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**Groups and Political Thinking:
The Role of Organized Interests in Attitude Formation**

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Abstract

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Groups and Political Thinking:
The Role of Organized Interests in Attitude Formation

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This paper examines the role of organized interests in political thinking -- specifically, the impact of political interest groups on attitude formation and change. A consideration of the motivations for group involvement in attitude formation suggests that it is frequently neither necessary nor efficient for groups to change policymakers' attitudes about substantive policy issues in order to achieve desired policy outcomes. The attainment of policy goals is frequently aided, however, by "focusing" the general public's attention on policy problems to produce the ripe climates of opinion which facilitate mobilization activities. While focusing activities are not generally undertaken with the goal of producing enduring attitudes (or attitude change), they produce temporary increases in the magnitude or intensity of particular attitudes which may significantly influence our understanding of such attitudes as they are measured by survey research.

This paper is organized in four sections. It begins with a brief description of what is meant by the term "political attitude." Second, it reviews motivations for group involvement in attitude formation, employing a view of group leaders as rational actors to assess the necessity and efficiency of influencing political attitudes in hopes of producing policy responses. A third section introduces the notion of "focusing" and suggests that it is a most appropriate technique for creating the ripe climates of opinion which groups ultimately mobilize to move from a situation of "attitude-holding" to one of "attitude-based response." The fourth section concludes by considering a more general, unintentional impact which successful focusing efforts may have on public opinion, i.e., the extent to which these activities perform on agenda-setting function within the general public.

Political Attitudes

Before we can discuss why, how, and with what degree of success groups influence political attitudes, we must arrive at some understanding of what political attitudes are. When we speak of "political attitudes" it is generally understood that we are referring to some evaluation of or feeling about political institutions, actors, or issues. Further examination of the concept, however, seems to render it less rather than more clear. Are these attitudes something more than value judgements? different than opinions? How are attitudes related to knowledge? beliefs? intentions? behavior? Is an attitude a response, or a readiness to respond? How are attitudes related to overt responses?

Unfortunately, neither social psychological nor political science literatures provide us with a consensus definition of "attitude" (see Abcarian and Soule, 1971: 2). In one two-year review period Fishbein and Ajzen (1972) found over 500 operationalizations of attitude (cited in Jaccard, 1981: 261). The one notion which all scholars seem to agree on is that attitudes involve some evaluation of an object. In the simplest terms, this affective (feeling, or emotional) aspect of an attitude consists of the individual's personal preference--like or dislike--of the attitude object (McGuire, 1969: 155; Manheim, 1982: 14). These personal evaluations are characterized by both their direction and intensity.

Another common, though not undisputed, notion is that attitudes are linked to behavior. Thus, while some scholars argue that there is no necessary, lawlike relation of attitudes to behavior,¹ many others assume that "attitude and behavior are causally linked through nomothetic mechanisms" with previous failures to uncover the link "largely due to improper specification and measurement of both variables," (Bagozzi, 1981: 607). McGuire notes that attitudes are commonly conceived as mediating concepts, partially defined in terms of consequent behaviors (McGuire, 1969: 142). Attitudes are often referred to as predispositions to behavior (e.g., Abcarian and Soule, 1971; Zimbardo and Ebbesen, 1969; Manheim, 1982), or readiness to respond. Attitudes are assumed to form a bridge (or perhaps more appropriately, fill a gap) between stimuli and response--between information and behavior. As described by Manheim, "an attitude is basically a set of psychological conditions that makes any particular response to a given situation more or less likely than any other response in accordance with the wishes and beliefs of the individual in question," (Manheim, 1982: 9).

This paper does not dispute the notion that evaluations of objects, individuals, ideas, the appropriateness of certain actions, or the probability of producing change may be taken into account in the formation of an intention to act. For purposes of clarity, however, it distinguishes attitudes viewed as the result of a cognitive process which screens and evaluates information, from attitudes as input to the cognitive process which considers and selects behavioral response. This paper defines political attitudes quite narrowly, equating them with value judgements or opinions, and distinguishing them from intentions and behavior. For the purposes of this discussion, political attitudes are defined as feelings about or evaluations of political objects--actors, institutions, policies, or issues. For the remainder of this paper we will consider the intentional attempts of organized interests to affect the development and change of these evaluations.

Motivations for Group Involvement in Attitude Formation

The literature outlines several explanations for group affiliation, but a general assumption is that at least some members of any political interest group have organized themselves for the purpose of "pursuing shared interests through a set of agreed upon activities," (Greenwald, 1977: 15). The most important shared activities of political interest groups are attempts to influence policymakers' decisions.² Assuming that political interest groups (or perhaps more appropriately, group leaders) are rational actors, this suggests that they are most interested in influencing those political attitudes which they feel affect their ability to obtain policy goals. Indeed, the very premise of the rational approach is that groups will try to influence political attitudes only to the extent that this is felt to be a necessary or efficient means of inducing the desired policy response.

