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Interest Aggregation and Articulation

Citizens hold various values or preferences that they wish to promote in public policy, such as protecting the environment or encouraging steel production, and these amount to their interests in government and politics. Citizens with similar political interests often organize into interest groups, and the related concepts of interest articulation and interest aggregation, which were popularized by Almond and Coleman (1960), describe different ways that interests are input into the political system.

To articulate an interest means to express it clearly. According to Almond and Coleman, interests are usually articulated by organizations, or interest groups, that present specific desires before relevant political actors, such as legislatures, executives, bureaucracies, voters, and courts. For example, an environmental group may back legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Interest groups typically—but not exclusively—engage in interest articulation.

To aggregate interests means to collect and balance different, often competing, interests. Suppose that an industry group backs legislation to subsidize domestic steel production. The legislation could increase greenhouse gases, so an environmental group lobbies against it. In this scenario, the legislature would decide between competing proposals or strike a compromise between the two interest groups. In either case, it assumes the task of interest aggregation.

However, Almond and Coleman note that interest aggregation is often performed by another type of political organization, political parties. Contrary to interest groups that are usually formed by those sharing similar and narrow interests, political parties are composed of broad coalitions of citizens with vastly different interests. In assembling that coalition and appealing for electoral support, political parties need to aggregate different interests.

As Almond and Coleman (1960) admit, “The distinction between interest articulation and aggregation is a fluid one” (p. 39). Moreover, the functional allocation of interest articulation to interest groups and interest aggregation to political parties can break down. Some interest groups—often called “peak associations”—are broader than others. They speak for whole classes of society, such as labor or business, and must aggregate their members' conflicting interests. Conversely, some political parties, such as environmental or religious parties, are more articulative than other parties. The extent to which interest groups and political parties vary in being articulative or aggregative becomes a matter for theory and research.

Unfortunately, most existing theory and research neglects the aggregative function of interest groups and the articulative function of political parties. Research often cites aggregation and articulation as functions of political parties but then discusses only how parties aggregate interests, neglecting to describe how they can also articulate interests. Indeed, parties that aggregate interests are usually praised for governmental contributions, while parties that articulate interests, especially ethnic parties, are deemed politically dysfunctional. However, the consociational model of democracy sees democratic potential in ethnic parties too.

See also *Almond, Gabriel; Business Preference Formation; Coalition Formation; Consociational Democracy; Ethnic Parties; Interest Groups and Lobbies; Political Party Platform; Public Interest Groups.*

KENNETH JANDA

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