



Interest groups in US local politics: Introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

Interest group scholarship has so far focused mainly on national politics and has had very little to say about interest groups in American cities, counties, school districts, and special districts. This special issue is a step toward remedying that: it is a collection of articles and essays that examine some of the interest groups that are commonly active in US local politics. The contributions herein discuss real estate developers, tenant organizations, teachers' unions, police unions, and local PACs—covering topics such as how they are organized, how they engage in local politics, some of the constraints on their influence, and the nuanced ways in which ideology and identities can sometimes shape what coalitions are possible in the local context. By bringing this work together in one place, in a journal devoted to research on interest groups, the hope is that this special issue will help to cement “interest groups in local politics” as the recognizable research focus it deserves to be.

Keywords Interest group · Local politics · Local government · Partisanship · Ideology · Union

Introduction

Some of the most salient policy issues in the United States today are responsibilities of local governments. Policing is mainly a charge of municipal police departments and county sheriffs. Housing development is shaped by municipal zoning ordinances and local political institutions. Local school boards regularly make important policies governing public education. And county public health agencies played a crucial role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these issues are nationally salient, affecting the daily lives of people throughout the country, but the policymakers responsible for them are primarily local.

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Until recently, however, the overwhelming emphasis of mainstream American politics scholarship was national politics and the federal government. Even as American politics scholars increased their attention to US *state* politics—which has a lot in common with national politics—the same did not occur for the nation’s cities, counties, school districts, and special districts. That has started to change in the last few years as there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in local politics (Warshaw 2019). But as welcome as this resurgence has been, it has so far ignored or downplayed the role of interest groups—and has instead framed local politics mainly in terms of interactions between voters, elected officials, and political institutions. Meanwhile, interest group scholarship has largely followed the trend of the broader American politics literature: it has been almost exclusively about the role of interest groups in national politics—and to a lesser extent state politics—and has had very little to say about interest groups in local politics.¹

The reason for this is *not* that interest groups are not active in local governments. In my new book, *Local Interests: Politics, Policy, and Interest Groups in US City Governments* (Anzia 2022), I show that interest groups are actually highly active in many cities, and also that patterns of interest group activity in local politics look very different from those we are accustomed to seeing in national politics. Moreover, for many of the local policy issues we would like to understand—including housing, policing, public education, and local fiscal issues—the reality is that interest groups are oftentimes quite involved in trying to influence them. By analyzing interest group activity in local politics and evaluating how it shapes a number of different local policies, *Local Interests* takes an important first step toward building a foundation for research on local interest groups.

This special issue of *Interest Groups & Advocacy* takes another important step. It was conceived from a recognition that there are a number of political scientists working on research projects that eventually lead them to questions about local interest groups, but that because local interest groups research is so severely underdeveloped—and is so far from being an established research focus—the work usually does not get identified as such. Moreover, the lack of a clear, identifiable network of scholars working in this area probably deters some researchers from pursuing projects of interest on these topics. This special issue is an attempt to remedy that—to bring together the work of political scientists who are all doing important research on local interest groups, and to label it as such. Through the articles in this issue, we learn more about some of the interest groups that are commonly involved in local politics. And by bringing them together in one place, in a journal devoted to research on interest groups, the hope is that this will help to cement local interest groups as a recognizable research focus.

¹ See Hojnacki et al. (2012) for a review of the interest group literature. Gray and Lowery (1996) focus on the US states in developing their population ecology theory of interest group systems. There have been some studies of interest groups in cities; see Berry (2010), Hajnal and Clark (1998), and Cooper, Nownes, and Roberts (2005). See also Moe (2006, 2011, 2019) for research on teachers’ unions in school districts.



The articles and essays in this issue span a number of different interest groups and policy areas. Katherine Einstein, David Glick, and Maxwell Palmer explore the role of real estate developers in local housing politics, explaining how antipathy to developers might deter some pro-housing groups and individuals from joining coalitions with them—possibly limiting developers’ political influence. Jamila Michener and Mallory SoRelle offer a rich descriptive account of tenant organizations: how and why they organize and what they do (and do not do) to counter the efforts of landlords in local politics. Michael Hartney presents a quantitative analysis of how teachers’ unions’ endorsements affect the outcomes of local school board elections in the modern era, and Daniel DiSalvo puts the focus on police unions in an essay that explains how they are organized, what they do in local politics, and how and why they are well positioned to influence local policies on policing and public spending. Andrea Benjamin provides an in-depth look at the specifics of interest group politics in Durham, North Carolina, showing how local PACs can provide structure to local elections in a nonpartisan context.