For it to be necessary for groups to influence political attitudes concerning policy goals, we must agree with Manheim that "in a very real sense political attitudes are the building blocks of political activity" (Manheim, 1982: 8). Moreover, it must be the case that the existing support is inadequate; i.e., that there are not enough individuals with the same evaluation of a political object, or that the magnitudes of their opinions are inadequate

to provide a base for political action. In turn, for it to be efficient for groups to influence political attitudes concerning policy goals, there must be no easier, better way to induce the required political behavior.

This raises an important question: What political behaviors do groups need to influence to achieve their policy goals, and how necessary or efficient is it to modify political attitudes in order to produce these behaviors? Considering the first portion of this question, obviously the actions of policymakers are of primary importance in affecting policy outcomes. Endorsing or working against legislative proposals, approving or denying budget requests, supporting or blocking political appointments--these are examples of policymakers' behaviors which affect the attainment of policy goals. Groups typically attempt to influence these behaviors directly (e.g., through lobbying activities). When direct appeals to actors in the policymaking system are insufficient, however, a group may find it necessary to influence the behavior of its members.

The mere act of joining an interest group may assist group leaders in affecting policy outcomes. As Salisbury points out, "the political power of an interest group rests on a combination of factors: money and organization are important, but so is the opinion politicians have of the ability of the organization to speak for the people it claims to represent," (Salisbury, 1977: 1). One important indicator of a group's ability to represent individual interests is individuals' willingness to let it represent them--as indicated by group affiliation. While evidence of a large membership base may assist groups in achieving desired policy outcomes, it may not be sufficient. Groups may find it necessary to encourage their members to participate more actively in the policy process (e.g., instigating letter-writing campaigns, encouraging members to sign petitions, persuading members to vote for candidates, securing cooperation in strikes or other forms of protest activity, and undertaking other forms of grass roots lobbying). When the efforts of even its members are insufficient, it may be necessary for the group to recruit others, unaffiliated with the group, to support its cause.

While affecting policy is their primary objective, ~~political interest~~ groups may wish to influence behavior for reasons other than policy goals. For example, group leaders' interests in maintaining a membership base are not always directly related to policy outcomes. Consider the case of groups that have been successful in achieving their policy goals--obviating the need for the group. The leaders of such groups may be unwilling to let the group die, as they generally have a vested interest in its continued existence (Greenwald, 1977: 55). In such cases the desire to maintain a viable organization may reflect personal (e.g., job security, prestige, solidarity, purposive) as well as policy goals. Indeed, as policy goals are required to justify the existence of political interest groups, policy goals may be defined by group leaders to further their own personal goals.

Thus there are two major categories of behavior which political interest groups frequently attempt to influence, and three audiences for these attempts. The two categories of behavior are those which: (a) affect policy outcomes, and (b) ensure the viability of the organization.³ The three potential audiences for the influencing attempts are: (1) policymakers, (2) group members, and (3) unaffiliated members of the general

public. Our next task is to address the question: "How frequently do groups attempt to influence each target audience's attitudes in hopes of affecting these behaviors?" To answer this question we continue to view group leaders as rational actors, assuming that they will try to influence political attitudes only to the extent that this is felt to be a necessary or efficient means of inducing the desired behavioral response.

The conventional wisdom argues that policymakers frequently respond to perceived political consequences of supporting or opposing organized groups' interests. Policymakers are felt to be particularly responsive to groups with: an ability to mobilize members and/or sympathizers, a large membership base, adequate financial resources, status or legitimacy, and media-attracting capabilities. These attributes are important at all stages of the policy process. Moreover, as they may be used to influence electoral and other political outcomes, they affect both elected and nonelected officials.

There is substantial evidence that political interest groups are much more likely to work with those policymakers who support their interests than with those who oppose them. Political interest groups' preference for working with supporters is illustrated by the resources which they devote to placing supporters in office. Both assisting individuals in election campaigns and seeking the appointment of group members or supporters to top government positions are classic methods of gaining access to the policy system (Salisbury, 1977: 1). Speaking of the uses of political action committees (PACs) in the political process, the Washington office director of the AMA stated that "We [the AMA] try, and always have tried, to influence the Congress by electing people that we agree with rather than influencing the Congress by buying votes," (Pressman, 1984: 19). By contributing to the election of individuals who are favorably predisposed to their concerns, groups can anticipate future support, rather than facing the need to expend resources to change the views of the opposition.

