure may provide either rewards or discouragement to collective political action. The political system offers material or other benefits to organizations which can be used to attract members. The combination of social and political structure set limits on the successful creation and maintenance of various types of organizations. Wilson uses his scheme, for example, to explain the problems in creating organizations of the poor: the poor can be permanently organized only when material incentives are present, brokered by middle-class entrepreneurs. Although some organizers of the poor will dispute Wilson's contentions, the experience of recent decades tends to bear out his interpretation.

In Part II, Wilson goes on to apply his overall perspective to labor unions, business associations, civil rights organizations, and political parties. In a masterful synthesis of case study literature, he demonstrates the variety of strategies used by successful organizations. Thus, the NAACP has combined general purposive incentives with relatively strong local solidary incentives to sustain a fairly large dues-paying base. Business groups like the National Association of Manufacturers may rely on a shifting membership of business firms ideologically committed to the "militant defense of the free competitive enterprise system." Labor

unions rely primarily on semi-coercive material incentives, although purposive incentives may be more important in their early years. Wilson's incisive analysis includes a discussion of the explanatory value of this theory in understanding the political behavior of group leadership.

Part III examines the problems of organizational creation and change, of authority relations within groups, and the ever-present problem of internal democracy. The discussion of internal power distribution throws new light on an old question. Wilson argues that the less members value their membership in an association, the less likely they will be to participate, and hence, the more oligarchical the organization. In contravention to some conventional wisdom, Wilson argues that organizations based on material incentives will also offer the leadership wide powers—as long as the flow of benefits to members is unimpeded. Only in organizations emphasizing purposive or ideological incentives do leaders face the necessity of remaining “democratic.” This may explain, for example, why the leadership of the AFL-CIO maintains a much more liberal political stance than its rank-and-file.

In Part IV Wilson turns to interaction between organizations. He dismisses game theory as largely irrelevant to real world coalition building, stressing that coalitions are more often influenced by maintenance imperatives. Drawing on the developing discipline of interorganizational analysis, he suggests that organizations seek “autonomy,” i.e. a recognized claim to certain resources, a demarcated field of operation, and an access to a membership base. Organizations approach coalitions with less optimism about the advantages of a united front than wariness about incursion on their autonomy. Thus, many “natural coalitions” seem to have an unnaturally difficult time appearing.

Ultimately, of course, the question of power is the *raison d'être* for organizational studies. Although Wilson initially declines to become involved in the group power dispute, he is eventually forced to confront it. First, Wilson considers the possibility that interest group power may be conditioned by the nature of the interest groups themselves, an approach taken by traditional group theorists. Wilson feels that this approach, though necessary and helpful, is not enough. As a supplement, he suggests that group involvement and power may be determined by the nature of the issue. After rewarding Theodore Lowi with a pat on the head for his classification of regulative, distributive, and redistributive policy arenas, Wilson dismisses the scheme as rather muddled, offering his own fourfold classification based on the distribution of costs and benefits involved, one becoming familiar to public policy analysts.

Although an improvement on Lowi's scheme, this division seems just as indistinct on many concrete policy questions, especially when political as well as economic costs and benefits are considered.

A perusal of this brief outline of *Political Organizations* almost demands the cliché: it is impossible to do justice to this major work in a review. Each page suggests hypotheses. Do indeed new organizations rely on purposive incentives to recruit members, shifting later to material or solidary incentives—material for a dozen dissertations there. A more traditionally-oriented group theorist could use Wilson's suggestive remarks on incentive systems to provide explanations for shifting organizational goals, changing leadership behavior, or altered coalition building. A political scientist combining behavioral and traditional skills might test Wilson's assertions about the importance of social and political structure in the development of large political organizations. For example, did powerful organizations in the South appear first in those states with relatively prosperous populations and the friendliest state political structure?

Whatever the revelations in these or other efforts to test Wilson's approach, the profession has reasons for gratitude that he has seen fit to retrieve the political organization from the newspapers and leftist journals. In addition, political organizers and activists may find a reading of Wilson not only sobering but helpful.

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