The engagement and influence of local interest groups—and the constraints they face

Viewed all together, these articles show clearly that local politics is not only about the interactions between voters, elected officials, and political institutions—that organized groups of different kinds are quite involved and can make a difference. The articles by Benjamin and Hartney in particular show how interest group endorsements can be important to local elections. In an analysis of exit poll data from the 2017 city election in Durham, Benjamin finds that many voters knew which candidates had been endorsed by some of the major local groups, and that that knowledge was associated with their vote choices in the local election. Focusing on local school board elections, Hartney assembles data on thousands of candidates in California and Florida and finds that candidates who receive endorsements from teachers’ unions are much more likely to win than candidates not endorsed by teachers’ unions. And as DiSalvo writes, similar efforts should be made to understand the frequency and effectiveness of police union endorsements in local politics. They are well organized in most parts of the country and have a great deal at stake in local policymaking, and so going forward, researchers might fruitfully borrow the approaches of Benjamin and Hartney and apply them to police unions.

That said, endorsements are only one way interest groups might try to influence the dynamics and outcomes of local politics. In their article, Einstein, Glick, and Palmer note how developers and a variety of groups make campaign contributions in local elections, and they underscore how important it is that groups and residents show up in force to public hearings.² DiSalvo emphasizes collective bargaining as an important route through which police unions can influence local policy.³ And

² See also Einstein, Glick, and Palmer (2019).

³ See also DiSalvo (2015).



Michener and SoRelle detail the varied tactics of tenant groups, including coordinating members to attend public meetings, running for rent board positions, engaging in protest, publicly confronting elected officials, and coordinating rent strikes. One of the challenges and opportunities for future research on local interest groups will be considering all of the different ways groups try to have an impact—some of which are more difficult to track than others. Concerns about the second face of power have rightfully loomed large in research on interest groups and power in American politics, but these articles and other recent studies begin to tackle that challenge, developing new, innovative ways of studying how groups might exercise influence (see, e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2014; Hertel-Fernandez 2019; Moe 2019; Anzia 2022).

These articles also illustrate how some of these local interest groups are dealing with considerable constraints on their influence—including groups that are commonly thought of as being powerful in local politics. Landlords are one example: Michener and SoRelle provide examples of tenant organizations that have successfully pushed back against landlords, changing the course of local policy. Developers are another. Some of the classic studies of urban politics depict developers as major influencers (e.g., Logan and Molotch 1987), but Einstein, Glick, and Palmer present striking new evidence of how unpopular and poorly trusted developers are in many local communities. They show that neighborhood groups and local residents wanting to block housing developments can use this unpopularity to their advantage by casting developers as profit-motivated outsiders that do not have community interests at heart. As a result, pro-housing groups and individuals that might otherwise form alliances with developers on the basis of their shared policy goals are wary of being viewed as cozying up to them, and pro-housing efforts in cities can remain fragmented. Thus, while there are groups and organizations active in local politics, these two housing-related articles demonstrate that they may often face considerable pushback from residents and other groups.

Ideology and the structure of politics: How local politics is different

A second theme that begins to emerge from these articles is that if there is a structure to local politics, it is a different structure than that of national politics, and any role of nationally-based ideology and partisanship is complex and conditional.⁴

For example, Benjamin portrays politics in Durham as a setting in which interest groups—not political parties—provide structure to city elections. Like many cities across the United States, Durham has nonpartisan elections that are held off-cycle. The city is also heavily Democratic; party affiliation (even if not shown on the ballot) is not something that distinguishes the candidates from one another. But as Benjamin shows, PAC endorsements do. In the 2017 city election she examines, a large PAC called the People's Alliance backed one slate of candidates for city council and mayor, while two smaller PACs—the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black

⁴ For more on this line of thinking and evidence in support, see Anzia (2021, 2022), Bucchianeri (2020), Bucchianeri et al. (2021), Jensen et al. (2021), and Marble and Nall (2021).



People and Friends of Durham—supported a different slate. This suggests that there may be some regularity or structure to local politics in Durham, but it is not defined by partisanship.