Government officials increasingly contribute to both the proliferation of interest groups and to their access to the policy system. An example of this trend is the increasing reliance of both legislators and bureaucrats on interest groups for expert advice (Gross, 1984). An examination of the role of interest groups in shaping the legislative agenda of the U.S. House of Representatives found that pressure groups often work to shape legislative proposals at representatives' or their staffers' request (McDonald, 1984). One congressional staffer reported that the lengthier a bill, and the more detailed its provisions, the more likely it is that interest groups played a significant role in its drafting. "They [the special interests] have the expertise. We don't have that. We have to go outside for help." (McDonald, 1984: 99). Gross notes a similar trend in the administrative and bureaucratic process (1984: 4).⁴

In addition to relying on interest groups for expert advice, policymakers also turn to political interest groups for indications of how receptive special interests will be to proposals which they are considering introducing or supporting. Policymakers frequently work with special interests, professional associations, or trade organizations to develop proposals, rules and regulations which their special interest constituencies can support. Through this process of accommodation, policymakers may become

captive to the groups' interests. Clientelism--the tendency of organized interests to develop close working relationships with the very policymakers whose job it is to regulate them (Lowi, 1979)--is a well documented phenomenon, and several scholars have commented on the more general phenomenon of policymakers' facilitating, if not institutionalizing, organized interests' access to the political system (e.g., Lowi, 1979; Cigler and Loomis, 1983; Kingdon, 1984). Greenwald observes:

Groups work toward governmental decisions that further their own goals, but at the same time decision-makers seek interest group support for a variety of reasons: to secure technical information; to implement federal directives; to coalesce political support for an official, department, or policy; and/or to ensure electoral support from identifiable blocks of voters. Two-way relationships are formed from mutual need and are reinforced by patterns of friendship and by decision-making routines, (Greenwald, 1977: 190).

What all of this suggests is that it is frequently unnecessary for political interest groups to change the direction of policymakers' attitudes about substantive policy issues in order to achieve their desired policy goals. Groups can be highly successful in influencing policy simply by persuading policymakers that they have the ability to affect electoral or other political outcomes. Many organized interests have established routes of access to policymakers who are already favorably predisposed to the groups' interests--constituting potential if not actual supporters. And while these potentially supportive policymakers may not always agree with groups as to the importance of a particular issue, or the desirability of a specific policy response to the problem, they are much more amenable to group influence than is the opposition. To the extent that groups do work to change policymakers attitudes, then, they are hypothesized to be more likely to change the magnitude or intensity of their supporters' attitudes than the direction of their opponents' attitudes. This is particularly true in the case of a vocal opposition, as openly changing the direction of one's stance on a policy issue is a much higher stake activity for public officials than merely reordering the priority attached to various issues. For this reason groups are hypothesized to attempt to change the direction of policymakers' attitudes infrequently--typically, only in critical situations (e.g., in the case of critical legislative votes).

How necessary is it to include attempts to influence attitudes in political interest groups' grass roots lobbying efforts? As discussed above, organized interests are most likely to work with those individuals who are favorably predisposed to their cause(s)--(whether these be group members or interested, unaffiliated citizens), than with their opponents. This obviates the need to affect the directions, and often the intensity, of group members' attitudes about substantive policy issues. As indicated above, however, it may be necessary to influence members' attitudes about the desirability of pursuing new policy objectives when a group has been successful in attaining its original goal(s). Greenwald observes that when events or success make a group goal obsolete, "the group either dies, as did the antiprohibition lobby and most antiwar groups, or it continues to exist despite current events either because it still sees the threat as menacing ... or it developes new issues," (Greenwald, 1977: 55).

For example, the March of Dimes, an organization formed to aid the fight against polio, now fights birth defects (Greenwald, 1977). Cigler and Loomis provide two additional examples of groups which expanded their issue arenas to maintain their viability, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the National Council of Senior Citizens (NCSC).

Originally formed to provide the elderly with adequate insurance, the AARP has become an active political group that seeks to protect Social Security and opposes mandatory retirement. The National Council of Senior Citizens (NCSC), another important recipient group, was organized by the labor movement for an explicit political purpose--the passage of Medicare legislation. Since its inception the NCSC has broadened its concerns to include many more aging issues, and like the AARP, this group offers its members a host of selective material benefits, (Cigler and Loomis, 1983: 13).

