

Abstract

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What is needed for an interest organization to gain access to political decision-making processes? Do certain organizational characteristics give some organizations privileged possibilities of access? These questions are at the centre of the dissertation, with the empirical focus on Swedish environmental politics. The purpose is to shed light on the problem whether the presence of interest organizations in political life jeopardizes the idea of equal opportunities for all citizens to influence public policy.

By studying interest organizations' possibilities to gain access to political decision-making processes and not the actual influence of the organizations, the perspective used here differs from the influence perspective used in most Swedish research on interest organizations. To gain a full picture of interest organizations in Swedish democracy, we do, however, need both the influence and the access perspectives. In international research on interest organizations in democratic political life, the access perspective is more frequent. Despite this fact, three different theoretical approaches, pluralism, corporatism and the Political Process Approach, provide us with different theoretical pictures of the possibilities to gain access. The dissertation tests these different theoretical assumptions. Three Swedish political decision-making processes are investigated. The material used consists of documents from the decision-making processes and 47 interviews with politicians, civil servants and representatives from interest organizations.

The empirical investigation clearly shows that there are certain organizational characteristics that provide some organizations with advantageous possibilities to access. The closer to the actual decision-making, where there are good opportunities to influence public policy, the more conditions have to be fulfilled by the organizations to gain access. Above all, the organizations' resources are important. Sometimes it is also an advantage to have representational domination or to be a producer organization. Still, there are some channels into the decision-making processes where the door is open for all types of interest organizations regardless of what characteristics they possess.

Both the pluralist and corporatist approaches gain some support, though during different stages in the political processes. On a more general level, however, none of the theories provide us with a full understanding of the possibilities for interest organizations to gain access. Instead the results indicate that theories of technocracy and bureaucratization in modern political decision-making processes help us to better understand the situation. The dissertation ends with a confrontation between the empirical results and different normative arguments about the proper role of organized interests in democracy.

Key words: access, interest organizations, organized interests, decision-making process, environmental politics, corporatism, pluralism, Political Process Approach, lobbying, political equality, technocracy.

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