

# Problems - Interests

## Introduction

In addition to causes, issues or problems have "effects." These effects, real or imagined, result in people developing different "interests" in the outcome of the issue. Groups representing different interests will make demands and do battle to influence the outcome of the political debate. Effects are not important in politics until they become demands, that is, until they turn into interests. Groups try to represent their interests in certain ways to mobilize support that will help them win.

## Key Concepts

**Objective vs. subjective interests** - Can someone have an interest in an issue that they don't know or care about? If it affects their livelihood or ability to get food or water for their family, can we say they have an objective interest? The line here is hard to tell.

**One person, multiple interests** - Often a person has multiple interests that can be in conflict. For example, a factory owner might have an interest in fighting new air quality regulations, but as a parent of a child with asthma, they have an interest in seeing the regulations pass.

**Mobilization** - The process whereby effects and experiences generate organized efforts to promote change. These efforts are what we call interests. There are several theories about how and why this happens.

Plurality - Anybody affected by an issue will generally organize activity to address it

Logic of collective action - People with individualistic, material interests will triumph over those with collective, non-material interests because people operate in their self-interest.

Distribution-of-effects - You can understand how interests organize around an issue by looking at whether the costs and benefits of a proposal are "concentrated" or "diffuse." Strong interests will develop around issues where there are concentrated costs or benefits. You can map the effects to see what kind of political battle will ensue.

| <b>Costs</b>        | <b>Benefits</b>          |   |
|---------------------|--------------------------|---|
|                     | <i>Diffused</i>          | <i>Concentrated</i>                                     |
| <i>Diffused</i>     | Social Security          | Veteran's Benefits                                      |
| <i>Concentrated</i> | Environmental Regulation | Unions vs. Management<br>Hospitals vs. Health Companies |

Diffused Benefits vs. Diffused Costs - Programs generally expand because lawmakers want to provide benefits and the costs are widely dispersed and not readily apparent

Concentrated Benefits vs. Concentrated Cost - Different sides will deadlock or alternate victories and defeats

*From Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making by Deborah Stone*

Concentrated vs. Diffused - Concentrated will almost always win because that side has more incentive to fight

But...

**Relative interests** - The temptation is to use logic to classify issues and put them into the boxes above to understand the political dynamics. But in a political fight, groups will try to frame issues in ways that put them in the most advantageous position.

### Example

When Republicans suggested changes in Social Security, Democrats focused attention on the retirees who would be hurt. They tried to make the diffuse, long-term, and abstract benefits of social security, concentrated, short-term, and specific

*"Policy issues don't determine the kind of political contests that occur, but instead, politics shapes the way problems and policy issues are perceived in the first place." (p. 224)*

**Public Interest (Good) vs. Special Interest (Bad)** - This is the rhetorical strategy that portrays "good" interests that are long-term, diffused, spiritual, social, and collective as **weak**. In this story, this general public interest is threatened by **strong** "bad" or "special" interests that are individualistic, selfish, narrow, and concentrated in nature. Groups will often seek to portray themselves as standing up for the weak, public interests against strong and powerful special interests. They do this to gain the assistance and protection of the federal government.

### Example:

Proponents of environmental regulation say that selfish utility companies are special interests thwarting the public interest in clean air.

Utility companies try to represent themselves as "shareholder companies" who represent the general public that would be hurt by trying to satisfy the narrow, special interests of elitist, "radical" environmental groups.

### Summary

"Problems are defined in politics to accomplish political goals--to mobilize support for one side in a conflict. To define an issue is to make an assertion about what is at stake and who is affected, and therefore to define interests and the constitution of alliances. There is no such thing as an apolitical problem definition. In confronting any definition of a policy problem, the astute analyst needs to ask how that definition also defines interested parties and stakes, how it allocates the roles of bully and underdog, and how a different definition would change power relations." (p. 231)