We have already noted that a sound membership base frequently assists group leaders in affecting policy outcomes. Yet a large and active membership is not always critical to the attainment of policy goals. Cigler and Loomis note that "increasingly groups have appeared that are essentially 'staff' organizations with little or no membership base," (Cigler and Loomis, 1983: 15). One of the most effective lobbying tactics--providing funds to political campaigns through political action committees--may require only the relatively "low-cost" member activity of writing and mailing a check for membership dues. And, as Cigler and Hansen note, the provision of selective material benefits may be sufficient to induce such "membership support," (Cigler and Hansen, 1983: 103-104). Loomis shows that alternative sources of financial backing (e.g., the government, single sponsors) can reduce both the necessity of attracting members for financial reasons, and the free-rider problem (Loomis, 1983: 22).

When a group does require a large or active membership to achieve its goals, a lack of participation incentives may be as serious a problem as a lack of potential group supporters or members. According to Olson's (1965) analysis, the major barrier to group participation is the "free-rider" problem; a rational individual would not choose to join a group and bear the costs of participation when the benefits of such action are collective material benefits (i.e., shared by all "similar" individuals, regardless of whether or not they are affiliated with the group that was responsible for the provision of the benefits). As both experimental and field studies found Olson's theory unable to explain collective behavior (Conway, 1984) scholars developed new explanations for collective action, typically expanding the notion of rationality and including a consideration of nonmaterial benefits in the choice process.⁶ An example is incentive theory, which argues that the free-rider problem can be overcome by the provision of selective material benefits, solidary incentives, and/or expressive (or purposive) rewards. It is interesting that this discussion of incentives includes no mention of the desirability of attempting to change individuals' assessment of the virtue of the group's goals.

Studies of the relationship of political efficacy to political behavior describe another barrier to group participation--the feeling that such participation is futile, as individuals are powerless to influence events in the political

system. Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that "persons who feel efficacious participate at a higher level than those who lack such feelings," (Milbraith, 1977: 58; see, e.g., DiPalma, 1970; Olsen, 1969; Verba and Nie, 1972; Lane, 1959). There is evidence that individuals with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to participate in party activities and political campaigns, and to vote, than are those individuals who lack a feeling of efficacy (Paige, 1971; Milbraith, 1965). Indeed, there is evidence that feelings of efficacy facilitate nearly all modes of political participation, though "some variation can be discerned," (Milbraith and Goel, 1977: 59).⁷ Research findings even call into question the previously common view that a lack of efficacy contributes to protest activities, by demonstrating that "protestors score above the average on sense of efficacy and self-esteem," (Milbraith and Goel, 1977: 59; see, e.g., Paige, 1971; Gamson, 1968; Verba and Nie, 1972). Gamson argues that a belief that it is both possible and necessary to influence policy is the ideal situation for mobilization (see Gamson, 1968; cited in Paige, 1971: 810-811). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) argue that "the most pertinent attitude as a precursor to behavior is the attitude toward the act, as opposed to the attitude toward the object," (Bagozzi, 1981: 608). All of this suggests that the most important attitude for groups to effect to increase political participation is efficacy; which implies that the need to change or reinforce attitudes about political actors or issues may be of only secondary importance.

To summarize, attempts to influence the attitudes of group members about substantive policy issues are not perceived as common group activities. As most group members are understood to be supporters of the group's cause, it is felt that when undertaken, attempts to influence their political attitudes will be attempts to change the magnitude or intensity, rather than the direction, of their attitudes about policy issues. However, it may be necessary to influence attitudes about the desirability of pursuing new policy objectives to maintain the need for and viability of a group. When a greater membership commitment (i.e., higher activity level) is the desired behavioral outcome, it is hypothesized that groups may find it necessary not only to influence the salience of policy issues to the members, but to expand their base of support. In this case, it may be more efficient for groups to reduce the barriers to participation (e.g., by providing selective benefits, by attempting to alter subjective feelings of efficacy) than to attempt to change their opponents' political attitudes. In short, mobilization activities may be more appropriate than attitude-change activities to produce the member behaviors which yield the desired policy outcomes.

Attitude Holding versus Attitude-Based Response: The Role of Focusing and Mobilization

The preceding section argues that it frequently is neither necessary nor efficient for political interest groups to change the direction of policy-makers' or group members' political attitudes in order to achieve policy outcomes. Groups' efforts to change political attitudes are hypothesized typically to consist of attempts to change the magnitude or intensity of particular attitudes. The purpose of these attitude change activities is to broaden or strengthen support for an issue, actor, or other policy object--i.e., to create a receptive climate of opinion. This aids the group in achieving its policy goals by facilitating the mobilization activities which characterize the bulk of political interest groups' activities. This

section introduces the notion of "focusing" and suggests that it is a most appropriate technique for creating the ripe climates of opinion which groups ultimately mobilize to move from a situation of "attitude-holding" to one of "attitude-based response."