Public-sector unions are also very involved in local politics in many places, and it is often hard to characterize their organization, behavior, and influence in partisan or ideological terms. DiSalvo's essay implies that police unions defy the familiar Democrat-versus-Republican structure of national politics. As unions, particularly unions with a strong presence in large cities (which tend to be Democratic), police unions have a natural alliance with the Democratic Party, but as law enforcement, they have a natural alliance with the Republican Party. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their political behavior in state politics is bipartisan, as DiSalvo notes. Teachers' unions, in contrast, affiliate more strongly with the Democratic Party in national and state politics (Moe 2011), but their activity and influence in local politics are not limited to school districts where most residents are Democrats. Hartney's article shows that teachers' unions endorse school board candidates in Republican and Democratic districts alike—and are just as successful in getting their endorsed candidates elected in the former as in the latter. These important local interest groups and what they do in local politics do not fit cleanly into a national partisan or ideological structure.

But that is not to say that ideology plays no role at all in local politics. Two of the articles in this special issue describe ideological commitments (in some form) as a motivator of group behavior. In their research on why individuals form and join tenant organizations, Michener and SoRelle discover an array of motives, some related to personal experiences with landlords, but others rooted in economic ideas and a desire to counter capitalist structures. They also find that many tenant organizations conceive of their missions not in terms of housing policy but rather as bringing power to tenants and ordinary people. Einstein, Glick, and Palmer's account of developers also seems to highlight a role for ideology—one where ideology can inhibit certain coalitions from forming. If pro-housing groups and individuals are reluctant to align with developers for fear that the public would accuse them of having a corporate, outsider agenda, then that fear of being ideologically pigeonholed is affecting the dynamics of local politics.

This last point is important because it may suggest a nuanced role for national ideology in local politics—one that is disassociated from people's positions on core local policy issues. American politics scholars have typically conceived of and measured ideology in terms of positions on policy: national partisanship and ideology, for example, are rooted in citizens' and elites' positions on national policy matters.⁵ In *Local Interests*, I argue that because the core issues at stake in local government are mostly different from those that define national partisanship and ideology, we should not expect *national* partisanship and ideology to be strong drivers of *local* politics and policy. And I find considerable evidence in support of that expectation (Anzia 2022). But Einstein, Glick, and Palmer's argument points to a different way

⁵ For instance, DW-NOMINATE scores are generated from congressional roll-call votes, thus positions on national policy matters (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 2007). Similarly, Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2014) pool public opinion data—positions on policy—to generate their local-level ideology scores.



that national partisanship and ideology might matter in local politics. It is not that national partisanship and ideology map onto people's issue positions at the local level. It is that people's partisan or ideological identities—their affective attachments from national politics—constrain and shape what can and cannot happen in local politics, including what coalitions are possible, and how forcefully and vocally groups and coalitions can push for local policies they favor.⁶

Note that this is not the same thing as arguing that local governments might generate their own distinctive ideologies, meaning local ideologies based on local government issues. There is some debate on that question, with some finding evidence of distinctive local ideology in a few large cities (Abrajano et al. 2005; Boudreau et al. 2015; Sances 2018), and others finding that local politics is often less structured than that and not reducible to a single dimension (Anzia 2022; Bucchianeri 2020; Bucchianeri et al. 2021). More research on that question is needed, but the proposal at hand here is something different. On the basis of what they want to see happen in local policy, a pro-housing group should be on the same side as developers, because they both want to build housing. But the pro-housing group might not join forces with the developers—especially in a left-leaning community—because if they did, residents wanting to block housing could credibly cast them as friendly to corporations. That might reduce support for the pro-housing group within the left-leaning community. Meanwhile, as Einstein, Glick, and Palmer suggest, residents and groups opposed to housing developments can benefit from a pro-environment image—one that will be viewed favorably by the community—even if their agenda really is rooted in raw economic self-interest.

What this implies, more broadly, is that there can be a very local conflict over policy, with groups and residents lining up on the issue in ways orthogonal to their alignments in national politics, but that what is possible in local politics—and the balance of power on the issue—is *also* shaped by the community's left-right identities from national politics. Consider that gun-owners who like to hunt might sometimes have shared policy interests with environmentalists in that both might want to preserve natural habitats, but their ability to work together locally might be inhibited by their tendency to align with opposite sides in national politics.⁷ Likewise, a local Sierra Club chapter and a local chamber of commerce might be in agreement that shutting down a polluting factory in the area would be desirable, but in a conservative town, residents might look askance at the local business community developing an alliance with Sierra Club.