Group leaders frequently demonstrate the relevance of political issues to potential supporters, as this relevance is one of several factors responsible for the degree of group politicization (Hawkins and Lorinskas, 1970 cited in Sigman, 1983). Organized groups "play significant roles in defining issues and articulating interests, as well as in mobilization support and opposition," (Salisbury, 1977: 1). We use the term "focusing" to refer to those actions which define the attention which individuals pay to particular issues or attitudes by limiting or constraining the universe of potential issues up for consideration. Focusing directs the formation of attitude "clusters" (Manheim, 1982) by increasing the salience of (or weighting) one or more of the component factors. Thus focusing assists the individual in drawing various beliefs and evaluations into an organized body, facilitating the development of some cogent composite attitude.

Initial attitudes can be viewed as potentially complex sets of elements that are not necessarily internally consistent. An overall evaluation of a political actor, or of a legislative proposal, may be composed of several component attitudes. Sometimes these component attitudes reinforce each other, and sometimes they conflict. Frankfurt (1977) argues that individuals' first-order and second-order desires may not coincide; "individuals can simultaneously hold several different preference orderings, and over time vary which one of these is the basis for decision-making," (Conway, 1984: 14). If an individual's attention can be focused on one of a host of (possibly conflicting) attitudes, that attitude may outweigh the others, and thus have a greater influence on the response decision. According to Manheim, it is generally the case that "the more a person thinks about a particular object, the more likely it is that each element of the attitude formed will be closely associated with all the other elements of that attitude," (Manheim, 1982: 20). The process of focusing is hypothesized to bring at least some of the elements of an attitude into internally consistent relationship and may serve as the basis of a person's expressed "concern." This organizing role facilitates the formation of "rational", predictable attitude-behavior relationships.

Focusing may also affect behavioral intentions by increasing psychological involvement (i.e., "the degree to which citizens are interested in and concerned about politics and public affairs," Milbraith and Goel, 1977: 46). By drawing attention to policy issues with a potential to influence the individual, groups increase their psychological involvement which, in turn, increases the probability of political participation (Milbraith and Goel, 1977: 46).⁸ Fessler's discussion of the grass-roots lobbying techniques of a lobby for the elderly illustrates the use of focusing to increase psychological involvement. Fessler describes this group's promotional materials as implying that benefits for elderly retirees (specifically, Social Security and Medicare) are in danger (Fessler, 1984: 1310), a message which, according to one Congressman, exploits "the everpresent fear of senior citizens that the benefits they worked so hard for will be swept away," (Fessler, 1984: 1310). The appeal is intended to attract members and to encourage their participation in group efforts (in this case, signing petitions), (Fessler, 1984: 1311-1312).

Focused attention is felt to be a necessary, rather than a sufficient condition for forging a causal link between attitudes and behavior. Groups focus attention on issues to create the ripe climates of opinion which facilitate mobilization activities. When focusing is done without mobilization, it is done in hopes that educating the public will be sufficient to produce desired behavioral response. It is unusual for groups to focus attention without then attempting to mobilize--the two activities typically are related. Thus, interest groups will intentionally focus attention on issues in hopes of influencing courses of action. Mobilization activity is hypothesized to be the key element which completes the attitude-behavior link vis-a-vis social behavior. Mobilization refers to intentional action to acquire support for a course of action based on attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge which are rooted in a preexisting, receptive climate of opinion. Mobilization is a deliberate attempt to spell out how attitudes, beliefs, et cetera can be translated into specific actions. As both the salience (or intensity) and centrality of attitudes affect the likelihood of behavioral response, groups undertake focusing activities in the hopes of predisposing individuals to act.

Individuals are hypothesized to be very receptive to interest groups' focusing attempts. As Achen points out, "the sheer volume of business in a large nation makes it impossible for even the most studious voter to follow more than a fraction of it," (Achen, 1975: 1218). Milbraith and Goel note that "relatively few people have sufficient information or sufficient understanding of the political system to be able to make a completely rational political choice," (1977: 7). Focusing is a simplifying process which helps individuals "make sense" of complex political realities. In effect, focusing prioritizes issues, and this prioritization is an important component in evaluating both policy options and courses of action. In keeping with the notion of bounded rationality which argues that "the capacity of the human mind for formulating and solving problems is so limited ... that we must construct a simplified (hueristic) model of the real situation in order to deal with it," (Anderson, et al., 1981: 30), focusing frequently oversimplifies issues in the hopes of facilitating behavior. In sum, interest groups focus attention to simplify decision-making, reinforcing political attitudes in hopes of affecting political behavior.

How is attention focused on an issue or attitude? A common focusing agent is the "focusing event" (Kingdon, 1984). Focusing events are most often crises or disasters which call attention to problems. Kingdon cites several examples, e.g., "Airplane crashes stimulate concern about air safety; the wreck of the Penn Central prompts government action on railroad finances; bridge collapses focus attention on highway infrastructure deterioration," (Kingdon, 1984: 100). Savvy interest groups take advantage of such circumstances to draw attention to their pet causes. Interest groups focus attention primarily by disseminating information about events, actors, or relationships among issues. They can supply new information, obstruct competing information, or present old information in a new light, thereby altering the information structure which provides the foundation for attitude formation.

Several studies emphasize the importance of environmental factors (political, economic and social "climates") in facilitating issue awareness (e.g., Kingdon, 1984; Cook, et al., 1983; McDonald, 1984). These general climates of opinion provide a background against which new issues emerge. But while intersecting

or reinforcing issue climates may condition a public to be receptive to the emergence of a new issue, they may not, in themselves, be sufficient to focus attention on an issue as a high salience item. Thus charismatic leaders or interest groups may take on the focusing role, working to forge issue linkages, garner support for their positions, and generally maintain or increase the salience of their pet cause(s). Rather than leave the recognition of a new issue (and/or its relationship to other high salience, "problem" issues) to chance, they act to increase public awareness of, and support for (or condemnation of), issues.

How can groups be sure that the information they disseminate will be successful in focusing attention? Issue linkages are important here. Groups are hypothesized to be most successful in focusing attention when they link issues or component attitudes either to (a) those attitudes which hold a central place in individuals' belief systems (e.g., attitudes which constitute part of the political culture), or (b) issues or attitudes which currently occupy a prominent position in the general climate of public opinion (i.e., high salience items). As Fessler's previously cited discussion of a lobby for the elderly indicates, success in focusing is also aided by an ability to point to a threat to the individual's or group's interests. Such a tactic may be particularly useful in stimulating political participation, as perceived external threats to groups affect the degree of group politicization (Hawkins and Lorinkas, 1970 cited in Sigman, 1983: 35).

Because it is easier to change peripheral attitudes than central attitudes, groups' focusing efforts are more successful when a link can be established between a new or peripheral issue and a central attitude. Manheim notes

"when a distant attitude is challenged or threatened, the stakes involved in modifying that attitude are relatively low. But when an attitude that lies much closer to the basic values of the individual comes under challenge, not only is the changing of that attitude more difficult to engineer .. but the potential consequences of that challenge are commensurately greater as well," (Manheim, 1982: 28).

Discounting attempts to change those fundamental attitudes which are part of the political culture, groups will find it simplest and most rewarding to increase the salience of issues by tying them with fundamental values and/or other currently high salience issues.

For focusing to be successful, the focusing message must be communicated effectively and forcefully to the individual. When political interest groups' focusing activities are directed toward policymakers, they may make use of both direct and indirect channels of access. Information can be disseminated to policymakers directly by lobbyists, through congressional testimony, and by circulating position papers. Information can also be channeled indirectly through the media, and by stimulated constituent and/or group member mailing campaigns. When focusing activities are directed to group members, newsletters or other private publications are generally employed as the channel of communication. Focusing activities directed toward unaffiliated members of the general public often employ the mass media (e.g., through advertising), and targeted direct mail techniques. For a group to be successful in focusing, it should not only use appropriate

linkages in developing its message, it should also consider source valence for its target audience in selecting the channel of communication. Any of the three components of source valence--credibility, attractiveness, and power--may enhance attitude-change efficacy, "with the psychodynamics and behavioral implications differing among the three," (McGuire, 1969: 179).⁹ Boffey notes the importance of using "respected" spokespersons to influence policy debate.

Both sides in the nuclear debate are claiming support from technical 'experts' in an effort to influence the uncommitted public. There is some ground for believing that the public does in fact place great stock in what scientists say. A poll conducted by Louis Harris and Associates last year concluded that 'for the final word on nuclear energy the public looks not to environmentalists, not to government leaders, and not to the media,' but rather to 'scientists -in fact, scientists inspired confidence in people on both sides of the fence', (Boffey, 1976: 122).¹⁰

The extent to which individuals can identify with, or feel similar to, the source also influences the credibility of messages, (and thus, will affect the success of focusing appeals). McGuire points out

there is a considerable body of evidence that a person is influenced by a persuasive message to the extent that he perceives it as coming from a source similar to himself. Presumably the receiver, to the extent that he perceives the source to be like himself in diverse characteristics, assumes that they also share common needs and goals. The receiver might therefore conclude that what the source is urging is good for 'our kind of people,' and thus changes his attitudes accordingly, (McGuire, 1969: 187).