It would seem that similar dynamics were at play in local school district debates about reopening to in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Hartney explains in his article, many teachers' unions resisted returning to in-person instruction, which resulted in many K-12 schools being fully remote for more than a year. This put many liberal parents who strongly supported a return to in-person instruction in a politically uncomfortable position: their views on this salient local

⁶ On partisanship as a social identity, and on affective polarization, see Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015) and Iyengar et al. (2019).

⁷ I am grateful to Rob Schwartz for suggesting this example.



policy issue were at odds with those of teachers' unions—one of the strongest allies of the Democratic Party in national and state policies. For those parents, being vocal in favor of reopening schools could mean being labeled anti-union, anti-teacher, or Republican (since President Trump and Republicans in many states called for schools to reopen).⁸ In liberal communities, this may have worked to weaken efforts to reopen schools to in-person instruction, just as Einstein, Glick, and Palmer suggest that this dynamic might weaken pro-housing efforts.

Some might quibble with the claim that distrust in developers and pro-union, pro-teacher sentiment should be counted as national party ideology, but the general logic here holds just the same. Ideology has always been hard to define. As Lewis (2019, xv) writes in his book about the endogeneity of national party ideology, “ideologies are vast and expansive mental frameworks and language structures that hold together many different ideas.” Einstein, Glick, and Palmer’s account of developers suggests that even when groups have clear positions on local issues, their pursuit of favorable policies could be hindered—or helped—by ideological commitments that are formed in other arenas, most notably the arena of national politics.

All of this makes it hard to know what groups’ and residents’ “true” motives are in local politics. As Einstein, Glick, and Palmer point out, it can be difficult to determine whether some local homeowners oppose housing growth because they really care about the local community and the environment or because they really care about the value of their homes. Police unions often advocate for policies on the grounds that they would enhance community safety, even though those policies are also in the interests of police officers. But Hartney’s article in this special issue offers a clever test on this question of motives: he asks whether the rate at which teachers’ unions endorse incumbents running for reelection in school board races can be explained by two different variables: 1) the rate of student achievement growth in the district in the year prior and 2) the percentage increase in teacher salaries in the district in the year prior. The results he presents provide a fairly clear indication of which criterion is more relied upon by teachers’ unions when they are deciding how to allocate their support in local school board elections.

Conclusion

The articles and essays in this special issue are rich with new ideas, data, and insights about the role of interest groups in US local politics. They combine a variety of analytical approaches, including quantitative analysis of data on group endorsements in local elections, qualitative analysis of data from interviews and public meetings, comparative analysis of hundreds of local elections, in-depth analysis of a single city, and a far-ranging review of the scattered existing research on a particular type of local interest group. From the research presented in this issue, we see that ostensibly powerful groups like developers may confront limitations to their

⁸ For an account of these dynamics, see Bodenheimer (2022).



influence. We see examples of how marginalized groups can successfully organize in race-class subjugated cities.⁹ We see that unions of local government employees are active players in local politics. And in municipal governments and school districts, most of which are formally nonpartisan, we see hints that interest groups fill in the gaps where political parties have less presence.

There are, of course, many other types of interest groups that deserve attention from political scientists beyond those discussed in this issue. Business groups have long been recognized as important to local governance (e.g., Stone 1989; Mossberger and Stoker 2001), and new work is beginning to further explore how they engage in local politics and to what effect (Anzia 2022; Kirkland 2021). Neighborhood associations are hard to characterize but are often quite active in local politics (Anzia 2022; Logan and Rabrenovic 1990). Local governments themselves can act as interest groups by lobbying other governments (Payson 2020, 2021). And this special issue closes with an essay by Jeffrey Berry, a prolific scholar of interest groups in American politics who has written about their activity in local politics (Berry 2010), especially the role of environmental groups in advocating for local sustainability policies (e.g., Portney and Berry 2016; Feiock et al. 2014).

Even for the interest groups that are discussed in the pages to follow, there are many more questions to ask and explore, most importantly how the organization and activity of these groups affect local policy. But the articles in this special issue help to establish a foundation for moving forward on those questions—and are an important step toward making “interest groups in local politics” the recognizable research focus it deserves to be.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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⁹ See the Michener and SoRelle article in this issue as well as Soss and Weaver (2017).



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