This suggests that groups will be most successful in focusing the attention of their members when relying on their own channels of communication (e.g., newsletters, special publications) to deliver messages, whereas alternative message sources (e.g.; the mass media) may be sufficient to focus the attention of the unaffiliated. An example of the use of the mass media to communicate group messages is public advertising, e.g., Mobil Oil Corporation's "nationwide series of 'educational' advertisements," (Greenwald, 1977: 76-77). Of course, practical considerations also influence the selection of a message source. Both residential segregation and the amount of interaction among group members affect the feasibility of relying on interpersonal communication as a means of communicating information. Physical access to membership also may affect the success of groups' focusing attempts, as "the more contact group members have with each other, the more pressure they will probably feel to adopt common political and other types of standards," (Sigman, 1983: 44).

The Successful Role of Political Interests in Attitude Formation

The preceding section outlined conditions which contribute to groups' success in focusing (i.e., reinforcing or altering the salience of) political attitudes. In this section, we conclude by considering a more general, unintentional impact which successful focusing efforts may have

on public opinion. Specifically, we consider the extent to which groups' focusing activities serve an agenda-setting function within the general public.

We have argued that organized interests play a very limited role in intentionally attempting to influence political attitudes. This is because it is rarely either efficient or necessary to shape the direction of attitudes about substantive policy issues in order to produce desired policy goals. To the extent that groups do attempt to influence political attitudes, they are hypothesized generally to confine themselves to focusing activities which are intended to increase the magnitude or intensity of opinions, thereby establishing the ripe climates of opinion which facilitate mobilization activities. As described here, focusing is intended to aid groups in achieving specific policy objectives. It is not intended to produce enduring changes in political attitudes. Nevertheless, focusing may produce an important effect on public opinion as it is generally measured and understood. By influencing attitudes not about specific political objects, but about which issues are problems, which matters deserve attention, and otherwise increasing the salience (intensity or magnitude) of specific (often preexisting) political attitudes, groups perform a classic agenda-setting function.

The parallels between focusing and agenda-setting are clear. Agendas influence policy debates by defining issues to be addressed. Focusing influences general climates of opinion by defining issues or attitudes to be considered. Both agenda-setting and focusing limit options, thus affecting subsequent decision processes. Agenda-setting is the identification of issues for consideration by policymakers; focusing is the definition of opinions to be considered in forming behavioral intentions. Indeed, focusing could be defined as the process by which agendas are set within the general public. Viewed in this light, focusing can play a crucial role in the the formation of public opinion. Focusing may not produce shifts in the direction of political attitudes, and it may not produce enduring changes in the magnitude of attitudes; but, by increasing the salience of issues and temporarily realigning attitudes, focusing may contribute to broader shifts in the general climate of public opinion. These may, in turn, be translated into new pressures on the policymaking process.

The most well-documented agenda-setting effects are those of the mass media, though political scientists have also examined the determinants of the agendas of political actors and institutions. Considering the determinants of the general public's policy agenda, the media has been demonstrated to play an important focusing (or agenda-setting) role (e.g., McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Becker, 1982; Becker, et al, 1979; Cook, et al., 1983; Erbring, et al, 1980; McLeod, et al, 1974; Shaw and McCombs, 1977). The "agenda-setting hypothesis" (that the media have the ability to influence "what people think about", if not "what they think) is widely agreed upon. At the risk of vastly oversimplifying this rich and complex literature, it is agreed that the media: (1) may affect a single response (i.e., attitude or behavior), or sets of responses; (2) can create, change, or reinforce such responses; and (3) tends to be more important in drawing attention to issues -- (issue specification/problem

recognition) than in transmitting substantive information about issues. Given that this agenda-setting function appears identical to the focusing role of political interest groups, one might wonder why relatively little attention is paid to the agenda-setting function of organized interests outside the realm of political institutions. Perhaps this is because, as mentioned earlier, groups generally work with their supporters; thus their major agenda-setting function may be viewed as relevant only to their members, and not to unaffiliated members of the general public. Given that groups do employ the media as one channel of communication, that their activities are often reported independently in the media, and that there are times when groups do target their focusing activities to nonmembers in hopes of increasing their base of support, this may be a shortcoming in the literature. The relative power of organized interests versus the media in influencing political attitudes through focusing is dependent upon: (1) the credibility which individuals attach to the two message sources, and (2) the size of the audience which each reaches. In general it may be the case that the media have a more widespread agenda-setting impact that any single political interest group, with the result that the media are viewed as a more powerful agenda-setting agent. Nevertheless, the focusing activities of political interest groups may perform an important agenda setting function.

Let us consider the impact of these focusing activities on public opinion as it is generally measured and understood. By increasing the salience of attitudes, and thus the frequency and intensity with which they are reported, agenda-setting activities may have a significant impact on political attitudes as measured in attitude surveys. Such apparent shifts in attitudes may contribute to the often articulated viewpoint that the public is generally passive and/or politically unsophisticated, with few stable political preferences (other than party identification). Page and Shapiro's 1982 examination of changes in American's policy preferences provides an alternative interpretation of such observable shifts in opinion. They find that when policy preferences do shift,¹¹ these "changes in opinions are understandable in terms of underlying secular changes," (Page and Shapiro, 1982: 30). They state: "our main point here is that when preferences do shift rapidly, there is no reason to presume that the public is fickle, confused, or irrational; most abrupt changes have been associated with important objective events," (Page and Shapiro, 1982: 39). Even in the foreign policy arena (where opinion is traditionally felt to be more volatile), Page and Shapiro found that "virtually all of the rapid shifts ... were related to political and economic circumstances or to significant events which sensible citizens would take into account," (1982: 34).

Both this finding and the discussion of the focusing role of groups suggests, in keeping with social psychological literature, that while the few central attitudes which form the core of individuals' belief systems are resistant to change, peripheral attitudes are more adaptable in keeping with changing external stimuli. Belief structures and opinion clusters are complex and multifaceted, and a variety of external stimuli (whether initiated by interest groups or not) can provide a focusing function, thereby tapping certain preferences at particular points in time. The important point here is that these shifts in opinion may be the result not only of the well-documented information dissemination,

focusing/agenda-setting functions of the mass media, but also of the focusing efforts of political interest groups. Indeed, the fact that political interest groups use mass media as one channel of communication indicates that the agenda-setting activities of the media and the focusing efforts of political interest groups may be one and the same.

In conclusion, we have argued that the intentional role of organized interests in the formation or change of specific attitudes about substantive policy issues is limited in scope and in long-term impact. Our interpretations (or misinterpretations) of irregular attitude surveys may exaggerate the apparent impact of focusing on political attitudes. Nevertheless, political interest groups may have a significant, longer-term impact on public opinion through the agenda-setting byproduct of their focusing activities. Thus while political interest groups may not have as a primary goal the formation of enduring political attitudes, their focusing activities may produce significant (albeit temporary) realignments in opinion structures, with a potentially longer-term impact on more general climates of opinion.

FOOTNOTES

¹Bagozzi notes that one of two major perspectives on the attitude-behavior relationship argues that the relation is not necessary, but rather, that it is "contingent on the context in which it occurs," (Bagozzi, 1981: 607).

²In order for a group to be considered a political interest group, it need not have policy-related goals at all times. Thus an interest group may be appropriately defined as a political interest group only at certain times throughout its history--i.e., when it is pursuing policy goals.

³Some behaviors may be classified in both categories (e.g., making financial contributions to an organization).

⁴Gross observes "Much of the theoretical work contends that interest groups have considerable access to administrators and that group support, in many cases, is important to the survival and growth of the bureaucracy. More specifically, interest group support may be useful to administrative agencies at budget time. ...In a broader sense, Rourke (1976) claims that interest group support and the mobilization of such support is vital to administrative agencies. He argues that the lack of political support from these outside groups severely circumscribes the ability of an agency to achieve its goals," (Gross, 1984: 4).

⁵They note, for example, that "for farmers, the American Farm Bureau Federation offers extremely inexpensive insurance, which induces individuals to join, even if they disagree with the Farm Bureau's goals," (Cigler and Loomis, 1983: 9).

⁶Moe provides a review of the economic and noneconomic incentives for joining interest groups in The Organization of Interests: Incentives and the Internal Dynamics of Political Interest Groups; Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

⁷See Milbraith, 1977, for an elaboration of the modes of political participation, and a discussion of the variations in impact of efficacy on the various modes of political participation.

⁸Milbraith and Goel point out that psychological involvement "is a central attitudinal variable relating to participation in politics," (Milbraith and Goel, 1977: 46).

⁹For a more detailed discussion of the five components of source valence, and their impact on attitude change via the psychological modes of internalization, identification, and compliance, see Kelman (1958, 1961) and McGuire (1969: 179-200).

¹⁰Discussions of the expert aspect of source credibility are included in McGuire, 1969: 182-183; Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953; and Aronson and Golden, 1962.

¹¹Contrary to that literature which seems public opinion as highly volatile, Page and Shapiro found it to be fairly stable.

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